

# Uncertain Futures

Young women in transition to adulthood in a  
post-industrial British city

Anna Maria Orrnert

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the transitions to adulthood of a group of 19 young women of mixed age, social class and ethnic backgrounds, from two adjacent ‘outer-urban’ neighbourhoods in the post-industrial city of Birmingham, UK. It focuses on three distinct, and inter-related, spheres of transition: education and training, employment and independent household formation, including family of origin, housing, couple relationships, marriage and motherhood.

Using the concepts of reflexivity, the appearance of choice and intersectionality, the study aims to shed light on the role of individual agency and structural inequalities in shaping the research participants’ (RPs’) life chances. It examines how RPs interpreted their available ‘choices’, the structural constraints – related to gender, social class and ethnicity – they encountered, and the strategies they employed during their transitions. An intersectional approach illuminates the multiple, co-constituted, ways in which gender, social class and ethnicity operated in RPs’ lives.

Using a critical ethnographic research methodology, data was gathered through participation observation at a local youth centre and repeated semi-structured interviews with RPs, over a 20-month period. Additionally, several one-off interviews were conducted with practitioners to build a picture of the context in which RPs lived their lives.

The findings indicate that while RPs frequently articulated notions of choice, their actual options were often heavily bounded. Structural constraints related to gender, social class and ethnicity shaped many aspects of their experiences of compulsory and post-compulsory education, the labour market, and transitions from familial dependence to independent households. Despite this, RPs consistently strove to make the ‘right’ choices to achieve positive life outcomes. Although this included remaining flexible in the face of uncertain futures, diverse opportunities, constraints and subsequent strategies were observed along social class and ethnic lines.

This study is relevant to sociologists, journalists, policy makers and others interested in the experiences of young women growing up in materially disadvantaged areas, in the context of widening inequality. The findings illustrate that an intersectional approach enables a more nuanced understanding of young women’s transitions to adulthood in the post-industrial city. This makes a compelling case to incorporate intersectional approaches into the study of youth transitions more widely.

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## **List of acronyms utilised in this doctoral research study**

<b>BME</b>	<b>Black and minority ethnic</b>
<b>BTEC</b>	<b>Business Technology Education Council</b>
<b>BYS</b>	<b>Birmingham Youth Service</b>
<b>BYOS</b>	<b>Birmingham Youth Offending Service</b>
<b>EMA</b>	<b>Educational Maintenance Allowance</b>
<b>FE</b>	<b>Further education</b>
<b>FSM</b>	<b>Free school meals</b>
<b>HE</b>	<b>Higher education</b>
<b>JSA</b>	<b>Job Seekers Allowance</b>
<b>MYC</b>	<b>Midford Youth Centre</b>
<b>NEET</b>	<b>Not in education, employment or training</b>
<b>NHS</b>	<b>National Health Service</b>
<b>NSPCC</b>	<b>National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</b>
<b>NVQ</b>	<b>National Vocational Qualification</b>
<b>PT</b>	<b>Personal trainer</b>
<b>RP</b>	<b>Research participant</b>
<b>SEN</b>	<b>Special educational needs</b>



# Introduction to research study

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This doctoral research study examines young women's transitions to adulthood in two adjacent 'outer-urban' (Hanley 2007: 12) neighbourhoods in the post-industrial city of Birmingham, UK. Empirically, the objectives of the study are two-fold: to contribute to the evidence base that considers transition studies as encompassing numerous spheres of life beyond just school-to-work; and to add to the growing, but still nascent, body of research that considers the transition experiences of young women as worthy of study in their own right. Weaving together these two objectives, it picks up where the seminal research on young women's transition experiences in Birmingham during the 1970s and 1980s left off (Griffin 1985; McRobbie 2000). Theoretically, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate between structure and agency in understanding youth transitions (see Atkinson 2007, 2013; Beck 2007, 2013; Woodman 2009, 2010, 2013; Roberts 2010, 2012; Furlong et al 2011; Threadgold 2011; Farrugia 2013), by using the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) to examine the ways in which gender, social class and ethnicity converge to create specific experiences of transition in the post-industrial context.

This study focuses on three areas of investigation: education and training, employment and independent household formation, including housing, relationships, marriage and motherhood. Within these distinct, but interrelated, spheres, young women's lives in the post-industrial context have been characterised by both change and continuity (Aapola et al 2005: 37). The landscape in which young people make their transitions to adulthood, in post-industrial Britain and elsewhere, has changed dramatically since the dismantling of industrialised labour. Since the 1980s, the field of youth transition studies has explored how the reshaping of the socio-economic landscape – by de-industrialisation, globalisation, the emergence of new employment sectors, the gains of the second-wave feminist movement,

creeping neoliberal reforms and the retraction of the social welfare state - has influenced young people's lived experiences on their pathways to adulthood. Since the 1990s, young women have been celebrated as freed from traditional family constraints and able to participate in increased opportunities for education and financial independence (Walkerdine et al 2001: 61). Yet, the changes have also resulted in more uncertain and fragmented transitions for many young women, particularly those growing up in materially disadvantaged areas (ibid).

This study aims to elucidate how the research participants (also referred to as RPs) navigate transitions in this post-industrial landscape. It asks the following research questions:

- How do the RPs interpret their available 'choices' as they make their transitions to adulthood?
- What are the structural constraints – related to gender, social class and ethnicity – encountered by RPs?
- In light of 'choices' and constraints, what strategies are employed by the RPs as they make their transitions to adulthood?

The study thus aims to shed light on the role of individual agency and enduring structural inequalities in shaping the RPs' life chances.

Using an ethnographic methodology, the study examines the experiences of a group of 19 RPs from the two adjacent neighbourhoods of 'Midford' and 'Weston'<sup>1</sup> over a period of 20 months. The RPs are of mixed age (14-24), ethnicity (white, black and 'mixed parentage' (Tizard and Phoenix 2002)) and social class background (predominantly working, but also middle and precariat, class – how these are defined in this study is explained in more detail in Chapter Two). Thus, an intersectional approach is integral to understanding the multiple, and sometimes overlapping, ways in which gender, social class and ethnicity operate in shaping life chances of RPs.

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<sup>1</sup> Midford and Weston are both pseudonyms – the rationale for anonymisation is given in Chapter Three.

My interest in young women's transitions to adulthood evolved over time. Between 2005 and 2010, I worked in two British universities carrying out research related to international development and conflict. During this time, I became particularly interested in the experiences of women and young people. I also began to observe how many of the issues that I was interested in within the international context (inequality and poverty, particularly with regard to gendered experiences of marginalisation amongst young people) were manifesting in contemporary Britain. After the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office in 2010, my intellectual urge to explore these issues 'at home' grew. I decided to focus my doctoral research on examining young women's experiences of transition in the context of the post-industrial city in which I lived, Birmingham. Making the decision to carry out my doctoral research in Birmingham was also (as will be explained in Chapter Three) an outcome of considering insider/outsider dynamics and their impact on research.

This research is timely as it began at around the time of the 2010 General Election in the wake of the 2007/08 financial crisis. Under the mantra of austerity, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, and the Conservative government that followed in 2015, implemented numerous policies on social welfare, employment, education and housing that have impacted negatively on young people. The consequences of austerity have been particularly significant for women (Fawcett Society 2012; Women's Budget Group 2012). There is evidence that disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately affected by the cuts, and that this has served to deepen inequality (Hastings et al 2015: 117-118). Whilst this dissertation is *not* a study of the impact of austerity policies on young women, it *is* a study of the lived experiences of a group of young women growing up in the types of communities most negatively affected by these policies.

The majority of RPs came from working class households, although some parents held middle class or precariat occupations. Yet, most RPs also lived in 'sole parent' households,

which meant that financial challenges frequently persisted in narratives regardless of social class background. People from working class communities are regularly presented sensationally in segments of the mainstream media as inhabiting the ‘badlands of the national imagination’ (Toynbee 2003: 149; see for example Pemberton 2014; Agency 2015; Bassett 2015; McClelland 2015; Newton 2015). This doctoral research study challenges sensationalist caricatures by examining the experiences of RPs who are, in many ways, ‘ordinary’ (Brown 1987: 3) young women. The majority are neither ‘high flyers’ nor ‘school rebels’ (ibid), and most live ‘ordinary, law abiding lives’ (Toynbee 2003: 149), albeit often in complex, and sometimes very challenging, circumstances. This research is of interest to sociologists, journalists, policy makers and others interested in the experiences of young women growing up in materially disadvantaged areas in the context of widening inequality across the UK.

Chapter One locates the research within existing relevant literature and sets out the conceptual framework for exploring RPs’ transitions to adulthood. The chapter clarifies the concept of *transition* as a socially constructed period in young people’s lives. It sets out the contradictory post-industrial context in which young women’s experiences are simultaneously shaped by new opportunities and increased uncertainty and also outlines useful analytical concepts: *reflexivity*, *appearance of choice* and *intersectionality*. The chapter concludes by examining existing research on young women’s experiences of education and training, employment and independent household formation in Britain, in order to contextualise the discussion and analysis of the research findings in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Chapter Two presents the fieldwork context. It describes the geographic, demographic and socio-historical context of Birmingham, since this shapes the opportunities and structural constraints that RPs encounter during their transitions. It also outlines the neighbourhoods of Midford and Weston, where most of the RPs grew up, as well as the primary fieldwork site,

Midford Youth Centre (MYC)<sup>2</sup>. The chapter concludes by describing the RPs and clarifying how social class – one of the key structural categories examined in this study - is understood.

Chapter Three sets out the research approach, methodology and tools utilised. This includes a brief autobiographical account, intended to establish criticality and positionality. The chapter describes how the data was generated, managed and analysed. Key to this is a discussion of how the concept of intersectionality was operationalised. Finally, this chapter addresses the ethical considerations that were encountered while undertaking this research and how these were handled.

Chapters Four, Five and Six discuss the research findings. Chapter Four examines RPs' experiences of secondary, further and higher education. It explores the extent to which they were able to access the growing educational opportunities available to young women and structural constraints they encountered along the way. This chapter argues that, despite the increase in opportunities available to young women more generally, the RPs' experiences reflected enduring gendered, classed and ethnic inequalities. In spite of these structural constraints, the RPs valued education as key to 'getting on' (Bynner et al 1997) in life and employed diverse strategies to make the 'right' educational choices. In this context, setbacks were often perceived as the result of individual failure rather than structural constraints.

Chapter Five examines RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, (un)employment and financial (in)dependence. This chapter illustrates that, despite the value placed upon paid employment as a route to financial independence, RPs' actual work experiences reflected the insecure nature of the labour market observed elsewhere (for instance, Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 9). For many RPs, uncertainty, alongside a sense of inevitability, generated a diverse set of responses, including anxiety and ambivalence. In this context, many RPs interpreted

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<sup>2</sup> Also a pseudonym.

‘success’ and ‘failure’ as the result of personal shortcomings and wrong ‘choices’, rather than structural constraints. Notably, these interpretations varied between RPs from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the absence of opportunities for social or occupational mobility often generated a desire for ‘escape’, real or imagined, from the local area.

Chapter Six examines RPs’ attitudes towards, and experiences of, independent household formation, including housing transitions, couple relationships, marriage and motherhood. It argues that, despite RPs’ overwhelming desire for autonomous living, financial constraints often resulted in fragmented and non-linear housing transitions. It highlights that RPs’ attitudes towards relationships, marriage and family formation reflect de-traditionalisation, alongside the increased opportunities young women have for financial independence observed elsewhere. Despite diverse attitudes toward marriage, however, most RPs expressed the desire for ‘settled’ partnership as well as young (but not teenage) motherhood. This chapter also examines RPs’ attitudes towards unexpected pregnancy, teenage motherhood and motherhood on welfare benefits. It finds no evidence to suggest that teenage motherhood is, as some segments of the mainstream media and government are fond of claiming, a ‘lifestyle choice’ (Moir 2010; Duncan Smith 2012; Hope and Mason 2013; Shipman 2013). Although motherhood was strongly valued by RPs, financial considerations influenced their attitudes towards pursuing this. In this context, many RPs articulated punitive attitudes towards unexpected or ‘irresponsible’ teenage pregnancies, whilst they simultaneously expressed strong anti-termination views. The chapter draws on several case studies to argue that, despite prevailing attitudes towards teenage motherhood as undesirable, the event of actual pregnancy was a source of great anxiety for RPs and decisions made in these circumstances were complex.

Chapter Seven concludes this dissertation by summarising the key findings and outlining the study's empirical and theoretical contributions. It argues that empirical research aiming to capture the complexities and nuances of young women's lived experiences is critical to understanding the processes of change and continuity that define young women's transitions to adulthood in the post-industrial city. Conceptually, intersectionality is an ideal tool for investigating these complexities and could be incorporated more widely into frameworks for studying youth transitions.

# Chapter 1. Reviewing the literature: key concepts and areas of investigation

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## 1.0 Introduction

This doctoral research study is situated with the field of British youth transition studies. This chapter discusses relevant sociological theory and key research on youth transitions in order to situate the study and establish the conceptual framework and research questions. The first section outlines the conceptualisation of transition within the field of youth studies in Britain. The second sets out the key concepts utilised in this study: *reflexivity*, the *appearance of choice* and *intersectionality*. The third highlights key youth sociological and transition studies which influenced the design of this study, as well as key themes within the three areas of investigation: education and training, employment, and independent household formation. The final section sets out the research questions that are explored in Chapters Four through Six.

## 1.1 Is the transitions approach still relevant?

This study uses MacDonald and Marsh's definition of transition as 'the pathways that young people make as they leave school and encounter different labour market, housing and family-related experiences as they progress towards adulthood' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 31).

These pathways are undertaken at different 'developmental stages' that occur from childhood to independent adulthood (Henderson et al 2007: 18).

Interest in youth transitions grew during the 1980s (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 29). This was, in part, in response to the criticism of subcultural studies as too narrowly focused on the 'stylistic art of the few' at a time when 'young adults are the prime victims of a state policy of manufactured unemployment' (Clarke 1982: 1; see also MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 28;



McDowell 2012: 580). It also emerged from concern about (working class) youth deviance (Margo and Dixon 2006: 48; Furlong 2009: 421-422) and challenged the post-subcultural focus on (individualised and globalised) forms of leisure and consumption-based identity formation. Primarily concerned with understanding how the reshaping of the socioeconomic landscape affected young people's life chances, youth transition studies aimed to shed light on structural inequalities which determined the life courses of (most often, working class) young people.

Earlier youth transition studies (for example Roberts 1984; Brown 1987; Hollands 1990) focused on school-to-work transitions. Often, these focused on young white working class men, as they were strongly represented among the unemployed (Griffin 2011: 247).

Historically, education, employment, relationship and family experiences were shaped by social class and gender (Winlow and Hall 2006: 20), which provided 'points of reference' and 'route maps' for young people to follow into adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 1).

During this time, women's roles in the labour market were considered 'temporary'; they were, primarily, expected to become wives and mothers (Griffin 1985: 50). Early youth transition studies were thus criticised by feminist scholars for ignoring the experiences of women.

Seminal studies that emerged out of these critiques, and influenced the design of this doctoral research study, are addressed later in this chapter.

The context in which young people transition to adulthood has changed since the 1980s reflecting the altered labour market landscape, including the dismantling of traditional industry, growth of the service and information sectors and increased participation of women in the workforce. The 'collapse' of the youth labour market' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 28) following the decline of traditional industry and the emergence of new employment sectors, has resulted in greater competition for fewer jobs and a growing demand for a skilled and qualified workforce. Higher and further education opportunities have expanded and

participation of working class young people, notably young women, has grown. However, rising costs - including higher tuition fees and the shift from grants to loans - may reverse this trend.

In emerging sectors, many employers prefer cheap and flexible labour, namely, 'part-time, casual, short term and temporary' workers (Aapola et al 2005: 58). In this context, young people's transitions have become increasingly fragmented (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 8), 'fractured' (Bradley and Devadason 2008: 126) and 'protracted' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 30). Calls have emerged for new approaches to understanding the labour landscape since traditional analytical approaches based on historical social class definitions are outdated. Standing (2011) argues that a new class of workers - 'the precariat' - has emerged. Their employment is characterised by insecurity, low wages, lack of protection within the workplace, limited opportunities for skills development and few possibilities for upward mobility (Standing 2011: 11). Simultaneously, widening inequality has renewed interest in understanding how social class is structured and operates in post-industrial Britain (Reay 2006: 289) although there is, as yet, no commonly-agreed definition. The way in which social class is defined in the context of this study is set out in Chapter Two. As a result of these changes, the relevance of 'transition' as a concept has been questioned. This is examined below.

### **1.1.1 Making a case for the continued relevance of the transition approach**

Transitions to adulthood have become increasingly characterised by 'false starts, backward steps, unpredictability and circularity' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 35). Du Bois-Reymond and Blasco (2003) describe these as 'yo-yo' transitions. Under such circumstances, it can be difficult to identify start and end-points (Dwyer and Wyn 2001), and there is a growing tendency among young people to 'remain in a state of semi-dependency' (Furlong and

Cartmel 2007: 10). Some critics argue, therefore, that the concept of 'transition' has lost relevance, and alternative ways of conceptualising this period of young people's lives have emerged.

The concept of 'young adulthood' aims to capture the elements of de-standardisation and fragmentation in young people's lives, as well as the interplay between individual and structural conditions in shaping trajectories (EGRIS 2001: 101). Similarly, 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2006, 2014) aims to shift the focus from what young people are *becoming* to what they *are* by capturing 'intangible and psychological criteria for adulthood', including 'accepting responsibility for one's actions, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent' (Arnett 2014: vi). The 'generation' approach argues for the need to understand 'how each generation is located within its social, political and economic milieu' in a way that 'take[s] account of, but go[es] beyond, the framing and defining actions of the state' (Wyn and Woodman 2006: 497).

Although I agree with the aims of these approaches, I concur with MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 31) who argue that criticisms of transition rest on 'a narrow and largely outdated picture of the nature of transition studies.' More recent transition studies have not only acknowledged the altered context, but also broadened the focus of transitions, arguing for a more holistic understanding of the interconnected spheres of young people's lives. Many of these include the conventional areas of education and employment, as well as housing, relationships, family formation, health, leisure, consumption and criminal 'careers'.

Additionally, conceptualising transitions as 'pathways', rather than 'trajectories', (as MacDonald and Marsh 2005 and Bradley and Devadason 2008 do) enables a shift in the focus of investigation. Trajectories imply 'linearity and impetus', whereas pathways 'can meander, fork or peter out' (Bradley and Devadason 2008: 133-134). As such, 'pathways' capture more

accurately the character of many young people's transitions in the contemporary context, and highlight their fragmented nature. Crucially, studying 'pathways', rather than 'trajectories', emphasises the current process rather than the end goal, since the end goal is less clear. As such, 'pathways' invite an examination of individual agency *and* the structural context in which this is exercised. The tension between individual agency and structure is key to this investigation and returned to throughout this chapter.

Whilst this study acknowledges the holistic nature of transitions, it focuses on three areas of investigation: education and training, employment and independent household formation (including families of origin, housing, relationships and family formation). As Furlong et al (2011: 357) argue, 'unless we maintain a perspective on youth that is underpinned by a concern with structural processes of reproduction we risk the diversity of lifestyles blinding us to the substantial predictabilities of social life.' The spheres of education and employment remain central to understanding young people's life chances (Pollock 2008: 480-481), particularly in the current socioeconomic and political context. Education is understood to directly influence young people's life chances, whilst access to the financial means to take part in leisure, consumption and independent living is underpinned by employment circumstances. Crucially, young women are often caught between the competing pressures of the labour market and family responsibilities. Where family responsibilities contribute to curtailed education pathways and/or challenges to engaging in full-time employment, women face increased risks of material poverty (Millar 2010: 122). The contemporary socioeconomic and political context in Britain (rising poverty and inequality alongside the government's austerity agenda) creates a strong imperative to focus on these three areas of investigation.

### **1.1.2 Deepening the understanding of young women's transitions**

Another persistent critique of youth transition studies has been the marginalisation of young women's experiences, although some seminal studies have sought to redress the balance.

McRobbie (2000) studied working class teenage motherhood in Birmingham during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, Griffin (1985) also examined young working class women's transitions from education to employment in the same city. Other studies that focus specifically on young women's education and employment experiences are Walkerdine et al's (2001) mixed class study, and Mirza's (1992) research on young Caribbean women in London. In-depth studies about young, ethnically diverse, working class women's experiences of motherhood include Gillies (2007) and Phoenix (1991). These studies influenced the themes explored in this study and informed the decision to adopt an intersectional analytical approach, which will be clarified later in this chapter.

More recent transition studies (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Henderson et al 2007) use mixed-gender research samples. Whilst their inclusion of young women's experiences is welcomed, their conclusions tend to concern 'young people' more broadly rather than the specifically gendered differences between men and women. The differences among and between women from different social class and ethnic backgrounds is equally neglected. In contrast, the studies that focus exclusively on young women illuminate the ways in which gender intersects with other categories (social class and ethnicity) to produce lived experiences which are not only different to young men's, but also diverge between young women from different backgrounds.

Despite the pioneering research by Griffin (2000) and McRobbie (1985), there has been little academic focus on young women in Birmingham since then. This study builds on where McRobbie and Griffin left off in order to provide an updated picture of young women's

transitions to adulthood in post-industrial Birmingham (Chapter Two outlines the rationale for choosing Birmingham as a research site). As such, it contributes to the growing, but still nascent, body of research on young women's transitions to adulthood.

The following section sets out the conceptual framework that is utilised to analyse the findings in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

## **1.2 The conceptual tools: reflexivity, appearance of choice and intersectionality**

The section begins by examining how the concept of *reflexivity* can inform understanding of the 'choices' made by young women in transition to adulthood. It goes on to interrogate the notion of 'choice,' suggesting that the *appearance of choice* is a more useful concept with which to understand young women's life chances. The third part argues that *intersectionality* is a valuable tool for deepening understandings of both reflexivity and the appearance of choice in the context of this study. Finally, I explain how these concepts influenced the design of this study.

### **1.2.1 Reflexivity**

As noted earlier, young people's biographies were traditionally predictable and linear, largely determined by their position in society vis-à-vis gender, social class and ethnicity. According to Winlow and Hall (2006: 18):

being born male or female into a clearly delineated class culture provided the practical context for biographies guided by relatively clear values, meanings and practices that constituted a stable identity and helped individuals make sense of who they were and where they were going.

It is argued that the changed socioeconomic landscape has led to a proliferation of new risks and opportunities, which require young people to engage in individualised, reflexive projects of 'self-making' as they transition to adulthood (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). Beck suggests

that in post-industrial ‘risk society’, individuals become ‘the producer of his/her own labour situation and in this way of his/her social biography’ through a process of conscious risk aversion (Beck 1992: 93). Giddens argues that individuals ‘employ a calculative attitude’ to engage in ‘a reflexive project of connecting personal and social change’ (Giddens 1991: 28-33). In other words, life chances are the result of an individual’s reflexive responses to both opportunities and risks. Reflexivity is thus often interpreted as the agency that individuals employ to ‘shape their own destinies’ (Brannen and Nilsen 2005: 415). Du Bois-Reymond coins the term ‘choice biography’ to describe how young people ‘reflect on the available options to justify their decisions’ (Du Bois-Reymond 1998: 65) (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Reflexivity as agency**



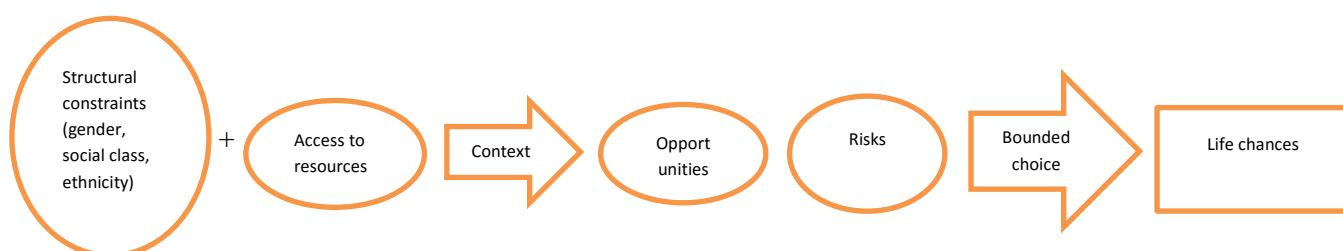
As others have noted, however, ‘choice biographies’ are not necessarily the product of choice. McRobbie (2009: 19) argues that choice is ‘a modality of constraint.’ Similarly, Savage (2000) reminds us that ‘individualisation is dependent on a process of social distinction, linked to ability to access resources’ (Savage 2000 cited in Gillies 2007: 23). Whilst young people more broadly face increased opportunities and risks, these remain unevenly distributed (McRobbie 2009: 19). Adkins (2002: 48) suggests that reflexivity arises ‘unevenly from subjects’ embeddedness within differing sets of power relations.’ Choice-making is, therefore, a more complex process than the term ‘choice’ suggests.

It is more useful to think of reflexivity as the ‘capacity for reflection’ (Woodman 2009: 251) in a structural context. Along these lines, reflexivity is interpreted as ‘a way of coping with

structural insecurity’ rather than a distinct kind of agency (Farrugia 2013: 682). An individual’s position within the structural context – which, in turn, shapes both opportunities and risks - is defined by inequalities related to gender, social class and ethnicity. As a result, individuals have varying, structurally determined, levels of access to resources that affect how they enact reflexivity in any given context.

Threadgold (2011: 388) suggests that ‘individual reflexivity can be understood as cultural capital: like language, everyone is using it, but some have the skills and resources to use it better than others.’ As a result, individuals with structurally determined access to resources can achieve vastly different outcomes faced with similar decisions. Evans (2007: 1) terms this ‘bounded agency’ (See Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2: Reflexivity as bounded agency**



I interrogated research participants’ (RPs’) reflexive processes to understand how they exercised agency, and the extent to which this agency was bounded as they pursued their pathways to adulthood. I asked them to speak about their aspirations with regard to education, employment and independent household formation, alongside their rationale for these goals and how they planned to achieve them. This was intended to reveal anticipated opportunities or obstacles, as well as their responses to them.

The following section builds on the notion of reflexivity by accounting for less visible, yet enduring, structural constraints.



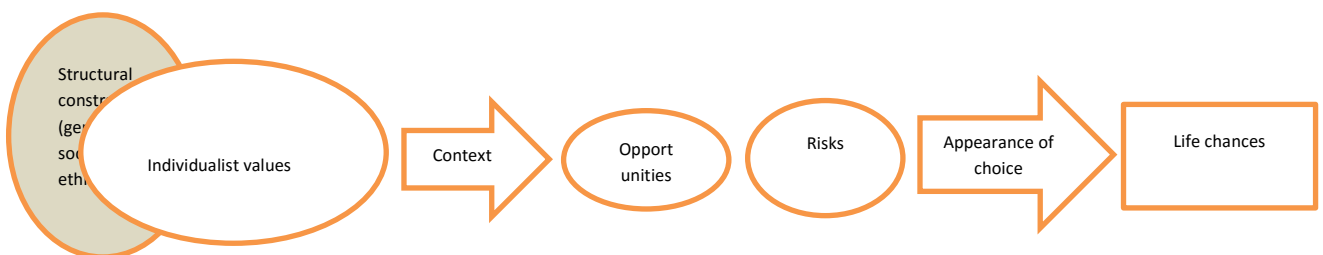
### 1.2.2 The appearance of choice

The concept of reflexivity is deepened by reflecting on the appearance of choice (Henderson et al 2007) which often characterises the post-industrial context. Furlong and Cartmel (2007: 2) describe this as the ‘epistemological fallacy of late modernity’, arguing that:

social structures, such as class, continue to shape life chances [but] these structures tend to become increasingly obscure as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify. (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 2-3)

An ‘impression of greater equality’ (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 5) is created when social structures that determine life chances are obscured. As Henderson et al (2007: 19) note, ‘the appearance of choice is created’ where in reality there may be little choice at all (See Figure 1.3). Indeed, choice is shaped by structural inequalities and by the ways in which young people’s resources are ‘entwined with personal, family and community factors and subject to individual, social and policy contingencies’ (ibid: 13).

**Figure 1.3: The appearance of choice**



This is consequential since the impression of choice encourages notions of individual responsibility for life outcomes. As Bauman (2000: 34) notes, ‘risk and contradictions go on being socially produced’ but ‘the duty and the necessity to cope with them [...] are being individualised.’ Without a structurally unequal society as a reference point, the appearance of choice implies that all individuals make their choices from the same starting point, which is not the case. Consequently, young women are held personally accountable for processes that

are beyond their control and setbacks are considered the result of individual shortcomings rather than structurally determined inequalities (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 5).

I interrogated how the appearance of choice operated in RPs' lives by asking them to speak about their hopes and goals for the future. To what extent did these reveal a sense of freedom to become whoever they wanted to be? I then asked RPs to talk about how they would achieve their goals as well as any challenges they anticipated. Thus, I attempted to highlight any limits on their freedom of choice created by the epistemological fallacy. The constraints presented by the appearance of choice are, as observed above, often obscured, even to those whose lives are impacted by them. I aimed to examine how the appearance of choice operated by carrying out several interviews, at intervals, with each RP. I asked the RPs to discuss their perceived options, the goals they set and the strategies they created to achieve these. In subsequent interviews, I interrogated to what extent their plans had been achieved in order to reveal opportunities and structural constraints that they encountered along the way.

### **1.2.3 Intersectionality**

An analysis of the RPs' *reflexivity* in the context of the *appearance of choice* is aided by the concept of *intersectionality* (Crenshaw 1989, 2011a, 2011b). Intersectionality was originally coined to explain how race and gender acted together to shape various dimensions of black women's employment experiences (Crenshaw 1989: 139). More recently, it has been used to elucidate difference more widely (Crenshaw 2011b: 230). Nevertheless, as Crenshaw observes, 'the implications of [the matrix of power] – when certain features are activated and relevant and when they are not – are contextual' (ibid). This section explains how the concept of intersectionality is understood and utilised in this study.

The structural inequalities that shape life chances (gender, social class and ethnicity) are multi-layered. Brannen and Nilsen (2002: 42) note that 'when structural forces and personal

resources [...] support each other, there is a tendency for the structural resources to take on an “invisible” quality.’ Therefore, it may not always be easy to identify the ways in which different, overlapping structural categories influence individual lives. Instead, ‘inequality is still more usually attributed to one [constraint] or the other’ (Gillies 2007: 29). In this study, intersectionality is used to probe beneath single social divisions - gender, social class and ethnicity - to ‘[foreground] a richer and more complex ontology’ (Phoenix and Pattymana 2006: 187). Gender, social class and ethnicity are highlighted since they constitute the ‘three major social divisions’ (Yuval-Davis 2006: 201).

Intersectionality enables a more nuanced way of examining RPs’ experiences than simply reducing them into unitary categories. To illustrate this, Crenshaw’s (2011a: 29) metaphor of traffic in an intersection is useful:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.

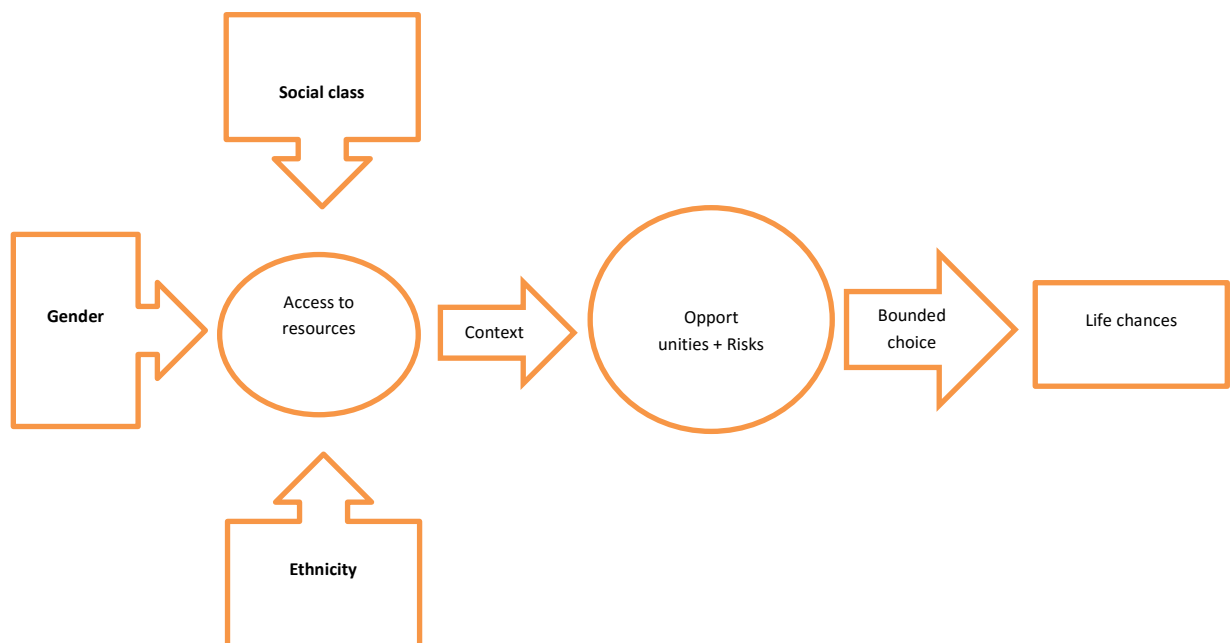
In other words, the structural inequalities and constraints that shape the conditions in which the RPs make their transitions to adulthood can be related to gender, social class and ethnicity and/or any combination of these. Intersectionality problematises the idea that the RPs are one homogenous group with a universal (female, classed, or ethnic) transition experience.

Instead of understanding RPs’ experiences as ‘young women’ or ‘working class young people’, intersectionality can illustrate, for instance, whether ethnicity creates diverging experiences of transition for working class women or whether transition is experienced differently between white women depending on their social class. Understanding multi-layered inequalities necessitates identifying where specific structural constraints emerge and how these intersect to create specific lived experiences. To accomplish this, I strove to identify where gender, social class and/or ethnicity came into play in RPs’ lives. At the level

of research design, I included questions intended to illuminate specifically gendered, classed or ethnic dimensions of their transitions. This included questions about course choices and the rationale for their selections at various levels of education; employment aspirations and reasons for these; the types of jobs they had held and their specific work experiences; attitudes towards marriage and motherhood; as well as experiences of living in predominantly white neighbourhoods.

Lutz et al (2011: 2) argue that ‘simultaneity and mutual co-constitution of different categories of social differentiation’ is what creates the ‘specificity of the experiences shaped by these interactions.’ In other words, the convergence of gender, social class and ethnicity is what creates different experiences of (dis)advantage amongst women which contribute to shaping their choices (see Figure 1.4).

**Figure 1.4: How intersectionality informs understandings of bounded choice**



In this context, intersectionality becomes a useful ‘prism’ for examining ‘what difference our differences [make]’ (Crenshaw 2011b: 222-226). In Chapter Three, I describe in more detail how the concept was operationalised methodologically.

The following section outlines the key areas of investigation, where these concepts are employed to inform understanding of the RPs' transition experiences.

### **1.3 A review of the literature**

The extent to which individual reflexivity and structural constraints shape the lives of young people has been examined in a number of empirical youth sociology and transition studies, though few have taken an explicitly intersectional approach. MacDonald and Marsh's (2005) two-year study of a group of mixed gender, white working class young people in a disadvantaged area in North East England, explores the roles of 'individual agency, local cultures and social structural constraints' in shaping social inequalities during transitions (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 46). The authors conclude that, whilst their interviewees exerted some degree of agency, their 'choices' were made in the context of local and structural constraints.

Henderson et al's (2007) 10-year study seeks to understand what shapes young people's life chances in five socioeconomically diverse areas of the UK, finding that reflexivity is heavily gendered and classed (2007: 111). Similarly, Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 425), in their comparative study of European transitions, find that whilst young people employed the rhetoric of choice, this was, in reality, shaped by structural constraints. The consequences were significant, particularly for those most exposed to structural disadvantage, since they blamed themselves for not achieving their aims (ibid: 423).

Walkerdine et al's (2001) longitudinal study examines the intersection of social class and gender on the transitions of young British women of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. The authors examine choice, structural constraints and reflexivity in education, employment and the domestic sphere from a perspective that centralises gender and class. They find that decision-making frequently occurred in 'contradictory economic, social and individual

landscapes' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 10) and that interviewees' aspirations, opportunities and responses diverged depending on their positioning vis-à-vis social class and ethnicity.

Mirza's (1992) study illustrates how the intersection of ethnicity with gender and social class shapes young women's transitions from education to the labour market (she uses the concept of intersectionality more explicitly in her later work - see Mirza 2009: 77-87). She surveys an extensive sample of (mixed class, mixed ethnicity) young people between the ages of 15 and 19 in two comprehensive schools in London, focusing on the experiences of young African Caribbean women. She finds that, in contrast to their Irish peers, the Africa Caribbean women rationalised gendered and racialised inequalities and local opportunity structures, creating strategies to achieve social mobility. Despite this they often failed to achieve 'economic status' and 'occupational prestige' due to structural constraints (Mirza 1992: 189).

A more optimistic reading emerges from Bradley and Devadason's (2008) study, which examines the employment experiences of young people, aged 20-34, growing up in four socioeconomically diverse areas of a 'prosperous, post-industrial city' (Bristol). They find that, despite the precarious character of the labour market, young people across socioeconomic classes exhibited 'internalised flexibility' which helped them adapt to changes (Bradley and Devadason 2008: 131-132). This study highlights the importance of local context in determining life chances, suggesting that Bristol's prosperity contributed to the 'buoyancy, entrepreneurialism and creativity' with which young people responded to their individual situations.

These studies illustrate the specifically gendered, classed and ethnic dimensions of young people's transitions to adulthood, and how these can operate together to create complexity and difference. Whilst many of these studies concur that reflexivity is key to navigating post-industrial transitions, they also highlight the contradictions that occur when 'choices' are made in the context of enduring and multiple, often co-constituted, structural constraints.

These studies compelled me to examine the influence of individual agency and structural constraints on the RPs' transition experiences. Employing an intersectional lens I aimed to shed light on the ways in which structural inequalities related to gender, social class and ethnicity, and individual agency, shaped their transitions to adulthood. Before setting out the research questions in the final section of this chapter, I examine the key themes that have emerged in the literature around three areas of investigation: education and training, employment and independent household formation.

### **1.3.1 Education and training**

The appearance of choice is highlighted in many studies of young people's educational transitions. In post-industrial Britain, advanced credentialism is considered key to young women's 'social, material and economic future[s]' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 136). New educational opportunities have freed young women from traditional patriarchal constraints imposed by the family and community and enabled them to exercise greater choice regarding future employment possibilities (McRobbie 2009: 73). However, not all young women have equal access to these new opportunities (Aapola et al 2005: 68). For many, access is shaped by structural limitations.

This section focuses on the opportunities and constraints faced by young women in secondary, further and higher education.

#### **1.3.1.1. Secondary education**

Young women overall are outperforming young men at GCSE level, however, significant gendered, classed and ethnic inequalities persist (DfES 2007: 2-4). Correlation is consistently observed between material disadvantage and educational (under)achievement (Harris and Ranson 2005: 575; Bramley and Kofi Karley 2007: 26; Ofsted 2013: 16). Whilst attainment

of children from low-income families has improved, the gap between this group and their more affluent peers has grown (Harris and Ranson 2005: 574-575; Reay 2006: 290).

There are also observed differences between pupils from different ethnic backgrounds. Particularly low achievement levels have been noted in poor white British communities (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 56; DfES 2007: 69; Tackey 2011: 3; Ofsted 2013: 16) and for young black men. The achievement of mixed parentage pupils also falls below the national average (Tikly et al 2004: 27). For black women, however, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods appears to impact positively on GCSE performance (DfES 2007: 69).

Although individual achievement is nuanced, attainment rates of working class women are 'far more diversified' than their middle class peers (Walkerdine et al 2001: 110). Attainment has also been linked to attendance, exclusion and bullying which display gendered, classed and ethnic patterns (Maguire and Rennison 2005: 199; Department for Education 2012: ii).

Poor academic performance is linked with academic disengagement (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 50) and attitudes of ambivalence (Henderson et al 2007: 42), notably among white working class students. Earlier work by McRobbie (2000: 170) suggests that for many working class women, the lack of importance attributed to educational qualifications was directly related to their anticipated employment opportunities, which did not require academic qualifications. Walkerdine et al (2001: 131) identify classed attitudes towards academic 'success' and 'failure'. Whilst middle class young women feared academic failure (ibid: 137), academic success created complex 'emotional costs' for working class women, frequently related to a sense of abandoning their community (ibid: 163). Henderson et al (2007: 39) observe that whilst some disadvantaged students in their study viewed education as 'a route out of the estate', in reality few had the emotional and material resources to pursue this.



Gillborn and Mirza (2000: 17) note that black working class students exhibited ‘higher levels of motivation and commitment to education’ than their white peers from similar social class and gender backgrounds. Mirza (2009: 13) suggests that this is linked to the value placed on credentialism as a route to social mobility within migrant communities. In contrast, Maguire (2010: 326) finds that her predominantly white working class respondents bought into the value of education, yet ‘their personal experiences had clouded their views about their own ability to progress through this route.’ Similarly, MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 61) find that many white working class young people in their study performed badly at school and only bought into the educational contract in hindsight.

Classed and ethnic processes have also been observed in teachers’ perceptions of students, and their parents, which can affect the support provided to them. Walkerdine et al (2001: 179) find that the educational achievements of middle class girls were ‘rigidly circumscribed by expectations of academic success.’ In contrast, teachers often normalise working class pupils’ underachievement (Reay 2006: 294; Dunne and Gazeley 2008: 452). Ethnic differences have also been observed, whereby white working class students are positioned as ‘inadequate learners’ by their teachers (Reay 2006: 298), and black students as ‘underachievers’ (Rhamie and Hallam 2002: 3) or ‘troublemakers’ (Griffin 1985: 186; Mirza 2004: 149). Views of mixed parentage pupils have been observed as varied (Tikly et al 2004: 47).

Research suggests that students from different ethnic backgrounds respond differently to this positioning. MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 67) observe that learner identities of white working class young people were ‘often severely damaged’ by compulsory education experiences. Mirza (1992: 57), on the other hand, finds that young black women did not internalise negative stereotypes of themselves. Instead, their ‘meritocratic ideal[s]’ enabled them to ‘rationalise’ the system and create strategies for social mobility (Mirza 2009: 16).

The availability of support from parents and schools has been found to be heavily classed (Walkerline et al 2001: 128). For middle class girls in private education, educational success often becomes a 'joint project' between students, parents and teachers (Aapola et al 2005: 75). Negative teacher attitudes toward working class parents, on the other hand, have been shown to limit the levels and type of support they, and their children, receive (Walkerline et al 2001: 129; Reay 2006: 302-303).

Despite numerous inequalities, secondary education provides the foundation for young women's further engagement in post-compulsory education. Key themes that have emerged in the literature about further education and training are examined in the following section.

### **1.3.1.2 Further education and training**

The declining availability of high quality employment for unqualified school leavers, as well as a growing demand for a skilled workforce, has contributed to the rapid expansion of post-compulsory education (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 104; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 34).

The proportion of women who continue into further education (FE) has risen to more than 80 per cent (DfES 2007: 34). Black and minority ethnic (BME) young people are also increasingly likely to remain in post-compulsory education (Gunter and Watt 2010: 66). To some degree, this can be interpreted as evidence of the successful widening of post-compulsory education (Henderson et al 2007: 32). Yet, classed and ethnic constraints shape access and influence experiences and outcomes.

Historically, post-16 educational pathways were shaped by social class (Griffin 1985: 11; McRobbie 2000: 53). Most working class women did not expect to continue with education and those who did faced barriers including attending 'inferior' schools, pressures to work outside of school, and fewer parental resources than their middle class peers (McRobbie 2000: 199). More recently, efforts to widen participation in post-compulsory education have

disproportionally benefitted middle class children (Reay 2006: 290; Henderson et al 2007: 38). They are 50 per cent more likely than their working class peers to stay on in post-16 education (Margo and Dixon 2006: 49).

Edwards (1997: 1) notes the ‘deep divide’ that characterises post-compulsory education into two distinct streams of academic and vocational learning. Academic post-16 routes (A-levels) remain the domain of middle class young people (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 104), whilst working class young people often choose ‘utilitarian’ vocational courses that aim to support their employment aspirations (Hemsley-Brown 1999: 86). Along both academic and vocational routes, gendered patterns have been observed with regard to course selection, with young women often studying ‘feminised’ subjects (DfES 2007: 9). Vocational training courses in particular have been identified as reproducing gender stereotypes, with young women often enrolling in hair and beauty, childcare and health and social care courses (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1999: 120; DfES 2007: 9; Millar 2010: 132). The types of jobs that these qualifications may lead to are often low waged, low status and insecure, reflecting an additional classed dimension. Interestingly, the gender bias is weaker among young women who attended single-sex secondary schools (DfES 2007: 8).

Though vocational courses were created as an alternative to academic pathways, they are often regarded as being of inferior quality (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 19). Vocational programmes have also been criticised for promoting unrealistic expectations about employment prospects and transmitting inaccurate notions of ‘exciting careers’ (Aapola et al 2005: 74). Actual training experiences can be perceived as disappointing when compared to ‘imagined future[s]’ (Lawy et al 2010: 344). MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 94-95) observe that among their interviewees, perceptions of the ‘*potential* benefits’ of youth training contrasted starkly with their ‘*actual* experiences’.

In addition to vocational training, the modern apprenticeship scheme was created to provide 'less academic' young people with hands-on practical training combined with the possibility to earn money. Despite its popularity, the scheme has been criticised for exploiting young people (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 95), enforcing gender-based occupational stereotypes (Fuller and Unwin 2003; Fuller et al 2005) and failing to ensure adequate commitment from employers (Steedman 2005: 7; McKay 2012). The apprenticeship programme is particularly weak in sectors without a history of apprenticeships such as retail, customer service and particularly gendered sectors such as childcare or 'body work' (Fuller and Unwin 2009). Since 'better schemes select the better qualified trainees', less qualified young people often get trained 'in contexts where the chance of employment are virtually nil' (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 32).

Of course, not all young people pursue post-compulsory education. Some seek entry into 'accelerated adulthood' in the labour market by becoming independent earners, the domestic sphere by 'settling down' with a partner or starting a family of their own or simply prioritise leisure by 'staying forever young' through partying (Henderson et al 2007).

The following section examines themes that have emerged in the research around higher education.

### **1.3.1.3 Higher education**

The increased uptake of post-compulsory education has also resulted in an expansion of higher education (HE) (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 20). The high enrolment of young women and ethnic minority students (Reay et al 2001: 871; Aapola et al 2005: 65; Mirza 2006: 102) is often celebrated as evidence of the successful widening of HE. Despite this, entrenched gender, social class and ethnic inequalities mean that the benefits associated with pursuing HE are not universally distributed.

Affluent young people are three times more likely to attend university than their low-income peers (Ofsted 2013). Working class and minority ethnic students are more likely than white middle class students to attend ‘new’ (post-1992, former polytechnic) universities rather than ‘traditional’ (older, more elite) institutions (Reay et al 2001: 858; Reay et al 2010: 108).

Whilst ‘new’ universities have successfully expanded participation, they are often denigrated in public and political discourses as providing education of inferior quality (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003: 612). Furlong and Cartmel (2007: 23) argue that graduates of former polytechnics often ‘face poorer employment prospects.’

There is evidence that ‘choices’ to pursue HE are linked to internalised messages about aptitude as well as access to financial resources (Reay et al 2001: 864; Walkerdine et al 2001: 162). Pathways into HE are often more fragmented for students from less affluent areas (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 92) as well as for Black Caribbean students (Connor et al 2004: 16). Tendencies towards localism (Henderson et al 2007: 43), as well as issues related to ‘fitting in’ (Reay et al 2001: 865; Mirza 2006: 105), can affect decisions about where to enrol. Ethnic minority students are more likely than their peers from other ethnic backgrounds to leave university before course completion due to financial difficulties, family problems, institutional factors related to teaching and subject choice (Mirza 2006: 107), alongside feelings of isolation or hostility within the academic institution itself (Connor et al 2004: 6).

The cost of education can also create ‘limited spaces of choice’ for less advantaged young people (Reay et al 2001: 859). University fees have risen significantly since the coalition government removed the cap on tuition in 2012. Whilst low-income students may be eligible

for means-tested grants and non-repayable annual bursaries<sup>3</sup>, those without access to other financial support, for instance parental assistance, can only participate in HE based on ‘the accumulation of debt’ through student loans (Callender and Jackson 2008: 405). Research indicates that the fear of debt is greatest amongst students from low-income backgrounds (Callender and Jackson 2005: 513; Callender and Jackson 2008: 409) and that less affluent young people are more likely to be deterred from HE by cost than their wealthier peers (Callender and Jackson 2005: 513). Domestic caring responsibilities and the cost of childcare can further limit access to education for women (Gimlin 2007: 358).

Students overall are increasingly dependent on paid ‘term-time’ work to support themselves financially (Purcell and Elias 2010: 1). It is, however, those students from less affluent families as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds that work the greatest number of hours (Reay et al 2001: 861; Callender 2008: 366; Purcell and Elias 2010: 23). Henderson et al (2007: 45) suggest that education and employment can become ‘competing goals’ and that ‘term-time working’ can negatively impact on academic engagement and performance.

Cost may also encourage tendencies towards localism among less affluent students when ‘choosing’ a university (Reay et al 2001: 859). Henderson et al (2007: 39) note that community connections and support can serve as negative social capital, binding young people to communities which can, in turn, limit future employment prospects. On the other hand, HE decisions can also be shaped by ‘strategies for escape’, although few young people from disadvantaged communities are likely to have access to the ‘practical means’ to pursue this (Henderson et al 2007: 104).

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<sup>3</sup> In November 2015, the Conservative Government implemented controversial measures to abolish grants for student nurses and midwives (HM Treasury 2015). At time of writing the government was also pushing through legislation to abolish maintenance grants for poor students (Beattie 2016).

