What to do? Twenty*somethings'* negotiations of unmapped futures, work and anxiety in post-traditional Britain

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Declaration of authorship

I, Benjamin Sanders, declare that this thesis, *What to do? Twentysomethings' negotiations of unmapped futures, work and anxiety in post-traditional Britain*, and the work presented in it are my own.

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Abstract

Starting with recent social theory accounts of individualisation, detraditionalisation and how governmentality discourses around enterprise and personal responsibility have shaped young people's lives, the research examines the experiential nature of contemporary identity and 'unmapped' transitions to adulthood. Using in-depth interviews with 20 'twentysomethings' graduates from southeast England it traces negotiations of leaving fulltime education and entering a labour market buoyed by pre-economic crisis optimism whereby they feel overwhelmed with opportunities, choice and uncertainty. Through narrative analysis the thesis charts the struggles and anxieties generated by the ambiguous structural position capitalism casts them into but which 'demands' enterprise and adaptability. Their circumstances, however, deny certainty or secure paths forward and generate existential trouble and, for some, mental pathologies as insecurity and self-doubt prevail.

The thesis explores how after university individual expectations met indecision and uncertainty. Resulting anxiety was offset through 'falling' into jobs, 'drifting' and avoiding getting 'stuck' in 'dangerous places'. Twentysomethings, without a secure profession or sense of security, developed new work values: either seeing it as a site of potential to realize themselves or rejecting it; preferring autonomy and authenticity outside of that domain. Identifying 'critical moments' in narratives showed how these could liberate desire but also subsume individual subjectivity to new forms of capitalist regulation. Lastly, it explores how 'strategies' of thinking uncertainty can stifle individual agency and 'thinking too much' generates emotional ambiguities, impeding decision-making compared to those that viewed uncertainty as a positive opportunity. These negotiations testify to the intensification of subjective difficulties in late capitalism and compromise a future-oriented, meaningful self that can adequately withstand them. Presumptions of cognitive responses to uncertainty are misplaced as 'internal ambiguities' arising from the weight of responsibility individuals now have for being themselves demonstrate the need to think and understand the contemporary self beyond the rigidity of (economic) rationalism.

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Preface

> The accelerated pace of change, the multiplicity of roles assumed by the individual, the deluge of messages that wash over us expand our cognitive and affective experience to an extent that is unprecedented in human history. The points of reference used by individuals and groups in the past to plot their life courses are disappearing. Answering the basic question 'who am I?' becomes progressively more difficult; we continue to need fixed anchor points in our lives but even our personal biographies begin to fail us as we hardly recognise ourselves in our memories. The search for a safe haven for the self becomes an increasingly critical undertaking, and the individual must build and continuously rebuild her/his 'home' in the face of the surging flux of events and relations (Melucci, 1996: 2).

> Depression began its ascent when the disciplinary model for behaviours, the rules of authority and observance of taboos that gave social classes as well as both sexes a specific destiny, broke against norms that invited us to undertake personal initiative by enjoining us to be ourselves. These new norms brought with them a sense that the responsibility for our existence lies not only within us but also within the collective between-us. Depression presents itself as an illness of responsibility in which the dominant feeling is that of failure. The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself (Ehrenberg, 2010: 4).

> It is the young people who suffer from being caught in this uneasy condition more immediately and intimately than others (Melucci, 1996: 149).

This thesis explores the post-education transitions to 'adulthood' that a group of young people – 'twenty*somethings*' – attempt to make in a moment of British capitalism prior to the economic crash of late 2008 when the economy was still looked upon in optimistic terms in terms of jobs and sustainable growth. Having left education buoyed with high expectations and an innate feeling of potential to be able to do anything, the thesis charts their attempts to find work that is financially rewarding but, perhaps more importantly, that enables them to gain a sense of self-fulfilment and an authentic way of life. This hopeful search, however, is frustrated and compromised through a confrontation with feelings of overwhelming choice and possibility in the job market resulting in chronic uncertainty over how to proceed. This leaves them with a particular identity struggle or what has come to be called a Quarterlife Crisis in the media. The generated anxiety informs their various attempts to negotiate a way forward in what feels to them to be an 'unmapped' world compared to the institutional structures that 'mapped' their parents and grandparents generation. The enterprising self, offered as a D.I.Y panacea for uncertain times, falters in these circumstances as it undermines

its rational basis. Various difficulties arise in the form of 'falling', 'drifting' and getting 'stuck' in a job which then further endangers their original desire to create a particular self-expressive lifestyle. Various ways of negotiating these dilemmas by twentysomethings are discussed which produce different emotional responses ranging from excitement at new possibilities through to feelings of guilt, regret and personal scorn.

The research was conducted through a series of twenty in-depth interviews with young individuals aged between 23 and 29, that were done across a period of four years between 2004 and 2008. Using strategic and snowballing sampling techniques, eleven women and ten men agreed to take part in the research. Nearly all of them represent a particular middle-class experience of leaving education and trying to 'get on'. As such their frustrations, in part, arise from the way in which their class identity had instilled a particular form of individualism that expects and is defined by (social) mobility and the ability to make 'free choices' which give expression to, and help construct, an inner authenticity (Skeggs, 2004: 54-56). In this respect they are what some authors would call the 'reflexivity winners' of late modernity (Lash & Urry, 1994) imbued with the educational resources and skills, aligned to the prerequisite cultural forms of capital, that are allegedly needed for success in the post-industrial social landscape. Yet as the thesis discloses, the majority of these twentysomethings are far from 'flourishing' and instead their lives and thinking, explored in the interviews, are mired by deep existential quandary.

Part of the initiative to conduct this research came from my own experiences of uncertainty in the face of a future that felt open to any thing I chose. I was a product of my time. I remember watching, in my first year of undergraduate study, Tony Blair arrive into Downing Street in May 1997 and being filled with optimism about the future having come to understand and despise what 18 years of Conservative rule had done to the country. I finish my thesis in 2010 with the end of the New Labour reign (as we know it), and a feeling of disappointment and forlornness at what could have been hangs in the air. It was that initial hope and feeling of possibility that helps mark out the generation of young people in this research because it was also their lives and hopes that were shaped by the youthful and eager

rhetoric of New Labour that promised to do so much to reverse inequalities and help redistribute opportunities for all. The hopes invested in future prospects resonated with the song that greeted New Labour's election: *Things Can Only Get Better*. I was also the first of my family to go to university, like some of those in this research, and my hopes for the future, while ungrounded, were informed by the firmly held belief that just getting a degree was a way to secure a good job and secure life post-university. Not much thought went into the specifics of what I would do but if the promotional blurb of my university was to be believed then I need not worry too much as job opportunities would be two-a-penny.

Jobs were actually unforthcoming and I decided to continue in higher education and pursue my interest in sociology which has provided me with a course of action for my future and helped off-set the sort of chronic uncertainty that affected some in this research. My own doubts and insecurities have fed into this research not only as a catalyst for investigating this area but it also meant the interviews conducted with individuals, in some cases just a few years younger than myself, have taken on a different quality in that I personally relate to and understand the anxieties and predicaments discussed. I think this 'insider' status helped because there was no need to try to transcend a generation gap that can sometimes exist in the research situation. I always felt too that those I spoke to were happy to have another young person take an interest in their problems, many of which they had tried to trivialise or accept as a personal failure.

I want to say a bit more about the specific context of this research as it has come to be book-ended by the present economic crisis which has helped position it in a particular moment of capitalism. To do this I use the thought of Boltanski and Chiapello as laid out in their epic *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005). The structural conditions of capitalism in the early years of the 21st century, when the research was conducted, I understand as a certain heady fin-de-siécle moment of what Boltanski and Chiapello have identified as the *third spirit* of capitalism. The conditions of this spirit arose from the forms of indignations generated by the previous system which is analogous to the Keynesian-Fordist settlement. While this period of capitalism provided institutional and individual stability it eventually came under attack for its

bureaucracy, inflexibility and uniformity. What forcibly came back in this period was a form of the 'artistic critique' that was concerned with alienation and processes of dehumanisation. This peaked in the major crisis of '68 when it combined with the more general social demands for better pay and equality. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the form of neoliberalism that came to define the decades after this crisis serve as testament to capitalism's ability to incorporate and anaesthetise the critical concerns of the day. To an extent low pay and equality issues but it was the system's reaction to worker demands for individual autonomy and authenticity in work that was denied them by the 'oppressive institutions' of what Bauman (2000) calls 'heavy modernity' that enabled capitalism to reinvigorate the system and disarm a subversive challenge to it.

The lives of the young people are framed by the way in which the rise of the third spirit of capitalism meant a new way of organising production. The dismantling of the more stable and secure institutions and structures that had defined most of the twentieth century enabled companies to introduce new working practices – flexibility, working in networks on projects, 'flat' management structures – in an effort to 'improve working conditions' (the ideal worker emerged as an enterprising networker who was 'light, adaptable and flexible'). These served to help answer the desire for individual feelings of authenticity in work and came to value ideas of self-actualisation and autonomy as ways to generate a new justificatory regime that would mean workers continued to commit to the system. The knock on effect of this for workers was that work could no longer be seen as the development of a career in a long-term job. Instead work or what remained of careers had to be understood as a series of projects to be fulfilled and where the responsibility for personal success and development was a not simple case of promotion through tenure and experience but to do with developing 'employability' and personal capital. They now had more 'freedom' as actors in their own development and, therefore, as much authenticity and autonomy as they could create for themselves through their own creative skills and talents. Capitalism turned its back on centralised state planning and supervision and instead deferred down to company and individual level generating a 'new, liberated way of making profit' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201), which involved the spread of market logic and principles into enclaves of society formerly out of bounds.

My reading of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* came at a time when I had all but finished the interviews and as a consequence it did not inform the original approach. But as I read the book it became clear that some of the aspects identified in the book clearly spoke to, and of, the generation of young people my research explored. In particular Boltanski and Chiapello touched upon what came to be the young people's essential problems explored in the research: uncertainty, anxiety and the struggle with 'projecting oneself into the future' which have come to fundamentally transform the traditional forms of transition to adulthood. Adulthood itself has also come to look remarkably unfamiliar in terms of the hallmarks normally associated with becoming an adult – secure employment, marriage, children and home ownership. The frustrations and difficulties discussed in the research come as a result of the dissolution of these forms of stable hierarchies and the expectations associated with them. Young people are meant to come to embrace uncertainty and insecurity as offering exciting possibilities for authentic realisation. Yet what develops for young people Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 421) argue are forms of anomie associated with fading tacit norms and conventions regulating expectations. Anxiety, consequently, arises around questions of what to do as regulatory norms are effaced from the situations and contexts young people find themselves in. This tension is further exacerbated through the way Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 421) suggest there is an:

> Elimination of the purchase that people can have on their social environment, with a consequent fading of their belief in the future as a vanishing point which can orient action and thus retrospectively confer meaning on the present.

This anomic difficulty of 'projecting oneself into the future' does not lessen the emphasis that is placed on work to still be the prime site through which individuals should seek coherence and self-fulfilment. This problem was very evident in those I spoke to and it was a real source of distress for many as they sought to try and find a job that would 'fix' things yet were operating with little in the way of long-term ideas or auspices that would help orient their choices in the present time. It is this unease and 'anomic difficulty' that lie at the heart of the concerns of this thesis.

Boltanski and Chiapello's thought also helps to theoretically frame the way that capitalism perpetuates a specific contradictory ideology in which some priority is given to those things that cohere over time (relationships, marriage, hopes and expectations of work etc.) and the human condition demanded in the flexible world where individuals need to alter themselves according to the situations they encounter. This paradoxical effect of the liberation from the old structural forms of capitalism has placed an increased number of people into anxiety-inducing situations and left many in a 'contradictory double incorporation' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005: 452) into new working conditions. New capitalist forms acknowledge the desire for 'genuine authenticity' in work, understood as a loyalty to the true self, yet at the very same time create a world where there is no longer 'a remaining position from which an authentic relation to things, people and the self might be demanded' (p. 455). New types of work and its practices constrain and undermine traditional ways of understanding personal authenticity and, for Boltanski and Chiapello, this desire for authenticity versus the imperative of adaptability underlines the key existential tensions in contemporary capitalism and individuals; engagement with the accumulation process (ibid.).

It is somewhat ironic that while neoliberal reform transformed the economic and social landscape, generating a new age of affluence and abundance for those able to access consumer credit and pushed the UK to the top of leading industrialised countries in terms of jobless and unemployment rates[1], it actually created an identity crisis for young people as unfettered financial capitalism stripped lives of identity-sustaining securities and certainties that defined previous generations' experiences. The stories I discuss in this thesis are testament to these tensions identified above. They also highlight inconsistencies in how the subject of neoliberalism is motivated and assumed to operate rationally in a future-oriented, calculative way. While incited to live and think in a particular way, especially through the dominant framing of their lives in enterprise discourse, young people's circumstances deprive them of any meaningful or secure present through which to justify decision-making. What I found becomes clear through the voices and experiences of those I spoke to was not only anxiety and uncertainty but also frustration and anger at the lack of real opportunities to live a life that

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[1] Between 1997 and 2005 alone GDP per capita in the UK rose from $22,312 to $32,860 (Michaleson et al, 2009).

had genuine autonomy and authenticity. Caught between wanting to believe that jobs existed that they could happily align themselves to and the actual reality of contemporary work that was anathema to some, means there is an underlying emergence of a critique, or what Boltanski and Chiapello would call an 'indignation', of the present forms of life offered to them by capitalism that are limited to, and defined, by material accumulation.

What is happening now in terms of the present economic crisis is perhaps the beginning of the end of the third spirit's 'organisational' philosophy which has become much forlorn after admissions of flaws in its underpinning economic theory and general widespread recognition that it was, in the end, an unsustainable way to organise an economy.[2] This economic crisis has only served to exacerbate and further entrench the struggles that many young people across Europe experience in their twenties and whose lives have been haunted by high unemployment, underemployment and bleak prospects. The sentiments behind the fighting and rioting that occurred in Greece after the police shooting of a 15-year-old boy in late 2008 called Alexandros Grigoropoulos, explained by a 60-year-old Greek man, echo these problems:

> Young people are right to take to the streets. They have absolutely no future. It's not just the global economic crisis. Even if they speak three foreign languages and get the best degrees they can't find work, and if they do it pays badly (quoted in Smith, 2008).

The violence and rioting that occurred on the streets were seen, across the media, as what could potentially occur in other European countries unless the issues of mass youth unemployment, alienation and marginalisation were not seriously addressed. While those in this research are arguably those that have the educational and social/cultural capital to 'get on' (Bynner et al., 1997) it would be wrong to ignore what their stories and experiences have to say about the contradictions of the system and the particular forms of subjectivity that are assumed to underpin social and individual action and motivation. What their struggles attest to and are perhaps evidence of, in combination with the present economic difficulties, is a

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[2] Alan Greenspan, the US Federal Reserve chairman for 18 years and whom guided US monetary policy, admitted in late 2008: "I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interest of organisations … were best capable of protecting shareholders. …I discovered a flaw in the model that I had perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works" (quoted in Clark and Treanor, 2008).

form of fourth crisis in which the battle lines and lines of resolution are still yet to be formally drawn.

What is most telling about the economic crisis is the paucity of alternative ways of organising and thinking our lives and economy. A telling quote from Peter Mandelson, New Labour's Business Secretary, in early 2009 tells all we need to know about the state of government thinking in terms of trying to create a new paradigm:

> First and foremost we need to foster a new climate for enterprise in Britain. There is no substitute for this - no substitute for the drive and ambition that it brings. It can sometimes be a touch ruthless and raw. But it is the single most important engine of economic progress. The recovery cannot be driven by consumer debt or public spending. It will be driven by private sector investment and private enterprise… Enterprise and effort should be rewarded. It sets goals to spur people and brings gains to us all (Mandelson, 2009).

More enterprise and rational, economic individualism is also meant to be the cure-all for reducing the budget deficit too according the new coalition government. Yet it is exactly these fundamental principles and assumptions that enterprise can somehow set goals and, therefore, offer structure and a set of (blurred) coordinates for individual lives that the experience of young people seriously calls into question. More enterprise is meant to be the panacea for insecurity. Uncertainty and risk get translated into opportunities and possibilities but actually only serve to engrain an aporia further; in that, without knowing what to do or what they want their future to look like, these young people remain unsure of how to proceed. Instead what replaces enterprise are new forms of anxiety evoked through the deferment of responsibility onto individuals to negotiate uncertainty and insecurity through the mobilisation of a certain performative self, which is reliant upon self-esteem and the desire for self-fulfilment. What this form of 'governing' fails to acknowledge is that while:

> Neoliberal ideology is based on the idea that an economy can be conceived as a balanced system of rational expectations and of rational investments … in the social space not all expectations are rational, and not all investments are 'economic' in a mathematical, scientific sense (Berardi, 2009: 208).

The legacy of neoliberalism reform and the New Labour era can be more readily seen and felt by those young graduates who now face the 'most intense scramble' in a decade to find work. There are now nearly 70 applicants for each vacancy and the number of positions available is predicted to fall by 7% (Vasagar, 2010). Graduates are being told to consider 'stacking shelves and burger flipping' and should 'stay positive' because a degree is a still a 'good investment' while others have warned of a 'lost generation' (Blanchflower, 2009). Young people now face inherently different prospects to those in this research, whose lives were couched in a sense of possibility amidst overwhelming choice, but their lives are still both framed by an economic discourse that encourages personal responsibility for one's position and a mean-ends rationality that discounts the very sorts of difficulties and emotional ambiguities evoked by this that are central to this thesis. All of these serve to question the foundational economic logic.

This thesis explores tensions created by this; tracing experiences and difficulties of twentysomethings leaving full-time education into uncertain and unmapped futures that at times are depressive and pathological. What emerges is not only the fallibilities of a government discourse that relies on an amorphous sense of enterprise but that the rational underpinnings of it also serve to engender anxiety and emotional discord, that cannot be accommodated in such a philosophy. Some twentysomethings felt personally inadequate; at fault for struggling in a world failed to provide certainty. As such it casts light on the problems of the new forms of conduct required in late capitalism.

The thesis proceeds as such: the *first chapter* charts the various literatures that proved most influential prior to, and during, the research process and relate to the topics covered in the later chapters. The *second chapter* discusses how I did the research, those I spoke to and the theoretical and analytical approach I took to their narratives. The remaining thesis chapters work in pairs:

TRANSITIONS
Chapter three is the first of six empirically informed chapters and charts the experiences and feelings of the twentysomethings having left university and how initial hopes and

expectations for good jobs and an 'easy ride' met an uncertain 'unmapped' world in which old certainties are long gone. *Chapter four* explores the problems and responses – 'falling', 'drifting' and getting 'trapped' – of the twentysomething had in trying to deal with unmapped futures and overwhelming sense of choice.

WORK

Chapter five goes on to discuss the different ethical relationships that some of the twentysomethings developed with the work they eventually ended up doing and how work was looked to or used to bolster a sense of identity. Developing on from this, *chapter six* looks at how they tried to resist assimilation to their jobs and their prioritization of an autonomous sense of self, an assertive form of individualism, over and above identification with work, contrary to managerial attempts, as a means of orienting themselves.

CHOICE AND THINKING

Chapter seven considers in-depth two reactions to individual critical moments in narratives that caused them to re-assess their desires and chosen way of life. It charts a modes of self-interpretation involving imagination and desire but also shows the ease in which subjective capital can be incorporated into the reproduction of capital. Finally, *chapter 8* draws together the general problem of uncertain choice to explore the ways twentysomethings came to think about them and how they coped. Their various 'strategies' complicate labelling their responses solely in terms of rational/irrational logic and have various levels of success in engaging positively with uncertain choices.

Chapter 1 – The Lives of Young People Today

> No previous generation has been brought up with such an inheritance of freedoms, such opportunities and such a range of often daunting choices. For no previous generation has tradition been such an unhelpful guide (Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995: 109).

> I don't know. I don't. I think it's harder. I think my mum probably had a better sense of identity than I have. I feel … I have felt completely lost at times and … you know, just recently, it's like, "Who am I? What am I doing? What is my purpose?" (Beth, 462-465[3]).

This chapter charts some of the different sociological literatures that informed my thinking around the predicament of young people today and helped shape the overall project. It explores the idea of a crisis in terms of young people's transitions to adult status and more generally a sense of identity crisis that has arisen amidst the rising affluence and sustained economic growth of recent times. These new structural uncertainties are then empirically explored in chapters three and four in terms of not having 'mapped' futures and how twentysomethings' responded. This chapter then proceeds to look at the way in which the nature of work has changed in the move from Fordist to Post-Fordist organisation and the effect on work ethics (these discussions are empirically explored in chapters five and six). I then move onto look at some of the social theory around contemporary identity-making in terms of 'free' choice and reflexive modernisation. This is then complicated in terms of class, gender and the modernist cognitive bias that underpins it. A counter theoretical stance to the liberation of individual identity from tradition is then presented in the form of understanding recent social changes instead as instigating new ways of regulating identity. Issues of decision-making and facing uncertain choices and how that affected twentysomethings are discussed in the final chapters, seven and eight. In them I examine the various struggles some of the twentysomethings' had in terms of trying to construct a self-identity and what this meant for thinking and doing something different.

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[3] These numbers after the name refer to the lines of the interview transcript from which the quote was taken. The research sample is introduced properly in chapter two and individual respondents when they 'first appear' from chapter three onwards.

The rest of this chapter then seeks to understand where these theoretical debates leave twentysomethings. I outline the forms of enterprise ethos and subjectivity that discursively framed and informed their growing up which aimed to instil a keen sense of self-reliance and personal responsibility for navigating unmapped futures. Finally I conclude by contextualising the forms of crisis in young people's identities in terms of anxieties and social pathologies generated by neoliberal ontologies. These unpinned recent ideas around reflexivity, enterprise and the pressure to succeed, which can come to compromise individual meaning-making and personal forms of 'protection' ('existential refrains') from the new pressures of responsibility.

A crisis in transitions?

> Young people live with contradictory social imperatives which 'destroy' the unity of the self/personality yet they struggle for a sense of decency, wholeness and coherence of experience set against the constant oscillation of identities and social world (McDonald, 1999: 211).

A letter posted on a website[4] run by Youth Net, a UK charity that aims to improve the general welfare of young people, captures succinctly the key uncertainties and struggles that greet young people as they try to make the transition from education to adulthood. The letter was posted by a young woman and entitled, *Who is Catalina?*

> Remember how when you were younger, you always thought that by a certain age everything would just slot into place? When I was 15 I thought in ten years time I'd be starting a great career in my chosen field, living in a nice flat in my favourite part of town, and if I wasn't married, I'd be in a solid long-term relationship with the man of my dreams. Everything was going to be perfect. Want to guess what happened? Ten years later and I've achieved none of the above. For many months after I graduated I was jobless, I'm as single as I ever have been, and I'm living in my parents' house.
>
> You have the expectation that with a degree everything will come your way. Wrong, it's not so easy. After the frustration of filling out numerous applications, you finally get a job, even in the area you hoped for, but after a month discover you hate it.
>
> … these issues are not easy to tackle, as you have no idea what's going to happen in the future. I hate not knowing! Could someone give me a map of my life please? I seemed to

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[4] See http://www.thesite.org/community/reallife/rants/midtwentiescrisis I have edited it down.

have come to a massive crossroad in my life, but which road leads me to a place called 'Happiness'? Ah, everything would be so much easier if I knew.

What is clear here is that Catalina's initial expectation of (and desire for) a smooth transition from university to a good job, which would then provide a stable base from which to construct the 'perfect life' jars with the social and economic realities of young people today. Catalina's experiences are not a one-off. They contain many of the inconsistencies that also mark the lives of those in this research. What Calatina's letter is testament to instead is a mismatch between personal desires and the realities of labour market and life for young people. What were once fairly short, stable and predicable transitions from education to full-time jobs for them, within a Fordist social structure in which the life experiences of the masses were relatively standardised and homogenous, have long since disappeared (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997: 27).[5] This was a model of youth or young people focused on the future; young people lived their lives as a 'project' that was understood, defined and achievable. The desire for a smooth and 'easy' transition is still prevalent however in the lives of young individuals and has yet to catch up with the way in which recent changes in the economic and labour landscape have transformed the traditional paths to adulthood.

There is a wealth of thought surrounding the contemporary transitions of young people today (for example: Anderson et al., 2002; Beck, 2002; Blossfeld et al., 2005; Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Bynner et al., 1997; Cannon, 1995a; Cieslik & Pollock, 2002; Côté, 2000; du Bois-Reymond, 1998; ESRC, 2002; Francesconi, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Kelly, 2001; Leccardi, 1999; 2005; Machado Pais, 2003; McDonald, 1999; ODPM, 2005; Pollock, 1997; 2002; Purcell & Elias, 2004; Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997; Roberts, 1991; Scott Jones, 2007; Thomson et al., 2002; Walther, 2006; Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995; Wolbers, 2007). While opinions differ on the specific dynamics and the extent of change, they agree that young people today have opportunities to shape their lives and control their destinies in lieu of the

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[5] There has been a steady decline in the UK's manufacturing industry which once would have provided clear end points for transitions. Correspondingly there has been a rise in the service sector, characterised by jobs that are part-time, flexible and short-term. Between 1996 and 2006 the largest areas of growth were financial and property services. Manufacturing declined by 7.9% (BERR, 2008: 14).

old standardised transitions in ways that exceed those of previous generations. This decline of traditional structures that once supported and guided young lives means there is a need to rethink how individuals cope with autonomy and uncertainty (Wilkinson, 1995: 34). Research confirms that with work more uncertain, the transition to adulthood becomes 'risky' and individualised: characterised by insecurity, fragmentation, flexibility and more choice. As such, linear progression towards a fixed, happy ending is by no means assured. These changes have to be incorporated and adapted to by young people as they become ever-more responsible for shaping their own biographical narratives all the while working with the knowledge of the unpredictability of the future, which could further undermine things to rely on (Leccardi, 2005: 124).

It is clear that arguably a crisis, or at least an intense faltering, in the traditional forms of transitions place young people in a great degree of uncertainty post-university given that they still maintained hope for a traditional transition:

> I mean after uni I just completely had in my mind that there would suddenly be this realisation that this is what I wanted to be this. A teacher, a fireman and then you do it and brilliant you're done! (Tom, 136-138).

What has replaced short transitions to a functional position in the economy are increasingly prolonged and convoluted 'transitions' that are determined through individual preference and do not necessarily operate with any linearity or cumulative progression (Machado Pais, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2005). As chapter three explores, this was a shock for twentysomethings, who did not give much forethought to what would happen after university:

> You have to, you know, go to university because that is what you do but you don't really think about what you want to study or necessarily think about the future (Alice, 823-825).

Instead they were faced with the need to make a decision about their future from what can often feel like a bewildering amount of opportunities, none of which come with a long-term guarantee. Devoid of the normalising institutions that structured previous generations' lives, what characterises the twentysomethings in this research, faced as they are with faltering

transitions, is uncertainty, as initial expectations are met with a situation that some twentysomethings called 'vague' and 'random'. Ambiguity helps define this post-education predicament as things fail to 'slot into place' as Catalina had hoped.

McDonald (1999) argues that young people experience these unpredictable transitions intensely because the culture increasingly demands the construction of a robust sense of self whereby young people are poised between the disintegration of older models of socialisation and the new, postmodern imperative to mobilise the self in a culture of performance. The decline of older modes of subjective experience meet the imperative of the new, and out of that come new forms of innovation and identity but also potent forms of crisis, lived mainly at the level of personal experience where the language of psychology is widely used to make sense of the multiplicity of day-to-day problems (1999: 11 and 122). As individuals are required to turn their lives into a project free of social determinism, they disengage from social roles; autonomy and self-creation increasingly come to replace the old forms of subjectivity created in terms of a functional integration into the economy and moral internalisation of role norms (McDonald, 1999: 217). The clear temporal stage of older forms of youth transitions to adulthood – school, leaving school, getting a job, promotion, career development etc. – have been 'desynchronised' to the point that young people no longer live life as a project defined in terms of a certain future, but more as a 'condition', no longer associated with images of the future (McDonald, 1999: 3).

What came to my attention early on in doing this research was the advent of a term that had started to circulate in the media and self-help books which helped confirm the issues McDonald (1999) highlights were being played out empirically. The *Quarterlife Crisis* came to my attention via a friend who had heard a discussion about it on Radio 4. It was a term for the issues of uncertainty and anxiety that had academically been claimed to characterise young people's transitions or 'condition'. According to the literature about the Quarterlife Crisis it is a crisis that revolves around problems of the self and intense feelings of confusion, anxiety,

doubt, uncertainty and disorientation about who they are and what they're doing.[6] It was described as a 'creeping malaise among graduate workers' (Monks, 2004). Self-help books and guides (see Barr, 2004; Barr, 2004a; BeatwaxCommunications, 2005; Fox, 2005; Harrold, 2004; Middleton, 2004; Monks, 2004; Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Smith, 2004; Twenge, 2006; Ungless, 2005) gave advice for the QLC which centred around identity: "Your identity is at the core of your quarter-life crisis – not your job, flat or partner … You need to work out who you are, or who you want to be, before you can truly get it together" (Barr, 2004: 251). Some of the prospective respondents in this research had heard of it.

New structural relations and uncertainty: unstable frameworks

> My grandfather was a chippie … it was all mapped out for him, properly mapped out, well it was mapped out for him since the day he was born (Trevor, 406-407).

> Young people's list of "what not to trust" has grown very long indeed. You cannot trust your parents to stay together, you cannot trust that your education will lead anywhere and you cannot trust your employers to provide secure jobs for either you or your parents. The economic insecurity familiar only to the working class has now become the everyday reality of the middle class (Cannon, 1995a).

This 'crisis' of subjectivity and transitions leads to the dominance of what Ehrenberg (1995) has called the 'uncertain individual' in societies that no longer function in a way that prepares individuals for institutional roles. Instead individuals are expected to choose and construct their futures relying on their own resources to negotiate a society and future which is 'complex and opaque' (quoted in McDonald, 1999: 121). This resonated with Tom when he told me he had, "no idea whatsoever where I want to be in 5 years time!" (270). This is the essence of the problem that the twentysomethings face in chapter four where they try to orient themselves and find a way forward in a world that they feel is 'new' and 'unmapped' compared to the worlds of their parents and grandparents that Trevor in the above quote

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[6] Over eight out of 10 (83 per cent) highly educated young people believe there is such a thing as a QLC when 'they and their peers think about what they're doing and want they want from life' (Middleton, 2004: 5).
 www.quarterlifecrisis.com is an American website, set up by some of the first people to coin the term, which provides online forums and message boards for QLC sufferers to share problems.

alludes to. Not having a map is in someways liberating but also generates anxiety over where to go and how.

To understand further the predicament of these young people and their 'broken' expectations for transitions to 'happiness', a brief look at some of the broader social theory about changes between structural relations and the individual becomes pertinent. Much recent research and thought (Beck, 2002; du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Margo, 2006; Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995) when trying to summarise the predicament of the young people today proposes that 'freedom' itself is the problem. They argue that young people 'suffer' from freedom (Beck); others talk of young people as 'orphans' of freedom (Margo) while other see them as 'children' of freedom (Wilkinson). All emphasise that what defines this generation of young people is new demands for self-determination and self-realisation that have come about through the internalisation of freedom their situation affords while bringing with it new forms of 'personal responsibility, self-organisation and personal politics' (Beck, 2002: 163). Stability and a normalised routine become a thing of the past as Alice recognised:

> I mean our parents generation was, like, 'get married, buy a house' and that was just like a real stable framework to it all (195-196).

Where once modernity and individual lives were arguably defined by Weberian 'iron-cages' and disciplined through Foucault's panopticon, generating a rational order to societal proceedings (or 'stable framework'), the sorts of capitalist reorganisation Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue defines contemporary capitalism have ushered in a fundamentally different relationship between the individual and structure. As discussed in more detail below, in line with thinkers like Beck and Giddens the argument goes that what has occurred is 'the freeing of agency from structure' (Adkins, 2000: 259). This helps make sense of the way in which the world twentysomethings confront and try to negotiate in chapters three and four feels increasingly alien to what they were expecting. This dissolution of older forms of structural relations gives rise to claims that we now live in a post-panoptican age (Boyne, 2000), where 'glass-cages' have replaced the iron ones (Gabriel, 2003) and that 'control' (Deleuze, 1995; Jones, 2001; Munro, 2000) has come to replace the disciplinary logic that

Foucault (1977) argued defined modernity. Deleuze (1995) probably best clarifies the way in which these theoretical claims of the weakening of social constraints come to affect the lives of individuals and helps make more sense of the 'unmapped' worlds faced by the twentysomethings.

Deleuze argues that the old forms of institution and structure associated with Fordism and modernity that operated as sites of confinement are breaking down and disappearing. The associated forms of regulation and repression of bodies and identities ("interiors") that they once produced, through associated stabilised rules and roles, are dissolving and giving way to control (1995: 178). This means that those sorts of institutions which young people expected to make transitions to in order to fill a specific role are reformed as the forms of control that was once confined to specific sites – prisons, hospitals, schools, factories and families – spill out across all fields of society (the exterior) and becomes something on-going, diffuse and continuous (ibid.). Control and the production of identities and roles is no longer centralised in traditional institutions or structures (Rose, 2000b: 325). Hardt (1998) argues, alongside Deleuze, that, "instead of disciplining the citizen as a fixed social identity, the new social regime seeks to control the citizen as a 'whatever identity,' or rather an infinitely flexible placeholder for identity" (p. 36). The breakdown of regulated transitions from one 'site of confinement' – school – to another – work (the factory or office) – for young people reflects the diffuseness of the 'crisis' of these old institutions that used to once provide coherent and stable subject positions. Instead young people are expected to perform a new amorphous and contingent identity, premised upon personal 'elements, capacities and potentialities', that is at home within the flow of networks and is caught up in continuous training, life-long learning, perpetual assessment, improving, constant monitoring and never-ending risk management (Rose, 2000b: 325).[7]

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[7] These issues also fall within the recent discussions within neo/post-Marxist theory about the rise of immaterial labour and the advent of the *real* subsumption of labour replacing the formal subsumption of labour that characterised the rise of traditional 'solid' forms of capitalism. In real subsumption it is no longer possible to identify production within the limited space of the factory. Instead capital penetrates all social relations including the production of subjectivity itself (see Berardi, 2009; Lazzarato, 1996; Meier Sørensen; 2002; Negri, 1999: Read, 2003).

This breakdown of modernity's structural forms helps to contextualise the de-standardised and contingent transitions twentysomethings are faced with upon leaving university. That young people are now responsible for choosing something to do and be – dependent on personal capacities rather than 'social integration through employment' (Gorz, 1999: 69) – understandably generates great pressure on making a choice devoid of any reassurances over what to do or institutional orders to trust in. Consequently what I explore in chapter four in terms of some of the twentysomethings' responses in the way some 'fall' into random jobs, get 'stuck' and 'drift' needs to be seen as ways of trying to negate and negotiate this weighty responsibility. In the next section I look more closely at how the structural changes of work itself have also come to provoke further anxiety and uncertainty in the lives of these twentysomethings.

In and out of work

> The society in which everyone could hope to have a place and a future marked out for him/her – the 'work-based society', in which he/she could hope to have security and usefulness – is dead. Work now retains merely a phantom centrality: phantom in the sense of a phantom limb from which an amputee might continue to feel pain (Gorz, 1999: 57-58).

> For me I am still finding it out but I have found out in ways that meant being in an office and in front of a computer I can't, I can't express my needs (Gareth, 347-348).

Having struggled with leaving university and realising things were not quite what they expected nor desired twentysomethings entered work. Chapters five and six explore in detail some individual's attempts to find forms of work that delivered on the promise of self-fulfilment while others rejected work as a site of authenticity. Work ethics in both cases came to be re-prioritized around the self as they come to doubt finding a job that can offer them the forms of authenticity they want. Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) observation, that one of the key tensions for young people is the decline of traditional stable employment that undermines the still existing desire they have for work that would bolster social and personal identity, is key to those in this research. Here I discuss some of the changes that relate to jobs and

working practices, which help to contextualise this generation's anxiety over work and the status they feel it should have in their lives.

Weber was one of the most eminent sociologists to write about organisations and he is famous for his discussion of how jobs, work and organisations come to be dominated through and by legal-instrumental rationality. Individuals were 'caught' in relatively fixed and stable positions, which while potentially demeaning did provide a sense of order and, what Sennett (2006: 23) calls, a 'steadiness of purpose' to their lives. People had a work ethic premised upon the long-term, and deferred gratification meaning that they would sacrifice present happiness for the future reward they knew would come. These were the work organisations that typified the second spirit of capitalism – large bureaucratized and hierarchical firms guided and framed through state economic policy. Work in this period met a functional demand in the economic machine and provided a sense of usefulness to workers whether they liked the job or not. Social and individual betterment was tied to how well an industry did rather than down to individual responsibility (Gorz, 1999: 56). Trevor's grandfather is a case in point having worked all his life in the Belfast shipyards. However, many prominent social theorists have argued that recent changes in the organisation of capitalism have swept all this away and what characterises work now is a post-bureaucratic order typified by flexibility and rapid change.

Bauman (2000: 116) characterises this change as the move from *heavy* modernity (massive factory buildings, heavy machinery, locally tied labour) to *light* modernity whereby the relationship between capital and labour which was bound to a specific locality through mutual obligations and interdependence no longer holds, as capital has managed to cut itself loose from it's dependency on location. Long-term commitment to workers disappears and so does their prospect of life-long employment. Heavy industry is replaced with the footloose movement of capital to where it gets quickest and best return, meaning the rigidities of the Fordist system had to go as they inhibited companies ability to be 'multiple, complex and fast-moving'. All this was in part due to the movement to a post-industrial 'knowledge' economy in the West where it is ideas rather than material objects that were produced and traded (Lash

& Urry, 1994). The result for the worker, according to Bauman (2000), was a life saturated with uncertainty, in which transience replaces durability as old forms of work security gave way to new short-term and 'disorderly' working practices (p. 125 & 147).

This brave new world heralded a new 'looser' organisational form – what some have described as 'disorganisations' (Lash, 2002; Miller, 2004: 39) – that saw large integrated companies broken into smaller more flexible and adaptable units that were then connected through a network of contracts and temporary work, sub-contracting and the out-sourcing of non-core business activities became the norm (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002). Hierarchical levels in organisations were 'flattened' to aid the flow of ideas and give workers a greater sense of autonomy from authority. This flexible organisation emerged as the antidote to the Weberian bureaucracy and ushered in continuous reinvention, redefinition and mobility through which success is measured by irregularity, innovation and disorder, not regularised routine (Gabriel, 2003: 171). These types of change have resulted in social theorists such as Sennett (1998; 2006) and Beck (2000) commenting on the particular consequences for employment stability and job security in terms of the corrosive effects on character new types of work bring (Sennett) and the 'Brazilinization of the West' (Beck) in which paid employment represents a minority experience with the majority left to eke out a more precarious existence.

Authors such as Strangleman (2007) and Doogan (2009) warn about the weak empirical basis for such conjectures (and at times the entrenched nostalgia for a bygone age) and the rather superficial account they give of the corrosive effects of the changes in the organisation of work for identity formation. Doogan, in particular, refutes many of the claims, arguing that what we are witnessing instead is a growing distance between the capitalist rhetoric that claims flexibility, speed and movement and the reality, that statistically can be shown, that employment patterns have not changed that much. While this may be the case it does not serve to diminish the general sensibility held by many that 'things are changing fast' or that jobs today are no longer associated with long-term sense of security and advancement (Doogan, 2009: 18). The experiences of those in this research certainly serve to reinforce a

view that the economy no longer integrates them into a functional and useful position. Bauman (2004b) goes as far to suggest that the contemporary economic structure generates a sense of redundancy for some young people as society can no longer supply a productive role for them (p. 11). These difficulties are confirmed to an extent by the twentysomethings who experience uncertain searches for jobs, which seem 'vague' and in a labour market that is 'random'. Having found jobs, their experiences confirmed the arguments of Bauman (2000: 147) around the prevalence of short-term contracts, rolling contracts and need to rely on personal initiative for progression. It was these sorts of experiences that led to some, discussed in chapter six, to start to question the locus of work as a site for self-realisation.

The new world of work

> I'm not that committed to my career you know and not on some big career path or big career plan (Mary, 85-6).

These transformations in work lead to the breakdown of what Sennett (2006: 26) calls a 'time-engine' that ordered and scripted lives in linear and progressive form under 'solid' forms of capitalism. The image of the secure and steady worker gradually working their way up a company's promotional ladder comes to be replaced by a person who eschews dependency, does not cling to others (nor institutions) and displays personal initiative and enterprise in pursuit of their more immediate prospects (ibid.: 46). This is the new ideal type of worker, theorists argue, who is a 'networker' and enterprising (more on this below), who relies heavily on personal talents and creative skills to negotiate and engage with transitory projects while all the time remaining flexible and autonomous (Boltanski, 2002: 14).

The new model of work proposes that genuine autonomy and fulfilment can be found through self-knowledge and self-directed work rather than the old 'false' means of trying to follow a career path and rigid job descriptions (Boltanki and Chiapello, 2005: 90). While this new way of working cannot offer the old forms of security or durability the insecurities and uncertainties are (meant) to be off-set through the way in which a job can now be a proper

site of pleasure and authenticity: life affirming and not dictated to by authoritative work ethics. Work is no longer meant to be a constraint upon the freedom of the individual to fulfil his or her potential instead it becomes an essential element in the path to self-realisation (du Gay, 1996; Miller & Rose, 1990: 27). Contemporary companies recognise the way to ensure loyalty from employees is to provide the opportunity for them to 'work' on themselves; to grow; to learn and to become more effective as a person – a *life* ethic rather than work ethic (Heelas, 2002). In a way, the answers to the uncertainty around work, companies would suggest, is to be found in a subtle realignment of personal goals and objectives with those of the organisation, providing a sense of belonging and easing self-doubt and anxiety (Webb, 2006: 161). However, counter to these, perhaps, idealistic views of new work is Bunting's (2004) account of the way in which *overwork* comes to characterise many people's relationship to their jobs resulting in fatigue and stress.

What also becomes apparent by looking at the work experiences of the twentysomethings is the failure of these recent attempts to entice greater worker commitment by promising authentic experiences of work and paths to fulfilment. Two stated boldly they "hated" their work, Jo felt almost physically repulsed by the corporate speak, Beth was bored and it always felt like 'groundhog day', work for Gareth did not meet his 'needs' while Mary was wary not to let herself get over-assimilated and Jenni felt exploited. These subjective difficulties are the other side of the summary of the 'objective' changes in work and find no place in the celebratory rhetoric of new work that champion the changes as the liberation of desire and authenticity in and through work giving opportunity to develop a 'flourishing self' (Boltanski, 2005: 201). As chapter five explores, some twentysomethings are drawn to this discourse that sees work as a key site for personal fulfilment while others, in chapter six, recognise that long-term security has long gone, reject the invitation to align their identity with their job and resist attempts to 'codify' their subjectivity with the new requirements of production. Both stances generate emotional difficulties and intense forms of reflection upon desires and hopes in a bid to find answers to their insecurities. Forms of thinking and decision-making become my focus next, as I move on to discuss reflexive modernisation and critically explore the place of freedom with it.

Thinking and choosing

> So that is where I am at and I just think it was lack of planning constantly, I just never gave a shit and I just thought that, you know, everything would turn out ok (Alice, 122-123).

Recent analyses of what has come to be called late modernity by some social theorists have stressed the need to understand the increased role and importance of reflexivity as individuals are increasingly 'untied from the rules, norms, expectations and traditions of modernity such as those of class and gender' (Adkins, 2000: 259). The external, traditional forms of authority are giving way to the authority of the individual to choose, create and invent their own self-identities and themselves as individuals (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1993). These processes of *detraditionalisation* (Heelas et al., 1996) and *individualisation* (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) are central to trying to contextualise the lives of the twentysomethings in my research and help further in understanding the fragmentation of transitions and the way in which work has appeared to lose it's ability to structure lives explored above. The uncertainty and difficulty they face can be contextualised in the way in which theorists of reflexive modernisation argue that what replaces and reconfigures the once stable structures and institutions that used to confirm and ascribe identity (Beck, 2003) – gods, nature, kinships systems, the state, work, class, gender, race – is 'risk' and precarious states. For Giddens (1991) this means that as individuals and societies themselves become aware of this uncertainty they respond by trying to calculate and organise their futures through the application of, and trust in, new expert systems and knowledges that only further undermine tradition.

On a more individual level the construction of identity becomes characterised by reflexive choice through which, for Giddens, the self becomes a 'reflexive project' involving a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future (1992: 30). Thinking about life and the future becomes characterised by planning and goal-orientation through the strategic adoption of lifestyle options in an attempt to control and colonise it (Giddens, 1991: 243). Beck argues this brings for the individual an unprecedented freedom of experimenting in

how to live and helps generate new forms of sociality but it also brings the unprecedented task of coping with the consequences: what he defines as trying to find 'biographical solution to systematic contradictions' (2002: xxii). The feelings of being daunted and doubtful over what to do that characterise many of the twentysomethings' initial reactions to leaving university need to be seen in this light. Where individuals once used to rely upon well-functioning rules and models, and it is evident in some twentysomethings they still expected and wanted this form of assurance, there is now a need to make a choice and 'produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves' (Beck et al., 1994: 13). Lash (2002) adds to this by stressing that in what he calls – *technological forms of life* – choices that individuals have to make must be '*fast*, [we must] – as in reflex – make *quick* decisions' as they become the 'rule-finders' themselves (2003: 51). This need for speed also affects the space and time for proper reflection meaning that contemporary individuals must already know what they want to do. Lash (2002: 109) argues that 'doing becomes, at the same time, knowing'. This obviously casts the construction of the self into even more difficulty and uncertainty if, as Giddens (1991) claims, contemporary self-identity is about making strategic choices in an attempt to control and colonise the future.

Difficulties

> It got me *down* just being at home and I just didn't feel like I was a real person at all … I have all this youthful energy and I just don't know where, I have no-where to put it. And it's got me really frustrated and that's the one thing I really do regret and would do differently. Just tell myself and force myself not to let myself get down about it because it really restricted me I think (Jenni, 315-327).

> I think there is too much choice. It is quite overwhelming (Hannah, 410).

Jenni's difficulty in positively engaging with the choices she faced in trying to form a 'coherent, future-oriented project' is characteristic of the problems many twentysomethings had which are explored in chapters seven and eight. In many ways they confirm the literature around youth in which 'choice biographies' become the norm as standardised routes and 'clear timetables' (maps) to guide choices disappear (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002: 515). The resultant disorientation and despondent feelings that Jenni and others experience call into question the

adequacy of the reflexive self as classically understood to fully grasp the nature of the difficulties these twentysomethings face. Both chapter seven, on critical moments, and chapter eight, on thinking and choice, support some of the criticisms levelled at the reflexive modernisation account of identity summarised by Elliott (2004: 71). The problem being it 'remains caught within a modernist prism that grants metaphysical privilege to rationality, unified selfhood and emancipation'. What the 'strategies' and forms of thinking explored in the later chapters attest to are various subjective and emotional contortions in an attempt to construct a coherent biography, all of which are testament to missing aspects of the reflexive theory. Critics have attacked it for the assumption that the reflexive agent is *knowledgeable at all times* leaving the relationship between an individual's inner and outer worlds conceptualised in instrumental terms; involved in means-ends calculations and attempts at achieving freely chosen, known future goals (Adams, 2003, 2007: 55) – one strong finding that came from this research was just how 'unknowledgeable' some twentysomethings were a lot of the time.

As Holmes (2010) suggests, when routine calculation fails and full information is not available to make a secure choice, thinking (reflexivity) becomes infused with emotion and feelings. The reflexive self, as classically understood, struggles to adequately account for these sorts of 'internal ambiguities' that characterise the narratives of the twentysomethings. These challenge the 'positivistic ego psychology' (Lash & Urry, 1994: 38) of the reflexive self that has a purposeful future trajectory (Adams, 2003: 224). Emotional difficulties put in doubt the supposed efficacy of reflective capabilities as a means of navigating the *topography* of post-traditional societies. Some twentysomethings experience chronic uncertainty resulting in a form of stasis and procrastination informed by feelings of guilt, regret and fear of making the wrong choice. This, I suggest, is a consequence of *too much* reflection or thinking and can be linked to another of Elliott's (2002) problems with the reflexive self: the mechanistic portrayal of the unconscious. This leaves little in the way of an account of the 'destructive forms or contradictory tensions' the unconscious can involve. These psycho-social issues become all the more pressing if Bauman's (2000) warning about the sheer un-viability of naked individualisation is taken seriously, as the resources of sociality and identity construction are

stripped away from individuals, leaving them with only themselves to blame if they struggle and fail in their attempt whilst also knowing there is no escape from this condition (Bauman, 1991: 237; McRobbie, 2004).

Omissions

I know I am in the privileged position to have these options (Sara, 81).

Other issues at stake within the reflexive self thesis, and more generally in the literature about young people's transitions, include the way in which the emphasis on a particular performance of identity comes to displace a proper account of class (France, 2007: 70; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Molgat, 2007; Skeggs, 2004) and that the 'tenor' of most of the reflexive self literature is nongendered (O'Connor, 2006: 114). Dispute remains over the position of women in relation to the reflexive self, sometimes argued to be a reinvention of the male, bourgeois liberal who is a reflexive and mobile subject through which women are marginalised and 'fixed' (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2004: 55). What the reflexive self actually reflects is a specifically middle-class, well-resourced and entitled self that can 'perform' and re-fashion themselves as they see fit. Giddens (1991: 106) does however, suggest, that women experience the openness of late modernity in a fuller, more contradictory way. The voices and experiences of the female twentysomethings in this research attest to the continued ambiguous presence and influence of gender despite their newly acquired economic independence and freedom from the domestic sphere.

The young women in this research largely fit the description of McRobbie's (2007) 'Top Girls' and have entered a newly de-industrialised landscape with 'feminised' labour patterns that position them as ideal neoliberal workers – flexible, presentable and capable (Aapola et al., 2005). The sorts of possibilities and choices this afforded to the women in this research, for autonomy[8], catch some off guard. Not only do they have to try and construct a life for

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[8] The concept of autonomy appeared often in the narratives of twentysomethings, especially in relation to work. It is a problematic term and I understand their use of autonomy in the sense that it is relative to the wider constraints they face but perhaps do not acknowledge.

themselves, they are also suddenly stripped of, and disembedded from, the more traditional forms of gender role that their mothers had. These more caring and domestic roles can come to be denigrated in the 'new girl order' (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008) because it can compromise the sense of new freedoms women have for self-invention and economic success in the workplace.

It is these sorts of pressures and contradictions that play themselves out as emotional difficulties, considerations and experiences these women had, that do not neatly fall into some of the more conventional ways of understanding reflexivity and the self (in the next chapter I discuss in more detail the importance of the *experience* of identity). Some of these women become caught up in personal conflict caused by these new tensions and contradictions, that operate in the post-feminist landscape (Walkerdine, 2004) and come to direct blame and anger towards themselves when they perceive to have failed to have 'got it all' because the new economy is meant to be free of the old patriarchical impediments.

These discussions about young people's transitions, transformations in work and the thought around reflexive self, which all in some way assume that within these changes there has been a liberation of the self and identity, can be contrasted to the Foucauldian inspired work of Rose who sees not liberation but new subjective forms of regulation and relations of power coming into operation. I discuss this before moving onto look at the framing of young people's lives by enterprise, which is meant to provide the appropriate forms of personal conduct to navigate unmapped worlds.

New regulation of the self

> What appears as the freedom of agency for the theory of reflexivity is just another means of control for Foucault, as the direct operation of power on the body has been displaced by its mediated operation on the body through the soul (Lash, 1993: 20).

> You've got hundreds of choices yet actually … how many genuine ones do you have? Not that many but the idea is that you have lots (Jo, 223-224).

For Rose (1996b; 1999b; 2000b) reflexive modernisation, detraditionalisation and the transformation of institutional fields, as discussed above, prompt 'new games of power' – not the liberation of the self from structure. The freedom to choose that defines late modernity and the construction of the reflexive self, advocated by Giddens et al, is nothing but 'new techniques of self' that represent the realignment of government conduct which operates less through traditional means and instead works through the individual 'folding in' of external authority into their own personal ethical force-field (1999b: 474). This is not a new 'freedom from' but a new problematisation of the self that obliges the individual to take up a new 'governed freedom' that entails acquiring the right skills to make choices to actualise oneself (Rose, 1999c: 87). It presupposes the subject's freedom to entrepreneurially conduct their lives as projects with the maximisation of quality of life as the aim (Rose, 1999a: 321). This reconfiguration, Rose argues (2000a: 1398-1399), involves a new 'particular territorialization of life' that goes beyond politically organised and state-directed assemblages that once morally managed and disciplined individual conduct. Replacing it is *ethnopower* which works subjectively (internally) through the values, beliefs and sentiments (or personal ethics) of individuals, and underpins the new techniques of responsible self-government that defines the present mode (Rose, 1999a: 261).

The reflexive self is indicative of the emergence of a new form of governmentality (Foucault, 1979; Gordon, 1991) that changes the means of regulation and conduct of individuals. The new 'freedoms' enjoyed by the reflexive self are, thus, nothing but new technologies for the conduct of conduct. This alignment of individual subjectivity with new rationalities of government works through the ethical valorisation of autonomy, freedom, choice and authenticity – all issues that are central to the dilemmas of the twentysomethings – that is promoted further through the way in which life dilemmas and problems are increasingly managed and filtered through what Rose (1999c: 93) calls a techne of *psychotherapeutics*. These replace the imposition of moral codes, external to the individual, with a therapeutic language of self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring and self-transformation

akin to the idea of the self lived as reflexive, self-interpreted project.[9] In chapter seven and eight I explore Helen's uptake of a 'therapeutic individualism' (Cruikshank, 1996; Illouz, 2006) that conforms to this new technique of self and provided her with a set of 'empowering' narratives auspices. Further to this, the experiences explored in those chapters, around critical moments in narratives and thinking and dealing with uncertain choices, can be understood not so much as a problem of 'freedom' but with trying to construct a sense of self that meets the contradictory regulatory demands of the day that insist upon certain forms of conduct and relationship to self.

What is left for young people?

> Neoliberal rationality provides principles for organising action (in workplaces, public services, fields of competition, public discussion) which are internalised as norms and values (the value of entrepreneurial freedom) by individuals, groups and institutions: in short, they become 'culture' (Couldry, 2010: 12).

