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To Plan or Not To Plan? Young Adult Future Orientations in Two European Cities

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges existing contentions regarding the weakening of work identities amongst young adults and the proposition that labour market uncertainty inhibits life planning. It draws on analysis of 48 in-depth young adult interviews carried out in two globalizing, post-industrial cities, Bristol and Gothenburg, and presents a typology of future orientations which demonstrates the salience of employment to young adult identities. Since young adult life narratives are often about *what they want to become*, rather than *what they are*, analysis of aspirations is crucial for understanding the place of employment in their lives. The findings reveal a propensity towards detailed employment-centred life plans amongst young adults in Bristol, which contrasts with the desire to take life a 'day at a time' in Gothenburg. These emergent *future* orientations reveal alternative versions of the 'good life', which stem from the contrasting education and welfare regimes of the two countries, Britain and Sweden

KEY WORDS

future orientations / life plans / welfare regimes / young adults

Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various scientific hypotheses. But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not. (Kundera, 1999: 33)

Introduction

Global economic transformations of recent decades are thought to have had particularly marked consequences for young entrants to the labour market in advanced-industrial ‘western’ countries. Higher youth unemployment since the 1970s and the resultant extension of the youth phase of the life course – the period of economic dependence between child- and adulthood – is thought to have weakened young people’s engagement with the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, 1995).

Young Europeans’ lives are now characterized by episodes of education, employment, and unemployment; the sequence of which increasingly reflects *individual* experience rather than following the standard routes and *collective transitions* common for previous generations of school-leavers (Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco, 2003; Russell and O’Connell, 2001). Increasingly individualized employment pathways, as opposed to linear trajectories, are thought by some to exacerbate the trend towards a diminishing engagement with employment amongst the young. Elsewhere, however, these somewhat pessimistic accounts of post-industrial labour market change are countered by researchers who argue that insecure and transient employment have long been standard features of youth employment (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2005). This article addresses these themes with a particular focus on young adults’ (20–34 year olds) accounts of their futures.

I argue that analysis of aspirations is critical to conceptualizing young adult identities because the articulation of hopes and dreams – which do not necessarily reflect the individual’s immediate situation or options – are particularly revealing of versions of the ‘good life’ they aspire to. As Nilsen (1999: 178) puts it: ‘The distant future... can truly be seen from a viewpoint of a *mental construct*, as unreal as a work of fiction, which can make it easier to talk about in itself.’ This feature of ‘talk about the future’ lends itself to the study of abstract and hypothetical ideals and concerns, as the analysis presented here illustrates. Furthermore, the empirical focus on 48 biographical interviews with employed young adults in two European cities facilitates analysis of how different social and cultural contexts inform the dispositions which constitute the habitus. These dispositions encompass divergent orientations to the future amongst young Britons and Swedes, as this article sets out. It thus facilitates an empirical examination of the habitus, illustrating the complex interplay between national institutional regimes, opportunities and constraints in the labour market and young adult values.

Bristol and Gothenburg were chosen as sites for this study because they exhibit many of the features that are thought to characterize ‘globalizing’ cities in post-industrial economies at the beginning of the 21st century (Beauregard and Haila, 2000). The economic growth and prosperity of these post-industrial city-regions is more likely to foster optimism amongst young adults than less successful urban centres, which are characterized by economic decline, as the evidence presented here suggests. Nonetheless, distinguishing between city-specific and

country-specific findings presents a challenge in a two-city, two-country study. Disentangling aspects of young adult experience, as though these derive from discrete structural categories – nationality, ethnicity, gender or city, for example – without recognizing their intertwining would be misleading. However, given the similarities between the cities – in terms of their social divisions, sectoral mix and relative economic success within their countries – it is probable that the distinctions which emerged in this analysis of future perspectives are due to *national* discursive and institutional differences between their welfare and education regimes, rather than being entirely city specific.

Young Adults' Time Perspectives and Life Plans

Young adults' time perspectives have captured researchers' attention in recent years as the transformations associated with late modernity are linked to the reconceptualization of time:

Time is also *accelerated* in that more activities (work, consumption, experiences) have to be compressed into a shortened timespan. In this perceptual process, it is not that time has become scarcer but that experience is overtaxed by expectations. (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 517)

Brannen and Nilsen (2002) use the phrase 'futures on hold' to characterize the time perspectives of young adults (18–30 year olds), based on a series of focus groups conducted in five European countries. It is also argued that young Europeans live in an 'extended present' whereby 'current work-life priorities remain sharply in focus' (Lewis et al., 1999: 95) and young adult capacity to plan for the future is compromised. In other words the intensity of everyday life – experienced as a 'constant sense of busyness' – is so consuming that 'people are unable to think about the long term much less plan for it' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002: 517).