Given the cost of HE, it is perhaps unsurprising that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely than affluent students to choose utilitarian courses with a perceived guarantee of employment (Callender and Jackson 2008: 409). Similarly, the gendered patterns observed in FE course choices often continue in HE (Millar 2010: 132).

#### **1.3.1.4 Section conclusion**

This section examined key themes from the empirical literature around young people's experiences of secondary, further and higher education. This suggests that the widening of post-compulsory education and training has created increased 'choices' for young women in transition to adulthood. At the same time, however, young women from different backgrounds have varying levels of access to parental and institutional resources and support that are likely to enable greater levels of academic success. The educational 'choices' they make in this context are, therefore, shaped by their position vis-à-vis gender, social class and ethnicity. The impact of earlier educational disadvantage and the reproduction of structural inequalities by a stratified post-compulsory education system (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 24), affect not only the 'choices' and educational experiences of young women from different social class and ethnic backgrounds, but also their future employment prospects. Without acknowledging the structural context that shapes young people's transitions, lack of academic success is frequently interpreted as 'an outcome of an individual's own choices and actions' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 65) even though individuals themselves may have limited control over these factors. Despite this, educational pathways lay the foundation for young people's employment prospects, which are examined in the following section.

#### **1.3.2 Employment**

Women in post-industrial Britain have significantly more opportunities for paid employment outside the home than they did historically (McRobbie 2000: 53; Walkerdine et al 2001: 54).

Simultaneously, an increasingly precarious labour market creates growing uncertainty for young people across social class backgrounds (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 44). In a more competitive labour market, it is early school leavers and those with minimal qualifications who are most vulnerable to unemployment and under-employment (Walkerdine et al 2001: 63; Aapola et al 2005: 60). For young women, ‘choices’ about employment are also weighed against decisions about starting families.

This section highlights key themes that have emerged from empirical studies of young people’s employment: attitudes towards the future, employment aspirations and experiences, attitudes towards unemployment and welfare dependency and relationships with the local area.

#### **1.3.2.1 Attitudes towards the future**

Evidence suggests that uncertainty in the post-industrial labour market causes deep anxiety for young people irrespective of social background, although it is heightened for the most vulnerable (Aapola et al 2005: 61; Henderson et al 2007: 24). MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 199) note that their working class interviewees held ‘hyper-conventional’ attitudes towards securing employment, despite the low-waged and insecure nature of available work.

However, their school-to-work transitions often became ‘a dispiriting sequence of knock-backs, let-downs, false promises and dead ends’ (ibid: 209). Henderson et al (2007: 46) observe ‘high levels of anxiety about whether [their interviewees] are ‘doing the right thing’ (Henderson et al 2007: 24). Anxiety results from notions of ‘individual responsibility and accountability’ combined with a sense of ‘vulnerability and lack of control’ (Walkerdine et al 2001: 58). There is a particularly classed dimension to this process, as narratives of self-blame remain prevalent even among those who lack the required resources and networks to achieve ‘success’ (Aapola et al 2005: 75).



Research highlights diverse coping strategies in this context and that these can be dependent, at least in part, on access to resources. Bynner et al (1997: 120) observe three distinct employment pathways among the young people in their study. Some were '*getting on*' ('high flyers' with educational qualifications and 'personal circumstances' that enabled them to 'take advantage of the new occupational opportunities of the 1990s' and achieve success); others were '*getting by*' (those with few educational qualifications and limited to insecure, low waged employment opportunities); and the rest were '*getting nowhere*' (minimum school age leavers without qualifications who were at higher risk of insecure employment or unemployment and characterised by early entry into domestic careers including parenthood).

Bradley and Devadason (2008) identify an 'internalised flexibility' among their interviewees, resulting in four main tendencies: shifting (between jobs and employment statuses), sticking (to the pursuit of one type of career), switching (to a different career direction) and settling (in one occupation or career). This differs from Bynner et al's typology as it aims to capture the reflexive nature of young people's 'choice'-making, as well as the structural context (what they term 'social hierarchies') and the 'limitations of local opportunities' (Bradley and Devadason 2008: 121). They find that most young people were likely to be stickers or shifters. There were, however, gendered and ethnic differences. Women were more likely to be shifters since their labour market involvement has historically been more insecure and becoming partnered can create the option of shifting. Ethnic minority young people were also more likely to be shifters (ibid: 124).

Mirza (1992: 144) finds that, irrespective of class, her Caribbean interviewees rationalised the constraints that they encountered in the labour market with overall aims of achieving upward mobility. In contrast, MacDonald and Marsh note that their white working class interviewees coped by 'gett[ing]by and mak[ing] do' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 145). MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 145) observe a sense of 'fatalism' which often helped rationalise the lack of

choice and any structural constraints encountered. This sometimes created contradictions between stated aspirations and actual responses, for instance, young women who entered into early parenthood ‘before achieving the sort of financial and employment security that [they] had hoped for’ (ibid).

### **1.3.2.2 Aspirations**

Several youth transition studies highlight the value placed upon paid employment by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Aapola et al 2005: 64). Walkerdine et al (2001: 58-59) argue that, across class backgrounds, ‘work remained crucial to the construction of [young women’s] subjectivities.’ MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 120) attribute the value placed upon work to young people’s desire for self-reliance, underpinned by financial independence. They state that the notion work was highly valued ‘even where [jobs] fell short of what [young people] hoped for’ (ibid: 108). Work was thus often described in terms of ‘potential material and social-psychological rewards’ even where actual jobs lacked these elements.

During the 1980s, it became common for women to seek paid employment outside of the home, though this continues to diverge along gendered, classed and ethnic lines (Walkerdine et al 2001: 57). Middle class young people are more like to aspire to professional careers than their less affluent peers (Margo and Dixon 2006: 49). The Caribbean women in Mirza’s (1992) study aspired to ‘gendered’ careers in ‘community and care related professions’ (Mirza 1992: 113). Although this correlates with MacDonald and Marsh’s (2005: 87) observation that the employment goals of their white working class interviewees were shaped by social kinship networks and ‘local structures of opportunity’, there were added dimensions to the choices made by the young women in Mirza’s study, who ‘used the stated educational requirements as a vehicle for obtaining more or better qualifications, in order to enhance their career prospects’ (Mirza 1992: 144).

### **1.3.2.3 Experiences of paid work**

One consequence of the restructured labour landscape has been the disappearance of a distinct youth labour market (Henderson et al 2007: 46; Maguire 2010: 318). Whilst this affects young people from all backgrounds, difficulties finding employment are emphasised for working class young people or those who lack qualifications living in areas that have been adversely affected by de-industrialisation (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 47).

In the post-industrial context, available work for young people is predominantly in 'lower tier services' in the hospitality and retail sectors (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 38; Roberts 2011: 32). These jobs are often low-skilled, low wage, part-time and insecure. The lack of skilled, semi-skilled and professional work means little or no possibility for progression or upward 'career' mobility (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 11; Roberts 2011: 23). The increase in 'flexible' employment practices has further intensified the exploitation of young workers as such arrangements tend to exempt employers from legal obligations to provide 'sick pay, holiday pay or superannuation' (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 40).

Despite having access to greater opportunities for paid employment than before, traditional gender patterns still shape the experiences of young women in the labour market. Women are predominantly found in 'clerical and secretarial; personal and protective services, including nursing, catering, cleaning and hairdressing; and sales occupations' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 6). In a number of these jobs – particularly those defined as 'body labour', that is, 'paid labour carried out on the bodies of others' – further class and ethnic hierarchies can be seen (Gimlin 2007: 359). Whilst working class girls tend to enter the labour market earlier than middle class girls, those without academic qualifications are at particular risk of 'becoming stuck in [...] low-grade, low-paid work' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 65- 67). Ethnic dimensions also shape labour market experiences. Numerous studies have identified a number of labour market disadvantages faced by BME students, including unemployment, exclusionary

practices, job insecurity and low wages (Walkerdine et al 2001: 64; Gunter and Watt 2010: 59). Ethnic minority women are thus more likely than their white peers to work full time, rather than part time (Walkerdine et al 2001: 64).

#### **1.3.2.4 Attitudes towards social welfare dependence**

A moral panic has emerged concerning young people from disadvantaged areas claiming social welfare benefits. This is often claimed to be a 'lifestyle choice' (Newton 2009; Moir 2010) and young mothers are frequently singled out for particular disdain (Walkerdine et al 2001: 189-190; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 68; Jones 2011: 189; Tyler 2013: 164). Claims of 'opportunistic welfare dependency' (Aapola et al 2005: 103) are, however, challenged by several empirical studies of young people, including young mothers growing up in poor areas (Phoenix 1991; McRobbie 2000; Turner 2004; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 69).

MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 114) note that despite the prevalence of 'notoriously low paid' and insecure jobs, most of their interviewees preferred employment over social welfare dependence. Notably, several interviewees refused to claim welfare benefits even after failing to secure paid employment. Others 'despised the fact that they had to claim benefits to support themselves and their children' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 135). Studies have also highlighted the processes of dis-identification that people in disadvantaged areas engage in to distinguish themselves as worthy welfare claimants against so-called benefits scroungers (Phoenix 1991: 170-171; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 127).

There are specifically gendered dimensions to welfare dependence. Although women now have greater opportunities for employment, many jobs employing women pay less than their social welfare entitlement (McRobbie 2000: 175; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 147). In spite

of the Conservative government's increase in the national minimum wage<sup>4</sup> in 2015 (from £6.50 to £7.20 per hour), the prohibitively high cost of childcare means that employment may not be financially viable for women with children. Additionally, McRobbie finds that:

No mother can easily go out to work if she is worried about what is happening to her child while she is away. Most mothers would put their child's well-being before the importance of a pay-packet. They would rather be poor than see their children at risk (McRobbie 2000: 175).

There is little evidence, however, to suggest that young mothers choose to live a benefits 'lifestyle'. MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 136) observe that the young welfare-claiming mothers in their study lived in extreme poverty. As such, 'they found laughable claims that women would choose positively to raise a family on government benefits' (ibid). Similarly, Phoenix's (1991: 5) extensive research concludes that there is no evidence to indicate that teenage women get pregnant to secure 'handouts', whilst Turner (2004: 222) points out that 'teenagers do not have sufficient knowledge of state benefits to be able to intentionally abuse such provisions.' These studies refute claims that young women pursued motherhood on welfare benefits as a deliberate strategy. Once in this position, however, claiming benefits was considered 'an acceptable, temporary, alternative way of getting by' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 135).

### **1.3.2.5 Influence of locality**

Tendencies towards 'localism' (Henderson et al 2007: 102) have been linked to the perpetuation of disadvantage (Atkinson and Kintrea 2004: 452; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 168). Mirza (1992) and MacDonald and Marsh (2005) observe that structures of localism influence young people's occupational opportunities. Social networks and relationships can be important resources for finding work (Henderson et al 2007: 48; Maguire 2010: 324). This

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<sup>4</sup> Whilst the rise in minimum wage is welcome, government claims that it represents a 'living wage' have been challenged (see, for example, Hirsch 2015).

means, however, that both privilege and inequality are often inherited through a local labour market (Henderson et al 2007: 58).

Familiarity, a sense of community and local support networks can prevent young people from leaving their local area despite limited employment opportunities (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 164). These factors may also create a pull back home for those who leave (ibid: 155). Nevertheless, more critical views of the local area can encourage fantasies of, and concrete strategies for, 'getting away'. Henderson et al (2007: 105) observe that many young people from the disadvantaged estate in their study expressed a desire to leave, either temporarily, for example going on 'dream holidays', or permanently, to 'escape the locality for good'. Despite these aspirations, however, few had the 'practical means of escape' (ibid). Atkinson and Kintrea (2004: 445) note that for several of their respondents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Edinburgh and Glasgow, "'getting on" meant "getting out".' Yet, they also find that individuals had varying levels of resources to mobilise for leaving. Indeed, housing allocation and place attachment kept many in the local area (Atkinson and Kintrea's 2004: 451).

Henderson et al (2007: 105) suggest that for many disadvantaged young people in their study, the idea of 'escape' remained more of a fantasy than a real strategy. Nilsen (1999: 178) suggests that '[day]dreams belong in a timeless and spaceless realm; they do not require any commitment from the person having them.' Expressed plans of 'getting away' can, therefore, range from sheer fantasy to having 'more concrete or tangible aspects, bordering on matters belonging to the sphere of hope' (ibid).

### **1.3.2.6 Section conclusion**

This section examined key themes from the empirical literature about young people's employment transitions in the post-industrial context. Henderson et al (2007: 58) observe that

‘the extent to which young people are able to make paid employment “work” for them depends in great part on their existing resources.’ ‘Getting on’ (Bynner et al 1997) is an increasingly unattainable ‘choice’ for young people who possess limited academic qualifications and restricted social and material resources. In spite of this, young people are increasingly held accountable for their occupational outcomes (Walkerdine et al 2001: 58). Whilst evidence suggests that they attempt to employ reflexivity, this occurs in ‘extremely contradictory economic, social and individual landscapes’ (Walkerdine et al 2001: 81) where the available ‘choices’ are shaped by the structural hierarchies of gender, social class and place. For young women, employment pathways are also linked with independent household transitions. Key themes that have emerged in this area of investigation are examined in the following section.

### **1.3.3. Independent household formation**

Housing and domestic transitions are ‘central to the attainment of adult status’ (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 60). Leaving the family of origin to embark on independent household formation historically marked ‘a major life-course transition’ (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005: 2), namely, the shift from dependent childhood to independent adulthood. Changes in school-to-work transitions have, however, had knock-on effects on independent household formation and pathways for many young people have become much more drawn out and fragmented as a result. This chapter examines literature from empirical youth sociology and youth transition studies around several key themes: families of origin, housing, couple relationships and marriage, and motherhood.

#### **1.3.3.1 Families of origin**

In their multi-country, mixed-class study of young people leaving home, Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 127) find that families of origin determine the emotional and material

resources available to young people during transitions. As is widely observed, the traditional nuclear family has been reconfigured and a range of alternative family forms has become more common (Nayak and Kehily 2008: 64). Conservative discourses express concern about these changes as indicative of ‘a wider moral malaise needing urgent reform’ (Gillies 2007: 5) and media accounts abound with accounts of ‘broken’ and ‘troubled’ families (Doughty 2010; BBC 2013; Freud 2014; Rudoe 2014). Criticisms of families who deviate from the nuclear ‘norm’ tend to be classed, gendered and ethnic. Some highlight ‘father absence’ as a cause of poverty (Centre for Social Justice 2012; Social Justice Policy Group 2006).

Although poverty is more likely to affect single-parent families, ‘broken family’ discourses conveniently confuse correlation and causation and perpetuate ideas about poverty being the consequences of individual actions rather than the result of societal inequalities. They also ignore the fact that poverty often persists even where sole parenthood is ‘not permanent’ (Millar 2010: 124).

Empirical research has challenged the idea that non-traditional families represent social capital deficits. Seaman and Sweeting’s study of young people from a disadvantaged area of Glasgow indicates that non-traditional family constellations can, and often do, provide young people with crucial resources for getting on in life (Seaman and Sweeting 2004: 187). This is echoed by McKenzie’s (2015) research on a disadvantaged Nottingham estate, which notes that ‘family life works in a different way in order to overcome the many barriers, hurdles and difficulties that structural and structuring inequality brings to poorer neighbourhoods’ (McKenzie 2015: 91). Indeed, MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 152) find that most working class young people in their study ‘reported strong, close relationships with their parent(s) and siblings.’ Similarly, Mirza (2009) observes that the educational success achieved by the young Caribbean women in her study was due, at least in part, to encouragement and support they received from their (often single) parents. She argues that ‘family disposition (i.e. beliefs



and values’) is of greater importance than ‘family composition’ (Mirza 2009: 15). Seaman et al (2006: 180) also find that the extended family often provides additional and strong support. Whilst familial resources do help shape young people’s life outcomes, these must be understood in a structural context.

### **1.3.3.2 Housing**

Historically, marriage was the main reason that young women moved out of the parental home (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 66). Greater possibilities for financial independence and growing acceptance of unmarried cohabitation reflect that this is no longer the case (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011). At the same time, housing transitions have become more fragmented (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 53) and are invariably influenced by a range of factors, including family relationships and obligations, higher education pathways, family conflict, relationships, the onset of parenthood, financial resources, and changes to social welfare entitlement (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 168; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Henderson et al 2007: 135; Heath 2008: 8). Heath (2008: 18) notes that young people are increasingly dependent on their families of origin. Although young people overall live with their parents for longer periods than historically, there is some classed variation. In this respect, middle class students often leave home at a younger age to attend university, whilst working class young people are more likely to live at home with their parents for longer periods (Henderson et al 2007: 131; Heath 2008: 18).

Independent living, including home ownership, has become a normative aspiration (Heath 2008: 24; Millar 2010: 121; Park et al 2012: 123), yet it is increasingly unaffordable for many (Henderson et al 2007: 131; Heath 2008: 24; Park et al 2012: 131). For young people across social class backgrounds, moving out of the family home no longer guarantees leaving home permanently (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 61). Instead, as Henderson et al (2007: 130)

observe, young people's living arrangements fluctuate between 'independence and autonomy' and 'relationship, interdependence and care'.

### **1.3.3.3 Couple relationships and marriage**

Entry into couple relationships is a key dimension of young women's transitions to adulthood, since these can serve as a precursor to independent household formation, including marriage and motherhood. The examination of relationships in many studies focuses primarily on getting married and/or settling down. Henderson et al (2007: 136) note that couple relationships take 'increasing prominence in the young people's narratives over time, often representing critical moments and providing motivation in their lives.' They identify three tendencies with regards to relationship formation: 'fusion' (preference for intimate couple relationships), 'autonomy' (either single or in casual relationships, prioritising academic or professional achievement) and 'being uncommitted' (preference for extended, 'fun-filled' youth, viewing relationships as a threat to this) (Henderson et al 2007: 139-142). These tendencies may shift with time and are not mutually exclusive, but they reveal diverse approaches to relationships which underpin subsequent transition stages including settling down, getting married and becoming mothers.

Many young women in Henderson et al's (2007: 149) study articulated a fear of losing independence and a reluctance to 'give up power on entering a relationship.' Despite this, many 'old inequalities' remain prevalent (ibid), rooted in the 'patriarchal family model', which still shapes many family practices (Aapola et al 2005: 91). This may explain McRobbie's (2000: 174) earlier observation that single mothers in her study preferred welfare dependency rather than 'the poverty of marriage where they were entirely reliant on the male wage and where the man had control of the household budget.'

There is evidence that relationship attitudes are shaped by social class and ethnicity. For instance, Henderson et al (2007: 138) find that working class interviewees entered into relationships at an earlier age, and attributed greater importance to settling down and starting a home than their middle class counterparts, who focused primarily on educational achievement. Historically, marriage was ‘a source of financial security’ for women (Henderson et al 2007: 137). More recently, however, ‘a lack of good job opportunities and unemployment make [working class] men appear less attractive as prospective husbands and fathers’ (ibid). This marks a shift from attitudes observed by McRobbie (2000: 163) during the 1970s-80s that, despite high male unemployment, ‘the idea of the male breadwinner remained in the background as a distant hope.’ This was because the white working class women in her study did not conceive of themselves as breadwinners. Due to increased opportunities for educational advancement and financial independence, young women can now be breadwinners and marriage is no longer an ‘economic necessity’ (Griffin 1985: 56).

Other studies observe ethnic variation with regard to marriage attitudes. Phoenix (1991: 16) suggests that marriage is ‘economically less beneficial’ for black women than white women, since black men face greater labour market inequalities and are less likely than white men to be employed and/or become high wage earners. Therefore, ‘not marrying may be a more sensible strategy for many young black women than it is for young white women’ (ibid).

Mirza also observes diverse relationship attitudes in her study noting that, whilst white women looked for ‘economic security (with its attendant values of duty and loyalty)’, black women looked for ‘compatibility’ (Mirza 1992: 158). She attributes this to black women’s employment aspirations, related to ideas about ‘relative autonomy and equality between the sexes’ (ibid). Although earlier research suggests that ‘young ... Afro-Caribbean women tended to be more critical of the mythical idea of romantic love and marriage than their white

peers' (Griffin 1985: 54), Mirza notes that the black women in her study took a 'cautious yet positive approach' to marriage (Mirza 1992: 158).

Marriage rates have been declining in Britain over the past few decades, whilst rates of cohabitation have risen (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011: 7). Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin (2011: 9) observe that 'marriage without first living together is now as unusual as premarital cohabitation was in the 1970s.' The doubling of divorce rates in England and Wales between 1970 and 2011 (ONS 2013) suggests that there are fewer financial incentives to remain in 'unsatisfactory marriages' (Aapola et al 2005: 89). Nevertheless, divorce rates stabilised in the 1980s and have since declined (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011: 14), perhaps because young people are getting married later (ibid: 9).

Despite the growing trend towards non-traditional families, several studies have shown that young people across social class backgrounds maintain conventional views towards relationships and wish, eventually, to 'settle down' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 149; Henderson et al 2007: 136; Heath 2008: 21). In these studies, ambivalence towards settling down mainly shaped short-term planning. Most young people held longer term expectations of 'a partnered future' (Henderson et al 2007: 149).

#### **1.3.3.4 Motherhood**

Many studies note a correlation between material disadvantage and young motherhood (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 128; Graham and McDermott 2006: 22; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 67). These suggest that it is more common for middle class women to obtain formal qualifications and employment before embarking on motherhood (Graham and McDermott 2006: 25). Walkerdine et al (2001: 194) suggest that 'the prospect of a professional career... acts as a contraceptive for middle-class girls.' In contrast, Henderson et al (2007: 138) note, motherhood is a source of status for many working class young women. The reasons for the

higher tendencies of early motherhood amongst working class women will be explored later in this chapter.

Despite this, MacDonald and Marsh note that their working class interviewees (male and female) spoke of becoming parents in ‘very conventional terms’ (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 130), which reflected middle class attitudes observed elsewhere (Wilson and Huntington 2006: 59). Indeed, working class interviewees spoke of wanting to secure the ‘foundations of stable employment, financial security and a home’ before having children (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 130). Nevertheless, MacDonald and Marsh (2005) also highlighted a paradox between ‘normative perspectives on parenthood’ and actual lived experiences of parenthood at an earlier age (ibid).

Disadvantaged mothers are often stigmatised (Gillies 2007: 1), particularly if they are young and unmarried. The principal concern with disadvantaged, unmarried mothers relates to their financial dependence on the welfare state (McRobbie 2000: 159). At seven per cent, the proportion of sole parent households (most of which are headed by women) has more than doubled between 1971 and 2005 (Millar 2010: 123). Rates of single motherhood are higher among the Black Caribbean community than other groups (Heath 2008; Millar 2010: 123). This may indicate differing attitudes to economic autonomy and marriage between women of different ethnic backgrounds. Mirza (1992: 150) observes that an ‘ideology of family’ shaped Irish women’s views of motherhood and employment as incompatible. In contrast, her Caribbean interviewees expressed a stronger commitment to the labour market and economic autonomy, which was not seen as incompatible with raising children. Nevertheless, access to childcare and support from family and employers affected employment possibilities.

Phoenix (1991: 16) finds fewer differences between ethnic groups, noting that:

this ascription of marked cultural differences between young black people (almost all of whom are now British born) and young white people is not borne out by recent British research into friendship patterns, language use and youth cultures [...] It would indeed be surprising if young women of similar social class, who have grown up in the same areas and attended the same schools were entirely distinct in their cultural practices' (Phoenix 1991: 16).

Yet, she also notes that racism affects 'societal power and access to resources' and creates marked differences in lived experiences between white and black people in Britain. These differences are 'likely to affect the ways in which people live their lives' (ibid). Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging that ethnicity can shape experiences of motherhood, she suggests that there is little evidence for 'clear cultural similarities... and clear differences' between groups of black and white women. Instead, she emphasises socio-economic processes that shape the mothering experiences of the women in her study.

#### **1.3.3.5 Teenage motherhood**

As noted earlier, numerous studies highlight links between materially disadvantaged neighbourhoods and young motherhood (Arai 2003; Turner 2004; Graham and McDermott 2006). England and Wales have historically recorded some of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, although the Office for National Statistics (2015) reports a notable decline in recent years. In 2013, the conception rate among women under the age of 18 was 24.5 per thousand compared with 27.9 per thousand the year before (ibid).

Historically, teenage pregnancy often resulted in marriage. In the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of teenage parents in Britain were married with many forced into 'shotgun marriages' (Duncan 2007: 311). Today, however, unmarried mothers are 'less subject to moral sanction than in previous generations' (Walkerline et al 2001: 189). Nevertheless, a 'moral panic' has emerged in the media around the issue of teenage pregnancy (Arai 2009a: 109), which is frequently cited as an indicator of 'family breakdown' (Duncan 2007: 309).

Concern about teenage mothers relates to their lack of participation in the workforce, welfare dependency and social exclusion (Wilson and Huntington 2006: 60). The focus is, therefore, on poor young women from different ethnic backgrounds whose experiences are 'set against the falling birth rate among older and better educated young women' (McRobbie 2009: 85). Notably, the moral panic has emerged alongside an actual decline in teenage birth rates (Wilson and Huntington 2006: 60; Arai 2009b: 171). Whilst 'family breakdown' discourses attribute teenage pregnancy to 'inter-generational cycles' (Quail 2011: 4), statistical evidence challenges this claim (Rendall 2003: 111).

The highest teenage pregnancy rates are recorded in materially disadvantaged areas (Arai 2003: 200). Policy makers have attributed this to low educational and employment expectations, poor use of contraception and strong anti-termination views (ibid). Empirical evidence suggests, however, that the reality is far more complex. Arai's interviews with teenage mothers indicate that low expectations and contraceptive failure may provide at least some explanation. She argues that 'the apparent fatalism of young mothers partly reflects their class background, with its relatively limited life options, but it also reflects a genuine desire for the maternal role.' (Arai 2003: 212-213). Whilst middle class women may also desire motherhood, they are more likely to put it off until they have completed education and started a 'career'. The main difference, Arai suggests, is timing.

Other studies also emphasise heavily classed attitudes toward teenage pregnancy. Whilst pregnancy is perceived to be a 'catastrophic' event for middle class teenagers, there is a greater acceptance of teenage motherhood in working class communities (Coleman and Cater 2006: 610). Coleman and Cater (2006: 611) suggest that this is because teenage pregnancy helps young women obtain adult status in a context where 'academic and employment were not perceived to be achievable triggers for such a shift.' Henderson et al (2007:148-149) also find that working class women believed 'becoming a mother was as important a measure of

“success” as was gaining a degree and securing well paid work.’ Consequently, middle class teenagers who become pregnant are more likely to choose termination, whilst working class teenagers are more likely to continue with the pregnancy (Walkerdine 2001: 196; Turner 2004: 222).

In later research, Arai (2009b: 174-175) highlights early life adversity as another causal factor. Such adversity includes bullying and parental separation as well as more extreme experiences such as physical abuse, clinical depression or time spent in care. In these more extreme cases, she argues, having a baby could fulfil previously unmet emotional needs. Similarly, in research carried out in Australia, Hanna (2001: 458) finds that young women with disrupted and unhappy childhoods view motherhood as a way to ‘find love and connection.’

Despite the moral panic, Duncan (2007: 308) suggests that teenage pregnancy can have positive implications for young women when it provides ‘the impetus to change direction, or build on existing resources, so as to take up education, training and employment.’ Arai (2009b: 175) notes that in cases of extreme childhood adversity, giving birth can create ‘resolution’ for the teenage mothers and their families. Other studies find a strong commitment to motherhood and a ‘positive maternal identity’ among teenage mothers (Graham and McDermott 2006: 28) once they decided to continue with a pregnancy. In some cases, pregnancy becomes a possibility to change direction (Wilson and Huntington 2006: 65) and/or establish a valued identity (Coleman and Cater 2006: 609).

Nevertheless, the emotional and financial challenges of teenage motherhood should not be underestimated. Without access to affordable childcare or family support, teenage mothers can struggle to complete education and access employment, which makes it more difficult to escape poverty and social welfare dependence (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 136).



### **1.3.3.6 Section conclusion**

This section examined key themes around young women's independent household formation in post-industrial Britain. This includes moving from families of origin to independent living as well as household formation, including couple relationships, marriage and motherhood. Whilst marriage was historically the main catalyst for this process, young women in Britain now have a greater range of options for independent living, economic autonomy and choosing whether or not to get married and have children. However, structural hierarchies related to gender, social class and ethnicity still serve to shape the resources available to young women to draw upon in order to make these 'choices'.

## **1.4 The research questions**

The examination of empirical literature around young women's education and training, employment and independent household formation provides the foundation for the design of this doctoral research study. The literature suggests that young women have a greater array of choices, but are also exposed to a greater range of risks than their predecessors. Moreover, opportunities and risks are unevenly distributed and shaped by young women's positions vis-à-vis their gender, social class and ethnicity. In light of these findings, I am interested in the following research questions:

- How do the RPs interpret the 'choices' available to them as they make their transitions to adulthood?
- What are the structural constraints – related to gender, social class and ethnicity – encountered by RPs?
- In light of these 'choices' and constraints, what strategies are employed by the RPs as they make their transitions to adulthood?

These questions are explored in Chapters Four through Six. Chapter Four examines RPs' experiences of secondary, further and higher education. I asked the RPs to speak about their experiences of secondary education in order to gauge how these may have shaped their attitudes towards, and experiences of, further education. I also asked them to discuss any parental, school and other resources that they were able to access when making 'choices' about post-compulsory education. To interrogate the gendered, classed and ethnic dimensions identified in the literature, I asked RPs to talk about the subjects they chose to study at secondary and post-compulsory level and the reasons for their selections. Whether or not they pursued (or planned to pursue) further education (college) or higher education (university), I asked them to discuss their rationale and their plans. This was intended to highlight the opportunities that were available to them, how they interpreted these, and what their strategies were for achieving their aspirations.

Chapter Five seeks to understand how RPs interpreted the employment landscape and the choices they felt were available to them, and how these shaped their transition strategies. To this end, I asked them about their employment experiences to date, their goals and aspirations for paid employment and their strategies for achieving these. Given the high unemployment rate in Birmingham, I asked them to discuss how they felt about potential unemployment, the possibility of having to claim social welfare benefits and their impressions of others who did so. I asked them to imagine their futures in five to ten years' time and how this made them feel. Although I did not initially solicit information about 'getting away', this topic emerged regularly in the RPs' narratives. Consequently, this became a main theme in Chapter Five. Within RPs' narratives, I also sought to identify any structural constraints that emerged, whether the RPs expressed an awareness of these or not.

Chapter Six explores to what extent the post-industrial context has opened up opportunities for independent household formation and the extent to which traditional constraints endure,

in addition to the various strategies adhered to by RPs. I began by asking them about their families of origin since these provided the foundation, resources and rationale for diverse pursuits of independence (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005: 127). I also asked RPs about their aspirations and prior experiences with regard to moving out of the family home, forming couple relationships and starting their own families. I solicited their opinions about the institution of marriage, whether this was something they aspired to, and the reasons for their answers. I also sought to find out how they felt about the prospect of having their own children and why this was something they desired or not. I asked them to discuss when they hoped to engage in these aspects of independent household formation and to explain why. I also sought to find out how they felt that marriage and motherhood affected their other aspirations, primarily with regard to further education and future employment. Three of the RPs became pregnant in their teenage years which provided opportunity to examine the ‘choices’ that were made in a real-life context and how these compared with the more theoretical discussions about young motherhood.

By conducting repeated interviews, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, I endeavoured to highlight constraints or opportunities related to gender, social class and ethnicity that emerged and how these interacted to shape both the transition context and the decision-making processes employed by RPs. Analysing these through an intersectional lens (also described in more detail in Chapter Three) was intended to shed light on the extent to which the appearance of choice operated in RPs’ lives and the consequences of this for their transition experiences.

The following chapter sets out the research context and provides an overview of the RPs.

# Chapter 2. Contextualising the research project: the local area(s), the primary fieldwork site and the research participants

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## 2.0 Introduction

By 2031 Birmingham will be renowned as an enterprising, innovative and green city that has undergone transformational change growing its economy and strengthening its position on the international stage. (Birmingham City Centre Enterprise Zone website, accessed 17 September 2015)

Manufacturing was the fabric of this city and it was ripped up. You can't divorce that fact from the social and economic problems of former manufacturing districts. (Carl Chinn, Birmingham historian, cited in Henley 2014)

With a population of approximately 1.07 million, Birmingham was selected to allow a thorough exploration of the lived experiences of the research participants (RPs) since it is a city with a strong industrial heritage and post-industrial transition well underway. The city boasts multiple upscale shopping complexes, the largest public library in Europe, a vibrant 'hipster' culinary scene and plans for large-scale redevelopment of the city centre, including the creation of a high speed rail service to London. Yet, Birmingham was also recently named the third most deprived Core City in England (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010)<sup>5</sup>. This chapter describes Birmingham's evolution from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, and sets out the demographic context of this study. This is important because of the links that have been identified between people's life chances and their geographic location, referred to by Atkinson and Kintrea (2001, 2004) as 'area effects'. As Wacquant (2008: 2) notes, individual experiences are embedded in 'the historical matrix of class, state and space

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<sup>5</sup> The Index of Multiple Deprivation is calculated based on 38 indicators around: income; employment; health and disability; education, skills and training; barriers to housing and services; living environment; and crime.

characteristic of each society at a given epoch.’ It is crucial, therefore, to contextualise the analysis of the research findings in terms of both place and class.

The first section of this chapter outlines the sociohistorical context of Birmingham which has implications for the specific localities in which the RPs reside, as well as the opportunities and structural constraints that shape their lived experiences. The second section describes the particular neighbourhoods of Midford and Weston, where most of the RPs lived as they made their transitions to adulthood. The third section outlines the primary field site, Midford Youth Centre (MYC), where participant observation, interviews and discussion groups were carried out (these are described in further detail in Chapter Three). The final section describes the RPs. It also includes an explanation of the concept of social class as utilised in this study.

## **2.1 The post-industrial city: Birmingham**

In 1911, manufacturing accounted for 50 per cent of Birmingham’s overall employment (Swinney and Thomas 2015: 7). The city’s economy grew quickly during the interwar years, driven by demand for manufacturing metal for the automotive industry (ibid: 25). Until 1966, unemployment rarely exceeded one per cent and, by 1961, household income was 13 per cent higher than in the rest of the country (SERC 2013). De-industrialisation significantly impacted upon the city’s economy to the extent that, by 2010, the manufacturing industry employed just 11 per cent of the city’s workforce (Dale 2010).

During this time there was modest growth in other areas of employment, driven primarily by the public sector (Larkin 2009: 5; AWM Strategy Team 2010; Swinney and Thomas 2015: 25). Although the number of private sector jobs fell by 90,000 between 1981 and 2013 (Swinney and Thomas 2015: 25-26), other jobs were created in transport, distribution, retail, wholesale, hotels and restaurants (AWM Strategy Team 2010: 4), as well as ‘knowledge intensive business services’ (Clark et al 2013: 7). Nevertheless, jobs in the former tend to be

low-waged and insecure, whilst the latter employs mainly university graduates. Crucially, growth in these sectors has not offset the jobs lost in traditional sectors (Swinney and Thomas 2015: 25). Moreover, the city centre, rather than outlying areas, has gained the most from job creation in these sectors (Clark et al 2013: 7).

Growth achieved in public sector employment was recently reversed by the budget cuts mandated by the coalition government. Historically the largest local authority in the country, Birmingham was forced to make cuts of £274 million between 2011 and 2013, with a further £615 million expected by 2017/18 (Slay and Penny 2013: 14). As a result, public sector employment is expected to shrink by nearly a third (Public Sector Executive 2014). These cuts have affected not only employment, but also the provision of social welfare and integral services to vulnerable individuals and communities, particularly those in the most materially disadvantaged areas of the city.

Since the dismantling of its industrial sector, Birmingham has recorded consistently higher unemployment rates than the national average. The number of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants in Birmingham grew to 47,365 in 2013, up from 36,578 in 2008 (Slay and Penny 2013: 14). Some variation has been observed between ethnic groups, with black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals exhibiting higher rates of unemployment and JSA claimancy levels than their white peers (Birmingham Race Action Partnership 2012).<sup>6</sup>

Youth unemployment has also grown as result of the economic downturn (Birmingham Commission on Youth Unemployment 2013: 17). According to the 2011 Census, the city's proportion of unemployed young people<sup>7</sup> (14.9 per cent) is higher than the national average (11.9 per cent), though this figure is attributed, in part, to the high number of full-time

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<sup>6</sup> According to BRAP (2012), Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA) claimancy is 16.6 per cent for black individuals, 12.6 per cent for mixed heritage compared with 5.4 per cent for white and 8.6 per cent for Asian individuals (BRAP 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Defined as those between the ages of 16-24.

students studying at the city's many universities. Nevertheless, even after accounting for the non-working university students, the city's proportion of unemployed young people remains higher than the national average (Birmingham City Council 2015). Officially, there are 15,000 unemployed young people in Birmingham, but because this figure only refers to young people registered with official agencies, the real number is understood to be higher (Birmingham Commission on Youth Unemployment 2013: 4). An estimated 3,000 of these young people are long-term unemployed, that is, they have been claiming JSA for more than one year (ibid). In 2012, Birmingham City Council created a Youth Unemployment Commission aimed at tackling long-term youth unemployment, albeit with limited resources. Alongside unemployment, Birmingham has emerged as a 'low-wage economy' (Fenton et al 2010: 21). Clayton (2014) notes that:

In Birmingham [...] jobs in manufacturing, which tend to be higher paid, more secure and were an obvious career choice for many in the past, are being replaced by lower paid jobs in the care sector. Employment in manual jobs (those most associated with manufacturing) declined by a fifth in Birmingham between 2001 and 2011, while employment in care increased by half. These jobs are notorious for being low paid and insecure.

Low-wage jobs are replacing 'intermediate' jobs at a faster rate than high-wage jobs and the gap between high- and low-wage jobs is also widening (Clayton et al 2014: 23).

This problem has been intensified by a real-term decline in wages<sup>8</sup>, which has disproportionately affected the already low-waged (Fenton et al 2010: 21), particularly in the context of increased cost of living (Hirsch et al 2009: 6). In recent years, the UK has seen the highest rate of food and energy price inflation in Western Europe (Slay and Penny 2013: 16). Slay and Penny's research highlights the devastating impact that austerity has had on communities across Birmingham, suggesting that people increasingly make trade-offs to get

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<sup>8</sup> During this time, wages have risen at a slower rate than inflation, reflecting similar developments in other parts of England and Wales.

by, most notably ‘between eating and heating.’ Between 2013 and 2014, The Trussell Trust (2014: 5) distributed an emergency supply of three days’ food to 93,461 people across the West Midlands (including an estimated 35,425 children) (Byrne and Evans 2015: 3).

Nationwide, the volume of food distributed by food banks grew by 163 per cent (The Trussell Trust 2014: 5) and it is estimated that one in five mothers regularly skip meals in order to feed their children (The Trussell Trust 2014: 4).

Birmingham local authority has the largest number of Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the most deprived decile of the Index for Multiple Deprivation (Lad 2010: 9), although this can be explained, in part, by the size of the local authority. 40 per cent of Birmingham’s population live the most deprived 10 per cent of areas in England (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010). 23 per cent live in areas described as the most deprived five per cent (ibid). Low income is just one indicator of poverty; others include lack of access to decent housing, community amenities, social networks and assets (Seymour 2009:19).

Individuals with low incomes overwhelmingly also lack access to the others. In Birmingham, some of the most materially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city also record high levels of crime and other social problems. As noted by social historian Carl Chinn at the start of this chapter, the dismantling of the city’s economic backbone has had a range of knock-on social effects in many of the city’s disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

In 2013, Birmingham local authority recorded among the highest levels of child poverty in the UK (Hirsch and Valadez 2014: 2)<sup>9</sup>. In 2013, the child poverty rate in Birmingham rose to 37 per cent compared to 31 per cent in 2012 (Padley and Hirsch 2013; Hirsch and Valadez 2014). By comparison, the local authority with the lowest level of child poverty recorded a

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<sup>9</sup> Child poverty, until 2015, was defined as children living in families receiving out-of-work benefits or tax credits where household income (after accounting for housing costs) is below 60 per cent of median income.



rate of 10 per cent in 2013, up from below five per cent in 2012 (Padley and Hirsch 2013; Hirsch and Valadez 2014).

Reflecting the insecure and low-waged nature of the labour market, the number of poor children in working households has risen by 320,000 during the past decade in the UK overall. The number of children living in poverty in working households now exceeds those in workless households (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2014a). Whilst children in sole parent households have historically been at a higher risk of poverty than two-parent households, this is no longer the case (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2014b). Although the majority of RPs in this research lived in sole parent households, the data is significant as it indicates the precarious nature of the labour landscape for many workers in post-industrial Britain.

Several waves of migration during the post-war years have altered the social fabric of Birmingham and the city is now one of the most ethnically diverse in Europe (AWM Strategy Team 2010: 3). In the 2011 Census, 42.1 per cent of Birmingham's population identified as non-white (compared with 14.5 per cent for England as a whole). The city has a notably large Asian population (26.6 per cent, compared with 7.7 per cent for England) and the percentage of black residents (8.9 per cent) is also higher than the national average (3.4 per cent). This diversity is, however, not spread evenly around the city. In the neighbourhoods of Midford and Weston<sup>10</sup>, the majority of residents are white British. This is a result of historic efforts to move the traditionally white working classes into the outer areas, as well as 'white flight' in response to migration. In later years, there has been a tendency to house residents dependent on low incomes and/or social welfare in several of the 'outer-urban' areas, which has begun to diversify the ethnic make-up of these historically white working class communities.

The following sections describe in more detail the neighbourhoods of Midford and Weston.

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<sup>10</sup> Pseudonyms are used to refer to these areas. The rationale for anonymity is provided in Chapter Three.

## **2.2 The neighbourhoods: Midford and Weston**

The ‘outer-urban’<sup>11</sup> (Hanley 2007: 12) areas of Birmingham were developed during the inter-war years to address the city’s housing shortage and rehome those residents being displaced by large-scale slum clearances throughout the city (Chinn 1999). Due to the high cost of renting and buying homes in these areas, it was the better off working class families rather than the poorest slum residents who could afford to move (ibid). During the mid-1960s, additional affluent white working class families began moving into outer areas, as migrant families from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent also moved into the city (Henley 2014). The process of de-industrialisation has been particularly detrimental to many of these neighbourhoods, whose residents were predominantly employed in the manufacturing sector.

I initially identified Midford as the primary site of my research due to the high concentration of areas in this ward among the most deprived five and 10 per cent in England. Once I had confirmed Midford Youth Centre (MYC) as my fieldwork site, I learned that it also served young people from nearby Weston, so I decided to include RPs from both areas in my research. Although the neighbourhoods of Midford and Weston both span different wards (and, furthermore, each neighbourhood falls into several wards), the RPs that attended MYC reside primarily in concentrated areas near the youth centre. These areas are easily designated into two main wards (in two different parliamentary constituencies). I therefore limit my overview of the context of these local neighbourhoods to these two wards (which I also refer to as Midford ward and Weston ward).

Relevant details about Midford and Weston, which help to contextualise the transitions of the RPs, are outlined below.

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<sup>11</sup> Hanley states her preference for the term ‘outer-urban’ because ‘the word suburban sounds too middle class’ (Hanley 2007: 12). Similarly, Wacquant (2008) uses the term ‘urban periphery’.

### **2.2.1 Midford**

11 RPs lived in Midford at the time of their interviews. Of these, two had recently moved back to the area having spent time living in other parts of Birmingham for reasons related to relationships and family. Meanwhile, a third RP had recently moved back after spending several years at university in another city. A twelfth RP officially lived with her mother in a different part of Birmingham, but spent several nights each week living with her grandmother in Midford. A thirteenth lived with her partner in a different neighbourhood at the time of her first interview, but had moved back to Midford at the time of her second.

Like many other parts of ‘outer-urban’ Birmingham, Midford was historically a rural agricultural area which underwent large-scale residential development during the 1930s to meet the city’s growing need for council housing. During this time, the area was primarily residential and its residents commuted to factory jobs and other work in different areas of the city. There are several primary and secondary schools, GP services, dentists, a number of food and other shops, restaurants, pubs, banks, post office, library, leisure centre and other amenities in Midford. The area is also connected via several bus links to the city centre.

The population of Midford ward is nearly 26,000. It has a younger population than the Birmingham and the national average (25 per cent of Midford’s population is aged 0-15, compared with 23 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively) (Census 2011). Although Birmingham is an ethnically diverse city, this is not the case in Midford where approximately 80 per cent of the population is white (British or Irish), compared with 59 per cent for the rest of Birmingham (Census 2011). See Table 2.1 for more detail.

The proportion of residents identifying as black and ‘mixed heritage’ is nine per cent and four per cent, respectively. At six per cent, the proportion of Asians is lower than both the Birmingham and the national average.

**Table 2.1: Population by ethnicity: Midford, Weston, Birmingham and England**

	<b>Midford</b>	<b>Weston</b>	<b>Birmingham</b>	<b>England</b>
<b>White</b>	80%	82%	58%	86%
<b>Black</b>	9%	7%	9%	3%
<b>Mixed parentage</b>	4%	3%	4%	2%

Source: Census 2011

Historically a residential area built for the working classes, the current levels of deprivation in Midford reflect the economic decline that accompanied the dismantling of Birmingham's industrial backbone. 74 per cent of Midford ward's residents live in areas ranked within the most deprived 10 per cent in England, and 66 per cent in the most deprived five per cent areas (see Table 2.2). The proportion of children living in poverty in Midford is nearly 40 per cent.

**Table 2.2 Percentage of ward population in 5%, 10%, 20% and 40% most deprived SOAs: Midford and Weston**

	<b>5%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Midford</b>	66%	74%	91%	94%
<b>Weston</b>	0%	13%	26%	74%

Source: Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010

The 11 per cent unemployment rate in Midford is significantly higher than the city's average, and more than double the national average (Census 2011) (see Table 2.3). The number of long-term unemployed is also more than double the national average. More than a quarter of 16-24 year olds in the local area are unemployed.

According to the 2011 Census, the three largest employment sectors occupied by workers living in Midford are wholesale/retail trade and motor vehicle repair (18 per cent); human

health and social work (15 per cent) and manufacturing (11 per cent). These are predominantly low-waged and insecure sectors.

**Table 2.3 Comparison of economic activity status: Midford, Weston, Birmingham and England**

	<b>Midford</b>	<b>Weston</b>	<b>Birmingham</b>	<b>England</b>
<b>Economically active</b>	69%	80%	69%	77%
<b>Economically inactive</b>	31%	20%	31%	23%
<b>Unemployed</b>	11%	7%	8%	5%
<b>Unemployed, never worked</b>	2%	1%	2%	1%
<b>Long term unemployed</b>	5%	3%	3%	2%

Source: Census 2011

Occupational levels also affect wage structures and more than half of Midford's workers are employed in lower level occupations, such as service, sales and customer service, plant and machine operatives, and elementary occupations. Higher level occupations (directors, professional and associate professional) comprise only a quarter of Midford's workers (see Table 2.4).

**Table 2.4 Comparison of residents' occupation levels<sup>12</sup>**

	<b>Midford</b>	<b>Weston</b>	<b>Birmingham</b>	<b>England</b>
<b>Higher level occupations</b>	24%	28%	37%	41%
<b>Mid-level occupations</b>	24%	28%	22%	24%
<b>Low level occupations</b>	52%	43%	41%	35%

Source: Census 2011

Occupational levels are related to the attainment of educational qualifications. The attainment rate in Midford is lower than the rest of Birmingham and England (see Table 2.5). 31 per cent

<sup>12</sup> Higher-level occupations include managers, directors and senior officials; professional occupations; and associate professional and technical occupations. Mid-level occupations include administrative and secretarial occupations; and skilled trade occupations. Lower-level occupations include caring, leisure and other service occupations; sales and customer service occupations; process plant and machine operatives; and elementary occupations (Census 2011).

of residents have no post-compulsory educational qualifications. Meanwhile, the proportion of Midford residents with Level 4 qualifications<sup>13</sup> or above is just 14 per cent.

**Table 2.5 Comparison of residents' qualifications**

Highest qualification obtained	Midford	Weston	Birmingham	England
No qualifications	31%	20%	21%	15%
Level 1	17%	19%	15%	15%
Level 2	17%	20%	15%	17%
Apprenticeship	2%	3%	2%	3%
Level 3	13%	15%	15%	14%
Level 4 & above	14%	18%	25%	30%

Source: Census 2011

Midford has a higher proportion of council tenants (31 per cent) compared with the national average (just over 9 per cent), whilst the proportion of residents living in owner occupied housing (49 per cent) is lower than the national average (64 per cent). Midford also reports high levels of poor health in comparison with many other parts of the country. The proportion of individuals identified as long-term sick or disabled is more than double the national average.

The area also exhibits many of the social patterns often observed in areas with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. For instance, although Birmingham's teenage pregnancy rates as a whole fell by 40 per cent between 1998 and 2011, the teenage pregnancy rate in Midford in 2011 remained amongst the highest in the city. The proportion of sole parent families in Midford is twice the national average (Census 2011), though it is crucial to distinguish between correlation and causation when linking poverty and sole parent data. Midford consistently exhibits high crime levels compared with many other parts of the city. The most commonly recorded crimes in the area relate to anti-social behaviour, violent crime, criminal damage, arson and burglary (UK Crime Stats, accessed on 9 October 2014). Support for far-right groups including the English Defence League and National Front and political parties

<sup>13</sup> For an explanation of qualification levels, see Appendix C.

such as the British National Party and United Kingdom Independence Party has been witnessed in Midford in recent years. The rise in support for far-right groups in white British working class areas is a complex phenomenon and a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this particular research study (Ford and Goodwin (2014) undertake a useful examination). Undoubtedly, this remains a salient aspect of life for residents in Midford, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The following section describes the neighbouring area of Weston, where a smaller proportion of the RPs lived.

