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From Young Workers to Older Workers: Eliasian Perspectives on the Transitions to Work and Adulthood



Abstract

Since 2000 we have been undertaking a detailed re-study of Norbert Elias's lost *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project from 1962-1964. Our interest in this project began over ten years ago when we rediscovered 850 interview schedules that had, since the late 1960s, simply been left in an attic office. Led by Elias, the project team interviewed nearly 1000 young people in Leicester, UK exploring every aspect of this cohort of young peoples' lives. What the researchers produced were detailed interview schedules that richly documented the experience of leaving school in the 1960s. From the outset it was clear to us that these interview schedules, left largely unused for over forty years, represented an extraordinary opportunity to both revisit the transitional experiences of these young workers and to retrace some of the original respondents to explore their subsequent lives and careers. As Laub and Sampson (2003: 302) suggest, this data afforded us a fantastic, if very rare, opportunity to 'examine within-individual variability over nearly the entire life course'.

We have two main aims for this paper. First, we provide an overview of the original 1960s phase of the research and outline Elias's theory of 'transition'. In his lost writings on youth, Elias argued that the transition to work requires the young person to become 'civilized', learning adult behavioural standards as well as job related skills. Yet inevitably, according to Elias, difficulties arise in the transition process as the 'norms' of working adults differ considerably to those adults the young people are already familiar with. Second, following on from our re-interviews with a sub-sample of the original 1960s respondents, we examine the extent to which the initial predictions for this group actually came true in terms of their early transitional experiences. These interviews reveal that their work histories did not follow exactly the linear and smooth trajectories predicted for them. Instead, careers were characterised by greater levels of individual complexity, insecurity, multiple 'transitions' and 'critical moments' that could not be fully explained by family background, social class or education. We conclude by reflecting on the implications these two for contemporary research on the transition from education to work and by highlighting Elias's legacy in this area.

KEYWORDS Norbert Elias; Young Workers; Complexity; Shock Hypothesis; Adulthood

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Introduction

It is the work, the occupation, the whole undreamed of reality of the adult world which is responsible for the stresses of adolescents in that situation...I have always preferred the term "shock-experience", to the term "shock". The most precise expression of which I can think at the moment is probably "reality shock". (ELIAS 1962. 1.)

... the current generation of young people are making their transitions to work in a period of turmoil and as a consequence may lack the clear frames of reference which can help smooth transitions on a subjective level. In this respect, entry to the world of work in the 1990s is characterised by a heightened sense of risk. (FURLONG – CARTMEL 1997a. 12.)

Compared to the 1950s and 1960s, this so called age of later modernity (FURLONG – CARTMEL 1997) is characterised by high levels of risk, uncertainty, insecurity and individualization. It is suggested that transitions from school to work have changed from a mass homogeneous process, where young people are conditioned by class, family and education into accepting their labour market destination, to a process where successful destinations are dependent upon the individual abilities to effectively navigate the risks and opportunities that come their way. Yet treating both the past and present in such a dualist and static manner, and ignoring the view that past and present transitions are linked as part of the same (but ever changing) long-term social process (the movement of young people from the confines of school and childhood to adulthood and work), often means that the past remains 'unquestioned' sociologically.

The immediate present into which sociologists are retreating, however, constitutes just one small momentary phase within the vast stream of human development, which, coming from the past, debouches into the present and thrusts ahead towards possible futures. (ELIAS 1987. 224.)

The point is that young peoples' transitional experiences do not *suddenly* become more stressful and problematic as compared to before, but instead change over time. As Elias (1987) suggests 'one cannot ignore the fact that present society has grown out of earlier societies' (ELIAS 1987. 226.). Therefore, the past cannot be ignored and it needs to be interrogated. For example, if one wants to understand the emergence of complex transitions it would be useful to reflect on past transitional experiences and explore the extent to which they were also stressful and problematic? Of particular interest here is the notion that transitional experiences generated 'shock' amongst young people on first entering work. From the archived material associated with the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project, it is clear that Elias had developed the whole research agenda around an interest in examining the extent to which young school leavers experienced difficulties in making the required adjustments to work and adult roles. Elias suggested that is project was

...concerned with the problems which young male and female workers encounter during their adjustment to their work situation and their entry into the world of adults. When they go to work, or begin to train for work, young workers have to make a wider adjustment to a situation and to roles which are new to them, whose implications are often imperfectly understood by them and by the adults concerned, and for which they are in many cases not too well prepared. The project will differ from other studies in investigating this wider adjustment

which young workers have to make in their relationships with older workers and supervisors in the factory or workshop; to the problems and to their role as workers; and to their roles as money earners in home relations and in their leisure time. (Young Worker Project 1962. 2)

The specified aim of the Elias project contains a certain resonance with later research interests and agendas. How the individual in this study deals with the problems of leaving school, becoming a worker, entering unfamiliar situations for which they are unprepared, adjusting to earning money, changing family relations, adjusting to leisure time, and working with others beyond the close circle of school friends, does not sound too dissimilar to the more recent explorations of labour market restructuring and the uncertainty and risk faced by young people.

