Constructing early graduate careers: navigating uncertainty in transition.

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Signature .....

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Abstract

There has been a growing pressure on higher education to be seen to deliver positive graduate outcomes. The prospects of graduates attract the attention of many commentators including the media, employers, government and universities themselves. Literature about graduate career destinations has tended to draw upon quantitative data about trends while more local and qualitative commentary about the experience of graduates has been scarcer. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the meaning-making that graduates confer to early careers in an uncertain labour market.

The context of this study is the population of one northern university in England. Graduates of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and Business and Law are investigated. Data collected included a survey, followed by interviews; research was timed to occur to capture experiences in the first two years after graduation. The study aims for an integrative approach which acknowledges the potential of varied schools of thought (including labour market studies, management, psychology, career guidance and sociology), and has adopted the anthropological theory of *Figured Worlds*, as a novel lens to consider how individuals author themselves in an economic context characterised by uncertainty.

Findings reveal the considerable identity work engaged in by individuals in reflecting upon their situation. Diversity, complexity and contradictions are normal in how graduates confer meaning to their early careers. The space to author selves is influenced by competing discourses about employability, contested notions of what being a successful graduate is as well as various "standard plots" about careers. More expansive and nuanced notions of being a graduate emerge which question public policy which narrowly defines positive outcomes. A new theoretical model which includes both social and individual factors is borne out of the analysis, which contributes to career guidance theory and practice.

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Publications derived from work on the Doctoral Programme

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Christie, F. (2017a). The early career experiences of Arts graduates. *Graduate Market Trends*, 8-9.

Christie, F. (2017b). The reporting of university league table employability rankings: a critical review. *Journal of Education and Work, 30*(4), 403-418. doi:10.1080/13639080.2016.1224821

Christie, F. (2017c). *Uncertain transition; exploring the experience of recent graduates*. Retrieved from HECSU website: https://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/University_of_salford_uncertain_transitions_2017.pdf

List of abbreviations

AGCAS – Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
BME – Black and Minority Ethnic
BNIM – Biographic Narrative Interview Method
CIPD – Chartered Institute of Personnel Development
CUG – Complete University Guide
DLHE – Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education
HECSU – Higher Education Careers Service Unit
HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council, England
HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency
HMRC – Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
ONS – Office for National Statistics
SOC – Standard Occupational Classification
TEF – Teaching Excellence Framework

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Uncertainty appears to be a feature of contemporary life. Whether in relation to financial markets, geo-politics or global terrorism, our society and economy is facing new questions for which there are no easy answers. The word is used regularly by society's leaders, e.g., the Chancellor of the Exchequer (ITV, 2016), the Governor of the Bank of England (Allen, 2016), while the Prime Minister makes a quest for certainty an election pledge (May, 2017). The labour market and the careers that individuals can develop for themselves share this uncertainty as the nature of work is affected by globalisation and the development of new technology. Received wisdom suggests that graduates with higher qualifications (and status as potential knowledge workers) are better positioned to navigate uncertainty. However, the advent of higher tuition fees has raised the stakes with regard to the economic return from a degree. In a marketised environment, universities do not dwell upon the complexity of labour markets when they sell their courses. However, for university staff whose role it is to support current students and graduates, ignoring questions about the diverse range of graduate experiences is not an option. Such a conviction contributed to the choice of a research topic which seeks to discover more about how graduates reflect upon their early careers. The departure from university has always been uncertain to some extent. However, an accumulation of factors has raised levels of uncertainty for graduates going into the job market as they compete with more graduates for fewer structured career paths.

There is little consensus about the graduate labour market, which can only add to the confusion that graduates experience in reflecting upon their own situation. Media commentary is preoccupied with graduate unemployment, but particularly underemployment. The latter generating controversially varying estimates of up to 47% underemployment by the ONS (2013), 58% by the CIPD (2015) and 25% by HESA (2016). In parallel to this, popular ideas argue that this generation has been adversely affected by public policy which means paying more for a degree, while graduating into a more precarious labour market (Howker & Malik, 2010). Others are more pragmatic about the career benefits of doing a degree, arguing that adjustment on the economic return of a degree is simply a by-product of the expansion of higher education (Behle *et al*., 2015), whereas others are more optimistic and highly critical of the alarming data drawn upon by organisations such as the ONS and CIPD (Ball, 2015a).

Although the experiences of graduates attract considerable interest in public and media commentary, academic research about challenges faced has been limited, possibly because this topic is one that universities in a hyper-competitive market-place prefer to steer clear of, which may inhibit researchers. Finn (2015) and Scurry & Blenkinsopp (2011) have argued for further research which can explore the meaning-making that graduates confer to their own transitions. This study contributes to addressing this gap.

1.2 Research questions

Although the thrust of the research project has remained the same since inception, the major question did evolve over time. Originally, the project explicitly sought to explore those who were unemployed or under-employed. However, it soon became clear that although these issues preoccupy commentary about the labour market, early graduate experiences included a volatility, only part of which is about unemployment and underemployment. The adoption of the word "uncertainty" in relation to context and transition experiences aims to better capture a range of trajectories, which are not exclusive to unemployment and underemployment.

The primary research question is:

1. How do graduates reflect upon and explain their early career experiences, in a contemporary context in which uncertainty is a prevailing feature of the labour market?

Additional questions delved further into the primary question:

a. What challenges do graduates experience in the two years after completing their studies?
b. What narratives about themselves do graduates draw upon with regard to uncertain transitions from university?
c. What contributes to the ability of graduates to cope with career uncertainty?
d. Are there contrasts in the experience of transition for different types of graduate (e.g., by discipline, social background)?

On completion, the project also sought to consider implications for policy and practice:

e. What are the implications of the answers to the above for universities and the current generation of students and graduates?

Underpinning these was a desire to go beyond statistics which dominate labour market debates to explore what the current context may mean for graduates themselves.

1.3 Context

The research undertaken broadly focused on the 2014 graduates of two schools of study at one university. This was the last cohort not to pay higher tuition fees in England. The

university itself is in a northern metropolitan area and characterises itself as one with many non-traditional students, especially in relation to age and social background. It does not enjoy a strong league table standing with a fluctuating position in the middle and sometimes lower rankings. Graduate destinations are one of the measures that contribute to such league table positioning, and are also used in the outcomes measure of the government-led Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Recent TEF categories (of gold, silver and bronze) utilised metrics gleaned from destinations data for three years (2013, 2014, 2015). The university in this study was awarded a bronze categorisation and it was considered to be "below the benchmark" in relation to graduate outcomes. Effectively this does mean that the graduate population of this study contributed adversely to the university's TEF assessment by virtue of their career destinations six months after they graduated.

Within this context, the notion that Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities may face a more uncertain future than their peers is not a new one. A former education secretary even pointed out that choosing to study the Arts risks a diminution of career options (Paton, 2014). In contrast Business and Law graduates are well-positioned to apply for structured graduate schemes which exist with employers that dominate the graduate recruitment market (Gordon, 2016). Research historically supports the perception that Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities typically take longer than their peers to settle into a career (Elias, McKnight, Pitcher, Purcell, & Simm, 1999; Purcell & Elias, 2004), but with league tables and the TEF focusing on graduate destinations and outcomes, and TEF proposals to include data from the HMRC about earnings (cf Britton, Dearden, Shephard, & Vignoles, 2016), these are subjects which are defensive under the spotlight of policy exchanges about the value of a degree.

National figures about outcomes from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey six months completing a degree are distilled annually for a public audience in *What do Graduates Do* (e.g., AGCAS/HECSU, 2015). The following table 1.1 summarises information from that publication about the destinations from different subject areas for 2014, the year of this study. Discipline areas which closely map the subjects explored in this research have been listed. Such data shows some similarity across disciplines especially in categories of destination such as unemployment. Where variation occurs, it is often an indicator of the nature of career paths and associated expectations around professional and/or postgraduate education in different fields. Employment/employability metrics drawn from DLHE do seek to further define whether a graduate is in a graduate level role as defined by standard occupational classifications (SOC).

Table 1.1 National graduate career destinations, 2014 leavers

	Numbers graduating (survey respondents)	Employment	Further study	Working and studying	Unemployed	Other
Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities						
Fine Arts	2990	70.2%	10.0%	4.9%	7.9%	7.0%
Design	11030	81.8%	3.7%	1.9%	7.8%	4.8%
Performing Arts	9665	73.5%	10.9%	5.8%	5.7%	4.1%
English	9785	61.9%	18.1%	7.6%	6.6%	5.8%
History	9270	59.9%	20.0%	6.8%	6.6%	6.8%
Media Studies	4735	78.0%	5.3%	2.4%	9.7%	4.6%
Languages	7315	62.4%	18.0%	6.2%	6.4%	7.0%
Politics	4690	62.2%	17.8%	6.8%	7.3%	5.8%
Business and Law						
Finance and Accountancy	5860	67.5%	6.9%	12.9%	8.6%	4.2%
Business and Management	15790	75.9%	6.0%	4.9%	7.6%	5.5%
Hospitality, Leisure, Tourism	4235	81.0%	3.5%	2.6%	6.4%	6.5%
Marketing	3295	82.3%	3.1%	2.3%	6.1%	6.2%
Law	9975	52.9%	26.3%	10.8%	5.4%	4.6%

Adapted From What Do Graduates Do? 2015 (2014 leavers)

1.4 Project design

The methodological approach adopted for this study is detailed in chapter four and is broadly in a social constructivist, interpretive and qualitative tradition; such an approach is complementary to the theoretical lens of *Figured Worlds* (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) which has been identified as valuable to illuminate data collected within the project. Although the paradigm of this research is broadly interpretive, pragmatic opportunism led to adoption of a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The study included an initial survey to the target population, data from which could then act to situate and source the eventual sample utilised for semi-structured interviews. Findings from the survey could also inform questions in the interviews, and add to answering research questions.

Philosophically, Holland *et al*.'s anthropological synthesis of ideas from Bakhtin, Bourdieu and Vygotsky, which is known as *Figured Worlds*, has guided thinking tools that have been used for analysis. Their theory which is outlined in chapter three, seeks

to explore the major social question of the relationship between structure and agency, looking for fertile territory between binary depictions of the sociological and psychological. Added to this, concepts from existing career scholarship, reviewed in chapter two are drawn upon to inform analysis and subsequent findings. The use of *Figured Worlds* can facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives. It also provides a theoretical and methodological vehicle to "evoke wonder" (Van Manen, 2016) in the ordinary personal dramas that individuals may have.

The integrative theoretical approach adopted contributes to the originality of this research. Integration of different literatures is supported by numerous writers who criticise current political and social framing of issues to do with graduate careers and employability (Artess, Hooley, & Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp & Graley, 2016; Finn, 2016a; Holmes, 2016). Similarly writers from wider career scholarship have argued for more integrated perspectives (Inkson, Dries, & Arnold, 2015; Rodrigues, Guest, & Arthur, 2014). My own position as a researcher-practitioner adds to its novelty as it is unusual for such a perspective to be captured in the literature.

1.5 Thesis structure

Chapter two begins with a review of career scholarship literature from labour market studies, management, employability, sociology of education and career guidance/development. This review seeks to situate the project with a consideration of major relevant perspectives. Following this, chapter three explores the *Figured Worlds* theoretical framework that informs this study, before going onto detail the research design and methods in chapter four.

Chapter five outlines data illustrating movement and change for graduates based on the project's initial survey. Chapter six, seven, eight and nine all draw upon interviews with presentation and discussion around voices, figures, characters and narratives in graduate worlds. Chapter ten concludes with a discussion of major themes generated from the research and presents key points of learning from the study.

1.6 My role in the research

In choosing to research this topic I was influenced by popular ideas that are sceptical of "positive thinking" and argue that it is wise to face the possibility of negative outcomes (Burkeman, 2013; Cederström & Spicer, 2015). For some time, I had been troubled by the statements designed to motivate individuals about their career such as "the only thing stopping you from achieving your dream job is yourself". This appears to

contradict what is known about how social background can influence individual career trajectories (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Burke, 2015) as well as wider structural inequalities of society and the labour market (Hutton, 2011; Savage, 2015; Standing, 2014; Wilkinson, 2010). Hence I wanted to undertake research which could capture the diverse experiences of graduates, and encourage a more candid debate about graduate careers.

As much of the research project explores biographical detail of participants, it is appropriate to acknowledge how I author myself. I have been struck by how experiences of this generation are different from my own. I graduated in 1988 with a degree in English and History at a time when university education was free and got a full grant. I applied for just one job which wholly suited my personal values; it was in a radical bookshop, workers' co-op in Manchester. My parents were Irish immigrants to the UK who left school at 14 and migrated to London to work in the health service and public transport system of London in the 1950s/1960s; both secured jobs for life. I grew up in the London borders of Essex in the 1970s and 80s. My two sisters and I all passed the 11 plus just before comprehensive education became the norm and got state-funded places at the local Catholic girls direct grant grammar school. We all went to university and subsequently moved into professional jobs.

Despite hailing from Essex, the spiritual homeland of the right-wing working-class, my politics have always been broadly on the left which contributed to my choice to train as a careers adviser a few years after finishing my first degree, with the motivation to do something worthwhile/practical. A local authority grant was then available to do the careers guidance qualification. I have been doing this work since the early 1990s, initially working in secondary and further education, while also doing a distance MA in Education. After six years I moved into higher education and worked for ten years for a Russell Group University, and for the last nine in an Alliance Group University. I have also become a mother of two sons along the way.

Over time, I have become aware of the political context in which my role is positioned. I have observed that careers advice operates at the sharp-end of a highly-charged political environment which has to be navigated while also getting on with the job. While the labour market appears more challenging for new entrants, specialist careers advice especially in English schools and colleges has been hard-hit as a public service. An economic and social context that puts emphasis on market forces and individualism has contributed to the diminished value of a universal brokerage system to help people get into the job market. Careers advice as a specialist support service still exists in

higher education but services are variable and priority in professional practice is given to immediate organisational drivers and metrics rather than wider contextual issues.

My choice of this study is motivated by the daily challenges of my professional work; and to understand the context in which I work more meaningfully. This study allowed for a deeper probing into the experience of graduates. I am keen to tell the stories of ordinary lives and to embrace an approach that documents sympathetically but also critically.

Chapter 2 Graduate careers in context

Literature about careers is extensive and draws from different disciplines including sociology, social policy, psychology, management, labour market studies and economics, as well as the careers guidance community (Hirsh, 2016; Inkson *et al*., 2015). I have selected just some of what has been written in order to situate this project into existing literature which adds value in reflecting upon graduate transitions into the labour market. Seminal as well as newer authors and bodies of literature have been identified and are considered, and in so doing, bring together perspectives on the topic that often operate in isolation from one another, despite addressing similar subjects of enquiry. My purpose will be to identify how each body of literature intersects, with a view to draw out from the whole what is of most value in understanding the research topic. I am also interested in exploring what discourses about the concept of career emerge from the literature with a view to consider how such discourses may impact or not upon research participants.

2.1 Diversity and uneven returns in the graduate labour market

The predominantly quantitative work of the Warwick Institute of Employment Research (e.g., Elias *et al*., 1999; Elias & Purcell, 2013; Purcell & Elias, 2004) which is seminal in graduate labour market studies has historically tended to have a fairly sanguine interpretation of the job market, e.g., arguing that unemployment is usually short-term for graduates, and that the nature of graduate jobs is evolving which means that classic definitions of a graduate versus non-graduate job do not always reflect new and niche graduate positions. Their work led to a new typology of graduate jobs - traditional, modern, new and niche, which they went on to map onto a categorisation of the use of certain skills and knowledge which they describe as expert (specialist knowledge-intensive roles), orchestrator (managerial roles), and communicator (highly interpersonal, creative and technological roles) (Elias & Purcell, 2013). The work of the Institute spans 30 years of analysing the job market and notably has become less positive over time about labour market returns on a degree (most notably after the 2008 crash); they depict a diversity of returns which may largely be as a result of expanded participation in higher education, with the implication that such an enlarged population may not match traditional or even newer graduate level work opportunities (Behle *et al*., 2015) which belong to a bygone age prior to mass higher education participation. The impact of the global crash of 2008 on the labour market put particular strain on the graduate labour market for all stakeholders, and Behle *et al*. (2015) describe the "recession effect" visible in the class of 2009-10, with higher graduate unemployment and underemployment reported in the DLHE survey, but

suggest that although the intensity of this down-turn was temporary, it is likely that the risk of underemployment of graduates will prevail.

Other labour market literature also picks up on the disparity of graduate outcomes; overqualification and subsequent job dissatisfaction amongst graduates is described, and a modestly declining return on personal economic investment in higher education in recent years is observed (Green & Henseke, 2016; Green & Zhu, 2010). Drawing upon labour force data, Green and his co-authors are broadly sceptical of normative optimism about human capital theory (Becker, 1994) which places faith in supply-side notions of a highly educated workforce that will find its natural place in the economy and be the spur for growth of opportunity. Green & Henseke (2016) argue that although graduate earnings have held up for "the average graduate" and have gone up significantly at the top end, the "long tail" of those who do not get expected returns has increased and those who fall into that category may be more prone to getting trapped in lower quality employment. Based on their skills-based definition of a graduate job, which focuses on "information processing" (literacy, numeracy, computer use), "orchestration skills" (communicating, organising own work and work of others) as well as "job autonomy", they estimate that over 30% of graduates in the UK are in roles for which they are over-educated.

However, Green and his co-authors do not argue that fewer individuals should get a degree but rather that a focus on economic benefits is overplayed, and wider societal value (social trust, volunteering and political efficacy) of having a more highly educated population should have greater attention:

> Our evidence confirms previous studies that have shown social return to higher education to be greater than private returns, and finds that higher education delivers external benefits even for those that become over-educated (Green & Henseke, 2016, p. 22).

They also argue that there should be more transparency about the mixed returns of higher education with the knowledge that for some individuals choosing a course with low potential pecuniary benefits may still be a rational choice (Green & Zhu, 2010). Green also addresses the theme of well-being in related writing on unemployment (2011) in which he seeks to measure what can reduce the ill-effects of unemployment and argues that an individual's sense of their own employability (enhanced by having a degree) can mitigate against the damaging consequences of unemployment:

> those with greater education can respond better to being unemployed, having more self-confidence and a greater facility to pursue and gain fulfilment from alternative activities (Green, 2011, p. 274).

Savage's (2015) recent work developing a new typology of social class in the UK explores the position of graduates and argues that despite the poor economic situation that many graduates experience, their accumulated cultural and social capital gained during university contributes to them rarely being present in the lowest social classes, i.e., the precariat. Seven specific new social class categories have been identified with estimates of how graduates are represented within them. The UK's elite class (6% of population) consists of 56% graduates whereas at the other end of the scale, 15% of the population make up the precariat class, only 3% of whom are graduates. In between, the established middle-class (25% of population) comprise 43% graduates; the technical middle-class (6% of the population) has 26% graduates; new affluent workers comprise 15% of the population, of whom 11% are graduates; the traditional working-class comprise 14% of the population and 11% are graduates; and emerging service workers represent 19% of the population, 16% of whom are graduates. Savage's view that graduates have a reduced risk of being in the precariat contrasts with Standing's (2014) work which considers that due to the enduring presence of unpaid work in some sectors together with rising living costs in geographical areas where there are jobs, means that some graduates may well become members of a precariat class. Standing describes work conditions that have become degraded for many, a perspective that can be traced in other writing (De Botton, 2010; Sennett, 1999) and is ever more topical in discussions of the "gig economy" and high profile employers such as Sports Direct, Uber and Deliveroo being criticised for poor employment practices. Although graduates may be less likely to work for such companies (though they may have done as students), the wider labour market context is of significance and although such companies may represent an extreme example of precarious work, more casualised working conditions are growing in many workplaces. Other labour market commentators have a more sanguine interpretation of the end of work as we know it; according to Beck (2000), who writes from a German context, societies must accept that full employment is disappearing and move towards a post-work, multi-activity society in which all forms of work – not only employment – are socially recognised, valued and financially rewarded. Meanwhile Bradley (2005) agrees that precarious employment is a feature of contemporary work lives especially for young people, but supports the view that those with higher levels of education tend to be less at risk than less well educated peers.

The term underemployment is widely used but McKee-Ryan & Harvey's (2011) review of underemployment literature observe how it has many different definitions, and that

the notion of overqualification is just one, but an important aspect. Other aspects can include hours of work, work conditions, pay, and skill-underutilisation. Notably, they reflect upon the challenge of researching the topic given subjective and objective understandings of the term underemployment. One strand in the literature they observe concerns the relationship between unemployment and underemployment and how a negative cycle can ensue, as an individual may be more likely to take any job if unemployed. Research on regional differences (Rafferty, Rees, Sensier, & Harding, 2013) in labour market structures relevant to this study which is a northern context, explore contrasts for both underemployment and unemployment. They argue that several of the sub-regions and cities of the north of England also suffer a fairly entrenched and comparatively high level of underemployment and over-education. This runs alongside higher unemployment in these regions – suggesting that unemployment and underemployment run alongside each other as part of broader labour market problems. Rafferty *et al*. express the concern that:

> Levels of non-graduate employment among graduates remain comparatively high in the North of England compared to London and the rest of England generally. Tentatively, this may suggest a particular underutilisation of the skills and talent of the workforce in the Northern regions (Rafferty *et al*., 2013, p. 160).

More optimistic analysis of graduates' transition into the job market tends to come from the professional career development community which is closely connected to graduates and graduate employers:

> Findings from the 2016 edition of *What Do Graduates Do?* reveal that the unemployment rate for graduates six months after leaving university is 5.7%, a significant fall from 6.3% in 2015. The report also highlights that graduates are working in more professional roles with the proportion in non-graduate jobs after six months falling from 32% in 2015 to 29% in 2016 (AGCAS, 2016).

Arguably, in certain parts of the job market, there are not enough graduates (e.g., nursing, engineering, construction, teaching, IT and parts of the business services industry), a trend that is unevenly spread across different sectors as well as geographical locations (Ball, 2015a), with very few employers investing in converting graduates into skill shortage areas of work. A focus of attention in government-sponsored labour market research on graduate transition for a professional audience has been directed towards what characterises graduates who make a "successful" transition rather that explore those who have found it more difficult (Pennington, Sinclair, & Mosley, 2013). A fertile line of enquiry has been around graduate migration patterns (Finn, 2017) which Ball (2015b) categorised as loyals, stayers, returners and incomers.

In a recent book, Tholen (2014) has usefully synthesised much of the above debate and research about the graduate labour market and considers discourses in the media and public policy which relate to this. He identifies seven trends shaping the UK graduate labour market: the fast expansion of higher education; the recession and the widespread effects on the general labour market; global economic integration; the emergence of new graduate occupations; new types of work organisations and technological change; the war for talent and the elite labour market; and finally, increasing wage differentiation. Based on these trends, he makes some clear rebuttals about existing myths in the market-place; and goes on to argue that discourses in the media tend to identify graduates either as victims of a crowded or poorly structured labour market if they cannot get a job or are driven into unsuitable jobs, or as responsible agents who should not be pitied but must and can show remarkable zeal in securing a job. It is also implied that they are responsible for their own situation if they chose a degree which is well-known not to pay good dividends (more typically Arts subjects), and so therefore struggle to get a job.

Notably, in much labour market research, quantitative data analysis and analysis of large-scale trends does predominate. Although valuable, this focus may ignore more nuanced perspectives on issues such as differences between objective and subjective measures of success for individuals. In their review of underemployment of recent graduates, Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2011) argue that analysis of the meaning-making that individuals confer upon their own career situation has been under-researched. I agree with their observation and this has contributed to this study's rationale and design.

In summary, labour market literature traces trends in the structure of the labour market which illustrate changes in the number and nature of work opportunities for graduates, with a growth of diverse outcomes. It raises questions about normative definitions of what a successful graduate outcome really is, and whether having a degree can help insure against the worst parts of an uncertain job market. In a context of mass higher education participation, it questions the optimism of human capital theory and effectively casts doubt upon public policy which is based on simplistic economic benefits of getting a degree. Other questions are raised with regard to factors that contribute to different outcomes for graduates in transition; these include location, social class, and subject studied. Graduates are variably positioned as winners and losers (Bradley, 2005) in difficult job markets, evoked as victims and responsible agents by Tholen (2014).

2.2 The limits of a boundaryless career

Boundarylessness was originally developed in organisational and management literature as a way to describe the changing organisational structures of a late twentieth century context in which labour market structures were in evolution, as has been partially described in the previous section. It also developed to address how such changes impacted on what was needed from individuals within such contexts. The boundaryless career concept has been an important one in capturing less linear and structured career paths, countering ideas of the prospect of "a job for life". It expressed a shift away from the organisational or "bounded" career and towards the idea of the "individual career actor" who moves between roles, jobs and employers, not being bounded by notions of loyalty to either an occupation or an employer. Originally developed in the mid-1990s (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) it has remained an enduringly popular theory for which the journal *Career Development International* ran a special edition twenty years on (Rodrigues *et al*., 2014). Gubler, Arnold, and Coombs (2014) provide a summary to define the concept:

> A boundaryless career has six specific meanings: first, moving across boundaries of separate employers, second, drawing validation and marketability from outside the present employer, third, being sustained by external networks or information, fourth, breaking traditional organizational assumptions about hierarchy and career advancement, fifth, rejecting existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons, and sixth, perceiving a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. Common to all meanings is that they emphasize an individual's independence rather than dependence on traditional career structures and principles (Gubler *et al*., 2014, p. 642).

They also go on to describe the subsidiary components which are the boundaryless career orientation (defined as an individual's preference for all or some parts of a boundaryless career) and boundaryless career path (what an individual career path might look like). The boundaryless career orientation concept has often been partnered with the idea of a protean career orientation (pro-active and values-led attitudes/behaviour) (Baruch, 2014; Hall, 2004; Waters, Briscoe, Hall, & Wang, 2014) and a boundaryless career path is complementary to ideas about portfolio working (a non-linear career including many parts) (Handy, 2011). Within such literature, there is emphasis on how individuals can have agency in uncertain environments. Six competencies were originally identified as desirable for individuals to respond to the challenge of boundaryless career environments. These were defined as:

> Knowing what – industry opportunities, threats, and requirements; Knowing why – meaning, motives and values; Knowing where – entering training and

> advancing; Knowing whom – relationships based on social capital and attraction; Knowing when – timing of roles, activities, and choices; Knowing how – technical and collaborative skills (Jones & DeFillippi, 1996, p. 91).

Subsequent work on developing how these competencies translated into measures of success has utilised just three of them, namely; knowing why, knowing whom and knowing how (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003). Knowing what, knowing when, and knowing where could be included under an expanded knowing how, in relation to understanding of how an occupation or job market operates.

There has been widespread criticism of the boundaryless career concept (Dany, 2014; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Inkson *et al*. (2012) in particular critically review how it has taken on a fairly hegemonic status in much writing about careers. They question its domination of thinking about careers, arguing that in many ways boundaries prevail in contemporary careers, e.g. many professions and employers have well-developed boundaries that are not easily crossed, and boundaries sometimes exist as barriers for those who are not the right gender, class or ethnicity. The implication is that boundarylessness is in some cases illusory, and that boundaries are more real than ever, and can have both positive and negative consequences, so it is not wise to think that they are not there. They sum up the boundaryless career as: "…increasingly obsolete as a "leading edge" construct in career studies" (Inkson *et al*., 2012, p. 323). Interestingly, Arthur, one of the concept's original authors, joins with some of its main critics (Rodrigues *et al*., 2014) in acknowledging the need for a review of the boundaryless career concept; in their joint paper they recommend further research that uses the concept, and should consider both boundaries and boundarylessness. They argue for a greater interdisciplinarity of work between career scholars, which eschews disciplinary isolation. An appeal is made for schools of management and education to draw interdisciplinary threads together (Rodrigues *et al*., 2014), which is something this study aims to do by integrating different bodies of literature in illuminating research questions.

Although, possibly an unintended consequence of the original concept, it does appear to have been effectively co-opted (though rarely referenced in public commentary) as a neutral way to explain why individuals should take responsibility for their careers rather than their employer or the wider economy, e.g., it can be traced in popular graduate careers books such as *The Art of Building Windmills* (Hawkins, 1999): "to be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure". Such an emphasis on the "individual career actor" risks failing to address employers' responsibilities and wider economic and social trends that have arguably downgraded the value of a notion of

secure and fulfilling work which labour market and sociological literature address; meanwhile policy pressures upon universities raise expectations to facilitate the "individual career actor" as the channel to a highly skilled workforce and driver of economic growth. Arguably the boundaryless career shares characteristics with the precarity that some workers such as graduates newly entering the labour market may experience. The positive aspects of the original concept may exist for the lucky few "individual career actors" who can thrive with considerable mobility, however, this is counter-balanced with workers for whom such permeability of job and work structures has brought adverse consequences. It suits policy-makers to present uncertainty in upbeat ways, e.g., a Conservative politician was recently reported arguing that: "Jobs of the future may not have stable hours, holiday pay, sick pay, or pensions, DWP secretary says. Damian Green describes development in the labour market as exciting" (Stone, 2016).

Despite these criticisms, I was interested to explore literature which considers what characterises individuals who demonstrate boundaryless career competencies (knowing how, knowing whom, knowing why) or a preference for a boundaryless career orientation, as this is relevant to how individuals cope with transition experiences such as leaving university. Acceptance of the boundaryless career concept has been influential in shaping definitions of individual employability (a key concern of universities), of which a strong dimension has been argued to be valuable in helping people especially in job loss and job search circumstances (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). Fugate and his co-authors' model of employability is based on three boundaryless competencies, career identity (knowing why), human capital (knowing how) and social capital (knowing whom) and in addition, personal adaptability. Proponents argue that possession of all components of this employability dimension can positively influence job search as individuals have more resources to draw upon in responding to the stresses of finding a job. This proposition resonates with work of labour market economists (Green, 2011), as discussed earlier, who write about the value of employability for individuals in reducing any adverse risks to wellbeing due to experiences such as unemployment.

In this vein, Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy (2012) consider protean and boundaryless career orientations together in analysing how individuals may cope with insecure employment conditions, drawing together the threads of job search behaviour, job performance, subjective career success, and psychological wellbeing. They endeavour to empirically prove that such orientations can help individuals develop career skills and ultimately cope with uncertain career environments:

> …the findings empirically confirm that protean and boundaryless attitudes may indeed help employees develop careers skills and ultimately cope with uncertain career environments…self-directed protean attitudes are more internally-focused, facilitating self-exploration that enables individuals to attend to identity issues, for example, while boundaryless attitudes are more externally focused, thus allowing individuals to cross boundaries of the organisation in seeking support and opportunities (Briscoe *et al*., 2012, p. p.314).

Waters, Briscoe, Hall, & Wang add to this line of argument, (2014) and explore protean career orientations which they define as:

> the extent to which an individual manages his or her career in a proactive, self-directed way driven by personal values and subjective success criteria…a protean career orientation motivates people to adapt to changing environments and to assign responsibility for a career to oneself… (p.405)

They associate a protean career orientation with the personal adaptability component of Fugate's earlier employability framework (2004) and argue that they have proof that a protean career orientation in particular can help individuals navigate adverse career experiences.

Discussion of subjective success criteria is a valuable contribution associated with the protean career orientation, a notion that tends to be ignored in quantitatively-oriented labour market literature about whether a graduate is in a graduate job, and in employability literature influenced by policy drivers about positive graduate outcomes. Research has drawn upon this concept, suggesting different ways of considering success in careers (Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008). They argue that influential factors include advancement, recognition, personal satisfaction, personal development, creative outlet, job security and financial security, as well as co-operation, contribution, and performance.

Notably, other recent theoretical developments for a professional careers guidance audience have focused on the career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) element that Fugate *et al*. (2004) included in their boundaryless employability model. Emphasis is given to how aspects of adaptability (i.e., concern, curiosity, control, confidence) can help individuals navigate career uncertainty. This theory describes individual "concern" about the future and "curiosity" about career possibilities which fit with a boundaryless attitudes to external circumstances, with "control", a belief in own ability to have control and "confidence", associated with self-efficacy, which are more akin to protean attitudes which are internally orientated. Savickas (2012a) has also written of life design and

individuals as authors of their lives which is complementary to boundaryless and protean career ideas of the individual. He differentiates between actors who exhibit behaviours, agents who interact and engage with their context and authors who can move beyond these stages into explaining their career positioning.

In summary, much literature which draws upon boundaryless and associated protean career orientations is individualistic and psychological, and considerable assumptions of individual agency are apparent. Successful career seekers are positioned as flexible and chameleon-like. Specific personal orientations are itemised and evaluated. The development of questionnaires and instruments that can measure and test orientations are commonplace. Such instruments are developed with a target audience that is responsible for human resource management, career counselling and occupational psychology so there is perhaps a pragmatic and implicit emphasis on what action can be taken and what individuals can control rather than what maybe outside of their control (i.e., the world economy and inequality therein). In general, it does appear that such approaches risk downplaying the wider socio-economic factors that impact on individual careers. An extrapolation of these theories also connects to what many have depicted as a neoliberalist emphasis on the individual as the source of securing a meaningful career (Duckworth, 2016; Gershon, 2017) and this review will return to this in section 2.4 which discusses literature about the deeply social nature of graduate careers.

2.3 The contested nature of employability in higher education

Government policy has increasingly required higher education to focus on its role in preparing graduates for employment (Department of Business Innovation & Skills, 2011, 2015; Wilson, 2012). The increase in student tuition fees has been defended by government as justifiable due to the potential graduate premium with an implicit assumption that individuals will be aware of the potential return on their specific degree subject (Britton *et al*., 2016). A focus of attention has been graduate outcomes which are set to grow in significance as part of TEF. Although it is well documented that the employability of graduates and their likely career success is only loosely related to their employment/career situation six months after graduating (Christie, 2017b), this outcomes driver has contributed to an increasing policy emphasis on employability within universities.

Ironically, the policy emphasis on employability is not married to any tradition of industrial or labour market-informed planning of higher education provision. Provision

of courses can often be in response to student demand which in the past has resulted in commentary which argues that there is an over-supply of certain graduates, e.g., Law, Media studies and an under-supply of others, e.g., Engineering, Maths. Reporting on a Higher Education Academy survey, a recent edition of the *Times Higher Education* reports on its front cover "Only 51% of undergraduates feel equipped for the world of work" (November 2016, edition no. 2280), with the implication that universities are at fault for this. There has been a steady growth of literature about employability. Two recent examples which illustrate this interest and which are wide-ranging in scope are a Higher Education Academy Review of the Employability Literature (Artess *et al*., 2017), and an edited volume on Graduate Employability (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016).

