The prevalence of ‘life planning’: evidence from UK graduates

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Published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2008

Abstract

At a time when ‘personal development planning’ is being rolled out across the UK higher education sector, this paper explores young adults’ inclinations to plan for the future in relation to work, relationships and other aspects of life. Although Giddens (1991) has emphasised the prevalence of strategic life planning (or the ‘colonisation of the future’) in all strata of contemporary society, du Bois Reymond (1998) has argued that there are important differences by social class, with young people from more privileged backgrounds more likely than their peers to engage in such life planning activities. This paper draws on interviews with 90 young adults (in their mid-20s) to question some of these assumptions about relationships between social location and propensity to plan for the future. It shows how, within this sample at least, there was a strong association between having had a privileged ‘learning career’ (such as attending a high status university and identifying as an ‘academic high flier’) and a *disinclination* to form detailed plans for the future. In part, this appeared to be related to a strong sense of ontological security and the confidence to resist what Giddens terms ‘an increasingly dominant temporal outlook’.

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Background

Late modern society is characterised, it is argued, by new risks that are less predictable and harder to control than those faced by previous societies, such as the possibility of ecological catastrophes and the collapse of highly interdependent global economic systems. In many analyses, these changes are thought to be accompanied by a concomitant decline of traditions and the rise of individualised patterns of consumption (Warde, 1994). Some theorists have gone on to argue that this ‘post-traditional’ order of modernity has increased the importance of strategic life planning. Indeed, Giddens (1991) has contended that:

The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options....Reflexively ordered life planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of identity (p.5).

Alongside these arguments which suggest that shifts towards greater reflexivity on the part of individuals are an effective means of responding to recent social change, are others which claim that policies that place more responsibility on the individual for managing his or her own life in a reflexive manner may be driven by other concerns. For example, Edwards (2002) has argued that the shift away from education and

training and towards lifelong learning, evident in both UK and European policy, aims to fashion conduct based on certain norms and values, 'wherein individuals are taken to be active subjects not passive objects'; and thus, 'lifelong learning can be argued to play an influential role in catering for active, enterprising selves and subjecting them to educational and training practices that attempt to instil flexibility and enterprise as desirable and desired ways of "being"' (p.359).

Such assertions have been explored in relation to young people, in particular, in a number of studies – both theoretical and empirical. Indeed, researchers in various developed countries have argued that there is now much greater diversity in the life course, especially in its early stages, and that young people are now faced with an increased number of choices in relation to education and training, employment, household formation, relationships and lifestyle more generally (e.g. Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Heath and Cleaver, 2003). As a result of these choices, some have contended that we have witnessed a corresponding increase in life planning, as young people are required – by the conditions of late modernity – to make choices between the different pathways open to them. Others have pointed out that, while young people may believe that they have a bewildering array of choices, the options that are, in practice, open to them are largely constrained by structural factors. For some researchers, the extent of this constraint varies with social location: du Bois Reymond (1998), for example, has distinguished clearly between 'choice' and 'standard' biographies. In contrast, others such as Reay and colleagues (2001) have argued that the choices of all young people are bounded by a strong imperative to follow what is deemed to be appropriate for 'a person like me'.

To test some of these claims about the prevalence of life planning, we can draw on detailed empirical research that has been conducted across various European countries. Although they have arrived at different conclusions, the studies discussed below all emphasise important differences by social position in young people's inclination to engage in reflexive life planning and/or the nature of the type of plans they form. Indeed, as Allat and Dixon (2005) argue, life planning and life management are not solely individual responses, but 'mediated by differences in motivation, values, family heritage and social background' (p.89).