Anderson et al. contest these claims, drawing on data from their Scottish *Telling the Future* study. They found that substantial proportions of young adults (20–29 year olds) 'exercise forethought over quite long periods of time across a wide range of areas of activity' (2002: 147). Having questioned young adults about their 'timespans' with regard to how far they think ahead (days, weeks, months, or years) and explored the level of detail these plans entail, they present a convincing challenge to the pessimistic predictions outlined above. They conclude with a useful discussion outlining the contrasting theoretical implications of their findings: arguably, increased uncertainty – in late modern society – inhibits life planning in accordance with the concept of the 'extended present'; alternatively, they contend that processes of individualization heighten the need for young adults to reflexively shape their own biographies and, thus, encourage planning. Indeed, the pluralization of options in education and the labour market is thought to promote an emphasis on the uniqueness and individuality of persons that lends itself to personal planning (Mythen, 2005).

Moreover, Beck-Gernsheim (1996: 139, emphasis added) describes '*planning and rationalisation* in the conduct of life' as a defining feature of late modernity.

Brannen and Nilsen (2007) recently responded to Anderson et al.'s critique by pointing out that the Scottish quantitative study conflates 'planning' with thinking about the future more broadly, and thus fails to distinguish analytically between different modes of thought. '[E]xercising forethought' and 'ambitions' are used synonymously with plans in their analysis, although these clearly involve qualitatively different orientations to the future. Brannen and Nilsen critique the idea of the 'choice biography' – which Anderson et al. support – as lacking sufficient reference to the structural conditions and opportunities which constrain choice and delimit the ways in which young adults are able to think about the future.

Despite these apparent contradictions, the two positions outlined are not diametrically opposed. The 'extended present' refers to high expectations in the present moment, which inhibit thoughts about the future, whereas Anderson et al.'s emphasis on planning represents heightened expectations for the future. Both, therefore, suggest the transformation of time perspectives with regard to the raising of expectations. Madeline Bunting (2004: 24) describes how the burden of how to spend one's time and maximize productivity has become the responsibility of individuals in the contemporary era. She calls this 'the individualization of time'. Although Bunting's focus is long-hours work cultures and, therefore, entails an emphasis on work regimes in daily life, the sense of blame this aspect of individualization engenders could be applied to the life course more broadly and have significant repercussions for young adults who are planning – or not planning – their lives. This article, in keeping with Brannen and Nilsen's conceptualization, facilitates further analysis of ways of thinking about the future.

Future Orientations and Structures of Feeling

Raymond Williams's concept 'structure of feeling' provides a useful vehicle by which to understand tacit and somewhat indefinable aspects of lived culture. Williams evocatively describes the 'intangible' qualities of (national) cultures as elements of 'impulse, restraint and tone', which characterize the structure of feeling of a place, class or generation. He goes on to state: 'culture must be understood in terms of *past and future aspirations*, as well as *contemporary lived experience*' (1977: 132, emphasis added). Williams's notions of *impulse, restraint and tone* can be perceived in the distinction between inclination and action, as new structures of feeling exist in 'embryonic' form *before* they are actualized. It emerges in the ways people talk about their lives, past, present and future. In this article I contend that this embryonic form of culture exists in the imaginations of young adults and, thus, can potentially be captured through talk. I argue that the 'intangible' elements which characterize a generation are articulated in narratives of aspiration, rather than necessarily being fully expressed in biographies. Williams elaborates on *structure of feeling* as follows:

... we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (1977: 132)

The analysis presented provides an opportunity to understand *present* orientations to life and work by drawing on seemingly private and idiosyncratic ways of thinking about the *future* in these two cities. It thus reveals alternative conceptions of the ‘good life’, which are shaped by British and Swedish culture and institutions, and have profound consequences both for individuals and the societies to which they belong.

This article puts forward a typology of future orientations, which sets out how young adults conceptualize the future with regard to the immediacy of their goals and indicates the centrality of employment to their lives. One critical distinction which emerges from this analysis is between vague thoughts and detailed plans. This distinction resonates closely with Nilsen’s (1999) use of the everyday terms ‘plans, hopes and dreams’ to encapsulate young adults’ future perspectives. The typology she sets out depends on the immediacy of goals in terms of whether they are abstract and are therefore not constrained by the present (dreams); are vague, yet related to a specific event and are, therefore, connected with the individual’s current situation (hopes); or, are contextualized in place and time, that is, relate materially with present circumstances (plans). Her tripartite distinction thus reflects varying degrees of linkage between present circumstances and future perspectives. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) conceptualize this variance in terms of aligned and misaligned ambitions. The former are ambitions which are connected to a specific education–employment trajectory, and are linked to precise means by which to achieve aspirations, whereas the latter, being more ends oriented, are not. Thus, misaligned ambitions tend to be unrealistic or unattainable.