### **2.2.2 Weston**

Three RPs lived in Weston at the time of interview, although one also spent significant periods of time at her father's house in a different area of the city. A fourth lived primarily in Weston during her interviews, although she also spent a brief period working in another city during the fieldwork period. A fifth RP attended university in a different city, but regularly returned home on weekends and during term-time holidays. A sixth had lived in Weston whilst growing up, later living and working for a few years in a different city. Although she lived in a different area of the city at the time of her interview, her mother still lived in Weston.

Residential development (a mix of private and council housing) began in Weston in the 1920s. Though not an affluent area, Weston is considered by many local residents as a 'better,' and more aspirational, area to live in than Midford. Like Midford, Weston has a white ethnic majority (see Table 2.1). It has a slightly higher proportion of Asian residents (8 per cent) and lower proportion of black residents (7 per cent) than Midford, though both are lower than the rest of Birmingham. The population of Weston is older than Midford, with a lower proportion of 0-15 year olds (21 per cent), and a higher proportion of residents aged 65 or over (17 per cent).

Overall deprivation levels differ considerably between the Midford and Weston wards (see Table 2.2). In Weston, the proportion of residents in the 10 per cent most deprived SOAs in England is just 13 per cent, compared with Midford's 74 per cent. When this category is extended to the 40 per cent most deprived SOAs, however, the proportion rises to 74 per cent. Nevertheless, the ward does not experience the same levels of acute poverty that exist in Midford. At just under 25 per cent, child poverty levels in Weston are significantly lower than Midford and the rest of Birmingham, but still much higher than those constituencies in the UK with the lowest child poverty levels.

At 80 per cent, the proportion of economically active individuals in Weston ward is higher than the national average (77 per cent), and significantly higher than Birmingham's average (69 per cent) (see Table 2.1). In Weston, the unemployment rate (7 per cent) is considerably lower than Midford (11 per cent). The main employment sectors occupied by workers in Weston are similar to those in Midford: wholesale and retail trade/repair of motor vehicles (17 per cent), human health and social work (13 per cent) and manufacturing (12 per cent) (Census 2011). Although the proportion of residents employed in higher level occupations (28 per cent) is higher than in Midford, it is still significantly lower than the rest of Birmingham (37 per cent) and England (41 per cent). The proportion of residents in lower level occupations (43 per cent) is lower than Midford, but significantly higher than the rest of Birmingham and England (see Table 2.4).

The proportion of individuals without qualifications in Weston (20 per cent) is significantly lower than Midford (31 per cent), though still higher than the national average (15 per cent). At 18 per cent, the proportion of Weston's residents with Level 4 qualifications or above is higher than Midford (14 per cent), but remains significantly lower than the rest of Birmingham (25 per cent) and the national average (30 per cent).



Given these economic and employment differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that private home ownership, at 74 per cent, is more common in Weston than in Midford. Reflecting the economic disparity, levels of ill health in Weston (5 per cent) are in line with the city and national average, and significantly lower than in Midford (9 per cent) (Census 2011). Weston also ranks lower than Midford with regard to crime by area in the city of Birmingham. The main types of crimes reported in Weston in 2014 were anti-social behaviour, bike theft, ‘other theft’ and public order offences (UK Crime Stats accessed on 10 October 2014).

The following section presents an overview of the primary fieldwork site: Midford Youth Centre.

### **2.3 The primary fieldwork site: Midford Youth Centre**

I chose Midford Youth Centre (MYC) as the primary fieldwork site. On a practical level, using an ethnographic research approach meant that I needed to spend several nights each week at my chosen site. The youth centre was a commutable distance from the area of Birmingham where I lived, which made it a realistic journey to make regularly. Basing myself at MYC made it easier to access RPs and also provided a safe and trusted environment for us all to engage in the research process.

MYC principally served young people from Midford and Weston. Occasionally young people travelled from further afield to meet friends or access the music studio, sometimes because their own neighbourhoods lacked youth facilities or because they felt too intimidated – in some instances by what they referred to as ‘gangs’<sup>14</sup> - to attend centres closer to home. Open drop-in sessions at MYC ran three nights a week, with a typical nightly footfall of around 60 young

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<sup>14</sup> The word ‘gang’ as used by the young people at MYC, to refer to a group of young people that hang out together, was often not meant in the same way as when used by practitioners. In this instance, however, some young men who did not want to attend their youth centre in the inner city used the term ‘gang’ to refer to young people who engage in deviant, often violent and criminal, behaviour.

people or more. Of this group, roughly 10-15 tended to be female. Most had learned of the youth centre through siblings or friends and attended the centre to participate in both formal and informal activities.

The formalised activities included a weekly girls' only group, which was created around halfway into my fieldwork by Linda, a senior youth worker, at the request of several young women. The girls' group met once a week when the centre was closed to young men and was structured around learning about specific issues, including breast cancer and domestic violence. These sessions provided space for young women to spend time together as a group, which many of them valued. The youth centre also ran time-bound activities such as a dance programme, a photography project (which I initiated and ran for a group of six young women, together with another female youth worker) and a series of cooking projects (run for young women and men by various youth workers, including myself). Mostly, however, the young women came into the centre to hang out, meet their friends, see their boyfriends or speak with the youth workers and get advice about problems they were having at home, in school or with their peers. Some also used the music studio or joined the boys in playing pool, table tennis, table football or cards (the young men also played football, an activity in which the young women never partook whilst I was there). A core group of young people (mostly young women, but also one young man) often came into the centre during daytime or evenings outside the centre's official open hours. Some of these spent more of their waking hours at the youth centre than in their own homes. The youth workers were doing targeted work with some of them; others just enjoyed hanging out with their 'MYC family'<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless, some of the young people who came in stuck to their own groups or cliques and there were sometimes problems between different groups or individuals that manifested in

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<sup>15</sup> Many of the RPs referred to MYC as their 'second home' and the youth workers and other young people there as a 'family', with the two senior youth workers, Linda and Paul, being designated, jokingly, the roles of 'mum' and 'dad'.

tension, outright disagreements and, at times, physical violence. Occasionally, the young women expressed feeling intimidated by some young men that came to the centre. Although members of staff aimed to provide a safe space for young people and deal with any tensions that emerged, there were occasional incidents including theft, vandalism and physical fighting. On some evenings, the centre was forced to close early due to such incidents. In a handful of instances, neighbours came to the centre to complain about criminal behaviour by certain individuals, or the police were called, although they frequently failed to respond.

The following section describes the RPs.

## **2.4 The RPs: young women from Midford and Weston**

The RPs were aged 14-24 (see Appendix B for an overview of the RPs). All were either current or past users of the youth centre, and lived predominantly in Midford or Weston. According to the UK National Youth Agency website, ‘youth workers work primarily with young people aged between 13 and 19, but may in some cases extend this to younger age groups and those aged up to 24.’ According to Shaheen and Kersley (2011: 11), 16-25-year-olds are ‘the group making the transition to adulthood [...] who make up around 12 percent of the UK’s population.’ The decision to interview young women between the ages of 14 and 24, therefore, took both official definitions of youth and transition periods into account as well as considering the demographic of young people who attended MYC.

During the 20 months that I volunteered at MYC, most of the female ‘regulars’ were aged between 13 and 21 years old. The selection of RPs for interviews was influenced by the relatively small number of young women who attended MYC and those who agreed to participate in interviews. At the beginning of my fieldwork period, only a handful of young women attended MYC on a regular basis. While the numbers notably increased during the 20 months I spent there, many were aged 13-14. This was directly linked to the youth centre’s

recruitment policy. Many young people were 12-13 years old when they began attending evening sessions and, with the exception of a handful of regulars, were expected to attend less frequently or move on completely by the time they reach their late teens/early twenties, although those who considered MYC their ‘family’ often continued coming in. I interviewed one 14-year-old at the beginning of my fieldwork, but it became clear during this interview that she was not yet fully engaged in thinking about her transition to adulthood (though she would begin to do this as the fieldwork period progressed). Following this, I made a conscious decision to focus my efforts on securing interviews with young women aged 15 or older to ensure meaningful discussions with those young women who were more firmly engaged in the process of transition. I do, however, include the interview conducted with the initial 14-year-old as she took part in a second interview at age 15. I approached all of the MYC regulars in this age group and asked them if they were willing to be interviewed. Most agreed and only two declined, one of whom would later agree to participate, and another moved away before she could be interviewed. I interviewed all the young women who agreed to take part. As my fieldwork progressed, I was able to secure a significant number of interviews with older RPs who had already completed compulsory education. Interviews with four young women who no longer regularly attended MYC were also arranged by youth workers.

As noted earlier, 13 of the RPs lived predominantly in Midford, and 6 in Weston. 11 were white, 5 were black and 3 were of ‘mixed parentage’ (Tizard and Phoenix 2002). Although some Asian families lived in Midford and Weston, only one young Asian woman attended the centre’s evening sessions during the period of my fieldwork (at age 11 she was too young to be included in the research)<sup>16</sup>. Two RPs identified as gay, and one as bisexual<sup>17</sup>. A fourth RP

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<sup>16</sup> A few young Asian men also attended MYC, but this was predominantly for specific activities, rather than the open drop-in sessions.

<sup>17</sup> As will be explained in more detail in Chapter Six, sexualities were at times more fluid than this breakdown suggests.

identified as straight at the time of her interview but also disclosed that one of her most significant prior romantic relationships had been same-sex.

Defining the RPs' social class was not always straightforward given the challenges resulting from the altered post-industrial labour market landscape. A detailed discussion of the debate around defining social class is beyond the scope of this doctoral research study. Instead, I will offer a brief explanation of how social class was interpreted in the context of this study, with reference to the relevant literature, before determining how the RPs were mapped onto these definitions.

Walkerdine et al (2001: 211) acknowledge that although social class inequalities have persisted, the 'face of class' has 'changed considerably.' In addition to the dismantling of industrial manufacturing in Britain, other changes since the 1980s mean that traditional employment-based definitions of social class have become less appropriate. For instance, Thatcher's right-to-buy policies have made home ownership more common across social classes and the widening of further and higher education has resulted in extended educational experiences for young people from diverse social backgrounds. It will be argued in Chapter Four, however, that classed hierarchies remain entrenched within the education system.

Whilst there is as yet no consensus on how to best conceptualise social class in the post-industrial context, a number of useful alternatives have been proposed. Class has been variously presented as 'multidimensional' (Savage et al 2013: 223); as a 'social relation' (Bradley 2014: 431); and as a dynamic process rather than a fixed structural category (Walkerdine et al 2001: 26). Class can be subjective (Skeggs 2004: 77). Walkerdine et al (2001) note the different ways in which their working and middle class respondents defined social class in relation to these changes with working class respondents emphasising education and home ownership and middle class respondents, namely, those who already own their

homes, emphasising education. There is also evidence that social class is constructed in relation to others through processes of dis-identification (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 126; Shildrick et al 2012:168). Additionally, as Hanley (2007: 18) argues, social class is often ‘built into the physical landscape of the society.’ Similarly, Taylor and Addison (2010: 104) suggest that structural divisions are often ‘reconstituted in and on the places occupied by young women.’

Clearly, class is not reducible simply to occupational status (Skeggs 2004; Savage et al 2013; Bradley 2014) and it is important to acknowledge these other aspects. Nevertheless, financial resources, as framed in terms of occupational status, determine opportunities to partake in home ownership and higher education, as well as consumption, leisure and cultural activities. Bradley (2014) makes a convincing case for the continued use of occupational categories, arguing that social classes should be defined by the ‘nature of their economic links to each other’ (what she defines a relational approach) and not just ‘placed on a scale in terms of possession of less or more of various assets’ (a categorical/gradational approach) (Bradley 2014: 431).

Bradley suggests that occupational indicators can provide critical insights into social relations. Thus, an individual’s position in the labour market is considered within the overall (shifting) socio-economic context, which positions the individual within society and shapes her relations (and subjectivities) with others.

**Table 2.6: Bradley's (2014) alternative class schema<sup>18</sup>**

	<b>Middle class</b>	<b>Working class<sup>19</sup></b>	<b>Precariat</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>	Possess wealth (housing, shares), but primarily defined by income. Possess qualifications, skills and appropriately valued experiences.	<b>Upper-working class and middle-working class:</b> may be home owners <b>Lower-working class:</b> lack of higher educational qualifications; may possess NVQs or other certifications	Can be either highly educated or low skilled. Marginal and insecure relation to employment (e.g., temporary, part-time, zero-hours contracts). Can include young people, including students and 'graduates without employment', migrant workers, minority ethnic workers, women and men recently made redundant.
<b>Earnings</b>	<b>Upper-middle class:</b> high earnings <b>Middle-middle class:</b> highly educated, less rewarded <b>Lower-middle class:</b> qualified but less well paid	<b>Upper-working class:</b> affluent and aspirant <b>Middle-working class:</b> lower waged earners <b>Lower-working class:</b> low earnings or benefits dependency	Insecure.
<b>Sample occupations</b>	<b>Upper-middle class:</b> doctors, lawyers, engineers <b>Middle-middle class:</b> teachers, social workers, computer specialists <b>Lower-middle class:</b> nurses, council workers, technicians	<b>Upper-working class:</b> skilled manual workers; redundant factory workers and mechanics who have utilised their skills in self-employment (the 'white van men') <b>Middle-working class:</b> feminised, low-paid workers in retail, care and leisure services <b>Lower-working class:</b> underemployed; long-term unemployed	Temps, cleaners, classroom assistants, hourly paid lecturers, call-centre workers, fruit-pickers, bar and restaurant staff.

<sup>18</sup> I have excluded the fourth class identified by Bradley, the upper class, from this table since none of the research participants or their families fell into this category.

<sup>19</sup> As highlighted by Bradley, the working class has shrunk due to the shift to services, the upgrading of the occupational structure in the post-war years and the expansion of higher education.

Bradley's typology of social class is a useful starting point for conceptualising social class (see Table 2.6). It underpins the way in which social class is understood in this study: middle class, working class and precariat.

The middle and working classes are further divided into upper, middle and lower sub-categories. The precariat class is also highlighted by Standing (2011), and comprises low-waged and insecure occupations, distinct from those that map more easily onto 'high-status professional or middle-status craft occupations' (Standing 2011: 8). More crucially, however, jobs in the precariat category are defined by insecurity, or 'precariousness' and 'a lack of a secure work-based identity' (Standing 2011: 9). As such, precariat workers are not building a career, as workers in other low-income jobs might be. This is also how precariat occupations are understood in this study. As noted in Bradley's schema, social class definitions can be further deepened by taking into account home ownership status and experiences of further and higher education, as well as dynamic and subjective experiences of social class (Walkerline et al 2001; Skeggs 2004).

Tables 2.7 and 2.8 illustrate the occupations held by the RPs' parents by neighbourhood and are categorised by Bradley's schema. I also attempted to ascertain information about grandparents' occupations, but this proved more difficult as many RPs were unaware of what jobs their grandparents held; in some cases this was due to having limited contact with (particularly paternal) grandparents. Those who did know overwhelmingly reported traditional working class occupations.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Midford and Weston were both developed in the 1920s - 30s to counter the city's housing shortage and create residential areas for the working classes.

However, as outlined above, differences have developed between the neighbourhoods with regard to age composition, home ownership, economic (in)activity and deprivation levels.



Midford has a significantly higher proportion of residents without educational qualifications – more than double the national average (see Table 2.5). Few of the RPs’ parents had post-compulsory qualifications, and only one had completed higher education.

**Table 2.7 Parental occupations of RPs living in Midford (does not include step-parents) – based on Bradley’s (2014) social class categories**

	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Fathers</b>
<b>Upper-middle class occupations</b>	N/A	None
<b>Middle-middle class occupations</b>	N/A	Teacher Computer specialist
<b>Lower-middle class occupations</b>	Assistant manager at Birmingham City Council Nurse	N/A
<b>Upper-working class occupations</b>	Purchase ledger clerk	Second hand car lot owner
<b>Middle-working class occupations</b>	Care worker (2) School welfare officer for disabled children	Van or truck driver (2) Dustbin man Forklift engineer Carpenter Telecommunications engineer
<b>Lower-working class occupations including long term unemployed/ on benefits</b>	Unemployed (3)* Supermarket worker	Unemployed (4)**
<b>Precariat</b>	Cleaner (2) Classroom assistant Model Bar maid	N/A

Please note: This table may include more than one occupation per parent, in particular for mothers. For example, one mother had been made redundant from her public sector job and was working in a fast food restaurant. Another had been employed as a care worker but later became unemployed following redundancy.

\* Reasons given: lack of childcare (1); being ‘lazy’ (1); being made redundant (1)

\*\* Reasons given: disability (1); made redundant (1); in prison (1); reason not known (1). This figure would be higher if unemployed step-fathers were also included.

With regard to parental occupations, slight differences emerge between the two neighbourhoods. RPs from Midford reported a higher concentration of parents in lower-working class occupations, whilst those from Weston reported a higher incidence of upper-working class occupations.

In both neighbourhoods there were also a few parents in lower-middle class and middle-middle class occupations. There were more in Midford than in Weston, though this is not necessarily representative of the areas. There were gendered differences, with mothers of RPs from both neighbourhoods more likely to be employed in ‘feminised’ areas of work (Walkerdine et al 2001: 70). Mothers of RPs living in Midford were also more likely to be found working in precariat class jobs. The fathers of RPs living in Midford were more likely to be unemployed whilst fathers of RPs living in Weston were more likely to be working in upper-working class (self-employed) positions. A few RPs had parents who were long-term unemployed; the reasons provided for this were diverse, including ill health, lack of childcare support, ‘laziness’ and a prison sentence.

Two critical points must be made regarding the social class positioning of these parental occupations. Firstly, employment categorisation according to social class alone provides a limited view of the economic position of the RPs’ families. Since all but one of the RPs lived in sole parent households (due to separation, divorce, or, in one case, a parent who had passed away), this meant that even those parents in higher-waged employment were often the sole earners in single wage households. A handful of parents had re-partnered or remarried but many, particularly mothers, were single during the field work period, which meant that they were heading up sole income households and/or were unable to work due to childcare obligations.

Regardless of which social class their occupation positioned them in, mothers of RPs in both neighbourhoods were also more likely to be employed in lower-paid feminised areas of employment as well as being the primary carers for their children. A number of RPs referred to the lack of child support paid by fathers in these contexts. More than half of the RPs’ parents owned their homes, but mortgage obligations and other debts could also negatively impact on finances. Some mothers worked several jobs and some took out loans in order to make ends

meet or be able to afford ‘extras’, for example, birthday parties, birthday and Christmas gifts, for their children. A handful who were less well-off had at times skipped meals so that their children could eat. Overall, regardless of parents’ social class positioning, a significant number of RPs referred, either directly or indirectly, to financial hardship experienced by their families.

**Table 2.8 Parental occupations of RPs living in Weston (does not include step-parents) – based on Bradley’s (2014) social class categories**

	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Fathers</b>
<b>Upper-middle class occupations</b>	None	N/A
<b>Middle-middle class occupations</b>	Unspecified position in ICT	N/A
<b>Lower-middle class occupations</b>	Unspecified public sector position	N/A
<b>Upper-working class occupations</b>	N/A	Mechanic (self-employed) Events promoter (self-employed) Head of training centre (self-employed)
<b>Middle-working class occupations</b>	Receptionist (GP surgery) Executive manager (nursery) Public house manager	Public house manager Dustbin man
<b>Lower-working class occupations including long term unemployed/ on benefits</b>	Unemployed*	Unemployed**
<b>Precariat</b>	Bar maid Fast food worker	Restaurant owner/ worker***

Please note: This table may include more than one occupation per parent.

\* Reason given: disability

\*\* Reason given: disability

\*\*\* Has been categorised as precariat due to insecure nature of this position – managed other people’s pubs before starting own restaurant, but had to close the business due to the recession and went back to working in other people’s restaurants.

Second, parental class positioning was more dynamic than these tables reflect. Skeggs (2004:

3) notes that ‘class is not a given but is in continual production.’ Indeed, the parents of several RPs fluctuated between social class categories, indicating the precarious nature of social class in post-industrial Britain. For example, one mother worked in a fast food restaurant after being made redundant from her public sector job. Another mother worked as a purchase-ledger clerk

before being made redundant and finding work as a classroom assistant. A father had managed pubs, then owned his own restaurant before selling due to the economic crisis and returning as an employee to work for an employer. Another father was working in a middle-middle class position in ICT before being made redundant. These changes overwhelmingly reveal a tendency towards downward mobility and/or movement into the precariat class, reinforcing observations by a number of commentators that social mobility in post-industrial Britain has faltered (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 11; Roberts 2011: 23; Standing 2011: 11; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014: v). Even in the few instances of upward movement, these were often from a precariat or lower-working class position, into a lower or middle-working class position with little improvement in finances or working conditions (as also noted by Walkerdine et al 2001: 77).

None of the RPs spoke directly of belonging to a specific social class and, with few exceptions, there seemed to be limited political awareness of social class and historical class struggles. This might be indicative of what Standing (2011: 23) refers to as ‘the weakened sense of social memory’ which characterises the social class landscape in contemporary Britain. Because ‘social memory’ emerges ‘from belonging to a community reproduced over generations’, it is perhaps not surprising that this has deteriorated alongside the erosion of traditional employment sectors such as manufacturing in Birmingham. It is perhaps unsurprising that many RPs exhibited a lack of awareness of political history and the class politics that would likely have defined areas like Midford and Weston a few generations ago. As Walkerdine et al (2001: 33) observed over a decade ago,

the world into which young women enter adulthood is vastly different from the one on which their parents lived as 21 year olds, so how can they possibly experience and therefore understand class in exactly the same way as their parents?

A decade later, this observation remains pertinent. The absence of explicit acknowledgement of social class, at least as it has been defined historically, does not mean that it is no longer a

relevant issue. Although the RPs did not directly reference social class, they frequently engaged in disarticulation and/or utilised ‘chav’ discourses. As articulated by Tyler (2013: 162) chav discourses might be viewed as the ‘new popular vocabulary of social class’ often employed to ‘demonise’ the working class (Jones 2011). Although, some RPs admitted to being ‘a little bit chavvy’ or ‘sometimes’ chavvy, most also continued to defend themselves, and their families, against the negative associations with ‘chavs’ living in Midford and Weston. In this way, they distinguished themselves as ‘better than’ others living there.

This section has given an overview of the RPs, including their class positioning. Although this study is not a social class study *per se*, an understanding of the contemporary manifestation of social class, alongside its intersections with gender and ethnicity (to be set out in Chapter Three), is crucial in highlighting the ways in which both agency and structure help shape the RPs’ transitions.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the demographic context of this research study. It established the key characteristics of the post-industrial city of Birmingham as well as Midford and Weston, the neighbourhoods in which the RPs primarily lived their transitions. It also described the fieldwork site (MYC) and provided an overview of the RPs, including the social class positioning of their families. As such, this chapter sets the stage for the exploration and analysis of the RPs’ transitions to adulthood which is undertaken in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

The following chapter sets out the research approach and methodological tools utilised.

# Chapter 3. Research approach, methodology and tools

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## 3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research approach, methodology and tools utilised in this study. The first section contextualises the research approach, which I situate within the critical, interpretative and difference-centred traditions. This includes a brief autobiographical account, which I include in order to establish criticality, and also to position myself in the context of the research with the aims of highlighting and challenging any personal assumptions, biases or theoretical ‘luggage’<sup>20</sup> (Potts and Brown 2005: 274). The second section describes the ethnographic research methodology. It also outlines the specific tools I utilised to generate data, specifically participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The third section explains how I approached data management and the production of my ethnographic narrative. In the final, section, I address the ethical considerations I anticipated and encountered during the course of my research.

## 3.1 Research approach: critical, interpretative and difference-centred

My research approach is based in the critical, interpretive and difference-centred traditions. Each of these traditions hold in common the beliefs that social realities are constructed, ‘truth’ is manifold, and that structural and cultural power structures determine both the manifestation of social realities and ‘truth’ claims in this respect (Moosa-Mitha 2005; Lather 2006). The critical tradition emphasises a commitment to social justice and to research that engages ‘in and with real-world problems and asymmetries in the distribution of economic,

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<sup>20</sup> Potts and Brown (2005: 274) emphasise that ‘we carry our framework, which is not inherently good or bad, around with us and it is through this framework that we view the data. Making visible this data is an individual and collective process.’

cultural and social capital' (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013: 314). Difference-centred approaches distance themselves not just from 'normative assumptions on the basis of universal claims' often defined by the experiences of white, middle class (invariably heterosexual, able-bodied) males; they also argue against 'hegemonic and dominant constructions of [womanhood]' (Moosa-Mitha 2005: 52-54). Instead, they emphasise the multiplicity of lived experiences based on intersections between gender, social class and ethnicity, among other categories that are not explored in this study.

Difference-centred theories, such as feminist theory, highlight the production of knowledge as 'an important site in the struggle for social justice' (Moosa-Mitha 2005: 56). Yet Brown and Strega (2005: 10) point out that 'research cannot challenge relationships of domination and subordination unless it also challenges the hegemony of current research paradigms.'

Interpretive approaches posit that social and cultural meanings are always constructed in the context of interactions between individuals and groups, including researcher and researched (Gough 2002: 6). Therefore, this research aims to undertake a critical and reflexive analysis of not only the contexts in which the young women in Midford and Weston are making their transitions, but also of the research process itself, including my own role within the process and how this has influenced the research context and findings.

In order to establish this criticality, it is necessary to initially clarify what constitutes knowledge and, secondly, explain how this has been produced in the context of this research. As Gough (2002: 7) points out, 'data are not 'out there' waiting to be 'discovered', but are actively produced or constructed by researchers.' In the following section, therefore, I aim to define knowledge as it is understood in the context of this study, before providing a brief autobiographical account in order to position myself within this research.

The starting point of research in the critical tradition is that knowledge is socially constructed; ‘produced through the interactions of people’ who themselves are socially located with regard to gender, ethnicity and social class (Potts and Brown 2005: 261). Gough (2002: 3) suggests that ‘truth claims tend to be framed in terms of their generalizability and their independence from historical contingency or context.’ Scholars of the critical tradition have emphasised that ‘truth’ in the social science research context does not exist as a tangible, objectively observable phenomenon. This presents dilemmas for the researcher, whose role is to be a ‘producer of legitimate and valid knowledge’ (Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro 1998: 2). Scheper-Hughes (1992: 23) highlights the inherent paradox between the ‘moral obligation to get the ‘facts’ as accurately as possible’ and awareness that ‘all facts are necessarily selected and interpreted from the moment we decide to count one thing and ignore another.’ Similarly, Potts and Brown (2005: 261) claim that ‘truth is a verb; it is created, it is multiple: truth does not exist, it is made.’ Numerous factors can affect how ‘truth’ is created and, therefore, what form(s) it takes. In ethnographic accounts, Scheper-Hughes (1992: 25) suggests that ‘facts’ are ‘built up in the course of everyday participation in the life of the community.’ This was also the case in this study, where my participant observation at Midford Youth Centre (MYC) provided a context to the data discussed in interviews.

Adding further layers of complexity, Potts and Brown (2005: 270) note that at least three distinct ‘voices’ affect the creation of research ‘truths’: the research participant who tells his/her story, the researcher who records it, and the reader who interprets it. Whilst the last of these is perhaps the most difficult for a researcher to anticipate – as Chase (2013: 74) points out, ‘researchers are less likely to study the audience side of this narrative process’ – an awareness of the first two is crucial. As such, ethnographic research does not reflect objective reflections of reality (Clifford 1986: 6), but is a product of the distinct voices that contributed



to the selection and interpretation of the ‘facts’ that are highlighted. The researcher’s presence thus becomes part of the story which is a ‘joint production’ with the research respondents (Coy 2006: 426).

Since ‘all qualitative research is by definition interpretive, subjective and partial’ (Street 2008: 10), ethnographers have incorporated *reflexivity* into their work. Acknowledging that it is not possible to carry out disembodied ethnographic research, reflexivity encourages critical awareness of potential biases, values and assumptions that ethnographers bring with them to their research. Reflexivity can be ‘confessional’, ‘theoretical’ or ‘intertextual’ (Foley 2002: 473). My account relies on the first two. ‘Confessional’ reflexivity suggests that continuous critical self-reflection can illuminate the socially constructed nature of self and the ‘other’ (ibid). ‘Theoretical reflexivity’ highlights the theoretical grounding of research claims. Together, these two forms of reflexivity effectively demonstrate how the researcher’s subjectivity affects her interpretation of the research data.

Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro (1998) refer to this reflexive approach to research as ‘mindful inquiry’. The first step for me in this process was to identify aspects of my own background and position that might have, consciously or unconsciously, influenced my research interests, approach and analysis. I do so in the following section through a brief autobiographical account of what brought me to carry out this particular research and why I chose a particular approach and methodologies.

### **3.2 Establishing criticality**

This section establishes my criticality within the research process. Autobiographical approaches have faced criticism for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, excessively subjective, self-serving and/or shallow (Foley 2002). Nonetheless, I believe, as do many researchers in the critically-oriented tradition, that conducting research that is able to challenge societal

inequalities and oppression also requires recognising ‘the complicity that each of us has in creating and sustaining oppression over others’ (Potts and Brown 2005: 258). Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro (1998: 4) suggest that:

Research is always carried out by an individual with a life and a lifeworld [...], a personality, a social context, and various personal and practical challenges and conflicts, all of which affect the research, from the choice of a research question or topic, through the method used, to the reporting of a project’s outcome.

Therefore, a brief autobiographical account is useful in order to contextualise my own presence in this story and how I came to the critical perspective, as well as highlight any values or biases that may underpin this research.

In the introduction of this study, I acknowledge the process which brought me to carry out my doctoral research ‘closer to home’. During this time, one particular experience influenced the research choices I made. Prior to undertaking my doctoral studies, I was employed as a research assistant on a large, multi-country study that explored the role of diaspora communities in conflict and its resolution. During this time, I was asked to travel to Kosovo to fill in for a colleague who was unable to attend – despite the fact that local project partners were already living and working in Kosovo and that my own responsibility on the project was for research on a different conflict zone. I had little prior knowledge of the situation in Kosovo, limited time to prepare, scarce guidance from the project’s management, and no power to make strategic decisions about the research. Although I spent three weeks in Kosovo and learned a tremendous amount during this time, I felt that my outsider status, compounded by the brief time spent in ‘the field’, hampered my understanding of the many complex and nuanced intricacies of everyday life for Kosovars during and after the war. As a result, significant depth of knowledge and meaning were lost in the research process. It made me very uncomfortable that one of the project aims was to write a ‘how to’ handbook for the communities affected by conflict. How were the foreign academic ‘experts’ more qualified to

set out guidelines than the local communities themselves? Additionally, the local project partners felt side-lined by the research process which resulted in resentment and damaged relationships throughout the remaining life cycle of the project. The experience influenced many of the choices that I made regarding the design and methodology of my own study.

Initially choosing to research through an institutional gate keeper (a local branch of the city-wide Birmingham Youth Service) may be considered reminiscent of my own top-down institutional origins<sup>21</sup>. However, it represented a practical choice as well as coincidental outcome of the contact nets I cast. Working through this particular institution (with its own agenda) did have implications for my research as is explored later in this chapter when describing the discussion groups. Yet, the experience was also profoundly transformative, both academically and personally, reflecting Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro's (1998: 7) suggestion that 'the development of awareness is not a purely intellectual or cognitive process but part of a person's total way of living her life.'

Although I utilised methodologies that are common in grounded and participatory research, there were aspects of top-down decision making and power inequalities that must be acknowledged (I do so in subsequent sections of this chapter). The story that I tell is undoubtedly different from the story that the RPs might tell if they were sole narrators.

Despite the aspects of 'joint production' that characterise this research, it is ultimately *my* version of *their* stories. The elusiveness of 'truth' does not mean, however, that ethnographic research, such as this account, is without value. According to Wagner (1993: 15), 'when we judge a research project solely on the apparent truthfulness of its parts, we neglect its larger purpose: generating new knowledge.' I hope that my academic perspective provides a 'deeper reading' (Foley 2002) of the RPs' everyday lives in transition, and that this can inform

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<sup>21</sup> Including higher education degrees in International Relations and International Peace Studies, and employment in the corporate sector as well as the field of international development.

understanding about social processes by highlighting subjective insights that invite questioning and prompt constructive dialogues (Clifford 1986).

My research methodology and the tools that I used are outlined in the following sections.

### **3.3 The rationale for a critical ethnographic research methodology**

I define my research methodology as critical ethnographic. Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology in which the researcher participates in the lives of RPs ‘for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1). The decision to utilise an ethnographic methodology was linked to my understanding of youth transition as a multi-faceted, often complex and non-linear, ‘life phase’ that is shaped by ‘shifting social, economic and cultural processes’ (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 36). There is a long history of using ethnographic methodologies in youth studies as they allow for not just sympathetic storytelling, but activist accounts of exploitation and inequality (Foley 2002: 470)<sup>22</sup>. Since youth is ‘inherently transitional’ (Roberts 2003) this can be a complex process requiring a research methodology that would enable an exploration of the holistic, changing and long-term nature of transitions. Since ethnographic approaches have been highlighted as an extension of everyday life, they are increasingly viewed as a useful mode of learning about lived experiences. As Hymes (1996: 13) highlights:

Much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have. Our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is learn the meanings, norms and patterns of a way of life.

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<sup>22</sup> The Chicago School of Sociology has used ethnography to study ‘deviant’ youth groups (‘gangs, criminals, ethnics and transvestites’) since the 1920s and 1930s (Foley 2002: 470).

Engaging in ethnography means that the researcher, as a ‘trusted outsider’, becomes immersed in the RPs’ social worlds, in this case MYC, in order to learn about their daily lives.

The popularity of ethnography has grown in recent years and it is used across a range of academic disciplines and other fields including market research and journalism. As a result, the term has come to mean many different things, from enthusiastic anthropologists ‘swanning around the village’ to market researchers carrying out ‘15 minute interviews or observations with consumers’ (Street 2008). This has led to some forms of ethnography being criticised as little more than ‘fad,’ ‘parody’ and/or ‘banality’ (Street 2008). I use an ethnographic methodology, which Green and Bloome (1997: 181-202) define as ‘framing, conceptualizing, conducting, interpreting, writing and reporting associated with a broad, in-depth and long-term study of a social or cultural group.’ To do this, I utilise a specific mix of ethnographic tools, namely, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and discussion groups, which are explained later in this chapter.

Some anthropologists would doubtlessly take exception to my use of the term to describe my methodology as I did not immerse myself completely in ‘the field’. That is, I did not leave my own everyday life to live in Midford or Weston, nor did I spend every day of the week at MYC. Nevertheless, I engaged in a form of ‘deep hanging out’ during a ‘selective intermittent time mode’ (Jeffrey and Troman 2004: 538)<sup>23</sup>. During this period, I did not spend all of my time in Midford, instead selecting a particular research focus and site, and opting to spend several nights a week there for an extended period of 20 months conducting observation. This approach enabled me to participate in the everyday lives of the RPs on several different levels: physical, social, mental and emotional (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010:

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<sup>23</sup> This is part of Jeffrey and Troman’s (2004) three-prong classification of ethnographic time modes. The other two are ‘compressed time mode’ (one brief, but intensive continuous period trying to observe ‘everything’) and ‘recurrent time mode’ (repeated visits to the field site, organised around specific temporal phases).

7). This process of multi-faceted participation enabled me to gain deeper insights into the individual and collective ‘meaning making’ (Chase 2013: 74) that the RPs undertook in their everyday lives in transition than other methods, such as surveys and structured interviews. Through immersing myself in their everyday worlds at the youth centre, the ethnographic methodology sought to understand the RPs’ experiences of transition in their own terms.

The ethnographic methodology is well suited to dealing with ‘controversial topics in sensitive locations’ since it enables researchers to gradually build relationships and allows ‘rapport to be established slowly with respondents over time’ (Brewer 1993: 130). Building rapport is crucial to generating meaningful data, since ‘only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions and expect thoughtful, serious answers’ (Bourgois 1995: 12-13). Over the 20 months I spent at MYC, the relationships I built enabled me to ask the kinds of questions that began to reveal the social realities of RPs’ everyday lives in transition, as well as gain insights into the meanings they themselves gave to these issues. The relationships we built also meant that I considered them as more than just participants in my research.

The value of this time-intensive methodology became clear as the months passed. For example, one RP initially declined to be interviewed early on in the fieldwork period, but a year later, once we knew one another better, she agreed to be interviewed together with a friend<sup>24</sup>. Other RPs who had initially responded to my attempts to engage in casual conversation in the youth centre, as well as earlier interviews, with polite monosyllabic answers, were engaging enthusiastically in conversations about a range of topics later on in the process, including some exchanges that might perhaps have been considered too private to have with a stranger. Importantly, an ethnographic methodology also enabled the

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<sup>24</sup> Prior to this, she had also sat in on part of an interview with another RP. She said that she enjoyed this process and, even when she noticed she was missing an episode of the TV programme *Hollyoaks*, she decided to stay anyway. It is possible that this experience eased her fears about participating in an interview herself.

participants to engage with and be engaged in the research, allowing them more direct participation and voice in the production of data than quantitative surveys would permit (James and Prout 1997). The use of an ethnographic methodology was useful because it allowed data production and analysis to occur in parallel, and explanations and hypotheses to evolve more organically, based on the realities in ‘the field’.

In traditional structured interviews, the interviewer sets the agenda and controls the data that is produced in several ways, including identifying topics for discussion, ordering the questions and deciding how the questions are worded (Bauer 1996; Holloway and Jefferson 2008). Thus, there is an incongruity that occurs when interviewees are encouraged to speak, but restricted to speaking only about issues identified by researchers (Gatenby and Humphries 2000 cited in Weckesser 2011: 84). Therefore, I decided to use a semi-structured approach to interviewing, which allows for more open-ended discussions, where the narrator maintains a greater degree of control over what is told and the degree of importance that this is accorded. This approach is compatible with critical research principles (Potts and Brown 2005: 282), relying on in-depth interviews to elicit information about ‘life experiences as narrated by those who live them’ (Chase 2013: 56).

This methodology recognises that told stories are not ‘neutral accounts of pre-existing reality’ (Holloway and Jefferson 2008: 303). Rather, this methodology treats the data as constructed within the context of the interview. In this way, storytelling becomes a form of ‘meaning making’ through which the narrator makes sense of her own life, attributing meaning to specific events whilst organising these into an overarching narrative (Chase 2013). Reflecting reflexive and ethnographic research approaches, the ‘truth’ of narrated events is of less importance than the narration itself which provides insights about the narrator. As Holloway and Jefferson (2008: 303) suggest:

While stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truth, storytelling stays closer to actual life events than methods that elicit explanations.

This methodology was intended to enable the RPs to speak of their own transition experiences by letting them decide what was, and what was not, relevant to their own stories.

The specific tools I used to generate data reflected the ethnographic methodology, namely, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. These are described later in this chapter. Firstly, I turn briefly to the concept of intersectionality, initially introduced in Chapter One, in order to explain how this was operationalised in the study.

### **3.4 Operationalising intersectionality**

Chapter One established the value of intersectionality as a conceptual tool for capturing lived experiences that are informed by ‘the three major social divisions’ (Yuval-Davis 2006: 201) of gender, social class and ethnicity. This section sets out how intersectionality was methodologically operationalised.

Crenshaw suggests viewing intersectionality as a video clip that encourages the question: ‘This is a piece that I can see. What other clips of social power might be a part of this collection?’ (Crenshaw 2011b: 231). In order to unearth the different ‘clips of social power’ related to gender, social class and ethnicity shaping the RPs’ transitions to adulthood, I used what Davis (2008: 70) calls the ‘(deceptively) easy procedure of ‘asking the other question’. Matsuda (1991: 1189) explains this procedure as follows:

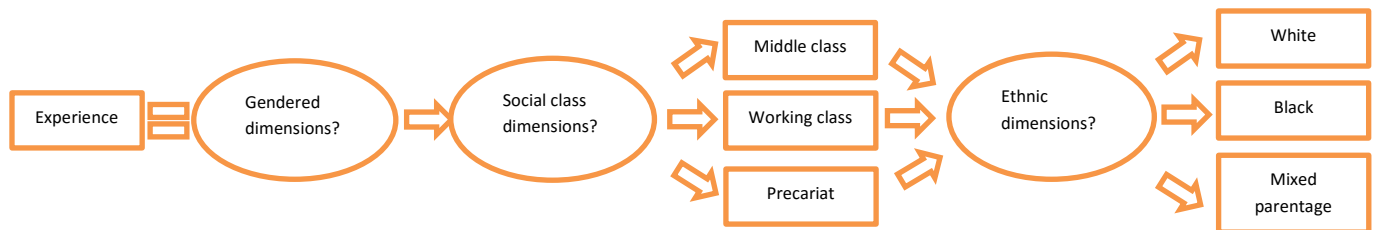
When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask ‘Where are the class interests in this?’

I utilised intersectionality in a similar manner when analysing my research findings. When thinking through RPs’ experiences, I employed the following chain of questioning: What are



the gendered dimensions of this experience? What are the social class dimensions? What are the ethnic dimensions? (see Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1 Operationalising intersectionality: ‘asking the other question(s)’**



This approach is useful because, as Yuval-Davis (2006: 195) argues, although all social divisions are ‘intermeshed’, the different levels of division must be ‘carefully separate[d], and examine[d] separately’ in analysis since they each have a different ‘ontological basis’. Whilst it is not always easy to identify the ‘dynamic interface’ between gender, social class and ethnicity, intersectionality thus provides a useful ‘prism’ for examining ‘what difference our differences [make]’ (Crenshaw 2011b: 222-226). This approach can illuminate underlying structural inequalities which are often made invisible when multiple inequalities exist (Brannen and Nilsen 2002: 42).

In order to explore how the social categories of gender, social class and ethnicity shaped the RPs’ experiences, as well as to interrogate where they potentially operated simultaneously, I incorporated questions intended to elucidate these within the interview guide (see Appendix D).

Below, I briefly explain my understandings of gender, social class and ethnicity, as utilised throughout this study.

### 3.4.1 Gender

My understanding of gender reflects Nayak and Kehily’s (2008: 5) observation that gendered experiences can be ‘enacted and embodied in daily life, frequently in ways that are competing

and contradictory [...] embedded in national and local cultures, institutional sites and settings as well as everyday social relationships.’ Gender is continually shaped by global and local aspects of the post-industrial order in ways that are not identical for every woman, yet not mutually exclusive. Whilst gender is cross-cut by other identity categories, including social class and ethnicity, the transition period, despite these differences, typically occurs when young women learn to take their gendered positions in hierarchies and structural power regimes (Hey 1997: 13). By focusing specifically on the transitions of young women as opposed to those of young people more broadly, this study contributes to the body of research that informs understanding of this particular period in young women’s lives. It also illustrates the ways in which gender, in the context of a post-industrial city, opens up new possibilities for the RPs and/or circumscribes them. With this aim, I asked RPs to speak about their experiences of education in terms of what subjects they enjoyed and what their plans were for post-16 education and why. I also asked about their experiences of employment, including prior work experience, employment aspirations, rationale and role models. In addition, I asked RPs to speak about family formation and the extent to which they wanted to get married and have children, how they felt about stay-at-home motherhood and whether they hoped to continue to work after they had children. In gathering responses and contextualising the findings in relevant literature, I hoped to identify any specifically gendered opportunities and challenges that they anticipated or encountered, as well as establishing how they responded to these. In order to capture the dynamic and shifting nature of their experiences, I conducted multiple interviews (typically two, but sometimes one and others, up to three) in order to gauge the ways in which this might shift over time.

### **3.4.2 Social class**

As outlined in Chapter Two, I draw primarily on Bradley's (2014) proposed class schema, which sets out four classes: upper, middle, working and precariat<sup>25</sup>. The middle and working classes are further subdivided into higher, middle and lower categories. I also draw on class definitions that include aspects of education and home ownership. I elucidated aspects of class in the lives of the RPs by asking questions about the educational experiences of their families as well as their own educational plans, their parents' and grandparents' occupations, as well as their own employment ambitions. I also asked questions to determine home ownership and individual and family income. I also draw on definitions of social class that highlight its dynamic and shifting nature (Walkerdine et al 2001: 26), influenced in large part by economic and labour insecurity as well as 'neoliberal globalism' and austerity policies (Bradley 2014). In order to capture these dynamic aspects, I conducted multiple interviews to analyse how the RPs' own plans and experiences changed or remained constant over time. During this process I gleaned insights into similar dynamic and shifting processes for their family members. Finally, I draw on notions that highlight how social class is often constructed in relation to others (Walkerdine et al 2001; Nayak 2004; Jones 2011; Tyler 2013) as well as the subjective implications this involves (Skeggs 2004). To illuminate these processes in the lives of the RPs, I asked them to speak about their own and other people's experiences of living in Midford and Weston, of insecure education and employment trajectories, social welfare dependency, and young motherhood. Hearing how they positioned themselves and others gave crucial insights into the subjectivity of social class as they experienced it.

### **3.4.3 Ethnicity**

The category of ethnicity presented some challenges to data collection and analysis in this study. Despite evidence that ethnic inequalities affect the lived experiences of young people

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<sup>25</sup> I do not include the upper class category in the study as none of the RPs were from this background.

growing up in Britain, (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Mirza 1992, 2009; Gunter and Watt 2010) discourses of ethnicity and ‘race’ have disappeared from debates about inequality in recent years (Goldberg 2009; Kapoor 2013). This ‘silencing’ of discourses related to racial structures and institutional racism is a consequence of policies designed to promote multicultural diversity through a process of assimilation, as well as a shift in discourse from *equality* to *diversity* (Kapoor 2013). As a result, Kapoor argues:

Race operates from an altered, less obvious and more hidden place than it once did. While the privatisation of race does not mute the possibility of making racial difference, it mutes the possibility of invoking the language to identify the phenomenon (Kapoor 2013: 1034).

The ‘silencing’ of ‘race’ does not dismantle the institutional structures that enable the enactment of inequalities related to ethnicity. Nevertheless, it restricts the discourses that make it possible to identify and confront these inequalities. This has created a context in which there is ‘racism without race’ (Goldberg 2009: 360), making it possible to deflect and dismiss racial structures. Instead, inequalities are explained as a product of individual attitudes (Kapoor 2013: 1035). This is significant because it becomes ‘near impossible to name, to identify and thus to redress racisms’ (Kapoor 2013: 1029), despite evidence of their existence and consequences (Mirza 1992; Reay et al 2001; Bhattacharyya et al 2003; Rafferty 2012). Discourses of ethnicity and ‘race’ are also affected by the manner in which discourses around social class are enacted. In those instances where social class discourses are employed, they have a tendency to mute issues around inequalities related to ethnicity (Kapoor 2013: 1038).

The silencing of race has practical implications for the research carried out in this study because it creates challenges for engaging in ‘race talk’ between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Housee (2010) witnesses silences during debates about race in her ethnically diverse classroom. She notes that her black and Asian students sought ‘safer

spaces' to speak and seem more comfortable approaching her after class to discuss race and racism, rather than engaging with these topics in mixed groups. 'We talk to you because... you are one of us,' a student told her (Housee 2010: 6). This shows that students felt safe speaking to Housee due to their shared experience of belonging to an ethnic minority.

Housee's insights highlight the potential challenges for a researcher such as myself, who does not share the same ethnicity with her RPs, to access data in the first instance and also understand the influence of issues related to ethnicity on their lived experiences.

I attempted to address this particular challenge within this study in a number of ways. The first was to acknowledge the limitations that my own positionality creates in constructing the research, specifically, to recognise my own 'blind spots' (Gough 2002: 4). It is possible, indeed likely, that some of the RPs held back during our conversations as I was not 'one of them'. This sense was heightened in specific interviews, for instance, discussing with Anika (B19) whether or not the UK could ever have a black prime minister (see interview transcript in Appendix E). Although Anika responds to the question of the UK ever having a black prime minister with forceful certainty ('No, never. '), she seems to hold back as indicated by the tone of hesitation that follows her initial statement when I ask her to tell me more about why she thinks this. Although a discourse analysis is not the objective of this study, the change may have been triggered by the unintentionally oppositional manner in which I phrased the follow up question ('Do you really think never?') as well as associated insider/outsider positionality. My sense that black RPs held back was strengthened when assessing the outcomes of the second strategy I employed in an attempt to overcome my own outsider positionality: building trust and carrying out multiple interviews. Indeed, questions about experienced racism often drew blanks or brief and mainly impersonal anecdotes in the initial interviews, but as the interview process went on, more personal stories began to emerge. I sensed throughout the research process that categories of ethnicity were indeed

salient to the lived experiences of the RPs, but also that I was not able to access these to an extent beyond the superficial. I mention this here to acknowledge the potential limitations of my data on ethnicity and to simultaneously emphasise the need for further research on this critical issue within youth transitions. Without jettisoning my own responsibilities as a researcher, I also acknowledge the need for an open discussion on the insider/outsider dynamics which determine which researchers are most suitable and most appropriately positioned to examine these important issues.

In an attempt to determine the ways in which issues related to ethnicity shaped the lives of RPs, I asked them (regardless of their ethnicity) to speak about their motivations for undertaking education and employment and their experiences of these, including any discrimination they may have encountered. I also encouraged the black and mixed parentage RPs to speak more generally about their experiences of growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood. This was, in part, to facilitate discussion of the possible ways in which ethnicity may have influenced their experiences of education, employment or decisions about family formation. I also hoped that it might highlight any structural issues that I may not have previously identified. In order to address the challenges of doing this, I also draw on empirical findings and themes that emerge from other studies to contextualise my own research findings within the analysis.

The following section sets out the methodological tools I used in more detail.

### **3.5 The research tools: participant observation and semi-structured interviews**

Ethnographic methodologies aim to gain ‘insight into lives as they are actually lived; rather than how the researcher thinks they are lived’ (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010: 10). The

following sections outline the key research tools I utilised: (1) participant observation and (2) semi-structured interviews.

The decision to undertake participant observation at MYC enabled a more in-depth, long-term and, consequently, dynamic understanding of the young women's life worlds than a shorter term and less involved approach would have achieved. Participant observation entails spending time in the fieldwork community, participating in, and observing the lived experiences of those within it. One benefit of participant observation is that it can reveal unspoken and nuanced patterns of everyday life that may not be accessible through interviews. As noted, the researcher must practice constant reflexive awareness of the elements of 'selection' and 'interpretation' that influence these observations (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010).