The absence of an agreed definition of employability is evidence of how it is contested even in how it is enacted within higher education. A recent Higher Education Academy publication about defining and developing employability includes multiple definitions (Cole & Tibby, 2013) and invites individual universities to create their own local definition. The following three definitions illustrate slightly contrasting emphases about it; however, all focus on employability as belonging to the individual. Yorke's ten year old definition does still seem to be the most often quoted:

1. A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).
2. Employability is having a set of skills, knowledge and understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can satisfied and be successful (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).
3. A set of attributes and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (CBI, 2009).

In their wide-ranging review of conceptions, models and frameworks, Williams *et al*. (2016) focus on individual employability. They identify themes which include capitals (human, social, cultural and psychological), and career management and contextual dimensions. Their recent review illustrates how crowded the territory of employability is; included in their review are works which factor in boundaryless career competencies discussed in the previous section (Eby *et al*., 2003; Fugate *et al*., 2004; McArdle *et al*., 2007). A related literature has reported the rise of an interest in graduate attributes (Barrie, 2012; Bridgstock, 2009). In defining graduate attributes, Barrie (2012) includes an orientation to scholarship, lifelong learning and global citizenship which are underscored by skills and abilities in research and inquiry, information literacy,

personal and intellectual autonomy, ethical, social and professional understanding and communication. A number of commentators have contributed to literature about how employability can be taught (Dacre Pool, Qualter, & Sewell, 2014; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Pegg, Lawton, Waldock, & Hendy-Isaac, 2012) and/or evaluated (Dempster, Saunders, & Daglish, 2015), or critique of the effectiveness of such teaching (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Holmes, 2001).

In contrast to the employability focus on skills and attributes, Holmes (2015) has drawn attention to graduate identity and "becoming a graduate", arguing that the emergence of a career identity commensurate with being a graduate, evolves slowly after individuals leave university. He presents a model of becoming a graduate of zones, which he calls indeterminate, failed, agreed, imposed, and under-determined. This approach positions graduates as fundamentally proactive and does appear to resonate with Savickas' psychological ideas about "career adaptability", as well as the boundaryless competency of "knowing why". Holmes positions his graduate identity approach as offering an alternative to a "counsel of despair"(2016, p. 366) that uncertain job markets can lead to. In a related study, Praskova, Creed, & Hood (2015) have sought to prove the importance of "career identity" to self-perceptions of employability and reduced career distress; "career identity" is defined as "a network of meanings in which individuals consciously link their own interests, motivation and competencies with acceptable career roles" (p.145). Focus on identity is also evident in the use of the phrase "identity capital" as a construct within graduate employability, as a distillate of how individuals develop a self-construct and personal narrative (Tomlinson, McCafferty, Fuge, & Wood, 2017). Such a focus on identity does expand debates about employability into terrain that tends not to have been prioritised in employability literature.

Some writers on employability have given attention to the structural issues associated with employability with an underlying observation that employability of individuals as a concept appears to have grown as graduate numbers have increased and opportunities for employment seem to have lessened and/or become less clear (an observation resonant of labour market literature). McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) critique the evolution of employability into something that risks being incorrectly focused on individual employability rather than acknowledging the combination of individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors which influence an individual's likely success. The relationship of which McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) write between structural constraints and individual agency is recurrent in some writing about graduate employability. For example, in their seminal research about traditional graduate scheme assessment centres, Brown, Hesketh & Williams (2004) observe an

emphasis on the individual and their own employability which ignores structural inequalities and positional conflict in the labour market. They criticise employer preoccupation with the "War for Talent" which captures an idea that only a few special graduates are sought, rather than considering how work-places can evolve to make better use of a wider number of graduates. Tholen and Brown (2017) have recently extended this critique of employability, arguing that the supply-side policy emphasis associated with human capital completely misses the point of structural problems in the labour market, in terms of scope for meaningful graduate work. Also with a more politically critical eye, Tomlinson (2012, 2014) traces conceptual themes around employability which illustrate a diversity of discourses which stretch beyond its individualistic depiction; he identifies key themes including human capital, identity, positional conflict, skills, and social reproduction. Which of these themes has priority tends to depend on who is talking about employability, of which there are numerous stakeholders including government, employers, policy-makers, universities, students and graduates. In his reviews of the graduate employability literature Tomlinson (2012, 2016) argues for a much broader acknowledgement and understanding of employability than is generally utilised by policy-makers who tend to focus on human capital and skills, rather than the thorny topics of positional conflict and identity. There is also evidence that even though some stakeholders such as employers and government will publicly espouse a commitment to a reduction of positional conflict and the disadvantaging of certain students and graduates, their practices can have the opposite effect (Bridge Group, 2017; Milburn, 2014).

What do these debates and activity mean for students who are, in theory, the objects of strategy and policy which seeks to embed employability and by so doing improve outcomes for them as graduates? In a study of a mixed cohort of students from more traditional backgrounds in a pre-1992 institution, Tomlinson (2008) observes a gradual downgrading of the perceived value of academic study as students think it is activities outside of their degree that matter most in relation to getting a job. In work with Business students at a post-1992 institution, Tymon (2013) describes students who may have fairly instrumental views of employability, associating it with specific activities like work experience and job seeking, rather than engaging with a more nuanced development of attributes and skills that are favoured by policy-makers. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) in a mixed discipline study of non-traditional graduates observe employability having potentially damaging consequences for graduates who are encouraged to focus on individual employability rather than wider social inequalities. Clearly, student and graduate attitudes to employability are complex, which has been further complicated by public policy which encourages students of all disciplines to

think that because they are paying for their education, there should be some return on investment, which their university has some responsibility for (e.g., Collini, 2012; Morrison, 2016).

There is a diverse literature about employability which explores the topic in relation to different subject areas within universities, including the disciplines of graduates who are the research foci of this study. For example, Business schools in universities tend to give high priority to employability issues. Many will even have their own specialist employability hubs, employability modules and/or careers advice teams. There is a perception that a choice of course such as business management or accountancy at degree level has been influenced by pragmatic career ideas and goals, in which the self-enterprise project of employability fits well for students who may be learning about related concepts in their studies already, e.g., human resources, marketing, branding. There are more traditional graduate schemes options for Business graduates, such as in finance, management and IT which offer a clearer path to graduates of business-related subjects, e.g., accountancy training places persist in offering the highest number of graduate vacancies (Gordon, 2016). Wilton (2008, 2011, 2012) writes of what seems like a perfect match of employability with business education, but also that some received wisdoms do not always play out as positively for graduates as policy-makers suggest, e.g., with regard to self-perceived employability, which Wilton illustrates that the benefits of which may well be trumped by differential access to valuable social capital, noting that ethnic minority and mature graduates tended to have worse employment outcomes than their peers even though they reported a higher level of employability skills development through their studies. Nabi (2003) writes of the realities of underemployment for some Business graduates, and others observe student perspectives which are misaligned to university policy narratives about the development of employability (Greenbank, 2015; Tymon, 2013), with a persistent expectation that achieving a 2.1 degree will be the most important key to success, ignoring the value of extra-curricular activities and wider skills development.

Literature about Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities is more diverse (Allan, 2006; Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose,2013; Ashton & Noonan, 2013; Bennett & Bridgstock, 2014; Bridgstock, 2009; Brown, 2007), and perhaps reflects the challenges such disciplines face to defend how they contribute to a labour market which foregrounds demand for graduates from other areas (most notably in recent policy, those from Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths). The notion of a boundaryless career environment and the neoliberal flexible worker is more applicable in the media and creative industries where there are traditionally less structured career pathways.

Students of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities subjects are typically considered to have chosen a subject because of a strong interest rather than because of a more instrumental purpose. They face an environment where even if successful as an artist, actor, musician or writer – technological innovation makes it complex to monetise what work they may do. Academic writing considers the challenge of preparing students with sometimes unrealistic expectations for what may be insecure job environments (Noonan, 2013), in a marketised environment with a wider discourse which encourages graduates to think that the purchase of a degree should lead to a guaranteed outcome (Ashton & Noonan, 2013). In a *Journal of Education and Work* special issue Bridgstock *et al*. (2015) explore the nuances of graduate level creative work, the kinds of value that graduates add to this work, and identify employability issues for creative graduates. These include emerging and developing creative career identities and the implications for educators tasked with developing a capable creative workforce; the articles in the special issue contribute to a more multifaceted picture of creative education and the trajectories of graduates from creative degrees.

In summary, the employability literature raises questions about the prevailing focus on individual employability in universities which ignore structural constraints or more complex identity issues. Employability is a concept which many graduates will have had exposure to, though rarely given the opportunity to consider critically. Questions are raised – are graduates being influenced by a discourse of individual employability, and how this may relate to being the responsible agent that Tholen (2014) has depicted? To what extent, do they consider the contingent nature of their likely career success? An emerging focus explores issues of identity which offers an alternative to dominant ideas about skills and attributes.

2.4 The deeply social nature of graduate careers

Recent literature that broadly originates from the sociology of education draws upon the work of Bourdieu (1977b) and focuses on social class as a lens to explore the careers of students and graduates. In doing so it reveals how some of the notions already discussed of being employable or having a suitably boundaryless or protean career orientation can be bound up with social background, individual habitus and an ability to draw upon valuable capitals. The significance of social background is evident in the labour market research of the Warwick Institute of Employment Research. The findings of the longitudinal Futuretrack study (Purcell *et al*., 2013) indicate that socio-economic background may have a greater significance than age, gender or ethnicity in likelihood

of participation in activities and lifestyle that can enhance career prospects and the subsequent chance of securing a graduate level role later on.

> The less positive labour market experience of graduates who did not take part in extracurricular activities, who remained in their parental home when they studied, and who did not develop the kind of social networks that provided them with helpful careers advice, and the extent to which such activities are more likely amongst particular disadvantaged groups presents a challenge to the prevailing notion that HE participation is a vehicle for social mobility and reducing the impact of prior disadvantage can be further entrenched by the very different HE experiences of those from more and less advantaged backgrounds (Purcell *et al*., 2013, p. 132).

Such findings are supported by the strong tradition of more critical writing about the role of class in higher education which identifies the contrasting experiences of middle-class and working-class students in their journey (Reay, 2013b; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Redmond, 2006). Assumptions about social mobility are also questioned which seem to be grounded in securing a good pathway for the lucky few rather than improving real opportunities and chances for all (Reay, 2013a). Qualitative research has focused on how these inequalities translate into career chances for students. The Paired Peers project compared students of different social classes studying similar subjects at two universities of different status and shows how middle-class students tend to be better at playing the game of employability/careers (Bathmaker *et al*., 2013). Bathmaker *et al*. argue that a prevailing emphasis on meritocratic competition within the student job market for things like getting work experience or an internship, actually adds to inequalities rather than alleviating them, as the playing field is not level especially in relation to social capital. Greenbank (2011) has specifically illustrated how working-class students may be less likely to understand the rules of a competitive job market, with attitudes and behaviours that include, putting too much faith in their educational credentials, and not gaining access to valuable careers advice from their social network or even their institutional careers service. In a context, in which working-class students are possibly more likely than their middle-class peers to be time-poor due to commitments to part-time work, Greenbank summarises an attitude amongst working-class students of "I'd rather talk to someone I know than somebody who knows".

Researchers writing from a sociological perspective have also turned their attention to focus on small-scale studies of graduates. The work of Burke (2015), Finn (2016a) and Leach (2016) are examples of this extension of education research to those who have left education. Burke (2015) writes of how social class impacts on career trajectories,

suggesting that the social class background of individuals may actually trump what kind of institution has been attended. Middle-class graduates who attend lower tariff universities are able to draw upon a wider range of valuable capitals as they go into the job market, in contrast to working-class graduates who attribute too much faith in what attending a higher tariff university may mean for their career, and are not able to draw upon valuable social and cultural capital in competing for added-value components for their CVs. This can contribute to an inhibited self-efficacy and confidence, of which Mallman (2016) has written, describing the feelings of working-class graduates who are more likely to doubt their own abilities even if they do pursue conventionally successful careers and may have feelings of illegitimacy, anxiety and insecurity.

With a focus on gender, Finn (2016a, 2016b) describes changing patterns of migration for graduates and an increasing likelihood for young adults to be dependent on their parents for longer, with family relations being ever more important in supporting transitional experiences. The economic status of a family will be an influential part in whether a student even leaves home to go to university and, described as a "boomerang generation", this is one for which returning to the family home after university is quite normal (Sage, Evandrou, & Falkingham, 2013). Finn's research highlights the relational aspects of career paths which counter notions of free-floating individuals making and acting upon rational career choices.

In a similar vein, writing from cultural studies vigorously critiques ideas of meritocracy in both education and employment contexts. Ideas which prioritise individual effort and hard work, have faith that success is meritocratic (e.g., Gladwell, 2008; Sandberg, 2013), and can come to anyone who puts in the required effort and is prepared to overcome adversity (as demonstrated in popular culture by programmes such as *The Apprentice*) have been criticised for promoting a form of selfish individualism (Biressi, 2013; Biressi & Nunn, 2014; Mendick, Allen, & Harvey, 2015). Such ideas of "the entrepreneurial self" risk ignoring structural constraints that limit career trajectories and de-value the infrastructure that can benefit the majority not just the lucky few. Added to this the changing student fee regimes can be seen as part of a wider cultural shift to responsibilisation in which individuals are positioned as solely responsible for their own careers (Morrison, 2014, 2016; Shamir, 2008); an important step being the apparent choice they have made with regard to university enrolment. Such a move can be seen as ideological; based on a conflation of consumerism with citizenship, commonly associated with neoliberalism. Young people (and older) are encouraged to consider choosing a university course as a market choice in which individuals are assumed to be making fully informed knowledge of the consequences of their purchase.

Leach (2016) has used the phrase "cruel optimism" to describe what individuals may experience when they are led to believe certain clichés such as "anyone can do anything if they just work hard enough" that are promulgated by some politicians (e.g., Daily Telegraph, 2016). Such idealistic and competitively-oriented individualism appears in some self-help literature (D'Alessandro, 2008; Gibson, 2012; Johnson, 2015; Purkiss & Royston-Lee, 2014). The normalisation of such strongly-stated individualist perspectives have been shown to be culturally-constituted when compared to other nations which have more collectively-based assumptions about careers (Chudzikowski *et al*., 2009).

Highlighting positional conflict in the graduate labour market, Brown *et al.* (2004, p. 125) identified an evocative typology in order to divide people into two types which capture the deeply social construction of employability. Bearing the influence of sociological theory, they describe "players" and "purists" (table 2.1), though stress that it is quite possible for individuals to move between both.

Table 2.1 Players and purists - typology

Approach to employability	**Players**	**Purists**
Competition rules	Market	Meritocratic
Task	Win positional game	Technical puzzle
Self-development	Expressed through work	Work expression of self
Career strategy	Maximise market options	Maintain career integrity

Source (Brown et al., 2004)

Sociological literature makes an important contribution to reflections on graduate careers. This literature has shifted from a traditional/stereotypical perception of sociological commentary which depicts destinies as largely socially determined (Roberts, 1977; Willis, 1977); to a context that is drawn by recent literature that explores barriers but also how agency may be manifest or not. New ideas have emerged which depict individual careers in deeply relational terms, and warn of the dangers of individual responsibilisation in a context in which any notion that the job market is meritocratic is illusory. The challenge of such literature is that in its depiction of unequal social contexts it risks what Holmes has described as a "counsel of despair".

2.5 In search of a new theory of careers for careers advice

Career theories associated with the professional careers advisory community have developed for over a century. Savickas (2008, 2011, 2012a) has partially traced this history which has tended towards a more psychological orientation; from Parsons' (1909) original ideas of trait theory and vocational choice, to Holland's matching approach (1997), to Super's (1983) ideas of developmental stages. More recently Krumboltz & Levin's (2010) theory of happenstance and Savickas and Porfeli's (2012) theory of career adaptability have considered how individuals respond to environments where uncertainty is endemic. However, despite contextual framing, the underlying philosophy of both these latter theories remains psychological and individualist in orientation. This strong tradition between career guidance and psychology which tends to have been influenced by US writers is something that has long been criticised by left-leaning sceptics of careers guidance in the UK (Roberts, 1977, 2013). Relatedly, much classic career development theory is prefaced by an assumption that a professional infrastructure exists to support individuals in utilising or acting upon ideas.

Some writers from career studies have endeavoured to characterise types of career decision-making and career behaviours. Arguably, some of these types could be considered to be akin to embedded cultural models, a concept that I will return to in chapter three. It should be stressed that although these types may be familiar to career studies scholars, their lexicon may not be so amongst the general population, although when described may be instantly familiar to lay people, due to a deep engraining in public consciousness. McCash (2016) has critically reviewed categories used in theories of career, which he usefully divides up as accounts of employability, success formulas, typologies and metaphors, suggesting the value that can be gained by contrasting such categories. Typologies do risk putting people in boxes which ignore the complexity of human behaviour. However, they do provide a value in distilling what may well be influential ideas which pervade society about careers.

Possibly one of the most enduring typologies is that of John Holland's vocational personalities, (1997). Holland produced this typology, based on the idea that it was possible to get an occupational fit for individuals based on career interests. The theory argues that individuals will tend to have a dominant three which would be translated into a three letter code which can be matched to a job. Individuals can find their three letter code through a test. Holland's theory has long been disparaged by commentators who grudgingly admit that its influence endures, especially in guidance practice. What critics perhaps fail to recognise is that an individual's Holland code may be best viewed as a jumping off point for career ideas; although Holland as original author may well

have intended it to be more exacting. Holland's vocational personality types are; artistic (creators), enterprising (persuaders), investigative (thinkers), realistic (do-ers), social (helpers), conventional (organising).

Another enduring career typology which addresses values is Schein's career anchors (2016, p. 166) which were developed in the mid-1980s, but are still going strong, especially in management development training. Like Holland's theory, individuals can conduct a test to find out which is their dominant career anchor. Described as values, Schein's anchors share some similarity to Holland's personality types. They are general managerial competence, technical functional competence, entrepreneurial creativity, autonomy/independence, security/stability, service/dedication to a cause, pure challenge, and lifestyle.

Less widely known, but developed in a UK context by career guidance academics, four categories have been identified to depict career decision-making behaviours (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007, pp. 22-25) which they call strategic, aspirational, opportunist and evaluative. All are framed in positive ways and all are action-oriented, although opportunism in particular, is framed more negatively, which is notable as other career scholars such as Krumboltz (2009), Clarke (2009) and Hodkinson (2008) are much more pragmatic about the role of opportunism in career decision-making.

Other schools of thought associated with careers advice have been more willing to grapple with sociological and political issues that may affect guidance theory and practice. It is perhaps no accident that much such theory has originated from the UK context in which careers work has been subject to the twin forces of strong policy pressures and an enduring social class system. Some British writing on career development is more transdisciplinary in its heritage drawing upon a balance between psychology and sociology, individual agency and social circumstances (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Gothard, Mignot, Offer, & Ruff, 2001; Hodkinson, 2008; Law, 2009; McCash, 2008). With regard to policy issues, Tony Watts has been a leading commentator on the political landscape, although his priority was work in schools not higher education. He adopted the phrase socio-political ideologies of guidance to depict the political aspect of careers guidance, a perspective which has gained little traction in the higher education careers professional community:

> Careers education and guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which such life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of

> whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them (Watts, 1996, p. 351).

Arguably career development practices in UK universities are influenced more by employability outcome measures and metrics than by the application of any kind of career development theoretical framework, whatever its origin. Theoretical frames have been squeezed and perhaps found wanting in a context in which practice is dominated by marketised pressures to prepare graduates to be suitably employable for employers. UK Career studies literature for higher education (McCash, 2008, 2016) does encourage a critical approach to employability which advocates that students are educated to consider issues of professionalism, identity and the contingent nature of their future career prospects. However, the drive to being responsive to market pressures has led to an approach to career development support which draws upon an eclectic range of theories and ideas, and is arguably in some cases atheoretical as services are reactive to contexts.

Educators, whether career development specialists or not, face a particular challenge in supporting students and graduates in what is a time of considerable economic and social change. In such a context, career development theorists argue for a greater need for individuals to engage with career thinking, which may call for more help from career specialists:

> Frequent job dislocation and career destabilization set workers adrift as they try to chart their futures and shape their identities. Entering today's work world requires more effort, deeper self-knowledge, and greater confidence than ever before. Individuals who must cope with unstable occupations and frequent job transitions may request substantially more help from career counsellors, and I think a different kind of help (Savickas, 2012b).

However, in the UK context, the professionalism of careers advice and guidance more generally, has been affected by education policy, and in universities individually based guidance work has shrunk while activities such as teaching large groups and organising employer recruitment events have grown which presents different demands upon practice (Christie, 2016). Savickas' suggestion that "more help from career counsellors" will be needed may be accurate, but in a mass higher education environment, this looks less likely to be resourced consistently for individuals. Those such as Hodkinson (2008) who have argued for a focus on guidance practice which is not associated with outcome measures have been firmly silenced in the current policy context in which the existence of careers advisory support in higher education is largely justified by the positive contribution it can make to outcomes.

A popular contemporary trend in international theoretical approaches about careers has been the application of narrative; epitomised by career construction theory and the work of Mark Savickas (2013). Many other writers have also utilised narrative as a concept for constructivist career counselling but largely as tool to be used in a diagnostic/therapeutic way (Collin, 2000; Hooley & Rawlinson, 2011; LaPointe, 2010; Law, 2015; McMahon, 2016; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2008; Savickas, 2012b, 2013; Winter, 2012). Inkson *et al*. (2015) have summarised this trend with the metaphor of "careers as stories". However, like "socio-political ideologies of guidance" such theoretical ideas have had little take-up in higher education practice in the UK, perhaps because in depth individual work, which narrative tends to be associated with, is limited. Savickas argues for the power of stories in the individual counselling context, and makes recommendations for practice around this associated with questioning prompts about childhood memories. Such ideas, though interesting do not appear to have transferred well into the high volume careers advisory contexts of UK higher education, and are probably more relevant to prolonged career coaching interactions.

> People use stories to organize their lives, construct their identities, and make sense of their problems. Clients enter counseling with a story to tell about some transition. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. By holding those stories in the relationship, counselors enable clients to reflect on their lives. Dwelling in their own stories often destabilizes old ideas that block decision making and usually enables an awareness that prompts a choice. As clients give voice to their stories, they hear what they already know and find the answers which they seek. (Savickas, 2015)

Pryor and Bright (2008), following in the tradition of Booker (2004), have suggested some "standard plots" about career which are "overcoming the monster", "rags to riches", "quest", "voyage and return", "comedy", "tragedy" and "re-birth". Research questions included issues of narrative, and this will be further explored in chapter nine.

It does appear that the tradition of psychologically-based career theory, which has historically informed the guidance profession, may not be fit for purpose in current organisational and uncertain labour market contexts. This assertion is supported by more recent appeals which call for a new approach to career theory that can support practice more meaningfully. A theory that can be sensitive to psychological, sociological, and political contexts could have a compelling practical application (Hooley, 2015; Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2012; Sultana, 2014; Watts, 1996). There are signs of a demand for a new approach to career theory which can build upon the breadth of career studies heritage in a meaningful way. My research is part of this landscape and will explore the value of different theoretical approaches in analysis of this project's data. In

so doing, I pick up on what has been argued for in recent literature which explicitly calls for employability literature to draw from wider career guidance literature in order to inform a more nuanced approach to theory, policy and practice in how universities approach employability (Artess *et al*., 2017; Holmes, 2016).

> In particular, we believe that there is a major opportunity to bring together the literatures on career guidance and employability in higher education. Both are centrally concerned with the kinds of purposeful interventions that can be built within education to help individuals to self-actualise, transition to the labour market, make the best use of their skills and knowledge and live happy and fulfilled lives. (Artess *et al*., 2017, p. 39)

I would add to this argument that it is difficult to draw clear boundaries around different bodies of literature that address the topic of career, and it is not just employability and career guidance literatures that can learn from each other, but also writing from labour market studies, management, psychology and sociology.

2.6 Summary

I have reviewed a range of literature that offers varying perspectives on graduate careers. Labour market commentary addresses large-scale trends influencing graduate career paths and their subsequent prospects. The boundaryless and protean careers literature seeks to describe how careers are less linear and depicts what can make individuals flourish or not in dynamic and uncertain contexts. Employability literature addresses issues related to individual employability and the role of universities in facilitating this. Sociologists consider the thorny topic of what agency individuals really can have in the development of their careers and the social factors that impinge upon people. Literature associated with career guidance and development tends to have focused on theory that may have a practical application in supporting those tasked with helping individuals with their careers.

Arguably, all of this literature addresses complementary concerns and appears to have similar gaps. The most notable gap is around the meaning-making that individuals themselves experience within the job market. Only recent literature in the sociology of education has begun to enter this territory to any extent. It is in this territory of interest that my research questions are positioned and a desire to unpack the lived experience of graduates in uncertain labour markets. My research is mindful of the value of different schools of thought, and in giving priority to a more qualitative approach seeks to consider how individuals view their own positioning in the labour market, as well as what scope they may believe they have for agency. Analysis of empirical data will be

informed by this literature with a view to reflect upon its relevance to the research population.

Chapter 3 Figured Worlds - a theoretical lens to explore graduate transition

In this chapter, Holland *et al*.'s theory of *Figured Worlds*[1] (1998), will be reviewed with the intention of explaining the rationale for testing its value within this research; and how it may be applied in data analysis. The theory is a sociocultural one which originates from anthropological literature. It seeks to create a model for analysis and interpretation of social worlds, which engages with how individuals and collectives respond to their cultural and material circumstances; in this study, the focus is career trajectories. How it fits within research design will be explored in chapter four.

Although the theory has been used within the social sciences for nearly 20 years now, it has not been utilised in studies of career apart from in explorations of professional identity (e.g., Hill, Solomon, Dornan, & Stalmeijer, 2015; Solomon, 2012; Williams, 2011). Therefore its utilisation in this study presented an opportunity to make an original contribution to theoretical discussions within career studies. My application of *Figured Worlds* experimentally extends its usage to a larger data-set as to date literature that has applied it tends to be in-depth studies of identity and pedagogy, sometimes with just one or two individuals (e.g., Barron, 2014; Braathe & Solomon, 2014; Chang, 2014; Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Urrieta Jr., 2007). The review of literature in chapter two has illustrated how career scholars interpret the world from separate philosophical and theoretical perspectives; a tendency which militates against interdisciplinary research and scholarship. Adopting a *Figured Worlds* theoretical lens offered the opportunity of an approach that could bridge boundaries of thinking about the concept of career; and follows in the spirit of others who have called for novel theoretical examinations of the subject (Artess *et al.*, 2017; Holmes, 2016; Hooley & Sultana, 2016).

In their seminal book, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland *et al*. (1998) have created the foundations of a grand theory about identity and agency in which they seek to reject a dichotomy of sociological and psychological, or structural and individual. They address the central paradox that humans are products of context and social structure yet producers of remarkable improvisation. In so doing they argue that identity can be the key pivot in which individuals can experience and reproduce scripted social positions but also have the scope to develop a consciousness of this positioning and in so doing make their own way in the world.

[1] Figured Worlds written with upper case refers to the whole theory; figured worlds written with lower case refers to one of the four constructs of the whole theory.

Holland and her co-authors (Holland *et al.*,1998; Holland & Lave, 2001) draw on major theoretical and philosophical standpoints across anthropology, cultural studies, social psychology, social theories of learning and development, constructionism, sociology and linguistics. Predominantly, they draw upon Bakhtinian, Bourdieusian and Vygotskian ideas to argue for a social perspective on identity that frames it as a dialogical performance of multiple selves, continually developed through social engagement. They conceptualise identity as a form of social learning that, "combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations" (1998, p. 5).

3.1 The origins of Figured Worlds theory

Holland *et al*. (1998) synthesise ideas from a range of 20th century thinkers. From Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b) they reshape notions of habitus into what they call "history-in-person" (Holland & Lave, 2001), i.e., those embodied dispositions and characteristics which constrain people but may also give scope and allow for improvisation. They also draw on ideas of the field, which they call "figured worlds" in which a set of structured practices and objective relations exist which position people in that field, which they depict figuratively, rather than materially. They invoke Bourdieu's depiction of agency which involves strategic improvisation within the limited choices that are available within a field, exploring in some detail what needs to be in place for such agency to be enacted. They propose that small transformations can take place in mundane ways, and in so doing they depart from a classic Bourdieusian position which argues that enduring habitus transformation can only occur across generations. Some newer scholars of Bourdieu would argue against this conceptualisation saying that Bourdieu does allow for smaller examples of habitus evolution (Choudry & Williams, 2016; Ingram & Abrahams, 2015).

From Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Leont'ev (1978) they adopt a focus on semiotic mediation in activity, and the conception of a self that develops within a "zone of proximal development" and is associated with "scaffolding" that allows for growth. The "figured worlds" of Holland *et al*. (1998), share this focus on the symbolic. Building upon Bourdieu's emphasis on power in the field through objective agents and institutions, the figures that appear in the "figured worlds" of Holland *et al*. may be material/embodied subjects and/or objects but are also likely to be mediated semiotically through cultural models and signs. Such signs which are framed linguistically can enter the psyche and become incorporated into one's "history-in-person", which can contribute to future reflection, improvisation and action in a process they call "symbolic bootstrapping".

Such signs or symbols or mediating devices/tools may be specific words, metaphors or phrases, but also emblematic narratives. Holland *et al*. (1998, p. 41) describe such signs as "identity tools". For example, in the context of this project, words or phrases such as "graduate" or "unemployed graduate" have both material and symbolic meaning. Signs may be rooted in use of figurative language (e.g. "starving artist" was phrase used by two participants), but arguably can also be traced in how graduates depict their situation in narrative terms, drawing on discourses and cultural models that have been revealed in the literature. As chapter two has shown, career scholarship is rich with typologies of categorisation, some of which represent cultural models that have become embedded, e.g., being "artistic" or "enterprising" (J.Holland, 1997), feeling like a "victim", or acting as a "responsible agent" (Tholen, 2014) or even being a "player" or "purist" (Brown *et al.*,2004).

From Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Holland *et al*. (1998) adopt a focus on the use of language. They adopt the notion of "dialogism" and that individual speech and action are always in dialogue and responsive to others. Thus, people "self-author" their identities using the cultural tools that their historical context gives them, speaking in different genres as they generate narratives about themselves. In homage to Bakhtin, they refer to the "space of authoring" which is complementary to Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development". They also draw together Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and Vygotsky's notion of "serious play" to explore how the "space of authoring" may offer scope for challenging rules, and argue that individuals may create new ways of thinking and acting, by the orchestration of the different discourses available to them within "figured worlds".

3.2 Defining Figured Worlds/Identity in Practice

Holland *et al*. (1998) define "identity in practice", which is the core object they seek to illuminate in their theory:

> We take identity to be a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organise, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectivities… Identity is one way of naming the dense interconnections between the intimate and public venues of social practice… Practiced identities are constructs that can be referenced to several contexts of activity. (Holland *et al.*,1998, pp. 270-271)

They go on to present four constructs that can be used by those using a *Figured Worlds* lens. An understanding of these constructs is pivotal in understanding what improvisation an individual may make within a field or figured world.

1. *figured worlds* – the field populated with embodied and symbolic figures, and cultural models.
2. *positionality* – the position held in a field linked to power, status and rank.
3. *space of authoring* – the resources available to author self and narratives utilised.
4. *making worlds* – the imagining of a different social positioning and structure, through the orchestration of existing cultural resources/voices.

I will go on to explain each construct further in the following sections.

3.2.1 Figured Worlds

> A figured world is a: "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others". (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 52)

Holland *et al*. argue that such worlds can be figurative, narrativised and dramatised, and can be formed and re-formed over time, with the emergence of certain "standard plots" in different contexts. Figures (i.e., "particular characters and actors") can be drawn from material reality but can take on a figurative identity. Individuals may be members of different figured worlds concurrently (e.g., home, work). Recent graduates will have moved from one figured world of being a university student with its own "standard plots" therein, including associated trappings, routine and status, to a different figured world as a graduate.

The most important figures to consider are those which individuals may draw upon for their own identity. The figure of "the Graduate" is a powerful symbolic figure against which individuals author themselves. Being a graduate has both material and symbolic implications which vary depending on subject studied and university attended. It is associated with a host of varied expectations in terms of what the potential returns of a degree may be: e.g., "the unemployed graduate" is a symbolic figure which can be associated with personal and societal failure; "the Oxford graduate" or "the Northcity graduate", "the Arts graduate" or "the Law graduate" evoke different ideas about status, ability and talent. In chapter seven, I will explore in more detail the figure of being a graduate and how individuals respond to this in authoring themselves.

Graduates may inhabit different figured worlds from one another, depending on what work they are doing as well as their social and family background. However, certain characters may appear across the whole landscape for graduates, e.g., former student peers, former lecturers, other university staff such as careers advisers, family, friends, mentors, managers, colleagues; similarly graduates may share institutions they interact

with such as their former university, recruitment agencies, the Job Centre, and employers. Sometimes these characters and artefacts may become symbolic, figurative, narrativised and/or dramatised when used by individuals to author themselves. For example, parents as "supporters" or "restrainers", or "sponsors". These symbolic characters, whether associated with people, or even artefacts or institutions can be depicted in a variety of ways and composed into certain narratives. Chapter eight will focus on the core characters used in individual self-authoring, i.e., family and close community, rather than consider all the characters that may appear.

3.2.2 Positionality

> Positionality has to do with more than division, the 'hereness' and 'thereness' of people; it is inextricably linked to power, status and rank. Social position has to do with entitlement to social and material resources and so to the higher deference, respect, and legitimacy accorded to those genders, races, ethnic groups, castes and sexualities privileged by society. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 271)

The construct of "positionality" in *Figured Worlds* bears the influence of Bourdieu's ideas about the power relations that exist in society.

> A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.' (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 40-41)

Holland *et al*. explore positional identity, not as an unconscious habitus but as: "a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world; that is, depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all" (Holland *et al.*,1998, pp. 127-128).

This construct within *Figured Worlds* invites consideration of individual position within societal structures and whether individuals have an understanding of this within power relations that exist and how they respond to this. In the spirit of this construct, this research project seeks to reflect upon how individuals perceive issues that are often associated with power, rank and status, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, institution attended and/or subject studied. It has been well-documented in labour market and

sociological literature how unequal the graduate labour market is; data analysis will seek to question if graduates reflect on their positionality within this context or not?

3.2.3 Space of authoring

The construct of the "space of authoring" and its twin phrases of "self-authoring" and "authoring self" bear a strong Bakhtinian influence. The construct builds upon what has already been discussed in relation to "figured worlds" and "positionality". There is a specific focus on the language individuals use in self-authoring.