This analysis of interview accounts reveals that these two key dimensions of the ways in which young adults conceptualize the future intersect to produce different orientations or tendencies (see Table 1).

Table 1 Typology of young adult future orientations

	<i>Misaligned</i>	<i>Aligned</i>
Vague	wishes	hopes
Detailed	blue-sky plans	precise plans

The use of everyday terms – hopes and wishes, precise and blue-sky plans – to represent these alternative ways of thinking about the future may introduce some slippage, because of overlap in their everyday usage; nonetheless, they helpfully encapsulate the divergent tendencies which emerged from this analysis.

Taking the basic contrast between vague and detailed orientations to the future, a striking difference emerged from this analysis between the British and Swedish young adults' future orientations. I argue that this derives, in part, from ideological differences that lie at the heart of British liberalism and Swedish social democracy and their respective welfare regimes. Individuals within the two societies draw on a different complement of cultural and social resources and, significantly, state provisions, whilst interpreting and tackling similar problems. Young adults in both countries are now faced with similar life choices in the context of less secure conditions of work. Hence they experience extended periods in education, greater risk of unemployment and those in paid work are increasingly likely to be in temporary positions or hold limited-duration contracts (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Furåker, 2002; Kugelberg, 2000). The concluding discussion elaborates further on this critical distinction between British and Swedish welfare systems and how these regimes affect young adults' biographies and the ways in which they conceptualize the future.

The Study

The research explores the experiences of a new generation of young adult workers in two 'globalizing' urban labour markets, Bristol and Gothenburg. The focus is on young adults (aged 20–34) who are in-between the conventional landmarks of transition, having completed compulsory education and being prior to (or in the early stages of) family formation. Forty-eight biographical interviews were carried out with employed young adults, 24 in each city. This study extends work initially conducted for an ESRC-funded project investigating young adult employment trajectories in urban labour markets.¹ From the Bristol data a subset of 24 qualitative interviews was selected with *employed* young adults for further analysis. The subsequent doctoral fieldwork provided the opportunity for a fuller analysis of this material and the collection of an equivalent data set in Gothenburg.² This material provides the data for the current study with an exclusive focus on biographical interviews with employed young adults in both cities. As part of the preliminary fieldwork in both cities, contacts were made with public and private sector employers, agencies dealing with regeneration and training, and community organizations. These contacts were drawn on to purposively sample employees in different sectors. Interviewees were selected in the following three categories, with roughly a third in each: professional and managerial high-income earners; intermediate, typically public sector and middle-income earners; and routine service and manual low-income workers. Thus, young adults in Gothenburg were sampled to create a comparable subset that effectively matched the Bristol interviews. Equal numbers of women and men were interviewed and a third were of ethnic minority descent in each city. A semi-structured interview guide was used which elicited rich life history accounts, with a particular focus on experiences in education, training, employment and unemployment. Given the exceptional levels of bilin-

gualism in Sweden, it was possible to conduct most of the interviews in English. However, towards the end of the fieldwork period (2002–3) I was sufficiently proficient in the language to negotiate language use and conduct five interviews in Swedish with respondents who felt less comfortable using English.

Approaching a single peer group or school-leaving cohort would not have been appropriate for this study because its aim was to explore patterns of working life amongst young adults from different backgrounds, employed in a wide range of jobs. Since this investigation required access to high-income, ‘elite’ workers, as well as intermediate and low-income young adults, negotiating access and persuading young adults to participate was crucial to the success of the fieldwork. Participants were purposively sampled on the basis of theoretically relevant criteria rather than aiming to represent an entire population. This method was particularly appropriate for identifying employed young adults, many of whom work long hours – often combining jobs with studies, social and childcare commitments – and are therefore unlikely to participate in research in response to cold-calling or postal requests.

