

Continuity and Change in the Experiences of Transition from School to Work

John Goodwin, Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

Henrietta O'Connor, Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

Contact Details:

The Centre for Labour Market Studies,

University of Leicester,

7-9 Salisbury Road,

Leicester,

UK LE1 7QR

Tel: 0116 2525944

Fax: 0116 2525953

jdg3@le.ac.uk

Biographical Note:

John Goodwin is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

Henrietta O'Connor is a Lecturer at the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.

Abstract

Using previously unanalysed data from Norbert Elias's lost study of young workers in Leicester - the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* (1962-1964), and data from a subsequent restudy of the same respondents in 2003-2005, this paper focuses on three main themes. First, we critically examine the concept of transition as it is currently used in education and youth research. We argue that the vast majority of what is written about the transition process focuses upon how the process has changed over time. However such approaches, whilst clearly documenting important aspects of social change, ignore and underestimate continuities and similarities in the young peoples' experiences of transition, regardless of their spatial and temporal location. For example, despite significant labour market changes in the UK, young people still have to make the transition from full-time education to whatever follows next, be it employment, unemployment or further and higher education.

Second, we examine the young workers' experiences and perceptions of the transition process in the 1960s. Building upon analyses offered elsewhere (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2005) the data suggests that the young person's experiences of school to work transitions in the 1960s had many similarities to the transitional experience today – namely that, as now, the transition process was characterised by complexity, uncertainty and risk.

Finally, the impact of these early transition experiences on subsequent careers are also examined as revealed in the life history interviews of the restudy. Despite a drastically changing local labour market, and the fact that most of the workers were no longer working in the industries of their youth, the analysis reveals the sample retained a strong sense of occupational identity based on their initial transition experiences.

The paper concludes by highlighting the significance of the findings of this particular data set. The data is unique because it provides a rare insight of the outcomes of decisions made by school leavers some forty years ago on their experiences of the labour market. As such it provides an invaluable glimpse of the lasting impact of the school to work transition on individual working lives.

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Introduction

The process through which young people make the transition from school to work has been a focus for youth studies and the sociology of youth since the early 1960s. However, it was not until the early to mid-1970s, when youth unemployment and decreasing employment opportunities for young people became issues more attention was given to the problem of youth (both in terms of transitions and more generally) (see Blackler 1970; Bazalgette 1975; Ashton and Field 1976). During the 1970s larger companies either stopped employing large numbers of school-leavers or became involved with government youth training schemes (Fuller and Unwin 1998). The research focus at this time shifted to issues around the growth of youth unemployment and the impact of government training schemes. As Roberts (1995:23) has highlighted ‘...the scarcer young people’s employment opportunities have become the more attention has been paid to their preparation and eventual entry into the labour market’. However, some have argued that this has led to an over-concentration on transitions, as Cohen and Ainley (2000) argue

The youth as transition approach not only implies a linear teleological model of psychological development, it is premised upon the availability of waged labour as the ‘ultimate goal’. The consequent emphasis on production has led to a limited research paradigm focused on ‘transition’ as a rite of passage between the states of psychological maturity and immaturity...Cohen and Ainley, 2000: 80)

Yet despite their call for youth studies to move beyond the ‘narrow empiricism’ of youth transitions and offer empirical studies that explore youth as a complex mix of social,

psychological, economic, cultural and political processes, the interest in youth transitions *per se*, remains very strong with explorations of current transitions (Ahier *et al* 2000; Johnston *et al* 2000; Kelly and Kenway 2001), of 'historical' transitions (Fuller and Unwin 2001; Vickerstaff 2003; Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005) and generational differences (Strathdee 2001). There is much to learn from the school to work transition process and we argue in this paper, as elsewhere (see Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005) that researchers need to problematise past studies of transition and re-examine data from long completed projects to question the orthodoxy of the earlier (and current) accounts.

The rediscovery of 854 interview schedules from a project carried out at the University of Leicester between 1962 and 1964, has provided us with such an opportunity. This rediscovered data was used to form a new project '*From Young Workers To Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course*'¹ and allowed us to examine continuity and change in the transition from school to work in one city over the past forty years. In the first section of this paper we attempt to reassess the orthodox view of transitions before briefly discussing our methodological approach. We then explore the young workers expectations of work and the realities of their actual transitional experiences. Before concluding we consider what actually happened to the young workers in later life, reflecting upon on subsequent careers and their experiences as 'older workers'.