Holland *et al*. define "space of authoring", explicitly drawing upon Bakhtin's way of describing how persons/collectives operate in the world:

> The world must be answered – authorship is not a choice – but the form of the answer is not pre-determined. It may be nearly automatic, as in strictly authoritarian practices or it may be a matter of great variability and most significant to a single person's address. In either case authorship is a matter of orchestration: of arranging the identifiable social discourses/practices that are one's resources (which Bakhtin glossed as 'voices') in order to craft a response in a time and a space defined by others' standpoints in activity, that is, in a social field conceived as the ground of responsiveness. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 272)

A key concept within "space of authoring" is "dialogism" which captures the notion that individuals always exist in a process of addressing and answering within a context that can include specific interlocutors (e.g., a research interviewer) but also the wider imagined social context in which they find themselves. Bakhtin coined the terms "addressivity" and "answerability", arguing that no-one speaks as a free-floating individual separate from the context they inhabit. Many graduates will be conscious of how they are perceived and anticipate answering questions such as "what do you want to do with your degree" to a wide range of people.

Bakhtin explains addressivity and answerability which are pivotal to his notion of dialogism:

> An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is the quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity…the utterance has both an author…and an addressee. The addressee can be an immediate participant-interlocutor in everyday dialogue…and it can also be an indefinite, unconcretised other… (Bakhtin 1986, quoted in Morris, 1994, p. 87)

Bakhtin also used the terms "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse", which describe the different discourses or voices that individuals may draw

upon. Authoritative discourse refers to dominant ideas and ways of thinking which are hard to resist and can lead to individuals being effectively "ventriloquated" by dominant voices. Bakhtin tends to refer to this as the discourses of religion, science or politics as authoritarian or authoritative; however, Holland *et al*. expand upon the scope for authoritative discourses using examples from a range of settings, including the world of romance and mental health diagnosis.

> The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally…It is so to speak, the word of the fathers…It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain… (Bakhtin 1981, quoted in Morris, 1994, p. 78)

I would argue that employability can be considered an authoritative discourse. The following is a possible discourse of employability, adapted from Grayson Perry's depiction of the dominant discourse of masculinity. I do not seek to argue that employability is as powerful a discourse as masculinity, merely to illustrate how it might be framed as authoritative.

Figure 3.1 Employability – a possible authoritative discourse

Somewhere in every student or graduate's head, there is a governor, an unconscious inner voice sending instructions through the intercom… Every student/graduate's personal governor has picked up instructions from a variety of sources…on what it is to be employable. S/he takes ideas and images from these sources and assembles them into a model of an employable and successful graduate. The governor then sits there constantly checking that the individual is living up to this ideal. This ideal includes good academic credentials, relevant work experience, a range of extra-curricular activities and interests, impressive skills and attributes as well as a perpetually adaptable and pro-active personality and unwavering work ethic… A graduate may not be aware of this governor, s/he may think that s/he is his/her own governor and is free to do as s/he chooses.

Text adapted from Grayson Perry's The Descent of Man (2016, p. 11)

"Internally persuasive discourse" contrasts with this. An "internally persuasive discourse" suggests some cognitive struggle with authoritative discourses, through which process individuals can begin to express discourses that they are inwardly convinced of or have generated themselves. According to Bakhtin and which Holland *et al*. (1998) follow, this terrain has scope for creativity:

> Internally persuasive discourses – as opposed to one that is externally authoritative – is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'. In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally

> persuasive word is half-ours and half someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition… (Bakhtin 1981, quoted in Matusov & von Duyke, 2009, p. 176)

Reflections on the meanings of "internally persuasive discourse" present challenges for research analysis which Holland *et al*. do not offer much detail upon. However, other writers have unpicked different ways to consider what an "internally persuasive discourse" may be. Matusov & von Duyke (2009) illustrate how Bakhtin's concept has been used variably by different writers, to describe how individuals may "appropriate" a discourse (i.e. become fully convinced of or persuaded by a specific discourse), "author" a discourse (i.e., utilise a discourse themselves) but also begin to "test" and criticise a discourse (i.e. explore the boundaries of a discourse and create new ways of thinking). Arguably, it is the latter definition of "internally persuasive discourse" that Holland *et al*. are most interested in as a way to trace what could be called an expanded "space of authoring".

Intimately connected to notions of "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourses, is the Bakhtinian concept of "heteroglossia", which Holland *et al*. summarise as:

> the simultaneity of different languages and of their associated values and presuppositions, it is the rule in social life…within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems…' (Holland *et al*., 1998, p.170)

Holland *et al*. argue that it is very common for individuals to draw upon multiple discourses and voices, some of which may be contradictory, e.g. believing that true talent will prevail while also knowing that life isn't fair. As such, they reject endeavours to make unitary or simplify voices/discourses that are drawn upon by individuals or collectives. The existence of "heteroglossia" which can also be called "multi-voicedness" relates to how individuals orchestrate such voices (including both authoritative and internally persuasive discourses) with the scope for a hybridising of different discourses that may create newer ways to confer meaning.

Within self-authoring, narrative is another Bakhtinian concept which depicts how individuals tell their stories and how they weave voices/discourses and figures within this. Skinner, Valsiner, and Holland (2001) describe how new narratives may evolve, and how old ones may be reinforced:

> The author of a narrative generates novelty by taking a position from which meaning is made—a position that enters a dialogue and takes a particular stance in addressing and answering others and the world ... In weaving a narrative, the speaker places herself, her listeners, and those who populate the narrative in certain positions and relations that are figured by larger cultural meanings or worlds. Narrative acts may reinforce or challenge these figured worlds (para.10).

In voicing a narrative, individuals draw upon specific "genres" of speaking and there may be typical forms of "utterance". Discourses of graduate employability have certain "standard plots", e.g., narratives which emphasise mobility and transformation, associated with what has been called the "public story of higher education" (Finn, 2010, 2015). Career counselling literature has identified seven archetypal career narratives: "overcoming the monster", "rags to riches", "quest", "voyage and return", "comedy", "tragedy" and "rebirth" (Pryor & Bright, 2008; Winter, 2012, p. 23). "Utterances", i.e., the words, phrases and sentences used in speech are produced and interpreted in relation to the different genres which provide a context of understanding, as well as dialogically in anticipation of an addressee's imagined response.

The self-authoring construct that Holland *et al*. (1998) utilise is complementary to ideas associated with narrative career counselling. There is some fruitful overlap between some career scholarship and *Figured Worlds*; Collin (2000) and Meijers & Lengelle (2012) do make reference to the work of Bakhtin, with a focus on "multi-voicedness" and how individuals conduct identity work in order to become the "hero" of their own story. *Figured Worlds* can extend narrative work in career scholarship by its embrace of concepts such as "positionality" and "heteroglossia". Such an approach would have scope to address calls for more socio-political approaches to career scholarship and guidance practice (Watts, 1996).

The concepts associated with the "space of authoring" offer useful analytical tools in reflecting on early career experiences. Arguably, the language of employability constitutes a genre of speech that students/graduates are required to learn as they progress through education. As illustrated in the employability literature in chapter two, discourses in this arena are predominantly individualist in relation to both issues of career choice and career management. This study will explore how individuals respond to such discourses in authoring themselves.

3.2.4 Making worlds

The final construct In Holland *et al*.'s construction of identity in practice, is "making worlds" which is dependent upon the other three stages just described. This construct traces how agency and emancipation from social structures may be enacted.

> The fourth context of identity is that of making worlds: through "serious play," new figured worlds may come about, in the peculiarly Bakhtinian way that feeds the personal activities of particular groups, their "signatures," into the media, the cultural genres, through which even distant others may construe their lives. Vygotsky's understanding of play is crucial to this argument…These new "imaginaries" build in their rehearsal a structure of disposition, a habitus, that comes to imbue the cultural media…that are their legacy' (pp., 271-2).

Holland *et al*. trace how with the use of cultural resources and imagination, individuals and collectives can effect change which may lead to "world-making" manifest via the orchestration of existing discourses to author new ways of being. In their definition of "serious play", selves are "assembled from, and in relation to, cultural resources" (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 289). In their utilisation of "making worlds", Solomon, Radovic, & Black (2016) describe how individuals make references to "popular culture, to social debates, and to activities which are outside the norm—to imagine a different social positioning and structure". Therefore the notion of Vygotsky's play is used loosely to define situations where alternative orchestrations and experimentation can take place. "World-making" can represent larger scale collective change but can also be on a smaller scale for individuals.

Holland *et al*. also use the phrase "figuring it otherwise" as an alternative to "making worlds". Although their definition of play is broad, they do appear to give recognition to how the arts in particular can be a space for "figuring it otherwise". According to Holland *et al*., "world-making" is only possible due to "improvisations" and "ruptures", which can break taken-for-granted patterns and "standard plots". Improvisation is a concept that can be traced to a Bourdieusian idea of how openings can happen which bring about altered subjectivities and a transformation of habitus (albeit rarely). They draw the notion of rupture from Leont'ev, arguing that "world-making" may only happen when something occurs to break taken-for-granted patterns:

> Ruptures of the taken-for-granted can remove these aspects of positional identities from automatic performance and recognition to commentary and re-cognition… Alternative figurings may be available for interpreting the everyday, and alternative ways of figuring systems of privilege may be developed in contestations over social arrangements (Holland *et al.*,1998, pp. 140-142).

The leaving of university as a graduate can be considered a rupture, though not a rupture that is guaranteed to lead to "world-making". For more traditional university students who have gone straight from school and college, it is a departure from a full-time education which has lasted at least 15 years. Though many may be expected to be delighted by an end of exams and assignments, it is undoubtedly the end of a major life phase and the beginning of a new one, for which nothing can as yet be taken-for-granted. As such, this space is one in which individuals certainly must author themselves and may engage in "world-making".

3.3 Summary

The process of writing this chapter has raised some problems in using Holland *et al*.'s theory of *Figured Worlds*. It has been necessary to go back to source authors that Holland *et al*. draw upon, particularly Bakhtin, to help make sense of Holland's theory. Similarly, it has been necessary to turn to related writing such as Matusov *et al*.'s (2009) exposition of "internally persuasive discourse" in order to address important concepts that Holland *et al*. do not cover in detail, certainly for a novice to the antecedents that they pay homage to. It does appear that although Holland *et al*. have created a valuable theoretical lens, its framing in their seminal book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (1998) generates questions as well as providing answers. The theory has a toolbox which this study will aim to test in order to consider its flexibility, its interpretative value, and whether certain aspects have more relevance.

In conclusion, I have sought to summarise the key thinking tools that will be applied in this study. The "space of authoring" construct is perhaps the most important tool for application, and I will go on to focus on voices, figures and narratives in the presentation of data. Many of the other tools mentioned in this chapter will also be woven in to analysis where appropriate.

Chapter 4 Research design

This chapter builds upon chapter three about *Figured Worlds* and outlines the approach to research design in this study. It goes on to re-state research questions mentioned in chapter one and explain the study's context. A focus is given here to my position as an insider researcher as I work for the university from which participants graduated. The chapter goes on to consider the project population and sampling as well as characteristics of respondents. Data collection methods will be outlined, including the survey questionnaire and interviews. The plan for data analysis and presentation will be explained in order to optimise how readers can evaluate later data presentation/discussion. It concludes by defending the robustness of the research design, which contributes to confidence in the study's findings.

4.1 Introduction to methodological approach and research design

This study is based in a world-view that careers do matter to people, but that how this is manifest varies considerably. The assumption is made that for those who invest their time and resources in completing a degree within a developed country, a rewarding career (however this may be defined), should eventually follow. Perspectives upon careers are embroiled with individual identity which this study considers to be never fixed but dynamic and multi-faceted. An understanding of the meaning-making that individuals construct about their own career required a research design that asked such questions of people, allowing them to tell their own story in their own words. Therefore the methodological approach adopted for this study sits predominantly in a social constructivist, interpretive and qualitative tradition; such an approach is complementary to the theoretical lens of *Figured Worlds*. Due to the fact that there are no universally verifiable answers to the research questions of this study, a more inductive approach offers new perspectives on what can be considered a "grand challenge" for society and its graduates (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016).

The research seeks to understand how individuals attribute meaning to their own career positioning, in the belief that individuals are shaped by context but can also contribute to the shaping of that context. Drawing on a heritage of Marxist thinking, *Figured Worlds* is based on the premise that knowledge is socially and collectively produced. It is a theory of "becoming" in which the notion that identity is ever unitary/static is rejected. In a social learning and social practice tradition, it encourages a focus on how individuals and collectives express identity in response to the daily situations and practices. The theory explicitly argues that what is of interest in analysing interview research data is not whether an individual's description of their

situation can be validated but that this is the way they have constructed their story. I have opted for the term social constructivist to describe the position this study takes and argue that the meaning-making that myself and participants make is grounded in aspects of material reality that are interacted with.

However, although the paradigm of this research is broadly interpretive, pragmatism led to adoption of a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The study included an initial survey to the target population, data from which could then act to situate and source the eventual sample utilised for interviews. Adopting such an approach can risk a confusion of approaches; however, the design of this project rejects a binary paradigmatic positioning of qualitative and quantitative data. The use of an initial survey has contributed to providing answers to some research questions, not so easily gleaned from qualitative data. Survey data also adds to the context that surrounds the lives of participants.

For the purposes of this thesis, quantitative data sourced from the survey aims to set the scene for the target population only, but priority for analytical focus is given to the detailed qualitative data collected during interviews. The priority given to qualitative data is appropriate to *Figured Worlds* and exploring lived experience. As a researcher I sought to be educated by my participants rather than use them to evidence any pre-conceived categories or hypothesis. The focus is the illumination of the everyday lived experience of the sample which can "evoke a fundamental sense of wonder" (Van Manen, 2016) .

The constraints in length of the thesis made it necessary to be strategic about what data collected could be focused upon in suitable detail. The opportunity of collecting data as part of the PhD project meant considerably more was available than could be used in this thesis. Some parts of the data (particularly the survey findings) that are not being used here, have begun to be reported upon elsewhere for a professional audience (Christie, 2017a, 2017c).

A focus on qualitative methods contrasts with much existing research about graduate careers which is dominated by quantitative data, which has been outlined in chapter two. Although such quantitative analysis has credibility within the public domain, it cannot include detailed reflections of the day-to-day realities of how life is experienced. More recently, literature from the sociology of education has adopted a more qualitative and critical approach (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Burke, 2015; Finn, 2015) to exploring issues of graduate transitions. I follow in this tradition with an emphasis on how

individuals narrate their experiences. In so doing, this study also answers a long-held criticism of career development literature for its de-valuing of qualitative and interpretative research (Collin, 2000, p. 174).

4.2 Research questions

This study aims to contribute to research about graduate transition and early graduate careers. As explained in chapter one, as the project was underway, research questions did evolve. The research design, methodological approach and methods chosen were developed in order to most effectively answer my primary research question which was:

How do graduates reflect upon and explain their early career experiences, in a contemporary context in which uncertainty is a prevailing feature of the labour market?

Additional questions delved further into the primary question:

a. What challenges do graduates experience in the two years after completing their studies?
b. What narratives about themselves do graduates draw upon with regard to uncertain transitions from university?
c. What contributes to the ability of graduates to cope with career uncertainty?
d. Are there contrasts in the experience of transition for different types of graduate (e.g., by discipline, social background)?

On completion, the project also sought to consider implications for policy and practice:

e. What are the implications of the answers to the above for universities and the current generation of students and graduates?

As introduced in chapter three, a *Figured Worlds* lens requires interactivity between theory and method in the process of research. The adoption of the theory to inform research design presented itself as a novel approach, which could allow for an integrative analysis of findings drawing upon different schools of thought to answer research questions. In recent writing only work about identity of doctors has used larger data-sets (Bennett, Solomon, Bergin, Horgan, & Dornan, 2017; Hill *et al.*, 2015) and I follow in this tradition.

4.3 Project site

The local context of the study was a sub-section of the graduate population of one northern university, for which this study uses the pseudonym, Northcity[2]. The university has a fluctuating mid to lower ranking status; it has courses that are more

[2] The University's name is that of the place it is located.

vocationally-oriented and defines itself as a university that draws upon many non-traditional students.

> At 42% of the overall population, the University has a relatively high proportion of students from Widening Participation backgrounds. Two thirds of our students fall within POLAR quintiles 1-3, indicating that they are drawn from areas with low-medium participation in Higher Education. On entry, 45% of our students hold low or medium tariff qualifications. (University of Northcity, 2017)

The annual *Times Good University Guide* in the year of this study (O'Leary, 2013) endorses this summary, listing university statistics which include: average entry standards of 300 UCAS points; 97.8% of students hailing from state schools; 45.2% from working-class homes; and 36.2% mature. As such it shares characteristics with many northern, urban post-1992 institutions.

4.4 Insider research and ethics

Professionally, I am familiar with Northcity, therefore the research project has characteristics of insider research (Mercer, 2007; Trowler, 2011). There is considerable value in having insider knowledge (Smyth & Holian, 2008), and my role allowed me to secure permission to gain access to contact details in order to invite participation in the project. On the flipside, in a competitive higher education marketplace, being conferred insider status requires having to be measured in reporting findings that could be construed as portraying anything negative about the university. One requirement of ethical consent procedures was to secure permission from the relevant Head of department to conduct the research which made clear that the project would not damage the university's reputation, either by researcher conduct or findings produced. Thus a careful path was followed to ensure the authenticity of research findings, while also seeking to research graduates who may be struggling in the job market, and therefore may not be considered good news for their alma mater. In agreeing the go ahead for the research, it was necessary to keep university staff informed and to present the benefits of a research project. I have already had the experience of writing a report for my funder (Christie, 2017c) for which I have been alert to avoiding anything that could compromise the reputation of the project host.

There are a number of staff at the university that I have had to secure the co-operation of. In particular, this includes staff who could provide participant contact details, but also academic staff from disciplines represented by the chosen sample populations. I anticipated that a by-product of the survey could be more graduates contacting the careers service for help – this support was something that was flagged up in the

invitation to participate. Adhering to ethical principles, I was aware that there was scope that some graduates may be experiencing challenges so it was right to offer them help at the same time as asking participation in the project. A small number of graduates did contact the careers service for help as a result of the survey.

Over the course of the research project, I have observed that the split role I have as practitioner-researcher is rare, which adds to potential insights and the original contribution of the study. On a practical level, securing permission to write to all graduates of two schools of study was no mean feat. My professional role may also have contributed to participants having faith that the project had legitimacy and was worth participating in, not to mention offering scope that their contribution could have an impact on university practices.

However, I am also aware that my insider status may also have put some participants off, if they did not want to engage with their alma mater or they felt despondent. Agreement to participate in a research interview suggests that participants had confidence that their story was worth telling. Notably, one participant declined to participate in an interview, saying she had "nothing worth telling" and another withdrew subsequent to the interview, I suspect because she knew that she had not given a candid account of her situation (for reasons which remain unclear). On a financial level, being a practitioner-researcher helped to secure funding for incentives for participation. Although, it could be argued that some may participate just to get a promised voucher, I consider that being able to offer an incentive meant reaching a wider group, and giving something tangible to graduates who were in precarious and/or economically insecure circumstances. I judged that many graduates would be time-poor and have competing priorities; I also knew that as they had replied to a similar survey (DLHE) ten months previously, there was a risk that they would ignore this project's request. So the decision was made to allocate financial resources to incentives in order to maximise reach.

The project was informed by ethical principles which sought to secure informed consent of participants through relevant information and consent sheets. Data was also handled securely. Bristol online survey software was utilised and NVIVO used to collect and analyse data. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed which allowed for scrutiny of content which accurately captured participant contributions. Pseudonyms were utilised for all names and UK locations used to ensure anonymity.

4.5 Project population and sampling

Given the small-scale nature of the project, it was decided to narrow the population to the graduates of two schools of study. Broad groupings of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities as well as Business and Law graduates were chosen (subjects largely represented by two schools of study at the university, i.e., Arts and Media, and Business). The total population of graduates for the university in 2014 (target year for the research project) was 5345, of which Arts, Creative Arts, and Humanities represent 25.7% and Business and Law 16.4%.

From the broad subject categories under scrutiny, the population of graduates from undergraduate courses was just over 1350 from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities in contrast to 680 from Business and Law. Partial data was available from the university about the target population; however, the following patterns could be traced. There were slightly more women than men graduating from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities (51.9%) but in Business and Law, there were more men (59.8%). There were a higher number of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in Business and Law (40.6%) in contrast to Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities (13.1%) (the university data collapses ethnicity data into BME and non-BME).

Research questions included comparison of graduates from different subjects and social background in particular. Therefore a variety of demographic data was collected in the survey for participants to allow for later comparisons and to guide sampling for interviews. Social background proved the most complex to decide how to collect information about. After consideration, the occupational background of the "highest earner in the home" that an individual grew up in was used as a way to differentiate social class background (based on Registrar General's Social class classification). Respondents were asked to categorise themselves into one of six categories, and for analytical purposes, these were also collapsed into two groups representing higher class background (professional and managerial/technical) and lower class background (skilled non-manual, skilled manual, partly skilled, unskilled).

In section 4.6 I will go on to trace the process from initial invitation to participate, to selection of participants for interview which serves to demonstrate the journey and trustworthiness of the data collected.

4.5.1 Survey respondent population

An email was used to invite participation in a research survey and to source participants for interview. The use of email optimised the scope to reach a random sample of participants, which could be reflective of the wider population. Only 836 email addresses were deliverable to from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and 352 from Business and Law, which meant reaching 82% of those who had responded to DLHE in January 2015. Details of subject areas included in the population are in table 4.1 which details numbers of contactable graduates and respondents as well as what percentage of the survey return is represented.

148 individuals responded to the October 2015 survey; 112 from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and 36 from Business and Law. This represents 12.5% of the population that was contactable (a 13.5% response from graduates of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and a 10.2% response from Business and Law). At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to indicate if they were prepared to participate in a research interview. Of these, twenty were selected based on a sampling strategy which targeted those aged 21-24 (the eventual sample included two that were 25), a suitable balance of subject backgrounds, gender, ethnicity and social background, as well as an indication from their survey response especially in the open questions that they had experienced career challenges since they had graduated.

Table 4.1 Target populations contacted and response to survey

Degree subjects	Contactable population	Numbers of responses to survey	Percentage response of total survey
Art & Design subjects Advertising Design; Animation; Art & Design; Computer and Video Games; Design for Digital Media; Fashion Design, Fashion Image-making and styling; Graphic Design; Interior Design; Photography; Product Design; Visual Arts	325	32	21.6%
Media Production and Journalism subjects Professional Broadcast Techniques; Television and Radio; Media Technology; Journalism	134	24	16.2%
Music and Performance subjects Music programmes: Music - Popular Musicology; Popular Music and Recording; Interactive Music & Studio Production Performance programmes: Drama and Theatre, Comedy, Dance, Contemporary Practices	183	23	15.5%
Humanities subjects Contemporary Military and International History; Contemporary History and Politics; English and Creative Writing; Drama and Creative Writing; English Language and Linguistics; English Literature, English Literature with English Language; Film Studies; English and Film Studies; International Relations and Politics; Politics; Politics and Arabic; Modern Languages	194	33	22.3%
Total number of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities	836	112	75.6%
Business subjects Business and Management Studies; Business and Financial Management; Business and Human Resource Management; Business and Leisure Management; Business and Economics; Business Information Technology; Business and Tourism Management; Sport and Leisure Management	211	23	15.5%
Finance subjects Finance and Accounting	77	5	3.4%
Law subjects Law; Law with Criminology; Law with Finance; Law with Spanish	64	8	5.4%
Total number of Business and Law	352	36	24.3%

Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities degree subjects; Business and Law degree subjects (contactable population, number of responses, percentage of total respondents)

4.5.2 Characteristics of survey respondents

The following table 4.2 captures by percentage some of the characteristics of respondents to the survey. This background information serves to situate the data collected by the survey but also assists in tracing the representativeness of the eventual interview sample and illustrates the diversity of respondents to the survey.

Table 4.2 Characteristics of survey respondents

Respondent characteristics	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities	Business and Law	Grand Total
Higher social background			
Female	**36.6%**	**36.1%**	**36.5%**
BME			
21-24	1.8%	8.3%	3.4%
25-29	0.9%	5.6%	2.0%
30 and over	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%
non-BME			
21-24	25.0%	16.7%	23.0%
25-29	5.4%	5.6%	5.4%
30 and over	2.7%	0.0%	2.0%
Male	**15.2%**	**16.7%**	**15.5%**
BME			
21-24	0.0%	5.6%	1.4%
25-29	0.9%	2.8%	1.4%
non-BME			
21-24	11.6%	5.6%	10.1%
25-29	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%
30 and over	1.8%	2.8%	2.0%
Lower social background			
Female	**27.7%**	**16.7%**	**25.0%**
BME			
21-24	2.7%	11.1%	4.7%
non-BME			
21-24	18.8%	5.6%	15.5%
25-29	2.7%	0.0%	2.0%
30 and over	3.6%	0.0%	2.7%
Male	**15.2%**	**16.7%**	**15.5%**
BME			
21-24	1.8%	5.6%	2.7%
25-29	0.0%	2.8%	0.7%
30 and over	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%

Respondent characteristics	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities	Business and Law	Grand Total
non-BME			
21-24	9.8%	8.3%	9.5%
25-29	1.8%	0.0%	1.4%
30 and over	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%
N/A			
Female	**3.6%**	**8.3%**	**4.7%**
BME			
21-24	0.0%	5.6%	1.4%
30 and over	0.0%	2.8%	0.7%
non-BME			
21-24	3.6%	0.0%	2.7%
Male	**1.8%**	**5.6%**	**2.7%**
BME			
30 and over	0.0%	5.6%	1.4%
non-BME			
21-24	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%
30 and over	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%
Grand Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Complete characteristics of survey respondents – subject area, social background, gender, ethnicity, age

Overall, patterns of response to the survey vary slightly to the shape of the target population. Women have replied to the survey (66.2% of respondents) in a greater proportion to how they are represented in the target population. BME response to the survey included 9.8% BME from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and 55.6% for Business and Law graduates, meaning that for the latter their response is greater than the population of BME graduates. The majority of respondents (75%) to the survey were between 21 and 24, and only 11.5% were over 30. Just over half (52%) identified themselves as from a social background with a higher occupational status. Not included in the table above, but the vast majority of the respondents were from a UK national background (87.2%).

4.5.3 Characteristics of interview respondents

All interview participants (see appendix four) were 21-25, and were of UK nationality. These shared characteristics were sought in order to allow for comparison. A balanced group of respondents was sought which reflected the diversity of the original population: ten men and ten women; seven from a BME background and thirteen non-BME. In addition, selection was deliberately skewed to those from a lower social background (fourteen) compared to a higher (six); although within this twenty, there was representation from all six occupational class backgrounds. This choice of sampling

was made as existing research tends to suggest that those from a lower social background have greater barriers in entering the job market post-university.

Notably all interview participants had achieved a good degree qualification. This was not something that was asked about in the survey, but the fact that individuals with a good degree are more likely to volunteer to engage with a university research project after they have graduated could be expected. On investigation of the original population, it was discovered that there was a high number of graduates achieving a good degree (i.e., a 1st class or 2.1) at the university. In the subject areas of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities this was 70.6%, in Business and Law, the figure was slightly lower at 61.2%. It is clear that the majority of completing graduates achieve a good degree classification.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 provide information to summarise interview respondents' characteristics and early career trajectories[3]. The activity recorded in these tables for January 2015 is sourced from responses to the national DLHE survey, not the survey conducted as part of this project which asked them to recollect what they had been doing in January 2015.

[3] All participants' names and UK place names have been anonymised/replaced by pseudonyms

Table 4.3 Career details of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities interview participants

Name	Subject	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Background	January 2015 (DLHE)	October 2015 (Survey)	Dec 2015 – March 2016 (Interview)	Pre-HE home location	Location at time of research interview
Harry	Music	M	21-24	White British	Professional	Kitchen associate	Kitchen team leader and MSc Management	Kitchen team leader and MSc Management	Midcounty	Living in Northcity
Alice	Media production	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual	Catering/hospitality assistant	Catering/ hospitality assistant/box office assistant	Catering/ hospitality assistant/box office assistant	NEcounty	Living at family home
Charlie	Performance	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled	Charity fundraiser	Unemployed	Retail/Hospitality jobs + misc. creative projects	Maincity	Living at family home
Robert	Film	M	21-24	White British	Disabled cannot work	Hair assistant	Bar work	Bar work	Maincity	Living in Canada
Bridget	Media Production	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual	Post-production runner	Freelance TV Production runner	Freelance TV Production runner	Maincity	Living at family home
Rosie	Media Production	F	21-24	White British	Managerial/ technical	University Admin. assistant/ misc. creative projects	University PA and General Admin./ misc. creative projects	University PA and General Admin./ misc. creative projects	Maincity	Living at family home
Joe	Computer Games Design	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled	Design placement	Design placement	Unemployed	Northcity	Living at family home
Dylan	History	M	21-24	White British	Partly skilled	PT Market research assistant	PT Market research assistant	PT Market research assistant/ Volunteer special constable	Nearcounty	Living at family home

Name	Subject	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Background	January 2015 (DLHE)	October 2015 (Survey)	Dec 2015 – March 2016 (Interview)	Pre-HE home location	Location at time of research interview
Daniel	Journalism and English	M	21-24	White British	Managerial/ technical	PT NCTJ and PT news internship	Freelance copywriter and proofreader	Freelance copywriter and proofreader. Preparing for overseas volunteer programme	Eastcounty	Living in Northcity
Anna	Fashion	F	21-24	Black Caribbean	Skilled non-manual	Sales assistant	Sales assistant/visual merchandiser	Sales assistant/visual merchandiser	Maincity	Living at family home
Ibrahim	English	M	21-24	Asian	Skilled non-manual	PhD English	PhD English/ PT admin assistant	PhD English/PT admin assistant/ teaching	Maincity	Living at family home
Ruby	Visual Arts	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual	Retail Sales assistant	Trainee art gallery project manager	Retail Sales assistant/Volunteer gallery project leader	Portcity	Living at family home
Isabelle	Graphic design	F	21-24	White British	Skilled non-manual	Bookmaker/betting shop assistant	Bus station assistant	Travelling/ Working in New Zealand	Maincity	Living in New Zealand
Sophia	Performance	F	21-24	Mixed other	Skilled manual	Unemployed	Studying at Specialist Theatre school in France	Studying at Specialist Theatre school in France	Another county	Living in France

Table 4.4 Career details of Business and Law interview participants

Name	Subject	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Background	January 2015 (DLHE)	October 2015 (Survey)	Dec 2015–March 2016 (Interview)	Pre-HE location	Location at time of research interview
Fouad	Business	M	25-29	Middle Eastern	Professional	MSc (withdrew early)/ PT hospitality jobs	Foreign exchange sales/ PT study in Financial advice	Foreign exchange sales/ PT study in Financial advice	Maincity	Living in London
Ravi	Accounting and Finance	M	21-24	Asian	Unskilled	Supermarket assistant/Maths Conversion (for teaching)	Supermarket assistant	Support teacher	Maincity	Living at family home
Elizabeth	Business and Tourism management	F	25-29	Black African	Professional	Travel administration assistant	Travel administration assistant	Travel administration assistant	Maincity	Living in London
Matthew	Business	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled	Self-employed music events promoter	Self-employed music events promoter	Self-employed music events promoter	Maincity	Living at family home
Farzana	Accounting and Finance	F	21-24	Asian	Skilled manual	Trainee Financial Reporting Accountant	Trainee Financial Reporting Accountant	Trainee Financial Reporting Accountant	Maincity	Living at family home
Rachel	Law and Criminology	F	21-24	White British	Professional	Paralegal	Recruitment consultant	Recruitment consultant	Portcity	Living in Maincity

4.6 Data collection methods

The initial quantitative stage of the project involved a survey in October 2015 (sixteen months after the graduation of the target population), followed by qualitative research interviews between December 2015 and April 2016 (18-22 months after graduating). The invitation to participate was phrased to encourage individuals to feel that participation would allow them to make a contribution to development of knowledge about the research topic. The consent forms and information sheets for both survey and interview were written in order to optimise understanding of the project and gain participant engagement (see appendix one and three). This aimed to serve to improve the quality of the research data collected from participants.

The timing of the research was decided upon for a number of reasons. The DLHE survey is a high stakes one for universities and is often presented as a definitive picture of graduate prospects from different subjects and universities. Ball (2014) has argued that early experiences are very change-able so focusing on the six months snapshot is limiting, e.g., graduate unemployment tends to be a very short-term experience for most. At the time of writing, following a lengthy consultation, it has been agreed that the survey will move to fifteen months after graduation (HESA, 2015, 2016) for 2018 graduates, which adds to the interest in my survey data collected at sixteen months to test whether there really is considerable change early career for graduates. In recent years there has also been a longitudinal DLHE survey which aims to capture destinations three years after graduation. Therefore the point in time selected explores a window of time that is not currently looked at in surveys directed by HESA.

Unexpectedly, it was also possible to access additional information about specific participants[4] from the DLHE survey (not anticipated in original project design), completed by them six months after graduation; originally, only macro-level DLHE information from Northcity was available. Information about participants was also gained from them at 28 months after graduation over email which provided further background insights. Details of interview participants available from both DLHE and this project's own data collection are listed in tables 4.3 and 4.4).

A timeline to summarise data collection points is in table 4.5.

[4] Details of 141 of 148 participants of this project's survey became available which could complement data participants had been asked to recollect about January 2015 in this project's survey in October 2015.

Table 4.5 Summary of timeline for data collected and utilised in project

Method	When conducted?	Period of time after 2014 graduation
This project's survey	October 2015	Sixteen months after graduation. Participants also asked to recollect their activity in January 2015.
Research interviews	December 2015 - April 2016	18-22 months after graduation
Additional/secondary data that became available during project's duration		
National DLHE survey	January 2015	Six months after graduation
Email communication with interview participants	October 2016	28 months after graduation

4.6.1 The survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire (see appendix two) was designed having reviewed existing questionnaires. Collecting data via a longer survey was an opportunistic tactic, as originally the plan was simply to send an email and brief survey to invite participation in a research interview. However, the scope to contact a large population some of whom would not want or be able to do an interview, led to seizing an opportunity to collect more data to contextualise the study. All 148 who started the questionnaire completed it. The same kind of categories were used as the national DLHE survey to ask about career activity (Employed, Working and studying, Self-employed, Studying only, Unavailable for work, Unemployed, Other). Some questions were also adapted from the AGCAS Graduate Success project survey (Pennington *et al*., 2013), and the attitudinal statements were influenced by both the Career Futures inventory (Rottinghaus, Buelow, Matyja, & Schneider, 2012) and the Career Adaptability questionnaire (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Participants were asked to rank themselves against a series of statements about self-awareness and career clarity, employer/occupational awareness, support networks, job-hunting and career planning, confidence in selection processes and general outlook. Some of the findings from the survey focusing on Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates have already been reported upon elsewhere (Christie, 2017a, 2017c). There is ongoing debate about the value of questionnaires and inventories as a way to collect data about individuals which is not dwelled upon here as the survey data is less important in this thesis.