Having considered the crisis in transitions, the transformation of work and ways of thinking about the new 'freedom' to construct identity I want to look at the remaining influences that have attempted to shape the direction and conduct of young people's lives given the unmapped situation they find themselves in. This takes the form of exploring the role of enterprise and entrepreneurial discourses that underpinned various attempts by legislators and government to promote and instil, in the wake of institutional and structural guidance, a form of subjectivity and ethos appropriate to the post-Fordist age. Enterprise was neoliberalism's answer to the problem of the post-industrial landscape that stripped individuals and communities of 'jobs-for-life' and traditional ascriptive patterns of life through which individual lives and meaning could be mapped, constructed and secured. In lieu of these, a highly individualised form of personal conduct was promoted which designated an array of rules for the everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal

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[9] The French sociologist Ehrenberg (1995 quoted in McDonald, 1999: 122) argues in a similar vein suggesting that we now make 'sense of a multiplicity of day-to-day problems in the language of psychology, and in particular that of depression, while only a short while ago these same problems would have been articulated in a political or social language, one of social demands, or struggle and of inequality (p. 23).

responsibility (Rose, 1992: 146). The self was to become a calculating self; a self that calculates *about* itself and that works *upon* itself in order to better itself (p. 146). This was to be done alone and without the assurances of yesteryear or looking to collective infrastructures. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that the advent of the third spirit of capitalism could not have happened without this drive to create a culture of enterprise within the population. In the UK Thatcher made a concerted effort to establish and 'activate' a form of self that was lived as a kind of enterprise (Heelas, 1991).

In respect to the twentysomethings, enterprise was experienced largely as a 'discursive endeavour' enacted through the education system that provided one set of responses to the problem of constructing a self, which they faced after university (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000: 93). The reform of the education system towards the end of the twentieth century, rather than ensuring a particular job or position after leaving, instead, came to change its remit and gave a form of instructions and rules of how to live enterprisingly in the uncertain labour market and take responsibility for getting a job (Hickox & Moore, 1992; Rees & Rees, 1992). So rather than conferring an identity or subject position it gave a model of how to live in the 'unmapped' world to come.

Young enterprise

> It is individual men and women on their own who are expected to use, individually, their own wits, resources and industry to lift themselves to a more satisfactory condition and leave behind whatever aspect of their present condition they may resent (Bauman, 2000: 135).

> I really hate the fact that you really have to think about things, you know, and that you have to have a game plan and be really business-headed about, erm, pushing yourself somewhere and forcing people to know (Jenni, 233-235).

This attempt to create enterprising individuals went hand-in-hand with the changes in work and job culture explored above whereby individuals were to bring their own initiative to corporations to secure more autonomy and authenticity. Yet the notion of enterprise had a much more explicit function in terms of not only trying to develop a certain kind of worker

but actually shaping a holistic sense of self and being that went beyond work. It was about a way of comporting and living one's life in tune with an age that was removing external structural auspices for life – the enterprising individual was to look first to themselves for guidance and not rely on 'out-dated' institutions. According to the Conservative's *Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative* (1988) the role of graduates was to be 'generating and taking ideas and putting them to work; taking decisions and taking responsibility; taking considered risks; welcoming change and helping to shape it; and creating wealth…' (quoted in Heelas, 1991: 73). While a Manpower Services Commission document declares that the student should be:

> A person who has a belief in his own destiny…welcomes change and is not frightened of the unknown … sets out to influence events … has powers of persuasion … and is good in health, robust, with energy and willing to work beyond what is specified … is competitive, moderated by concern for others (quoted in Heelas, 1991: 74).

Prior to the economic crisis and gradual erosion of confidence in market-solutions, Kelly (2006) claimed that this form of self came to dominate the horizons of Western thinking about young people and their own imaginations and desires for success. This is reflected in the enormous investment that was made in attempting to construct enterprising young people through the education system in conjunction with the human capital theory prevalent at the time (see Davies, 2002; Donzelot, 1991; DTI, 1998; du Gay, 1991; Flores & Gray, 2000; Gray, 2001; Gray & Flores, 2000; Greene, 2002; Heelas, 1991; Horne, 2003; Keat & Abercrombie, 1991; Kelly, 2001; 2006; Layfield, 2004; McRobbie, 2005; Newnham, 2001; Read, 2009; Thrift, 2002). A recent New Labour review of enterprise and economy argued that enterprise gives:

> The capability to handle uncertainty and respond positively to change, to create and implement new ideas and new ways of doing things, to make reasonable risk/reward assessments and act upon them in one's personal and working life (Davies, 2002: 17).

Ideas such as self-reliance, innovation and risk-taking mean that everyone is meant to be able find a gap in the market to position themselves successfully: "You can make it, if you really want to" becomes the key phrase of the enterprise economy (McRobbie, 2002: 108). These

ideals informed the sense of personal responsibility the twentysomethings felt and in many cases contributed to the feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and failure some felt as they struggled to use their own 'robust energy' to respond 'positively to change'. While most did not act 'enterprisingly', they had absorbed the sense that they could do largely anything and as such felt personally responsible for the struggles they encountered. The way in which these ideas and discourses were incorporated into their sense of self and the potential consequences of this, which arguably can be seen reflected in the notion of a Quarterlife Crisis, are discussed next.

Anxieties and neoliberal ontologies

> People are haunted by the problem of identity (Bauman, 2005: 6)

> You feel guilty for feeling crap! And that's the thing. That's why you hide yourself away even more because you just don't feel like you deserve to because there are always other people and terrible situations and you just don't – "I'm ok *really!* Don't be so stupid. I don't deserve to feel depressed and get locked in this place. I should just get off my arse and do something." (Jenni, 545-549)

The particular discursive positioning of young people within the enterprise culture (Davies & Harré, 1990) that is meant to provide certain resources, frameworks and instructions to living life needs to be understood within the context of neoliberal reform that gave birth to it and pressure it creates to live and think a certain way – Jenni, in the quote above, chastises herself for feeling 'crap'. Enterprise fits with the logic of neoliberalism's belief that to govern better means governing *less* and optimising the economy through the entrepreneurship of autonomous actors (Rose, 1999b: 482). Kelly (2001) argues that this is not glib fantasy because the meaning of life is slowly transformed and aligned to market forms and principles. Individuals come to think of themselves predominantly along economically rational terms in which emotional ambiguities have no market value or function. Consequently, both du Gay (1996: 181) and Burchell (1996: 29-30) claim that the entrepreneur became an *ontological priority* through which government/economic rationality becomes the condition of individual freedom and becomes a part of individuality. It remains to be seen what the collapse of free-market economic legitimacy will have on this.

This emphasis on enterprise and the entrepreneur fits with Rose's earlier notion of 'governed freedom' he sees as integral to New Labour and the Third Way. Unsurprisingly Giddens, having been a theoretical architect of the Third Way, is attacked for his earlier thought around the reflexive self closely resembling neo-liberal modes of governance. Indeed, Adkins argues (2002: 123), the reflexive self 'is the ideal and privileged subject of neo-liberalism'. The theories of Giddens (and Beck) are criticised for failing to properly address the new nature of neoliberal hegemonic power and instead the 'self-realising, reflexive project' merely mirrors, replicates and blends with the entrepreneurial/enterprising self which represents social life as a network of opportunities and 'free' choices (Adams, 2007: 92; Gordon, 1987: 300). In fact for critics it is a 'fiction of autonomous selfhood' (Adams, 2007: 90) and actually represents a 'new compulsory individualism' (Cronin, 2000).

Social pathologies

> I stayed for a year and then I left because it made me really depressed and I just couldn't stand it … I left (Beth, 78-79).

> I am going to stick it out even if I am about to have a nervous breakdown because I hate it so much or I am so stressed. You know, I am completely run into the ground but I still stick it out for… But really I don't know… this is the thing, why am I so worried erm? And may be the idea of finding something you love is too much pressure as well. I just *don't* know. (Alice, 255-260).

This recomposition of the social and the rise of new forms of self-identity, discussed by both the reflexive modernisation theorists and Foucauldian-inspired Rose, whether emblematic of neoliberal economic power or indicative of the liberation of individual from structure has, according to McDonald (1999), given rise to what he calls 'new pathologies of the self'. These arise in the form of a subjective crisis in the face of the new imperative to mobilise self-esteem and participate in the world of uncertain flow, movement and opportunity (p. 6). This demand for engagement – echoed in the enterprising self – replaces the process of socialisation into a social identity (p. 203). Young people's identities are no longer shaped by place in the production process and are required to develop a calculative, strategic and

entrepreneurial mindset. *'Know who you are and what you want!'* is the rallying cry and guiding principle to the new 'social' terrain. Failure to develop this knowledge risks being labelled dysfunctional (Kelly, 2001). The opening quotes to this section attest to the uncertainty felt by many twentysomethings and the struggle to negotiate not knowing which in some cases was 'relieved' by staying in a job they hated as it offered a semblance of security. Many made allusions to depression they had suffered (or felt was not far away), their stress and struggles to maintain self-esteem in the face of not knowing which was only amplified by the contrast to the sense of potential (and pressure to succeed) they initially felt after university.

Ehrenberg in *The Weariness of the Self* (1998; 2010) links the rise of depression in Western society to individuals becoming 'psychically overburdened by the diffuse but widespread demand that they must be themselves; the permanent compulsion to draw the material for an authentic self-realization from their own inner lives requires of individuals an ongoing form of introspection which must sooner or later leave them feeling empty; and the point at which inner experience no longer marks out the path for one's own life' (quoted in Honneth, 2004: 475). Helen's adopted therapeutic individualism bears witness to this pressure and she admits to the strength required to 'be real'. Further to the forms of 'malaise' felt by the twentysomethings, there is evidence to support the view that the lack of desirable jobs, lack of a sense of purpose and utility to help young people grow up during the latter half of the twentieth century has left them vulnerable to mental ill health.

It is estimated that one in six children and young people has a diagnosable mental health disorder (Penny, 2010a: 59). 7 per cent of young people in Britain regularly self-harm as a way of dealing with stress, rage or despair. There has also been an 80 per cent rise in, mainly female, cases of anorexia needing to be hospitalised. While the Samaritans' 'most conservative' estimate had 24,000 young people attempting suicide in 1999, with that figure rising by at least 10 per cent in the last decade (ibid.). The mental health charity Rethink (2009) claims the young people are suffering from an 'anxiety overload'. Frustrated aspirations and performance anxiety in late capitalism have for some theorists come to overload individual cognition as it became freed from the old systems of obedience and conformity. Depression results as one has

to live with the illusion that everything is possible (talent shows like *The X-Factor* and *American Idol* give lie to the belief that anyone can make it), choice is the norm and insecurity is the inner cost (Ehrenberg, 2010: 232). These mental health issues can be understood as 'unheard' voices or unacknowledged critical responses to the imperative of neoliberal rationality underpinning young people's lives. While neoliberalism has denied them existential security it casts their claims (or 'voices'), that run counter to the economic imperative and call its efficacy into question, as 'market externalities' overlooking the implicit role it plays in generating young people's pathologies (Couldry, 2010).

Struggles for existential refrains

> I am sacrificing so many other things in my life: relationships, friendships and even just me, time for me (Alistair, 358-359).

> Basically I was losing the plot and I was heading towards, not a breakdown – that's overstating it, but chronic fatigue to the point that if I didn't change it I wouldn't be able to work at all. I would have been sent to the loony bin or something! (Alistair, 377-380)

The anxieties and uncertainties explored in this thesis bear witness to Ehrenberg's (2010) claim that the dominance of the sovereign individual, predicated on psychic freedom and individual initiative, can ultimately lead to identity insecurities, the incapacity to act and trouble forming a 'self as project' (p. 233). Berardi (2009) links this rise in depression and psychopathologies in the West to the new forms of psychic and emotional investment demanded by, what he calls, semiocapitalism that takes the mind, language and creativity (the *soul*) as its primary tools for the production of value (that induce individuals to '*just do it*') and overwhelm individual capacity to construct a robust *existential refrain* that can protect subjectivity from being reduced to economic rationality. The struggles of the twentysomethings throughout this thesis (such as Alistair's above) can be contextualised in this wider idea of a difficulty in establishing a meaning-giving refrain. Many complained of working long hours with poor work/life balance and, more generally, the difficulty some had in choosing, resulting in 'falling' into things and 'drifting', corresponds to how Bauman

(2001: 43) characterises depression as a 'feeling of impotence, of an inability to act, and particularly the inability to act *rationally*'.

Guattari (2000) advances the idea of an existential refrain as a individual means of 'marking' out and making a meaning-giving structure or 'territory' consistent with a self which serves to protect and aid the development of it amidst contemporary forms of capitalism that seeks to 'deterritorialize' it (Guattari, 1995: 15). A refrain can be a repeated motif such as a hummed phrase, a gesture or a form of behaviour. It 'captures' various components and 'couples' them to the self, or one's existential territory' providing 'coping mechanisms' for the pressures of life. Guattari was inspired by animal ethology, especially songbirds and their singing which constructs a certain meaningful territory for them and helps establish and organise social relations (Watson, 2005: 312). However, much as bird's ecological niches or homes can be encroached, eroded and decimated through intensive farming methods human refrains can also be encroached upon and eroded. Alistair in chapter eight loses time to cook, see friends and even sleep properly leading him to a crisis-point in his life. Nevertheless I understand the struggles of the twentysomethings as an attempt at, what Guattari (2000) calls, a 'singularisation' of experience that tries to break from the required normalised forms of capitalist subjectivity but have to contend with weak refrains that offer poor 'existential consistency' as they erode and capitalism infiltrates 'the most unconscious subjective strata' (p. 50). As such, some psychoanalysts would understand the depressive tales recounted in this thesis as forms of protest and refusal at the attempted reduction of subjectivity to efficiency and economic productivity (Leader, 2008: 13).

The twentysomethings' problems can, thus, be understood as a result of the contradictory position they are in due to their generational and physical location in the early twenty-first century UK cohort of young people whom – prior to the economic crisis – have 'never had it so good' and had their lives framed and underpinned by a belief in unending economic growth, an abundance of jobs and possibilities and constantly told that individual initiative will win out. This imperative to live reflexively and enterprisingly requires individuals to *a priori* know what they want to do yet no allowance is given to the converse fact that what

characterises their lives is uncertainty – an *unknowingness* of what they want or what they want to do. The appropriate model of action to find their way – in a complex society with opaque futures – is based on knowing calculation and cognition yet they are condemned to do this under individualised conditions that preclude means of developing any clear, rational certainty over their desires and futures. There is little room, however, in the rational basis underpinning the neoliberal self for the sorts of ambiguity, emotional discord and indecision explored in this thesis. Touraine (1995) though has a more encouraging take on individual dissonance generated through what he sees as the disintegration of modernity's institutions that once socialised people and assigned them positions, functions and modes of belonging. The crisis of social identities brings with it *subjectivation* whereby individuals are for the first time faced with the task of being able to free themselves from the logic of former means of social domination.

For Touraine, the *proper* Subject can now emerge at the point of 'non-belonging' and non-correspondence with social roles which engages in personal struggle to give meaning to his or her life, motivated by the suffering and loss of identity (Gorz, 1999: 134). The Subject, as Touraine defines it, is a 'resistance fighter' that defends its freedom from power. In contradistinction to Giddens, the subject is not the consciousness of the Ego taking itself in hand that attempts to unify behaviour and meet the demands of the social system, still less the recognition of a social self: it means the freedom from the image of the individual created by the roles, norms and values of the social order (Touraine, 1995: 292). The subject consequently exists only in the form of a *social movement,* a challenge to the logic of order and is based upon the desire to be recognised as an actor (1995: 207). And counter to Rose, it is a subject that refuses to be reduced to the environment of a system in which the private meaning of experience is incorporated as a resource for dominant economic and techno-cultural systems (McDonald, 1994: 58). Touraine's thought is important in its return to a sociology of experience that takes seriously the ability of the individual to be a social actor engaged in trying to make sense of a incoherent social world. The importance of paying attention to the individual experience of 'doing' identity I discuss more in the next chapter.

Conclusion: uncertain struggles

> This process [adoption of a entrepreneurial life] is immensely emancipationary, but also imposes a task of adjustment, which most people, even young people, haven't yet made (Gray, 2001).

The literatures covered in this chapter – transitions, changes in work, thinking and choosing, enterprise and social pathologies – help situate the struggles and difficulties of the twentysomethings covered in the chapters to come. All serve to help understand the way in which the contemporary social landscape has changed within the space of a generation for the twentysomethings in this research. What was a fairly traditional model of transition and society for their parents and grandparents, marked by stability and a faith in the long term, has given way to, not so much as a new model, but the need for individualised responses to diffuse and uncertain circumstances that are not readily surmised or generalised. Devoid of obvious external conferment to a role that would help produce a sense of self-purpose, the young people of this research are faced with the task of trying to 'make themselves up' from, what at times can feel like, a bewildering amount of possibilities, none of which come with any assurance they provide the answers to their existential quest for meaning and authenticity.

The contradiction and tension identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) around the way the desire for a coherent and authentic way of life is constantly compromised through the elimination of the confidence individuals can have in their social environment, and the adaptability it requires, underpins the anxieties this research explores. It is also present at the heart of the new social pathologies that characterise this age and haunt the prospects of the twentysomethings. The imperative to take personal responsibility for, and engage enterprisingly with, new uncertainties only further aggravates the anxieties and struggles that mark these twentysomethings as distinct from previous generations' transitions to adulthood.

What characterises this struggle, and the tensions more generally, is an attempt at reconciling and developing an 'interior' sense of self with an 'external' social world. In that light it follows the claims of Hennis (1987; 1988) about Weber's work that it (rather than being about rationalisation in general) sought to address the development and evolution of certain

personality types to meet the exigencies of particular socio-cultural settings. Much as Weber was arguably concerned with how individuals meet the particular demands of their times and the tensions and antagonisms this caused (Hennis, 1988: 104), this thesis explores the problems and subjective consequences of the new capitalist forms of personal conduct that require young people to become responsible for shaping their lives in a period devoid of the norms and values of institutions that once ordered and shaped lives. Twentysomethings' attempts to reconcile the discord between interior and exterior goes beyond simple rational and reflexive calculation; it involves interpretation and negotiation of emotional responses that become important means for trying to figure out what to do. This means paying close attention to the voices and experiences of these twentysomethings because they become important in exploring and understanding the tensions the new forms of personal conduct generated. This 'importance of experience' is explored more in the next chapter, as is how I went about doing the empirical research that formed the basis of this thesis.

Chapter 2 – Anxious narratives: researching and talking to twenty*somethings*

> I don't have anything. I don't know what I do want. I don't have…I don't think, 'Oh In five years time I want…to be at this level of salary with this house doing this' because I don't see anything. I don't know what I do want (Rebecca, 58-60).

The tension between the desire for authenticity and (market) demand for adaptability identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) in the new spirit of capitalism enables a better understanding of what underpins the difficulties the young people in this research have. The dissonance, struggles and ambiguities that inform young peoples' lives, invoked through the structural transformations explored in chapter one, enables reflexivity onto taken-for-granted belief structures, habits and ways of being and doing (McNay, 1999b). This is on an unprecedented scale for any previous generation resulting in anxiety generating uncertainty coming to underpin their engagement with, and responsibility for, the choices they now must make to construct themselves. The Mental Health Foundation (2009) recently found that younger people consistently report greater anxiety than older people. 77% of 18 – 34 year-olds say they feel frightened or anxious at least some of the time, compared to 65% of over 55s, and more than twice as many in the younger age group would describe themselves as a 'generally anxious or fearful person' (13% compared to 6%) (p. 10). These findings add further weight to the theoretical discussions around new social pathologies prevalent in new capitalism.

It was reading about research findings like this and the quarterlife crisis in conjunction with recent social theory that speculated on the changed nature of identity and subjectivity construction in postmodern times that initially sparked my interest in trying to research the difficulties individuals now had in trying to construct a meaningful life. I had always been interested in Weber's idea of disenchantment and more latterly the work of Foucault I found, in some ways, complimentary to Weber's earlier concerns about individual comportment in modern societies. These ideas, however, I thought seemed to struggle with the ways in which

identity formation was being argued to have changed. The theories all seemed to point towards a post-iron cage and post-panoptican age where individuals were 'released' in some way from these structures and were at 'liberty'. What became my focus was to try and find a way to research these changes and try to understand what they meant for the dynamics of power, meaning and potential in individuals' attempts to 'make themselves up'. Aligned to this was my desire to understand the lived practices of these new classed, gendered and ethnic identity formations arising out of the new capitalist dynamics and in doing so deepen an appreciation of the 'losses' this can entail (Hey, 2005). What was missing in all the theory that I was reading was a proper account of individual experience, grounded in empirical research, that took seriously the actual *experience* of these alleged changes in identity formation.

This chapter proceeds to tell the story of how I came to do the research and the particular form it took. It starts by telling how I came to focus on and talk to twentysomethings and their negotiation of post-education transitions. It then focuses on the need to pay due attention to their experiences as indicative of new forms of individualism that stress the new forms of dynamic relations between the psyche (interior) and social (exterior). I then discuss the ways in which the role of anxiety in the narratives initially focused my attention on the potential I thought young people might have in their new found 'freedoms' before realigning the research. I finish the chapter outlining in more detail how the research was conducted: the characteristics of those I spoke to in terms of gender, class, technology and work and the specific temporal moment of the research (which became important in light of the economic crisis). I briefly discuss the interview method before detailing the form of narrative analysis I did and dynamic status I gave to the stories I collected which was in keeping with wanting to respect the voices of the young people's difficult experiences.

Finding a way in: anxieties and the Quarterlife Crisis

> I think, for our generation, we have too many choices (Beth, 363).

> Yeah because I have been freaking out about it and I just don't know what I am going to do (Alice, 19-20).

I established that my research was to explore the impact and effect of the changes in contemporary capitalism and society (that had theoretically been examined) on individual identity formation and how individuals came to orient and 'think' themselves in these, what were argued to be, unprecedented times. I was left with then how to 'operationalise' this in terms of finding a specific site, group or locus for the research. This took some time and involved the exploration of a few alternative paths before settling on the research that is presented here. For a while I considered talking to young people involved with organisations that delivered entrepreneurial and enterprise training and education to them either in or out of school.[10] This would have been combined with discourse analysis on the written material produced by these organisations to map the forms of subjectivity constructed within them and then followed up with interviews with young individuals who had done the training.

This, I hoped, would be one way for me to consider the influence of trying to forge a certain approach to identity formation suitable to new capitalism. Kelly (2001; 2006) had already written some very interesting articles about the imperative for enterprise to be instilled in young people and my initial forays into researching this area in the UK confirmed just how much the idea of entrepreneurial skills was seen as key for young people to 'get on' in the new economy. In part I was attracted to this approach because of my own theoretical leanings that were closer to the forms of analysis of contemporary life led by the Foucault-inspired Rose than the rather speculative theory of Giddens and Beck which I always felt was rather ungrounded and welded to a modernist account of subjectivity and identity.

However, my initial attempts to contact relevant individuals in these enterprise education organisations was not easy and calls went unreturned while one visit to such an organisation in London and exploratory interview resulted in me recording an hours worth of promotional zeal. It soon came to dawn on me that this was not the track I wanted to be going down.

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[10] Young Enterprise is perhaps one of the most prominent http://www.young-enterprise.org.uk/ Choose Enterprise is another one http://www.chooseenterprise.com/ While LiveWIRE is an organisation backed by the oil company Shell to support and help young people start and establish their own businesses http://www.shell-livewire.org/

Instead my attention and thought always returned to reports and findings about the rise of depression in young people (Bynner et al., 2002; JRF, 2002) and the ways in which their circumstances generated new unprecedented levels of anxiety (BBC, 2009; Rethink, 2009). The thought of Elliott (2004) and Bauman (2004a; 2004b; 2007) in particular stressed the way in which anxiety came to be a telling characteristic of today's younger generation whose lives where increasingly defined by uncertainty and new freedoms (Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995). So it was with some relief when a friend of mine informed me about a recent discussion she had heard on the radio about the Quarterlife Crisis that was gaining notoriety within 'pop' psychology circles and self-help books. This was a 'crisis' of young people in their twenties that were struggling to 'get on' with their lives in contrast to previous generations.

I followed up the lead and gathered as much initial information as I could and, to my relief, realised that this was handle onto the research I had been waiting for. I discovered that the Quarterlife Crisis revolved around a profound anxiousness and disillusionment in young people about not knowing what to do upon leaving the education system but having been brought up with the expectation, coinciding with the decline of institutionally sanctioned social conventions, that they could be anything they wanted to be and do work, that was not just about making money, supporting a family or gaining social prestige but was a rich and fulfilling experience in and of itself (Twenge, 2006: 80). The central problem of the Quarterlife Crisis revolved around the imperative to choose; yet to 'make a choice' contemporary young people are, as Melucci (1996) argues, 'plagued by a fragility of a presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists' (p. 43-44). Learning about this 'crisis' actually struck a cord with me as much of what it talked about resonated with my own and friends' experiences of uncertainty about our futures and the prospect of having to try and decide what I wanted to do after leaving university. The world seemed full of possibilities but nothing seemed clearly defined or assured. This feeling was subsequently reflected in some of the voices of the young people I spoke to:

> I think you don't really plan anything actually when you think about it. That's it suddenly
> you've got hundreds of choices yet actually … how many genuine ones do you have?

>   Not that many but the idea is that you have lots and that was hard to begin with. For me
>   anyway (Jo, 222-225).

The notion of the existence of Quarterlife Crisis had received widespread attention in media (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Times* have all had articles or columnists discussing it) and marketing companies have been quick to analyse it as a new segment of a particular youthful consumer identity (BeatwaxCommunications, 2005), there was even an MP suggesting a Parliamentary Committee be set up to investigate the phenomena (Charter, 2004) alongside numerous websites providing information, advice and online forums for discussion.[11] Consequently I took the Quarterlife Crisis to serve as a useful insight of how some individuals – in the main white, well-educated middle class young – had come to experience life under new capitalism and the transformed social landscape. All of which touched upon my central research interests and I decided that, in line with my own experiences, here was a potentially rich avenue to explore. I came to the conclusion that the best way to research the sorts of experiences I was interested was simply to try and talk to young people, in particular those who had recently left college or university as it appeared that they were some of the most susceptible to identity 'difficulties', and talk to them about the sorts of problems the Quarterlife Crisis picked up on i.e. hopes, plans and expectations upon leaving education and actual experiences and negotiation strategies adopted to try and deal with choice, uncertainty and anxiety.

It was around this time of learning about the Quarterlife Crisis and the research starting to take that shape, that I had started to read Heidegger. Initially this was because of my interest in the important influence Foucault claimed he had on his thought (see Brocklesby & Cummings, 1996). Foucault's later thought around ethics (1994a; 1989) and his notion of a

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[11] www.quarterlifecrisis.com is an American website, set up by some of the first people to coin the term, which provides online forums and message boards for QLC sufferers to share problems. See also:
http://www.quintcareers.com/quarterlife_career_crisis.html
http://quarter-lifecrisis.blogspot.com/
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christine-hassler
http://www.davidwong.nl/online/?cat=22
http://www.quarter-life-crisis.com/
http://www.wellingtongrey.net/journal/archive/2006-07-06-quarter-century-crisis.html

'limit attitude' (1994d) had chimed with me in terms of making me wonder what the potential consequences of contemporary social change were for the forms of personal transformation Foucault became interested in towards to the end of his life (Foucault, 1994a; 1989). Yet it was Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) with its emphasis on the important role that anxiety could play in the narrative of an individual that came to influence me. Many of the earlier interviews were done alongside my own reading struggles with Heidegger's *magnum opus.* It was an important and influential read in terms of shaping my approach to the research topic but also the interview material because I came to realise that essentially what I was dealing with in the interviews was forms of anxiety and existential struggles that young people had as they confronted their own fallenness (or thrownness) upon leaving university and attempted to establish something (authentic) they really wanted to do.

The anxieties reflected in the Quarterlife Crisis and present in the interview transcripts focused my reading of Heidegger in terms of what he had to say about anxiety. Feelings of anxiety, for him, are a mood or mode of existence for Dasein (Being) that does not register objective features of the world but rather registers subjective responses to it. It plays a special function in confronting Dasein, and individualising it, to its falleness within the world. This then means Dasein can (potentially) engage in its nature of understanding and interpretation of the existential possibilities it is faced with (many of which it did not choose or determine i.e. inauthentic possibilities) and how, or if, this engagement leads to the creation of a 'authentic' self that wrestles itself from the 'uncanniness' of the everyday fallen and thrown nature, which is defined by the (dominant inauthentic) 'they'. Anxiety is a crisis of meaning; feelings of being alienated, homeless and unsettled but it is also an opportunity, Heidegger claims, to try and come to grips with one's life: 'in anxiety there lies the possibility of a disclosure which is quite distinctive' (1962: 235). Heidegger provided me with not only a way to think about the new anxieties that young people had but also a way to approach and think about the possibilities their uncertain circumstances afforded them for thinking and living differently (this also linked to Foucault's later concerns).

The Importance of Experience

> I don't know how my Dad or my Granddad would react to the situation that I am in. Be able to go to uni, basically have a great time, do what degree you want to, finish and then go right, 'What do I want to do?' I just don't how they would react. I expect they would probably be in the same situation (Tom, 239-242).

As the Quarterlife Crisis attests what comes to define the problems of some young people today is a particular struggle with working out what they want to do and how they can achieve that. My interest in changes in identity formation in the move from modernity to postmodernity that I had decided to explore in the context of the difficulties certain young people had in making the transition from education to 'adulthood' required me to take seriously their voices and experiences. The earlier theory explored in the first chapter speculates about identity change but is ungrounded in an empirical basis. Craib (1998) argues that this absence of *experience* is a serious gap in the recent growth of sociological understanding and explanation around identity. Further to this, Craib (1994: 132) argues that the central features of reflexivity and the reconstruction of the self in late modernity, as envisaged by Giddens, is assumed as a 'real' process through which the individual has real control over his or her self. However, what they are really mapping is a 'false self' defined by a sense of omnipotence that is generated by contemporary experiences of fragmentation and ignores or tries to deny the real ambiguities and inconsistencies that make up a sense of self. In many ways this 'illusion' was present in those I spoke to; fuelled by the belief that getting a degree would make the world amenable to their desires and life would 'unfold' smoothly. It was one which hid a much more troubling reality that they came to face. As Craib claims, the reality of experience for individuals becomes one where they are less powerful, less able to change their world and are subjected to changes by forces well beyond their control or even understanding (1998: 2).

Accounts of reflexive modernisation fail to accommodate the anxiety, disappointment and constant failures that result in trying to live in the manner of the reflexive self and can lead to seeking refuge in, and over-identification with, a particular social identity (i.e. a certain job or being a certain kind of man or woman) leading to living in 'bad faith' (Craib, 1994: 163).

These experiences, however, receive no real attention aside from the increased prominence of the cognitive feature of reflexivity (Craib, 1998: 2). Importantly, Craib (1998: 171) argues that rational capacity alone does not allow one to take decisions; they arise in the peculiar conjunctions of rational thought and the flow of feelings and unconscious processes. It is 'peculiar conjunctions' that the anxieties and struggles, present in the interviews I conducted with the young people, attest to and help in move the understanding of identity formation beyond the purely rational and calculative. With chronic uncertainty about their futures informing young people's presents there is little in the way of security to enable straightforward rational decision-making. This is further complicated by the way in which Giddens assumes a convergence of women's and men's identities and experience in relation to work and family life (Wajcman & Martin, 2002: 987) which, as the chapters below explore, is not quite accurate.

The difficulty of accounting for the differing (emotional) responses to uncertainty and anxiety that the young people had within a reflexivity framework grounded in assumptions of cognitive rationality, pushed me further towards appreciating Craib's (1998) insistence on paying attention to what the actual experience of identity could tell us about today. In this light I also started to move away from leaning towards a staunch Foucauldian-esque understanding of contemporary changes in identity because of the way in which governmentality literature also afforded little in the way of real engagement with the *lived* reality of people's lives. Framing and referring back individual responses to discursive formations gave no genuine autonomy to individual emotional struggles with, and resistance to, the new hegemonic forms of neoliberal governance as theorists like Rose purport. A Rose-ian inspired reading of the young people's struggles I also realised, with the aid of in-depth supervision discussions, would mean understanding their accounts as the playing out of 'given' responses induced through the matrixes of contemporary power/knowledge discourses. Craib (1998: 175) captures a problematic inconsistency in this way of conceiving and understanding the playing out of selfhood and subjectivity when he argues that, 'something [is] implied but not said directly'. Keeping the level of analysis at the discourse limits ways of understanding and knowing individual forms of resistance and personal

negotiation, interpretation and adaptation. Further there is a 'peculiar instrumentality' to the argument that places 'technologies of the self' and power at the heart of analysis yet seems to appear as a 'disembodied force'. There is a denial of subjectivity which comes to have a complex way of understanding itself: 'it has an inner life, but that inner life is a product of the outer life and does not generate anything new' (Craib, 1998: 9).

It was this intriguing prospect of learning and discovering something new within the narrative accounts of how young people came to manage uncertainty and choice that confirmed my belief that I needed to take seriously the ability of individuals to be 'adequate' interpreters of their own situations. One social theorist who has taken seriously the damaging experiential effects of contemporary flexible capitalism is Richard Sennett (1998; 2006). His work explores the impact of the decline of long-term stability in the labour market and the rise of flexible working patterns on a generation of workers older than those in my research. These changes, Sennett argues, see the workers lose the ability to generate a coherent sense of self (character) as they try and negotiate the dissonance generated by the new working conditions of capitalism. Instability, unemployment and re-skilling become an all too real reality for a generation of workers who relied upon and expected long-term work and stability to be integral narrative auspices. While in agreement with a lot of what he argues, his account is tinged with a lingering melancholy for a way of life that preceded the era of flexible capitalism. This overshadows and limits the application of his arguments to the young people I am interested in because the generation of workers he speaks to, and of, had grown up expecting stability in terms of work, family, community etc through which stable narratives and lives could be built.

Sennett's thought, based upon empirical referents that are anecdotal or highly selective (Wajcman & Martin, 2002: 986), works with the assumption that work is the key aspect in how individuals in modern societies can construct a sense of self. Meaning is located in the public sphere via work. As such, his account of the corrosive effects of capitalism on identity also fails – like Giddens' and Rose's – to give an account of the subjective way individuals 'internally' and subjectively can appropriate 'difficult' times; engaging them in trying and

working something new out for themselves. For Sennett, 'internal' and personal struggles smack of narcissism cut off from the external, public world. Yet my research is concerned with a younger generation's experience; those who have grown up with the contingencies of flexible capitalism as their norm whereby they have not expected long-term stability in the workplace and taken as read the need to be resourceful and proactive in constructing their 'character'.

McRobbie (2002) herself draws attention to this problem in solely seeing the potentially corrosive effects Sennett identifies for selfhood as characterising the experience of being alive today. McRobbie points to the fact that Sennett fails to investigate (or consider) how these problems play out for younger individuals (she suggests those under 40) when the predicaments of 'fragmented selves no longer capable of telling a whole story, … deprived of social bonds' (i.e. 'non-careers') actually becomes the norm, and for whom flexible working conditions are the accepted part of the new economy and are increasingly framed by the entrepreneurialising discourses of government (p. 105-06). While reading Sennett's work was important and influential on my thinking there was always a feeling I had that it was speaking to a different generation and I wondered instead of this mourning for forms of work lost that there was another, more positive, story to be told that, perhaps in large part, became possible because of self-same changes Sennett scorns.

Potential – reacting and thinking differently?

The sense of being at a loss as to what to do, generated in part by the sense of feeling there are too many things one could do, is, of course, a function of a particular privileged class moment through which certain expectations meet with feeling of potential and capabilities generated through a university education. Leaving aside these more materialistic aspirations in terms of jobs and earning, I became interested in what sort of subjective possibilities these young people had potentially gained through the decline of older 'repressive' regimes of subjectification associated with the more solid or heavy forms of modernity (Bauman, 2000).

Rationalised time enabled people to think about their lives as linear narratives with an enduring sense of purpose anchored in the steadiness of organisational and bureaucratic cultural frames of reference (Sennett, 2006: 23).

In part influenced through my reading of, and thinking with, Heidegger, I become interested in trying to consider more metaphysical concerns in the way Lash (2002: 68) suggested postmodern times were characterised by a new indeterminacy of being and instrumental reason that raised 'the question of existential meaning, of the meaning of being'. This 'turn-to-life' (Heelas, 2002) and what Vattimo (1992) has called the potential 'emancipatory confusion of dialects', in the way that postmodern societies bring an end to progressive unilinearity of knowledge and understanding, interested me as a possible way of approaching young peoples' experiences and reactions to the new uncertainties and insecurities their generation faced. Spinosa et al's (1997) ideas around entrepreneurial skills as ways to 'disclose new worlds' furthered my sense that there was a interesting case to be made for considering how young people coped with contingency and new choices given the emphasis and attempts made to make them conduct themselves enterprisingly. Some of Heller's thought (1989; 1995; 1996) also preoccupied me for a time; especially her engagement with the idea of contemporary contingency freeing the individual for authentic choice-making.

During the process of conducting interviews and supervision discussions about the transcripts these interests proved tangential to maintaining a focus on the experience of young people and came with the danger of staying at the rarefied and grandiose level of theoretical speculation, which I had originally wanted to avoid. It was really only in considering the thought of Craib and Elliott that I helped re-ground my research and focus. Both thinkers want to try and give an 'adequate' account of how the human subject comes to make sense of social transformations and accord some transformative power to subjectivity within the social discourses it is 'made up' in (Elliott, 2004: 72). Burkitt (2008) also argues for a new way of understanding the 'self' that has diverse bases from which it can develop critical ideas and alternative ways of understanding and valuing itself in contradiction to the way in which the idea of self can be synonymous with 'subjectivity' which implies subjugation to others,

institutions and power (control and domination). Rather, he suggests, contemporary subjects emerge in diverse and heterogeneous networks of power that are official and unofficial, and set within competing ideologies located in various cultures, subcultures and groups whereby 'selves' that are created through this are always 'unfinalised' (p. 242). It was ideas like these that helped me feel more alive to the rich and valuable empirical material I had started to record in the interviews. There was much to be understood from young people's reactions and coping strategies in relation to uncertainty and anxiety, in ways that went beyond just understanding their lives in terms of reflexivity or regulation.

Disorientation and a new individualism

> I don't really know what I want to do. I just don't know whether if what I am doing is the right thing for me but I wouldn't know whether what is the right thing necessarily for me to be doing. It would be nice to have the confidence to know what you are doing is right (Rebecca, 44-47).

Elliott (2004), arguing from a psychoanalytically informed position, helped me come to consider the ways in which the social transformations that had fragmented and disrupted young people's transitions do not have to initiate mourning for lost times. Instead he argues the ensuing disorientation caused by social change and the 'disintegration of self provides the necessary representational basis for fresh thoughts and feelings', breaking from the hegemony of modernist codes and blueprints through the creative use of imagination and desire (p. 118-119). Ambiguity and confusion come to be central features of life and are tolerated rather than assigned a negative value as pluralism and contingency come to define identity (ibid.). Elliott contends that new 'creative forms' of living could emerge as individuals become more aware of the unconscious realm of representational contingency which can be reflexively turned back upon itself generating new, multiple ways of making meaning and personal significance (p. 130-131).

In a throwback to Heidegger, Elliott also gives anxiety an important role as new levels of it are created by the experience of fragmentation yet become 'regrooved' into everyday life and become a reflexive resource for thinking and initiating new feelings, moods and dispositions

(Elliott also calls this 'reflexive scanning' which I discuss later). A consequence of this is the ability of postmodern individuals to generate a 'psychic capacity' to tolerate contingency and providing new ways of doing and being: 'possibilities of existence different from those previously imagined' (p. 128-132). This is in keeping with Craib's (1998: 174) understanding of the experience of identity as a psychic capacity that can be closed down or opened up more dependent upon an individual's social circumstances.

This idea of a self goes beyond traditional ways of understanding identity that are to do with efficacy and rationality. Instead it hints at what Elliott and Lemert (2006) call the 'interiors of a new individualism'. This involves *ongoing emotional struggles* to relate internal and external experience in which both processes and structures of self-definition are explicitly examined, revised and transformed (p. 72). This is a dynamic process which brings together the psyche and social – normally separated – involving the internal re-imaginings of the self. There is an endless cross-referencing of experience against the 'operations of fantasy' and unconscious contortions (p. 73). While these ideas themselves are highly speculative they do provide a more nuanced way of trying to understand and interpret the emotional struggles of those I had spoken to.

It also supported a way of thinking about self-identity in contemporary times in keeping with Craib's (1994) argument that these struggles could represent a possibility for the emergence of something different to the illusory omnipotent self that the market and consumerism perpetuate. Whilst anxiety can act as a push towards over-identification with a job or some external confirmation of identity (a 'false' self) what is needed is proper recognition of emotional *disappointment* that comes from failing to meet the desire for narcissistic satisfaction (p. 179). A disappointed self is one that foregoes the attempt to change what cannot be changed and instead seeks to think differently and find an alternative rationality to live by. Craib likens it to the 'recognition of one's shadow, the integration of the 'bad' and through this the recognition of one's own limitations (p. 176). This 'disappointed' form of thinking involves toleration of, and ability to think about, internal conflicts, to recognise the

complexity and allow that play, with perhaps something novel emerging. It is not about ego-centric, calculative goal-orientation or reason finding presupposed by Giddens.

Having discussed how and why the research took the shape it did and the various theoretical twists and turns involved I now move onto discuss in more detail the specifics of the actual research process starting with who it was I spoke to and the social and political context of the time it was done in.

Talking to whom?

> The central social narrative of our childhood and early adulthood was the fairy tale of perpetual economic growth … if you tried really hard you, too, could be one of the lucky few racing up the exhilarating slopes of wealth and progress (Penny, 2010b: 136-37).

Having decided that I wanted to focus the research around young people's struggles with choice, uncertainty and anxiety post-education I was then left with the task of finding some young people to talk to. Taking my cue from the Quarterlife Crisis that was said to afflict those entering the job market and in particular recent graduates, and my earlier attempt at talking to young people involved with enterprise training having failed, I decided that I would focus on those members of a younger generation who had recently made, or were in the process of making, the transition from education to work. In this sense it was a strategic decision to concentrate on these individuals because according to the sociological literature and Quarterlife Crisis material these were the young people must likely to be experiencing the sorts of 'identity-troubles' I wanted to explore.

The notion of identity problems invoked by the idea of a Quarterlife Crisis did not locate it within a specific group of young people but it was clear from the self-help guides and other material that it did have a certain middle-class bias or at least those that had continued in education well past their GCSE's. The sample I eventually generated reflected this class bias. It was also an exclusively white sample which was not an intention but a result of the networks I tapped into. Aside from wanting to ensure a balance in terms of gender in the sample I did

not set out to specify any further aspects in terms of who I interviewed. As an exploratory piece of research I did not seek to map a specific group of young people or those working in a certain sector of the economy. Instead the thesis sought to explore a range of responses to the sorts of identity problems that have theoretically been argued to characterise the development of late modernity/postmodern society.

Taking a lead once more from the supposed identity crisis of young people in terms of struggling to know what they wanted to be or who they were, I used a loose definition for those in my sample – *twentysomethings*. There is a literal and latent meaning behind my use of 'twenty-something'. Initially, it refers to the basic fact that the people of my research are aged twenty-*something* – aged between 23 and 30. The second, more latent meaning which I imply in using the term is that these individuals are '*some-thing'* i.e. they are not all in the same type of job or industry and also refers to the absence of assurance in who they are outside of their 'objective' job title or label. By using the term, I hoped to capture the sense of existential contingency around the lack of a normative sense of identity that the Quarterlife Crisis had labelled. It was also clear from the literature around this identity crisis, meant to be afflicting young people, that it was not solely about work.[12]

As the testament of Catalina showed, it was a more holistic sense of self that was in trouble, which transcended a specific job and was more to do with uncertain transitions to what appear now to be contingent markers of traditional adult status: a full-time job, marriage, home-ownership and family. This is not to dismiss the continued importance of work in the lives of young people (Ball, 1999; Roberts, 1995) but to draw attention to the new problematic status and position of work in young people's lives (Bennett, 2008; Cannon, 1995a; Heiman, 2001) and the changed nature of the transitions from school to work (Bradley & Devadason, 2008). I also feared that if I had selected a certain sector of the workforce to

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[12] British Social Attitudes Survey show that in 1993, 58 per cent of the 18-24 age group and 57 per cent of the 25–34 group were not prepared to let their commitment to work interfere with their lives. Only 37 per cent of the 45–54 age group showed this sort of reluctance (quoted in Pahl, R, 1995: 51).

concentrate on then the thesis would have become as much about the changing nature of work as it would have been about the particular subjective struggles I was interested in.

Further to this was the way in which those 'suffering' with a Quarterlife Crisis were generally in 'good', well-paid jobs. This was not the issue. The problem arises from the tension that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have recognised in the demand for a consistent authentic self that can find expression and fulfilment in work by young people being compromised through the contemporary nature of work that demands flexibility and adaptability, which generates inconsistency.[13] Here was a mismatch between young people's internal desires and external realities, which generated and required 'mental readjustment' and, once more, hinted to me the importance of the thinking of theorists like Elliott and Craib.

One further coincidental thing which confirmed my approach was reading a Sunday broadsheet's 'agony aunt' column which was about a young, male twentysomething Londoner who was in complete disarray and dismay at the state of his life and felt an inability to make any kind of decision to change it (the article is reproduced in the appendix). Remarking on this letter to my flatmate of the time, it turned out that it was my flatmate's friend that had sheepishly admitted writing the letter to him. I had met him on a number of occasions previously and what I felt was significant was that it served to show that this young man, on paper, was a successful graduate living and working in London yet was confused and uncertain. He was struggling to reconcile the expectations he had about what he felt he should be doing (doing and achieving great things) and the reality of his life which gave him what he felt was no secure reason to be doing one thing over the other. As he complained in his letter: "How can I commit to anything when I know I haven't stuck at very much for most of my life?" I reasoned that if I could find other such young individuals willing to talk to me I could generate an interesting sample.

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[13] A recently publish e-book about how to secure meaningful work asked, 'How can people my age, in their twenties and thirties, find a balance between the lifestyle they desire, the career they want and the change they want to invoke in this world? And why hasn't anyone figured this out?' (DreamNow.org, 2008).

The sample

I generated a sample of twenty young people through strategic snowballing (Mason, 2005: 123) or what could be called purposive sampling (Arber, 2001). This had the aim of selecting or focusing on 'information rich' subjects relevant to the research interests of the thesis. I initially started with interviewing acquaintances of work colleagues and friends whom having spoken to me about my research then recommended individuals they thought were suffering from 'identity troubles'. I also drafted an email for them to forward on to others they thought might be interested. Through this I was able to tap into a number of friendship networks all located within the southeast of England, primarily in London. The residing location of the sample is important because it was the southeast of the UK and in particular London that enjoyed most of the benefits of the sustained period of employment growth and expanding economy from the late nineties onward. London was, and still is, one of the key nodes in the network of neoliberal cities that benefited greatly from the 'success' of market deregulation (Massey, 2007; Sassen, 2001). I am sure there would be a different story to be told if my sample had come from parts of de-industrialised north England.

I did not specify or seek people doing certain types of work or working in particular sectors of the economy. My reason for this was because research showed that this 'malaise' felt by twentysomethings was not specific to an area of the economy nor did it entirely revolve around work. However, as Table 1 (below) shows the majority of those I ended up speaking to were based within the tertiary service sector. Three worked in or with law, five worked in what could loosely be called a 'corporate or business' environment. Six were either in further training, interning or seeking employment having failed to find the 'right' job. Two worked in a 'creative' sector and a further two were self-employed. Of the remainder there was a journalist and charity office manager. Most of these areas had been effected by the reform of working practices and cultures discussed in the previous chapter which undermined long-term security and a certain sense of 'place' in a hierarchy. This is significant in relation to the findings of the research which shows the uncertain work experiences and difficulties these members of the next generation of the professional class (given their class location) have had

and what it means for the forms of commitment to, and legitimation of, the capitalist system, which Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue is complicit with the reproduction of it.

The only requirement was that they were aged between twenty and thirty and that the issues I had outlined resonated with them. I also posted a notice on Goldsmiths university alumni website and had one response from a young woman but she was moving away and we could not find time to meet up and talk. Of the sample of twenty individuals eleven were women. A fifth of the sample were Oxbridge graduates. All were white and aside from one firmly working class respondent the others could be identified as either lower middle class or firmly middle class with parents working in traditional professions (law, medicine, architecture). This, of course, places certain restrictions and boundaries around how applicable the findings and issues discussed represent a wider, more general, problem with young people's transitions.

Of the twenty twentysomethings in the research only two had not been to university or completed degrees (these had been to FE colleges). The rest were graduates: graduates were prevalent among those mentioned in the discussion around the Quarterlife Crisis so it made sense for me to focus the generation of a sample around them. Being based in London and the southeast meant there was no shortage of graduates. If I had focused on a specific industry sector I could have potentially generated a sample with greater ease (e.g. approaching certain companies, organisations or associations), and potentially one more representative, but with the sample I generated I got a broader spectrum of respondents and therefore a richer diversity of personal responses to uncertainty and anxiety (Miller & Crabtree, 1999: 96). While a 'limited' sample, in one sense, it had certain characteristics that were likely to help toward theory generation (Seale & Filmer, 1998).

Table 1: Interview sample details

Name	Age	Occupation	First to uni	Studied	Post-grad	Home again	Stop-gap
Alice	25	Recruitment/corporate head-hunter	Y	Foreign languages	N	Y	Y
Alistair	28	Self-employed sound engineer	?	Computer science	Y	N	N
Beth	26	Furniture store layout designer	Y	Textile design	N	Y	Y
Corinne	25	Artist/Assistant theatre director	N	Fine Art	Y	Y(?)	N
Dan	26	Self-employed painter and decorator		N/A	N	N	N
Ellie	24	Waiting for MA to start	Y	Art	Y	Y	Y
Gareth	25	Unemployed/intern at think-tank	N	PPE	Y	Y	Y
Hannah	25	Journalist for London paper	N	English	Y	Y	N
Helen	25	Paid intern at NGO	N	Maths	Y	Y	Y
Jason	25	Patent Attorney	N	Chemical Sciences	Y	N	N
Jenni	26	Unemployed. Bkgrd in fashion/design	N	Textile design	N	Y	Y
Jo	25	Administrator for venture capitalist company	Y	English	N	?	Y
Martin	26	Solicitor	Y	Law	N	N	N
Mary	25	Office manager, women's media company	Y	Sociology & comms	Y	Y	N
Mary (2nd I/V)	26	Office manager, gay/lesbian housing assoc.					
Rebecca	29	Pension solicitor	Y	Law	?	N	N
Richard	23	Corporate relocation administrator	Y	P'graphy	N	Y	Y
Robert	26	Recruitment agent	Y	Psych.	N	N	N
Sara	24	Media intern at BBC	N	Int. Rel.	Y	?	N
Tom	26	Charity corporate fundraiser	Y	Biology	Y	Y	N
Trevor	25	Training to be a plumber	?	Performing arts	N	Y	Y

Timing of the research

This research was conducted and completed before the economic crisis of late 2008 and therefore a word needs to said about the political, economic and social timing of the project. Mannheim's (1952) thought on generations as particular social phenomena representing

particular identity positions helped me understand this more. Following Mannheim, those in this research are members of an age-related group embedded within a particular historical process. This specific generational location in a historical structure sets the parameters of individual experience and helps establish a distinct generational consciousness formed through exposure to events and experiences unique to that time. Certain dispositions and approaches are contained within this collective consciousness which Mannheim understands as 'potentialities' that, depending on the pace of social change, can be realised more slowly or quickly through the 'fresh contact' each generation has with the existing social and cultural heritage. A new generational consciousness emerges when there is 'a quite visible striking transformation of the consciousness of the individual … a change not merely in the content of experience, but in the individual's mental and spiritual adjustment to it' (1952: 293).

Generations can also be formed around dramatic events that have occurred and given a defining form to the times of people. For the twentysomething generation 9/11, 7/7 and, earlier, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and subsequent ending of the Cold War stand out as possible unifying events that helped shaped a particular collective consciousness. For those young people entering or leaving Higher Education now the economic crisis and ensuring recession will surely serve a key event in their generational consciousness and adaptation to 'new times'. For those in this research I argue that what the struggles and difficulties the Quarterlife Crisis bear witness to is part of a process of mental adjustment that some are trying to make to their uncertain circumstances post-education. I now want to say something about the circumstances surrounding work, technology, class, choice and gender before moving on to the political climate of the time that helps define the 'parameters of experience' of those I spoke to.

Work

> There are no real defined jobs anymore. It's a bit random (Trevor: 350)

> You have got to, sort of, figure it out for yourself (Hannah: 396)

These two brief snippets of quotes from two individuals I spoke to neatly capture how the labour market and work looked to them upon leaving education. Compared to Trevor's grandfather who had worked all his life as a 'chippie' in the Belfast shipyard, much of the work they saw on offer looked 'vague' and involved what one described as 'sitting on stools at computers'. Further to this, Trevor, as a non-graduate, believed many graduate level jobs did not require any specialist skills and he was confident he could 'blag' his way through half of them. Leaving education and entering the 'knowledge economy' those in this research were met with a 'complex typology of graduate jobs' as traditional destinations of established professions have been complemented by the emergence of 'modern graduate occupations' in new professions such as management, IT and creative vocational sector; 'new' and 'niche' occupations in marketing, sales, advertising and social work; as well as a growing number of graduates occupying 'non-graduate' occupations (Margo, 2006: 79). Acknowledging this one respondent told me:

> Now I think there is too much choice. It is quite over whelming. I mean you can't say there is too much choice but there is just a lot. There are so many different things that you could do (Hannah, 410-412).

Work no longer provided an automatic functional integration into the economy and society as perhaps it once did. The consequence of this was a loss of direction or drive for a specific profession:

> I have never really formed an idea of what I want to do in the long term and I have never really worked towards anything. I have never settled into one particular idea of what I want to do …(Gareth, 91-94).

Coupled to this amorphousness for some was the feeling of overwhelming choice of things they could do; as Jo reiterated earlier, 'suddenly you've got hundreds of choices'. There was a real sense in those I spoke to of the range of possibilities that getting a degree would open up. It was in many ways a problem of the abundance of choice that these young people felt they had in the labour market, rather than a dearth of jobs, that marks this particular cohort out compared to previous generations of young people. Graduates leaving now in 2010 face a much harsher climate. The buoyancy of the job-market and economy that marked the last

few years of twentieth century and beginning of the twentieth-first defined their circumstances. This was arguably the culmination and peak-point of effects of the neoliberal reforms that had been introduced in the 1970s and early 1980s by the Thatcher government and eagerly embraced and continued by New Labour.

However, go back a generation to those young people leaving university and school in the 1980s and there is a very different story to be told: not one of choosing from a glut of jobs or feelings of 'anything is possible'. This period was defined by growing fear and anxiety about youth unemployment as the very economic restructuring that arguably brought the sorts of jobs and possibilities to the young people in this research started to take drastic effect on traditional areas of the economy that had provided occupations for young people. Neoliberal market reform transformed the youth labour market bringing with it the highest levels of youth unemployment in the post-war period (France, 2007: 18). Jobs were few and far between for young people. The government response was to expand youth training, provide more re-skilling/vocational programmes with a corresponding deregulation of the youth market combined with removing welfare benefits to young people that were seen as stopping them taking up lower paid jobs (p. 19). The problem for this generation of young people, and perhaps those now leaving education post the economic crisis of 2008, was a dearth of jobs and opportunities. The warning signs for the contemporary generation of young people are there now too, with emergence of mass youth unemployment on a scale not seen since the early 1990s (Travis, 2009b).