Using Qualitative Interviews in Employment Research

The recognition that dispositions and discourses that are taken for granted may *not* be articulated precisely *because* they constitute the bedrock of individuals’ interpretations of their lives is key to the analysis of cross-national variance in qualitative data. Thus, as a cross-national study, implicit assumptions need to be identified as well as explicit ones. This methodological problematic is usefully captured by Ricoeur’s (1981) distinction between the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. The former is characterized by a willingness to listen, and aims to achieve a restoration of meaning. The aim is to understand the subjective world of the participants and represent these worlds in keeping with their perspectives. The latter is associated with the work of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche whom Ricoeur describes as ‘masters of suspicion’ because they treat explicit meanings and consciousness with scepticism, as disguises concealing hidden truths. In the case of this study, my aim is not to de-mystify young adult narratives and reveal hidden meanings, but rather to investigate if and how young adult life narratives are structured around their employment, and whether this forms a central component of their ‘identities’. The analysis draws on tools from linguistic, discursive and narrative methods in order to approach a reconstruction of the interviewees’ perspectives (see Josselson, 2004). Yet, as talk about the future is inherently fictitious, the heuristic task becomes not distinguishing the ‘real’ from the ‘unreal’, but rather discerning the motives and conditions which inform these mental constructs.

In this article the analytical focus is the responses to prompts, ‘Can you tell me a bit about your future plans?’ and ‘Do you have a life plan or career plan?’, as these were found to be particularly revealing regarding the significance of employment for young adults. It could be argued that these young adults emphasized employment in their accounts, and neglected other aspects of their

lives, due to the constraints of the interview situation, since this research was introduced to participants in both cities as being about employment and its relationship to the rest of their lives. Nonetheless, the depth and richness of the narrative accounts that emerged in these interviews was not context bound – not, that is, in the sense that the version of future plans narrated was *only* a product of a research interview. Rather, their accounts reflected thoughts and previous conversations with friends, partners and parents to which many of them explicitly referred.

In the next section I draw on young adult accounts and biographies to illustrate the prominent future orientations identified. It sets out to explain cross-national variance in the data and show how this is linked with young adults' experience in the labour market – progression and setbacks – and the life course.

Orientations to the Future in the Context of Young Adult Biographies

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of young adult future orientations by city.

Table 2 Distribution of young adults by their future orientations

		Bristol	Gothenburg
Vague	hopes	3	13
	wishes	2	3
Detailed	precise	15	4
	blue-sky	4	4

It is worth underlining two main points: first, the detailed precise and blue-sky plans of young adults in both cities centred on employment; second, the propensity towards detailed employment-centred life plans amongst young adults in Bristol provides a sharp contrast with a seemingly explicit resistance to life planning amongst those in Gothenburg. Ethnic and gender differences did not emerge in this analysis as the decisive variables shaping young adult future perspectives. However, this may be due to the relatively small sample size; elsewhere analyses of the quantitative Bristol data demonstrate marked distinctions in income and employment pathway by gender and ethnic group (see Bradley and Devadason, 2008). Broadly speaking, women in Bristol were more likely to couch statements about their futures in vague terms, whereas men in Bristol displayed a greater propensity towards more confident assertion. Interestingly, this pattern is not reproduced in Gothenburg. Instead experience in the labour market, attainment of personal goals, and national context emerged as the decisive factors informing young adult future perspectives.

Vague Hopes and Wishes

Young adults with vague hopes and wishes can broadly be categorized into two groups: those who are satisfied with their situation in life so far and expect to continue in the same direction, hence the vagueness; and those who – due to uncertainty – feel unable to pursue their goals or even define specific goals, as they lack the confidence or resources to do so. The former group tend to have achieved certain landmarks in their employment, such that progressing further up their career ladders is not emphasized in their accounts, and other priorities, such as housing, relationships or children predominate. In Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) terms, their hopes are *aligned*. Work-life balance is central to many of these accounts. In contrast, others express a reluctance to plan, given their circumstances and uncertainty regarding the future. The latter subset's ambitions may be misaligned because they lack clarity or knowledge of the means by which to pursue their wishes. This orientation encompasses a further dimension, the incapacity, or aversion, to thinking about the future – or, perhaps, verbalizing those thoughts – which was expressed by over half the Swedish respondents, who explicitly stated that they had 'no plans'. These young adults without plans proceeded by narrating vague thoughts about their futures in dialogue.

The different biographical bases for vagueness in this category serve to illustrate the two sides of the debate concerning uncertainty and life planning: either, labour market uncertainty confines young adults to living in an 'extended present', such that they are unable to plan for the future; or those who feel secure in their employment, or life situation, do not feel the need to plan. Thus, this orientation is seemingly linked to contrasting situations in employment.