4.6.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone, skype or facetime depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a third party sourced through Lancaster University. The ability to be flexible about mode of interview proved valuable as participants included individuals located in Canada, New Zealand and France. Interview questions were piloted and tested and sought to capture life history information as well data about attitudes and influences (see appendix five).

The approach to the interviews was informed by concepts from biographical interview methods (Burke, 2014; Roberts, 2002; Schütze, 2007) as well as studies that have utilised *Figured Worlds* in research interviews (Braathe & Solomon, 2014; Solomon, 2012; Solomon et al., 2016; Williams, 2011). Research questions sought to understand how participants confer meaning to their situation. Therefore biographical interviewing provided an ideal way to explore how participants reflect on their past and what has brought them to where they are now, knowing that the wisdom of hindsight together with selective memory can provide valuable if partial and unverifiable narratives.

In his technical explanation of biographical narrative interview methods (BNIM) Schütze (2007) argues for the value of biographical narratives and warns of two commonly held, though contradictory assumptions to resist. Firstly, that autobiographical formulations can simply mirror personal reality, and secondly, that autobiographical narratives lack any trustworthiness as individuals choose to legitimise the story they want to tell. Proponents of *Figured Worlds* would go further than Schütze and argue firmly that what is interesting to discover, is what stories individuals choose to tell about themselves, so therefore it does not matter if that story is only partial or even inaccurate.

Usage of BNIM in its original format requires three separate sub-sessions with participants. This project had only one full interview with each participant which on average lasted one hour. The organisation of the interview selected elements of BNIM and adapted for the one interview, bearing in mind background information was already known due to completion of the project survey. Each interview began with very open-ended questions about career and education history, similar to how a BNIM sub-session one would be begin. This allowed for the participant to share what was of importance to them. The language adopted in the research interviews sought to reflect the vocabulary used by participants, which is recommended as part of the BNIM method. Many follow up questions were asked in a semi-structured style, and questions of theoretical

interest to the researcher more typical of a BNIM sub-session three were asked about career and social capital as well as confidence which had been identified of interest from the survey.

In relation to the research interviews, it is wise to consider how participants responded to me as the researcher as I conducted the interviews myself, e.g., participants may wish to exaggerate or downplay the issues they may be experiencing in transition depending on how they view me as a careers adviser. I also needed to manage my response to them, e.g., ensure I was not tempted to default to my professional advisory role in the research context. Contracting at the beginning of each interview took place which made the purpose clear and allowed participants to be directed for careers advisory support subsequent to the research interview if required. The research interviews undertaken required me to adopt an approach informed by BNIM which was distinctly different from what I am accustomed to. Careers guidance interview methods share characteristics with semi-structured interviews but tend to be future-focused and action-oriented rather than reflecting on the past or personal circumstances. A high level of sensitivity to participants was required as the nature of the interview required participants to reflect on their life in ways that they may not have done before (Rosenthal, 2003; Schütze, 2007). Respondents were sent the transcript after the interview and some replied to me that re-reading their own words had been a powerful experience for them.

Using a semi-structured approach, a common outline of questions was used for all interviews. However, the list of questions was not adhered to slavishly and varied depending on what participants wanted to talk about. Flexibility was employed to ensure that conversations flowed. Broadly questions addressed life, career and education history, self-reflection and career goals, occupational/labour market knowledge, career capitals such as work experience and degree qualification, approaches to job search and career planning, the role of family and friends, and questions about personal confidence about the future.

4.7 Data analysis/presentation

Analysis was informed by existing ideas that are prevalent in career scholarship as presented in chapter two. Added to this, it was guided by thinking tools associated with *Figured Worlds* as explained in chapter three. Analysis required a deep immersion in data which was influenced by established practices in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) and inductive research (Eisenhardt *et al*., 2016). A systematic process of

coding and re-coding occurred, culminating in a theoretically-sensitised presentation of data. NVIVO acted as a useful organisational vehicle for this coding. A *Figured Worlds* analysis plays close attention to elements of language, e.g., the imagery, tropes and repetitions that are used by participants.

Usefully, an initial content analysis of a section of the data which focused on Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities was undertaken as a report for my funder (Christie, 2017c). However, this was not a theoretically sensitised analysis which is the intention here. The undertaking of that initial analysis was a valuable activity in identifying key themes and issues across the data that could be built upon theoretically. Analysis of a small amount of quantitative data from the survey data has been conducted for this thesis which primarily acts to set the scene empirically, and is included as it offers a useful descriptive account of the population and to compare responses against different variables such as social background and subject discipline. This is in chapter five.

An important stage in analysis of the twenty interview participants was writing a summary of each participant (essentially their story) which sought to focus on important themes which could be illuminated by *Figured Worlds* thinking tools. Four stand-out foci slowly emerged to be of particular value to the final analysis and subsequent presentation of data. These were voices, figures, characters and narratives which have been utilised to provide a framework for chapters in this thesis. Data was scrutinised to consider what if any of the established discourses about careers, participants draw upon. The literature explored in chapter two revealed how many assumptions about employability and careers are individualist in orientation, so analysis sought to consider how participants respond to such dominant ideas. In addition, the richness of the careers literature, which is full of typologies, some of which are comparable to the cultural models that Holland *et al*. focus on in their theory, acted to influence analysis. Notably, career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) has argued for the role of stories in how people narrate themselves, and Pryor & Bright (2008) identified common plots that exist. This categorisation of plots provided a fertile territory for analysis of narratives. Other *Figured Worlds* tools guided a search for elements such as "heteroglossia" and "ruptures" as useful ways to examine data.

Data presentation and discussion sections on voices (chapter six), figures (chapter seven), characters (chapter eight) and narratives (chapter nine) have been developed drawing specific examples in order to interpret and illustrate the application of thinking tools from *Figured Worlds*. In so doing, I do not suggest that participants themselves can be uniformly categorised or closed off but that some of what they said could be used to

illustrate certain points. In fact, participants often drew upon multiple voices, figures and narratives in how they self-author. Data from all twenty respondents is used, in depicting how the theoretical analysis could be applied in creating a shared landscape of recent graduates. This approach extends the usage of how *Figured Worlds* has been typically utilised by others in in-depth analysis of individuals.

Included in Tables 4.3 and 4.4 are details of all twenty participants. These include comprehensive information about subject studied, location, gender, social background, ethnicity as well as career activity at approximately six months, 16 months, and 18-22 months. Throughout the remainder of the thesis, the name of a person quoted will be used and these tables act to allow the reader to refer back to details of an individual rather than having to continually repeat the detail of an individual participant. This method of presentation has been deliberately chosen in order to allow writing to flow and not be cluttered with extraneous footnotes.

4.8 Summary

Questions can be raised regarding the generalisability of my findings as the project is located in one university, focusing on two broad groups. It has also relied upon volunteers to participate, which narrows the sample to those who have the personal organisation skills and motivation to check emails from their university. The claims made will be limited by the narrowness of the eventual sample used. However, an advantage of having such a sample is that is allows for a more in depth analysis which adds value to this topic. The more random way participants were reached via a call-out for volunteers, arguably adds to their representativeness.

A number of writers have successfully used limited samples in research about similar topics. They are careful not to make grand claims of generalisability but to argue that their research raises questions and implications that have wider value (Burke, 2015; Finn, 2015; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Tymon, 2013). They also contextualise their research in a wider body of literature and research that has used bigger samples. I follow a similar approach and have sought to situate the study in literature that addresses the career trajectories of UK graduates as a whole as discussed in chapter one and two. The characteristics of my sample groups from an urban northern university with a high number of non-traditional students is comparable to other such universities; and I would argue that a focus on this limited sample allows for the illumination of local experience with the scope to influence practice in the spirit of action research.

I am closely connected to the research topic as the core purpose of my own career for the last 18 years has been to support students/graduates in how they set out for their future. A belief in the potential significance of career development support activities is fundamental to such professional practice. Therefore I already have opinions about how graduates may experience transition, although the systematic investigation into graduate experiences which this project aims to do is new for me. My relationship to the topic has required me to be alert to potential blind spots in my thinking and a consideration of how my biography impacts on the project (Roberts, 2002), which I discussed in chapter one. Aiming to be a reflexive researcher (Alvesson, 2009) and honestly acknowledging my position in relation to the topic is important in ensuring that my own story does not unduly blinker my ability to research the topic.

The project has been designed in order to maximise its rigour and subsequent credibility, albeit with the limitations just discussed. Its design was a mixed methods approach which allows for the use of different parts of the data to be used for varied audiences. The entire design from timing to sampling to survey design and interview questions have been carefully decided upon to maximise the rigour integral to this project.

Chapter 5 Movement and change in the early careers of graduates

This chapter aims to set the scene for graduates studied in this project and draws macro-level data from Northcity's DLHE survey return as well as the survey conducted as the first stage of this project. It also situates this data within a wider context. At the outset it is acknowledged that data reported here is partial due to the nature of available national and host university data. However, the content of this chapter does contribute to tracing the movement and change that occurs for graduates in the first two years after graduating and how this may vary or not depending on subject of study, and other factors including social background. The small amount of data collected by the project's initial survey led to a decision not to do a full statistical analysis of quantitative data collected. However, in summary, this section does draw a broad frame around the qualitative data that will be explored in later chapters.

5.1 First career destinations of graduates (six months)

Graduate destinations have historically been of great interest to university policy-makers due to the impact they have on league tables. This importance is set to grow as they now also contribute to TEF metrics. The destinations of 2014 graduates of universities were utilised by the three major tables, the *Guardian* (2016) and *Complete University Guide (CUG)* (2016) in their 2017 tables and the *Times* in their 2016 Guide (O'Leary, 2015). Such rankings and the interpretation they lead to are highly controversial (Christie, 2017b) as arguably, more influential factors affecting graduate destinations are social background and geographical domicile rather than merely university attended. This controversy is relevant to the university in this study which has a higher than average numbers of students from lower social backgrounds and is located in the north of England with relatively less prosperity. Discussions about the variable return of investment from a degree have been further foregrounded in recent analysis of tax data gleaned from the student loan company which has illustrated the differences between graduates from different disciplines, institution and social background (BBC, 2016; Britton *et al*., 2016). Notably, in that analysis, some of the subject areas included in this research study, e.g., Creative arts and Mass Communication are considered to offer the lowest return in terms of likely salary.

Universities are tasked annually with collection of destination data for graduates via the DLHE survey six months after graduation which league tables utilise, with the aim of securing an 80% response return from UK-domiciled first degree graduates. In 2014, for Northcity, the total population of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates was

1350, 1006 (74.5%) of whom responded to DLHE; for Business and Law the total population was 687, 447 (64.2%) of whom responded to DLHE[5]. The following table 5.1 illustrates the broad destinations six months after graduating of the population of graduates who responded to the DLHE survey. Differences include: a higher proportion of Business and Law graduates continuing their studies; and a higher proportion of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates working part-time.

Table 5.1 Northcity graduate DLHE data (2014 leavers)

Activity on January 15, 2015 (6 months after graduating)	**Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities**	**Business and Law**
Working full-time	462 (45.92%)	208 (47.17%)
Working part-time	253 (25.15%)	42 (9.52%)
Engaged in full-time further study, training or research	89 (8.85%)	104 (23.58%)
Engaged in part-time further study, training or research	21 (2.09%)	12 (2.72%)
Due to start a job in the next month	36 (3.58%)	14 (3.17%)
Taking time out in order to travel	19 (1.89%)	6 (1.36%)
Unemployed	105 (10.44%)	40 (9.07%)
Grand Total	**1006 (100.00%)**	**441 (100.00%)**

Summary of graduate destinations 2014

Additional analysis was conducted by Northcity's DLHE collection team which shows whether employed graduates can be considered in graduate level (categorised as professional, managerial and associate professional/technical roles) or non-graduate level work (administrative and secretarial, skilled trades, caring, leisure and other service roles, sales and customer service, process, plant and machine operatives, elementary occupations). A higher percentage of Business and Law graduates (52.1%) were deemed to be in graduate level work as defined by the standard occupational classifications (SOC) used by the DLHE census coding compared to Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates (47.5%).

Similar data analysis is conducted by the annual subject league tables which compare the positive outcomes position (based on numbers in graduate level work and/or postgraduate study after six months) across subjects. Movement in the lower and middle rankings is typically volatile. The following table 5.1 uses publicly available data

[5] Respondent numbers from Business and Law lower due to a larger international student population, who are a lesser priority in the in the DLHE census collection.

from the *Complete University Guide* (2016), based on 2014 leavers, which captures the relative positions of some of the subjects within the target populations for this study.[6] Overall the university employability score was 56%, in contrast to the highest scoring university at 89.9% and the lowest at 44.4% (the median being 65.9%). Based on lower than median scores, it appears that many of Northcity's graduates were facing relatively more challenges in establishing themselves in the job market when surveyed six months after they graduate. This supports the choice of this university as host for this research study to explore graduates' early careers.

Table 5.2 Northcity CUG employability comparisons (2014 leavers)

	Northcity percentage employability score	**Median sector score**
Art and Design	47%	51%
Performing Arts	Drama 40% Music 50%	47% 60%
English	45%	52%
History	46%	52%
Media Studies	37%	50%
Politics	42%	62%
Finance and Accountancy	53%	57%
Business and Management	51%	59%
Marketing	56%	60%
Law	67%	69%

Based on Complete University Guide 2016 data

I will now go onto consider data collected from the sample of 148 respondents who replied to this study's survey in October 2015, sixteen months after graduating.

5.2 Changing career circumstances and ideas

When asked to report on whether their circumstances had changed between January 2015 and October 2015, a total of 54.7% of graduates reported that they had had a change in their career situation. Response rates were similar for social background and gender: 55.1% of women and 54% of men reported a change of circumstances; 54.5% of those from a higher social background and 55% of those from a lower social background reported a change. The difference was more remarked between Arts, Creative Arts and

[6] Where subjects from this study are not included in this list - due to respondent population not being large enough to have been included in the Complete University Guide

Humanities graduates; 58.9% report a change in career situation compared to just 41.9% of Business and Law graduates.

When asked to consider if their career ideas had changed since they graduated, only 27.7% indicated that they had had no change in ideas since they graduated. The rest answered that their ideas had either changed (29.1%) or partly changed (43.2%), in total 72.3%. More Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates reported that their career ideas have changed/partly changed (74.1% in total) compared to Business and Law graduates (66.7%). In total, 73.5% of women reported that their ideas had changed or partly changed since graduating; 70% of men reported a change of ideas. Virtually the same number of graduates from a lower social background reported that they had changed/partly changed their career ideas (72.3%) when compared to their peers from a higher social background (72.7%). However, it is clear that the majority of graduates report changing circumstances and also evolving career ideas between six and sixteen months after graduating.

5.3 Career change and circumstances – steady improvement

Based on data collected in the research, it was possible to compare self-reported status of 148 participants between January and October 2015. The most notable changes were a reduction in "unemployment" from 12.8% to 7.4%, a reduction in "studying only" from 8.8% to 4.1%, and an increase in employment levels from 56.7% to 63.5%. There were slighter changes in "unavailability for work" and "self-employment" as well as "working and studying". Men from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities, from a higher social background were the only group to report no unemployment or unavailability for work in either January or October 2015. Across both points in time, a number of other observations can be made in relation to specific groups, e.g., the actual number of those from a lower social background reporting unemployment is higher, and those from a higher social background report a greater level of engagement with further study. Tables 5.3 and 5.4 detail these changes.

Table 5.3 Survey respondent destinations, January 2015

	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities						Business and Law						Grand Total
	Higher		Lower		N/A		Higher		Lower		N/A		
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Employed full-time and/or part time	43.6%	70.5%	74.2%	58.8%	50.0%		46.2%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	66.7%	50.0%	56.7%
Self-employed/ freelancing	4.9%	5.9%		5.9%						16.7%			3.4%
Working and studying	7.3%	11.8%		17.6%			7.7%	50.0%	33.3%	33.3%			10.8%
Studying only	7.3%	11.8%			25.0%	50.0%	23.1%		16.7%		33.3%	50.0%	8.8%
Other	12.2%			5.9%	25.0%								4.7%
Unavailable for work	2.4%		3.2%						16.7%				2.0%
Unemployed	9.8%		22.6%	11.8%		50.0%	23.1%	16.7%		16.7%			12.8%
Can't remember	2.4%												0.7%
Total – number only	**41**	**17**	**31**	**17**	**4**	**2**	**13**	**6**	**6**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**148/ 100%**

Table 5.4 Survey respondent destinations, October 2015

	Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities						Business and Law						Grand Total
	Higher		Lower		N/A		Higher		Lower		N/A		
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Employed	75.6%	70.6%	64.5%	64.7%	75.0%		46.2%	33.3%	66.7%	50.0%	33.3%	50.0%	63.5%
Self-employed/ freelancing		11.8%	6.5%	11.8%						16.7%			4.7%
Working and studying	7.3%	11.8%	6.5%	5.9%	25.0%		15.4%	50.0%	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%		11.5%
Studying only	2.4%		3.2%			50.0%	7.7%		16.7%		33.3%		4.1%
Unavailable for work	7.3%		3.2%				7.7%						3.4%
Unemployed	4.9%		9.7%	5.9%		50.0%	15.4%			16.7%		50.0%	7.4%
Other	2.4%	5.9%	6.5%	11.8%			7.7%	16.7%					5.4%
Total – number only	**41**	**17**	**31**	**17**	**4**	**2**	**13**	**6**	**6**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**148/100 %**

In addition, a comparison of the data from this project's survey in October 2015 with the DLHE survey of January 2015 was possible for 141 of the 148 respondents (who had given identifying information in the research project survey) which allowed for analysis of their responses at those two separate points in time. Twenty-six individuals showed an improvement in status by October 2015, either moving from unemployment to work, lower status to higher status work, or a move into postgraduate study. Four individuals had had a decline in status in this period. All others had stayed in a similar status role/situation even if in a different job. Specific examples of movement over time illustrating improvement and decline have been presented elsewhere (Christie, 2017c, p. 23). Movement for the twenty interview participants is included in chapter four, tables 4.3 and 4.4.

5.4 Perspectives on work that needs a degree

Debates about the underemployment of graduates often draw upon what graduates say in surveys about whether they need their degree in the job they are doing or not (Vasudeva & Barea, 2016). Following this lead, the survey asked participants who said they were employed whether they considered that they needed their degree for the job they are doing. Of 94 graduates who were employed, 42 (44.7%) indicated their degree had not been needed. Participants were asked to explain their answer.

The responses to this question illustrate the subjectivity of asking, "did you need your degree to get this job". Comparing what jobs individuals said they were in with whether they think they needed a degree revealed that some graduates may take the question literally and might be in a fairly good job but if that job does not relate to their degree specifically, then they may answer "No", that they did not need their degree, although arguably their degree may have afforded them some more general skills and abilities that have equipped them to compete successfully for that job. Although many of the 42 graduates who said they were not using their degree were clearly in non-graduate work such as in in bars and shops, seventeen individuals were identified who said they did not need their degree, although based on what they said they were doing, it is probable their degree may have contributed to their application, e.g. a graphic design graduate working as a police officer, a journalism graduate working as a PR account executive. There is an implication that some graduates may be viewing their degree and its value in the job market in a narrow way that overlooks at the very least the signalling value of being a degree-holder. The question "did you need your degree to get this job" is open to interpretation for certain careers that don't make a degree compulsory which is commonplace in the creative and media sectors (but not exclusively so). Examples of

this included a Visual Arts graduate working in an Art gallery, a Media and Performance graduate working as a media production researcher, who both reported they did not need their degrees. Specific examples in the data of how individuals explain why they think they did not need their degree, although in a role that a degree may have helped to secure, have been written about elsewhere (Christie, 2017c, p. 25).

5.5 Attitudes to careers

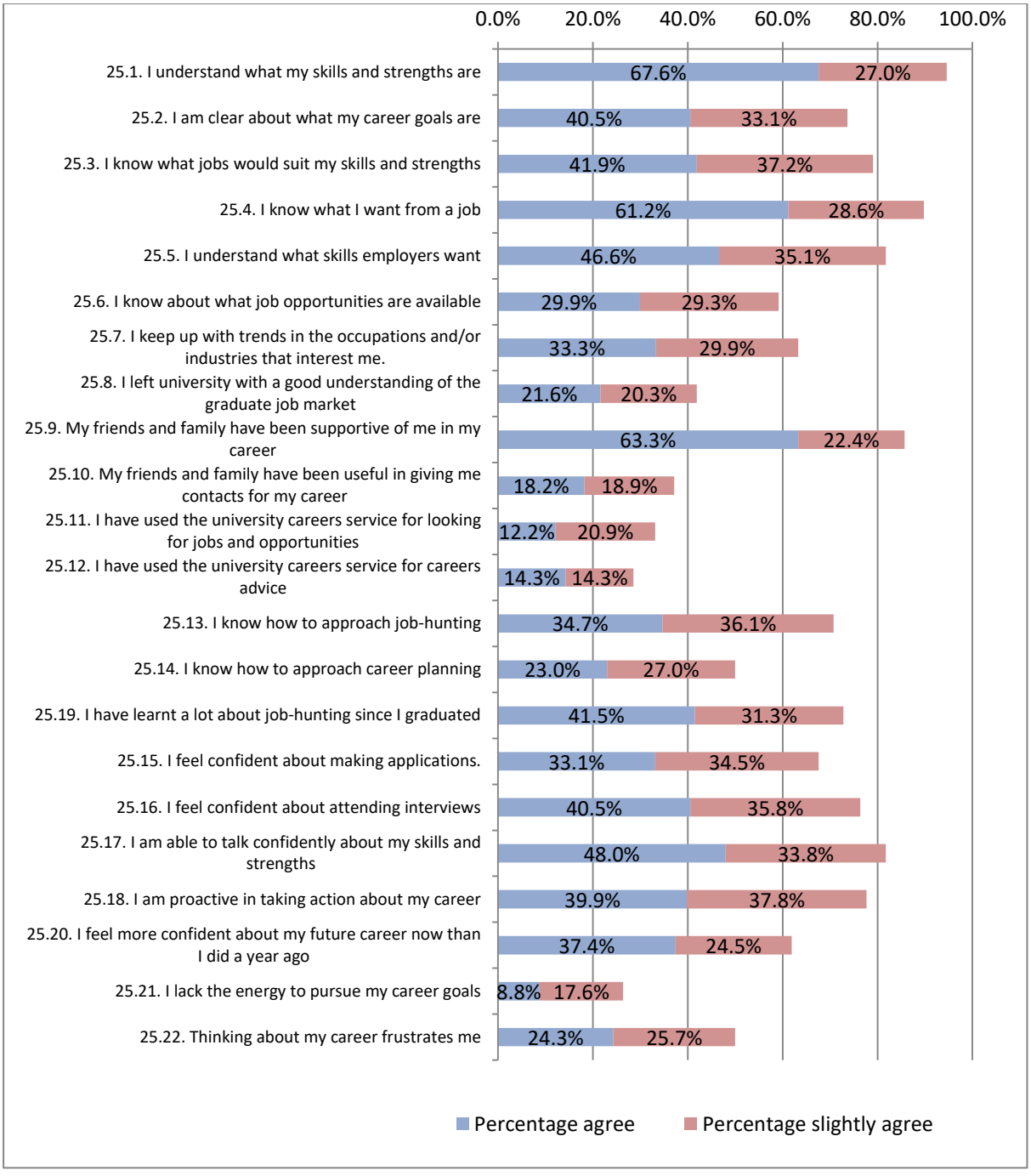
The following figure 5.1, and figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 (see appendix six) report responses to a series of statements about careers that participants were asked. Responses are compared by subject area, social background and gender to reveal any differences and will be returned to later in the thesis. The highest level of agreement is given to a statement about self-awareness, "I understand what my skills and strengths are" (94.6%), and graduates also indicate a relatively high level in an associated question "I am able to talk confidently about my skills and strengths" (81.8%). The two other highest scoring statements are "I know what I want from a job" (89.8%) and "My friends and family have been supportive of me in my career" (85.7%).

Comparisons across gender, social background and subject areas broadly follow similar patterns. However, more women tend to agree with statements about knowledge of what employers want (women 88.8%, men 68%) how to approach job-hunting (73.2%, men 66%) and being pro-active (women 83.7%, men 66%) as well as feeling more confident since graduating (women 64.3%, men 57.1%). In contrast more men indicate that thinking about their career frustrates them (women 46.9%, men 56%), but state they are more confident about attending job interviews (women 73.5%, men 82%). In relation to background, more graduates from a higher social background agree that they are confident about talking about their skills (higher 89.6%, lower 73.3%) and about attending interviews (higher 81.8%, lower 71.7%) and have become more confident about the future since graduating (higher 69.7%, lower 51.7%). A considerably larger number agree that their family and friends have been useful in providing contacts for their career (higher 46.8%, lower 23.3%).

A comparison of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and Business and Law graduates shows that Business and Law graduates are broadly more confident in their attitudes about careers. They report higher levels of awareness of jobs (Arts 53.2%, Business 77.8%) and job markets (Arts 34.8%, Business 63.9%) as well as how to approach career planning (Arts 46.4%, Business 61.1%); very many more have utilised the university careers service (Arts 20.5%, Business 54.3%). The only statement in which

more Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates score more highly is around self-awareness and knowing what their skills and strengths are (Arts 96.4%, Business 88.9%).

Figure 5.1 Percentage of survey participant population who 'agreed' or 'slightly agreed' to career attitude statements



(Base 148 graduates)

5.6 Summary

This chapter has sought to briefly contextualise the group of twenty graduates who participated in research interviews. The context is one of considerable change in early careers, although with steady improvement. It is also possible to observe a diminished value placed upon a degree by graduates in the labour market. With regard to attitudes to careers, most graduates say they have good self-awareness of skills and strengths which is associated with strong self-perceived employability but are uncertain about tackling the job market that faces them. Such a lack of confidence is unsurprising given what labour market literature reveals about risks of underemployment and the inequality of opportunity that is present in the job market. In general, it does appear that Business and Law graduates, women graduates and those from a higher social background have more positive attitudes about themselves and their careers than their peers. Notably, in relation to gender, this pattern is not clear-cut, e.g., women report feeling more confident since graduating but less confident than men about job interviews. Data about specific career status indicates that those from a lower social background and from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities tend to be in less objectively positive career situations, whereas the difference between men and women's status is less tangible at this early career stage. Broadly such patterns do follow what we know from literature about employability and labour market studies.

Chapter 6 Competing voices about employability and careers

Initial content and subsequent thematic analysis of interview data revealed the competing voices about the topics of careers and employability that participants draw upon. The literature discussed in chapter two has revealed the tension between the prevailing discourses in employability debates that it is primarily about the individual and their attributes, which tends to push to the background contextual factors which impact upon prospects. In this study, a complexity of perspectives emerged in how individuals tried to make sense of their own career positioning and this chapter seeks to explore competing voices associated with this. The word "voices" is deliberately used as a *Figured Worlds* thinking tool.

The ways individuals reflected upon their own endeavour and self-determination emerged from interviews. How this was manifest varied, but included (not exclusively): a belief that "talent would out" and a faith in meritocracy; a competitive perspective which indicated an awareness of embracing tactics to get ahead; a consumerist view about the purchase of a degree and how this has/has not lived up to expectations; and a confidence in being in charge of their own destiny or alternatively feeling powerless in the face of a hostile and crowded job market. Such reflections on the role of individual agency go to the core of employability discourses. To what extent individuals can be responsible for their own employability is debatable, and an over-emphasis on individual agency has the potential to cause individuals to blame themselves or alternatively seek to blame somebody or something else for lack of success rather than considering wider social and economic constraints. It can also lead individuals to fail to recognise dis/advantages they may have had in their belief that success is all down to them. Analysis of data also suggested the significance of individuals' relationship to family and community in shaping perspectives presented, which can be contradictory to an individualistic discourse, but lurked as a powerful force in how individuals authored their own identity in research interviews. Holland *et al*.'s rejection of the notion of "free-floating" (1998) individualism is pertinent in this regard.

Figured Worlds' thinking tools offer a lens to consider such varied voices which stem from dominant though sometimes competing individualistic discourses. As outlined in chapter three, Holland *et al*. argue that it is very common for individuals to draw upon multiple discourses and voices, some of which may be contradictory. As such, they reject endeavours to make unitary or simplify voices that are drawn upon by individuals or collectives. The existence of "heteroglossia" relates to how individuals orchestrate and organise such voices (including both authoritative and "internally persuasive

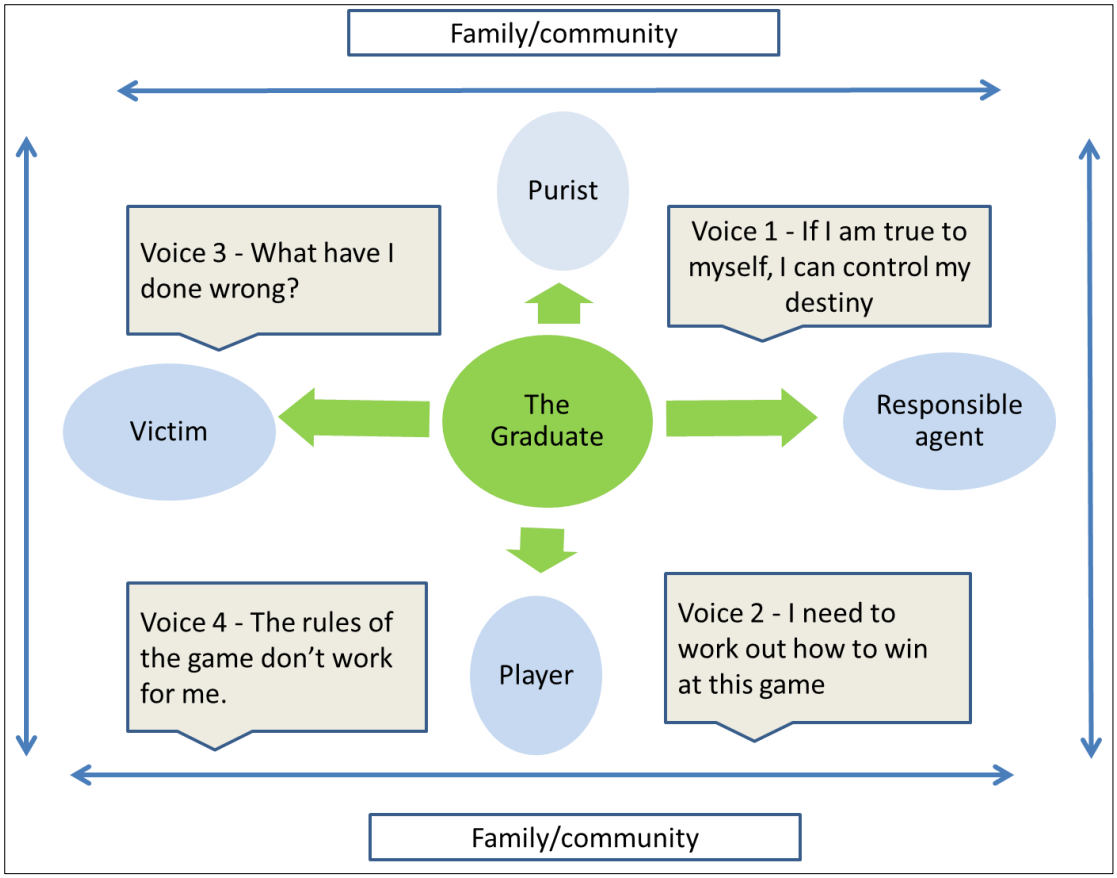
discourses") with the scope for a hybridising of different voices and discourses that may create newer ways to confer meaning.

6.1 Mapping competing voices

Observation of such competing voices led to a consideration of how to organise and present analysis of data in a novel way that was informed by existing literature as discussed in chapter two. The work of Brown *et al*. (2004) and more recently Tholen (2014), which both address the social construction of employability, stood out as being of relevant and complementary analytical value. A cross-mapping of the typologies used by these writers was experimented with. Brown *et al*. identified the player/purist typology; the player is associated with positional competition and knowing how to play the game, whereas the purist is associated with a belief in meritocratic competition and being true to oneself. Tholen depicts how graduates are represented as victims and responsible agents in the media; victims are considered the unlucky ones subject to an unfavourable context and to be pitied, whereas responsible agents are not to be pitied but are expected to take full responsibility for their own career trajectory.

Figure 6.1 suggests how a mapping of Brown *et al*.'s and Tholen's types usefully draws out the interplay of voices in how individuals reflect upon their career. The intention is not to suggest that any individual would fall solely into one of these quadrants but that the voices represented in each quadrant illustrate voices that individuals are drawing upon and moving between as they make sense of their situation. The diagram is also framed by family/community; informed by an awareness of the deeply social nature of careers and in particular the role of family and community in shaping individual perspectives (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Burke, 2015; Finn, 2015). This diagram risks flattening the complexity of voices that "heteroglossia" suggests is present in how people author themselves, but is presented as a framework to consider the relationships between different voices, in the awareness that an individual may draw upon all the voices simultaneously and/or at different times even though they appear contradictory.

Figure 6.1 Framework of voices about employability and careers



To elaborate on this diagram, each quadrant can be distilled as follows:

6.1.1 Voice distillates

Voice 1 – *If I am true to myself, I can control my destiny*: a belief in the individual's ability to determine their own destiny and be true to self and a faith that society is fundamentally meritocratic around this. This voice is resonant of the pro-active and values-led protean career orientation (e.g., Hall, 2004).

Voice 2 – *I need to work out how to win at this game*: an understanding that positional inequality is intrinsic to society and individual capacity/use of resources can assist in taking responsibility for playing the game required. This voice resonates with competitive individual employability (Biressi & Nunn, 2014) in which mobilisation of capitals is required (e.g., Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013).