Technology

This group of young people and timing of the research pre-empt the widespread onset of web 2.0 network sites and technologies (facebook, myspace, iphones and smartphones etc.) as essential mediums for establishing and maintaining contacts with friends and acquaintances in their close vicinity and further a field. While mobile phone technology and internet use was firmly established, with consequences for the time, space and content of reflexivity (Lash, 2002; 2003), the manner in which relationships with others and work were mediated is arguably different to those that are now always 'logged on'. None for instance owned or used

a Blackberry, one (Alistair) had been given a pager for when he was 'on call', which enabled them to be 'off-line' or 'switched off' from work when they were away from it. This had consequences in terms of helping to maintain and establish the boundaries between work and the self. Speculatively it is interesting to think what the impact of social network sites and their ability to aid collective gathering around issues or interests, and sharing of concerns, would have had on the difficulties and individualised responses of these twentysomethings.

Social class and choice

It would be remiss to state that the sorts of possibilities in terms of jobs that the twentysomethings felt they had were the same for all their age-cohort. As this quote makes clear:

> Young people can struggle to establish adult identities and maintain coherent biographies, they may develop strategies to overcome various obstacles, but their chances remain highly structured with social class and gender being critical to an understanding of experiences in a range of life contexts (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997: 109)

Socio-economic and cultural change has meant young people's agency is more important in determining their outcomes throughout life in education, work and in their communities. For those with the capacity and capital to take advantage of these changes and expanding opportunities it has led to improved outcomes but for those that cannot it leaves them even further behind and disadvantaged (Margo, 2006: 3). The vast majority of those I spoke to could be identified as having middle-class backgrounds and that, combined with a university education, brings what Skeggs (2004) argues to be a sense of entitlement and expectation that nothing is really out of reach for them. Below are some statements from the interviews that display a certain form of class entitlement and presumption of access to choice and an ability to choose and capitalise, personally, on the opportunities they have been given (which many do not have access too):

> There is this idea, for a lot of people, well for me and my group of friends that we can do anything that we set our minds too, which is a fucking massive pool of things that we could do and so, it's just.. and we should travel and see the world and we *must* travel because this is an opportunity that other people didn't have (Alice, age 25: 823-833).

> Be able to go to uni, basically have a great time, do what degree you want to, finish and then go, "Right, what do I want to do?" (Tom, age 26: 240-241)

While there is disorientation and struggle to work out what to do most of the young people in this research could be considered the 'reflexivity winners' of the new economy as their middle-class habitus, resources and social networks correlate directly onto the forms of individuality now defining capitalism and which require the ability to be reflexive, mobile and self-narrate (Skeggs, 2004). Although almost half of the sample were the first of their immediate family to go to university, in the main, they all fall into the group Bynner et al. (1997) say 'get on'; they are the 'high-fliers' with qualifications, skills and personal circumstances to take advantages of recent changes.

Gender

The differing forms of negotiation of uncertainty and choice by the twentysomethings are shaped and defined not only by being embedded in a particular economic moment and class background but also by the way the experience of gender has changed for this generation. A widely held view of recent transformations in the economy posits men as 'losers' (and in crisis) and women as 'winners'. Young women emerge as the 'ideal neo-liberal subject' for post-industrial times (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008: 52). Young men are dispossessed, haunting a de-industrialised landscape, while young women appear to take centre stage in the reconfiguration of labour patterns, consumption practices and gender roles. Change in work and the economy are argued to have unshackled women from patriarchal past as post-industrial work and the 'feminisation' of labour holds young women as ideal – flexible, presentable and capable – workers. No longer beholden to the male breadwinner they become economically independent and liberated from the confines of the domestic sphere and, aided by reproductive technologies, can realise the possibility of 'having it all' and 'doing it all'.

The men in the research did not refer directly to gender 'troubles', as some of the women did, but in their stories and experiences, compared to grandfathers and fathers, it was clear new

uncertainties prevailed in their transitions to manhood. In part this was around the decline of traditional work that used to sustain male identities as providers, which also ended the handing down of knowledge and skills from father to son (Seidler, 2006). This problematised the model of masculinity they inherited from their fathers because as men it quickly became obvious that they could not 'control' their experiences in ways that they felt their fathers had. Tom, in particular, talked about how he missed the 'grand narratives' (the second world war and the subsequent Cold War) that he assumed had shaped his grandfathers life. These young men were having to come to terms with engaging with, and articulating, their sense of confusion and feelings that threw into doubt some of the masculine traits they had learnt as a young boys: 'independence', 'self-sufficiency and 'rationality'. They had difficulty in reconciling a strong desire to control their transitions with a new need to engage with their emotions (anger and disillusionment) and anxieties their situations provoked.

The young women emerged from education into a 'new girl order' (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008) in which women are cast first as 'worker' and secondarily as mother (Power, 2009: 20). The position and experiences of young women in the sample generally support these theories about the changing position and status of women. Their voices echo the post-feminist moment that some argue characterises the younger women of today and presumes the battle for gender equality has been won (McRobbie, 2004; Ringrose, 2007):

> I don't really feel anything is really closed off from me (Sara, 81).

> I have been given all these choices …I've got too many options and too *many* opportunities (Alice, 728-734).

There is now a feeling that all young women's practices can be freely chosen and women are now presented as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances (Gill, 2007: 153). In many respects the women in this research meet the criteria of those that McRobbie (2007) identifies as 'Top Girls': increasingly well-educated women charged with the responsibility of performing as economically active citizens (in government discourse economic capacity replaces women's former reproductive capacity) and are invited to recognise themselves as privileged subjects of capacity and social change – the 'can do' girl

(p. 722). Gill (2007: 154) sees in this a 'striking fit' between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism both of which are marked by the narrative of free choice and autonomy.

This is, of course, tempered through class with those in the middle classes helping to construct a new competitive elite. Class background is still a key indicator of future success with those upper and middle class young women with the right resources, connections and social capital invariably able to make the most of their chances (Aapola et al., 2005: 68). Having benefited from equal opportunities there is now no longer any need for recourse to outdated feminist thought as a post-feminist masquerade comes into operation, which posits the continued presence of formerly traditional forms of femininity and presentation as a matter of free choice rather than obligation. The hyper-femininity now often on display is deeply ambivalent and ironically, as McRobbie (2007: 723) argues, serves to re-stabilise gender hierarchies and is reinforced by what Gill (2007) calls a postfeminist sensibility.

The women I spoke to, perhaps members of the first generation to grow up with a (formal) sense of gender equality, felt a pressure to succeed and had a sense of privilege in relation to the new 'freedoms' that had, unencumbered from the traditional gendered expectations that characterised their mother's lives. Explicit experiences of gender differences have fallen away as a sense of equality replaces them and so with it has gone a (feminist) language to articulate the way in which their gender does remain an important influence in their lives. It is clear from the research that gender does remain an importance influence on experience: the desire some had to marry and start a family created tension with the new imperative to succeed economically in a job; by wanting to get married and have children they felt a sense of betrayal to those women who never had such potential choices. In relation to the men in the sample the most telling differences emerged when they talked and reflected about their work experiences – struggling to find something they wanted to do from a range of different things they had done – compared to their grandfathers most of whom could not understand their struggles and had worked in 'proper' jobs their whole lives.

Politics and Higher Education

> Everyone was still exhilarated by New Labour as we streamed out of school, some into work but record numbers into higher education. By the time we graduated, Britain was experiencing its largest economic boom for decades. Like many others born then, by the time I emerged into adulthood, it was with a certain sense of optimism (Asthana, 2010).

These twentysomethings came of age in the New Labour era. I finished my undergraduate degree two years after Tony Blair had stepped into number 10 and, equipped with my degree, felt flush with possibilities. Nearly all of those in this research left education a few years after me. New Labour's commitment to increase employment opportunities and improve the 'employability' of the young saw youth unemployment fall by 2004 to its lowest rate since 1975 (France, 2007: 65). This does not mean the fragmented and disjointed transitions disappeared – in fact they continued to get worse (Quintini et al., 2007). Rather New Labour instilled an elusive and élan discourse around creating a well-educated workforce fit for the twenty-first century economy centred around individual responsibility and choice and the proposal that 50 per cent of all young people aged 18-30, by 2010, should have been to university. Young people felt a sense of optimism about their future in terms of possibilities, which were reflected in the claims made by colleges and universities that boasted of their qualification offering 'endless possibilities' and high levels of graduate employment six months after completion.[14] This optimism and expectant sense of success rubbed off onto those in this research:

> So you all have this idea that you go to university and you are told … you kind of, I suppose you feel that you can do anything, to a certain degree (Jo, 228-230).

It remains to be seen what will happen in the near future with young people as they experience the downturn in jobs and opportunities first hand as they leave university: will the highly individualised responses and post-collective politics that characterised those in this

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[14] Hackney Community College claiming that for their students, 'The possibilities are endless' while the University of East London boasts of the 93% of its graduates that are in work (or further studies) within six months of completing their degree.

research give way to a new (re-awakened) inclusive political response to the cuts and sacrifices they are expected to bear?

Going back to Mannheim's understanding of generations as an age-related group embedded within a particular historical process, that sets in place a collective consciousness defined through events and experiences in their formative years, and discussing briefly some of the key attributes of those I spoke to has helped to contextualise the forms of difficulties and struggles that the thesis explores. Entering a labour market buoyant with job opportunities (albeit 'vague' ones) and largely coming from a fairly privileged class background that combined with a good education helped instil sense of 'entitlement' and capacity to be able to actualise one's desires and choices, meant the twentysomethings had high hopes for their futures. Added to this for the women was the way in which recent transformations in work and gender expectations positioned and endowed them with capacities to become the new ideal post-Fordist professional. Finally the political zeitgeist of the time helped instil a sense that the world lay at their feet. Before discussing the rather different reality they encountered and the problems that caused, I want to say a bit about the interview process and the way I went about analysing the transcripts.

Talking with twentysomethings

The interviewing process took a considerable amount of time with bursts of interviewing as I tapped into a network, and was recommended likely individuals to talk to, followed by 'dormant' periods as respondents dried up. These gaps were helpful in giving me space and time to process and think with the material, allowing me to reflect on what issues were arising and aiding me in shaping future areas to focus on in subsequent interviews. Supervision discussions were of particular help and influence in exploring issues and tensions in the twentysomethings' narratives. The interviews were conducted consistent with the principles of in-depth interviewing (Johnson, 2002). The interview situation differed significantly from a traditional interview in which the respondent is 'mined' for information to be 'extracted'. I viewed the interview as 'a partnership on a conversational journey' (Miller & Crabtree, 1999:

89) which sought to build a 'kind of intimacy common for mutual self-disclosure' (Johnson, 2002: 103).

As such the interviews resembled something more like the forms of talking that can occur between friends and in the process aim to discuss 'deep' information and knowledge (Johnson, 2002: 104). A few of the respondents I had previously met before socially so there was a preliminary pre-existing connection prior to some of the interviews. In the case of my research I was interested in talking and learning about personal matters of anxiety and uncertainty to do with their personal sense of self, their experience of leaving university/education and some of the decisions that informed their attempts to make the transition to 'adulthood'. These, of course, were areas that were potentially emotionally charged and while no one I spoke to declined to talk about these areas some acknowledged to me after the interview how good it had been to have had the time and space to openly discuss the issues that were raised. Very often it was the first time they had talked about them to someone else. I think my status as a social researcher somehow helped enable them to take seriously their anxieties.

Me in the research

It was at this point in the research that my own position and status as a young person, nearing the end of my twenties myself, became very important for the interview process and one my own experiences become implicated in. There were two aspects to this: one, what I actually heard in the interviews themselves and subsequent analysis because of my own 'close' standpoint to those I spoke to and, two, in an attempt to gain a 'deep' level of knowledge and understanding of those I talked to, the way in which I was personally involved in, what Johnson (2002: 109) calls, a 'strict reciprocity' whereby I decided I would share my own feelings and experiences related to the topics we discussed. Researchers can all suffer from not necessarily 'hearing' what their informants tell them, but only what their own intellectual and

ethical development has prepared them to hear (Johnson, 2002: 106).[15] With regard to 'hearing' in the interviews and analysis a problem could have arisen because of my own possession of experiential knowledge of the issues I was interested in; a result of having been a 'twentysomething' and endured doubt and uncertainty about my own future. A problem I was alive to was how that experiential knowledge could be taken for granted in the form of tacit assumptions made by both myself and the respondent which could leave important avenues or issues not fully disclosed and discussed. One way I tried to get around this was by reflecting on the experiences I had shared, and examining my early interviews for how I interacted with the respondent and looking for those moments of things going unsaid or unexplored more fully because there was an assumed tacit understanding on both sides.

Deciding to draw upon and share some of my own experiences and feelings – a form of reciprocity – seemed a logical decision to make before doing the interviews. I did so because I felt it would help transcend the outsider/researcher versus insider/research subject dichotomy and power imbalance (see Skeggs, 2002) that can often exist in social research creating a barrier that can affect the outcome of the interview. I hoped it would help build trust and rapport and put the respondents at 'ease' in terms of showing them I knew and understood what they were talking about. I also hoped it would off-set the risk of the narratives and stories produced being of conventional and formulaic form or sticking to 'safe' established story-lines that failed to 'wander off' into uncharted territory.[16] In doing this I hoped that both my own and respondent's drawing upon some common knowledge and shared experiences we could co-produce and generate a rich narrative that helped illuminate and explore the multiple issues my research was interested in. There are problems with these assumptions

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[15] Some of my early analysis was spent trying to import and find examples of anxiety and potential that confirmed my initial Heideggerian inspired reading of these concepts. However it quickly became clear that this was importing a quite foreign understanding of the twentysomethings' issues and inhibiting a 'proper' listening. Consequently Heidegger has taken a back seat in the analysis.

[16] On more than one occasion at the end of an interview a respondent would remark to me about the uniqueness of experience that was the interview. Often saying that it was the first time they had really sat and discussed or aired these thoughts and never really tried, or been asked, to verbalise and 'structure' their thoughts about their present life situation. In some this provoked anxiety and would ask 'I must sound mad?!' or 'Am I making any sense? Is this ok?' as they struggled to put into words feelings and thoughts that had been 'knocking around' inside their heads.

though as Valentine (1998) makes clear. The non-neutrality of the researcher and their 'positionality' mean that the resulting knowledge is always the result of a performance of sameness and difference in the interview or research process. Identity and positioning in the interview are never a priori defined or apparent and play out in dynamic form in the interview. 'Closeness' cannot be assumed to equate to a full disclosure of thoughts and feelings because adverse views or opinions may be held back so not to break the illusion of sameness and connection. Conversely open difference can engender a frank discussion or a challenge to the interviewer resulting in a more open discussion (p. 123). Points of sameness and difference are consciously and unconsciously made throughout an interview; based not only on views expressed but also read off each other's performance (p. 121). All of which serves to complicate the presumed advantage of being an 'insider'.

All interviews were recorded and uploaded to my computer, made anonymous, and then transcribed. My approach to interviewing went well beyond positivist assumptions and objectives of traditional interviewing (Scheurich, 1997). I understood the interviews as a particular (unstable) moment for telling and generating a story that had no a priori, objective existence prior to the interview process and nor could I hope to 'discover' a true reality beyond the realm of our discussion.

Narratively speaking

> Our curse as humans is that we are trapped in time - our curse is that we are forced to interpret life as a sequence of events – a story – and that we can't figure out what our particular story is we feel lost somehow (Coupland, 1999: 181).

> You have got to, sort of, figure it out for yourself (Hannah: 396)

The interviews I conducted, having firstly explained issues of confidentiality and a little bit of background to the research, started with asking the respondent to tell me about their experiences since leaving education and any difficulties or problems they had had in making decisions about their future. With this rather general and open question I hoped to elicit a

narrative which, having carefully listened for interesting points of tensions during their original answer (in which I allowed them to continue uninterrupted until they came to a natural pause), could then be explored further through more directed questions and elaboration. It was the resultant narratives constructed that became my data for analysis. Immediately apparent was the existence of what could be called 'regressive' narratives in most of the transcripts which featured a 'course of deterioration or decline' (Elliott, 2005: 48) and told a story of how high expectations and aspirational feelings came to be compromised, complicated and, in some cases, eventually abandoned in light of the new uncertain realities they encountered. Without the institutional and organisational auspices earlier generations had to underpin their transitions I came to understand the twentysomethings' narratives as 'faltering' or 'disrupted', generating disharmony in their attempt to construct a coherent sense of self:

> I feel … I have felt completely lost at times and … you know, just recently, it's like, 'Who am I? What am I doing? What is my purpose?' (Beth, 434-435)

No longer having the sorts of 'genres' or 'plots' (Elliott, 2005: 46) – alluded to here by Beth - that would provide a culturally shared framework, helping to structure events and experience into meaningful narratives, meant emotional discord and cognitive dissonance was generated. However, the majority of the middle-class twentysomethings arguably had a pre-existing (idea for a) plot-line they expected to follow, shaped by their experiences of university and family background, into a decent professional job and join the expanding ranks of young men and women living in large cities, who cultivate a distinguished form of consumption of cultural goods, are single or cohabiting without children (Boltanski, 2002: 15).

The struggles for existential security I understood in terms of Elliott's and Lemert's (2006) 'new individualism' whereby a new interweaving of internal emotional and social struggles emerge and involve the interplay of psychic imagingings and anxieties. The narratives of the twentysomethings represented an attempt to adjust subjectively (internally) to a new 'objective outside'. This adjustment was further complicated by the breakdown of a sense of linear progression that is axiomatic to the reflexive construction of modern subjectivity. As

Heidegger (1962) makes clear in his notion of 'forestructure', the temporal basis to understanding and interpreting one's present and future is dependent upon the ability to project (existential) possibilities, available to oneself in the present that have been supplied by a secure past, into the future. When Beth, above, declares herself 'lost' and Tom says:

> In terms of thinking what am I going to be doing in five or ten years time I honestly just haven't got a clue (289)

then what is occurring is a scrambling of coordinates or axis points for young individuals that could help shape and secure their present and consequently offer some secure basis from which to go forward from. In this way Leccardi's (1988) claim that youth is no longer lived as a project in terms of a future, but more as a 'condition' comes to make sense (quoted in McDonald, 1999: 3). This is what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 421) had identified in their work as an 'elimination of the purchase that people can have on their social environment' as a means to project a future for themselves. The uncertainties of the immediate future which complicate the immediacy of the present open up spaces of variability and potential change (McNay, 1999a: 317) and also usher in an intensification of reflexivity and a personal interrogation in a search for new ways to justify and legitimate one choice over another:

> I am, and always have been a really analytical person anyway and I have always questioned what I am doing and why I am doing it and who I am and where I am going and stuff (Mary, 356-357)

One way of understanding this loss of traditional narratives and transitional paths to adulthood is to contextualise it within the notion of the foreclosing of what Guattari (2000) understands as existential refrains (as discussed earlier). The struggles and intense reflection that characterise the twentysomethings' lives speak of the difficulty they have in constructing a meaning-giving structure for their lives which is robust enough to withstand anxiety and uncertainty.

Narrative analysis in particular lends itself to the sorts of subjective issues that are central to this thesis and help explore what Craib (1998: 171) calls those 'peculiar conjunctions' where attempts at rational behaviour (in this case the quite reasonable hopes of leaving university and

searching for a job) meet the flow of feeling and unconscious processes. I take seriously the voices and narratives of these young individuals as indicative of the difficult experiences and psychosocial responses involved in trying to 'get on' today. It goes beyond the realms of understanding their lives as purely discursively framed by the governmentality of neoliberalism or as just engaged in a reflexive, calculative goal-oriented process. Freeman expresses this position well:

> Narratives are unquestionably *dependent* upon the present, they are not on that account strictly *bound* to it … narratives far from representing a defensive retreat from the threat of real life, may instead represent a desire to encounter it head-on, toward the end of understanding and explaining both one's past and present self better than had previously been possible (1993: 108).

Narrative analysis and positioning

Taking narratives seriously means giving prominence and relative agency to individual ability to constitute a self. It forges a new way of thinking about identity that 'simultaneously refuses the humanist tendency to assert the primacy of individual experiences and understandings' whilst avoiding the pitfalls of an over-determining structuralist account, which closes down room for agency (Elliott, 2005: 130). What it does do well is to go someway towards overcoming the persistent problem of the dualism between the self and structure in the social sciences. The recent 'narrative turn', that has come to see narrative 'everywhere' and in 'everything' (Andrews et al., 2000; Bruner, 1987; Burkitt, 2005; Carr, 1986; Franzosi, 1998; Freeman, 1993; Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Laslett, 1999; Munro Hendry, 2007; Riessman, 1993), comes to see the dichotomy of the individual and the social as opposite sides of the same coin (Denzin, 2000: xiii).

Reading through my interview transcripts my initial concern was with first-order narratives – the stories that the twentysomethings told about themselves and their own experiences, including details of their anxieties and struggles. It is this practical level of arrangement and construction of stories that constitutes individual identity (Elliott, 2005: 12-13), managing as it does the opposing forces of change and continuity through time. With continued reading

and analysing, certain themes and issues started to emerge that went across the individual interviews. Some of these I then fed back into the subsequent interviews I did in terms of asking specifically about them or helping to move the discussion towards those areas. While these first-order narratives helped me understand how the twentysomethings personally made sense of themselves and their circumstances, it is by thinking about the second-order narratives (accounts constructed by researchers to make sense of the social world) that could be told, within and across the interviews, that enabled me to analyse the impact of the social on the personal. These narrative identities were not free fictions but the product of an interaction between the cultural discourses which frame and provide structure for their narratives (Elliott, 2005: 127). As such narrative analysis lends itself to understanding how a culture 'speaks itself' (Riessman, 1993). Concentrating on narrative conceives of the human subject that is, at once, socially situated and culturally fashioned while, at the same time, the subject expresses a unique identity and agency that is singular to, but simultaneously time part of, local communities and discursive formations (Day Sclater, 2003).

In this sense then, I understood the twentysomethings lives as being discursively framed and positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) within the neoliberal valorisation of enterprise and entrepreneurialism that had informed the contemporary fabric of their lives and underpinned their passage through the education system (Austin, 2005; Rees & Rees, 1992). As explored in the first chapter, the concept and role of enterprise was to instil and provide certain capacities, abilities and 'narrative repertories' as the *most* effective means to conduct and understand oneself within the context and demands of the new economy (du Gay, 1991; Heelas, 1991; Keat & Abercrombie, 1991; Kelly, 2001; 2006; McRobbie, 2002; Newnham, 2001; Rose, 1992; 1996b; Thrift, 1997), that was increasingly devoid of traditional institutional settings and contexts that could provide cultural and material resources. As Rose (1999b) argues, there is a strong affinity between the new focus on the reflexive self as creative and choosing of it's own narratives and the neo-liberal modes of governance that induce subjects to think of themselves as free and autonomous. For him this is an effect of discourse and new forms of 'governed freedom' (Rose, 1999c). Yet far from passively taking up the advocated narrative forms and 'modes of conduct', human subjects are more likely to interpret and negotiate, or

even challenge and resist, the prescriptions for acting, thinking and feeling that dominant discourse imply (Day Sclater, 2000: 132). This was clearly in evidence with some of the twentysomethings, particularly in relation to their negotiation of their relationship with work.

Dynamic and transitional phenomena

> We need to conceive of narrative as a *dynamic process*; the practice of narration needs to be seen as, at once uniquely individual, yet social, cultural and interpersonal. Narration is a dynamic signifying practice that is the work of embodied human agents in cultural settings (Day Sclater, 2003).

While the lives of the twentysomethings might be shorn of the sorts of structures and organisations that helped provide narrative resources and frameworks for their parents and grandparents, it would be wrong to assume that their lives are devoid of materially grounded auspices – schools/universities, hospitals, counselling agencies, work etc. – that offer resources for 'making themselves up' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995: 565). Still, given the precarious situation of the twentysomethings and their faltering narratives, what becomes most apparent in their lives is a form of *interpretative practice.* This involves a persistent interplay between what is available (the specific discursively formed subjectivities) for conveying a story and how a particular individual narrative unfolds in practice (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Echoing Elliott's thought, Holstein and Gubrium's (2000: 104) insistence on this dynamic interplay means that difference is created in the individual stories that emerge; who and what we are is not frozen in available discourses. This is what Elliott (2005: 129) means by the 'active narrator' who is able to 'artfully construct' a story based upon their interpretations and experience, which involves 'narrative editing' and modification resulting in an identity that is never a 'static essence' but a dynamic accomplishment.

It is very much in this vein that I understand the narratives I have collected. Further, in keeping with the thought of Day-Sclater (1998; 2003), I see the narratives co-produced in the interviews as *transitional* phenomena and 'potential space' within which a self is constituted. Story-telling is very much a creative act on behalf of the individual enabling them to create objects, exert control over them and to manipulate in the service of the self. This is how, and

why, making sense by telling stories also facilitates the making of the self; both are creative experiences and invested with passion and the paradox of Winnicott's transitional phenomena.[17] The personal narratives we tell express this paradox, embodying as they do both separateness and union, inner and outer. For Winnicott, it is only in this paradoxical transitional space that the individual can truly be creative. The meaning invested in these transitional objects is emotional and relational, it is never fixed or unitary but fluid, shifting and multiple. And, arguably, it is only in being creative that the individual has any access at all to the self (Day Sclater, 1998: 88-89).

Finishing off

This dynamic and processional way of understanding narrative lent itself to my initial research interest of exploring the *potential* for personal transformation created by uncertain circumstances and the opportunities they offered for creating a different way of being and understanding one self that went beyond the modernist ideals of selfhood. Yet as I worked with the interviews and talked to young people it became clear that the sense of potential I was using was too abstract and any potential there was – hopes, aspirations and desires – had very little in common with the philosophical and ontological concept I had conjured up from Heidegger and the later Foucault. It became clear my focus would need to be much less 'grand' and grounded closely in the interview material. As it was, the stories they told about

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[17] Winnicott's work emphasises the intersubjective nature of experience and begins to challenge the inherent dualism in thinking about subjective/objective – inside/outide and provides a way of thinking beyond them. His is a psychodynamic explanation of the relations between narration and identity. Winnicott developed his theory of transitional phenomena to help answer what it is that facilitates autonomous selfhood when a baby starts to separate from its mother. Transitional phenomena explained the process through which the separation from the mother was achieved and a capacity for objectivity was created out of subjectivity and complete dependence. The idea requires a new way of thinking about separation, reminding us that no separation is ever truly complete and that individual autonomy cannot arise except in an intersubjective process (Day Sclater, 1998: 88). 'Transitional objects' (a soft toy/blanket) enable the child to make the transition from the first oral relationship with the mother and represent the child grasping the difference between self and other as something outside and separate i.e. not me (ibid.). Winnicott suggested that transitional phenomena continued to have significance throughout life, particularly in relation to art, creative activities and religion and the intense feelings they produce. The initial psychical relations between mother and baby, the transitional stage, is a 'potential' space because the mother provides the opportunities for the infant to experience their own creativity, negotiate and explore the inner and outer worlds. This potential space 'is an intermediate area where the infant is able creatively to explore, negotiate and integrate internal and external reality in the creation of the self' (Day Sclater, 1998: 88).

themselves were testament to their creative ability to generate and maintain a sense of self that negotiated the contingency of circumstances and which demonstrated, at times, intense interplay between emotional (psychic) wrangling and their external 'objective' uncertain worlds.

It was with this realisation that the thesis really started to take the subsequent shape it has and how the proceeding chapters, starting with the next, took their content and shape. The following chapters try to remain true to the form and content of twentysomethings' narratives and experiences so that they start with the difficulties of leaving university and proceeds to chart their move into work, and the struggles that provokes, before ending by exploring in more detail some particular critical moments and the ways in which they came to 'think' and deal with uncertain choices and futures. I did this because I wanted to remain close to the material and 'flow' of issues that arose in the interviews rather than impose my own 'alien' over-arching narrative and themes onto their personal troubles. As such, the next chapter starts at the beginning of the narratives told to me by the twentysomethings: their experiences of leaving university and how that set in motion a series of unexpected struggles evoked by anxiety over unmapped futures.

Chapter 3 - Things are not what they seemed: dealing with leaving university

> Going to university is the fastest, most agreeable way to gain confidence and enhance one's creativity. A society rich in critically thinking graduates is best equipped to build and sustain the good life (Prof Edward Acton, pro-vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia).[18]

> I think, you know, everyone says it's all about your education and everyone goes to uni now, even if they go to a shit uni, like it doesn't matter. This idea that education is the *key* and will get you everywhere (Alice, 344–346).

Leaving university

Student numbers have risen since 1994/95 by 49% and an abundance of research shows that having a degree makes sense (Universities UK, 2007). Across their career lifetimes, graduates will earn more - historically, they have earned a lot more: an Institute for Employment Studies survey of the current thirty-something generation shows those with degrees earn several thousands a year more than those without degrees (Warwick, 1999). Getting a degree, therefore, comes to be understood by young people as a means to creating a route that will lead to establishing a secure, happy and successful life. University is the springboard to getting what one wants:

> The mass ranks of the middle classes and those from aspirational working-class families have high hopes of what the knowledge economy has to offer, fuelled by the expansion of the higher education (Brown, 2003: 150)

Those in this research have been caught up in the expansion of higher education in the UK and graduated before the economic crisis and subsequent recession of 2008.[19] Almost half of

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[18] Quoted in http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/nov/09/graduate-student-degree-worthwhile

[19] The most visible development in British higher education over the past decades has been the massive increase in participation rates from 12 per cent or so of 18 year olds, in the late 1970s, to in excess of 30 per cent in the space of twenty years since then (Robins, 1999: 192). There are now over 2.3 million students in higher education (Universities UK, 2007), compared with just over half a million in the late 1960s. In 1992 there was the retitling of thirty or so polytechnics to call them universities. This move followed increasing attempts during the 1980s by the government to direct the development of higher education away from unwelcome directions. Robins and Webster (1999) argue that the 'major refrain of government intervention has concerned the appropriateness of universities'

those I spoke to were the first of their families to go to university and I show in this chapter the effect university had in creating a sense of (almost endless) possibility and the initial high expectations they had upon graduating. These aspirations and the feeling they had a 'massive pool of things' they could choose from comes into sharp relief against the unsettling realities of leaving university and entering the labour market, which leaves them thinking they have entered a 'different' world. I trace their confrontation with what they come to realise is an 'unmapped' world compared to their parents and grandparent's 'worlds' (exemplified through the experiences of a grandfather's shipyard and grandson's virtual internet company).

The chapter proceeds to look at specific encounters that unsettle the twentysomethings' initial internal sense of optimism. These include the proper committing to something, the increased competition from all the extra graduates around who are scrabbling for what the twentysomethings' describe as 'vague' and 'random' jobs that bear little in the way of resemblance to solid 'careers'. This then leads some to encounter the struggle to break into the industry they desire which means running the exploitative gambit of internships and work experience. I next move on to outline how this, combined with a sense of unlimited choice, starts to generate uncertainty and indecision about their futures. A number of part-solutions are devised to deal with this not knowing: further study, stopgap jobs, travelling or moving back home to regroup and re-assess their situation. I finish the chapter by discussing in more detail the predicament of some of the women in the research who are put in a difficult pressurised and ambiguous position compared to their mother's experiences.

The unfolding tensions and discord in this chapter between expectations for an 'easy ride' and the exterior realities of the pre-crisis economy can be contextualised in reasons for why these twentysomethings might well have had high-hopes after university. The 'knowledge economy' of the future will, it is argued, require more highly skilled individuals (Aston &

responses to economic exigencies', quoting a Tory government paper from 1987 arguing that 'Higher education should serve the economy more effectively', which is an ideal that is still in play (p. 196). It is in this phrase that the 'needs of industry' and the 'employability' of graduates have become firmly welded together and a government priority which Dyer-Whiterfield (2005) sees as the absorption of universities into 'cognitive capitalism'.

Bekhradnia, 2003: 2). Consequently getting a degree made sense and was drummed into this generation by parents and school alike: over the next decade 80 per cent of the jobs created will recruit graduates. Unsurprisingly graduates expect a return on their educational investment. Brown (2003: 154) explains how the move to mass higher education system in the UK, while removing some of the old class barriers, has not tempered this feeling that a degree represents a passport into professional and managerial (in many case elite) positions and resultant affluent lifestyle. The mismatch between twentysomethings' expectations and reality can create insecurity as futures suddenly appear 'unmapped' and devoid of secure transitions to a good job (and good life) that their parent's lives had.

High expectations and potential

> Our starting point is a profound belief in the equal worth of every human being and our duty to help each other and everyone – all children and all adults – develop their potential to the full – to help individuals bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become (Brown, 2004).

> Be able to go to uni, basically have a great time, do what degree you want to, finish and then go, "Right, what do I want to do?" (Tom, 240-241)

> So you all have this idea that you go to university and you are told … you kind of, I suppose you feel that you can do anything, to a certain degree (Jo, 228-230).

Both Jo and Tom, above, express characteristic sentiments of the twentysomethings I spoke to. Jo was 25 when I spoke to her and working in admin for a venture capitalist company. She disliked her job, having taken it to get money coming in and ideally wanted to become a journalist while Tom was 26, a biology graduate, worked as charity fundraiser, and was chronically unsure about his future having expected things to be much easier post-university. The rhetoric about the benefits and advantages of going to university had a drip-like effect over the years of being in the education system and fed theirs and other twentysomethings' aspirations and expectations that getting a degree equated to a good and prosperous life. Going to university and getting a degree is understood by them as opening up the prospect of being able to freely choose what they want to do. As Alice explained:

> In my head there is a plan that I will make money, buy a house and then have my babies and go back and study and do something that I really enjoy when I am older (191-193).

This was a stable linear narrative form from earlier times, so Alice claimed:

> I mean our parents generation was, like, 'get married, buy a house' and that was just like a real stable framework to it all (195-196).

Alice was 25 when I talked to her. She worked in corporate recruitment having studied Foreign Languages at Oxbridge and, as becomes clear later, this was a source of great anxiety given how she felt her life was informed by a great generational freedom:

> [You] go to university because that is what you do but you don't really think about what you want to study or necessarily think about the future
> …And there is too much choice: "Do you want to study economics? Or is it better to study languages?"
> Everyone is saying languages is what is needed. Or history, that is good. Like there is too much choice … There is this idea, for a lot of people, well for me and my group of friends that we can do anything that we set our minds too, which is a fucking massive pool of things that we could do and so, it's just.. and we should travel and see the world and we *must* travel because this is an opportunity that other people didn't have…
> And we must study everything that we can and learn everything that we can and take advantage of every opportunity; grab the bull by the horns and … huuewgh [sighs]! (Alice, 823-836).

Meanwhile for Mary, university meant a means to acquire the sort of aspirational lifestyle she wanted:

> I am going to get a 'career' type of job. They are the sort of jobs I am applying for, not because I want a career necessarily but so I have enough money to be able to exist in London. And that I can have a nice kind of lifestyle. I want to find some sort of group of friends or community that I can go out with, hang out with and I want to go to evening classes and learn Spanish, do my jewellery course again. I want to go round the second hand stalls and markets and create some sort of life for myself that is ok (204-210).

Mary was also 25 when I interviewed her and worked as an office manager for a charity media company, and then later in a housing association for gay and lesbian people. She had suffered from depression in the past and this was something she wanted to avoid in the future.

Possibility

This sense of possibility, freedom and choice that has been opened up for some by university also engendered the belief that the future would be relatively plain sailing: the transition to work would be straightforward. Tom told me:

> I mean after uni I just completely had in my mind that there would suddenly be this realisation that this is what I wanted to be this... A teacher, a fireman and then you do it and, brilliant, you're done! (136-138)

This sense of being able to turn one's hand to a anything is fuelled by a inner sense of potential – a similar sense of potential that Gordon Brown believes education should bring out in young people – that just needs to be connected to the right job or career. For Beth, a textile design graduate aged 26 and struggling to find a decent path forward having moved back home before settling in London as a store designer, this meant discovering her inner talent:

> I want to discover. Because I don't think a lot of people know what they are good at and I think I have a lot of talent in there somewhere and I just haven't discovered it yet and I don't think I have ever really had the chance, or well may be I have been given the chance and I just haven't taken that chance.
> And I think that, you know, I think I have a lot to offer but I haven't found or used it yet (257-262).

Twentysomethings' sense of possibility makes sense given the moment they left university: the UK was experiencing the longest period of sustained economic growth since the Second World War. The education system, government, and labour market in general, all helped promoted the belief, underpinned by the notion of individual enterprise, that anything was attainable given the right qualifications and hard work. Expectations of a relatively easy ride defined those I spoke to and they foresaw few problems. Research by the Natwest Bank (2008), a few years later than most of the twentysomethings graduated, is testament to these raised expectations. Natwest found that 59 per cent of young people[20] expected to own a house by the age of 25 with 31 per cent believing they will have no debt in the future. 71 per

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[20] The bank surveyed 8,500 11-19 year olds about their expectations for the future.

cent expected to own a car by 21 and by the age of 25 being earning well in excess of £30,000pa.

These expectations are optimistic. Across the UK in 2008 the average age of a first time buyer was 28. The average student has to repay £12,363 by the time they leave university. While expectations of earnings at age 25 compares to the current average annual earnings of only £17,817 for 22-29 year olds in Great Britain (Natwest, 2008). While being highly optimistic, they reflected a firmly entrenched discourse and ideology that promised choices and possibilities. The continued expansion of Higher Education and student recruitment was based on the assumed ever growing need for an army of 'symbolic analysts' to manage the knowledge economy. The feelings of optimism twentysomethings expected would meet fruition, met a different reality: one less clear-cut and less 'mapped' than they had been led to believe.

Different worlds

Leaving university for many of the twentysomethings was a 'shock to the system'. It created confusion, uncertainty and anxiety. The once structured and relatively secure environment of university – Jo likened university to "a little bubble [and] that bubble would burst when we left" (203-204) – had given way to the 'real' world where their new degrees seemingly failed to land them that dream job. This made Jenni, 26, angry that what had been 'promised' by university failed to materialise. Having had graduated with a degree in textile and graphic design she had only managed a short period of work in that area. The rest of her time had been spend working with autistic children:

> I just thought, "Why the hell did I even bother doing a degree? It hasn't got me anywhere." I don't feel like I had learnt anything. I just felt it was time for you to rediscover what you knew already but just do it and home in on your creativity and skills but I don't feel like I actually *learnt* anything or come away with anything that anyone else hasn't (57-61).

The sense of a map providing a secure future path that Alice alludes to above – and both her and Jenni wanted – was an often-repeated refrain in twentysomethings. In part this was the

shock of leaving an 'ordered' university institution: Corinne spoke of the timetables and deadlines that provided parameters; while Sara suggested that her 'game plan' for the future extended no further than choosing her degree subject. All suffered from a lack of, what Jo called, 'foresight'. Corinne metaphorically explained to me what leaving university felt like:

> It was like I had gone ra ra ra run through these hurdles and the last one was this cliff, and I was seeing this cliff and thinking, "Whoa wh..wha…what about that hurdle? I don't know where I am going…?" and I think I was… Yeah let's put it like this: I was hurdling and then it was like the floor was gone (422-425).

Tom puts this lack of foresight, or thought, more pointedly:

> There is no thought; its just go to uni and then you'll get a job doing something, you know? I just don't think that is particularly helpful because everyone can get to that point where they just think, "Well shit what the hell am I doing?" (326-335).

Leaving university left behind structure, security and certainty, bringing twentysomethings face-to-face with a world devoid of those things. Their resulting anger and disappointment can be further understood by considering the contrasting details of the lives of grandparents and parents, which were 'mapped' by the structural forms of a previous 'world'. These 'contrasts' included fragmented and non-linear transitions and competition for good jobs from amongst the increasingly amorphous amount generated by the 'knowledge' economy.

Unmapped transitions to work

> At the moment young men and women enter the game of life, none can tell what the rules of the game will be like as time goes by; what everybody can be pretty sure of is that they will change many times over before the game is finished (Bauman, 1995: 265-66).

The experiences of grandparents generated a very telling contrast when twentysomethings reflected upon grandparents' words of advice or compared their lives to theirs. Advice and experience were characterised and shaped by a world of work and community that was more defined and set out compared to the society twentysomethings were in where they ended up 'not knowing what to do'. The older generation could trust their present and 'map' their futures. They knew what their future would hold: it would closely resemble their present.

They would most likely be doing the same job, in the same place and progress up the career ladder. This could not be more different to their grandchildren's experiences.

A good example of this is Trevor, aged 25, and the difficulty his grandfather had in understanding the various things he had done since leaving education. His background was in Performing Arts but he had done a lot of 'random' things since, all without a guiding rationale:

> I mean my grandparents would probably think, "What…?" cause it's different for other generations, like my parents are pretty cool sort of erm, but my grandparents find it quite hard, quite difficult to comprehend that I am 25 now and I still don't really have…I don't know what I will be doing in the next few years. Like I don't have a goal. My grandfather was a chippie [carpenter] or something in a [Belfast] shipyard or something and it was all mapped out for him, properly mapped out, well it was mapped out for him since the day he was born and it was mapped out for my dad that he would go into that sort of, into this company which was the largest employer, so long as long as you weren't Catholic, you got a job there. So you know, it was all mapped out for them. It's not mapped out for… Because it's not mapped out I don't really care and if it comes to, the worst comes to the worst and I find myself…temping for the rest of my life, I think I'd just live at home and temp for 10/15 years and until I've saved up a couple of grand or so and then go and live in Thailand for the rest of my life or something. The great thing is it's, it's a world economy and it's a world, well…yes the world is at your doorstep really and you can go places. Places years ago in their wildest dreams wouldn't have thought they could go to but you can go…if you get pissed off in the UK then, you know, even somewhere like South Africa I might, the cost of living is pretty…basically somewhere the sun shines, there is a nice beach and the cost of living is pretty cheap (402-418).

This quote captures the contrasting 'worlds' that Trevor and his grandfather came of age in. The presiding structural coordinate that has changed is the nature of work. The thing that structures and maps Trevor's grandfather's life was his job in the shipyards. A job in a heavy manufacturing industry which is very much a rarity today in Britain. The world famous ship building industry in Belfast provided steady (male) employment for many in the location. This was a period marked by Bauman's (2000) heavy modernity and the mutual obligation between capital and labour rooted in locality. Trevor's grandfather's existential horizons were drawn by the prospect of life-long employment in an industry whose life span he felt assured would stretch beyond his. In contrast, Trevor had no industry anchored in the local community to work in. Instead his world of work is defined by uncertainty about the future,

choice and mobility. Much as 'footloose' corporations become disconnected from locality and search for better profit opportunities elsewhere so too does Trevor mirror this with a sense of transience and possibility of moving elsewhere. He recognises this is unimaginable to his elders but as he says of their time, "it was all pretty much mapped out for you but now I just think everything has pretty much become pretty vague really" (471-472).

This sense of vagueness was further exacerbated for Trevor because by the age of 25 he had already had seven different jobs and been travelling in Australia for almost a year.[21] One job in particular is indicative of the recent changes in work (as discussed in chapter one) and compares starkly with his grandfather's 'job-for-life'. Trevor worked at the height of the dot.com boom for an online retail company and quickly got promoted to accounts manager. Trevor said of it:

> I was earning the most amount of money I have done in my life and it was brilliant! And erm, working hard but having a good social life with it and earning lots of money and I was going to move into town and get a flat, buy a sports car… (54-57).

Yet as quickly as his success came and his future prospects began to look more settled, Trevor got a phone call a few days before Christmas telling him his services were no longer required and he could have an extended festive break because the company had gone into receivership owing thousands of pounds including Trevor a substantial amount. The company failed because it had overstretched itself and was trying to grow too fast.

The internet company perhaps exhibits, like no other, the changes that have occurred in the structure and nature of companies and employment in the move from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production. Trevor's internet company compared to his grandfather's shipbuilding yard are almost two distinct, alien places. One is 'heavy', 'solid' and enduring in place and time, the other is 'light', 'soft' and fleeting in place and time. Both give different sets of co-

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[21] These jobs were 1) counting cash at a bank's money repository 2) touring with a dance/theatre company around Eastern Europe and taking the show to the Edinburgh festival 3) working as an administrator/barman/technician for an arts/theatre venue 4) working as a service advisor/accounts manager for internet company 5) working as a 'handyman' in a French ski resort 6) working as a recruitment agent and 7) training and working as a plumber.

ordinates or maps upon which to try and base a life. Just as Trevor starts to let himself think about planning for the future the security and certainty he needed was ripped away. Trevor's experience resembles the workers Sennett (1998) discusses whose lives are devoid of enduring practices through which coherent lives can be constructed. He adds, 'routine can demean, but it can also protect; routine can decompose labour, but it can also compose a life' (p. 24).

Commitment

The problem of trying to compose a life in a world of work that denies long-term or stable prospects was complicated further by the way in which Gareth was not willing to compromise his values or needs in work. He was 25 at the time of the interview. He lived in London and, having studied PPE at a well-respected university, had struggled to commit to anything long-term, which was a source of tension with his family. He told me of his grandfather and father's experiences, both of whom had worked long-term in jobs – his grandfather in a teaching job he disliked and his father in huge bureaucratic international NGO – both stuck at them regardless of the compromise this involved. Gareth turned down the opportunity to start a career where his father worked saying:

> Erm, it was quite interesting but it was, "Well I am sitting at a desk and I am in front of a computer", and that would be alright if I was doing something interesting but actually hanging out in front of computers isn't that interesting (41-45).

> It's what my dad did but I don't know how he managed. He did and he was a responsible guy and probably enjoyed himself along the way but I wouldn't be able to do that (349-351).

His grandmother chastised him for lacking the commitment to stick it out:

> "You're 26, you should be having a house. You know when I was 26 I was …" but well it's a different world, you know? (Gareth, 317-320).

Gareth's inference of insurmountable generational worlds – "it's a different world, you know?" – is not too far off Mannheim's (1952) notion of the 'fresh contact' between the inherited values and norms of a previous generation and those of a new one. Both Trevor's and Gareth's experiences illuminate the manner in which the structure and nature of work has

changed for young people. It also demonstrates a change in attitude towards work. Not only has the job-for-life and mass employment in industry gone but also what individuals come to expect and want from work has changed. Gareth rejects the steady routine that informed his grandfathers and fathers careers because it limits his attempts to find self-expression and fulfilment. This also represents a new form of masculinity that wants to give due expression to emotion and is unwilling to deny or repress it in or through work. These changed expectations of work are explored further in chapters five and six but I now discuss other aspects of twentysomethings' disconcerting reality.

Competition

> …all the time it's so competitive as well. All the time everyone else, or you feel like everyone else, is just *rushing* along (Tom, 300-301).

This sense of 'unmapped' and 'different' worlds was exacerbated by the realities and outcome of what the expansion of Higher Education really meant. These were not mentioned in university prospectuses or hyperbole surrounding going to university i.e. a labour market populated with more individuals holding what were once elite qualifications, and a job market increasingly defined by ambiguous service jobs, requiring no specific degree skill set. The realisation soon dawned that a degree no longer automatically lead to a 'great job' and there was greater competition for the better jobs that did exist. This was confirmed through the bitter experience some twentysomethings had in trying to get a job. It also made it harder to work out what the wanted to do from the plethora of job their degrees qualified them for. Of those I spoke to only one – Martin – had studied a degree subject that had a clear profession to go in to upon graduation (he studied Law and is now a solicitor). The rest had studied either humanities, social science, sciences/maths or creative art based subjects meaning their options were *opened* up rather than narrowed down.

Being vague and random – 'sitting on stools at computers'

Hannah, 25, had studied English 'up north' and had aspirations of being a journalist for a national broadsheet yet had been told frequently how hard this would be. She had studied further and was currently living at back at home, which was not part of the 10-year plan she had envisaged. She summarised her position and her peers like this:

> In our parents' day they didn't have to create jobs purely because there were too many people. You were an architect or a lawyer or a doctor or a cobbler. And suddenly everyone is sitting on stools at computers. There are so many things you could do. And there are so many more jobs within that all of which have… are probably quite easy to up from and go away to somewhere else, in a completely different area. Erm. And so, it's not like you have to decide what job you want to do. You have to decide what you are interested in and there isn't really that person sitting there saying you should do that or do this. You have got to, sort of, figure it out for yourself (389-396).

Trevor, in a similar vein, came to question the value of a degree:

> Coming out of university with a general…you know, business or something… Well business, but yeah what sort of business or what sort of thing are you doing? It's good to show that you have been to university and you can show that you have done your homework and done your courses, and what not, and come out with a 2:1 or whatever grades that you've come out with. But then what do you do? You… there are no real defined jobs anymore. It's a bit random (345-350).

This vagueness and randomness that Hannah and Trevor allude to is compounded by the competition for the few good jobs Alice experienced:

> Jobs are harder to come by and every job you go for, even the job I was interviewed for, for head-hunting, there were like 20 people interviewed for the same job as me and that is a really small company and they're… I, in terms, of if you wanted to work, like I was saying before, in a bank doing sales there would probably be 500 applicants for one position, so you are pitting yourself against this constantly and erm, you know, failing is the worst thing. So you don't try for it. I just wouldn't try because I am not ambitious enough or hard-working enough. I don't view myself as hard working enough to try but then I am expected to be (359-366).

The economic argument that underpinned the expansion of the Higher Education system in UK and the associated correspondence theories of education (Hickox & Moore, 1992) seems to be failing if the twentysomethings' experiences of competition and growth of 'vague and

random' jobs is anything to go by. Leaving university and finding a great job is not as straightforward as originally promised by the glossy university prospectuses. While education arguably ceased working as a liberating force many years ago, it now appears even more entrenched that degrees function as a positional good (Brown, 2003; 2007).

Breaking in: internships and work experience

Competition for highly sought after jobs, particularly in the media and creative industries, meant having to try to gain prior relevant experience to boost the CV. Yet even internships and work experience placements are hard to come by and, according to Richard, serve as an unpaid labour source in a market saturated with graduates desperate to work:[22]

> It is a catch 22 because do I leave and do work experience somewhere for four weeks which I might enjoy but actually end up making tea and emptying bins erm? And, you know, you feel like if you are remotely hopeful about something you are fantasising a little bit because you are not going to go and do your work experience there for four, or for however long and fall into a job there, they'll just get the next person in for four weeks. Another thing that I have seen is rife, erm, in the creative and media industries is people filling job roles with work experience so they annually have a rota of people on work experience and it's just… It's *really* horrible (469-476).

Richard, one of the younger twentysomethings at 23, had a passion for photography and studied that at Fine Art college yet had lost his way after graduating and had found it hard to get 'a break'. He worked in a job he 'couldn't be less interested in'. Richard claimed that the only way to get away from this was through nepotism, favouring graduates with the right personal connections. Sara, 24, had studied International Relations and done an MA, but had found it particularly hard to get relevant experience and was interning when we met to try to break in to TV news journalism:

> You kind of realise that what you did before didn't really count for much anyway. No one is really interested in it. Ha ha. So you go to these interviews and they may be not…

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[22] Richard's concerns are well founded with it coming to the attention of the media and government that some unscrupulous businesses exploit recent graduates. There is now a Low Pay Commission enquiry in the exploitation of interns. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2009/jul/31/mps-graduate-interns-pay See also http://internsanonymous.co.uk/

even if you said you would like to work for free, for example, and you were keen and maybe they are not even interested in that. And I have had that quite a lot. So that kind of thing…. And you're like, "Well right [sighs]". They can be quite unfriendly people. I have found that. It's quite depressing and quite demoralising… Maybe you don't have the right experience and you feel like, "Well I can't get the right experience" – it's that thing where you can't get the right experience, because no one will give you the chance to get the experience, and then they say they can't give it to you because you don't have the right experience! (180-192)

So even having found an area and type of job they wanted twentysomethings still found it hard to get work and still faced competition for the work experience and internships on offer (with no guarantee of a job at the end of it).

As a result of these problems – different worlds with no maps, random and vague jobs (with some that are hard to break into or commit to) fought over by more graduates than ever before – the expected 'easy ride', made as part of an early twentieth-first generational cohort in the southeast of the UK, was not as smooth or as easy as they expected. Without the sorts of structures and organisations that informed the life of Trevor's grandfather, twentysomethings are left with the task of trying to negotiate a radically different social topography. The initial high hopes and aspirations had to be tempered as it became self-evident that getting a job was going to be hard but also exacerbated by the overwhelming sense of choice twentysomethings felt they had in the labour market.

Not knowing what to do – too much choice

> I am quite interested in a lot of things that is more the problem. It's kind of hard to … it's hard for me to be focused. It's not because I am not enthusiastic, or apathetic so much as I kind…. It's kind of the opposite: I am interested in a lot of things but too anxious about getting it right I think (Sara, 169-172).

> Now I think there is too much choice. It is quite overwhelming. I mean you can't say there is too much choice but there is just a lot. There are so many different things that you could do (Hannah, 410-412).

It is believed that choice and the ability to make choices is something that the young have a commitment towards, seeing it as a critical aspect of the independence and control that shapes

their biographies (France, 2007: 61). While this may well be the case it does not mean that choice in and of itself is a wholly neutral or always welcome thing. In this section I show how, especially in the case of the young women, choice – and having to make one – can become an unprecedented burden when faced with not knowing what to do.

Indecision and not knowing

Most of the young men and women I spoke to were unsure about what they wanted to do after experiencing the realities of the labour market. It was not a lack of actual jobs that was the problem, which is the most acute one facing young people today, but one of how to choose what to do from the all the opportunities they had or as Alice put it, the "massive pool of things that we could do". With increased choice, and feeling of opportunity, there is a corresponding rise in doubt and indecision. Too many options raises expectations and anticipation that there must be the *right* possibility if only they could just find it (Schwartz, 2004: 186). These are the 'opportunity costs' associated with trying to make a decision that involves imagining or trying to work out which the best option is and the potential consequences of making the wrong choice. This can bring a feeling of 'deadly' responsibility to trying work out what they want.

Alice had an interesting way of 'managing ' this:

> I got a 2:1 from London, which is a standard degree, and then I fucked around for a long, long time cause I just didn't know what I wanted to do. And I actually just found applying for jobs really scary. I just didn't (34-36).

Alice's 'inaction' was compounded by the her weight of expectation, added to by her family, that she had to get the right job:

> I pretended that I was [applying to jobs] to my mother and to everyone but I was doing nothing because I was too erm… I was just too scared. I just didn't know what I wanted to do. And everyone was just … people assume, like my family just assumed that I'd be like a banker or something like… I wanted to be a teacher for a long time. But then there were no grounds really for that. I didn't have a reason for why I wanted to be a teacher. I just saw myself in a caring profession (38-43).

