Relational transitions, emotional decisions: new directions for theorising graduate employment

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ABSTRACT

University-to-work transitions tend to be discussed in terms of skills, outcomes and the readiness of graduates for an increasingly insecure and flexible labour market. Such a focus on individual attributes and orientations depicts graduates as lonely and ostensibly rational figures; disembedded from their intimate networks and devoid of emotional context as they navigate their post-university pathways. This article aims to steer the debate in a new, fundamentally relational direction by exploring the role and significance of intimate kin and non-kin relationships for the ways graduates experience and make choices about employment and careers.

Drawing on qualitative longitudinal research with women who graduated from universities in the UK between 2009 and 2011, the discussion highlights the value of an explicitly relational perspective for revealing the personal and emotional dimensions of the transition out of higher education. The article concludes that the process of securing work and committing to a career is embedded within the broader experiences of personal life, emotion and (im)mobility and, thus, raises important questions about the role and responsibility of universities at a time when employability metrics are read as a marker of teaching quality.

KEYWORDS: Emotion; graduate employment; personal relationships; reflexivity; relationality

Introduction

Studies of graduate outcomes, identities and employment trajectories have swelled in recent years as the inter-relationship between higher education (HE) and the labour market continues to change (Tomlinson 2012). For the most part research has centred on the skills and attributes that graduates may or may not possess (Jackson 2014) and/or the ways in which the HE system re-establishes social positions and inequalities (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Purcell, Wilton, and Elias 2007). Developing alongside these *possessive* and *positional* approaches, however, is a view of graduate employment as an interactional and relational process, embedded within graduates' emergent identities and their ongoing relations with key employment gatekeepers (Holmes 2013, 2015; Tomlinson 2010). This article aims to extend this third, *processual* approach by developing a relational theory that goes beyond the discrete and 'official' relations of education and employment, and attends to the emotional and personal concerns of graduates as they make the transition from HE into work.

The relational theory developed here proceeds from work undertaken within family and intimacy studies conceptualised as the study of 'personal life' (May 2011; Smart 2007). As a concept relationality offers a way to take seriously the significance of relationships which lie outside of, but interweave with, traditional notions of 'family' and to connect public and private spheres of experience (May 2011). Relationships and personal life are not (yet) well represented in debates about graduate employment and policies tend to conceive graduates as individuals, rather than as interdependent, caring, other-centred human beings(Lynch, Lyons, and Cantillon 2007). Data from a UK-based qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) project undertaken with women students and graduates over a seven-year period (2006–2013) reveal, however, that relational concerns are often at the centre of this process. The women's experiences of post-university employment were embedded within complex and interconnected networks comprised of kin and non-kin relationships as well as generalised and imagined affinities. These networks were generative of particular modes of relational thinking and doing and emotionally-infused practises of self-reflexivity (Burkitt 2012, 2014; Holmes 2010). Two modes of relationality were identified in the data and the aim of this paper is to develop these typologies in order

to demonstrate how theories of personal life and relationality can extend current understandings of university-to-work transitions.

The two typologies developed here are proximate and the elastic relationalities. Briefly outlined, proximate relationalities denote interpersonal practices and values that are characterised by physical closeness, informality, and traditionally working-class and gendered ideas about care and support. This includes emotions talk, a consensual 'support group culture' (Brownlie 2014) approach to decision-making, and patterns of parental involvement in which fathers are regarded as practical 'experts' whilst mothers occupy background, caring spaces (Brooks 2004). Elastic relationalities signify feelings of embeddedness in more diverse and geographically dispersed networks of kin and non-kin intimacies. Similar patterns of parental support are evident here; however, 'thought and talk' is far less common and decisions or strategies for employment tend to be devised in more autonomous ways (Archer 2007). Even though styles and practices of relating differed, all the women in the study engaged in 'emotional reflexivity' (Holmes 2010), defined as the complex relational negotiation of emotional norms and the practice of altering one's life as a response to emotional know-how as well as other forms of knowledge about one's own circumstances (Holmes 2011).

Deliberations and decisions about post-university employment are, of course, dependent upon available resources as well as emotional engagements and know-how. There were observable class and educational differences, which mapped on to the two relational modes; however, relationality represents the complex nexus of place, socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity and practices of intimacy, rather than class differences alone. Thus, in advancing a relational approach the aim is to move beyond the binary understandings of middle/working class experiences of HE (Davey 2012) and employment, and connect micro level experiences with structural factors that pattern the nature and practice of relationality. By doing so we may begin to 'think otherwise' (Fine 2009; cf. Trowler 2012) and see graduate employment as one sphere of personal life that intersects and overlaps with ostensibly 'private' matters such as mental health, bereavement, faith and sexuality.