Young adults in Gothenburg were much more likely to articulate their thoughts about the future in vague terms (16 out of 24, Table 2). This orientation is not particularly associated with high or low income employment, or certain levels of education, but is distributed throughout the sample. The majority of young adults in Gothenburg responded that they had 'no plans', or made vague statements about their futures which were aligned with their progress in life. They tended to express satisfaction with their progress in their careers and their situations in life in general. Many asserted that they prefer to adopt a 'day-at-a-time' approach to life and link this with explicit resistance to planning. In response to the question about future plans, Rolf, 33, an IT systems manager, explains his outlook as follows:

RD: Do you have a career plan or a life plan?

Rolf: No, I take the day as it is... I don't *think* so much, I don't like that. It's more fun to see what happens!

RD: Ok and how do you feel about your progress in your career so far?

Rolf: Oh it's quite good I think. But I think that's just because *I didn't have any plan*. I tried to be myself all the time because it's much easier then, because if I had a plan I couldn't be myself... if I wanted this job so bad I should do anything for it... maybe I couldn't get it.

Rolf interestingly links planning to not being able to be himself and implies that it leads to stress and anxiety, which his ‘day-at-a-time’ approach to life avoids. Karin, 27, similarly has made good progress in her career in Human Resources so far, yet does not feel that she needs to plan to progress:

RD: So do you have a career plan or a life plan in your head of what you want to do in the next –

Karin: No, not really. I think I know somewhere, that I sometime, I am going to work as a manager, I am quite sure of that, *it will happen even if I don't actively strive for that. I think it will happen...*

She goes on to describe how she does prepare for the future, yet frames this in terms of a combination of chance and agency using the metaphor of the ‘banana peel career’: she may ‘accidentally slide’ into an area, but has strategically placed the banana skins. The degree of reflection underlying this use of metaphor suggests that ‘not planning’ cannot be equated with a lack of forethought.

Vagueness in itself, therefore, does not point to job insecurity or uncertainty regarding the future, but can arise from not feeling the need to plan. Yet, as stated, this orientation does not necessarily stem from a position of job security either. Some Swedish young adults who are not in secure employment also express contentment and reluctance to plan too much for the future. Camilio, who is working in a temporary job as a janitor, states:

I don't plan really, like ‘what am I going to do in ten years?’ I don't think so far ahead you know? I'll think perhaps now, ‘what should I do after the summer?’ So I do think more and more, but actually I don't worry so much. I'm more someone who lives for now.

Camilio's aversion to planning at 22 may be a reflection of his stage in the life course, rather than being longer-term strategy. The effect of age upon future perspectives is discussed further in the following subsection.

In general, contentment with the present seems to inform these young adults' reluctance to plan for the future, although, for a few – particularly those in Bristol – lack of progress in their employment and insecurity feed into their reluctance to plan. For those young adults present uncertainty seems to promote vagueness, as Lena, 27, a bank clerk in Gothenburg puts it: ‘*I can't say actually where I am going to be, just that I won't be here*’. Sabina, 33, decided at a young age that she enjoyed creative, artistic employment and wanted to become a professional theatre-set designer in Bristol. Sabina had been in her current job as a call-centre worker for nearly six years. As it was part time, she anticipated being able to combine this with her desired occupation, but was yet to secure paid employment in this area. When asked about her future plans she poignantly replies:

I haven't really got any future plans, I have lots of future hopes, I hope that I'm going to be more focused and more motivated, and yeah I do plan to do something about that really – about getting more sorted. I want to travel more, I want to have

a nice life, it's never been a priority just to make money, but I like to have variety... so I may have to retrain, or do something different in order to do that.

The vagueness in Sabina's response stems from her sense of uncertainty about the future and a lack of confidence that she will be able to achieve her goals. Sabina's incapacity to plan resonates with those of other young adults in both cities who find themselves in uncertain positions in the labour market. Others who express uncertainty about their futures in Bristol include Anita, a management consultant, 29 and Lucy, a nightclub promoter, 26. In each case, they reflect upon the possibilities of changing careers, due to the demands of their jobs, but were yet to make decisive choices. Thus, vagueness can stem from a lack of experience in a new field, and perhaps increased awareness of the range of options open to them.

Precise and Blue-sky Plans

Young adults who describe their future plans in elaborate detail tend to be extremely ambitious and career-oriented. They recount the various options open to them and the potential pitfalls and benefits associated with these alternatives. Employment emerges in their accounts as a central life interest through which they anticipate developing personally, often as well as accruing status and income. It might be assumed that this type of planning is limited to professional and managerial young adults. However, certain career-oriented, yet low-income, service workers also exhibit this tendency. It tends rather to be associated with individualism and self-belief since those who have experienced successes in their early careers anticipate moving further.

