

**‘My father found it for me’: changing experiences of
entering the workforce in twentieth-century urban Britain.**

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Abstract

Leaving education and gaining employment is a significant life-course transition for most people. This paper explores the processes by which young people gained their first job in mid-twentieth century urban Britain, and examines the ways in which this changed in relation to major shifts in society, economy and culture. Key themes include the role of parents and other family members, changes in levels of autonomy and control and the impacts of societal change. Data are drawn from oral testimonies collected in three major urban areas: Glasgow, Manchester and London, and span a period from the 1920s to the 1980s.

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Context

There is an extensive and multi-disciplinary literature on life course transitions such as starting school, leaving home, marriage or retirement¹. These are events that most people experience, with the transition from school or college to the workplace one of the most important. Such movement may also coincide with leaving home, though this is not necessarily the case, and the experience itself is likely to vary substantially depending on a wide range of factors including previous education, type of labour market entered, location, age, gender and familial support. Although there has been substantial demographic research on leaving home in the past², and many historical studies of intergenerational social mobility³, much less attention has been paid to the experience of first entering the workforce. One notable exception is the research of Selina Todd⁴ who argues, among other things, that family ties continued to exert a strong influence on female experiences of finding work and entering the labour force in the twentieth century. This paper seeks to extend Todd’s research by focusing on men and women in the mid-twentieth century, and demonstrates that family and friends were widely used to gain work for men as well as women entering urban labour markets in this period. However, the factors influencing life course and time-space interactions are both complex⁵ and historically contingent⁶, and this paper seeks to explore some of these complexities in the context of mid-twentieth century Britain. In particular, the paper focuses on the ways in which the transition from education to work was being reconfigured in relation to the changing structures of society, economy, location and familial relations. Three themes are highlighted. First, and most fully, issues of autonomy and control.⁷ How much power did young people have to select their own career and how did this affect job choice. Many factors could restrict career choice, including family pressures and concerns, transport constraints, economic factors and societal norms.⁸ Second, and following from this, the paper explores briefly how entering the workforce varied between three British labour markets (London, Glasgow, Manchester) and, third, attention is paid to how these factors varied from the 1920s to the 1980s.

The mid-twentieth century was undoubtedly a period that saw significant changes in most aspects of economy and society, all of which influenced the ability of young men and women to gain work and also the types of employment available.⁹ Extensive reviews of such changes are available elsewhere¹⁰, here some of the main themes are briefly enumerated. Perhaps of most significance

were changes in education and the age of leaving school, thus leading to both men and women not only gaining more qualifications but also higher expectations about the nature of their careers.¹¹ Second, the period saw massive labour market fluctuations with high unemployment in the 1920s and 30s, and significant new opportunities in the second half of the century.¹² Third, there were societal changes affecting the expectations of young people¹³, not only influenced by the experience of two world wars during which many women and men (temporarily) took on new roles and gained life-changing experiences, but also more broadly as pre-twentieth century class barriers were slowly reconfigured, though never entirely removed.¹⁴ While intergenerational social mobility increased for some, it has been argued that for many of the working class such barriers remained strong.¹⁵ The mid-twentieth century was also a period in which there were significant regional differences of experience, with the south east of England prospering much more than the north of Britain. Although there was some inter-regional transfer of labour from more to less depressed economic regions, this often acted to exacerbate such inequalities.¹⁶ Finally, this was also a period in which gender roles began to be renegotiated though, as with geographical and class-based inequalities, the extent to which real change was experienced by most women was limited.¹⁷ It is against the historical context of such changes that the experience of entering the work force for the first time is examined.

The cities of London, Manchester and Glasgow selected for study were three of the largest urban areas in twentieth-century Britain, located in very different regional economies and with varied urban labour markets. London, as a primate capital city, had by far the largest and most diverse labour market potentially offering a wide range of employment in the more buoyant southern economy, but both Manchester and Glasgow offered a wide range of possible careers, with Glasgow more dominated by manufacturing than Manchester.¹⁸ All three cities has good intra-urban transport networks which would have allowed workers to travel to employment in most parts of the urban area though, as with most towns and cities, radial journeys were more easily undertaken than cross-city trips.¹⁹ Although all urban areas have their own distinctive characteristics, it is argued that the three cities studied represent a range of conditions and experiences found in large urban areas in twentieth-century Britain.

