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# Graduates' experiences and perceptions of career enactment: identity, transitions, personal agency and emergent career direction.

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## Abstract

This paper contributes to the contested body of work about graduate employability, employment and sustained career building. Educational establishments across the world are expected to equip students with the knowledge and skills for employability, sustainable employment and career development. The protean career concept and the boundary-less career model influence much of today's career literature. To remain marketable, it is said protean careerists are able to repackage their knowledge, skills and abilities to fit the changing work environment. They are said to be '*career actors*' who value their freedom, are flexible, believe in continuous learning and seek intrinsic rewards through their work. Hardly surprising, therefore, commentary on protean careers tends to emphasise the '*winners*' in the employment marketplace. There are few critical studies that focus on the difficulties that others face when attempting to be '*career actors*'. Drawing on the work of Martin Buber and Homi Bhabha in particular, the research for this paper is focused on the way graduates perceive and enact their careers, the evolution of their careers, and how building their careers involves crossing physical, cultural and psychological boundaries. The implications of the research findings for post-compulsory education are discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Education for employability; identity and careers; career journeys; the politics of careers and hazards of passage; personal agency; Martin Buber; Homi Bhabha

## Introduction

This paper contributes to the contested body of work about graduate employability, employment, and sustained career building in a complex employment environment. Looking back to earlier times in the 1950s and 1960s, widely held perceptions of the employer-

employee relationship emphasised the idea of reciprocity. It was assumed that loyalty from the employee would be recognised and rewarded with on-going work-related training, career development opportunities and job security from the employer (Rousseau 1995; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). This modelling of the employment relationship served to support the working environment and societal structures at that time; males were considered as bread winners, hegemonic discourse promoted the nuclear family, and work places were able to offer stability and life-time employment (Parsons et al. 1955; Sullivan and Crocitto 2007). Baruch (2003, 231) and Yorke (2006, 3) remind us that this is no longer the case. Nowadays, according to Clarke and Patrickson (2008, 121-2), much of the career literature continues to promote the idea of employability as a basis for career and employment success. Within the international discourse about employment and employability, the expectation that educational establishments will equip students with the skills and knowledge required for employability and career building is promoted (BIS 2009; Gillies 2011; Holden and Hamblett 2007, 517; OECD 2002, 72). Graduation from post-compulsory education is considered to be a starting point in relation to career development (Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2004, 2), and the individual is largely made responsible for their continued professional development throughout the length of their careers (NCTL 2013; BASW 2012).

Changing global, economic, and technological factors have resulted in the evolution of workplace structures and the formation of new career concepts to accommodate the decrease in job stability and security (Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Reflecting the changing nature of employer-employee relationships, Sullivan and Baruch (2009) claim much of today's career literature is influenced by Hall's (1996, 2002, 2004) protean career concept, and Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) boundary-less career model. It is suggested employees displaying a protean career attitude are able to '*repackage their skills and abilities to fit the changing work environment in order to remain marketable*' (Sullivan and Baruch 2009, 1544). They are portrayed as '*career actors*' who value their freedom and whose traits include flexibility and a disposition towards continuous learning (Hall 1996). Responsibility for career management is said to lie with the employee, although this may be supported and facilitated by the employer. The protean careerist is said to be self-directed and driven by values, and their achievements are measured by psychological success rather than external rewards (Briscoe, Hall, and Flautschy DeMuth 2006; Hall and Chandler 2005). Complimentary, but separate, to the protean concept is the boundary-less career model (Arthur 2008), which acknowledges that employees can move freely between organisations and are therefore not dependent on a single employer for career fulfilment.

## The research

An extensive review of the career literature by Sullivan and Baruch (2009) identifies several gaps. Research on protean careers tends to emphasise the '*winners*' in the employment marketplace, those who '*find their true calling or form a new working identity*' (Sullivan and Baruch 2009, 1550). In contrast, there are few studies that focus on the difficulties that others face when attempting to be '*career actors*'. Seeking to better understand the realities of career building after graduation, the aims of the research were to examine:

- how graduates' perceive and enact their careers;
- how the careers of graduates evolve in today's complex work environment;
- the interplay between a person's career decision making and the context within which decisions are made;

- the relationship between the graduates' identities and strategies used when seeking to build their careers;
- the implications of the research findings for post-compulsory education.