On the basis of her work with 120 15-21 year-olds in the Netherlands, du Bois Reymond (1998) distinguishes between two different concepts of life which are realised by today's post-adolescents: 'choice' biographies and 'normal' biographies. The former are characterised, she claims, by the paradox of choice typical of modern life:

Although (western) societies provide more options to choose from, modern (young) people are forced to reflect on the available options and justify their decisions. They might also get frustrated because they realize that there are many options available; perhaps they do not feel ready to make a good choice, or perhaps they would like to make a choice but are prevented from doing so. (p.65)

These biographies are often non-linear and gender-independent in ways that 'normal' biographies are not, give expression to post-materialist values (such as self-actualisation and communication), and tend to be associated with the cultural elite or,

in du Bois Reymond's terms, the 'trendsetters' of contemporary society. In contrast, the young people who take up 'normal' biographies do not occupy such a privileged social position. For this group, the goal is to take up clearly defined employment at an early stage in their lives and enter into long-term relationships in order to start a family. Within this typology, it is clearly theoretically possible for both groups to engage in very similar degrees of 'life planning' – developing equally detailed strategies to achieve their (different) medium- and long-term goals. However, although this is not discussed explicitly in du Bois Reymond's paper, the assumption seems to be that, because of the greater choices that they believe to be open to them and the perceived absence of any preordained lifecourse trajectories, the 'trendsetters' engage in a significantly higher level of reflexive life planning than their peers.

Brannen and Nilsen's (2002) work, amongst 18-30 year-olds in Norway and the UK, also points to considerable diversity in the ways in which young people conceptualise their futures. In contrast to du Bois Reymond, they place much more emphasis on the temporal or age-related dimensions of the choices and plans of their respondents, and the extent to which they engaged in planning for the future. Indeed, they outline three main models which, they argue, represent the different discourses that they identified amongst their sample of young adults: 'deferment' in which most emphasis is put on the present (and was evident amongst younger age groups); 'adaptability' in which respondents were also concerned with the extended present but saw themselves as having the possibility to forge the future; and 'predictability' where the emphasis is very much on the long-term. However, in Brannen and Nilsen's study all the members of this last group were young men, leading the authors to conclude that 'it is perhaps ironic that the only young people in the study from whom the notion of life as

a planning project may be truly apt are those who aspire to be male breadwinners' (p.531). Thus, while the studies by du Bois Reymond and Brannen and Nilsen both point to significant differences in young adults' propensity to plan, they arrive at rather different conclusions about the characteristics of those who do engage in strategic life planning.

More recent work, amongst a large sample of young adults in the UK, conducted by Anderson et al. (2005) has, however, raised some questions about the extent to which Brannen and Nilsen's work can be generalised. Indeed, they claim that many more young adults plan than had previously been thought. Almost all their 268 respondents claimed that they had made at least short-term plans and had some ambitions, and over a half had planned for at least a few years ahead. While some in their sample did place emphasis predominantly on the present, in line with Brannen and Nilsen's model of deferment, the majority demonstrated a more linear and forward-looking approach. This leads Anderson and colleagues to conclude that:

In spite of considerable sense of insecurity, the young adults we studied do in general feel in control of their lives, and do have well articulated ambitions and plans to achieve them with respect especially to work and housing.

Indeed, conditions of modern life almost force many to seek to plan to some degree in these areas. (2002, p.1)

The one exception to this general trend were those 'in multiply stressed situations where any possibility of planning for the future is severely hampered by lack of resources and other constraints' (2005, p.148). They typically exercised forethought

only in the short-term, and believed that any possibility of planning for the future would be severely restricted by a lack of resources and other constraints.

Research methods

In engaging with these debates, we draw on evidence from 90 young adults who were interviewed between September 2005 and January 2006 as part of a project on ‘Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning’. All were graduates of a UK higher education institution (HEI) and were recruited primarily to investigate the relationship between higher education and lifelong learning. Nevertheless, as part of our in-depth interviews we were keen to explore the extent to which our respondents had actively planned their learning and work careers, and whether there had been any changes in their propensity to plan, post-graduation. As part of a more wide-ranging life history interview, we asked them about their decision-making processes (in relation to work, learning and leisure) at various points throughout their lives. As Table I demonstrates, fifteen graduates were recruited from each of six HEIs, with very different market positions. Mailshots, asking for volunteers to take part in the study, were sent by the alumni offices of the six institutions to 600 young adults who had graduated in 2000, and who were in their mid-twenties at the time of the project. As this method of recruitment did not generate sufficient responses, it was followed up with adverts on the ‘Friends Reunited’ website. This enabled us to reach our target sample of 90, with 15 young adults from each of the six HEIs¹.