The data

Data used for this paper were originally collected for the purpose of studying changes in the journey to work in the twentieth century. This part of the project has been completed and published²⁰; but in

carrying out this research we were also aware that the data we had collected provided information that went well beyond the remit of the original research. Only now have we returned to these data to explore other aspects. The main data base consists of 90 in-depth interviews (conducted by Jean Turnbull in 1997 and 1998) with respondents born between 1912 and 1969 and living in London, Manchester or Glasgow at the time they started work. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face but some, especially with very busy younger respondents, were undertaken by phone. There was no evidence of any significant difference in quality between those done in person and those carried out by phone. In Manchester 25 interviews were conducted with respondents, in Glasgow 24, and 41 in the much larger labour market of London. The respondents were divided almost equally between males and females. Interviews were conducted as a narrative life history, encouraging the respondent to talk about their experience of gaining work, travel to and from work and how this changed over time. While the main focus of questioning was on the factors influencing choice of work in relation to residence and the journey to work, inevitably many additional items of information emerged during the interviews. Early in each interview the respondent was asked to relate how they found their first job (excluding national service and casual work while a student) and the factors that influenced this choice. We thus had a reasonably consistent set of data on entering the workforce in three urban labour markets at various times between the 1920s and 1980s. Because the main focus of the research was initially on the inter-war period the sample is biased towards those born in the 1920s and entering the workforce in the 1930s (Tables 1 and 2). This means that for later periods in particular the number of respondents from each city is relatively small and care must be taken in drawing conclusions from such small numbers. In terms of occupational groupings female respondents are drawn mainly from those entering clerical, secretarial and administrative work, symptomatic of the types of work available to women in these mid-twentieth century urban labour markets²¹, while male occupations are distributed more evenly between the categories identified (Table 3). Although there are some respondents from all social groups, in common with many such surveys there is a bias towards those with more education and training. Analysis presented below draws briefly on a simple quantitative analysis of the data, but mainly on the content of the rich transcripts produced from the interviews. All interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using the text analysis programme Atlas ti, but as with all oral evidence there are complex issues of interpretation relating to what and how the past is remembered that must be borne in mind during the following discussion.²² The focus of the paper is largely empirical, though some of the bigger issues raised are briefly discussed in the concluding section.

Entering the workforce: issues of autonomy and power

The role of parents

The desire for individuals to have some autonomy and control over their lives is common to all cultures and time periods, as too is the desire of parents to regulate the lives of their children through the development of close family bonds.²³ However these can often conflict with each other, including in the context of leaving school and finding work where the preferences of offspring may not conform to the expectations of parents. In Britain the school leaving age was raised to 14 years in 1918, to 15 years in 1947 and to 16 years in 1972.²⁴ Thus throughout this period school leavers could reasonably still be viewed as children subject to at least some parental control. However, most respondents in this sample did not begin work until sometime after the minimum school leaving age (Table 4). In most cases this was due to the combination of an extended education, voluntary travel, unemployment, caring responsibilities or military service. Overall the mean age of entering the labour market was 17.2 years, with almost no difference between males and females (17.2 for women and 17.3 for men). As would be anticipated the mean age at which young people began work increased from the 1920s to the 1980s, but even in the 1920s and '30s many did not begin work until they were 15 or 16. From the 1930s the mean age of gaining a first job was over 18. There were also few differences between the three areas studied, although a smaller proportion began work at 14 in London (17%) compared to Glasgow (29%) and Manchester (24%), suggesting that the capital offered greater opportunities for extended education. However, in all three locations over one third of those studied started work aged 17 or older. Unsurprisingly, of those in unskilled work only 20 per cent started work later than the minimum school leaving age at the time, with those entering retail and caring roles also mostly starting work as soon as the school leaving age was reached (33%). For all other occupational categories more than half of respondents had some form of education or training beyond the minimum school age: 68% for those in skilled industrial work; 84% for clerical, secretarial and administrative work and 100% for those entering professional and managerial roles. These data suggest that for many young people there was no sudden transition from school to work, but rather a more gradual shift over a longer period of time, and that many had reached an age where it would be reasonable to expect quite a high degree of independence. Qualitative evidence drawn from extended interviews is now used to explore the process by which this transition was effected.