For this study, the requirement was to gather data in such a way that the richness inherent in the participant's experience is recognised and acknowledged. The aim was to uncover the meaningful ways in which things are experienced, made sense of and enacted in everyday life (Berglund 2007, 75-6). Consequently, a phenomenological approach was used, and qualitative data was obtained during email interviews. A similar approach was used in an earlier study when researching graduates' lived experiences of vocational education (Leach 2012). The sample for the study comprised 18 mature graduates. Graduating in 2013, 12 participants (11 female and 1 male) were part-time students in their 30s and 40s, who continued with their pre-existing employment while studying for a Foundation Degree followed by a top-up BA Honours degree. Across the Faculty, the female population outnumbered the male population by more than 2 to 1, an imbalance that is more noticeable in the programme from which these participants are drawn. Their work involves supporting vulnerable children, young people and families. All had level 2 and 3 vocational qualifications when enrolling for the degree programme, but it is important to note that this was their first experience of higher education and the rigours of academic study. It is also important to note that throughout this time the students were affected by cuts in public sector funding. It followed that some were required to compete with one another when applying for and when interviewed for a reduced number of re-structured jobs. Remarkably, they managed to build and maintain high levels of group cohesion and to support one-another as best they could throughout this time. To that end, the degree programme and our support also seems to have played a part in helping them cope with these challenges and to graduate. The remaining six participants are arts or science graduates from different universities who, having first experienced various jobs, have since founded their own businesses and are self-employed.

Ethical approval was obtained from the author's faculty ethics committee when planning the investigation. Known by the researcher, participants were approached via email, inviting them to take part in the study. The nature and purpose of the study was explained, and, in line with common practice, they were assured their privacy and anonymity would be protected.

In development, each interview was asynchronous and quickly became a shared conversation, a collaborative venture during which the researcher and the research participants immersed themselves in the emerging conversation and became co-constructors as well as interpreters of knowledge (James and Busher 2009, 25). The texts that were created online helped reflect and shape the researcher's and the participant's understandings of the participant's lived career experiences. Adopting this approach can create problems in terms of eliminating researcher subjective attitudes and judgments, and when judging the authenticity of the participant's online contributions. On the other hand, Hayes (1997) reminds us that it is naïve and impractical to claim our views and attitudes have no impact on the way we interpret and understand the meanings contained in data obtained in real everyday situations. Using the approach known as '*bracketing*', we can, however, reflect on, and bring to the surface, our subjective viewpoints so that they can be acknowledged when making sense of the data we collect in qualitative research.

## Findings and analysis

In this analysis, the aim is to represent, as near as possible, the participant's experiences of the realities of building sustainable careers after graduation. The following themes emerged strongly during the interviews: their career journeys, career and the person's sense of identity, transitions, the politics of careers and hazards of passage, the importance of community and dialogue with others, personal agency and learning the craft.

### *Their journeys*

Participants were asked a range of questions about their career journeys. I was particularly interested in their rite of passage narratives, and their transitional experiences as their careers unfold. De Botton (2010, 121) reminds us how *'in the meritocratic, socially mobile modern world, one's status might now be determined by one's confidence, imagination and ability to convince others of one's due.'* For the mature students who recently completed their part-time graduate studies, the efficacy of this educational experience and the positive impact of becoming a graduate on their feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and enhanced ability to articulate their employment credentials with employers, colleagues and families are evident in their narratives.

*Graduation boosted my confidence as I am now in a similar position to my colleagues who are mostly graduates. That's the chip on the shoulder thing, but it has worked wonders. The wonders are internal really. For me, feeling very much overlooked at school, it's like a validation, confirmation of being as good as anyone else. Consequently, I am more willing to get involved and not just give an opinion, but also to argue it (Youth worker).*

*I was written off at school for being lazy and lacking academic ability. This led to me failing all my GCSEs. Thereafter, over the years I gained great experience, focusing my career in supporting young people with disability. I started the foundation degree course as I got to a point where my experience could no longer get me to the next step on the career ladder and I needed the qualification to match. YSJ (York St John University) picked up on my difficulties almost instantly and I was diagnosed with dyslexia. Support was given and I went on to gain my degree. All the confidence issue I had disappeared on gaining this qualification. It has changed how my family sees me, immense pride in overcoming the hurdles I faced. It is my confidence in my own ability that has been the biggest change (Youth worker).*