¹ Although our initial sample, to whom the alumni mailing was sent, was chosen to be reasonably diverse (in terms of gender, degree subject, ethnicity and geographical area), the achieved sample was imbalanced in a number of ways: for example, we recruited more women than men, and a very small number of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Given the focus of our study, it is clearly the case that we did not interview a representative sample of young adults in their mid-twenties. Although our respondents came from a variety of different social class backgrounds, they were all in possession of at least a first degree. Thus, the claims we make in this paper are primarily about the life plans and life projects of a relatively privileged group of young adults who, by virtue of their educational credentials if nothing else, would be likely to be seen as part of the middle class. As a result, the extent to which we are able to generalise is limited. The middle classes have been shown, through a variety of studies, to be more inclined to engage in long term planning for the future than other social groups (Bernstein, 1997). For example, in their study of middle class decisions about childcare, Vincent and Ball (2006) argue that such practices: ‘involve investments within the child, both in the accrual of class resources...and in terms of the realization over time of particular selfhoods and personalities’ (p.159) and go onto claim that, for these families, the emphasis is very much on the long term and the educational futures that they plan for their children. Nevertheless, despite the apparent homogeneity of our sample, as the discussion below will demonstrate, we focus on some interesting cleavages within the middle class and, in particular, on those young adults who eschew all forms of forward life-planning.

[Insert Table I]

Evidence from the ‘Young Graduates’ project

Overall, the respondents in our study exhibited a high level of engagement with ‘life planning’ and a clear majority talked about how they had developed plans for the medium- and/or long-term. As such, this tends to support the claims of Anderson et al., that life planning is perhaps more common than previous studies of young adults have suggested. However, across the sample as a whole there was a clear distinction between, on one hand, young graduates who liked to form detailed plans about their future employment, learning and – in some cases – other parts of their lives and, on the other, those who consciously rejected any pressure to develop this type of plan. Indeed, our research builds on previous studies by suggesting that it is not only those in situations of multiple disadvantage who do not engage in life planning – it is also those at the top of the social hierarchy. Amongst our sample of young graduates, it was those in the most privileged positions who actively rejected any suggestions that they might plan for the future. In this section, we present some data to support these claims, and then go on to explore some of the reasons why a small and highly privileged sub-sample of our respondents were resistant to notions of reflexive life planning.

The Planners

It was apparent from the life history interviews that planning for the future was an important part of the lives of a majority of our respondents. For these young graduates, the type of learning they took up post-graduation (as well as, in many cases, earlier in their learning careers) was carefully planned. For some individuals, it

was also linked to well-formulated plans about career and/or family life. Both men and women were represented in this group, as were all six higher education institutions. For some, this commitment to planning for the medium- and long-term represented clear continuity with previous stages in their lives:

My plans change all the time because every year I set new goals and new milestones and things. (Josephine, business account executive, Post-92²)

Others, however, were able to pinpoint particular moments in their lives when they had started to develop life plans. For Reese, this moment had come when he was at school, and was prompted by a work placement:

I went on a work experience...and suddenly I just had this grip that I wanted to be, work in the commercial world....so I had my career planned out from about the age of 15, knew from research what qualifications I needed and what experience I needed to get me where I am now. So I knew that about the age of 15.....The next step is to be a member of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport so that I can network, meet people, go to the presentations to learn more about my field. (Reese, supply chain manager, College of HE)

For others, like Derek, a propensity to plan had developed during the final stages of higher education, when he, like many other respondents, had started to think seriously about entering full-time employment:

² All respondents are referred to by pseudonyms and the university they attended is referred to by 'type' only (i.e. Oxbridge, London, Redbrick, Campus, Post-92 or College of HE).