Corinne, aged 25 at the time of speaking, told me she dreamt of being an artist and had studied Fine Art at Oxbridge to fulfil this. Yet, as with others, had a similar experience of struggling for clarity or finding something she really wanted to do. She was working for a theatre and studying part-time when I interviewed her:

> When I finished at uni and I just wasted so much time erm but I was… Basically what happened was … the change was that I was so unfocused and so like, "What am I doing with my life?" but didn't really have enough, kind of… to go anywhere and that really …I mean I was really miserable because I was fully aware that I was just wasting my time and I am not going for anything (342-346).

The responsibility for choosing what they should be doing and the opportunity they have to shape their futures weighs heavy upon the shoulders of these individuals. Their responses to this feeling took various forms aside from Alice's inertia. These included postgraduate study, travelling funded by 'stop-gap' jobs and (reluctantly) moving home.

Further study

Studying at postgraduate level was an important means for almost half of those I interviewed. This is in line with universities seeing an overall rise of 63 per cent in students continuing on to postgraduate study since 1994/'95 (Universities UK, 2007). Tom's decision to study further was brought on by a period in which he was clamouring for something to give him back structure and direction. His first port of call was postgraduate study yet this failed to cure the anxiety about his future:

> Yeah I started a PhD and before that I was going to do teaching and I had a place on a teacher training course and then I thought, "Shit! Do I really want to do this?" I mean I was going to join the police and then I thought, "Do I really want to do this?" No and then I started a PhD which was all lab based and then I realised pretty quickly that I didn't want to do that either (48-52).

For Hannah it was a means to bide time before hopefully finding something she wanted to do:

> And, erm, I, when I left university I did a masters. I did English Literature at X and then I did a Masters in English Literature at X again. Mostly because I actually didn't know what

I was going to do or how I was going to do it. So all my friends left and I stayed to figure it all out. Still didn't figure it all out by the very end of it (20-25).

Remaining in or going back to education was a means to shelter from uncertainty and indecision while potentially 'arming' themselves with further qualifications that might give them the edge in the labour market.

Travelling and stop-gap jobs

The rather unwelcome realisation that their dream job was not forthcoming presented another problem: what to do until they got or found a job they actually wanted? Alice took a well-trodden path for university leavers: travelling before taking a 'stop-gap' job:

> So when I graduated I travelled and stuff and just bummed around for quite a while and then I got a job through my cousin at the *most* depressing place in the world. It was an IT firm called Solarprotect and I was basically the office bitch! Really stupid, really rude people that just didn't give a shit about their job and that just turned up and sat there and you know… Then I thought I wanted a job that was more challenging (34-50)

The venom and resentment in this quote is telling if one thinks back to the earlier part of the chapter that previewed some of the desires and expectations these twentysomethings had for their lives and jobs upon graduation. Alice, perhaps understandably from her position, thinks the job and the people are beneath her, having committed herself to Higher Education and the rewards that promised. University prospectuses never say that you might get a boring job with stupid colleagues.

Taking stop-gap jobs, which were often menial, were taken by the twentysomethings to bide time before hopefully finding something better. Tom, who started a PhD but stopped, thought about being a teacher and then toyed with joining the police force, before eventually taking a job as a drug rep:

> …my brother started doing the pharmaceutical sales and I just thought, "Sod it. There are transferable skills there, you know, and I'll get a car, get some money" and that was it really (53-54).

> I couldn't care less about it really (39).

Tom's "sod it" and lack of care for what he was doing is an indication of the resignation he felt as the things he had hoped for failed to materialise and echoes Alice's earlier "fed up-ness with not knowing what to do but having to do something". Similar sentiments are found with Richard who, while he knew the direction he wanted to take (a career in photography), failed to strike out on that road because he found it too daunting and risky.

> I had kind of seen it coming from a long way off, but I kind of thought, "I don't know what to do now" because I can't …I've done the wrong A-levels for what I want to do but like friends said, "You know, you should come and do this" and that's what I did (61-64).

Echoing what others had previously said about competition for jobs and the need to be in the right networks, Richard struggled to settle and ended up doing various things before becoming 'stuck' in an administrative job he hated:[23]

> …none of them have been really places that I wanted to work and… That's… I've applied for lots of things which I have been interested in but you can get rejection letters but it's just basically [I] have always got jobs on recommendation. Don't really know people in the right places erm (25-28).

In line with Richard's experiences, Trevor was perhaps the best example of a twentysomething taking 'stop-gap' jobs, none of which he had a specific desire for, before getting something more in line with a 'career' type job with the internet company (which ended abruptly). Gareth, having done some travelling in India before going on to start an MA, summarised the feelings of many of these twentysomethings about trying to get or find a 'proper' job when he says:

> I came out of that and I sort of… had this experience in India which was great and erm and I was applying for stuff and it was then that I realised that, "Hey this is pretty difficult to find a job, you know!" Ha ha (28-34).

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[23] This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Moving back home[24]

Further studying, travelling and taking 'random' jobs often combined or revolved around a period of moving back to their parents' home. This occurred more with the young women than the men. While providing a short-term solution, in terms of cheap accommodation and familiar surroundings, brought its own set of problems. For Hannah it heightened existing tensions in her relationship with her mother and she began to feel left behind by her non-live-at-home friends. For others there was a depressing sense that something had gone wrong or that they had failed by returning instead of starting their high-flying careers and adult lives.

Moving back home for many was meant to be a short-term solution: a respite and chance to gather strength before getting back out into the 'real' world. Jenni explains the logic she used to justify returning to the parental fold:

> I think I would have done a lot more if I hadn't let myself get down about the situation I was in because I would have been… That's the regret that I have because when I came out [of university], I had had it with education and I just wanted to do something real, and there was no way I wanted to do an MA. At least not straight away. So what I thought I would do is I'll move home and that will be so terrible that it will sort of force me to, you know, give me the kick up the butt… To do all those things that I have wanted to do. Er but it got me *down* just being at home and I just didn't feel like I was a real person at all. So part of me just thinks that I should have kept on bobbing along the surface and taken and carried on doing simple jobs for money (311-322).

Jenni's plan backfired serving only to entrench a feeling that she had failed as a 'real' person. Moreover she articulates a sense of depression that not being able to 'get on' and get something 'real' can cause when the expectation that things would work out fails to materialise.

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[24] The media have been quick to pick up on the increasing number of graduates who return home after struggling to get a decent job or meet housing costs calling them 'boomerang kids' (see Murray, 2008 and Travis, 2009).

Alice continues this theme of the 'psychological' effects of moving back home after university. She perceives her imminent move back to her mother's house, with poor transport links, with some trepidation:

> I just can't and I don't want to go home and live with my mother which I am doing in a month. In like really far north London
> Ben: How long is that going to be for? Is it just a stopgap?
> Alice: I don't know… until … I hope it is a stopgap. It's kind of shit going from living in a really nice flat – dirty but nice flat
> … In West London to moving back to my mum's in north London, you know, where there is no tube! Ha ha!
> And all my aunts and uncles live like on the roads, so it is just back in the family and, you know, won't be able to do the things that I would normally do and they all see me as this 'success'! I don't know why because there are others… the younger ones in my family are studying to be doctors and stuff but because I am the oldest and was the first to go to university and stuff they are all… I feel a bit embarrassed moving back home
> …I feel embarrassed now moving back home because it's like, "Ha ha working all these hours and I can't afford to pay my rent". So I basically I am mug. I am a mug.
> So I am not looking forward to it at all. At all. But it should be ok, you know, I get on with her and she works. She is about to retire and she is going though the menopause…
> Fucking nightmare! Ha ha! Absolute nightmare! (634-657).

Although there was humour in Alice's voice when she told me this, it is a telling testimony to what could be seen as a partial failed attempt at constructing a stable and robust sense of self. Moving back into the sanctuary of the family home, without a tube stop nearby, robs her of the mobility and independence she has become accustomed to. In terms of Beck's (2002) individualisation thesis, Alice has struggled to provide 'biographical solutions' to the uncertainties instigated by the new social 'structures'. She berates herself – "I am a mug" – for not doing better and is embarrassed at what she perceives as her responsibility for the 'failure' to establish a new life after university. Earlier in the interview she had told me: "In my head there is a plan that I will make money, buy a house and then have my babies". Her disappointment is reinforced further when she compares herself to other young relatives with (supposed) professions to go into.

It is interesting to note that the last few examples of indecision, difficulties and attempts to negotiate the post-university uncertainty over what to do have come from the young women I spoke to. While the men I spoke to had difficult transitions theirs were, in the main, the

consequence of transformations in the nature of work and rise of a post-industrial landscape which has positioned a lot of men as 'losers' (France, 2007: 75; Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008: 40). The young women, however, not only faced a world of work that was more open to them but this went hand-in-hand with dramatic changes in terms of traditional gender roles and expectations. The consequences of this is (some) young women are more able than ever to be independent and shape their future. I want to discuss these gender issues in more detail as this was something that the female twentysomethings explicitly reflected upon when talking about their experiences compared to their mothers, while the young men seemed to mourn the loss of more simple and straightforward times their fathers and grandfathers had.

Gender, transitions and post-traditional choice

> Possibility, choice and self-invention have become central to ways in which young women are able to think about their identities and futures with the new economy, and this is strongly encouraged by the market and the state (Aapola et al., 2005: 67).

> I wish I was like my mum. I wish that my destiny was as, sort of, mapped out as my mother and my grandmother stuff and I am fucking fed up with, of not knowing what I want to do but having to do something. I don't really want to do anything! (Alice, 9-11)

The 'new girl order' (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008) and notions of being new privileged subjects of neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2007) discussed in chapter two goes someway to conveying the context which framed the women in this research and helps to understand some of the difficulties and confusion that the young women I spoke to had. Alice clearly articulates this new order when she tells me:

> I have been given all these choices and I *should* make the most of them because, you know, women didn't have them before and *that* is another pressure because what if I do, as I said before, what if I do just want to have a family but I've got too many options and too *many* opportunities. And I don't know what to do with them. And there is pressure on you to be these, you know, to take advantage of all of this stuff and erm, you know, but you can't have it all. I just don't think you can (Alice, 728-738).

This new order brings with it a pressure and a feeling of personal responsibility or imperative to take up all these opportunities or otherwise be deemed some kind of failure. A sense of

being 'forced', or as Bauman and Beck both argue 'condemned', to take up this 'freedom' to create and manage one's own life must be done alone. All this must be done, as Alice frankly states in second opening quote to this section, without the maps of yesteryear. This is the other side to the 'liberation' of young women which involves having to negotiate a post-traditional (post-domestic) landscape which induces forms of subjectivity based around being a 'Top-Girl' in terms of material and economic success in the workplace, having already excelled in education (McRobbie, 2007). This can then come to denigrate older, more traditional, forms of femininity which were based around care and domesticity.

Female twentysomethings considering older models or forms of femininity would be seen to fail or renege on the advances of womens' position. Alice articulates this tension when she tells me about the relationship she is in:

> I feel like this strong, independent woman who has to make her own way in the world, so I have got to earn money but really I just want to get married and have babies. But if you say that to most of my friends they'll be like, "What's wrong with you? You've had this education and …" It's, it's this conflict (174-179).

> I just actually want to get married to and have babies ha! And I have never really felt like that was a possibility before and I know I am still young, this is the other thing like I was saying about my friends: "You know, what are you just going to give up work and have babies?" like when they are all studying to be lawyers and working really hard, and it's really kind of like a dirty-bad thing to think (415-420).

Within the space of one generation it appears that what was once an ingrained, acceptable and largely expected thing for young women to do – start a family – has become something that young women think of as 'poor form'. It compromises the individualising economic message of neo-liberalism that places self-invention, choice and flexibility as ideals to be strived – one *must* live a highly individualised, successful life. In many ways this shift resonates with the arguments of those that suggest we are living in a post-feminist moment (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2008).

Different structures and responsibilities

When Beth reflects on the differences of her life to her mother's when she was her age this generational gap becomes more apparent:

> I think looking at my parents ok, they had … my dad left school at 15, he didn't like school at all, erm he took over his father's business – took over the business and then he met my mum and I think she was a secretary for one of the colleges in town and she was doing her own thing and then they got married and she started working for him and they have built up the business over the years and it has been really successful. It is a good little business. I think you know, their aim was always… Well people had children so much younger then so, so people had a different sort of outlook. Different responsibilities (347-353).

> …she had children, she wasn't particularly young compared to some of her friends, but I think she had my brother at the age of 23 or 24 and so, you know, I am 26 now so she would have … would already have had children … No she, she had more. She had responsibility didn't she? (436-439)

> I think it's harder. I think my mum probably had a better sense of identity than I have (433-434).

Economic independence and freedom from the domestic sphere means these twentysomethings are no longer tied to the responsibilities that come with starting a family, as was clearly the case with Beth's mother. Of all the young women I spoke to, without exception, their mothers had been married and had had at least one child by the time they were the age I interviewed their daughters at (the youngest woman I spoke to was 24 and the oldest 29). Arguably what replaces this responsibility is a sense of 'active girlhood' (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008: 59) with an attenuated individualistic belief in their ability to get what they want – via success in educational and economic fields.

The powerful narrative of girl power with its emphasis on freedom, choice and self-invention is present in the way that Beth sees the way out of her state of confusion and indecision as to spend time on her own. There is a belief that more independence will help her:

> I think it's time I spent a couple of years on my own really and just concentrate on what I want to do. Because I am so confused about what I actually want to do career wise, I think that now is a good time to start looking into that and instead of just kind of drifting

from one job to the next in London just trying to survive, actually do something worthwhile and make me feel good about myself (216-221).

Beth's story of being in her twenties is in sharp contrast to her mother whose life by then was already structurally underpinned by having a child and working in a successful small business owned by Beth's father. She was not drifting and not alone.

Young women now face not only a crisis of traditional femininity but also a multitude of new opportunities to shape their futures in ways that they see fit. This is in keeping with the new sexual contract that suggests young women can get what they want and do what they want (Aapola et al., 2005; Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008: 61). McRobbie (2004; 2007) is, however, quick to warn of the manner in which the neo-liberal re-shaping of young women's subjectivities needs to be understood in the light of new technologies of the self that conform to the regulatory powers of consumption and realities of the new economic order. This is the 'double entanglement' of feminist ideas around gender, sexuality and family life with neoliberal values that has incorporated them, revised them and depoliticised them (Gill, 2007: 161).

The young men of this research faced uncertain transitions into a de-industrialised labour market, which it has been argued constitutes a 'crisis' in masculinity because men no longer know who they are or are supposed to be in a society where gender roles have rapidly been reconfigured (Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008: 44). It was clear that the men in this research entered a more feminised workplace compared to their fathers and the type of work they did, the commitment to it and the value they placed on work differed significantly, especially compared to their grandfathers lives. These twentysomething men were not expected nor strived to be the sole 'breadwinner'. Neither were they willing to just 'do a job': work was sought that needed to have some personal significance and enabled self-expression. This was in contrast to Trevor, Gareth and Tom's grandfathers who had all 'stuck it out' in jobs (a shipyard carpenter, a teacher and timber merchant) that restricted their personal desires but which offered secure employment (and pay) and a 'map' for their lives.

These young men's lives were not so much marked by a crisis of masculinity evoked through deindustrialisation – being highly educated meant they could take advantage of the new jobs created in the knowledge economy – but by the profound uncertainty around having to choose what they did. This required becoming, in a sense, 'new' men that reflected more upon their own feelings and desires. Tom's dismay at his circumstances led him to get angry and wish for a time when things were more straightforward and did require him to search for something he enjoyed.

Privilege and pressure

The openness and resulting confusion articulated by the young women are particular moments of 'classed' advantage that are important characteristics and markers of the sample of young women I spoke to. Both Sara and Alice acknowledge this privileged position compared to other female contemporaries and also earlier generations of women:

> I know I am in the privileged position to have these options *and* that I do feel that I have a lot of options; I could go abroad, maybe, and find a job somewhere else and I have, probably, got a chance to work in various different fields, you know. I don't really feel anything is really closed off from me. That is quite privileged and as a woman, you know, I think I should probably be very, you know, grateful for and I am fortunate that I am in the generation I am in and the opportunities are there for me (Sara, 81-87).

Echoing throughout this is a sense choice and possibility, which is new to this generation. Alice, too, is aware of the differences that separate her and her mother's experiences yet her feelings are tempered by the pressure opportunities can bring:

> …compared to my mother, yeah, things have changed massively because, you know, erm I am not just expected to have, I am not just expected to get married. I am expected to … I have been given all these choices and I *should* make the most of them because, you know, women didn't have them before and *that* is another pressure because what if I do, as I said before, what if I do just want to have a family but I've got too many options and too *many* opportunities. And I don't know what to do with them. And there is pressure on you to be these, you know, to take advantage of all of this stuff and erm, you know, but you can't have it all. I just don't think you can. I think there are few women can work really, really hard and have a family and, you know, look pretty all the time and stay thin, and I *can't* imagine being that kind of person (727-736).

Alice articulates the tensions and contradictions that underpin this 'new girl order' and shows how within it – lingering within this 'pressure' – is still the older and traditional expectation about female conformity to certain accepted ideals of feminine beauty and body type. Young women are meant to be able met the demand to be a self-actualising neo-liberal subject while also negotiating the desire to have a start a family *and* maintain a body and style of life that does not transgress accepted norms of feminine appearance and behaviour (McRobbie, 2007). This pressure is all fuelled by expectations gained through education and the powerful new narratives of active girlhood.

While newfound freedom for young women is welcome, the choice and opportunity can become an existential burden as Sara explains:

> I have been raised by my mother and the teachers at my secondary school to believe I can have it all. And I believe I can, but only if I can get everything right at the right time - and get the right job and meet the right man… It's great to be part of a generation where women aren't stigmatised for going out with whomever they choose, but in the end it's the traditional security of marriage and family that we also aspire to… I feel a burden of expectation to do the same. That is a wonderful opportunity, but sometimes my friends and I wonder if it will ever happen for us. I think that's the great fear for twentysomethings today.[25]

A mother reflects

I finish this section with reflections from Sara's mother who, it turned out, was an influential feminist in the seventies. She had recently been interviewed for a national newspaper where she talked about the differences she sees between her life and her daughter, Sara. This is some of what she said:

> I dropped out of university after a term, yet I still managed to get a job and from those first steps build a career. Sara has two degrees and she's worked hard to get qualified, but even these aren't enough to land her a job. And a job is not the only thing: while building a career she also needs to worry about where to live and when to have her children. It never seemed to be a worry for my generation. She lives in a world which is full of endless career choices, but which is cruelly hard to break into. Work experience, which didn't exist in my day, seems to have become an extension of your qualifications - but

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[25] This quote comes from the daily newspaper article that Sara and her mother appeared in some time before I interviewed her. The article sought to explore their generational differences in terms of being a woman.

how on earth are you expected to stay afloat while you bust your guts for just the cost of your daily transportation? To my mind, that's the kind of stress that can cause a crisis.

This 'voice' from an older generation contextualises and sharpen the notable differences in the circumstances these young women have to become an adult in. Not only do they have to engage and negotiate the uncertainty that informs their circumstances, which is similar to the circumstances the young men encounter in terms of too much choice and competition, but they are also expected to perform and embrace a new form of femininity. Yet as the views of these young women here make apparent, trying to negotiate the demands of this new femininity can be daunting and bewildering. Alice's toying with or ruminating about the idea of possibly wanting to start a family brings surprise from her female friends and shows how far values have changed.

Conclusion: uncertain paths and confusing futures

…it would be much easier if, if there was something kind of planned and you knew, not so much what the future holds but you knew where you were heading in a general direction, whereas although I probably have a general direction insofar as law and stuff is concerned it's not necessarily the right direction but because it's the direction I have always been going in I wouldn't know where else to go (22-26). … It is hard to be motivated and directed towards something when you don't know which way you are heading (Rebecca, 69).

A mate of mine has these 'game plans'. He always plans them and we always discuss this idea of game plans and I don't have one you know! (82-84)

I have never really formed an idea of what I want to do in the long term and I have never really worked towards anything. I have never settled into one particular idea of what I want to do … (Gareth, 90-94).

Brown (2007) suggests that if one was believe the rhetoric of the knowledge economy (prior to the economic crisis) there is little to stand in the way of the aspirations of graduates in a society hungry for talent, knowledge and creative minds. However, Brown warns that expectations of middle-class lifestyles, fuelled by the rise of mass higher education, have encouraged more people into an already congested labour market. The expansion of the Higher Education system in the UK was predicated upon the fact that the economy needed

more highly skilled employees. University education was meant to ensure the country's young had the qualities to 'capture the best available jobs in global capitalism' (Robins & Webster, 1999b: 201). However, evidence suggests that many graduates are now doing jobs that were previously performed by those with A-levels (1999b: 209). While Mason (1996) shows that in the financial services area there is a 'bifurcation of recruitment between high-flying' graduates with prospects (and good pay) and the rest (totalling as much as 45 per cent of graduates employed) entering clerical, cashiering and such like jobs' (quoted in Robins, 1999b).

This was the reality that confronted twentysomethings leaving university. Initial expectations for an 'easy ride' were more suited to the world of Trevor's grandfather's with its 'maps' to future security. Twentysomethings' reality fostered no maps. Instead a plethora of choices and 'vague and random' jobs, most of which lacked future prospects for security, greeted them. Yet, as Trevor discovered, these could not be relied upon. This reality undermined twentysomethings' plans and meant trying figure out what to do without any guidance. Consequently, the decision to commit to anything became fraught with difficulty, generating anger and a sense of being duped into believing a degree would have secured their futures. Initial solutions to this problem – more study, travel, stop-gap jobs or a move back home – gave a respite from uncertainty and deferred decision-making in the hope that something 'certain' would crop up. These came with an equally unwelcome depressive state of dejection and feeling of personal failure.

The onset of anxiety and uncertainty generated by unmapped futures and worlds was exacerbated for the young women in the research by the transformation in the opportunities they sensed they had compared to their mothers. Feeling free of the traditional gender structures, their lives were marked by a sense of privilege and unprecedented possibility. Their new independence – care of the 'new girl order' – still harboured tensions though: all the choice meant feelings of bewilderment came with the ideals of the 'top girl', post-feminist contract (McRobbie, 2007). This intense pressure to succeed meant individual consideration of a more traditional (gender) route was met with derision by other young female friends.

The faltering transitions discussed in this chapter help highlight the loosening of social structural auspices. The mismatch of twentysomethings' internal hopes and desires against an unexpected reality left them without a 'game-plan' and anxiety about the future. This made rational decision making even harder. The sense of potential is checked against, not only, the outcome of years of economic deregulation and restructuring, but also the privatised and subjective effects that reordering brings in the form of personal responsibility for their predicament. The next chapter goes on to explore how some of the twentysomethings responded to entering this new 'disordered' world and the consequences their decisions brought.

Chapter 4 – Where to go and what to do? Responding to unmapped futures

> A map says to you, "Read me carefully, follow me closely, doubt me not." It says, "I am the earth in the palm of your hand. Without me, you are alone and lost." And indeed you are.
> Were all the maps in this world destroyed and vanished under the direction of some malevolent hand, each man would be blind again, each city be made a stranger to the next, each landmark become a meaningless signpost pointing to nothing (Beryl Markham, West with the Night. New York: North Point Press, 1983 quoted in Harley, 1989: 1).
>
> I feel … I have felt completely lost at times and … you know? (Beth, 434-435).
>
> …Everyone can get to that point where they just think, "Well shit! What the hell am I doing?" (Tom, 314-318)

According to Trevor his grandfather's life was all mapped out for him, 'since the day he was born'. This could not be further from the reality that confronted the twentysomethings. As I show in this chapter, those not fortunate enough to have a degree in a profession, that offered a career path, faced an uncertain struggle to work out what to do from an overwhelming range of options. Without a sense of where they wanted to go, individuals were left susceptible to inauthentically falling into 'random' jobs, drifting along in them and facing the undesirable prospect of feeling or being 'trapped' in them. Without secure jobs upon which to plan for the future, some twentysomethings remained stuck in an 'extended present' as progression forward faltered. The promotion of entrepreneurial forms of conduct as solution to young people's uncertainty, so becoming 'self reliant, pioneering, adventurous ... ambitious people who organise ideas into action on their own initiative' (Horne, 2003: 5) largely failed to off-set insecurity. If anything they appear de-motivated by the 'new challenge' they face as 'controllers of their own destiny' (Abidi, 2001; Darby, 2001) because of the intense pressure it puts on them to make the *right* choice and foreclose other possibilities.

While there are negative aspects to problems of falling, drifting and getting trapped I also note the existential function they serve in enabling individuals to alleviate and gain some respite from uncertainty alongside a sense of getting *somewhere* at least. In this respect their

situations give space and time for twentysomethings to come to terms with the mismatch between their initial sense of potential and possibility and the unwelcome reality that starts to dawn. However, by way of contrast I start this chapter by exploring the maps and 'paths' taken by two twentysomethings who were fortunate in having a sense of what they wanted and where they wanted to go.

'Quite a set route'

> I have worked really hard for it but as I say I think I am really well placed now to move however I want to move forward (Martin, 317-318).

Martin, 26, unlike some of the twentysomethings, had thought about his future before going to university.[26] His decision to study law had been pragmatic, with one eye firmly set on his future possibilities. He had not returned home after graduation and was confident in his ability to master his future telling me about his wish to set up a business. This itself provided a map, of sorts, lacking in the narratives of other twentysomethings:

> So what I have just done is just try and put myself in the best position possible to – so I do decide what I want to do or whatever. I went to do a law degree because basically… I went to do law because it was something that compared to the other options was something that quite interested me and I thought it would teach me quite a lot about the world that would be helpful to me in whatever I decided to do in the future (10-17).

Martin now works as a solicitor at one of London's most prestigious and oldest law firms. This has enabled him to plan confidently for his future – he expects to make progress within his firm and eventually make partner level: "it is a well-regarded firm [and] will stand me in really good stead" (24-26). While Martin had more sense of a structured future than some, that, in itself, caused slight concern:

> Law is it… it gives quite a set route through. It gives you a real structure which is good but in others it is not. I don't know. It isn't something that frustrates you but…it puts you in real… (44-46)

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[26] Martin had originally started at university studying business studies but had to drop out half way through the first year because of illness. He started again the next year having, perhaps, had further time to reflect on things and changed his course to law.

He complained that because law is based on the development of cumulative experience and knowledge there can be no short cuts to 'going up the chain', which Martin believed would be the case if he were a young person in business (something that in the next chapter Rob is on the look out for). In law he felt there was a 'limit to how good you can get' (63) at a young age.

Despite that fact, Martin still felt well set for the future and for what awaited him on the horizon: 'in five years time I will be able to buy a house or should be able to' (378). In contrast to other twentysomethings he was confident and not fazed by what the future might bring, feeling that by the time he hit thirty he would be in quite a senior position in his job. Talking to Martin it was obvious that he had been astute in his decision to go into the field of law. He told me the rationale behind his choice:

> …part of me just wants to set myself up for when I am older. I mean that is when I really want to do things. I mean I really want to travel and I want to… There are things in life that I want to do and I think that is what my goal is and the job that I am in because I work reasonable hours and it pays me well and because at the end of the day because I will have a trade at the end of the day. It is…basically I am using it as a mechanism to do what I want with my life and also I have been lucky to get a job that interests me (82-92).

He went on to tell me that he would not be surprised if he found in five years time that he had indulged his 'urge' to start his own business and test himself in that environment. He saw his current work in law as being an invaluable experience that could serve him later on.

It is obvious from what Martin says that his job provides a stabilising and anchoring role in his life and one which he enjoys and will work hard at. In return for this he has to 'rein' himself in and adhere to being 'incorporated' within an organisation in the form of 'life-as' a solicitor. His story bears more resemblance to those of Trevor's grandfather and Gareth's father whose lives were mapped by the assured routes they found in the respective jobs they did, maintaining the central tenets of Weber's work ethic.

'10 year plan?'

It was Hannah, as discussed in the previous chapter, who decided to stay on at university and complete a Masters in English Literature partly because she did not know what she wanted to do. Unlike some of the other twentysomethings Hannah had passion and a sense of the direction she wanted to go in. While doing an MA staved off decision-making and engagement with the 'real' world, the subject was in keeping with her interests and aims for the future:

> I always wanted to do something with writing and I always, sort of, thought it would never happen. Ever. Well not for years and years. Journalism was always something there but features journalism rather than news journalism (19–21).

Hannah knew it would be tough to get a decent job in journalism especially as her ambition was eventually to end up working for a national broadsheet in some capacity. She envisaged a 10-year plan, after having done work experience at an advertising company that pressed home just how hard it would be for her to get a break in journalism. They suggested it would take her 20 years before she might be writing for a newspaper. Hannah explains how it came about that she was quickly working for one of the daily London newspapers:

> I came back to London and applied for work experience at advertising companies, and a film company, Metro newspaper and a magazine. And they all gave me work experience. And Metro said, "Actually we're at the Edinburgh Festival and we have a lot of people away and it could be useful if you were there to open mail". So I went and opened mail and they happened to be launching this new paper a month later. And they were starting it all up then. The theatre critic for Metro was going to be made the Arts Editor of one of the London freebies so she, sort of, took me and said, "Well can you come and work on this with me?" So I started doing that and suddenly I am writing about films and music which was my, sort of 10 year plan. So suddenly I was doing this, absolutely loving it, not being paid as much as I would probably like to be paid but still having this most fantastic time but then suddenly thinking, "Oh God! This is not what I expected to happen now" (25–35).

Hannah had managed, through good fortune, to land herself a journalism job which she described as being 'diverse and dynamic' with good prospects. It set up a route for her to follow in her future. She recognised that, despite still living at home, she was fortunate compared to some of her friends to have found a job that could take her somewhere.

Through the course of the interview she told me of some of her friends who were gripped by doubt or hatred of their jobs and that three of them have decided to become teachers because of the security they perceive the job brings. Despite Hannah's sense of security in terms of having found something that helps 'map' her future there remain echoes of the potential other possibilities that the other young women in the previous chapter felt:

> There is that moment where you suddenly realise that if you choose one thing you are completely blotting out everything and the chance for anything else … Suddenly you go into journalism and you have sort of chosen that. And I didn't really want to feel that if I was choosing journalism, I was missing the possibility of doing something in film (74-79).

Hannah's early desire to end up in some form of journalism enabled her to set future targets and cleared a path for her from amongst the plethora of opportunities that characterise leaving university. This, while denying some possibilities, saved her from the anguish of not knowing what to do and trying to find something.

Both Hannah and Martin worked in areas which, in London prior to the recession at least, provide coordinates and parameters of sorts to base life narratives on. Journalism and law are vocational areas that still reward individuals with a 'steadiness of purpose', relatively ordered and scripted paths to follow that are generally linear and progressive. While this ordering and 'disciplining of life' raised concerns in both – they were worried about missing out on other possibilities – neither chose to leave their jobs, preferring, the assurance and security for their present and futures that came with their respective lines of work. Hannah and Martin turned out to be the exception in the sample of twentysomethings I spoke to. The rest of this chapter goes on to explore the responses and difficult situations some young people got into. These tell a different story characterised by uncertainty, anxiety and indecisive decision-making.

Struggling on

Hannah and Martin, it could be argued, had made conscious, 'authentic' decisions about the course of their lives since leaving university. This cannot be said to be true of the way in

which the twentysomethings I discuss in the remainder of this chapter reacted to being faced with 'unmapped' futures upon leaving university. Having left education there is obvious pressure to try to get a job and fulfil the sense of potential they feel. Yet their experiences of not knowing what to do and feeling overwhelmed with choice and possibility create unforeseen difficulties. One way of trying to circumnavigate these difficulties, without a fixed goal in mind, was to 'manage' this uncertainty through a type of 'disengaged engagement' that saw them neither really choosing to do something *nor* choosing not to do something. It is a problem of commitment. Without certainty about what they want to do nor a means through which to realise something, these twentysomethings 'struggle on', taking whatever suitable comes along.

Falling

> Yeah but I think a lot of people just fall into their lives. I feel like a lot of what I have done has just been fallen, I've fallen into a lot of things. I think the times when I feel most proud of myself in my life are times when I have made a decision about where I want to go next but I think I have still fallen into those things. I don't think I have made many conscious decisions about what I am going to do next (Mary, 367-370).

The problem of uncertainty and not knowing led some twentysomethings to just 'fall' into jobs without a sense of real conscious choice or appreciation of whether it is the right thing to in the longer term. The opening quote from Mary summarises this problem well. Perhaps the best example of this sense of falling into something comes from Alice when she explained to me how she ended up working in financial recruitment (not a line of work she favoured) after university at an IT firm because she hated it. She quit the job without another job to go to nor a sense of what she wanted to do. The sector she ended up in did not really inspire her – calling it 'quite lame' and 'salesy-rubbish' which she had never envisaged herself doing.

She ended up in financial recruitment having been swayed by other people to believe that she was a 'people person' and should work in recruitment. Even before taking the job the signs were not good:

> So I interviewed at lots of places and I knew at the time... You know you just bullshit in interviews and they are like, "You've got to be tenacious, ruthless and hard and you've got to really care about money" and I was like "Yes! I am all of those things! I am all of those things!" Ha ha
> I am none of those things. And now I am in a job where I work for a small company. It's a small company start-up that when I interviewed for them I thought they were absolute, I thought they were absolute jokers. A load of young guys that has set up a firm and they were a bit 'wide-boy', you know. And I actually quite fancied one of the guys…
> And I accepted the job with them and I hate it. I really hate it. But I am doing really well at it which is something I don't really like about myself (72-87).

The problem for Alice is not having an alternative direction in which to head. While doing something 'lame' and 'rubbish' that involved her having to deceive not only her employers but also herself it did provide a form of (inauthentic) respite from the uncertainty and a means to stabilise her present. It also instigated a telling emotional 'interior-split' in her as she compromised her own sense of self by accepting the job, resulting in her 'hating' that side of herself.

Pressure – 'It's too much!'

> I keep pressurising myself - you know, 'Why do I keep falling into this?' but you know you just can't do that because … You just have to chill out because you might die tomorrow. Ha! Just try and enjoy life more (Beth, 505-508).

Alice's yielding to doing something she initially despised came about from the sense of pressure she felt to 'get on' in life and take up all the opportunities she was privileged to have. She felt expected to 'grab the bull by the horns', but:

> It's too much! It is too much. It's fine but I can see that it has got a bit more complex and it is seen as… it is an incredible luxury to have choices and opportunities but they do get a bit erm too much. And hence, you know, I ended up falling into something I didn't really like and it's classic recruitment for people that don't know what they want to do. They fall into it. Like everyone in my company doesn't really know what they want to do. So they are just in something that makes money and is an interim.
> They just fell into it because they didn't know what else they wanted to do. And no one grows up and says, "You know what? I really want to be in recruitment. I really want to be a headhunter!" (835-846).

The way of legitimating this fallen position, and managing this pressure, is to think, as Alice argues others do, through convincing oneself that the job is just 'interim'. It is just a safe haven for a while from this pressure to make the *right* choice from among the plethora of opportunities that this period of capitalism offered. The fact that Alice is 'doing really well' at a job she did not actively choose, and lied in the process of getting, must only serve to heighten the sense of compromise she feels at having fallen into a job she hates and despises. As she says:

> I have been freaking out about it and I just don't know what I am going to do… I hate it. It goes against everything that I ever thought I would end up doing (16-20).

Later in the interview Alice reflected more widely on how she had made, or makes, 'decisions':

> It really has just been falling into things. I don't think there has been any strategy because I see it all as … as I said before that when I am older I will think about these things, so I haven't had a plan at all. I say a lot of things. I say I am going to do a lot of things and I get ideas in my head and then I miss the deadlines for applying for various things and, you know, or I am too chicken to apply and do a PGCE erm so, you know, there hasn't really been a plan … I just do them [jobs] and then find out I don't like them and then that is how I made my decisions and move on. I guess that is the same for most people (667-678).

Alice's reactive strategy is contrasted to her mother's experiences who had worked in the same accountancy firm for thirty years without 'proper' promotion:

> I don't want to be like that but I don't think that happens so much anymore if you have got qualifications. She didn't have any. She left school when she was like 15 or 16 and came over to England and just worked very hard and, yeah, she would never, ever *not* have a job. And she hates it but she sees it as it doesn't matter whether she hates it or not. So she, you know, now she is a bit more chilled about me hating my job and she says, "Well if you hate it that much, you should give it up". But previously she would be like, "Well I hate my job but you have to work". Of course we have to work! But you get this notion that you have to do something that you *love* (235-243).

Weighty choices

The reference to trying to find work that one 'loves' is a telling characteristic of this twentysomething generation in terms of their expectations. This search to find work and *the* right job gains new existential weight. Unlike Alice's mother's generation, a job gains a new significance because it is one of the few identity confirming configurations remaining that can help structure an individual's sense of self. A job is no longer just a job – it is something that you are expected to love. A job – if contemporary new managerial speak is to be believed – is a means to 'actualise' and express oneself through.[27] Yet trying to find the unique and *right* job from amongst the ever-growing types of jobs available to graduates is a minefield and as Alice attests can be 'too much'.

This is exacerbated by what Schwartz (2004) calls the 'paradox of choice' whereby the increase in choice and possibility creates the expectation and anticipation that the perfect decision and choice can be made, therefore resulting in complete satisfaction. This could not be further from the truth, as Alice and others would attest, because decision-making comes to be an unattractive prospect once one has to try and make something 'stand out' as better than all other options. Better alternative scenarios are imagined that serve to create doubt and perhaps regret at what was not chosen and would have 'obviously' been better. In these instances non-decision making, procrastination and 'going with the flow' are common occurrences. Without the set of parameters that guided earlier generations and 'limits' on choice that created, it becomes easier to understand why Alice says she 'ended up falling into something'. Doing something, anything, stops the not knowing, the doubt and uncertainty about the future. At least they are doing something which provides a 'map' of sorts, keeping uncertainty and insecurity at bay for as long as the job may last. They might not *love* the job but it served the function of earning money.

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[27] This 'self and/versus work' nexus I explore in the following chapters and is a very much a contested arena.

Recommendations

Richard, despite his desire to pursue photography, has a similar story of how he ended up as an administrator in corporate relocation. It followed a pattern set earlier in his life when he was persuaded by his parents and teachers to do A-levels that went against his own personal interests and were, he was told, more career-oriented. Since leaving a prestigious London art college, having studied photography he had been temping through an agency recommended by his friend. He ended up at his current place of work through another recommendation. He did not actively seek out what he did. As he says of when he left education:

> I had kind of seen it coming from a long way off, but I kind of thought, "I don't know what to do now" because I can't …I've done the wrong A-levels for what I want to do but like friends said, "You know, you should come and do this" and that's what I did (61-64).

> …none of them have been really places that I wanted to work and… That's… I've applied for lots of things which I have been interested in but you can get rejection letters but it's just basically [I] have always got jobs on recommendation. Don't really know people in the right places erm (25-28).

Having relinquished control for where he works and what he does to other people and as a result of knowing people in the right places:

> …the primary concern is to get out of where I am now because I really hate it. Erm and I've been there for fifteen or sixteen months now and, and I, kind of, feel like I haven't achieved anything since I graduated (411-413).

> when I started it was casual for three days and then it went up to three weeks and then three months so I got put onto a contact, kind of, pushed onto a contact and I have *never* planned to be there that long (442-446).

Richard never planned or wanted to be an administrator working in corporate relocation yet he has ended up there. Although having done the 'wrong' A-levels and feeling he could not do what he wanted there is a sense that he did know what he wanted his future to hold – or at least what he didn't want it to be like – but by not taking 'charge' his future was determined by others not his and he 'fell' into whatever came his way.

The problem of falling into jobs that Richard, Alice and Mary allude to in their stories is indicative of a way in which some of the twentysomethings 'disengage' from choosing to create their futures. It is perhaps best understood as an un-chosen strategy for lightening the burden of individual responsibility for choosing one's future from a vast array of possibilities, none of which come with any guarantee nor remove the lingering sense of regret that would come with choosing one over the over. With little to rely on except their own judgement and desires, trying to chose becomes a heavy weight to bear. It is not just a job they are meant to be choosing but the reflexive construction of their identities. This awareness of contingency only adds to the twentysomethings sense of unease about their futures. Through 'falling' they let other people or circumstances dictate what they do rather than making a daunting choice. Gareth articulates this well:

> And maybe at a, at a personal psychological level that is what I do: I just fall into things as opposed to have that whole sort of empowering thing of taking control of your life and things. I don't really understand that, you know, because I see so much that is out of your control and that so many things do happen because of coincidences. And it's that view of the way forward contrasted with a view of taking control of your life, doing something pro-actively…(185-195).

For some this 'fallen' position continues as they 'drift' along knowingly or unknowingly maintaining this inability to make a 'proper' choice.

Drifting

Twentysomethings' lives are no longer lived in or structured by the forms of rational disciplinary regimes associated with Weber's iron-cage of bureaucratic organisations. Without their lives 'tethered' in some sense to an external institution, as Trevor's grandfather's life was tied to the Belfast shipyard industry, it is not hard to understand the problem and nature of drift. The problem of falling into something was exacerbated for some by the problem of *drift*. By drifting I mean the way in which some of the twentysomethings have been *carried along* in their fallen state and 'failed' to take a 'stand' on anything of their real choosing (Heidegger, 1962). Instead they move fairly easily from one thing to the next without ever really trying to reorient themselves.

Sennett (1998) summarises peoples' reaction to new capitalism by describing two contrasting personality types: the 'surfer' and the 'drifter'. The 'surfer' embraces and accepts the rapid changes of context and that they are required to play the game themselves and respond actively. The means of steering comes from an attempt to be conscious of change. They accept that decisions must be made and can be made under conditions of uncertainty, with the view that everything will work out in the long run (quoted in Beck, 2003: 26). The 'drifter', by contrast, experiences contingency and non-continuity of life as a loss and a threat. The multiplication of boundaries and lack of pre-given principles appears to them as something that inhibits decision-making and steering their lives. This feeling of dislocation makes drifters passive and mouldable objects of restructuring. This loss of bearings leads either to a drive to recover those lost powers, or an aimless turning inward (ibid.). However, Sennett is too quick to dismiss the 'drifter's' inward turn as narcissistic indulgence without appreciation of *experiences* and fear generated. As is clear from the discussion below it is not from want of trying that these twentysomethings end up 'drifting', it provides a means of coping.

Why don't you do something?

Beth's father had criticised her at various times since leaving education for not having a proper aim in life. Beth had done various jobs by the time I spoke to her. She had been a receptionist; a waitress; shop assistant and was a store layout designer when we spoke but told me her aim was to learn to teach English and then teach in Spain.

> I think my dad used to get pissed off with me because he always used to say, "Oh you're always just drifting along you are. You're drifting aren't you? Why don't you do something?" but I just… I don't know. It's not because I wanted to drift it's just that I have never really been interested in … or never found what I wanted to do (400-404).

Her father's observation might be right but Beth was 'doing' *something*, she was earning a living from a job. What her father appears to be referring to is that Beth has done lots of

things but not found a job-for-life or a vocation; a calling to something she is interested in and consciously chosen. Yet as Beth protests, her problem is not from a desire to drift but that she has "never been interested… or found what [she] wanted to do." As a result of this, her time living in London was,

> Just kind of drifting from one job to the next … just trying to survive (207)

Without being 'attached' to something that interested her it was easy to drift along in, and into, things which failed to give meaning or a sense of 'depth' to her life. Her present job she likened to Groundhog Dog with a repetitive dullness to it, which bored her and gave her nothing aside from financial subsistence.

Bumbling, tootling and floating along

Alice, as we have already seen, quite readily fell into recruitment work. She is also aware though of the manner in which she has drifted along yet wishes to try to get out of this situation:

> There hasn't really been a plan and now I am more so … I *am* going to start thinking about it because I have been, I graduated in 2006, so this will be 2 years this summer since I graduated and I think I can't just carry on bumbling along. I do need to have a bit more of a plan and if I want to move away from the thing that I am doing now I will have to think about it more seriously. But I don't really think about things very seriously (667-678).

As she already explained in the previous section her means of deciding upon something was purely reactive: doing it and seeing whether she liked it. There is nothing proactive about her 'unthinking' approach yet this 'bumbling along' troubles her and she wants to do something different. The prospect of breaking this 'drift' creates fear: Alice is "too chicken" to apply to do a PGCE. It is a scary predicament to consider taking the risk that is involved in trying something new and making a decision that could define who she could become in the future, when there is no guarantee of it working out. Bumbling from one thing to the next, by contrast, is fairly risk free and requires no confrontation with trying to work out what it is you really want.

While Alice was worried about her 'bumbling', Rebecca was concerned at the manner in which she 'tootled' along in her job as a pension solicitor. Rebecca was one of the oldest twentysomethings I spoke to. She was 29 and since graduating with a law degree, and working in that field, had always had a nagging feeling that she had never really made a proper choice and should, perhaps, be doing something different:

> I suppose the fact that I am not doing anything and that I am just tootling along doing the job that I am doing now means that maybe that is *what* I am *meant* to be doing now (72-74).

> …it is hard to be motivated and directed towards something when you don't know which way you are heading. I mean it's probably easier to say what I don't want. I know things I don't want, and areas of life and paths I don't want to end up on but I just don't know which one…I do want to be following. Ha ha! And I should just get on with it and stop whinging about it (69-75).

Rebecca's talk of "tootling" along as a pension solicitor implies a sense of distraction, lack of real engagement and desire for what she is doing. Yet she also ponders in an attempt, of sorts, to convince herself that perhaps she had, by good fortune, landed upon the right job and therefore can ignore the inkling of suspicion (what Heidegger would name as the 'call of conscience') that perhaps everything is not as it seems.

'Bumbling', 'tootling'[28] or 'floating', as Jo refers to it, gives allusion to some sense of blissful ignorance through which no harm is done, when the reality of a situation remains hidden or at a distance from proper conscious recognition. It is a means of carrying on and deferring confrontation with having to make a proper choice about the future. It avoids proper commitment. As Jo discusses here, it is a way of letting things happen rather than making things happen:

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[28] Drifting or bumbling along in a detached state was alluded to by other twentysomethings as a means of expressing their begrudging acquiescence to a job or situation. Jason talked of "plodding" along being a patent attorney in sharp contrast to the way he "runs" to his dance classes (dancing was his real passion) to perfect his développé and other moves.

I didn't feel like I could make a decision and … I don't think I have made a proper decision for a couple of years! I have just sort of floated through, not even floated through but it actually made me realise that actually you can't plan things to do and things do just happen. Yeah I haven't felt particularly in control of my life whereas before I suppose I did. In fact everything up til a few years ago I felt like I had planned everything (201–206).

A means of navigation?

Drifting was a distinct possibility – and problem – for twentysomethings because the sense of overwhelming choice, yet uncertainty about to choose, created a desire for something which would relieve this existential doubt. Often it was the first acceptable job that came along that with an acceptable monetary return. It was taken with the hope they soon would find something better. Yet it became easier to 'drift along' and more 'scary' to try and actively create futures they desired when they had no direction. Doing so left them open to getting 'trapped' in an 'extended-present' that repeated itself and does not look forward. For Bauman (2002: 152) 'surfing' – as Sennett suggests – also captures this new mentality of the world of uncertainty. Surfing keeps one on the surface and gives the person the ability to move quickly without any of the drag that impedes movement when swimming. To have depth or allow oneself to 'sink' into the water comes to be viewed as treacherous. Bauman likens this fear to Sartre's mediation of the nature of 'slime'. Unlike water which runs right off the body, slime's viscosity and stickiness does the opposite: it possesses one if you sink into it. It draws one in and appropriates you for itself (ibid.). Slime comes to hold you to the ground and is hard to shake off – the fear of becoming fixed, held back and defined by something you do not desire. Helen captures this predicament when she was telling me about the fast paced nature of life in London.

Helen was 25 when I spoke to her, interning for an NGO, and attempting to turnaround her life having completed a self-help course that was a revelation (this is discussed more later) and gave her new means to engage with uncertainty. She told me how people can get scared to stop because they are afraid of being left behind by others and how:

> We will just do what is in front of us because that is the easy option and because …if you don't quite know what you want then you'll kind of go for anything (447-450).

However, the sense of drifting alluded to here is different to Sennett's conception of drifting – it is not directed towards a specific, chosen end – but this is not to say it does not serve a purpose. Without a specific direction they drift, much as would a surfer if they were to stop and lie on their board, hoping that it leads them somewhere good:

> You learn from everything. And I just don't think and I wouldn't know what I would want in the future… And I am so unclear about where I want to go, I don't think there is anything I could say if that happens then it will all work well because I just think that you just plod on wherever you are and hope that it will take you to the right place (Jenni, 862-865).

Drifting becomes a way of negotiating choice and uncertainty that serves to neither fully commit to something nor make a (authentic) choice about one's future. It could be understood as making an 'uncommitted commitment'. The idea of 'planning' for these twentysomethings comes to look increasingly meaningless when it is no more than a mere projection of present conditions into the immediate future (Nilsen, 1999). Drifting became an 'un-chosen' form of engaging providing a means of 'just getting on' with practical, daily existence while trying to 'bracket out' the ever-present feeling that something is not right. It keeps an individual in the 'extended-present' (Nowotny, 1994) reacting to things as they happen. Yet without planning or the sorts of maps to guide them, wrong turns become more likely and dead ends a potential hazard.

Dangerous positions

> I think maybe partly for me then, what getting stuck in a rut was like was that I had got too assimilated to my job and I felt I couldn't separate myself (Mary, 497-498).

Without a real 'chosen' commitment to something, having fallen into something and then drifted along, some of twentysomethings faced a further problem of getting 'trapped' in their 'unwanted' (job) situation. The jobs that they ended up in were often the result of an initial instrumental approach to doing something because they needed money and came with the

expectation it would tide them over until they get a 'proper' job. This logic operated with a presumed progression to something better down the line. Yet this assumption of progression could – and did – get stuck. As this section explores there are two ways in which it is possible to understand the twentysomethings as getting 'trapped' or what Mary calls "getting stuck in a rut".

Firstly, figuratively speaking they *are* 'trapped' in their job. Caught in an *external* position or structure. Of course they could just leave but that puts them straight back into a world of uncertainty, choice and insecurity – with no income – which is not, ideally, where they want to be. It becomes a case of better the devil you know. Richard demonstrates this predicament below. Secondly, the other sense in which twentysomethings could be said to be trapped is *internally* through, and by, the manner in which they think about themselves and their given situation.[29] As Jenni discusses below, the two ways of feeling trapped feed off one another with both helping to limit the sense of agency twentysomethings have. Without a map to guide them – that helps order their future – twentysomethings are open to the risk of developing thoughts not conducive to escaping their 'traps'.

"I *never* planned to be there that long"

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Richard had not known what to do upon leaving education and had ended up working in various jobs acquired through an employment agency he was recommended to by a friend. Having studied Fine Art he wanted to 'get quite far away from it' (162) after graduation. His justification for this he explains:

> I do have, a genuine interest in like arts and media but it's …It just seems really difficult but I… I go through bouts of a couple of months where I apply for a job every day in my lunch hour then I won't hear anything back and then you have a few months when you just think, "I can't". It becomes more painful looking for a job than it does doing (373-377).

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[29] This problem with 'thinking' is taken further and explored more fully in later chapters especially chapter eight.

This sense of acting against his own desires is heightened and felt more acutely when in the course of his work as a corporate relocation administrator he deals with companies he has ethical misgivings about. Having written a thesis about sponsorship and ethics in the Fine Arts he found that as he 'progressed through life' he was faced with having to make decisions that went against his ethics (324-326).

The sense of compromise and general misgivings about the job did not stop him trying to secure a promotion. The pragmatics of it outweighed the reasons, and silenced his wishes, to leave. He did not know what he wanted to do as an alternative so it seemed wise to go for promotion, but he was aware of the potential "dangerous position" he was creating for himself:

> So I am thinking I want to get out of here but I might as well get a better job title to try and get somewhere else but at the same time as well as doing that you think, "Am I setting myself against the jobs I want to get because the people are looking at corporate relocation they are going to think I am an estate agent!" Erm and there is prejudice against that and I've got stuck in one field. But yeah so I am not really sure to be honest what I want to do (445-449).

> It's kind of like, I am finding it very, very, very difficult to erm …to push this, this promotion through possibly because when I started they were like, when they put me on a contract I did manage to negotiate some kind of leniency so I had an exhibition, well I didn't have an exhibition – I was part of a group show in, at the end of May – and I managed to negotiate time off for that and everyone was like, "Oh so you do art? Yeah oh right ok". And then I think it was, kind of, like, kind of, shot my own self in the foot and steadied myself in admin which is probably only because I have been doing it and I think I'd hate any job there! But I don't want to get …I feel like even after just almost a year and half I have, kind of, getting into a dangerous position where I am setting myself as an administrator (458-466)

As discussed in the previous chapter the difficulty in trying to break into an area of work you actually want makes the decision to stay or leave harder. Richard talked of the frustration the catch 22 situation caused whereby leaving his job for work experience somewhere in the hope of breaking into his desired field might mean 'making tea and emptying bins' with no promise of a proper job at the end of it.

Consequently what had started out as a temporary job for Richard – "I have been there for fifteen or sixteen months now… when I started it was casual for three days… I *never* planned to be there that long" (411-446) – has become a job in which he is actually consciously seeking promotion to try and redeem, to an extent, the predicament he finds himself in. There is logic at work within Richard's thinking to get a better job title and pay even though he hates working there and he risks "setting" himself as an administrator. The sense he has of 'shooting himself in the foot' prays on his mind making his non-committal commitment to promotion even harder but is indicative of these two contradictory thoughts at work within him. Richard being trapped in his administration job is further exasperated by the way in which he thinks about it and tries to rationalise his decision making.

External/internal traps

Jenni exemplifies the way in which a style of thinking can come to make someone feel 'trapped' in their present situation and unable to manoeuvre a way out of – again essentially because of not knowing what want to do or where to go in ones' life; the problem of not having a map. Jenni says of her situation:

> I think I had let myself get trapped, very trapped. Just mentally in a place where you just don't yeah… and I am sure … I think that everyone goes through that after they are finishing or when you are searching for a job and stuff erm. It's just happened too many times now! Ha. I just don't want to let myself get in that trap again. It just makes you feel… Yeah like I said before, just going and being sociable and just feeling inadequate, that you can't tell people about yourself and it stops you being interested in other people in case they ask you the same questions or … And I have hated the way it has made me… because when you feel insecure about yourself... you're perhaps not the nicest person outwardly… (Jenni, 342-349)

There is an emotional and psychological cost to the way in which Jenni feels lost and uncertain about her future. She has an intensely personal sense of being at fault for the 'trap' she has got herself into. It has stopped her being able to be her normal self. She tried to withdraw to a safer place; somewhere she would not be reminded of, or have to face up to, the unanswered questions that remained about her future. This depressive state is induced by the imperative Jenni feels to be able to get on and take responsibility for her future and what she understands as her failure to succeed. As Sennett (1998), notes, in circumstances like these

individuals can come to struggle with understanding how to resolve their problem. Attention turns to, and becomes preoccupied with, immediate circumstances, turning them over and over, aware that something needs to be done but struggling to find the means to do anything (p. 91).