*Studying for the degree has undoubtedly broadened my horizons and prompted me to question procedures. I am now quietly confident in my work and will attempt new ideas, whereas before I felt inadequate and poorly equipped. I feel studying has enabled me to understand the behaviours of not only young people, but also my colleagues (Para-professional working in a school).*

### *Career and a personal sense of identity*

Important aims for the research were to explore the way graduates perceive and enact their careers, and the relationship between their emerging sense of identity and the strategies they use when seeking to build their careers. It is striking how all of the participants refer to their jobs as central to the identities they are willing to inhabit. The work they do is part of the core that makes them who they are. For some, this causes them to reject more highly paid work when it is not in tune with their identities. For others, the search for work that matches their sense of identity and ethical stance is the reason why they set up their own businesses.

*I am still looking for other jobs that have more responsibility, but my main aim is to still have direct contact with young people. I know this limits my options but I would take enjoying my job over earning more (Youth support worker).*

*I never wanted to work 9-5 or in an office. I wanted to be doing 'hands-on' creative work, and as I got older I wanted to do something that changed or influenced other people's lives. So for me, becoming self-employed in the end was a matter of necessity. I don't think the skills I have are rewarded in the conventional job market; I had lots of abilities, but none of them were any use. I felt like I was trapped in the wrong life, having to abandon all of my artistic and spiritual interests (Self-employed therapist).*

*For me, my business is 'me'. Its brand, ethics and approach to looking after clients have been shaped by the person I am. I would not be able to run a business where I compromised my own sense of integrity (Self-employed copywriter).*

Writing about craftsmanship, Sennett (2009, 13) reminds us how humans ‘are skilled makers of a place for themselves in the world’, and how ‘pride in one’s work lies at the heart of craftsmanship as the reward for skill and commitment’ (Sennett 2009, 294). The link between the work they do and their identities is evident in the entrepreneurs’ rite of passage narratives. In part, their decision to branch out and start their own businesses is shaped by earlier experiences of employment in corporate environments. The un-willingness to accept poor management practice and provide poor customer service is frequently given as reasons for starting their own businesses.

*One of the reasons I hated my job before was that I didn't believe in the company or anything it stood for, and so I felt embarrassed about selling its services to potential new clients. Now I feel proud of what I do, and know I offer a good service, I feel happier and more fulfilled. I could've ranted for pages about my ex-employers! But really, they did me a big favour ... they taught me how NOT to run a business and made me realise I had nothing to lose by quitting (Self-employed copywriter).*

For one entrepreneur, part-time jobs before and while at university served to reinforce the attractiveness of self-employment. Thereafter, the learning journey is marked by a series of false starts leading up to the most recent venture.

*My eyes were opened both to what was possible, and to what I knew I didn't want to do fairly early on. Prior to going to university and during it I worked a series of low-paid summer/part time jobs. In reality, all it did was convince me that the last thing I ever wanted to do was work for anyone, ever, particularly in anything approaching a 'heavy corporate' environment. Always I felt like I had to hold my tongue, lie, and pretend to be someone else just to hold down those jobs. I heard about a technology company incubator being run on campus, and that funding was available for startups. A friend and I decided to have a go, and were surprised to discover ourselves in receipt of 10k of funding. The next couple of years were a learning experience. The company went nowhere in the end. The dot.com bubble had burst, and we never managed to move from a series of small equity-for-cash exchanges to proper VC funding..... The decision to found this business was based on my circumstances at the time. I was in the process of failing my Masters degree, having become disinterested in the topic and demotivated to the point that I couldn't bring myself to start on the dissertation. I was also sick of being poor. I invested \$20 on a reseller hosting account with a company and started selling web-hosting to the general public (Entrepreneur: Internet Service Provider).*