Possession, position and process: characterising graduate employability

Graduate employability has become a defining narrative within debates about the value of university qualifications for graduates and the wider labour market (Brown and Hesketh 2004), and is set to be a key a measure of quality within the new teaching excellence framework (BIS 2016). For the most part, it is understood as a possession; a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that graduates must possess or acquire as part of their engagement with HE (see Jackson 2014; Knight and Yorke 2003; Raybould and Sheedy 2005). Despite being routinely and uncritically adopted within policy, the possessive approach is, 'undermined by its failure to explain differences in employment outcomes between graduates from particular demographic groups' (L.M. Holmes 2015, 222). Thus, far from benign, employability initiatives that proceed from this perspective have been roundly criticised for ignoring the gendered constructions of the performance of differentially embodied 'people skills' (Leathwood and Hey 2009, 434) and for neglecting the role of employers (Morley 2001).

Sociological research has provided an important counter-argument to the notion of employability- as-possession, illuminating the links between graduate success (i.e. income, aspirations and outcomes) and different social positions (see Purcell 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Rafferty 2012; Wakeling and Savage 2015). These studies have been critical in situating graduate outcomes in broader structural contexts of class, gender and ethnicity in the UK; nevertheless, there is still significant scope to further examine the relational and emotional dimensions of graduate transitions, and to see family and relationships as more than mere 'background' but as part of the process of graduates' everyday becomings.

It is the notion of graduate employability as a process that this paper seeks to extend. Holmes (2015) has argued for a greater focus on employability as a relational process, stating that 'whilst formally based on the award of a degree' this process 'has personal (i.e. biographical) and social meaningfulness in large part in terms of achieving employment in the types of job normally regarded as

appropriate for a graduate' (200). It is argued here that for a processual – or relational – approach to properly extend debates about the personal meaningfulness of graduate employment, then the familial and emotional processes that sit outside of the official relations of HE and employment must be taken more seriously.

Relationality, reflexivity and emotion: the significance of personal relationships
Relationality is now a popular concept within sociological theorising; however, it requires some clarification because, as Roseneil and Ketokivi (2015) maintain, it is often under-theorised, weakly invoked or, at the very least, its use is under-explained. It is important, then, to draw a distinction here between 'relational sociology' (i.e. Crossley 2011) and a rather different inclination toward the 'relational turn' that has been taken forward by researchers who are interested in the study of intimacy, personal life (e.g. Smart 2007; May 2011; Finn 2015) and emotion (Holmes 2010; Burkitt 2012). It is within this latter strand that the current research is situated and, following others (Mason 2004), relationality is developed here to challenge the contemporary (neo-liberal) focus on the individual in HE.

Relationality posits that actions, identities and values are fundamentally embedded within webs of relationships. These may be enriching and sustaining; however, they can be equally difficult, mundane, and even toxic. Thus relationality does not denote positive or wholly supportive networks, but instead offers a fluid framework for theorising the broad range of relationships that matter to people; kin and non-kin, human and non-human, real and imagined or memorialised (Smart 2007). Relational connections and the specific histories and practices that sustain them are understood to shape decision-making and the ways in which opportunities and constraints are perceived and negotiated (Finch and Mason 2003). Thus, it is in the context of ordinary relationships, and the emotional work that goes on within them, that we act, make changes or simply to carry on (Brownlie 2014).

Understanding relationships and emotions as central to decision-making and selfhood moves us away from the idea that emotions are irrational, individual and internal possessions which must be worked on or overcome (i.e. Goleman 1996). Emotions are, instead, understood to be fundamentally social in the ways they are produced and given meaning; they are vital to everyday experiences bringing both costs and benefits to the decisions we make. It is impossible, therefore, to engage with the world in a neutral, non-personal way (Burkitt 2014, 101). Accordingly, reflexivity, understood as the practice through which we develop perceptions and dispositions, values and judgements, and consider ourselves in relation to our social contexts and vice versa (Archer 2007, 4), is infused with emotion. As Mary Holmes (2010, 143) asserts:

> How and why people feel committed to their concerns is a matter of emotional relations to other things and people… Feelings about and connections to others are crucial to reflexive practices, even within a climate of individualization. Reflexive commitment to projects fundamentally involves how we relate to others.