This future orientation can be further subdivided into those who have precise goals and the means by which to achieve them clearly mapped out, and those who express blue-sky plans. Many young adults with precise plans had attained a degree of stability, committed to their occupational choices and – in many cases – also established household and relationship stability. Some have children but this is not the defining feature of their accounts. The latter group, in contrast, describe hypothetical blue-sky plans about what they would like to do in the future, such as become a novelist, make it in the music industry, have their own business, work for the United Nations, yet without necessarily knowing the means by which to achieve these ambitions.

Broadly speaking, whether young adults hold precise, aligned or blue-sky, potentially misaligned, plans depends on their biography; that is, whether they have achieved certain landmarks in their lives and employment thus far, and, therefore, aspire to progressing further – having effectively raised the stakes for themselves – or whether they are yet to achieve a key ambition, such as a particular job, and therefore describe seemingly blue-sky ideas. The distribution of this category of future orientations seems to be particularly linked with age and national context. Young adults in Bristol had a far greater propensity towards detailed, precise plans compared with those in Gothenburg. Out of the 24

young adults in Bristol, 15 narrated precise, employment-centred plans compared to 4 out of 24 in Gothenburg; blue-sky planners represented a relatively small component of both subsets (see Table 2).

The way in which Andrew, 24, an aerospace engineer in Bristol, narrates his future plans exemplifies this orientation. He explains how his choices so far have been calculated to move *onwards* and *upwards* in his career:

I've given myself five years to work very hard within the company and see where I get to. If I'm not given the opportunity that I think I deserve after all the hard work and the qualifications education-wise behind me and all the proactive tests that I've done like going on courses... if I'm still not getting the opportunity which I think I deserve then I might have to go elsewhere to find better things to do.

Emil, 29, an electrical engineer, is unusual amongst the Gothenburg interviewees because of the way he describes his extremely ambitious future plans:

I think I have the end goal of what I want to do. Who knows if I can get there, but I would like to be the president of a company... Maybe not [with current employer] but at least something with a lot of people, at least hundreds of people. That is my goal... *so most of these things that I have been doing, the reason that I've been doing them, is 'cos of that direction.*

Thus, Emil's biography and his aspirations are clearly linked in the strategic pursuit of his career. Jayne, 31, a former teacher in Bristol, had recently made a decision to retrain and pursue a career in the media industry. She articulates her aspirations in precise terms, having already taken decisive steps towards them:

I'd like to get a more interesting and fulfilling job, which is why I'm doing the course that I'm doing in the hope that I'm going to retrain. And I want to earn more money... and I want to have more control over my working life, so three major factors, not necessarily in this order: earning more money; getting a more fulfilling and rewarding job and having some control over my working time – more flexible working conditions – so that I can combine my family and work basically.

The pragmatic ease with which these aspirations are set out characterizes the future orientations of many professional young adults in Bristol and Gothenburg. In addition, however, ambitious low-income workers also demonstrate strategic thinking underpinning their thoughts about the future. As Joe, 24, a coffee kiosk manager in Bristol, put it:

... what's important to me at the moment, is basically trying to further my career. I started from the bottom as working in the cappuccino bar over Easter and then gradually worked my way up, went to a supervisor then I became assistant manager and now I actually run the cappuccino bar which was one of my big achievements, but I do hope to go further.

Having started out working in restaurants and hotels, in a range of unskilled jobs, Joe has committed himself to furthering his career in the catering industry and aspires to becoming a regional manager of the chain of coffee bars he

works for. Dan, 22, a hair stylist, places a similar emphasis on furthering his career and narrates detailed plans.

In contrast, blue-sky planners sketch out big ideas, often without reference to the means by which to achieve them. Their narratives of aspiration exude a sense in which the world is their oyster. Several of the Swedish respondents in their early twenties envisaged exciting futures: Åsa exemplified blue-sky planning in the extreme, as she describes wanting to own a riding stable, become a photographer and set up a hair salon in Thailand and was determined not to get stuck 'cutting people's hair'; Carlos expressed resistance to the idea of a stable, boring job, instead imagining a future in the music industry; and Christina describes how she would like to work in international conflict resolution or as a journalist 'telling stories... that affect people'.