Reassessing The 'Orthodox' View of Youth Transitions

The literature on the transition from school to work is broadly split into two historical camps. First, there is the literature based on studies undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s (Wilson 1957; Carter 1963; Douglas 1964; Bazalgette 1975; Ashton and Field 1976). These studies are characterised by a number of features including analyses that highlight

relatively buoyant youth labour markets; the ease with which transitions were made during this time (albeit homogeneous determined by gender, class, family background, and educational attainment); and use concepts such as niches and trajectories (see Evans and Furlong 1997). The post-war period up to the mid 1970s is characterised as a 'golden age' for school to work transitions with young people making smooth, linear and uncomplicated transitions from school to work and obtaining their workplace training during a 'heyday' of apprenticeships.

A classic example of this period is the book '*Young Workers: The Transition From School to Work*' by Ashton and Field (1976)². Ashton & Field (1976) identified three groups central to understanding the transition process, as the *careerless*, the *short-term careers* and the *extended careers*, with each group attaching different meanings to work, reflecting their different experiences and self-image. For example, the careerless entered semi-skilled and unskilled work, without adjustment problems, from the lower streams of state schools. Their concern was for the immediate present and they worked in jobs that provided good short-term economic rewards but limited future prospects. This group had low levels of commitment and a boredom threshold so frequently changed jobs considering themselves not suited to jobs requiring lengthy training. Those in the short-term careers category were moderately successful at school and went on to seek jobs in the skilled manual trades, technical occupations and clerical work, choosing jobs to 'make something of themselves'. These jobs offered development through training (with many experiencing lengthy periods of training/further education at the start of their jobs), and a degree of long-term security with the young workers becoming locked into the occupation based in their job specific skills. The third group, identified as 'extended careers', had more middle-class backgrounds and were aware of the link between academic success and entry to a good career. They focused on long-term rewards and

their career paths offered continuous advancement and high, secure incomes. Their self-image was as intelligent individuals capable of considerable self-development. As such they embarked upon careers that required a long period of learning in order to progress and develop their potential skills. The three categories identified by Ashton and Field (1976) illustrated neatly the straightforward nature of the transition process based on family, class and school experiences, with all the young workers having niches to enter in the labour market in a smooth, predictable and unproblematic way.

Literature in the second historical camp comes from studies undertaken post 1975 when the youth labour market began to collapse. These studies focus on the substitution of work with youth training schemes; the rising levels of youth and unemployment and the lack of opportunities; problems with supply and demand; and the increasingly fragmented, extended, complex, individualised and risky nature of the transition from school to work (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). A recent example of this approach is provided by Worth (2005) who, using data from the UK *Department of Work and Pensions*, highlights four key trends in recent patterns of youth employment

Young People change employers more often than previous generations did....Young people are changing employers much more than older people do....Young people are more likely to be in temporary jobs than older workers...[and] Young people are starting long-term jobs later in life. (Worth 2005: 406-407)

Worth (2005) argues notions of employability and current government policies, such as the *New Deal*, do little to address the ‘churning’ of young people through low paid, low level service jobs in which there are no incentive for employers to invest in the training. The contrast between Ashton and Field (1976) and Worth (2005) is seemingly stark with

young people in the 1960s *all* having labour market niches to enter whereas youth in 2005 all seemingly have limited immediate prospects and opportunities.

However, there are serious conceptual problems in treating these two broad periods in such a dichotomous way. First, the perception of transitions to work in the 1950s and 1960s is mediated by a strong nostalgic view of the past still dominant in the literature which means that past studies of the school to work transition process are treated uncritically and presented as unproblematic. This does little more than perpetuate a caricature the 1950s and 1960s and is problematic as it underestimates the level of individual complexity in past transitional experiences and ignores the continuities and similarities in young peoples' experiences of transition, regardless of their spatial and temporal location. Second, it is epistemologically fallacious to ignore the links between past and present, which we would argue are part of a same (but ever changing) long-term social process (see Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Goodwin and O'Connor 2005; 2007). As Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) argue, transitional experiences do not *suddenly* become more stressful and problematic as compared to before, but instead change over time - 'one cannot ignore the fact that present society has grown out of earlier societies' (Elias 1987:226). Finally, treating the findings of past youth transitions studies as 'given' ignores the broad conceptual shifts that have taken place over the last forty years and the move from macro inspired analyses toward more micro concerns. We simply cannot accept, uncritically, the findings of past studies as somehow being fully representative of the reality of youth transitions in the 1950s and 1960s as most of these studies were too pre-occupied with structural issues and systematically ignored the individually complex subjective experiences (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005). A re-examination of past studies, therefore, has potentially a great deal to reveal about young peoples' transitional experiences and, as Furlong *et al* (2005) suggest, it is now