Although in the past, the outcome of transitions were seen as largely predictable (CARTER 1962; ASHTON – FIELD 1976; WILLIS 1977), it is possible that the young workers subjective experiences were neither predictable, uniform nor unproblematic. As LAWY (2002) suggests, the transitional experience and the transformation of young people is ‘necessarily a personal, individual and psychological affair’ (LAWY 2002. 213.). As such, in the past some young people may have coped with the experience far better than others. It is also possible that some members of earlier generations of youth felt exactly the same levels of risk and uncertainty as the current generation of young people.

Separation of Children from Adults

According to ROJEK (1986) ‘Elias maintains that socialisation is basically a process of status acquisition. Being born into a family at a certain time, the individual is empowered with resources to participate meaningfully in everyday life’ (ROJEK 1986. 587.).

Norbert Elias, perhaps one of Europe’s most original sociologists, was keen to develop a processual or figurational approach to sociology that would allow sociologists to understand the social world around them via a long term, dynamic (rather than static) framework that emphasised the interrelationships between individuals. For Elias, human beings are ‘interdependent, forming figurations or networks with each other which connect the psychological with the social, or habitus with social relations’ (KRIEKEN 1998. 49.). The constantly changing relationship of habitus with social relations Elias conceptualised as the inter-relationship between *sociogenesis* and *psychogenesis*. Sociogenesis is the processes of development and transformation in social relations with psychogenesis being the processes of development and transformation in the psychology, personality or habitus that accompany such social changes (KRIEKEN 1998). In this sense habitus, or an individual’s personality makeup, is not inherent or innate but ‘habituated’ and becomes a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience and, according to Krieken (1998), develops as part of a continuous process beginning at birth and continuing through childhood and youth (KRIEKEN 1998. 59.). Understanding this link between processes of change in social relations and changes in the psychic structure was the main aim of Elias’s most important text *The Civilising Process* (MENNELL – GOUDSBLOM 1998; HUGHES 1998).

Elias’s ideas and approach to sociology have been used to understand a wide variety of social phenomenon. Indeed, Elias also explored a range of issues, from sport to community relations, and was keen not to be associated with one strand or subject area within sociology. The fact that Elias also developed an interest in the processes through which young people become adults is

of no real surprise to those familiar with his work. Indeed, Elias made a serious commitment to studying these processes during his final year as a reader in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester and in 1961 Elias was successful in applying to the UK Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) for a grant of £15,000 to fund the research project *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*. The data was to be collected via interviews with a sample of young people drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of all Leicester school leavers from the summer and Christmas of 1960 and the summer and Christmas of 1962. The target group was to include all those with one year further education. This sample was then further stratified by the school attended (secondary, technical, grammar or other), by the size of firm entered in first job and whether they were trainees or not. The sample was divided up into five sub-groups and using a table of random numbers a target sample of 1150 young people were identified. From the 1150 individuals, the research team were successful in contacting 987 of which 105 refused to be interviewed and 882 interviews were completed. An additional 28 interviews were undertaken as part of a pilot study in a near by town. Of these a total of 851 interview schedules (including 28 from the pilot study) have been recovered.

The interview schedule was semi-structured but the responses tended to be open-ended, textual and reflective in nature. It contained a series of 82 questions in 5 sections (including Work, Family and Expenditure, Leisure, School and Work, and General). The interviewees were asked to write all answers to questions verbatim if possible and always in as full detail as the time and circumstances allowed. The interviewer was also asked to make a series of general comments at the end of the interview schedule giving the interviewers general impression from the interview, noting any problems connected with work, family or leisure. The fieldwork began in 1962 and ended in 1964.

However, there are two important points to make about this aspect of Elias's work. First, the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* was to mark a radical departure in Elias's approach to research - moving away from the analysis of secondary sources to the collection of quantitative data via a large scale survey. Throughout his career Elias had used empirical material largely derived from historical secondary sources. For example, in *The Civilising Process* Elias drew upon the writings of Erasmus to illustrate how the changing nature of etiquette codes accompanied a corresponding shift in behaviour (HUGHES 1998. 141.). However, the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was a large-scale, publicly funded research project that utilised a large-scale survey methodology. From Elias's biography it is clear that the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was the *only* time Elias had engaged in this type of research that involving large amounts of fieldwork.

In the early 1960s Elias also successfully applied for a major research grant...to investigate school leavers' adjustment to working life. The results of this 'Young Worker Project' eventually appeared in publications by colleagues at Leicester, not by Elias himself. (MENNELL 1992. 21-22.)