Voice 3 – *What have I done wrong?* a belief that society is meritocratic, and therefore any lack of career success is fundamentally due to individual suitability. This voice is

resonant of a neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility that risks leading to a flawed self-blaming (e.g., Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Voice 4 – *The rules of the game don't work for me*: an understanding that positional inequality is intrinsic to society and that a game needs to be played; but where individual capacity/circumstances have not led to desired outcome. This voice is resonant of an individual sense that the external environment is against them, either as a disappointed consumer of higher education (Tomlinson, 2014) and/or as part of the precarious jilted generation (Howker & Malik, 2010; Standing, 2014).

It is possible to illustrate what these four different voices might sound like in practice through the words of participants, although it is stressed that each participant used here as an exemplar would also draw upon other voices. In particular, it is indicated how for each of these four examples, despite a default tendency to focus upon their own situation and agency; when stirred by research questions about influences, rich depictions of family and community emerge which act in contradiction of free-floating individualism, and serve to qualify the voice that it being claimed.

6.1.2 Voice 1 (purist/responsible agent)

Matthew is a first class Business Management graduate. He espouses a strong entrepreneurial attitude and has been self-employed in music promotion since graduating, making the choice while in his final year not to apply for graduate schemes. His work originates in a particular enthusiasm he had for a genre of music.

> Sure, well because I was getting involved in the music industry during my final year at university, things were taking off at an impressive rate, so I made the decision to not apply for typical sort of graduate schemes, which even at the time felt like a huge risk, but I felt like I'd found something that I'm passionate about…

Added to this he does have a faith in having a career that is something you love doing and uses a familiar trope to convey this:

> I've always been told; if you work on something you enjoy, you'll never work a day in your life.

Matthew articulates this trope, with scope that he is being ventriloquated. However, at the time of the research interview he also expresses doubt about the pathway he was so optimistic about as he is experiencing disenchantment with the precarity of his work situation and is doubting that being true to his interests in music will lend itself to the

security he would like, referring to the poor health of his mother who he is increasingly responsible for and his hoped for and imagined future children.

6.1.3 Voice 2 (player/responsible agent)

Rachel has a 2.1 in Law and Criminology. She is materially motivated and has sought work that can ensure financial independence rather than for a personal passion. She made a major decision to leave a solicitor training position in order to move into recruitment consultancy which promised speedier financial rewards. She reflects dramatically on her departure from law saying what she had thought at the time: "do you know I hate this", which contributes to a need to justify how she explained her decision to her family at the time for stepping off a prestigious career path. She compares herself favourably to her sisters who according to her do not share her commitment to being economically independent. She also criticises friends from university who she is connected to on Facebook, who moan about their lives but are not doing much about it. She uses a familiar trope "to provide for my children" to explain her position.

> Yeh, absolutely, because I've come from a wealthy family so I've always been given everything that I needed. I was always, I had a decent phone and we had nice holidays, we've got a place in Spain that we go to as well and coming from that sort of background I was always very much of the mind-set, I want this for my future, I want to be able to provide this for my children, I don't want it to stop, and I think, as opposed to my sisters who haven't 100% taken the same approach as me, um, I'm the independent one in the family.

Despite her self-congratulation, she does also acknowledge her family's support in her career. In particular, her mother's intervention at a critical point in securing a key placement opportunity is mentioned. She is proud of her Jewish background and laughs when she comments:

> I come from a Jewish family so everyone has an input into everything basically [LAUGHS]. Yes, everyone has an opinion and wants to get involved into any sort of decision that's made.

6.1.4 Voice 3 (purist/victim)

Alice completed a Foundation degree at a partner college, before doing an extra year to top up to an honours degree in Media Production. Alice is frustrated by the limited opportunities living in the small northern town she has returned home to, and also the poor quality of some of the media/creative industry jobs she has gone for. However, she is also self-critical giving numerous examples of what she sees as her unsuitability for

jobs e.g., "I've not got the right voice", "I'm not a stunner", "I'm not the smartest person". As such she is not happy and has slipped into feeling that others will see that she has failed, and berates her own lack of courage to get her career on the track she wants it. She uses familiar tropes such as "I know I can do better" and "not that I care what people think", though in the case of the latter, she clearly does.

> Not that happy, like it upsets me when I talk about it. It's just frustrating cos I don't get enough money and, I love living at home, I do like that but I feel like to get somewhere I need to get out of my comfort zone and I just feel…I just feel it's not satisfying and I feel like I see customers and they think I'm a failure. And it's not that I care what people think but I do in my mind cos I'm like, I know I can do better than this, so it's frustrating for myself.

Alice depicts her family with ambivalence, describing her mum who she lives with as both "anchor" and "annoying", encouraging her daughter to go into the police like her grandfather: "so she says, policeman's a good job, that's a secure job." Her father is more supportive but lives further away.

6.1.5 Voice 4 (player/victim)

Charlie has a 2.1 in Theatre and Performance. He did a 2 year Foundation degree at a partner college before doing a top-up honours degree year. This quotation in response to a question about the challenges he faces, illustrates his awareness of the contextual barriers to finding secure employment in the creative/cultural sector, and his frustration at not finding a way through this. In contrast to Alice, he does not doubt the quality of the work he can do.

> Finding people who are willing to pay a fair price for it, that's like the biggest one, because it's all well and good me doing free work and I'm all for it but there's only so long you can do that for before you have to say to yourself, when do I start charging for this… It's just like a perpetual over and over again; oh this person should work for free because they've not got the reputation behind them. No they shouldn't, they're working for you, like if you want quality work produced you should pay these people and that sort of goes, that's sort of my rant when it comes to it basically.

The use of the phrase "free work" which is commonly used as a critical trope in how the creative/cultural sector uses workers, allows Charlie to explain his situation as one that is shared by a wider community. He shows political awareness and is aware of his own positional identity as someone who is not well-connected in the arts. However, countering the player/victim voice, he reports of a strong creative community that he has been part of and the successes he has had. He describes a short film he has made:

> Where I grew up, I've had basically quite a rough upbringing, the sort of area I grew up in but fortunately for me I've obviously gained the knowledge to come out of it. So I did a small project for the Pride Festival, it was about two gay friends of mine that I grew up with and that was like my big project. That's the one I made the most money for…

6.1.6 Multi-voicedness

In the following example, I aim to illustrate how one individual moves rapidly between voices, exhibiting traces of the "heteroglossia" that Holland *et al*. have argued is common. Ibrahim tells his story of his post-graduation life and career to date vividly. He graduated with a first in English literature, and lived at home with family during university and continues to do so. His career aspiration is to be a film director and he has already written and put on a play that with hindsight he reflects upon as semi-autobiographical. The dynamic process of self-authoring is something that would appear to come naturally to him.

His initial voice in the interview is that of the purist/responsible agent. He is highly committed to being a creative, almost as if that is what he was born to do. He is emphatic about what he wants to do and refers to "hiding in education" when discussing the PhD programme he is also enrolled for. He is proud of what he has achieved against the odds and talks about the play that he wrote, directed, produced and toured while studying which received a "five star review" in a local online magazine:

> And in university I started a publishing and production company, and I wrote a play and I was sick of thinking, oh do I get it put on so I just did it myself. What I did was, which is really bad, I took out an overdraft and I just made this play and hired actors who I was on the same programme with…just sourced everyone I needed from my programme to make this tour, put all the money into it which I'm still paying off right now… It paid off creatively, financially I'm still paying it off…I'm very good at sort of utilising what I've got.

He also describes how his commitment to film helped secure a place on a practice-based PhD programme (albeit self-funded), which meant unusually bypassing a Masters.

In contradiction of this heroic depiction of himself, his self-confidence appears diminished by his admission of the vulnerability he felt in the first few months after graduating which is more in tune with the purist/victim voice. There are indications that Ibrahim is perhaps not as confident as he may at first appear, although even when he is describing self-doubt, he does so in a dramatic way, revealing confidence that his story is an interesting one to tell.

> I had these expectations of what things were going to be like and it was just a case of like, you're on your own and you don't know what you're doing and it's very confusing and you think, oh what am I doing? In a way I think I've suppressed that and it's still there lingering in my mind but, I don't know…It was the worst period of my life… oh right I'm an adult now and it was just, it was not a good time.

However, his purist/victim voice moves quickly to player/victim. Notably, he uses the phrase "mis-sold adulthood" when reflecting on "the worst six months of my entire life" with an implication that somehow he has been deceived by forces outside of himself about what post-graduation life might be. He alludes to popular ideas which argue that his generation are facing greater challenges transitioning into adulthood than previous generations. His reflections on the use of social media also illustrate a potential player/victim voice as he acknowledges the online environment for promoting creative content such as his films but expresses discomfort with what he describes as the "falsity" of the internet; he has de-activated his Facebook account and reflects with envy on the world an older generation that did not have to worry about the internet.

Ibrahim also makes comments that indicate his knowledge of what is required to be a player/responsible agent too. Despite his verbal dismissal of his PhD as a Plan B, he even uses the trope "imposter syndrome" to describe his PhD student status, he is ploughing on with it and even doing some teaching of undergraduates; he has managed to hold down an administrative job at the university although he is also disparaging of this, and working with the "over 40s". He has also secured a small university travel grant to go to the United States in order to develop his film-making.

Ibrahim covers much ground during his interview, and movement between different voices betray a contradictory self-assurance and vulnerability which arguably illustrates some of the cognitive struggle that Holland *et al*. refer to in their depiction of self-authoring. There have been "ruptures" in the taken-for-granted for him, evoked in the shock he felt in the first six months after he graduated, which do appear to have triggered for him a desire to find his own voice, one that he has orchestrated and Holland *et al.* depict as an "internally persuasive discourse" which will be expanded upon in the following section.

6.2 Multi-voicedness and an "internally persuasive discourse"

In this chapter so far, the different voices that exist in discourses about employability and careers have been distilled. Arguably, each of the voices described stems from answering dialogically an authoritative individualistic employability discourse. Ibrahim has been traced as an example of "multi-voicedness", however, the other examples above also show how individuals even as they illustrate one particular voice, may well say things that conflict with this voice especially in relation to the powerful influence of family and community, which act to qualify any espousal of free-floating individualism. It is in this territory, where individuals demonstrate contradictions, in what can be considered a self-contest of ideas at times, that analysis can reveal the complexity of the meaning-making that individuals engage in and how agency may occur as they move between different voices. Such a consideration of self-contest leads onto consideration of how the orchestration of multiple voices can allow for the tracing of the evolution of an "internally persuasive discourse", in which individuals are testing out and arguing against prevailing discourses.

Anna, Matthew and Isabelle are used here as examples to illustrate some of the cognitive struggle that is implied to be necessary to develop agency in Holland *et al*.'s theory, and is associated with an "internally persuasive discourse" which involves testing voices, not just authoring or appropriating them. This can be triggered in response to "ruptures" in taken for granted assumptions about how a career may play out, and can be more likely to occur when individuals have a clearer view of their own "positionality".

Anna, who is a working-class, Black Caribbean, Fashion graduate, with a family lineage which includes a number of "seamstresses", shows considerable awareness of her own "positionality", i.e., her gender, ethnicity, Christian faith, and occupational heritage. This explicit acknowledgement is evident in her being pulled from a purist/responsible agent who believes "you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it" to a player/responsible agent voice with a strong awareness of challenges to be overcome for young Black women like her face in the fashion business. She also shifts to a player/victim voice, when stating how much she hates the fashion business which she describes as "toxic, nepotistic and exploitative". However, in her plans to set up her own lifestyle fashion website which can draw upon a "community of positive people" who share her ideas and in which she can build upon her own heritage (e.g., she is naming her website after her grandmothers) and support available through her background, it is possible to observe her testing established individualistic voices about what it takes to make it in the fashion business. In so doing, Anna shows traces of growing her own

"internally persuasive discourse", which has been triggered by how tough she has found her early experiences in the job market.

Isabelle, a Graphic Design graduate, also evidences the cognitive struggle of "internally persuasive discourse", and acknowledgement of her own "positionality" helps her in doing so; her late diagnosis of dyslexia, her exploitation as an unpaid intern as well as her failed study of architecture as well as her parents' late occupational mobility all feature for her. Over the course of the research project she moves between a purist/victim voice in which she berates her own indecision and disappointing career situation to arguing against dominant ideas about what graduates should be doing as she chooses to work and travel. Later, she adopts what is a more purist/responsible agent voice, partially qualified by the realism of the player. Nine months after her research interview, she contacts me to say she is returning to the UK, having travelled and worked in a tax advice job in New Zealand. In dialogically answering the world (including me) she defends her ongoing rejection of dominant ideas about settling into a career and voices her own "internally persuasive discourse".

> I don't have any plans past Christmas as I am not really a person who plans things, and I am quite excited to go back to the UK not knowing what I will end up doing… it is a possibility that when I go back to the UK I will just get a job to save more money to go travelling again…, but as I previously stated I have zero plans; just a head full of ideas of what I could do. I feel like this would've previously scared me but now it makes me happy not knowing what is around the corner.

Although Matthew's voice is predominantly a purist/responsible agent one, he does seek to argue against what he sees as dominant discourses. His unconventional final year at university during which he had started a successful music promotion business, led him to question what he calls the "paradigm of the Business school" as he figures himself as a rebellious entrepreneur. In his survey response he is critical of employability discourses which focus on how graduates can be moulded to be employable for employers:

> We are taught very effectively what companies are looking for in graduates and the new workforce. However, I feel we should be taught more about how we as skilled individuals should identify the work best suited to ourselves.

In so doing, he is arguably testing out established player discourses in employability, which risk a focus on becoming employable in an impersonalised way. Such testing on his part can be associated with the concept of "internally persuasive discourse".

6.3 The voices of employability and career: a summary

Holland *et al.*'s application of Bakhtin's concepts of voices and "multi-voicedness" are useful in depicting the different voices individuals draw upon. Graduates are required to make sense of multiple voices that exist in society, the media, and universities. This chapter has categorised these voices using the intersection of Tholen's (2014) victim and responsible agent, and Brown *et al.*'s (2004) player and purist. Notably, while participants do often appear ventriloquated by authoritative individualistic ideas about employability, especially associated with the responsible agent, there is also evidence of an ability to think critically as some move between different voices in the orchestration of an "internally persuasive discourse". Responses by graduates to the competing voices around employability and careers are complex and dynamic which reflects the difficult terrain in which they find themselves.

In reflecting upon the data, the two voices that appear to have the strongest attraction across participants are that of the purist/responsible agent and the player/victim. Reflecting back on the literature discussed in chapter two, the former resonates with the protean career orientation (Baruch, 2014; Hall, 2004) and the latter of precarity (Standing, 2014) and/or being a disappointed consumer (Tomlinson, 2014). Arguably, both voices capture the differential ideological positioning of an individually-constituted career, and how the same career could be considered as both of these simultaneously depending on the "positionality" and perspective of the career author and/or their observer. Both are materially the same career, as each foregrounds the individual as navigator of uncertain contextual terrain, and present different aspects of neoliberalism. The protean career orientation can be considered to put a superficially benign framing around neoliberal ideas of the individual, depicted by Tholen (2014) as the responsible agent, with the implication that such a perspective is unleashing the individual to be true to themselves according to their own values and success criteria. However, precarity lurks behind such positivity; despite many graduates espousing a protean orientation, this may not be enough to carve a career in competitive, unequal, crowded and uncertain environments. Some participants do position themselves more explicitly as being in precarious situations in which they are obliged to be more reactive than pro-active, with an overwhelming feeling that context is against them, which can also lead to blaming others, such as the university or employer practices.

Despite its neoliberal overtones the protean career orientation, depicted in this chapter's voices as the purist/responsible agent, does allow participants to adopt an approach to career that escapes the narrow discourses that predominate in the public

policy domain about graduates, in which success is defined as being in a graduate level job categorised by standard occupational classifications. The protean career orientation gives emphasis to more subjective notions of career with an emphasis on values and pro-activity. It has the potential to describe participants such as Matthew who say they have purposely chosen the insecurity of self-employed work over a more traditional organisational career, or those such as Isabelle who have chosen to give priority to personal development through travel. The protean career orientation does resonate with Beck's (2000) work on the new world of work and the need to pragmatically adapt to the decline of traditional full-time, waged or salaried work. Interestingly, although the theory has been in existence for two decades and echoes a neoliberalist focus on the individual, it is not a concept that is drawn upon in university approaches to employability, though arguably it could be a useful in explicitly helping students think through the role of values and pro-activity in career trajectories which could avert damaging wellbeing consequences for those who do not have conventional career advancement. Arguably, the current policy domain around employability pushes graduates to a player/victim voice, in which graduates are encouraged to expect that studying for a degree may give them a certain outcome as a consumer, and that if this does not emerge somebody or something else is to blame. It is possible to observe this is Charlie's damning critique of the creative industries, and Alice's sense of frustration with the small northern town she is located in, and Ibrahim's sense that he has been "mis-sold adulthood".

In considering how graduates may be able to develop agency, through the voices they orchestrate, Holland *et al.*'s thinking tool of "ruptures" is useful in describing how this can trigger the development of individuals' "internally persuasive discourse", as they test out existing voices critically. This line of enquiry seems of particular contemporary value as wider society/economy witnesses fractures in what is taken-for-granted. It is possible that it is where such "ruptures" occur, newer ways of being and thinking can emerge through "internally persuasive discourses" which may lead to what Holland *et al.* call "making worlds" or "figuring it otherwise". Arguably, such cognitive struggle allows for a response to the limitations of dominant neoliberal ideas of individualism which admonish individuals to take charge of their lives, while also behaving as a consumer. As they deal with the challenges they face, some graduates appear to be searching for meaningful alternative explanations to the tropes associated with meritocracy and competition which risk leading them nowhere.

In summary, the purist/responsible agent voice which echoes of the protean career orientation does resonate with participants' desire to explain a more subjective and

values-oriented approach to career. While still deferring to dominant individualist ideas, employing the protean career language, can ameliorate a sense of having a career that falls short of imagined objective career success. Similarly, utilising language of the player/victim which connects to precarity and consumerism can allow for individuals to explain away poor career circumstances as being attributable to the socio-economic and political context surrounding the labour market, or being poorly prepared for work by their university degree. My pairing of the precarious and protean concepts purposely addresses the tensions around voices about careers which these two concepts from the literature evoke well.

Chapter 7 Responses to the figure of being a graduate

This chapter explores the concept of the "figure" of being a graduate, drawing upon Holland *et al*.'s (1998) usage of idealised figures as important in how individuals author themselves. Holland *et al*. define figures as being pivotal to figured worlds and they can also be considered "cultural models". This concept has been identified of value in this chapter in considering how individuals reflect upon their career positioning as a "graduate".

> Cultural schemas or cultural models are stereotypical distillates, generalizations from past experience that people make…According to the cognitive architecture currently theorized for them, cultural models…certainly may and are likely to change… but here we emphasize figured worlds that have some durability; those that are, for various reasons, reproduced socially. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 102)

The culturally embedded notion of being a graduate is explored to consider how individuals dialogically author themselves in relation to such an idealised figure. The themes of entrepreneurialism, advancement, signalling, personal development, creativity, helplessness, disappointment and regret capture associations with the imagined figure of being a graduate. Exemplar cases of individuals are used as illustrative. Notably, Dries *et al.*'s (2008) work on identifying cultural conceptions of success have been valuable in tracing how individuals respond to the figure of being a graduate.

7.1. The figure of being a graduate

Figures that graduates author themselves in relation to can represent the idealised "could be" or "should be" figures that individuals measure themselves against. Holland *et al*. (1998) use examples of figures within the world of Alcoholics Anonymous, e.g., an alcoholic and/or a non-drinking alcoholic; the world of romance and attractiveness on an American campus, e.g., an attractive or unattractive woman; the world of mental health care, e.g., associated with different mental health labels; and the domestic political world of Nepali women, e.g., a good woman or a good daughter. Others have applied Holland *et al*.'s theoretical notion of figures, e.g., in how teachers author themselves against being either a traditional or connectionist (Williams, 2011); how women surgeons navigate competing figures as good surgeons as well as good wives and mothers (Hill *et al*., 2015); and similarly how women mathematicians articulate identity (Solomon, 2012) .

In this tradition, it is possible to argue that figures associated with being a graduate are embedded in cultural ideas of what it represents and how this relates to having a career that befits a graduate. A notion of what "could be" or "should be" influences how individuals explain their situation and what language they use. Such figures are associated with the identity-making that graduates invest in once they have left university and the liminality that is commonplace (Holmes, 2015) for recent graduates' identity formation.

The rite of passage of becoming a graduate has a long history, e.g. evocatively illustrated in the 1960s film *The Graduate (Nichols, 1967)*, in which the lead character has just completed his degree and returns home to a party celebrating his graduation at his parents' house, uncomfortable as his parents deliver accolades and neighbourhood friends ask him eagerly about his future plans. Such a depiction epitomises the figure of a graduate as one of expectancy and hope, on the brink of a new life for themselves. This depiction is not just a private one but is also social; collectively graduates and their destinies act as a touchstone for what the future may be like for us all.

More recent popular culture depictions of the figure of the graduate are more ambivalent (e.g., Bissett, 2011; Killeen, 2015; Mercy, 2015; Nicholls, 2009; Southwood, 2011), but retain hope and expectation at their core, e.g., in Pack Men (Bissett, 2011), the lead character (of Scottish working-class background) has graduated in English literature and expresses disappointment in prospects that face him as he searches for work during the fall-out of the 2008 Crash. His expectations appear to have been cruelly dashed.

> But underlying everything is the vague feeling of disappointment… you're not yet something - which is compounded by having a degree. You come to realise the only thing it really equips you to do is say, '*I have a degree*' and the most companies aren't that interested in how diligently you pored over those books on post structuralism… (Bissett, 2011, p. 215).

Labour market literature discussed in chapter two substantiates the ambivalence of such cultural evocations, illustrating how the definition of a graduate job has evolved (Elias & Purcell, 2013), while the spectre of graduate unemployment and underemployment as described by Bissett attracts media attention and fears of both economic and societal failure (CIPD, 2015; Howker & Malik, 2010; Tholen, 2014). Society invests considerable hope in graduates; the word itself invokes a certain status that is not accorded to other leavers of cycles of education/training such as school leavers or completing apprentices. This can be illustrated by a substitution of the word graduate with the more ordinary phrase university leaver; the latter suggests a

diminished depiction of an individual's achievement, although both have a close literal meaning. The co-opting of the status of the word graduate has been attempted in other contexts, e.g., in the enactment of graduation ceremonies for nursery children.

Within this context of engrained but ambivalent notions of what a graduate is, government-led employability policy drivers in universities have contributed to defined notions of what being a successful graduate is as measured by positive outcomes in the guise of further study and graduate level employment (HESA, 2016). Universities focus attention on attributes, scholarship, citizenship (Barrie, 2012; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke, 2006) in outlining what characterises a graduate. Holmes (2015, 2016) has led criticism of prevailing ideas of measuring graduateness in terms of skills and attributes, preferring to foreground what he calls, a graduate identity approach; he argues that for individuals, it can be an uncomfortable journey to feel worthy to call themselves a graduate and being in a work, life or career situation that allows them to do this. Analysis of interviews data in this project would support Holmes' argument.

7.2 "Authoring selves" in response to the figure of being a graduate

Data from the initial survey presented a community of graduates who said they have a high degree of self-knowledge. 94.6% agreed or somewhat agreed that they knew what their skills and strengths were and 89.8% said they knew what they wanted from a job; a heartening level of self-confidence perhaps? Analysis of qualitative data sought to delve more thoroughly into how individuals understand themselves.

Research interviews revealed reflections on being a graduate in which participants can be traced explicitly and implicitly comparing themselves to an idealised notion of what a graduate is. This self-authoring is dialogic as participants articulate their own perspectives in response to me as a researcher but also with an eye on how society and the multitude of characters therein may view them. There were subtle differences between types of graduate and these inter-relate with the figures associated with the careers that may connect to certain degrees. It does appear that those who have a clearer focus and confidence on who they are and what they want even if this is not secure, are more at ease with a graduate identity.

The following are descriptions of how different graduates present themselves. In so doing, I aim to provide examples of variation but also the commonality of hope and expectancy that is invested in being able to call oneself a graduate; also included are examples of those for whom the idealised figure of being a graduate in a commensurate

career eludes them. How they author themselves also relates to the narratives they draw upon which are explained further in the chapter nine. Of the twenty interview participants, there are four that used the word graduate most in their answers; all of these are from Business and Law (Matthew, Rachel, Ravi and Farzana), and I start with them as they exemplified a particular emphasis on being a graduate. In contrast and in general, responses from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates appear less embedded in constructions of graduate status, and draw upon other figures which relate to a desired career.

7.3 Growing confidence

7.3.1 The Business graduate – entrepreneurialism

Matthew is a first class Business Management graduate and uses the word "graduate" twelve times in his interview which is more than any other participant. His use of the word is embedded with the status it confers, but also the rebellious choices he made not to apply for typical graduate schemes and being an entrepreneur. Nearly two years on from graduating he is reviewing that decision with a suspicion that continuing with the work he has been doing as a self-employed music promoter does not befit his identity as a graduate. Having a first class Business degree is also important for him and he mentions this five times, referring to a graduate recruitment agency he has been to recently "who specialise in placing high calibre graduates", of which he sees himself as one. He made a choice to study Business as he felt it would "open doors" and connected to his ambition becoming an "an entrepreneur". His doubts about being self-employed relate to feelings that he is missing out on the structure, mentoring and career track that graduate schemes appear to promise, so he has decided to step back into the "corporate world". This process of applying for jobs has forced him to reflect on who he is:

> what really set me up well if I did choose to seek graduate positions anything like that, that definitely helped and having gone through some application processes with graduate employers recently, you know what stood out apart from the fact that I've got a First class degree is my real world experience, both from the placement that I've done and also how I've kind of worked as self-employed in the music industry…

In reflecting on the value of his degree he states:

> the fact that there is a graduate job market speaks for itself that graduates have got these skills because they've done a degree and you know, I'm 24, if I was 24 and…hadn't gone to university, I think my career prospects would be significantly lower.

7.3.2 The Accountancy graduate – advancement

Like Matthew, for Ravi, a graduate of Accountancy and Finance, status is important. After graduating, he was initially tempted into what seemed like a suitable graduate job "£26,000 for a graduate is fantastic, a business car, and a business phone". However, it rapidly emerged that he hated the job, although the title was business development executive, he was actually a cigarette salesman, so he quit to go back to his sales assistant job for a large retailer, which did not sit comfortably with him either:

> when I was working at large retailer like, you know what, I'm a 2:1 graduate, it's my ego speaking that is the truth, I'm kind of like, I'm a 2:1 graduate, how am I working here, what am I doing with my life.

In reflecting upon his degree, he compares the respect that being a graduate confers over an apprentice: "you talk to a graduate and you talk to an apprentice, you kind of give the graduate more respect. That's my thinking, my concept of it." Although he does qualify this by saying that "other career paths need to be given a bit of oomph as well." His move into teaching as a career sits much better with his idea of being a graduate, although it does represent a plan B.

Farzana is also Accountancy and Finance graduate and is the most conventionally successful of all participants; having secured an accountancy graduate role via a recruitment company. She repeatedly uses the phrase "graduate scheme" to depict what she applied for and the role she is doing as well as advice she would offer new graduates. Her advice to current students is to avoid keeping their "blindfolds on" and just applying for "those coveted graduate schemes". She did apply for many graduate schemes before securing the one that she is on at the time of the research interview. She is clearly happy that her role is commensurate with her idea of what it is to be a graduate and how university sets you up for this: "it's that matureness that you sort of get when you graduate and it's preparing individuals for that so yeh, and I think the university does quite well". Farzana's notion of what it is to be a graduate is also embedded with becoming an accountant and how she imagines this. She presents studying a degree in Accountancy and Finance as being a rebellious choice against advice at her girls' school which steered pupils into what she considered more gendered women's work. She aspires to be a chartered accountant and welcomes the clear career structure this affords. Her growing financial independence now allows her to plan to move out of home in the near future with her partner. The figure of an accountant has allowed her to balance individual and family expectations.

7.3.3 The Law graduate – signalling

Although Rachel has decided to turn her back on the legal work, she is aware of a certain quality guarantee and signalling value that having a Law degree (albeit in her case Law and Criminology) may confer upon her. However, she also contradicts this prestige, by downplaying the degree's value in a more literal sense.

> …when I first joined the previous recruitment company they obviously looked and said, graduate, Law degree, 2:1, you know must have a bit of something behind the ears basically so maybe initially that might be why they chose to interview me, because I had a degree…

When referring to her choice of doing the degree in the first place, she is vague, admitting it wasn't carefully thought through, but knew it was a "good degree to have", with an implication that it could lead to advancement:

> …to be honest I literally did not know what to do at university at all. I had no clue in the slightest. I decided on Law because my mother did Law so I thought if I get stuck maybe she could help me.

7.3.4 The Performing Arts graduate – personal development

Sophia has a first class degree and feels she has gained a lot from her studies. For her, having a degree has been about her creative development as a performer. She knows that conventional notions of career advancement are not readily applicable to acting. When asked about her career goals, she seeks clarification of what is meant by career, and whether acting is counted as a "normal career" or "something you just do". She feels that society at large positions Performing Arts degrees negatively and she is eager to defend her degree. She frames this politically by commenting on government policy.

> Leaving university with a Performing Arts degree can sometimes feel like you shouldn't have done it at all. Performing Arts degrees have a bad rep for being doss degrees, and, of course, this stems from the government's lack of interest in Arts and Culture. Overall I've learnt a lot from being at university, academically and personally (cliché I know)…

Her view of her degree is influenced by the fact that her career aspiration is to be an actor, for which a degree is not compulsory. The figure of an actor has a strong pull for her, but it is a precarious figure that she cannot claim just because she is a graduate in a suitable subject: "I'm sort of determined to prove that I am worthy to be an actor". Being a Performing Arts graduate and doing her degree in the face of detractors (notably her father) is evidence of this personal commitment and sacrifice to become an actor. She is

currently studying at a specialist clown school in France (having guiltily used her inheritance from when her father died) and believes that in France, there is a much more positive attitude to being an actor and the education associated with this which is good for her own self-worth: "being in the arts is very very highly regarded, not like it is in the UK where it's just you work unpaid for as long as possible."

7.3.5 The Fine Art graduate - creativity

Ruby graduated in Visual Arts and wants to work in the arts. Effectively she is already a practising artist although this is yet to provide her with a regular income. Like Sophia, she is aware that you don't need a degree to be an artist. On her survey response she indicated that she was working as a trainee project manager in an art gallery but stated that she hadn't needed her degree to secure the post. By the time of research interview, she has returned to working in retail to earn money as the art gallery contract has finished, but she is still actively involved in the same gallery's artist collective and is making art in her own home studio. The figure of being a Fine Art graduate is embedded with her identity as an artist; she had not expected to go straight into being a practising artist full-time straight after her degree.

Like Sophia, becoming a graduate of a creative subject was a journey of creative and personal development as an artist. It appears for creatives such as artists and actors, the language of career and advancement which comes more readily to graduates from Business and Law, does not sit so easily. On reflecting upon her degree:

> Um I think during my degree because I was practising art, I loved doing it, I loved making art…but I knew I couldn't make a living being an artist, freshly graduated.

The figure of being an artist appears to have a stronger pull for Ruby than that of being a Fine Art graduate, although she also says she doesn't want to "downplay a degree" as she knows that many arts jobs do say a degree is desirable. It appears that for her an important aspect of the figure of an artist is an egalitarian attitude in which the measure of the artist is the quality of the work rather than the qualification of the artist.

7.4 Lacking confidence

7.4.1 The Creative Arts graduate- helplessness

Joe is an example of someone for whom his imagined figure of being a graduate has been cruelly dashed. He appears to be one of the most vulnerable of participants. He

completed his degree in Computer Games Design, saying he was drawn to this subject due to an expanded media sector in Northcity, where he was born, went to university and continues to live. The figure of the graduate he would like to be eludes him, and he suspects being a graduate may be a disadvantage in the world that he is operating in:

> But the way I found it was a lot of companies are looking for people without degrees for the starting levels so they can train them up. So it's like a lot of companies will turn you down for your degree, a lot of companies won't even give you a reply.

Joe has got entangled in Job Centre processes which have shifted his gaze to jobs that he is probably over-qualified for. However, his disappointment indicates the hope he had put in the figure of being a graduate; but does not appear to have the individual capacity or resources to make real. He is a graduate of a new and emerging field of study closely connected to developments that straddle creativity and new technology. However, Joe is unsatisfied.

> It seems like I said before, a lot of companies for their entry level positions keep turning me down because I have this degree and it's a bit like, it sounds a bit childish but I kind of feel like it's not fair that I go through all this work to get this degree and it's then turned down for the job because I have when I was kind of promised the opposite in a way.

It isn't clear where he may consider this promise came from, but he does feel that he has been deceived somehow.

7.4.2 The History graduate - disappointment

Being a graduate has so far not lived up to Dylan's hopes. His imagined figure provides him both comfort and rebuke. His response to questions convey both confidence at what it means to have a first class degree in History, with a lack of confidence in dealing with transferring this success with getting started on his career. Becoming a graduate has given him important affirmation of his academic credentials and he conveys his seriousness about his studies when he compares himself favourably to others who had an "easy ride" to get a second. The figure of the graduate as intellectually able and hard-working is one he compares himself favourably to.

> …I mean I've, probably the hardest I've worked academically. Any notion people say, oh students have an easy ride in going through their degree, well that's only if they're coming out with a second. If they're coming out with a First then they're really putting the effort in.

He also justifies being a commuter student which meant he couldn't get closer to student life, by dismissing the typical student lifestyle, "most of the time it's just getting drunk". His intellectual self-belief also emerges when he reflects on the symbolic differences of graduates from different universities, arguing that the academic quality of a first from Oxbridge is not really any different from a first from Northcity, while he also tries to make sense of differential social capital:

> If you come out with a First, Oxford, Cambridge, obviously it's going to have a little more standing than coming out with a First at Northcity but the difference isn't going to be that much, the main difference is the connections that you're going to make…

However, his career so far has been disappointing for him. His confidence in his academic ability in comparison to others risks hubris, when faced with the job market. Twenty months on, he remains stuck in the part-time, zero hours contract market research job he did through university. His ideal is to join the police and is already volunteering as a special constable, but is not confident that he will be able to get a job in the police due to public sector cuts. As such, he cannot invest too much in this future imagined figure as it appears under threat by forces outside of him, and he appears to be protecting himself from disappointment.

7.4.3 The Business graduate – regret

Elizabeth has a degree in Business and Tourism Management. She moved to London after her degree and has worked in a number of entry level travel industry jobs already. Although she is broadly working in the industry she was educated in, she is not satisfied. She mentions pay twenty times in her interview, and it preoccupies her that she is not earning more, although she also indicates that some higher paid jobs are more stressful which she doesn't want either.