'Emotional reflexivity' (Holmes 2010) is a useful analytical tool for thinking about how decisions and orientations towards work and employment, domestic arrangements and geographical mobility evolve out of emotional processes as well as practical know how. For Holmes and Burrows (2012, 459) emotions have become central to the ways people deliberate their actions and relationships 'in the face of a plethora of options, and of often conflicting information and advice'. So, rather than being resources for certain kinds of responses, as in the Bourdieu-inspired 'emotional capital' model (Reay 2004), emotional reflexivity recognises that our own self-feeling is coloured by the emotional judgements and stances of others towards us, to the extent that emotions thus become part of the ways situations are interpreted and actions monitored (Burkitt 2012, 471). Reflexivity is not a unique feature of late modernity, nor is it a practice limited to a particular class of people (Archer 2007); when emotionalised, reflexivity can change people's relations with others and change how they feel about their own lives and choices (Holmes 2010) even if there are limited resources for action and material transformation. A relational approach thus allows graduate experiences and emerging identities to be

understood as dynamic, ambivalent and creative, as well as socially patterned. Moreover, as biographies becomes more uncertain for women graduates, the ability to interpret one's own and others' emotions is increasingly necessary for making sense of continuity and change and for living with (and out) decisions about work and career.

The research

The discussion draws on analysis of biographical interviews generated through QLR conducted with women over a seven-year period (2006–2013). Twenty-four women were interviewed on three separate occasions for a doctorial study (ESRC funded) which explored the experiences of undergraduate students. Five years later, by which time the women had graduated from university, funding1 was sought to conduct a fourth phase of interviews with ten of the original 24 participants. Participants were recruited from state sixth forms and further education colleges in 'Millthorne'; a former mill town in North West England. Millthorne is an historically working-class town; it has a history of heavy industry, however in recent years it has seen social and economic decline and considerable deprivation (DCLG 2010). Participants reflect a range of socio-economic backgrounds; overwhelmingly, however, the women were first generation entrants (FGE) to HE (n = 18). Millthorne has a small but significant ethnic minority population (10%); thus, the sample included seven participants who identified as British Asian or British Muslim and 17 as White British. The phase four sub-sample included six FGE and one British Muslim participant.

Analysis of each phase of interviews was cross-sectional, exploring themes which emerged from the literature on HE choice and experiences and post-university transitions. In addition, case histories were also produced in order to capture the motifs, narrative devices and the ways in which relationalities were interwoven with other practices related to social class, gender, ethnicity and locality (Thomson 2009). The case histories were important for capturing the ways in which relatedness takes shape in the unfolding of time and how meanings shift and change in different temporal contexts. Analysis was organised, then, to attend to the structural and sedimented, as well as the creative, dynamic and individual.

This article focuses on phase four data, which captures the experiences of ten participants two years after exiting university. These data are, however, situated within ongoing biographies and relational histories which emerged in the project as a whole. The phase four interviews took place in 2012–2013, during which time graduate unemployment in the UK was 25%, with underemployment also a common experience (Office for National Statistics 2012). Only three of the ten women moved directly from undergraduate study into 'graduate employment' (Elias and Purcell 2004); others combined postgraduate education with volunteering and unpaid internships; flexible, low-skilled employment; and full-time work in non-graduate jobs. Employment trajectories were shaped by local labour markets and opportunity structures and, reflecting a general trend in the UK (see Roberts et al. 2016; Stone, Berrington, and Falkingham 2014), returning to live with parents after completing HE was a common experience (n = 8).

Making meaning through proximate and elastic relationalities

When the women offered narratives of their lives and their choices about HE and work they did so with reference to 'complex and lengthy accounts of the interrelationships between sets of considerations, constraints, opportunities, coincidences and serendipity' (Mason 2004, 166). Thus, even in highly personal accounts, agency and identity were presented in relational rather than individualistic terms. Notwithstanding this, experiences and orientations towards relational thinking and doing were by no means equal, nor did they engender the same kinds of emotional affinities or labour. Consequently, two fluid types of relationality were observed – proximate and elastic – and these are outlined below.

Proximate relationalities

Given the tendency to return to live with family in Millthorne, over half of the women (n = 6) described proximate relationalities. Overwhelmingly these women were FGE and came from families with long histories in Millthorne. Parents, particularly mothers, were employed in lower-skilled and lower-paid occupations and showed a tendency towards part-time employment. Returning home was described by participants as a means to ease the pressure on their search for work; moreover, there was a sense of inevitability about this and return was a common practice amongst proximates' friends, partners and peers.