### **Transitions - the politics of careers and hazards of passage**

Various commentators highlight the emergence of a post-degree vocational need resulting in new graduates undertaking unpaid internships, voluntary placements or casual employment that enables them to gain and demonstrate the necessary contextual knowledge and skill, and



to join networks through which they can build employment capital (Guile 2009, 762-3; Rae 2007, 606; Holmes 2006, 240). However, critics question the discourse wherein responsibility is placed on graduates to ensure they are employable, and the unemployed are said to lack the appropriate skills (Valencia, 1997, 11; Mitchell and Muysken, 2010, 297). In their view, suggesting the unemployed are ‘unemployable’ provides an unhelpful label which underestimates the circumstances that graduates face, such as the mismatch between career expectations, availability of employment in the current labour economy and employers understanding of what skills a graduate realistically has on completion of study. Developing this argument, Keep and James (2012, 221-2) claim the expansion of HE when the labour market is ‘configured along neo-liberal lines’ has resulted in levels of over-qualification in a labour market characterised by large numbers of low skill ‘bad jobs’ which increasing numbers of graduates occupy. There is support for this assertion in this participant’s narrative.

*I gained good grades throughout school, and had talents for writing and painting. I went to a 'redbrick' university, and I felt it was always assumed that therefore, I was guaranteed a proper profession when I left. Yet all I could find was admin/reception work and even then it was on a temporary basis because you usually don't have to interview for a temp job! (Self-employed therapist).*

Other participants who recently completed their part-time degree course describe an equally troublesome trend in the labour market - the impact of the cuts in public sector funding on their employment prospects and a period of job insecurity.

*I applied for a job as a youth worker in a management position. The job has a lot more responsibility and I wanted a new challenge. They offered me the job. However, I told them I would not accept it immediately as I still had other questions for them. I've looked at the funding cuts for youth services over the last 3 years and I have some concerns over the position and how long my contract would be for. To be fair to them, they were honest with me and said they didn't even know if their jobs would be there in 12-18 months time. If I didn't have children and a mortgage, I would have taken the risk and accepted the job. Thankfully, I had not handed my notice in at work. It was at this point, my manager asked if I would consider staying if they could offer me more. We discussed what I would want (more money, more responsibility, but more importantly, I would still have direct work with young people). This was agreed but I am still waiting for the confirmation and a contract to sign. I have taken on the responsibility and a much larger workload, but my wages are still the same (Youth support worker).*

Reflecting the impact of funding cuts and uncertainties regarding their employment, some participants describe the experience of being asked to manage public sector projects, staffed by volunteers. They also describe a growing requirement for them to support ‘third sector’ organisations so that they can assume responsibility for services previously provided by local authorities.

*There is now a greater push to establish group work, so that a number of young people can be worked with at one time. Volunteers are now drawn upon to deliver intervention work that previously would have been undertaken by a paid member of staff. Case managers are now expected to train and manage volunteers as well as write specific intervention programmes and train colleagues. Everyone is a manager! The constant ‘fear’ of the axe dropping and repeated consultation periods that appear to roll out annually, have meant that the service has lost a number of valued workers, further adding to the time constraints of a small team. There is a general ‘air’ of discontent amongst many of my colleagues. The financial insecurities within the public sector do generate feelings that trained volunteers are ‘apprentices waiting in the wings’, particularly within an agency where it is difficult to secure paid employment (Manager of a youth offending team).*

Others, reflecting the politics of careers in these uncertain times, describe how events are causing them to think about and investigate new opportunities.

*Current job uncertainties and being a single mum is causing me to actively explore the possibility of setting up my own business. There is a real problem with weight/healthy lifestyles among people with disabilities, and service providers often lack the skills needed to support this client group. The aim of the business will be to provide access to supported fitness opportunities for children and young people (Youth support worker).*

*When my head teacher realised that I was keen to progress and learn and was prepared to work hard I was slotted into the role of home school liaison coordinator. I began the role with three hours a week allocated to the role which gradually increased to twenty in my last year of studying. After finishing my degree I was given the role full time. I was assured that I would receive a new contract together with an increase in salary relative to the extra responsibility that I was undertaking. When the job description was completed and sent to evaluation, the HR department disagreed with the grade. The grade they think it is worth is the grade I am currently paid at and with some alteration it may rise to one grade higher; not two or three grades higher as had been indicated when I was given the role. So as you can imagine I am a little disillusioned. I thought my career was 'on the up' but at present I haven't moved at all through any pay bands yet have more responsibility. For want of a better term I feel a little 'cheated' and am now actively researching other career opportunities (Para-professional working in a school).*

### ***The importance of community and dialogue***

Pring (2012, 752) argues the point that ‘...persons are not, and cannot be totally autonomous. Growth depends on relations with other people, participating in different cultural communities.’ The importance of community and dialogue with others as an alternative source of education, and a force for the building of social capital, is embedded in almost all of the participants' narratives. Frequently, they describe the groups they are members of and the influence of others, in helping them to see the way forward and to have the confidence to embark on new career journeys.