Todd²⁵ highlights the importance of family members for young women seeking work in the inter-war years: data reported in this paper support these findings and suggest that, especially in the 1920s and '30s, family ties were the main route into paid employment for both young men and women.

The degree to which adolescents were directed into a particular line of work by parents varied substantially, with young women often more strongly directed than young men, but some parental influence was recalled by many of the male respondents who entered the workforce in the inter-war period.

Two women who started work in London in the 1920s and '30s were typical of many female respondents at this time. R09 began work at 14 and stated that when she left school:

My mother took me to the Labour Exchange, which was the place you had to go to in those days, and stressed to the man behind the counter, apparently there were no ladies doing that job in those days, and said I do not want my daughter to go into a factory, and she would be happy buying and selling things I think, but said definitely not a factory. So I was offered a place [as a receptionist] which was not buying or selling but which could be quite interesting for me.²⁶

R30 continued in education until the age of 16, but still had limited control over her choice of work:

I've always thought I'd like to be a teacher but parents in those days I think thought an office was a nice safe job and they always thought girls would marry anyway, and of course now I think that my father thought that perhaps I wouldn't stand up to the rough and tumble of school life. He might have been right. I don't know.²⁷

R31, a young man also living in London was also strongly directed by his parents when he left school in 1938 aged 16 years. Although directed to several potential employers by the local employment agency it was his parents who pushed him towards employment on the railways:

... and then I got the application forms and my parents looked at these forms, and because as you know at sixteen and a half you haven't got a clue really what you want to do and they said oh that's got a pension attached to it. That's a job for life. Oh you must put in for that one. So not knowing what else I wanted to do, well I did know what else I wanted to do but they wouldn't let me, I filled in all the forms and then was told to report.²⁸

R28 was also strongly directed by his parents when he started work in London as a messenger boy at the age of 14 in 1936.

My father found it for me. He was in the Post Office and actually my father was very concerned about employment. I could have gone on to sixteen at Grammar School. ... I could have gone on but he said no. He'd known too many Grammar School boys and graduates who'd been reduced to taking encyclopaedias around the doors and he thought it was far

better to get into a job. That was the most important thing. So fourteen he, well he didn't actually get me the job, but he arranged for me to go for an interview which I did and I was taken on at the Post Office.²⁹

Parents did not always agree on the career that their son or daughter should take and although there is some evidence that career advice or direction from parents was gendered, with mothers assisting their daughters and fathers their sons, where there was disagreement fathers mostly took the dominant role. This was the case for R25 who started work in Manchester in 1939 aged 14 years. Initially her mother had gained her a position in a knitting factory where relatives already worked but her father objected to this: 'My dad was more influential. He was ambitious for me. My mum first of all had got me a job in a knitting factory and my dad threw up his hands in the air and said no she's got to go somewhere where there's training'.³⁰ After this intervention it was her mother who then assisted in finding an acceptable job as a junior sales assistant in an up-market gown shop in Manchester.

All the above themes continued throughout the 1940s and '50s in all three labour markets with relatively little variation over time or space. For many adolescent boys and girls parents continued to play a major role in both career choice and in finding a job, and the recollection of respondents is that they had relatively little autonomy and control: any wishes that they had were over-ridden by the concerns of parents who often had strong views about what would be sensible or appropriate. R23 who began work in Glasgow in 1950 was thwarted in her ambition to be a nurse by her father's objections to this career for his daughter. Her first job was as a trainee sales assistant in a high status ladies' gown shop but her recollection of the process of gaining this post is revealing:

Well sadly it wasn't what I wanted to do. Just previous, before I left school I had gone to the headmistress with other girls in my class who wanted to do nursing and she was absolutely delighted that the four of us had gone to take up this post and she gave us forms (to take) home to give our parents to fill them in, and my father's reaction – my mother was delighted because her mother had been a midwife for the village – but my father was mortified because he did not want his daughter to be emptying bedpans. Right. And that's one of the excuses. And also on the form they wanted to know particulars of the husband's income and his savings and any family wealth, and he was most indignant about this and the forms went into the back of the fire. He wasn't going to tell anybody his business. I had to go back to the headmistress and apologize and she was quite upset for me but it's something that you just

have to accept. ... And I believe in those days that there would have been a bursary if your income had been low, and my dad being a milkman, but he was a saver and he kept his money in his pocket or behind the bed and that sort of thing. He didn't believe in banks either. He didn't want anyone to know his business.³¹

