The Just in Time Self? Work, Aspiration and the Limits of Flexibility in the Creative Economy

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by

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Abstract: Several writers who have analysed the ‘new economy’ and reflexive individualism have suggested that in recent times young people from working class backgrounds have broken decisively with the vocational patterns their parents’ generation. No longer wedded to fixed occupational identities and communities of practice, they are now more likely to pursue individualistic dreams, developing capacities for flexibility and reinvention. This paper will evaluate the relative pulls of individualism and collectivism by exploring the biographical reflections of John, a man in his late twenties from the Western Suburbs of Sydney, who has worked in the music industry for seven years and is now facing the consequences of long-term precarious labour.

Keywords: Youth Transitions, Work, Biographical Narratives, Creative Economy.

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Theorists like Beck (1997; see also Beck et al., 1994) and Giddens (1991) have described the erosion of collective affiliations and the rise of risk, reflexivity and individualism in late modernity. Their approach sees life patterns as influenced less by the impulses associated with residual affiliations and more by the ability to respond appropriately to increasingly rapid change (institutional, technological, social, cultural) and by the vicissitudes of markets and other social forces. The latter are matters about which we
have become increasingly better informed, and such knowledge of the public world and its pitfalls plays its own part in eroding collective habits and dispositions. The waning affiliations are based on, for example, class, nation, or cultural minority group – zombie categories as Beck describes them, which might have been useful for describing social patterns in the mid twentieth century but hold little utility when exploring the growing individualism of late modernity. These general observations about reflexive individualism have been applied in studies of work. Beck (2000) and Furlong and Cartmel (1997), for example, suggest that work and vocational aspirations are now less shaped by communal impulses than by the individualism associated with the breakdown of manufacturing and manual trades and the weakening of job security. As Fordist mass production increasingly gives way to post-Fordist just-in-time manufacturing for niche markets, so the same versatility is required of workers (Du Gay and Pryke eds, 2002). In this skittish landscape prized qualities are flexibility, mobility and the preparedness to retrain. But the success of the new worker is dependent on the ability to identify and articulate transferable skills and to articulate portfolio narratives of self (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

Figure 1 Illustration from NSW Department of School Education Vocational Advice Kit
AN ENTERPRISING PERSON ...

- finds OPPORTUNITIES
- displays INITIATIVE
- is CREATIVE
- is ADAPTABLE
- is RESOURCEFUL
- is FLEXIBLE
- learns from MISTAKES
- is RESPONSIBLE
- likes CHALLENGES
- is a good NEGOTIATOR
- is MOTIVATED
- is a DECISION MAKER

‘An Enterprising Person’
Young people are frequently told that they should be both versatile and capable of parlaying accomplishments into marketable skills and of constructing narrative connections between apparently disparate experiences. They face the challenge of gathering together the fragments of their lives to produce a coherent and plausible account of vocational identity and direction. This capacity is useful because of the shifting and precarious nature of labour markets and the ephemeral character of skills in the context of rapid technological innovation. Young people are told there is no place in the new economy for the old brittle Fordist trade identities, those rooted in artisanal communities of practice, the idea of a job for life and the sense of being defined indelibly by skills that have been developed on the job.

This paper explores the existential complexities associated with precarious labour. In what is described variously as the new, knowledge or creative economy (terms that have been subjected to critical scrutiny, see for example Heartfield, 2008) the relative fortunes of workers are based not simply upon labour markets and skills. Their fate is also dependent the cultural narrative forms that shape the aspirations of young people and give them a sense of what is possible and desirable. In what follows I will explore the ways memories/ experiences are worked through in narrative terms in a single case study. John completed high school and then underwent five years working in an unskilled factory job and seven years working in the music industry. From the vantage point of his late twenties and in the context of a research interview he was given the opportunity to reflect on the experiences of education and early working life and to take stock of
youthful dreams. He is one of (to date) 25 interviewees (18-35 years) in a project seeking to elicit such reflection, narratives of aspiration and to explore the development of vocational survival skills. In particular, the research considers how family/communal backgrounds affect the capacity of young workers to deal with adversity.