Nowhere in Jenni's individualised account is a sense of the wider social void that deprives her of the means – both material and psychological – to construct a robust existential refrain (Guattari, 2000). Her desire 'just' to not let it happen again underplays the way in which McDonald (1999) would argue how self-esteem has become the most important resource for young people need to mobilise today. Jenni's anger at leaving university – "Why the hell did I even bother doing a degree? It hasn't got me anywhere" (58) – hints at the possibilities she had been led to believe should have been hers upon graduation. The frustration of those aspirations is felt intensely as personal inadequacy. With only further uncertainty informing her present, Jenni becomes not only trapped in material circumstances but also within her sense of self: "you can't tell people about yourself and it stops you being interested in other people".

To add further to Jenni's depressive state of mind was the familial context she grew up in. Both parents were architects and had worked in the industry since university. Her sister and sister's boyfriend were both architects too, had good jobs and were buying a house. Jenni told me:

> …they are gradually getting on the property ladder and are doing everything right and I feel like I am the dud one! (287-288)

This sense of feeling like a "dud", echoing Alice's, "I am a complete mug" at the end of the last chapter, indicates the extent to which she feels culpable for her situation; something had gone wrong with her. Once more a sense of personal inadequacy prevails – "not good enough". This is not helped by the arguments she has with other (architect) friends who cannot grasp her situation and just tell her to, "Get a job" (repeating the same 'advice' of the grandparents earlier).

A further unintended consequence of Jenni's present malaise is the way in which she thinks it could continue to affect her in the future even if she does find a job, and path, she wants:

> I mean what I think I am worried about is when I am in a good and decent job I will be scared of, if for some reason I don't know – you know, I want to make a life decision and maybe stop and do something else, that I'll be scared of stopping just in case I stop and fall into that hole again (359-363).

She feels her present experiences could come back to haunt her in the future making decision taking feel even more precarious. There becomes a sense in which the only manner in which she can feel some sense of coherence about herself and future is to just keep going, not stop. Bauman (2000: 209-10) argues that uncertain and fragile individuals are doomed to feel like they are skating on thin ice all the time and when doing so the only safety is in *speed*. To slow down is to risk falling through and finding oneself, once more, back in a state of bewilderment and personal interrogation: Jenni's self-referential 'hole' which further reinforces stasis. The problem with 'moving on' all the time – as with the 'surfer' earlier - is that it could actually stop anchoring bonds or coordinates being formed – a robust existential refrain – which could provide the sort of meaning Jenni longs for.

Personal rut

The sense of a "hole" or trap that is fallen into and is difficult to get out of is referred to by other twentysomethings too. One consequence of getting 'trapped' in a hole is that it can provoke (intense) reflection on behalf of the individual and can act as an imperative for change or the reverse, an acquiescence to one's current state. Mary was one such twentysomething who, contrary to Jenni's metaphorical 'hole', felt she had got stuck in a 'rut' that was holding her back. Here Mary explains to me why she left her job and went travelling to San Francisco:

> So it was more to do with, my career was ok but it wasn't like I was with a partner or anything but I was ok with that. I didn't feel particularly enthusiastic about going to work but I felt that was more to do with that I felt I had got into a personal rut where I was starting to feel depressed again and I didn't want to be in S anymore. It wasn't opening up any new opportunities for me (88-91).

> I think maybe partly for me then what getting stuck in a rut was like was that I had got too assimilated to my job and I felt I couldn't separate myself (497-498).

The 'rut' that Mary[30] felt she was in is different to the 'hole' Jenni feels she might slip back into. A hole goes nowhere except down vertically and traps you in it with its walls so you cannot get out. Instead a rut runs horizontally with shallow walls that hem, border and guide you somewhere; it provides a structure or guide for life – but not one necessarily of your own choosing. It is easier to stay in it than try to get out. Both are positions from which Mary and Jenni reflect back upon themselves from and ask questions. Both are a means of being trapped but Mary's 'rut' does not seem as all encompassing as the 'hole' that Jenni was trapped in. At least Mary had something to move away from or push against; she had "got too assimilated" to her job whereas Jenni was still searching for something.

Conclusion: unplanned meanderings

Far from flourishing in their new freedom these twentysomethings, with the exception of Martin and Hannah, have struggled to 'get on'. Even if there remained maps to help them, the twentysomethings would require a desired destination point and this is largely absent from their stories. The use of maps and the rational logic of the enterprise discourse really only comes to bear fruit if an end-point is known i.e. a particular job or long-term goal. The uncertainty of the individuals in this chapter over what they want undermines the means-end rationality at work in both potential means of navigating and moving forward. The resulting pressure to rely on themselves to find something becomes a heavy burden and one that is relieved by a quiet and, in some cases, pragmatic acquiescence to particular jobs they 'fell' into or were recommended. Remaining in and drifting along in these unauthentically chosen jobs served to help bracket out further uncertainty and bide them time to gather their thoughts. However, there was the danger that this interim solution could entrap them further in 'dangerous' isolating places that brought with it potential psychological costs and a self-

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[30] The desire for something different and the ability to change that characterises Mary here is discussed further in chapter six.

referential feeling of inadequacy that could undermine further action. These depressive states bear witness to the new sorts of struggles and pathologies neoliberalism produces in young people, which serve to undermine their attempts to make a coherent project of their lives.

The difficulty with deciding what to do that some of the twentysomethings had, in some ways reaches a crisis point which is only further problematised through the highly individualised sense of responsibility they feel for not 'getting on'. What remains from the enterprise discourse is the responsibility and blame it helps create in those who feel they have failed to answer the question 'what to do?' The decisions made in this chapter must be understood as an attempt to meet the imperative of the contemporary world that requires individuals to 'mobilise' and 'choose' themselves while being plagued by the fragility of a present which denies them any firm, long-term foundation to trust or to base a decision on (Melucci, 1996: 43-44). The falling, drifting and getting trapped in one way looks obviously self-defeating but when the uncertainty of the future is seen as a threat and viewed with apprehension then these responses can be understood for what they are: attempts to make the best of a bad situation. Nowotny's (1994) concept of the 'extended present' is useful here because it suggests how the notion of planning for the future may be altered by the experience of the present. It is no surprise that when the circumstances of twentysomethings leaving university appears and feels 'unmapped' that responses to forge a future should take on similar characteristics.

The twentysomethings' hesitancy, unknowingness and 'rational' responses attest to the glaring problems of, and inconsistency within, the idealised logic of the enterprise whose tacit assumptions, that individuals know what they want and will rationally act accordingly to achieve that desired goal, prove to be largely fictitious. Nor does it acknowledge the way that deregulation has significantly raised the stakes for the need to make correct choices as old institutional 'maps' wane (Lemke, 2001). These struggles highlight not only a epistemological fallacy but also show a potential material consequence for the future prospects of the twentysomethings: Bennett (2008) shows how 'stop-gap' or 'random' jobs after university can seriously damage career prospects. He found those still in low-grade work after nine months

after graduation were more distressed, less motivated and more likely to fall into depression than those who were unemployed, while some had given up hope of getting into graduate level jobs. The next chapter goes on to examine in more detail this relationship between work, the self and expectations for better things to come.

Chapter 5 – Having found something to do: negotiating expectations of work

> With industrialism, work is placed at the centre, not just of man but history. Work is the means by which he makes himself... The question 'who am I?', which would formerly have been answered almost everywhere in terms of religion, family or place of origin, could now really be answered only in terms of the occupation a man worked in (Kumar, 1984: 8-9 quoted in Baldry et al., 2007: 3).

> Stripped of its eschatological trappings and cut off from its metaphysical roots, work has lost the centrality which it was assigned in the galaxy of values dominant in the era of solid modernity and heavy capitalism. ... or as the ethical axis of individual life... Instead work has acquired mainly aesthetic significance (Bauman, 2000: 139).

> I don't think of myself as being a media professional or whatever, or an office project manager. I don't think of myself in those terms at this stage. Maybe other people do but it's not how I do (Mary, 102-103).

The problem of negotiating an unmapped future featuring numerous uncertain choices in terms of work meant that work came to be viewed as a potential panacea to this predicament or as an instrumental means to get what or where they wanted to be. In this chapter I look at three different relationships that some of the twentysomethings developed with work and the expectations they had of their jobs. Unlike Martin and Hannah, at the start of the last chapter, who had some prospect of long-term progressive linearity to their respective jobs, those discussed here contrast starkly with the central tenets of a traditional (Weberian) work ethic that is premised upon commitment to the job, deferred gratification and long-term planning (generating a 'steadiness of purpose' for a life). What becomes apparent is the move to an individualised work ethic that is about securing personal reward outside of the notion of career development or development *in* a job.

The chapter starts with Rob, the one twentysomething to adopt enterprise as his mode of conduct, who had long-term goals outside of work and who saw work as a tactical means, which, combined with his personal traits, would achieve those future aims. Then I discuss Beth and Tom's struggles over the status they want or feel work should have in their lives. Both hankered after work to provide an immediate answer to their uncertain futures and

sense of disillusionment. This served to foster a short-term attitude and further difficulties when jobs failed to deliver. They struggled with reconciling a traditional conception of work as bestowing meaning and identity, with the 'dispassionate' realities of 'new' work, which failed to offer authenticity or deliver on the sense of potential they felt. I finish the chapter by discussing Corrine who displays typical traits of the twentysomethings I spoke to in that she wants to remain non-committal and 'un-fixed' by her job. She wants to be able to explore and experiment with the possibilities she has as a 'creative' worker, which leaves her vulnerable to the ways in which neoliberalism has developed to exploit 'inner' talent.

A phrase of Tom's helps contextualise further the nature of the relationships the twentysomethings developed with work and how the recent changes in organisations can be understood. He noted how his generation lacked 'enforced responsibilities' towards work either in the form of financial desperation, personally in terms of being married and children or a more ontological threat posed by war that focused one's commitment. As this chapter explores the one person who had 'enforced responsibilities' (Rob, who was married and had long-term plans with his wife) and spoke with certainty over what he wanted, was the only one who spoke with confidence about work and the future. He also enthusiastically adopted the central tenets of the enterprising self to negotiate what he recognised as a new marketplace, so to capitalise from it. In this respect he too espoused a highly individualised work ethic, related to his and his family's betterment only; not one aligned to a mutual interdependent relationship with a company or organisation. The others, lacking 'enforced responsibilities' either from commitment to a career or children, are left to define their own relationship to work in ways that were largely focused on short-term gratification and ensuring work did not compromise that.

Contemporary work ethics and twentysomethings

Weber argued that the dominance of instrumental rationality within the rise of modernity traps the individual within an iron-cage of bureaucracy. Through this the impersonal order of

legal-rationalism substitutes personal beliefs (or ultimate values) for the rational consideration of means and ends, draining social life of its vitality (Gane, 2004: 25). While this process of disenchantment is demeaning for individuals the pay off was a 'steadiness of purpose' provided by capitalist organisations that were fixed and stable. The secret to Weber's iron-cage for Sennett (2006) is that people would 'immure themselves within fixed institutions because they hoped finally to empower themselves in a future reward'. Deferred gratification and the hope of long held strategic plans coming to fruition makes possible self-discipline in the present. Individuals can steel themselves to work, unhappily or not, because they are focused on future reward. And this requires institutions to be creditable and stable enough to deliver future rewards (p. 77-78). Sennett analogises lived time in a fixed-function organisation (the iron-cage) to being like 'slowly crawling up, or down, the stairs in a house you have not designed; you are living someone else's design for your life'. People will do so because bureaucracies teach the discipline of delayed gratification and long-term thinking (p. 31).

However, as chapter one explained, contemporary work has fundamentally changed. The contemporary spirit of capitalism is defined by flexible adaptation, networks and projects releasing individuals from the 'hierarchy, planning, formal authority, Taylorism, 'managerial status, lifelong careers in the same firm' that characterised the old spirit (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002: 24). This new paradigm makes nonsense of delayed gratification as a principle of self-discipline because the institutional conditions essential to it are missing (see for example Baldry et al., 2007; Bauman, 2007; Beck, 2000; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Cannon, 1995a; 1995b; Casey, 1995, 2002; Flores & Gray, 2000; Gorz, 1999; Hardt, 1999; Heiman, 2001; 1994; Lash, 1987; Lazzarato, 1996; Leadbeater, 1999; Miller, 2004; Perrons et al., 2005; Rifkin, 2004; Ringrose, 2007; Robins & Webster, 1999a; Strangleman, 2007; Thrift, 2002; Walkerdine, 2006; Webb, 2006; Westwood, 2002; Westwood, 2004). The image of the secure and steady worker gradually working their way up a company's promotional ladder comes to be replaced by a person who eschews dependency; does not cling to others (nor institutions) and displays personal initiative and enterprise in pursuit of more immediate prospects (Sennett, 2006: 46).

Having briefly (re)considered Weber's thought on work ethics I now move onto considering in detail three twentysomethings' relationships to work. They do not exhaust the variety of responses but instead represent archetypical responses that capture the essence of how the twentysomethings understood and related to work. They emerged from reflecting on the way twentysomethings' talked about work and the recent sociological literature around changes in work, which at times, I felt, tended to over-generalise transformations in work relationships and remain at the theoretical level. I chose these three 'ideal types' because all the other twentysomethings' responses could, broadly, be aligned to one of them and they captured the new dynamic relationship these individuals had with work. The first 'relationship' adhered to enterprise and takes a very individualised approach. The second involved being caught in anxiety-ridden tension between two opposing stances towards work and the third way involved adopting an open and experimental approach. All, however, entailed a quite thorough re-working of the central tenets of the traditional work ethic.

"I need to put steps in place": enterprise and individualised work ethics

> You have to take ownership of your own career and you have to look at the opportunities and it's about building the network of people and that's important to build these contacts that will get you up the ladder (470-472).

Rob was the only twentysomething I spoke to who was married. He and his wife had been together for two years and had just bought a house together. At the time of interviewing he was 26 and displayed a resounding confidence in what he wanted and his ability to get it, surpassing all the others I spoke to. Since graduating the various jobs he had done had all been about accruing skills and experience to drive him forward. What also makes him distinctive was that he was a practicing Christian (as was his wife). Unlike other twentysomethings he had two significant 'internal' institutional pillars – marriage and religion – that, it became evident, were important structuring bearings in his life. Rob called them his 'couple of driving factors':

They're the key areas… I've got another responsibility there, which is not just for myself but for Julie as well. So Julie, my wife, wants her, sort of, aspirations are really along the lines of having a family, security and those sorts of things and they are my goals aswell, is to be able to get to a point and where I can provide that for Julie so she doesn't have to work and can look after the family (113-119).

Religion and marriage for Rob served a similar function as law and journalism did for Martin and Hannah in chapter four, providing a sense of linear progression towards traditional markers of adult status (with traditional ascribed gender roles). This he told me would require hard work, dedication and potential 'sacrifices made in the short term for benefits in the long term' (296-297). While this might retain in theory all the trappings associated with a traditional work ethic – long-term strategic thinking and deferred gratification - in practice Rob displayed a much more radical and individualised approach to work and what he wanted to achieve. He eschewed identification with a company in favour of using his capacities and wits to get what he wanted emulating principles of the entrepreneurial self rather than the functional strictures of a job within an organisation.

At the time of speaking to Rob he was a successful recruitment agent with big ambitions[31], in a successful recruitment agency near where he lived. He had long-term plans in the shape of getting to the point where he could be the breadwinner and his wife would no longer have to work. He wanted to work 150 days a year, have a house and explore the 'faith side of things' in church (132). These long-term ideals needed a plan and shaped Rob's approach and relationship to work:

I really need to think how am I going to get there? Am I going to get there by carrying on what I am doing now? Well maybe but I need to put steps in place. So what job can I do in ten years time or five year time that will be…I need to be earning 200-300 thousand a year really. To get to that sort of level income then I need to rapidly move up the food chain (133-137).

I am thinking about ending up working for myself doing business consultancy and perhaps training and all that sort of thing but in order to do that I need to apply some skills so yeah I guess along, the plan is now to look at what other jobs will give me the

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[31] In subsequent contact with Rob two years after the interview I learnt that he had taken up the offer to buy the recruitment business from his boss and was now director of the operation.

skills and get me working with the clients I need to and also better in terms of financial remuneration (139-143).

Psychological enterprise and planning

Rob was confident he could deliver on his aims because he felt a 'certain type of individual' (405) could prosper in the changed times he was living in. It became apparent that Rob had embraced the recent changes in the economy as opening up potential for people like him to take full responsibility for the direction of their lives:

> I think it is good. I don't think, I don't think you're owed anything, society … At all. It is down to us to do… You know, I don't think we have a right to a house or a right to eat nice food or a right to have a good car and a job - things like that. I think that is down to you and yeah I might have been given more but equally I think that we also have a responsibility, the society does have a responsibility to be able to act in a way that enables and helps people to push on in a sense, but I don't think that…yeah but I guess that sounds a bit contradictory doesn't it? I think, I don't think society owes you anything but equally I think society should try and help everyone do the best they can (410-419).

Rob felt he was ideally suited to this new economy – "I think it is down to your personality. … I would say I am more of a risk taker (218)" – compared to his father who was more suited to the stable conditions of 'old' capitalism, and that he welcomed the chance to rely on his own wits as it meant he was able to strategically and quickly manoeuvre 'up the ladder' towards his goals. Rob, drawing upon the Myers Briggs type indicator, sees himself as 'extroverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving' (226-227). The opposite to his father who, he claims, is 'super-dependable'. Rob described himself as 'more fly-by-night kind of – a real ideas person, innovative' (229). When I asked Rob about this idea that innate personality determined an individual's success, he restated his belief that 'it's down to what your personality type is like' (234).

Rob's reliance on personal psychological traits has affinity to the way in which Walkerdine (2005; 2006) argues that psychology has come to have a special place in the way in which workers in the new economy think about and manage themselves. Rob's recourse to personality helps him sustain a sense of self that is grounded in a psychological narrative.

Work for him is created and related to his personality and capacities whereas, Walkerdine argues, older age groups of workers had access to alternative discourses of work (2005: 51). Rob's father worked in the public services and Rob is quick to stress in the interview that he thinks his dad would find it 'very stressful' (236) in the new world of work where 'it's down to you'. Rob's insistence that it is personality that is most important attribute for success means that failure in the labour market no longer has to do with social or external factors. Instead failure is to do with personal psychological deficiency (Walkerdine, 2005: 48-49) – a failure to adapt, take risks, be flexible – this goes someway to understanding the damning verdict Alice and Jenni pass on themselves when they label themselves as being a 'mug' (Alice) and 'dud' (Jenni) for somehow believing they had the right capabilities. The new economy demands a strong and resilient ego.

Rob's characterises himself as an 'innovator' and 'ideas-person' – adopting many of traits associated with the enterprising self – and, as such, marks himself out but not only for his entrepreneurial zeal. What also set Rob apart from other twentysomethings is that he knew the direction he wanted his life to take. Being enterprising is all the easier if you know in advance what you want:

> So working back from that [marriage and aspirations for family and financial security] I need to think, "Right ok what can I offer to the world, you know this marketplace, what skills can I go out and capitalise to get money in order to get that security?" That financial freedom to do that and erm, they are, erm, excuse me, they, you know, obviously I have got into recruitment and it's a fairly good area and lucrative etcetera (124–128).

Fully aware of the economic and labour market requirements – 'the culture now is very episodic' (252), 'today is *all* about what you can offer now isn't it? What job can you do for me now?' (267-268) – Rob happily adapts to the conditions of short-termism and fast-pace:

> You need to be learning new skills and moving into new areas all the time. But I don't see that as a problem that's, that's not going to hinder me … but that you have to be able to plan and allow some room for contingency planning but you also some room to take opportunities when they come and I think you have to live your life permanently with one eye on the next thing, so that although you're doing this job now, you know although I am working now I am interviewing all the time with other companies not

because I am definitely looking to leave but just because I am feeling what is out there in the market (322-330).

Rob sounds like a 'Me-Plc'[32]; becoming the individual source and resource for the ordering and betterment of his (and wife's) life. Again he reiterates how he thinks he is suited to this new economy because it 'suits people that are very versatile and can change careers and move in a fluid jobs market. I couldn't think of anything worse than being blocked into one avenue and having to do the same repetitive stuff all my life'. (253-255).

Do it yourself

Rob welcomes the responsibility the new freedoms he finds himself in bring. He is quick to dismiss and chastise those that complain about the recent changes to work:

> They [people who want to win the lottery] moan on about, you know, Thatcher and the Tories and blardy blar but I think, "Well yeah too bad!" Yeah you've got to get off your arse and actually do something and you can do it, anyone can do it! You've just got to work hard and that's what the market is about – these days *is* working hard (343-346).

> You are rewarded by what you put in personally, it's down to you. You know, society is all fine and good but I don't think…I am not paying into pension plans or expecting to a company pension or…I am expecting it to be down to me (348-350).

Rob's firm commitment and ready acceptance to take 'personal responsibility for things' (445-446) given the demise of institutional support echoes Thatcher's infamous phrase, "There is no such thing as society". As such, Rob comes to epitomise the Conservative and New Labour rhetoric around trying to develop an enterprise culture in the UK that imbues individuals with codes of self-sufficiency. In these terms he is a successful 'neo-liberal autonomous subject of choice' reflexively using his new found freedoms and agency to negotiate and utilise opportunities afforded by the market to make money and secure his *own* future (Walkerdine,

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[32] There is a interesting and growing amount of literature that supports initiatives and training regimes through which individuals are encouraged to think of themselves as miniature personal Plcs. The Reed Foundation, the charitable wing of Reed Recruitment and Consultancy, set up and run the *Academy of Enterprise* that published a guide called *ME Plc A Business Giant Where You Are The Boss* (2000). What is striking is the sheer emphasis put all the way through on the need to 'know oneself' and to 'think like a business' to forge your own future and the best person to do that is 'yourself'.

2005). He wants to work hard to secure his and wife's future. Yet this future is privatised and individual to them – not tied to the success or fate of a company or wider collective of people.

Future reward

Rather than the realisation of prospects through long-term commitment to a specific job, it is Rob's two social, but privatised, coordinates of marriage and religion that give progressive parameters to his life:

> …the motivation comes from other values, like in order to do what I really want to do you can't just, you can't just go and do it. If you want to live a certain way and if you want things in life you do have to work from them and it is down to you. And Julie and I… and Julie will, and that may mean taking decisions that on the face of it look strange; like me living away to work for a while or things like that you know, but we know we are in it together to build something but yeah it's down to you; you take what is given and try and use it (274-280).

> One of my core values is to have a very deep sense of personal authenticity wherever I am … the work/home life balance [then] that's important to me but there may be sacrifices made in the short term for benefits in the long term so although naturally I am a sort of live for the moment type of person you know I am thinking a lot more in terms of contingencies and, and, future plans now (294-299).

It is a personal, private value sphere that marks out success for Rob and provides a 'grand narrative' through which to orient his life. As such elements of a traditional work ethic persist in Rob's narrative in that he will work hard and be self-disciplined for fulfilment and reward in the future but he is not tied to an identity conferred on him by a work situation nor is gratification reliant upon achievement in a job. Marriage and his religious conviction bolster and provides a foundation from which his risky and entrepreneurial fuelled strategy of living 'life permanently with one eye on the next thing' (327) can be launched. Rob's ethic could be seen as one of tactical instrumentality whereby work is only valued as a means to self-gratification in other spheres. The locus of authority lies with his 'autonomous' self rather than the traditions of established rules, roles and regulations found in an organisational work ethic (Heelas, 2002: 81).

The clear-sightedness that Rob exhibits in terms of what he wants and how he intends to get it is the exception to the other twentysomethings I spoke to. His relationship to work is distinctive too in its instrumental approach that does not waiver in terms of what he wants or expects from it: just financial reward to secure his own family's future. The responsibility for that overrides consideration of the problems that beset the next twentysomethings I consider in this chapter. Their troubles stemmed from a tension to do with the sort of meaning and fulfilment they expected from work and the reality, which was rather different.

"There has to be something I feel more passionate about"

> …my job just bores me and it doesn't give me anything at all. I don't get anything at all out of it. And I am working for this big company and it's like … in the end … I, I take pride in my work and I want to do things properly but in the end I don't because I don't have enough time and the way they run things. I just bodge things together now - "Who cares?!" … You become a bit of a cowboy and I don't like to think of myself like that. (Beth, 338–342)

> You get this notion that you have to do something that you *love* (Alice, 243).

Tom expected a smooth ride after leaving university – "in my mind that there would suddenly be this realisation that this is what I wanted to be" (137) – but struggled to find anything he wanted to do, getting to the point where he asked, "What the hell am I doing?" (335) He eventually found a job as a charity fundraiser but doubt still lingered:

> …It's got to the point with my job that though there are bits of it that I enjoy, bits of it I don't enjoy and… in particular I am not that really bothered about it. I am quite apathetic and in terms of a career path or thinking, "Great I can get to be director of fundraising in this charity", I don't feel massively passionate about it (26-29).

For many in previous generations the prospect of becoming a director of an organisation would have been worth striving for. Instead Tom lacks any drive for it and the even the prospect of a relatively secure career with the organisation fails to ease his apathy. The source of his problem: no passion for it.

A job failing to excite him was nothing new. He told me of a job he had done as a pharmaceutical sales rep which he quite enjoyed but the problem was 'not giving a shit' about it and ultimately he 'couldn't care less about it' (37- 41). Prospective high earnings failed to offset the desire to feel 'more passionate about [something]: more adventurous' (43). A job, for Tom, must bring him to life and have a sense of authenticity about it. Meanwhile Beth's experiences of working for a large multinational home design company ended up with her repeating a similar motif and hope for something better:

> …since I have been at A it's just really this kind of dull, groundhog day at work and you just lose all your passion for design and stuff because er you just think, "Oh is this what it's all about?" (228-230)

The realities of the working day drain any passion and meaning Beth might have got from the job causing her to question the very value and purpose of work itself. Her opening quote to this section testifies to the fact that she feels like the job fails to 'give' her anything and comes to compromise the way she views herself and the way she expects and wants to be able to approach her work i.e. with passion, care and attention to detail.

Both Beth and Tom expect and want work to give them something more than just financial reward. There is a desire for something that Gorz (1999: 58) argues no longer exists: paid work in a permanent job that is a means of access to both social and personal identity and helps define and give meaning to one's life. Gorz would argue that recent economic transformations mean this desire will always end in disappointment. Yet it would seem Beth and Tom's desires remain and are only perpetuated by corporations' attempts to align employee identity with the corporate image and core values. A basic psychological need arguably lies behind it too.

Psychoanalyst Dejours highlights the central, normative importance of work for subjectivity through its ability to connect the individual to the collective. It provides the only type of experience that can provide a subject with opportunities to develop their skills, capacities and abilities (quoted in Deranty, 2008: 452-453). The post-Fordist organisation of work –

flexibility, irregularity, networks – can remove and contribute to the loss of social bonds and other social protection that would perhaps help twentysomethings manage the threat of uncertain futures better. This 'need' to identify with work combined with the new fear and anxiety, aroused by work under flexible capitalist conditions, runs counters to the idealised type of risk-loving enterprising and entrepreneurial self that dispenses with solidarity and loyalty to a job or work (p. 460). Arguably Rob manages to be 'enterprising' because of the two 'driving factors' of religion and marriage that provide a sense of security.

Short-termism

Tom's initial desire for passionate work which gives a sense of purpose was matched by an acknowledgement of how the 'rules of the game' had changed, making things more difficult for young people. He came to realise the fluid nature of skills and jobs after visiting a recruitment agency where, without a fixed trade or profession, what comes to the fore are 'soft-skills that are transferable to any job' (127). Without being 'very specifically qualified' it would take 'awhile to narrow down those things' he could do and actually enjoy. However, his impatience for finding the right job fuelled a relentless quest to keep trying something new as he became disillusioned with present circumstances:

> It's amazing how quickly it gets to that point where you're feeling, "Yeah, this is ok", and then to the point where you just don't want to do this anymore at all. And, I suppose, if I had to do something then I would be able to do it but I don't know whether it is anything actually in the job because I look back at that rep'ing job and it wasn't… my memory wasn't that bad but I remember thinking some days that, "This is just terrible and I can't do this anymore" (119-125).

This then induces the next move and maintains a short-term outlook that curbs something more stable and secure from potentially developing. Tom is fortunate in that the labour market he graduated into could support and, in many ways, encourage this episodic approach to work with plenty of (short-term contract) jobs available that could be done with transferable soft skills. So what becomes the driving force in Tom's relationship to work is a sense of personal well-being that cannot be compromised through a 'terrible' job. Without a

trade or specific skill set enabling him to 'slot' into the economy Tom is left unsure about what he wants and actually enjoys.

Tom came to reflect upon how he should approach work:

> I think it should be much more about what it is that allows me to enjoy what I do? What do I enjoy doing and what can I do that I will enjoy? Rather than looking at a profession – it's the actual things within it (133-134).

Once more the idea of self-fulfilment and self-expression are core-directives – if "it quickly gets to that point" when a job inhibits enjoyment it is time to leave. In turn, driving the on-going search for the right job rather than sticking it out unhappily in the hope that things will get better. This is not the Weberian notion of a work ethic which sees the worker adhere to, and come to be 'stuck' in, a slow, demeaning job, inside a suffocating bureaucracy that 'promises' future rewards for the sacrifice of one's energy and desires to the companies remit. What Tom is searching for is some vocation that can quickly provide meaning, passion and fulfilment in the present without having to wait. This restlessness perhaps makes it difficult for Tom to come to a point where he actually *knows* what he wants or enjoys: there is no time to allow something to develop or progress. This restlessness is something different to the forms of drifting discussed earlier but both can be understand as responses to uncertainty in the labour-market.

Difficulties and differences

Tom's struggles relate to the forms of personal troubles Sennett (1998) discusses that occur as a result of the new organisational forms and working practices of contemporary capitalism and mean, for Sennett, the breakdown of possibilities for a secure and authentic self. Giddens (1991) counters Sennett's pessimism by arguing for the ways in which these same changes open up realms of autonomous choice over personal identity. Tom is caught between these two perspectives: he wants a job that can help support his sense of self (character) yet is denied this because of recent changes in work. He continues to search though yet he also displays a

desire to maintain control and management of his identity and quickly revokes any commitment to a job that might compromise present enjoyment and autonomy.

When Tom quit his rep'ing job, because he did not enjoy it, his grandfather thought his reason was 'completely mental' (99). These sentiments – leaving unfulfilling work – would perhaps seem at odds to those of an older generation for whom, as Gorz (1999: 56) suggests, what was important was just having a job; what they did was not too important, the pay at the end of the week was. The grandfather's incredulous reaction[33] caused Tom to reflect on some of the generational differences that separated them:

> Things happen to people and those generations… that enforced and things just occurred… I mean he came out of the army and he had to get a job and then he got married and then… I suppose it's the enforced responsibilities. I suppose that just really narrow…so many things down and now you know we seem to have this world of… and I feel awful. I think writing into that [advice column in a broadsheet] and thinking, "What the hell have I got to complain about? It's just brilliant and it should be totally amazing!" (99-105)

These differences are also witness to changes in masculinity whereby Tom's grandfather felt nothing in subsuming his own desires and enjoyment to having job because his was a traditional model of masculinity where being a provider was paramount first and foremost; not acting on the whim of not 'enjoying' yourself. Without 'enforced responsibilities' to structure his future Tom is left to navigate and try and construct a sense of (working) self through the whims and individualised choices of those on offer from the new, uncertain labour market. Unlike Rob who had two guiding principles, Tom severely berates himself for struggling and feeling 'awful' about his confusion, with not knowing once more indicating the intense personal responsibility these twentysomethings feel for 'getting on'. He struggles to revel in the new 'freedoms'; neither does he view them as (market) 'opportunities' to be turned to his advantage.

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[33] Tom also told me that his grandfather wrote to his old company with the expectation that they would make a donation to sponsor Tom who was running the London Marathon for charity. His belief in the paternal care and generosity of his old company was, as Tom had warned him, misplaced. They did not respond to the letter.

Webb (2004: 725) helps to contextualise Tom's reluctance. The breakdown of 'smooth functioning identities' regulated by traditional institutions has increasingly been replaced by the presentation of work as route for self-growth and not just duty. Employees are encouraged to believe that the job choices they make give messages about who they are and how successful they are. People are meant to be seduced by the idea that identification with a job (and a corporation) will solve the problem of who they are. Yet as Tom shows here what happens for those that 'fail' to make successful job choices is that they come to feel a sense of shame due to a perceived inability to achieve chosen ideals. This is what Tom, perhaps, means when he says he feels 'awful' and berates himself for things not being 'brilliant and amazing'.

Internal conflicts

Through the course of the interview I tried to get Tom to reflect some more on his search for self-fulfilment in work that had seemed so apparent initially. Subsequently what he had to say really helped draw out the difficulties and tensions existing within him about work and how he should let it 'matter' to him. He felt caught between just wanting to take a purely instrumental approach to work – "it's a job and you do it 9-5 to get money and it doesn't matter" (138-139) – and realising the "massive role in plays in your life" (140) and, therefore, it should be taken seriously. Yet it could quickly get him back to thinking, "What is the point of being there?" (143), exactly because:

> It's *not* you, it's *not* your life, your job is *not* your life! Your job isn't you (146).

This is a turn around from his earlier sentiments whereby he was looking to find an occupation that in some way *did* help create and bolster his sense of self (his life). Now he wants to resist the 'massive role' it can play in life to the extent that it can *over* determine one's self. While trying to negotiate the fine line between letting a job take up too much of oneself and not caring at all about it, Tom came to realised how his job and work colleagues has already come to unknowingly re-orient and affect his commitment:

> I think I have massively changed doing this job [charity fundraiser] and people have noticed it. Paul [his flatmate] has said that when I was living with him in T I was a very

different person to who I am at the moment. And I don't just think it is the job but also the people you work with as well (154-157).

The effect of working with people where it is 'very soft and very nice' is that everyone will work late because they are 'conscientious' and it rubs off on him making him a lot less spontaneous in terms of just leaving when the job goes 'bad':

> I think that has made me more, a lot more incisive just because, "God I quit that last job and thought, 'Yeah! Fuck it!' and quit." … But I cannot imagine doing that now and I don't know whether that is the pressure of not getting old, because I know I am not really old, but feeling the societal pressure or it's probably a huge range of things. I don't know! (159-63).

Not knowing how to resolve this tension makes him come to question further the nature in which work impinges on him, having been drawn 'unconsciously' into working late. He has misgivings about the value that should be placed on work and commitment given to it:

> I think that has just happened to so many people and it's looking for fulfilment in your job or whatever and maybe that just isn't the right place to look. I don't know (172-173).

He talks with envy of a young woman he works with who is 'not bothered about getting promoted or anything'. Tom is envious because he sees her as just being 'really happy … doing whatever' and that all her personal goals are met: 'that's lovely' (340-343).

Tom is caught between viewing and relating to work in quite a traditional way: wanting it quite strongly to be a meaning-giving and identity-confirming signifier versus holding it at a distance ('It's *not* you!') and using it instrumentally, investing little of himself in it, to accrue money to live his life outside of work. He lacks a definite profession to provide status and a career path. Instead he remains in an uncertain state about work and one prone to restlessness. Tom's tendency to move and become quickly dissatisfied with a job mirrors the tension identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) between the personal desire for authenticity in work which is constantly compromised by the economic demand for adaptability and change. Unlike Rob, Tom does not adopt entrepreneurial traits as a means to negotiate the new labour market and is left with a gnawing anxiety about his future and failure to make it 'brilliant'; further fuelling the search for a job that might just do that. His traditional desire for work to

be a vehicle and platform for personal identity comes with a twist on the associated traditional work ethic in that Tom seeks an immediate return in terms of personal meaning and gratification otherwise work quickly becomes a site for disappointment.

"Just trying everything out": keeping options open

Corinne strikes a middle ground between Rob and Tom. Having left the security of university she suddenly felt the full force of uncertainty and 'wasted so much time' wondering what she was going to do with her life. Yet she had one advantage over some of the other twentysomethings in that she considered herself an 'artist', in a loose sense, and this was her one guiding principle that saw her continue to study at postgraduate level as a means of improving her chances of getting work. The term 'artist' also retained a form of protective status that she would not compromise in pursuing work. When I spoke to her she was working part-time as an assistant theatre director (and still completing a course).

Experimenting on the way to nowhere

Corinne summarised her philosophy to work, which sounds rather paradoxical, as:

> Try and make myself not feel like I am not on the way to anywhere, I should be applying for this, this and this (602-603).

This approach, she went on to explain, was more about enabling her to keep her options open and not narrow her chances for, or experiences of, work down to one specific area. Her intention was focused on gaining work and experience in a broad number of artistic and creative areas – filmmaking, performance art, theatre, design – to improve her personal social and cultural capital and 'employability'. Yet while portraying a quite savvy approach to finding and getting work, Corinne also acknowledged the other side of keeping things open and having to scout for 'bits'n'pieces' of work herself:

"Maybe I am interested in film? Well there is only one way to find out! Cram that in as well". So erm yeah I still don't really know what I am going to do and it doesn't… It is scary and I do worry here and there that I should know but then I, kind of, think, "Wow you are always going to be, in inverted commas, an 'artist' and if you are dabbling a little bit in film and the next minute you are invited to do an exhibition or you are working on a piece yourself." I think I am a little bit better because I have so many years of getting those pangs of, "What am I doing with my life?" that now, because I keep myself busy, and it seems ok (458–465).

Keeping busy keeps the existential doubt and worry at bay and her 'dabbling', but never fully committing, evokes and maintains a type of self, and relationship to work, that can be characterised as experimental. Lury (1998) claims that the adoption of experimentation as a technique of the self (within a prosthetic culture) makes possible a relation to the individual in which aspects that have previously seemed fixed, immutable or beyond will or self-control are increasingly made sites of strategic decision-making, matters of technique or experimentation (p. 1).

What were once quite 'fixed' and ordered transitions to 'proper' jobs for previous generations which, in some senses, were most often beyond the 'will' of individuals have been replaced by the 'choice biographies' characterised by insecurity, fragmentation, and flexibility as they try to deal with a 'vague' job market. So while, arguably, what is beyond Corinne's control is her knowing exactly what she wants to do and how she could achieve that in the future, she does come to have more say in trying to negotiate and deal with that uncertainty i.e. without a clear path to a job she can experiment and try things out. This experimentalism then can be understood as a pragmatic response to uncertainty. As Bauman argues (2000: 209–210), for uncertain subjects sometimes the best option seems to be to carry on and not stop: there is a sense of safety in quickly moving on. So Corinne aims to:

Try and do lots of things, but lots of areas… Because I am so… I don't know if I definitely want to be a fine artist and that's it but you can sort of, but I saw that and I can go for that and thought I can try for that and see where I could get, if I put a bit of time into that. But meanwhile, also being aware, I don't know if that is definitely what I do want to do, so I should also try other things and see how I can go with that. And also, I have always been interested in film or TV so may be I should try and, sort of… (614–618).

This experimentalism is in some senses the testing of her personal capabilities. For Lury (1998: 23) this can be understood as the emergence of an ideal individual for whom the capacity to put *all* the parts of the person to work is at a premium and whereby the possession of a resource-ful self is something to be worked at in experimental form. It is not about what one *is* but what one could be. This echoes Corinne sentiments of not wanting to be "on the way to anywhere". Rather she approaches work in open-ended fashion with no fixed destination point in sight but it is also a means of dealing with existential uncertainty about who she really wants to be. Through never quite fully committing to any one thing Corinne can stave off the crisis of not knowing through appeasing it by always being-in-process of *becoming* or being on the way to being *some* artist.

Creative entrepreneurial spirit

While gaining valuable experience and skills through 'trying things out' without fully committing she can still feel 'open', retaining a short-term and episodic style to work while exploring opportunities and nurturing herself as an artist. However within that, the problem of commitment – "I don't know if that is definitely what I want to do" (617) – remains. This is a contingency that workers under the conditions of new capitalism must be able to bear. In many ways Corinne's personal conduct and approach to the labour market exhibits all the hallmarks of the new spirit of capitalism that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue has emerged in the 1990s. Unlike the 'justificatory regime' that legitimised capitalism in the industrial period, where work and being active meant holding a steady and wage-earning position, the new regime – characterised as a network or project – 'overcomes the opposition between work and no-work, steady and unsteady, paid and unpaid'. Life comes to be conceived as a series of projects with an emphasis on the future and the next project or idea to be encountered through networks of people (2002: 9-10). The ideal worker must be – able to move from one activity to another – take risks and make contacts that open up new possibilities.

It is these characteristics that are evident in how Corinne, and also in Rob, seek to comport themselves in seeking work. As she (rather unenthusiastically) says here:

> You learn from everything. And I just don't think and I wouldn't know what I would want in the future… And I am so unclear about where I want to go, I don't think there is anything I could say if that happens then it will all work well because I just think that you just plod on wherever you are and hope that it will take you to the right place (862-865).

She also tells me of the time when she when she was trying to complete her MA dissertation and interning at a collective interactive media art group, where she worked on a show at the Barbican, at the same time as she was completing and showing her work for the prestigious Saatchi Artists competition she had been selected to compete in (it selects the twenty 'most promising young artists' each year). It was through this hectic schedule that she made a contact with a representative from Modern Art Australia who expressed interest in her work via the Saatchi competition. Her choice of words are telling as to how she felt she had overstretched herself and could have made more of the opportunities:

> I could have been around that and really utilised that exhibition (487)

> I know other people from that exhibition, I get emails, there are twenty of us or whatever, and they are like, "Come to this. I am doing this show and this show". And a couple of the people really utilised that … (503-505)

For Corinne managing and 'utilising' networks and making sure new opportunities present them is of utmost importance to keep the ball rolling. Wittel (2001) notes this signifies a new form of 'network sociality' that characterises working in the creative industries (and more generally new working practices in capitalism) whereby it becomes imperative to cultivate and exploit one's own networks and creativity to find work and maintain your reputation.

Further to the new ideal type of worker that fits the new spirit of capitalism identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), Corinne displays all the attributes that come to define work in the creative industries. Her reliance on her creativity and talent as an 'artist' is indicative of the changes in way work is done in the cultural and creative economies (and is spreading out into the wider economy as new forms of 'best practice') (McRobbie, 2002: 111). The

exploitation and expression of the 'creativity/talent' couplet arguably comes to replace fixed location and durable employment (McRobbie, 2001). This ideally is done with entrepreneurial zeal, emboldening a new work-ethic of self-responsibility whose mantra is '*You can make it if you really want!*' (ibid.). Creativity and talent become synonymous with an 'inner self' and are highly desired human qualities in the new economy through which an individual can develop a drive and passion for something which enables an individual to be resilient to failures and knock-backs they will endure in the labour-market (McRobbie, 2002: 112).

Take over

This 'way of life' in many ways mirrors the logic of the enterprising self that places an ethic of self-responsibility at it's heart. It lies firmly at the heart of Corinne's conduct which sees her constantly busy, often trying to juggle many things at once and, like Rob, keeping one eye firmly open for the next bit of work or opportunity. This can result in missed opportunities like the one above from Modern Art Australia but there is also a more personal cost that such self-reliance for personal security has. While Corinne tried to, 'get some focus and just do something [she] might find interesting' (367):

> I think I caned myself ha and then that was really depressing because when you think, "Now all I am on is this career… got this panic of like" and then forgetting friends or the idea of a relationship or myself as a, kind of, if there is all that other which is being a young person, which is, like, feasibly meeting someone you might like, or feasibly… or you know.
> So they were two really like, like stressful times but very different. One was *so* hectic and so busy that I … Didn't have time to even, you know, I did not even have time in the week to think if anything ran out (368-379).

What seems apparent is that the distance between work and life for Corinne has largely disappeared and having to constantly rely on herself is tiring and difficult creating stress. It fuels anxiety that made her feel as if she should *always* be busy doing something that aids her 'career' prospects:

> I think that, I think it's that thing of the minute I start to worry that I am not… because why I did the film was because I was suddenly thinking, "I am not doing anything

creative, I am not making anything erm I am not making any art work, I am not working on a theatre piece. I have got to make something". And I think I am very much one for seeing competitions and going, "That gives me a deadline", because I am terrible with, like, …since like, "There is a deadline. I'll jump on that and I do it for that deadline". It gives me something to … (592-598).

The existential 'weight' of being solely responsible for finding something to do that comes with being an 'artist' is telling when external structures ('There is a deadline') are 'jumped' on by Corinne as a means of helping to alleviate the pressure for finding something to structure and guide her present. McRobbie (2002: 101) argues that work in cultural economy – driven by personal creativity – comes to mean more than just earning a living: it incorporates and overtakes everyday life to the extent that it appears 'to supplant, indeed hijack, the realm of the social, re-adjusting the division between work and leisure, creating new modes of self-disciplining, producing new forms of identity'.

The disappearance of the gap between 'work' and 'life' for Corinne brings tiredness, stress and meant personal relationships suffered. These just have to be accepted. These costs compromise the ability of Corinne, and young people in general, to construct a robust existential refrain that would provide meaning-giving structure and (mental) protection from the unrelenting rigours and demands of work. The closing down of this space and gap between self and work raises the question of what happens to the space and time required for the forms of reflexivity that are meant to inform decision-making today? Lash (2002) claims that the fast paced nature of contemporary life has already collapsed the space between knowing (thinking) and doing whereby knowing and doing become the same thing. Corinne's struggle for a work/life balance, in a period just prior to shifts in technological devices making always being 'on call' almost ubiquitous for some workers, is an important aspect for marking out this generational cohort's experiences.

Ticking things off

This problem of 'knowing' and thinking caused problems for both Tom and Corinne especially as trying to decide upon something felt as if it would define them *and* their future.

Integral to this thinking process was trying to maintain a sense of personal authenticity and not compromising oneself through work. However, for Corinne, without any reassuring guidelines and only deadlines to 'jump on', anxiety and indecisiveness becomes too dominant:

> So just trying everything out and I suddenly think that I rationalised definitely a worry of how you choose. What you are going to do and how you are going to go, to just go for something when every time there is an opportunity to try something out – like you see a job or see a competition – would this give me an opportunity to try something out? Then that gave me a focus, of like, "Well that, sort of, ticks that worry off." Like I have done that (619-624).

The 'ticking off' of opportunities as they come does not finally resolve anything nor mean a choice or commitment has been made. Rather it keeps in place an open-endedness in the present without long-term strategic planning. It also seems to embolden a certain hope that eventually something will materialise, if lots of things are tried, that will solve the problem of not knowing.

Corinne, in this respect, differs from her father who had decided to forgo a career following his passion for writing and theatre (his best friend is a successful comedy writer with a critically acclaimed and award winning TV series). Corinne said he did "the right things" by deciding to study medicine. He is now a professor at a London university and a successful doctor. His medical career provided a stable framework and narrative for his life. Corinne is not doing the "right things" by way of the older generation. This is partly driven by not knowing quite what she wants but also the importance of doing something she is passionate about (unlike her father) and *is* authentically her. While not compromising may bring financial and personal drawbacks, it does aid a sense of personal integrity:

> I can, kind of, stand by the work that I am making is me, and I am keeping to those passions (693-694).

> I do think I am being true to myself in those roles and so, I think, that I don't know maybe … I think that if, in dream world you can pursue it then maybe, maybe, me or other friends involved in doing artistic things… could get to a stage where we are …doing what we want to do but also can exist in a [financial] way quite similar to our friends. But in some ways it seems sad but there does seem to be… that you are giving up one for the other. Because I am thinking I am probably missing the boat now but earlier

on, maybe, I could have taken a path where I would have had a stable job and then the…
but then maybe not been doing it every day but… No. I do think it is fair to say that I am
indulging my passions and what I want to do ha! (698–706)

Corinne's desire for authenticity, which she finds easier to support given she – unlike Tom –
had an idea of what she wants means she lives in an existentially different way to her parents.
Her individuality, creativity and freedom combine in a way to make her desire and seek a
form of work that is not a 'painful' obligation nor 'locking' her into a certain position. Such a
stance has its drawbacks in terms of all encompassing work ethic and agitation over securing
work which brings personal costs and mental fatigue. The potential irony of such a stance
against a 'stable' job, which she suspects would inhibit self-expression, is to foreclose structures
and possibilities that might help her live like her friends and appease the nagging anxiety and
'worry over how to choose'. Instead she is left with the heavy burden of sole responsibility for
her life and is reliant upon exploitation of her 'inner creative self'. This all fits with Boltanski
and Chiapello's (2005) 'new spirit of capitalism' which emerged from the incorporation and
pacification of critiques of bureaucratic industrial practices that oppressed human dignity and
stifled creative potential, and which now appeals to values of self-actualisation, freedom and
authenticity in the workplace as a means of justifying its new forms and maintaining
individual commitment to it. At the same time it creates the very conditions that make living
a genuine authentic life all that much harder.

Conclusion: 'life' in work

> Everything seems to conspire these days against distant goals, life-long projects, lasting
> commitments, eternal alliances, immutable identities. One cannot build long-term hopes
> around one's job, profession, skills even; one can bet, before long, the job will vanish, the
> profession will change beyond recognition (Bauman, 1996: 51).

> There is no longer much use for the old Fordist faith in the relationship between hard
> work, company allegiance and financial stability; rather, a whole new relationship is
> required among workers, which entails that they be flexible, as well as comfortable with
> flux and volatility (Heiman, 2001: 284).

If, in the past, there was a pronounced work ethic which fostered a desire for occupational achievement and nurtured work-based values around which personal identities could be constructed, this has now diminished (Scase & Goffee, 1989: 180 quoted in Pahl, 1995: 55). As this chapter has shown, instead of a sense of commitment to a certain job, and willingness to endure short-term dissatisfaction for future rewards in the job, the twentysomethings demonstrate different ways of relating to work that transcend any obvious desire for work-based achievement. Instead a work-ethic individualised around the pursuit of personal gratification and goals external to a job starts to emerge. Rob, confirming the need for assured end-goals to act enterprisingly, was the most assured of the twentysomethings in relation to the recent transformations in work. He revelled in his reading of the market and new freedom it gave him to take personal responsibility, shunning the constraints of an 'organisational job'. He preferred to rely on strategic moves and his personal traits to secure his and wife's future goals. Rob exploited the new economy to his benefit and work became an individual means to secure gratification in the personal spheres of his marriage and religion. Work was not an end in itself.

For those lacking the assurance of knowing what they wanted, work became more problematic. Yet as Beth and Tom's search for 'passionate' work failed and their jobs struggled to meet their expectations in terms of providing excitement and personal meaning so started an intense questioning of the place and value of work in life. In many ways Tom wanted the stable and meaningful narratives of 'old' work but without the deferment of fulfilment in the present. He struggled to adapt to the new world of work and yo-yoed between viewing it as an important site of meaning to just being an instrumental means to an end. The new working practices that promised jobs as a means for growth and self-expression largely failed in this case. Unsure of what he wanted from his future, Tom's relationship to work was ambiguous.

Corinne strikes a middle ground between Rob and Tom. Adopting a form of experimental self, that relies on a 'creative entrepreneurial spirit', she lives in an 'open-ended' manner that sees her 'on the way to nowhere'. She moves from one job or project to another accruing

creative cultural capital that supports the one guiding principle in her life – art. Unlike Tom, Corinne manages the 'no long-term plans' by happily, in the short-term, 'trying things out' and 'ticking off' opportunities as they come; believing that they might help her, one day, settle into something. Her artist status orients her enterprising relationship to work but leaves her with no 'gap' between her work and self, resulting in exploitation of her 'inner-self'. Anxiety and insecurity are played off against the sense of authenticity and flexibility she is able to maintain in what she does. Her individualised relationship to work in many ways adheres to the principles required of the contemporary ideal worker.

All three responses signal the end of the 'time-engine' of solid capitalism in which individuals deferred happiness and readily accepted an externally chosen path for their working life. In Weberian terms, they are attempts to meet the exigencies of their particular socio-cultural setting and the corresponding tensions and antagonisms (Hennis, 1987; 1988). The 'life-order' they enter after university was one that ideologically demanded flexibility, adaptability and risk-taking (Read, 2009; Sennett, 2006). It is Rob who best emulates these despite, and because of, being having 'enforced responsibilities'. These new demands leave Tom confused and disappointed while Corinne's creative capital found a home in the new cultural economy (McRobbie, 2001; McRobbie & Forkert, 2009). Despite these changes in relationships to work, and expectations of what it can provide, it remains, for those in this chapter, an important site for doing identity 'work'. It was still looked to as a platform for giving expression to personal attributes and values. The next chapter discusses the twentysomethings I spoke to who more firmly came to reject or react when work impinged upon their sense of self or demanded more than they were willing to give.

Chapter 6 – Prioritizing the self? Boundaries, autonomy and work

> As for young people, although they are crushed by the dominant economic relations which make their position increasingly precarious, and although they are mentally manipulated through the production of a collective, mass-media subjectivity, they are nevertheless developing their own methods of distancing themselves from normalised subjectivity through singularization (Guattari, 2000: 33).

> I feel like the opportunities I have to develop myself psychologically, you know, personally and socially, to a really great extent but economically I am not that interested (Mary, 330–331).

This chapter explores the way in which some twentysomethings come to resist work and demand autonomy from it. Instead of aligning their subjectivity to the dictats of their work environment they come to try to assert and prioritize a sense of self in terms of well-being – creating distance from work – that acts as a means of orienting themselves in their unmapped worlds. Feelings and emotional concerns come to the fore in ways that complicate the rational neoliberal ontologies that underpin the forms of ideal worker conduct. Anxieties generated by the encroachment of work, in part driven by the huge resources invested by organisations into managing employee identity in order to give space for employees to 'grow' and 'learn' in their roles while adding value to new spheres of existence (du Gay, 1996: 65), serves to induce new attempts to remain authentic into twentysomethings' lives. What becomes apparent is a desire to listen to their 'selves' for guidance and not compromise or deny that in or through work. The talk of depression, getting ill or nervous breakdowns in the chapter come at points in the twentysomethings' narratives when they have not properly listened to themselves. As such, I identify an emergent form of postmaterialism that is not just about cold means/ends calculations in terms of future money or career prospects but is concerned with present well-being and authenticity.[34]

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[34] This concern with authenticity is problematic from a strict poststructuralist perspective that would see such claims to authenticity as a fictional outcome and construction and fabrication of discourse, merely reflecting contemporary modes of orienting/regulating the self. Yet what I hope this chapter, and thesis moreover, does is show the process of singularisation in twentysomethings' narratives that negotiate and challenge this overly deterministic reading.

In many ways they are grappling with the same tension underpinning the new spirit of capitalism characterised by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 90) which proposes that 'genuine autonomy' is founded upon self-knowledge and personal fulfilment, not by the false autonomy framed by career paths and rigid job descriptions. It is this false autonomy and ingratiation that leaves the second twentysomething discussed, Jo, so repulsed at her company's attempts to integrate her. As Bolstanki and Chiapello (2005: 201) suggest, attempts to reinvigorate workers commitment to organisations through trying to incorporate people's 'interior being', addressing concerns of alienation and authenticity within oppressive institutions, can actually foreclose the very space for 'genuine autonomy'. Consequently, as this chapter explores, this desire for an authentic sense of self that coheres over time, and is autonomous from the dictates of work, comes into conflict with the uncertainty inherent in the labour market and the imperative to be a flexible, adaptive worker. Mary in many ways grapples with this problem and resolves it by giving priority to herself. Yet such a 'precarious existence' and conflict can inhibit some – Alice – from striking out for something they really (authentically) want to do leaving them in a state of 'uncommitted commitment' to their jobs and dealing with the psychological effects of such a compromise.