Two key themes emerge from the last two quotes. In both cases parents from strongly working-class backgrounds had aspirations of improved status for their daughters with work as a sales assistant in a ladies' gown shop not only being appropriate for young women, but also a career that could bring their daughter into contact with high-status customers. In both cases the shops were in an up-market part of town and certainly one in which the family would not normally shop themselves. Caring for others or working in a factory was not good enough. Precise reasons for such reactions are hard to deduce from the historical evidence available. The account by R23 implies that her father had concerns about privacy or possible shame at his status, possibly reflecting mid-twentieth century working-class views of masculinity,³² and was therefore not prepared to reveal his income on the forms that would have enabled his daughter to gain a bursary to train as a nurse as she wished. However, other factors may have been important such as the relatively low wages of nurses in the mid-twentieth century, and the fact that his daughter would have to live away from home while training.³³

Three further brief examples from the 1940s demonstrate clearly that parents, and especially fathers, took a major role in determining the careers of many young men. R01 began work in London in 1940 aged 15 and his first job was gained directly through his father's connections: 'I wasn't doing very much and my dad from the First World War, his major said that if he ever wanted anything to get in touch. I wanted a job so he got in touch with the major and I got, he was connected with Lloyds Brokers, so I got a job with Lloyds Brokers' (as a junior clerk).³⁴ R06 also lived in London and started work in 1942 at the age of 14 years. He stated that his education had been badly disrupted by war-time air raids and that he did not feel well prepared for work. However his father used his Union connections to get his son an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner in the Victoria Docks:

So then I'm getting to, there's a few more months and then it's almost time for me to finish school. I'd hardly done any arithmetic. I hadn't done oh anything really and so it was just a case of where do I go. Well, me dad, he was a Millwright at the Daks Chemical Works and through the union, the Amalgamated Engineers Union which he belonged to, he put out

enquiries and I was told that I was to go for an interview and went down to Thomsons at Victoria Docks ... so that is how I started my apprenticeship.³⁵

One final example, also from London, again shows how many young men leaving school in the 1940s had little input into their choice of career, and also demonstrates the importance of family connections. R41 started work as an office boy in 1940 at the age of 14 when he left school though, like the respondent quoted above, his education had been disrupted by air raids.

There wasn't any schooling after the war started. There were night schools which were all right until the raids started then they all packed up anyway. So that was it, no more schooling and I was old enough to go to work and the firm was almost the 'family firm', it was Central London Electricity. My father was there, he was an electrician. My brother had gone there and so somewhere for B [*respondent*] to go so B went. ... The standard way, well especially where a parent was working there, is he goes up and sees the boss and says that my boy wants a job. Alright send him in and that was it, and that was the way it worked.³⁶

For these young men their careers were interrupted by war service as soon as they became old enough, but two out of the three examples continued in the line of employment begun when they left school, and into which they were at least encouraged by their parents (especially fathers), after their war service ended. The role of parents declined markedly from the 1960s, possibly linked to the later school leaving age and thus greater maturity and independence of young people, though for at least some respondents parents continued to be important. R62 who began work in Manchester in 1960 had relatively little idea what she wanted to do when she left school at 18 and it was her father who directed her towards secretarial work with a local employer, possibly because she has passed only one of the three A levels that she had taken. As the respondent put it: 'I think that my father had heard of the Chloride Group and knew they were good employers. I didn't know what I wanted to do and I think that I just went with the flow I'm afraid'.³⁷ R65 who began work in Manchester in 1980, also aged 18, had a not dissimilar experience. Her original intention was to go into nursing and looked for a temporary job while she waited for the course to start. Her father got her a post as a 'hopper filler' with Great Universal Stores and as she enjoyed this she decided to stay there rather than train for nursing. It is clear from her account that she was comfortable to follow her father into the same firm and that she did not have strong views about her career: 'Well my father actually worked – it's quite a big firm – and my father actually worked there and he knew that there were

temporary positions and mainly over the Christmas period, in the run up to the Christmas period so that's how I, I applied there in the first place 'cause I knew there were, there were jobs available'.³⁸