*I first started learning about hypnotherapy when I was going to evening classes and groups with an interest in Mind, Body & Spirit stuff. So if I hadn't had access to those groups, I don't think I would have made the decision to train as a therapist. I think joining the Writers' Group was key, even though my business isn't writing-related. I met people who were serious about developing their writing to a publishable standard. So for me, what was significant about joining this creative 'community' was that they took a realistic, pragmatic view of self-employment, and we had practical discussions about self-discipline, marketing, profit margins and so on. And so, of all my friends I'd say the writers were the most encouraging when I started setting up my business (Self-employed therapist).*

*My mum had set up a training consultancy a couple of years before I started my business and her success and bravery gave me confidence that I too could branch out alone. Her partner is an accountant - and his business start-up and tax advice was amazing. My fiancé is also very supportive emotionally, and his belief in me and my writing - when I didn't even believe in myself - was a huge factor in my decision. If the people closest to me had given me reasons not to try, I would never have dreamt of starting my own business. I now also have regular clients who seem to believe in and rely on my work. There's a printer / designer over the road from me, and I always refer clients to him when they need design work or printing. In return, he passed a big new client my way, and I've managed to secure work with the NHS as a result (Self-employed copywriter).*

*Those staff that have been supportive and willing to let me 'have a go' are the ones that I've learnt so much from... they have allowed me to be in their classroom and see what happens 'warts and all' and that leads me to think that they are the individuals who probably feel most confident in their abilities to teach/survive classroom disasters. They have been happy to laugh*



*alongside me at the mistakes that we both make and we have been able to support each other because we seem to have created our own 'personal work history'.... this has meant that we have become more than just two separate individuals working in the same building- we actually have things in common. The importance to me of having that good relationship is paramount, it is a way of the teacher showing that they do value and respect the work that you do - perhaps more importantly that you are actually another human being! (Teaching assistant).*

### **Working at it - learning the craft**

Sennett (2009, 172) reminds us that ‘ten thousand hours is a common touchstone for how long it takes to become an expert.’ A feature of the participants’ narratives is the extent to which their journey is about learning and developing their craft as they interact with others.

*Since I graduated my manager has said she can see a difference in my work, and not just with young people. I had a meeting with her and said I felt a new approach with the work we were doing with the young people may benefit them. I talked about how they are lacking in confidence and that with a constant reminder, they can make a positive change. I had to feed all this back to the staff and we agreed to keep telling the young people that they can achieve whatever they put their mind to. The approach and strategies used were to stop them thinking they were no good and to convince them that they had opportunities to succeed. The evidence this approach is working is the increase in numbers of NEET young people at the project who are entering into and staying in employment. Even when they leave/lose a job or college course, they do not sit around doing nothing; they want to find another job or course (Youth worker).*

*I'm in the business of t-shirt printing, specialising in small runs and "while-you-wait" same day service, for which there is very little competition in the localities where I'm operating. I'd never sold a t-shirt in my life until about 3 years ago when I was helping out at a friends' t-shirt printing shop, not just serving customers and working on the production side but also helping to improve the systems and procedures to tune up the efficiency of the workflow, thus increasing production capacity. I also contributed a lot of marketing ideas, and as a team we managed to take business to another level - it's been a truly phenomenal success. The guys are happy with one shop, I knew the business was replicable in other territories so I decided to set up on my own, and parted with my friends' business on very good terms. 12 months later I'm now running 2 t-shirt printing shops, and I'm looking for premises in other cities. (Entrepreneur: manufacturer and & shop owner).*

### **Discussion**

As already mentioned, within the international discourse, educational establishments are tasked with equipping students with the skills and knowledge required for employability and to be ‘career actors’. Hardly surprising, therefore, graduate employability is seen as a significant issue for institutions of further and higher education. The majority take steps to publicly present an institutional approach to addressing student employability concerns by embedding employability skills within the curriculum and offering students curriculum vitae enhancement opportunities (Leitch, 2006, 1; Yorke, 2006, 8; Gillies, 2011). They also gather information on the student’s first employment destination following graduation, information that is subsequently used to promote the university and its programmes to future students. However, there are reported gaps in terms of what we know about our graduates’ employment experiences and the challenges they face when trying to build sustainable careers after graduation (Wilson, 2012, 1). This small-scale study begins to fill in some of these gaps.