Second, this aspect of his work remains largely unknown beyond those at the University of Leicester or those fully familiar with Elias's work and biography. It is surprising that no one has engaged directly with, or explored fully, Elias's interest in youth transitions or his foray into the arena of large-scale government funded research in this area, this despite assertions that the main

aspects of Elias's life and work are well researched and well known. Indeed most introductions to Elias do not mention this research at all (see FLETCHER 1997; KRIEKEN 1998; HUGHES 1998) nor does Elias mention the project in his autobiographical writings (ELIAS 1994). The exception to this is MENNELL (1992) in which the young worker project receives the very briefest of mentions.

Whilst this is certainly a tantalising reference, MENNELL (1992) does not explore the reasons why Elias did not publish the findings himself nor does Mennell provide any additional detail on this 'major' research grant obtained by Elias. There are, perhaps, a number reasons for this, and it is possible that Brown (1987) points the way

Someone who had thought so long and to such good effect about sociological problems as he had could find it difficult to understand why others did not see things as he did, or to take on board ideas and points of view different from his own. There was in my experience one major disagreement about the conduct of a research project which proved quite damaging to all concerned and to the progress of the research (BROWN 1987. 538.).

One possible reason for the lack of exploration of this project is perhaps the controversial manner in which the research was undertaken and the fact that the project ultimately collapsed and remained unfinished. From the records it is clear that 1962 the researchers involved with the project were unaware that Elias, despite having this large research grant, had already arranged to take up a Chair in Sociology at the University of Ghana from the October of that year. Although Elias attempted to direct the project remotely via a research committee, the project then became characterised by acrimony, distrust and feelings of failure, and entered the 'Leicester air' as something never again to be referred to. By the time the fieldwork had ended, and 882 interviews plus a pilot study of 32 interviews had been completed, the research team had resigned and the project effectively ended. The bulk of the data emerging from the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was never analysed or published. With the exceptions of KEIL *et al* (1963), and ASHTON – FIELD (1976) in which a sample of the cases or background literature were used, and despite being one of the largest government sponsored projects on young workers of the time, the data remained unanalysed and unexplored for over forty years (for a full discussion see GOODWIN – O'CONNOR 2002). However, we rediscovered 854 of the original interview schedules archived in an attic office (see GOODWIN – O'CONNOR 2002). Of these we traced (mainly using last know address, telephone directories, electoral register and social networking websites and local print and broadcast media) 157 of the original respondents and re-interviewed 97 of them to find out what had happened to them in their subsequent careers.

Conceptualising the Transition to Work and Adulthood

A central concern from Elias in the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was the role that the transition to work played in the broader process of the transition to adulthood. However, he felt that much of the early research on young people was essentially 'adult centred', with adults trying to apply their norms and values to young people or researching those issues relating to youth that concerned the adults themselves (for example delinquency). For Elias such work was inadequate as it did not explore the experiences or concerns of the young themselves. In the grant application Elias stated that this project was

...concerned with the problems which young male and female workers encounter during their adjustment to their work situation and their entry into the world of adults. When they go to work, or begin to train for work, young workers have to make a wider adjustment to a situation and to roles which are new to them, whose implications are often imperfectly understood by them and by the adults concerned, and for which they are in many cases not too well prepared. The project will differ from other studies in investigating this wider adjustment which young workers have to make in their relationships with older workers and supervisors in the factory or workshop; to the problems and to their role as workers; and to their roles as money earners in home relations and in their leisure time. The factors to be examined will include differences between age groups, between sexes, in size of organisation, in nature and status of job, and between young workers from working class and middle class home backgrounds. (Young Worker Project 1962. 2.)

From this position emerged five specific areas of enquiry – adjustment to relationships with older workers and supervisors; adjustment to job problems; adjustment to role as workers; adjustment to role as ‘money-earner’ in home relations; and adjustment to role as ‘money-earner’ in leisure time.

For Elias, the development of habitus in young people and acquiring the adult norms and standards of behaviour was not a smooth process, and he speculated that many of the young people would experience difficulties, anxiety or even ‘shock’ when entering adult world of work. Elias suggested that the transition from school to work not only required the young person to learn new technical skills and the skills required to do the job but also to learn the broader relationship skills and the norms of the adult world.

...adjustment to relationships with older workers, supervisors etc. in factory and workshop (e.g. learning new codes of behaviour, problems of competition and co-operation, conforming and non-conforming in factory and workshop, coping with tensions in social relations etc) (ELIAS 1961. 1.)