Many studies in the social sciences have turned to narrative and discursive methods to explore the ways in which people talk about, and make sense of, their lived experiences and life histories (Andrews et al, 2000; Chamberlayne et al, 2002; Wengraf, 2001). This approach understands subjectivity to be in part constituted through narrative forms located in specific historical, political and social moments. These influence the way experience is lived and made meaningful. Life history narratives are social accomplishment shaped by socially available narratives and discourses (Allen and Doherty, 2004). Attention to these can inform an understanding of the subject and of the social as well as historical specificity of the discourses through which work/worker subjectivities are constituted, understood and performed. Drawing on the work of Phil Cohen (2006) I would argue that narratives of working life are shaped by cultural codes or templates that serve to organise vocational identities and aspiration. Cohen distinguishes working class codes like apprenticeship (‘techniques of bodily mastery and social competence’), from those of the middle class like career (‘increments of professional status or qualification’) (Cohen, 2006, p. 117). Each code ‘provided a distinctive “biographical imaginary” within which it was possible for people to make sense of the unfolding life history’. In the new economy some of these would appear to be obsolete and there is the possibility that new codes will emerge: when the job for life
has for many been replaced by the short-term contract, the constructs of apprenticeship or career may no longer correspond to any real opportunity structure (Cohen, 2006, p. 118). But although the material conditions for these codes might have been undermined, Cohen observes that ‘as a biographical imaginary they may retain salience’, residual and emergent narrative grammars for organising working life. For those children of skilled workers the enduring influence of the model of apprenticeship based on workplace learning and communities of practice might be particularly strong. There are also forms of intergenerational accountability that involve young people in responding to familial expectations as to what is a worthwhile work and occupational identity.

Wyn and White (1997) have argued that the passage from youth to adulthood has become more fragmented and fractured in recent times and indeed that the whole idea of youth transition is problematic, suggesting as it does the division of the life course into separate and sequential phases—education/work, familial dependence/maturity and independence. Rapid processes of economic and technological restructuring have made for uncertain vocational times. Some commentators (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2007; Vickerstaff, 2003) have expressed doubt that uncertainty and disorientation commonly experienced by young people facing the world of work is a new development, arguing that this was a characteristic experience of their counterparts in the mid-twentieth century. However, there is little doubt that for the most part young people face the prospect of much more precarious labour than that which confronted their parents at a similar age.
Recent research (Nixon, 2006; Kenway et al., 2006) indicates that it is young working class men in particular are not adapting well to the ‘new economy’. They are neither inclined towards service work, largely viewed as feminine, nor to performing the chameleon roles required in the labour market, in particular those living in rustbelt, de-industrialized cities (McDowell, 2003). To use Bourdieu’s term, their habitus – the structured dispositions acquired in their upbringing – inclines them towards manual rather than mental labour, towards immersion in communities of (often predominantly male) workers rather than dealing, for example, with customers and clients (Bourdieu, 1972). Additionally, these young men have difficulty in developing vocational aspirations, in part because the templates, around which earlier generations of men organised their senses of self and biographical narratives, now seem obsolete. They find it difficult to assume the role of the rootless postmodern worker, choreographing new versions of themselves in response to changed circumstances. Nor do they fit in with what Connell calls this the ‘hegemonic masculinity of the middle class world’ where:

*The notion of a long-term career is central. A calculative attitude is taken towards one’s own life; a passive and subordinated position in training programs is accepted in order to provide future protection from economic fluctuations. The life course is projected as if up a slope, with periods of achievement distinguished from plateaux of wasted time.*

(Connell, 2000, p. 140)

The remainder of this paper will consider the biographical reflections of a young man from a working class background who spent much of his early working life engaged in
precarious creative labour and who sought to break with the vocational advice provided by his parents. However, as much of the literature on youth culture and subculture indicates, despite the prophecies of the advocates of reflexive individualism, parent cultures continue to over-determine the ways life experiences are understood even in the context of youth resistance and even where those experiences are vastly different from those of the parents (Nayak, 2006).