The role of school

Schools, and especially head teachers, often played an indirect role in the transition from education to employment. They would suggest possible careers, point out vacancies, make appointments with employment agencies and facilitate in a variety of ways. However they rarely directed in the way that parents could, and often school and parent interacted to determine the career of a school leaver. This was certainly the case for R05 who began work in a bookshop in Manchester in 1944 at the age of 14:

It was through the headmistress at school. She had several jobs on her book and it wasn't the usual time for leaving, it was Easter and I was 14 and these jobs had come up and she asked me would I be interested and I told my father and my father went to school and he chose me that job as a start but you see it didn't work out, but I enjoyed it.³⁹

The reason it did not work out was largely because her father had clearly not enquired carefully enough about the job. As the respondent put it: 'I think I was there about three months and dad suddenly found out I was working in a Communist bookshop, the red flag was in there you know and I was taken out swiftly'.⁴⁰ She subsequently gained employment as an office junior with a cotton manufacturer, and attended commercial college part time to learn shorthand typing. This opening was facilitated by the Captain of her Girl Guide company, again showing the importance of networks of key contacts in gaining access to work.

The influence of school was also important for R10, a young man who started work in London in 1932 aged 15:

Well I was pretty hopeless at school. Charlton Central School in London, ... and it was when I was about fifteen, you usually left when you were sixteen, but I came fifteen, the headmaster said to me there is a job going in the City and although you have got another six months to go we advise you in this day and age, because then jobs were very difficult, we advise you to go and take it on, you see ...⁴¹

It is clear from these extracts that labour market conditions played a significant role in job choice: in the 1930s in particular work was limited (especially in the more depressed Glasgow labour market) with high youth and adult unemployment,⁴² and young people were encouraged to take whatever

was available even if it was not necessarily what they were best suited for. However, most of the respondents we spoke to did gain work and clearly some jobs were available in a range of economic sectors, with school leavers having some advantages in the job market as they were relatively cheap to employ.⁴³ As with parental influences, the direct role attributed to the influence of school declined in the 1960s: the latest example we have is R91 who started work in London in 1955 aged 16 years. For him school provided the contacts that enabled him to get work in the local docks:

We lived in a dock area and a couple of people who worked in the first shipping firm that I was with, they were very involved with my, my school, and one day I think one of these reps from the shipping firm came in to Peter Hills [school] and just asked if there was anyone suitable that could start as a junior at the Christmas leaving. I think my headmaster sort of said I could probably do quite a good job for them. So it was really a rep from another firm that lived in my area and was involved with my school.⁴⁴

The role of employment agencies and careers officers

As demonstrated above both schools and parents worked with employment agencies and related organisations to place young people in work. But it was rare for an agency or careers advisor to be the sole actor in determining the career of a school leaver, though their influence did seem to increase as the century progressed.

R11 who began work in London in 1932 aged 15 did ascribe her first job mainly to simply going along to an agency and taking the first suitable job (as a typist) that she was offered, though she also implies that she was accompanied (presumably by a parent) and that the economic conditions of the time meant that she felt constrained to take whatever was available: 'Well it was the one that was offered really. Things were very difficult in those days and we went to an agency and that was the one I was sent to and I was appointed straight away'.⁴⁵ R19 also ascribed her job selection to the local Youth Employment Exchange when she started work in Manchester in 1936 aged 14 years, though she did exert some agency over her career as she rejected the first post offered in favour of something that she felt better suited her skills:

Well I think I left school at, on the Friday and I probably went to the, it was the Youth Employment Exchange, probably on the Monday morning and they offered me a job in a sewing factory quite near to home but I didn't fancy sewing. Then they offered me this other job, clerical job so I thought that was more/so I went.⁴⁶

The above quote suggests that even in a period of relatively high unemployment in the 1930s there were not only jobs available in a city like Manchester, but also that some young people at least felt able to be relatively selective about what they did. During war-time conditions in the 1940s male school leavers too young for military service found work much more easily due to the shortage of men in the civilian labour force. R26 was fairly typical: he had a clear idea of what he wanted to do and went with his father to the employment exchange in London to find employment when he left school aged 16 in 1943.

