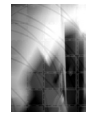

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Young people's aspirations for education, work, family and leisure

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Abstract

Young people are arguably facing more 'complex and contested' transitions to adulthood and an increasing array of 'non-linear' paths. Education and training have been extended, identity is increasingly shaped through leisure and consumerism and youth must navigate their life trajectories in highly individualised ways. The study utilises 819 short essays compiled by students aged 14–16 years from 19 schools in Australia. It examines how young people understand their own unique positions and the possibilities open to them through their aspirations and future orientations to employment and family life. These young people do not anticipate postponing work identities, but rather embrace post-school options such as gaining qualifications, work experience and achieving financial security. Boys expected a distant involvement in family life secondary to participation in paid work. In contrast, around half the girls simultaneously expected a future involving primary care-giving and an autonomous, independent career, suggesting attempts to remake gendered inequalities.

Keywords

aspirations, employment, expectations of work and family, gender and work, leisure, transitions to adulthood, young worker, youth

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Introduction

Young people are arguably facing more 'complex and contested' transitions to adulthood than ever before (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004: 131) and an increasing array of 'non-linear' paths (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999: 5), although the extent of this complexity, and whether non-linear paths are in fact recent phenomena, is contested (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005; Vickerstaff, 2003). Those who support the increased complexity argument highlight structural changes to industrialised economies, with the rise of the service sector and increased flexibility and insecurity in employment (Golsch, 2003). Education and training have been extended, identity is increasingly shaped through leisure and consumerism and youth are expected to plan and navigate their life trajectories in highly individualised ways (Giddens, 1991; Gordon et al., 2005; Nilan et al., 2007).

A key motif of these and other contemporary perspectives on social change is the 'fact' of changing gender relations (Thomson and Holland, 2002). The rise in women's employment, the demise of the male breadwinner model and the increasing uncertainty of the labour market have meant that traditional notions of male adulthood are increasingly redundant, while new notions of female adulthood are still emerging (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). As Beck (1992) acknowledges, however, while 'gender fates' are less prescriptive than previously, traditionally gendered identities and life courses have not disappeared in practice but rather are less visible because the *consciousness* of change outstrips material changes.

Understanding how the journey to adulthood unfolds in gendered ways requires attention to the way youth understand their own unique positions and the possibilities that are open to them, as well as the resources upon which they can draw as they shape their futures (Sanders and Munford, 2008). The principal objective of this article is to examine the ways in which young people anticipate their future employment, family life and leisure activities. In addressing this objective previous work is extended in a number of ways. First, data were collected from both boys and girls attending the same schools, thereby enabling a contrast of gendered perspectives while holding socio-demographic factors constant. Written rather than spoken text, derived from short essays, was also analysed, offering a potentially more authentic picture of youth expectations without the interviewer scrutiny that occurs in interviews and focus groups. The approach also provided a much larger sample than usual in qualitative studies, thereby allowing a high degree of confidence in the broader conclusions. The findings yield important insights into anticipated life courses for a cohort of contemporary adolescents in an Australian context. In particular, empirical evidence is provided which supports and, in some cases, contests, several ambiguous themes in the youth transitions literature. These contributions include the extent to which the 'consciousness of change' in expectations of future gender roles is evident (Beck, 1992), whether youth prefer to embrace or defer central work identities (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002), the defining features of traditional versus detraditional anticipated biographies (Ball et al., 2000) and how young people express notions of autonomous and relational futures (Sanders and Munford, 2008).

Youth pathways and transitions

It has been argued that relations between youth's social structure and their passage through the lifecourse are being transformed and, indeed, have been fractured (Brannen

and Nilsen, 2002; Wyn and Wright, 1997). Status passages, such as leaving home, marriage, parenthood and entry into the labour market are no longer linear, but may be reversible, blended, synchronic or deferred (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Nilan et al., 2007; Skrede, 1999). In essence, there is no clear timetable to govern young people's navigation through the multiplicity of life's pathways (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). In the following section four central, inter-related areas of literature are explored which are important in understanding the context in which adolescents' choices and decisions are made and in which their expectations are shaped. These four themes (identified by Ball et al., 2000) provide a framework for the subsequent analysis of empirical data because they illustrate the ambivalent and problematic ways in which the category 'youth' is constructed by different groups and institutions with vested interests (e.g. educational elites, politicians, marketers and the media). Consistent with the aims of the study, the focus was also on the way in which gender intersects with these broader themes.