At the heart of the research was Elias’s assumption that the transition from school to work, or the process of learning adult behavioural norms, could be characterised as a ‘shock’ experience in that young people can experience real difficulties in adjusting to their new role as adults and workers. This hypothesis and the problems surrounding this research project has been examined and explored fully elsewhere (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2002). From the archive material and Elias’s writings on youth transitions, it is clear that Elias identified eight specific problems relating to the transition to adulthood that contributed to the experience of transition as a one of shock. They are: (i) *The prolonged separation of young people from adults*; (ii) *The indirect knowledge of the adult world*; (iii) *The lack of communication between adults and children*; (iv) *The social life of children in the midst of an adult world with limited communication between the two*; (v) *The role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life*; (vi) *The social role of young people is ill-defined and ambiguous*; (vii) *Striving for independence through earning money constitutes a new social dependence (on work rather than parents)*; (viii) *The prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity*.

In the research, Elias wanted to examine how young people experienced the transition from school to work, not only how people learned to do a job, but also how the young workers acquired

the prevalent adult standards or norms of behaviour. In doing so he focused on their problems of adjustment to work. For Elias, difficulty arose in that the norms, the behaviour and attitudes of adults in the workplace differed considerably to those adults the young people were familiar with. Indeed, unlike previous societies, in our current society when the young person begins to make the transition to work and adulthood their role is not clear. This Elias argues is due to the limited amount of contact between young people and adults over and above family, friends and teachers. For example, at a meeting of the young worker project team Elias argued that

The central problem arises from the fact that a complex society such as ours requires customarily a prolonged period of indirect preparation and training for adult life. By indirect I mean from the age of 5 to 14,15 or 16 the growing up children of our society are trained for their adult tasks in special institutions which we call schools, where they learn, where they acquire the knowledge about the adult world past, present and future not by direct contact with it, but largely from books. Their actual knowledge of the adult world, their only contacts with adults, are relatively limited. (Young Worker Project 1962. 2.)

According to Elias, the limited contact with adults and the fact that school leavers had been taught very little that would prepare them for the reality of starting work mean that the experience of making the transition from school to work is a “shock” experience. To support this view Elias quoted an example of the shock experienced by a young worker at being told not to work too hard and argued that he wanted to understand how the young worker *experienced* the norm of not working too hard. For example, it could be argued that shock emerges in that the young adults have moved from a situation where adults, in the form of teachers at school, have instructed the young adults to work hard and have administered punishments to those who did not, to a situation where unfamiliar adults are instructing, advising and encouraging the young people to behave in a way that was previously discouraged. The existence of the young worker is threatened by the fact that their social world changes and they come into contact with behaviours and norms that are totally unfamiliar to them. These changes to the social reality of the young worker according to Elias caused anxiety or shock.

Before they enter their job, adolescents have a highly selective and still rather unrealistic perception of the adult world and of their life in it. The encounter with reality enforces a reorganisation of their perception. This is a painful process for a least two different reasons. First, because every strongly enforced reorganisation of perceptions is painful. Second, to all intents and purposes the “social reality” to which the youngsters have to get used, is unsatisfactory and the gap between the adult reality as it turns out to be is very great indeed. This is the objective situation...We are after the actual experiences to which it gives rise...“shock-experience” or “reality-shock” understood as something which may have a variety of forms, which may sometimes be sudden and biting and sometimes slowly coming over the years ending in a final shock of recognition that there will never be anything else but that, seems to me our best bet. (ELIAS 1962. 1.)

A further contributing factor to the ‘shock experience’, Elias suggests, was the degree of difference between fantasy and reality held by the child versus the reality of the adult world. Given the absence of relationships between children and other adults, the differences between

the fantasies of future adult roles and the actual reality of adult life, and the encounter with reality, which enforces a reorganisation of perceptions during the transition from school to work, all lead this experience being one of shock. The reality of work is different from the perceptions of the young person and, for Elias, the realisation that nothing will ever be the same leads the young person to experience a 'reality-shock'.

ELIAS (1964) suggested that it was possible to classify each 'interview' in terms of a particular 'reality types'. According to Elias (1964), one of the reality types was the '*types of relationship between expectation and reality*'. Elias argued that there were three main possibilities that the young workers would experience. First, that expectations of the job would be more or less like school but the reality was that work was indeed very different. For example, the supervisors at work were not like teachers and, whereas at school it was possible to 'mess about' (or act in ways not approved of by adults) when not directly supervised, at work it was not possible to 'mess about' at all. Second, the expectation that work will be terrible and the reality was that work was not as bad as expected. For example, that work would be hard and the young person would be made to work like slaves, whereas the reality was different with less control of the young person and great possibilities for controlling the pace of work. Finally, the expectation that the freedom from school would be 'marvellous' but the reality of work and adult life were less 'marvellous' than expected. Leaving school would be almost like an escape from the prison like or controlled realities of education. However, on escaping the young person finds that work is also controlled and provides little opportunity for the individual expression they so desire.

Elias's aims were to explore how the young people in the sample actually experienced the transition process and to examine whether or not work made the young people more adult, or in his terms quickly adopt the norms and behaviours of the adults around them. In the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*', the young workers were asked a series of questions about work and the transition to adulthood including '*what sort of things make a boy/girl become an adult?*' '*do you think of yourself as an adult?*' and '*if a young worker and an adult do exactly the same work, should they be paid the same?*'.