> Cos right now I'm still trying to get my experience but cos I'm on minimum pay I can't get my own place at the moment, so it's a bit of a struggle for me. I am looking for a job at the moment but I don't want to go for a low salary.

She has mixed feelings about the work she is doing and has begun to doubt whether this is the right industry for her anyway. It appears to be an industry she has drifted into, going back to disappointing GCSEs which led her to do a BTEC in Travel and Tourism because there was not much choice for her at the time. She thinks she would have done better in the travel industry if she had just worked rather than going to university, as her perception is that the industry doesn't really value graduates. When she filled in her

survey questionnaire she was working as a Travel after-sales administration assistant, but said she didn't need her degree, which is illustrative of how she thinks her industry does not value graduates.

Although, Elizabeth is proud of her degree, it appears that she feels she is not in a sector which gives the recognition she wants as a graduate, and this has left her doubting the value of the educational pathway she has followed, and berating herself for earlier decisions/behaviours going back as far as high school.

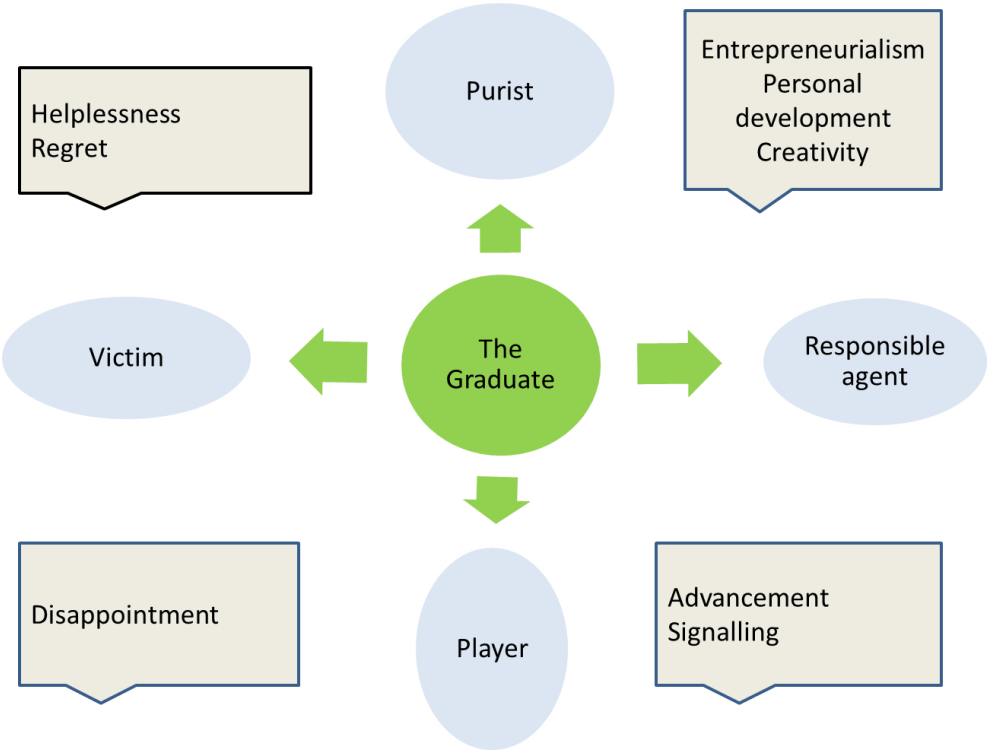
7.5 Authoring selves and the contested nature of graduate success

Tracing of how individuals author their situation, reveals their ideas of what they feel they "should be" or "could be" in response to culturally embedded ideas of what it is to be a graduate. The themes of entrepreneurialism, advancement, signalling, personal development, creativity, helplessness, disappointment and regret capture a variety of dialogic responses to the imagined figure of being a graduate. These examples serve to depict the complexity and diversity in how individuals reflect upon life as a recent graduate and what it means to be successful. This identity formation is rarely straightforward and is invested with considerable hope and expectancy. Such subjective complexity confirms the limitations of findings that are drawn from survey questions which simply ask graduates whether they needed a degree for the job they are in (chapter five). Culturally entrenched concepts about careers are evident in how they author themselves in response to being a graduate, and they draw upon different voices in which Bakhtin's notion of a voice that is "half ours, and half someone else's" (quoted by Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 186) can be observed. Figure 7.1 suggests a mapping of the distilled themes identified with growing and lacking confidence in this chapter onto the diagram introduced in chapter six. The presence of fewer themes on the side of victim voices is indicative that there is more discursive space for graduates within responsible agent voices. Even when rejecting more conventional notions of success within the purist/responsible agent quadrant, graduates are arguably drawing upon the more superficially benign face of individualist neoliberalism in the guise of the protean career orientation. In contrast, for those who are lacking confidence, there is less discursive space for them to explain their situation.

Interestingly, the themes drawn also bear the influence of cultural models such as being "entrepreneurial" or "creative" which appear in psychological careers literature. Though derided by recent career theorists, echoes of John Holland's (1997) enduringly popular theory of psychological career matching are evident in the commitment creative

graduates espouse to being "artistic" and Business graduates claim in relation to being "enterprising". Emphasis on personal development/creativity amongst creative graduates has been compared in the literature to the model of the protean career orientation (Bridgstock, 2005), whereas those that lack confidence in their graduate identity appear to be authoring themselves more as victims of context (Tholen, 2014).

Figure 7.1 "Authoring selves" in response to the figure of being a graduate



On embarking on the project, individuals were sought who based on their survey return exhibited evidence of difficult early career experiences. Choice of participants was influenced by signals given in their answers. However, on meeting them all at interview, it was clear how circumstances evolve rapidly, and for many their circumstances had improved, e.g. Ravi moving from being a supermarket sales assistant, to working as a full-time support teacher with a place lined up for School Direct teacher training and Ruby, who although back in her retail job, had completed a rewarding Art gallery project manager contract.

All of the participants are very early in their careers, but the Business and Law graduates do appear to have made more rapid objective progress and have growing confidence in their careers irrespective of their background. Although some of them do espouse a passion for business (e.g., Matthew) or a love of accounting (e.g., Farzana),

they seem to express views that are more akin to being a player than a purist in choosing a subject or a role that will help them get on (e.g., Rachel, Ravi) rather than with some of the idealism expressed by Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates about being a an artist (e.g., Ruby), or actor (e.g., Sophia).

Public policy over recent years has led to a problematic framing of graduate success which has been steadily reified and defined by performance metrics for universities about graduate outcomes. Despite current proposed alterations to the DLHE survey which seek to capture more subjective notions of individual progress by asking questions about broad career direction, rather than just actual status, the development of TEF with its focus on graduate outcomes, means that success for graduates in terms of public policy is still set to revolve around whether graduates are considered to be in a graduate level position or not when surveyed as part of the national DLHE survey (proposed to move to fifteen months after graduation). The data presented in this chapter about how graduates author themselves does support alternative ways of considering graduate success. Recommendations from labour market economists, Green & Zhu (2010) and Green and Henseke (2016) argue for the wider social and individual benefit of becoming a graduate. From management and organisation studies, Dries *et al.* (2008) have also argued for a more nuanced approach to defining career success that is not about specifically defined outcomes such as advancement and salary. What emerge from participant reflections are the varied notions of success which supports the work of these scholars. An over-emphasis on conventional success as embodied by graduate outcomes public policy risks adverse effects to the wellbeing of graduates who compare themselves unfavourably to an idealised figure that they have failed to live up to drawing upon victim voices. This is a risk for the examples in this chapter who compared themselves unfavourably to the graduate "could be" or "should be", which I categorised as helplessness, regret and disappointment.

Dominant ideas about a degree leading to certain tangible measures of success leads participants to appear obliged to dialogically defend or justify their situation if it is not conventionally successful. In general, their stories suggest that having a degree and becoming a graduate contributes positively to individual pride etc., but how this translates into a career befitting a graduate is a slow process, a reality which does not readily translate into university marketing slogans or a defence of government policy which stresses the financial return of doing a degree. More accurately, universities and government might say "do a degree, and very likely, you will grow considerably as a person, and you will also probably benefit in career terms eventually", but this

statement is unlikely to be considered snappy enough by managers of university advertising or policy-makers defending university tuition fees.

Chapter 8 Core characters in graduate worlds – family and community

This chapter explores the characters that appear in the figured worlds of graduates; family and close community are discussed as of compelling importance in how individuals depict their own experiences of who they are and their status as a graduate. Characters identified appear symbolically as representing constancy, support, inspiration, restraint and sponsorship.

Research questions sought to explore what contributed to the resilience of graduates in navigating uncertainty and to compare differences in participants' background in relation to this. As a careers professional, trained in practice which focuses on the individual in careers advisory conversations, it was a novel experience to openly probe participants about how friends and family had influenced or supported them. In professional practice, such questions could be considered intrusive and/or risky with regard to any assumptions about family backgrounds/personal circumstances. However, utilising the theoretical frame of *Figured Worlds* required examination of the characters that appear in narratives and contribute to how individuals author themselves.

Characters in individuals' narratives were numerous including: people such as cheerleading/restraining families, more/less successful peers, nurturing friends, helpful/unhelpful university lecturers/careers advisers, useful/useless contacts, even social media trolls/fans; institutions or organisations such as the supportive/unsupportive university, bad/good employers, and the bureaucratic Job Centre. All of these differentially played a part in graduates' self-authoring, however, in this section, I have chosen to focus on family and what I am calling community, i.e., other important people in individuals' lives. Remarkably vivid depictions of relationships with family and community emerged which led to prioritisation of these characters over others in analysis of self-authoring. Much focus in literature about careers has considered issues of differential social capital in relation to family and community, with well-founded fears of inequality which continue unabated. While acknowledging these issues, this study aims to delve beyond this debate which can get stuck in binary depictions of the advantaged and disadvantaged and explore how individuals reflect upon family and community.

Returning and/or remaining at home with family were very common experiences for the graduates interviewed. Although those that felt stuck expressed frustration at the lack of independence they had and even interference from their parents, the support of

family was a powerful anchor for many. Following other literature on this topic, it does appear that those from a lower social background tend to have a more delayed departure from home (Bathmaker *et al*., 2016; Sage *et al*., 2013). At the time of interviews, five of the six graduates from a higher social background were living away from their family home; whereas only three of the fourteen participants from a lower social background were living away from their family home. It was notable, that many appeared to sanguinely accept this prolonged dependency, perhaps because it is normal amongst their peers.

The initial survey of this project indicated that 85.7% of graduates agreed or somewhat agreed that their friends and family were supportive of their career, whereas only 37.1% felt the same in relation to whether their family and friends had given them useful contacts for their career. The following examples seek to unpick how participants' closest relationships inform their stories. The deep intergenerational bonds which have been reported upon in the literature (Finn, 2015) emerged in this study; all of such relationships are anchoring but can be manifest in different ways, as organised in the following examples. In their depiction of close characters in graduate stories, it is possible to observe deep influences at play.

8.1 Constancy

Ravi is an example of a graduate for whom both his family and community are tightly woven into his story. They have been a constant and continuous presence for him and it is hard to draw a line between his voice and their voice in how he considers his career. He is a British Sikh whose dad is a taxi driver and his mum a housewife. He is one of four children, and he is the youngest. He describes his father's and also his brother's influence:

> …he's kind of pushed us to get a career and I think he's been my biggest inspiration, cos when I come home and said, "I don't want to do this anymore", he'd say "you are doing it". And it's out of force but it's out of love… But he's forced me to get a degree and I've got a degree which holds its value in itself. My brother as well he supports me a lot, he's assistant principal now, he's only been teaching for 8 years and he's already an assistant principal… I want to do that or surpass him…

Ravi's daily life is deeply connected to his family. He has married since graduating and lives with his wife at his parents' house. He talks of routine responsibilities at home:

> you have to please everyone… you've got responsibilities, got to take your mum somewhere, got to do something with my dad, got to look after the kids, got to take my wife somewhere, got to do something with my wife.

All of his three siblings work in education and this has contributed to his decision to go into teaching too, turning his back on accountancy; his brother is a particular role model. Ravi's wider community is important too. He is very active in his local temple and has been responsible for teaching Punjabi and organising youth activities for many years. Ravi doesn't appear to want to rebel against such responsibilities but seems proud of his importance to the people he is close to. This responsibility has accelerated his choice to give up applying for jobs in accountancy and go for a teaching career.

8.2 Support

Robert describes a team of supporters behind him. He graduated in Film Studies, and having worked in various jobs to earn money, which included a few months in London, he moved to Canada to work as a cashier in a bar. His dad is disabled and cannot work, and his mum is his carer. He attributes his ambition to them, and draws on a social mobility narrative in carving out a way for himself from a fairly disadvantaged background:

> Well for me I think the reason I have so much desire to essentially succeed in, you know my interests, you know my parents they don't work. My dad's disabled and my mum cares for him.

Despite his warmth towards his parents, it is noteworthy that he considers a physical move away from them as so important, although they are presented as his unconditional cheerleaders:

> So with my parents especially, any decision I make, or anything I say to them, they're totally on board with, they just always want me to be doing what I want to be doing. So it's been really nice to just go, even when things seem crazy and I go…'oh I'm moving to Canada'. As much as they'll miss me, they're always saying, 'whatever is right for you just go and do it'.

Location and travel are important for Robert and his desire to escape his home town is strong. Robert's friends are also mentioned regularly during the interview. His move to Canada was alongside other friends who were doing the same. He found out about the visa option to go to Canada via those friends, and he describes a supportive group seeking adventure together.

8.3 Inspiration

Ruby's mum is her inspiration. She states emphatically: "My mum's been my most influential person – she's a total rock star". Ruby's mum introduced her to embroidery and sewing which led her into Art and design more generally. She is happy to talk about her mum's interesting career as a professional wrestler turned artist (her mum does also work at the local supermarket too in order to supplement income from art). Her mum completed a degree in Art at a local college, a couple of years before Ruby, so their journey as artists has been close. This interesting personal history adds to Ruby's identity as someone with an unconventional background suitably befitting an artist.

Returning home has meant that Ruby has a readymade studio, and artistic collaborator, although she also describes the challenge of being with her mum so much.

> So our own house is kind of like a studio, you know every room, you know we do a bit of interior design, we upcycle furniture, it's, me and my mum we do a bit of collaboration on the majority of things. But it's a bit of a love hate relationship um obviously I can't be with my mum like 24:7 [LAUGHS].

Ruby's own lesbian sexuality has also contributed to a rich community around her. She is making life plans with her partner of six years; and she is still in touch with her old college art teacher and her partner who are also artists and teachers who act as informal mentors to her.

8.4 Restraint

Alice is frustrated by her mum's ambivalence towards the careers that she is interested in, although it does seem that she shares some of her mum's concerns. Her mum favours the police as a more secure career for her daughter and Alice has to position herself against this, while living at home and thus being economically dependent on her mum. This contributes to her self-doubt:

> …she's a bit against it all the time. She doesn't like me travelling to all these places for interviews.

She depicts her mum as very much an anchor but one that is restraining her from what she would like to do. However, her mother's own sceptical voice about the media sector seems very much entangled with her own as she describes particular experiences she has had, e.g., an interview to be a live-in personal assistant for a celebrity which offered no pay, only accommodation and expenses.

8.5 Sponsorship

Harry shows awareness of his own positional identity and feels fortunate that his parents have provided him a financial buffer which he is grateful for:

> My parents are also quite well off I guess like I didn't need bursaries to come to university and live but like they were able to pay for guitar lessons, music lessons. They've actually paid for my Masters as well and yeh they were just like able to provide certain opportunities. I was able to get insured on a car, they paid for driving lessons and yeh. There was like emotional and financial support I guess for my choices.

They have actively supported his choices to study Music. He tells his father's own story of choosing to go to catering college rather than Art College when he left high school, as the former was considered more likely to lead to a steady income. He says his father regrets having missed that opportunity to study art which contributed to their support of his son's creative abilities in music. Harry presents his parents' values as unconventional, e.g., his father took a year off to look after Harry and his brother when they were small children. They also seem to have encouraged him to find a self-fulfilling career rather than one that may just be materially-rewarding. Notably, Harry's work in catering since he graduated picks up from the threads of his father's early career, and he also shares in common with him a study of Management (his father did an MBA). Harry's family are depicted by him, not just as economic sponsors but also as sponsors of his personal and creative development.

8.6 Characters in graduate worlds: the myth of free-floating individualism

Reflections upon family and community reveal the significance of these characters in how individuals author themselves, which serve to reveal the limitations of dominant notions of individualist employability in which individuals are represented as highly rational and autonomous. Characters identified here appear symbolically as representing constancy, support, inspiration, restraint and sponsorship. Relationships are very important for the graduates in this study which go beyond whether an individual has a family that can provide useful career contacts and "valuable social capital". Research questions asked about what contributes to the ability of graduates to cope with uncertain career situations, and it does appear that family and community are important in maintenance of morale; irrespective of whether these are well-connected or not. Being able to turn to family is critical when economic independence is much

tougher; and appears to be normalised for this generation of graduates, for whom intergenerational dependency is deeply embedded, in contrast to previous generations.

Deep bonds with family and community were evident amongst participants and the rich hinterland that lay behind graduates was varied and compelling. It also reveals in a more nuanced way how such bonds are enacted as well as the differences in access to valuable social capital. The research project was able to ask questions about the role of family and friends which often get overlooked in university contexts where it is considered impolite to enquire about an individual's social background. This also raises questions for those graduates who do not have a family or close community behind them to act as an economic and social safety net. None of this study's participants were in such circumstances.

Findings bring alive some of the issues raised in sociologically-oriented literature about the importance of social background for individuals. It should also be stressed that this study, although it did categorise by social background is based in a university where even those from a higher social background do not tend to be the children of parents in elite professions, that may be more commonplace in Russell Group universities. However, patterns could be observed in the research participant group, which raise questions about the varying resources graduates from different backgrounds draw upon.

In the following comments about the data, examples of participants are drawn from this and other chapters to summarise key findings. The data suggests that for some, more especially those from a lower social background, although family are supportive, they are not able to provide very much practical assistance through networks to get careers started, e.g., Joe, Dylan, Charlie, all of whom live at home with their families. A lack of awareness of certain jobs and sectors amongst family/friends may even act as a restraint e.g., Alice, whose mum is sceptical of travelling round the country for jobs and Joe, whose parents keep telling him about unsuitable jobs in computers. Those from a higher social background appear to more consistently be able to access both economic capital e.g., Harry's parents have paid for his Master's programme, as well as social capital via useful contacts e.g., Rosie, whose parents were able to help her in getting early media experience. They even appear to have greater self-belief that a desired career may well be possible e.g., Fouad's interest in finance and Daniel's goal of journalism/writing. For the graduates from a higher social background in this study, they are able to move more quickly to live away from home, which also contributes to greater levels of self-confidence via independent living. Geographical literature

describes this as a boomeranging generation which moves back and forth from family homes (e.g.,Sage *et al.*, 2013), which this study supports.

It is wrong however, to consider that there is a binary opposition in relation to social background and that those from a higher social background are always the winners. For example both Robert and Anna have gained valuable support from close friends and family. With the support of a strong group of friends Robert has gone to Canada to work, and Anna is very positive about her uncle who is a mentor for her business start-up. Ruby's unconventional mum has been a major inspiration to her. There is evidence that these graduates have been given considerable opportunity to talk about their career ideas amongst family and community, and this has contributed to their self-efficacy going forwards. In contrast, Elizabeth, classified as from a professional background as her mum is a social worker, is discontented and feels adrift in her move to London. In her case, the complexity of categorising social class is raised, and its intersection with other characteristics is relevant; arguably, of Black African heritage and the daughter of a single parent, she does not draw on a securely advantaged background although her mum is a professional.

More tentatively, there were also indications from the data that the role of family was even more powerful for some ethnic minority graduates who very explicitly had factored in family expectations in their plans. Ravi has been able to use the help of his three siblings, all of whom work in education to switch his career direction from accountancy to mathematics teaching. Farzana, the youngest of six sisters, all except two of whom have gone to university, reports a strong belief in education as a "family mantra". For both, this family connection was considered very valuable and definitely not an inhibitor to their own career. In contrast, other ethnic minority participants appear determined to break with any expectation of a family pattern in relation to careers. Fouad is going into business, although he suspects his father thinks businessmen are generally "scummy" or "evil". Similarly, Ibrahim hopes to move into a field in which his family have no understanding, and he has no interest in following in their path.

The construct of "positionality" from *Figured Worlds* is useful in reflecting upon intergenerational bonds, as it suggests that individuals require some understanding of how they are positioned (which close family status does tend to exemplify), if they are to have agency to develop an "internally persuasive discourse". Anna was shown as an example of this in chapter six; she was very conscious of her positioning in relation to gender, ethnicity and religious heritage as she moved through her early career. Clearly,

having awareness of one's "positionality" is an initial stage, and another is to know how to approach and manage what that position represents. This may seem obvious, however, this also presents challenges in practices within universities as no student wants to hear that their chance of success is relatively slim due to their social background, or on the other hand that any future success they may achieve can be largely be attributed to their background.

Chapter 9 Narratives in graduate worlds

Figured Worlds uses narrative as a tool to describe how individuals author themselves in reinforcing or challenging existing worlds. Holland *et al*. (1998) do this most evocatively in their presentation of the stories used by alcoholics within AA. In this chapter the use of such emblematic narratives by participants is explored, prefaced by a stress upon the role of dialogism in how narratives are employed. The established role of narrative in career theory is acknowledged as influential in identifying culturally-embedded narratives that have proven valuable for discussion.

Two narratives which have been identified as dominant, adversity and im/mobility are explored in a more depth followed by other narratives, goals, exploration, confusion, vulnerability, and change. Examples from specific participants of how these narratives emerge are presented, illustrating the nature of narrative that people unconsciously and consciously draw upon. Examples are used not to narrowly close off individual stories but to show how career narratives shape how people explain their stories in "answering" uncertainty dialogically.

9.1 Self-authoring and narrative

In chapter three, the role of Bakhtin's dialogism was introduced as an important tool within *Figured Worlds*. This is not just important to consider as a researcher in measuring claims of this study; but it is also relevant in considering how individuals want to present their best self-portrait in a research interview but also to the wider world. This can include self-justification, self-aggrandisement as well as apology. It is also associated with what Collin (2000) has suggested occurs in how individuals articulate their identity to others, arguably in becoming the main character or hero/anti-hero of their own story.

Prevailing ideas about the relationship between gaining a degree and starting a suitable graduate career lead individuals to weave stories to explain their situation especially if they appear to not have had a conventionally successful path so far. Although many graduates may know that careers grow slowly; public and university policies as well as media scrutiny has been focused upon conventional and immediate success. Eminent individuals from the world of universities and graduate recruitment are witnessed to publicly disagree about what constitutes a typical early graduate career path (e.g., Isherwood, 2017; H. Yorke, 2017). In such contested territory, it is unsurprising that

graduates feel they need to justify their career situation. Narratives can play an important part in answering imagined expectations of others.

9.1.2 Narrative and career theory

In considering the narrative tool that Holland *et al*. explicate as part of Figured Worlds, this study recognises existing work which has used narrative in career theory mentioned in chapter two (Collin, 2000; Hooley & Rawlinson, 2011; LaPointe, 2010; Law, 2015; McMahon, 2016; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2008; Savickas, 2012b, 2013; Winter, 2012). Such theoretical exploration which has been used in constructivist approaches to career counselling tends to view narrative primarily as part of a therapeutic technique for individuals. Collin (2000) and Meijers & Lengelle (2012) allude to the work of Bakhtin, drawing upon his work as a way to understand the contradictions that are integral to career reflections. This study adds to this literature but focuses on the way that narrative is rendered by Holland *et al*. as a way to illuminate experience rather than to seek to create therapeutic solutions.

Holland *et al*. use the term "standard plot" (1998, p. 53) as one way to reflect upon what narratives individuals draw upon. They argue that such plots are culturally embedded. In a similar vein, Pryor and Bright (2008), following in the tradition of Booker (2004), have proposed "standard plots" about career which have proven of value in this study's use of narrative as an analytical tool. They use such plots as part of their technical explanation of the chaos theory of careers. However, this study follows a different path, showing that their identification of plots is not merely of value to their favoured career theory. Table 9.1 adapts Pryor and Bright's work with an additional column to capture my chosen plot names, arrived at after analysis of data discovered that these plots could be traced in individual stories. The adapted name has been chosen to more accurately reflect the orientation of a certain plot in this context.

Table 9.1 Standard plots and narrative in graduate self-authoring

Adapted name for this project	**Descriptors from Pryor and Bright** (2008)		
Project Plot name	**Plot**	**Theme**	**Career implications**
Adversity	Overcoming the monster	Tackling a major power or fear	Facing challenges, confronting fears, taking risks
Im/mobility	Rags to riches	From darkness to light	Seizing opportunity, realising potential
Goals/ Ambition	Quest	Seeking a better life	Purpose, achievement
Exploration	Voyage and return	Learning from challenges	Adventure, recovery, exploration and discovery, open-mindedness
Confusion	Comedy	From misapprehension to apprehension	Dissonance to harmony
Vulnerability	Tragedy	Vulnerability and demise	Victim mentality, over-estimation of control, hubris
Change	Re-birth	Triumph through travail and trial	Hope, insight, change, wisdom

Table 9.1 Adapted categories of narrative for analysis

I will go on to explore how this study has traced the use of such narratives (or "standard plots") in specific examples of how individuals tell their stories. Different narratives often resonate with perspectives outlined in the careers literature outlined in chapter two. In composing such narratives, participants can be witnessed orchestrating the voices of chapter six and the figuring of chapter seven; in addition examples of "positionality", "multi-voicedness", and "ruptures" can be traced. Presentation of examples does not follow a set formula but seeks to sensitively respond to data with relevant theoretical thinking tools.

9.2 Dominant narratives

Two major narratives prevailed across the qualitative data sourced. These were adversity and im/mobility. Aspects of these appeared to greater and lesser extents across all participants.

9.2.3 Adversity

The need to overcome challenges was a narrative that all participants drew upon to varying extents. Talking through what this represented allowed participants to present themselves as their own story's most important character, if not hero. Challenges and fears were diverse but could relate to both internal and external factors. Recognising

and being able to describe adverse circumstances appears to be a valuable process for individuals if they are to feel able to exercise agency and is associated with an awareness of structural constraints around them. Arguably, adversity is a normal part of life and very few people are likely never to face it. However, the specific framing of adversity within self-authoring appears to be a common plot to draw upon which allows for personal pride in managing difficult circumstances that otherwise could risk an individual's sense of self-worth, e.g., in the case of repeated job rejections. It is also a response to wider public discourses associated with generational inequality (e.g.,Howker & Malik, 2010; Standing, 2014). The following descriptions of two participants give examples of this and also explore what identity tools were utilised in the process of responding to adversity. The adversity narrative is associated with the neoliberal individualism of "grit", however, both participants use adversity not just to describe a personal battle, but to criticise dominant practices and acknowledge that adversity can require a collective not just individual effort.

9.2.3.1 Remaining strong

Anna reports many challenges along the way, which include: suffering from anxiety; having difficult relationships with peers at college; persuading her parents she could do Fashion at university; disappointment with aspects of her degree including feeling that her chosen approach to Fashion wasn't liked by her tutors; an exploitative fashion industry placement in London; and coping with a job she feels she has outgrown. Most recently, she has found the repeated rejections she has experienced for jobs she has applied for very dispiriting. She details demanding but "ridiculous" selection days in which candidates are set a task and then find out in a group if they have been successful in the style of a TV talent show (you're staying, you're going home). She also reports the nepotism of companies, who despite openly advertising jobs, then fill vacancies with friends and family. Her frustration about the powerlessness she feels as a jobseeker is evident. She uses the film "The Devil wears Prada" which mocks the Fashion business as an accurate example of what she hates about it. At one point she says: "do I want to be part of an industry that has that kind of toxic kind of environment?"

Anna's rejections have made her think: "Yeh but that's what I've figured out, if no-one wants me, I'll have to do it myself." Anna has dreams of developing her own fashion business which is more suited to her own values. As discussed in chapter six, she draws explicitly on her own positional identity in describing the social and cultural resources she has to draw upon in in setting up her own fashion business. Her grandmothers were

both “seamstresses” and she refers to her own Christian beliefs and Caribbean heritage as influences upon how she imagines her work:

> Both of my Grandmas were seamstresses and the brand that I want to create is actually named after them and it’s everything that they’ve taught me so it’s altogether, cos they were from the Caribbean… I don’t really know how to describe it but I would say that all my friends, my family, my upbringing, it’s all directed and it’s all reflected through the clothes…

Anna demonstrates different voices. Her independence and determination resonate with dominant discourses of individualist employability switching between a purist/responsible agent and a player/responsible agent. What she espouses “you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it” resonates with a version of positive thinking that risks ignoring how social structure does impact on what people can and can’t do. In contrast she also demonstrates a strong dependence on her community and wants to build “a community of positive people”.

Anna is engaged in orchestrating different voices around her to make her own way in an industry that she is highly critical of. Drawing on the narrative of adversity provides her with one tool to do this and find her own “internally persuasive discourse”. This allows her to have pride in the things that have gone wrong for her and the risks she is willing to take in setting up her own business.

9.2.3.2 Overcoming poor practices

The adversity faced by Bridget relates to the nature of the sector she has been educated for and the poor working practices therein. She is a Media Production graduate who is working in media but wishes the sector was different “I wish the TV and film industry was different, it is ridiculously difficult to have a career in”. After she graduated she was employed as a post-production runner for a year for a small company. Subsequently, she has been doing contract/freelance work as a runner for production companies and has worked on some well-known programmes. She is disillusioned with the insecurity of working in the media and how hard it is to get regular work, which means she is considering making a career shift. She describes one particular example of bad practice:

> So they essentially replaced both of us within months and it was somebody related to someone in the company already and I was just like, that just absolutely, it’s just shocking really. I know the media industry can be very cut throat but that was just a bit like, I’d never ever work for that company again.

This experience for Bridget was a massive shock, a "rupture" of the "taken-for-granted" is enacted in what she expected of her imagined figure of a first class university graduate. The experience of effectively being sacked from a job was a challenge, although it is a story she now tells with personal pride that she has survived to tell the tale, and it has made her more determined to get work with better conditions. With hindsight, she is glad the job ended; and provides numerous details of sexist practices in that small company. As a result, she has developed a sense of the injustice associated with some of the working practices in media and has participated in a network of people who campaign against this. This has been a community of people that she values and identifies with and in contrast is critical of advice she has had elsewhere which appeared to encourage her to work for free in the media.

Using the adversity narrative provides Bridget an important tool for the maintenance of her own self-respect. She embraces the online media advice network that helps her, while demonstrating deep scepticism of the "work for free" careers advice previously given. Poor employment practices have witnessed her growing consciousness of the idealised figure of becoming a media worker as having been "mis-sold". She is moving from a voice of the purist/responsible agent voice to that of a player/responsible agent.

9.2.4 Im/mobility

Mobility is an expansive concept which in this context refers to both geographical and social mobility. Both are very much associated with the "public story of higher education" (Finn, 2015) that participation can be transformative. There has been a substantial focus on barriers to social mobility in public policy debates largely coming from the work of the Social Mobility Commission (Milburn, 2014). The notion that higher education can be a route to social mobility prevails largely founded on entry to the highest status professions, for which a degree is still a pre-requisite. Geographical issues have also stirred considerable debates in relation to regional unevenness of job markets for graduates in which London and the south-east are a magnet but also prohibitively expensive for many; and the reality that choices are constrained by the place you live in (Ball, 2015b; Finn, 2016b). The two following examples present contrasting experiences in relation to mobility.

9.2.4.1 Keep on moving

Fouad's dad is a university lecturer and his mum is a teacher. He describes himself as "MainCity born and bred", and describes his ethnicity as Middle Eastern. Although both

his parents have professional jobs, his family do not appear to be wealthy ("I've seen my dad struggle financially at certain times") and he has worked continuously alongside his studies and is determined not to have to struggle with money in the future. Although this is not something he dwells upon, arguably his second generation immigrant status, albeit the son of professional parents means money and achieving his potential are not things he seems to be able to take for granted. He appears to have made a partial departure from his parents' values in choosing a business career. He describes a "rags to riches" story of a friend which helped to trigger his desire to study Business Management at a point when he was considering dropping out of the first year of a Science degree. Within the story of his friend's dad, who is a "really successful businessman", there is something of how he imagines his own future in which he is determined: "within 5 years, I have to be making, you know, a very considerable amount of money".

> He first came to this country, they were all living in his grandma's apartment, basically in a living room and then I remember…, his dad would suddenly get a car in and it was like a red Mazda sports car and then he got a BMW five series, then he got an X5, now he's got the most beautiful apartment in Lebanon and he's got a driver…

Financial security and advancement are a priority for Fouad. Having done well in securing a scholarship to do a postgraduate course at a neighbouring Russell group university, he says lack of money was the reason he did not complete this. Geographic mobility is something that he is comfortable with and is living in London at the time of the research interview, and he says he would even be willing to go overseas. London is depicted by him as a realm of opportunity. At the time of the interview, Fouad is working in corporate foreign exchange sales but is also looking out for the next opportunity.

He is somebody who doesn't want to stand still, and embraces the mobility narrative, in part ventriloquated by the voice of the player/responsible agent in securing progress in a career.

> I think people should take responsibility,…you know there's plenty of jobs out there…it's competitive for a reason and you know, some people can fall into the trap of complaining about it being competitive…instead of actually trying to make the change.

Fouad is orchestrating different voices, figures and characters in constructing his narrative; while he acknowledges his family, he firmly states that he is also going it

alone in a more responsible agent, individualistic way. The figure he aspires to is of advancement, that of the "successful businessman" who inspired him a few years previously.

9.2.4.2 Feeling stuck

Joe was born and brought up in Northcity. His mum works in a bakery shop and his dad does a manual job for a cash handling/transit company. He lived at home through university and is still doing so. Joe has not ventured out of Northcity for his education or work so far, and his instinct seems to be to stay locally. He says that he chose media and design options because they seemed a good idea as the media sector was expanding in his area; putting faith in his perception of a local labour market trend. Joe does talk about the scope for applying for jobs elsewhere but this is hazy; his resources to tackle geographical mobility are constrained. Financial necessity has led to him being embroiled in Job Centre processes, of which he has become highly critical. He is the only graduate of the twenty interview participants who has had prolonged engagement with the Job Centre.

Joe lacks confidence and thinks his degree may be stopping him getting jobs; his imagined figure of being a graduate eludes him. He says employers have told him "we can't hire you because of the degree". His slight speech impediment affects his communication confidence, which adds to the stress of recruitment and selection processes, such as asynchronous video interviews.