John

John grew up in Sydney’s south western suburbs with a policeman father and a mother who worked in a low-paid job in school administration, the second of four sons. His parents struggled to raise children on the meagre family income and communicated the importance of financial security and stability. His three brothers appear to have heeded the message, but John has taken risks in his working life that his parents didn’t approve of. Attending a Catholic high school that prized sporting prowess, and with little interest in that direction, John felt like a misfit. In his first year there his mother was called to the school by the form master to discuss John’s apparent alienation. This led to her seeking out something that would give John a sense of personal purpose, and she persuaded him to take up the guitar. While this provided some satisfaction and the basis for a teenage identity it gave him little status among his peers. He recalled the shame of being identified as a musician at school and the humiliation of public performance:
But this whole sport thing … and it was like ‘once a month we’ll have this token music performance’ get one of the music classes to do a performance. And you’d get the absolute shit ripped out of you once you played because … it just made you feel really crap being on stage and playing in front of a thousand other guys. Normally guys who played music were not, like, big muscly kind of football built guys. The musos were weedy and all the footballers were big. So it was that kind of physical thing.

This reflects Connell’s observations (1990) about the hierarchies that operate among young men, with hegemonic masculinities being based on physique and athletic prowess. While in performing/ creative arts public high schools (of which there are a handful in the Sydney area) musicianship might confer a basis for peer respect, it carries no kudos amongst those who attend comprehensive public or private schools. John received scant institutional encouragement for his enthusiasm for music, and had little sense that it might become a platform for vocational aspiration.

The early lessons his parents paid for were based on classical finger-picking and John wanted to play rock and so taught himself by listening to music and from books. Despite being frustrated at not being able to emulate the skills of his favourite rock musicians, John persevered and became proficient. His musical learning experiences were hardly satisfactory:

Qu did you have good music teachers at school
J No. They were just as daggy as we were. I remember there was one music teacher for the whole school. It was compulsory for years 7 and 8. Then it was elective year 9-12. So everyone had an experience of being his student. But he was a bad teacher. I thought he was an OK musician from what I know. Like, he knew his theory and really encouraged you if you were into it, if you wanted assistance he would help. But all the jocks just ripped the hell out of him. Like he was just the stereotypical piano-playing muso nerd, like skinny, weedy no-confidence guy working in this big macho school. He would have had other teachers rip on him for sure. Yeah.

Qu You were brave. He was too.

J He was. The kids gave him so much crap. I still feel sorry for him. But he was a bad teacher. He’d just lose it. Like really lose it.

Interestingly the teachers were subject to the same criteria of masculine cultural worth as the students. Tragically, John was not even able to bond with this man who, for all his inadequacies as a teacher, might have been a mentor. Both student and teacher were mired in the stigma associated with being musicians and isolated from each other. The home environment was scarcely more encouraging. None of John’s brothers was musically inclined, his father was ‘really uncreative’ and while his mother had once learned piano, there was rarely music playing in the house: I suppose I found music myself and that was my thing. John began to play with two school friends – mostly grunge music – in his spare time but at first they rarely performed publicly (other than
when conscripted at school) and were reluctant to describe themselves as ‘a band’.
Neither of the other members was as serious about music as John, who had little interest in academic studies and performed poorly in his final school exams.

At 18, despite harbouring dreams of being a rock star, John had little sense of purpose or direction. He was offered a job at an inner-city factory manufacturing hearing aids. It was unskilled labour (I was working in plaster everyday, very unglamorous) and he was reluctant to accept, but was pushed by his parents to do so. He remained in this job for five years. It was mindless work and his employer discouraged communication among those on the production line during working hours. This provided John with the opportunity to listen to music on his Walkman and to develop his knowledge of alternative music (If I didn’t bring the Walkman in it was a bad day. 2DayFM was on the radio). He was also able to find lots of free time out of working hours to write and play. One of his co-workers was in a band that was performing publicly, and was also involved in band management. John learned much from him and this gave him the incentive to take his music further:

*There was another guy who worked there who was in a band as well. When I first started there the guys I was playing with at school would get together once or twice a week. And I said to them after a year, like, I want to up it, write my own stuff, see if we could get some gigs. So we got all that sorted. And this guy who I worked with I looked up to because he was out there doing it. He gave me a crash course on how to approach agents*
and venues, what we need to do to approach them. Bounced things off him for a couple of months and then started doing things for myself.