> **Harriett:** … after four or five months of applying for jobs [in Bristol] and getting nowhere, I had to come home to get back on my feet … Most folk have to be honest, it's not like I've moved back and there's no-one around here. Same old face in the pub.

Boundaries between financial, emotional and social support were often blurred and interwoven, so that it was difficult to separate one from the other and negotiations around care and responsibility were complex. The proximates described relational networks with a strong sense of mutuality; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Finn 2014, 2015), the women were more than mere recipients of support but were regarded (by themselves and others) as important, contributing members of their close networks. This feeling of value, and of being valuable, was critical for the ways they took decisions about post-university employment.

Anna provides a useful example of this. A White British FGE, Anna returned to Millthorne after gaining a first class degree from a Russell Group institution in the North East of England. Following university, she lived within her family home and travelled an 80-mile round trip each day to work as a marketing assistant in a large international travel company. The role was advantageous in career terms; however, as Anna explains, it was important because it allowed her to be emotionally and geographically close to her family following the news that her parents' separation.

> **Anna:** To land that job in, like a recession, well I was very lucky … it made really good sense for me to take it and be close to family again. Things had been really wobbly and I wanted to be around; check everyone was ok, you know. It hadn't been easy for any of them and I felt so far away. My brother, he's a young lad, but he was, well he struggles a bit.

In making sense of her choices, Anna references a range of interrelated concerns and feelings: the wider socio-economic context; feelings of luck, comparative to the experiences of (generalised) others; time and timing; and the emotional needs of her family. As the older sibling, Anna reflected on her 'duty' to care throughout the project; however, this sense of responsibility emerged relationally and emotionally rather than categorically (Finch and Mason 2003). For example, Anna felt a strong sense of guilt about being away from home at a time when her younger siblings had no choice but to live through the gradual decline of their parents' marriage. Returning to Millthorne was, then, a chance to make amends and lighten the load for others, a decision formed in relation to her own emotional needs but also with regards to her interpretation of others' feelings about this situation (M. Holmes 2015). It was something she had discussed at length with her parents and negotiations were made to provide her with transport. Thus, although Anna's academic credentials were clearly important for her transition into graduate employment, the decisions she made reflect the context of her changing personal life, interactional kin negotiations, relational histories and intersubjective emotions.

Elastic relationalities

Fewer women (n = 4) described elastic relationalities and these women tended to be geographically mobile, living at a distance from family in Millthorne. Mostly, these women had family history of engagement with HE and attended prestigious universities. This group described family members as

having legitimacy and import, but not automatic priority. Thus, kin featured in their deliberations about post-university employment in more remote but still significant ways, particularly through the financial support they received to undertake study, unpaid work, and/or secure a mortgage. This support was not the informal kind described above; transactions were explicit and understood as discrete from emotional and social relations, even if this logic was tested from time to time. They did not, then, feel obliged to discuss the finer details of career plans with parents and family, or indeed their wider networks of intimacy. Even so, they often referenced a community of others – peers, friends, siblings, colleagues – in determining how to approach employment, and university-to-work transitions were nonetheless embedded in personal and emotional concerns.

Stacey is typical of this mode of relating. A White British graduate, she moved directly from an elite Scottish institution into an unpaid internship in publishing in London, supported by her parents both of whom studied at university and worked in professional occupations. London was one of several locations she considered, with a Journalism Masters in Canada coming a close second place. Stacey described her move to London as temporary and due in large part to her boyfriend's ongoing studies in the South of England. Additionally, she drew comparisons with other university friends: 'it's kind of a rite of passage to go straight from [university] to a South London house-share and a crummy job'. There was then a strong sense of Stacey being part of a 'temporal convoy' (Gillis 1996), sustained by non-kin ties in her decisions and actions. However, the longitudinal data provides a deeper insight to her relational histories and a 'long view' of how her decision to move to London was made and supported. Specifically, her relationship with her mother had been in transition for many years; a change that Stacey felt had been thrust upon her when she returned home for her first Christmas vacation in 2006. At that time Stacey described how her mother had cleared out her bedroom without prior discussion or warning, leaving her to return to a stark and depersonalised space. This was upsetting and destabilising at the time and it set the tone for her relationship with her family and home thereafter.