Individualism and individualisation

Youth transitions are shaped by theses of individualisation and detraditionalism – the notion that each young person must consciously tailor his or her own life trajectory to achieve predictable and successful adult citizenship (Giddens, 1991). Individualisation, which implies a 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 3), is increasingly emphasised in neoliberal politics and changing patterns of consumption (Gordon et al., 2005). The culture and ideology of individualism interpenetrates – feeds and is fed by – social changes which encourage greater reflexivity (Ball et al., 2000). However, while the thesis of individualisation is a dominant discourse in the politico-cultural context, it has been critiqued from numerous perspectives, including a gender perspective which highlights fundamental contradictions in the individualisation thesis. First, adopting a gender lens leads to awareness of the paradox that, while the ascendancy of individualism has profoundly influenced youth's preferences and decisions, these same choices are criticised because they are at odds with traditional, heteronormative markers of adulthood such as marriage and childbearing. An example is that young women bear the brunt of social and political anxiety about falling fertility rates because they are the targets of media rhetoric about the public good being corroded by individual selfishness and a lack of responsibility; a phenomenon encapsulated in the term 'child ambivalence' (Crawford, 2006: 121). Meanwhile, structural factors such as paid maternity leave, childcare and workplace flexibility are minimised as issues that may significantly affect fertility choices (McDonald et al., 2006). Further, little or no attention is given to the role of males in fertility decision-making and 'failure' is blamed on individuals rather than socio-economic conditions and policies (Hockey, 2009).

A second gendered contradiction in the thesis of individualisation is the variance between expectations of gender equality and the reality of inequality. Beck (1992) argues that although there has been an 'equalisation of prerequisites' in education and law, the spheres of employment and domestic labour are sites of continuing inequalities. Young people espouse the principles of equal opportunity but career aspirations remain gendered and expectations of egalitarianism in future partnerships by females and males are mismatched (Pocock, 2005; Tinklin et al., 2005). A third gendered contradiction at the

heart of individualisation is that socialisation orients females into a relational, rather than an autonomous, individualised stance (Sanders and Munford, 2008); the latter being the hallmark of discursive constructions of what it means to be a successful adult (Gordon et al., 2005). Sanders and Munford's (2008) study of young, middle class women in New Zealand, for example, showed that young women recognised that relationships and independence required balance, which they reconciled by segmenting their responses into a present that was relational and a future that was occupational and independent.

In summary, contemporary youth are expected to individually tailor and navigate their pathways to adulthood, while simultaneously being the targets of (often) traditional societal prescriptions of what 'responsible adulthood' entails, all within a myriad of structural uncertainties and inequalities, often highly gendered in their impact, that affect their choices. However, it is not clear how the contradictory pathways play out in different contexts, including the 'interdependencies' of race, ethnicity, class and gender (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 113–114). It is to the issues of class and gender which we now turn.

Social and economic polarisation

Critical scholars have long argued that the ideologies of economic individualism and of individualisation obscure the continuing class-based nature of structural inequality (Ball et al., 2000). As Beck (1992: 131) argues, 'class differences and family connections are not really annulled … they recede into the background relative to the newly emerging "centre" of the biographical life plan'. Hence, while young people no longer derive strong primary identity from social class membership, this does not mean facts of existence (such as class or gender) do not continue to shape their lives (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Shu and Mooney Marini, 2008).

The way young people think about and narrate their futures unfolds differently for youth situated in different social locations and by the extent of resources and opportunities (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Nilan et al., 2007). Indeed, the discourse of choice may in reality be relevant only to the privileged few who have the necessary social and material capital that allows life choices (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). The current study explores this issue by examining how high school students in Australia conceptualise their futures with respect to employment and family life and, consequently, reveals how disadvantage is reproduced yet obscured by discourses of choice and individualisation.