The real focus came in my fourth year, in my final year, when I didn't get a [legal] training contract and I thought, right, I really need to sit down and work out how this game works and try to get myself a job. (Derek, solicitor, London)

In his research on young people's decision making processes, Hodkinson (1998) identifies various 'turning points' at which 'horizons for action' undergo significant change: structural turning points, which are determined by institutions and other external structures; self-initiated turning points, in which the individual is instrumental in precipitating a transformation in response to a range of factors within his or her life; and, finally, turning points which are forced on some by the action of others (p.101). Our research suggests that similar shifts can occur in young people's *propensity* to plan, as well as in the substantive content of the plans themselves.

The majority of the respondents who 'planned' in this way seemed not only to enjoy making decisions about their lives, but also were able to articulate specific reasons for behaving in this way (such as the need to take a more proactive stance in the labour market, as suggested by some of the quotations above). A small number, however, indicated that detailed planning was also a form of security to them, and that a lack of forward planning would be a source of stress.

I think it was the end of February I did get that job, so that was all sorted before I started finals and everything, so that was organised.....I mean some of my friends were going into finals and they'd no idea what, you know, they didn't even have a job for afterwards....and I couldn't have coped with that

kind of stress. I mean I need to know what I'm doing. (Sue, librarian, Oxbridge)

Only one of this group of graduates thought that there might be any disadvantages associated with this approach to decision-making: Leanna (teacher, Campus) wondered whether her inclination to form detailed plans for the future had closed down her options too early.

The course was always going to be English and drama because I was always going to do a degree first and then my teacher training second...in retrospect I wish it had been something else. I suppose I did get a bit narrow minded about things, I think, maybe, but it's the choices you make, I suppose.

In many ways, this evidence supports the conclusions reached by Anderson et al. (2005) – that many young adults do engage in fairly detailed life planning processes, and are comfortable working within long time perspectives. Similar points have been made by Holdsworth and Morgan (2005): on the basis of their study of transitions to adulthood in the UK, Spain and Norway, they suggest that the considerable variation in the sequencing of life events both within and between countries can, in general, be seen to support the claims of 'do-it-yourself' biographies (p.150). These findings also accord with Sweetman's (2003) contention that reflexive engagement, life planning and ongoing reconstructions of self-identity are 'characteristic of certain forms of contemporary habitus' and may, in some cases (as a result of norms within the workplace, personal relationships and consumer culture), be unreflexively adopted (p.537). Amongst our sample, at least, the majority of respondents provided little

evidence to support the assertion that the rapid processes of social change and the fragmentation of experiences deemed to be characteristic of late modern society have made it 'extremely difficult to plan for the future or manage lives (subjectively or objectively) in any meaningful sense' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006, p.8).

The Resisters

As noted above, a number of studies have argued that young adults commonly show a strong disinclination to plan for the medium- and long-term (and, in some cases, even the short-term). However, the research by Anderson and colleagues (2005), which draws on a larger and more representative sample than previous work, has suggested that many more young adults may engage in such life planning than has previously been thought. While our data does generally support that of Anderson et al., it also raises some interesting questions about those who remain opposed to any form of life planning. As discussed above, in Anderson et al.'s study, the small group who did not engage in any form of planning were the most disadvantaged – typically, those on low incomes, with children, or whose plans had failed them in the past. In our study, however, the non-planners exhibited markedly different social characteristics. Indeed, amongst the 90 young adults involved in our project, it was typically the most privileged, with the highest levels of social and cultural capital who were most reluctant to form detailed life plans. A fifth of our sample (18 respondents) expressed an active dislike of such forms of planning. The quotations below provide some examples of how these generally privileged individuals believed they 'got by' without any particular plans:

Interviewer: You didn't have a career plan?

Charlie: No. Still don't!

Interviewer:OK. Plans for future in work, education and leisure terms?

Charlie: Not really, no. (Charlie, teacher, Oxbridge)

I still don't have a career path planned out or a target or anything like that.