During her fourth interview Stacey explained that the family home was now bed and breakfast accommodation, run by her parents who had retired from their professional jobs. Home ceased to be home and, thus, her transition out of university was embedded within these ongoing emotional and relational transformations, which shaped the ways her parents offered support.

> **Stacey:** Mum and dad instantly said go for [the internship]; they saw what a good offer it was and that it would be incredibly valuable for me and for getting a foot in the door. So, yes, they agreed to support me with rent and things whilst I was in London. I don't know that it was ever a conversation really; it had to be done and they knew that.
> Interviewer: Was going home ever an option for you?
> Stacey: God no! No, not at all. Home just gradually stopped being my home. When I go home now, the room that I stay in is one of the guest rooms. I don't leave a tip. [Laughter]

So, although Stacey's experiences demonstrate the significance of financial, social and cultural capital transmitted between middle-class parents and their adult children this example shows the tangled emotional legacy (Brownlie 2014) underpinning this support which complicates notions of the 'smooth' middle-class transition. Stacey's experiences are illustrative of the flexible and mobile forms of support exchanged within elastic networks, and the implicit, unspoken nature in which decisions were arrived at. Her quip at the end reveals the ongoingness of emotional negotiations within personal networks and the ambivalence that characterised both proximate and elastic relationalities.

Having introduced the typologies, the discussion focuses on two key findings from the data. The first is that 'becoming a graduate' is a process fundamentally embedded within wider experiences of personal life. The second is that decisions to change course or hold on to ambitions and longstanding career plans emerge out of different modes of emotional reflexivity and relationality.

Becoming a graduate as an aspect of personal life

It is imperative that connections to others are not romanticised or homogenised, and nor should personal relationships regarded as 'unchanging wallpaper' (M. Archer 2012, 124). As others have shown (Mason 2004; Smart et al. 2012) personal relationships and feelings of embeddedness shift and change over time and can feel deeply constraining, inhibiting identities and possibilities for action. The examples discussed in this section illuminate some of the more challenging aspects of relational thinking and doing, and the ways in which post-university employment coloured other aspects of personal life. Two participants, Mira (British Muslim) and Catherine (White British, non-heterosexual), described the ways in which issues of faith and sexuality respectively manifested in their experiences of post-university employment. These examples illustrate how the process of 'becoming a graduate' is not separable from other aspects of selfhood and emotional entanglements thus illuminating the artificial distinction between 'public' and 'private' concerns for university leavers.

Mira did not leave home to attend university and after graduating from a local post-1992 institution found work in a secular state school attended predominantly by local Muslim children in her community. She described typically proximate relationalities with kin and community; during her first year of university she tutored local school children and invoked a strong sense of duty and connection to those closest to her. As a graduate, however, Mira experienced tensions between her sense of self as a Muslim woman, part of the local community, her emerging identity as a primary school teacher. Specifically, Mira noticed that expectations were placed upon her (the only Muslim teacher) by parents who saw her not only as a teacher, but as a Muslim woman with particular responsibilities to the faith. She reflected on the pressure she felt to speak bilingually and to exempt herself from school performances in which there were public displays of dancing and singing.

As Louise Archer (2012) has argued, performing 'acceptable' middle-class identities can be ambivalent for young professionals from minority ethnic backgrounds, who feel they must tread the fine line between authenticity and pretension. The judgments and expectations of parents certainly took their toll on Mira as she tried to forge a sense of graduate self that chimed with her connection to her faith.

Thoughts about how she was perceived by parents ('probably really stuck up') weighed on her emotionally and although Mira was generally happy in her job, these pressures lead her to consider other positions where she would be more anonymous and where her faith was not a defining issue. These deliberations about work and career, were part of a reflexive process involving internal conversations and 'thought and talk' (Archer 2007) with her partner and father-in-law who encouraged her to stand her ground and assert herself more in her present role. We can identify here how Mira drew upon her proximate relational network to solve problems that a proximate, embedded professional life engendered.

Perhaps understandably, a solution based around distance, anonymity and more elastic modes of relating was not encouraged.