Consumerism, leisure and identity

Another central, yet contested theme, important to understanding how youth expectations and choices are shaped, is their role as consumers in neoliberal markets. At the micro level it is argued, young people's identities can be established by judicious consumption of consumer goods and fashion trends (Nilan et al., 2007) which give them an essential gateway to social inclusion by conferring belonging, power and friends (Pocock and Clarke, 2004). Critical studies of youth consumption argue, however, that while young people may be conscious consumers, they show a sophisticated understanding of the codes of media culture (Crawford, 2006; Ransome, 2005). A recent and salient

example of gender-based consumer identity that has entered popular consciousness is the notion of 'girl power', which suggests that a youthful feminine and resistant identity is something to be embraced and celebrated (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2001) and/or used to sell music and fashion to girls (Thomas, 2008). However, the idea that girls can re-write the rules of conventional femininity through consumerism or other identity-shaping practices has not gone unchallenged. For example, Currie et al.'s (2006) study of the self-construction of 'empowered girls' found that their opposition to conventional girlhood does not necessarily bring with it transformative agency but rather can incite them to act competitively while concealing the actual barriers to achieving changes in their lives.

The above discussion illustrates that research on the ways in which young people understand, acknowledge and expect to negotiate gendered identities and roles is expanding but there are gaps in research regarding the perspectives of young men and there are still contested debates about the relationships between youth identity, behaviour and consumption.

New work and labour market identification

It is clear that new generations of young people are making an early entry to both work and consumption (Pocock and Clarke, 2004) and understanding young people's work identities – as well as their consumption identities – is important. While in general occupation, status and identity are inextricably interwoven – we are what we do – and not to work is in many ways to become a 'non-person' (Ball et al., 2000), young people may not place as much importance on occupational status and work as their adult counterparts – recognising that the interpenetration of occupational status and identity may be primarily a middle class phenomenon (Ball et al., 2000). Instead, as was suggested earlier, other sources of identity deriving from music, fashion and leisure may be more central to how youth think about themselves. Many post-adolescents may try to 'postpone' or keep their work identities 'on hold' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), by means of a 'model of deferment' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 520), whereby they focus on enjoying an extended period of youth characterised as a time of possibilities, variety and excitement, while delaying 'adulthood', which they consider boring and routine.

Ball et al. (2000) also argue that the relationship between work and identity affects young people through the 'rhetoric and reification' of a skilled, technologically literate and flexible workforce. This rhetoric is embedded in policy terms such as 'lifelong learning' and the view that qualifications are the key to obtaining work (Ball et al., 2000). This debate has two gendered dimensions. Firstly, women may be ideal reflexive subjects – and thus subject to particular disadvantage – in this deregulated, flexible, knowledge-intensive labour market because they are willing to adjust to part-time work and to respond to downsizing, retraining and irregular hours (Harris, 2004; Nilan et al., 2007). Secondly, theories of masculinity suggest men have experienced a loss of power in the workplace and in other spheres such as education; though such theories have themselves been extensively critiqued (see Heartfield, 2002; Morgan, 2006; Nayak and Kehily, 2007).

Study context and objectives

The themes described previously contain inherently ambivalent and paradoxical elements. For example, individualisation is about both 'choice' and 'risk' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 205); the relationship between consumerism and labour market behaviour is emphasised more strongly for younger people than it is for adults, yet the justification for this emphasis is not well developed (Crawford, 2006); and while youth labour market participation rates have increased markedly in the last two decades, it is argued that young people defer work identities (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Furthermore, limited evidence is available to support or refute these various positions. The current study seeks to address some of these debates by asking the following research questions:

1) How do young people conceptualise their adult identities and project themselves into the future with respect to employment and family life?
2) What contextual features, including notions of individualisation, social and economic polarisation, new work and labour market identification and consumerism, leisure and identity, influence youth's orientations?
3) To what extent does gender and social position shape young people's agency in negotiating their pathways into adulthood?

The data reported here were derived from a larger research project investigating young people's social and industrial citizenship, which focused on the understanding and experiences of paid work for high school students in the state of Queensland, Australia. Field work for the broader study included surveys and focus groups conducted in 2008 with students in years 9 and 11, in 19 schools from metropolitan Brisbane, regional towns and remote locales. This study reports on a single open-ended question on the survey, which asked students to write about the issue: 'Looking back at my working life', with the following advice given:

> Pretend you are about your parents' age. Tell us about your working and family life: what you've done as a job (or jobs), what you've achieved, and how you have tried to attain a reasonable income, fair treatment at work, and a balance between work and family. Be as creative as you like, but try also to be realistic.