(Oscar, IT trainer, London)

My decision about where to go to university wasn't really a decision, it just fell into place. I didn't like decisions, and I don't like decisions now so that was just, that just happened and I think now I still fall into things. I'm very much happier not knowing what it is I'm going to do.....I still get into things by accident. (Margaret, Redbrick)

It is also the case that, for many of these young adults, a disinclination to plan had been a long-standing feature of their lives so far. Thus, as success had often been attained without much planning, these respondents saw no need to change their approach to achieve similar levels of success in the future. Indeed, several described how active planning had not been necessary as opportunities had 'just appeared' and/or certain decisions had been 'assumed'. This was particularly evident amongst those who had attended Oxbridge:

In a way, kind of, the decision was made for me rather than very consciously. It wasn't something I had really set my heart on...so I ended up going to [Oxbridge] almost by accident. That sounds awful, doesn't it?With

hindsight it seems like quite a nice logical progression [to the PhD] but along the way I didn't have a game plan at all.....at the time it sort of felt like fate was stepping in at certain points and directing. Sort of things came into place rather than me making them happen. (Jayne, PhD student, Oxbridge)

I certainly never intended to become an academic. That was definitely never the intention, it just kind of happened. (Celia, post-doctoral researcher Oxbridge)

I had no idea what I wanted to do. It was just getting the degree that was the important thing. You decide what you want to do afterwards. Doesn't make a lot of sense really! (Emily, development director, Oxbridge)

It was all very vague, to be honest. That's one of the, that's probably one of themes through my [life], that I never really knew what I was going to do....in the end I think it would be safe to say that I never did exactly decide on a career (Alice, executive administrator, Oxbridge)

It is possible that this reluctance to reveal strategic planning may be part of a wider and well-documented cultural disinclination to acknowledge effort, investment and underlying resources (e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1994) – either to the interviewer or to oneself. However, within this particular sample, this seems an unlikely explanation given the respondents' reflexivity, apparent willingness to reveal aspects of their lives that did not always portray them in a positive light (such as periods of

unemployment, lack of success in gaining a desired job and difficulties faced whilst at university) and, in some cases, their pejorative view of planning *per se*.

Possible explanations

One possible hypothesis is that these young adults felt little need to plan because of a secure and highly advantaged family background, which they believed they would be able to reproduce with little effort. However, as Table II illustrates, it is certainly not the case that all ‘resisters’ came from privileged backgrounds; indeed, only six of the eighteen had been educated in the private sector (and only three of the eight Oxbridge graduates). Moreover, the occupational profile of these respondents’ parents is similarly mixed: while solicitors, doctors and lecturers are represented, so are considerably lower status jobs. For example, Emily’s father was a sales representative and Alice’s father, a truck driver. This suggests that their disinclination to plan cannot be explained simply with reference to high levels of cultural, social and/or economic capital originating from within the family. Furthermore, from their narratives it is clear that relatively few were brought up with parental expectations that they would attend a high status university or that they would enter a particular occupation on graduation.

[Insert Table II about here]

It is also possible that the lifestyle circumstances of our respondents, in the years immediately after graduation, had some bearing on their propensity to plan for the future. In line with the characteristics of the overall sample, the large majority of the

‘resisters’ were single (14 of the 18) and were living either by themselves or in a shared household with friends. One ‘resister’ was married (Rita) and three had resident partners at the time of the interview or shortly before (Janet, Sarina and Stewart). None of this group had any children, which again reflected the broader sample³. It may be argued that it is the onset of responsibilities to a partner and/or children that encourage one to engage in strategic life planning. For some of our resisters, recognition that the carefree nature of their current lives (as they perceived it) would not last indefinitely may have driven some of the emphasis they put on enjoying opportunities for spontaneity (and resisting pressures to plan) while they were able. This is alluded to in extracts from interviews with Jackie and Zeyar:

I kind of thought you know I’m young and I don’t have a mortgage and if I don’t do it [leaving the UK at short notice to work in Greece] now will I regret not doing it. (Jackie, Oxbridge)

I don't have any particular plans, and I spend my time quite happily taking things as they come, maybe trying to develop new skills. I'm not in a rush to get back to full-time work. I've got this strange idea that while I'm young I might as well enjoy myself, and then when I get a bit older I'll do a bit more work. (Zeyar, unemployed, Oxbridge)