After five years doing unskilled work, and a year after moving out of home, John left his job to pursue a career in music intending to supplement whatever income he received from performing by working as a manager/booking agent for other acts. When he told his parents they were resolutely opposed to the move: _Mum and Dad? Music for them was not a career choice. It’s fun._ They were sceptical that John could make a living out of it, even as an agent:

_They were against the music thing but also [against the business thing]. Because that’s taking a risk and Mum and Dad were never risk takers. They always played it by the books and if there wasn’t enough money for anything we’d just go without. They still don’t take risks._

At first John was working on commission for an existing booking agency but the rewards were minimal and payments were often delayed. By this stage he’d left the parental home but also, significantly, the working class western suburbs of Sydney (_covers-land_) to settle in poverty in the more bohemian inner west, where there were more outlets for playing original music. For John, as for many young people moving from the suburbs or small town, the inner city symbolised a break from the cultural uniformity and bland convention his family’s ambitions implied. He eventually set up his own booking agency
business, largely representing singer-songwriters who performed mostly original music at small and medium venues in the region of Sydney in which he lives.

He brings an unorthodox approach to the business, looking into the long-term viability of the venues rather than maximizing short term profits:

_Some musos have a warped view of it and they’re unrealistic. They’re not thinking two, three, five years from now… Like a venue comes in and they get the licence up. And everything’s sorted out and they’ve thought now we have to put some stuff in here, we have to put bums on seats, we have to get trade happening. So they go with an agent and the agent goes ‘Excellent. Here’s a cow I’m going to milk it for all it’s worth’. The venue’s got money, a budget. The agent overspends… It didn’t work, costs too much money. We’re in the red. The venue has what we’ve called ‘been burnt’ and to get that venue back on board is really hard unless there’s a change of management. I think musos are the same. They see a cow where they can get a bit of money for it for the next two months and they killed it. They’re only thinking of themselves and not of the industry as a whole. At the moment I’m trying to think of the industry as a whole… [In one club I represent] the old agent was … overpaying bands, ripping off the venue. All very dodgy. I come in, average crowd on a Friday night at this club 50-80 people… [and] the guy was paying $2000. I’ve … said that’s just ridiculous. Two grand for fifty people? What are you getting? The bands are too loud, the production they’re bringing in is too big. This is insane. So I’ve immediately come in and brought down the budget. The venue … say ‘yes, whatever costs us less money’ But the musos. Being a muso myself, the way I explain it to
them is I don’t say ‘venue’s cutting budgets everyone has got to come in’. That’s a part of it, but I say ‘How do you actually feel playing to 50 people and getting paid that amount of money? Like is that long term? Something that you feel comfortable actually doing that?’ Most of them go ‘Oh no. I get where you’re coming from. It’s great that you’re being so transparent about things.’

This approach embodies some of John’s qualities: bluntness, matter-of-fact pragmatism and a financial prudence that appears to be grounded in his experiences of growing up in a family where money was in short supply.

These traits can be contrasted with the dreams of rock star fame that he came gradually to realise were unlikely to be fulfilled:

*I wanted to be a rock star when I was 17. I still had ambitions of being a rock star until I was like 24 and then I just went ‘nah!’: ‘It’s not gonna happen’. It wasn’t a harsh reality check. It was just like ‘it’s not gonna happen’. I think I’m talented as a musician but I think there’s a lot of musicians who are more talented than me. So … it’s alright … I probably started too late. I wasn’t out there soon enough. I made the wrong choice of band members and I was too scared to get away from those guys … I’m not saying I’m a really good musician, but when it comes to these two guys, they were adequate but they didn’t have the drive and they were holding me back, well … holding me back from what [ironic tone]? From being a booking agent.*
Here is a key moment of narrative disjunction. The fame dreams (revealed at a point in the conversation when he had relaxed and opened up to us) collapse and John indicates his feeling that the fallback career was scant consolation. One of the desired qualities for those involved in precarious creative labour is the capacity to unite disparate experiences into coherent accounts, for example by describing the movement between being an aspiring musician and a booking agent in seamless and unified terms. It is unclear whether John would be able to offer such an autobiographical account to those with influence over his vocational prospects (see below). However, in the setting of a research interview, he is more candid and his telling-it-like-it-is bluntness discloses regret. Far from describing a seamless transition he talks about frustrated ambition. The work he was doing to ‘tread water’ until the big break came along, had come to define him. It became his vocation by default.