'Shock Experiences' in the Adjustment to Work

As suggested above, Elias's aims were to explore how the young people in the sample actually experienced transition from school to work and to examine how the young people experiences the acquisition of the adult norms and behaviours visible around them. In the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' interviews the young workers were asked a series of questions about work and the transition to adulthood including '*what sort of things make a boy/girl become an adult?*' '*do you think of yourself as an adult?*' and '*if a young worker and an adult do exactly the same work, should they be paid the same?*'. Some anxieties/fear of 'real' world but the YW wanted to be like older friends/adults. What does the data actually reveal about shock experiences? In the main the data suggested that the young workers did perceive the world of work to be 'Adult' – and that it was not yet and an adult world where they felt (yet) they belong ('you'd feel like the odd one out'). It is also clear for many in the study, as Elias suggests, their aspirations and the reality of work did differ – they also perceived the wider choices that work would offer but none of its limitations. They had also been given a negative image of work from teachers - work is hard and 'slave' like yet this also differed in that many were surprised at the

limited amounts of effort required no had they fully understood the monotony of working day in day out. In the main, despite an eagerness to leave school, most not regretted it and wished they had stayed on longer at school and they missed the freedoms and opportunities it would bring. The following quotes are illustrative.

Oddly enough it didn't hit me till the day. The headmaster's speech showed the finality of it you know. I suddenly realised your whole life was going to be changed completely. As soon as you walk out of the gates you are no longer leading the school life which is very different to the working life. You don't know what's ahead of you and you think it's quite a frightening thought for a second or so.

Not much - about longer hours - shorter hols. But to me nobody can explain what its like when you go into a factory. (P) I mean at Corah's real different to what I thought it would be (P) People walking around looking at you - I just freeze up - didn't know what to do. Scared of doing job wrong - do it wrong for first time - have to be there to find out for yourself - nobody can explain it to me.

Very interesting example of disillusionment with higher education and jobs associated with it. R did well at school and transferred to the tech college (from a sec. mod.) to undertake a two year GCE course. After one year he knew he wasn't doing any good and he left to take a job. He saw an advertisement for a trainee cost clerk and got the job. He was very unhappy in it, found office work incredibly boring and a waste of time. [see Q28. He gave no marks at all to the office work] and changed (again answering a newspaper ad) to the semi-skilled job of machine minder in a very small hosiery firm. He thoroughly enjoys this (and has worked 55-60 hours or over last two months) and voluntarily attends evening classes, 3 times a week on the hosiery trade machinery as he hopes to do something on the technical side.

I think this R could qualify as one of Dr. Elias' "Youth islanders", for she seems to live in a two-thirds dream world. This consists of black leather coats, coffee bars, Art and Tech etc. She obviously yearns to be one of the college set and was proud of her affiliations to it. She seems happy at work despite this; but I should imagine that conflicts with her parents (which seem to be quite numerous and make her seem one of the conventionally unconventional rebellious adolescents.) partly rose from her 6 months waiting period during which she tried to get herself fixed up in hairdressing. Her ambitions - modelling, air hostess, own salon by 20 are all very out of track with reality. Perhaps her maturity has been put off partly as a result of being an only child of rather old parents.

An interesting character who seemed to typify Norbert Elias's "Culture Shock". This is to some extent and whose job choices seemed to be rather haphazardly and irrationally chose. Obviously a boy who disliked hard work and enjoyed the more than occasional skive "this is a very good job. It might not lead to anything but I think I will keep it until I can buy my motor bike. The foreman isn't looking over you all the while and you can have a 10 mins rest every barrow. You don't have to bend over your work and really keep at it just in case the foreman comes round and gives you the sack". Also: "I just lark about sometimes. if I didn't mess about every time when I have finished a rack I could get 3-4,000 shoes done a day. But sometimes I only do 1,000". But his main ambition was to become a skilled mechanic and he was obviously in the wrong job and hoped to join the army and get a skilled trade.

This boy gave some evidence of having experienced a 'shock' on going to work. It took him, he

said, a month to get adjusted. He had his mind set on a draughtsman's job in drawing office, mentioning it several times. He found his training rather narrow and liked the tech because it gave him a chance to broaden it. Noticeably work centred boy.

R was the first case I have met of a real traumatic shock on entering work. Her mother said that in her first job which only lasted a week she cried every night, couldn't eat her food and couldn't sleep. She wasn't shown how to do anything, the people were snobbish, and she found it generally too much for her. It was quite different at her second job, where, although she had criticism, she seemed to identify strongly with her office group.

R expected too much of work altogether. She thought she'd go straight onto big money and it took sometime to realise that it could only be done gradually. R now feels (in her 6th job) that she will settle down. Some type of shock exposed in frequent job changes? Very interesting that she should have moved from office to factory work (which her S recommended after several jobs and considerable discontent.)