... somewhat premature to argue that youth transitions have greatly increased in complexity over the last few decades. To argue for an increase in complexity, it is necessary to reanalyse some of the major surveys conducted in the 1960s and 1970s with the benefit of modern conceptual and methodological sophistication...We are only just beginning to appreciate just how complex transitions were prior to the 1970s. (Furlong *et al* 2005: 29)

The Data

The data used in this paper is taken from the *Economic and Social Research Council* (ERSC - R000223653) funded project '*From Young Workers To Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course*'. This research was based on two data sets relating to the same respondents interviewed when they were teenagers in the 1960s and again when approaching retirement in 2004. The origins of the project is the school to work transition research undertaken by Norbert Elias, at the University of Leicester in the early 1960s. Funded by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (D.S.I.R) Elias's *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* examined how young people experienced the transition from school to work, not only how people learned to do a job, but also how they acquired the prevalent adult standards or norms of behaviour. In doing so he focused on their problems of adjusting to work, arguing that difficulties arose in that the behaviours and attitudes of adults in the workplace differed considerably to those adults the young people were familiar with. Developing ideas contained within *The Civilising Process* (2000), at the heart of Elias theorising on young workers was a view that the transition from school to work was characterised by 'shock' experiences and an argument that most young people experience real difficulties in adjusting to their new role as adults, workers, and independent money earners.

It is the work, the occupation, the whole undreamed of reality of the adult world which is responsible for the stresses of adolescents in that situation....The most precise expression of which I can think at the moment is probably “reality shock”. (Elias 1962, p.1)

For Elias (1962) there were eight specific problems relating to the transition to adulthood that contributed to the experience as a one of shock. They are - *the prolonged separation of young people from adults; the indirect knowledge of the adult world; the lack of communication between adults and children; the social life of children in the midst of an adult world with limited communication between the two; the role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life; the social role of young people is ill-defined and ambiguous; the striving for independence through earning money constitutes a new social dependence (on work rather than parents); and finally the prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity.* To illuminate the shock hypothesis further we can briefly examine the prolonged separation of young people from adults and the role of fantasy elements versus reality.

The central problem arises from the fact that a complex society such as ours requires customarily a prolonged period of indirect preparation and training for adult life. By indirect I mean from the age of 5 to 14,15 or 16 the growing up children of our society are trained for their adult tasks in special institutions which we call schools, where they learn, where they acquire the knowledge about the adult world past, present and future not by direct contact with it, but largely from books. Their actual knowledge of the adult world, their only contacts with adults, are relatively limited. (Young Worker Project, 1962: 2)

As the quotation suggests, for Elias when a young person begins to make the transition to work and adulthood their role is not clear because, unlike in previous societies, there is a limited amount of contact between young people and adults beyond immediate

family, friends and teachers. This limited contact with adults, and the fact that school leavers are taught very little to prepare them for the reality of starting work, means when they enter work there has to be a reorganisation social reality of the young worker which, according to Elias, causes anxiety or shock:

Before they enter their job, adolescents have a highly selective and still rather unrealistic perception of the adult world and of their life in it. The encounter with reality enforces a reorganisation of their perception. This is a painful process for a least two different reasons. First, because every strongly enforced reorganisation of perceptions is painful. Second, to all intents and purposes the “social reality” to which the youngsters have to get used, is unsatisfactory and the gap between the adult reality as it turns out to be is very great indeed. This is the objective situation...We are after the actual experiences to which it gives rise...“shock-experience” or “reality-shock” understood as something which may have a variety of forms, which may sometimes be sudden and biting and sometimes slowly coming over the years ending in a final shock of recognition that there will never be anything else...(Elias 1962, p.1)

A further contributing factor to the ‘shock experience’, Elias suggests, was the degree of difference between fantasy and reality held by the child, versus the reality of the adult world. To illustrate this Elias argued that young people, when leaving school, perceived the wider choices, freedoms and benefits that work would bring but never focused on its limitations. Given this the encounter with reality the transition from school to work is characterised by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and shock.

Elias’s research on the experience of transition was carried out between 1962 and 1964, based on interviews with a sample of young people drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of school leavers from the summer and Christmas of 1960 and 1962. From

an initial sample of 1150 young workers 882 interviews were completed, around three-quarters with boys and remainder with girls. The interview schedule was semi-structured and the respondents were asked questions focused on their experience of transition. The data was archived in the mid 1970s and remained untouched until 851 of the original interview schedules were rediscovered in 2001. With the exception of a few cases used by Ashton and Field (1976) the majority of the data had not been analysed or previously published (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2006).