When considering the purpose of higher education, Morley (2001, 132) poses the following questions:

*‘Has utilitarianism eclipsed intellectualism in UK universities? Do universities exist to meet the needs of modern capitalism and are students being constructed solely as future workers, rather than fully rounded citizens?’*

Pursuing this argument, Pring (2012, 750) examines the extent to which the public policy-driven language of ‘*performativity*’ and ‘*the science of deliverology*’ (747) depersonalises the learner and the learning process. Commenting on the emergence of the language of performance management and a target setting culture in education, he explains how ‘*the language shapes both political discourse about educational standards and professional discourse about educational practice.*’ (Pring 2012, 787). The discourse, he says, fails to acknowledge the extent to which personal identities and careers are forged in communal spaces and through dialogue with others.

To elaborate further, in his writings Martin Buber offers powerful theoretical insights that can be used when exploring the realities of an education for employability, employment and career building in communal spaces. In *I and Thou (Ich und Du)* (2004, first published in 1925a) and his subsequent writings on education: *The Address on Education* (1925b), *The Education of Character* (1939) and *Between Man and Man* (1947), Buber explores the way we experience the world in terms of two basic forms of relationship - the ‘*I-Thou*’ and ‘*I-It*’ relationships. The ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship is about the mutual and holistic existence of two beings - an encounter of equals who recognise and are in dialogue with one another (Buber 1947). It is through the ‘*Thou*’, our meeting with the other, that we become ourselves, an ‘*I*’ (Smith 1966, 17). When describing the ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship, ‘*words such as dialogue, meeting, encounter, mutuality and exchange are frequently used*’ (Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 567). According to Olsen (2004, 17 cited in Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 567), the ‘*I-Thou*’ inter-human relationship is about mutuality, when our ‘*I*’ perspective is ontologically open to and recognises the ‘*Thou*’ of others as independent of our ‘*I*’ pre-judgement. In contrast to the ontological openness of the ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship, in the ‘*I-It*’ inter-human relationship there is a notable absence of dialogue. Rather than being recognised as equals other beings are objectified as resources to be manipulated, used and experienced to satisfy our own needs (Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 567).

Because we understand things in objective as well as subjective ways, Buber contrasts ‘*I-Thou*’ knowledge with the ‘*I-It*’ way of knowing. Moreover, he understands that both the ‘*I-Thou*’ and the ‘*I-It*’ relationships are constituent elements in one’s education. It is impossible to have the one without the other. Consequently, when too much emphasis is placed on the idea of a curriculum for employability and the instrumental role of the teacher as the expert provider of knowledge and skills for employability and career building, the teacher and the student can easily find they are caught up in an ‘*I-It*’ relationship. On the other hand, when too much emphasis is placed on the role of the student as an independent learner, it is difficult for the ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship to emerge because of the implied absence of guidance from the teacher in the knowledge and skills for employability (Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 568). Consequently, communion and dialogue are key terms in Buber’s philosophy of education. For Buber, the teacher can only educate when there is authentic dialogue with students, based on mutual trust and respect, and when the student’s needs, values, identity, capacities and interests, and the prescribed role of the teacher are recognised and accepted in the dialogic relationship. This is said to happen when the teacher perceives things from the student’s perspective without losing control of their perspective as teacher, and when the student agrees to share in experiences and to accept the teacher’s guidance. (Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 569).