This reaction against 'techniques of incorporation' and a shift of focus away from work and employment, to one of attempts at personal transformation and 'working' on private aspects of the self (Aapola et al., 2005: 77) I align to Elliott's (2004: 130) argument that as anxiety replaces certainty in postmodernity it can instigate, via *reflexive scanning*, attempts at psychic re-imaginings of the self which can value other priorities in life apart from work. The chapter starts by exploring Mary's reaction to the onset of depression and over assimilation to her job, which kick-started a series of big changes despite her good job prospects. I then discuss the striking inauthentic discord felt by Jo between her self and job that reinforces her resistance to the corporate culture and structure of her work place. Gareth and Jason's rejection of work as a site for 'passion' or where 'needs' can be met are then explored before the final twentysomethings' struggles are discussed. Alice, who in chapter three had fallen into her job and remained 'drifting' along, elaborates on her struggle in attempting to reconcile the competing desires she had in terms of work, framed by the 'new girl order', which in turn

drives an incessant anxiety about what status and relationship she should have with her work. Her indecision brings with it significant costs as work continues to encroach on her own time. I close the chapter with a discussion of the twentysomethings' postmaterialism and its questioning of the economic and market assumptions of rational-choice.

"I knew it was time to change my life"

In chapter four Mary had complained about the way she felt her life had become 'stuck in a rut' and had never felt like she had made many proper conscious or authentic choices about the direction of her life. This sense of getting stuck was integrally tied up with her job: "I had got too assimilated to my job and I felt I couldn't separate myself" (497-498). This fuelled an anxiety about the need to change and do something different. Similar to how Heidegger (1962: 232) understands anxiety to be a potential means of re-engaging with, and choosing, one's *own* possibilities in life, Mary develops a specific concern – or angst – with how her life had come to be shaped and defined by forces and institutions which compromised her sense of self and what she wanted to do:

> I wasn't growing as a person anymore and the experiences I was having wasn't making me, and weren't challenging me anymore, and also because erm of having, you know, spending some time the previous year being depressed and ill and then recovering from that, I felt myself going through the warning signs of that again. I wasn't willing to put myself through that again and I knew it was time to change my life because I wasn't going to start getting ill because of having some sort of meaningless existence in L where I wasn't really happy (54-59).
> …it was more than just being in a routine because you can be in a routine and that can be quite comfortable but I felt like my life had become directionless and that I wasn't growing (51-52).

This concern with well-being and a general sense of needing to care and nurture herself, maintaining her health while trying to personally 'grow', becomes more significant in light of the fact that six months prior to the interview she had been very depressed and her eczema had flared up to a point that she had to take time off work. This is what she refers to when talking about 'warning signs'. It is her well-being that is prioritized and valued over her job. Her anxiety becomes a driving force for her to try to engage with finding new possibilities.

Through feeling as she did Mary came to realise that she was not at 'home' in, nor that committed to, her job as an office manager for a small independent media company.

> If you have a fulltime job, you know I was doing between 36-40 hours a week which is quite a lot of time if you think about it and the rest of the time you spend sleeping so you have a few hours a night left to yourself. But I am lazy, I'm lazy! I'm not that committed to my career you know and not on some big career path or big career plan. As long as I am happy with the people I am working with I am kind of ok, you know? I don't feel the need to be earning shit loads of cash or anything (83-88).

> I don't think at this stage of my life that I am defined by my career. I don't think that is what makes me 'me'. I don't think of myself as being a media professional or whatever, or an office project manager. I don't think of myself in those terms at this stage. Maybe other people do but it's not how I do (101-103).

Boundaries

This 'over assimilation' to her job drove her desire for autonomy and freedom from constraining external categories that she rejects as means for channelling her understanding of her self. The desire to try to re-negotiate the boundaries between self and work came because Mary felt that work was 'taking up' or 'using up' too much of her:

> You know, outside of work I didn't really have much else going on and work was fulfilling. When I went to work I felt like I was doing something worthwhile and spending time with friends but outside of that it didn't really feel like there was anything much else happening for me so I didn't feel like I was developing in the ways I wanted to. So at that stage I think I felt that I needed to find out what life was like beyond work. And what other opportunities and alternatives there were (497-503).

Mary's sense of ability to move on elsewhere is specific to the moment of the research. It is only in the context of the prosperous economic period she graduated into that made available the sense of being able to 'go off' and then come back to a ready supply of jobs. While the work Mary did was 'fulfilling' and 'worthwhile' (and done in the company of friends) it was not enough to compensate for the fact that she felt stifled:

> It wasn't opening up any new opportunities for me. I wasn't having a fulfilling kind of life there … I was bored and other prospects seemed more exciting (90-93).

Once more the importance of a concern with personal fulfilment and opportunities *outside* of work is paramount. For Mary, work is not a site worth trying to use to fulfil her desire for new experiences and opportunities. She is not willing to compromise exciting prospects by staying in a job she feel inhibits her potential to develop in new ways. It is perhaps also important to know that Mary is gay and perhaps that side of her identity has greater prominence even though she worked in an all female, feminist driven environment. As such, and contrary to, some of the twentysomethings' parents or grandparents who stuck it out in jobs they did not like or who chose to sacrifice the pursuit of other possibilities – perhaps not acting on any sense of anxiety that might have caused – Mary feels too assimilated to her job and the way that limits and constrains her self-expression which overrides the fact that she has secure employment with good prospects.

Similar to Corinne in the previous chapter, Mary wants to experiment and explore possibilities to grow in new ways that are not dictated by work. She is the one that wants to decide and dictate her future in experimental fashion (Lury, 1998). This is a reversal of the traditional work ethic which aligned deferred gratification and long-term planning. Mary told me in no uncertain terms that she was not going to spend the rest of her life doing something she did not think was worthwhile (528-529). This distancing of herself from her job also further distances her from a work ethic grounded in the values and norms of an organisational culture and having to fit (incorporate) one's self to external regulation. Mary wants to choose her self for herself. She operates much more with a form of self–ethic that privileges personal rather than institutional values. Mary uses her sense of self, and desire for well-being, as the locus for reorientation and reference point to make decisions. If that self feels compromised and 'chosen' without consent, by others, the resulting anxiety, I would argue, instigates a form of reflexivity in line with Elliott's notion of reflexive scanning by which he means the way an individual, devoid of the traditional codes and blueprints for life, 'scan' their psychic internal state for ways to think differently about themselves. What emerges from this can be a 'distinctive set of possibilities and pressures as regards personal and social development' (Elliott, 2004: 130).

All change

Mary did leave her job and potential that could have seen her there 'for the next ten years' (70). There was, what Gorz (1999: 61) says characterises most contemporary jobs now, 'insufficient substance' to make her stay. Instead she went and lived in San Francisco for six months before returning to work in London. San Francisco was specifically chosen because of the large gay community and it's gay friendly reputation. Upon speaking to Mary when she returned she had this to say about the changes she decided to make:

> I feel like, although I have met lots of interesting and different types of people since leaving university, I haven't really felt like my life has been my own in the same way as I feel like it is now (2, 139-141).

Making this change had felt like an authentic act that focused on her personal development. One that entailed facing up to and choosing her own possibilities and breaking with a way of life that she had just 'fallen' into. In an Heideggerian way of seeing it, Mary had managed to come to terms with herself against prevailing ways of understanding and accepting her life in the 'inherited' terms she had not chosen. There was now a more steely resoluteness about where she was going:

> I have had the break with San Francisco which ended L for me and propelled me towards the next thing in my life. I don't know whether this is the right path, or track as you are putting it, but it is a different one and it's a good one. It's all temporary though.
> ... It's not what I want to be doing forever. I have made a commitment to be with the organisation for two years (2, 104–109).

Her life now seemed open to possibility and not closed down by the 'inauthentic' boundaries of a given work identity that stifled personal fulfilment. Even though her changes lack long-term stability, perhaps in itself generating further anxiety, what seems important and makes her feel better is that *she* chose them. She acted and got out of her 'rut', enabling her to learn and discover more about herself while redrawing the boundary between her 'self' and work.

"This isn't me": resistance to corporate identity

> I have to do something my body repels against (Jo, 381).

Jo had left university with high aspirations and a feeling that her degree enabled her to 'do anything'. University had a been a 'safe little bubble' where she need not plan for the future and she was afforded the autonomy she valued so much to pursue her interest in English Literature. When I spoke to her she had been working for eighteen months in the marketing department of a prominent venture capitalist company. She had originally started there on a temporary basis but took up the offer of a full time position when the chance came.[35] It is this 'decision' that is the source of her anxiety which continues to make her feel unsettled:

> I think the main thing or problem with it is… I kind of like the work but the *main* problem is that it is not what I *chose* to do and I don't feel that it is *me* and so I don't let myself like it. I am not quite sure where that kind of, even when I am quite enjoying it and liking it for a moment then I soon say, "Oh you can't like it because this is not what you chose"…
> "What am I doing working in a financial institution when I'd…? This isn't me … I don't like this corporate sort of lifestyle". So er yeah I probably actively dislike it more than it warrants I think sometimes. Do you know what I mean? Like sometimes I won't allow myself to (78-87).

Once more at the heart of Jo's worry is a concern about authenticity – 'This isn't me' – was this job something that was actually true to what she wanted or had she just gone along with something because it was the easy thing to do:

> I didn't feel like I could make a decision and … I don't think I have made a proper decision for a couple of years! I have just sort of floated through, not even floated through but it actually made me realise that actually you can't plans things to do and things do just happen. Yeah I haven't felt particularly in control of my life whereas before I suppose I did. In fact everything up til a few years ago I felt like I had planned everything (201-206).

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[35] Jo is another twentysomething who displays a form of 'pragmatic falling' into a job as one response to uncertainty amid not knowing what she really wanted to do and feeling there was too much choice.

This concern with drifting along materialises because Jo realises the 'average-everyday' way she has been living is inauthentic and, in Heideggerian language, she has failed to 'individualise' herself against the seductive ease of 'floating' through and not making proper decisions. Her sense of having never properly chosen the job with the venture capitalists perhaps lies behind her refusal to 'allow' herself to like it.

Fish out of water

Jo's particular sense of discord in her life, created by an ill fit between her job and sense of self, generates further hesitancy and resistance towards work when the company tries to realign her own personal values and ways of doing things to that of the corporation. This attempt at incorporating and moulding Jo's personal qualities in line with the ethos of the business meets resistance:

> It's the corporate environment … and it's quite, I think… you can't get away with too much at work. I can't bear to do anything sort of extraneous. I am happy to do my work but the minute I have to have a meeting, the minute I have to fill out a…., the minute I have to have a meeting that isn't to do with my work, the minute I have to go and erm – what do we have to do? – or have a meeting about what we are doing or … or sort of have. They are every bloody day. I have to do something that my body repels against or that corporate speak; I find that whole thing a bit weird. You know you have this whole set of terms that erm – "building relationships" is one that I hate and we have to go and "build" relationships with people. "Strategic" relationships. Or you can't just speak with someone, you have to "build" a relationship with them. And everything is "robust" or "granular" and it's just that kind of thing I find weird and I just think… ha (376-386).

Jo feels that there should be a separation between work and self, to the point that there is almost a physical repulsion at her company's attempt at getting her to 'operate' in new ways. Her company's attempt at invoking a new language within its staff, so the corporation actually 'speaks' through the person, and rigid ways of doing things instead of harmonising personality with corporate identity, in this instance, only serves to heighten Jo's suspicion, not only to the intention behind them but also the level of her commitment to the job. She values her own autonomy before any sense of loyalty to the company and it's attempts to align her own values with theirs. Jo, in fact, comes to question the whole nature of where she works:

> I think that I am, in the way that I am a kind of fish out of water there, because actually they don't see it like that and I think that mentality, certain people find that almost a security; being told what to do and having a quite structured vocabulary and quite a structured part to your day having to report to someone and having to behave a certain way because someone is higher up than you, even though they are not as clever as you or not necessarily liked but you have to behave in a certain way and I just find it *weird* and I can't think people will just believe that (390-395).

Jo's comments find affinity in the form of critique that fuelled the post-'68 crisis in capitalism in which bureaucratic work organisations came to be resented by young people for being out-dated, oppressive institutions that denied autonomy and authenticity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). She does not buy the obvious attempts there have been in her company to change – the New Age managerial speak fails to excite or enrich her working experience.

Jo also seems conscious of the manner in which re-structuring of working practices are attempts at creating a new intensification of the relationship between work and self that is not compensated financially but via a new sense of personal fulfilment that is meant to be created. As she says here:

> …and that's another difference in that I don't work … I think I have, we have lost that thing that we work for money. You work to make … you know, you have to work so that almost work is, not a luxury, but that … I don't think I am working for wages but I am thinking that I am working to fulfil myself in something or … but it's not doing that (424-428).

The attempt at incorporating qualities of a personal kind such as fulfilment fails for Jo because genuine autonomy from, and in, work is still valued very highly by her:

> … not being told what to do and having time to do what I wanted to do. That is hugely important to me. That sort of freedom… the time I have away from work is, is not enough and I am sure I am not alone in thinking that. It's not enough basically and there is not enough time to… That's where you need a job that you kind of don't feel that way about it (420-423).

Freedom *outside* of a job is where her identity resides while Jo is aware of the potential appeal the security offered by her company could provide. She does not buy the company's framing of their provision of a job as a something she should be thankful for because it provides a vehicle through which she can express herself and gain a sense of personal fulfilment. It is an

inauthentic gesture and 'weird': only serving to heighten her sense of 'uncanniness'.[36] Jo contrasts her experiences in her present job to the waitressing she was doing before starting it. This job gave her space in that it did not try to define or regulate the relationships she had with colleagues, gave her time to think about other things and was grounded in actually doing something practical, in the sense of feeding people, she said. In many senses it was an 'honest' job with no pretences – no 'corporate speak' nor promising 'personal fulfilment'.

Jo demonstrates a savvy awareness and rejection of the kind of managerial mantra that, for instance Webb (2004; 2006), du Gay (1996) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue, has come to define contemporary workplaces. She acknowledges that her work is *meant* to be a place where she can find meaning and personal fulfilment, somewhere where she is meant to align her sense of self and personal desires with those of the corporation. She is suspicious of this and reluctant to view her job as a potential site of authenticity and personal fulfilment. In part this is because of the initial inauthentic 'choice' that saw her end up in such a job. What is important for Jo, as it was for Mary, is retaining a strong and authentic sense of self that is not subsumed or compromised at, or through, work. While Jo did not act on her unease and discord at work, in the sense of leaving, she is still alive to her desire for something different and resists giving full commitment to her job. She was in the process of trying to find something she really wanted to do when I interviewed her. She mentioned that some form of journalism work was ideally what she would like.

Needs and passion outside of work

Both Mary and Jo admit to getting some enjoyment through the work that they do while at the same time making sure that it does not encroach too much or impede on their personal sense of who they are. The twentysomethings I discuss in this section – Gareth and Jason –

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[36] For Heidegger (1962: 233) 'uncanniness' is caused by the realisation of an individual that they are 'not-at-home' within the public 'they' and they are *the only ones* who can determine what it is for them to be a self and how it is that they are to become what they have within them to be.

have a more stark sense of boundary between work and self to the point where Gareth even comes to question the value of work to his sense of self. As was seen in chapter three both Gareth's grandfather and father before him had been in quite rigid career paths – teaching and NGO agency work – which they stuck at and based a life around. He, however, passed up the job opportunity his father secured for him in the section of the NGO he worked in. Gareth was incredulous at his father's ability to endure sitting at a 'desk in front of a computer' for the whole of his working life. Jason, meanwhile, struggled with the fact that his real passion and what made him feel excited and alive lay outside of his chosen profession, creating anxiety and a sense of compromising himself.

Why do I need this?

Gareth, contrary to his grandfather and father before him, is unwilling to stick out a job that failed to meet his expectations and aspirations. The NGO might have provided a 'platform' upon and through which Gareth could have 'composed' his life but, perhaps because he lacks responsibility to a family that both his grandfather and father had by his age, he is unsure of the place and role work should play in his life. When I spoke to him he was interning at a political think-tank while considering what was the best way ahead having done a considerable range of different things up to that point.

> Material things were not necessarily the most important things just because we have them. Whereas… I think there is also this idea that people's securities and what people's fears are perhaps. What they need? Really at a basic level what their needs *are*? And what are the ways to express those needs? And for me I am still finding it out but I have found out in ways that meant being in an office and in front of a computer I can't, I can't express my needs. You know, it's not what I, it's, it's not my idea of life (344-349).

His talk of needs goes well beyond perhaps what the more basic material and biological needs a generation before him would have been primarily concerned with. Work – or at least office-based work – is seen instead as antagonistic to meeting and fulfilling needs. With Gareth it is his own subjective values that are paramount and to be confirmed, *not* those of a certain company, job or vocation. Whereas work was obviously a bolstering institution for those before him it instead becomes something that needs careful consideration and

negotiation to ensure he can nourish his needs which he perceives potentially only being achieved outside work. There is a distinct level of introspection with Gareth that sees him reflect and imagine about his various prospects in terms of personal significance and authenticity.

Despite work still being able to bolster identity, Gareth rejects it as a means or site to do so:

> So it's also your own perception of what you need and whether those needs, a combination of material stuff, spiritual stuff, and then you find – if you want to find, if you're interested in working at that level but then you find a model of self that matches those sorts of things. So for example I might go on a retreat. A Buddhist retreat or something like that and talk to people there who for them it's like they have absolutely no concept of erm of, of why do I need a salary? Why do I need this? (351-356)

Work, if anything, is just tolerated as a means to an end that can then support the pursuit of life affirming spiritually – Buddhist retreats etc – living and valorising personal ethics and values *outside* the perceived instrumentalised nature of contemporary work. Even the very concept and assumption of work itself comes in for question. This in itself can cause further anxiety because it not only generates ongoing concern about what job he should commit to but, with that being an ongoing source of contention, any sense of progression or development also becomes problematic because of not having a commitment to external institutional markers of progress in the form of promotion or such like. I asked him if he ever worried about this:

> Sometimes I do. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes, you know, I wake up in the middle of the night or something and you kind of mentally map what's going on at the moment and it all seems that it's not going on at the moment. Right from the little things like er to the bigger picture. And then sometimes I think, "Hey it doesn't really matter you know!" as long as one is growing, one is doing fun things, one's being aware of the opportunities you know (140-145).

Priority to, and importance of, the subjective sense of self takes the place of commitment to a specific job and willingness to sacrifice certain things in the present – perhaps some 'fun things' – which might help him provide a more coherent mental map that is 'going on'. Instead what is important is being 'loose' and open to new opportunities, not tied into one thing.

Plodding versus dancing

> So I have been plodding along in my job as a patent attorney thinking, "Oh! I'm not really sure I want to do this. I think I want to be a dancer" (157-158).

This brief quote neatly summarises the work predicament of Jason. Jason, 25 at the time of the interview, had studied Chemical Sciences, as both his chemist parents had, and was an articulate and intelligent young man. After graduating he was unsure what to do, unlike his parents who had gone straight into pharmacy. Yet his education gave him enough confidence to think he could do a number of things. Medicine, management and pharmacy were all tried but it was only after discovering patent attorney work that allowed him to maintain his interest in, and earn a living from, the chemical sciences he studied (without having to be in lab all the time) that he settled upon something. The work he does on securing patents for new pharmaceuticals and scientific inventions was interesting but meant sacrificing his real desire to pursue a career dancing in theatre. While he admits there are aspects of his work he enjoys – he says it 'reflect parts of my personality quite well' (380) – and the flexible nature of it enables him to go to dance classes, he still feels a strong discord between his passion for dancing and his job:

> So at the moment I am kind of just plodding along being a patent attorney ignoring the fact that I have this major dream, which I am not pursuing. And that is really where I am up to now (172-174).

His repetition of the verb 'plodding' to describe the nature of his work is in stark contrast to what he tells me about going to his dance classes:

> I will literally *run* to AP [dance school] and get to the class and just start doing it.
> … I'll go to the bathroom at work put my jeans on, put a vest on underneath my shirt and run to AP and strip off and start doing the class. As quickly as possible (441-444).

> I am really, really proud of what I can do and I don't know, when you put it into practice in a routine it just, I don't know, makes me incredibly happy. And, you know, I am competing with myself last time I was in class: "How high was my développé? I am going to get it a *bit* higher this time!" (431-434)

He tries to squeeze in as many classes as possible a week even if he is tired and will spend all his spare time dancing. The week I spoke to him he had already attended five. Jason had fallen

in love with dancing at university and his passion was confirmed when he did a one year Musical Theatre course after graduation. Yet Jason has come to be stuck in a situation where his real passion lies *outside* and well beyond the parameters of his job:

> I think it is a big conflict …people I meet in the patent attorney world and the people I meet in the musical theatre world are *completely* different. There is *no* overlap (192-193).

> I love dancing so much because I would rather go and do a dance class than rather do pretty much anything else (199-200)

His parents were not keen on him pursuing a career in dancing and he acknowledges the stability, decent money and potential a career as a Patent Attorney has but it creates a "whole worrying thing going along" (138-139) in his head. Jason, however, harbours a potential escape plan:

> I like to think that, I don't know whether I'll do it, once I am qualified as a patent attorney I'll quit and then be a dancer but I don't know whether I have got the guts (160–162).

Unlike Gareth, Jason has a clear passion for something in his life that if pursued could perhaps enable him to live with an authentic bringing together of work *and* life – what individuals like Mary and Gareth seem to be striving for. Yet as it is there remains nagging anxiety and tension because there is a telling discord: what he has chosen to do belies his real desire for something else more embodied and alive that lies well beyond the dry and legalistic confines of patent attorney offices. Gareth would revolt at the idea of this sort of work yet Jason seems resigned to it as it is the sensible option. Perhaps the fact that he can still indulge his passion with regularity and the pipedream of quitting to pursue it full time maintains his commitment.

Stuck in the middle

The final twentysomething discussed in this chapter is Alice. She has already featured in chapters three and four where it became evident that she had particularly struggled with indecision brought on by the abundance of choice and opportunities she felt she had. Alice

had high expectations of the new choices and opportunities she felt she had after leaving university – "we can do anything that we set our minds to" (830). It came as a shock to realise things were not quite as easy as she had imagined (or been led to believe). Abundant choice and competition for jobs made Alice uncertain about her future. The pressure of this led Alice to 'fall' into recruitment work in city finance which created all sorts of new anxieties. Alice in many ways epitomised the new feminine subject which has arisen recently within the context of a post-feminine 'new girl order' (Aapola et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2005; Nayak & Jane Kehily, 2008; Ringrose, 2007; Walkerdine, 2004). The inherent contradictions of this feminised neoliberal subjectivity – the idea that young women can now have it all – create conflict for Alice: she wants to enjoy and make a success of her corporate recruitment job while, at the same time, also vehemently hating it and wanting to leave for something she would be 'respected' for and be more authentically 'her'. Alice also had fantasies (embarrassingly harboured) about giving everything up and settling down to have babies. These conflicting desires came together to leave Alice feeling confused and stuck in a 'fix', remaining there because she is unsure or unwilling to take the risk and commit to something different or give real priority to her 'self'.

Alice comes to summarise her relationship to work like this:

> It's, it's this conflict and then… oh I really find, I really find the corporate lifestyle really attractive. I like those things and I want be … and I want to be *respected* for my job, which I probably would have had more in teaching, erm but really it's money and I want a house and I don't want to be struggling for the rest of my life. You know, I am still working in a job where I have to move home so it hasn't really worked out. So increasingly now more I am realising it's not as important to me as I thought it first was and that maybe I will have to make some sacrifices and go … I want, I want to be eventually …I want to be a therapist and go back and study and be a relationship therapist (179-186).

Right at the start of talking to her she had told me that she was 'freaking out' about her job and that it went against everything she ever thought she would end up doing. She had lied in the interview to secure the job, claiming that she was ruthless and motivated by money. Yet it turned out that she was good at the job and this particularly grated having dismissed the job as "pathetic" and "salesy-rubbish". This contradiction is the root of the difficulties Alice has with

her job and her desire for something 'different' while still desiring the conventions of the good life ('I want a house').

Sticking it out: obligations to be happy

I asked Alice what kept her in a job that she obviously struggled to reconcile herself with. Her explanation was interesting in light of recent theoretical discussions around the changing place of work in people's lives and organisational and managerial attempts to ingratiate jobs to people as a means for finding meaning and happiness. Alice's commitment to her job is torn between begrudgingly having to accept it and unrealistic expectations about what work can do:

> …just quitting because you don't like it? I don't, I just don't think we can expect to be *that* happy in our jobs and it's work, it's what we do and…I don't know. And then the other side of me would be that, "Happiness is all that matters". You see? Ha ha! I don't really believe in what I am saying! (453–458)

> …we always have to be happy in everything that we do and have to really love our jobs. It is important to like your job; it makes your life so much easier but it's kind of unrealistic I think, unless you really know what you want to do. And it is ok to be a bit unhappy sometimes, you know? But I, I really feel… My flatmate, for example, would be like, if she doesn't like something she will just leave it and there is no sense of responsibility and everything is about her own happiness. Whereas I am like, I hate it but I am going to stick it out even if I am about to have a nervous breakdown because I hate it so much or I am so stressed … (249–256).

This mention in a half-joking way of a nervous breakdown is an interesting contrast to Mary above who takes seriously the negative physical and psychological effects of her job. She would not 'stick it out'. It is also telling of the new forms of mental distress young people experience in uncertain times. Alice's desire not to have unrealistic expectations about happiness in work, which echoes Jo's doubts about the promises of work, is reinforced by a suspicion of the obligation felt to 'really love' her job. Yet contradicting that she has some affinity to the notion that maximisation of happiness should be her end goal.

One certainty does remain for Alice: leaving unhappy work is considered 'superficial' despite telling me numerously how much she hated it:

> If I was saying I am going to stick this out for the rest of my life even though I hate it you know, for example, I can't, I don't, I have been at points where I thought I would just quit my job and thought, "Fuck it! Who cares? I'll just move back home" but I haven't been there for a year. You know, I haven't been … I *have* to stick it out for a year. I have to and it's short term on happiness, you know, and that is not a big deal, you know. That's … it's not going to *kill* you for fucks sake, you know?! (465-471)

Going 'short-term' on happiness is contrary to some of the twentysomethings already discussed who put a premium on their well-being. A compromising of that becomes a catalyst for changing things. Alice operates with, perhaps, what is a defining feature of some of these twentysomethings: namely, saying and wanting one thing, but doing another because of lacking the assuredness to go through with what they really want. This helps to explain some of Alice's declarations that run counter to other statements of hers (and which bring significant personal costs):

> I don't think it is acceptable to just give up because you don't like it. I think that, yeah, I think it is *really weak!* I think that I just wouldn't do it. I really wouldn't. And I don't understand, I think you can really only understand if you do that if you have no responsibility or you have someone giving you money or you know if you have got something that you really want to do (449-453).

It is as though she is personally fearful of being seen to fail to commit to something herself while at the same time telling me about concerns she had about her contract being terminated on a 'whim' by the company. The company has little in the way of commitment to her but she feels a commitment maybe not to them but at least to herself to try to sustain something that is relatively secure and gives her some basis. The exercise then becomes one of self-entrapment whereby her desire to succeed in the job, even though she hates it, stops her doing something else. Her strength of feeling about this is telling: to make a proper decision about leaving would bring a loss of the one thing that does bring some security and external structure to her life. Leaving might also confront her with uncomfortable feelings of personal responsibility for her position.

Yet it remained difficult for me to understand Alice's insistence that leaving a job to alleviate suffering is 'really weak'. This desire to stay in her job exhibits the hallmarks of a work ethic

that is allegedly long gone in young people who are meant to be after autonomy and authentically fulfilling experiences of work or will up sticks and leave (Cannon, 1995a) – as seen in Mary. This determination to stick it out perhaps can be understood in the context of the competitive streak she told me she had: Alice wanted to succeed in her city-life, earn more money than her friends and enjoy the corporate lifestyle while she was young enough to. Yet once away from all that she did not care and found it hard to live by her own convictions:

> I think that I'll be left behind from my friends who'll be moving on and moving up and now people are moving away and getting promoted and also once you leave a job it's much harder to get another job and you can't make these rash decisions like… Even if you don't have financial commitments, leaving a job just looks bad on your CV. And I would be worried about that constantly. And it's true that people would be like, "Well why, why did you…. Why couldn't you stick it out?" And that I will regret it and I'll end up doing something equally… like I gave up my last job and I started doing a job that I hate and then I'll just start doing another job I hate. And, because I am desperate. So being left behind? Yeah. I don't want to be 30 and be earning, you know, I either want to be in a job that I enjoy and gives me the fulfilment that I love or I want to be making a lot of money. And because I can't decide between the two I think I will, probably, stick with making a lot of money (369–383).

Money is meant to compensate for unhappiness and the fact that she is trying to suppress a strong hatred of her job in a manner that wants to deny legitimacy to her true feelings and desire to leave. Acting on her feelings is deemed weak and irresponsible unlike Gareth and Mary who give free reign to their emotional responses to work as means of orienting and guiding their (working) lives. Both are unwilling to sacrifice their sense of well-being because it would stunt their personal 'growth'. Alice remains caught in a half-desire for her job to provide the sort of fulfilment, certainty and security she craves which leads to inertia towards doing something else.

Infringements and cost of work

Alice's indecision over whether to fully embrace her job or quit brings significant costs. Costs that compromise meaning-giving, life-affirming auspices (an existential refrain) outside of the work realm that could help act as recompense for, and 'protection' from, unhappy work:

I work at the weekends. I've got no life. So I hate it. So I have got to think about something else but I don't know what that is. I really have *absolutely* no clue. And I don't… I envy people. All these people who have got jobs or, you know, jobs that they even vaguely enjoy or that are going somewhere. This job is not going anywhere. I can stay in it and I could make some money but I am making money from other people's talent. And I am not making money because I am good at anything really. It is just numbers and I just… I just don't know what my skills are still. I mean I have languages but I don't really because I haven't spoken them for so long also. (114-122).

Not only does the job infringe Alice's autonomy but perhaps more invasively it undermines her own sense of self-worth and confidence. Caught in a limbo between her 'chosen' fallen state and a desire to change, Alice's indecisiveness over what she wanted left her going nowhere. Unable to leave, as Mary did when her job impinged on her too much, Alice leaves herself open to further difficulties generated by the realities of the corporate world:

You are making sacrifices. And if you really, really care about it that's fine but if you are just making sacrifices, as I am, because I just think I am too weak to or I am being too weak or too scared to move, or think about moving, it's too scary then it's all so pointless. And people get angry. People get angry with you. Your friends get angry with you that you are not seeing them and, you know, my family as well. My step mother has just finished chemo as she had cancer erm and she's been ill for the past 6 months and, you know, I love her and I see her as often as possible but for most people… you know, like they would just go and see their step mother but I remember when my step mother came out of hospital, I was like, "I have got to stay in the office". Why do I have to stay in the office? Really? Why? (555-564)

The encroachment of work into her personal time and value judgment makes a mockery of the recent claims that new working practices enable a better work/life balance to be achieved. Alice claims she has 'no life' as work takes priority over other commitments. This eroding of separate personal space and time away from work is exemplary of the sorts and forms of 'deterritorialization' that Guattari (and Deleuze) argue compromise individuals' abilities to construct and maintain robust existential refrains outside of the appropriation of capital power. Alice's allusion to mental breakdown and being fearful and weak in the face of the increasing demands of her job suggest a form of subjectivity lacking in grounded resources to say no. In many ways she is subsumed by capitalist enterprise (Read, 2003).

Alice was preparing to move back to her mother's house because she was struggling financially to meet rent and general living costs. This came with a foreboding sense of failure which the proposition of quitting her job only added to; further proof to Alice that she had been incapable of making a smooth transition from university to adult life. She labelled herself a 'mug'. The overwhelming feeling of choice and ability to 'self-create' born by many of the twentysomethings comes with a heavy price if things do not work out as planned: it is felt as personal failure. Alice's understandable anxiety derives from this point. Having failed to make a proper 'authentic' choice she remained caught in a situation she was 'too scared' to move out of. The uncertainty that so paralysed her was perversely held at a manageable distance by the 'hated' job and hence she ends up in such confusion about her relationship to the job. Without valorising her well-being to justify quitting she, arguably, displays a form of 'uncommitted commitment' to work and, consequently, furthers an impasse in terms of imagining a future different for herself:

> I think if I made the, the decision to definitely go back and study or to definitely do a PGCE or something I'd be fine and if I was really committed to it but I, as I am sure you can tell, I am not really committed to anything. I don't really … I can't be … I think, I just really … don't think I am ever really fully committed to anything (433-436).

Hard being a woman

Alice meets many of the 'Top Girl' criteria of the new form of active girlhood identified by McRobbie (2007). She had the elite education, top grades and a degree from Oxbridge and was constantly told that the new world of work was made for women like her. What helped shape her horizons was a sense of entitlement and a powerful and seductive narrative that young women can now get what they want and do what they want through careful decision-making – the 'self-making, self-choosing' agenda – and adherence to the dictates of the market (Aapola et al., 2005: 67; McRobbie, 2005). Alice – her life no longer shaped by traditional gender relations – had faced the future with optimism. Yet things turned out differently. She has learnt the hard way that educational credentials do not necessarily translate into economic success, in part due to competition from other women because of the concentration of 'Top Girls' in fewer employment sectors (Aapola et al., 2005: 73) and 'poor' decisions. These 'failures' are felt intensely personally – "I thought everything would turn out

ok". Her staunch antipathy to the very idea of quitting the job she hates perversely mirrors the supposed new 'hard-nosed' business mentality young women need for self-made economic success, which she feels has been denied her. To quit – while acceptable behaviour in her flatmate – would be to confirm 'failure' and poor decision-making in Alice's attempt to become a successful neoliberal subject. More generally this, 'taking it personally', marks the shift in responsibility for this generation of young people, that has come with neoliberal reform of the economy and contributes to a more insidious and draconian berating of the self.

In Alice's account there is no room for acknowledging the way 'inevitable failure' and contradiction are built-in to this self-inventing narrative. As Walkerdine (2003) is quick to point out, as the neoliberal social landscape removes forms of support for the subject (social coordinates and cognitive basis), who are left trying to construct a 'successful' self from the myriad of fractured and uncertain subjects positions they now exist in, wrong turns and mistakes are inevitable (p. 241). Orbach (2010) in her clinical work notes how many young women are struggling now with the extreme choices they face, leaving many bewildered and at a loss as to what to do with all this new choice when they are instructed to pursue 'perfection' and be permanently happy. For Alice, not being properly committed to anything means uncertainty and apprehension pervades her story. Sennett (1998: 97) notes how apprehension increases as past experience fails to be a reliable guide to the future and anxiety replaces certainty about what to do. One response is to remain caught 'drifting' in an extended or eternal present (Nowotny, 1994) as the means to progress in a linear fashion are hard to find. Alice's lack of a secure 'platform' in the present, informed by a past she did not authentically choose, and without her choosing something different, means her future retains uncertainty and sameness.

A word on postmaterialism – success without work?

> The neoliberal subject is an individual who is morally responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculations grounded on market-based principles to the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests (Hamann, 2009: 37).

The discussion in this chapter has revolved around attempts by twentysomethings to distance themselves from the work sphere as the site for personal meaning and fulfilment. Instead of dedication and commitment to developing themselves in a particular job, emphasis is placed on certain aspects of themselves *external* and autonomous to work – particular characteristics, aptitudes and dispositions, which they value and wish to see developed. In Gareth, Mary and Jo we see a re-focusing of concern with not compromising their sense of self or well-being through work. Alice's difficulties could be put down to her not valuing her well-being enough and remaining looking at work as a route to fulfilment. This 'turn-to-life' and prioritising quality of life arguably expresses a form of postmaterialism that rejects striving for success and material accumulation through work. Mary summarises this stance as such:

> I think maybe what we are doing as Thatcher's Children, which unfortunately we are, is not may be maximising our self in terms of economics but in terms of social development and geographical development. The world's becoming a smaller place and I think that is definitely that my peers and… through technology… and people are making the most of it. So I feel like the opportunities I have to develop myself psychologically, you know personally and socially to a really great extent but economically I am not that interested (326–331).

Gareth expresses something similar with his incredulity at his father's ability to stay in the same job that involves being desk bound. It is Gareth's needs that count and need to be expressed, developed and fulfilled in the way he sees fit. He will not let them be transformed or compromised through the rational and monotonous confines of a particular job. These twentysomethings want to break out of the last vestiges of Weber's 'iron-cage'. Aapola (2005: 76-77) claims many young women are beginning to question whether employment, despite their new opportunities, is the only track towards happiness and fulfilment in life. So while the opening up of work for young women may offer chances of success, choice and achievement it can be experienced as limiting if 'psychological' development is compromised.

These sentiments show the way in which some of the twentysomethings' way of thinking problematises the assumptions of the 'rational choice and cost-benefit calculations' associated with the enterprising forms of subjectivity they are meant to be using as a benchmark to live by. The recommended forms of conduct cannot account for the twentysomethings valorising

'qualitative' values over material and financial accumulation exactly because it transgresses the logic of rationality, that presumes maximisation of benefits, underpinning that neoliberal thinking (neatly summarised in the opening quote to this section).[37] An interesting story Hannah told me that involved an argument she had had with her uncle, who is an accountant, helps to illuminate the generational shift in values there has been. The discussion revolved around what Hannah's younger brother should do, who was doing a Masters in History but was unclear as to his next step. He was thinking about following Hannah into journalism but her uncle thought otherwise:

> My uncle was saying, "That is a ridiculous idea. Hannah should quit and go work in the city." And I was like, "What are we talking about? Are we talking about David or are we talking about me?" And I like my job and he was like, "Well you are never going to make any money. You should immediately go and work in the city. You need to make some money". My parents were getting really angry with him and saying, "She likes what she is doing, why on earth would she do that?" He was saying, "Because money is the most important thing. And if you don't have enough money you are never going to be happy" and I was like, "It sounds like he is saying this because he'd made that sacrifice" and he'd given up something he'd like to do. God knows what it was because he wasn't making any sense but erm it sounded like he was really bitter and resentful that now, you do have to make a choice between what you want to do and money but more people are choosing what they want to do. Rather than the money (426-440).

Inglehart (2000) claims that the result of long term economic security has been a major inter-generational shift from 'materialist' to 'post-materialist' values. These new values emphasise quality of life issues over money or social order. The postmaterialist thesis claims that individuals liberated from tradition and social constraints come to seek personal fulfilment and happiness, to choose their own lifestyle and control the terms on which they make relationships to others and work (Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995: 70). In many ways Hannah, Gareth and Mary confirm this and in doing so complicate the presiding logic of *homo economicus* that defines contemporary individuals as little more that 'self-interested subjects of rational choice' (Read, 2009). These twentysomethings transcend economic materialism, one which Hannah's uncle is firmly rooted in whereby it appears completely *irrational* to

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[37] Of course, it is possible to see these twentysomethings' reaction to uncertainty by valorising their 'self' as a rational response to their predicament. Their self is the only remaining constant thing that they know and that can still be relied upon given the contingent nature of the labour market they face. Therefore it makes quite good sense to let that be your anchor and guide rather than fix your hopes and aspirations on a job.

value happiness and well-being over money. For him the line of causality goes from money to happiness with money being the most important thing to secure.

Hannah's generation, perhaps enjoying material and economic security unknown to previous generations did not put happiness before money. Being in fortunate class positions (and with, what Skeggs would call, a sense of entitlement), means happiness and the avoidance of monotony and boredom in work can consequently become the driving logic rather than striving for financial and material security. That is why Mary left for San Francisco, Gareth does not want to sit at a computer and why Jo's body repels at her company's attempt to integrate her to the brand. Of course, now in light of the recent downturn in the graduate labour market these sentiments may have had to change as the priority shifts back to securing any work and money.

Conclusion: 'life' before work

Unlike the previous chapter, which charted twentysomethings' relationships with being in work, this chapter sought to examine twentysomethings' attempts to negotiate and create distance between themselves and work. Anxiety over work boundaries and personal space – and a resultant desire for more autonomy – generated various reactions ranging from leaving the job (Mary), rejecting the employer (Jo), rejection of work itself (Gareth) and an intense struggle and confusion over what to do (Alice). These responses all throw into question the new justificatory regimes corporations and capitalism have developed to help renew commitment to work and the economic system. They also begin to challenge the ways in which subjectivity is codified in line with the requirements of production (Lazzarato, 1996: 136).

As such these narratives can be understood as a form of resistance to work – sometimes embodied through bodily revulsion or a depressive, ill state – and a turn to prioritizing the self to try to fulfil and maintain an authentic sense of self as jobs fail to do so. This 'valorisation' of their selves becomes a means of orientating the new work topography where work no longer

integrate them into a community, class or wider sense of long-term cohesive progression. Work becomes about self-development in the present; not about trying to maintain or secure long-term career prospects. Yet doing this without the old subjective supports can become precarious and fragile, as Alice shows, in terms of the level of responsibility this brings and potential for feelings of personal inadequacy, low esteem and consequences for mental well-being.

Anxiety, as Heidegger (1962) contends, can awaken critical questioning about one's authenticity. The desire for 'genuine' autonomy in the narratives of the twentysomethings was premised upon personal fulfilment contrary to the 'fake' (corporate) fulfilment promised through jobs, which entailed acceding to the demands of an institution and it's values. In some senses what Mary, Jo and the others crave is a job where there is no existential disjunction or friction between work and self. This 'friction' is the force that keeps them looking elsewhere. Research about North American and European graduates in the nineties confirms this rise of a 'personal agenda', which eschewed personal alignment with work. Autonomy and control over time become priorities. They came to withhold full commitment – 'giving their bodies, but not their souls' and would 'happily throw it all up' for more authentic pleasures. The conclusion was that the relation to work is growing looser because life goes on elsewhere (Cannon cited in Gorz, 1999: 61-63). A 'life-ethic' is put before a work ethic.

Heelas (2002) argues that work in 'exploratory' or 'soft' capitalism comes to be fuelled by such a '*life ethic*' that eschews the ascetics of the authoritative Protestant work ethic and sacrificing one's own life for 'life-as' an 'encorporated' worker. Those younger and better-educated members of the workforce will not tolerate 'just' working, it must be something that is a 'role' they can take on, make their own and 'act out one's life' in (p. 94). Work anxiety becomes a catalyst to find other sources or platforms to base their lives on. In the process, what they are arguably doing is coming to reflexively 'scan' the 'psychic dimensions of their experiences' to help imagine something different (Elliott, 2004). These ongoing emotional struggles, relating 'internal' and 'external' experience, examine and revise self-definition (Elliott & Lemert, 2006:

72). This is a form of thinking and understanding the self that goes beyond rational choice-making and planning enshrined in neoliberal governing discourses which presume individuals are driven by the maximisation of material and financial benefits.

The cumulative difficulties twentysomethings faced leaving university unsure of what to do; competition for good jobs; potentially falling into a 'random' jobs; and then struggling to figure out quite what it is they want or expect from work are further problematised by the tension Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) identify as key to understanding contemporary existential troubles. The contradictory market demand for short-term adaptability and yet at the same time present and maintain an authentic form of self over time underpins many of the dissatisfactions in the narratives of the twentysomethings. Consequently these narratives represent something like initial 'voicings' of new (artistic) indignations levelled at work for, still, creating alienation and inauthenticity. Points of encroachment of work shown in this chapter, consequently, became moments of potential transformation, resisting assimilation and maintaining 'difference'. It is these points of realignment of personal priorities that the next chapter focuses on in the critical moments identified in two twentysomethings' narratives.

Chapter 7 – Re-orientation: facing up to critical moments

> Concerning change, we must assume, that some specific event initiates it, an event capable of triggering or disclosing the disjunctures which incite a particular self or group to question its way of being. Such disruptive events could cohere around a spatial and cultural disturbance…that shakes being to its foundation (Venn, 2002: 66).

> The effect of catastrophe, then, is to release difference from the hold of repetition (Elliott, 2004: 145).

> I think the feeling depressed and feeling quarter-life crisisy about where is my life going and what is going on: I need a house, I need a boyfriend, I need to try and figure out exactly what I am going to do because it's at the point of no return a bit (Hannah, 312-314).

This chapter explores in detail the manner in which two twentysomethings face up to a number of 'shocks' or critical moments in their lives since leaving university. Whereas Alice and others have struggled with reaching a decision over what to do, Alistair and Helen make 'risky' but decisive choices to change their lives having been forced to face up to decision-making by the preceding events of getting fired (Alistair) and doing a self-help course (Helen). In keeping with the two previous chapters, decisions over work, what to do and commitment to the job remain prevalent especially in the experiences of Alistair, which reveal what the problem of 'no boundaries' and adherence to the principles of enterprise can lead to. The respective critical moments in the narratives become important opportunities for reorienting their lives in ways that 'liberate' them from old patterns and circumstances that compromised their sense of self and personal desires. They also provide a telling insight into the *experience* of identity constructing that I identified as important in chapter two. These moments are akin to what Giddens (1991) calls 'fateful moments' or what I understand as 'critical moments'. Fateful moments appear as personal *crises* when individuals are called upon to made decisions that are consequential for their ambitions and future of their lives. This generates uncertainty in the face of the obvious risk this change can bring for an individual

and, Giddens argues, can threaten the core of self-identity (p. 185). As such they can be responded to either with a form of fatalism or engaged choice.[38]

Alistair and Helen help illuminate both the potential positive and negative effects of critical moments. The chapter starts with Alistair and his sacking from a job (with draconian demands on his time and personal life), which offered him the chance to become self-employed in a line of work passionate to him. Yet as the chapter charts, his emulation of the enterprising self and neoliberal subjectivity brings with it both new freedom to do what he wants but also an escalation of this to a point where the work logic encroaches more insidiously into his life as the old boundaries between work and life become obsolete. This leaves little space and time for other meaningful activities and has consequences for Alistair's mental well-being.

In many respects Alistair's story exposes the limits of neoliberal forms of conduct and prevalent forms of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996, 2009; Negri, 1999) because they entail the incorporation (subsumption) of subjective capital to the reproduction of capital and the reconfiguration and intensification of everyday practices defined by the principles of *homos economicus* (Read, 2009), whereby life becomes work (Lewis, 2003). This leaves little or no space for the pursuit of everyday practices or values (Jones, 2003) that fall outside of, or can meaningfully resist, the remit of economic rationality because they are deemed surplus to requirements (and cast as market externalities). Helen, the second twentysomething to feature in this chapter, has a more positive outcome to her critical moments. I chart how, having completed a weekend long self-help course, she discovers a new approach to understanding and thinking about her life, that overcomes her old inauthentic ways and which sets off a chain of decision-making to change the direction of her life. With the adoption of the auspices of a therapeutic narrative and a new language to orient her, Helen adopts a form of

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[38] Critical moments are distinct from 'fateful moments' because they are derived from the narratives of the twentysomethings retrospectively and they do not assume, as Giddens' 'fateful moments' do, that they automatically result in consciously chosen consequences for an individual's life. As Thomson et al (2002) argue there is a danger in the way Giddens 'fateful moments' can be seen to be within the control of an individual and constructs an abstract individual in charge of them (p. 338).

positive engagement with uncertainty and the choices she faces, seeing them as a means to achieve what she wants.

More generally Helen and Alistair's confrontation with their critical moments involved an assessment of the risk involved in doing something different as their original existential 'security' was breached. As such, I understand these moments as 'epiphanies' which represent 'interactional moments and experiences that leave marks on people's lives by altering fundamental meaning structures' (Denzin, 1989 quoted in Thomson et al., 2002: 337). As such a level of *self-interpretation* (hermeneutics) is required that goes beyond, as Lash (1993) claims, the cognitive-rationality assumed in the understanding of more traditional reflexive approaches to self-identity such as Giddens and Beck. These moments dispel the illusion of individual mastery and control over life-projects and instead can administer shock, crisis or catastrophe into narratives (Elliott, 2002: 20). While critical moments run the risk of individuals seeking refuge in well-known forms of life (Craib, 1998: 174), as the responses of Alistair and Helen show, they can actually also 'promote a heightened self-understanding of imagination and desire in the fabrication of meaning in daily life' (Elliott, 2002: 15). The reason for this Elliott (2002) contends, is that there is 'a certain emancipatory significance to emotional astonishment and shock' which opens up dimensions of uncanniness, of strangeness, and of Otherness (p. 20). This feeling of renewed potential as the flipside of crisis can aid the management of loss that comes with them. The role of anxiety here, as with Heidegger, can be progressive or regressive: individuals can use anxiety as a spur – reflexively scanning the self for new possibilities – or fleeing in the face of it.[39]

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[39] This notion of break, crisis or fateful moment in the narratives of postmodern individuals in the thinking of Giddens, Beck and Elliott can be further contextualised in the manner in which Heidegger (1962) conceives of Dasein becoming open and *resolute*, authentically manifesting itself in it's specific possibilities – i.e. choosing itself. This moment of transformation Heidegger calls *Augenblick* – literally 'glance of an eye' or Dreyfus' (1995: 321) term 'the moment' (in *Being and Time* it is translated as 'the moment of vision'). In resoluteness Dasein becomes open to a *'unique situation'* and can develop a 'clear-sightedness' about what is actually possible and what needs to be done to embark upon a new, authentic way of life. In the 'moment' Dasein brings itself back from an inauthentic fallen position and faces the truth about its being and is 'carried over' to 'whatever possibilities and circumstances are encountered in the Situation which has been disclosed' (Heidegger, 1962: 387). This 'truth' is unique and individual to each Dasein and as, what Giddens calls, 'expert systems' or traditional modes of orientation fail to provide solutions to these fateful moments (unique situations) individuals are 'thrown' back upon themselves.

Getting sacked: a chance for something better

Alistair

When I spoke to Alistair he was having some down time from a busy period in his job as a self-employed sound engineer. He was 28 and really just starting to have some success in his job having completed an MSc in Computer Network Studies some years earlier. Alistair's story helped illuminate the nature of contemporary work and, in particular, it showed the consequences adopting the logic of enterprise if left unchecked. Prior to being self-employed he has been leading a corporate life in Canary Wharf working for a leading global investment bank ensuring their IT trading systems did not miss a beat (or rather monetary pound). It was high-pressure work with intensive bursts of long hours but it was work he enjoyed and shared with a tight-knit IT team who hung out socially. He got to work with 'amazing technology', which, as a self-confessed geek, he loved.

Working in an corporate arena that adhered to cutting-edge business practice meant all IT support had been outsourced to the company Alistair worked for, and then his services were contracted in, meant essentially working in a quite traditional and well structured (bureaucratic) environment with a defined separation between the site of work and life outside of that. However, it was the constant transgression of this divide by work intruding into his private life that became a source of tension in his and girlfriend's life. While well financially rewarded, there were downsides Alistair explains:

> As a contractor I grossed about 60 grand a year – which I'll never earn or I doubt I'll ever earn again – but they own you. They effectively own you. And I can think of lots of examples whereby I was meant to meet my (ex) girlfriend for dinner and I can remember saying something has gone on and I can't meet you. Or you know when you're on call and you're on call for a whole week, 24 hours a day and I had a pager under my pillow and sometimes it would go off maybe every hour or sometimes twice an hour and, of course, Caroline was beside me and she'd be disturbed and I'd have to get up go downstairs and log onto the computer and depending what had happened do something. So it did dominate your life (44-52).

This encroachment of work into private life is a familiar story for many in a UK economy where work has steathily worked its way more and more into people's lives aided by new information and communication technologies that dissolve the old physical boundaries between work and home (or 'at' work/'away' from work) (see Bunting, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Miller, 2004; Perrons et al., 2005; Sennett, 2006; Taylor, 2002). Alistair when he was away from work wanted and expected to be free from the job's disciplining effect on him and his time. And for the times when he was not on call he was free to do as he pleased – he was doing an part-time audio engineering course in his spare time – maintaining work and self being largely closed off from one another.

All this was to change when Alistair was fired for tomfoolery at work.[40] It came as a sudden, unexpected shock and is the first critical moment that I identify in Alistair's narrative. He was now confronted with having to make 'risky' decisions that would have important consequences for his future. But, as Alistair says, the level of risk and insecurity he faced was offset by financial security and early inklings of desire for change:

> The time I got sacked: it was an interesting time because I was really thinking, "Yes I do really want to change profession" and I could see that if I stayed at the bank and in the computer industry that I would never get around to changing profession so yeah it was a big kick in the pants and because of my position, and I had earned so much money and my business account so wealthy, it basically allowed me to stop working for about 6 months and finish my course (79-84).

The shock came as an awakening and a means to reflect upon his interest in audio engineering which had initially taken a back seat to the IT work because his MSc was in that area:

> …getting fired was a massive incentive to change profession and I choose not to go back into computing at that point and risk it. The risk was minimum because I knew I could survive for a long time (87-89).

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[40] He forwarded on a 'joke' email to other staff at the bank, which had originated from within the IT team, and found its way to management who took a dim view of such practices. Alistair said that they were looking to 'trim' the IT staff numbers at the time and his error provided them with an easy way to get rid of him.

His desire to escape the way in which work encroached upon his life made getting fired seem a release.

Going solo

Alistair turned down offers from former work colleagues for decent IT work. Instead having financial security he decided to try and combine his passion for music and technology by becoming a self-employed sound engineer. Just as the discourse surrounding and promoting enterprise and entrepreneurial skills sets out, Alistair in many ways responded in an ideal way to the change and uncertainty he faced by making 'appropriate risk assessments' and acting upon his 'own initiative to control his own destiny'. His reflections on, and justifications for, setting up on his own are interesting in the way they draw upon a mixture of personal desires and passions to authentically match up to or be in tune with, what he was doing work-wise. These then become resources for helping Alistair manage his transformation from 'organisation man' (Whyte, 1961) to an enterprising self no longer able – or willing – to rely on the 'certainties' of nine-to-five work.