In 2001 funding was provided by the ESRC for the tracing and re-interview of some 200 of the original respondents with the aim of finding out what had exactly happened to them since the original 1960s study. Table 1 outlines both the composition of the original sample and the reinterviewed sample. The table illustrates that the young people were classified according to gender and to the length of time they had spent in formal education. Sample groups A, C, D and E left school at minimum legal age and group B spent an additional year at school. The final sample interviewed comprised a relatively even mix of individuals from each category although women were under-represented as tracing women, many of whom had changed their name on marriage, proved a difficult task.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

The re-interview was semi-structured and covered topics including work histories, education and training and social attitudes. The research instrument included qualitative questions to allow respondents to elaborate on aspects of their lives. The respondent's original responses to the first study also generated further reflective data. Despite our research instrument having some structure, the interviews tended to be more open and qualitative in nature. The respondents often began the interviews by talking about

significant life events, which meant the interview schedule had to be adapted during the interview process.

We now go on to consider the young workers individual perceptions and expectations of paid work before moving on to consider the reality of their experiences.

Individual Perceptions and Expectations of Paid Employment

The interview schedule included a series of questions examining the young workers' preconceived ideas about working life. As the quotes below illustrate, although these respondents had been keen to leave school they were under no illusion about the reality of work and most felt that it would be a bad experience. Whilst prison analogies had been used to describe the experience of school, work was compared to 'slavery'.

...I thought it would be ghastly, working continuously without a break, without being able to talk to anyone, that's what I thought it would be...

...a bit like school, very strict and worked like slaves...

...start in the morning and slave right through...

There was also a fear that like school, the workplace would be hierarchically structured with the young worker at the bottom. The main concerns focused around discipline and the fear of being 'told off', not being allowed to talk to workmates and being watched over constantly.

...expected everyone would be shouting at you...

...I thought you'd get told off if you did anything wrong...

...I thought they would be bossy. If you did the least thing I thought you would get the sack. I was scared.

Many of the respondents recalled that they had been very frightened at the prospect of entering work. Their fears centred both on their ability to perform the job role and on other people at work:

Frightened for a start in case I couldn't cut straight, shears very heavy, thought I would never manage.

I expected to be a bit rough, I didn't expect it to be easy, it scared me a bit to start with because I didn't know what I would be doing.

I was nervous of the chaps I was going to work with - I was really scared.

I was more nervous than anything else. Going into a factory, strange people, I didn't know whether they'd like you, whether you'd do your job properly.

What becomes evident from the data is that the largely negative perceptions of work had been informed by comments from teachers who had described work as harder and more unpleasant than school:

The impression they gave me at school that it was all rough and hard graft going out into the big wide world.

Headmaster and form master said you'd wish you were back here - it was a large leap from leaving school and starting work.

However, regardless of their rather negative expectations of employment, work was seen as an important life change to be looked forward to. The desire to escape from school and '...the prospect of money and the cultural membership amongst real men beckons very seductively...' (Willis, 1977:100) far outweighing any fear or trepidation.

Complex Transitions and the Realities of Work

The data also reveals the transition from school to work for many of the young workers in this sample was non-linear and complex, more individualised and lengthier than any previous studies had suggested. An uncomplicated transition is characterised by the absence of major breaks in employment, divergences or reversals (Furlong *et al.* 2002: 7) whereas non-linear or complex transitions 'involve breaks, changes of direction and unusual sequences of events' (Furlong *et al.* 2002: 8). A 'usual' sequence of events for youth transitions in the 1960s would be a linear, smooth transition with young people entering labour market position based on family, class and educational background. An unusual transition for this time would include periods of unemployment, changes in direction, frequent job moves with the young workers experience none of the certainties that are said to characterise employment at this time. However, the data reveals that many of young workers in the study did experience changes of direction and reversals with some changing their jobs as many as seven times in the first year of employment. Contrary to popular belief that this was simply done due to the availability of work, many suggested they changed jobs because of poor training, pay and working conditions, not being able to sign apprenticeship papers and workplace bullying:

Wanted to be a fitter but just to work in sheet metal dept. Passed exam to be apprentice but told me there was no vacancy.

Felt not getting on in job - wanted an apprenticeship but not given one.

The strain on my eyes on some of the work - I had to wait a month for glasses - they filled the post machinist job and said I'd have to be a runabout for 2 years so I left.

They started timing the jobs and if you didn't do it as well as the person before had they would tell you off. An older man was before me and they expected me to do the work in the same time. It was just slave labour as far as I was concerned.

Likewise, many experienced breaks in their employment and periods of unemployment, with some also having a sense of 'fear' about being out of work. As the interviewer notes reveal

He couldn't get a job to start with so he had an uncle in carpentry who ... gave him pocket money.