> I had one for ABC and their interview was weird because it wasn't like a one on one, it was, they have their own website and you have to have a video chat with someone who isn't there…

Social mobility debates focus on the role of networks in fostering careers. For Joe, friends and family are mentioned as adding to his helplessness. He says his parents influence him but "not in a positive way". They told him to get a degree, "do something better than us" and "tell him about unsuitable jobs" to apply for. He describes peers that seem as lost as him, who are drifting. He did have one friend from the university Anime society who helped him get a job working as a zombie in survival games, which he did part-time through university; with hindsight Joe thinks that what he gained from that job in terms of skills was limited.

Joe shifts between victim voices, using the purist/victim voice he blames himself for not doing more to develop his employability, but also being well aware of how

circumstances militate against him using the player/victim voice. Joe's narrative is of immobility rather than mobility. His story is the opposite of the mobility narrative that is the "public story of higher education". His immobility is also resonant of the vulnerability narrative explained later in this chapter.

9.3 Other narratives

I will now go on to explore examples of how other narratives can be traced in individual stories. For each narrative, one example participant is drawn upon.

9.3.1 Goals – a sense of purpose

The goals narrative is resonant of established ideas in career theory which argue that a strong career focus and calling can be valuable for success (Praskova *et al*., 2015). This notion is fundamental to the protean career orientation (Hall, 2004) but also to research which seeks to evidence the value of career planning, (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007; Shury, Vivian, Turner, & Downing, 2017) although is something that is criticised by those who point out the dangers of goal fixation (Burkeman, 2013) and the pragmatism that careers require (Hodkinson, 2008).

At the time of the research interview Daniel is doing freelance work in PR and journalism. He is living in Northcity, but planning an imminent volunteer placement in Africa. The placement lasts three months and he does not know where he will return to after. He is considering a move to London where there are "unrivalled" opportunities and definitely will not go back to Eastcounty where his family is. What appears to anchor Daniel is his dual commitment to both journalism/writing and international development.

On completing the initial survey, Daniel indicated that "the delay in finding relevant graduate level work in journalism has also knocked my confidence in applying for jobs in the journalism sector", and he was disgruntled with additional training he'd had to do because "my degree course had failed to supply me with the industry qualifications". In so doing, his voice was one was of the player/victim for whom circumstances had conspired against. However, two months later at the research interview, the prospect of his overseas adventure, means that as a researcher, I am faced with a self-reflective and optimistic young man.

Since he graduated he has done a journalism internship, got the NCTJ qualification and done part-time work in PR. He has been working for the same PR company for some time now, but in a freelance capacity as he declined their offer of a more regular job because he wanted to remain focused on journalism/writing. Declining the opportunity is evidence of his determination to stick with his goals; a less focused person may well have said yes to a job that offered more security. He even has a goal in relation to the type of journalism he wants to do ideally.

> I like the long form, kind of human interest long in depth features that draw on policy and academia and big kind of weighty interviews, so that's ideally what I'd like to get into with obviously a global development context.

In reflecting on his own "positionality", he reflects on the "huge" level of family support to go to university (his parents work in housing and education) but also his own sense of calling to higher education is clear: "I genuinely felt like I wanted to go but there was no outside influence from parents or friends". Daniel's description of himself depicts a more traditional notion of higher education as a route for young people to leave home and not return home. He follows this pattern anchored by a narrative which depicts his own career calling with a clear sense of purpose and associated values. However, this has not been an easy journey for him and has involved moving between different voices about employability; from berating his own lack of courage (purist/victim), to criticism of poor practices in journalism (player/victim), to giving priority to what he really wants (purist/responsible agent), and exploring tactics to how to make this happen (player/responsible agent).

9.3.2 Exploration – embracing risk

The exploration narrative resonates with a long history within career theory. It echoes of being flexible in response to uncertainty and boundaryless career environments (Rodrigues *et al*., 2014). It also bears traces of career adaptability, (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) "planned happenstance" (Krumboltz, 2009) and being open to new discoveries rather than being overly focused such as in the goals narrative.

Isabelle is a Graphic design graduate who completed a top-up honours degree year at Northcity. On completion of her survey she was fairly downbeat about her bus station assistant job and confused about her direction:

> I have never been sure what I want to do. It is not difficult to get a job. I can't get a career because I don't know what I want to do and that makes it difficult.

Later on at the research interview, she returns to the phrase "what I want to do" eight times in relation to her frustration about not having an answer for this. At the time of the research interview, she is living in New Zealand, having recently arrived after a period of travel and is starting to look for a job. Travel is something she has wanted to do for some time, and the fact she doesn't know what she wants to do for a career and is open-minded about this has led her to save up money to take the opportunity to work and travel. Her emphasis is on personal growth, discovery and independence when she says how happy she is:

> I'm probably the happiest that I've been in a long time being here…So I'd say that I'm really happy with my situation at the moment even though I don't actually have a job [LAUGHS].

Isabelle has a history of exploration and embracing risk. She is averse to being "stuck", a word she uses five times when describing her eagerness not to get "stuck in a rut" at different points of her story.

> I don't like just sitting around waiting for things, you know like opportunities to just sort of come up and I just feel like, if there's something that you want to do and you've got the means to do it, then I don't see what should stop you…

She went to a southern university to study architecture but withdrew having narrowly failed her first year after a re-sit year. She reflects with hindsight on the absence of support at that university for her dyslexia but is matter-of-fact about this. She uses the word "fail" four times when talking about her forced withdrawal from her architecture degree. She is sanguine about what she has learnt from the challenges she has experienced, drawing upon the adversity narrative.

> I feel like it's helped me a lot because I did a degree, I failed it and then I picked myself back up and I went and started again from scratch and I think that's one of my proudest things that I've done…

Isabelle recounts a well-trodden narrative of travel and exploration as life affirming experiences. She uses this as a counter-narrative to that of more immediate career success for graduates which she has chosen to purposefully ignore. Her imagined figure of herself is one of an adventurer. This narrative has given her considerable comfort while she remains career-confused and has allowed her to turn her failures into triumphs. She has moved between different voices in doing this, though the purist/responsible agent holds sway.

9.3.3 Confusion – movement to clarity

Confusion as a narrative echoes of the liminality that Holmes (2015) has described in discussion of the emergence of a graduate identity. It also resonates with proponents of career theory who argue that career choice and planning is rarely clear and evolves over time (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007; Hodkinson, 2008). Arguably too, the ability to surf confusion is influenced by access to capitals (Tomlinson *et al*., 2017) and those who have more valuable social capital may be better able to manage this (Burke, 2015). The emphasis on luck for this exemplar participant directly references "planned happenstance" (Krumboltz, 2009).

Rosie grew up close to Northcity and graduated with a 1st class degree in Media Production. She went to university when she was 20 having dropped out of A' levels and worked for two years, before going back to college to study Media, and going onto to university. She lived at home with family during her studies. She describes her parents as old hippies, her dad is now a nurse and her mum is a charity manager. Rosie secured an administrative job at the university she studied at straight after graduating and is still working there. She is no longer interested in making the media her main career, and is running spoken word events in her own time in the city as well as doing occasional film/photography projects. The emphasis Rosie stresses in her career is "being happy". She enjoys telling her story of dropping out of college, and rebelling against her hippy parents who were worried about her, despite their own unconventional "wildchild" histories.

According to her, she has had a lot of luck. She uses the word luck or lucky six times in total, more than any participant. She says she has been "incredibly lucky" three times. "I've always kind of fallen on my feet a little bit, which is quite lucky." Rosie does seem to wonder with some disbelief about her own good fortune. She also uses the word "incredibly" a lot, in total fourteen times about various experiences she has had.

Using the concept of luck is notable in Rosie's narrative of confusion. In using this motif, she retains modesty about what she has achieved so far and this fits with her self-presentation as sharing the free spirit of her "wildchild" parents. A number of factors do seem to have contributed to her luck, not least of which are the connections her family/friends have given her access to that she has capitalised upon, e.g., the university job she got was as a result of a chance conversation with a friend of her partner. When pressed she does qualify her emphasis on luck:

> So I think that the reason why people recommend me or hire me, particularly in that pub sort of easy going setting is cos they know that I will get the job done and I'll be pleasant to work with as well, so.

Her adoption of a confusion narrative allows her to present her move away from the media career she had been educated for as "lucky". She is happy to have got a more regular administrative job which offers better work conditions than she perceives possible in the media. She knows that she can get her creative outlet outside her day job due to the creative/ media projects she can work on "more as a hobby".

In weaving her way through confusion to some harmony, Rosie's voice moves from the player/victim frustrated with the media sector precarity to those of the responsible agents both purist and player; she gives a positive spin on the apparent dissonance of herself as a media graduate, working in an administrative job, by stating that her employer is one that she believes in, and that the conditions of work in media are in opposition to her values in relation to good work-life balance. She is appreciative of the "positionality" of her background and the luck motif does allow her to play down the access to resources and support this has afforded her to stay on track after false starts.

9.3.4 Vulnerability – feeling out of control

The vulnerability narrative is relevant in the contemporary environment in which media discourses reflect how graduates are victims of inhospitable job markets (Tholen, 2014). It foregrounds precarity (Standing, 2014) as an experience with the possibility that those with less valuable social capital may be more likely to draw upon it (Allen et al., 2013; Burke, 2015; Comunian, Faggian, & Li, 2010).

Charlie has a degree in Performance. He has mainly lived at home with family who are "very supportive". He describes his parents "my dad is a very standard rough round the edges mechanic; my mum was just like a proper stay at home mum". Since graduating he has worked as a charity fundraiser, and done retail/hospitality work. In addition he has done occasional work as a performer and has created some short films. His survey response was fairly downbeat. He said he had been unemployed in both January and October 2015. He also stated that, "I keep getting work rejected for shows and nobody will take me seriously". Despite this, on his survey he said his career ideas hadn't changed since he had graduated.

Charlie is the hardest of the interview participants to pin down, despite showing interest in participation. He does not pick up email but does answer his mobile phone,

though sometimes has to call me from a different number if he is out of credit, creating an impression that that he is not in control of routine life administration. This impression is added to when he indicates that his YouTube channel which hosted his short films had been taken down because of small breaches of copyright and he glosses over where it would be possible to find examples of his work, saying he cannot afford a website and he has not got the equipment to make the films he'd like to. Dialogically, my view of him as a researcher, and as a practitioner, is that he shows signs of vulnerability, of a life that he is struggling to have full control of.

Charlie describes many barriers which prevent him doing the creative work he wants to do. He is critical of unpaid internships and inequity in the creative industries. However, he also finds solace in the figure of the "starving artist" and that his experience is a collectively shared. His depiction of the challenges of being someone wanting a creative career is epitomised by his "dreadful" interactions with the Job Centre. He also quotes examples of successful people he knows doing creative work but who didn't go to university, which cause him to de-value his degree.

Charlie's narrative is one of vulnerability. He moves between different voices through our interactions. Drawing on victim voices, he shows a clear player/victim understanding of the barriers against him but also suspects that he is doing something wrong as a purist/victim. However, he also demonstrates a purist/responsible agent voice in his commitment to creative work, which may not be helpful to him. The use of the vulnerability narrative allows him to present himself as the anti-hero of his own story and explain his immobility. Even in this vulnerability, Charlie does show glimmers of his own "internally persuasive discourse" in response the difficulties he faces. He counters individualistic discourses and imagines that in the future he will help others like himself.

> I don't want to get to the top and then forget about the bottom because obviously at this moment in time, that's currently where I am.

9.3.5 Change – finding myself

The change narrative is one of self-actualisation and transformation. It captures ideas of a career calling (Praskova *et al.*, 2015) and values-based careers akin to the subjective measure of success associated with a protean career orientation (Hall, 2004).

Sophia graduated in Performance. The twelve months that followed were a mixed experience for her. She embarked on bereavement counselling following the death of

her father, and was unemployed, and also did some acting work. A year later she decided to move to France to attend an acting school to which she has enrolled for two years. She was able to use the money her father left her in an inheritance to commit to this study. Her interview is conducted virtually, six months into her French experience.

Her experience at the French Clown school promises to be a transformative one and she describes the leader at the Clown school in heroic terms. She describes in detail what it is like to be there and the idiosyncratic and inspirational pedagogy that is used, and refers to a *Newsnight* report about the school in which she features. She is "mesmerised" by the experience and her commitment to it is a sign of her commitment to be a "worthy" actor. She chose the school over "big dreams in London" of studying an MA at a specialist Drama school. For her "acting is my life".

> He will strip you down and strip you down and strip you down and then he's able to sort of push you in the right direction to show your beauty as an actor.

Being a performer appears to have been a therapeutic experience for her; drama was the only thing she liked at school and eventually excelled in. Her attitude to her current programme of study follows in this tradition and she invests considerable hope in the school's lead teacher, whose methods are extremely tough. She recounts a troubled childhood with difficult relationships at school and with her parents who were divorced, and in particular her father.

> He was very abusive and he was an alcoholic and I had to live with that but not only did I rebel against him, um wanting to be an actor but I also rebelled at school which is probably why my GCSEs were below average.

She talks about a low period soon after she graduated when she felt adrift. She was "lonely", "sad", "bored" and dealing with dual bereavement of her dad and her sister. During this time, she describes her clichéd experience of an actor signing on the dole to the bewilderment of Job Centre staff. Pragmatic concerns continue to lurk behind her idealism about her acting career.

> I'm having this sort of emotional sort of existential change, I'm still really in the same place as I was financially possibly, you know a year and a half ago… another twenty something year old cliché, which is what we all are. I'm that, I'm doing that at the moment as well, finding myself.

Sophia's narrative is one of hope and redemption which is very much invested in her acting teacher. Her own story is a dramatic one in which adversity underscores her change. She does not want to settle for the ordinary and is very focused on being a

performer; in so doing the purist/responsible agent voice dominates, although other voices are woven in her story.

9.4 Narratives and weaving an answer to the world

Narratives depicted weave many of the thinking tools associated with *Figured Worlds,* and can both reinforce and/or challenge dominant discourses/voices. The lack of routinely clear career pathways for graduates which is interpreted to different degrees of optimism in labour market literature, leads to what was observed in research interviews, i.e., the considerable identity work undertaken by individuals in order to make sense of their varied situations. In the ordinary challenges that graduates face - whether in earning a living, working out what their preferred career might be, where they would like to live, coping with unforeseen setbacks and moving to independence from family - very personal dramas are enacted which demand deep emotional and rational engagement. Such engagement is continually complicated by the diverse and often contradictory subject positions both discursive and material, that graduates find themselves in. All participants prompted by participation in the research project use narrative as one tool to explain their positioning. The "standard plots" utilised here support Pryor and Bright's identification of such narratives, which appear to be culturally embedded in how people narrate themselves. This discussion draws upon examples given in this chapter but also from participants depicted in earlier chapters.

Narratives can serve different purposes in supporting individuals to answer the world around them dialogically and to explain their own situation to themselves. Narratives employed appear to help make sense of the normal but challenging rupture that has occurred as individuals shift from the secure world of being a student with all its trappings and status to becoming a graduate and the figure of hope and expectancy this represents.

> Ruptures of the taken-for-granted can remove these aspects of positional identities from automatic performance and recognition to commentary and re-cognition. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 141)

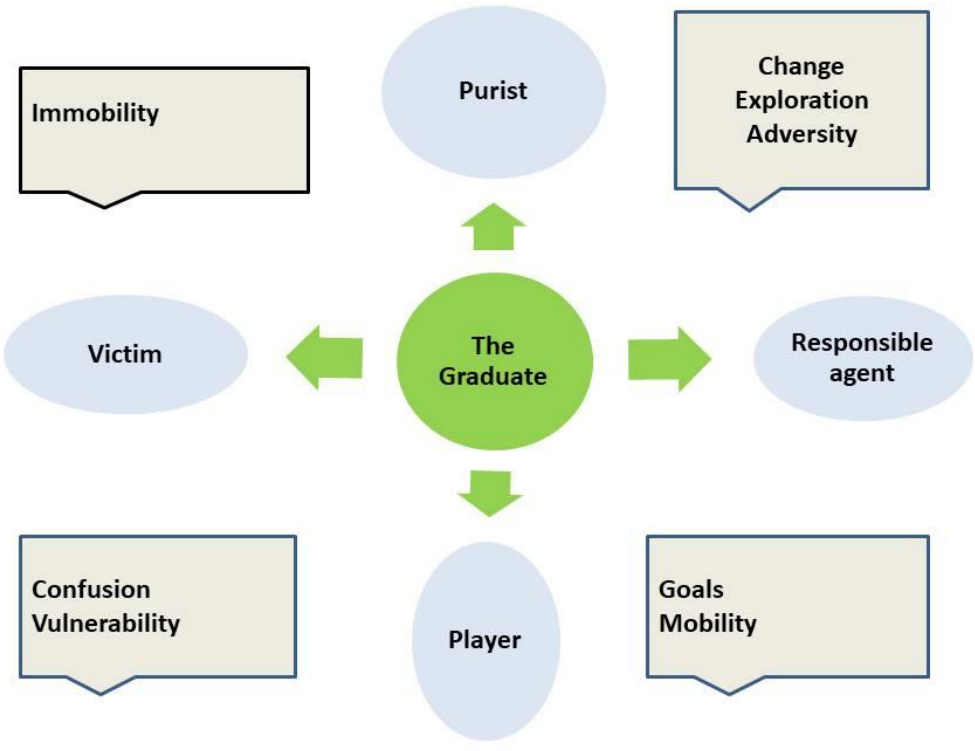
In such a context, Holland *et al.* argue, "the world must be answered – authorship is not a choice – but the form of the answer is not pre-determined" (1998, p. 272). Where uncertainty is normal in the job market, and yet many individuals invest hope and expectancy in becoming a graduate, it appears that when probed in a research context, graduates have plenty to say about their positioning in relation to an imagined future

career. Adapting available narratives helps them to answer the world and in so doing claim identities.

> People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 3)

Narratives were mapped onto the diagram presented in chapter six in Figure 9.1, in order to consider how they could be placed in the four quadrants. Similar to the diagram which mapped themes in chapter seven, it appears that narratives available to graduates tend to gravitate more to responsible agent voices than victim voices, which suggests that there is more discursive space for the former voices. I have separated mobility and immobility in this diagram.

Figure 9.1 Narratives in graduate worlds



Adversity as a concept has been recently monopolised by champions of the "grit narrative" which is associated with positive psychology (Duckworth, 2016). I would argue that the notion of overcoming ordinary challenges as Anna and Bridget have done can be re-claimed as a concept which can factor in the significance of close community

and family in coping with adversity, not just about the more individualistic endeavour which "grit" implies. For Anna and Bridget, their adoption of the adversity narrative, allows them to make sense of various experiences which have challenged their sense of who they are and how they have figured themselves. Both women, arguably show signs of the scope to "figure it otherwise" and traces of their own "internally persuasive discourse": Bridget with the help of the extended community of characters in her media advisory network, which has built her confidence not to tolerate poor practices; and Anna's search for a new way ahead, building upon a vivid depiction of her own positional identity which can hybridise her Caribbean and Christian heritage, her seamstress family history, her gender and her status as a Fashion graduate.

The adversity narrative exemplifies how individuals characterise the varying challenges they face and have to overcome. Anna and Bridget are examples, for illustrative purposes but adversity appeared for other participants too. Adversity acts as the barrier that needs to be overcome if a mobility narrative can be claimed. It is also associated in other narratives such as exploration and/or change, e.g., in the risks that need to be undertaken for those other plots to develop. Using the adversity narrative requires individuals to reflect upon themselves as the hero of their own story, extrapolating that without challenge, or more dramatically, without fear, one cannot be a hero; a graduate for whom their career moves smoothly, cannot be a hero. Such a narrative allows people to make something good out of something bad, which is valuable in a crowded job market in which rejection is commonplace. Such reflection is resonant of Collin's (2000) depiction of the "modern hero" and how people put considerable work into making their life meaningful and comprehensible to themselves, and in so doing they answer the world around them.

Mobility as a narrative has been dominant in public policy which promotes higher education as a route to individual advancement. However, reflections from participants critique this firmly, while at the same time illustrating the narrative's powerful magnetism. "Positionality" is important in Fouad and Joe's utilisation of the mobility narrative and the two depictions perhaps epitomise rather than challenge dominant societal discourses about graduates, archetypally described as victim and responsible agent (Tholen, 2014). Their own positioning appears to have contributed to their self-authoring. Fouad's second generation immigrant status and professional parents mean that geographic and social mobility appear to be something he takes for granted, albeit not with strong financial security. In contrast Joe describes the low value that his family and friends can offer him in supporting his career. Joe is aware of a lack of fairness at play and this is rendering him immobile as he sees the rules of the graduate career game

to be stacked against him, resonating with both the victim voices. Across other participants, the relationship individuals have to the embedded figure of a graduate, discussed in chapter seven and associated with hope and expectancy of individual growth emerged in the twin narrative of im/mobility.

Reflections on the mobility narrative witness individuals answering contextual factors which affect their progress and geographic and social mobility are entwined. The perceived role of geography is stark with London in particular, but other large urban centres being considered the most sought after locations. Reflections on this do seem to conflate both ideas about potential career opportunities with what are considered the "best places to live". Akin to the tale of Dick Whittington, London appears to promise the most diverse and highest volume of opportunities and this view is expressed by Fouad and Daniel. However, if once reached for some, e.g., Elizabeth, living and working in London does not guarantee a happy ending, with expensive living and slow commutes. Living in small northern towns leads to what appears to be an inevitable compromise in career ambition, e.g., Dylan, Alice; and similarly small towns in other areas are considered to offer very little to graduates to return home to (e.g., Daniel, Harry and Sophia). For some this has led to a clear idea that they want to escape the small town they come from which is inhibiting them (e.g. Isabelle, Robert).

Holland *et al.*'s use of the construct of "positionality" is useful in reflecting upon how aware graduates are of their position/status and how this may qualify a hoped-for mobility narrative. Typically those who face barriers due to their social background are well aware of them and it is hard for them to imagine themselves into the future figure of being a successful graduate. Immobility interacts closely with the narrative of vulnerability. Graduates from a lower social background tend to be more vulnerable in getting their careers started. Charlie and Joe are proud of their degrees, and have perhaps invested too much faith in its currency; for them, the career mobility this achievement promised has not yet been borne out, although both do challenge their positioning, e.g., Joe is critical of public policy enacted in Job Centres, and Charlie espouses commitment to being different to Arts establishment cliques. Arguably, there was some naiveté/idealism in their original choice of a creative subject, given the nature of media and creative industries (Faggian, Comunian, Jewell, & Kelly, 2013; Higdon, 2014).

As discussed in chapter eight, those from a higher social background do appear to have more resources to draw upon in moving forwards in their career which include the ability to move geographical location, whether out of a family home and/or not to return

to it. These resources are valuable in constructing different narratives, e.g., with regard to confusion, those from a higher social background, e.g., Rosie, who has experienced disenchantment with the media sector, appear better able to have woven a satisfactory alternative path, whereas Alice who also wants to move away from media, continues to drift.

Unpicking narratives to consider where individuals may be ventriloquated by authoritative discourses or showing signs of cognitive struggle to create newer ways of thinking, is difficult to be emphatic about. "Multi-voicedness" is a feature of this and has been observed in narratives described in this chapter. Charlie moves between confident claiming of his creative talent depicted via a purist/responsible agent voice, to that of a player/victim in suspecting that context is against him, but is looking for a way through. Such "multi-voicedness" can also be observed as individuals switch narratives, e.g., Sophia's story shifts between adversity, vulnerability and change as she traces her path to becoming a "worthy" actor. Daniel has moved from confusion to a goals narrative as he justifies the journey he is on. Participant use of different narratives illustrates varied priorities which connect to imagined figures as discussed in chapter seven, e.g., in the case of those who have travelled abroad (e.g., Isabelle, Sophia), exploration is associated with personal development. Those who are experiencing confusion and change as they turn away from earlier career ideas also illustrate their own personal development journey of discovery and adjustment e.g., Rosie and Ravi who frame altered career choices positively. For those who aspire to creativity (e.g., Sophia, Ruby), having the opportunity to make and develop creatively is important even if this means compromises.

Examples of the tropes associated with dominant individualist ideas predominate, but the use of narrative provides fertile territory and explanatory solace when imagined ideas of how a graduate career should be, fail to emerge. Narratives can challenge prevailing ideas while also appearing to be clichéd. The narrative of exploration is an example of this, as it depicts graduates expressing the life-affirming experience of living and working outside the UK. For the five graduates (Daniel, Robert, Isabelle, Sophia, Ibrahim) in the participant group, who describe their respective trips/moves overseas, their stories are resonant of a long tradition of young people's personal growth through travel and learning about other cultures. The three graduates who were overseas at the time of their interview evoke the greatest appearance of personal pride of all participants in the research (based on my perception as research interviewer). In the current policy context which stresses so-called graduate level work as the definition of

success, it seems almost rebellious in an old-fashioned way that graduates are deciding to step away from societal pressures to escape the UK.

In conclusion, the considerable identity work that individuals undertake in explaining their story does resonate with the work of career scholars such as Savickas (2012b), Holmes (2015), and Tomlinson *et al.* (2017) who focus on emergent identity formation in career contexts. However, the theoretical model that this study invokes with the support of empirical data extends and departs from such writing by considering what voices and figures are utilised in the weaving of narratives about career. It also invites consideration of the movement between the zones I present diagrammatically, as being fundamentally connected to scope for agency, manifested as "internally persuasive discourse".

Chapter 10 Conclusion

This chapter begins by outlining the contribution the research has made to understanding graduate careers and answering research questions empirically. It goes on to consider the original theoretical contribution made, before considering implications for policy and practice, limitations, and potential future research as well as final comments about the research journey. Outcomes of the research include the contribution of an original framework to the body of career guidance theory which draws together both individual and social aspects of careers.

10.1 Constructing meaning in early graduate careers

This study has made an original contribution by exploring the ordinary lives of graduates from a new and primarily qualitative perspective. In summary, data collected illustrates how meaning is conferred by individuals, which goes beyond most career scholarship which focuses on macro-level trends and patterns. The research has discovered that volatility appears to be a normal feature of early careers, and more expansive and nuanced notions of being a graduate emerge. The navigation of an uncertain labour market requires considerable rational and emotional engagement, and access to valuable capitals affects the ability to manage this. Diversity, complexity and contradictions are normal in how graduates confer meaning to their career situations. Evidence of deep bonds to family and community serve to expose the frailty of dominant individualistic ideas about careers, while simultaneously graduates are often ventriloquated by neoliberal ideas about unleashing self-determination. However, there is also evidence that graduates are not passive players in turbulent early careers and are searching for ways to improvise and respond critically to meritocratic tropes. Public policy which both narrowly defines positive outcomes, while encouraging students to be consumers, risks leading to damaging wellbeing consequences as individuals compare themselves unfavourably to the ideal of being a graduate.

Research questions sought to explore how graduates reflect upon and explain their early career experiences, and to uncover challenges faced, and how these are influenced by different graduate characteristics such as social background and discipline studied. Findings show that graduates reflect upon the uncertainty of their early careers in diverse and complex ways, but it is clear that there is a deeply-held engagement with hopes of a meaningful career which requires considerable identity work to explain situation/s to themselves and others. The theoretical model developed from data collected presents a new framework which illustrates that discursive space or “space of

authoring" is affected by available identity tools and that prevailing discourses tend to oblige people to espouse positive ways to present experience which can result in denying/disparaging the reflections of those who are doing less well which can adversely affect their wellbeing.

A new intersection was created of the opposites of responsible agent/victim and player/purist to depict the variety of voices that graduates draw upon. This illustrates how graduates variably will blame themselves and/or others for perceived failure; as well as asserting personal confidence in their chances and suitability for a certain career and/or awareness of the ordinary and even extraordinary career-seeking tactics that must be utilised. Graduates may undertake their own self-contest in responding to the different voices they are subject to in relation to career. The embedded figure of being a graduate and having a commensurate career lurks as one of hope and expectancy offering imagined promise of adventure, independence, and mobility, which individuals measure themselves against. How this figure is manifested is intertwined with what careers certain degrees are associated with, so that Business and Law graduates may tend towards prioritising advancement and status whereas those from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities may search for personal development and creative outlet.

Making sense of the landscape that is around them is demanding. All interview participants were individuals with a good degree (i.e., 1st or 2.1) who had done many of the right things in building a bank of employability-related evidence for their CVs. However, as illustrated in labour market literature the job market is crowded and competitive so doing the right things is no guarantee of success. The following list suggests an original summary of challenges faced in early careers which have been distilled from data presented and discussed so far, all of which require answering by those who experience them. This answerability is aided by drawing upon different voices, characters and narratives as identity resources. Graduates are not passive players in the face of these challenges.

1. Absence of career clarity can lead to drift and being stuck.
2. Early turbulence, with both good and bad experiences.
3. Employment practices vary in quality considerably.
4. Inequality/unfairness in the games that need playing in job-hunting.
5. Rejection is commonplace which adversely affects confidence.
6. Uncomfortable adjustment of career ideas is evident.
7. Underemployment is more likely than unemployment.

Responses to career situations can be a complex mixture of plans being adjusted and re-framed to take into consideration personal preferences, opportunities and circumstances. An idealised way of rational career planning (e.g., Shury et al., 2017) rarely plays out, although clarity of career conviction (even calling) can support how individuals figure themselves. Both Hodkinson's (2008) pragmatic rationality and Krumboltz's (2009) "planned happenstance" can be observed; but it would be wrong to depict such alternatives to rational career planning as the antithesis of it.

Graduates use a range of narratives to make sense of their situation. Individuals appear to get comfort from drawing on emblematic narratives of how lives are lived. In discussing this I drew upon narrative as a tool which is used in *Figured Worlds* theory, and depart from how it has been used in career guidance literature (Savickas, 2012b). Narrative is used to justify, aggrandise and apologise. It is a tool that allows for "self-directed symbolisations" (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 277), which can incorporate individual and contextual issues. When the conventional plot of the successful graduate is slow to materialise, graduates draw upon other "standard plots" which were explored in chapter nine. Without having anticipated this line of inquiry when conducting research interviews, it was remarkable how on analysis, certain plot lines could be observed in how people told their stories, which can both reinforce and challenge dominant discourses.

The adversity narrative is a powerful one for this group of graduates. This narrative has a strong relationship to im/mobility too – both connect to the imagined figure of being a graduate. Although individual circumstances are diverse – a preoccupation with issues of adversity and im/mobility is shared, and contributes to the utilisation of other narratives too. The use of a narrative does not follow a predictable sequence of events but can act as a way to underscore the direction of an individual story. Individuals do not just draw upon one narrative/plot and in a similar way to movement between different voices, movement between narratives can also be observed, often as individuals orchestrate their own explanation. Although adversity and im/mobility have been associated with a neoliberalist focus on unleashing aspiration; I argue that the varied relationships that individuals in this study have to such plots suggest that such narratives should not be considered the privileged territory of dominant discourses, but can be re-framed in ways that can counter such ideas.

Following what has been observed in sociological literature and demonstrated most recently by the Paired Peers Project (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016), those from a social background who have more resources to draw upon in terms of economic, social and

cultural capitals, do seem better able to cope with the vagaries of an uncertain job market. The ability to move location and live independently is markedly easier for those from families of professional and managerial/technical family backgrounds. The value of differential capitals is enacted in diverse ways. Economic support is important in acting as a buffer for further study and living costs. Social networks act in subtle ways to provide access to valuable advice and advocacy as well as specific opportunities. Cultural capital can contribute to a greater level of self-confidence in believing that a certain career path is possible, and to have safety net for alternative meaningful paths.

However, it does not follow that those from other backgrounds are somehow in deficit. A number of graduates from lower social backgrounds have gained considerable support from family and have also been able to create other networks which support them. How this occurs varies, but on occasion can be associated with certain aspects of identity which in this study included examples related to the LGBT community, religion, and ethnicity. The positioning of different characters in the stories they tell can have considerable significance in an ability to overcome challenges.

The variable value of where people live is important which confirms labour market commentary (Ball, 2015b). Amongst graduates, there is a sense of the imbalance of opportunity affected by geography. Geographic and social mobility often appear to connect as those who feel able to be geographically mobile have more opportunity open to them. Business and Law graduates appear to be less vulnerable to market uncertainties, and their embrace of tactics to play the game appear to help them in carving out more conventional career success, whereas Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities graduates do seem more idealistic and hopeful, resonating more with purist voices on employability and careers.

More generally, an ability to reflect critically on how one is positioned and to have access to support in answering the challenges faced is of great value. This is strongly associated with Holland *et al.*'s depiction of how agency can occur and the development of an "internally persuasive discourse" that results from cognitive struggle. Such critical reflection which is generally absent from employability-related education in universities requires an ability to see through dominant ideas of individualism with its emphasis on personal adaptability, human capital and competition. Only a few participants evidence such cognitive struggle explicitly (e.g., Anna, Matthew), while others (e.g., Rachel, Fouad) with valuable capitals to mobilise appear ventriloquated by individualistic ideas.

The significance of identity development as critical to coping with uncertainty appears to generate some agreement across the literatures. The "space of authoring" that individuals may have in order to nurture their identity is important, and this is something for which there is no clear route-map. As such, findings support Holmes' (2015) argument about the liminality of graduate identity formation, but have extended his work substantially by illustrating the tools that individuals use to facilitate such development.

10.2 Theoretical contribution of this research

The approach to this study has been to integrate different schools of thought about careers. This is not something that is commonly done due to the scope and scale of different literature about careers, which militate against interdisciplinary approaches which do not have a natural home, or place to publish findings. There appears to be a gap in trying to address more integrated approaches to the subject of career, as has been argued for in recent writing (e.g., Artess et al., 2017; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016).

This study has made an original theoretical contribution in addressing this gap. In its application of *Figured Worlds,* it has created a new theoretical model which has threaded together the concepts of voices, characters, narratives, and figures in depicting how graduates tell their stories. In so doing, it has built upon existing work in career scholarship and extends depictions of players/purists, victims/responsible agents, as well as archetypal career narratives. *Figured Worlds* has offered a way to embrace the complexity of how people explain and author their career trajectory, allowing me to go much further than the scholars drawn upon in the diagrammatic depiction/s in this study. Much of their work (Brown et al., 2004; Dries et al., 2008; Pryor & Bright, 2008; Tholen, 2014) is divorced from the complexity of how people confer meaning to their own lives, which is what I have focused upon. The application of *Figured Worlds* has allowed for an original approach to research that illuminates how individuals tell their stories.