It was Alistair's desire for freedom from authority and the conformity required by a company that drove his move to self-employment. This was coupled with two passions – music and technology – and trying to find a balance between them:

> I have always enjoyed music: listening to records and going to gigs and things like that. That has always been something I have done. That is just part of who I am so when I discovered engineering as an idea and engineering I was, "This is cool! Here you've got music, you've got technology, dealing with people". It was a balance of things that I didn't get from within computing … So for me after the shock wore off of getting sacked it wasn't really a decision. I just knew and, yeah, in my heart this is what I want to pursue and I knew that I could … The computing profession didn't interest me as much as it used to because I was seduced by computers when I was about 13 years old and I thought they were incredible and I still do but I just don't want to work with them. Sound is so much more interesting and challenging! (99-115)

His decision aligns his internal self with what he does in the external world in a manner Heidegger (1962: 334) would see as authentic and not requiring a rational, intentional choice because, as Alistair says, it is felt in the 'heart' making it really 'no choice at all' (Dreyfus, 1995:

319). The shock of getting sacked – it was also at this time that he spilt with his long-term girlfriend – is important as a moment that made him confront his reality – "it was a big kick in the pants" – provided a chance for new possibilities (as well as uncertainty). It instigated something akin to what Elliott (2004; 2006) calls reflexive scanning which saw Alistair re-imagine his future life drawing upon personal hopes, desires and fantasies against his new reality. This gave him a means of reflecting upon and understanding this 'crisis' point:

> It's funny because I remember as a school kid, and this came back to me recently I don't know why, that I wanted to work for myself. I remember thinking that at about the ages of 14 or 15 and I don't know why because at the time I didn't know what it meant to be in the workforce or be self-employed but I guess I had some kind of gut feeling that I didn't want to be part of some big organisation or some big hierarchy. I just wanted to be more independent. I just guess it was related to who I was and a feeling of, not separation but…I don't know what it was based on (157-163).

> A vague sense of not conforming, maybe conforming is the wrong word putting too much on … I just remember being outside the school of German thinking, "I want to be self-employed. I don't want to work for an organization". And I don't know why. Specifically there was a sense of … to be honest I cannot answer that question the way I want to answer it because I don't know the answer. I am still trying to find that answer today (255-259).

While unable to fully articulate or find the definitive reason why he would prefer to be self-employed, Alistair has a clear 'gut' feeling or desire to do something different. His reflection on his childhood enables him to articulate his decision to go into sound engineering as the meeting of some 'calling' that had materialized through new circumstances. It becomes less about him having to make a rational decision but instead *listening* to an internal sense of what to do which helps regain a sense of control and direction over his future. He could justify and accept his sacking after the event as actually coming as a blessing in disguise and re-wakening him to his earlier hopes and fantasies so he could *re*-orient his life to do something he wanted to do.

Finding himself

In many ways Alistair reacts to getting sacked with the 'correct' enterprising ethos, yet the void or silence in his attempt to explain his reason for becoming self-employed highlights a

telling problem (admission) in the assumptions of this form of neoliberal subjectivity. Rather than there being a clear rational decision behind Alistair's move into self-employment there is an interplay of conscious and unconscious hopes and desires stemming from an earlier part of his life that are hard to equate with the hard, rational logic that is meant to drive the 'economic man' to the exclusion of other motivations. Instead the pursuit of an answer or reason for Alistair is a much deeper and more profound existential exercise in trying to find out *who* he is. During the interview he told me that he was in the process of reading Eric Clapton's autobiography, which had given him pause for thought about the path and direction of his own life:

> Part of what I am reading about is a question of identity. Who is he? What does he want to do? Where does he belong? He and I are very different people in some respects but also very similar in other aspects and we have some superficial similarities in the sense of losing parents. His was worse than mine because basically his mother deserted him to his grandparents and his father, who was a soldier, he never knew. My case was being deserted by my father and my mum I know so I have more than he has got. There is a whole self-employed thing and where you belong and I have always felt all along of being different and being separate and I can't put my finger on it specifically but yeah. So that is why I can't answer that question completely about why being self-employed was the right thing for me but it kind of ties back into that. And it's just part of being non-conformist and may be having no real respect for authority figures because I just don't necessarily think just because you have a certain job you deserve automatic respect. So the whole management-subordinate relationship you know – you still have twats who are managers and who you want to punch because they are just twats! So, yes it's a bigger complex issue but…(304-317).

Getting sacked instigated an intense period of self-reflection and interrogation that went well beyond just abstract reasoning about what to do next. While unable to put his 'finger on' the exact reason for his change of direction, Alistair's 'scanning' of his early childhood experiences and feelings come to be a source of justifying something new and different at a moment lacking external, institutional ordering. This is a 'complex issue' as he acknowledges: the way in which Alistair (almost psychoanalytically) unpacks his motives is characteristic of the individual practices of self-management that, Walkerdine (2005: 59) claims, defines new capitalist work identities. She claims that psychology has become implicated in the discursive organization of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives in this new world of work (Walkerdine, 2005: 50). Alistair's legitimation of his disdain towards large organisations

stems, in his mind, from his lack of paternal authority figures in formative years. This reliance on certain psychological traits or qualities enables him to use them positively in the (re)construction of his self post a 'turbulent and uncertain' event (Walkerdine, 2004: 3).[41]

Becoming and living 'unfixed'

Having left the security, routine and structure of full-time work in a large corporation where his life was structured by the whims and dictats of an IT system, Alistair suddenly found himself on his own and without limits. Where once his days were regulated by the 'rhythm' inside the company, he now had to impose his own routine:

> The drawback is that I have no routine. I mean with a 9-5 job you know you are working Monday to Friday from 8 til 6 say and you organise evenings here and sort out weekends here. Decide to take a day off and do something. So there is no routine. So you have to impose your own routine. Being self-employed and starting up a profession, I would take any work that came. That was necessary just to get money for starters (140-144).

The shift from employee to entrepreneur that Alistair had to make gives an interesting insight into the consequences of the subjective workings of neoliberalism and the adoption of this much promoted form of personhood. Leaving secure employment was a "frightening time" (198) and he felt "vulnerable". This, however, served to further his resolve; securing work and developing his networks became his priority (as it was for Corinne). It was this search and attempt to secure work that, without the "bread and butter – a safety net" (197) of 'proper' employment, saw the beginning of a slow creep of work becoming the dominant sphere in his life:

> And this comes back to being in control of your own life: yes, you are because you don't answer to anyone else but, in a sense, you are not because you are still depending upon the phone ringing and you still have to, that has to be your first priority … If work comes up I am going to work and put you on hold until I have some idea what I am doing. So

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[41] Alistair's psychologisation of himself overrides the fact that he got fired perhaps unjustifiably and ignores the more structural manner in which the corporate environment he worked in could not accommodate certain types of individuals (i.e. independent) within their employee framework. By doing this Alistair absolves any blame to the company or corporate environment – it was his fault – and ignores the experiences of working there leading up to that point of being fired which might have influenced his behaviour and judgment.

that also answers the question of control too – you are a slave to your own business (218–225).

Where at least there was an element of control of being 'inside' and 'outside' of work in his previous job when he could 'switch off' Alistair was now dictated to by the amount of personal effort he had put in to ensuring the phone would ring. And of course, once it rang he was obliged to accept it; not knowing when the next offer would come:

> Everything would come second to work and what happened was that my career went really well and I got more and more work. People called me more and I was in more demand and I'd pick up this work and by about 3 months ago I was working virtually everyday! (351–354).

Trying to live without guarantees, the security and certainty of a full-time job, thus, had drawbacks but Alistair also found it more fulfilling. He got more "satisfaction, personal satisfaction from the jobs" (235–236) and was working in a sector that excited him, combining two of his boyhood passions, and answered only to himself. However, it was this new work's 'internality' to him as opposed to being external that sowed the seeds of the next critical moment in Alistair's story, which required him once more to re-think his life.

Boundaries – the problem of no limits

> … I know I have this evening free for others, who have a more regular life, plan things and that doesn't necessarily work that well. So that's certainly the biggest drawback – having no routine and no predictability to what you do. I mean being self-employed is great because, whether you do what I do or are self-employed working 9-5 self-employed, you are your own boss and you only have yourself to answer to (153–157).

Predictability comes from routine and having confidence that certain boundaries exist between things such as work and home life, that some things can relied upon to occur – such as finishing work at 5, getting the train home and meeting friends later. All those things for Alistair became rare. The unpredictability and unsociable hours he worked and the precedence that a job took over everything else meant that any boundaries between his work and life quickly become formally redundant:

> I am sacrificing so many other things in my life: relationships, friendships and even just me, time for me. Time for me just to relax and have a time outside of work and pursue arts and physical fitness. Cook for myself. All that kind of stuff was just completely gone: sacrificed to work, which was brilliant. When work went well it was brilliant (358–361).

> You know other things in my life have been on the backburner for so long that I have forgotten half these things you know! I mean what are girlfriends? Who are my mates? What does it mean to go to the pictures? How many films have I missed I wanted to see? How many books have I read or half read in the last year? (228–231).

Alistair, in one sense, has been fulfilling the remit of the enterprising self with too much zeal with its emphasis on navigating the social realm via 'rational choice and economic cost–benefit analysis to the exclusion of other ethical values and social interests' (Hamann, 2009: 38). It was a form of 'responsible self-management' that re-configured Alistair's life and pushing economic interest or choice to the fore upsetting the balance he had with other (existential) ways of conducting and valuing one's existence. By prioritising work and putting all his effort and energy into pursuing and securing work Alistair adheres to the move under neoliberalism which reconstructed the wage earner (the worker) as 'human capital'; no longer recognised as dependent on a employer and company nor compelled to participate in capitalist production but instead fashioned as free and autonomous entrepreneurs reliant upon their human capital – skills, abilities, tastes and knowledge – which requires a readiness to use one's own abilities and emotional resources to bear in the service of individualised projects (Hamann, 2009: 43; McNay, 2009: 65).

Burning out: "it was either my sanity or my job"

The result of this for Alistair was not only social in cost in terms of sacrificing meeting friends, reading books and pursuing personal relationships – alternative meaning-giving activities outside of work – but also the extraction of mental and psychological costs that exacted a different type of toil:

> There was some weeks when I'd be looking at my diary and thinking, "Just how am I going to survive this week?" It was kind of like, talking about routine and planning and

stuff, I was looking at my diary and thinking, "When am I going to sleep?" and it was like I realized, "I can't go on like this". It would probably kill me (354-358).

In the previous chapter Alice talked of the possibility of having a nervous breakdown while Mary was only too aware of the manner in which her work situation had contributed to her depression and getting ill. The weight of personal responsibility for identity and demand for a successful life can come to psychically overburden individuals, as capitalism comes to require greater emotional investment in work and the self becomes a primary tool for the production of value (Berardi, 2009; Ehrenberg, 2010). The debate, however, remains open as to whether late capitalism does cause mental distress (Salecl, 2010: 71). Alistair's own experiences of the encroachment and dominance work had on his emotional and mental well-being add something to this discussion:

> When work didn't go well then, if I had lost a gig or lost my confidence or something went wrong, then this…the ceiling started to feel like it was caving in because that had become my sole focus. And when it was good it was great but when it wasn't good it was like there is nothing there, there is nothing else. I kind of realised that I had to change. I was…I got to the point where I was permanently tired and about 3 months ago I did a gig and just got really badly shaken. Nothing specific happened but I just felt rattled and fortunately the guy I was with realised and he just said, "Do you want me to do this gig?" and I was just seriously rattled. That was the time I realised I just had to change things and it took sometime for those changes to take effect because my diary was so far booked up in advance that it took about 2 to 3 months before I could start getting some time (362-372).

Getting 'rattled' came as a warning sign for Alistair to try and slow down and get more balance in his life. The 'ceiling caving in' metaphor speaks of the way Guattari would liken the effects of contemporary capitalism on individuals ability to construct and maintain a existential refrain that aids and protect a way of life that is 'singular' and meaningful. As Alistair explained, his capacity to mark out a 'territory' for himself outside of work become increasingly difficult:

> I need more balance and that there are other priorities that just for me to be a normal human being I need to pursue. Me and my mental health and physical health was suffering from me working too hard. I was heading towards, not burn out, but something…(418-421)

This 'something' was more clearly defined by Alistair when he told me about his 'blackout story' that served as a forceful reminder that he needed to change how he was living. It came about after a night out drinking with friends whereby he found himself coming round from being unconscious and laid out on Waterloo Bridge in the early morning with commuters bustling past. He had a ripped jacket and a cut to his face. He could not remember the latter part of the evening and no idea how he came to be in such a state. He critically reflected upon such events and puts it in the context of pushing himself too hard: 'you're working, working, working. Not eating properly. You're tired. You're stressed out' (394).

This blackout came as further warning for the need to do things differently:

> You cannot do this. One day you will die. I will be unconscious somewhere and will never wake up. So it's like, "Yeah, you got to look after yourself better boy or you're otherwise you're in big trouble!" (395-397)

Once more it was a 'moment', or rather a 'shock', in Alistair's life – much like getting sacked – that made him reassess his priorities and directly threatened his sense of ontological security. His previous decisions and choices while creating a future he enjoyed in terms of passions and interests had also put him at risk, of which he was only too aware. Alistair set about making changes and "completely changed things around" by getting a much better balance between work and life, attempting to re-build a refrain or a series of meaningful auspices outside of work – things that could not be subsumed directly to exchange value and the pursuit of wages:

> This period of my life right now I have done next to no work and it has been it's been a luxury. It has been so much fun. I have been reading again. Cooking. I have been socializing (373-374).

He had also found time to 'do some exercise, pursue a woman' and to just do 'normal things'. Alistair had been left in little doubt as to the need to change the overwhelming and dominant position work had come to have in his life:

> It has had to be quiet because basically I was losing the plot and I was heading towards, not a breakdown – that's overstating it, but chronic fatigue to the point that if I didn't

change it I wouldn't be able to work at all. I would have been sent to the loony bin or something! (376–379)

The crisis points or critical moments in Alistair's story are telling of the new ways in which work has come to encroach on young people's lives and consequences not just physically in terms of tiredness but the forms of mental degradation that come with the sacrifice of other activities and commitments to work. While Alistair is an exception in that he was self-employed his experiences echo those of Mary and Alice who both suffered with the encroachment of work into their personal lives. Mary held it responsible for her depression and getting ill.

The initial liberation that Alistair felt after being sacked and being free from the strictures of the corporation he was working for quickly eroded as he was forced to assume complete responsibility for finding and securing work. Individual autonomy and Alistair's 'freedom' to pursue other interests (his 'life') were subsumed to the pursuit of economic self-interest.[42] For Alistair being enterprising and self-employed meant no longer having any 'outside' of work. His old job gave him limits but now had none. Alistair's predicament finds affinity in the theory which argues we can understand capitalism better today by acknowledging the way in which neoliberalism no longer works in the manner of Foucault's disciplinary power which confined and fixed bodies in the closed sites of the workplace (the factory) but which works by dispersing bodies and individuals through privatisation and isolation (Read, 2009: 34). Deleuze (1995) argues that as control that was once confined to specific locations (an interior) i.e. the factory or school spills out across all fields of society (exterior) it becomes something ongoing and continuous. Alistair's reliance on his own 'human capital' became ensnared in the new enterprising capitalist logic. This was the subsumption of subjective capital (his *whole* life) and affective (immaterial) labour (Hardt, 1999; Meier Sørensen, 2002) to the reproduction and processes of accumulation. Where once the worker just sold labour power, the emergence of *homo economicus* and interpenetration of its logic into everyday practices

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[42] Alistair told me that during one winter things got so tight with money that he never switched the heating on in his flat instead preferring to save money and wear layers upon layers of clothing.

sees a reconfiguration of identity and subjectivity towards responsible self-management in terms of economic interest and choice (McNay, 2009: 62).

The costs of living such a life are clear from the closing down of Alistair's existential refrain to the chronic fatigue it caused which he feared might lead to further serious (health and psychological) problems. His adoption of the eulogised 'techniques of self' characterising the entrepreneurial self meant the difficulties he experienced were re-articulated as poor management of 'human capital'. Under these terms, it was no longer a problem with the 'corporation' but the result of a 'mismanaged' life and a failure to properly engage in the requisite processes of subjectivation (Hamann, 2009: 44). The concerns of work are continuous, not left behind at the office when the job finishes. Negotiating and attempting to redress the balance and boundaries between self and work came to be focal points of Alistair 'critical' moments. For all the supposed emancipatory force of the neoliberal reform of the 'old' economy, that promised new freedoms and autonomy, what Alistair's experiences are testament to are the potential incompatibilities of the demand for adaptability and a genuine attempt to construct and live an authentic, autonomous life.

Overcoming 'crap-ness': recognising new ways

Helen

Alistair's critical moments in his life stemmed from the events related to work that then set in motion negotiations to match up his desire to work for himself and a passion for music and technology. By contrast Helen's critical moments, which I discuss now, derived less from an 'external' interruption or disturbance induced by work than driven by an 'internal' sense that something was not right or amiss in her life. To perhaps over simplify, it was Helen's concern and desire to lead an authentic life – both in work and personally – that gave rise to her critical moments. In Helen's narrative since leaving university there reside two identifiable critical moments that were sources of tension and difficulty in her life (transition points). Separating them both is Helen's decision to take a weekend-long self-help course that was run

by an organisation called *Landmark Education*[43] who promise to 'transform lives' and which became a very important and, what she understood as, significant transformative event in terms of trying to become, and be, the person she always wanted to be. Prior to doing the course her concern or crisis centred around her job and quitting. After the course attention was introspectively focused on ways of authentically understanding herself and being *active*. She developed a quite distinctive form of thinking about herself (I explore this further in the next chapter).

Stop pretending

Helen left university having studied maths and computer science knowing that she wanted nothing to do with computer science anymore. She enjoyed the maths side but was passionate about social and environmental campaign work. That is what 'made her tick' she said. As with many of the twentysomethings in this research on leaving university she had *no* idea where she was going or what she was going to do. As with some other twentysomethings she retreated back to the secure confines of Higher Education completing a MSc in Environmental Modelling that she hoped would combine her passion for campaign work and academic interests (Helen had a dream about working on coral reef conversation). She got a job that she thought was ideal after the MSc. It applied her maths and computer skills to conservation techniques and was the 'epitome' of everything she wanted to do: it was ethical, academic and applied exactly what she believed in. She did it for three years but told me she, "*really, really* hated it!":

> It was *so* dull. I mean circumstances of the job didn't help but I think I used those as an excuse quite a lot for why I didn't like the job. The boss this, the people I worked with that. And and … we didn't have enough resources to do the job. A million excuses! The real truth was that I just didn't want to be there. I just really didn't want to be there. I wasn't interested in it. At all. At all. And so yeah I just a lot of time going, "Oh my God!" I was so depressed in that job (199–204).

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[43] When I spoke to Helen it was only 11 months after she had done it (and another follow up course) and she was still very much enthralled to it and was evangelical about it. I feel a lot of what she said and thought about the period of her life prior to doing the course was significantly refracted and filtered through the new vocabulary and discourses she had acquired from the course.

She almost quit on a number of occasions and was offered more money to stay, which she refused. Instead she took some time off and decided to go on a charity bike-ride from London to Jerusalem in support of the Palestinian cause.[44] She wanted to do something exciting. It turned out to be an important and challenging experience.

> It opened my eyes to so much and really made me think, "What are my likes? Why am I pretending that I have to have this career in research just because that's what I have done at university?" Ok may be I am good at it and I always thought I had to do it because I was good at it but may be my skills somewhere else may be more valuable. Just because I am good at one thing doesn't mean I have to do that (224-230).

Prior to going on the ride Helen had mulled over her chances of getting work in international development where she felt she really could find something she enjoyed. However, she talked herself out it because it was too competitive and plenty of people with better and more appropriate qualifications ahead of her. But the ride had an effect:

> It really made me realise that I was pretending that I had to, like that I couldn't get a job in international development or what I wanted to do and I was telling myself that I couldn't do it and I realised that I was believing what I was telling myself and that I was making it all up. Actually if that was what I wanted then I would bloody well go and do that, do you know what I mean? (244-248)

> I just really got just how crap I was being and treating myself. So I was like, "Right I want to do this and I am going to have to make a bit of a sacrifice". (250-251).

This 'crap-ness' can be understood in terms of a sense of inauthenticity Helen felt that had characterised part of her life before going on the bike ride. These include the 'untruths' she tried to make herself accept about the job she hated – it was her boss, colleagues: "a million excuses!" This inauthenticity was caused by the manner in which Helen was not *choosing* what she really wanted and *disowned* her own possibilities to work in international development. Instead she had got the 'good' job after university that equated with her qualifications and tried to convince herself – 'pretending' – that this is what she wanted and that changing would be too hard. These were other people's expectations of what she should

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[44] Helen's mother was Welsh and her father Egyptian. She was born in Wales but grew up in Cairo and went to an international school there before moving back to the UK for post-16 education and university. Helen was sympathetic to the Palestinian cause because of her "Arab roots" she told me.

be doing with her life. The bike ride enabled her to realise the manner of her disingenuousness and to listen to the anxieties she had about her job but had tried to suppress:

> …it sounds so simple but it was really, it was a real revelation for me to recognise that just because I was good at it doesn't mean I have to do it (230-231).

> I really got that I wanted to make a difference in the world and that was what drove me. You know, when I was into my environmental campaigning at uni and stuff that inspired me and motivated me because I was trying to change peoples thought and inspire people (234-237).

The bike ride and change of environment can be seen as an intervention in, or disruption of, Helen's narrative that was stuck in 'tranquillized familiarity' (Heidegger, 1962: 234). This disruption or moment brought realisation "that it had to end" (242), and she was able to take the risk ("a bit of a sacrifice") of leaving her job to try and get unpaid, voluntary internships to gain experience in the international development field. She was very determined and speaks of feeling as if, "there wasn't any choice anymore" (254) about what she needed to do. The 'decision making process' Helen describes is devoid of choice, as if there was no longer an option to choose not to do it. Post-bike ride, in trying to be authentically resolute Helen does not need to make intentionalistic choices towards goals rather is in a manner 'called forth' to the new possibility (Heidegger, 1962: 33). The choice to change becomes no choice at all.

Her experiences and resolution to change provided a new 'clear-sightedness' and 'carried' her forward to new possibilities. As she explained:

> I really want to resolve this because I don't want to go back to my previous career because I know it doesn't make me happy. So I am a bit sort of, there is still a lot of anxiety still there and it's not based around what I am doing or what my career path is, it's totally based around who I am being. And who I choose to be for myself (319-323).

Helen's anxiety goes beyond the misplaced concerns of trying to find meaning and fulfilment in, and through, confirmation in an external social identity (her job) but drives much deeper to an existential worry about her holistic being. She even uses language of (in)authenticity when reflecting upon the changes she has:

> It's funny like … this is one of the first times … like recently within the last couple of months it is one of the first times in my life when I have really felt like I am really inspired by what I am doing and am loving what I am doing but there's some sort of, but someway I am being quite inauthentic about it. Yeah. I'm… and I am starting to think a lot about what drives me, not intellectually not in terms of what I am doing, but in terms of who I am being (282-287).

> I'm really doing a lot of work on understanding myself yeah and on being, I suppose you can say, on being true to myself ha! That sounds such a cheesy phrase! (338-340)

There are strong affinities between the manner in which Helen talks about wanting to be honest and truthful to herself (authentic) and the way in which Mary, in the previous chapter, placed a high premium on honouring her sense of subjective well-being which was the orienting coordinate in her life. For Helen a similar thing emerges or is instigated after leaving her job and creates a desire try to find something more suited to her sense of who she was and being true to that.

Much of the language and manner in which Helen spoke about herself and her desire to leave her job and find a new one was in a register that drew heavily on her experiences of the self-help course. The basis for these courses drew on a simplified rhetoric of existential philosophy and the ability individuals have to engage in new choices and open up new authentic possibilities. It is the effect of completing this course that I now look at as Helen's second critical moment.

A revolution in thinking and doing?

It was close to a year since Helen had done the original *Landmark Education*[45] course when we spoke yet she still spoke of it in highly revered terms because of the effect it had had on

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[45] See http://www.landmarkeducation.co.uk/ The website says this about course: "'One of life's most rewarding experiences." That's how graduates describe The Landmark Forum. In fact, more than 90% of participants report that they received, "practical and enduring value." Fun, exciting, collaborative, The Landmark Forum is not a lecture, motivational technique, or therapy - it's a powerful, accelerated learning experience. A guided dialogue between the instructor and participants.' Elsewhere they say, "It is a moment-by-moment approach to being alive." Illouz (2007: 49) points to the way in Landmark Education Corp. has partially been responsible for the

her. She made a distinction between before and after taking the course as quite 'revolutionising' her thinking and approach to life (367-368). Her enthusiasm hides the original misgivings she had about doing the course after being encouraged by an old school friend to do it. It was not until she was at her wits end with her boyfriend, who was depressed and "very stuck in his life and was very stagnant" (521), that she recommended he do it on threat of her leaving him. As a compromise they both agreed to do it.[46]

Helen told me a bit about what doing the course meant for her:

> Landmark for me is about who you are in the world. It is not just about who you are inside yourself because who you are inside yourself is going to die with yourself and so what? Who's ever going to remember and then they'll just bury you and then you are gone and there'll be a little cry for an hour and then you are gone. Ha! You know? That doesn't matter. We go through all this turmoil inside of ourselves and like none of the shit matters. If I go through years and years finding myself and soul searching and depression, do you care? No! You just care what you put out there and if I help you in some way or if I help your community or society. That is what counts and that is what makes a difference and that is what people remember. Like what is creative? That to me is what Landmark is about. Who you're being (567-576).

It appears to have had a profound and transforming effect on her outlook and approach to life. The course outline and material for the Forum reads like a cherry-picked selection of 'prime-cuts' from the mid-twentieth century milieu of existential writers and philosophers. Therefore it is no surprise to see the manner in which 'death' comes forth in such a way as to help illuminate what is really important for Helen. For it is in facing up to death (*being-towards-death* in Heidegger or Sartre's confrontation with *nothingness* affirming *freedom*) that individuals confront the very contingency that informs their thrown existence and that the only one possibility an individual can be assured of is its own death (nothing). For Heidegger it is this confrontation that produces anxiety which can then *individuate* Dasein out of anonymity and inauthentic average-everydayness and make it confront and engage it's *own*

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commodification of self-realization: Landmark, in 2007, grossed some $50 million a year in business and while its headquarters are in San Francisco it has 42 offices across 11 countries and defines it purpose as providing participants with the ability to enhance their relationships with others and accomplish what's important to them.

[46] Helen told me that her boyfriend was very much against the idea of doing the course and warned her that he would have a 'mental breakdown'. This did not deter her and they still went ahead. The boyfriend did have a breakdown and Helen learnt the valuable lesson that she does not "listen to people".

possibilities and desires. Something along these lines can be understood from how Helen describes the outcome of doing the course – an intensification of her choices and existence while realising the manner in which she had previously being living in *bad faith*:

> I have completely transformed who I am and … who I am being. I really get how much possibility there is out in the world and how much I was refusing to see before because it was safer for me not to see it and easier for me not to see it and it was, exactly what we were saying before about, how once you recognise that something is possible then all of a sudden you have to do it. But, oh my God, it is hard work but it gets you out in life and you start being active (548–553).

The 'decision' to do the course had significant consequences in terms of challenging and changing Helen's attitude towards herself and life. It was a critical moment or intervention that brought her to a crossroads in the way she was choosing to live her life.

Choosing an engaging life

Helen felt the course helped her face the manner in she was living an inauthentic life. She now felt a need to *engage* in life and grab opportunities as they came. She gave the analogy used at the Forum of a football match and how most people live their lives sitting by the side of pitch, shouting, and watching the game of life unfold without ever "being active". She makes a distinction between 'observers' (not actually living life) and 'players'. By failing to play, "you are not actually living life…letting things happen around you". This resonates with Heidegger's understanding of inauthenticity as Dasein being swept along by the options and opinions of 'they-self' (Das Man) and never choosing things for itself. Helen, as she stated above, felt she had refused to see the possibilities she had and that she had been letting things pass her by in life (she had been watching rather than playing):

> That is not life. Life is like you see something over there and you just go for it or maybe you have an idea that may be out there; there is this thing and you go and search for and *that* is what is inspiring and that is what is like is amazing … like once you start and do it for one little thing and get how beautiful it is and you cannot not *do* it anymore. Do you know what I mean? You're suddenly like I have to *engage*. (563–567).

This strong and active sense of *doing* and *being* '*LIFE*' has an almost blissful effervescent element that once grasped properly cannot be denied Helen seems to want to suggest. This is

a joyful way of being in which Dasein takes over authenticity in its existence (Dreyfus, 1995: 316). Helen's 'facing up to' and engagement appears to transform any anxiety she felt from being a threat to one of 'an exciting manifestation of Dasein's (Helen's) finitude' (ibid.: 317). The course became a turning point in her life:

> …before I did Landmark I would have said the same thing that I compromise myself a lot. I have always put other people first and never had time for myself yeah. Since having done Landmark what I get is that is what I choose. That is what I am choosing, like when… if my friends are going somewhere and I don't want to go to that place that is me, in some ways, being really… not knowing myself or being true to myself yeah? (373-378)

As well as enabling her to realise her previous inauthentic or disingenuous ways Helen now felt the world to be full of new and exciting possibilities:

> You could be closing yourself off and so often you are closing yourself off. What it does is *really* get you to *clear* yourself of all those choices and decisions you have made about your history and get them out of the future so you can go, "WOW!" but it's not about passivity it's about empathy and I can create whatever I want there and, "Oh my Gosh! I can do *whatever* I want there" and that is *so* inspiring (601-605).

The realisation that she can create a new future and life for herself, understandably, comes as a revelation and a means for her to feel that her history no longer constrains her. Helen develops, in some senses, not fear but clear-sightedness and a fearlessness in contradistinction to some of the other twentysomethings who seem held back by anxiety and doubts about the future. Perhaps one of the best examples Helen told me of making a change, which she attributed to having completed the course, was stopping taking anti-depressants she had been on for four years and tried numerous methods and times to get off. She had a well-told narrative of psychological scars from her father and brother dying – traumatic events that had been worked through by years of therapy and counselling to overcome the depression and panic attacks that took hold in her late teenage years. Her turn to pharmaceuticals was the result of one panic attack where she feared she might try and kill herself. Since doing the course she had been able to stop taking them and the depression had not returned. She felt able to properly face up to things: since the deaths, as a young girl, she had preferred to linger

in self-pity where people would be 'nice to her' and make friends because they pitied her. All this changed she claimed after the course:

> And I really got that, oh my God, and then I got that and I realised for the first time that I really didn't need them [anti-depressants] and it's really been for the first time that I have been able to get off them and know that I will never need to go back on it ever again. And I know that now and it's really… it is actually really amazing and that is because I am getting to know myself (724-727).

Knowing and accepting

Similar to Alistair there are 'moments' in Helen's narrative that 'impact' upon the direction of her life. Helen, as with Alistair, saw these 'interventions' or moments as means to reorient and re-understand herself. In both cases they moved away from trying to define or ground their selves in a particular external job identity and instead manifest a sense of self with an authentic correlation to their 'true' selves; to live and choose their paths, not what someone else chose. Alistair was clear that it did involve a rational and intentional choice to become self-employed but one that chimed with his 'gut feeling' and desires from childhood. This was also true for Helen who had the sense that it became obvious – "suddenly like I have to *engage*" – and was not a hard, long drawn out decision that had to be made. Both Alistair and Helen were placed in sort of 'unique situation' (Heidegger, 1962) by their critical moments through which it becomes clear what they should do.

> I think that being true to yourself doesn't take time because you know sometimes you can have a revelation, sometimes you can have an inspiration and it's a second and that's all it takes and that's what being true to yourself is. I don't think being true to yourself is about what you are doing. I don't think I am being true to myself anymore because I am in a job that I prefer to one that I didn't. I think being true to myself means really knowing myself and accepting myself and you can know yourself just as well no matter what your career is (352-358).

Like Craib (1998), Helen also realises the dangers of (over)identifying with and trying to be a 'job' which will never complete the meaningful sense of self one is after because it always involves 'bad faith'. Instead Helen argues Landmark Forum gave her another way of orienting and maintaining a resolute sense of who she is that involves recognising and changing the negative aspects of one's past so it is not repeated in the future:

> [It] is just all about yourself and just getting who you're being and *how* you have this *self-perpetuating life* that you live into. Like, you know, your whole past and history and who you have been, like and then you go, "Oh my God! Why does my future just look like my past? Like I am just … the same things keep happening…" But that is because that is what you create for yourself, you know? Because all these decisions you have made about the past and about your experiences (583-590).

> So it's brought that into my life and also brought a lot of action into my life in terms of I don't sit around and think about things so much. I just do them, you know? And stuff that you just think may be is a bit crazy like I am organising this big lobby event in January for… I am going to get our local swimming baths reopened. I am completely committed… (835-840).

The only way to change your past is to change the present. Rather than wait for something to come along that will give her meaning and fulfilment Helen develops a more *anticipatory* and *resolute* attitude towards her present life, now aware that what has gone before need no longer define/confine her future. Her realisation that what matters is more than just individual moments (specific jobs/projects) but her life as an *ontological whole*. Helen's 'transformation' appears existential in her acknowledgement that ultimately she is responsible for her life and she, alone, can alter it. This fills her with excitement rather than anxiety (or existential dread) about the potential she feels she has. This gives her a certain assuredness about the future, lacking in many of the other twentysomethings' uncertain accounts of themselves, and while having no specific or definitive platform to 'project' forward from, she appears to view constructing it as a challenge ripe with possibilities.

Conclusion: change and re-inscription

This chapter has explored the responses of two twentysomethings to a series of critical moments in their lives. Understood as 'unique moments' they brought disruption and shock to existing 'meaningful structures' operating in the lives of Alistair and Helen. Yet unlike anxiety in other twentysomethings' narratives here anxiety and disorientation was used with more positive effect to induce personal transformation in line with personal desire. Perhaps this decisiveness was the result of critical moments threatening their existing ontological security and forcing them to make hard choices whereas those that have drifted along,

remaining in the form of what Helen might identify as an 'observer', lack the sudden confrontation with the desperate need to *make* a choice. To find new paths they engaged in something akin to Elliott's (2004) notion of *reflexive scanning* – an internal dialogue with hopes, fantasies and desires alongside the reality of their experiences – to help create new and more 'authentic', distinctive possibilities. This relates internal and external experiences in the processes of (re)self-definition (Elliott & Lemert, 2006).

By returning to inner desires and emotions for guidance, neither of which are necessarily rational, Alistair and Helen developed a 'psychic capacity' that cross-referenced experience and reflexivity to generate coping mechanisms for a life lived without maps, codes and certitude (Elliott, 2004). Understood in this way their critical moments contain a 'emancipatory significance' (2004: 20) in line with how Touraine (1995: 292) understands postmodern individuals having to create new ways for themselves given the new dissociation between social function and personal project. This is a complex and far from straightforward, calculative goal-oriented process of constructing and choosing a self or life-project. What this chapter (and the next one) is testament to is the need to take seriously the interplay of 'internal ambiguities' and how they become important sources of direction and orientation for twentysomethings living without assured futures.

To leave the discussion there, however, fails to acknowledge the wider economic and discursive positions Alistair and Helen ended up in. Alistair's original 'escape' from his job and pursuit of his passions ended with him driving himself to the point of mental and physical breakdown. While Helen's talk of authentic engagement sharply echoes the pervasive narrative of therapeutic self-realisation seen in the growth of the self-help industry which posits an idea that 'we are the full masters in our own house' (Illouz, 2007: 47). Both represent new forms of techniques of self (regulation) fit for the post-panopticon age through which the regulation of identity no longer occurs through external structures but is individualised down to the personal level of conduct, becoming diffuse and continuous; placing onus on responsible self-management of 'life-projects' with the aim to maximise quality of life (Rose, 1996a: 321).

Alistair's desire to work alone met these criteria and conflated his aspirations with the operation of neoliberal power and new rationalities of government. These work through subjectivity and follow a 'general trajectory of intensification' (Read, 2009: 29). The sacrifice of other meaning-giving activities – reading, cooking, seeing friends, personal relationships etc. – witnessed the collapse of any form of robust existential refrain for Alistair that could have served as protection from the encroachment of economic rationality (cost/benefit analysis of time with friends etc.) into the heart of his personal conduct. Without the limits (physical split in time and space) of his old job, Alistair's life suffered. The obsessions of the entrepreneurial life, or the need to "live dangerously" (Kiersey, 2009: 384) meant having no 'outside' from his job, which depended upon his ability to self-manage and exploit his subjective interests (Rose, 1999b).[47]

Alistair's critical moments did create an opportunity for something new but quickly got ensnared in the intensifying logic of enterprise. Helen's reactions represented something different albeit remaining in the neoliberal valorisation of an ethic of autonomous selfhood. Where enterprise provided a new means of orientation for Alistair, it was Helen's adoption of the life-affirming narrative – the therapeutic self – that provided means of orientation, seeking to reunify herself around the goal of a 'self-realised life' (Bellah et al., 1985: 127). In keeping with the therapeutic narrative, Helen identified a number of 'pathologies' or automatic 'ways of being' ('being crap') that had held her back and became the focus of work to overcome and transform herself (Illouz, 2007: 52). However, both Illouz (2007) and Rose (1999c) note the increasing dominance of psychotherapeutic narratives or techniques as individual tools to regulate subjectivity. Helen's problems are filtered through, and set in terms of, psychological interpretations: self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring and self-transformation, re-establishing what Rose (1999c: 93) argues is individual governance through their 'freedom', autonomy and choice. Remaining solely at this level of critical

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[47] "Labour today is not limited to the factory or the specific place of work (the "job") but extends out into any area of society that can be recruited into the production of value" (Kiersey, 2009: 383).

theoretical and discursive concern though downplays proper recognition of the self-transformation Alistair's and Helen's critical moments instigated.

Both enacted a form of agency that transformed and negated the foreclosure of other possibilities of their own choosing from emerging. Their subjective capacities enabled new directions to be found for their lives despite the acting out of those 'internalities' becoming intertwined with neoliberal power that works through those very forms. Where personal identity was once bolstered and harboured within various institutions, which provided 'limits and boundaries' between work/self and private/public, this has now largely dissolved yet as this chapter showed new ways of thinking, choosing and orienting a life are possible. The final chapter continues to explore this and focuses in more on specific ways of thinking and coping the twentysomethings developed when faced with the choices and uncertainty 'unmapped' futures confronted them with.

Chapter 8 – Coping with uncertain choices: thinking and 'strategies' of the self

> Living in the 'risk society' means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence (Giddens, 1991: 28).

> An important foundation of the philosophy behind the arguments for private enterprise, free economies, and free societies more generally, is that these societies rely on and require individual decision-making and responsibility (Becker & Posner, 2008).

> I don't really think about things very seriously. I just do them and then find out I don't like them and then that is how I made my decisions and move on (Alice, 675-677).

This final chapter draws together more general thoughts and reflections from the twentysomethings about how they engage with choice and uncertainty in terms of their futures. I identify differing approaches or loose 'strategies' that some had. The chapter shows that in order to understand the difficulties and predicaments those in this generation find it is vital to recognise the nature of the mediation between internal psychical struggles and external circumstances. These complicate the rational and cognitive basis of the idea of the reflexive self (Beck, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1993) and neoliberal subjectivity that underpinned much of recent government reform of welfare and the economy (Burkitt, 2008; Hamann, 2009). What the chapter finds is that in the absence of certainty or full information on which to base or guide a decision about the future, as is the case with these twentysomethings, thought becomes infused with emotion and feeling (Holmes, 2010: 148). Consequently, what comes to characterise their responses is an intense *emotional* reflexivity which engages with, and is bound to, the burden of responsibility they feel for making a success of their lives. Reflexivity is not just about rational calculation but feelings and emotions provoked by not knowing.

Traditional ways of understanding reflexivity (as discussed in the first chapter) would struggle with the forms of 'irrational' responses to the lack of 'routine calculations' (Giddens, 1990) explored here. Alongside this emerge two further difficulties in responding positively to

(uncertain) choices. One is the desire not to foreclose other (potentially) better possibilities from arising through making a committed choice to one thing over another. This is in part driven by the ideological valorisation of the 'freedom' enshrined within compulsory individualism (Cronin, 2000) that abhors anything other than continual refashioning of the self in the pursuit of being 'whomever you want'. This leads to a second problem afflicting the positive affirmation of choice: the fear of personal failure that would ensue from making a 'wrong' choice. This generates and puts an almost unbearable weight on the making of any decision because of the sense of complete personal responsibility they feel for their futures. This instigates feelings of guilt and regret at having let themselves down.

The chapter starts with Rebecca and her postmodern use of fate, which helps foreclose the potential she feels for doing something different. Richard comes next and the difficulties he had with trying to adopt a rational approach to his future that left him feeling daunted. The chapter then focuses in on the problem of thinking *too* much – hyper-reflexivity – which characterises Tom, Jenni and Alice's attempts to 'get on'. Here the problems becomes one of guilt, regret and disappointment at the sense of possibility they feel they have. The final twentysomethings provide a stark contrast to previous ways of thinking about choice and uncertainty. The discussion rejoins Alistair and Helen, from the previous chapter, and their articulations of a resolute engagement with uncertainty and choice which is not beset by doubt and procrastination. Rather they are marked by what I call an assertive individualism and therapeutic individualism. The manner in which I have grouped individuals together is not definitive and nor is it the case that there is no over lap between some responses. Instead my approach is one way of understanding the problems and institutional inconsistencies that shape these young people's lives and thinking. This focus on thinking and reflexivity comes to question Lash's (2002; 2003) assertion that reflexivity is no longer about life-narrative organising but about reflexive tying of knowledge to action, collapsing the gap between knowing and doing ('*doing* is, at the same time, *knowing*' he claims). This requires 'quick decisions' as there is no longer sufficient distance on ourselves to construct linear narrative biographies. Meaning has, allegedly, become 'informational' (not just draining from narratives as Sennett contends) (Lash, 2003: 51).

This chapter cautions against those rather gung-ho claims while lending credence to the thought of Elliott (1995: 341) and Craib (1994) who claim that postmodern societies create situations in which the emotional processing of meaning cannot be adequately performed. The fears, ambiguities and difficulties present in twentysomethings' lives, while finding no room in neoliberal discourse, are still in service of trying to create 'life-narratives' – exactly because they generate 'confused time and space' to think. The 'thinking strategies' below negotiate a line between indulging emotions as potentially inhibitive of action and trying to remain cognitively steadfast in the face of uncertainty.

Postmodern fate and narrative foreclosure

> Within a complex world a person does not usually have the knowledge required to make a fully reasoned decision (Holmes, 2010: 149).

> I am sure fate already carved the way that I am and the path that I am on (Rebecca, 194).

Rebecca was working as a solicitor and coming towards the end of her training within the public sector which had relatively good job-security and career prospects. Yet she was desperately unsure whether this was what she wanted and lacked any sense of assurance over the choices she had made to reach this point. As discussed earlier, Rebecca knew the paths she wanted to avoid but was 'just tootling along' (73) worrying whether she was on the right path, given she had never made a decisive choice about the direction of her life. This generated a dilemma over whether to act and make a change, in the process perhaps, discovering an as yet unknown better 'path':

> Do I risk finding out that result? Or do I just stay put and never find out. So I think that's my dilemma most of the time. Do you do nothing? Or if you do something, is it worth it in the end anyway? (134-136)

Rebecca managed this dilemma and her understanding of her circumstances as the complex and contradictory outcome of fate. She was aware of the kind of 'trickery' she played upon herself. One way to understand this postmodern and reflexive use of fate, is to see it as a pragmatic response that helped lighten the weight of responsibility she felt for the state of her

life and helped alleviate the anxiety over whether to do anything different while lacking any certainty over what that change should be. On a more abstract level it functions to form 'narrative foreclosure' in Rebecca's story of herself (Freeman, 2000), which can help deny the agency individuals have and cover over the 'frightening possibilities' they face (Craib, 2000: 67). It becomes a way of managing choice and uncertainty by inhibiting the possibility of a new way forward from readily emerging.

'An element of fate'

Rebecca stresses the difficulty and confusion over whether to do something different, and asks:

> I don't know how much of it is just me, how much of it is just may be what is already predestined for me? And how much is just…I don't know just chosen by me (184-186).

> Why am I working at WP and not working for some big city law firm erm…? I am sure fate already carved the way that I am and the path that I am on already but I am sure it does have an impact. I do quite strongly believe that erm…not that we all have predestined paths mapped out but that there is something about everyone that means you would only ever get so far (193-197).

While not believing in a literal understanding of fate, guided by an omnipotent controlling force, as having determined the outcome and course of her life, there is a willingness in Rebecca to believe that her life so far has not been a series of chance occurrences but has had some unbeknown guiding logic (as a sociologist would confirm in a sense her life *has* been shaped by the unbeknown playing out of the stratifying logic of gender, class, race and her geography). Tension and confusion then arises over the amount of control she thinks she has and desire for that control or to relinquish it to a 'predestined path' that is already 'mapped out'. This rather complex tension helps Rebecca rationalise and 'tame' the range of choices and options she has, enabling her to establish *herself* the limits or 'path' for her future. Yet this reclaiming of a sense of agency – of sorts – is kept in check by fate:

> I probably do believe that if I was a bit more pro-active and less lazy and sort of motivated then yeah you probably could climb and land yourself a really good job but within that I

would always say that there is an element of fate. But I do believe that you have actually got to make the effort and do things to get somewhere but I would still see certain constraints. I mean from a, sort of, fatalistic area (217-222).

Rebecca's limited sense of agency is constrained by the way fate steps in and places 'limits' on her possibilities. Yet what complicates and makes this recourse to fate interesting and difficult to theorise is Rebecca's own acknowledgement of the 'trickery' she plays on herself – she knows her recourse to fate is not a 'real' limit to what she could do. She explained the function she thought her 'naive' attitude had,

> Perhaps I have a completely naive attitude because that attitude gets me off the responsibility issue for my own life because I will say, "Oh well I was never meant to work anywhere else apart from WP for the next fifty years so, you know, that's it". So that is a bit of a get out clause for me because I can just resign to myself and say, "Oh well it was fate that I was meant to be here". So I am aware of my own sort of trickery on myself which probably sounds completely crazy but…I am aware that I do do that but I still wholeheartedly believe that where I end up to an extent has come about through something else; not necessarily my own choosing but something was going to happen regardless of what I chose to do (233-240).

In the absence of not knowing what she really wants, fate helps alleviate the pressure felt to make a decision when no certainty abounds. It helps Rebecca then to reinforce a belief that her present state of things is what is meant to be and lesson anxiety over doing something different. Fate, in a way, gets Rebecca 'off the hook' of responsibility for trying to get the big city law firm job. It perhaps also helps mask a fear of trying for such a change and failing but equally, as Salecl (2010) attests, the problem of choice is not just about fear of choosing wrongly but also about the fear of actually succeeding and the changes that brings with it.

Rebecca's recourse to fate is also an example of the way some postmodern individuals continue to embed themselves in cultural discourses in ways which contradict the understanding of Giddens' post-traditional fate-less and rational, reflexive self. Fate provides a culturally meaningful and embedded 'story' (Adams, 2004: 404). Devoid of identity confirming institutions to trust (Cannon, 1995a), Rebecca's references to fate and a sense of 'predestination' are an example of, what Adams calls, 'a means by which trust is engendered in the 'coherence of everyday life" (2004: 396) which can ease existential pressure to choose:

'something was going to happen regardless'. It can help 'bracket out' perplexing concerns (p. 392) but also cover over real possibility. As such it is a means of negotiating anxiety and carrying on as 'normal' avoiding the feelings of guilt other twentysomethings experience because the hand of fate absolves one of full responsibility and provides some reassurance in terms of a partially 'settled future'.

Foreclosure?

> Problems in my way? That's easier to start off with. The first one is obviously, bearing in mind everything that I said before, is got to be me. So it depends how much I am willing to risk myself, probably (332–334).

Rebecca's concern and, perhaps, desire for something different was tempered by her fatalism leaving her 'tootling along' with nothing changing. Potential uncertain decisions were appeased through fate. This form of 'inhibition' resembles Freeman's (2000) concept of 'narrative foreclosure'. This is the way in which an individual can construct or think his or her own narrative which can prematurely foreclose a new way forward or the possibility of change materialising. The reification of a narrative is increasing likely if an individual's culture fails to 'provide adequate narrative resources for living one's life meaningfully and productively' (p. 81). As a young woman this is arguably the case for Rebecca who, as with other female twentysomethings, feels uncertain in the face of the expectant success she should have. Freeman suggests that when things do not work out as desired a sense of despair and resignation can set into narratives while retrospective reassessment of the past as a 'failure' (re)conditions and taints the future as more of the same (this feeling of resignation also plays a part in the condition of drifting explored in chapter four). I would suggest that an element of narrative foreclosure is at work within how Rebecca articulates her future. The role she hands to fate helps to cover over the, perhaps frightening, possibilities she does actually feel and the anxiety that generates.

Being instrumental: 'rational doesn't work'

Richard, as seen from earlier discussions in chapters three and four, had struggled to get into the line of work (photography) that originally interested him because of, in his view, unfair internship schemes and nepotism underpinning recruitment in creative companies. His struggle to 'break in' saw him decide to get 'far away' from his desired area: he fell into an administration job he hated and a 'catch 22' situation, whereby leaving the job to try to get into his field might mean internships, 'making tea' and no guarantee of a job. Instead he was seeking promotion in the present job to get a new job title and better pay even though he "couldn't be less interested in it" (246): hardly a rational or logical move. For Richard this was the end of a series of struggles between trying to orient his life instrumentally versus a desire to strive for his personal dream of being a photographer. He had now had enough of trying to be rational as he explained, after I asked him whether, with hindsight, he would have done anything differently in terms of leaving university,

> I think I would have thought less about what I was doing and more… and just gone for things and done what I wanted. Instead of trying to rationalise everything which I think puts you… doesn't really get you anywhere because I have been trying to rationalise everything and it's landed me… (552-555).

This tension between being rational and pursuing his desires is exemplary of the tendency men often have of treating themselves as a sort of 'means to an end'. In Richard's case this stemmed from his earlier experiences at FE College where he was instructed to act instrumentally and select career-oriented subjects. He was told to be 'sensible' and deny his own interests. Ever since compromising his original choices he had always felt a moment would come where he would be faced with the result of this decision. He had, "a kind of dread about it" because, unlike Rebecca who was unsure of her chosen path, Richard *did* know what he had wanted to do: he wanted to be a photographer, putting to good use the creative talent he had honed at a prestigious London college,

> I mean I had, I did have interests which I didn't capitalise on (153–154).

Frustration at doing a job he hated fuelled his distrust of trying to be rational in the future and a desire to find work he was passionate about, which might have meant setting up as a freelance photographer. Yet his aversion to the risk that entailed held him back (unlike Alistair who was eager to set up on his own). Richard's stance left him stuck between rationally accepting the element of risk involved while recognising the irrationality of not pursuing his desire to be a photographer and putting his training and skills to use,

> You'd invest time and money in it and then it's not very likely to take off. I mean and that's not the only reason that you want to do it because it takes time but you have to be realistic as well (164-196).

> I wouldn't say I disliked it but … … That's it, you see, it's not very rational because I had trained in it for four years and I was … I did have stuff that I was interested in erm… but I don't know. It all seemed a bit, like, I still don't know. I just think it's just completely irrational and it all seems just a bit daunting just to go for something and then there is the guilt of having to commit time to it and perhaps not going and get a job like you feel you should. And …I don't know. That's it though: I don't know. It's a bit stupid (183-189).

Richard's attempt to be 'sensible' and rationally 'calculate' his choices and decisions by-passes or omits to take into consideration his proper feelings which he labels as 'irrational' and 'stupid' thereby internalising blame. His engagement with his predicament seems to assume some smooth ordering or rational outcome that could somehow by-pass the difficult feelings provoked, while the guilt he alludes to comes as a result of a sense of being somehow indulgent if he was to pursue his desires. This would indebt him to the 'real' rational self that knows best and has to indulge this fantasy until he sees sense. Consequently the result of this emotional difficulty provoked Richard's rejection of 'trying to rationalise everything'.

Being daunted

It is not the hand of fate that Richard feels is at play in his life, compared to Rebecca, but rather pressure that comes from the sense that he needs to make a correct (rational) decision about his future despite his rejection of the 'rational'. This instils an added dimension of fear into decision-making as twentysomethings' choices come to be felt to be so full of significance for their future success, which they feel responsible for. Denied certainty over the

outcome of any decision, Richard consequently comes to feel fearful at the prospect of following his passion,

> I have thought about setting up [as a photographer] but that is almost, like, far too daunting for the moment and risky and yeah. I just, kind of, like the thought of living at home for much longer because if you have got set back like that then… (238-240).

> There's a pressure to get to a job that you would like doing but at the same time a little bit paralysing also because you are thinking what's…[sighs] (354-356).

This internal feeling of being daunted then also comes into direct contact with the new capitalist imperative that the work you do should be personally fulfilling. This adds further pressure to how Richard feels about any potential choice he could make and enhances the fear of making a wrong decision. This almost unbearable tension perhaps helps to explain his 'irrational' decision to go for promotion in a job he hates as it sidesteps the paralysis invoked by the pursuit of his desires. Richard's mention of paralysis echoes the feelings of those earlier in chapter four that felt trapped or stuck, unable to stop 'drifting' along. Richard's unsure sense of self – caught between feeling he is being irrational for not being rational in pursuit of his photography – only adds to feelings of doubt generated by his predicament and attempts to change it;

> What I am looking for at the moment, as well as better full time jobs, is part time work so I can see, see how I get along with things but then you are hard on yourself because you think, "I should be doing this in my evenings or doing them at the weekends". I don't know. I don't know. I feel like I should be using my time better. I kind of feel… I mean I am not sure …I doubt myself a lot (530-534).

Richard's despair and almost resignation to his fate harbours the sorts of 'foreclosure' Freeman (2000) remarks can become set into personal narratives when success is unforthcoming or denied. His adversity to risk and doubt help weave a story that potentially entails just more of the same, forestalling some new hope materialising.

The way Richard comes to think about his future prospects and choices highlights an important inconsistency in the way in which young people's lives were framed by the logic of enterprise. This assumed instrumental rationality, the maximisation of benefits and

minimisation of costs. However, as this chapter and others before attest, this obscures and marginalises the emotional discord – in this case, Richard's fear and dauntedness – created by uncertain and unmapped circumstances. Richard henceforth labels himself 'not very rational', but his feelings and response is *not* irrational given the predicament he finds himself in. Rather what is irrational is the framework of thinking oneself as an 'enterprise'; an unfolding capitalist project that only serves to distort and amplify feelings of risk, make decision-making an almost unbearable endeavour given the demand for certainty when none exists. Given this state, the bitterness and confusion Richard tells me of becomes understandable,

> I feel like I have come to be, as well as being bitter, I have… but not like I am irrational and I am mad and bitter and crazy but I feel like I have become er quite hard, hard on myself perhaps… and I probably do doubt my decisions and what I want to do more which might be why I am still where I am right now (536-539).

> I don't know. It's like I say, as it goes on and you are not… I don't know. I don't know (541).

The doubt running through all of these statements, and that he is left with, serve to enforce Richard's earlier conclusion that "trying to rationalise everything … doesn't get you anywhere". This doubt becomes self-referential and self-accusational in its search for answers, hindering the establishment of a more assured self.

Richard's story is testament to a struggle between rationality and desire. His initial attempt to be rational resulted in him being in an 'irrational' place: unsure of what to do and doubting his own convictions and desires. He wished he had thought less and just done more. However, while harbouring a desire to be a photographer, Richard's thoughts still inhibited action because of a sense of being daunted at the fear of failure or getting it wrong, which he would feel to blame for. Richard's issues with dealing with uncertain choices and his bitterness at having been held back by his preoccupation with having to think them are expanded upon in the next section by twentysomethings' who also came to 'think too much'.