It took quite a few weeks until I found the right job...

The respondent has had fears of unemployment and general economic insecurity. It came out several times in the interview.

He was worried when it came to leaving school in case he didn't get a job: took the first he could get because it was better than being unemployed.

Another key feature of Ashton and Field (1976) and Carter (1963) and subsequent discussions (Roberts 1995), is that transitions are a 'homogenised' process with all those sharing a similar biographies entering similar work at the same time (Roberts 1995:113). As we have reported elsewhere (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005), the respondents in the *Adjustment of Young Workers* project were asked 'did anyone else you know have the same sort of jobs as you?' and 'was there anyone you knew working in the same firm?'. Both questions capture the elements of Roberts (1995) argument and reveal the extent to which the transitions were homogeneous or individualised. Out of the 851 respondents, around fifty per cent young workers did not make the homogenised transitions and forty nine percent of the respondents suggested that they did not work in the same sort of job as their friends or relatives. Fifty two percent of the respondents indicated that they did not know anybody working in the same firm.

A point that struck me is that I left a year earlier than I could and one of my friends stayed on for the extra year.

No, I don't think I really did know anybody in the hosiery industry because as I say all my friends of the same age all practically at the same time moved into different types of job.

A key feature of contemporary transitions is that they have become lengthier, prolonged and not single step, whereas in the past it is argued that the transition process was much short with young people finding a job, getting married and leaving home in a relatively short space of time. However, our data again questions this orthodox view as, whilst the vast majority of young workers did leave school as soon as they could, most of young workers in this study reminded dependent on their family for housing, money and

decision making long after starting work. For example, many of the young workers relied on their mothers or fathers to resolve any problems they had at work and it was not uncommon for a parent to be at the workplace.

We started at Tech for one year and then he stopped us going the following year. My father got the trade union in and the secretary went to see the boss. He got it so that we shall carry on at Tech next September.

I was told by the personnel officer when I started in my first year that if I did well at night school should be given a day release but I wasn't sent although my report was very good. I saw the personnel officer, I showed report. He made excuses said that every boy couldn't go. Parents went to see him too and were told the same.

Likewise, the majority were still living at home, despite having left school up to four years previously, and the young workers had not financially 'disengaged with their family of origin' (Hubbard 2000:97) with many handing over their entire pay to their mothers and fathers in return for which they received pocket money for sweets and going out.

I give it all to mother and she gives me spending money - about a £1.

[Mother has] All my wage packet, I have spending money...

Say I come home with £6 she gives me £2 spending money then 12-6 for my dinners and bus fares.

As well as exploring the complexity of the transition process, the data reveals the reality of the young workers initial experiences of work. As in Carter's (1963) study, the

majority of these school-leavers were pleasantly surprised by their early experiences of work and, of those who responded to the question, 62 per cent suggested that work had not been what they had expected. They found that overall it was very different to school life and in general a more positive experience than school had been perhaps because of the 'dignity and freedom' (Carter, 1963) the young workers were given. For example, the workplace was found not to be strict or monitored and there was a lack of discipline compared to school. The work itself was easier than expected and the young workers found that they were treated as adults, able to work at their own pace and allowed to stop and talk to their colleagues. In this respect work was also less restrictive than had been feared and the older, established workers were friendlier than had been anticipated.

...It was much easier. They didn't stand over you watching everything you did like I thought they would...

...Everyone friendly - if you did anything wrong you would be told but not told off...

...everybody just talking to each other and if you want a word with each other just switch machines off, put tools down and go and have a chat...

I thought I was going to have to work really hard & do as I'm told & all sorts but then it's not really like that at all once you know what you're doing & you're on your own time you please yourself.

However, others had less positive experiences than expected and reflected that

When you go into a shop you tend to think of glamorous side of it, and not the dirty jobs you have to do.

If you make a mistake you have to stand by it but at school it is just written off. At work there is no way of passing it off.

I think that being a prefect, I got used to not being treated like a child, but at work I was the lowest kind of worker.

The machines were small and not as efficient as I'd expected. There were no breaks. The conditions weren't good.... The girls didn't bother with their appearance. Language wasn't what it should have been.

Whatever Happened to the Young Workers ?

As highlighted in the methodology section of this paper, although the original 1960s project was not intended to be longitudinal, we were able to trace and re-interview the young workers some forty years later, as they approached retirement. This represented a unique opportunity to examine the long-term impact of the experience of the school to work transition on eventual career path and work histories. As MacDonald *et al.* (2001) suggest, studies of youth transition usually focus only on the age range of 16-19 but 'by looking *forwards* we can track the outcomes of these early careers to see where they lead as people enter their early and mid-twenties'. Our data enables us to track the outcomes of transition much further and to build complete and individualised work histories for this group of respondents. This paper now moves on to explore the significance of the early transitional experiences on the employment trajectories of this group of individuals, now classified as older workers.