This methodological approach has been applied to a range of similar subjects, such as gendered expectations of domestic roles, fertility and other lifecourse decisions (e.g. Bulbeck, 2005) and anticipated pathways to education and work (e.g. Sanders and Munford, 2008), as well as more diverse topics including ageing (Patterson et al., 2009).

The Australian educational, labour market and socio-political environments are relevant to the interpretation of the study findings. As in other industrialised countries, between a third and a half of Australian secondary school children are engaged in paid work (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005). School students predominantly work in retail and service industries. Youth employment patterns have changed in recent years in response to the relative abundance of casual jobs in retail and

services, driven by the growth of deregulated trading hours, the low cost of youth labour, increased consumerism, changes in government policies such as youth welfare allowances and a long-term boom in the Australian economy driven by the resources sector (Campbell, 2000; Langer, 2005; Lloyd, 2008).

While class as a social category is contested, the student sample was considered to be predominantly 'working class', based on a number of factors. The schools themselves included state-funded high schools (SHS) (N = 16) and (relative to many non-government schools) low-cost Catholic high schools (N = 3). In Australia, only 61 percent of high school students attend state-funded high schools with the remainder attending fee-paying, non-government/private schools (ABS, 2008). Fourteen of the schools were located in provincial and rural towns where tourism, mining and agriculture were often the major employers and the five metropolitan schools were located in low to medium socio-economic areas. Additionally, responses from teacher interviews suggested that students at their schools were relatively disadvantaged compared to those who attend non-government/private schools, with respect to family income and future educational and resource opportunities.

Methods

Sample

The adolescents who participated in the research were born in the early 1990s and included 579 year 9 students (aged 13–14 years) and 313 year 11 students (aged 15–16 years); mean age 14.6 years. Year 9 and year 11 students were sampled to contrast knowledge and experiences of paid work among a younger cohort who were infrequently employed, with a cohort who were more likely to be employed (35% year 9s employed; 80% year 11s employed). After excluding 63 responses that could not be coded, 819 narratives were available for analysis. Of the respondents, 64 percent were girls, seven percent were from a non-English speaking background and three percent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Consistent with the ethical requirements of the universities and education authorities, only students whose parents had returned a signed consent form participated in the research. This requirement limited sample size relative to overall student numbers and has been raised as a methodological concern elsewhere (Munford and Sanders, 2004). The jobs in which young people were employed were almost invariably in the hospitality, fastfood and retail areas, as well as in family businesses, including farms. Individual school selection was both 'purposeful', in that regions of the state with industry and geographic diversity were selected, and 'convenience', in that some schools initially contacted in each region declined to participate and other, similar schools were substituted.

Procedures

Participating students were requested to attend a pre-designated area of the school (e.g. library, empty classroom) and the research team outlined the purpose of the study and what participation involved. The written topic ('Looking back at my working life') was

structured to be as non-directive as possible and to allow for participants to write about subjects, within the defined parameters, that were spontaneous and salient for them individually. This approach also avoided what Sanders and Munford (2008) refer to as typical repertoires designed by young people to satisfy frequently asked questions by adults, such as 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' Students had 20 minutes to complete the written question. Responses varied from a single line to a full A4 page of text.

Analysis

The analysis began using Ball et al.'s (2000) four inter-related, contextual themes as broad a priori categories, searching for evidence of how the young people's present time world and the possibilities they saw for themselves (Sanders and Munford, 2008) were reflected in written descriptions of their future work and family lives. Initially, with the assistance of NVivo, an attempt was made to identify segments of text as aligning with and illustrating one particular theme (e.g. individualism, social/economic polarisation and so on). However, as coding continued, it became clear that many fragments of text initially identified often cut across a number of a priori areas identified by Ball and colleagues. As a result, and in order to preserve the integrity of the original data, the results are grouped and presented as three emergent areas for discussion. Not all participants provided information pertaining to each area and in each section the number of relevant excerpts available for analysis is reported. Disconfirming data was also actively sought (Stake, 1995). Consistent with the research objectives, the way both boys and girls imagined their futures was explored. The data were also examined to ascertain whether themes varied across other socio-demographic categories, including age (as a proxy for developmental maturity) and geographic region. The analytic approach concurred with Nowotny's (1994) assertion that the notion of planning for the future may be altered by the experience of the present and followed Sanders and Munford (2008) who argue that young people's expectations of the future are not predictive, but rather express their understanding of their present time world and the possibilities they see for themselves.