Catherine's experiences of coming out as non-heterosexual and beginning a same-sex relationship provide a slightly different example of the ways post-university employment took on shape and emotional complexity within the multiple spheres of personal life. In 2013, Catherine was living in the family home after completing her degree on the South Coast of England. Earlier in the study, attending university as a FGE, she described university as a chance to 'take off the jackets' that others had placed upon her in school and sixth form and, thus, she was seeking out more elastic modes of relating, breaking free from some of the strictures of family whilst still being supported over distance. Although HE provided opportunities for self-transformation for Catherine, when she returned to Millthorne as a graduate her parents refused to accept her sexuality as anything more than a phase; something that proved difficult when she began a same-sex relationship with a colleague at work. Here again is an example of how finding a sense of stability as a graduate was embedded within the desire to shift from proximate to more elastic modes of relating. This is not straightforward, however, because family practices have histories and reflect sedimented investments.

> **Catherine:** I think a move would be best because it opens up the jobs … it would give [Catherine and her partner] a chance to start something without anybody overlooking or saying, why are you doing that? Are you sure you're not doing it too early on? Things like that. When it comes to mum and dad, like, I like them to be involved, and I wouldn't still be here – believe me – if I didn't want to make things right. But, they are just not well-informed about the decisions I want to make. Sometimes I just think this whole situation, my life; like, it's been two years [since she graduated]. It's crazy. I'm more qualified than some of the managers [at work]. But I don't have the experience. You know, it's really strange because you think university is going to change your whole life and two years on, and you're just stuck.

Working part-time as an administrator in Millthorne, amongst colleagues who did not have a degree qualification, Catherine felt 'stuck' and misrecognised both at home and at work. This excerpt is telling of the ways employment decisions and matters relating to family, intimacy and relationality were discussed as one and the same; as seamless and interconnecting. Catherine's narrative moves from her situation at home to her experiences at work, producing a general feeling of disillusionment as her emerging identity is not 'warranted' by key others (L.M. Holmes 2015, 232). That this lack of ascription takes place within two separate but overlapping spaces is significant, and reinforces Catherine's sense of disconnection to those around her. Openness, thought and talk remain important strategies, despite giving rise to conflict and intense emotional labour. Indeed, as was characteristic of proximate relationalities, family is central here and, thus, 'making things right' with mum and dad is fundamental to Catherine's decision to stick her situation out for so long.

Emotional reflexivity: changing course and holding on

'Sticking it out' was a key motif across the interviews, no matter for how long this strategy was in place. This section examines the role of emotional reflexivity in the women's decisions to change course and revise career plans, or hold on to aspirations and ambitions. As shall become clear, changing course was more common amongst women in proximate relational networks, with holding on a preferred strategy of those who exhibited elastic modes of relating. In both instances, self-reflexivity was infused with emotion and decisions about work strongly tied to emotional wellbeing.

Emily, a White British FGE reflects on her decision to terminate an unpaid internship within a music management company (her chosen field) in favour of a junior administrative role (in an unrelated field) close to her family home in Millthorne.

> **Emily:** I was getting to the point where I'd had enough. I think I'd started to doubt that [the internship] was what I wanted so it made me, I dunno, I just seemed to feel more exhausted and fed up once I'd made that mental shift. And people were like, a bit shocked when I told them [about the internship]. I think my dad and, well, my mates too I suppose, well they were just like, 'you're driving all that way to Leeds to work for free and you're not even guaranteed a job at the end of it?' I kind of felt, is the joke on me here? I knew I had to consider other options.

Emily reveals how post-university employment is made sense of through the process embodied meaning making; she links her mental shift away from a career in the music industry to physical feelings of exhaustion, sadness and a lack of motivation. This emotional context was important for her decision to pursue a new career highlighting that emotional states and relational connections are as important for reflexivity as official knowledge and information (Burkitt 2012; Holmes 2010). Equally, the perceptions of her friends and family – their vocalised doubts and disbeliefs – were integral to her self-perception and sense of self-worth.

When the proximates devised second best options for employment they did so in the context of personal relationships, emotions talk with key others, and a distinctly communicative self-reflexivity. As Archer (2007) notes, those who engage in 'thought and talk' are 'great respecters of contingency because their immersion in "similarity and familiarity" greatly restricts the experiential database upon which they can draw'. Emily's explicitly emotional narrative is indicative, then, of 'the ties that bind' and the value of place-based (and traditionally working-class) values attached to 'settling down' and feeling secure. Tanya, also White British and a FGE, shared similar experiences. Whereas Emily felt relieved and empowered by changing course, however, Tanya's narrative was underpinned by feelings of loss and self-blame. Tanya studied a design degree at a local post-1992 institution and her longstanding ambition to be a stage designer on Broadway was something she spoke about at length during the study. When we met again in 2012, however, Tanya was working alongside her mother as a social care assistant in Millthorne.