Age is clearly a factor here since the period of youth is typically associated with a moratorium in which plans are provisional and do not necessarily have long-term consequences (McAdams, 1996). However, from this analysis, it is clear that age is not the decisive variable since some very young adults in Bristol (Dan, 22, Joe, 24, and Luther, 23) articulated precise plans, which were aligned with their present circumstances, whereas other older interviewees (Henry, 31, Jack, 31 and Tom, 29) described blue-sky visions. The common feature linking these blue-sky planners in Bristol – who are beyond the typical youth moratorium phase of 16–24 – is dissatisfaction with their progress in employment thus far, such that pursuing their dreams is deferred until the future. Henry aspires to making it in the music industry in America and describes keeping his life on hold, not settling down – in relationships or housing – because of this dream.

My main love is multimedia music, so even if Britain has got cutting-edge companies in multimedia, the music is not quite up there and that's what I want, and I know that I've got the talent and the creative-like-focus to be able to produce wicked music that could you know blow-up basically, so that's my own belief and my dream and I want to go for that. (Henry, 31, studio technician/student)

Tom spent his early twenties doing a degree, travelling and working in a range of jobs before getting his current job in IT, but still aspires towards a more creative vocation:

I had a fairly facile plan, when I started this job, I was like: in five years I'd like to have quite a lot of money, I'd like to buy a boat and I'd like to live on it. This has been a fairly light-hearted thing about what I'd like to do. Yeah I mean basically long term I'd like to give up working and be successful, you know fiscally and professionally, as a writer as opposed to a commercial, corporate person. (Tom, 29, IT)

Nonetheless, many young adults in both cities describe how ageing and gaining experience of the world *has* altered the ways in which they think about the future. They refer to a transition from somewhat naïve, blue-sky thinking towards a more grounded perspective. Some hold their dreams in tension with present realities. Thus, the boundary between aligned and misaligned ambitions may be blurred or two alternative visions of the future may co-exist:

The vision right now maybe which feels most reasonable is me becoming a teacher and living in Gothenburg and – yeah – having quite a secure situation, maybe a good relationship or something. Yeah, this is what seems quite reasonable, but my dream would be to get into drama school... and this is – I suppose – what I hope for, or I guess this would be something I would really have a passion for. (Sara, 27, call-centre worker/student)

The alternative vision of the future that Sara sets out, one which feels reasonable as against her dream, evocatively sums up the dilemma facing many young adults as they make significant life choices.

The concluding discussion draws together the emergent themes within the conceptual framework and analysis outlined above. It proceeds by identifying factors which are thought to underpin alternative future orientations in the two contexts, and elaborates on the significance of these orientations in terms of ideals of the ‘good life’ they engender.

Discussion

The analysis suggests that the marked distinction between young adult future perspectives in the two cities does not arise primarily from the specific features of their local labour markets. Young adults in both Sweden and Britain are exposed to the deregulation and restructuring of labour markets in the face of globalization and progressive neoliberalization. Nonetheless, their biographies, aspirations and life plans reflect the particularities of their respective social and cultural milieu. The ways in which young adults think about their futures in each city illustrate taken-for-granted values which are not necessarily reflected upon. In Bourdieu’s terms these values are the dispositions of the habitus which reflect the internalization of the material social realities of the field (institutions, social divisions and processes of socialization). Habitus and field are mutually constitutive. Disentangling the two, both conceptually and analytically, poses a considerable challenge in qualitative cross-national research. Raymond Williams’s distinction between cultural ‘precipitate’, which is measurable, and tacit, often immeasurable, aspects of ‘feeling’ encompasses this problematic. It thus highlights how tacit value differences cannot necessarily be measured by comparative analysis of welfare regimes or labour markets but reflect established practices which are embedded in everyday life and inform young adult orientations. It is these values which became particularly revealing in this biographical study of young adult employment in two European cities, and hence formed the focus of this analysis.

If we apply Brannen and Nilsen’s (2002) concept of the ‘extended present’ to these findings, young adults in Bristol are more secure than their counterparts in Gothenburg as they feel more able to make plans. Yet given the contrasting welfare regimes in the two countries this interpretation seems counterintuitive. In Plough and Kvist’s (1996) typology of unemployment benefit regimes, Britain and Sweden exemplify residual and comprehensive systems,

respectively. The residual support available for unemployed people, particularly under 25 year olds, in the British welfare system means that the costs of not planning – that is, the risk of social exclusion – is far greater for young adults in Britain than in Sweden. Conversely, Swedish income security transfers, education and training costs, student allowances and services such as child care, disproportionately benefit the young and those of working age. Thus, under the means-tested British system social provisions accrue primarily to the *worst off* in society, whilst *most* citizens in Sweden access welfare provisions at one time or another. The comprehensive provision of the Swedish social insurance system means that employed young adults can defer planning until such time as they become unemployed for any reason. In contrast, British residual provision fosters a necessarily aspirant structure of feeling, which involves making plans, precise or otherwise. Having said this, the income-replacement rates of the Swedish insurance system are accessible only to those who are within it (and have contributed for at least a year); thus, young labour-market entrants cannot necessarily benefit from them. Moreover, since the recession of the 1990s in Sweden, the generous social benefits and replacement rates which were sustainable during the extended period of low unemployment – whilst claimants were few and contributions high – have been eroded (Furåker, 2002).