Results

Detraditionalism or traditional biographies?

Clear examples of detraditionalism – the idea that traditional markers of adulthood have been rejected or substantially modified by young people – were scarce in the data. Around half (N = 393; 48%) of the full sample provided information on anticipated biographies which included marriage, property ownership and/or family. Of these respondents, the majority (94%) cited traditional expectations of some combination of marriage, children and property ownership. Girls (52%) were more likely than boys (20%) to specifically suggest family size, the gender of future children and even their names. Typical of these narratives was one from a year 9 girl from a rural SHS: 'At aged 23 I had my first child named Jasmine. Then followed the last three children with each one being a 2½ age gap. Their names were Jasmine, Samuel, Josh and Ashley.'

While traditional markers of adulthood featured prominently in the essays, there were 22 narratives (12 girls, 10 boys) from students who stated they did not plan to have any children and/or did not wish to marry. A year 11 boy from a metropolitan SHS: 'I don't have any children because I feel like they'd only get in the way of what I wanted to do – travel' and a year 9 girl from a provincial SHS: 'I have no children and I'm not married because I can't commit.' With the exception of one girl who indicated she wanted to marry a female partner in California because 'it is legal there', all reflected heteronormative expectations. There were also 56 cases (14%) which revealed modified traditional biographies in the sense that there were expectations of travel and career development before 'settling down' to marriage and children. Apart from these exceptions, assumptions of a traditional biography involving future family were the norm.

Alongside traditional notions of family and heteronormative adulthood were expectations of property ownership. This expectation is not surprising in the Australian context where, despite some of the highest property prices in the world relative to median income (ABS, 2007; Cox and Pavletich, 2009), the expectation of owning a detached house remains strong (Crawford, 2006). Where property ownership was mentioned it was often referred to using salubrious descriptors: 'five bedrooms, a theatre room, a pool, big back yard' (male) and 'a two-story house with tennis courts, pool and helicopter pad' (female). The tendency to describe future property as large and expensive was consistent with the many descriptions of relative financial wealth. Over one-third (35%) of the total sample – approximately equal numbers of boys and girls – referred to their future financial position; with only two exceptions that referred to limited incomes, students said they would achieve wealth and security through, as Giddens (1991) puts it, an individualised and consciously tailored life trajectory which leads to adult citizenship. Narratives often suggested that financial prosperity would occur via clever investing and/or successful careers: 'I am now a vet and I make enough to basically buy whatever I want and need' (male, year 9, rural SHS). There were many examples of income cited, varying from wildly unrealistic to conservatively optimistic. While financial success was mostly achieved through employment, a few girls suggested they would achieve wealth by marrying wealthy men.

Nearly one in five narratives (18%) of the total sample cited expectations of overseas travel, with no discernible distinctions between boys' and girls' responses. At first glance, high expectations of travel reflected in the essays might suggest elements of detraditionalism and support for the model of deferment, whereby young people focus on enjoying an extended period of youth (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Importantly though, the sequences of expected lifecourse events revealed that travel was anticipated in varying stages between gaining educational qualifications, employment, family formation and retirement, not in terms of an extended period of time when responsibilities could be abandoned in favour of leisure. For these students, extended overseas travel was frequently directly linked with, or followed, training, the achievement of qualifications or employment experience. In seven cases, plans for travel were timed after children had left home and retirement was imminent.

Both boys and girls expected to delay childbearing until they were financially secure, such as a year 9 girl from a rural SHS who wrote: 'I am 36 and have now got enough

money to raise kids and start a family'. However, delaying family formation was related to income security rather than an extended period of fun and excitement.