> **Tanya:** Being in Millthorne, you know it's not the end of the world and I can do a job now, that I really want to do and the thing is that I'll be really good at it without thinking, oh, I've got to go to London or America to earn good money and have a career … when I got the job [in social care] my mate was like, 'you've been around care all your life, why did you not think of it sooner?' … it took her to point it out to kind of spell it out to me and for me to say, 'ooh, I've made a mistake I should've done this years ago'. (emphasis added)

This excerpt reiterates the emotional and relational work involved in making university-to-work transitions meaningful; especially those which emerge out of contingency. Tanya's narrative conveys a deep sense of ambivalence towards home and a future there; it is neither the end of the world, nor what she had envisaged for herself. However, amidst her feelings of loss are strong relational connections and a sense of intergenerational continuity which imbues this 'second best' experience with meaning and emotional value as she tries to reconcile the trade-off she has made. It has been argued that FGE to HE carry a particularly heavy responsibility and are required to do a great deal of emotional, cultural and social work for the wider family and community in ensuring their own success (Thomas and Quinn 2007, 59). Tanya's experiences are revealing, then, of the contradictions underpinning transitions out of HE for many women who return home after university. As Allen and Hollingworth (2013: 514) maintain, raising young people's aspirations without providing labour market opportunities to accommodate these is dangerous, particularly when, as in the examples of Emily and Tanya, aspirations are for careers in the creative and knowledge economy. Whilst there is undoubtedly support of various kinds, and a deep emotional connection to home, feelings of success are undermined because of the ways is 'getting on' has become synonymous with masculinist notions 'getting away' (Cairns 2014; Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine 2003).

Contingency was not exclusive to women who returned to Millthorne. Caitlin demonstrated an elastic relational network; however, she too reflected on the need to change the course of her career plans. Caitlin is White British and graduated from a Russell Group university in England. She followed a very structured pathway into a career in Law; supported financially and in other ways by her university-educated parents, Caitlin studied the Bar Professional Training Course in the Northern city where she lived with her boyfriend, eventually qualifying as a barrister. Despite her success, Caitlin felt unhappy and unfulfilled in her job as a legal advocate and planned to leave to take up an unpaid political internship in Westminster. Her networks were significant for the ways she devised an alternate career for herself, and she drew on emotionally poignant memories as well as the imagined judgements of others. In contrast to women like Emily and Tanya, however, the practice of emotional reflexivity was mostly internal and autonomous for Caitlin.

> **Caitlin:** I try to talk to mum about [being unhappy at work] but it is so hard, sometimes I just hide my feelings … I laid the seeds [...] I didn't get the greatest reaction. The whole thing, personal injury claims, it's completely soulless and I hate every minute of it. It isn't me, it isn't

for me … between second and third year I went to Malawi to work as a volunteer and, you know what, it was the best time of my whole life. The feeling I got from, like making a real difference to the lives of these kids … What I'm doing now, there's no value in it; I've no pride in it. Just stress and sleepless nights. (original emphasis)

Caitlin's narrative demonstrates the ways in which reflexive understandings of self are imbued with memories, embodied practices and relational connections, even when deliberations are internal, away from the involvement of others. A career change is, of course, an option for Caitlin because she possesses the necessary financial, social and cultural capital to secure an unpaid internship in London; however, this decision is no less emotionally charged or significant because she is well resourced and the tensions between her and her mother are palpable. There are clear distinctions between this case and others who changed course, however; for Caitlin, the emotions driving change were linked to the intrinsic value of the job – doing something meaningful – rather than achieving a sense of emotional security or stability – doing something concrete. Caitlin thus saw herself as moving forward, rather than sideways or even backwards as she changed direction.

It was generally more common for women within elastic networks to speak of 'holding on'; persevering through periods of unsatisfying employment in the hope that something better would come along in time. Sophie, for example, moved to London to attend drama school after spending a year in Millthorne. Sophie's story offers another account of complex, historical familial negotiations that built up over time. In brief, Sophie made a deal with her parents prior to university that she would gain a degree on the condition that they supported her acting career thereafter. Far from a smooth and cushioned transition out of university, however, Sophie described two years of constant rejection from casting calls and auditions, feelings of loneliness in her anonymous flat-share and exhaustion from casual work in a restaurant that gradually built up into an episode of depression.