Thinking too much: guilt, regret and choice

> Speaking of the 'unprecedented variety and wealth of opportunities from which to choose', young people declare that none of the choices open to them has 'enough consistency and meaning to warrant a commitment. None could justify a person's identification with it (Gorz, 1999: 143).

The difficulties encountered so far in terms of trying to take a positive stance towards engaging with the possibilities and choices felt by twentysomethings is expanded upon here in the way that excessive thinking and reflection generates further emotional issues such as the guilt referred to Richard. The essence of these problems comes from a sense of the excessive liberty twentysomethings have, to be and do whatever they feel is possible. The flipside of this is that to choose and commit to one thing immediately curtails and forecloses other possibilities and choices to do or be something else, which then generates further anxiety about missing out on something (potentially) better. Rational decision-making becomes all the harder as guilt and pressure sets in because they are doing 'nothing' rather than something.

Tom and Jenni expand upon this problem. Tom was pondering his brother's offer to start a landscape gardening business in the West country and leave London. This set in chain an intense period of reflection on the state and direction of his life. Meanwhile Jenni was struggling to find work that would ignite her creative passions:

> When you start thinking about it too much…because I never had a problem changing my mind all the time about anything. It is only now that I am thinking, "God I really should be a bit more sorted out by now" (Tom, 56-58).

> I wish I didn't think about it so much, you know. I wish I just took anything and let my life just roll on which I usually have that attitude and just having gaps of time and space makes you think about things *way* too much. Er in a way you become less open to things because you come a bit idealist. Er and I wish I wasn't in a way. I wish I just … let things roll and see how… (Jenni, 374-378).

Both complain of *too much* thinking. Jenni's 'gaps of time and space'[48] complicate the assertions of Lash (2003) who claims that contemporary forms of capitalism close those 'gaps' that give room for individual reflexivity. In one sense too much reflexivity inhibits their decision-making because no assured answers are found to the question, 'what is to be done?' nor how to compensate for the sense of loss associated with foreclosing other options. Both refer to periods in their lives when choosing was simpler and not caught up in the self-perpetuating cycle of uncertainty and over-thinking: previously Jenni used to 'let things roll' while Tom 'never had a problem changing' his mind in the past.

Uncertainty about what they want combines with feeling too many options and raises expectations and anticipation that there must be the *right* possibility there if only they could just find it (Schwartz, 2004: 186). As Jenni says, this can result in a form of idealism creeping into thinking and, perhaps, furthers unrealistic expectations about the opportunities they do have. The pressure this then puts on making the right choice and trying to calculate whether something better might come along takes it toil on Jenni,

> I really hate the fact that you really have to think about things, you know, and that you have to have a game plan … pushing yourself somewhere. Making people need you (233-236).

The manner in which this way of thinking and action denies or conflates alternative ways of conducting or understanding oneself also causes problems in the way it can inhibit action and a 'go-gettingness'. As Jenni declares,

> Choice makes you make more hesitant and you worry about things more and think, "I should be doing this and I am supposed to be doing this and be successful and I am not!" (484-486)

Hesitancy, anxiety and procrastination over trying to keep options and possibilities open, while also being only too aware that to achieve actually requires proper commitment to one

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[48] It is possible to argue that these 'gaps' appear because she is relatively 'marginalised and excluded' (she is working part-time and on short-term contracts) from the mainstream 'global' economy whereby those that are excluded are 'time-rich' and static compared to those who are hyper-mobile and 'time-poor'.

thing, finds no place in the rational neo-liberal discourses of enterprise, which presumes individuals unproblematically know what they want and will seek to maximise their 'returns' through doing and pursuing that. Uncertainty is not meant to stall choice but create new 'market' options and more choice is meant to be an inherent 'good'.

Yet as Jenni and Tom discovered, for every possible 'right' choice there are numerous 'counterfactual possibilities'. For Tom to take up his brother's offer immediately curtails the chance of something better perhaps coming along rather than it being couched in terms of what he gains and opportunities such a venture might open. He can never know either way but the sense of loss and potential disappointment at all these options being taken away prevails. There is also a fear or 'dread' of making the wrong choice because any mistake implicates and damns the individual as having failed to negotiate the new social topography successfully.

Alice, who in chapter four had described how she had fallen into a job she hated, summaries the problem with choice many twentysomethings felt:

> I've got too many options and too *many* opportunities. And I don't know what to do with them. And there is pressure on you to be these, you know, to take advantage of all of this stuff and erm, you know, but you can't have it all. I just don't think you can (731–734).

Trying to choose becomes a 'dangerous' and precarious task shot through with potential pitfalls for undermining self-confidence when the expectation is that the world is their oyster and they should just 'grab the bull by the horns'. In this context, the deferment of choice, or indecision of Tom and Jenni, becomes an understandable means of delaying, yet embeds them further into circumstances that bring disappointment and a sense of loss. This can then lead to guilt.

Guilt

> It's a really individual thing: either you, as an individual, think, "Yeah! I am absolutely totally making the most of this and do this or that", but even doing that you need to

know, to have that commitment to do it you need to really have a direction or something to be focused on. If you haven't got that… (Tom, 288-291).

I have been given all these opportunities and I am not making the most of them. So …So it's guilty. You feel guilty for not making the most of them (Alice, 795-798).

It's the worst thing to do stuff and then feel bad about it all (Tom, 181).

Jenni, Tom and Alice's struggles are, in part, informed by a omnipotent sense they have that they should be able to control and order things: make a choice unproblematically and 'get on'. They feel a responsibility towards themselves that urges them to do something different and better. This comes from an amorphous sense that they are, in some way, failing themselves by not making the most of the opportunities available to them. This generated a sense of indebtedness (guilt) to the 'real' self they are 'letting down' (or choosing not to be) but also, in some cases, to their parents and grandparents whom they felt would have 'loved' the possibilities they struggle to enjoy.[49] This guilt was only furthered through comparison to others they felt were more 'sorted' resulting in more emotional exigencies (Holmes, 2010: 148):

It is a really bad feeling to feel bad about not knowing what to do. Do you know what I mean? To sort of think or…I mean it's awful that we…you know you talk about too many choices and stuff and I feel really guilty about feeling like that because there are so many people who in the world, or other generations, who would be just like, "Wow!" (Tom, 350-353).

I think guilt is a very big thing. I have felt *very guilty* about just about everything, I guess. Ha. Just guilty for not doing stuff, guilty for not… yeah not… just (Jenni, 539-540).

You feel guilty for feeling crap! And that's the thing: that's why you hide yourself away even more because you just don't feel like you deserve to because there are always other people and terrible situations and you just don't – "I'm ok *really!* Don't be so stupid. I don't deserve to feel depressed and get locked in this place. I should just get off my arse and do something." You try but… ha! (545-549).

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[49] Both Tom and Trevor in earlier chapters talked of how the 'enforced responsibilities' their grandfathers had prompting Tom to ask, "What the hell have I got to complain about?" (105).

Feelings of ingratitude towards opportunities and choices induce guilt and in Jenni's case make her feel like she needs to 'hide' away further from the responsibility (she feels) to make the most of these opportunities. However, the extreme difficulty that arises in actually making a choice and committing to one thing rather than another makes alleviating guilt less than straightforward; often leading to the sort of depressive state Jenni alludes to – 'feeling crap' – and Ehrenberg (2010) sees as symptomatic of the 'illness of responsibility' the weight of personal initiative created. Jenni's resoluteness in rejecting any other way of accounting for her situation, the social context, the economic conditions etc, that might ease or absolve her guilt plays through the way in which she, as do the others, frames her sense of self as pertaining to be filled with a omnipotent and autonomous neoliberal agency (Layton, 2010).

Consequently their guilt stems from this sense that they should have done something different (and better). Jenni and Tom feel they should have made more of their lives as they have had more fortune than others: "there are always other people and terrible situations" and thereby their anxieties and guilt somehow patronises them. Tom told me that, while he feels awful he is struck (and stuck) with the question of, "What the hell have I got to complain about?' It's just brilliant and it should be totally amazing!' (104-105). What is also emerging here is a middle class guilt that recognises the advantages they have had, that have resulted in the privileged position of being able to choose, and feeling bad about it not being wonderful at the top (Skeggs, 2004).

Heidegger (1962) recognised the existential difficulties individuals had in trying to reconcile their conscience with the sense of indebtedness they felt to a past which grounded their present existence yet which they cannot control or change. Yet they must still take responsibility for choosing certain authentic possibilities or risk being 'chosen' by others. Herein lies the 'call of conscience' or where guilt becomes apparent, alerting the individual to those aspects of indebtedness and need to take 'care' and 'choose' oneself and make their actions their own (p. 309). The particular 'unsettledness' felt in these circumstances is testament to the need to reconcile internal tension with the conscious realisation of the need to choose a particular possibility. It would seem the 'flux' of young people's circumstances

heightens their awareness and possibility of something different. This is not easy though, as Alice explains,

> And if you really, really care about it that's fine but if you are just making sacrifices as I am because I just think I am too weak to or I am being too weak or too scared to move, or think about moving, it's too scary then it's all so pointless. And people get angry. People get angry with you (555-558).

I return to this problem of being scared below when discussing Helen but move on now to look at further problems induced through 'thinking too much'.

Positive thinking?

Alice recognised the 'call' to do something different that guilt creates, yet despite this remained 'stuck' in a job. Richard wanted to 'think less' while Jenni wanted to 'just roll' with things. Tom tried to react in a more positive manner to uncertainty while recognising the problems of over thinking,

> …it's the worst thing to do stuff and then feel bad about it all. If you're going to do stuff, then just do it and don't feel bad about it. Don't beat yourself up about it all the time, which I think I do that way too much. Analysing everything you know. I don't know. I think everyone – people – just want to control things so much I think but if you can't work out what you want to be doing or how you'll be fulfilled in a job then you can't possibly control anything. If you don't even know what direction you want to be going in, within the job or whatever you're doing. I mean I just got promotion recently and that's great and it's all going very well but it hasn't really given me much fulfilment. I feel really awful saying that because I am moaning about that! (181-188)

Tom recognises some things are beyond his control, and the feelings of omnipotence are fantasy. Consequently over-analysis brings only more emotional difficulty to resolving uncertainty. What is needed is acceptance,

> I actually think that after I wrote that [letter to advice column in broadsheet] I think I was just trying to stop feeling bad about it really. So it's fine to do whatever with your time and money – get pissed you know – and feeling quite temporary about that. But the worst thing to do is to still do that and still feel bad about it. So I kinda of think, "Either change that or just do it and don't feel bad about it" because to feel guilty about it is a complete waste of time (110-114).

Heidegger understood guilt as a potential catalyst for generating an authentic way of life and in this vein Tom's view of guilt as wasted time unless there is a positive response to it makes some sense. Yet the various 'strategies of denial' (Hoffman, 1993: 211) – fate, being daunted, guilt – 'implemented' by the twentysomethings can impede new responses or a freer engagement with choice and opportunities. In doing so they put off limiting their options and side-step, for a while, making the wrong choice – and feelings of failure that would bring – by not making a proper choice. This can then lead to problems of disappointment and regret.

Regret and disappointment

Part of the difficulty twentysomethings' have with decision-making, that marks their particular individualism, is that choosing one thing over another closes down other possibilities and their imagined futures that are full of potential. This generates further issues in that if something is to be chosen then how can they ensure, given their uncertainty, they do not make a wrong choice because, as I explore now, if things go wrong blame comes to rest on their shoulders and an unforgiving condemnation of self. Trying to negotiate regret and disappointment – emotions that Craib (1994) argues are afforded little room in the prevalent omnipotent sense of progressive individualism at work in late capitalism – becomes a problem for some twentysomethings. Jason describes being faced with a choice about whether to follow his passion for dancing or take the 'sensible route' and become a patent attorney,

> I mean I remember the day I found out. I had already been offered this [patent attorney] job and then I got a phone call from someone saying, "We'd like to offer you representation" and I sat in my car and I cried. It was like, "Fuck! Before I had just applied for things and I've got them and I've done them but now I have applied for these two different things and I have got these two very different things and I can't do them both". So that was really the first time I have had to make a real, serious decision about where my life was going because I have just wandered, wandered through life up til that point (231-237).

Jason was suddenly confronted with the need to make a decision and one that either way would foreclose the other possibility. The emotion this generated is telling, particularly in

relation to the way he described having 'wandered' previously and avoided making a choice. Facing up to choice involved tolerating the complex realities of internal conflicts and that disappointment is part of life, not something that can be obfuscated forever. As such, the problem of disappointment establishes a contrast between a person's actual experience and an imagined alternative and with this contrast can come regret over the actual decision (Schwartz, 2004: 156). Gareth told me he had become "obsessed with the past" and what he imagined it could have been,

> "Why didn't I do that? Why didn't I do this? Why didn't I chill out more here? Why didn't I work harder here?" Erm (400-402).

These questions invoke regret about past actions and fail to engage in something that was 'real' and held him in the past rather than facing up to the future or present experience. He had to tell himself to, "Come on! Be present. Be doing things now" (410-411). Residing in the past or 'wandering', as Jason does, (and previous twentysomethings' 'drifting') become ways of negotiating or avoiding decisions that involve opportunities for regret, and aim to minimize that feeling. Economists have a phrase that enables them to quantify this problem associated with choosing. They call it 'opportunity costs' – what other possibilities and options are denied in the purchasing of one good or doing one thing over another.[50] In essence this is what we see in Jason and Gareth – albeit with more emotion that an economic equation allows for – when they struggled to accept their chosen positions.

Having to face up to making a choice and not 'wander' through life or drift in an unengaged manner is hard. Jenni was alive to this pressure having moved back to her parents to do jobs 'here and there, hoping the right thing would emerge':

> I think it's important not to hide away from it and it's very easy to hide away from it and think that you're a minority but I have seen so many things – articles and stuff … and you suddenly find yourself somewhere and you don't even know how you got there.

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[50] The problem is that the greater the number of possibilities an individuals feels they have, when a decision is finally reached, the sense of satisfaction is much less than if they originally had fewer options because the opportunity costs of all those options detract from the benefits of the one that was chosen.

It's a catch 22 isn't it?
'Cause you just do that to release, the sheer release from that (521-532).

Jenni wants release from the pressure of having to choose and having to make the right decision otherwise feel a sense of personal failure. In this light that the frustration felt by Tom at things not being 'amazing' makes sense. While the condemnation that Alice and Jenni dish out towards themselves – Alice labels herself a 'mug' for having to move home; Jenni thinks she is the 'dud' of her family for not having a proper career – is evocative of the humiliation they feel and way their unforgiving thinking implicates them as solely responsible for their difficulties. It marks a (re)privatisation and 'carrying' of public issues internally. Stuck in this framework, the potential positive aspects that Craib (1994: 170-71) suggests coming to terms with disappointment can bring, the dropping of personal delusion, the acceptance of limits and different ways of understanding oneself are denied while exacerbating the 'opportunity costs' making the whole decision-making process evermore unattractive (Schwartz, 2004: 141). This reinforces the fantasy that entertains the idea that if the right choice could *just* be made or right job found then radical change would occur redeeming anxiety and guilt (Salecl, 2010: 118).

The last two twentysomethings I look at in this chapter develop different strategies and ways of thinking to those above that are not steeped in fear of wrong decisions nor the foreclosure of the other possibilities a choice brings. Instead both Helen and Alistair engage with, and face up to, uncertain choices as positive challenges and potential catalysts to discover and do new things.

Getting on with it

The experience of failing to 'get on' in the narratives and thoughts of the above twentysomethings focused around finding or choosing something specific – mainly a certain job. Free of the constraints of yesteryear and working with a widely held perception that jobs are the route to self-expression and fulfilment, all underpinned by an ideology of freedom, choice and self-creation, only makes it all the harder to bear when success is unforthcoming.

The final two twentysomethings discussed here are less concerned with pursuing a specific job that will redeem them. Moreover, what Helen and Alistair set out is an approach (or philosophy) to living and thinking their lives. In some ways it could be understood as an ethical life-politics that is more about experiential ways of living than acquiring a 'fixed' institutional identity. Helen, with the help of a new self-help discourse, comes to feel empowered to engage authentically with the choices she has while Alistair approaches uncertainty (almost) as an existential exercise to discover and test who he is. Both display a positive and proactive approach to uncertainty.

Being courageous

In the previous chapter I discussed the critical moments in Helen's narrative that had been important – quitting her job and doing the Landmark Forum course – which acted as catalysts to reorient the direction of her life but also the nature of her 'thinking' and how she came to understand herself. I want to explore a bit more the way in which the self-help course she took helped her develop a positive outlook in the way that Salecl (2010: 31) argues plays on the idea of individual omnipotence and that 'sheer determination can change the world around them and thus increase their own well-being'. Helen confirms a sense of the work and effort that was needed to 'get' herself under proper control before being able to change things:

> It's a long process of hard work of really getting yourself, and I don't get myself at all, but I am starting to get to understand *how* I can get myself (741-742).

While not a 'tight cognitive grip' on herself there is a sense of coming to understand how she can control herself. 'Starting to get herself' meant an ability to approach the problem of what she wanted to do in a different way to others who struggled or who longed for a certain job to 'fix' them. Helen believed that it was not what you did that dictated who one was and she also argued that modern societies were wrong to emphasise the idea that happiness could be attained in a particular job:

> That is not the way it works. The way it works is that you have to *be what you want to be* and then you'll just end up doing the things that those people do, you know? (415-418)

Helen did not expand further on this rather ambiguous claim nor how she thought someone was meant to 'just be what they wanted to be', given the uncertainty she and the others felt. As with the enterprise discourse, Helen works with the a priori presupposition of knowing which operates as a platform from which a future can be planned. Yet as this thesis has shown it is precisely a *lack* of such knowing that characterises the majority of twentysomethings' lives. Helen seems to propose a more amorphous sense of self not grounded in a particular external identity and, as she earlier admitted, being true to oneself is not about a job but about knowing and accepting oneself (355-358).

An ethical distinction is made by Helen in how to approach trying to choose what to do. The hopeful search for confirmation of the self in a particular job or identity that can then appease anxiety is misplaced Helen argues because it covers over – through what Craib (1998) would argue is an act of Sartrean 'bad faith' – the fact that people do *really* know what they want but are too scared to strike out for it:

> They are scared of what will happen if they stop or they don't keep up or if, you know, they can't make ends meet blah blah. So a lot of the time we will just do what is in front of us because that is the easy option and because we don't quite, if you don't quite know what you want, then you'll, kind of, go for anything. But what I really think is that really everyone knows what they want. Everyone actually knows what they want but in modern society people are too afraid to act upon it (523-530).

This description could be applied to some of the twentysomethings that have found themselves drifting or feeling daunted and unable to strike out for what they really want. There is an existential fear, Helen suggests, that holds people back and makes the 'easy option' preferable.

In contrast to this fear, Helen is driven by a desire to properly engage in life and not be an 'observer'. This zeal for life and 'courageous' sense of being able to achieve things, she credits to the self-help course and the way in which it helped things 'conspire' together:

It's funny. It's like suddenly like when you act or put your action out there … things… the world conspires to help you out, in a funny kind of way. So it's made me a lot more active and a lot more engaging: a lot more courageous. A lot more inspired. A lot more authentic (877-879).

This 'courageous' way of thinking is the opposite of the deliberations and indecisiveness of those discussed above, who are all too aware of the responsibility they have for their own fate, seek to minimise risk-taking, defer decision making to another time and, consequently, remain in an eternal present where little changes. Helen instead proclaims:

"WOW! … I can create whatever I want …I can do *whatever* I want there and that is *so* inspiring" (603-605).

This mantra is, of course, partially the discourse of positive thinking espoused by the step-by-step prescriptions offered by the course Helen completed and symptomatic of the rise of a form of therapeutic individualism and new ethical relationships to the self.

Therapeutic Individualism and facing up to authentic choices

Helen's engagement with uncertainty and choice to forge an 'inspired' future came about as a result of the self-help weekend-long course she attended. This was an important intervention – a transformative experience – at a time when she was struggling in a relationship with a depressed boyfriend and at a loss as to what she wanted to do. The *Landmark Education* course provided the sorts of narrative auspices to help her understand her life and role in it in a new way. What it did, as most other therapeutic narratives do, was to make her realise the previously hidden culpability and desire for her situation and, consequently, how she is now directly responsible for alleviating it (Illouz, 2007: 47). The goal becomes one of self-realisation and a narrative can be constructed that is performative around the ideals of self-improvement and change, having identified a generalised dysfunction in past experience. In many respects these therapeutic repertoires fall into the sorts of expert systems Giddens' (1991) argues individual 'life-projects' come to be justified through. Rose would go further arguing that this turn to 'therapies of freedom' (1999a: 261) needs to be understood as a response to

individuals being 'unable to bear the obligations of selfhood, or when anguished by them' (1999a: 231).

Understood in this way Helen's adoption of a therapeutic or self-help narrative can be understood as a means through which she restored her capacity to function as a self-creating, choosing individual. The course gave a new means of personal conduct at a time when her life was devoid of old 'codes' to live by. Seen like this the course provided a new language to 're-narrativize' her life around one of the defining principles of her time; namely shaping life through autonomous, 'free' choice (Rose, 1999c; Salecl, 2010). This is best exemplified through her approach to uncertainty, which is remarkably similar to the principles of enterprise, that firmly establishes her commitment to her past culpability and responsibility for her future:

> I think that uncertainty is just like… uncert … What is uncertainty? The only thing that is certain is like what is tangibly there in front of us. Why is that preventative? Like things become certain when you create them, so create them and you've got certainty in your life. It's given me great access around choice. Like choice: I totally get that every single choice in my life, *I* am the one who's making it. Like before it was like I felt some force was making choices for me and my life and it was in control. Ha. And I was the victim blah, blah, blah. And like it's just so funny to think about that now because I am like, "What I thought something else was making decisions and choice in my life?" Bullshit! Like these are *my* choices and that I was really getting that I was the one making choices. What had me leave academia cause I was like… for some reason I thought that I had been put there and I had to be there and suddenly I realised that *no actually* I signed the contract (885-895).

> I wasn't really being straight with myself or completely honest. I didn't see how I had made these decisions in my life (747-748).

Much as risk and uncertainty are meant to become opportunities for entrepreneurs, Helen seemed equally resolute in her commitment to make authentic choices and try to actualise desires and aspirations, through the freedom to 'choose' for herself (Rose, 1999a: 230). Doubt, regret or guilt is absent; replaced instead by an authoritarian imperative, engrained through the belief that sheer determination can change the world, to strive for what you want. As Helen states:

> Somewhere deep down everyone knows what it is that they really want and it's kind of like once you recognise it and admit it then you have *no* excuse not to go for it 100% because once you have seen it … (533-534)

Helen argues that an authentic 'inner' voice resides within everyone that is either listened to or ignored. When adhered to, Helen believes it enables an individual to (re) gain control over their life and future. Once more this echoes the foundational principles of individual responsibility underpinning neoliberalism that disregard personal context or circumstances. Helen contrasts her thinking compared to those she sees as failing to 'admit' to, or hear, their real desires:

> I find a lot of the time people don't question it and I don't think it's not because they don't want to question it. I think it's just because they are just scared of even confronting it. I see a lot people who are just making excuses around not being concerned with it and just be like, "Argh life is just, you know, a bit slow and a bit of joke really and whatever happens happens, you know, and like I am so laissez faire and care free." And I think that's a little, a little weird too because, to be honest, I get the carefree-ness. I think that is really good but I mean people can be however they want to be but I think that it's, it's always something that needs to be challenged. It's like our lives and what we are going to do with our lives, you know? Erm. I do see, let me just think… yeah that's true, I do see a lot of people around me having ideas, having dreams but in a way not taking them so seriously There's a lot of, "One day speak" you know? "One day I will" (944-954).

This problem of procrastination and 'fear' was met earlier in this chapter whereby problems such as guilt are created through trying to avoid confrontation with and acting upon, real desires. Helen worked hard to avoid this form of inauthenticity since doing the course. Armed with a new therapeutic discourse she told me she worked hard to maintain her new life strategy and way of thinking. There was not finding a certain job or doing something in particular as the goal but it was about maintaining an on-going sense of authentic experience and personal fulfilment. This realisation comes as an epiphany, of sorts, to keep her on track:

> I am still working on it and everyday you have to remind yourself: "Come on! Let's be real". So I think that, I think that however now I have seen it, it is not something I cannot ever see again. Like I can try and hide from it for a bit but it will always be keeping me in check in my life now. Going, "Really is this what you want?" You know. And, and if it's not then I have the courage to say, "Right then I am not doing that". And I don't think that is about being strong. I think it is about knowing yourself and just actually being *completely* honest with yourself (491-497).

This on-going 'obligation' towards authenticity can be understood as a new form of self-government or ethical relationship to oneself appropriate to our age, what Foucault (1994b; 1994c) would call a *technique of the self*[51], that gives her a means to critically reflect upon and 'master' her circumstances. It is one that accepts the new 'obligation to freedom' that Rose (1999c) identifies as key to the governing of advanced liberal economies and finds affinity with the arguments of Cruikshank (1996) about the increasing use and importance of the role of ideas like self-esteem and empowerment as a 'technology of citizenship' (p. 234). Helen has a sense of omnipotence that through positive-thinking alone she can control and master her own destiny. Yet it would wrong to understand Helen as merely adhering to the new regulative forms of the day or simply developing a rationally ordered project of the self. Rather the outcome of the course gave Helen a new language and means to engage with uncertainty, via an internal psychological dialogue, on her own terms which opened up potential new 'lines of flight' that go beyond the remit of neoliberal discourses.

I want to see what I can do

The final twentysomething discussed is Alistair and follows on from the discussion in the previous chapter about the critical moments he had faced so far in his life. He develops a quite distinctive attitude to his life, one that echoes in places Foucault's notion of a 'limit-attitude' or life ethos that was all about critically working against limits and certainties in life, to test them and experiment with new forms in the hope of going beyond them (Foucault, 1994d). Alistair came to see uncertainty and choice as a challenge after being fired and becoming self-employed. Those experiences caused him to reflect upon his hopes and dreams and, in particular, how his childhood shaped who he is. When Alistair told me about his fear that he was working too hard and desperately needed to change, he suggested that this strong work ethic was the result of the need he felt to always 'push on' and challenge himself. He told me about plans to leave the UK, learn a new language and work somewhere completely new for

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[51] These techniques of self can be understood as the way in which 'individuals [come] to effect by their own means or with the help of others a number of practices on their bodies and their souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being' (Foucault 1994c: 225).

a while. He explained that this compulsion to work hard and tendency to be restless had always been there:

> Always. Always. Always push. Never stop. I always need new challenges otherwise you get bored and I can't deal with being bored (492-494).

His approach to opportunity and choice is couched in a different register to some of the previous twentysomethings: gone is the anxiety, doubt and indecision, it is replaced by seeing risk or uncertainty instead as something not to be fearful of but bringing exciting possibilities to test himself:

> I want to see what I can do. I don't know what I can do yet. This comes back to the whole thing about identity and where I belong. Reading the Eric Clapton biography about identity and I can't grasp it fully but I just feel the need to explore things and push things and just see what I can and can't do (502-506).

There is an interesting interplay in Alistair of internal desires and feelings mapped against external circumstances in a way that provides him with a means of orienting the predicaments in finds himself in. Through reflecting upon his own desires he came to be more comfortable, and understand his place in the contingency other twentysomethings find so unbearable. One way to understand it is through the way uncertainty and choice created opportunities to escape subordination to external authority he had no respect for and find a place where he belonged. This became an ongoing search; not one concerned with worrying about doing the conventional thing or finding the right job – it was more about learning about himself and finding out who he was through new experiences:

> I want to see what I can do. I don't know what I can do. I have never really pushed myself that hard so, yeah, just up for a challenge. It's a funny thing about my brother, my brother has been married, has a kid, bought a house, did the…has the conventional 9-5 lifestyle and ok he got separated and is now going to buy a new house with an extra bedroom so his son can stay with him as well his mum. I have done completely the opposite and I can't imagine living that kind of lifestyle (508-513).

His rejection of a conventional path did not faze him nor did the question I asked him about what his future held:

> Who knows? What for the future? The answer is I don't know. It's all open. And that
> pretty much sums up everything that has been happening to me for a long time. Slightly
> scary but also exciting.
> Ben: Full of possibility and potential?
> Yeah. Lots of unknowns and no certainty (520-524).

Alistair's way of thinking and dealing with uncertainty and choice is a radically different approach to those of twentysomethings discussed earlier. Similar in ways to how Helen did not get hooked up on making *the* right choice in terms of finding something to do, Alistair instead developed a way of 'listening' to himself and absolved himself from a fixation on an 'external identity' and desire to close down existential uncertainty. His stance was more about *opening* up, exploring and discovering through the opportunities afforded him *by* uncertainty. Consequently the unbearable weight and emphasis on making the *right* life-defining choice experienced by others in decision-making was lifted and the fear of foreclosing other options through making a choice became obsolete because in choosing to do something, in his mind, it opened new possibilities rather then denying them.

Conclusion: new ways?

> Constructing a sense of self today is about managing some blending of those different
> modalities of identity: a kind of constant interweaving, and dislocation, of modern and
> postmodern states of mind (Elliott, 2002: 16).

> Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined (Camus, 2000: 12).

One way of understanding the twentysomethings' thinking and engagement with uncertain choices is to see them as initial (minor) un-formalised articulations that register difficulties with the contradictions of neoliberalism and narrow instrumentalism of economic reasoning that has informed and shaped engagement with their new 'freedoms'. Present economic thinking posits freedom to choose as an end in itself yet as this chapter has shown it is not so straightforward. The fear of failure, foreclosing potential better options arising and a sense that what they choose must be the best possible or most certain option, inhibited a free engagement with possibilities for some twentysomethings. A number of narrative devices and emotional consequences help to further understand and explain the struggles some had with

facing up to and dealing with uncertain choices. All of these attest to 'internal ambiguities' that complicate presumed instrumental rationalism and calculative forms of individual decision-making and motivation.

Rebecca alludes to the hand of fate in a bid to aid her negotiation with uncertainty over her future while Richard's frustration and 'being daunted' inhibited his pursuit of photography. Both stances helped foreclose new ways of thinking or doing from easily emerging and helped maintain a sense of inertia. For those that thought or reflected 'too much' their free engagement with choice and doing what they really wanted was frustrated by feelings of guilt, disappointment and regret. These emotions increased a sense that they should just be able to cope, were personally at fault and were 'unreasonable' reactions to be eradicated only if they just *knew* what they really wanted or had certainty it would work. This led to more procrastination and a preoccupation with trying to control uncertainty and find the right choice rather than accept the limits and opportunity costs that would come with making a committed choice. All of these negotiations with uncertain choice featured a commonality in trying to avoid being painfully impeached as personally responsible for failing to make a success of post-university life.

Yet as Helen and Alistair show other ways of thinking were available but involved readily accepting that certainty cannot be a precursor to making a choice. Instead it must be accepted that 'one will never know', relinquishing a rational basis for life-decisions and welcoming what comes if one does makes a 'courageous' choice and overcomes fear of not knowing or following one's desire. A feature of both these responses was a centering of personal desire and acceptance of the responsibility that came with trying to actualise them – not waiting for or searching for external confirmation before doing so. Helen's adopted new therapeutic language and Alistair's reflection on his earlier childhood and desire to test himself both served as means for them to 'authentically' engage and face up more freely to uncertainty and the choices their circumstances threw up.

What these different ways of thinking and engaging with uncertainty highlight is the importance of interaction and interpretation of the psycho–social aspects of life in twentysomethings' narrative constructions given the dearth of external confirmation of their identities or formal pathways to adult status. In this light, their struggles align to the problem of incoherent social logics (dissolution of roles) that Touraine (1995) suggest marks out new processes of subjectivation, in which individual experience is marked by an attempt to construct new meaning and understanding for lives. Consequently while some twentysomethings' ways of thinking might appear self-defeating or limiting they are also strategic coping mechanisms that make their lives bearable given their unmapped natures. Those that struggled appear caught or stuck with desiring a way of thinking which is more attuned to a defined and regulated society. This clashes with the reality in which they find themselves, only furthering anxiety and confusion about the future as their desire and reality fail to align.

Conclusion

> You represent a financial services sector that generates £50bn of wealth each year, provides work for over one million people and accounts for over 5% of UK GDP ... London has maintained its position among the world's top financial centres - with its daily turnover of more than $500bn - has secured its position as the largest and most important in the world. ... What you, as the City of London, have achieved for financial services we, as a government, now aspire to achieve for the whole economy ... I believe that the next step is to widen and deepen the spirit of enterprise in all parts of our country... the greatest constraint on the growth of Britain's productivity and prosperity today is now our failure to realise the educational and entrepreneurial potential of our own people (Gordon Brown, 2002).

> The perfect machine of Neoliberal ideology, based on the rational balance of economic factors, is falling to bits because it was based on the flawed assumption that the soul can be reduced to mere rationality. The dark side of the soul – fear, anxiety, panic and depression – has finally surfaced after looming for a decade in the shadow of the touted victory and the promised eternity of capitalism (Berardi, 2009: 207).

The economic crisis of autumn 2008 brought to a close the moment and form of capitalism, which had characterised and underpinned the uncertain struggles and transitions of the young people in this thesis. The buoyancy of the economy and messiah-like status of free markets, that had served to generate new sorts of choice and opportunity for these twentysomethings, has now given way to a much starker and harsher reality that now affects all in society. The basic principles and founding beliefs of the system have been found wanting. This leaves graduates and young people today, entering the labour market with a different set of problems around scarcity of jobs and paucity of prospects that contrast with the bright futures and sense of abundance that the twentysomethings of this research felt. This is coupled with forthcoming reform of tuition fees and the increasing burden of debt graduates are going to be left with.

While the empirical research in this thesis was completed before the economic crisis the findings resonate strongly with much of the heralded critiques that came to prominence in the aftermath of the near collapse of the capitalist system. I think it possible to understand and hear in the twentysomethings' voices and struggles forms of 'irrationality' and contradiction that would become starkly obvious to post-crisis critics on the unsustainable nature of that

form of capitalism (Berardi, 2009; Crawford, 2010; Massey & Hall, 2010). What became clear in the narratives is that neoliberal reform, providing 'new principles' for organising social life, started before these twentysomethings were born but their coming of age coincided with its peak largely failed in offering all young people better prospects and opportunities. The twentysomethings' struggles, including their mental pathologies, could be understood as a 'minor' protest, resistance or refusal at this neoliberal rationality underpinning their lives (Andrews, 2009; Leader, 2008). Within the narratives, I would suggest, was or are the beginnings of an attempt at try to develop a counter-rationality – a different configuration of values, norms and emphasis – to live and understand themselves by. Perhaps something akin to Mannheim's generational spiritual consciousness, that tries to give new space and respect to the value, process and capacity of voice to enable individuals to live and articulate meaningfully understood lives (Couldry, 2010). A new and different way is pressingly urgent: the post-baby boomer generations are now faced with having to live with the consequences of reforms and decisions taken by their parents' generation that have left them far worse off materially and economically than the baby boomers (Beckett, 2010; Howker & Malik, 2010; Willets, 2010).

It remains to be seen what economic reform will come or whether the moment has passed for radical change, as banks and the coalition government seem intent on continuing the same flawed economic philosophy. As such, my research has important insights into the present and continuing system. I set out to explore, examine and understand the consequences of the new forms of personhood and personal conduct required, and expected of, a group of young people caught in the socio-economic and cultural changes ushered in through the advent of neoliberalism. In keeping with Weber, according to Hennis (1987; 1988), I tried to understand the relationship between personality and 'life-orders' and what the conditions of possibility were within the given 'exigencies of a particular socio-cultural setting'. Twentysomethings' particular socio-cultural setting served to deprive them of guiding institutional norms and values, which inhibited and complicated the ability to develop straightforward transitions and control their narratives to a traditionally understood

adulthood. This 'loss', however, did not serve to deplete the sense of potential and choice they felt. As Zeldin (2001) concurs:

> We've created a new sort of person …a young generation whom we have educated to enormous curiosity…to feel they have many talents…we are faced with a new kind of human being.

In part this was because of their education but also their particular generational location in a period of peak economic growth and creation of jobs. The aftermath of feminism (McRobbie, 2008) and the re-shaping of gender identities also marked their experiences.

By way of further contextualising this research, Weber, at the start of the twentieth century, talked of the disenchantment of life when framed through processes of bureaucratic rationalisation. This required a deferment of gratification but linearly ordered lives in an 'iron-cage'. Sennett (1998), meanwhile, traced the consequences of the transformation of capitalism at the end of the century from this more certain manifestation to one which stripped a generation of workers of this 'purpose of meaning', corroding their character and ability to sustain linear narratives. My research has looked at a different set of consequences of social change that has gone further than the problems discussed in Sennett's work. What so disturbed Sennett's workers was having security and a 'map' taken from under them yet the twentysomethings' lives did not have maps. Leaving university into an economy, framed by enterprise, the onus was suddenly all on them. The burden, bewilderment and uncertainty explored in the early chapters must be seen in this light.

Struggles to 'mobilise' themselves and engage enthusiastically in uncertainty stems from an inherent problem or contradiction within the rational calculation such a form of conduct requires i.e. having a goal and knowing what one wants. Without being able to 'see into the future' to help orient themselves in the here and now, their present comes to take on a confused and self-referential manner whereby trying to understand and work out a way forward is undermined by lacking the means to project forward possibilities. This teleological

faltering undermined and compromised their individual ability to construct a meaningful sense of future and self. In this there lies an injustice:

> To make someone less capable of understanding himself, evaluating and choosing, is to deny totally the injunction that we should respect him as a person (Taylor, 1996 quoted in Couldry, 2010: 97).

Anxiety became a familiar and key emotion in the twentysomethings' narratives. Their reflexivity, devoid of full knowledge required for any sense of certainty over their futures, became infused with feeling. As Heidegger (1962) argued, anxiety is an unsettling subjective response to the world yet harbours possibility in the way it can help engage an individual to understand and interpret their life (in new ways). These twentysomethings' anxiety stemmed from a number of concerns about their lives. Firstly, there was a general unease over their futures provoked by uncertainty. This was accompanied, secondly, by a fear of failure induced by the way in which choice and responsibility was solely devolved down to them. This generated tremendous, almost unbearable, pressure and weight on decision-making because their subjectivity was implicated in its own reproduction and difficulties automatically became self-referential. This led to the third source of anxiety; one that proved to have potentially negative effects on subjective well-being, around being exposed to feelings of personal inadequacy and negatively judging (blaming) themselves for their predicament because they felt unavoidably implicated in it. A feeling of failing to 'know' or being able to 'get on' quickly led to a questioning of themselves. The effect of all three sources was to complicate the potential positive engagement Heidegger foresaw in anxiety because they created hesitancy and inertia in lieu of a free and ready exploration of the possibilities their circumstances afforded them.

Responsibility and deferment down to the individual to forge their own biographies was meant, under the new justificatory regimes of the new (neoliberal) spirit of capitalism, to open up new freedoms to develop their own authenticity and autonomy in ways they saw fit – leading to the creation of a 'flourishing self'. Yet deprived of the 'modernist codes and blueprints' that structured previous generations lives, and fired up with the expectations and

aspirations that getting a degree encouraged, twentysomethings quickly encountered the 'anomic difficulty' of trying to forge a future in circumstances where old regulatory guiding norms have been effaced and devolved down to individual choice. Anxiety and disappointment emerged alongside the form of a *lack* or void in certitude over what to do or where to go. In the place of certainty came emotional discord in decision-making and, despite 'not knowing', a 'turn-to-self' as the remaining source of some validation of choice.

It was this situation that served to complicate these twentysomethings' attempts to develop meaningful and consistent narratives post-university. This turn to a 'sense of self' as an arbitrator in decision-making, trying to live authentically in line with personal values, substituted adherence to the no-longer readily available ideals of a career, marriage, home-ownership and family. Yet this self-responsibility for success was further exasperated by the 'randomness' of the job market, which was awash with 'vague' jobs and competed for by the increased amount of graduates. It was here that Boltanski's and Chiapello's (2005) identification of the 'contradictory double incorporation' in new capitalism which insists on authentic living yet deny structural means to achieve such, became relevant. The contrary insistence on remaining adaptable to the demands of work and economy removes any logical or long-term consistency required to live authentically as traditionally understood. This was a nagging tension in some twentysomethings stories as struggles to find something they wanted to do or that was longer-term undermined trying to remain 'true to themselves'. As Boltanski and Chiapello recognised, acquiescing to the realities of the labour market largely means eschewing the hope of career progression within a secure setting and becoming an active 'networker'. This was something witnessed clearly in the cases of Rob, Jenni and Corinne.

Negotiating the exigencies of capitalism

One of the most telling metaphors for understanding the plight of the twentysomethings was the one offered by Trevor in relation to his grandfather's experiences and the way in which an older generation's lives were 'all mapped out'. A map provides a sense of certainty over one's present and possible future locations. If older generations had maps then these young people

were left with partial leftover fragments, dependent upon their background and the work sector they 'chose', that served as cruel reminders of what they could no longer have themselves. Safe old collective routes disappeared to be replaced by individualised wanderings, beset by anxiety and forms of mental distress, and guided only by personal preference and desire in lieu of the structural certainty they expected. Leaving university came as shock with the reality casting doubt on the sense of entitlement bestowed through their education.

Twentysomethings' responses to unmapped and uncertain futures were dependent upon whether their degree gave them a 'quite set' route (law/journalism). Considered as part of a particular university cohort then, these individuals were highly qualified (mainly in the Arts and Humanities or Social Sciences) but did not serve to fulfil any specific functional remit in the economy. They joined the growing mass of graduates searching for the elusive *right* job that never seemed to materialise. This then raises the question of how the present economic crisis is serving to undermine the life-chances and opportunities of those entering and leaving Higher Education now given how these twentysomethings' struggled in a buoyant and growing economy.

Negotiating initial indecision and 'not knowing' was achieved through trying to offset insecurity and anxiety by finding something that gave respite from choice – more study, 'falling' into random jobs or moving back home. These helped for a while but came with potential personal consequences in the form of depression, getting 'stuck' and feelings of personal inadequacy. Trying to find the right job became a pressing problem for twentysomethings and being bereft of existential anchors and having to choose a job, from a range of 'random and vague' ones, affected the ethical relationship some developed with work. Some hoped for a resolution of uncertainty and work to provide excitement and passion. The nature of contemporary work, despite the best efforts of new managerial discourses to integrate life, self and work, left them disappointed and served to reinstate anxiety over the status work should have in their lives. The only twentysomething entirely at home in the new economy, Rob, had his life already bolstered by the two institutional pillars of marriage and religion and knew what he wanted. Those reliant upon their 'creativity'

adopted a form of experimentalism that never properly committed to one thing over another and stopped any job becoming too consuming.

An alternative response to the contingency of work was to stop the encroachment of work into their lives and separate their sense of self from their job. Particularly those that had come to feel 'trapped' in work, what was prioritised was a sense that their subjective self needed space to grow, be enriched and protected from compromise. This 'life-ethic' meant rejecting work as a site of significance, aside from the material reward it gave, and resisting corporate attempts to ingratiate and align their selves with a company ethos. This could be hard though as Alice attested to. She had intense inner conflict over her corporate job and while the resulting indecision engendered significant costs, work encroached further into her life. These negotiations with work illustrate the way in which the justificatory regimes (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) that serve to maintain a subject's commitment to capitalism are faltering. The twentysomethings' complaints about work harboured similar indignations around alienation and inauthenticity found in the artistic critique rather than attractive and exciting prospects which work is now meant to give. Consequently, they resisted new immaterial production methods (Lazzarato, 1996; Negri, 1999) that entailed the instrumentalisation and commodification of 'specific qualities of human beings' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 465). They wanted to 'maximise their human capital' but on their own terms.

Finally, important negotiations involved particular critical moments and how twentysomethings came to think about uncertain choices. Critical moments represented both potential for 'new ways' of living to be created by twentysomethings – following passions and living authentically – but also the precarious and fragile nature of doing so. Alistair's uptake of the valorised forms of entrepreneurialism saw his narrative narrowed down to pure market function and performance. This restricted any alternative meaningful refrain being constructed proving a detrimental state for his mental health. Helen's therapeutic individualism enabled her to re-think and re-orient her life, which enabled her to, almost uniquely, view uncertainty positively. Yet it also implicated her in new regulative technologies of self-regulation/ethical self-management, aided by therapeutic systems of

expertise, consistent with a neoliberal discourse of crafting a style of life around self–realisation. Thinking and dealing with uncertain choices provoked various emotional responses and 'strategies'. All, in their own way, developed a way of thinking that made life bearable amidst the anxieties and doubts. Yet in trying to think and deal with uncertainty (*hyper*-reflexivity) new narrative possibilities could be foreclosed and served to generate guilt and regret, and, in some cases, this could further the sense of personal inadequacy. Finally, some did manage to engage positively with uncertainty and orient themselves in a manner that was not fixated on needing external guarantees.

Narratives and existential refrains

> Articulations of life stories is the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life (Bauman, 2001: 13).

This thesis has given an experiential account of the twentysomethings' struggles to come to grips with a society and form of capitalism that gave few answers to their questions of 'what to do and where to go?' Their circumstances generated personal problems in the forms of mental pathologies and struggle for meaning. The breakdown of an ability to live and think their lives with a purposeful trajectory, in line with wider cultural norms, that can only be realised through calculation and mastery of their futures generates these psychic costs. As both Elliott (2002) and Adam (2007) argue, this idea of the better future to come denigrates meaning in the present with the belief that any 'breakdown' or problems are insured against the promise of salvation in a time to come. The 'internal ambiguities' experienced by the twentysomethings impede their ability to 'colonise' their futures and complicate a traditional mechanistic and instrumental (ego-centric) way of understanding the self. These ambiguities also demonstrate the need to take seriously the psyche-social aspects of contemporary identity.

The assumed linear progressivism of Western individualism found affinity with the economic discourses underpinning the twentysomethings' education and lives. However, the logic of enterprise requires a cognitive, 'knowing' self. This breaks down or falters in the majority of the twentysomethings' cases as they have no secure platform to project forward from. As

Heidegger (1962) argues, successful projection (or carrying one's life forward) presupposes a comprehending grasp of the world, meaning having understanding about what to do in the future is 'doable' and makes sense (Dreyfus, 1995: 185). It is a practical competence to do something. What defines these twentysomethings' lives, and a wider generation of young people, is a social context that feels 'open' and specifically lacks life-defining circumstances. This means that while endless possibilities might be felt, concrete situations that develop practical competence are scarce resulting in a breakdown or crisis in identity.

When things breakdown or falter Heidegger claims they 'shine forth' becoming 'conspicuous'. Attempts at interpretation of the problem ensue. This is what I heard in the twentysomethings' narratives: attempts to comprehend why things had not worked out and find a solution. Yet this requires foresight: an ability to see something in advance as a way of resolving the problem (Mulhall, 1996) and it is precisely the lack of a secure knowing how to overcome uncertainty and anxiety that characterise twentysomethings' circumstances. Nothing endures for long enough or seems right for twentysomethings to place their faith in, leading to a breakdown in the temporal basis required for coherent narratives to be formed. The one remaining certain entity is their sense of self and, in some, this 'turn-to-self' occurs as it remains the one source of significance in their life. Yet even this most personal and 'internal' of aspects of twentysomethings' lives could be compromised.

The contradictions of the capitalist system the twentysomethings entered incited responsibility for personal identity yet denied, transformed and negated the very conditions required to properly do that. Trying to meet the demand for greater mobility and flexibility renders problematic the temporal basis for self-understanding and it is arguable that neoliberalism has, in certain ways, rendered these young people's lives unnarratable in a satisfactory way (Couldry, 2010: 98). What individuals are left being able to be articulate eludes or suppresses their 'possibility of tracking down the links concerning individual fate to the ways and means by which society operates' (Bauman, 2001: 8). Their unsettling social and economic circumstances become 'brute facts' which they feel they can neither challenge, control nor transform. To this end, Ray and Reed (1994: 189) suggest Weber's 'iron-cage' has

given way to a self-referential, circular (non-linear) 'trap', in which lives are no longer fixed to an 'outside' of relatively visible and identifiable social structure and bureaucratic mechanism that are progressively linear in orientation. Instead lives are tied to, and oriented around, a reflexive, socio-psychological individual self engaged with the new ideology of personal happiness and self-realisation.

In this light it is possible to understand how the twentysomethings' difficulties to find the right 'personality', to meet the demands of twenty-first century capitalism, came to compromise existential refrains and induce depressive feelings. The internalisation of insecurity and adaptation of the need to rely on 'personality' and subjective resources (Walkerdine, 2005) meant when these faltered or failed blame was quickly turned inwards. Condemnation and harsh judgement was quickly passed – they were 'duds' or 'mugs' – anger and dismay at their inability to fulfil hopes and make successful transitions. Contemporary wider social norms do not acknowledge the possibility of failure as failure as it is now assigned a personal-psycho-pathological context (Berardi, 2009: 99). The incidences of depression (low-self-esteem, doubt, feeling awful etc.), ill health and fear of mental breakdown referred to by several twentysomethings that occurred at particularly difficult moments – Alistair's life consumed by work - are a telling indictment of the way external socio-economic circumstances impact subjectively and affectively.

Further to this, uncertainty and 'fearful' decision-making problematised twentysomethings' abilities to construct consistent existential refrains that could serve as robust defence from the sort of mental pathologies now defining late capitalism and costing the economy millions (Centre for Mental Health, 2010). Being human involves narrating stories and mentally making a niche or home for oneself. Narratives express emotion and beliefs about 'how things should be'. They also enable individuals to organise their experiences meaningfully (Fraser, 2004). Twentysomethings' post-panopticon world compromised their ability to do just that. The rhetoric of enterprise did nothing to appease that or the sense that they, as young people, are always in the process of *becoming*; no longer having the old routes to secure and stable subject positions. Their depressive states, as Ehrenberg (2010: 4) understands them, can

consequently be understood as a pathology of responsibility generating feelings of inadequacy. This depression can be understood as the struggle to break out of particular existential refrains, while being denied alternative routes to a meaningful life by the normalised forms of capitalist subjectivity (Berardi, 2009: 216).

Further research of contemporary times is required that would seek to continue the exploration of how, in what maybe Boltanski and Chiapello might term an emerging fourth spirit of capitalism or, at least, new crisis, young peoples' prospects and sense of self are being given form. Of particular interest is how young people's faltering belief in, or sense of, a secure future has consequences for orienting meaning and understanding in their present day lives especially given the present bleak economic outlook for them. The continued eulogising of enterprise and economic rationalism, and increased incidence of mental distress in young people, would seem to suggest that 'anomic difficulty' and problematic transitions are set to remain albeit filtered through class, gender and race.

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Appendix

This is the letter Tom sent to the *Observer* and the rather unsympathetic response he got:

Life

THE MANUAL FOR MODERN LIVING

RELATIONSHIPS

Dear Mariella

Despite just drifting through life, he can't be bothered to seize a chance to make his mark

Since leaving university I've been waiting for something to happen with my life. I've done various jobs and I've been in my current one for two years (the longest I've stuck anything since university). I feel I'm drifting along in London, paying most of my wages on rent, wasting the rest (mainly on drinking). I've been talking to my brother about setting up a business with him in the southwest, where he's settled down with a family. But I'd need to move down there, find a job, girlfriend, house, etc. The question is, how can I commit to this, or indeed anything, when I know that I haven't stuck at very much for most of my life? I'm 28 this year, and part of me feels that I should have made more of things by now. Maybe this chance to work for myself will be the chance to feel like I've achieved something. Or do I keep on with my current unsustainable lifestyle while waiting for something to 'happen' to change it?

I was utterly exhausted reading your letter. So much world-weariness in such a few short lines. And in one so young. What on earth made you so jaded? I can only imagine that in your world the sun always shines, disease is a thing of the past, love is all around and you've forgotten how to even spell war, deprivation or suffering. All of which is distinctly possible, judging by the narrow parameters that seem to have defined your life thus far.

Is there nothing in this world that animates you? I'm worried that lethargy on such a scale could be infectious, in which case you should be quarantined. We can't have you wandering around giving all those you come into contact with a case of the 'futility blues'. I don't want to sound like Maggie Thatcher's secret daughter, but if you were in the vicinity of my handbag I'd be tempted to take a swipe at you.

Maybe you have insider knowledge of a breakthrough in terms of the expected human life span? Otherwise you wouldn't have squandered a third of yours (if you're lucky) waiting for something to 'happen'. What did you have in mind? A new ice age, a lucrative lottery win, global warming on such a scale that you could open a snorkelling business in the Firth of Clyde? I'm no John Reid, reeling off lists of targets and goals as though life was just one big sports event, but it's good to have something to aspire to. Even if it's as banal as your next holiday. What do you talk about when you're busy flinging your wages at your 'unsustainable lifestyle'? I can't help thinking that being a fly on the wall would prove a dangerous pursuit: I'd probably drop off in boredom.
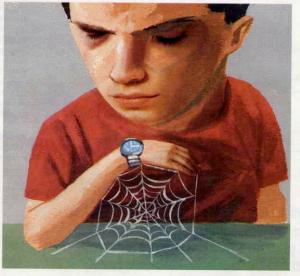
Running away from problems is appealing, but it tends to be a pointless exercise. There's an old

I'm hoping your fatigue is just a Morrissey-style pose, and in 10 years' time you'll admit you weren't miserable after all

Ethiopian saying that goes: 'As a baboon can't see his red bottom, so a human being can't see his own shortcomings.' Facing up to our complicity in the life we've made is as essential as eating our greens. In your case the alternative is to embark on a behavioural pattern of bolting for the great yonder that will define your life. But wherever you go that same old face will be looking back at you from the mirror. Some people squander their lives thinking happiness is just a move away and perpetually blaming geography and their social environment for the endless cyclone going on in their heads. I urge you not to join their number. If you're in the right frame of mind you can make a happy home almost anywhere; if you're not, then elsewhere will always seem more appealing than where you are.

You're right about one thing: whether you leave the city for the southwest and self-employment, or stick to the status quo, at present it makes little difference. Until you can rustle up a sliver of enthusiasm for the one-off, precious, finite gift of life neither lifestyle will bring you any joy. I'm hoping your fatigue is all just a Morrissey-style pose. In 10 years' time you'll come clean, admit that you weren't miserable after all and reveal your happy-go-lucky qualities in all their kaleidoscopic glory.

I can't conjure up a list of enthusiasms for you to embrace, hobbies to adopt or phone numbers for you to call in pursuit of a love interest. But for heaven's sake, stop moping around waiting for fate to step in and decide your destiny. Lethargy is the domain of the spotty teenager and the clinically depressed. For anyone else, it's an unattractive affectation that just looks bad on the wearer. **Mariella Frostrup**

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS
Is there anything about relationships you'd like to ask Mariella Frostrup? Email her at mariella.frostrup@observer.co.uk and her answers will be published in a special Ask the Experts edition of OM on 8 August

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