The data indicates, therefore, that while young people's expectations for the achievement of adult status passages are indeed more synchronic, deferred and perhaps even reversible (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Nilan et al., 2007; Skrede, 1999) than traditional, linear pathways, they are nevertheless conscious and purposeful. In contrast to previous work which suggests that young people attempt to extend the period of youth as a time of variety, fun and excitement before adulthood, young people in the current study were more likely to associate the post-school/early adulthood period with hard work in gaining qualifications and work experience. Typical of these responses was a year 11 boy from a rural SHS:

> I slowly worked my way up the ranks to be one of the top metallurgists at the company. That process took many years of hard work. Here I am today, earning $33.50 an hour and living life the way I wanted.

The emphasis on economic security and employment and relationship stability appears to reflect the backdrop of structural and institutional uncertainties against which youth must navigate the more central 'biographical life plan' (Beck, 1992: 131). Therefore, like Hockey (2009), who studied young employed adults in the UK, elements of both standardised and destandardised, or postmodern, approaches to anticipating futures were found, as well as inherent tensions between them.

Work identities

Around two-thirds (N = 571; 64%) of respondents indicated they intended to pursue at least one of almost 100 different future professions, careers or jobs. As expected, given their relatively lesser exposure to vocational information, year 9 students were less likely than year 11 students to report the specifics of future careers and/or to describe their post-school educational pathways. Almost all year 11 students described a future work identity. Some highly feminised or masculinised jobs were, as expected, exclusively or predominantly noted by girls/boys respectively such as (for girls) teachers, childcare workers, nurses and hairdressers/beauticians and (for boys) pilots and trade jobs such as mechanics, electricians and carpenters. However, while no boys indicated feminised occupations, 25 girls anticipated a desire to take up a stereotypically masculine job, such as defence force personnel, mining-related professions and engineers. There were few discernible differences in job expectations across geographic regions, except for doctors/surgeons and lawyers/barristers, which were identified almost exclusively by urban students.

Multiple career trajectories and qualifications were described in 125 (15%) essays. Some narratives described multiple job-holding, such as a year 9 girl from a provincial SHS who wrote: 'I would like to be a piano teacher as well as working in the mines or owning my own hairdressing salon'. Others suggested different employment futures would occur sequentially, such as a year 9 girl from a metropolitan SHS who wrote: 'accepted a job as a microbiologist. After about five years or so at work I settled down

with a family … after that, I went to work as a science teacher'. Some aspirations for multiple employment and career options appeared to reflect current indecision in career choice or uncertainty about the likelihood of achieving in a chosen area. For example, a year 11 girl from a rural SHS suggested she would like a career in the health sector but was not certain about the specific job: 'I went to university to become a nurse, then pursued a career as a doctor.' Also supporting this possibility were narratives which reflected aspirations for high status sports or arts careers coupled with more stable occupations in the professions or trades. Other narratives explaining multiple career pathways expressed a view that having a single career throughout adult life would be narrow and limiting. For example, a year 9 boy from a rural SHS wrote, 'Doing a job for 30 years would be boring but I think I would quit one job after a certain amount of time and go to another'.

Incongruously, references to financial security and even wealth were commonly cited alongside jobs and professions that attract relatively low salaries. Participants frequently referred to their future occupation as business owners. Indeed, of the 532 responses indicating an identifiable occupation, 75 (14%) suggested they would operate their own business. Young people also expected that high incomes would allow for leisure time, travel and child rearing, in stark contrast to the evidence that high income earners and the self-employed typically work very long hours (Ng and Feldman, 2008). It seems that by age 16, students have not only internalised notions of occupational identity but in their expectations of multiple qualifications and jobs had done so in a way that is consistent with labour market changes of the last two decades (Ball et al., 2000; Kelly, 2006; Nilan et al., 2007).

Only five girls (0.01%) and no boys saw gender as potentially having an impact on their experiences in the workplace. One girl cited the benefits of paid maternity leave for maintaining employment continuity, while the other four girls indicated potential difficulties in male-dominated professions. However, girls believed they could easily overcome whatever hurdles arose, for example: 'I finished my diploma at the defence force and served my time in the air force as a photographer … gender didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was how well you did' (Female, year 11, urban SHS).

In summary, expectations of future employment were characterised by a multiplicity of pathways and optimistic prospects for financial security. Occupational choice was also largely gendered, although gender was mostly perceived as unproblematic in employment.