> **Sophie:** when I was really depressed, like not functioning and just in my room all the time, it was hard to keep mum at bay, even down here [in London]. But I knew she'd say, 'come home, find an internship locally. You're a clever girl, forget this acting business', so even in my darkest moment, I still knew not to, well, not to go there with her.

The geographical distance that separated Sophie and her family allows for an autonomous, though still relationally and emotionally orientated style of reflexivity. The perceptions and values of key others were still central, even if they did not support her plans to hold on. 'Not going there' with her mother is clearly different to not entertaining her mother's point of view, which is acknowledged in the internal conversation. However, by avoiding direct scrutiny Sophie is able examine her options and, crucially, she is free from the need to take her mother's advice on board. As Archer (2007) contends, those who engage in this sort of reflexivity consider nobody to be more authoritative than themselves in matters relating to their own life.

The examples discussed here show how decisions to change course or hold on are often driven by emotional impulses, memories, and relational connections. Both strategies emerge as a response to periods of unhappiness and poor levels of post-university satisfaction; however, the ways in which the reflexive decision-making takes shape varies according to the women's resources and the relational styles that characterise their networks. This reveals that emotional and relational dimensions of choice are as important as objective knowledge about employers, local labour markets, and the views of 'official' others. Indeed, the examples demonstrate how relational and emotional ties inform judgements of what constitutes a 'good' or 'appropriate' job in each case, as well as the broader process of 'becoming a graduate'. This might be a job or position that is well known, enjoys respect and is also readily available in the local community, or careers from which meaning and emotional satisfaction can be derived (Archer 2007). It is curious that across the narratives, and irrespective of social class, 'good' employment was embedded in feminine notions of care and 'making a difference',

or tied to intrinsic passions rather than ostensibly rational (and masculinist) notions of status and success. These examples thus demonstrate the ways social distinctions of class and educational background are played out through gender giving rise to ambivalent and contradictory experiences (Silva 2005).

Concluding discussion

This article has demonstrated the ways in which women's experiences of exiting university, securing employment and making plans for a career are embedded and become meaningful within the context of personal life. By examining how women graduates feel connected, supported and very often obligated to their intimate networks, this paper has shown that university-to-work transitions are valued and narrated in much broader terms than skills and attributes, status or salary. Indeed, finding a 'good' job and feeling good about post-university employment was expressed as relational and emotional processes that related strongly to feelings of wellbeing, stability and personal satisfaction. It is important, then, to bring new theoretical tools to a field which increasingly seeks to foreground relational practices and interactions for graduate transitions and identities (L.M. Holmes 2015; Stevenson and Clegg 2012).

Although the findings presented here emerge from a small and geographically specific sample, they nevertheless indicate that a much broader range of relationships – than simply those between graduates and employers, official advisers and university tutors – are significant for shaping decisions, identities and resources. The nature and location of the networks into which graduates are (re)embedded following university clearly have an impact upon the ways they feel able to navigate different types of information and advice; the ways different employment attributes and trajectories are valued; and how the temporality of transitions is organised and understood. As graduate transitions into employment continue to attract attention, and as (im)mobility and intergenerational support become defining features of this process in the UK (Roberts et al. 2016), Europe (see Moreno 2012) and the US (Swartz 2009), it is more important than ever to understand the role of graduates' relational networks for how they navigate this period.

If we acknowledge the complex ways in which post-university decisions and actions interweave with personal life, economic and social resources, modes of relating and (dis)connections to place, then we must also think critically about where and how HE institutions fit into this entanglement. Given that teaching excellence and success is to be measured in part by graduate employment metrics (BIS 2016) it is likely that universities will strive to do (even) more to attend to the employability 'problem' via the curriculum and other skills-based initiatives. This paper reveals, however, that once they have exited university, women graduates, regardless of social class or resources, make sense of their post-university employment trajectories in and through their personal and emotional lives. Success is often embedded in feelings of self-worth and gendered notions of making a difference or living a caring and connected life, and this necessarily has implications for employment opportunities when relational networks are located in towns and cities that cannot offer graduate-level opportunities in abundance (or at all). Thus, as Stevenson and Clegg (2012) have argued, despite the explicit curriculum efforts of PDP, and extra-curricular activities which may be encouraged to produce a "future-focused, performative self", many women may simply resist these in favour of more meaningful, care-centred strategies which might put them at a disadvantage whilst also increasing pressure on universities to attend to neo-liberal notions of insert successful selfhood that fail to resonate.

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