However, amongst those four resisters who were (or who had been) in long-term relationships, such commitments did not seem to have prompted any planning. Indeed, the narratives of Stewart, Sarina and Rita suggest that, for them, their

³ Only one of our 90 respondents had any children.

relationships may have actually *discouraged* them from this kind of forward planning. For example, while Stewart described how, on graduation, he had just followed his girlfriend to Leeds and taken whatever work he could find, Sarina and Rita both outlined how they tended to prioritise enjoying the here-and-now with their partners, rather than making plans for the future. These examples show how lifestyle circumstances had some bearing on some of the resisters' disinclination to plan. However, the nature of this influence operated in different ways: for some, an absence of financial and personal commitments allowed them to act in a more spontaneous manner without the need for planning; for others, however, commitment to a partner was itself seen a partial reason for not engaging in strategic life planning. Nevertheless, given that the lifestyle circumstances of the resisters were broadly typical of the other respondents in the sample, it seems likely that there are other reasons, beyond the personal, which can help to explain the differences between the two groups.

In a small number of cases, some of the explanations that were given to justify this reluctance to plan appeared to be related to wider beliefs about the futility of planning. For example, several young adults claimed that they had stopped making plans because they rarely came to fruition:

I've stopped sort of planning my future as such because, all the kind of things I have done, certainly since university...it was never planned but it happened. The internet thing was never planned, going into broadcasting was never planned, but it happened. It worked out, so I have stopped making plans,

because they don't happen but things usually work out. (Max, journalist, Oxbridge)

In line with some of the arguments made in the literature, and alluded to above, others claimed that the overwhelming choice of options available to young adults in contemporary society was bewildering and could seriously impair their ability to put together coherent plans for the future:

...That's actually a bit of a problem for my generation because you're almost spoilt for choice, you don't have to stick at one career and you don't have to be trained in anything....and it's crippling us all. I mean, like literally, you know, people don't know what they're doing with themselves, they get, yeah, getting totally lost....we've got too much choice. (Hayley, marketing manager, London)

While Sarina did not share Hayley's view of the 'crippling' array of choices open to her, she did believe that the large number of available options (in terms of career, learning opportunities and also broader patterns of living), had made long-term planning redundant. Indeed, she believed that drawing up plans at this point in her life would be likely to restrict her options later:

I get bored really easily....I'm not an absolutist either and the thought of having to pick something that I have to do for the rest of my life, it's just not going to happen. I know that whatever I do isn't going to be for the rest of my life because probably in five years time I'm going to change my mind again

because I have done [that] like, pretty much, well, throughout my life really.
(Sarina, communications co-ordinator, Campus).

Although some of these explanations help to explain why some individuals were disinclined to engage in strategic life planning, the strongest correlation appears to be with type of higher education institution attended and also, to some extent, identification as an academic ‘high flier’ at a relatively early point in one’s educational career. As Table II suggests, there were clear differences by institution attended, with a large majority of the resisters having graduated from the higher status universities (including eight who had attended Oxbridge). Indeed, the institutional profile of this group may be explained by assumptions they were making (not necessarily correctly) that with a degree from a high status institution there is less need to make detailed plans to secure one’s place in the labour market than if one had graduated from a less prestigious university. While those from more disadvantaged backgrounds may feel the pointlessness of planning, the disinclination to plan on behalf of those from more privileged backgrounds may reflect the assumption that they will not be unduly disadvantaged in life as a result. This is suggested in Hayley’s narrative when she explains that, as she went to university at ‘London’, she believed she would be better positioned in the labour market than if she had gone to a new university and could therefore ‘worry about the career later’.