I undertook participant observation at MYC for 20 months, between July 2011 and February 2013. Although I was an outsider, I was able to embed myself and maintain a continued presence over the entire fieldwork period. In this way, I became a 'trusted outsider' (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010). As time progressed, I also became an *accepted* outsider and, hopefully, a more *aware* outsider. Nevertheless, when my visits to MYC became more sporadic after the formal end of my fieldwork, I understood that my status as accepted outsider was conditional on my continued presence there. Whilst I still felt trusted by the RPs, the closeness that had developed during the course of my fieldwork grew weaker when my visits to the centre became less frequent. This reinforced my belief that I was able to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of 'the meanings, norms and patterns of a way of life' for the RPs through spending an extended period of time embedded in the fieldwork site (Hymes 1996: 13).

During the fieldwork period, I spent between one and three evenings a week participating in, and observing, activities. I was one of a number of volunteers on the team, which also included more than ten part- and full-time youth workers. During this time, I occupied the dual roles of volunteer youth worker and doctoral research student. The ethical and practical dilemmas that resulted from maintaining these dual roles will be outlined in the ethics section of this chapter. Although I did not receive formal training, I worked very closely with staff members who gave me informal guidance, advice and support to help me carry out my tasks as a volunteer as well as support my research project. I was able to discuss ethical and practical dilemmas with the senior youth workers, Linda and Paul. Linda, in particular, became somewhat of a mentor to me. In addition to shifts at MYC, I also attended staff meetings, barbeques and parties, an awards ceremony and cultural events, including those in which young people from MYC performed. I went rock climbing with a mixed-gender group of young people, participated in a weekend residential trip to Wales with the MYC girls' group and took a group of young women to participate in a workshop at Birmingham's Central Library and an art gallery. At all of these events, I balanced dual roles: participant and observer, volunteer youth worker and researcher.

I maintained regular field notes, which I typed up when I got home from MYC (or sometimes, depending on how late I got home, the next day), while my observations and thoughts were still fresh in my mind. These field notes, which I wrote in a journal format, served two main purposes. First, they generated questions which helped me to identify relevant issues to explore in interviews during the fieldwork period. Second, after coding the interviews, I conducted a thorough rereading of the field notes employing the same codes I applied to the interview data to reinforce the themes that emerged through the coding process. At this point, the field notes also served as 'an anchor for the crafty frames of memory' (Lederman 1990: 73), prompting 'conscious reflection' (ibid). Like MacDonald and Marsh



(2005: 41), I found that the field notes helped ‘to contextualise, and weigh up, the claims and comments of interview-based accounts.’

My contact with the RPs, whilst regular and sustained during the 20-month period of fieldwork, was of course limited to the specific fieldwork site (MYC) and related arenas and activities. Nevertheless, being there enabled me to get to know the RPs and what was happening in their lives, which provided a foundation for deeper and more meaningful discussion during interviews. As our meetings progressed and our relationships developed, I felt more confident probing deeper and they seemed increasingly comfortable to share information with me.

Nevertheless, doing research with young women is not without challenges, even for female researchers. McRobbie (2000: 49) suggests that ‘it is more difficult for a [female researcher coming from outside the area] to be ‘one of the girls... than for a ... male researcher to be ‘one of the boys’. I found this to be the case at MYC. Many young women did not participate in specific activities as young men did, for example, playing football or pool. Instead, they spent their time in more informal leisure pursuits, such as ‘hanging out’ in pairs or with small groups of friends. This removed the possibility of being able to bond with them through the shared experience of participating in an activity to the same extent as I was able to with the young men, for example, over a game of pool. Trying to be ‘one of the girls’ was, as I experienced on a few occasions in the earlier months of my fieldwork, likely to be seen as ‘an infringement of their private territory’ (ibid). I found my initial awkward attempts to engage with small groups of young women to be met with noticeable discomfort. Conversations would suddenly fall silent when I sat down and my attempts at making small talk would more often than not be met with polite, but monosyllabic, responses and a swift exit by the young women I approached. On more than one occasion, a young woman would move on to a different sofa if I sat down next to her in the communal ‘hang out area’. McKenzie (2015)

acknowledges the challenges of gaining trust as an outsider researching within a close community, noting that connections – ‘being connected, and finding connections’ – can help (McKenzie 2015: 53). I did not have any connections to facilitate trust, but a few months into my fieldwork, I began to feel accepted as a regular face at the youth centre. The young women stopped going silent when I joined in their conversations and would instead fill me in on the latest joke or gossip. The benefits of engaging in long-term participant observation, where I was afforded the opportunity to spend time building up contact, and subsequently trust and relationships, became clear. Even if some of my initial encounters may have been shy, clumsy or awkward, they broke the ice and repeated exposure enabled more meaningful interactions to take place as time went on.

My own age, gender, nationality and class background affected not only the way that I was perceived, but also how I approached and interpreted my surroundings. Being a woman was the most obvious aspect of identity that I shared with the RPs. Like McRobbie (2000), however, I observed that shared gender on its own was not a guarantee of commonality between researcher and respondents.

A particular characteristic that differentiated me from many of the RPs was my middle class background, including my educational background. Although several RPs attended university, this was not the typical or expected path for many of them. As a result, I consciously shifted between the academic language I encountered in reading, at conferences or in my own writing, to more accessible, non-academic, everyday language at the youth centre. Overall, academic language held little currency at MYC. If I sounded too academic, I was likely to exclude myself from conversations with precisely those young people that I had come to talk to. Similarly, the way I asked a particular question in an interview affected the nature and detail of the responses I received. If a question was framed in academic or general terms, I was likely to receive a vague, confused or even inauthentic answer. On the other

hand, if I asked a specific question using non-academic language that directly related to her life, this enabled the RP to speak freely from experience in detail. After spending several months at MYC, I experienced culture shock listening to the jargon and academic buzz words that seemed to be in vogue when I attended an academic conference. Straddling both worlds meant that I now fit neatly into neither. I wondered what the RPs would think of the conference and what the academics would make of the youth centre. This made me reflect on some of the existing, though subtle, societal divides that characterise the post-industrial city. It reinforced my conviction that if academics, policy makers and young people remain unable to genuinely access each other's worlds, there is little scope for bridging these divides in any meaningful way.

Age was a further factor differentiating me from the RPs. I was often unfamiliar with the music and film references that the young people and other youth workers (most of whom were also five to ten years younger than me) constantly talked about at the centre. This was not only due to age but also cultural differences as I did not grow up in the UK. The differences, however, were not always obstacles. Whilst they sometimes meant that I found it more difficult to relate to cultural references and take part in conversations, they also gave me a good excuse to explore certain issues in more detail. If the young women used a certain phrase or referred to an event I was unfamiliar with, I could always say 'Since I'm not from here, can you explain what you mean by that?' which often led to interesting conversations. My accent, a legacy of several years spent living in the United States, also proved to be quite an effective icebreaker at the youth centre, as my origin was invariably one of the first things that the young people there asked me about when we met.

Bourgois suggests that 'in order to collect "accurate data", ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study' (Bourgois 1995: 13). My formal roles as volunteer and researcher co-existed with my more informal

persona in the personal relationships that developed. It was not always possible to neatly delineate these roles, and navigating overlapping roles was an ongoing and complex process. Ethnographic fieldwork 'has never been simply about codes and canons but about better or worse choices' (Silverman 2003: 118). Unlike more formal research capacities, there are no clear-cut, one-size-fits-all rules for ethnographers and the dilemmas faced are sometimes subtle (Coy 2006: 420). I found I had to make daily choices on a case-by-case basis, underpinned by the aim of not doing any harm in the process. Although my initial reason for being at MYC was my role as a researcher, as a youth worker I sometimes had to make choices that prioritised the wellbeing of RPs which involved subordinating my researcher role to my youth worker role. This did not invalidate either role, but simply meant I had to remain conscious and reflexive about both at all times.

I conducted repeated interviews with RPs between July 2011 and February 2013. Initial interviews were conducted at the beginning of this timeframe with follow up interviews at around six, nine or twelve month intervals. 19 RPs took part in a first interview, 14 in a second, and three (those who had been among the earliest interviewees) in a third interview. Conducting a series of interviews, rather than interviewing on a one-off basis, enabled me to be in

persistent interaction with [the] data while remaining constantly involved with [the] emerging analyses. Data collection and analysis proceed[ed] simultaneously and each inform[ed] and streamline[d] the other. (Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 1)

Conducting repeated interviews allowed me to observe the transitions of RPs as a series of snapshots, rather than a single, isolated, event. I began each interview by asking RPs to tell me how they had spent the day before (a technique employed by Weckesser 2011). In addition to breaking the ice, this allowed RPs to identify the topics most relevant to them, which set the tone of, and guided, the rest of the interview. Although I referred to an interview topic guide (see Appendix D), I encouraged the RPs to lead the conversation,

though I did intervene if it deviated too far from the research topics. Consequently, I did not ask all questions in every interview. This resulted in a rather informal mode of interviewing which was intended to feel more like a discussion than a formal question-answer session and data was generated through ‘chains of conversations’ (Parthasarathy 2008). One RP said after her interview:

I don’t feel like I’ve just had an interview for your project. I feel like I’ve just met you and for some reason poured my heart out to you. You know, I honestly felt extremely comfortable, and like it flowed really well. (Lisa W22)

This approach enabled me to focus the overall research according to the issues that RPs brought up during conversation as certain themes proved more, or less, relevant than others. Research became an ‘iterative process’, as I moved back and forth between generating and analysing data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 159) suggest that in such an approach ‘ideas are used to make sense of data, and data are used to change our ideas.’ For example, although the topic guide asked RPs who were the most and least successful people the RPs knew, many initially responded to this by asking what I meant by ‘success’. As a result, I worked in additional questions that allowed for an exploration of how they themselves defined success, rather than providing mainstream, hegemonic definitions. Although initially only one question flagged up in the interview guide, this ultimately emerged as a key theme in the research. Had I relied on standard, fixed questionnaires, this may have remained a ‘blind spot’ throughout my research (Wagner 1993; Gough 2002)<sup>26</sup>.

This approach had additional benefits. Holloway and Jefferson (2008) warn that standard interview questions can potentially be interpreted differently by interviewers and RPs. An

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<sup>26</sup> Gough states that in research ‘what we ‘know enough to question but not to answer’ are our blank spots. Materials that provoke researchers ‘to ask new questions illuminate blind spots, areas in which existing theories methods , and perceptions actually keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might’. What we ‘don’t know well enough to even ask about or care about’ are our blind spots’ (Wagner 1993: 16).

example of this occurred when MYC youth workers were asked to conduct a short survey on behalf of an external service that was evaluating a potential new gang intervention programme in the local area. The questionnaire asked whether the young people or anyone they knew were involved in 'gangs'. As it did not clarify what was meant by 'gang', most of the young people answered 'yes'. However, it subsequently became apparent that 'gang' was widely understood as a group of young people hanging out together, which was likely quite different from the definition adopted by the service provider. Using a semi-structured approach avoided such misunderstandings as it enabled additional clarification questions during the process. This approach allowed me to be more proactively engaged with my data, as well as more flexible in adjusting the research focus as needed. First round interviews were followed by second and sometimes subsequent interviews, which enabled me to thoroughly investigate certain topics that emerged.

All the interviews took place at MYC as a trusted place where the RPs felt comfortable (Punch 2002: 328). Conducting interviews at the centre provided safety for the RPs and myself, given that staff members were on hand if necessary (although it never was). At the start of each interview, I requested permission to digitally record the conversation which all RPs agreed to. The interviews were predominantly conducted one-to-one, with just five RPs asking (a) friend(s) to attend.

The interviews with younger RPs were scheduled not to coincide with their MYC social lives to minimise disruption and ensure their continued willingness to participate. A few of the older RPs expressed interest in learning the research findings that emerged. Some seemed to enjoy their interviews (for example, one RP stated how much she enjoyed her first interview, then unexpectedly came along to two subsequent interviews I had scheduled with some of her friends. She expressed dismay after the final interview that there would be no more). For others, who talked extensively about chaotic pasts or complex issues in their lives, the

interview was possibly a cathartic opportunity to offload. One RP alluded to this when she told me she thought I should become a therapist. Another RP asked to see her interview transcripts as the process went on. In this way, the transcripts proved useful not only for my research but also as her record of particular times in her own life. From the outset, I explained to RPs that, like many PhD students, I hoped to turn my research into a book. For several RPs, this was a more interesting prospect than participating in academic research.

Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the three full-time youth workers at MYC as well as a handful of individuals that worked with youth or other community members in the local area. While the focus was on the RPs, these additional interviews complemented the data and helped to build a picture of the context in which RPs lived their lives.

The iterative nature of my research methodology meant that it was not always possible to clearly delineate between data generation and data analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 159). Indeed, the two often occurred in parallel or overlapped. The following section outlines the process of data management and the production of my narrative account.

### **3.6 Managing the data: transcription, coding, data analysis and ‘writing through’**

After completing interviews, I transcribed them in their entirety to enable data analysis. Although time-consuming, word-for-word transcription rather than indexing and summarising key portions of interviews was undertaken to avoid the risk of overlooking potentially relevant material (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 149). It also allowed for the illumination of potential ‘blind spots’ in the research (Gough 2002: 4).

After completing transcription, I undertook repeated and detailed readings of the transcripts in order to ‘get to know’ the data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:162). I then carried out several rounds of ‘open coding’ (Strauss 1987: 28). At this stage in the analysis, the aim was not to ‘manage and manipulate’ the data, but rather to use the data ‘to think with’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 158). In this way, I was able to revisit each interview and think about what was said, as well as what was meant. No themes were established at this point, to avoid imposing pre-set categories that might influence further analysis (Crang and Cook 2007: 139). Whilst working through the scripts in this way, I also took notes about observations or potential insights into connections or relations I observed in the data. I would return to these notes throughout my analysis in order to view the relationships between various pieces of texts rather than just individual statements. The process of coding became ‘recurrent’ – as new categories emerged, repeated readings of previously coded data were necessary to see whether they corresponded with new codes. The goal of this was to reach a set of ‘promising’ categories in order to then recode the data in the context of these categories (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 164-165). I reread each text again to establish a set of themes and sub-themes which I mapped out in a matrix. Using this matrix, I sorted the data around each theme and sub-theme. The matrix shaped the direction of the research as some of the themes I had initially considered as central to the final analysis were ultimately abandoned in favour of other themes that had emerged more strongly. For instance, whilst I had included several questions about the RPs’ free time in the interview topic guide (see Appendix D), intending initially to explore leisure time as one of the key areas of investigation in this study, the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the process of coding prompted me to focus instead on the three areas of investigation that form the core of this study: education and training, employment and independent household formation. Additionally, whilst I had not initially included specific questions about travelling or ‘getting



away' from Midford and Weston, these themes featured strongly during the process of coding interviews. As such, 'getting away' became one of the central themes of Chapter Five.

During this phase, I stopped going into MYC to gain some distance from the fieldwork site and delve deeply into data analysis. I found that writing up the data using RPs' pseudonyms, rather than real names helped to reinforce this distance. Whilst coding, I constantly asked myself 'to what extent [was] this a participant's world view or some composite of my representation of [her] world view?' (Crang and Cook, 2007: 140).

After completing this analysis, I approached the RPs with the themes that had emerged, along with my initial analysis, in order to facilitate a process of 'respondent validation' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 181). This transpired through a series of four separate discussion groups, which I detail in the following section.

### **3.7 Validating the research findings: the discussion groups**

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, discussion groups served to reinforce the participatory nature of the research. After the initial round of coding, analysis and writing up preliminary findings, I held four separate discussion groups in order to engage RPs in a process of 'respondent validation' (see Appendix F for structure and content). The aim of this was to test some of the ideas that had emerged in my analysis with RPs who may have had additional knowledge of the context that was unavailable to me (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 182), thereby prompting a different interpretation of the data. Crang and Cook (2007: 90) highlight that these types of groups can create space for 'the expression and discussion of the plurality of sometimes contradictory or competing views that individuals and groups hold.' As such, they can become 'spaces of resistance' where participants can 'explore and enable... [their] social agency and collective knowledge production (Hyams 2004: 106).

Two of the discussion groups were held in the context of the MYC girls' group<sup>27</sup> and two of the sessions were held with a smaller group of RPs who preferred not to attend the MYC girls' group. There are no universally agreed guidelines for how to run a focus group, although it is generally acknowledged that the composition of the group can affect how the subjects are discussed (Crang and Cook 2007: 92).

Despite the commonly stated sentiment that MYC was like a family, there were subtle fault lines between groups of young people that occasionally emerged. As many RPs were more comfortable engaging in discussion in familiar groups, I felt that the MYC girls' group would facilitate more fluid conversation than any other group formation. As I had previously been involved in this group, I also felt that my presence would not upset the group dynamic.

Although I had run these sessions with the aim of enabling RPs to participate in the analysis of my data, I realised as the sessions were concluding that I had made the assumption that this was something that they wanted to do. It is possible that they were more interested in telling me their own stories than being part of a 'collective knowledge production' process.

Alternatively, the discussion group forum may not have been an ideal way to elicit their interest if it appeared too 'school-like,' something MYC actively avoided. Some of the specific factors affecting the discussion groups are outlined in Appendix I.

I did, however, engage in another form of 'respondent validation' throughout the interview process which proved to be more effective. I employed 'triangulation' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 183), namely, comparing data collected in different interviews, from participant observation and other sources. This corroborated some findings and revealed interesting disparities in relation to others. The writing process also enabled me to organise and make sense of the data, a process examined in the following section.

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<sup>27</sup> See invitation letter for discussion groups in Appendix H.

### **3.8 Writing as ‘realisation’ and ‘record’**

Writing is closely related to analysis. According to Pelias (2013), writing is both ‘realisation’ and ‘record.’ As such, it is useful to think of writing ethnography in the following way:

Writers come to realise what they believe in the process of writing, in the act of finding the language that crystallises their thoughts and sentiments. It is a process of writing ‘into’ rather than ‘writing up’ a subject. (Pelias 2013: 549)

Writing ‘into’ my research was not just a way to communicate my findings, but also a part of the analytical process itself.

Earlier in this chapter, I outlined the reflexive aspects of my approach. Both serve an analytical and communicative function. Reflexiveness ‘allows researchers to turn back on themselves, to examine how their presence or stance functions in relationship to their subject’ (Pelias 2013: 554). A reflexive stance is key to thinking through the data and its presentation. Through this approach, I attempted to transform material from ‘the field’ into ‘the text’ through the construction of ‘meta-narratives’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 199). The approach was useful because it allowed me to create order out of a ‘messy collection of narratives, whilst also facilitating a process of ‘meaning making’ by presenting them in context. In this way, I engaged in a process of ‘storying other people’s stories’ (ibid). This is not a neutral, value free process. I reflect on the ethical dimensions that underpin ethnographic research, including the production of ethnographic accounts below.

### **3.9 Ethical dilemmas and considerations: power and (re)presentation, consent and confidentiality**

Ethnographic research is intrinsically full of ethical dilemmas. Burman et al (2001: 449) highlight the ‘inherent tension set up between the aims of the research (to ‘elicit information’)

and ethical concerns (to ‘protect’ those taking part).’ Power and (re)presentation, consent, and confidentiality are key concerns for researchers working with young people.

The primary concern of representation in ethnographic research is the accurate depiction of RPs in ways that facilitate understanding and analysis, while simultaneously maintaining an awareness of the hierarchical political implications of any such representation (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 1995; Scott-James and Watt 2010). Earlier in this chapter, reflections on ‘truthfulness’ highlighted some of key issues that have emerged. These issues around truth and (re)presentation are intimately connected with issues related to power.

Through my presence at MYC over a 20-month period, I built relationships with RPs which compelled me to undertake responsible analysis. Although I make no claims to ‘represent’ the RPs, I realise that through the very act of carrying out this research, I risk contributing to their misrepresentation. Coy (2006: 427) reflected on her ‘anxiety that (she) was potentially removing the stories far from the realities that they described and subjecting them to (her) own theoretical perspective.’ I share this concern.

While feminist researchers aim to conduct equitable and unexploitative research, the process of generating data, analysing it and writing ethnographic accounts, creates inherent power imbalances. One criticism is that RPs are rarely consulted in the process designing the research questions or writing about the data (Gluck and Patai 1991). Whilst I did not involve the RPs in the research design, I attempted to minimise this risk through other aspects of my research methodology. My approach encouraged RPs to speak about issues that were important to them. It also facilitated constant revision and the incorporation of emerging issues into the research questions in a flexible and fluid manner as the research progressed. The discussion groups aimed to create space for RPs to (in)validate the data and analysis, thereby involving the RPs in the research process and the creation of the final narrative.

Nevertheless, my own background and knowledge of other youth transition studies also informed the themes and categories through which I selected and interpreted the data. The narrative thus resulted from a combination of concepts identified as important by RPs and myself. The meta-narrative I present here is a ‘montage’ of ethnographic accounts that emerged through our discussions. Though in many ways a ‘joint production,’ the final narrative has been filtered through my lens, which is ultimately shaped by my own academic and personal ‘luggage.’

Many debates around the ‘hierarchical politics of representation’ inherent in ethnography (Bourgois 1995: 13) ignore the agency of RPs. This is often the case in research with young people, where researchers make ‘presumptions of “innocence”’ about them (Alexander 2000: 28). These presumptions cast young interviewees in a ‘uni-dimensional role’ of ‘victim’ (ibid). When I began fieldwork at MYC, I was initially worried about asking RPs to speak about potentially sensitive topics as I did not wish – as so much literature warns – to take advantage of the power imbalance between researcher and researched. As a result, there were interesting issues I ultimately chose not pursue in some of the pilot interviews in order to ‘protect’ RPs. When I mentioned my concern to Paul, a senior youth worker, he reminded me that the young women were quite adept at choosing what they wanted to reveal, or otherwise, about themselves.

As the interviews progressed, I came to see this first-hand and realised that trying to ‘protect’ the RPs was patronising and underestimated their capacity for agency. Instead, I made sure to emphasise at the start of the interview, as well as prior to asking about a potentially sensitive issue, that it was fine if they did not want to answer certain questions. Sometimes they were happy to speak and sometimes they chose not to.

Concerns with issues of empowerment and disempowerment caused by the research process are also raised by researchers working with young people. Given the inherent power inequalities that this type of research can create, the issue of consent is important. Laverick (2010: 76) highlights that consent in ethnographic research should always be ‘informed, voluntary and continuing’. Because of the long-term and ongoing nature of participant observation in ethnographic research, issues of consent become more complex compared with interviews where written consent is collected at the point of interview.

Gaining formal written consent from all young people at MYC in order to carry out participation would have been impractical since the sessions were not always attended by the same young people. Moreover, as Silverman (2003: 117) points out, ‘formal consent – whether written or verbal – at one point in time removes people’s right to withdraw consent at a later time, and to deny their past involvement, if they later wish to do so.’ Silverman suggests that ‘unwritten non-formalised verbal consent’ is most appropriate in the context of participant observation (Silverman 2003: 117).

Making practical use of such a form of consent required constant awareness and reflexivity, and was not always straightforward. The complex nature of consent in this context was emphasised in one interview, when two RPs asked to take a look at my interview guide before we began. The guide contained notes on a few specific incidents related to each RP’s life that I wanted to ask about. After reading the questions, they laughed and said ‘You’ve been spying on us!’ Whilst they did not seem to mind, the incident highlighted a sense of discomfort that I carried with me throughout the period of participant observation. It also reflected historical criticism of ethnography of everyday events, particularly ‘undercover ethnography’, as ‘spying’ (Johnson 2005). I always sought to prioritise the wellbeing of the RPs over the outcomes of my research and tried to be aware of potentially negative or unintended consequences. I hope that the aim of my research in countering negative dominant

discourses about young women growing up in disadvantaged areas will mitigate the potentially negative consequences of participant observation. However, I still carry a sense of unease about this.

Unless gathered directly from interviews, I did not present any data collected through participant observation biographically. Although I might have included it in my analysis, I did not link it to a specific RP. Several RPs made intimate disclosures in their interviews or in informal conversations at MYC. If I felt that particular disclosures were personal or RPs might be uncomfortable with such a citation in my research, I discussed it with them first. I asked if it was okay to use this information, explaining why I wanted to write about it. I reiterated my commitment to confidentiality and emphasised that I would not write about anything where concerns existed.

The proliferation of social media among young people added another ethical dimension to my research (Zimmer 2010). Whilst I did not actively use twitter, BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), or the range of other social media popular with young people, I did have a Facebook account and a few months into my fieldwork, several RPs sent me friend requests. At first I felt uncomfortable, sensing that Facebook was an arena in which the line between researcher, youth worker and Facebook 'friend' would blur. I could, of course, have refused all friend requests from these young people during my fieldwork period and explained my reasons to them in the same way as some teachers decline Facebook friend requests from their students. However, refusing them or outlining my concerns might have had a negative impact on relationships in relation to my youth worker role at the centre as other junior and senior youth workers were friends with the young people on Facebook. Therefore, I decided to accept the friend requests, but to view Facebook as an extension of my participant observation at MYC. This is perhaps a tenuous position. Zimmer highlights a number of valid concerns related to private versus public data in the context of research on Facebook, notably that 'the data was

made available on Facebook for the purpose of social networking among friends and colleagues, not to be used as fodder for academic research' (Zimmer 2010: 322).

Nevertheless, Zimmer's main critique of the use of Facebook data is the lack of consent with which it was harvested for research purposes. As such, I decided to treat any potential data from Facebook in the same way that I treated other sensitive data – that is, I would not use it, or attribute it biographically, without first gaining verbal consent from the RP to whom the information belonged.

Consent was easier to establish in the context of interviews. Before all interviews, I explained my aims and intentions to potential RPs before asking if they would participate. Several days often passed between initial conversations and actual interviews affording RPs ample time to reflect on taking part. Before each interview, participants received a consent form (see Appendix G), which I talked them through. I reiterated that participation was entirely voluntary; that they could choose to refrain from answering certain questions or refuse participation at any time before, during or after an interview without any negative implications.

Only two young women (a 14-year-old and a 15-year-old) declined to participate. One said she was too shy to be interviewed although, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, she agreed to be interviewed a year later. The other did not say no, but when I brought it up with her again having introduced the idea a week or two earlier, she seemed reluctant saying simply 'I don't know.' Whilst this could have been taken as a sign that she might agree if prompted, I interpreted her evasive body language and reluctance to make eye contact as an indication that she in fact meant 'no'. I did not ask again, saying simply that if she decided she wanted to participate to let me know at any time. Two of the participants asked to end their interviews before we had gone through all the questions - one because she wanted to spend



time with her friend, and another because she wasn't feeling well - but stated they were willing to resume at a later time, which we did.

There is debate around disclosing place names when doing research in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Some researchers choose not to do so in order to 'reduce possible stigmatisation' of the area (Aldridge et al 2008: 41). While many reasons for anonymising research sites are valid, the approach has faced a number of criticisms. One is that locations may still be recognised by academics, practitioners and research communities themselves. Another is that it raises practical challenges in terms of how the community is portrayed in analysis, as even providing demographic and socioeconomic statistics becomes difficult (ibid). Those who have utilised this approach, however, argue that the benefits, primarily, garnering support from community stakeholders, outweigh the drawbacks.

Although I agree with the arguments made by Aldridge and colleagues, I initially decided to disclose the names of my fieldwork site and neighbourhoods, but not those of RPs, for two main reasons. First, I imagined that anonymisation would create difficulties in speaking of neighbourhood characteristics without giving away their identities. In addition, limiting 'identifying talk', as Aldridge and colleagues did, might constrain the analytical value of the research, which ultimately attempted to understand how living in particular neighbourhoods affected the RPs' transitions. Second, one of the neighbourhoods (Midford) is already stigmatised. I felt that carrying out more nuanced analysis in an open and accountable way, might increase understanding of some of the local dynamics and thereby help reduce the stigma associated with the area. Nevertheless, as I became more deeply embedded in the research process, I came to several significant realisations that resulted in the decision to anonymise both place and people names.

Most crucially, I came to understand that it would be more difficult to maintain the anonymity of the small group of 19 RPs if the specific research site were disclosed. I was reminded on a number of occasions that one of the negative aspects of the local area was that everyone knew everyone else's business. Anonymising place names was therefore intended to further protect the privacy of the RPs who contributed their ideas, thoughts, and personal experiences to this research.

Additionally, Midford and Weston are not unlike other areas across Birmingham and the rest of England, where young people face similar challenges and risks rooted in financial hardship and inequality. Pinpointing the exact geographic location thus seemed less important. Whilst my research does not claim to be transferrable, I do believe that many of the issues faced by RPs growing up in Midford and Weston are also relevant in other materially disadvantaged areas in Britain.

In order to preserve the privacy of those who contributed their thoughts and experiences to this research, I use pseudonyms for all RPs and youth workers. In most cases, I picked the pseudonym, although three RPs asked to choose their own. Where relevant, I altered specific details that might reveal their identities. With regard to those issues identified by RPs as sensitive, I used either generic descriptions, such as 'one RP', or a second-level pseudonym whereby an additional pseudonym is used on top of the original.

The duality of my volunteer youth worker/researcher roles had confidentiality implications for the information I collected. One mechanism for subtly delineating my youth worker self from my researcher self was to ensure that I never wore my staff sweatshirt or other clothes with the MYC logo when conducting interviews. As both researcher and youth worker, I promised RPs complete confidentiality to tell me their stories. As a youth worker, I was always expected to remind young people not to swear. By contrast, when RPs apologised for

swearing during interviews, I reminded them that they were free to say whatever they wanted in interviews and that different rules applied because I was in ‘researcher’ mode. As a researcher, I explained that I would not use their real names when I recorded the data or wrote up the findings and advised that I would only break confidentiality, as I made clear at the onset of each interview, if they revealed harm to a minor, a risk to someone’s life including their own, or a serious crime. When confronted with issues that were neither life-threatening nor criminal, but may nevertheless have had a negative or debilitating impact on the RP’s life, for example, depression, self-harm, an eating disorder or bullying, I had to act in the capacity of a youth worker in the RP’s best interests. At times this meant being a confidant or encouraging her to speak with the senior youth workers at MYC or other professionals.

During the interviews we often moved fluidly between roles. Over one to two hours we could be any combination of researcher/RP, youth worker/young person, or simply friends. In some instances the interview process helped me bond with a particular RP, thereby improving my relationship with her as youth worker. In others, RPs shared information they may not otherwise have revealed to me *because* of the interview. Likewise, some RPs imparted details during interviews because they trusted me as a youth worker but asked me not to include the information in the research. In a few instances, I felt an RP might have told me certain information in my capacity as youth worker or friend, but ultimately held back due to my capacity as a researcher. More specifically, I sensed that she felt constrained by the confidentiality guidelines that I set out at the start of the interview. There was no way to establish clear-cut guidelines that applied to every situation, so I had to maintain constant awareness of these different, at times overlapping or contradicting, roles and decide how to act on a case-by-case basis.

At times, more serious issues surfaced. Three RPs disclosed that they had been raped and/or sexually abused<sup>28</sup>. As trusted adults in their lives were already aware of these incidents, I did not need to alert the senior youth workers. In two of the cases, legal processes were underway. In the third case, the perpetrator was in a different country and had no contact with the RP. A few comments made me think she was suffering from post-traumatic stress, so I broached the possibility of speaking with a counsellor, which she seemed disinclined to pursue.

During these specific interviews, I worried about re-triggering trauma by asking RPs to speak about their experiences. None of my questions solicited these types of disclosures, so I asked follow-up questions around the voluntarily shared information, emphasising that RPs did not have to talk about the experiences if they did not want to. They all chose to speak. I worried that I was out of my depth, but did my best to be an empathetic and caring listener. After each interview, we discussed how speaking about these issues made them feel and I reiterated that I would not write about their experiences if they did not want me to. They all said that it was fine to do so. We spent some time after interviews speaking with the other youth workers, and the RPs seemed to be feeling okay when they left MYC. At a later date, I debriefed with Linda without revealing which RPs had made the disclosures.

Following the interviews, I worried about any potentially negative impact my research may have caused. Their stories remain with me, vividly. I do not write about the incidents in detail, as I wish to avoid sensationalised accounts of violence against young women. To remove the narratives completely, however, would be to deny these violent and traumatic experiences that are a devastating reality for far too many young women.

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<sup>28</sup> The youth workers also revealed suspicions that this might have been the case for a number of other young women, though disclosures were never made in the context of this research.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter provided an account of my critical and difference-centred research approach, as well as the ethnographic research methods I utilised. It also provided a rationale for the research tools I employed and the ways in which I generated and handled the research data. Throughout this account, I have interwoven reflections on the ethical dimensions that impacted on the research process. At times it was challenging to know how best to navigate these. I trust the reader will understand that I always tried to choose the option that prioritised the RPs' wellbeing and did the least amount of harm in terms of potential unintended consequences. In the following chapters, I present my research findings and analysis.

# Chapter 4. Education and training

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## 4.0 Introduction

This chapter explores the secondary, further and higher education pathways of the RPs in the context of young women depicted as the ‘prime beneficiaries’ of the expansion of further and higher education (Aapola et al 2005: 73; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 18). It seeks to understand how RPs interpreted their ‘choices’, the constraints they encountered, and how they anticipated and/or responded to these. The research questions are addressed with data drawn from field notes and interviews as well as ethnographic observations from MYC. I frame the findings within the literature reviewed in Chapter One.

The chapter begins with an examination of RPs’ experiences of secondary education, since these, in turn, form the basis of their further education (FE) and employment transitions. It considers how their experiences of secondary education influenced their attitudes towards future education and learning and decisions about pursuing post-16 education and training. The second section looks at the post-16 educational pathways embarked upon by RPs, noting that whilst most of the RPs believed in the value of education for ‘getting on’ in life (Bynner et al 1997: 120; Henderson et al 2007: 102), their own educational pathways were often non-linear and/or fragmented as a result of structural constraints they encountered.

The third section examines RPs’ attitudes towards, and experiences of, higher education (HE). It illustrates the value attributed by RPs to HE as a way to strengthen employment and earnings potential and also the challenges involved in pursuing this pathway. The final section of this chapter reflects on what the RPs’ experiences of education and training reveal about the choices available to them, the strategies that they employed within their own transitions,

and how these were informed by their intersecting experiences of gender, social class and ethnicity.

## **4.1 Secondary education**

At the time of their first interview, 16 of the 19 RPs had completed compulsory secondary education while the remaining three were still enrolled. The majority attended five different mixed-gender comprehensive schools, primarily two larger schools in the local area. One RP attended an all-girls' grammar school, and another a small, specialised institution for students with medical conditions or special educational needs (SEN). Two additional RPs had previously attended local comprehensive schools until being expelled for physical fighting, at which point they attended independent specialist schools for students formally excluded from mainstream education. More than half of the RPs attended schools where the proportion of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) was higher than the national average<sup>29</sup>. In one school, more than half of the students were eligible for FSM. In two schools, the percentage of students gaining 5 A\* to C GCSEs was lower than the national average, one of which was significantly lower, reflecting the correlation observed elsewhere between material disadvantage and educational achievement (Harris and Ranson 2005: 575; Bramley and Kofi Karley 2007: 26; Ofsted 2013: 16).

Many of the RPs expressed ambivalence towards education. For example, Daisy (W18)<sup>30</sup> revealed that she felt disengaged from learning and often struggled to understand lessons:

In lessons I just didn't listen. In English I just didn't listen at all. [...] I couldn't listen to [the teacher] then for more than five minutes and I'd just go away with the fairies 'cos, like, I just didn't get the work.

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<sup>29</sup> Free school meals is often used as a proxy measure for disadvantage (MacDonald and March 2005).

<sup>30</sup> The RPs' ethnicity and age are denoted in parentheses, where W=white, B=black and M=mixed parentage.

Although she had not enjoyed the academic aspects of school, Daisy reminisced nostalgically about the social aspects:

Daisy: I'd love to go back to school.

AO: What would you love about it? Like, what would you like to do?

Daisy: Um. I dunno. I just miss, like, certain lessons and miss everyone ... like your friends when you get to hang around with them in your class and you just get laughs and stuff.

Whilst Daisy had struggled academically, she considered post-school life to be much more complicated and reported a sense of longing for 'nostalgic memories of easier times' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 63).

Many RPs disclosed low levels academic achievement, citing a range of contributing factors. These included negative social experiences (Rachelle M15; Emily M16; Talia M17; Sarah W18; Jenny W20); suspected (but not diagnosed) dyslexia (Daisy W18; Sarah W18); disruptive behaviour of other students (Tina B18); and overall feelings of ambivalence (Cassie W15; Daisy W18). When asked to recount their school experiences, some RPs focused on the positive social aspects of school including time spent with friends and peers 'having a laugh', whilst others recalled difficult relationships with their peers and/or negative experiences with teachers.

The following section examines some of these experiences of secondary school and the implications for educational engagement and achievement.

#### **4.1.1 Negative experiences of secondary school**

For several RPs, secondary school was characterised by negative social experiences including some specifically ethnic variation. Several black RPs felt uncomfortable attending 'mainly white' schools (DfES 2004: 2) in predominantly white neighbourhoods. Connor et al (2004: 4) notes that minority students in predominantly white schools can struggle with a sense of



belonging since ‘many teachers in mainly white schools minimise the significance and value of cultural and ethnic diversity’ (Connor et al 2004: 3). Additionally, BME students may not feel adequately supported in facing discrimination and/or racism at school and in the local area more generally (ibid). Although the black RPs in this study seldom articulated these issues explicitly, perhaps due to the difficulties in engaging in ‘race talk’ as outlined in Chapter Three, some of their narratives hinted at these. For instance, Xyleah (B20) described the lack of diversity in her secondary school: ‘There were, like, a few Asians. When I say a few I mean, like, three. And [...] in the whole school there was, like, ten black people.’ She went on to say that she would have preferred to attend a nearby school that was ‘more mixed’. Similarly, Soraya (B17) and Shanelle (B17) contrasted the lack of diversity in their respective secondary schools with their more ethnically diverse FE college:

Soraya: I think that in college it’s better. A lot of people,

Shanelle: Yeah.

Soraya: like, a lot of different, um,

Shanelle: races.

Soraya: Yeah, you feel more comfortable.

The ethnic diversity of Birmingham was not reflected in these secondary schools in the predominantly white areas of Midford and Weston and the black RPs articulated feeling more comfortable when they moved on to more diverse FE institutions.

A sense of isolation could also result from bullying, which was experienced by five white and mixed parentage RPs. Though only two used the term ‘bullying’, the incidents they recounted correspond with the formal definitions used by Childline and the NSPCC. Bullying often took on a specifically gendered nature, focusing on alleged sexual behaviour, weight and/or appearance. Two RPs had faced rumours being circulated about their alleged promiscuity, and one was ostracised by her peers after a male classmate circulated a nude photograph of her on

social media. The RPs' experiences contrasted with those of their male peers, who often narrated alleged sexual encounters with boastful pride. Sexual reputation was, for some RPs, a source of anxiety, which resulted in feelings of isolation, acts of truancy and/or poor academic performance.

For some, bullying affected school attendance. 'Self-exclusion' (McCluskey 2008: 453)

occurred when RPs attempted to escape bullying by skipping classes or school altogether:

I wagged my lesson because it drove me that crazy, 'cos everyone was, like, taking the mick out of me, they were laughing at me, saying, people that I didn't know, in older years, saying "Are you pregnant?" And I didn't like it. It even got outside school as well. (Talia M17)

I got bullied in primary school and secondary school. [...] They used to say that I stuffed my bra and, um, they used to, like... call me names [...] and they used to just, like, they used to throw things at me and say I'm ugly and everything [...] I stopped going to school after a while, because of the bullying. (Rachelle M16)

Attwood and Croll (2006) find that truancy can have a knock-on effect on academic engagement and attainment, with those who engage in frequent truancy more likely to achieve low GCSE scores, drop out of education and become unemployed. The experience of Emily (M16), who was bullied about her weight over a five-year period, seems to support this: '[It was] hard. I didn't want to go to school.' She was in the lower academic sets in school and left with only three low-grade GCSEs. Emily disclosed that the bullying had made her feel suicidal at times and she linked her experience of being bullied to her poor academic performance: 'I think that's what caused me to slack a bit in my exams.'

Although Sarah (W18) remained in school, she was shunned by her peers, which contributed to negative feelings towards school:

The people were just mean, selfish... and teachers and.... The whole way [...] it's like you don't have proper friends in there 'cos they all bitch behind your back and I can't deal with that. (Sarah W18)

Although Sarah was physically present in school, her experiences of being snubbed by her peers, and feelings of not fitting in, reflect an unofficial form of exclusion (McCluskey 2008: 449).

Truancy was also reported in the absence of bullying. Cassie (W15), who attended a small SEN school, estimated that she missed school on average two or three times a week:

AO: Why don't you go to school?

Cassie: I don't know... I just don't like it to be honest.

[...]

AO: Can you tell me a little bit about why you don't like school?

Cassie: It's just... everything about it really.

Cassie's emotional disengagement with school was the result of a number of complex interconnected factors, including health, family problems, and negative feelings towards the school she attended. This combination resulted in frequent episodes of self-exclusion.

In a few cases, formal exclusion resulted from disciplinary action. Talia (M17) and Jenny (W20) were both expelled from secondary school for fighting. Each reported periods of hanging around with the 'wrong people', underage drinking and getting into trouble with the police:

At one point I was getting into a lot of trouble because I was hanging about with the wrong people. [...] I hated it around here. I was getting into a lot of trouble with the police and... drinking at silly ages and that. I've never done drugs or nothing but... always, like, just getting into trouble. (Jenny W20)

[I] was going through, like, a really rough time. Like, I was hanging around with the wrong people. (Talia M17)

Jenny and Talia responded differently to their formal exclusion. Talia's academic performance improved when she started to attend a specialised school; she achieved all A\* grades, albeit in a limited number of subjects. Jenny continued to struggle with her self-

reported ‘anger problems’ and was subsequently excluded from additional educational institutions.

Jenny (W20) and Talia (M17) were both, with the benefit of hindsight, keen to distance themselves from their past behaviour which had resulted in exclusion. Jenny rounded off her narrative of ‘getting into trouble’ by saying, ‘but then obviously I started to grow up. And then realised that... it’s just not right [laughs].’ Reflecting on her own past behaviour, Talia said ‘I’m trying to prove to [my mother] that I have changed and I’m not that little girl that used to be naughty.’ These narratives suggest that Talia and Jenny had both internalised discourses about outcomes of specific lives being the result of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ choices made by individuals. Often gendered, these discourses construct young women as either the ‘new success stories of contemporary times’ or as ‘in deep trouble, at risk of causing harm to themselves or more likely to develop troublemaking or anti-social behaviours’ (Aapola et al 2005: 8-9). Whilst acquiring a sense of personal responsibility is a key aspect of growing up, discourses that ignore the structural context obscure more nuanced understandings of why the majority of excluded pupils tend to come from disadvantaged families, certain ethnic backgrounds, and/or have SEN (McCluskey 2008: 449). They also ignore how young women from different class or ethnic backgrounds may be positioned with regard to expectation, aspiration, and attainment within education, and how this might create structural barriers that influence available ‘choices’. This is explored further in the next section.

#### **4.1.2 Processes of classed and ethnic positioning**

Findings from this study support evidence from other studies of classed and ethnic processes that position young people in different ways and subsequently shape the forms of support they receive while still in school (Mirza 1992; Aapola 2005; Reay 2006; Dunne and Gazeley 2008).

Anika (B19) also attended a predominantly white school and felt she was often singled out by teachers for negative behaviour due to her ethnicity:

I felt that [the teachers] were being very discriminatory towards me and racist at times. Like, I'd have earrings really small, and one of the school rules was you're not allowed big earrings. And I was standing in the dinner line and [the teacher would] walk past a white girl with massive earrings, she'd tell me to take mine out. And I'd say "No, that's not fair. Why must I take mine out when you've just walked past her? Look at her earrings." And she said "Oh, I didn't notice." And I was like, "Yeah, sure, you never."

Although Anika presented only this isolated example of being reprimanded for an act of rebellion also engaged in by several of her white peers, her statement 'Yeah, sure, you never' implied she felt such singling out was a regular occurrence, even if the teacher did not seem conscious of this. Mirza's (1992: 56-83) research indicates that both 'overt' and 'unintentional' racism existed among teachers within the schools in her study which influenced their treatment of students. Gillborn (1997: 380-381) highlights a tendency of white teachers to stereotype black students as having 'low ability' and/or 'potential discipline problems'. In his own study of a multi-ethnic school in the Midlands, he finds that 'black students were disproportionately controlled and criticised, not because they broke school rules any more frequently, but because teachers perceived them as a threat' (ibid: 381). In light of this, Anika's account takes on a deeper significance. Significantly, Gillborn suggests that 'race-gender' stereotypes of young black women as troublemakers can lead to '[academic] opportunities being closed down' (ibid: 383).

Social class also affected the ways in which RPs were positioned by their teachers. Tanya (W16), from a middle class household, was the only RP who had attended an all-female grammar school. She explained that this was because her father, himself a secondary school teacher, thought that 'if I went to a comprehensive it would be a waste of my SATs [scores].' Many RPs, regardless of their social background or performance in school, indicated that their parents recognised, and often emphasised, the importance of education. Yet, Tanya's father's

middle class profession as a teacher provided her with access to an important resource that was unavailable to many of the other RPs, namely insider knowledge of how to navigate ‘the secrets of [the] system’ (Hanley 2007: 9). Her interview suggested that her father and teachers provided emotional and practical support alongside information which helped her to maximise her educational achievements. After completing secondary school, Tanya studied A-levels at a local college and planned to attend university, which was likely to open up additional opportunities and choices for her as she transitioned to adulthood.

Tanya’s narrative resonates with Aapola et al’s (2005: 75) observation that middle class educational pathways in private education are often ‘joint projects’ between young women, their parents and their teachers. That is, their reflexive projects of ‘self-making’ are actively supported by families and schools to ensure educational and occupational success. This was not the case, however, for most of the RPs. The experience of Ellie (W14), who lived with her father, a forklift engineer, illustrates the difficulties involved in making academic choices without the ‘insider’ resources available to Tanya and her father:

AO: Did you get any advice... when you were picking [your GCSE options]?

Ellie: We had Options [Information] Evening [at school] but obviously I didn’t go ‘cos we were having pizza [at MYC].<sup>31</sup>

AO: Oh, so you did come here instead of going for the Options Evening?

Ellie: Yeah ‘cos my dad was busy as well.

AO: So you were supposed to go with your dad then?

Ellie: Yeah. But I come here and had pizza [instead].

AO: Did you say you got some advice from [youth worker] as well?

Ellie: Oh yeah. [Youth worker] sat down on Tuesday and just, like, helped me through it. Like, ‘cos I didn’t know what I was doing.

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<sup>31</sup> The pizza was a reward given to a small group of young people who had helped to paint the youth centre. Ellie initially said she wouldn’t be able to come to the pizza evening due to Options Information Evening – which was intended to help pupils and their parents prepare for the process of choosing subjects for study in Year 10 and 11 - but did so after it became apparent that her father was unable to attend with her.

AO: Did you get advice from your dad as well?

Ellie: My dad just thought “Take what you want to take.”

Her father was her sole parent, and I did not get the sense that he was uninterested in his daughter’s life as she spoke of a good relationship with him and of the leisure time they spent together. However, the purely vocational route to his own profession perhaps meant that he lacked the intricate insider knowledge, possessed by Tanya’s father, of the education system and the implications of various choices. At the same time, Ellie’s father’s suggestion to ‘take what you want to take’ may also indicate that he prioritised Ellie’s happiness at school over her academic success. Walkerdine et al (2001: 131) suggest that whilst this attitude might be perceived by teachers as working class parental disinterest in their child’s progress, it can instead be a result of these parents’ (often unconscious) feelings about their own difficult relationships with education. Nevertheless, Ellie’s example illustrates that for students without access to knowledge, making the ‘right’ educational choices can be a daunting task. This is because ‘making informed choices about good training options is [...] a difficult process when support is minimal and information is conflicting and confusing’ (Aapola et al 2005: 75).

Two additional narratives highlight the negative consequences for RPs when support from schools was limited or lacking. Lindsay (W24) wanted to pursue an A-level in PE after completing secondary school, but was discouraged both by her GCSE grade and teacher’s attitude.

I was quite disappointed. I got a B in PE, which I was quite gutted with. Didn’t really get along with my PE teacher at the time. [...] I’d got enough to do the A-level. I’d got the mark I needed to do the A-level but she kind of pushed me away from it, saying that I hadn’t done well enough, and [that] I could do it if I wanted to, but [...] I felt like it was a little bit opposed really, and that she didn’t want me to do it and it kind of stopped me from doing it. I listened to what she said and I didn’t do it.  
(Lindsay W24)

In contrast to the support provided by schools to ensure middle class women's educational and 'career success' (Aapola et al 2005: 75), Lindsay received limited encouragement from her PE teacher. Rather, she found her teacher's lack of support influenced her decision away from her preferred choice. Similarly, Sarah (W18) recounts being written off by her English teacher:

[English teacher] said the highest grade I could ever get was a D. And my mum flipped. [...] In the middle of year 10, [the teacher] said "I've looked at Sarah's exam, she shouldn't be in my lesson. She shouldn't be in my group, she's too stupid to be in my group." [...] My mum flipped. [The teacher] said "No, I didn't mean stupid, she's not high, hitting the grades what everyone else is hitting. She's one of the lowest [learners, based on a mid-year exam that the class took]." And my mum dragged me straight to my head of year and said "I'm not happy with this. My daughter needs a C to get into college to do... the art she wants to do. And you're telling me the highest [the teacher] can get my daughter is a D." And we had loads of meetings after that. And I kept getting dragged to the deputy head teacher's lesson, like [...] Teacher would pull me out of lessons, tell me I needed to go speak to her. I couldn't be bothered with it in the end. I hated school.