My impression is that he has not yet come to terms with himself and that any adjustment he may have made to society is precarious. He tries to give the impression that he is doing a job he enjoys with good prospects, that he reckons his friends in dozens and that he enjoys "punch ups", sports, motor cycles, fishing, "boozing" and "birds". But he also gives the impression of being solitary, fearful and melancholic.

His problems at work seem, (a) a dislike of dirty work..., (b) difficulty to adjust to adult sarcasm or obliqueness...and, (c) over anxiety about his exams.

R is suffering from a sense of failure after being successful and happy at school. So far as I can see he is going to continue being unhappy. He is quite conscious of this problem [Respondent was thrown out of college]. Unfortunately he considers he was let down by the YEO and that source of advice is therefore closed. However, he did mention that he occasionally sees his former schoolmaster - perhaps he will get some help from that quarter. His plan now is to enter business with his father who is a butcher. But several times during the interview R showed that he considers shop work to be inferior...He is a pleasant, sensible boy who's sustained one or two bad shocks.

R gives impression that he didn't think much about work when at school, and has quickly defined work as boring, monotonous, but with good money. However his job demands speed, some physical fitness and some skill. He is orientated towards sport had many cups from school. Note that now looks back with some regret on school...and a fact that didn't realise hardness of work.

Becoming Adults?

Entry to work and the economic independence this brings are often seen as key factors in the transition to adulthood. JONES (2002) for example defines adulthood as 'the achievement of economic independence' whilst PILCHER (1996) has described the transition to work as also being a transition to adulthood. In the Elias interviews respondents were asked to reflect on their decision to leave school and start work. For most of the young workers in this sample the prospect of leaving full time education and entering the labour market was welcome. The commencement of full time paid employment was seen as an important life change to be looked forward to and for those in our sample, like those who took part in WILLIS'S (1977) research, '...

the prospect of money and the cultural membership amongst real men beckon[ed] very seductively...' (WILLIS 1977. 100.)

I wanted to stand on my own two feet and begin to look after myself, earn my own keep... I wanted to get to work to be like the rest of my friends ... they start talking about work and you feel left out...

However, not all respondents were so keen on starting work, and some were fearful of this life change for the same reasons that others looked forward to it. The fears that were expressed in the interviews focused on the prospect of entering the 'real world' and being 'amongst real men'. I was a bit apprehensive, I had heard so many things about the big world, that it was harder than school...

For many of our sample, whether they were looking forward to leaving school or not there was a certain fear and uncertainty about what lay ahead:

I wanted to leave school, but I was frightened about starting work.

I wasn't glad to be leaving. I liked school but I wanted to get a job. But I was a bit worried about what things would be like - what the people would be like and if I would get on alright. The dominant theme from the data however, is that whatever their feelings about leaving school, the majority were keen to start work and were looking forward to their new lives, particularly the prospect of earning money and becoming more independent. Indeed, money was the single most important factor which seemed to override all other positive aspects of starting work:

No I just wanted to leave to earn my own money; to buy own clothes.

Fabulous, I thought it was a great idea. (Why?) Because I thought I would get more clothes, more of everything.

In other studies of that time, such as CARTER (1962), it is often highlighted how, earning money and the independence this would provide, was the further defining feature of adulthood. However, the experiences of earning money were less clear-cut and for many spending, and the associated freedoms that spending (and earning) might give, did not materialise in a way that was expected. For example, Carter (1962) found that the earnings that the young people obtained were, by and large, administered by their mothers and it was the mothers who decided how much 'spending money' the young workers were allowed. Similarly in the Elias study, whilst as school leavers the possibility of earning their own money had been something to look forward to, the young workers idealisation of earning their own money and becoming independent was often not realised. Like the children in Carter's research, earning money did not symbolise the freedom to spend that money as they wished. When asked what happened to their wages, the data reveals that far from being domestically and financially independent fewer than half the respondents kept the money themselves (47%). Many had to pass their wage packet to their mother (45%) or to share it equally with her (5.5%) or, for a small number, give it to their father (2.5%). Their parents would then allocate money for the young workers to spend on themselves. Once they had their own 'allocated' income, their patterns of consumption also identified the young workers as not yet being adult. For many their own money was not spent on the pursuit of an independent life style but on 'sweets' or 'going out' and buying clothes, records and cigarettes.

Alongside the anticipation of having their own source of income once they started work respondents explained that they were also looking forward to being treated more like adults and

being less ‘controlled’ than they had been at school. This finding is consistent with later studies of school leavers, for example, Griffin (1985) found that girls in her study looked forward in particular to being treated as adults, feeling that at school they were still seen as children and treated as such. When the members of the Leicester sample were asked the question ‘is there anything you like about being at work compared to being at school?’ many of the respondents also cited their new ‘adult’ identities as being a positive factor:

I think you are looked upon more as a grown up than at school

At school you were always told things, you were treated as a child. But at work they make you feel old and they leave you alone.