As we collected data on only the first five years post-graduation, it is difficult to arrive at any firm conclusions about whether these assumptions on behalf of the privileged ‘resisters’ were justified. Nevertheless, the early careers of the 18 young adults in this sub-sample suggest a mixed picture. There were certainly some for

whom transitions from school to university and then from university into fulfilling and well-paid employment had been relatively straightforward. The advantages associated with having attended a high status institution are also well rehearsed in the literature. For example, Smetherham's (2006) statistical analysis has shown the advantage of holding a degree from an elite university compared to a similar qualification from a middle- or low-ranking institution, when competing for traditional graduate jobs and places on graduate training schemes. Nevertheless, stories of labour market success were not told by all our resisters. Indeed, some had markedly different experiences. For example, Alice (Oxbridge) described considerable disappointment with her career to date:

I found myself thinking, 'Oh God, what am I doing here? I'm wasting my life.' I've got this, you know, I'm really intelligent, I could be out doing something, you know, much more productive, much more helpful to society and here I am...in an administrative department of this college.

This complexity is also reflected in other studies. Brown and Hesketh's (2004) research into the employment practices of high status graduate recruiters has highlighted the importance of personal capital – a combination of 'hard currencies' such as educational qualifications and work experience and 'soft currencies' including interpersonal skills and charisma. This would suggest that graduates need to exercise considerable caution in assuming that a good degree from a high status institution will confer automatic advantage within the labour market.

These less positive stories indicate that the social capital and high status qualifications offered by universities such as Oxbridge and London cannot, in all cases, compensate for an unwillingness to plan. However, it is of course impossible to determine whether these particular individuals would have been any more successful in achieving their goals if they had planned. Perhaps more interestingly, it suggests that a reluctance to plan may be quite deeply embedded, such that even negative labour market experiences do not cause one to change one's approach. It is also worth highlighting that there were a number of examples of respondents who had attended lower status HEIs who had engaged in planning processes and were subsequently more successful in securing well-paid graduate employment than those resisters mentioned above. However, on the basis of this qualitative data it is hard to determine the extent to which their relative success was related to their propensity to plan.

Despite these questions that remain unanswered, our respondents' narratives provide an important contrast to those reported in other research, which have suggested that it is primarily unhappy life experiences that discourage young adults from engaging in life planning. Indeed, Anderson et al. argue that while a failure to achieve ambitions in the past does not necessarily affect one's future ambitions, it does limit willingness to plan for the future, especially for the long-run. They go on to argue that such unwillingness to plan for the future is often associated with disadvantage; moreover, 'many of those with very short timespans of planning are in multiply stressed situations where any possibility of planning for the future is severely hampered by lack of resources and other factors' (p.148). We would argue that, on the basis of our research, a similarly short timespan of planning is shared by young adults at the

opposite end of the social spectrum, whose lives have been characterised by academic success and a high level of privilege.

Conclusion

In his insightful analysis of the relationship between policy and practice, Holford (2007) points to the limitations of Edwards' (2002) theorisation of 'governmentality' and the capacity of the state (and its various agencies) to shape 'enterprising selves' among its citizens. In part, Holford's critique is based on detailed empirical evidence which, he argues, demonstrates that a significant number of 'active citizens' are engaged in vigorously contesting official agendas. While accepting this general point – that current policy produces a variety of responses among citizens, not a simple 'responsibilisation' – we have shown that in our sample of graduates, a majority of respondents were engaged in the kind of life planning (for the medium- and/or the long-term) which is at least congruent with the argument that young adults are taking substantial responsibility for their own life choices, along the lines suggested by Edwards. It also provides some support for Giddens' contention that reflexively-ordered life planning has, for many young adults, become a 'central feature of the structuring of self-identity' (1991, p.5). In this way, our findings reflect those of Anderson et al. and suggest that, on the whole, young adults in contemporary Britain do appear to feel in control of their lives, and are engaged in planning for the future.

However, we have also demonstrated that those not engaged in reflexive forms of planning are not just the most disadvantaged in society, as Anderson et al.'s study

suggests. Instead, we have argued that the most privileged young adults are also largely immune from the pressure to engage in strategic life planning. We have demonstrated how, within this sample at least, there was a strong association between having had a privileged ‘learning career’ (such as attending a high status university and identifying as an ‘academic high flier’) and a *disinclination* to form detailed plans for the future. In part, we would suggest that this appeared to be related to a strong sense of ontological security on the part of these young adults and the confidence to resist what Giddens terms ‘an increasingly dominant temporal outlook’ (1991, p.87).