Sarah's narrative also indicates a lack of support of the kind articulated by Aapola et al (2005) as extended to middle class students. Sarah struggled to read and write and suspected she had dyslexia but had never been diagnosed. Despite her mother's intervention, institutional support remained elusive. Instead, the process served to further disrupt Sarah's already fraught engagement with school, and contributed to the continuation of a secondary school experience which placed limitations on the post-compulsory educational 'choices' available to her.

Lindsay's and Sarah's narratives resonate with Reay's (2006: 298) finding that working class students are often positioned by their teachers as 'inadequate learners'. Their experiences contrast sharply with the supportive experiences of middle class girls in private education. Whilst interviewing teachers was beyond the scope of this study, Lindsay's and Sarah's narratives give credence to findings elsewhere, indicating that some teachers normalise white working class pupils' underachievement (Reay 2006: 294; Dunne and Gazeley 2008: 452).



Like Ellie's father, Sarah's mother may have lacked the 'insider knowledge' that could have helped to effectively navigate the education system since, as Hanley (2007: 9) notes, it is often only opened up 'through years of non-compulsory education and the social mobility that comes with it.' This resource may have been more difficult for Sarah's mother to access as she had been forced to drop out of school as a pregnant teenager. Raising several children as a working single mother, she had been unable to complete even compulsory education. Reay (2006: 302-303) notes 'prejudicial views of working class parents' amongst teacher trainees which, if allowed to persist into their teaching careers, may negatively affect how parents and their children are treated in the context of situations such as Sarah's. Despite strong support from her mother, the fallout of this incident proved exhausting for Sarah who said she 'couldn't be bothered with it in the end.' Though she would eventually go on to pursue FE, and later HE, her pathway became fragmented from this point. Her educational 'choices', as well as her eventual educational achievements must, therefore, be understood in the context of the structural barriers she faced from early on in her educational experience.

#### **4.1.3 Section conclusion**

This section examined the RPs' experiences of secondary school revealing evidence of gendered, class and ethnic structural constraints. Most of the RPs reported weak academic engagement and achievement typical of working class students in disadvantaged areas (Harris and Ranson 2005; Bramley and Kofi Karley 2007; Ofsted 2013). Disengagement could be magnified by experiences of isolation, characterised by an ethnic dimension, and bullying, which often took on a gendered aspect. Additionally, the positioning of students by teachers through heavily classed and/or ethnic stereotypes could open up or close down academic opportunities (Gillborn 1997; Aapola et al 2005). Yet, in the absence of a structural framework or understanding of their experiences, many RPs bought into notions of educational outcomes being the result of individual 'good' and 'bad' choices. Moreover, in

the absence of adequate support and resources from family and teachers, RPs often made short-term choices, such as disengaging with the academic process and/or truanting which had implications for their longer term educational pathways.

Some of these are examined in the following section which looks at RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, further education.

## **4.2 Further education and training**

16 of the RPs who had completed compulsory education during the fieldwork period continued in some form of further education (FE), and the remaining three still in secondary school also expressed plans to do so. This reflects the increased participation of young women in FE (DfES 2007: 34). Upon closer inspection, however, the experiences of the RPs reflect evidence from other studies suggesting that the gains of increased participation have been unevenly distributed (Reay 2003: 302; Reay 2006: 290; Henderson et al 2007: 38). This section examines the RPs' post-16 education and training aspirations and their experiences.

### **4.2.1 'Learn while you earn': apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships were considered a desirable option by many RPs, particularly those who were younger or had struggled with academic education. Four RPs (Daisy W18; Emily M18; Sarah W18; Lucy W21) pursued apprenticeships and a fifth (Soraya B19) was waiting for an apprenticeship to begin. Several RPs were attracted to apprenticeships due to both the hands-on nature of the training provided and the opportunity to 'learn while you earn':

I was thinking it's best, like, learning at the same time as getting money. (Rachelle M16, still in secondary school)

[Apprenticeships are] more practical [than FE courses], and you get money as well. (Daisy W17, taking time out of FE, due to health reasons)

Modern apprenticeship schemes have been criticised for enforcing gender-based occupational stereotypes (Fuller and Unwin 2003; Fuller et al 2005). Indeed, several RPs undertook ‘feminised’ apprenticeships such as childcare (Emily M18) and hairdressing (Daisy W17). Similarly, many of those who aspired to apprenticeships also hoped to do so in ‘feminised’ areas. Shanelle (B18) was looking for an apprenticeship in health and social care, whilst Cassie (W15) and Ellie (W15) hoped to obtain childcare apprenticeships. Although Sarah (W18) undertook apprenticeships in two traditionally male-oriented occupational areas - carpentry and warehousing - there was a distinctly classed dimension to these.

Apprenticeship experiences confirmed employment aspirations for some RPs. Lucy (W21), who did a 12-month physical education apprenticeship in a primary school, said: ‘I really enjoyed that. That just made me want to work with young people a bit more.’ Emily (M18) also enjoyed her apprenticeship in a nursery. She loved working with children and enjoyed being part of the team with other staff members. Nevertheless, neither of these apprenticeships led to further employment once completed. Whilst apprenticeships traditionally provided high quality training for valued vocational occupations, modern apprenticeships in non-traditional sectors have been found to provide low-quality training that does not necessarily guarantee future employment (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 32).

Some RPs were left disappointed by the discrepancy that emerged between their high expectations of apprenticeships and the more mundane day-to-day tasks that these entailed in reality (Aapola et al 2005: 74). Daisy (W18) said:

When I done [hairdressing] in full time college, we went through everything quick, like every day we’d do different cuts and different styles and stuff. [...] But with, like, an apprenticeship it’s really boring, like, you just get to washing hair for ages... I got told I’m actually really good at hairdressing, like, in college and I was gonna work for some lady and she said “You’re gonna be a really good hairdresser.” But it’s just the fact of going so slow. Like, I can’t. Like, it was like I was [the salon’s] little joey, like they can’t be bothered to do the washing up and stuff like that so they’d send me to do it.

Moreover, the financial incentive was generally viewed more positively by RPs prior to commencing apprenticeships. Emily (M17) was initially very excited to be getting paid for her apprenticeship in a children's nursery, saying 'I was over the moon, I was really happy... and obviously I get paid now, so I've got some money coming in and everything.' Once she had started her apprenticeship, however, she quickly became disillusioned with what she termed the 'absolutely rubbish wages' (£2.60 in 2011 and £2.65 in 2012<sup>32</sup>), to the extent that she felt taken advantage of.

In addition to low pay, the working conditions could make RPs feel exploited. Daisy (W17) quit her hairdressing apprenticeship after a few months. She complained of boredom (as noted above) and feeling taken advantage of:

Daisy: I was supposed to have a day [off] and they didn't tell me, so I was doing over hours, and I was, like, that's cheeky.

AO: Were you getting paid for the extra time that you were working?

Daisy: No.

Similarly, Emily (M18) found that on some days there were too few children and too many staff members at the nursery where she was doing her apprenticeship. Without prior notice not to come to work, she would be sent home without pay.

Similar disappointments were also articulated in narratives about college work placements.

This was the case for Jess (W16), who quickly became disappointed with the tedious daily reality of her work placement in a children's nursery. She cited this as one reason she decided to quit her childcare course:

I'm not involved enough. Like, they always get me cleaning up after the kids, like. I don't mind, it's just I do it [...] most of the day. I'm hardly with the kids. If I spend any time with them it's like five, ten minutes... and it's [the work day] like a half eight start till five o'clock. (Jess W16)

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<sup>32</sup> These rates were for apprentices aged 16 to 18 and those aged 19 or over who were in their first year.

Whilst most RPs initially expressed optimism and enthusiasm about their chosen training courses and the ‘imagined futures’ (Lawy et al 2010: 344) that these would lead to, their actual experiences of low-status, low-wage jobs could diminish enthusiasm and lead to disillusionment (Jess W16; Emily M18) or changed career goals (Daisy W17).

#### **4.2.2 Sixth form and vocational courses**

Whilst all RPs embarked on some form of FE, the ‘deep divide’ (Edwards 1997: 1) between academic and vocational pathways along ethnic and classed lines was evidenced in this study. A small number of RPs pursued academic post-compulsory education: four continued on to a sixth form college (Lucy W21; Jayne W22; Lisa W22; Lindsay W24) and one (Tanya W16) pursued A-levels at a local college. The majority, however, enrolled on vocational college courses in pursuit of BTEC or NVQ qualifications.

With the exception of (middle class) Tanya (W16), the RPs who chose an ‘academic’ post-compulsory education route lived in households that were headed by a parent in a working class occupation. Notably, however, several of these RPs had a secondary parent, namely, not the parent they lived with, who was either in a middle class profession (Lisa W23) or self-employed working class (Jayne W22; Lindsay W24). Several of these parents placed significant value on gaining post-compulsory educational qualifications and actively encouraged their daughters to do so. This was not the case for Jayne (W22) and Lucy (W21), although Jayne received encouragement to pursue further educational qualifications from other trusted adults in her life. Although they did not pursue academic post-16 pathways, the value of credentialism was also emphasised by several of the black RPs living in working class households. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Regardless of whether they pursued academic or vocational education, most RPs engaged in reflexive decision-making. The majority aspired to financial independence through

employment and, since most considered FE necessary to secure employment, the subjects they chose to study reflected this. They subsequently chose ‘utilitarian’ courses to support specific employment aspirations (Hemsley-Brown 1999: 86). These included early years and childcare, health and social care, hospitality and catering, and hairdressing (see Table 4.1). These choices also reflected gendered tendencies towards course selection observed elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 86; DfES 2007: 9). More than half of the RPs studied ‘feminised’ subjects (Millar 2010: 132), the most popular being childcare and health and social care. These both involve emotional labour built around ideas of ‘sacrificial femininity’ in work that women traditionally carried out in the home (Colley et al 2003: 487-488), but has been outsourced to the state and private sector organisations in more recent years. There is also a classed dimension to many of the types of jobs these qualifications often lead to, particularly those involving ‘body work’, that is, intimate physical contact between workers and those being cared for (Gimlin 2007: 358; Dyer et al 2008: 2032).

As Table 4.1 indicates, there is also a pattern of ethnic variation to these subject choices. Childcare was a popular choice articulated by the white and mixed parentage working class RPs, whilst health and social care was more common among the black working class RPs.

These subject choices appear to be influenced by ‘local structures of opportunity’ (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 87) as well as the diverse strategies that resulted from these which are shaped by the intersection of social class and ethnicity amongst the RPs. In her earlier study of young working class women in Birmingham, Griffin (1985: 51-52) observes the value attributed to domestic childcare duties. Although childcare has been outsourced to the state and the private sector, the importance attributed to this sort of work has endured amongst the white working class RPs in this study. Griffin also notes that, among the young women she interviewed, childcare was perceived to be a ‘‘natural’ feminine ability rather than a skill’ (ibid). Indeed, many RPs cited their rationale for wanting to study childcare as being

something they were ‘already good at’ (this point is also examined further in Chapter Five). It is notable that several of the white and mixed parentage working class RPs who wished to study childcare reported educational disengagement. Therefore, they may have been attracted by the opportunity to train for a valued position in something they were already good at that did not require advanced educational qualifications.

**Table 4.1: RPs’ FE college course choices by subject area**

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>RPs</b>	<b>Total number of RPs</b>
<b>Vocational courses</b>		
<b>Childcare</b>	Emily (M17) Jess (W16) Ellie (W15)* Cassie (W15)* Rachelle (M16)*	5
<b>Health and social care</b>	Jenny (W20) Tina (B18) Anika (B18) Shanelle (B18)	4
<b>Hospitality and catering</b>	Jenny (W20) Talia (M17)	2
<b>Performing arts</b>	Talia (M17) Soraya (B17)	2
<b>Sports</b>	Xyleah (B20) Lucy (W21)	2
<b>Hairdressing</b>	Daisy (W18)	1
<b>Forensics</b>	Jayne (W22)	1
<b>Art and design</b>	Sarah (W18)	1
<b>Non-vocational courses</b>		
<b>A-levels</b>	Tanya (W16)	1
<b>Access to HE</b>	Lindsay (W24)	1
<b>GCSE maths and English</b>	Jenny (W20) Daisy (W18)	2

\* Stated ambitions of RPs still in secondary school.

Mirza (1992) notes that similar local structures of opportunity affected the educational choices of young black women in her study. Indeed their choices were ‘based on ability and job availability’ (Mirza 1992: 193). Nevertheless, she argues that they also ‘attempt[ed] to achieve upward occupational mobility through a strategy that rationalised the various constraints that they encountered’ (ibid: 144). Therefore, they ‘used the stated educational requirements as a vehicle for obtaining more or better qualifications, in order to enhance their career prospects and satisfy their desire for credentials’ (ibid: 144). The findings from this study seem to support Mirza’s assertion. Several black working class RPs were studying health and social care. Unlike their white working class peers, they all cited plans to continue their study at university level with the aim of securing middle class occupations in areas such as nursing, midwifery and radiography.

Only a handful of the RPs chose to study subjects based on their personal interests:

I had a fantastic science teacher at school and um, he always pushed me [...] I really enjoyed science. (Jayne W22, studied forensics)

I just love [art] ‘cos it’s my way to express [myself]. Not everyone’s work has to be the same [...] That’s what I love about art... I don’t get judged. Nothing can be wrong in art. (Sarah W18, studying art and design)

Unlike those RPs who pursued utilitarian qualifications, neither Jayne nor Sarah linked their initial course choices to specific employment aspirations. Instead, their employment aspirations evolved from engagement with, and enjoyment of, these subjects. This was, however, not the norm amongst RPs.

#### **4.2.3 Replacement for viable employment**

In some cases, RPs embarked on FE to improve their prospects of gaining employment when their prior strategies had faltered. Some RPs who reported a lack of engagement in secondary school or fragmented education pathways thereafter (Daisy W18; Jenny W20; Lindsay W24) returned to FE to redress previous educational limitations. Jenny and Daisy both took courses



to improve their maths and English qualifications, while Lindsay took an Access to Higher Education course.

Enrolling on FE courses was also considered a sensible option in the absence of viable employment prospects. Although Lucy (W21) had completed two FE qualifications and an apprenticeship, she was still struggling to find employment. As such, she enrolled in another NVQ training course with the encouragement of her employment agency. As has been observed in other studies, however, training does not necessarily lead to employment. Instead, many young people are increasingly ‘building a portfolio of vocational courses, which might in fact lead nowhere’ (Henderson et al 2007: 43). Lucy (W21) exhibited an awareness of this risk. Instead of ‘wasting’ her prior training, she strove to weave a coherent narrative to incorporate the seemingly incongruous courses she had taken in terms of her past study of travel and tourism with her current plan to pursue a Level 2 qualification in exercise and fitness. She hoped, she said, to become a fitness instructor on a cruise ship. It was not clear at the time of fieldwork whether her prospects for securing gainful employment would be significantly improved as a result. Indeed, the range of available FE training ‘choices’ can serve to mask the lack of employment opportunities available to young women making their transitions to adulthood in the post-industrial city.

The following section looks at FE in the context of strategies for pursuing higher education (HE).

#### **4.2.4 Route to higher education**

Only a handful of RPs created strategies that involved pursuing FE as a route to HE. This strategy was most commonly articulated by RPs with at least one parent in a middle class occupation (Tanya W16; Tina B18; Lisa W22) or black working class RPs (Anika B19; Xyleah B20). Whilst white working class RPs also embarked on university study (Sarah W18;

Jayne W22; Lindsay W24), this was more frequently through non-linear and more protracted routes.

Tanya's (W16) experience highlights the interplay of social class and gender dynamics. Her FE experience exhibited the most 'middle class trajectory'. As noted earlier in this chapter, her father, a secondary school teacher, placed her in a female grammar school in order to maximise her academic potential. She then studied A-levels with the intention of going to university. Notably, she was one of the few RPs that did not gravitate towards studying the typically 'gendered' subjects common for both working and middle class women (DfES 2007: 9). Instead, she hoped to study either marine biology or astronomy, aspirations that were undoubtedly shaped, at least in part, by her schooling since, as DfES (2007: 8) notes, 'the gender bias is weaker for those young women who attended single-sex secondary schools.' Tanya's educational aspirations also reflected the typical middle class educational pathways observed by Walkerdine et al (2001: 182), which involved university education: Tanya did not contemplate the choice to *not* pursue advanced credentials

Many black RPs (Xyleah B20; Anika B19; Shanelle B18; Tina B18) expressed post-compulsory education strategies which included a linear sequence, with FE leading to HE. For Anika, Shanelle and Tina, this included studying health and social care, with the intention of pursuing university qualifications in related subjects including nursing (Tina B18, Anika B19), midwifery (Anika B19), dentistry (Shanelle B18) or radiography (Shanelle B18). As noted earlier, this resonates with Mirza's finding that the young black women in her study created educational strategies that involved advanced credentialism as a route to social mobility. Although this often resulted in choosing 'gendered' subjects leading to caring professions, they held aspirations of gaining further educational qualifications in order to 'enhance their career prospects' (Mirza 1992: 191). Yet, their choices also indicate classed limitations. The types of occupations they sought through gaining advanced qualifications

were middle class occupations such as nursing, midwifery, radiography and teaching. None articulated aspirations of higher middle class professions such as becoming a doctor or lawyer (Bradley 2014).

Two of the mixed parentage RPs (Rachelle M15; Emily M16) also articulated the desire to pursue HE following their completion of vocational college courses. Yet, it was not clear during the fieldwork period whether this was likely given their historically weak educational engagement and achievement, particularly when the occupations they hoped to pursue in the respective areas of childcare and teaching dance to children did not require advanced credentials. Despite this, they both seemed convinced that HE was necessary for ‘getting on’ in life (Bynner et al 1997: 120). In her first interview, Emily (M16) said:

I could be working in a shop. Or in say, like, McDonalds or something... but that’s boring. I can change the future. That’s why I’m going to college. To progress on to Level 3 and then hopefully go to ‘uni’.

Her statement reflects her belief in the notions of opportunity and choice available to young women in the post-industrial economy. A few months later, however, she spoke about her struggles with the academic workload at college:

I was in the lower sets at school so I can just about cope with the work I’ve got set now. And it seems like [university] would be too much for me.

As a result, she reconfigured her plan accordingly. She would no longer go to university but instead she would try to gain practical experience through an apprenticeship at a nursery. Her overall goal of working with children remained unchanged.

The following sub-section examines RPs’ experiences of FE.

#### **4.2.5 Diverse pathways**

Although the RPs’ FE pathways were diverse (see Table 4.2), most were non-linear, fragmented and/or protracted. This reflects findings elsewhere which indicate that linear

pathways are no longer the norm, particularly for young people from disadvantaged areas (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Henderson et al 2007). For some RPs, fragmentation of post-compulsory education was due to academic setbacks. This was the case for Lindsay (W24) and Jayne (W22). Although they embarked on a more academic sixth form route, both dropped out during their first year following disappointing exam results.

Lindsay (W24) explained her decision:

Lindsay: I didn't like it [sixth form]. It just wasn't for me [...]

AO: Can I ask, when you say it wasn't for you, what was it about it?

Lindsay: I loved school. But... [sixth form] was very different. You're not prepared for the big jump from GCSE's to A-levels. They don't prepare you for it. And, uh, I don't think I was really... sure of what I wanted to do, so it was quite difficult to... pick... what I was going to sit. And I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in university in the first place.

Despite her positive experience of earlier schooling, her initial experience of FE at sixth form was not. Her narrative reveals several issues. The first was her lack of a longer-term vision in terms of what to pursue as an occupation and what to study at university in order to achieve this, which made it difficult to choose an academic pathway. Her narrative also indicates a lack of support of the type that Aapola et al (2005) suggest is available to middle class girls in private education who are struggling to make the same decisions.

As noted earlier, Lindsay had felt steered away from her preferred course of study prior to entering sixth form. Subsequently, she chose more academic subjects, but did not enjoy them. She said, 'I took psychology, law and... drama, I think? But they weren't, they're not me, drama yes, but the rest no. I'm not an academic type person really.' After being discouraged from pursuing her primary interest of physical education, she chose subjects that did not engage her. She also said that she was not prepared for the increase in academic workload and intensity. Together with her statement 'I'm not an academic type person', this suggests that her secondary school had not positioned her as a young woman destined to succeed

academically, and that she had internalised this notion of herself. Despite pressure from her mother to do well academically, it is likely that her secondary school had not prepared her for a rigorous post-compulsory education. After all, as research indicates, schools are less likely to invest in students deemed to be ‘inadequate learners’. After dropping out of the sixth form, Lindsay worked for several years before returning to pursue an Access to Higher Education course.

As Lindsay’s narrative indicates, fragmented educational pathways could result from confusion about end goals. Talia’s (M17) experience also illustrates the confusion that can result from the range of available educational options in the absence of tangible employment at the end of a particular qualification. She felt anxious about the future and spoke of the array of available FE course choices as both an opportunity and a source of confusion:

After [the hospitality and catering course], I’m doing loads of other courses. I’m doing business, art and design and I’m going to try out bricklaying [...] As I got older I got really confused so I just thought I’ll try everything out and either way I’ll have a qualification in all of them, so... I can go back to either one of them. (Talia M17)

Talia employed a reflexive strategy to prepare for a seemingly uncertain future. This involved pursuing as many different qualifications as she could, hoping one of these would lead to a viable occupation at some future point.

**Table 4.2: RPs’ post-compulsory education pathways**

<b>In FE at time of interview(s)</b>	<b>Completed one or more qualifications</b>	<b>Non-linear FE Pathways</b>	<b>Curtailed FE pathways</b>
Tanya (W16) Emily (M17) Soraya (B17) Shanelle (B17) Tina (B18) Anika (B19) Daisy (W19)	Soraya (B18) Sarah (W19) Xyleah (B20) Lucy (W21) Jayne (W22) Lindsay (W24)	Daisy (W17) Talia (M17) Anika (B18) Jenny (W20) Lucy (W21) Jayne (W22) Lindsay (W24)	Jess (W16) Jenny (W20)

Fragmented education could also result from events and issues in RPs' personal lives. After the death of her grandfather, a grieving Sarah (W18) missed her college enrolment deadlines. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, her engagement with secondary education was already fractious, particularly having felt so unsupported by her school in her goal of gaining entry to art college. Instead of enrolling in college, she undertook two apprenticeships in carpentry and warehousing. Following these, she resumed her initial plan and enrolled in an FE course in art and design. Although she would eventually also pursue HE, her route there was not linear.

Although she enrolled in college after the completion of secondary school, Jess (W16) soon dropped out of her childcare course due to undisclosed 'personal problems'. As noted earlier, she had also felt unmotivated by her work placement in a nursery, in which she was constantly cleaning up and spending little time with children. She did not enrol in FE again during the time of fieldwork.

Daisy (W17) and Talia (M17) both abandoned their courses in hairdressing and performing arts respectively due to health problems. Both would later re-enrol, Daisy to take her English and maths GCSEs and Talia, as noted above, on a range of different courses. Their engagement with FE remained fragmented throughout the fieldwork period.

Finally, FE pathways could be curtailed due to formal exclusion. Jenny (W20) was 'kicked out' of several FE courses for fighting, something she attributed to 'anger problems'. During the fieldwork period her priority was firmly rooted in finding employment. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

The RPs that withdrew from further education followed diverse pathways. As noted, some re-engaged with education at a later date. Others pursued accelerated pathways to independent adulthood either in the labour market (becoming independent earners), domestic sphere

(‘settling down’ with a partner or starting a family of their own) or attempted to delay adulthood through the pursuit of leisure (Henderson et al 2007). These pathways are explored in Chapters Five and Six.

Since RPs appeared to universally accept the notion of ‘the educational contract’ (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 61), the negative consequences of ‘quitting’ were acknowledged and frequently caused anxiety. Jess (W16) expressed her fears about the future: ‘I’m scared that I’ll have a bad life I s’pose [...] I’m scared that... I won’t do what I want to do.’ Without acknowledgement of the structures which contextualised their own pathways, the RPs accepted notions of individual responsibility for their educational ‘choices’ with regard to pursuing self-reliance through employment.

#### **4.2.6 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs’ attitudes towards, and experiences of, FE. RPs were able to choose from a greater range of further educational options than women traditionally had access to in the forms of academic education, vocational courses and apprenticeship training. They universally aspired to financial independence through waged employment and seemed to believe in the value of education for achieving this. Yet, their ‘choices’ were also limited by the endurance of what Edwards (1997) observes to be the ‘deep divide’ between academic and vocational routes. A minority of the RPs pursued academic education, whilst the majority embarked on vocational courses that were both heavily gendered and classed. There was also an ethnic dimension to their choices, which is returned to in the conclusion of this chapter.

Most RPs made ‘utilitarian’ educational choices, choosing subjects they felt would help them gain the type of employment they hoped for, which will be explored further in Chapter Five. Only a handful chose courses based on strong interest in the subject. This is indicative of the boundedness of the ‘choices’ most of the RPs made, as the potential for gaining financial

stability through waged work took priority over those courses they might have pursued out of sheer interest. The elusive nature of some of the ‘choices’ emerged as well. For example, the college courses embarked upon due to the lack of viable employment options and apprenticeships, though popular amongst many RPs, particularly those with a history of weak educational engagement, rarely led to further employment. For the majority, experiences of further education were characterised by non-linearity and fragmentation.

The range of educational choices could be seen as overwhelming, rather than empowering, particularly in cases where RPs lacked access to information and support for decision-making. Despite this, they exhibited an enormous amount of reflexivity and constantly strove to make the ‘right’ choices. The diverse ways in which they did this were exemplified by Lucy’s (W21) attempt to weave together the disparate courses she had studied in travel and tourism, and later sports, into a coherent strategy for securing work, as well as Talia’s (M17) plan to take as many courses as she could, hoping that one would lead to future employment.

Only a handful of the RPs considered FE a route into HE. Attitudes towards, and experiences of, HE are explored in the following section.

### **4.3 Higher education**

By the end of my fieldwork, five RPs had enrolled in university (Sarah W18; Xyleah B20; Jayne W22; Lisa W22; and Lindsay W24). All were the first in their families to do so<sup>33</sup>, which reflects the successful widening of access to HE over the past few decades (Henderson et al 2007: 36-37). Yet, a closer look at their experiences, as well as the experiences of those RPs who chose not to pursue HE, reveals that a number of gendered, classed and ethnic inequalities continued to influence their pathways. This section examines how their ‘choices’ were shaped. It also considers how, in the absence of clearly articulated structural

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<sup>33</sup> Only one parent in this study had attended university.



circumstances, the ‘appearance of choice’ resulted in emotional consequences for those RPs who were unable to follow through with plans to pursue HE.

### 4.3.1 Experiences of higher education

Although a higher proportion of working class students now go to university, there remains a division between the institutions attended by students from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. Working class and BME students are more likely to enter post-1992 ‘new’ universities, whilst older ‘elite’ universities remain the domain of their middle and upper class peers (Reay et al 2010: 108). The endurance of this hierarchy was reflected in the experiences of the RPs. The only RPs who had embarked on HE during the fieldwork period - Lindsay (W24), Lisa (W22), Jayne (W23), Xyleah (B20) and Sarah (W18) - all enrolled at post-1992 universities.

**Table 4.3: RPs’ experiences and aspirations of attending university**

<b>Enrolled in university</b>	<b>Plan to attend university</b>	<b>Do not plan to attend university</b>	<b>Mixed feelings or changed mind</b>
Lindsay (W24) Lisa (W22) Jayne (W22) Xyleah (B20) Sarah (W18)	Tanya (W16) Anika (B19) Tina (B18) Rachelle (M15)	Jenny (W21) Talia (M17) Daisy (W18) Ellie (W15) Cassie (W15) Jess (W16)	Lisa (W22) Lucy (W21) Shanelle (B18) Emily (M16) Soraya (B18)

Four additional RPs expressed plans to attend university (see Table 4.3). Just over half of the RPs, however, had no plans to pursue HE. A handful articulated mixed feelings about HE or changed their minds after initially harbouring university ambitions (Emily M16; Soraya B18). Their reasons are explored later in this chapter.

There is evidence that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to choose areas of study that guarantee employment (Callender and Jackson 2008: 409). This was the case for most, but not all, of the RPs in this study. Three enrolled on relatively

utilitarian degree courses with clear links between the courses and occupational outcomes.

Lindsay (W24) studied sports science with the aim of becoming a physiotherapist, Lisa (W22) studied sports and exercise science hoping to become a PE teacher, and Xyleah (B20) studied education in order to become a primary school teacher. Jayne (W22) and Sarah (W18) both studied subjects with less certain occupational goals – Jayne studied criminology, hoping to work for the Youth Offending Service and Sarah was enrolling on a fashion degree, with hopes of becoming a designer.

Among the RPs articulating university aspirations, course choices were mixed. Tina (B18), who wished to study nursing, and Anika (B19), who was undecided between nursing and midwifery, articulated utilitarian aspirations which enabled social mobility. Middle-class RP, Tanya (W16), hoped to study marine biology or astronomy or, alternatively, education if neither of her preferred choices worked out. Two of the younger working class RPs who expressed university aspirations, Emily (M16) and Rachelle (M15), were still in secondary school, however, both wanted to study childcare-related courses at university. They each had a history of weak academic engagement and articulated occupational goals that did not necessarily require advanced educational credentials. Emily wished to work in a nursery and Rachelle as a dance teacher for children. As already noted, Emily later decided against applying to university after struggling with her FE coursework, although she did not rule out returning to HE at some distant point in the future. It was, at the time of my fieldwork, uncertain how Rachelle's HE aspirations would turn out.

With the exception of Tanya (W16), who wished to study science, and Jayne (W22), who studied criminology, the course choices of most of the RPs reinforce research findings elsewhere that young women are more likely to enrol in 'feminised' university courses (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1999: 120). Whilst the criminology course itself may not be a

‘feminised’ course, the types of jobs that this degree may lead to, such as policing, corrections and social work, are often more gendered.

Availability of funding also shaped some choices to pursue HE and/or degree selection. For example, in order to become a physiotherapist, Lindsay hoped to obtain NHS funding to pursue a Master’s degree:

I finish [undergraduate studies] next year, but I have to start thinking about applying for certain [Masters] programmes. There is a Masters I can do which is two years. Obviously it’s funded, ‘cos it’s a lot of money. Um... if not then I can apply... Sometimes the NHS do particular courses that I can apply for, which involves the Masters as well as training in a working environment. (Lindsay W24)

Similarly, the nursing and midwifery courses that Tina (B18) and Anika (B19) hoped to pursue would make them eligible for NHS grants, bursaries and/or reduced student loans (<https://www.gov.uk/nhs-bursaries/overview> accessed 6 December 2015). Although Shanelle (B18) was undecided about pursuing HE, she was contemplating study in dentistry or radiography which are also eligible for these sources of funding<sup>34</sup>. The issue of funding is returned to later in this chapter.

#### **4.3.2 Incentives for pursuing HE**

RPs’ reasons for going to university varied. Several (Xyleah B20; Lisa W22; Lindsay W24) had come from households where parents placed great value on advanced credentialism and parents encouraged their daughters to pursue university study:

I was always told by my parents, more my dad than my mum. Although they’re separated, they always wanted me to go to ‘uni’. I think the way they put it was, “You’ve got brains and you’re wasting them.” (Lindsay W24)

[The importance of education has] been drilled into me since I was a child [...] You know, “Get education.” Um, “I didn’t have this, you have an opportunity to go to ‘uni.’” “You have this, I didn’t, you must do this.” (Lisa W22)

All my family, like, we all are interested in education. (Xyleah B20)

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<sup>34</sup> During the latter half of 2015, the Conservative government proposed controversial changes to this funding scheme, which would cut grants and bursaries making healthcare students dependent on loans.

As noted earlier, each of these RPs also had at least one parent who was in a middle class occupation (Lisa W22) or who was self-employed (Xyleah B20; Lindsay W24), which may have influenced attitudes linking education with social mobility. Among those RPs from more solidly working class households who embarked on HE, the encouragement, and/or pressure, from parents to pursue advanced qualifications was less evident. Whilst Jayne's parents did not encourage her to pursue post-compulsory educational credentials, she had other trusted adults in her life who did. Sarah's (W19) father was not interested in her educational aspirations: 'When I told him that I got into 'uni', he said he doesn't fucking care.' She was, however, encouraged to apply to university by the MYC youth workers and, once she had made the decision, her mother was very supportive, accompanying her to all of her interviews for moral support.

Some RPs associated HE with better employment prospects:

I knew I had to get to 'uni' to get a solid job, and a well-paid job, to get further in life. It's a known fact that people who go to 'uni', earn more in life and get further. (Lisa W22)

This view that university enables higher waged employment was also reflected by Lindsay (W24) who returned to further and higher education after several years of full-time employment as a chef:

I got fed up with earning minimum wage, in a boring job. It wasn't boring. I love cheffing, I love cooking for people and things like that. And it's something that I'm good at. But you don't have a life because you work so much. And you work for nothing. And... I don't know. I just felt like I didn't want that ... Having grown up in pubs with my parents being in that sort of environment, I didn't want that for my life. (Lindsay W24).

Lindsay abandoned her career as a chef and went back into education because she was tired of working long hours earning a minimum wage. Although she had the option of working as a massage therapist upon completing her degree, this would not guarantee higher wages

(National Careers Service website accessed on 3 September 2014). She had already invested time, energy and finances in HE to escape the low-wage trap and felt that further investment in the form of a Masters level qualification was necessary in order to achieve this.

Xyleah's rationale for choosing HE was related to securing permanent employment:

I was thinkin', I need a job that I know I can definitely keep. For years and years and years. I was like, that's education, isn't it? Everyone's gonna need education so [...] I knew it was something to do with education and something that will benefit the country sort of thing... So I thought teachin'. (Xyleah B20)

Xyleah's desire for a job that she could 'definitely keep' reflected a desire for the types of 'jobs for life' that were available to previous generations in the industrial sector, but are proving increasingly elusive in the post-industrial economy. She wanted the guarantee of long-term employment and identified primary school teaching as such a career, which required a university qualification. Her rationale that the job 'would benefit the country' also reflected Mirza's finding that whilst occupational mobility was the driving factor for educational and occupational choices of the young black women in her study, they often articulated aspirations of securing employment that involved 'helping others' (Mirza 1992: 122).

Whilst Lisa (W22), Lindsay (W24) and Xyleah (B20) saw university as a necessary step toward secure and well-paid employment, Jayne (W22) expressed a different reason for going to university: 'I decided to go to university 'cos I wasn't a hundred per cent on what I wanted to do and um... I think I needed a bit of time to build up my confidence in the field.' Whilst citing a practical aspect in terms of her desire to secure employment in a related field, Jayne also expressed a lack of confidence which she believed further learning would address.

Tanya's (W16) motivation for attending university may have reflected her family's middle class attitudes towards education. Like several of the RPs above, Tanya's rationale was

strongly connected to her belief that attending university was necessary to get ahead in life. In contrast, however, it was less connected to a specific occupational goal which is reflected in her statement: 'I don't mind which career I go into.' She said 'I plan to [go to university]. Whether I will or not it depends on my grades.' Like Jayne (W22), she also expressed a lack of confidence. For Tanya, however, this anxiety about her academic prowess, a theme which surfaced repeatedly in her interview, reflects observations about the distinct pressures felt by women from different social class backgrounds with regard to education. Walkerdine et al (2001: 168) suggest that middle class women's anxiety stems from fears about '[deviating] from the norm of the other middle class girls... not able to sustain their footing on this tightly circumscribed educational path' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 168). This seems to be supported by Tanya's strategy for planning against the risk of academic 'failure'. This involved creating a series of back-up plans: 'I want to do marine biology. But if I don't pass this exam, I'm gonna do astronomy. And if I don't pass the physics exam, I will do teaching in either art or history.' In contrast to the back-up plans articulated by some of her working class peers, all Tanya's back-up plans involved the pursuit of HE.

The following section looks at the role of localism in shaping RPs' HE plans.

#### **4.3.3 Local community as incentive and disincentive to pursuing HE**

Studies have identified localism as a factor that can equally deter *and* incentivise working class students from pursuing HE, as well as determine their 'choice' of institution (Reay et al 2001: 861; Henderson et al 2007: 105). The findings from this study were mixed. Of the five RPs in this study who enrolled in university, four did so in different cities. Lindsay (W24) was the only RP that chose to study in Birmingham. Having returned to education as a mature student in her mid-twenties, she was reluctant to leave her job, social network and relationship and so decided to apply only to universities in or near Birmingham. She noted that, 'had I

gone [to university] at 18, I probably would have moved further away.’ Given the geographic limitations of her decision to stay in Birmingham, Lindsay’s ‘choice’ of where to study the subject she wanted to study, was limited to just one local university.

Going away was not always entirely by ‘choice’, as Xyleah’s (B20) case illustrates. She claimed she wanted to stay in Birmingham, but had not been accepted to any local universities: ‘Trust my luck, I didn’t get into Birmingham or Wolverhampton [laughs] but I got into [university in North West England].’ Her desire to pursue advanced credentials, therefore, outweighed her desire to stay close to home.

Not wanting to leave Birmingham was cited as a significant deterrent for several of the younger RPs. Cassie (W15) reflected the feeling that, ‘I wouldn’t be able to cope being away from everything.’ It is possible, however, that their reluctance to leave home was due in part to their age and that, when they got a bit older, they would feel independent enough to move away. Nevertheless, Henderson et al (2007: 39) suggest that community connections can serve as negative social capital, binding young people to local communities, thereby limiting their educational and employment prospects, particularly in local communities characterised by disadvantage.

On the other hand, the lack of prospects in the local community can also spur a desire in young people to ‘escape’. Henderson et al (2007: 43) note that young people who chose to move away often do so to ‘get out in order to get on’. In other words, they leave to sever links with the social capital that might otherwise bind them to a community with limited prospects. This was the view that Sarah (W19) took when she said, ‘I can’t wait to move out of Birmingham.’ Whilst she was extremely close to her family and had a boyfriend who would remain in Birmingham, she felt she needed to move away in order to succeed in the fashion industry and had chosen a course at a university in the East Midlands due to its ranking. Her

family supported her decision and she and her boyfriend were making plans to visit each other every other weekend. All RPs who left Birmingham to pursue university study went to cities that were within a two-hour train journey, thereby allowing them to return home frequently to visit family and friends. Going away to attend university did not necessarily mean escaping forever and the issues of location and mobility will be explored further in Chapter Five.

The following section examines the main deterrents to pursuing HE articulated by RPs.

#### **4.3.4 Disincentives to pursuing HE**

As noted in Table 4.3, six RPs decided that HE was not for them while four harboured mixed feelings or changed their minds after initially expressing a desire to go to university. The reasons that deterred them varied, but were primarily due to doubts about their own academic capabilities and/or concerns about financial cost and debt.

For several RPs, the decision to attend university was related to a lack of confidence relating to their academic ability. This often resulted from weak track records of prior academic attainment and/or academic disengagement. This was the case for Daisy (W18) who, despite having an older sister who had graduated from university, did not feel that it was a route for her:

I don't think I'm, like, brainy enough [to go to university]. Like, people say if you want to do something you can do it, like you can achieve it. But I, I'm not the type to wait around and do like loads of training. [...] Like, I just want to get to it, and I think I'd leave after like a year, like, not even a year, like, a few months!

Daisy cites doubts about her own intellectual capacity and lack of patience as factors that she believes would inhibit her from succeeding at university. This reflects findings by Maguire (2010: 326) who notes that although the white working class respondents in her study believe in the value of education, 'their personal experiences had clouded their views about their own ability to progress through this route.' As noted earlier in this chapter, however, prior



experiences of weak educational achievement, as well as internalised notions of being inadequate learners, are often shaped by structural inequalities.

Reflecting the tendency of young women to express self-doubt about their own capabilities (Reay et al 2010: 117), several RPs expressed unconfident learner identities. Soraya (B18), who studied performing arts at a local FE college, said: 'Before I wanted to go to 'uni'. But now I'm not. Like, it's hard to keep up with the work. I won't be able to do it.' Emily's (M16) original higher educational strategy was predicated on her conviction, as mentioned earlier, that she could 'change the future' through going to college and university. This reflected the notions of 'possibility, limitless potential and the promise of control over the future' that Aapola et al (2005: 39) argue characterise popular 'girl power' discourses (ibid). Yet this sense of unlimited possibility proved to be elusive for both Soraya and Emily, both of whom, faced with the reality of their FE experiences, struggled with the academic workload. As a result, they changed their transition strategies. Both abandoned plans for pursuing HE and focused their strategies instead on securing apprenticeships which they hoped would enable them to pursue their occupational goals. Soraya and Emily both reflexively reconfigured their transitions in the context of the limitations they encountered along the way.

The cost of higher education and subsequent fear of debt were cited as deterrents for several RPs. Lucy (W21) said, 'I've thought about [going to university] but... it's just getting the funding for it as well, innit?' Ellie (W14) also stated that cost was a disincentive to pursuing HE:

Ellie: Two [more] years at school, then I'll go to college. And maybe, pushing it, I might be going to 'uni'.

AO: Why would it be pushing it?

Ellie: 'Cos I don't know if my dad can afford it.

AO: So the recent tuition increases, have they...

Ellie: We're hoping they don't go up any more.

AO: What about things like taking a loan? Would you ever take a loan to go to 'uni'?

Ellie: I don't know. I don't know if I could pay it back.

Callender and Jackson (2005: 513) find that young people from lower-income families are more likely to say that they are deterred from pursuing higher education by the cost than students from more affluent families.

The RPs in this study could not rely on financial support from their families. All RPs who pursued HE funded their studies through bursaries and student loans. This would result in debt, irrespective of whether or not they completed their degree programmes. Despite having never graduated, Lisa (W22) was still paying off her student loan years after withdrawing from her course. Whilst Jayne (W23) considered pursuing a Masters level qualification to improve her chances in the labour market, she had already taken out loans to complete her undergraduate degree. The thought of taking on additional debt was a significant deterrent for her: 'It isn't really an option for me. I would love to do a postgrad at some point in my future, but unless I win some sort of lottery it's unlikely.' She was reluctant to accrue more debt, saying 'I'm already in debt for the undergraduate course so until something major changes financially [post graduate study is] just a pipedream' (Jayne W23).

For Sarah (W18), the financial pressures of going to university became apparent before she even arrived on campus. Residence in student halls required payment of an entire academic term's accommodation in advance. Since Sarah's student loan would not be awarded until several months after the payment deadline, student halls were not an option for her. Her mother helped her find a private company that rented student accommodation on a weekly basis and allowed more flexible payment schedules. Whilst this arrangement suited Sarah better in terms of time and payment flexibility, the weekly rental amounts amounted to significantly more than if she had been able to pay the university's student accommodation

fees up front. Callender and Jackson (2005: 511) highlight that students from less advantaged families tend to leave university with greater levels of debt than their middle class peers.

The potential for rising debt levels was a frequently-cited disincentive to pursuing HE. Soraya (B17) and Shanelle (B17) were deterred by the prospect of debt, especially when they weighed the benefits against the risks:

Soraya: I think you think about all the debts...

Shanelle: You have to pay it all back. It's just, like... going to take ages.

Soraya: And then, especially if you don't like the course as well.

Shanelle: Exactly, you can't, you have to drop out, like.

Soraya: I couldn't do it.

Research indicates that since debt is unequally distributed across students from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds, the fear of debt is consequently greater among the former (Callender and Jackson 2005: 513; Callender and Jackson 2008: 409).

Xyleah (B20) was the only RP who did not cite fear of debt as a deterrent. She said 'I do really strongly believe that if you really want to go to 'uni' [...] I think you should do it. Forget the fees.' Her rationale was that she would not need to pay back the loan unless she was earning enough to do so. Her attitude resonates with findings on the educational motivation of young black women (Gillborn and Mirza 2000: 17) built on the belief in credentialism as a vehicle for social mobility (Mirza 2009: 13). In light of this, Xyleah argued, 'Better to just get as much education as you can.'

Nevertheless, the cost of higher education has increased significantly in the UK. This has led to growing numbers of students taking on paid term-time working (Purcell and Elias 2010: 1). Relying on parental financial support was not an option for any of the RPs in this study.

Lindsay (W24), Jayne (W22) and Lisa (W22) all undertook term-time working in hospitality, retail and other odd jobs, to support themselves during their undergraduate studies. Although

Xyleah (B20) did not work during term-time in her first year at university, she returned to her old waitressing job in Birmingham during term breaks and anticipated having to consider term-time work during her second year at university. Overall, students are increasingly dependent on term-time work to support themselves financially throughout their HE experiences. This is, however, disproportionately true for students from less affluent families who tend to work the greatest number of hours (Callender 2008: 366; Purcell and Elias 2010: 23).

The danger of term-time work is that education and employment often become ‘competing goals’ (Henderson et al 2007: 45; Callender 2008: 362). The case of Lisa (W22) illustrates the challenges of balancing studies with full time work as well as the detrimental impact this can have on studies when the two pressures clash. Lisa initially withdrew from university to return to Birmingham to care for her critically ill mother. She said it was ‘a decision that I didn’t think twice about. She didn’t want me to [quit]. But I did’ (Lisa W22). Upon re-enrolling in a university closer to home the following year, she needed to work simultaneously to support herself and her mother financially. Reflecting on her job in a local pub, she recalled:

I had a horrible boss [...] He didn’t have time for people who wanted to study. At the time, I needed money to help out my mum. Um, so I just went “Right. Okay. I’ll work.” I was working 60-70 hours a week. Um... And then I just got caught up... I tried to keep up with studies but... that just slacked off. (Lisa W22)

Since Lisa’s work rota left her little time to study and her boss was not supportive of her educational goals, she made the decision to withdraw from her university studies a second time. The ‘choice’ she made to withdraw from university must, however, be seen in the context of the competing pressures in her life at the time. Crucially, her short-term strategy for financial survival had a negative impact on her longer term occupational opportunities.

### **4.3.5 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, HE. The small number of RPs who enrolled in university were, without exception, the first in their families to do so, which suggests evidence of the successful widening of HE. Yet, whilst most RPs articulated notions of HE as a route to social mobility, many also doubted their own academic capacity to participate. Personal choices about pursuing HE were primarily linked to fears of cost and debt, alongside unconfident learner identities, which were often related to prior experiences of education characterised by a range of gendered, classed and ethnic inequalities, as noted earlier.

The experiences of RPs who enrolled in HE reveal further structural inequalities. All RPs enrolled in post-1992 universities which reinforces hierarchical classed and ethnic patterns observed elsewhere (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Whilst most RPs cited a utilitarian rationale for their course choices, linked to securing gainful employment, they also enrolled in predominantly 'feminised' courses, which can lead to lower waged employment. Financial burdens also characterised RPs' HE experiences, forcing most to engage in term-time working which can create competing pressures with studying. The RPs' experiences illustrate the potentially elusive nature of HE as a route to social mobility.

Employing an intersectional lens reveals some additional differences. These are examined in the following, and final, section of this chapter.

## **4.4 Chapter conclusion: what does intersectionality illuminate?**

This chapter examined RPs' experiences of secondary, further and higher education in order to understand their 'choices', the challenges they encountered and the strategies that they employed. It found that whilst the RPs bought into notions of the value of further and higher

education, their own educational experiences were heavily shaped by enduring structural constraints. This conclusion illustrates how an intersectional lens can deepen our understanding of their education transitions.

Considering the RPs' secondary education experiences from a purely gendered lens presents a rather limited picture. The weak educational engagement and low academic achievement disclosed by most of the RPs contrasts starkly with observations of the overall gains made by young women in education in Britain in recent decades (DfES 2007: 2-4). In this context, it might be tempting to explain these differences in terms of good or bad 'choices' made by individuals. Adding social class to the analytical lens, however, illuminates similar patterns observed in other studies of the links between disadvantage, social class and weak educational engagement and attainment (Harris and Ranson 2005; Reay 2006; Bramley and Kofi Karley 2007; Ofsted 2013). Tanya (W16), who grew up in the most solidly middle class household, also reported the strongest educational engagement and achievement. Her narrative of being able to draw on support from her father, a teacher with access to 'insider information' about the system, as well as her teachers, reflects Aapola et al's (2005: 75) observation of the 'joint project' of support that often underpins middle class girls' educational achievements. In contrast, this study revealed that several working class RPs (Sarah W18; Lindsay W24) were positioned as 'inadequate learners' (Reay 2006: 298) by their teachers and that this limited the support they received to progress academically.

Extending the analytical lens to include ethnicity reveals further nuances, since the ways in which working class RPs were positioned by their teachers were also demarcated by ethnicity. Whilst white working class RPs were positioned as 'inadequate learners', Anika's (B18) narrative resonates with other studies that suggest that black students are positioned as 'troublemakers' (Griffin 1985: 186; Mirza 2004: 149) and 'underachievers' (Rhamie and

Hallam 2002: 3). An examination of RPs' FE experiences suggests that responses to these negative stereotypes were also diverse.

From a purely gendered lens, RPs' FE experiences suggest that they are indeed reaping the benefits of widening participation in FE. RPs universally accepted the notion that FE is essential to 'getting ahead' in life and all responded to this message by enrolling in some form of FE. However, extending the analytical lens to include social class reveals further layers of complexity. Reflecting findings from other studies, the working class RPs enrolled in predominantly vocational courses in FE colleges. Tanya (W16) was one of the few RPs following an academic pathway and her all girls' grammar school education encouraged her to pursue the non-gendered subject/occupational choices of marine biology and astronomy that were not evident in other RPs' narratives. The experiences of the handful of working class RPs who followed more academic post-16 pathways were mixed. Several struggled with sixth form and dropped out in the first year.

Adding ethnicity reveals further differences. Like most of their white working class peers, all the black working class RPs enrolled in vocational college courses. Nevertheless, their subject choices diverged. Whilst white and mixed parentage RPs gravitated towards childcare, the black RPs pursued studies in health and social care. This chapter argues that these 'choices' reflect available 'local opportunity structures' as well as RPs' diverse responses to the learner identities imposed upon them in secondary school. It suggests that white working class RPs, who often exhibited weak educational attainment, chose childcare because it did not require advanced credentialism. Whilst this did not provide opportunities for upward mobility, it enabled RPs to undertake a valued role in the community doing something many felt they were 'already good at'. In contrast, black working class RPs rejected their imposed learner identities and chose to study health and social care which, as

Mirza (1992) points out, can lead to more socially mobile occupations through obtaining advanced credentials in areas such as nursing, midwifery and radiography.