In parts of the literature, employability is variously described as a ‘*fleeting experience*’ and a ‘*condition that can never be entirely fulfilled*’ (Cremin 2010, 131), and achieving a

degree is said to be merely a starting point in relation to career development (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004, 2). After graduating, the participants in this study describe a journey of self-discovery and self-realisation, a journey that is played out in communal spaces. The importance of communal spaces and mutual dialogue with others is embedded in almost all of their narratives. Frequently, they describe the groups they are members of and the influence of others in helping them to see the way forward, and to have the confidence to embark on new career journeys. Their identities and careers are being forged in spaces in which interactions with other beings, and with their work, are experienced in terms of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relationships (Buber 1925a). They describe their jobs as being central to the identities they are willing to inhabit, and their relationship with the craftsmanship of providing a high quality service for others. Moreover, the study illustrates how the emergence of 'I-Thou' relationships can result in unexpected and sometimes powerful changes in relationships and power dynamics. For some, the setting up of their own business is about creating 'a space' in which they can *'feel proud of what I do, and know I offer a good service'* for the client. Experiencing multiple, short-term jobs and struggling to find a permanent job consistent with her identity led another participant to say this when explaining her decision to found her own therapy practice: *'I don't think the skills I have are rewarded in the conventional job market; I felt like I was trapped in the wrong life, having to abandon all of my artistic and spiritual interests.'*

In social theory, the concept of 'Third Space' is used when exploring spatial relationships. The concept's origins can be traced back to Bhabha's (1994, 2) identification of the '*in-between spaces*' that are seen to exist between binary descriptors of difference. For example, the traditional binary positioning of the boundaries between the role of teacher as the source of the knowledge and skills the student needs to get a job, and the role of the student as the '*in-need*' beneficiary of prescribed programmes of study that are matched against the requirements for particular forms of work. Significantly, according to Whitchurch (2013, 21), in-between spaces are likely to be invisible and not written into organisational charts or job descriptions. Proactivity in and building careers in these in-between spaces can involve crossing physical, cultural and psychological boundaries. Working in the openness of '*third spaces*' is said to allow for the emergence of '*creative combinations and the restructuring of oppositional ideas and thinking*'. It is said to require communion and dialogue between people, resulting in '*joint and individual sense-making*' (Martin, Snow, and Franklin Torrez 2011, 300). '*Third spaces*' are also said to be '*sites of struggle, a relational effect*' (Law 1992, 4 cited in Whitchurch 2013, 21). In this study, participants employed by a local authority explain how funding cuts mean they are required '*to train and manage volunteers to do the work that was previously done by paid employees*', and to engage with voluntary bodies to equip them with the knowledge and skills to provide services that will no longer be provided by the local authority. Doing this, they are also aware that it could result in their own redundancy.

Purcell, Wilton and Elias (2007) remind us that tangible employability skills cannot be provided by one singular source and that access to a chosen career path may not be linear. Career pathways can evolve slowly, involve false starts or a rethink, are affected by changes in public policy and one's personal circumstances, and they can involve periods of further study. To appreciate and understand the difficulties which some graduates experience when seeking employment, it is important to acknowledge that career paths cannot be seen in isolation from the social and emotional factors within which individuals operate. Parents, family, social, environmental contexts and events influence a person's career. Their gender, age, abilities and interests, geography and the political and economic climate also influence it

(Wilton and Purcell 2010). This seems to be true for participants in this study. Their narratives reinforce the view expressed by Pring (2012, 748):

*In addition to providing the conceptual foundation for the construct of employability, person-centred active participation also provides the conceptual glue that integrates the component dimensions of employability – career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital.*

The knowledge, skills and social capital students gain through higher education, and in the communities they inhabit in their everyday lives, is a valuable asset when seeking employment and building their careers in a neo-liberal inspired labour market. The participants' narratives also highlight that although institutions of further and higher education play an important role, in relation to enhancing employment prospects, ultimately it is a range of variable factors that lead people into employment. In particular, it is apparent that their experiences in higher education, and in work, have enabled them to establish a connection between notions of their personal and professional identities, and the practice associated with their career aspirations (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, 564). Moreover, the study suggests identity and the processes of transition in the course of their careers are fluid and subjective concepts, and that individuals must capitalise on available opportunities in order to access the marketplace and their chosen career trajectory. To that end, it would seem their time in education, and when interacting with fellow human beings, has empowered them to be what Pring (2012, 753) calls 'being a person.' That is, 'to have the capacities for reasoning, for inter-relating with other persons in community and for deliberating about the end worth pursuing.' Listening to the participants' voices, it would seem reasonable to assume that relationships forged with people in higher education (tutors and fellow students), and with others in the various communities that they are part of, has equipped them as 'career actors' for the complex, on-going, problematic journey of career building in a fast changing and challenging labour market.

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