I think you're looked upon more as a grown up than you are at school. You have more to spend. I think you have more freedom at work than at school. Your parents treat you as an adult rather than as a child - they leave you to make decisions.

Certainly then there was a sense amongst this group that on entering work they were treated more as adults but when they were questioned in more depth about this issue what transpires is that the young workers themselves still did not feel like adults. In the following section we look in more detail at their perceptions of adulthood.

Complex Transitions?

Alongside shock experiences, the data reveals the transition from school to work for many of the young workers in this sample was non-linear and complex, more individualised and lengthier than any previous studies had suggested. An uncomplicated transition is characterised by the absence of major breaks in employment, divergences or reversals (FURLONG *et al.* 2002. 7.) whereas non-linear or complex transitions ‘involve breaks, changes of direction and unusual sequences of events’ (FURLONG *et al.* 2002. 8.). A ‘usual’ sequence of events for youth transitions in the 1960s would be a linear, smooth transition with you people entering labour market position based on their family, class and educational background. An unusual transition for this time would include periods of unemployment, changes in direction, frequent job moves with the young workers experience none of the certainties that are said to characterise employment at this time. However, the data reveals that many of young workers in the study did experience changes of direction and reversals with some of the young workers changing their jobs as many as seven times in the first year of employment. Contrary to popular belief that this was simply done due to the availability of work, many suggested they were changing jobs because of poor training, poor pay, poor working conditions, not being able to sign apprenticeship papers, and workplace bullying. For example, when asked why they left certain jobs some young workers commented

Wanted to be a fitter but just to work in sheet metal dept. Passed exam to be apprentice but told me there was no vacancy.

Felt not getting on in job - wanted an apprenticeship but not given one.

The strain on my eyes on some of the work - I had to wait a month for glasses - they filled the post machinist job and said I'd have to be a runabout for 2 years so I left.

They started timing the jobs and if you didn't do it as well as the person before had they would tell you off. An older man was before me and they expected me to do the work in the same time. It was just slave labour as far as I was concerned.

Likewise, many experienced breaks in their employment and periods of unemployment, with some also having a sense of 'fear' about being out of work. As the interviewer notes reveal

He couldn't get a job to start with so he had an uncle in carpentry who ... gave him pocket money.

It took quite a few weeks until I found the right job...

The respondent has had fears of unemployment and general economic insecurity. It came out several times in the interview.

He was worried when it came to leaving school in case he didn't get a job: took the first he could get because it was better than being unemployed.

Another key feature of ASHTON – FIELD (1976) and CARTER (1963) and subsequent discussions (Roberts 1995), is that transitions are a 'homogenised' process with all those sharing a similar biographies entering similar work at the same time (ROBERTS 1995. 113.). As we have reported elsewhere GOODWIN – O'CONNOR 2005), the respondents in the *Adjustment of Young Workers* project were asked 'did anyone else you know have the same sort of jobs as you?' and 'was there anyone you knew working in the same firm?' Both questions capture the elements of Roberts (1995) argument and reveal the extent to which the transitions were homogeneous or individualised. Out of the 851 respondents, around fifty per cent young workers did not make the homogenised transitions and forty nine per cent of the respondents suggested that they did not work in the same sort of job as their friends or relatives. Fifty two per cent of the respondents indicated that they did not know anybody working in the same firm.

A point that struck me is that I left a year earlier than I could and one of my friends stayed on for the extra year.

No, I don't think I really did know anybody in the hosiery industry because as I say all my friends of the same age all practically at the same time moved into different types of job.

A key feature of contemporary transitions is that they have become lengthier, prolonged and not single step, whereas in the past it is argued that the transition process was much short with young people finding a job, getting married and leaving home in a relatively short space of time. However, again data from the *Adjustment of Young Workers* project questions this orthodox view as, whilst the vast majority of young workers did leave school as soon as they could, most of young workers in this study reminded dependent on their family for housing, money and decision making long after starting work. For example, many of the young workers relied on their mothers or fathers to resolve any problems they had a work and it was not uncommon for a parent to the workplace.

We started at Tech for one year and then he stopped us going the following year. My father got the trade union in and the secretary went to see the boss. He got it so that we shall carry on at Tech next September.

I was told by the personnel officer when I started in my first year that if I did well at night school should be given a day release but I wasn't sent although my report was very good. I saw the personnel officer, I showed report. He made excuses said that every boy couldn't go. Parents went to see him too and were told the same.

Likewise, the majority were still living at home, despite having left work up to four years previously, and the young workers had not financially 'disengaged with their family of origin' (HUBBARD 2000. 97.) with many handing over their entire pay to their mothers and fathers in return for which they received pocket money from sweets and going out.