There is an increased interest in older workers within the literature on work and employment (Roberts, 2006), however, existing accounts tend not to follow the same

cohort of workers through their lifecourse or, alternatively, they rely on respondents reconstructing their past working lives from memory (Vickerstaff, 2003). Where longitudinal studies have been used they tend not to encompass both labour market entry and exit, for example, the respondents in the *National Child Development Study* are not yet in a position to contemplate labour market exit. However, our cohort were in their late 50s and early 60s and represented a useful group for the exploration of themes relating to older workers and work through the lifecourse.

In the re-interviews we were interested in the respondent's work histories, their experiences of unemployment and labour market inactivity and their qualifications, skills and training. We also aimed to link the actual work experiences of the respondents to the career paths predicted for this group by Ashton and Field (1976) at the outset of their working lives (the *careerless*, the *short-term careers* and the *extended careers* – see above). Access to the same group of individuals some forty years later enabled us to 'test' their predictions to some extent and to measure the impact of the early transitional experience on future work trajectories.

There were many examples of individuals who, at the outset of their working lives, clearly fitted one of Ashton and Field's three groups. However, over the long term, Ashton and Field's predicted linear and highly differentiated paths for these individuals did not develop in such a simple way. The career paths for all three groups were characterised by far greater levels of individual complexity and insecurity which could not be explained fully by family background, social class or educational achievement. When asked to talk about their work and career histories, respondents did not provide simple, one step accounts of their working lives. Their employment histories were often

characterised by high levels of job mobility with moves in and out of positions and even occupations.

Data from the reinterviews, which took place forty years later, reveals that many individuals diverged from their predicted path soon after the first interview. This was particularly true amongst those originally predicted to have 'extended careers'. For example, amongst this group there were individuals who soon after the original interview, moved in to short-term careers in factories, lured by the attraction of high wages. At the time of the re-interview many recalled that they had seen their friends entering high paid and lucrative work in factories. Whilst they were aware that their own trainee roles had better long term prospects the lure of immediate high wages in traditional industries proved hard to resist. Whereas this group had been predicted to enter and remain in managerial and professional work, lower white collar work or to jobs as skilled craft workers, the reality was that individuals moved between these pathways, shifting from white collar work into semi-skilled manual work and eventually into unskilled work.

A good example of this career path is Michael, who came from a middle class background and obtained five GCE 'O' levels on leaving school. At the time of his first interview he had secured employment as a trainee chartered accountant and he explained to the interviewer that he was *'on the road to becoming a professionally qualified man'*. Soon after the original interview he was dismissed from his position when his employers discovered he also had a part-time sales job. His career then became chaotic and unplanned. He became a knitter in a textiles factory and then took a series of jobs as a clerk, a window cleaner, a labourer, a shop assistant and a warehouse manager. Some forty years later, reflecting on leaving his 'extended career' and becoming a knitter, he

commented that *'As I explained, in those terms I was less worried about my long-term career and more worried about the money in my pocket'*.

However, there was some support for the predictions made by Ashton and Field (1976) about job stability and training amongst all groups. For example, for those with predicted extended careers there were generally higher rates of job stability with the majority having held 5 or fewer jobs in total. By contrast more than two thirds of the careerless and short-term career groups had held six or more jobs, whilst some had held between ten and fifty different jobs, interspersed with periods of unemployment, in forty years of work. A good example of this type of work history is Bob. He was the youngest of two boys from a working class background and had left school without qualifications. Although originally identified as falling in to the group of 'short term career' having secured employment as an apprentice engineer on leaving school, he soon became 'careerless'. Over forty years of work he had held jobs as a knitter, a turner, a removal man, an engineer and he had experienced six periods of unemployment.

Respondents such as Michael and Bob explained the high number of positions held by citing the decline of traditional industries in Leicester. As a consequence of this decline they were happy to take any available work for financial reasons. Although based on a very small sample size, these findings do seem to lend some support to Ashton and Field's (1976) suggestion that there would be high rates of job mobility, explained by frequent job moves in pursuit of short term higher financial rewards, for those who left school at minimum school leaving age.