I argue that an application of elements from Holland *et al.'s* (1998) framework has served as a way to help integrate schools of thought about careers in the situating of this study and analysing data. Specifically, I have drawn upon their tools of voices, idealised figures and associated characters, and emblematic narratives; the construct of "positionality" has also proved useful, and the concept of "ruptures", offers a promising a line of enquiry. My use of the theory has also purposefully departed from others who have used the theory by adopting a horizontal rather than vertical analysis of the data in

order to demonstrate the tools across a diverse group, ambitiously constituting recent graduates from one university as effectively sharing a figured world in the landscape they inhabit.

Agency is a topic which has attracted much attention in debates about graduate employability and employment in uncertain labour markets. This study contributes a useful theoretical lens in response to such calls. A number of authors in Tomlinson and Holmes (2016) book about graduate employability are preoccupied by the scope for agency (e.g., Burke et al, 2016; McCash, 2016). It is also a focus of attention in careers literature that argues for social justice to inform practices of career advice and guidance (e.g., Arthur, Collins, Marshall, & McMahon, 2013; Hooley & Sultana, 2016).

Exploring how agency may occur is something that this study contributes to theoretically. The fourth construct that Holland *et al.* draw upon is that of "making worlds" which requires "ruptures" of the taken-for-granted, and can lead individuals (and collectives) to "figure it otherwise". This process was outlined in relation to the identity work manifest in how graduates author and explain themselves, especially in relation to "internally persuasive discourse", a concept which has not been used in studies of career before. In the current uncertain economic/socio-political context, in which society is itself experiencing "ruptures" in the taken-for-granted, it is valid to seek out new ways to theoretically illuminate how individuals' experience "ruptures" as they navigate uncertainty.

10.3 Implications for policy and practice

Graduate career destinations are of consistent interest to policy-makers. The use of graduate outcomes in TEF suggests that policy attention will increase. This study has illustrated the considerable turbulence that graduates experience during early careers and therefore welcomes a recent policy direction which plans to shift the date of graduate destinations survey to fifteen months after graduating and to include questions about direction of travel in a career which could for example, usefully capture creative graduates who may be working to earn money only while developing their practice.

The findings of this study would also support policy-making that allows for a more nuanced perspective on the benefits of a degree. In so doing it agrees with Green and his co-authors work (e.g., Green & Henseke, 2016), in their argument against a narrow framing of higher education as being for individual economic benefit. Unfortunately

public policy which needs to defend tuition fees forces attention to matters of return on investment on a degree and the other benefits are glossed over all too quickly. University responses have followed the direction of government, and too often, prospective students will be presented with statistics about graduate destinations which ignore the more subtle ways that careers develop. Policy environments which lead students to be viewed as consumers and encourage them to think of themselves as such, risk damaging the individual agency that needs to be fostered in students in the development of their own career identity. A consumerist attitude risks getting locked into a player/victim voice which puts too much emphasis on forces outside of oneself to enable enactment of career success.

The study did not seek to make grand recommendations for practice as it primarily sought to illuminate experience. However, the research findings have implications for practice, some of which drill into questioning what may appear obvious and taken-for-granted; a continual challenge in relation to anything to do with careers, a topic which everyone has a view upon and can be expert upon by virtue of having had a job or having gone to a job interview.

There is a strong case for practices in universities that relate to employability and careers advice to pay due attention to contextual factors and be candid with students about the challenges they may face. The theoretical model developed offers a concrete framework what can inform a career guidance practice that can factor in both contextual and individual factors. Language could be adapted to depict the voices identified for different audiences, e.g., authentic, tactical, self-critical, context-critical. A more critical approach to employability pedagogy could support graduates in the development of agency as the research findings indicate that those who are able to critically review different voices about careers seem better able to navigate uncertainty; e.g., neither blaming themselves nor simplistically blaming others for any career disappointment or frustration. Appendix seven illustrates how the voices can be depicted visually which provides another way to stimulate such discussion. This is not easy to enact as more honest reflection on structural inequality does risk a "counsel of despair" (Holmes, 2016), although ignoring such constraints runs another risk of engendering "cruel optimism" (Leach, 2016). How such a recommendation may be enacted warrants further discussion, however, McCash's (2016) work does offer a framework for career learning which encourages students to "see through" dominant perspectives on employability.

However, before students and graduates can be encouraged to think critically, staff in universities who are connected to careers advisory and employability practices, should reflect critically on their own assumptions. Prevailing ideas tend to be individualistic and fail to address structural issues very often due to the complexity of doing so. Discourses about building a personal bank of human capital (via qualifications. skills and work experiences) in order to compete and get ahead which are the default advice of many, risk ignoring the material and discursive positioning of different graduates. Such approaches to practice risk being unwitting prey to instrumental and meritocratic tropes associated with the responsible agent (Tholen, 2014) and neoliberalist ideology about personal responsibility and competition (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Gershon, 2017).

Another implication for practice is in relation to the support that universities offer their graduates. We know that the transition for many graduates is harder than they may have anticipated and that some of this is not possible to prepare for in advance. The agency of students and graduates can be supported by timely and sensitive conversations about how they can approach their future. Those supporting students and graduates whether it be lecturers, careers advisers, employers or family can contribute to the morale of graduates by being prepared to listen to and take graduates' hopes and fears seriously, bearing in mind the considerable emotional and rational entanglement associated with building a career. University practices would do well to factor in relevant support for graduates in the period after they leave. Very tangibly for some creative graduates, this could include access to studio space and/or equipment. Recognition of the differential social capital and seeking out ways to develop this for students without access to such networks while at university is also wise.

10.4 Limitations

My research study was a pragmatic one in terms of research methodology which led to a mixed methods approach, although emphasis in this thesis has been given to the interview data collected. However, using mixed methods adds to the project's rigour and its defence of the sampling strategy. The priority given to the qualitative data collected purposefully makes a break with writing on career development that relies on quantitative approaches. The use of a *Figured Worlds* theoretical lens impacted upon the methodological approach; but in contrast to other studies which have used that lens, analysis has been conducted in a horizontal way which has meant a lack of depth in places. However, this horizontal approach has illustrated the scope of the theory's tools to be applied across a larger amount of data and in so doing extended the theory's potential application.

It is not possible to claim generalisability from the findings, however, the robust design of the project means that the questions raised by findings, especially theoretical ones have a wider relevance. My role as an insider researcher is both a limitation and an advantage. My position may have influenced analysis and choices about depiction of data; and certainly as a practitioner in this field, have led me to seek out positive aspects about how individuals cope with uncertainty.

10.5 Future research

The design of the project is one that could be replicated, in terms of both the survey and interviews. It would be valuable to compare how findings differ depending upon what fee regime individuals have been subject to as the 2014 population were the last to pay lower fees. It would also be good to explore the experiences of graduates from different subject areas. There is also scope for a more longitudinal project which could follow participants further on in their careers as well as analysing more vertically each participant in this study. The study also invites further reflection of issues of wellbeing in relation to career positioning. Also, perhaps a reflection of my status as a parent as well as a careers practitioner and researcher, it would be interesting to explore the lived experience of parents and families of this new generation of graduates that are dependent on family for longer. Research has begun to explore the boomeranging generation; however, little has been investigated about the experience of families who often have to manage twin priorities of dependent adult children and aging parents.

10.6 Research journey

Undertaking this study as well as other parts of the PhD has been an uncomfortable but transformative journey for me. It has forced me to question elements of policy and practice in my field of work. Doing the research project has added to the vocabulary I have to reflect upon the policy and practice context. It has made me see more clearly how dominated public policy is with metrics and outcomes and how contested careers and employability practices in higher education have become, albeit in subtle ways. Different forces are at play – a public policy context which gives emphasis to getting a return on investment, running alongside dominant discourses of human capital, competition and individualism. Becoming a researcher has meant that I now inhabit an underpopulated territory between practice and academic research. This has proven a fertile territory for research but does mean that I do not fully exist in either space; which offers scope for growth, but also risks of isolation. One way forward is to recognise that I share the same uncertain and crowded labour market as my participants and to consider Holland *et al.*'s tools as ways for me to consider how I

manage my own professional practice environment, knowing that improvisation is possible.

Appendix One: Ethical consent statement – survey

Participate in research into life after graduation

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Any data and responses that you provide through this survey will be anonymised so that individuals will not be identifiable. Any personal information that you provide will be held and used in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and Data will be stored for a minimum of 10 years once this study has been completed (anticipated to be December 2017) under Lancaster University policy.

Participation in the survey is voluntary and you can inform the researcher that you want to withdraw your responses within 2 weeks of completing the survey and all data relating to you will be deleted and not used in the study.

It should take you no longer than 10 minutes to complete this survey.

1. Participant consent

I have read this statement and give my consent for the data that I provide to be used by the research project.

Appendix Two: Survey questions[7]

Life after graduation research project

I have read this statement and give my consent for the data that I provide to be used by the research project.
1. Participant consent

Education history
2. What subject area did your degree belong to? (select one answer only)
Drop-down list of courses
2.a. If you selected Other, please specify:
3. What was your status when you were a student? (select one answer only):
UK student, EU student, International student
4. What degree type did you get? (select one answer only)
BA, BSc, BEng, LLB
4.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

Recent activity
5. Which of the following was your main activity in January 2015?
Employed full-time
Employed part time
Working and studying
Studying only
Self-employed/freelancing
Unemployed
Unavailable for work
Other
Can't remember
5.a. If you selected Other/Unavailable for work, please specify:
5.b. Please confirm if you have had any career or job changes since January 2015
There have been NO changes in my career situation since January 2015.
There have been changes to my career situation since January 2015.

5.c. What were you doing in January 2015 (in relation to work/study/career) if this was different to what you are doing now?

Current activity
6. What is your current main activity (October 2015)? Please specify...
Employed
Working and studying
Studying only
Self-employed/freelancing
Unemployed
Unavailable for work

[7] Survey included a considerable number of drop-down options for certain questions (not all included here due to length).

Other
6.a. If you selected Other/Unavailable for Work, please explain:

Employed
7. Did you need your degree to get this job?
Yes No Not Sure
7.a. Please explain your answer.
8. What is your job title?
8.a. Do you work full-time or part-time?
Full-time Part-time
9. What sector do you work in?
Drop-down list of sectors
9.a. If you selected Other, please specify:
10. How satisfied are you with your current job?
Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Not satisfied
11. How long were you looking for a job before you found the job you are doing now?
Under 1 month 1-3 months 4-6 months Over 6 months

Working & Studying
12. What course of study are you doing?
12.a. Is your study full-time or part-time?
Full-time Part-time
13. What is your job title?
14. What sector do you work in?
Drop-down list of sectors
14.a. If you selected Other, please specify:
15. How satisfied are you with your current job?
Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Not satisfied
16. Did you need your degree to get this job?
Yes No Not Sure
16.a. Please explain your answer.
17. How long were you looking for a job before you found the job you are doing now?
Under 1 month 1-3 months 4-6 months Over 6 months

Studying Only
18. What course of study are you doing? Please specify
Full-time Part-time
18.a. Is your study full-time or part-time?

Self-Employed/Freelancing
19. What role/s are you in as a self-employed person/freelancer?
20. Did you need your degree to get work as a self-employed person or freelancer?
Yes No Not Sure
20.a. Please explain your answer.
21. What sector do you work in?
Drop-down list of sectors
21.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

22. How long were you looking for work as a freelancer/self-employed person before you found the work you are doing now?
Under 1 month 1-3months 4-6months Over 6 months
Please choose one
23. How satisfied are you with your current work situation?
Very satisfied Fairly satisfied Not satisfied

Unemployed
24. How long have you been currently unemployed?
Under 1 month 1-3 months 4-6 months Over 6 months
24.a. Choose up to 5 of these statements which most closely reflect your attitude to being unemployed.
There are very few job openings for someone with my background
My personal circumstances restrict what work I can take
I lack confidence in making job applications
I lack confidence in going for job interviews
I'm not worried about being unemployed, I know it's only temporary
I am optimistic that I will get a job soon
I have deliberately chosen to be unemployed while I am securing the right option for me.
I don't know what jobs to apply for
I lack the energy to pursue my career goals
I am fed up about being unemployed
I lack energy to apply for jobs
Other (please include any alternative statements which describe your thinking better)
24.a.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

Career Planning Questions
The following questions ask you to rank yourself in relation to a series of statements about your attitudes to your career.
25. For each of the statements below, please indicate if you agree or disagree with the statement (please choose one). Agree, Slightly agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Slightly disagree, Disagree.

I understand what my skills and strengths are
I am clear about what my career goals are
I know what jobs would suit my skills and strengths
I know what I want from a job
I understand what skills employers want
I know about what job opportunities are available
I keep up with trends in the occupations and/or industries that interest me.
I left university with a good understanding of the graduate job market
My friends and family have been supportive of me in my career
My friends and family have been useful in giving me contacts for my career
I have used the university careers service for looking for jobs and opportunities
I have used the university careers service for careers advice
I know how to approach jobhunting
I know how to approach career planning
I feel confident about making applications.

I feel confident about attending interviews
I am able to talk confidently about my skills and strengths
I am proactive in taking action about my career
I have learnt a lot about job-hunting since I graduated
I feel more confident about my future career now than I did a year ago
I lack the energy to pursue my career goals
Thinking about my career frustrates me

Open comments

26. Do you have any general comments to make about your experiences of going into the job market after finishing your degree? If so, please write them here.
27. Have your career ideas changed since you graduated?
Yes Partly No
27.a. Please add comments to explain your answer above.

Personal Details

Please choose your age range
28. Age (select one answer only
21-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40 and over
29. Gender (select one answer only):
Male, Female, Trans, Prefer not to say
30. Ethnicity (select one answer only):
White British, White Irish, White Other, Mixed: White and Black Caribbean, Mixed: White and Black African, Mixed Other, Asian, Black Caribbean, Black African, Chinese Other
30.a. If you selected Other, please specify:
31. What region do you currently live in? (select one answer only)
Drop-down list of regions
31.a. If you selected Other, please specify:
32. Your background - which of these best describes the type of job done by the main earner in the home you grew up in? (select one answer only)
Professional, Managerial/ technical, Skilled manual, Skilled non-manual, Partly Skilled, Unskilled, Don't know, Other
32.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

Further research

33. Without committing yourself now, would you be happy for us to contact you as a follow up to this survey?
Yes No
34. Do you want to enter a prize draw for £100 voucher for completing this survey? If so, please leave your name, email address and phone number.
Yes No
35. Name:
36. Email:
37. Phone Number:
38. Are you willing to participate in a one hour research interview (can be conducted face-to-face or over the phone or skype). A £50 voucher is available to interview participants.
Yes No

Appendix Three: Ethical consent form – Interview

Participant Information Sheet – Research Interview

Title of Study: Graduate transition: An investigation into the experience of recent graduates

I would like to invite you to take part in a study for my PhD research with the Centre for Higher Education Research in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. The project host is Northcity University [8]and I am a part-time PhD researcher at Lancaster University. Before you decide if you wish to take part, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of the study

This research is for my PhD thesis and may also be used for journal articles and conference presentations. This study aims to contribute to wider research about graduate transition with a focus on those for whom this transition is an uncertain experience. I aim to contribute to knowledge which can inform policy and practice at Northcity University and other universities. Do not hesitate to ask if you would like more detail on the questions addressed in the study.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you indicated a willingness to participate in this study when you received a recent survey (Life after Graduation) that was sent to all recent graduates for the Business School and the School of Arts and Media at Northcity University.

What does participation involve?

You will be asked to participate in a one hour research interview to be conducted either face to face or over Skype. We will agree a mutually convenient time and place for the interview to take place. You will be asked questions in relation to your education and career.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is your choice whether to take part and your participation is entirely voluntary.

Can I change my mind?

Yes. You can withdraw from this study at any point and do not have to give a reason. If you withdraw up to 2 weeks after your interview, all data obtained from or relating to you will be deleted and not used in the study. You can still withdraw from the study after that time but it may not be possible to withdraw your data as it might already have been anonymised or analysed. Please contact me if you want to withdraw from this study.

[8] NorthCity is the pseudoymn used for the university and has replaced the name of the university in the actual ethical clearance documents.

What will happen to my data?

'Data' means my notes taken during the interview, survey results, audio recordings and any email exchanges we may have had. All data will be stored in either electronic or paper form for a minimum of 10 years after the end of a project (anticipated to be December2017), under Lancaster University policy. Audio recordings (from both face-to-face and Skype interviews) will be transferred and stored on my personal encrypted and password protected laptop and deleted from a digital recorder, as soon as possible after the interview has finished. Identifiable data (including recordings of your voice) will be stored on encrypted devices and/or password protected file space on the University server. You can request to listen to the audio at the end of the interview and any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted or disregarded from the data. Any paper data will be stored in a locked cabinet, accessible only to me, in my home office.
Your data may be used in any reporting of the research (including in my thesis, academic papers or conference presentations). If your data is used, it will be anonymised and so will not identify you.

How will my identity be protected?

A pseudonym will be given to protect your identity in my PhD thesis and other publications or presentations, and any identifying information about you will not be included.

What I can gain from participation?

You may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon your current career thinking, and I will be able to direct you to careers advisory support if you would like it. As a Northcity graduate you can access services (e.g., information on job vacancies, general careers advice) from the Careers & Employability team for life (*link included*). You can also use services as an alumnus of the University *(link included*). You can also contact the University Wellbeing team for referral to appropriate support (*link included*).There are no risks to you in taking part in this research.

Who to contact for further information

If you would like further information on this study or the programme within which it is being conducted, please contact:

Researcher: Fiona Christie f.christie@lancaster.ac.uk)
Supervisor of project: Dr Steve Dempster Department of Educational Research
(full details included)

Who to contact with concerns or complaints:
If you have any concerns or complaints about the study, your participation in it, or my conduct as a researcher, please contact:

Head of Department: Prof. Paul Ashwin
(full details included)

If you require support and want to discuss any of the issues raised in your interview further, please contact me (Fiona Christie) and I will be able to refer you to the appropriate member of the Careers & Employability team and/or the Wellbeing team.

This study has been reviewed and approved by members of Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee.

CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW

Title of Study: Graduate transition; an investigation into the lived experience of recent graduates.

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. If I wish to withdraw during the period of this study, I am free to do so without providing any reason. I understand that if I withdraw up to two weeks after my interview all my data will be deleted and not used in the study. I can withdraw after that date but my data may still be used	
3.	I understand that my contributions to the study will be part of the data collected, and that my anonymity will be ensured. I consent to all and any of my contributions to be included and/or quoted in this study.	
4.	I consent to my interview being audio-recorded	
5.	I understand that my data will be stored for a minimum of 10 years.	
6.	I understand that the information I provide will be used in a Ph.D research project, and may be included in academic publications or conference presentations. I understand that I have the right to request to review and comment on the usage of information provided by me, prior to its inclusion in a submitted article for publication.	
7.	I agree to take part in the above study.	
Name of Participant: Signature Date		

Appendix Four: Interview Respondent Matrix

Subject discipline	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Background
Music	Harry	M	21-24	White British	Professional
Media production	Alice	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual
Performance	Charlie	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled
Film	Robert	M	21-24	White British	Disabled cannot work
Media Production	Bridget	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual
Media Production	Rosie	F	21-24	White British	Managerial/technical
Computer Games Design	Joe	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled
History	Dylan	M	21-24	White British	Partly skilled
Journalism and English	Daniel	M	21-24	White British	Managerial/technical
Fashion	Anna	F	21-24	Black Caribbean	Skilled non-manual
English	Ibrahim	M	21-24	Asian	Skilled non-manual
Visual Arts	Ruby	F	21-24	White British	Skilled manual
Graphic design	Isabelle	F	21-24	White British	Skilled non-manual
Performance	Sophia	F	21-24	Mixed other	Skilled manual
Business	Fouad	M	25-29	Middle Eastern	Professional
Accounting and Finance	Ravi	M	21-24	Asian	Unskilled
Business and Tourism management	Elizabeth	F	25-29	Black African	Professional
Business	Matthew	M	21-24	White British	Unskilled
Accounting and Finance	Farzana	F	21-24	Asian	Skilled manual
Law and Criminology	Rachel	F	21-24	White British	Professional

Details of interview participants – subject, pseudonym, and other characteristics

Appendix Five: Interview questions

The following is a list of questions drawn upon in semi-structured interviews.

Life history

1. Can you talk me through your education history?
2. Can you talk me through your work history?
3. Can you tell me what you have been doing since you graduated? Step by step… If you have been unemployed since you graduated, what was this experience like for you?
4. What have been the most challenging experiences for you since you graduated?
5. How satisfied are you with your current situation?

Goals, self-awareness

1. What were your career ideas before your degree? Have they changed or developed over time?
2. Do you have any career goals?
3. Do you feel that you have a good understanding of your skills and strengths?
4. Do you know what career might suit your skills and strengths?

Occupational/Labour market knowledge

1. What's your understanding of the job market in the field/s you are looking in?

Reflections on career capital

1. Do you feel your degree (subject? University?) has had value in enhancing your career prospects?
2. In addition to your studies, what other activities did you engage with while at university (e.g., PT work, volunteering, and work experience)? Do you think such activities have supported your career prospects?

Job search

1. How do find out about what different careers and jobs may involve?
2. How do you find jobs to apply for?
3. How do you decide what to apply for?
4. Who do you go to for careers advice?

Social capital

1. How have your family and friends influenced your career ideas or not? Check survey question re background
2. What factors have influenced your career situation since you graduated? e.g., money, accommodation, family, location etc.
3. Have your friends and family been useful to you in developing your career? If so, how?

Self-esteem/self-belief

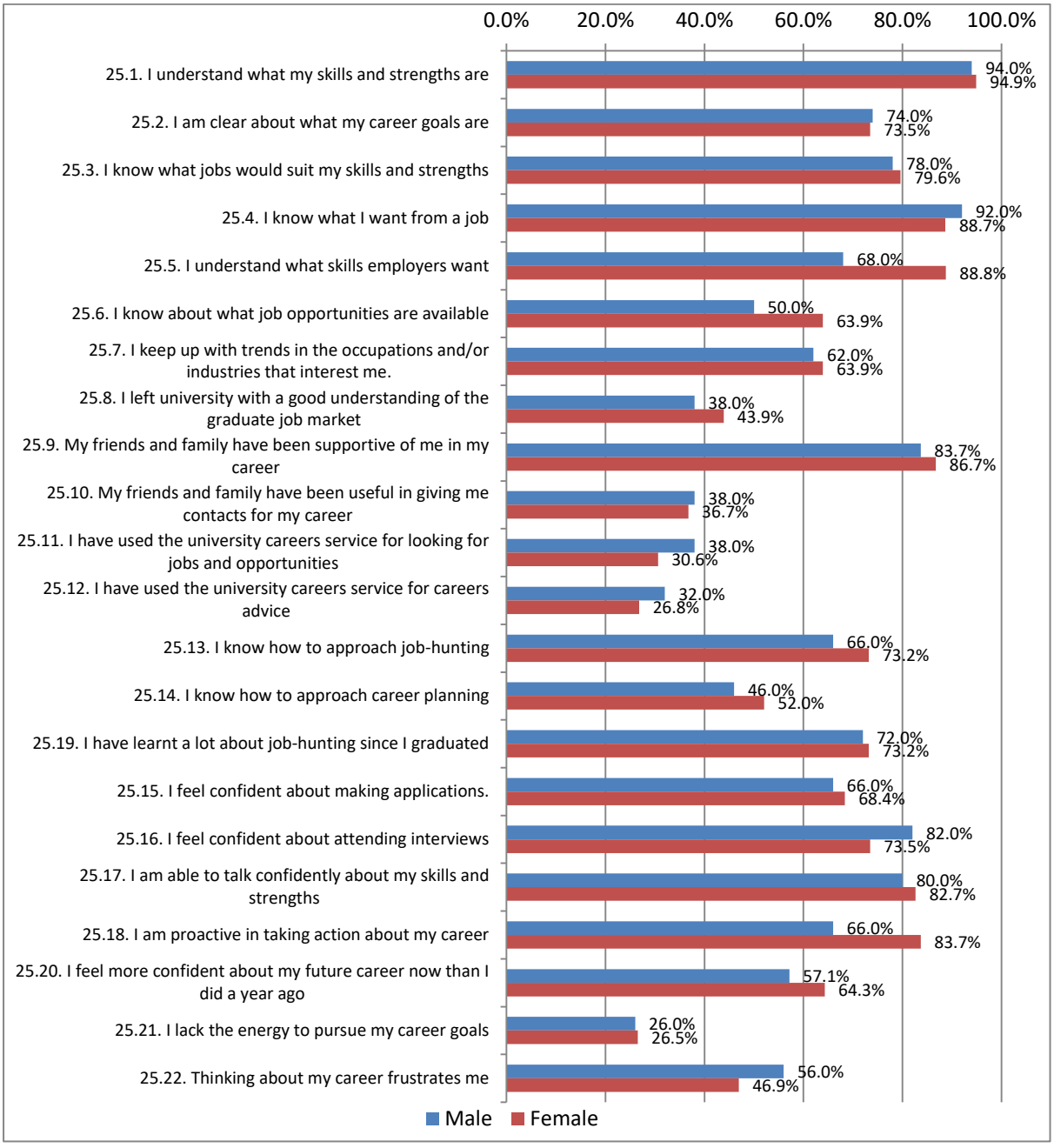
1. How confident are you about presenting yourself in job applications and interviews?
2. How confident are you about securing the kind of career you would like to have in the future? Do you think it's possible to be employable/done all the right things, but not get the career you want?

Other

1. Any other comments on what your early experiences have been like that we haven't talked about?
2. What would help you now in developing your career?
3. What do you think could have helped you while you were at university to be better prepared?

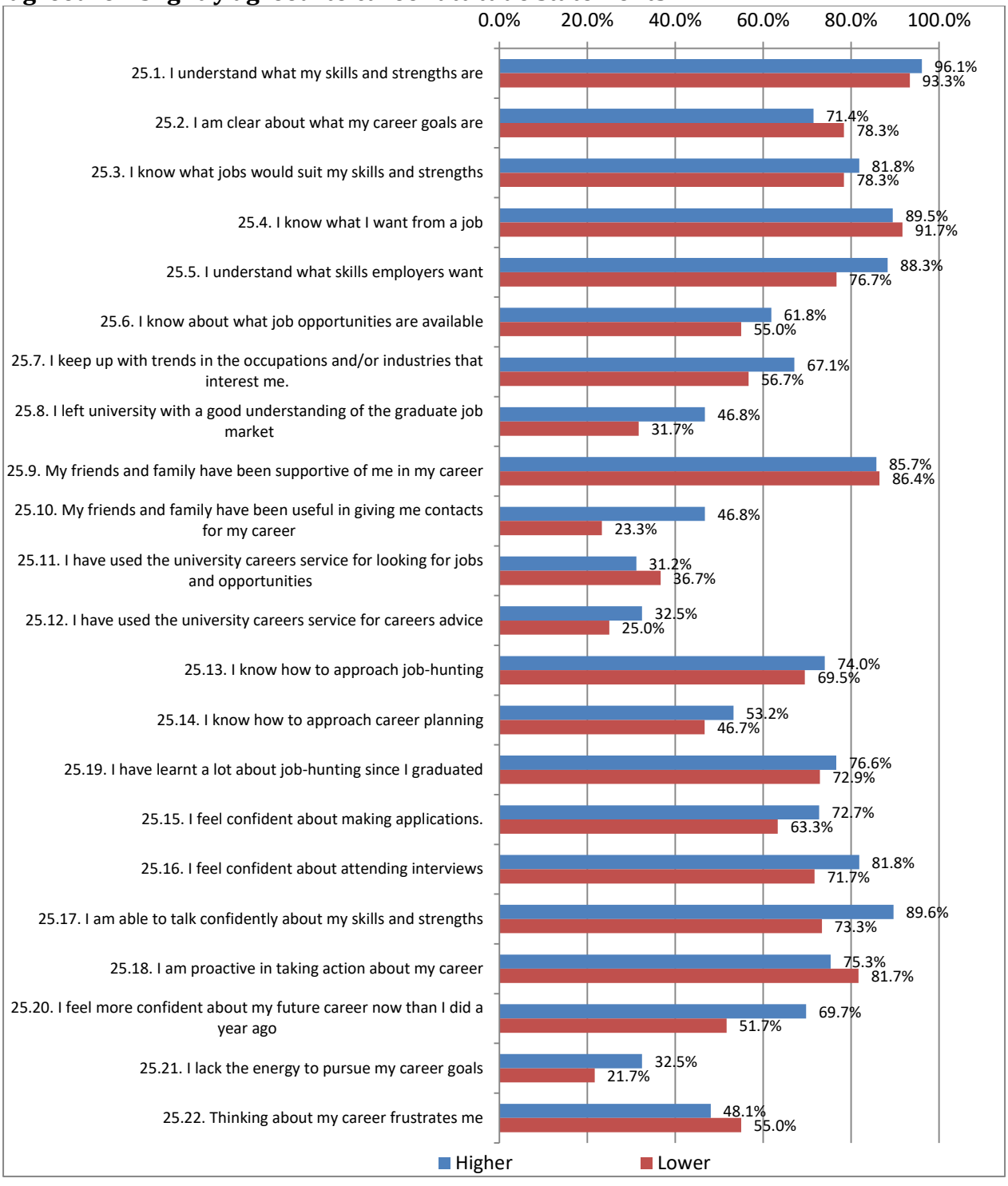
Appendix Six: Career attitude statements – additional data

Figure 5.2 Percentage of survey participant population by gender who 'agreed' or 'slightly agreed' to career attitude statements



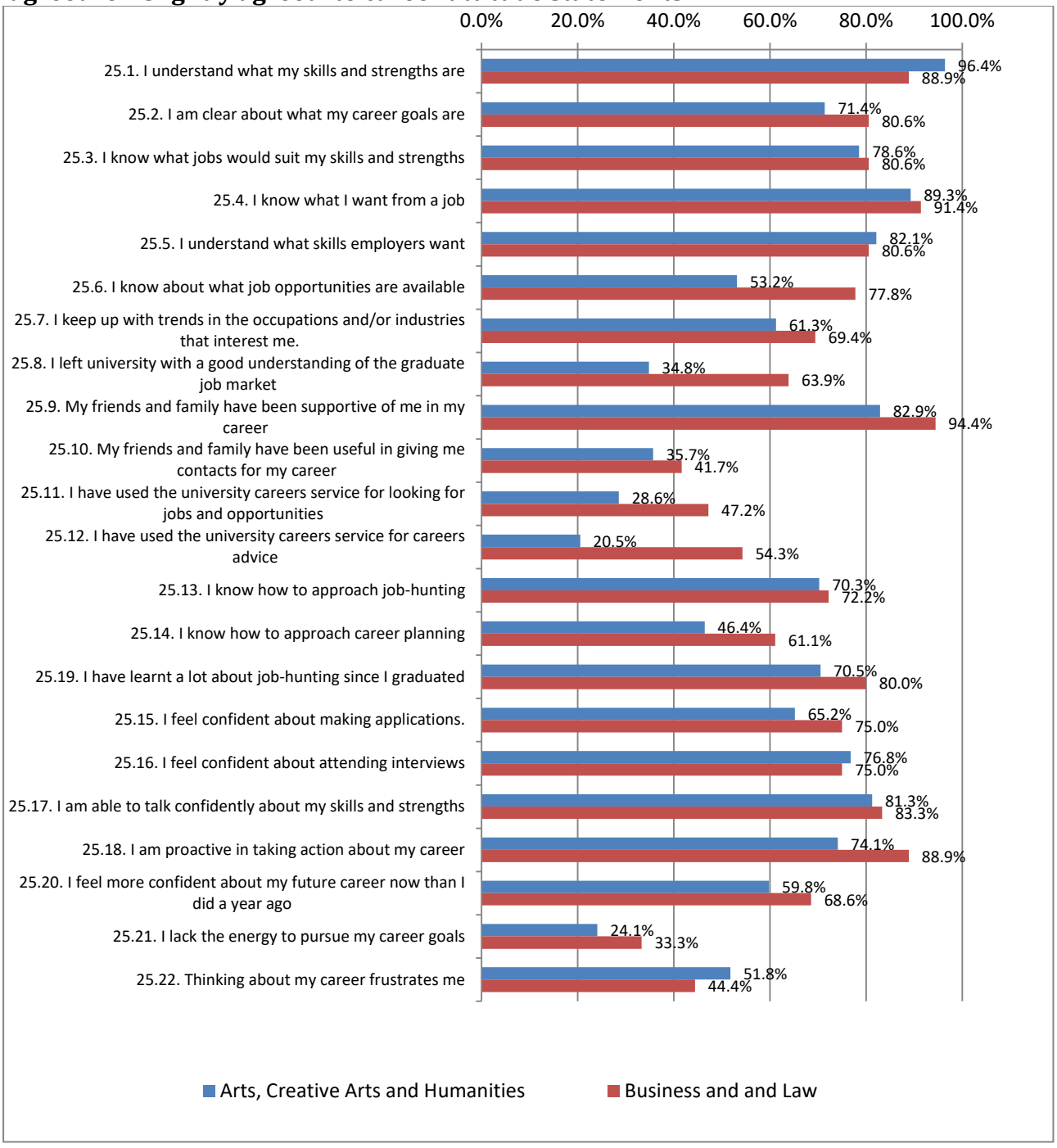
(Base: 98 females; 50 males)

Figure 5.3 Percentage of survey participant population by social background who 'agreed' or 'slightly agreed' to career attitude statements



(Base: 77 higher; 60 lower)

Figure 5.4 Percentage of survey participant population by subject area who 'agreed' or 'slightly agreed' to career attitude statements

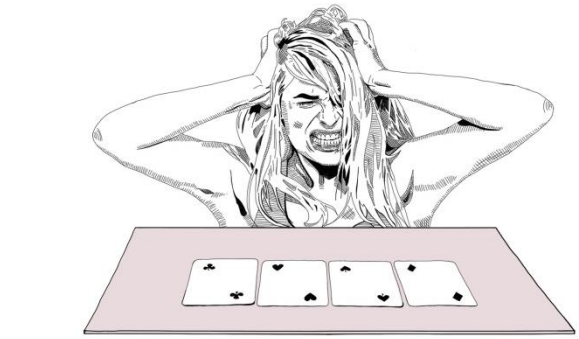


(Base 112 Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities; 36 Business and Law)

Appendix Seven: Visual depictions of competing voices[9]

Voice 3. What have I done wrong?

Voice 1. If I am true to myself, I can control my own destiny.



Voice 4. The rules of the game dont work for me.

Voice 2. I need to work out how to win at this game.

[9] Created for this project by Callum Simmons. © Copyright owned by artist and auhor. Permission required for usage from Fiona Christie and/or Callum Simmons.

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