After Christmas, I think in January, I went with my father to the employment exchange up in London ... and they interviewed us there and they said well I think I've got a sort of job that you might like and they sent me round to the Government Chemist Laboratory. We went straight away, you know after the interview and they were of course very short of male employees because of people being called up and they said well you know start next week so to speak and that's the way I started. There was no interview. It was very simple and straightforward.⁴⁷

In the 1960s both employment exchanges and school careers officers were important routes into work for some young people, and this was the only period in which school careers advice (as opposed to using school connections in the 1920s and '30s as outlined above) seemed to be significant. The Schools Careers Service was established in Britain in the early 1960s, in which local authority careers officers worked alongside schools to provide careers advice,⁴⁸ and evidence from the interviews suggests that in this decade it was quite widely used by pupils to gain work. However in the 1970s and '80s it was barely mentioned by respondents. Both R92 and R94 ascribe their first jobs primarily to the role of the school careers officer. R92 began work as an apprentice telephone technician in London in 1967 at the age of 16 years. He states:

It was suggested by the Careers Officer at school actually. He arranged an interview with the South-east area initially which was based at Wimbledon and I didn't pass the interview there. I passed their exam or their test that they gave us but didn't pass the interview and thought no more of it, and then I got a letter from central area, from Dial House, asking me to go up there for an interview and I was accepted.⁴⁹

R94 also began work in London aged 16 years, this time in 1963, when she gained a job as a typist. She recounts a similar experience, though did get the first job she was interviewed for: 'Right I got that job, I think it was through the careers person at school. You know you had these Careers

Advisers or whatever they're called and I think they found the vacancy in London and I went up and had an interview and was offered the job'.⁵⁰ R64 began work in Manchester in 1964 when he left school at 16, and took the advice he was given by the Youth Employment Department in the city, even though it was not exactly what he wanted to do:

Yes well this was a case of since, since I left school I went ... to the Youth Employment Department, the Council of Youth Employment section and at that time I wanted to be, you know I wanted to go into journalism and I didn't have the qualifications then and they just said to me well, more or less, you have to take any job that's going and so I just settled on the first thing that came along and it was a clerical job as an office boy with a firm of solicitors.⁵¹

He did eventually train as a journalist and subsequently worked in the newspaper industry most of his working life.

Responding to advertisements

Young people gained work by simply responding to advertisements in each of the decades studied, but there were some significant differences in the frequency with which this occurred and the degree of independence exercised by the applicant. Job searches using advertisements were much more common in the later decades, and in this period the search was much more likely to be initiated solely by the applicant. In the 1920s and '30s although adverts were of importance these were usually identified and/or responded to in conjunction with a parent, relative, friend or teacher. In other words, the agency exercised by the applicant was diminished. The example of R08 who began work in London in 1929 aged 16 years shows the combination of factors, including school, relatives, economic situation, advertisements and chance that led to him getting work as a junior clerk in the Public Health Department of the Metropolitan Borough of Hampstead during a period of recession. He stayed at school well past the minimum school leaving age of 14 so that he could matriculate with five London Matriculation subjects but he did not gain work immediately and, unusually for a boy, gained additional experience in shorthand and typing, something which he attributed to his headmaster:

Yes this was, this was entirely due to the excellent headmaster we had. One took the matric in June and the schools broke up mid-July and it was a mixed school and the headmaster two or three days before the school broke up he came in and said to us all – I don't want you children running about the streets if you haven't a job at the end of the holiday. If you

haven't a job come back and we will find you something to do. So about half the class went back and he started a commercial class on shorthand and typing and that is where I picked up sufficient, to say I had a knowledge of shorthand and typing.⁵²

R08 went on to say that staying in education any longer was not an option as his father (a Master Baker) was on the verge of bankruptcy and he needed to provide an income for the family. He was aided in his job search by his aunt who identified a suitable vacancy:

It came about by an advertisement that was sent to me from an aunt who lived in Willesden. It was in the South Kilburn Times and I applied for it and as I say there were 126 applicants altogether. Now the strange part about it was that the Chief Clerk, who was a bachelor and very keen, very keen on music, picked the short list. I was the only one out of 126 who had taken music and I'll, I'll swear to this day that's why I got the job.⁵³