Work and family roles

Of all the themes examined, the way in which young people expressed the work-family nexus was the most obviously gendered. Of 196 essays which referred to work-family boundaries, four-fifths were written by girls. The 41 boys who referred to the work-family nexus were far less likely than girls to suggest a prioritisation of family over work. Around half the boys who wrote about work-family issues acknowledged that their work commitments were likely to interfere with family life and to preclude being an involved spouse or father. For example, a year 11 boy from a metropolitan SHS wrote: 'Due to the distance travelled to work and the hours on the job I rarely get to enjoy quality time with my family.'

The other half of the boys' responses indicated that a balanced life could be achieved. However, the notion of 'balance' favoured the 'employment' sphere over caring and domestic responsibilities. For example, boys suggested they could exert personal control over working hours, work night shifts, outsource labour in their own businesses (one boy suggested his wife would take over the business on weekends so he could spend time with his children), keep in contact with family while travelling overseas and join their families on holidays. While three girls mentioned shared caring responsibilities with their partners and another three suggested their partners might be the primary care-givers, no boys presented these options.

Future work-family balance scenarios for girls were very different. A few girls acknowledged the difficulties they were likely to face in balancing paid work and family responsibilities, without resolving this dilemma. Typical of these responses was a year 9 metropolitan SHS girl: 'I work long hours each day and my kids have to catch buses to and from school and have learned to cook their own dinner.' In the vast majority of narratives, however, girls expressed confidence that they could successfully balance paid work and family life.

Unlike many of the boys, for whom 'balance' meant a distant involvement in family life that was secondary to paid work, almost all the girls envisioned 'balance' through the prism of primary care-giving. The prioritisation of family over employment was mentioned repeatedly in the narratives, including 'family comes first', 'my kids are my priority' and 'putting family before anything else'. Many girls also mentioned taking a career break during family formation and reducing working hours from full-time to part-time. Being a 'stay at home mum' was mentioned in ten narratives. As a year 11 girl from a provincial SHS explained, 'I took five years off working to look after my children. Once my children started attending primary school, I opened my own business and worked suitable hours as the mother of my family.'

While still assuming a primary care-giver role, other girls were silent on career breaks and part-time working, describing ambitious, high status full-time employment throughout child-rearing years. These girls cited strategies that they would use to exercise control over their jobs, such as alternative work scheduling, careers (particularly teaching) that fitted in with children's school hours, outsourcing work to others in their own businesses or working from home. They also highlighted the importance of individual efforts and commitment to family as a strategy for work-family balance. As a year 9 girl from a metropolitan SHS wrote: 'I sometimes find it difficult to spend time with my family, but I always put in the effort and find the time.'

While this study is not the first to identify gendered differences in future trajectories (see, for example, Fenton and Dermott, 2006; Hockey, 2009; Pocock, 2005), through the direct comparison between girls' and boys' narratives, some additional insights are provided around the challenges adolescents identified (or not) in domestic and employment roles and how they were reconciled (or not). In summary, while the potential for work-family imbalance was salient for many of the girls and some of the boys in the sample, their narratives, like those related to employment and property ownership earlier, reflected substantial agency in addressing any hurdles, resulting in a largely uncomplicated future. Both boys and girls expected an autonomous, independent future with reliable and satisfying employment. However, in contrast to Sanders and Munford's

(2008) study of middle class girls which found that young women segmented a relational present and an occupational, independent future, around half of the girls in this study expected a *simultaneously* relational and autonomous future. These girls expressed expectations of satisfying, demanding, often professional careers, alongside primary care-giving and a range of other traditional domestic tasks. The inherent tensions associated with this scenario were rarely expressed. This belief, that demanding careers and 'always putting family first' were compatible, is suggestive of notions of resistant, feminine identities (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2001). It also suggests that many young women will be engaged in balancing acts between traditional and detraditional notions of gender (Gordon et al., 2005), attempting to remake gendered inequalities within changed conditions and a new language of choice (Adkins, 2002).