For many of those who moved jobs frequently money was not the only explanation for their job mobility. Occupational training was also very important to many of the

respondents in the short-term career group of the sample and this appears to be a trend throughout their careers. In their first interviews respondents explained that those positions with opportunities for education, training and advancement were better than those without. Learning at work and employer support for workplace learning was so highly prized by the young workers that limited learning opportunities were often cited as the reason for frequent job moves. Despite notions that learning at work is a recent concept, workplace learning was widespread through all industries and occupations in the 1960s. The data suggests that learning at work was a positive process when compared to formal education. Workplace learning for many of the young people entering apprenticeships in the 1960s was as much about acquiring an occupational identity as it was learning the required skills.

Indeed, although at the time of the reinterview most individuals were no longer working in the industry for which they were originally trained there was a sense that it was their early occupational training and subsequent occupational socialisation (for example, as engineers or mechanics) that retained the greatest importance for them. Whilst many found that the skills they had learnt in the hosiery and boot and shoe industry were no longer in demand, they nevertheless retained a very strong sense of occupational identity, often formed in their very first jobs. Based on their responses it was clear that some felt they 'had done well very for themselves' because of their early access to vocational training and that their current occupations, often based in the service industry, were not a true reflection of their identities as workers. For example, one respondent had been an engineer throughout his working life and he was proud of the skills he had learnt but regretted the fact that these skills were no longer important:

Yeah trouble is a lot of my skills have been superceded. I mentioned being able to work a plug ball machine you don't see those now. I could work a capstan lathe, you don't see those so much now they've all been taken over by CNC (Computer Numerical Control). Now it doesn't just stop at working a capstan lathe, it's a case of being able to screw cut to be able to cut threads and to be able to use what you call a roller box and now these were skills that I know and have retained but don't use.

Another of the respondents had worked his way up to become a training manager in a knitwear company where he had worked since leaving school:

I became a training instructor with []. I was the first one in the company to become a training instructor. I got selected, and in that we were used as, like, training instructors, supervising, helping shift managers, etc. You know, positions of responsibility. They called us team leaders, but we were doing the same job. I passed me training instructor in '92 and I went into management ... we were supervising shifts and running different areas, without money. But we were doing it because we loved it, you know.

Once the knitwear factory closed down he took a job in a snack preparation factory, with a similar level of responsibility, yet he appeared not to feel the same level of pride about the job or the standard of training he was now expected to provide:

I took a team leader role. Well, it's similar to before. It's management. It's supervising, it's documentation, not so much health and safety as I'd like, training, but the training's not, it's a bit more basic. The training's not in-depth like we'd got it at []. We use a lot of temps, you see, so half my shift any night's going to be temps. So, if they're new temps, you have to train than up, on the run, like, 'cause you start at ten o'clock and it's go, go, go.

Some reflected upon their desire to pass on their skills to a new generation, as their own skills had been passed down to them, but recognised that the labour market has changed so extensively that these skills are no longer required. A number of respondents also mourned the decline of the hosiery and footwear industries, the decline in traditional apprenticeships, the under utilisation of their skills and their lack of current skills:

Well I don't know what else to do really, 'cos I mean hosiery's definitely a dying trade, there's nothing at all unless you can overlock or you're a lock stitch machinist. That's about all there is going, and several people I know who've gone back into hosiery have been made redundant again... So I thought I'll try something else and I applied for one at a old people's home like helping out with the cooking and that kind of thing but you've got have a hygiene certificate and I haven't got that.

It's such a tragedy, because there's none of it (knitwear industry) ... it sort of almost broke my heart, considering how the knitwear was sort of central to Leicester. Same with the knitwear, Boot and Shoe and engineering, and it's just gone. I think it's disgusting, really. You'll find two or three factories, they're sort of shadows of their former... you've got Richard Roberts, which is virtually on its knees and now going to have all their stuff made abroad.

Conclusion

Our access to data collected some forty years ago, and equally importantly, the opportunity to revisit the original respondents as they are approaching retirement has provided a unique dataset. The data collected has enabled us not only to examine the impact of early transitional experience on future career and employment paths but also

to ‘test’ predictions made forty years earlier by both Elias and by Ashton and Field. In terms of the shock hypothesis, despite being largely dismissed as being ‘common sense’ (see Carter 1963; Ashton 1973; Ashton and Field 1976), reassessment of the data suggests that Elias’s concerns are not without current relevance, as the following quotation from Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggests

... the current generation of young people are making their transitions to work in a period of turmoil and as a consequence may lack the clear frames of reference which can help smooth transitions on a subjective level. In this respect, entry to the world of work in the 1990s is characterised by a heightened sense of risk. (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 12)

Underpinning both risk and shock debates are indicators of the tensions, uncertainties and change in habitus that accompanies transition and such experiences are as true forty years ago as they are today. It is also true to suggest that, at the time that the original data was collected, Elias’s concept of transition as a ‘shock experience’ was never actually ‘tested’ or explored empirically as the data was archived before a full analysis could take place. However, subsequent reanalysis, as we have reported elsewhere (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2006), suggests that the original data did contain cases of young workers that appeared to support of Elias’s shock hypothesis

This was first case I have met of a real traumatic shock on entering work. Her mother said that in her first job which only lasted a week she cried every night, couldn’t eat her food and couldn’t sleep. She wasn’t shown how to do anything, the people were snobbish, and she found it generally too much for her.