As the 1930s progressed more work gradually became available, but very few respondents gained work purely by responding to an advertisement. Indeed, by the late-1930s vacancies had increased substantially for young people and as R49 stated: 'They were always advertising and at that time there was a lot of jobs, message boys well they couldn't get enough message boys you know, it was an obvious, you just walked in and nearly every shop under the sun had, was looking for message boys at that time'.⁵⁴ In fact this respondent first worked as a kennel boy at a greyhound track (no doubt his work included taking messages) which he started aged 14 in 1939.

From the 1950s the use of advertisements, sometimes still in combination with parental or school advice, increased markedly as job applicants increasingly exercised more individual initiative. One key factor in this must be that school leavers were older. Not only had the school leaving age increased but more pupils were staying on beyond the minimum school leaving age to gain qualifications. This meant that they often had more maturity and independence together with clearer aims with regards their future career. R70, a male who started work in Glasgow in 1969 age 18, although guided by school careers advice did initiate his job application himself: 'There was an advert in the paper. I'd had careers guidance at school and the only thing they came up with was civil engineering so, when I saw an advert for a City Engineer's Office as it was then called, I went for that and got the job as a trainee'. At the same time, and possibly in response to such changes, firms made increasing use of advertisements for job vacancies which, by the 1970s at least, became particularly important when recruiting from a regional or national rather than local labour market.⁵⁵

In most respects the data show little difference in the strategies and experiences of men and women, but one example suggests that in certain areas of employment, especially those that were traditionally male dominated, women could be severely disadvantaged in their job search. Schools and careers advisors tended to guide young women towards traditional female roles,⁵⁶ and advertisements that clearly discriminated against particular groups remained relatively common in the 1960s. R85 experienced this in her search for work as a graphic designer in London as she completed her Art College training:

Well I'd been trained to be a graphic designer. I spent several months looking for a job [in 1969]. The problem was that in those days they didn't employ women in the industry and I think probably about two jobs in twenty were for women and the rest advertised for men so it took me quite a long time to find something. Then I got two jobs offered in one week, so I took the one that I thought would be most interesting and I was allowed to leave before the end of the course provided I went back and did my exams.⁵⁷

Other influences

In addition to the four sets of factors outlined above respondents also found work through a variety of other channels, including (as briefly alluded to already) relatives, friends, others with some authority and chance circumstances. For instance R 32 gained work aged 14 as a post boy with a firm of wholesale gents' outfitters in 1935 through connections made at his Welsh church. The inference is that both the church and Welsh connections were instrumental in getting a job.

Yes the church I went to, the vicar was a Welshman and he had Welsh friends and one of his friends was part-owner of this firm which is a wholesale gents' outfitters in Manchester called Parry, Sons and Hansons and it was Mr Parry and Mr Edwards, they were two of the Welsh and were involved in it and he was instrumental in getting me the job. He sent me down for an interview and I got the job.⁵⁸

Whereas the example above used quite specific connections to gain work, for others it was much more informal and open networks that provided relevant information about the availability of employment. This was the case for R48 who started work in 1933 as a bookbinder in Glasgow aged 14. She had passed exams to stay on at school but her mother could not afford to keep her there and, as the oldest, she had to find a job. For her being part of a local community where information about work opportunities circulated freely was clearly important:

Well, left school on the Friday and the minute I left school, 'cause as Friday's a big day with all the staff over there for wages so somebody told me they were looking for girls in Collins, the book publishers. So I went in there and they asked me a few questions about school and different things and I started on the Monday.⁵⁹

For those who had been through Higher Education the network of friends made at university was often important in finding work, possibly because of their greater maturity. This was clearly the case for R78 who started work as a library assistant in Glasgow in 1978: 'I had been at Strathclyde University ... and then I didn't work for a year and that job came up and I actually can't remember, I think it was a friend that, that they were looking for people, the District Council, at the time,'⁶⁰