From a gendered perspective, the RPs' experiences of HE were mixed. Though some RPs pursued, or aspired to pursue, university education and were the first in their families to do so, many others did not. A classed perspective suggests that whilst most RPs recognised the value of HE for occupational stability and wage mobility, many working class RPs doubted their own academic capacity to pursue this path. Whilst lack of confidence can be both a gendered and classed phenomenon (Reay et al 2001; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 93; Maguire 2010: 326), this manifested differently in the responses provided. Tanya's (W16) aspirations reflect the pursuit of HE as 'destiny' for middle class girls (Walkerdine et al 2001: 162), yet her lack of confidence led her to create a hierarchy of back-up plans, all of which involved pursuing HE, albeit in different subjects. In contrast, several working class RPs (Emily M17; Soraya B18), abandoned HE plans when faced with their own lack of learner self-confidence and created alternative educational and vocational strategies. The majority of working class RPs studied 'utilitarian' and often 'feminised' subjects which were likely to affect their employment prospects and future earnings potential. Moreover, they enrolled exclusively in post-1992 universities, reflecting the continued classed and ethnic divide observed in HE (Reay et al 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Reay et al 2010).

Extending the analytical lens to account for ethnicity also reveals potentially shifting attitudes towards the rising costs of HE and subsequent fears of debt. These factors were cited by the majority of RPs, regardless of ethnicity, as a deterrent to considering HE. Whilst the pursuit of advanced credentials was historically viewed as a route to social mobility, the growing cost of HE, stalling social mobility and increased insecurity of graduate employment may signify that this is no longer viewed as a secure investment. This was indicated by the different attitudes towards debt held by Xyleah (B20), who was pursuing a primary education



degree with lower tuition fees and greater employment prospects than Anika (B18) and Shanelle (B18), who were weighing up the benefits of pursuing a qualification in health and social care against a backdrop of rising tuition fees, their fear of debt and growing uncertainty regarding employment in this sector. Tina (B18) also wished to study a health and social care subject at university and seemed less discouraged by the prospect of debt, though this attitude may have been influenced by her family's lower-middle class positioning.

Overall, the RPs seemed aware that their educational qualifications would impact on their employment pathways. These are examined in the following chapter.

# Chapter 5. Employment

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## 5.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, paid employment. It looks at the opportunities available to them, the challenges that they encountered and the strategies that they employed in making the transition into the labour market. Analysis in each of the sections draws on data taken from interviews, field notes and ethnographic observations at MYC. The findings are framed in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter One. Given the strong link between employment prospects and educational qualifications (Aapola et al 2005: 57-58), this chapter also returns to some of the data and findings that emerged in Chapter Four.

The chapter begins by exploring how RPs' attitudes toward the future affected their labour market strategies. The second section examines their employment aspirations whilst the third looks at their actual experiences of paid, unpaid and volunteer work. The fourth section interrogates attitudes towards (un)employment and social welfare dependence, noting that, for many RPs, ideas about success and failure are based on the desire to work as well as opportunities for gainful employment. The fifth section explores issues related to localism, including the aspiration of 'getting away' from the local area. It argues that the lack of local opportunities for getting ahead created a desire to escape, either through fantasy or real strategies. The chapter concludes by examining how RPs' experiences were shaped by the intersection of gender, social class and ethnicity.

## 5.1 Attitudes towards the future

This section examines RPs' attitudes towards the future, which were overwhelmingly shaped by uncertainty and/or a sense of inevitability. It goes on to explore the emotional

consequences of this uncertainty, before examining the coping mechanisms employed by RPs.

### **5.1.1 Uncertainty and inevitability**

Attitudes towards the future were influenced by age. Those RPs who were still in secondary school (Ellie W14; Cassie W15; Rachelle M15) did not give the future much thought, whilst RPs who were leaving or had already left school were generally more reflective about their prospects. Only one RP articulated a sense of optimism and empowerment when discussing the future. Shortly after leaving secondary school, Emily (M16) said, ‘I could be working in a shop. Or in say, like, McDonalds or something... but that’s boring. I can change the future.’ In this statement, she distinguishes between ‘boring’ work - often unqualified work in ‘lower tier services’, including retail and hospitality (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 38) - and her own ambitions for something better. Her statement indicates that she feels confident about the opportunities and choices available to her in the post-industrial city. Through creating a reflexive strategy and making the ‘right’ choices with regard to pursuing further and higher education (as noted in Chapter Four), Emily believed she could ‘change the future’. Yet, her history of educational disengagement and low academic attainment, which, as noted in Chapter Four, can be a structurally rooted problem (Harris and Ranson 2005: 575; Bramley and Kofi Karley 2007: 26; Ofsted 2013: 16), made it difficult for her to keep up with her college coursework. After abandoning her goal of pursuing the necessary qualifications for higher education, the ‘choices’ available to Emily for ‘chang[ing] the future’ proved more limited than her initial optimism suggested.

In subsequent interviews, Emily’s sense of optimism diminished. Although she maintained a sense of agency and continued making decisions based upon calculating opportunities and risks, her decision-making was exercised in the context of the constraints she encountered.

Her end goal of working in a nursery did not change, but she modified the means by which she hoped to achieve this. Although she secured an apprenticeship in a children's nursery, she recounted several challenges. She felt taken advantage of due to the 'absolutely horrible' apprenticeship wage rate (£2.65 an hour). More disappointingly, the apprenticeship did not lead to further employment, reinforcing one of the major critiques of many such schemes (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 32). After difficulties finding work in childcare, Emily began to look outside the sector. Whilst she did not find paid employment during the fieldwork period, I later learned that she was working at a supermarket checkout. Emily's case illustrates how, in the post-industrial context, the notion of 'choice' is often shaped by invisible structural constraints, including educational inequalities, lack of labour opportunities for young people and low wage structures in feminised fields of employment.

Many of the RPs on a variety of educational pathways described the future as uncertain:

It could all change. You never know what's going to happen in the future. (Daisy W17, NEET, after withdrawing from hairdressing college course due to health reasons)

I don't know what the future holds, d'you know what I mean? Like, at the moment everyone is asking me what I wanna do after college... I'm not really sure. (Sarah W18, in second year of arts and textiles college course)

Although obtaining advanced qualifications is increasingly necessary for securing skilled or semi-skilled employment (Furlong et al 2012: 6), these did not necessarily diminish uncertainty, as indicated by Jayne's (W22) experience. Although she was the only RP who had successfully completed university education during the fieldwork period, she had, at the time of her first interview, unsuccessfully applied for a number of positions related and unrelated to her degree. Her experience echoes findings from other studies that advanced credentials do not guarantee employment in the post-industrial economy (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 44; Lawy et al 2010: 342). Insecurity is often heightened for graduates of post-1992 or 'new' universities. Graduates often come from working class or ethnic minority

backgrounds and find themselves disadvantaged in the labour market when competing with graduates from older ('elite') institutions. The 'choices' that emerge following the completion of advanced qualifications are, therefore, intricately bound up with the structural hierarchy that characterises HE and subsequent labour market prospects.

The prevailing sense of uncertainty was often experienced by RPs as anxiety-inducing.

Chapter Four noted the fears expressed by Jess (W16) that withdrawing from her college course would result in 'a bad life'. Her attitude indicates an awareness of the basic requirement of educational qualifications in successfully securing employment. Whilst Jess felt unable to cope with her college course due to personal problems, she also worried about the impact of leaving education on her future employment prospects. Jess's statement reflects her dread at the thought of ending up in the type of low-paid, 'dead end jobs' mainly available to young women entering the labour market without skills or qualifications (Lawy et al 2010). Indeed, young people without qualifications are more likely to find themselves trapped in low-level, low-wage and insecure employment (Walkerdine et al 2001: 67; Aapola et al 2005: 70; Maguire 2010: 318-319).

Talia (M17), who had recently returned to college after taking time off for health reasons, also expressed fears about the future:

I think about [the future] all the time. It sort of scares me 'cos I think what if I'm not doing nothing? And then I think I will be, but, because I've got so confused it's, like, I hope I am doing something. So I'm glad that I'm at college now. Like, trying to get somewhere. (Talia M17)

Talia's narrative reflected anxiety about the future as well as hope that pursuing FE would help her 'get somewhere'. Anxiety did not disappear with the successful completion of advanced credentials:

I'm nervous about the future [laughs]. Very apprehensive [...] I think it's just because I'm about to come up to graduation and I don't know where I'm going to be.

So, I find that quite frustrating. I don't know... Very nervous about the future. (Jayne W22)

In addition to uncertainty, several RPs also expressed a sense of inevitability about the future. This echoes the sense of 'fatalism' MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 145) found among their interviewees, which they suggest was caused by 'lack of choice, poverty and other lived experiences' (ibid). This 'fatalism' is illustrated by Lindsay (W24) who said 'I do think about [the future], but I don't overly think about it. What will be, will be.' In this case, the sense of 'what will be, will be' wrested control from Lindsay. In light of inevitability, there was, in her opinion, little point in overthinking things. Sarah (W18) also referred to an inevitable future, causing her to conclude that 'I don't, like, plan anything.' This sense of inevitability can be understood as a challenge to the notion of unlimited 'choices' for women growing up in neighbourhoods like Midford and Weston. In their experience, planning, and even making 'good' choices, did not guarantee against what was 'meant to be', so there seemed little point in doing so.

### **5.1.2 Coping strategies**

Several RPs adopted strategies for responding to the uncertainty and/or inevitability which they felt characterised their lives in transition. These strategies mainly involved not thinking about the future - what I term 'deferral' - or taking a short-term view on planning. Jenny (W20) pursued the first strategy. She had a fragmented and interrupted educational pathway after being formally excluded from secondary school and several colleges for fighting. At the time of her first interview, she had been looking for work for nine months. Unsure of what she wanted to do and feeling increasingly anxious about her unemployed status, she said 'I think too much so I don't like to think about [the future] too much.' In other words, because she tended to overthink things and these thoughts became a source of stress, she preferred not to think about the future.

Tina (B18), on the other hand, adopted the short-term planning strategy:

AO: Do you think about the future?

Tina: I do and I don't.

AO: Can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by that?

Tina: I focus on what I'm trying to do now to make myself get there... 'Cos society and the government changes all the time. So if I think forward and it changes, I will have to be going back on myself anyway.

Tina cited the recession and the increase in university tuition fees as examples of ways in which 'society and the government' might impact on her life. Tina was enrolled in a health and social care course at a local college, after which she hoped to obtain NHS-funding to pursue a nursing degree at university. Despite this, she did not want to plan too far ahead, acknowledging the possibilities for structural or policy changes that might disrupt her plans. Instead, she focused on the present. This strategy of short-term planning in an attempt to avoid unnecessary stress, was applied by many of the RPs, regardless of age or ethnicity:

I just find that it's easier to concentrate on one thing at a time, otherwise I get myself a bit stressed out... But it doesn't help, so... For now I'm just going to concentrate on getting my degree finished. And then, the next step after that... (Lindsay W24, in second year of sports science undergraduate degree)

I kind of, like, live each day by day, to be fair. (Xyleah B20, in second year of primary education undergraduate degree)

I just deal with what the year brings, really. (Cassie W15, still in secondary school)

Chapter Four highlighted the varying levels of resources and support available for RPs from different social class backgrounds to pursue their educational and occupational goals. It also highlighted the challenges to planning and decision-making for those who lacked access to support and resources. Having to navigate their employment transitions on their own, many RPs chose to focus solely on the issues that were most immediate in their lives at any given time. Such short-term planning helped them to respond to unexpected events or uncertainties with the kind of 'internalised flexibility' noted by Bradley and Devadason (2008: 131-132). RPs expressed many things that they hoped to accomplish in the near term, whilst their

aspirations over the longer term became decisively more general. Yet as Evans (2007: 86) observes, longer term strategies tend to generate more stability than short-term plans. This is because short-term strategies which lack ‘a sense of ultimate goal or overall direction’ (ibid) tend to be reactive and, therefore, carry greater risks of forfeiting long-term goals in the face of short-term obstacles. Nevertheless, longer term strategies also require access to resources and support in order to be sustainable in the face of constraints and these were not always easily available to the RPs in this study.

### **5.1.3 Section conclusion**

The RPs’ attitudes toward the future illustrate how deceptive the notion of ‘choice’ can be for many young people in the post-industrial city. The optimistic, empowered attitude initially articulated by Emily (M16), when she said ‘I can change the future’, was rare. Rather, most spoke of the future as uncertain and anxiety-inducing. Higher education, viewed by many as a route to social mobility, did not guarantee against uncertainty as Jayne’s (W22) experience illustrates. Although the RPs did not consciously articulate an understanding of the structural constraints which bounded their choices (Evans 2007), their attitudes of inevitability hinted at these. Nevertheless, their labour market strategies suggested the adoption of an ‘internalised flexibility’ (Bradley and Devadason 2008). This was illustrated by their strategies of deferral and short-term planning. As Evans (2007) points out, however, strategies which make sense in the short-term can limit stability in the longer term. This point will be returned to later in this thesis.

The following section outlines RPs’ aspirations in relation to paid employment.



## **5. 2 Aspirations**

Despite the prevailing uncertainty noted in the previous section, most RPs hoped to obtain secure paid employment in order to achieve financial independence. This reflects similar findings from other studies (Aapola et al 2005: 64; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 108). A smaller number considered stay-at-home motherhood a desirable option if they found a romantic partner with a ‘good job’, a point which will be explored further in Chapter Six. Their aspirations, as well as their rationale, are examined below.

### **5.2.1 Employment aspirations and rationale**

There was a heavily gendered slant to most of the employment ambitions articulated by RPs. With a few exceptions (marine biologist, astronomer, PE teacher), most of the occupations mentioned were in predominantly feminised areas of work and/or those sectors that have traditionally been filled by women such as childcare, teaching and health and social care (see Table 5.1). Many of these jobs also involve the ‘commodification’ of domestic caring activities historically carried out by women ‘for “love” (in the colloquial sense of for nothing) in the home’ (McDowell 2012: 579). In addition to being gendered, some of these employment categories, in particular childcare, ‘body labour’ (Gimlin 2007: 359) professions, as well as some less qualified health and social care jobs, are also imbued with a classed dimension. This is because, as McDowell (2012: 578) notes, they tend to be ‘part time, casualised, and temporary as well as poorly paid’ jobs held by less affluent young people servicing the more affluent. Although they constitute the basis of paid employment for many women, these jobs – with some exceptions such as teaching or more advanced health and social care professions - often lack opportunities for career progression and social mobility. One exception, the aspiration of becoming a teacher (a middle class occupation), was articulated by several RPs. However, aside from Xyleah (B20), who was studying to

become a primary school teacher and Tanya (W16), for whom teaching was a back-up choice, the other RPs abandoned this aspiration.

**Table 5.1 RP's aspirations of paid employment (by sector)**

Employment sector	Midford	Weston	Total
<b>Childcare</b>	Emily (M18) Jess (W16) Cassie (W15) Ellie (W15)	-	4
<b>Teaching</b>	Lisa (W22) Lucy (W21) Talia (M17) Tanya (W16)	Xyleah (B20)	5
<b>Body work *</b>	Lucy (W21) Talia (M17)	Soraya (B18) Daisy (W17)	4
<b>Health and social care**</b>	Tina (B18)	Lindsay (W24) Anika (B18) Shanelle (B18)	4
<b>Entertainment</b>	Jenny (W20)	Daisy (W17)	2
<b>Youth Offending Service</b>	Jayne (W22)	-	1
<b>Art and design</b>	Sarah (W18)	-	1
<b>Science***</b>	Tanya (W16)	-	1
<b>Hospitality****</b>	Jenny (W20)	-	1
<b>Other*****</b>	Rachelle (M15)	-	1
<b>Total</b>	17	7	24

Note: Multiple aspirations were articulated by several RPs. Hence, the total is more than 19.

\* Hairdressing; massage; fitness instruction/ personal training (2)

\*\*Nursing or midwifery (same person); radiography; physiotherapy

\*\*\*Marine biology or astronomy (same person)

\*\*\*\*Waitressing

\*\*\*\*\* Children's dance teacher

The RPs expressed a range of reasons for their choices. Some cited a utilitarian rationale, based either on the perceived availability of jobs or on the availability of funding for education and/or training. For instance, Xyleah's (B20) motivation for embarking on a primary education degree was to secure a stable, long-term job. She stated: 'I need a job that I

know I can definitely keep. For years and years and years. I was like that's education isn't it? Everyone's gonna need education.' Xyleah's choice was driven by her desire for job security.

The availability of funding for education or training also underpinned practical considerations for choosing an employment path. For instance, Lindsay (W24) hoped to secure funding for a Master's degree to become a physiotherapist. Tina (B18) and Anika (B18) alluded to the availability of NHS funding for training as underpinning their career choices in nursing and midwifery respectively.

As noted in Chapter Four, there were differences between the occupational aspirations of RPs from different ethnic backgrounds with a large number of white working class RPs drawn to childcare whilst several black (mostly working class) RPs aspired to work in the health and social care sector. Chapter Four argues that these choices relate to divergent local opportunity structures, experiences of educational engagement and achievement, learner identities resulting from stereotyping by teachers as well as different responses by RPs. Until 2010, the health and social care sector in Britain was growing (McDowell 2012: 581) and was likely considered a stable employer in a city like Birmingham with higher-than-average unemployment and youth unemployment figures. Although the occupational choices of the black RPs were middle class professions, their choices may also reflect historically rooted inequalities related to gender, social class and ethnicity since, as Batnitzky and McDowell (2011: 198) point out, 'doctors were white men, senior nurses white women and domestic workers women of colour.' There is still evidence of ethnic inequalities within the nursing sector, with BME women disadvantaged compared to their white peers with regard to pay differentials and opportunities for career advancement (ibid).

Other RPs aspired to paid employment doing things they felt they were already good at. Ellie (W15), Cassie (W15) and Jess (W16) wanted to work in childcare because they considered

themselves ‘good with children’. Daisy (W17), who initially wanted to become a hairdresser, said ‘I know I’m good at hairdressing and that’s the only thing I, like, know I’m good at. Like, I’ve been doing it since I was little, hairdressing, by, like, just messing with my mum’s hair, always been into it.’ Often this sense of being good at something emanated from messages they received from those around them. Jess (W16) said: ‘Even when I was younger everyone could tell “Ah, you’re lovely with kids, you are”.’ Tina (B18) wanted to be a nurse because ‘mum always tells me that I care for people.’ It is notable that most, but not all, of these RPs disclosed a history of weak educational engagement and/or low academic achievement. In light of this, their desire to work at something they were ‘good at’ takes on particular significance.

A smaller number were driven by the desire to work doing something they enjoyed. Sarah (W18), who wanted to become a fashion designer, had loved creating art from a young age. Jayne (W22) had completed an undergraduate degree in criminology, and hoped to work for Birmingham Youth Offending Service (BYOS), a path she had initially pursued because she enjoyed studying forensics in college. Tanya (W16) explained her desire to be a marine biologist, saying:

I do take a very big, big interest in biology. I really do enjoy it, but then, because I like swimming outside of school and, I do like being on the beach and stuff I thought it’d be a good career since I kind of enjoy both things.

In some instances the rationale for particular aspirations overlapped. Tina (B18) wanted to study nursing, not only because the NHS would pay for her course, but also because she had experience caring for an infirm family member and felt she was good at it. Some RPs articulated multiple aspirations. In some cases, this involved back-up options in case first choices proved unattainable.

If you do midwifery it’s a very, very hard course to get in [...] like a lot of people from college they’ve applied but they haven’t gotten in. ‘Cos it’s more older people

who are doing the midwifery. But if you go into nursing first, and then once you finish that degree, then you can go and do an, um, 18 month course for midwifery. (Anika B18)

I want to do marine biology. But if I don't pass this [biology] exam, I'm gonna do astronomy... And if I don't pass the physics exam, I will do teaching, in either art or history. (Tanya W16)

Tanya's aspirations reflected a range of possible options available to some young women in the post-industrial order as well as her anxiety about failing to achieve her goals. Her strategy was to identify a hierarchy of preferred paths to avoid the risks associated with failure. A similar strategy was indicated by Anika who hoped to become a midwife, but struggled with lacklustre performance at college during her first interview. As a result, she contemplated alternative routes into employment - first nursing, which she considered easier to access, then midwifery.

Some RPs revised their occupational goals more frequently, based on their education and employment experiences. Lucy (W21), who had studied travel and tourism but also did a physical education apprenticeship in a primary school, wished to incorporate her past experience into a coherent strategy for pursuing employment. She wanted to pursue work as a gym instructor or personal trainer on a cruise ship because 'I was doing [travel and tourism] for, like, four years... So [...] instead of, like, wasting it, go and do something about it.' Her stated desire not to 'waste' her educational experience, but instead incorporate it into a coherent plan for securing employment, indicates her desire to be a successful 'choice biographer'. Working on a cruise ship would also enable her to pursue her aspiration of 'getting away' from Midford, a point returned to in the final section of this chapter.

### **5.2.2 'Dream jobs' and realistic options**

A few RPs made distinctions between 'dream jobs' and more 'realistic' options. For example, Jenny (W20) dreamt of becoming a singer or a nightclub owner, but her 'realistic' employment choice was waitressing. Sometimes 'dream jobs' were related to the pursuit of

fame, glamour and excitement. Shanelle (B17) said 'I wanna be famous [...] I don't know how I'm gonna be famous, but I wanna be famous.' In 'real' life she was contemplating employment in dentistry or radiography. Some RPs who aspired to relatively 'normal' or even mundane jobs hoped to carry these out in a glamorous and exciting context. Daisy (W17) said 'I don't want to just be a hairdresser in a salon. I wanna [...] be, like, behind the scenes and stuff and do the hair on catwalks and that.' Emily (M17), who wanted to work in childcare, sought me out at MYC one evening to tell me her latest plan to find employment as an au pair for a very wealthy family. The implication was that if her chosen job itself was not a route to wealth and glamour, which her apprenticeship in a nursery was quickly making clear, working for a family with this lifestyle was the next best option.

Ideas about exciting careers often contrasted starkly with the mundane realities of work experience. Chapter Four noted the disparity between real work experience and unrealistic expectations set by training schemes. Daisy's (W18) experience is illustrative. Far from the glamorous life she had imagined doing hair on catwalks, she found the daily tasks of making coffee, cleaning up, washing hair and blow-drying in her apprenticeship boring and demeaning. Her apprenticeship experience discouraged her from pursuing employment or further training in this field.

Despite the fact that many RPs articulated specific employment aspirations, not all had a clear idea of what they wanted to do. Jess (W16) said 'I'm only 16. I haven't got a clue what I want to do as a job and that.' Uncertainty, as well as disappointing experiences of previously 'imagined futures' (Lawy et al 2010: 344), could result in confusion and changing plans. Chapter Four noted how the range of training possibilities for young women could be perceived as overwhelming rather than empowering. Talia (M17), who was taking a range of college courses said, 'as I got older I got really confused so just thought I'll try everything out and either way I'll have a qualification in all of them, so... I can go back to either one of

them.’ Despite feeling overwhelmed and confused by the possibilities and uncertainties, she attempted to be a good ‘choice biographer’ by preparing for multiple employment possibilities.

McDowell (2012: 568) notes that some of the young women in her study without educational qualifications or skills desired motherhood as an alternative to (un)employment. A small number of the RPs in this study also expressed attraction to the idea of stay-at-home motherhood. Notably, however, they all also articulated aspirations of paid employment and their desire for stay-at-home motherhood was contingent on a more traditional ‘male breadwinner model’ context (Aboim 2010: 172-176). That is, stay-at-home motherhood was articulated as an option on the condition that their partner had a ‘good job’ with which to support a family. This topic is returned to in Chapter Six.

### **5.2.3 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs’ aspirations for paid employment. Echoing their educational choices, employment aspirations reflected gendered, classed and ethnic dimensions of ‘local opportunity structures’ (Mirza 1992; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Their strategies for choosing employment categories were often utilitarian, namely, based on perceptions of job stability and/or available funding for relevant education or training. Many, particularly those RPs with weaker educational histories, chose jobs they felt reflected what they were already good at. A smaller number cited occupational aspirations based on personal interests. Others articulated both ‘dream’ jobs characterised by fame and glamour and ‘realistic’, typically more mundane options, which indicates the elusive nature of actual occupational choices they felt were available to them. However, their aspirations often suggested the desire to be good ‘choice biographers’ (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). Their strategies for doing so varied, including creating a coherent strategy out of seemingly disparate experiences, preparing for a

range of possibilities and creating a series of back-up plans in case strategies did not work out.

The following section examines RPs' *actual* work experiences.

### **5.3 Experiences of paid, unpaid and volunteer work**

Given their age range of between 14 and 24 years, the RPs were at diverse stages of transition into the labour market. This section examines their experiences of paid, unpaid and volunteer work.

#### **5.3.1 Diverse pathways**

Although most RPs were in the early stages of their labour market transitions, their experiences resonate with the employment tendencies identified by Bradley and Devadason (2008): shifting (between jobs and employment statuses), sticking (to the pursuit of one type of career), switching (to a different career direction) and settling (in one occupation or career). The 'shifters', included Lucy (W21), Jenny (W21), Daisy (W18) and Talia (M17), who all moved between employment statuses, occupational categories and/or different types of education or training. Their pathways also reflected the 'yo-yo' transitions observed by Du Bois-Reymond (2003). 'Stickers' included those who were in, or on the way to, HE, with specific 'career' goals, such as Xyleah (B20), Sarah (W18) and Tanya (W16). At the time of fieldwork, it was not possible to ascertain whether they would fulfil their occupational goals and continue along this tendency. Lindsay (W24) was a 'switcher' who, having worked as a chef for several years, made the decision to go back to university to gain advanced qualifications in order to become a physiotherapist. Lisa (W22) was a 'settler' who had spent several years working in the hospitality industry since withdrawing from university. Nevertheless, this did not appear entirely a result of 'choice'. Rather, Lisa seemed to have



fallen into this employment pathway, neither actively deciding to stay there nor actively planning to leave. Like the young people in Maguire's (2010: 327-328) study, Lisa was reluctant to give up her ability to 'pay her own way' in order to go back into education. Finally, although Jayne (W22) had a coherent strategy in terms of finding work for the Youth Offending Service (YOS) following completion of her undergraduate degree in Criminology, her lack of success in finding a related occupation meant that she had taken a job in retail. She was still looking for alternative employment but it was unclear whether she might become a 'shifter, a 'sticker' or a 'settler'.

Several of the older RPs expressed a strong work ethic and extensive, if fragmented, formal employment experience. Several had worked since a young age, supporting observations that less affluent young people enter the labour market earlier than their middle class peers (Walkerdine et al 2001: 65). Lindsay (W24) held multiple jobs after dropping out of the sixth form: 'I had three jobs at one point. I worked as a waitress. I worked in a bank, nine to five, Monday through Friday. And I worked with Linda [senior youth worker] for a little while, for [MYC], setting up a project.' Jayne (W22) had worked in a local takeaway restaurant, a fast food chain, several retail stores, and had also been a student support assistant at a university. At times, Jayne also held several jobs simultaneously: 'I had two jobs at one point. I did the [...] takeout on the evenings and worked in a clothes store [on weekends and during the day].' These RPs took great pride in their financial independence. Jayne (W22) said 'I haven't taken money off my mum since before I was 16. I, like, always worked and whatever to pay for everything that I wanted to do.' Their narratives suggest that whilst wages are an important incentive for young people in employment, the psychological benefits resulting from financial autonomy are also significant (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 121).

Most of the younger RPs had limited, if any, experience of paid employment. Cassie (W15) helped her older sister with a paper round; Sarah (W18) worked on the cloakroom for a few

months until the nightclub where she worked closed down; and Rachelle (M15) had done some modelling work. Others (Ellie W15; Tanya W16; Soraya B18) had no prior experience of formal paid employment.

Regardless of RPs' aspirations, the majority of their paid employment experiences reflected low-skill, low-status services jobs typical of the post-industrial economy (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 38; Roberts 2011: 32).

### **5.3.2 Unpaid and volunteer work**

Lack of paid employment experience did not mean RPs had never worked as several had undertaken either unpaid or volunteer work. Ellie (W15) helped out as a dance assistant at the local community centre; Tanya (W16) volunteered as a swim teacher for young children at a local leisure centre; and Sarah (W18) was a volunteer youth worker at MYC. Although these positions were not financially remunerated, the RPs sometimes gained other benefits from them. Ellie received free dance lessons (and a vague promise of future payment) and Tanya decided to obtain an additional lifeguard qualification which would give her grandmother free swimming pool access. Sarah gained the status of being a youth worker as well as the associated 'perks', including an invitation to the staff Christmas party and clothes with the MYC logo, much coveted by the young people. Several RPs (Jess W16; Emily M17; Daisy W18; Anika B18; Xyleah B20) also helped family and friends out with babysitting and/or household chores, specifically, tasks that were typically gendered and frequently unpaid. Those RPs that did not earn their own income received pocket money from their parents, most in exchange for helping out with chores at home. In addition, they relied on gifts of money received for birthdays or Christmas or asked their parents for money when they 'needed' it for going out with friends.

### 5.3.3 Routes into employment

Routes into paid employment were frequently informal, reflecting findings elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 108; Maguire 2010: 326). Whilst some RPs proactively looked for work by submitting solicited or unsolicited CVs to retail stores, restaurants and other places of employment, friends or family connections were a more typical route for gaining employment. Often, this was achieved without the formality of an interview. Lisa (W22) who had worked since the age of 16, said: ‘I’ve never actually had a formal interview for a job. Ever.’ She recounted how, at the age of 17, she secured a job as a barmaid at a pub through a friend who was already working there:

It was, like, “Well yeah, alright, show me... have you ever poured a pint?” I was like “No.” She said “Give it a go.” I did alright and she went “There you go, you’ve got a job.”

Jayne (W22) described a similar experience: ‘[Boyfriend] had worked for [retail store] before. And they were looking for quick staff. I gave them my details and said I was free. Started straight. Didn’t even interview.’ Anika (B18) got her job in the fast food restaurant via her mother who also worked there, and her previous job in a pub through her ‘sister’s boyfriend’s little sister’. Xyleah (B20) got her first waitressing job at the pub where her mother worked and Daisy (W18) got her barmaid job via her aunt who worked for the same company. Henderson et al (2007: 48) note that work is often fixed in the context of social relations. The RPs’ experiences suggest that, regardless of ethnic background, social connections were crucial to employment success (Maguire 2010: 324).

The tendency toward informal routes affected some RPs’ strategies for finding paid employment. After dropping out of her college course, Jess (W16) hoped to find paid employment at a nursery, saying: ‘My brother’s girlfriend knows someone that works there... so she was going to try and get me a place.’ Tina (B18) had also gotten her jobs through her mother’s connections:

Tina: She [mother] knows people.

AO: Is that important these days to get a job?

Tina: Yeah. Or you can't get nowhere.

Daisy (W18) echoed this perspective, suggesting that 'It's not what you know, it's who you know.' Some RPs (Shanelle B18; Jenny W21; Lucy W21; Jayne W22) had used more formal routes, such as the Job Centre and employment agencies, or submitting CVs directly to employers. However, given that these did not seemingly yield results very quickly - both Jenny and Lucy had been out of work for long periods - it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the RPs expressed a preference for informal routes. Nevertheless, this also meant that RPs' success in securing employment was dependent on local labour market opportunities. Moreover, as Henderson et al (2007: 58) note, privilege and inequality are thus inherited through a local labour market.

### **5.3.4 Employment experiences**

Reflecting findings from other British studies on youth employment, the most common jobs held by RPs were in hospitality and retail, primarily bars, pubs, fast food restaurants or retail shops (see Table 5.2). These are predominantly 'precariat' positions, characterised by insecurity, low wages, lack of protection within the workplace, limited opportunities for skills development and few possibilities for upward mobility (Standing 2011: 11).

Despite being low-waged, bar and restaurant jobs were generally spoken of positively, due to the social aspects. For instance, Jenny (W20) enjoyed waitressing because:

you're always on your feet. There's never time to, like, be bored. 'Cos you're always moving around. So... back and forth, back and forth, constantly serving. It's just fun 'cos you get to talk to people as well.

Daisy (W18), who had briefly worked as a barmaid in a different city, described the best part of the job as 'meeting new people'.

**Table 5.2 RPs' experiences of formal paid employment (by sector)**

<b>Employment sector</b>	<b>Midford</b>	<b>Weston</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Hospitality*</b>	Lisa (W22) Jenny (W20) Jayne (W22) Sarah (W18) Talia (M17)	Lindsay (W24) Xyleah (B20) Anika (B18) Daisy (W18)	9
<b>Retail and sales**</b>	Jayne (W23) Lisa (W22) Lucy (W21) Jenny (W20)	Shanelle (B18)	5
<b>Administration***</b>	Lisa (W22) Jenny (W20) Tina (B18)	Lindsay (W24)	4
<b>Youth work/ coaching</b>	Lisa (W22)	Lindsay (W24) Xyleah (B20)	3
<b>Cleaning</b>	Tina (B18)	-	1
<b>Care work</b>	Jenny (W20)	-	1
<b>Miscellaneous****</b>	Jayne (W22) Rachelle (M16) Cassie (W15)	Xyleah (B20)	4
<b>No experience of formal paid employment*****</b>	Emily (M18) Jess (W16) Tanya (W16) Ellie (W15)	Soraya (B18)	5
<b>Total</b>	22	10	32

Note: Several RPs held multiple positions within each sector. For example, Jayne (W22) worked in two different fast food restaurants and several retail stores, but these have only been recorded once in each sector.

\* Includes waitress; bar maid; fast food worker

\*\* Includes retailer; telesales; and door-to-door sales

\*\*\* Includes receptionist; telephone operator; admin assistant; and bank teller

\*\*\*\* Includes paper round (2); student support work; modelling

\*\*\*\*\* This was predominantly the younger RPs, aged 15, 16 (2) and 18 (2). The two 18 year olds included were undertaking apprenticeships which have not been referenced here, but rather in the previous chapter on training and education.

Bar and restaurant jobs were also deemed attractive because the basic salary could potentially be supplemented by gratuities. For instance, Talia (M17) earned £5 an hour working at an inner city bar but also received ‘a lot of tips’. This was not the case in all hospitality jobs, however. Anika (B18) cited the key reason for leaving her pub waitressing job as ‘Rubbish wage. £3.68 an hour.’ Lindsay (W24) also cited low wages and long hours as the key reasons she decided to return to education as a mature student to gain additional qualifications and change careers.

In addition to low wages, RPs revealed other negative experiences of working in the hospitality sector. In this respect, hospitality jobs could be viewed as an insecure source of employment hours. Talia (M17) said ‘I don’t always work there, only when they need me.’ Similarly, Sarah (W18) was often sent home early if the nightclub where she worked was empty, which meant the club did not pay her if there were no paying customers. This reflected similar behaviour by employers recorded elsewhere, such as part-time Burger King employees being forced to ‘clock out’ during times of low customer demand (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 39).

Working in the night-time economy could also expose young women to a range of risks, including alcohol, drunken (male) customers, and having to travel home alone in the middle of the night, sometimes through ‘rough’ neighbourhoods. For instance, Lisa (W22) described the neighbourhood where she worked in her first bar job at the age of 17 as ‘a bit of a scummy area.’ The bar where Talia (M17) worked was in an inner city area with a reputation for higher-than-average rates of violence and crime. Interviews also revealed an undercurrent of sexualisation of young women in bar work. Sarah (W18) enjoyed her job on the cloakroom in a nightclub, but she frequently regaled me with stories of drunken men trying to ‘chat her up’ while she worked. This undercurrent of sexualisation was articulated more explicitly by Jayne (W22), who was struggling to find paid employment following the completion of her

undergraduate degree. She recounted how one of her boyfriend's friends had suggested she apply for bar work: 'And he says, um, "We always used to hire, regardless of experience." 'Cos I said I had no experience, "We used to hire the girl that dressed the most provocatively".' Talia (M17) recounted a similar experience at the bar where she worked, saying that the owner had 'looked [her] up and down' before hiring her. This reflects findings by McDowell (2012: 574) who argues that young people competing for employment are constructed as 'appropriate or inappropriate employees' based on 'their embodied social characteristics, including their looks, their accent, their posture, as well as their gender and class position.' McDowell suggests that this highlights the endurance of traditional social divisions, including gender, social class and ethnicity. Given the limited timeframe of this study, it was more difficult to ascertain the social class and ethnic dimensions of this sort of employment since, as Furlong and Cartmel (2007: 44) note, bar work is undertaken, at various times, by young people from a range of backgrounds. Nevertheless, several RPs' experiences indicate that their 'appropriateness' as bar staff was assessed based on embodied gendered characteristics including notions of attractiveness and sexuality.

The sexualisation of young women in this context can have devastating consequences. One RP disclosed that she had been raped by a stranger one night after leaving a bar on her own. Two other RPs also disclosed incidents of rape and sexual abuse. Although none of these incidents occurred in the context of a workplace, they were stark reminders of the specifically gendered dangers that young women can face, and which are enhanced in the night-time economy. Several RPs recounted incidents of feeling frightened when walking home alone at night as several had been followed and some had been verbally or physically harassed by male strangers and semi-known acquaintances on these journeys. Working late nights in a bar, therefore, could require either paying for a taxi home which, depending on the distance

needed to travel, could absorb a significant portion of an evening's earnings, or putting oneself at risk travelling home by cheaper, alternative means.

In addition to bar and nightclub work, several RPs were employed in fast food restaurants.

These employment experiences were spoken of less favourably. Jayne (W22) who had worked in a large international fast food chain said 'I hated it [laughs] [...] I've never been in a place where managers treated people so bad.' She felt women were treated particularly badly and given the lower-status jobs. Xyleah (B20), who had worked at a different international fast food chain, also described it in strongly negative terms: 'I was like a hermit. They trapped me in a hole, in my cage. And I was only allowed out when the doorbell rang.'

Not all jobs in the fast food sector were experienced as negative. Anika (B18) felt that her job at a third international fast food chain was a significant improvement on her previous job in a local pub, where she had felt she was taken advantage of:

Obviously [the pub] was my first job... so I didn't know what I had to do kind of thing. Like, my first job and I was getting taxed, yeah, so then I had to carry my tax back and I didn't know what the hell I had to do for that. 'Cos they didn't say "Oh you have to fill out this form." They didn't tell me nothing. [...] And I didn't know that I could get holidays off, and get paid for it as well. They didn't tell me anything at all.

In comparison, she viewed the fast food chain, with its strict emphasis on following employment regulations, as a huge improvement. Nevertheless, she also frequently felt frustrated by last minute rota changes:

I went to [bus stop], yeah, and I was dressed in my work clothes and I would've went straight to work and [manager] rang and said "Oh you don't need to come into work anymore," like, an hour before. And they done it before when I was on the bus going to work. He rang and said "You don't need to come in, you can have the night off." And I was, like, halfway there. (Anika B18)

Like Talia's and Sarah's experiences outlined earlier in this chapter, this reflects the increasingly common corporate 'flexible' employment practices that young people are forced to contend with (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 40).



Negative aspects across the different employment sectors experienced by RPs included low wages, insecure and unpredictable working hours and boredom:

The worst [aspects of the job] would mostly likely be the low pay and lack of notice in regards to the rota. (Jayne W23, on her job as a retail assistant)

If you're not working the tills, you're just walking around, picking clothes up that fell off [a rail] and that. There's nothing fun about it... It's just boring. (Jenny W20, on her experience working in retail)

I lasted at the bank about two months. Not me. I can't sit behind a desk. [...] I used to press '1' enter, and the foreign money would come out, put it in an envelope, stick a piece of paper in. It was all pre-ordered holiday money basically. Travel money. And that's what I did, for eight hours a day. It was quite tedious. So, yeah, I didn't last there very long. (Lindsay W24)

Long working hours and insecure rotas often meant having to sacrifice other aspects of life, including time with family and friends, education and other employment opportunities. As noted in Chapter Four, the long hours were cited by Lindsay (W24) as one of the reasons that she decided to leave her job as a chef and embark on HE in order to become a physiotherapist. Long working hours also competed with the time that Lisa (W22) had to study when she was at university:

I was working 60-70 hours a week. Um, and then I just got caught up... I tried to keep up with studies, but that just lacked off. [...] So I ended up just going, "Right, I can't do that. I'm just gonna work."

Lisa was working full time to support herself and her ill mother, which made it difficult to find time to study. Exacerbating the pressure, her manager was not very supportive of her educational aspirations and Lisa ultimately decided to give up her studies and focus on employment.

Jayne (W23), who had struggled to find paid employment after completing her undergraduate degree in criminology, eventually found a job as a retail assistant at a major retailer.

Although this enabled her to become financially independent and move out of her mother's house into rented accommodation with her fiancé, it also had negative consequences for her

employment aspirations. As noted earlier, Jayne hoped to work for BYOS and was thrilled when she was offered a coveted, but unpaid, internship with the organisation. Unfortunately, her unpredictable rota made it impossible for her to make the regular commitment that BYOS required as she often did not receive details of her retail schedule until the last minute. Without alternative financial support, she could not afford to leave her paid employment in order to pursue the unpaid internship and ultimately had to turn it down. Although her retail job allowed her to achieve financial independence in the near term, it also meant that she was unable to pursue relevant work experience that might help her secure her desired occupation in the longer term. In this case, Jayne's short term 'choice', which was driven purely by financial necessity, was likely to limit the employment choices that would be available to her in the future.

### **5.3.5 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs' diverse experiences of paid and unpaid employment. Many of the older RPs exhibited a strong work ethic and had undertaken paid work from a young age, reflecting Walkerdine et al's (2001: 65) observation that working class girls enter the labour market at a younger age than their middle class peers. The younger RPs had less experiences of paid employment, though many did volunteer work, household chores or unpaid work for family and friends. There was a strongly gendered element to much of this work, which was principally cleaning and babysitting.

RPs' strategies for finding paid employment were frequently informal, relying on family and friendship networks. This meant, however, that they were limited by local labour market opportunities. RPs' employment experiences illustrate the appearance of choice that characterises the current employment landscape. Regardless of their employment aspirations, paid work was most frequently found in the hospitality and/or retail sectors, reflecting the

‘lower tier services’ jobs (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 38; Roberts 2011: 32) typical of the post-industrial labour market. Whilst RPs enjoyed the social aspects of these jobs, the negative aspects included low wages, insecure and/or changing rotas, boredom and lack of progression. Long working hours could entail social and educational sacrifices as Lindsay’s and Lisa’s experiences illustrate. Moreover, without access to parental financial support, short-term strategies for gaining financial independence could limit longer term job opportunities as Jayne’s experience suggests.

The following section explores attitudes towards financial autonomy, (un)employment and social welfare dependence.

## **5.4 Attitudes towards financial (in)dependence**

As noted earlier in this chapter, financial independence was overwhelmingly cited by RPs as the key reason for aspiring to paid employment. This reflects McDonald and Marsh’s (2005: 120) observation that their interviewees ‘imagined adulthood in terms of self-reliance, most obviously symbolised and bought by a wage.’ This section looks at how, in light of this, RPs viewed unemployment, social welfare dependence and, subsequently, their own ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ in relation to obtaining employment.

### **5.4.1 Unemployment**

Most RPs expressed anxiety and frustration about potential and/or experienced unemployment. As Jayne (W22) approached her university graduation and was finding it difficult to secure a job, she said: ‘I don’t want to be unemployed.... That’s my only worry I guess, being unemployed.’ Her fear of unemployment reflected her own experience of having unsuccessfully searched for work for several weeks, in the context of the overall youth unemployment landscape. McDowell (2012: 580) notes that by the end of 2011 in the UK,

nearly half a million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were claiming unemployment benefit and, as outlined in Chapter Two, Birmingham's youth unemployment rate is higher than the national average. Jenny (W21) had experienced several lengthy spells out of work, and was actively seeking employment at the time of both her interviews. She described the experience as 'a nightmare'. Lucy (W21), who was also unemployed and looking for work, expressed the sense of futility she felt about the job search: 'Everyone's looking for experience. But how are [we] going to get experience if you're not going to give it us?' With limited educational qualifications and a lack of employment experience, she felt daunted by the job search.

Because of the stigma associated with unemployment, several RPs who were not working went to great pains to explain why. For instance, Soraya (B18) had just completed college and was waiting to begin an apprenticeship as a gym instructor. She received money from her parents (who were both employed in working class occupations), explaining that her mother actively encouraged her to enjoy some time off before the reality of hard work set in:

At the moment, like, my mum and my dad obviously give me money, 'cos, like, once I start work I'm not gonna stop. Like, no-ones gonna see me once I'm workin'. 'Cos once I'm workin', I'm just into workin', so my mum's like "At the moment you might as well just take a break." 'Cos this is the only break I'm gonna get.

Her comment that 'this is the only break I'm gonna get' hints at perceptions of the employment conditions described by Toynbee (2003) as 'hard work' in 'low-pay Britain.' Soraya was keen to emphasise that not working was a temporary arrangement and that she was no shirker. Not working - often described as 'doing nothing' - was generally disparaged by RPs. At the time of her first interview, Daisy (W17), who was not in education, employment, or training (NEET) following surgery, said: 'People are like, "Ah I want to be a bum and not work" and you know [...] I've been doing it for six months now. I'd rather be at work than, like, doing nothing.' RPs valued working, not just because it provided a source of

income but also because it alleviated boredom and provided a meaningful alternative to ‘doing nothing’.

Being unemployed carried with it the risk of having to claim social welfare, which was overwhelmingly denigrated. This is explored in the following section.

#### **5.4.2 Social welfare dependency**

Several RPs had experience of claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), but there was no evidence to suggest that they considered this a preferred ‘lifestyle choice’ (Moir 2010).

Instead, claiming social welfare benefits was often spoken of in disparaging terms:

AO: Who’s the least successful person you know?

Anika: People on the dole. People who just live off government money... Because to me, that isn’t your money. That’s not yours. It’s not something you can call your own. (Anika B18)

Nevertheless, as illustrated by the following conversation, some RPs also acknowledged that there were cases in which people demonstrated genuine claim to the social welfare system:

Soraya: I can’t even say nothing bad about [welfare benefits claimants], ‘cos some of them can’t get a job.

Anika: Yeah, that’s true.

Soraya: So I can’t even say nothing.

Anika: It’s the ones that don’t try.

Soraya: Yeah.

Anika: That’s the one [...] I think it’s someone who don’t try, they don’t try to do anything for themselves. (Soraya B18 and Anika B18)

After being challenged by Soraya on the basis that there were some genuinely deserving welfare benefits claimants who could not find work, Anika reformed her initial judgement and suggested that it was those ‘who don’t try’ to become financially independent, but claimed benefits instead, who were unsuccessful. Genuine need for welfare, that is trying, but not being able, to find a job, often elicited sympathy rather than negative judgement. This

perspective resonated with popular discourses about the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 126; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013: 168). Indeed, it was not unusual for RPs to make the distinction between deserving and undeserving welfare claimants. Lindsay (W24) contrasted the experience of her cousin who had been on social welfare benefits all her life (an ‘undeserving’ claimant) with the experience of her mother who had been on disability benefits since ill health prevented her from working (a ‘deserving’ claimant):

She [cousin] had a kid when she was... She’s 40 now, 41? She had her first child when she was 19, with a guy who was 16. That didn’t work... [She] got put, because she was on benefits and a single mother, got put on to an estate that wasn’t very nice. Um... had another child with another guy. Or got pregnant with another guy who turned out to be in a relationship. While she was pregnant, she met her husband who was from this estate and has never done a day’s work in his life. [...] She’s got four children now. She’s very intelligent and has never done anything with it. Never worked. He doesn’t work. And it’s just, sometimes, especially with my mum being unable to work now, like they [mum and mum’s partner] struggle. She does get disability and things, but it’s not a lot. And it’s kind of, like, they [cousin and cousin’s husband] actually have a better life, with regards to financially and materialistically, than my mum does. And my mum’s worked hard all her life...

Attitudes towards social welfare benefits claimants perceived as undeserving were often harsh. Lindsay’s narrative highlights the value that she placed on working and the disparaging view she held towards those who did not work. Lindsay looked down on her cousin who was ‘very intelligent and [had] never done anything with it’ and the cousin’s partner who had ‘never done a day’s work in his life’, who were bringing up their children on welfare benefits. On the other hand, she recounted more sympathetically the experience of her mother who ‘worked hard all her life’ but was unable to work due to illness and was, therefore, compelled to rely on disability benefits. Through using the narrative about ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ benefits claimants, Lindsay distinguished her mother from others who she perceived had a less legitimate claim to state assistance.

Similarly, Daisy (W18), who was claiming JSA by the time of her third interview also made the distinction between herself (a ‘deserving’ claimant) and ‘undeserving’ claimants, saying ‘I’m not getting paid and I’m searching for jobs so hard’ whilst other ‘people on the dole [are] putting down jobs they haven’t even applied for.’ MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 126) note that their interviewees frequently engaged in similar discourses ‘to highlight that “I” am not like “them”.’

The attitude amongst RPs was that claiming JSA and other social welfare benefits was not a desirable ‘choice’. As with MacDonald and Marsh’s (2005: 135) interviewees, they perceived it to be ‘an acceptable, temporary alternative way of getting by’ in the absence of viable employment. Jayne (W22), who worried about not being able to find paid employment upon completing her university studies, said:

[If I don’t find a job] I’ll have to sign on to Jobseekers. ‘Cos currently I pay rent to my mum. [...] She didn’t want me to but I didn’t think it was fair to live there and sap all of her money [laughs]. So I pay rent towards that. [...] But I think that’s one thing that I dread, not being able to help her out as much. Um... I would have to sign on to jobseekers. I don’t think I’d have much choice. ‘Cos I’m already crazy in debt with my studies.