What has not been possible within this study is to explore the impact of life planning (or a rejection of such planning) on the life chances of young graduates. While we have suggested that there was an association between having had a privileged learning career and a disinclination to plan, we do not have a sufficiently strong evidence base on which to assess whether this failure to plan disadvantaged the young adults in any way. Similarly, we cannot make any firm claims about whether those who did plan gained any advantage (in the labour market or elsewhere) over their peers. Indeed, we consider this to be a fruitful area for further research to help extend the debate.

Anderson et al. (2005) argue that one of the advantages of their methodology – using questionnaires as opposed to interviews – is that they minimised the likelihood that respondents would conform to any peer pressure about hedonism and a pejorative view of planning (perhaps associated with perceptions about the ‘dullness’ of adulthood). While we believe that the in-depth nature of our interviews and the rapport we established with respondents makes it unlikely that significant life planning would be concealed, we do acknowledge that there are dominant cultural

scripts associated with such activities. However, we would speculate that: these operate in different ways among different groups of young people; the value (positive, negative or neutral) attached to planning varies similarly; and a propensity to plan may well change over the lifecourse. Whether the resistance to forming plans for the future demonstrated by our most privileged respondents persists into later adulthood, or whether it is likely to change as part of a wider refashioning of self-identity at some point in the future, therefore remains unclear.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to: the two anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper; the 90 young graduates who gave up their time to be interviewed for the project; and the ESRC for funding the research (RES-000-22-0662).

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Table I: Gender of respondents, by HEI attended

Higher education institutions (placed in order of typical league table position)	Women	Men
Oxbridge	8	7
London	8	7
Redbrick	10	5
Campus	14	1
Post-92	11	4
College of HE	7	8
TOTAL	58	32

Table II: Characteristics of the ‘Resisters’

Name	HEI attended	Degree subject	Compulsory education (state or private)	Father’s occupation	Mother’s occupation	Current job
Jayne	Oxbridge	History	State (grammar)	Lecturer	Social worker	PhD student
Celia	Oxbridge	Geology	Private	Health and safety manager	Occupational therapist	Post-doctoral researcher
Emily	Oxbridge	Chemistry	State (grammar)	Sales representative	Teacher	Deputy development director
Jackie	Oxbridge	Maths	State (comprehensive)	Consultant paediatrician	None	Finance manager
Alice	Oxbridge	Physics	State (comprehensive)	HGV driver	Shop assistant (part-time)	College administrator
Charlie	Oxbridge	Archaeology and anthropology	Private	Pilot	Teacher	Teacher
Stewart	Oxbridge	Geology	State (grammar)	Teacher	Secretary	Recruitment consultant
Zeyar	Oxbridge	Maths and computing	Private	Doctor	Doctor	Unemployed

Francis	London	History	State (comprehensive)	Teacher (deceased)	Lecturer	Museum curator
Hayley	London	Geography	Private	University dean	Architect	Marketing manager
Oscar	London	French	Private	Senior manager, social services	Residential warden	IT trainer
Sam	Redbrick	Maths and chemistry	State (comprehensive)	Joiner and carpenter	Delivery personnel	Research chemist
Terry	Redbrick	Maths and finance	State (grammar)	Financial director	NHS clerical worker	Financial services case officer
Sarina	Campus	Philosophy	Private	Hairdresser	Catering assistant	Internal communications co-ordinator
Joseph	Post-92	Computing science	State (comprehensive)	Lecturer	None	Developer and director, web company
Nicola	Post-92	Management (Arts)	State (comprehensive)	Solicitor	Counsellor	Self-employed development consultant
Janet	College of HE	Law	State (comprehensive)	Heavy plant operator	Cook	Assistant lending manager, bank
Rita	College	Performance	State	Coppersmith	Clerical	Project assistant

of HE

Studies

(comprehensive)

officer