Her ambitions - modelling, air hostess, own salon by 20 are all very out of track with reality. Perhaps her maturity has been put off partly as a result of being an only child of rather old parents.

This boy gave some evidence of having experienced a 'shock' on going to work. It took him, he said, a month to get adjusted.

In many cases, some forty years later approaching retirement, the respondents could also recall in some detail their feelings of 'shock' at entering the world of work and their in unease about being in a world where people behaved very differently to the adults in their families or the teachers at school. For example,

I was shocked the language from the women. The women swore more than the guys did....I hadn't heard it before....My parents didn't swear in front of us and grandparents and aunts and uncles you know... it was just the attitude and the severity of the language, if you like. It wasn't swearing it was, well it was downright filthy language.... a group of women using it all the time.

.... I knew I was going to work in a factory, but I was in a...it was going to be in an office in a factory, which it was... it was a bit of a shock to the system, I mean I went into a department with a hundred, a hundred and twenty, thirty women, of all ages, and there were there were two males...

Beyond the shock hypothesis of Elias, we have found that the work histories were ultimately far more complex and fragmented than originally predicted by Ashton and Field (1976). A striking trend identified from this unique longitudinal data set is that few individuals are retiring from the same industries in which they began their careers. Drastic changes in the local labour market over the past forty to fifty years mean that once well-established local industries and companies have all but disappeared from the industrial landscape and jobs and trades once thought to be 'secure' have disappeared alongside this. These traditional industries, which historically employed huge numbers

of school leavers in factories manufacturing knitwear, hosiery and boots and shoes, have largely been replaced by the service industry based employers. Snack and sandwich manufacturers and call centres have replaced traditional industries as large employers yet these jobs are not seen as providing young people with long-term career paths (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Worth, 2005). There is, perhaps, a far greater degree of continuity in transition than it would appear. Whilst the school leavers of the 1960s may originally have perceived their jobs as secure ultimately this was not the case and the rigorous training provided by highly valued apprentice schemes ultimately gave little job security as traditional industries disappeared.

In many respects little has changed and we have argued that contemporary transitions have much in common with historical transition experiences. The move from full-time education to employment has always been fraught with risk, uncertainty, insecurity and individualisation. Although in the past, the outcome of transitions were seen as largely predictable (Carter 1962; Ashton and Field 1976; Willis 1977), it is possible that the young workers subjective experiences were neither predictable, uniform nor unproblematic. As Lawy (2002:213) suggests, the transitional experience and the transformation of young people is ‘necessarily a personal, individual and psychical affair’. As such, in the past some young people may have coped with the experience far better than others. It is also possible that some members of earlier generations of youth felt exactly the same levels of risk and uncertainty as the current generation of young people. Indeed, as Furlong and Cartmel (1997:34) argue: ‘Young people’s transitional experiences can be seen as differentiated along the lines of class and gender. Indeed we suggest ... continuity rather than change best describes the trends of the last two decades’. We would go further and suggest that continuity best describes trends in youth transitions not just over the last two decades but also over the past fifty years.

Notes

[1] This is from the research project '*From Young Workers To Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course*' (ESRC - R000223653).

[2] The Ashton and Field (1976) text is also significant in terms of this paper as used a small number of the interviews from the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' project that we have re-analysed.

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Table 1 Sample Descriptions and Composition

Group	Original Target Sample	Archive Sample	Reinterviewed
<i>Pilot Study</i>	28	0	-
Practice*	16	-	-
<i>Actual Study</i>			
‘A’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with less than one years further education.	330	243	26
‘B’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with more than one years further education.	160	130	27
‘C’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1960, with less than one years further education.	300	202	34
‘D’ - girls who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with less than one years further education.	200	155	6
‘E’ - girls who had left school in summer or Christmas 1960, with less than one years further education.	160	105	4
Totals:	1150 (28) [†]	851(16) [†]	97

Note: * The practice schedules appeared to by ‘dry-run’ interviews with actual respondents. Some vary in the degree to which they were completed. [†] Totals including practice/pilot surveys.