Jayne took pride in the fact that she had been financially independent since the age of 16, hence the prospect of not being able to find paid employment was a source of stress for her. Yet, she also reflected on her choice to pursue HE. Whilst this is seen as crucial to securing viable employment (Aapola et al 2005), it had also resulted in significant debt. This debt limited her current options in terms of her capacity to wait for a job she aspired to or ‘choosing’ whether or not to claim welfare benefit should she be unable to find one. Similar to the interviewees in Maguire’s (2010: 328) study, Jayne insisted on paying rent to her mother to maintain her independence, not because her mother demanded payment. She was actively seeking employment at the time of her first interview and felt frustrated at not being able to find work despite her university qualification. The financial debt she had assumed in

order to complete her studies, as well as the fact that she was paying rent to her mother since moving back home<sup>35</sup>, meant that she perceived JSA as a necessary, albeit undesirable, mechanism to subsist until she was able to find employment.

Some RPs weighed decisions about whether or not to claim JSA against potential wages available through paid employment. Although Daisy (W18) disparaged welfare claimants, she also reflected on the low-waged and insecure nature of many available jobs, stating that this would influence her own decisions about employment versus claiming welfare benefits: 'If they're [employer] not offering more than £100 [for every two weeks], then there's no point doing it, 'cos I'm getting £100 from the dole.' In other words, her preference was to work, but if the choice was between working for wages that amounted to less than she would receive for 'doing nothing', she did not see any incentives to choosing employment.

### **5.4.3 'Success' and 'failure'**

Employment and social welfare dependency were both implicated in RPs' perceptions of 'success' and 'failure'. As noted, several RPs looked down on those perceived not to exhibit a strong work ethic, namely, people who did not 'try' to be self-sufficient, who 'wasted' opportunities, skills or perceived intelligence and were 'on the dole' as a result. Giving up easily, quitting, and not following through with things, particularly with regard to education or employment, were also spoken of disparagingly. The interview data suggests that the RPs bought into ideas about 'good' and 'bad' choices leading to (un)successful life outcomes. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising – though still rather striking - that many of the RPs were also harsh in their views of their own 'successes' and 'failures' in education and employment. Five RPs cited themselves, without hesitation, as the 'least successful' person that they knew. The reasons they gave for this were linked to abandoning apprenticeships or paid employment and/or dropping out of education and training courses. Judgements were

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<sup>35</sup> Several other RPs who lived with parents or grandparents, and had an income, also paid rent.



particularly harsh in the cases of repeated incidents of perceived ‘failure’, despite the fact that these outcomes were often the result of diverse, and sometimes multiple and inter-connected, factors. These included experiences of physical and mental health problems, competing responsibilities (financial responsibilities and/or caring for family members with illness), boredom, confusion, inability to concentrate, lack of existing job opportunities, prohibitive cost of HE, being formally excluded from a course or ‘laid off’ from a job and/or experiencing scheduling conflicts between education and work. In outlining these chains of events in their lives, other narratives emerged, in which the RPs described themselves in disparaging terms. They referred to themselves as giving up too quickly, ‘running away’, ‘screwing up’, being ‘stupid’, being ‘lazy’ and/or not ‘sticking with’ anything.

In Chapter Four, it was noted that lack of confidence related to learning is a common gendered phenomenon (Reay et al 2010: 117). It seems feasible that this lack of confidence carries over into the employment sphere for young women, in particular those with weak histories of educational engagement and attainment. The findings in this chapter reflect research by Henderson et al (2007: 46) who found that ‘young people have a tendency to blame themselves rather than social or economic factors for any failure to achieve educational or occupational objectives.’ There is a particularly classed dimension to this, as Aapola et al (2005: 75) note that ‘this narrative remains powerful even with those who do not have the other resources to become successful in the new economy.’ The RPs’ narratives were largely devoid of reference to the ‘structural limitations of the new economy’ (Aapola et al 2005: 76), and this seemed to carry significant psychological implications for those who did not manage to ‘succeed’. This point is returned to in the final section of this chapter.

#### **5.4.4 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs' attitudes toward (un)employment and social welfare dependency.

The RPs universally valued employment and perceived 'shirking' was frowned upon.

Although their attitudes contradicted the popular mainstream media portrayal of welfare benefits dependency as a 'lifestyle choice' (Moir 2010), finding quality paid employment was challenging. This was the case for RPs who lacked advanced credentials as well as those who had made the 'right' educational choices, illustrating the potentially illusory value of educational qualifications. In the context of lack of quality employment, financial constraints and debt, claiming welfare benefits was considered an 'acceptable temporary, alternative way of getting by' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 135). Nevertheless, the RPs seemed to accept the notion of labour market outcomes being the result of individual 'good' and 'bad' choices. This had significant emotional implications as a quarter of RPs cited themselves as the least successful person they knew. There were gendered, classed and ethnic dimensions to this phenomenon, which are reflected upon in the final section of this chapter.

The following section examines issues of localism and the frequently cited aspiration of 'getting away'.

### **5. 5 'Getting away'**

The role of the places where young people live – particularly with regards to 'place attachment', 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital – in shaping their transition pathways has been noted by Henderson et al (2007: 54). Field research highlighted the importance of local family and friendship networks and the salience of local labour market structures in determining available employment opportunities, as well as the negative perceptions RPs

held of the local areas, Midford in particular<sup>36</sup>. This section examines how the pull of Midford and Weston kept some RPs close to home, while others described their local area as somewhere to escape from.

### **5.5.1 The ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of local area**

Locality has been observed to affect young people’s employment outcomes in a variety of ways. As noted in Chapter Four, there is an established link between disadvantage and educational outcomes, which also shapes employment outcomes. Lawy et al (2010: 343) and Maguire (2010: 342) note that access to housing and transport can affect young people’s willingness to search for employment outside their local area. If they choose to stay in disadvantaged areas, they may be subject to the stigma that Atkinson and Kintrea (2001: 2277-2278) find employers associate with young people from such locations.

Some RPs did leave Midford and Weston to pursue education or employment elsewhere. Sarah (W18), Xyleah (B20), Lisa (W22) and Jayne (W23) all chose to attend universities in different cities. Daisy (W18) moved briefly to a different city to work in a bar at a resort and Lindsay (W24) lived and worked in a different city for a year. Nevertheless, these moves were not linear journeys continuously leading away from home. Some RPs had moved several times, including longer and shorter periods back in Midford and Weston. In these accounts, family and relationship ties, as well as financial constraints, were often implicated in the pull back home. Such was the case for Lisa (W22), who dropped out of university during her first year to return home and care for her seriously ill mother, and Jayne (W22), who also moved back to Midford after completing her undergraduate studies. Jayne’s decision was made partly due to financial necessity and partly due to her close ties with her family:

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<sup>36</sup> See Appendix A.

Jayne: I know that Midford isn't the best area but I'm used to it. It's familiar so... I don't know... I'll probably stay close. [...] I like this area. As bad as it sounds I like this area.

AO: What do you like about it?

Jayne: I don't know. I think it's convenience mostly. 'Cos... my sisters are close. And I'm closer to my sisters than anyone. And [boyfriend's] family is quite close.

Family and relationship ties were cited by several RPs as a pull back to Birmingham, even those who had the opportunity to go away. For Jayne, these were combined with financial constraints when she decided to move back in with her mother until she found a job and was able to move in with her fiancé. Sarah (W18) was making plans to go away to university in a different city. Although she was looking forward to this new chapter in her life, she also said 'It's just my family I'm scared of leaving [...] 'Cos, umm, we're such a family kind of people. All our family live really close.' Lindsay (W24) had moved to a city in the South when she was younger to work. When she returned to Birmingham, she chose to live in a different area of the city. She had come out as gay when she was younger, and although her mother had ultimately accepted her daughter's sexuality, I got the sense that their relationship was not always easy. Her mother's attitude is illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

Lindsay: My mum had always been quite averse to that kind of lifestyle [i.e. being gay] and didn't agree with it. It was wrong.

AO: So she thought of it as a lifestyle then?

Lindsay: Yeah, I think my mum always thought of it as a choice rather than who you are.

Although Lindsay did not say so, her mother's attitude may have influenced her decision to live in a different part of the city. In her early 20s, Lindsay decided to return to HE as a mature student. She chose to stay in Birmingham, citing relationship ties: 'I was in a relationship and we'd been together for three years, we lived together and I didn't want to move... And I was older so didn't really want to move away to 'uni'.'

A reluctance to leave family and friends was particularly notable among the younger RPs. Ellie (W15) said: 'I don't know if I could go away from home. 'Cos if I went away from home, I'd end up living there and I just don't want to do it.' Tanya (W16) spoke of her anxiety about attending university in a different city - something she thought would need to do if she pursued her dream of becoming a marine biologist:

I'd obviously need to move away [...] which is why I got so many [backup career choices] because I'm, I'm really not too keen about moving away and having, like, no-one who I know with me.

The ties of family, friends and relationships anchored many RPs to Midford and Weston, despite the negative aspects they mentioned about these areas.

A large number of RPs spoke about wanting to leave Midford and Weston, either temporarily or permanently. Their reasons are explored below.

### **5.5.2. The desire to travel and/or 'escape'**

The desire to 'get away' emerged in several interviews. For some RPs, 'getting away' involved dreams of travelling:

I don't wanna stay in Birmingham. Like, I just wanna travel the world. (Soraya B18)

I wanna go travelling. I wanna see the world. I wanna experience different things. (Sarah W18)

When I leave college I wanna... go on a cruise and travel the world doing hair. (Daisy W17)

Hopefully after that [training] I can get on a cruise ship and do gym instructing on a cruise. (Lucy W21)

Some articulated the desire for shorter vacations abroad, while others including Daisy and Lucy hoped to spend longer periods of time away through finding paid employment that involved, or at least enabled, overseas travel.

It is likely that for many RPs the desire to travel was spurred by the increasingly globalised nature of the world, the availability of information on the Internet and social media.

Additionally, the rise of affordable air travel due to the emergence of a range of 'low cost' airlines and packaged tours, means that travel abroad has now become accessible to a growing number of people. Henderson et al (2007:105) note that 'holidays and travelling' were an 'important source of pleasure and leisure' for their young respondents as they gained access to financial resources through work.

Some RPs articulated further strategies for more permanent escape, through moving away.

Many RPs cited the desire to move abroad:

I don't want to live in the UK. I want to move away and do what I want to do. [...] I dunno... maybe to Australia or something. (Tina B18)

I wanna move to America. (Shanelle B17)

I'd like to perhaps contemplate going abroad for a bit, work abroad maybe, depending on the situation, whether I've got my masters, and I've passed that and am a qualified physiotherapist. (Lindsay W24)

I want to live abroad. I've always wanted to live abroad. [laughs] Um [...] Probably Greece. I'm not sure. Or America. (Talia M17)

It was difficult to gauge how serious these stated aspirations to move away were. Jenny (W21) spoke of moving away from Midford, either to the inner city Birmingham area where her father lived or to Australia. These two destinations were starkly different and suggested, in line with RPs' aspirations, a combination of 'realistic' and 'dream' options. Jenny explained her attraction to Australia in terms of 'the accent', 'the men' and 'the people, they're so nice and generous.' Similarly, Shanelle (B17) and Soraya (B17) spoke very enthusiastically about wanting to move to America. The life that they imagined in America was 'fun' and 'different' and involved a sense of freedom: 'cruisin' in your car', 'just enjoying life', and 'having a job that you enjoy'. Often, these narratives suggested idealised, dreamlike, characteristics.

Sometimes, the desire to get away was influenced by parental attitudes. In her first interview, Jenny (W20) told me that her mother was hoping to move to Cornwall. She said 'I'm not sure

where I will be living [in five years' time] because my mum's moving to Cornwall in, like, a couple of years. So I don't know if I will be in Birmingham or if I will be in Cornwall.'

Talia's (M17) desire to move to Greece was also linked to her mother's dream of moving there:

We've went there on a lot of holidays and I love it over there [Greece]. Because how hot it is and just the people over there seem really friendly and that. And I know I won't be living in, like, the holiday resort. But I'd just love to live over there anyway, it's easier to get jobs, and even as a barmaid I'd love to just live over there.

For some RPs, the desire to get away was explained in practical terms associated with the perceived availability of work. Talia (M17) suggested that 'it's easier to get jobs' in Greece.

Soraya (B18), who had emphasised the desire to escape both the boredom of the 'same old people' and limitations of Birmingham, said 'I wanna go London. 'Cos then I've got more opportunities there than here.' Sarah (W19) contemplated moving away from Birmingham to be somewhere with an established fashion industry in order to become a designer.

The following section examines the desire to 'get away' permanently in the context of existing local opportunities (or lack thereof) for social mobility.

### **5.5.3 Alternative to social mobility?**

When considered in the context of the disadvantaged areas in which many young women make their transitions into the labour market, expressed desires of 'getting away' take on particular significance. Lucy (W21) was one of the RPs who wanted to 'get away' from Midford, though she spoke of a destination closer to home:

Lucy: I'd love to live in London.

AO: Lucy, why do you want to move to London? What is it about London that you like?

Jenny: London's just as bad as 'ere.

Lucy: No I wouldn't live in... [the bad part of] London.

Jenny: Essex?

Lucy: I'd live in, like, the nice part.

Jenny: Essex?

Lucy: Like, no. I don't even think I'd live in Essex. I'd like to visit Essex<sup>37</sup> but... yeah I'd love to live in the nice part of London. (Lucy W21 and Jenny W21)

Lucy related her desire to move to London to accounts of the exciting life of her uncle who lived there. Her narrative also echoed the desire to escape the social problems of Midford – an area which she and Jenny described variously as 'horrible', 'vile', and 'chavvy' due to the 'gangs', 'alcoholics' and 'druggies', thereby reiterating similar descriptions of Midford presented by a number of RPs. When Jenny suggests that London's 'just as bad' as Midford, Lucy clarifies that she won't live in the 'bad part' of London, but in the 'nice part'. It was unclear whether Lucy was aware of the level of economic means that living in the 'nice' parts of London would require. It is, after all, a city that has repeatedly made the headlines in recent years due to increased gentrification of formerly affordable neighbourhoods, to the extent that lower income residents are pushed out only to be replaced by the überwealthy (Cecil 2015; O'Carroll 2015; Sheffield 2015). There is a stark difference between having the means and resources necessary for moving away from Midford versus achieving social mobility.

This discussion with Lucy and Jenny, as well as discussions with other RPs who dreamt of moving out of Midford, reminded me of another young woman I met through MYC, who I had initially hoped to interview. Before this could happen, however, she moved away to a town in South West England with her toddler son. I learned that her decision had been underpinned by the desire to escape the social problems that characterised Midford, specifically crime, violence and drugs and give her son a 'better' future. A few years later,

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<sup>37</sup> The Essex reference was interesting, not least because it conflated Essex with London. Although I did not explore this further at the time, the 'scripted reality' television series *The Only Way is Essex (TOWIE)* was popular among several RPs, and it is possible that impressions of Essex as a 'nicer', more exciting, place to live than Midford, or even London, were based on this.



however, I heard that she was moving back to Midford. The new life she had imagined had been hampered by the realisation that the same social problems she had encountered in Midford also plagued her new hometown. She also missed the support from family and friends ‘at home’. This resonates with McKenzie’s (2015: 200) observation that local family and kinship networks on the Nottingham Estate where she conducted her study provided crucial resources for ‘getting by’.

It is revealing that, when asked about how they would make their emphatic goal of ‘getting away’ a reality, most RPs seemed uncertain. Lindsay (W24) said:

I’ve always wanted to [move abroad]. I’m sick of England to be honest. It gets a bit cold and wet and miserable. Places like Australia, maybe South Africa. Places like that. I’m intrigued to see what they’re like.

When probed about how she would make this happen, she responded:

I’m not sure to be honest, I’m really not, because I haven’t really looked into it that much. But with regards to Australia a lot of it is down to your job. Medically you can get in a lot easily. It’s a profession that gives you access to certain things which is quite good. Uh, I haven’t really looked into it that much to be honest. (Lindsay W24)

Similarly, Shanelle (B17) and Soraya (B17) also seemed unsure about how to move to America:

AO: You talked about moving to the States. How would you make that dream happen?

Shanelle: Um...

Soraya: I’d want... yeah. I’d want to go over there, and stay there like six months or something and get, like see.

Shanelle: Like try it all out first...

Soraya: And see... how you find it.

Shanelle: Or do, like, an internship. You can do that over there, can’t you? Like, with a company or something. So...

Soraya: And there’s also that Camp America.

Discussing their stated desire to move to America in more detail, it emerged that, like Lindsay, Shanelle and Soraya had not explored actual possibilities for relocating. These narratives indicate that, for many of the RPs, going abroad was more of a fantasy than a real strategy for escaping Midford and Weston. This reflects similar findings by Henderson et al (2007) and Nilsen (1999). Some RPs' narratives appeared to be influenced by images from social media, television and cinema, whilst others were based on happy memories of family holidays to sunny, friendly resorts. In any case, these idealised depictions of places far away contrasted starkly with their invariably grim descriptions of the local area, Midford in particular.

In the late 1990s, Bynner et al (1997) studied the transitions of British young people in their twenties, noting three typologies. The first was the 'high fliers' who were 'getting on', including those who had educational qualifications and 'personal circumstances' that enabled them to 'take advantage of the new occupational opportunities of the 1990s' and achieve success (Bynner et al 1997: 120). The second included those young people that were simply 'getting by', specifically those who left education with few qualifications and were thus limited to insecure, low-waged employment opportunities. The third were those who were 'getting nowhere', that is, those who left school at minimum age without qualifications and who were at higher risk of insecure employment or unemployment, as well as early entry into domestic careers including parenthood.

Much has been written about the changing nature of youth transitions during the two decades since Bynner et al's research was published. Standing (2011) highlights that the 'precariat', many of whose members are 'getting nowhere', is growing. In light of this, the narratives of the RPs suggest that there is a fourth category to add to the 'getting on, getting by and getting nowhere' thesis. This fourth category could be outlined in terms of 'getting away'. With stalling opportunities for social mobility in Britain – indeed a downward trend in social

mobility has been observed (Henderson et al 2007: 55) - the possibility of ‘getting on’, and even ‘getting by’, is becoming more elusive for many young people growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Certainly, ‘getting nowhere’ - that is, getting stuck in insecure employment or, worse, unemployment - was not an appealing option for any of the RPs.

As noted earlier in this chapter, several RPs made concerted attempts to disassociate themselves and their families from those who might be included in this category. MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 127) reference the ‘complicated local mythology’ that individuals used to distinguish themselves from benefits claimants and others who are deemed to be ‘useless and unworthy’. In a similar fashion, the RPs’ narratives about ‘getting away’ – which were rarely underpinned by clear strategies for doing so - indicate another possible mechanism by which the RPs aimed to disassociate themselves from the area in which they lived. If social mobility is in decline, and getting on, or moving up, is no longer an option for many young people, then ‘getting away’ – or at least *the idea of getting away* – is perhaps an alternative to the dreaded possibility of getting nowhere.

#### **5.5.4 Section conclusion**

This section examined the influence of aspects of localism on RPs’ transition strategies and experiences. Although other studies have found localism to be a classed phenomenon that often limits young people’s transition opportunities, the findings from this study were mixed. Whilst the younger RPs exhibited a reluctance to move away, several older RPs had moved to engage in higher education and/or employment in other cities. Frequently, however, family responsibilities and/or support networks brought them back ‘home’, thereby limiting their employment prospects to local opportunities.

Despite this, a large number of RPs articulated the desire to ‘get away’, either through travel or moving, often abroad. However, plans for making this happen were often nebulous, and it was difficult to ascertain whether their aspirations represented firm strategies or merely fantasies of escaping the locality. This section argues that the popular notion of ‘getting away’ illustrated the RPs’ awareness of the elusive nature of social mobility in the post-industrial city. In this context, the articulation of plans to ‘get away’ represented a desire to disassociate from the risks of ‘failure’ in the context of lacking opportunities locally for getting ahead.

## **5.6 Chapter conclusion: what does intersectionality illuminate?**

This chapter has examined RPs’ attitudes towards, and experiences of, (un)employment and financial (in)dependence. It has analysed their occupational aspirations, their employment experiences, the challenges that they encountered and the strategies that they adopted in making their transitions into the labour market. This conclusion illustrates what an intersectional lens reveals about these transitions.

The RPs’ narratives indicate that, in some respects, the post-industrial employment context was experienced in similar ways regardless of their positionality within the matrix of structural inequalities. The RPs universally aspired to financial independence through paid employment, reflecting the growing opportunities available to young women in the post-industrial labour market. Only a handful of RPs entertained the idea of full-time stay-at-home-motherhood and only if supported by a (male) breadwinner. Unemployment was feared and social welfare dependence eschewed, although it was deemed acceptable as an occasional, temporary means of ‘getting by’ in the absence of viable employment. Attitudes towards the future were generally perceived as uncertain and generated anxiety, irrespective of social class or ethnic background. Regardless of their specific occupational aspirations,

however, the types of employment experiences cited by most RPs were in the hospitality and retail sectors and routes into employment were frequently informal.

Nevertheless, an intersectional lens did reveal some important nuances. Chapter Four highlighted significant differences in occupational aspirations and underlying rationale along both classed and ethnic lines. As noted, the majority of RPs articulated occupational aspirations that were in ‘feminised’ employment sectors, such as childcare, health and social care, hairdressing and primary school teaching reflecting gendered tendencies observed elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 85). A small number of RPs studied less gendered courses or articulated more ‘masculine’ job aspirations. Lindsay (W24), Lisa (W22) and Lucy (W21) had wanted to become PE teachers<sup>38</sup>, while Tanya (W16) hoped to become a marine biologist or astronomer, although her backup plan was to become a teacher.

Adding social class to the analytical lens reveals some classed differences in aspirations. Tanya’s occupational goals were not only less typically gendered, but were also more middle class, most likely nurtured by her middle class family and educational background. In contrast, a number of RPs articulated the desire for occupations that are typically characterised as working class, such as childcare or hairdressing. Meanwhile, others aspired to more upwardly-mobile occupations primarily in middle class professions such as teaching, nursing, midwifery and radiography. RPs who aspired to middle class occupations often had at least one parent or other trusted adult in their lives, who placed a high value on higher education. Many of these parents were also either in middle class or self-employed entrepreneurial occupations. This resonates with findings from Walkerdine et al (2001: 57) and Margo and Dixon (2006: 49), who also observed differences in the occupational aspirations of young people from different social class backgrounds.

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<sup>38</sup> Whilst PE teaching is a job held by both men and women, specific activities within the curriculum are often perceived in highly gendered ways (Waddington et al 1998).

Expanding the analytical lens to include ethnicity suggests that working class occupations were predominantly aspired to by white and mixed-parentage working class RPs. Notably, all RPs articulating a desire for stay-at-home-motherhood were from white working class households. As many had a history of weak educational attainment, it seems feasible that full-time motherhood would offer them a respected position in their community (McKenzie 2015) without the need for further educational engagement. By contrast, some of the older white working class RPs, as well as several black working class RPs, revealed aspirations for upward social or wage mobility through their occupational choices. Older white working class RPs often had extensive experience of low-waged labour and cited their employment motivation as wanting to escape the low-wage trap by gaining advanced credentials. Similarly, the black RPs also exhibited a desire for social mobility through striving for middle class occupations requiring advanced degrees, resonating with findings by Mirza (1992, 2009).

An intersectional lens also highlights some interesting differences with regard to attitudes towards 'success' and 'failure'. From a gendered perspective, the tendency of a quarter of the RPs to identify themselves as the 'least successful' person they know is perhaps not surprising. As noted in Chapter Four, Reay et al (2010) suggest that lack of academic self-confidence is a gendered phenomenon. Given the strong links between educational performance and employment prospects, lack of confidence will likely extend to occupational accomplishments and prospects. Focusing the analytical lens on class reveals that the majority of RPs citing themselves as the least successful person they know lived in households headed by a parent in a working class occupation. Yet, when ethnicity is added to the lens, clear differences emerged along ethnic lines. It was predominantly white working class RPs who exhibited this tendency, while, black and mixed parentage RPs all cited someone else, usually a friend, or 'people on the dole' more generally. This study proposes

that this manifestation of self-esteem is a direct result of the learner identities imposed upon RPs during secondary school, as well as the ways in which the RPs responded to these. Research indicates that working class pupils' abilities as learners are frequently circumscribed by teachers (Reay 2006; Dunne and Gazeley 2008), but that white and black pupils respond differently to this imposed positioning. MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 67) note that white working class students' learner identities are 'often severely damaged' by this process. In the absence of a structural framework for understanding their own experiences, it is likely that this damage also affects RPs' overall self-esteem with regard to perceptions of further educational and occupational 'successes' and 'failures'. By contrast, Mirza (1992) observes that the young black women in her study did not internalise the negative identities imposed upon them during compulsory education. She argues that although the young black women resented the negative stereotypes imposed upon them by teachers, these did not erode their self-esteem (Mirza 1992: 54-55). Instead, she proposes, they engaged in a process of 'strategic rationalisation' (Mirza 2009: 16), underpinned by their belief in meritocracy, in order to pursue social mobility through gaining advanced credentials. The findings from this doctoral research study echo this.

The following chapter goes on to examine the RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, independent household formation.

# Chapter 6. Independent household formation

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## 6.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, independent household formation in the context of young women's increased opportunities for financial independence. The first section looks at RPs' families of origin since these define access to 'the material, cultural and social resources' which help shape the opportunities available to young people (Aapola et al 2005: 84). It also examines housing transitions, since moving from the parental home to independent living is considered a 'key dimension' of transitions to adulthood (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 152). The second section examines couple relationships and views about marriage. Finally, the chapter examines attitudes about motherhood, concluding with an examination of the experiences of three RPs who became pregnant as teenagers and the decisions they made. It draws primarily on data from interviews, field notes chronicling observations with young people and staff at MYC, as well as contextual data about Midford and Weston. The findings are framed within the literature reviewed in Chapter One.

## 6.1 Housing transitions

Historically, young women lived in the parental home until they moved out to get married (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 66). This has changed since the 1980s, alongside young women's increased opportunities for financial independence through the pursuit of advanced credentials and employment. This section begins by providing an overview of RPs' families of origin, since these shaped the emotional and material resources available to RPs when making choices about independent adulthood (Aapola et al 2005: 84; Holdsworth and



Morgan 2005: 127). It then moves on to examine the RPs' aspirations, and experiences, of independent living.

### **6.1.1 Families of origin**

17 of the 19 participants in this study had biological parents who were separated or divorced. The reasons for parental relationship breakdown varied and the research did not explore these in great detail but domestic violence (two cases), infidelity (four cases), and the accrual of a large amount of debt (one case) were cited as relevant factors, with overlap in some instances. Only one RP had parents who were still married and living together, and another's parents were married and lived together until the mother passed away. Four RPs had mothers who had remarried and, thus, had a long-term step-father<sup>39</sup>. Three additional mothers, but none of the three fathers who were the primary parent, were in long-term 'semi-detached'<sup>40</sup> (Bauman cited in Henderson et al 2007: 143) or live-in relationships.<sup>41</sup> Approximately half of the RPs' primary parents were single at the time of interview, although some had previously been in long-term relationships, including one mother who had remarried and divorced a second time. This data is relevant because it highlights nuances frequently omitted from 'broken family' discourses that designate 'father absence' as a cause of poverty and welfare dependence (Social Justice Policy Group 2006: 32; Centre for Social Justice 2012: 6). Whilst poverty is more likely to affect single parent families (Millar 2010: 135), 'broken family' discourses conveniently confuse correlation and causation. By pointing the finger at single parents which, as Millar (2010: 123) reminds us, are usually mothers, these discourses

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<sup>39</sup> Some fathers, who were not the primary biological parent, had also remarried – although I do not include this data here.

<sup>40</sup> According to Henderson et al (2007: 143) semi-detached couples are couples who choose not to live together, often have separate friends and finances and 'spend time together when they feel like it'. Levin (2004) calls this 'living apart together'.

<sup>41</sup> The difference in maternal partnership status was not significant between Midford and Weston with nearly 40% in long-term relationships in Midford; just over 30% in long-term relationships in Weston. Of the three young women who lived with their fathers, only one spoke of a new long-term partner, although this relationship had recently ended (something the daughter was pleased about).

perpetuate ideas about poverty being the consequences of individual actions and ‘choices’ rather than the result of societal inequalities. They also ignore the fact that poverty often persists even where single parenthood is ‘not permanent’ (Millar 2010: 124).

The financial challenges faced by the majority of the RPs’ families reflect the correlation observed by Millar (2010: 122) between ‘sole parenthood’ and material constraints. Yet, there were some observable differences. For instance, the white working class RPs’ mothers were more likely than the mothers of the black working class RPs to be in live-in or ‘semi-detached’ relationships. In cases where the mother had a partner in employment, households benefitted from additional financial support. In contrast, the black RPs’ mothers were all single, which meant that their households were largely dependent on single incomes. Despite this, the black RPs were less likely than their white peers to speak of financial hardship in the family. This may have been due to the middle-working class, and (in one case) lower-middle class, occupations held by their mothers. However, since the white RPs with ‘sole parents’ in middle class occupations did refer to financial hardship, it may also have indicated reluctance on the part of black RPs to disclose this information to a researcher who was not ‘one of them’ (Housee 2010). Despite the financial hardship recounted by several RPs, their experiences overall reflected observations elsewhere that non-traditional family constellations can, and often do, provide young people with stability (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 64) and crucial support structures (Seaman and Sweeting 2004: 187). Nevertheless, material poverty remained a challenge for many of the RPs’ families. Since the majority of RPs lived in ‘sole parent’ households, this was true regardless of the occupational class status of parents.

Of the RPs whose parents had separated or divorced, many spoke of difficult or non-existent relationships with the parent they were not living with on a periodic or permanent basis.

Interrupted relationships were often, but not always, due to the acrimonious nature of parental separations. In many of these cases, mothers were the primary caregiver and ‘emotional

core,’ whilst fathers were a ‘source of uncertainty and change’ (Thomson cited in Graham and McDermott 2006: 149).

Some of the RPs’ responses reinforced this sentiment:

My dad’s not really a dad. He’s just kind of a mate, sort of really. He’s never really been a dad. [...] My mum brought me up. (Lindsay W24)

He [father] can be a bit of a knob sometimes, like the way he is. Like, he’d rather spend more money on his, like, girlfriend [than his children]. But then, like... I don’t really mind ‘cos, like, my mum gives me everything anyway, so... it’s not like I need money off him. (Daisy W18)

Five RPs were completely estranged from one biological parent (either mother or father) at the time of interview. Another spoke of a fraught relationship with her mother and cited this as the reason she recently moved in with her grandparents<sup>42</sup>. In most of these cases a range of complex contributing issues existed, including acrimonious divorces, substance abuse and, in the case of one parent, abusive behaviour. The majority of RPs, however, reported a loving and supportive relationship with at least one biological parent.

In several cases, extended family also provided support, echoing findings by Seaman et al (2006: 180) in their study of a disadvantaged area of Glasgow. Where parents (mothers or fathers) were absent, grandparents sometimes took on parental roles:

Honestly I feel like [grandmother] brought me up better than my own mum [...] She’s the one that taught me how to write. She’s the one that taught me to walk, d’you know what I mean? (Lucy W21)

My dad hasn’t been really a big part of my life since I was seven [...] My granddad just took that role [...] and he was the centre of the family. (Sarah W18)

Nevertheless, this type of support is frequently ignored in discourses attributing poverty and inequality to ‘broken’ families (McKenzie 2015: 10).

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<sup>42</sup> Although all of the RPs reporting parental estrangement at the time of interview, as well as the participant who had moved in with her grandparents, lived in Midford, this is not necessarily representative of family relationships in the local area. Several RPs living in Midford (as well other young people I encountered at MYC) reported positive relationships with both parents, even those who were separated. It may be that young people with complex family situations were more likely to regularly attend Midford Youth Centre and, thus, more likely to be included in my research sample.

In cases where parents had a new partner, relationships varied. Some RPs felt ambivalent about new partners. Xyleah (B20), for instance, referred to her father's girlfriend as both 'nice' and 'sneaky', ultimately concluding that the new relationship 'could have been worse.' Other RPs held negative feelings towards parental partners, which could lead to family tension or conflict. 'Kayla'<sup>43</sup> said: 'I never got along with [mother's boyfriend] and my mum didn't really want me because of all the arguments [...] So, I went to live with foster parents.'

In several cases, however, RPs reported close relationships with their parent's new partner. For example, Lindsay (W24) said:

My stepdad's been around for about... 12 years. And I'd say he's been more of a dad to me in them 12 years than my dad has ever been... In the way that he treats me, the things he does for me and he considers me and everything. I'm his daughter the way he sees it, it's not a case of I'm his stepdaughter and so on.

In Lindsay's case, her stepfather had taken on the fathering role, whilst her own father had, as noted above, become more of 'a mate'. Talia (M17) referred to a trusting and supportive relationship with her stepfather, saying 'I'd rather tell my stepdad things than my mum 'cos it's easier to speak to him.' When it came to challenging issues or major life decisions, Talia's stepfather was often the first line of communication between her and her mother. In these cases, the stepfathers were perceived as steady and positive influences in RPs' lives.

Overall, most RPs felt supported by their parents despite not living in traditional nuclear families. In those cases where one, or both, parents did not provide their daughters with adequate support, extended members of the family, usually a grandparent, often stepped in to take on this role. Nevertheless, the RPs universally aspired to independent living, which was considered key to becoming adult. This is the topic of the following section.

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<sup>43</sup> Second-level pseudonym used to protect RP's anonymity.

### 6.1.2 Moving out of the parental home

Due to their diverse ages, RPs were in different stages of housing transition. 15 lived in the parental home at the time of their first interview. Of these, some spent time between parental homes and one spent a great deal of time staying at her grandmother's house, although her primary place of residence was with her mother. Another RP moved out of her mother's house and lived with her grandparents. Three RPs lived away from the parental home in rented accommodation - one with a friend, one with her girlfriend and one on her own. During the fieldwork period, the RPs' housing experiences often proved to be temporary, reflecting Furlong and Cartmel's observation that young people increasingly 'find themselves moving back and forth into a variety of living arrangements over the life course' (2007: 53).

Cohabitation was one reason for changing living arrangements, and could be temporary and/or experimental (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 66), as well as a potential first stage in partnership leading to marriage<sup>44</sup>. For instance, Jenny (W20) disclosed several temporary moves including living with her boyfriend and in sheltered accommodation after an argument with her mother at the age of 15 before eventually moving back into her mother's house a few months later. Talia (M17) engaged in cohabitation as a form of experimentation, moving in with her boyfriend and his mother for a year before moving back to her mother's house. She reflected on the experience:

It was acting a bit grown up when we was living together [laughs]. Um, but I just think it's better [not living together] because we get to see each other when we want and we get to hang out with our friends and whatever.

Talia and her boyfriend had experimented with being 'grown up' by living together, albeit living with his mother, but encountered challenges. Instead of the 'fun' relationship they had before the experiment began, they argued a lot. Talia ultimately moved back into her

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<sup>44</sup> Furlong and Cartmel also cite a third example – outright rejection of the institution of marriage – although this did not emerge in my fieldwork data.

mother's house, thereby ending the cohabitation experiment, although she and her boyfriend remained a couple.

Lisa (W22) and Jayne (W22) also cohabited with their respective partners, illustrating examples of the first stage in a long-term relationship. Jayne (W22) had initially moved out of her mother's house to attend university in a different city and lived with her boyfriend who later became her fiancé. After completing their degrees, however, they both moved back to Birmingham and into their respective parental homes whilst looking for employment. Their goal was to find work and save up enough money to move back in together, something they had accomplished by the time of Jayne's second interview. Although housing 'choices' could be constrained by financial resources, Jayne and her boyfriend developed a strategy for moving back in together. As noted in Chapter Five, this strategy also shaped Jayne's employment decisions.

Lisa (W22) left home to attend university in another city, although she moved back within a year to care for her ill mother. At the time of her first interview, Lisa was living with her long-term girlfriend. They had spoken about marriage<sup>45</sup> and were considering buying a house together. By the time of her second interview, however, the relationship had ended and Lisa had moved back into her mother's house, illustrating that not all long-term relationships are permanent. Although my fieldwork did not reveal examples of cohabitation as an outright rejection of the institution of marriage, several RPs – as will be explored later in this chapter – were averse to getting married. Nevertheless, they also expressed the desire for cohabitation with their romantic partners.

Cohabitation was not the only reason for changing housing status. Five RPs (Daisy W18; Xyleah B20; Jayne W22; Lisa W22; Lindsay W24) moved out of the family home due to

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<sup>45</sup> At the time of interview, gay marriage was not yet legal in the UK. Whilst Lisa spoke of civil partnership, she referred to this as 'marriage'.

education or employment. More than half moved back again after these experiences ended, either naturally or prematurely. In other instances, for example, family conflict, moving out was not a choice but a necessity. This was the case for ‘Kayla’ who had lived with her mother and her mother’s new partner and subsequently with foster parents, before moving in with her father. In some cases, reasons overlapped. Lucy (W21) lived with her grandparents as she did not get along with her mother, but she also took on, informally, the role of carer for her ill grandfather. The choice to care for a family member could, as illustrated by Lisa’s experience in Chapter Four and Five, impinge on the RPs’ available time and energy for education and/or employment.

Although RPs aspired to autonomous living, they also acknowledged the financial demands this entailed. Having her ‘own place’ was something all the RPs desired, whether ‘own’ meant independently or with a partner, or buying or renting. Imbued in this aspiration was a desire for independence. The preference for home ownership observed nationally (Park et al 2012: 125), was reflected among the RPs’ families, approximately half of whom owned their own homes. This was, however, not always a straightforward process and the issue of parental debt linked to mortgage borrowing was disclosed by two RPs. For one family, the problem was compounded following parental job loss, resulting in a narrowly-avoided repossession.

Buying a home was articulated as a goal by some of the older RPs. For example, Xyleah (B20) said:

I’d rather have my own place. I don’t even wanna rent. That probably seems big-headed now, but my ideal place [...] like I’d like to have my own house. I’d just have a mortgage, ‘cos eventually that could be our family home.

Xyleah's suggestion that the house could be a 'family home' indicates a long-term strategy, one based on normative notions of home ownership<sup>46</sup> (Heath 2008: 24; Park et al 2012: 123). Yet, her comment that wanting to buy a house 'probably seems big-headed now' indicates that buying could be seen as an ambitious, even unrealistic, goal at her age. Xyleah's comment hints at the 'appearance of choice' indicating that although the aspiration of home ownership has become common for young people, in practice the option is increasingly unaffordable for many (Heath 2008: 24). The financial challenges related to buying a house were often acknowledged:

It'd be nice to have my own house [laughs]. Don't think that's gonna happen, but we'll see [laughs]. (Lindsay W24)

It's easier to rent, I think, to begin with. To sort of accumulate stuff, like furniture... So I want to accumulate furniture rather than just drop, like, fifteen grand on a deposit, whatever. We've got to make that fifteen first. (Jayne W22)

House prices have risen substantially in the past few decades (Park 2012: 131) and significant deposits are now required to be able to get on to the housing ladder in view of tighter criteria among lenders since the financial crisis. Home ownership is increasingly challenging for young people, particularly those from less affluent families who do not have access to parental financial assistance (Heath 2008: 24) and/or are in low-paid, temporary, part-time or insecure employment. These young people also often spend longer living in the parental home (Aapola et al 2005: 101; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 61).

### **6.1.3 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs' transitions from family of origin to autonomous living. It found that the majority of RPs felt supported despite not living in traditional nuclear families. Nevertheless, material hardship was a common theme, particularly as many RPs lived in sole parent families. The RPs' housing experiences reflected the range of choices beyond

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<sup>46</sup> The British Social Attitudes survey found that 86 per cent of Britons aspired to home ownership.



marriage that are available to young women in the post-industrial city, as well as the increased fragmentation of housing transitions observed elsewhere (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). RPs' experiences of moving out of the parental home, as well as moving back, were due to both choice and necessity. Reasons for changing housing status included changed education, employment or relationship status, family conflict and/or caring responsibilities. Whilst the majority of RPs aspired to home ownership, many believed that the cost of doing so was prohibitive. Those in low-paid or insecure employment, and without access to parental financial assistance, face particular challenges to independent living and often spend longer living in the parental home (Aapola et al 2005: 101; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 61). Whilst Jayne (W22), and to some degree Xyleah (B20), articulated a strategy for achieving autonomous living, most of the RPs appeared to respond more reactively to their shifting housing status, though this may have been due to age as well as financial constraints.

The following section explores RPs' experiences of, and attitudes towards, couple relationships.

## **6.2 Couple relationships**

Marriage was at one time 'a source of financial security' (Henderson et al 2007: 137) for young women. With increased opportunities for financial independence arising from growth in labour market prospects for women, possibilities to delay or avoid marriage altogether have also increased (Aapola et al 2005: 80). This section examines RPs' attitudes towards couple relationships and marriage.

### 6.2.1 Relationship tendencies

The majority of RPs self-identified as heterosexual, two as gay and one as bi-sexual<sup>47</sup>. With the exception of four of the younger RPs (aged 14-18), most had started to experience couple relationships and sexual relations. Seven RPs were in long-term relationships at the time of interview (defined, in the context of this research, as more than one year<sup>48</sup>), while three were dating and nine were single. Of the single RPs, three referenced a past significant long-term relationship. Those without relationship experience all articulated relationship aspirations.

Although attitudes towards relationships varied, they generally reflected the main tendencies identified by Henderson et al (2007: 141-142) for ‘autonomy’, ‘fusion’ or ‘being uncommitted’. Seven RPs were in a relationship, and/or open to dating, but their overarching priority was pursuing education or finding employment (‘autonomy’). By contrast, four RPs prioritised relationships (‘fusion’). Six RPs expressed a preference for *both* ‘fusion’ and ‘autonomy’. That is, whilst they strongly valued intimate relationships or were in long-term partnerships, they also held strong individual educational or employment aspirations. For them, these positions were not mutually exclusive.

The third tendency, ‘being uncommitted,’ is characterised by the prioritisation of an ‘extended and independent fun-filled youth’ (Henderson et al 2007: 142). Although this was not a tendency that emerged directly as a priority among RPs, it was nonetheless alluded to by some. For instance, whilst Daisy’s relationship was very much a priority in her life at the time of each of her interviews, she also reflected that:

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<sup>47</sup> Sexuality was at times more fluid than this breakdown suggests. One ‘heterosexual’ RP said during an interview that although she considered herself straight, one of her most significant romantic relationships had been same-sex. Some of the ‘heterosexual’ RPs also, during participant observation, later made reference to being bi-sexual or having had same-sex relationships in the past.

<sup>48</sup> The longest of these relationships was well into its sixth year.

I was thinking I shouldn't really have gotten into a relationship that young 'cos... when you're 18 you just want to go out with your friends and you don't have to worry about boys and all that kind of stuff. (Daisy W18)

Comments by a few of the younger RPs, who tended towards autonomy, also hinted at this.

Ellie (W14) said 'I wanna live my life, not rush into things, have a commitment, like, getting married, having kids and stuff like that. I wanna do the things I've always like wanted to do [for example, travelling].' Emily (M18) prioritised finding a job and getting her own place to live, saying she did not want to get married until her 30s: 'I wouldn't wanna be [...] tied down to one man when you know that you could have other men before you.' In these cases, becoming tied down in a relationship at a young age was often perceived to inhibit 'youthful' activities, such as going out with friends, travelling or exploring sex and relationships.

These diverse attitudes toward couple relationships among the RPs who were predominantly from working class backgrounds contrast with Henderson et al's (2007: 138) findings that working class interviewees entered into relationships at an earlier age, placing a greater emphasis on settling down and starting a home than their middle class counterparts who focused first on academic achievement. Although the RPs generally expressed the desire to pursue the options available to young women in post-industrial Britain for further education, employment and leisure pursuits (spending time with friends, travelling), the majority also wished to 'settle down' with a partner in the long term, echoing findings from other studies (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 149; Henderson et al 2007: 136; Heath 2008: 21). In the shorter term, serious relationships also contributed to shaping the choices that RPs made with regard to education and employment, despite their rhetoric of autonomy. For example, Lindsay (W24) chose to embark on higher education in Birmingham rather than another city so that she could stay near her girlfriend. Similarly, Jayne (W22) chose to accept a job in retail rather than hold out for one more related to her university degree in criminology, as this would enable her to move in with her fiancé and get married.

There were also observable differences in attitudes along ethnic lines. The majority of the black RPs (four out of five) revealed a preference for autonomy, compared with lower proportions for both the white and mixed parentage RPs (four out of eleven; and one of three, respectively). This echoes findings from other studies. Mirza (1992: 151) notes ‘differing ethnic attitudes to occupational aspirations and to family life’. She suggests that, among her interviewees, ‘traditional cultural attitudes’ of parents shaped divergent outlooks among the young women in her study: the Irish women held more traditional attitudes toward relationships than the Caribbean women. Similarly, Griffin (1985: 54) found diverging attitudes about romance in her study, noting that young white women emphasised love and romance whilst young Caribbean women were more critical of these notions. This point is returned to in the discussion of marriage in the following section.

### **6.2.2 Attitudes towards marriage**

Whilst marriage was once the norm for young women in Britain, this is no longer the case (ONS 2013: 6) with tendencies to delay marriage being widely observed (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011: 10; ONS 2013: 8). The RPs in this study held diverse attitudes toward marriage. Seven RPs initially expressed uncertainty about wanting to get married; five hoped to get married; and five were vehemently opposed to the idea<sup>49</sup>. The RPs’ attitudes reflect the increased opportunities for financial autonomy available to young women in the post-industrial economy.

It was predominantly the younger RPs aged between 14 and 17 who wanted to get married. Due perhaps to their limited relationship experiences, the reasons they cited were often abstract. For example, Cassie (W15) wanted to marry because marriage ‘finishes off [namely, completes or represents the culmination of] a relationship.’ Her comment reflected the

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<sup>49</sup> This data is based on data from only 17 out of the 19 RPs. Two of the RPs who initially expressed uncertainty conceded that they would ‘probably’ get married ‘if they met the right person’.

romantic ‘happily-ever-after’ narrative common in fairy tales and films, which usually end with a couple getting together or getting married. The narratives of older RPs usually acknowledged the more complex emotional and material dynamics of relationships and marriages. In many instances, conversations about getting married among the younger RPs veered almost immediately toward a discussion of the wedding day. Ellie (W14), for instance, did not think there were any significant practical reasons for getting married, but said she was looking forward to ‘just get[ting] everyone together... and going home hammered and sleeping it off. And the honeymoon.’ Jayne (W22), who was engaged, was the only older RP who desired marriage. Having been opposed to marriage when she was younger, she had only recently come around to the idea. ‘About two and a bit years ago I changed my mind about it. I think that now... less marriage, more a level of commitment to a person. So my opinion changed.’ The issue of commitment is returned to later in this chapter.

The RPs who did not desire marriage were often vehemently opposed to the idea. This is illustrated by Tina’s response:

AO: Do you ever think about getting married?

Tina: No. I ain’t getting married.

AO: Why aren’t you getting married?

Tina: I don’t agree with that.

AO: You don’t agree with marriage?

Tina: I don’t agree with just a piece of paper.

AO: Why don’t you agree with it?

Tina: Why would I want to pay for a piece of paper to tell someone I loved them? No point.

AO: So marriage is not a very important part of a relationship then?

Tina: No. (Tina B18)

The idea, expressed by Tina, that marriage was ‘just a piece of paper’ surfaced in several interviews:

I just don't see the point in [marriage], like, it's just a piece of paper. (Daisy W18)

What's written on that certificate I could write on a piece of paper, like. Both sign it. Sorted. Put it in a bottle [laughs]. (Lucy W21)

You don't always need forms just to tell you that you are part of each other. (Rachelle M16)

Many RPs felt that marriage was simply a bureaucratic exercise that created few tangible benefits. Although these RPs did not wish to marry at the time of their interviews, it is possible that their views may change as they grow older. As Lindsay (W24) said:

For now, for me it's not something that I want in my life, but that might change, you know what I mean? It might be that the person I'm with wants that... and if that's what they want, and it's that important to them, then yeah, fair enough... But it isn't something that I aspire to do.

In this context, the findings in this study may reflect tendencies toward delaying marriage, rather than avoiding it altogether (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011: 10).

The majority of RPs were simply uncertain about whether or not they wanted to get married. Lisa (W22) spoke of being in ‘two minds’ about it. On the one hand, she desired the official commitment that marriage signified, while on the other, she struggled to come up with tangible benefits: ‘My feelings for her don't’ change just ‘cos we're married. Generally, I've heard they get worse in marriage [laughs]. I'm not sure.’

Anika (B18) was another participant who expressed uncertainty about marriage.

Anika: I don't know if I'd ever get married.

AO: No? Why not?

Anika: I don't know... I actually don't know why I wouldn't get married but... I suppose I'd like to get married. But I'm not in a rush or nowt to get married.

Anika's response indicates ambivalence insofar as she is unable to think of reasons not to get married, nor can she think of good reasons for doing so.

Black and mixed parentage RPs were more likely to express uncertainty or ambivalence about marriage, which reflects Mirza's (1992: 158) findings of the cautious attitudes that the black women in her study held towards marriage. Several RPs linked their own views about marriage to the marriage models they viewed around them, which also displayed observable differences along ethnic lines and may relate to traditional attitudes towards marriage in different communities (Griffin 1985: 50; Mirza 1992: 151). A greater number of the white RPs' mothers were in live-in or 'semi-detached' relationships than the black RPs' mothers. The absence of relationships among the black RPs' mothers may have contributed to the ambivalence felt by their daughters about marriage. Similarly, the positive and negative relationship models the white RPs viewed around them may have contributed toward their tendencies to view marriage either as desirable or something to avoid. It is more difficult to ascertain the ways in which social class shaped attitudes towards marriage, as the results in this study were mixed.

The rationale that RPs provided for their attitudes towards marriage is examined in more detail in the following section.