John does not provide a neat individualist narrative with a strong sense of agency. Such narratives conventionally plot experiences as salutary, conserving the narrator’s sovereignty in the face of adversity and structural circumstance. John’s biographical reflections display no such linear certainty. They are not organised so as to describe his progress towards self-awareness and true vocation. There is no neat account of choice made in the context of experience, no orderly sequential plotting of phases of life. Rather there are three strands of identity and aspiration that coexist often syncretically in his recollections – fame dreams, creative fulfilment and the practical challenges of making a living – with a complicated nexus between the three. He explains the elusiveness of fame initially by reference to his dogged loyalty to band members who failed to match his
creative aspirations, rather than by reference to the prohibitive odds that face all of those who aspire to such goals, particularly those who receive little creative encouragement in early life. John had originally been committed to performing exclusively original material and was slightly scornful of those who performed covers (It wasn’t like looking at them and saying ‘You sold out’, it was like ‘You’re playing someone else’s song dude. Where’s your self respect?’). But he has now moderated these high ideals, now plays in a ‘Guns and Roses’ tribute band and has discovered that many covers artists are better musicians than those performing only their own material. Not particularly lucrative (I do it for ... giggles), this conversion to standardized ‘Fordist’ musical performance corresponded with the waning of fame dreams.

John has made sense of his experiences of running the booking business through a narrative of independence, resilience and industrious energy: a very different expression of individualism from the entrepreneurial narratives of the self-made man, one much more reminiscent of the archetypal figure of the Australian ‘battler’ through which stories of small business endeavour are often configured. They stand in stark contrast to the transcendent dreams of fame and creative integrity:

I need to be in control of not so much what I do but how I’m going to do it. I’ve got my own ways of working. I know how I work well and how I don’t. I’ve learned that after seven years of running my own thing, I’m really high motivation. If I can see things being a bit crap I’m like, I’ve just got to pull my finger out and do it. I’ve always been practical. I’ve never been like ‘she’ll be right’. I’ve had a really realistic last seven years.
There’s no fairyland. No dreamland. If I physically don’t do it, it doesn’t get done. I do everything: accounting, marketing, booking…client liaison.

However, the constant responsibility and financial uncertainty has taken a toll:

Q Where do you see yourself going? What aspirations?

J [Pause …] Um. Just recently I’ve been thinking about getting out. It’s been seven years it’s been great. Yeah. The constant financial stress. There’s no guarantees. Like with the venues … they can be there one week and literally the next week they can be gone. … I’m just about to take on a mortgage as well. So it’s like I’ve got the payments each week. Like with the industry being what it is, I don’t know what it’ll be like in six months. It could increase … If I had to take a punt I’d say it would decrease and that’s why I’m getting out. I haven’t got any qualifications in anything else.

John has come to recognise that working with (but not necessarily for) ‘corporate-land’ will free him from the treadmill of his booking agency, but consign him to less fulfilling work. With the admonitions of his parents ringing in his ears, he faces the challenge of identifying the transferability of his skills and reinventing himself without acquiescing to the account of the world and of working life that they provided, without accepting that they were ‘right all along’. In reflecting on the life course John contrasts his own choices with those of a younger brother, the most academically successful of his siblings and the only one in his family to attend university:
So he did four or five years of uni and came out and realised that he can only get a job that pays 45,000 bucks a year ... He did Law and marketing. He didn’t want to go into the legal field and he went into marketing. Now he’s the marketing coordinator [for a fibro cement company] and it’s bizarre. He’s talking about ... fibro cement and I’m like ‘You actually enjoy fibro cement? Why do you want to work in fibro cement?’ And he goes ‘It’s really exciting. It’s got these uses.’

John told us this not in order to disparage higher education itself, but to demonstrate his conviction that even the conventional lines of social mobility do not guarantee a radical break with the parent culture, either in financial or cultural terms.

His cantankerous disposition shows he is likely to continue to resist familial expectations even if he breaks with the music industry.

People are saying I might be able to do project management coordination ...I thought if I’m going to make a change I shouldn’t do something totally different ... something that would use my skill sets. Like I don’t work well working for someone else. I always piss my bosses off, always have. So I’ve got to find something where I can run my own show, have control over deadlines and budgets, otherwise I’ll just end up fighting with the boss.

Q Are you sad about throwing it in?
I am. But it was like I had that realisation when I was 24 (about being a rock star) I gotta think like what have I got to do about the mortgage payments.