I give it all to mother and she gives me spending money - about a £1 and if I want something...

[Mother has] All my wage packet, I have spending money...

Say I come home with £6 she gives me £2 spending money then 12-6 for my dinners and bus fares.

As well as exploring the complexity of the transition process, the data reveals the reality of the young workers initial experiences of work. As in CARTER's (1963) study, the majority of these school-leavers were pleasantly surprised by their early experiences of work and, of those who responded to the question, 62 per cent suggested that work had not been what they had expected. They found that overall it was very different to school life and in general a more positive experience than school had been perhaps because of the 'dignity and freedom' (CARTER 1963.) the young workers were given. For example, the workplace was found not to be strict or monitored and there was a lack of discipline compared to school. The work itself was easier than expected and the young workers found that they were treated as adults, able to work at their own pace and allowed to stop and talk to their colleagues. In this respect work was also less restrictive than had been feared and the older, established workers were friendlier than had been anticipated.

...It was much easier. They didn't stand over you watching everything you did like I thought they would...

...Everyone friendly - if you did anything wrong you would be told but not told off...

...everybody just talking to each other and if you want a word with each other just switch machines off, put tools down and go and have a chat...

I thought I was going to have to work really hard & do as I'm told & all sorts but then it's not really like that at all once you know what you're doing & you're on your own time you please yourself.

However, others had less positive experiences than their expectations and reflected that

When you go into a shop you tend to think of glamorous side of it, and not the dirty jobs you have to do.

If you make a mistake you have to stand by it but at school it is just written off. at work there is no way of passing it off.

I think that being a prefect, I got used to not being treated like a child, but at work I was the lowest kind of worker.

The machines were small and not as efficient as I'd expected. There were no breaks. The conditions weren't good.... The girls didn't bother with their appearance. Language wasn't what it should have been.

Conclusion

At the time that the original data was collected Elias's concept of transition as a 'shock experience' was never 'tested'. The data was archived before a full analysis had taken place and it has only been in recent years that the data has been subjected to a full analysis and Elias's ideas examined in more depth. Without doubt we have found cases where the transition to work was experienced as something of a reality shock and in many cases, some forty years later approaching retirement respondents could recall in some detail their feelings of 'shock' at entering the world of work.

Our access to data collected some forty years ago, and equally importantly, the opportunity to revisit the original respondents as they are approaching retirement has provided a unique dataset. The data collected has enabled us not only to examine the impact of early transitional experience on future career and employment paths but also to 'test' predictions made forty years earlier. Although we found some support for the predictions made by Ashton and FIELD (1976) we have argued that work histories were ultimately far more complex and fragmented than originally predicted. This was particularly true for those identified as having 'extended careers'. Amongst those in the careerless and short term career group the predicted paths were more likely to be followed. In these groups we found evidence of less stable careers and a reliance on skills developed in the early part of individual careers.

In many respects little has changed and we have argued that contemporary transitions have much in common with historical transition experiences. The move from full-time education to employment has always been fraught with risk, uncertainty, insecurity and individualisation. Although in the past, the outcome of transitions were seen as largely predictable (CARTER 1962; ASHTON – FIELD 1976; WILLIS 1977), it is possible that the young workers subjective experiences were neither predictable, uniform nor unproblematic. As LAWY (2002) suggests, the transitional experience and the transformation of young people is 'necessarily a personal, individual and psychological affair' (LAWY 2002. 213.). As such, in the past some young people may have coped with the experience far better than others. It is also possible that some members of earlier generations of youth felt exactly the same levels of risk and uncertainty as the current generation of young people. Indeed, as FURLONG – CARTMEL (1997. 34.) argue: 'Young people's transitional experiences can be seen as differentiated along the lines of class and gender. Indeed we suggest ... continuity rather than change best describes the trends of the last two decades'. We would go further and suggest that continuity best describes trends in youth transitions not just over the last two decades but also over the past fifty years.



A striking trend identified from this unique longitudinal data set is that few individuals are retiring from the same industries in which they began their careers. Drastic changes in the local labour market over the past forty to fifty years mean that once well-established local industries and companies have all but disappeared from the industrial landscape and jobs and trades once thought to be ‘secure’ have disappeared alongside this. These traditional industries, which historically employed huge numbers of school leavers in factories manufacturing knitwear, hosiery and boots and shoes, have largely been replaced by the service industry based employers. Snack and sandwich manufacturers and call centres have replaced traditional industries as large employers yet these jobs are not seen as providing young people with long-term career paths (FURLONG – CARTMEL 1997; WORTH 2005). There is, perhaps, a far greater degree of continuity in transition than it would appear. Whilst the school leavers of the 1960s may originally have perceived their jobs as secure ultimately this was not the case and the rigorous training provided by highly valued apprentice schemes ultimately gave little job security as traditional industries disappeared. *

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