Even so, I argue that the divergent orientations to the future that emerged in this analysis stem, in part, from the contrasting welfare regimes, their respective approaches to the problem of inequality, and ideological differences which lie at the heart of British liberalism and Swedish social democracy. The relative absence of a welfare safety net in Britain places the onus on individuals to provide for their own futures. Accordingly, British education and welfare systems – implicitly, and increasingly, explicitly – *require* planning, at least by those who are able to avoid the social exclusion wrought by unemployment. In contrast, Arnell-Gustafsson describes this generation of young Swedes as the ‘children of the welfare state’, who – despite experiencing unemployment, temporary and poor quality jobs – ‘also have the opportunity to postpone a decision on choice of occupation and entry into the labour market’ (2003: 119–20). She suggests that Sweden’s education and welfare policies facilitate a moratorium for young adults to reflect on their futures and purposively make decisions which reflect their individuality. Consequently, the day-at-a-time approach to the present adopted by many young Swedes in this study does not appear to be primarily related to labour market uncertainty but rather reflects an orientation to life which places less of a premium on planning ahead and the accrual of income and status and, instead, values contentment in the present and quality of experience.

A further explanation for the apparently *laissez-faire* approach to the future of many young Swedes may derive from a more contemporary labour market imperative, that of ‘employability’. Brown et al. (2003: 111) define employability as ‘the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment’. They state that, highly skilled graduates rather than aspiring towards long-term, bureaucratic careers within single organizations,

prioritize the acquisition of personal capital, which accentuates individual qualities and competencies, and thus facilitates readiness to move. Notably, young adults in both cities were reluctant to articulate plans that implied ‘settling’ in terms of employment. Yet the emergence of employability in quite distinct forms in young adults’ talk about the future in Bristol and Gothenburg nonetheless reflects contrasting values which are embedded in their national institutions and discursive practices.

In his influential work, *To Have or To Be?*, Erich Fromm distinguishes between alternative ‘modes of experience’, which confer a particular orientation to self and the world. He argues that different types of society foster these alternate types of social character as follows:

The difference between being and having is not essentially between East and West. The difference is rather between a society centred around persons and one centred around things. The having orientation is characteristic of Western industrial society, in which greed for money, fame, and power has become the dominant theme of life. (1978: 28–9)

Although Britain and Sweden are both industrial, capitalist states, the contrasting emphases of their welfare and education regimes not only affect future orientations, but also confer a different mode of experience. Making detailed plans for the future is ends oriented and implicitly focused on attainment, or *having*, as the route to the good life. Conversely, for some young adults who are content with their lives thus far and not inclined to plan, vague thoughts about the future tacitly place value on a state of *being* in the present. Young adults who are reluctant or unable to plan because of current uncertainty in their employment or life situation, therefore, can not necessarily access this quality of experience. Brannen et al.’s (2002) contention that young adults are trapped in an ‘extended present’, meaning the intensity of everyday life prevents them thinking about the future, much less planning for it, applies to a minority of individuals who are particularly marginalized in the labour market. Some are in low-income, service sector and manual jobs, which do not fulfil their aspirations, yet lack the knowledge or means by which to escape these situations. However, from this analysis it is clear that an alternative emphasis upon *being* – as a mode of experience – exists, which underpins most of the Swedish young adults’ reasons for not planning their futures in any more than vague terms.

This cross-national analysis sheds light on subtle or ‘intangible’ contrasts between British and Swedish structures of feeling through its focus on aspirations, which might otherwise be regarded as ‘personal’ or ‘idiosyncratic’. As detailed plans and vague hopes emerged from interviews in both cities, the propensity towards, and content of, life plans is not exclusively determined by place. Nonetheless I conclude that these contrasting tendencies are shaped by the dispositions of the habitus, which are shaped within the context of institutions and regimes that are country specific, and mediated for the individual by the structure of feeling. These somewhat intangible processes persist in shaping

young adult orientations to work – and the versions of the good life informing them – despite macro-economic trends eroding some of the specificities of local labour markets across Europe.

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Notes

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