The other half of the girls acknowledged that combining autonomous, demanding careers and primary care-giving was problematic. These girls had resigned themselves to 'fragmented careers' (Fenton and Dermott, 2006: 217–218) and cited strategies such as career breaks and reductions in working hours, abandoning autonomy in favour of a period of economic dependence while children were young. These expectations were in contrast to boys, who expressed a clearly autonomous future and an awareness of the tensions between a demanding career and a deep involvement in family life. No boys referred directly to expectations of primary care-giving or of sharing care. These gendered views of future care arrangements are in contrast to the Australian adolescent boys and girls in Pocock's (2006: 129–130) study. With a smaller but more heterogeneous sample, Pocock (2006: 131) found that 40 percent of both boys and girls held expectations of 'shared care', however, shared care was contingent on financial positions and 'preferences' of future partners. Hence, the findings of both Pocock's (2006) study and the current research, emphasises the 'default position' of female care.

Conclusions

This research examined written narratives of young people's expectations of lifecourse trajectories, revealing rich and complex patterns of young people's expected journeys to adulthood and their understandings of the possibilities open to them. The data revealed a strong discourse of choice and agency about their futures, suggesting that the policy and public rhetoric of choice has been internalised not only, as Brannen and Nilsen (2002) suggest, by the privileged few, but across the social divide. However, there is a tension between the rhetoric which emphasises responsibility for individually and self-consciously navigating pathways to adulthood and high expectations of choice, and the reality of available opportunities and imposed constraints – factors which have an impact but are beyond the control of any individual. This tension may lead to increased frustration and the marginalisation of some groups, as well as deeper divisions between those whose opportunities align with dominant discourses and those whose experiences do not measure up to them. Hence, the way young people view their futures needs to be seen through the lens of the dual epistemology of agency as well as structure (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002).

The findings partially support the assertion made in some previous work that adolescents have adopted a 'model of deferment' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 520) by delaying certain markers of 'adulthood'. However, the adolescents in this study did not anticipate

postponing or delaying work identities (e.g. Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) in favour of an extended period of youth (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Instead, the data suggest young people only intended to delay adulthood with respect to family formation, with post-school intentions firmly focused on gaining qualifications and work experience in order to be financially secure.

The gendered patterns of expected domestic/employment roles found in the data support Beck's (1992) assertion that the 'equalisation of prerequisites' in education have not extended to employment and domestic labour, even for these 14 and 16-year-olds who have grown up in a world steeped in gender-neutral rhetoric. There are several possible consequences of these expectations of domestic and employment roles. It is likely that for young women who embrace femininity (Gordon et al., 2005) and who expect to sacrifice career opportunities by working part-time or leaving the labour market altogether, few contradictions are likely to arise. Inequality will persist unchallenged. However, contradictions are likely to be acutely felt where women embrace some aspects of changing gender relations, such as opportunities for continuous careers, while retaining other, more traditionally gendered roles, such as primary care-giving. This tension may threaten a 'sense of life control' which, along with social relations, is a powerful determinant of life satisfaction for both men and women (Khattab and Fenton, 2009: 22). For material changes to catch up with the consciousness of change (Beck, 1992), women may be faced with one of two choices. They may abandon the idea of an independent, autonomous future, as many do, especially when they encounter unexpected structural barriers such as systemic discrimination or harassment in their workplaces. Alternatively, they may relinquish notions of neo-traditionalism, especially primary care-giving, while actively pursuing egalitarian household roles. For the young men, the status quo of gender relations was largely uncontested.

Even in a relatively large sample of adolescent narratives such as those examined in this research, only certain insights can be offered into the way youth expect to navigate their pathways to adulthood. First, the sample was a relatively homogeneous one in terms of age and class. This focus provided a useful contrast with previous studies of middle class and mixed class students (e.g. Bulbeck, 2005; Pocock, 2005; Sanders and Munford, 2008) with its emphasis on youth most likely to be vulnerable in the 'new economy', and it allowed for a nuanced examination of gender differences while holding class constant. However, the approach did not support an analysis of how class impacted the themes identified. The lack of evidence for young people wanting to vigorously pursue leisure time in the post-school years may reflect that few students have access to family resources to purchase an immediately gratifying lifestyle. The 'life will be easier when I'm older' scenarios described may also reflect the relative disadvantage of the sample in terms of class and rurality. However, at the time the data was collected, in 2008, the booming mining sector offered substantial opportunity for employment and prosperity for many of these students. In different economic circumstances, the self-conscious ownership of future pathways (Ball et al., 2000) and the strong sense of agency identified in the data may be diluted, consequently making more visible the tension between aspirations and reality.

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