Conclusions

As outlined at the start of this paper, interpretation of the evidence presented must be set within the context of the changing social, economic and spatial structures of twentieth-century Britain. There is not space to pursue these themes in detail but, as many studies have demonstrated, this was a period of significant social change influencing economic opportunities, gender relations and class allegiances.⁶¹ Given these conditions, perhaps the most striking theme to emerge from these data is the degree of similarity between the experiences recounted irrespective of gender, social background or location. There is evidence of change over time, with perhaps the key factor being the extent to which young people continued in education until they were more able to exercise some control over their career choices, together with a gradual broadening of the labour market for many from the 1950s. Such interpretations must always be subjective (others may view the data in a different light), and it is impossible to assess the extent to which testimonies have been influenced by the passage of time and the insights of adulthood, but the similarities in the experiences recounted in three different urban labour markets are striking.

It is clear that many school leavers had relatively few ambitions and limited control over their own careers. This was especially the case in the 1920s, '30s and '40s when more adolescents left school at 14: these school leavers were very young and it is not surprising that they were strongly directed by parents, teachers and others with authority. As the school leaving age rose, and especially as a larger proportion of the population continued with post-compulsory education to gain further qualifications, then not surprisingly school and college leavers demonstrated both a greater sense of direction with regard to their careers and also exercised more control over what they did. However, some degree of parental and school influence is evident throughout the period studied.

Differences between the experiences of males and females are limited, with both equally influenced by parents, but there is some evidence that young women were more likely to be pushed in to work that required relatively few qualifications and which was seen as appropriate for a young female, regardless of their aspirations or abilities. Outright discrimination against women was only rarely referred to but this could reflect the aspirations and expectations of women at the time. Most did not apply to jobs that were normally taken by males.

There were also relatively few differences between the three labour market areas. We have more data for London and there is some evidence that employment could be gained more easily in the large London labour market. As would be anticipated this was especially the case in the interwar years when the British economy was undergoing major restructuring, with high unemployment among many industrial workers in northern England, but with new opportunities in service and consumer sectors in the south. However, the means by which young people gained work were essentially the same in all three locations and also showed similar trends over time.

It can be suggested that these data provide a nice example of continuity and change at the level of individual experience mapped on to the much larger structural changes within British economy and society outlined briefly in the introduction. There is continuity in the ways in which young people, of all ages, were provided with support and guidance to find work, be it from parents, relatives, friends, school, employment agencies or other sources. Although parental influence seemed to decline in the 1960s, the extent to which parents today influence university choice for their offspring shows that such forces continue to be strong for at least some modern teenagers.⁶² However, at the same time the world was changing. Young people remained longer in education, new work opportunities developed, expectations – especially for young women – changed and horizons were broadened increasing the likelihood of longer-distance migration for work.⁶³ Together these factors did reshape the urban labour markets of London, Manchester and Glasgow, but for the individuals involved some very traditional forces and processes continued to operate to facilitate transition from education to the workplace.

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Table 1: Decade of birth of interview respondents

City	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s
London	6	12	6	7	7	3
Glasgow	3	9	3	4	3	2
Manchester	5	9	2	5	1	3
Total	14	30	11	16	11	8

Source: 90 interviews with respondents living in London, Manchester or Glasgow when they first entered the workforce.

Table 2: Decade interview respondents entered the labour market

City	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s
London	2	12	4	8	6	6	3
Glasgow	1	8	4	3	3	4	1
Manchester	0	10	5	1	5	1	3
Total	3	30	13	12	14	11	7

Source: 90 interviews with respondents living in London, Manchester or Glasgow when they first entered the workforce.

Table 3: Occupational grouping of first occupations (including employment-based training)

Occupational group	Males	Females	All
Professional and managerial	10	5	15
Clerical, secretarial, administrative	11	26	37
Retail and caring	2	7	9
Skilled manufacture and industrial	12	7	19
Low skill	10	0	10

Source: 90 interviews with respondents living in London, Manchester or Glasgow when they first entered the workforce.

Table 4: Age at which respondents entered the labour market

City	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23+
London	7	3	13	1	6	1	1	1	4	4
Glasgow	7	4	2	4	1	0	2	2	1	1
Manchester	6	4	6	0	5	0	0	1	0	3
All	20	11	21	5	12	1	3	4	5	8

Source: 90 interviews with respondents living in London, Manchester or Glasgow when they first entered the workforce.

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