It is difficult for John to account for his life transitions in positive terms. At the end of our conversation we, the interviewers, found ourselves seeking to reassure him about work in the new economy, the wide utility of his skills and encouraging him to think about them in abstract terms. But ‘spinning’ himself in this way to facilitate sideways movement does not come naturally to John. He appears ill-at-ease with the process of narrative reinvention of vocational identity that is so central to participating effectively in the precarious labour markets. Like the Fordist era tradesperson, John is inclined to cast his life in frank, empirical terms, exemplifying the characteristic brittleness that has made it so hard for many retrenched working class men to find a place in the new economy. This confirms the position of those (Nayak, 2006) who dispute the theories of reflexive individualism and whose research suggests that class/communal/familial patterns and habits have an inertia. One would suspect that those endowed with greater reserves of social and cultural capital might find the identity transitions associated with contemporary working life easier to achieve. Notwithstanding this there is a \textit{ne regrette rien} tone to John’s narrative, something that suggests he will remain defiant and idiosyncratic.

\textit{P} Do you think it’s necessary to take risks?

\textit{J} In music, yes.
P In life?

J Oh, I think you’ve got to push yourself a bit. If you don’t push yourself that’s where you have all these guys going out and having mid life crises. They’re always thinking ‘what if?’ I don’t think I’ll have a ‘what if’.

Conclusion

The sorts of dreams that were being pursued by John were not new in any sense. However, the discourses of the new economy vaunt the sorts of inclinations that he has shown: flexible, individualistic and ready to take a chance that involves a radical break with the previous generation. In the mid-twentieth century there was little public encouragement for those from working class backgrounds either to take up creative labour or to embrace the associated variable work patterns. Now these patterns have become the conventional template for working life. In recognition of the emerging creative economy, those charged with the responsibility for vocational guidance are trying to shift people to develop creative and cultural/cosmopolitan skills: while at the same time engendering in them a subjectivity of infinite pliability. If there has been a diminution of the modernist faith in our ability to predict and foreshadow the direction of economic, technological and stylistic change, this has produced a paradox. The new worker must have ambition without strong direction. If the meaning of past experiences can only be found by articulating their significance in relation to present opportunities
and exigencies, then the idea of planning and setting rigid goals goes out of the window. The Just In Time vocational self is always a work in progress and its identities can only be perceived retrospectively. Gambling on the uncertainties of the new economy, John has accepted precarious labour in occupations that are hard to classify and describe to their families for whom ‘steady’ jobs with a regular wage – tradesperson, nurse, teacher, police constable, shop assistant – are preferable to the vague opportunities associated with creative industries. Far from the sanguine and unitary narratives of bourgeois individualism, John’s biographical reflections embody a sense of disquiet, indications they are wrestling with apparently intractable structural problems associated with transitions to adulthood. He strives to make sense of the sobering consequences associated with the pursuit of youthful dreams but does not seem prepared completely to acquiesce to parental expectation. John has come to recognise that working with ‘corporate-land’ will free him from the treadmill of his booking agency, but consign him to less fulfilling work. With the admonitions of his parents ring in his ears, he faces the challenge of identifying the transferability of his skills and reinventing himself without acquiescing completely to their hopes and expectations for him. His contrary disposition shows he is likely to continue to resist these expectations even if he breaks with the music industry. But even in situations involving the resistance of children, the parent culture has an over-determining role. John refuses, for example, to maximise his income by milking the large venues as do other agents. His down-to-earth frugality betrays his upbringing, and his honesty and bluntness are hardly the traits likely to maximise his financial success as an agent. It is trite to say that biographical narratives are present-centred rationales of contemporary circumstances, teleological accounts. Far from performing
himself as a ‘Just-In-Time’ worker, confidently reworking the fragments of experience into a coherent identity account, what John presents is a series of narratives characterized by ruptures, disjunctions, points of disturbance, silences and contradictions. This indicates diffidence towards the narrative and identity demands of the new economy and suggests that the capacities for reflexive individualism might be differentially apportioned. At various points, especially those from poorer backgrounds are unable to produce confident and coherent narratives. They are torn between the competing pulls of the discourses and imperatives of the new economy and the models provided for them valuing stability and fixed occupational identities. Success in the new economy is not only based on the strategic abilities of my interviewees as reflexive individuals but also on cultural resources that are transmitted inter-generationally and are shaped by class and ethnic backgrounds.

References