### **6.2.3 Rationale for marriage attitudes**

Many RPs linked their cynicism about marriage to their lack of belief in its longevity. Indeed, divorce was a distinct possibility mentioned by many RPs. This attitude was summarised by Sarah (W18) when she said, 'Most marriages end up splittin' up anyway.' Indeed, the divorce rate in England and Wales – although it has fallen in recent years<sup>50</sup> - had almost doubled by

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<sup>50</sup> The falling divorce rate has occurred in tandem with a declining overall marriage rate. Simultaneously, the age at which women get married has risen, suggesting that later marriages hold a lower risk of divorce (ONS 2013: 11).

2011 compared with 1970 (ONS 2013: 3). As noted earlier, the majority of the RPs' parents' relationships had ended in either divorce or separation. Several RPs specifically referenced their parents' failed marriages when discussing why they did not want to get married.

Lindsay (W24) suggested that she was 'probably more biased [against marriage] from seeing my parents divorced.' Jayne (W22) also linked her prior desire to not get married to her mother's experiences:

Jayne: Before I met [boyfriend], I didn't believe in [marriage]. 'Cos my mum's been married twice now, and divorced. Because from my mum's experience, she's been left in the lurch by three men [...] She was married to my dad and she was married to [sister]'s dad. But I don't think it matters if they're married or not. I think women generally get left in the lurch with the kids.

AO: So marriage doesn't necessarily mean security?

Jayne: No. [boyfriend's] parents were the same... I think it's something that's always happened. I don't think it's a new thing. (synthesised interview, Jayne W22)

Several RPs voiced doubts that partners would remain faithful. Jenny's cynicism towards marriage was based on the many failed marriages and volatile relationships she had witnessed around her:

You can still go cheat and that. Just 'cos you're married don't mean it's gonna be perfect does it? You can still cheat. You can still have violent boyfriends and girlfriends, and it's one of them... I never wanna get married. (Jenny W21)

In some cases doubt was linked to personal and/or parental experience of infidelity:

Daisy: [Father is] just as bad as the rest of the boys.

AO: So did he cheat and stuff as well?

Daisy: Yeah. He was really bad. (Daisy W18)

Many RPs characterised marriage as risky behaviour. Marriage, it was acknowledged, did not guarantee against infidelity and other relationship problems that RPs observed around them. But this did not mean that RPs were cynical about commitment or long-term relationships. In this respect, many contrasted their parents' failed marriages with more 'successful' long-term, unmarried relationships:



My mum and her boyfriend have been together for 16 years now. And they ain't married. They don't live together and they get on so well... they get on so much better. Whereas my mum and dad, they were married, they lived together. (Daisy W18)

My mum and dad [were married but] split up. My mum's been with her partner now, and they've been together maybe 14 years. Not married, don't even live together, all going swimmingly well. He's been married twice before... and never worked out. [...] Sometimes I think it [marriage] can just put that pressure on things, and it can kind of blow it out of proportion. (Lisa W22)

There were undoubtedly complexities in each of these situations that are not captured in these narratives. Yet they indicate that some RPs associated the act of marriage itself with the outcome of relationship breakdown.

Additionally, some RPs cited the cost of the wedding as a disincentive to marry:

It's a question of money as well as... being happy. [...] I'm not all, like, for the registry office. I'm more, like, for the big white wedding. And I know that my dad would have to pay for that and I don't think he'd be very, very fine with it. (Emily M17)

We'd all like to have, you know, the big dress and walk down the aisle and that kind of stuff. I haven't got just £10,000 just lying around, but do I need to spend that amount of money on... what is essentially a ring and a piece of paper? When I'm not going to love her any more just 'cos we're married. (Lisa W22)

Jayne (W22) and her fiancé, who were planning to get married, were trying to balance the cost of their wedding with the cost of everyday living:

He wants a big thing and I don't. [...] So we still have to work out the cost and stuff. And decide how we're gonna do it. I dunno. It all depends on how much we're paying to live and stuff like that.

Displaying a practical strategy to planning their future together, Jayne and her fiancé prioritised their more immediate financial needs ahead of planning their wedding celebration. Given the uncertain outcomes, the lack of perceived financial benefits and potentially high cost, few RPs considered marriage a sensible investment to make.

Despite their diverse feelings towards marriage, most RPs desired commitment:

Anika: I think being married shows everybody else that you're with somebody. You've got a life-long partner. But you don't have to be married to do that. It's just to show everybody else, I feel. But I get it...it does take your relationship one step further kind of thing.

AO: Yeah, is it about sort of commitment then?

Anika: Yeah, but, like, I'm in a relationship now and I'm committed to him kind of thing but... I don't have to be married to show it. (Anika B18)

According to Anika, marriage can serve as a signifier to the outside world. Yet, whilst it can signal a couple's commitment to each other, it is not necessary; couples can be committed without being married.

In other instances, marriage was perceived as a deeper level of commitment than simply being in a relationship. The previous section highlighted the RPs' relatively conventional views towards settling down. Henderson et al (2007: 149) note that 'those expressing ambivalence did so mainly in relation to their short term plans and the majority envisaged a partnered future.' This was also the case for many RPs, even those who did not aspire to marriage. Jenny (W21) said 'I'd rather just have an engagement ring and stay like that.' Although she was cynical about marriage, she expressed the desire for an official symbol of commitment: the engagement ring. This was also the case for Talia (M17), who did not want to marry her boyfriend. She said 'We'll do this thing called eternity, like, it's before you're engaged. It's a bit like an eternity thing. Like, you're together and you don't want to break up.'

Marriage was not considered, as it was historically, as a route to independence from the family of origin. Indeed, with other means to attain independence, marriage was sometimes seen as a threat to independence:

Jayne: Before I met [boyfriend] I didn't believe in [marriage]. 'Cos my mum's been married twice now. And divorced... and um, I never really agreed... I always challenged gender roles. [...] I didn't agree with marriage because when I was younger the message sort of was, um, you have to do what you're told. In a marriage role.

AO: As in, the husband tells the wife what to do?

Jayne: Yeah. And you have to have kids. I didn't want kids. (Jayne W22)

Jayne related her opposition to marriage to her fear of losing her independence, due to the message she had absorbed when younger that once married, 'you have to do what you're told.' This reflected observations by Henderson et al (2007: 149) that 'young women were no longer willing to give up power on entering a relationship.' Yet, despite gains in women's equality in both the public and private sphere, 'old' inequalities remain prevalent (ibid). These are often rooted in the 'patriarchal family model' which still affects family practices (Aapola et al 2005: 91). Many of the RPs depicted homes in which their mothers had done most of the work raising the children and running the household:

My mum split up with my dad when I was eight. She's brought us up. When my dad was living at home he didn't really bring us up anyway, just sat there at the computer. And my mum looked after us, made sure we's fed, clothed. She still does it today. (Sarah W18)

It's irritatin', you know, when you're out on the street with them [fathers] and they're like "Ah yeah, that's my daughter. I've done this, I've done that." I'm thinkin,' no you haven't. My mum's done that, not you. (Soraya B18)

In some cases, gender divisions were reinforced in the allocation of chores to children (Aapola et al 2005: 91):

Jess: When [mother] leaves the house I handle the washing and [look after] my little cousin .... And she's [mother] always like "Good thing I've got you."

AO: Do your brothers help out at home at all?

Jess: No they don't help us out (Jess W16)

Jess was expected to help out with chores at home although her older brothers were not. Not all the RPs spoke of heavily gendered family responsibilities. In a handful of cases, most notably in black RPs' families, men also participated in household chores despite, as Mirza (1992: 157) suggests, this not being typical. This influenced what RPs wanted in a partner:

They've got be able to cook, even if it's spaghetti bolognaise. (Xyleah B20)

I'd like a very independent man. Not one of these boys "Oh I don't even know how to use a washing machine". (Anika B18)

Even among these RPs, however, more traditional notions surfaced when it came to child rearing, which will be examined later in this chapter.

The desire for independence was related to observations of mothers who had married and had children young. This was associated with sacrifice and limited opportunities. Most RPs preferred to postpone marriage until their 'late twenties' or 'thirties,' which reflects national tendencies towards delayed marriage (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011: 10; ONS 2013: 8). Some RPs in this study wished to delay marriage in order to engage in youthful activities like hanging out with friends, clubbing and going travelling. In these cases, early marriage was considered a threat to youthful independence with the potential to bring about early entry into a life defined by potentially patriarchal family practices that often begin with motherhood.

Yet, embarking on motherhood did not necessarily mean giving up preferences for independence. 'Evie'<sup>51</sup>, who was in her teens, was expecting a baby together with her boyfriend. He had proposed to her 'loads of times' with a ring given to him by his grandmother, who was keen that they marry as they were expecting a child together. She consistently turned him down, although they were still together as a couple. Explaining her decision not to marry him, she said:

Loads of people have said you should get married, but I just think I'm too young to get married. Like, I am having a baby but I think... having a baby together doesn't mean we're always going to be together.

Echoing the attitudes above that marriage was something one engaged in when older, Evie stated that she felt she was too young to get married. She said 'I wouldn't get married just because we're having a baby [...] Like, I do love him and everything. But we are really young still and, like, I've got a lot more to experience and so has he.' Evie's attitude towards

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<sup>51</sup> 'Evie' is a second-level pseudonym.

marriage was practical. She clearly loved her boyfriend and they had been together for more than a year. However, they argued a lot and she acknowledged that having a baby was no guarantee that the relationship would last. Historically, becoming pregnant would very likely have resulted in marriage; in the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of teenage parents in Britain were married with many forced into 'shotgun marriages' (Duncan 2007: 311). Today, however, young unmarried mothers are 'less subject to moral sanction than in previous generations' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 189). Thus, having a baby without getting married was an option for Evie. As will be seen in the final chapter section, however, unmarried teenage motherhood can result in material poverty and stigma.

#### **6.2.4 Section conclusion**

Marriage is no longer inevitable for young women and the RPs' attitudes towards relationships reflect the increased choices available to them in the post-industrial city. Consequently, the RPs articulated aspirations of engaging in education and employment with a view to gaining financial autonomy, as well as youthful pursuits, such as going out with friends and travelling. Although this, to some extent, challenges findings elsewhere suggesting that working class women settle down at a younger age than their middle class counterparts, the majority of RPs also envisioned a partnered future (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Despite the value placed on independence, being in relationships sometimes shaped RPs' educational and employment choices, as in the case of Lindsay (W24) and Jayne (W22). Although commitment was generally valued, attitudes towards marriage were often ambivalent since there were few perceived benefits. There was an ethnic dimension to this, with a stronger priority of autonomy expressed by black RPs, who were also more ambivalent about the institution of marriage. This may reflect parental models and/or a greater acceptance historically of non-traditional families.

The following section goes on to look at the RPs' attitudes towards motherhood.

## **6.3 Motherhood**

This section examines the RPs' attitudes towards motherhood. It explores issues related to young motherhood, motherhood on social welfare benefits as well as stay-at-home motherhood. It also reflects on the experiences of three RPs who became pregnant as teenagers, the 'choices' they made in this context, and the rationale for their decisions.

### **6.3.1 Attitudes and aspirations**

Motherhood was something that 14 out of 19 RPs aspired to. Three were undecided or revealed contradicting desires during the course of interviews while two categorically stated that they did not want to have children. Jayne (W22) did not want to have biological children, stating that if she and her fiancé ever changed their minds, they would choose to foster or adopt. She said: 'I think there are a lot of unloved, unwanted kids. And, you know... there's no reason in the world why everybody should have a biological child.' Lindsay (W24), who was gay, said: 'I don't necessarily believe that if I'm in a gay relationship it's fair to have children.' Lindsay's 'choice' was shaped by societal attitudes toward gay parents which she feared would have a detrimental impact on a child through, for example, bullying.

Although most RPs wanted to be mothers, the majority did not aspire to this in the immediate future. Instead, they preferred to wait until they were 'settled.' The age at which they predicted this would happen diverged, but generally ranged from early to late twenties. This reflected MacDonald and Marsh's (2005: 129) findings that their interviewees thought that mid- to late-twenties was the 'ideal time' to start families.

The RPs in this study generally believed that having a child before being 'settled' would result in financial struggle:

I want my career first [...] you don't want to be strugglin'. (Soraya B18)

I think when I've got a house, a car and a stable job, that's when I'll have a kid. [...] Then at least I know, like, I've got myself sorted and I know that I can give my child everything. I don't want to have to struggle. (Anika B18)

For some, the desire to be 'settled' influenced their desire for later motherhood. For others, being 'settled' was a deterrent to doing something they would prefer to do earlier:

I was thinking that I wanted a baby now, but [laugh] I've also thought about obviously getting my qualifications, getting a steady job. I don't necessarily want to have kids until I've got something that I know I can support them with. (Emily M18)

I wanna good job and I want, like, a house or a car. Like, I don't want to be, like, in a debt like situation where I can't, like, give my child stuff so... Like, I'd want one [a baby] now but then I always think of the consequences, as in, well, what about the money, what about the living somewhere. (Daisy W17)

I wouldn't mind having a child [now] but then... I ain't even got a job, d'you know what I mean? And that could take me two years to get a teaching job, or some kind of job and [...] my mum's only got a two bedroom house. I would not want me in my mum's house, bringing up, d'you know what I mean? It's, like, it's not fair on my mum. Not fair on them [the children]. (Xyleah B20)

Although these RPs 'wouldn't mind having a child now', they also exhibited a keen awareness of the challenges they would encounter if they became mothers at a young age without adequate material resources. Hence, they were concerned about the impacts this would have on their experience as mothers, their children and other family members. Their stated 'choices' of not pursuing young motherhood were thus made with regard to the financial constraints they faced and/or anticipated. This indicates a shift away from the attitude observed by McRobbie (2000: 161) that 'work was something you did once the whole business of getting married and having children was out of the way.' As will be examined later in this chapter, contradictions emerged between stated desires to postpone motherhood and actual incidences of teenage pregnancy. This was also a phenomenon observed by MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 132).

Only one young RP disclosed a previous desire for early teenage motherhood. ‘Kayla’<sup>52</sup> revealed that although she now wanted children ‘later’ in life (which she defined as age 19-20), she had, at one point, wanted to have a baby at the age of 13:

Kayla: I wanted something to love for myself. Something that no-one could take away from me. I know someone could take it away from me. But I know that it would be mine...

AO: Is that a good age to have kids then, 13?

Kayla: No. I thought about it and it just wasn’t. ‘Cos you haven’t got a house, you haven’t got a stable home, you haven’t got money. You haven’t got a car. You haven’t got work. And it just wouldn’t be right bringing the kid up with nothing, basically. So I’d rather be like 19, 21, something like that. And, like... experience life more. (synthesised interview transcript)

In the context of her own turbulent childhood which related to family difficulties and time spent in foster care, Kayla’s narrative indicated an emotional need she imagined would be fulfilled through having a baby. This resonates with Arai’s (2009b: 174) correlation between young motherhood and time spent in the care system. Arai argues that in such cases, motherhood is a ‘direct response to adversity’ (ibid). Similarly, Hanna (2001: 458) suggests that young women with disrupted and unhappy childhoods view motherhood as a way to ‘find love and connection’. Despite her earlier desire to become a mother, Kayla, like many of the other RPs, now weighed this desire against the practical and material requirements she would need to fulfil in order to raise a child.

### **6.3.2 Financially dependent motherhood**

This section examines views on dependent motherhood – either on the state, through claiming welfare benefits, or on a partner, as a result of giving up employment to become a stay-at-home-mother.

There was no evidence to suggest that RPs created reflexive strategies to pursue a ‘lifestyle choice’ of teenage motherhood on welfare benefits (Newton 2009; Moir 2010). Indeed,

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Kayla’ is a second-level pseudonym.



raising children on welfare benefits was not deemed desirable, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

Xyleah: I don't [want to] have to rely on my mum... and especially I don't want to go on benefits or anything [to raise children]

Soraya: No.

Xyleah: like, when I don't have to. Do you get what I mean?

AO: So you guys wouldn't want to go on benefits if you had a child?

Soraya: Nah.

Shanelle: Uh uh.

Xyleah: Not really. If you have to, you have to but... I wouldn't [want to]. (Xyleah B20, Soraya B18, Shanelle B18)

The view that raising a family on welfare benefits was an unattractive option was echoed by other RPs:

I would never, like, wanna have a child, like, raise a child with, like, hardly no money and, like, and then they're living a life where they can't really do that much because they haven't really got money and that. (Rachelle M15)

Emily (M18) also reflected on the fact that social welfare was a limited source of income, particularly if one had a family to support:

Emily: I feel that I have to support my [future] children no matter what, 'cos that's what my mum has done for me. I'm not going to sit at home and be a mother of seven/eight kids because I don't work [...] Dole money is, like, a hundred and something pound every two weeks, not even that half the time. And there's no way I could have that benefit, and that wouldn't...that would only get us by.

AO: So it wouldn't be enough, basically, to raise a family?

Emily: No.

Like Rachelle, Emily did not want to raise her children on minimal income. Their attitudes echo those of the young welfare-dependent mothers in other studies which challenge claims that young women actively 'choose' to raise children on welfare benefits (Phoenix 1991: 59; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 136; Arai 2009a: 25). Instead, RPs considered welfare dependency as a last resort which, far from being a desirable 'choice', would limit their life

opportunities and result in stigma. The language Emily adopted - describing mothers of 'seven/ eight kids' who 'don't work' – echoed the derogatory portrayals of welfare-dependent mothers in some segments of the mainstream media (Newton 2009, Moir 2010). By contrasting these with the example of her own mother who supported her 'no matter what', Emily simultaneously engaged in a process of disassociation from what she perceived to be undeserving benefits claimants. This reflects similar discourses found by Shildrick et al (2012: 168) and MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 126) among their interviewees distinguishing between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Nevertheless, like MacDonald and Marsh's interviewees, RPs concurred that although claiming benefits was not a desirable 'choice', it was an 'acceptable, temporary alternative way of getting by' in the absence of paid employment (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 135).

Reflecting the changes observed by Aboim (2010: 172-176) to the traditional 'male breadwinner model', many RPs did not want to give up employment in order to raise their children:

I wouldn't want to rely on my husband or my boyfriend to do anything for me. I would want to do it myself. I'm not one of them girls that just let [men] do everything.' (Tina B18)

Most stated a preference to stay at home until the children started school, then return to work.

Parenting was, however, still conceived by many in traditionally gendered terms (Gillies 2007: 10). The idea of being the sole earner with a male partner as a stay-at-home dad was therefore not appealing to many RPs:

AO: What about the idea of a stay-at-home-dad? Would you ever let your partner stay at home while you went out to work?

Shanelle: Nah, nah.

Soraya: [laughs] No, I don't...

Shanelle: I think I'd rather him make money than me... in a way. (Shanelle B17; Soraya B17)

Whilst their comments initially implied enduringly traditional views about gender roles, employment and parenting (Griffin 1985: 52), other ideas emerged as the discussion progressed relating back to ideas of financial (in)dependence. Soraya and Shanelle suggested that they did not want sole responsibility for providing for the family. Their ideal situation was to share earning between both parents, as they also did not want to depend financially on a male partner:

AO: Why [do you want both partners to be working]?

Soraya: You don't have to rely on him...

Shanelle: It's like equal share really. You don't want to rely on that person. It puts pressure on them as well.

Soraya: Yeah. But then you can live comfortably, if both of you are bringing in something.

A dual-income household provided both a degree of financial independence as well as increased potential to live in material comfort.

For the RPs to whom stay-at-home-motherhood appealed, financial stability was stated as a necessary precursor:

If I got enough and that to pay bills and get food and that for them... I'm not fussed really. 'Cos, like, if I had kids, they'd mean the world to me and I would want them to have the best like... growing up, like, childhood they could. And obviously I'd always want to be there so I'd probably be home with 'em. (Jess W16)

Ideas about financial stability were often based on the notion of having a working partner:

It depends on money and stuff. 'Cos if you're with someone and they've got enough money then, um, then yeah, I probably would [stay at home with children] but... if, like, I was on me own, I wouldn't be able to. (Daisy W18)

I wouldn't mind [being a stay-at-home mum]. It depends on what, say, like, if I had kids, their father, it depends what their dad worked as. If we was earning enough money to run a home and look after kids and a family. Otherwise I'd have to... I would work as well. (Jenny W20)

Most RPs suggested they would take a few years out to raise the children until they reached school age<sup>53</sup>, then return to work. Although the majority of RPs would wish to continue working after having children, combining work with motherhood is not, as was frequently acknowledged, without challenges. Finding affordable childcare is one enduring challenge (McRobbie 2000: 175; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 147).

The following sections look at attitudes towards young motherhood and teenage pregnancy.

### **6.3.3 Young motherhood**

Historically, many young women in Birmingham primarily expected to settle down and be mothers (Griffin 1985: 50; McRobbie 2000: 161). In contrast, the attitudes of the RPs in this study are, to some degree, shaped by the increased opportunities for financial independence available to young women in contemporary Britain. Most prioritised further education and/or finding employment and preferred to postpone motherhood until they were ‘settled’. This resonates with MacDonald and Marsh’s (2005: 130) observation that their interviewees thought ‘it was important to have in place the foundations of stable employment, financial security and a home before having children.’ Yet, they find a discrepancy between such ‘mainstream’ views and the statistical evidence (ibid: 132). Similarly, teenage pregnancy rates in the local area, in particular Midford, are significantly higher than many other parts of Birmingham.

Although many RPs had mothers, sisters or grandmothers who had children at a young age - a factor that has been identified as a strong predictor of young motherhood in subsequent generations (Aapola et al 2005: 104; Arai 2009a: 30) – this was often cited as a deterrent. RPs did not want to make the ‘sacrifices’ their own mothers had after embarking on young

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<sup>53</sup> Several mentioned the reluctance to leave their children in the care of strangers, a phenomenon noted by McRobbie (2000) and others.

motherhood. Principally, RPs' mothers did not want their daughters to face the same struggles they had and actively tried to dissuade them:

I wanted to be a young mum, but when I brought it up in a conversation how I was going to have a baby when I was 19, it didn't go down well with my mum [laughs]. My mum thinks that, like, 'cos she had me at 21, she still thought she was too young. (Emily M17)

'Evie'<sup>54</sup>, who was pregnant, spoke in detail about her mother's reaction:

She [her mother] was just like "I'm really worried about ya. Because, um, I don't want you to go through what I went through." She went "It's up to you but [...] I don't want you to, like, miss out on things in your life." I think she does want me to have an abortion. But she's not saying it, because it's my decision. But [...] she just wants the best for me really.

Mothers were often vocal about wanting their daughters to avoid teenage motherhood.

Moreover, RPs whose mothers had children at a young age were aware of the 'struggles' and 'sacrifices' this had entailed and did not desire the same experiences for their daughters. This reflects accounts such as Rendall's (2003: 111) which contradict claims of young motherhood as an intergenerational preference (Social Justice Policy Group 2006: 31; Quail 2011: 4).

Despite not wanting to be 'young' mothers, most RPs expected to have had children by the time they turned 30. This echoed other studies that found that young women from working class or disadvantaged neighbourhoods prefer motherhood at earlier ages than their middle class peers (Arai 2003: 213; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 129).

'Unplanned' pregnancy was often framed in terms of 'fatalism' (MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 142) by RPs. Sarah (W18) was one of the handful of RPs that did not express the desire to have children:

I don't wanna think about kids or anything. My sister [aged in her early 20s] now has two kids, she has a house... that's not me. I wanna go travelling. I wanna see the world. I wanna experience different things.

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<sup>54</sup> 'Evie' is a second-level pseudonym.

Although Sarah spoke of imminent parenthood as a potential interrupter of the experiences that she hoped to have, like travelling and seeing the world, she went on to say that if she did get pregnant, she would continue with the pregnancy:

If I get pregnant, then that's how my life's meant to go. That's how I see it. 'Cos I don't, like, plan anything. So if I get pregnant, that's the way my life has chosen for me to go. (Sarah W18)

Lucy (W21), who hoped to have kids 'one day,' expressed a similar view:

See me, if it [getting pregnant] ever happened to me, touch wood, I couldn't get rid of it or anything like that. I'd have to keep it [...] I just don't believe in it [abortion], at the end of the day. The baby's put there for a reason. D'you know what I mean? (Lucy W21)

Although neither Lucy nor Sarah wanted to have children at the time of their interviews, they both believed that if it happened, it was meant to be. This reflected attitudes of 'positive ambivalence' found by Coleman and Cater (2006: 600). That is, although they did not currently desire pregnancy or motherhood, they would continue with it if it occurred. Arai (2003: 207) suggests that 'fatalism' might also 'indicate a stoicism and realism in the face of hardship and lack of opportunity.' Many of the RPs articulated the hardships that their own mothers had stoically faced after becoming young mothers, citing their mothers as their 'role models'. It is possible that their fatalistic views on unplanned pregnancy also reflected their mothers' experiences.

Many studies have also identified links between teenage pregnancy and 'pro-life' views (Sharpe 1987: 212; Walkerdine 2001: 196; MacDonald and Marsh 2005: 141; Arai 2009a: 103). Turner (2004: 222) asserts that many teenage mothers 'continue with their pregnancy... because they reject abortion rather than because they wish to become mothers.' This resonates with findings from this study. Indeed, the majority of RPs expressed strong anti-abortion views. For example, although Jess (W16) stated that she wished to postpone

motherhood until she was older, she indicated that her views on termination would influence her decision should she get pregnant before then:

Jess: My family is against abortion... If I turned out pregnant or something, I'd definitely keep it.

AO: Can you tell me a little bit about why you are against it?

Jess: 'Cos it's like killing your own baby, ennit really and that. Like, a friend of mine actually had found out she was pregnant and she had an abortion. I was screwed at her for it... I was like, "Ah, you're fuckin' stupid." I was like, "You basically just killed your own baby" and stuff like that. Just screwed at her. And then... she was, like, in tears and that, 'cos it was her ex-boyfriend's, that's why she wanted to get rid of it. But... it's not an excuse really, is it?

Many RPs expressed 'pro-life' views based on similar notions of 'foetal personhood' (Kumar et al 2009: 3) and abortion was frequently equated with 'killing your own baby' (Ellie W15; Jess W16; Emily M17; Xyleah B20; Jenny W21). Pregnancy as a result of rape was the only instance in which some RPs (Cassie W15; Shanelle B17; Lucy W21) would consider termination.

Several studies have noted the classed ways in which teenage pregnancy is interpreted by young women (Sharpe 1987: 213; Arai 2003: 213; Wilson and Huntington 2005: 67; Coleman and Cater 2006: 610). For most middle class teenage women, unplanned pregnancy is perceived as a catastrophic event which interferes with educational and employment prospects. For working class young women, on the other hand, young motherhood is often considered a rational choice (Arai 2003: 213; Duncan 2007: 325) made to attain a valued position (Graham and McDermott 2006: 34; Hallam and Creech 2007: 16; McKenzie 2015: 91). Middle class teenagers who become pregnant are more likely to choose termination, whilst working class teenagers are more likely to choose to continue with the pregnancy (Walkerdine et al 2001: 196; Turner 2004: 228). Whilst further research would be needed to confirm such views in the context of this study, it is notable that the only two RPs who openly supported termination had middle class parents and/or experience of HE. Those RPs

who expressed the strongest anti-termination views were from lower- or middle-working class families.

Although teenage pregnancy has been attributed to ignorance about sex and contraception, there was, echoing Arai's (2003: 212) findings, no evidence of this from my fieldwork data.

Lindsay (W24) noted:

We had it [sex education] in school, we used to have it with the youth projects [...] and it's all over the telly... you can't miss it. D'you know what I mean? [...] I don't think you can necessarily blame the lack of education.

As will be seen in the following and final section of this chapter, both RPs who became pregnant during fieldwork, did so despite using the birth control pill (though it is not possible, in the context of this study, to gauge the effectiveness with which they used this). RPs often expressed punitive views of young women who become pregnant, despite the widespread availability of contraception:

Cassie: If you think [you] would know better enough to go and have sex without protection, you're, you're obviously mature enough to have the baby.

AO: So do you think that people are mature enough?

Cassie: I don't think they're mature enough. I just think, if they're stupid enough to do that...

AO: So you think they should have to deal with the consequences then?

Cassie: Yeah. (Cassie W15)

This view was also expressed by Xyleah (B20): 'You've done the deed, you're gonna answer the consequences. That's how I see it.'

Some research suggests that sexual confidence and assertiveness among young women has increased since the 1990s (Allen 2003: 231). Although attitudes towards sex were not explored in detail in this study, active sexualities and attitudes towards sexual relationships did emerge throughout the course of interviews and fieldwork more generally. Whilst girls



may indeed be more sexually confident than a few decades ago<sup>55</sup>, female teenage sexuality remains a double-edged sword. In an increasingly sexualised world, young women must, therefore, attempt to balance the dual pressures of living up to sexual standards whilst protecting their reputation. Being seen as too sexually free came with the risk of being labelled a ‘slag’<sup>56</sup>. A tarnished sexual reputation, whether based on fact or fiction, was a source of anxiety for several RPs.

Some RPs reflected on the social pressures that teenage women felt to engage in sexual activity. Jenny (W21) suggested that:

a lot of girls, what they’re doing these days, they’re leaving school, or still in school, are going to house parties, gettin’ drunk, having sex at a young age ‘cos they’re feeling, like, under pressure to have sex and to lose their virginity. So they’re just gettin’ pregnant. That’s what a lot of kids are doing. ‘Cos that’s what a lot of my sister’s friends done. It was at house parties that they ended up sleeping with someone that they hardly knew, just for the fact of he’s there and, you know, they’re drunk. They ended up getting pregnant. That’s what I reckon a lot of what’s happening.

Sarah (W19) also spoke of the pressure to have sex, which she said sets in from the age of 14:

It’s ‘cos... once, like, a few mates have lost it [virginity], everyone’s like... “Oh, you haven’t done it yet?” And, like, the girls question, like, other girls and then the lads...when girls get in relationships and then lads expect sex off them and, like, the girls kind of give in...

These comments reflect the sexual pressures that young women can face from both male and female peers in their early teenage years. In addition to the risk of unplanned pregnancy, this context can increase the danger of sexual attack and predation for young women, which, as noted in Chapter Five, had been experienced by several RPs.

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<sup>55</sup> For example, I recall one particular open session at MYC when a 16 year old young woman came in proudly waving a see-through bag of condoms she had just acquired from another local advice service for young people.

<sup>56</sup> On more than one occasion at MYC, I observed how an (alleged) sexual encounter between two young people would later be recounted by the teenage men as an achievement to boast about whilst they simultaneously denounced the young woman who had been involved in a derogatory manner.

The following, and final, section of this chapter explores the experiences of teenage pregnancy disclosed by three of the RPs.

#### **6.3.4 Case studies of teenage pregnancy<sup>57</sup>**

The actual event of an unplanned pregnancy was a source of dilemma and internal conflict for the RPs. ‘Evie’ and ‘Ally’ became pregnant during the fieldwork period, and ‘Annie’ disclosed a terminated pregnancy during her early teenage years. Although some RPs recounted stories about friends who had ‘planned’ pregnancies at a young age, none of the pregnancies I encountered were such, and the decisions made in these circumstances were far from straightforward.

Annie disclosed that she had an abortion at the age of 15, a decision she said was right at the time, but that she would not repeat now as it conflicted with her strong anti-abortion views:

In a way, I had no choice. I was 15... I’d just left school. I’d just done my exams. It’s, like... you know, I was still a baby... And the boyfriend was a complete div [idiot] anyway. So, it was just, uh, yeah. It had to be done in a way. ‘Cos I would have ended up having it and the baby would have ended up having a bad life because I wouldn’t be able to support it, d’you know what I mean? ‘Cos I was still a baby myself.

At the time that Annie became pregnant, she did not have any of those things that the RPs generally agreed were necessary to take care of a child, including a steady income or a home of her own. She believed that if she had continued with the pregnancy, her child would have had ‘a bad life’ due to her inability to provide for it. She framed her ‘choice’ as one based on lack of options. She also expressed feeling conflicted about her decision:

That’s why I don’t believe in it [abortion]. I’m against it now. Because it ruined my life, it did... I had the abortion for the fact of I was so young... But it killed me after [...] It’s just haunted me... Literally. And now, that’s why I don’t believe in ‘em. ‘Cos I done it myself and I know how much it damaged me... Emotionally, mentally, physically just drained me. It killed me to know that I’d killed my own baby so... I, uh, don’t believe in them at all now. (synthesised interview excerpt, Annie)

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<sup>57</sup> Second-level pseudonyms (‘Evie’, ‘Ally’ and ‘Annie’) are utilised in this section to ensure protection of the anonymity of the RPs.

Whilst middle class young women consider going through with an unplanned pregnancy as catastrophic since it interrupts educational and employment plans, Annie interprets the act of terminating her pregnancy as ‘life-ruining’ due to the emotional and mental strain it caused. Despite, or perhaps because of, her own experience, Annie was a vocal opponent of termination. It is possible that this is because the stigma associated with abortion prevents women from defending those who do abort and cause women who have had terminations to publicly oppose them (Kumar et al 2009: 6).

Making the decision to terminate her pregnancy in the context of the ‘moral world’ that framed abortion in Midford and Weston as killing ‘innocent lives’ (Kumar et al 2009: 10), had resulted in emotional distress for Annie. Her narrative reflects the guilt that emanated from her decision to terminate when she adopted the popular local discourses that labelled women who terminate as ‘killers’ to reflect her decision: *‘I killed my baby.’* It is likely that she internalised the stigma that emanated from this. As Kumar et al (2009: 2) point out ‘stigmatised behaviours need not be visible to be stigmatised.’ Yet, stigma often results in ‘guilt and regret’ (Sharpe 1987: 217). In this context, it is possible that other teenage women choose to go ahead with pregnancies as the judgement from the outside community for being a young mother might be easier to deal with than the stigma from one’s own community for being a purported ‘baby killer’.

In other cases, views on termination changed as RPs grew older. Jayne (W23) was one of the few RPs who did not want to have children. Yet she said:

I think I would face a real dilemma if I had to make this choice [what to do in the event of an unplanned pregnancy]. I'm not sure it's something I could face doing in my current stage of life, but at 16 I recall telling my mother-in-law that if I found myself pregnant I would run to a clinic. Now it would be a major issue for me, six and a half years on. But again, I don't disagree with termination...I'm just not sure I could if I had to, despite not actually wanting kids!

Jayne's comments highlighted that theoretical beliefs did not always translate easily into real-life situations. Expected behaviours might alter, despite deeply ingrained beliefs, when the young women were faced with real-life dilemmas in individualised contexts. Choices were often shaped by circumstances, which also shifted during the course of the RPs' transitions to adulthood.

Evie and Ally became pregnant during the fieldwork period. Both were teenagers, in romantic relationships. Both had experienced 'early life adversity' (Arai 2009b: 174). Neither expressed the wish to have children at the time of their interviews, although Ally had stated that she wanted them in the future, and both had been using contraception. They were, at the time of writing, embarking on young motherhood and both were still involved with the fathers of their children. Because my fieldwork was completed just after the birth of their babies, this research does not track their actual motherhood experiences in any detail.

Evie had recently become pregnant at the time of her first interview, despite taking the birth control pill. She was contemplating termination but felt unsure about this decision. As she elaborated on her feelings, she hinted at views related to 'foetal personhood' (Kumar et al 2009) and the subsequent feelings of guilt associated with terminating (ibid):

I've gone with the decision of an abortion but then, I feel confused at the same time 'cos I still am unsure because... one minute I wanna keep it, one minute I don't wanna keep it. I think it's 'cos I feel guilty, even though I haven't seen, like anything, it's just the thought of... getting rid of... like someone's... Even though they haven't developed yet, I just feel bad.

On the other hand, she also worried about the challenges of raising a child whilst still in her teens, having not yet completed college. Her circumstances were cited as the main reason that she was leaning towards termination:

It's because of the situation, like I'm young. I haven't got money. [...] If I can't get a flat, I'm going to have to move into a hostel or something. I'm just.... not ready. The baby-father's<sup>58</sup> young, as well. And it's just... awkward.

Her mother, although supportive, had herself become a mother at the age of 18, and emphasised how difficult it was to raise children at a young age with very little money:

My mum just said that she would support me. But she said that it's not easy. As easy as it sounds, it's gonna be hard, like. You won't be able to go out no more with your friends... 'cos you won't get paid a lot anyway, um, you'll always have to put your baby first. Like, all your money and that. So you might not get stuff for yourself. And sometimes you'll have to starve so that your baby eats... She said that's what, when she had me, that's what it was like because she had me so young... She planned to have me but she didn't realise how hard it would be.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Evie's account contradicts moral panic discourses about teenage pregnancy as a result of 'intergenerational transmission of family breakdown' (Centre for Social Justice 2006: 31). Rather than perpetuating an intergenerational tendency, her mother, who had also been a teenage mother, tried to discourage her from entering into young motherhood by emphasising the challenges and sacrifices this would entail.

I interviewed Evie again about six months later. In the end, she had decided to continue with the pregnancy, saying she 'just couldn't go through with the abortion.' Prior to becoming pregnant, Evie described aspects of her life as chaotic; she had a fragmented and difficult educational pathway, and had, at times, been in trouble with the police. She felt like she had just gotten her 'life back on track' and initially feared that having a baby might derail her. Once the decision had been made, however, she expressed commitment to, as well as excitement about, becoming a mother. Evie's own mother, who had initially tried to dissuade her, was committed to supporting her in motherhood, including providing childcare support so Evie could go back to college and get a job. Overall, Evie seemed to have adjusted well to her role as mother-to-be. Each decision she now reached was made with the baby's best

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<sup>58</sup> The term 'baby-father', according to Turner (2006), refers to 'biological fatherhood in the absence of any real parenting' (ibid). Evie uses this expression here even though she is still in a relationship with the father of her baby.

interest in mind. Her newfound maturity was interpreted as ‘being boring’ by her friends who previously knew her as someone who loved to party, have a laugh and who had not wanted to be a young mother.

For Ally, the decision to continue with her pregnancy also appeared to have a positive impact. She was in a relationship at the time that she became pregnant, and was using contraception. Although she had expressed a preference for postponing motherhood until she was a bit older and more settled, she was also vocal about her anti-abortion views prior to getting pregnant. Termination was not an option for her. Prior to becoming pregnant, Ally had struggled with her educational trajectory, stressed about her lack of employment and expressed strong anxieties about the future. She had also periodically struggled with depressive episodes. For her, as for Evie, the experience of becoming pregnant seemed to have a positive impact, giving her a meaningful role and direction in life.

Although neither Evie nor Ally had expressed a strong desire for young motherhood during their initial interviews, both exhibited a strong commitment to motherhood and a ‘positive maternal identity’ (Graham and McDermott 2006: 28) once they decided to continue with their pregnancies.

### **6.3.5 Section conclusion**

This section examined RPs’ attitudes towards various aspects of motherhood, which was something most RPs aspired to. Nevertheless, RPs’ desire to postpone motherhood until their mid- to late-twenties reflects the increased educational and employment choices available to young women in the post-industrial city. Despite this, RPs desired to be ‘young’ rather than ‘old’ mothers, reflecting observed classed differences in perceived ideal age of motherhood (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). The majority cast the possibility of unplanned pregnancy in ‘fatalistic’ and, at times, punitive, terms, which also appeared to be strongly influenced by

anti-termination views. There was also evidence of classed views with regard to termination (Walkerdine et al 2001).

Overall, RPs aspired to be financially ‘settled’ and secure before becoming mothers, articulating a keen awareness of the struggles involved in not doing so. With a few exceptions, parenting was perceived in traditionally gendered terms, which involved caring for the children whilst a male partner served as the family’s breadwinner. There was no evidence of a desire for motherhood on benefits as a ‘lifestyle choice’ as claimed by segments of the mainstream media (Moir 2010). Whilst generally undesirable, raising children on benefits was considered an acceptable option in the absence of other possibilities for financial independence (MacDonald and Marsh 2005).

The case studies indicate that unplanned teenage pregnancies were a source of dilemma and internal conflict, without straightforward strategies. ‘Choices’, as well as their consequences, were shaped by individual circumstances such as earlier life adversity, educational achievements and employment prospects, as well as attitudes about termination held by RPs and others in the community. For Annie, the decision to terminate her pregnancy had significant long-lasting implications in the context of a community which generally judged such actions harshly. On the other hand, and counter to middle-class sensibilities (Walkerdine et al 2001), the decision to embark on teenage motherhood created positive changes in Evie and Ally’s lives. Nevertheless, as argued by McRobbie (2000: 207), embarking on teenage motherhood also increases their risk of becoming trapped in financial dependence and poverty.

## **6.4 Chapter conclusion: what does intersectionality illuminate?**

This chapter examined the RPs’ attitudes towards, and experiences of, independent household formation. This included experiences of moving out of (and, frequently, back into) the

parental home and starting couple relationships. It also looked at attitudes towards marriage and motherhood, including young motherhood. This conclusion demonstrates what an intersectional lens reveals.

Regardless of social class or ethnic background, the majority of RPs grew up in non-traditional families, reflecting broader family trends in Britain (Nayak and Kehily 2008: 64). The vast majority of RPs felt emotionally supported and reported close relationships with at least one parent or other significant family member, for example, a grandparent. Nevertheless, many also disclosed familial financial hardship which is hardly surprising since, as Millar (2010: 122) points out, single parent families are at greater risk of material poverty than households with two working parents. Not only were these households dependent on single incomes, but several RPs reported unemployed parents and/or fathers who refused to pay child support. The RPs from white working class families were more likely than their black peers to have mothers that had repartnered and, therefore, additional income if those partners worked. Despite this, however, black working class RPs were less likely than their white peers to disclose financial hardship experienced by their families. This may have been due, at least in part, to the lower-middle class and upper-working class occupations held by their mothers. It may also have indicated heightened resistance to disclosing family hardship to the researcher.

The RPs' attitudes and experiences indicate that the post-industrial context in which they are making their transitions provided a varied range of options for independent household formation. Marriage was not the prime reason for leaving home, as historically (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 66). Instead, decisions to move out of the parental home were related to education and employment in other cities and couple relationships, as well as family conflicts and caring responsibilities. Moving out was seldom permanent and financial constraints often brought RPs back to the parental home. There appeared to be no discernible differences in the



housing pathways of RPs from different ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, RPs across different social class and ethnic backgrounds articulated normative attitudes towards home ownership (Heath 2008: 24; Millar 2010: 121; Park et al 2012: 123), though most acknowledged financial constraints as likely barriers to buying their own home.

From a gendered perspective, RPs' attitudes toward couple relationships indicate the growing opportunities for financial independence available to young women in the post-industrial context. A large number of RPs, regardless of relationship status, expressed a preference for autonomy. This reflects Henderson et al's (2007: 149) findings that young women fear losing independence when entering into relationships. Despite this, Henderson et al also identified a tendency for working class RPs to settle down at a younger age than their middle class peers (Henderson et al 2007: 138). This did not seem to be the case for the RPs in this study, although perhaps their attitudes would change as they grew older. Indeed, reflecting similar findings by MacDonald and Marsh (2005), most RPs hoped to settle down with a partner in the longer term. The preference for autonomy was particularly pronounced for the black RPs compared with their white and mixed parentage peers. Although the majority of RPs also expressed ambivalence towards marriage, this tendency was also more common among black RPs. This may reflect the black community's historically more tolerant views of 'alternatives to traditional marriage' (Griffin 1985: 50), fewer financial incentives for marrying due to the higher unemployment rates amongst black men than white men (Phoenix 1991: 16) and/or traditionally more equal attitudes in black relationships and marriage toward breadwinning (Mirza 1992: 158). Several decades ago, McRobbie (2000: 163) noted that the young white working class women in her Birmingham study 'had no notion of themselves as breadwinners'. This is no longer the case. Indeed, the increased possibility of being breadwinners themselves may have contributed to the ambivalence many RPs expressed towards marriage.

Attitudes towards motherhood reflected more traditional views, as the majority of RPs, regardless of social class or ethnic background, wished to have children. Despite a preference for ‘young’ rather than ‘old’ motherhood, there was no evidence of a desire for teenage motherhood funded by social welfare benefits. Indeed, all RPs across social class and ethnic categories wanted to be financially ‘settled’ before having children. Despite this, however, two RPs became unexpectedly pregnant. As their case studies indicate, the choices they made were complex and based as much on individual circumstance as well as local attitudes toward termination and the value attributed to motherhood. The study revealed heavily classed attitudes towards termination reflecting similar findings by Walkerdine et al (2001: 196) and Turner (2004: 222), though there were no discernible differences by ethnicity. Similarly, motherhood was a valued position for RPs regardless of ethnic background (reflecting similar findings by Graham and McDermott 2006: 34; Hallam and Creech 2007: 16; and McKenzie 2015: 91).

Reflecting observed desires for financial independence, the majority of RPs preferred to continue in employment despite becoming mothers. As noted in Chapter Five, only a handful entertained the idea of full-time stay-at-home motherhood. This attitude was most common among white working class RPs with a history of weak educational engagement. Their acute awareness of the need for educational qualifications in order to ‘get ahead’ in the labour market, and their lack thereof, may have resulted in their perception of full-time motherhood as a desirable option. Nevertheless, this preference was predicated on having a male partner as breadwinner. By contrast, white and black lower- and middle-middle class RPs, white working class RPs with higher educational qualifications as well as black working class RPs planning to gain higher educational qualifications may have perceived greater incentives to continue in employment than being full-time stay-at-home mothers.

The following chapter concludes this research study.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

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## 7.0 Topic, research questions and structure of study

This doctoral research study explored the transitions to adulthood of a group of 19 young women from two adjacent ‘outer-urban’ neighbourhoods (Hanley 2007: 12) in the post-industrial city of Birmingham, UK. The research participants (RPs) were of mixed age (14-24), ethnicity (white, black and mixed parentage) and social class background (predominantly working, but also middle and precariat, class). The study focused on three interlinked spheres of their transitions: education and training, employment and independent household formation (including families of origin, housing, relationships, marriage and motherhood). Employing the concepts of *reflexivity*, *the appearance of choice* and *intersectionality*, I set out to answer the following research questions:

- How do the RPs interpret their available ‘choices’ as they make their transitions to adulthood?
- What are the structural constraints – related to gender, social class and ethnicity – encountered by RPs?
- In light of ‘choices’ and constraints, what strategies are employed by the RPs as they make their transitions to adulthood?

Chapters One to Three provided background to the study: the conceptual framework and a review of the relevant literature; an overview of the research context, fieldwork site and RPs; and an explanation of the approach and methodology. I employed an ethnographic research methodology, gathering data through participation observation at a local youth centre and repeated semi-structured interviews with the RPs, over a 20-month period. Participant observation enabled a more in-depth understanding of the RPs’ life worlds than a shorter term and less involved approach would have achieved. Similarly, undertaking repeated interviews over a sustained period of time, rather than one-off interviews, created a more dynamic

understanding of the ways in which RPs' lives shifted and/or stayed the same. This provided critical insights into the gendered, classed and ethnic constraints that RPs encountered, making it an ideal research tool with which to investigate aspects of intersectionality that shaped their lives.

Chapter Four through Six examined the RPs' attitudes towards, and experiences of, education and training, employment and independent household formation. The key findings are highlighted below.

## **7.1 How do the RPs interpret their available 'choices' as they make their transitions to adulthood?**

In some respects, the RPs' narratives reflect the increased choices available to them compared with previous generations. Marriage is no longer their main vehicle for moving out of the parental home and securing independent adulthood and, without clear benefits for entering into marriage, many RPs expressed ambivalence toward it. While most envisioned a partnered future, they also wished to postpone this in order to engage in further education (FE), employment or youthful pursuits of leisure, such as spending time with friends or travelling. Most RPs availed of increased educational opportunities now available to young women. They all, at least initially, pursued post-compulsory education and some went on to higher education (HE), with the intention of securing financial independence through paid employment. Several RPs with fragmented educational pathways, or histories of weak educational attainment, also chose to retake their GCSEs and/or take an Access to HE course in order to improve their employment prospects. Those RPs who went on to HE were the first in their families to do so, which may be interpreted as evidence of the successful widening of participation. However, as the following section highlights, their HE experiences were also characterised by many structural constraints.

Although attitudes towards motherhood were more traditional, in that most RPs wanted to be mothers, these attitudes were shaped by the increased choices young women have in the post-industrial context. Access to birth control (contraception and abortion) provide RPs, at least in theory, more control over their own fertility, while a greater acceptance of unmarried motherhood means that choosing to become a young mother does not require getting married as in earlier times. Many RPs wished to continue working after having children, though they acknowledged that this choice was dependent upon access to affordable childcare. A handful of RPs desired stay-at-home motherhood, but this was also contingent upon having a working partner who earned enough to support the family. Most, however, expressed a reluctance to be financially dependent on a partner, parent or the welfare state, preferring instead to earn their own money. Significantly, there was no evidence to support the popular media myth that young women from disadvantaged areas choose to pursue a social welfare benefits 'lifestyle'. Overall, regardless of whether they had families to support, claiming welfare benefits was articulated by the RPs as a last resort, rather than a preferred choice.

My fieldwork indicates that the RPs had internalised notions of 'choice', although these choices were not always perceived as empowering. In some cases, RPs acknowledged that their own experiences, for instance, dropping out of education before obtaining qualifications, had ruled out certain options. In others, the array of educational opportunities was perceived as overwhelming and/or confusing, particularly where RPs lacked the necessary support or information to make decisions. Whilst few RPs articulated a structural framework within which to understand their own experiences, some of their narratives hinted at an acknowledgement of this. Most spoke of the future as highly uncertain, which reflects general labour market insecurity that characterises the post-industrial city of Birmingham in the wake of economic downturn. RPs also expressed attitudes of inevitability, referred to as 'fatalism'

by MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 145), which reflect a tacit acknowledgement of the structural constraints that, ultimately, defined their opportunities.

The RPs' narratives indicate that they consistently strove to make the 'right' choices about education, employment and independent household formation. Although 'choices' were often elusive due to structural constraints (discussed further in the following section), many RPs appeared to have bought into notions of individual responsibility which are implicit in 'choice' discourses. Without a structural framework for interpreting their own experiences, many therefore engaged in self-blame when they 'failed' to access or follow through with education or employment opportunities – even in instances where outcomes were due to circumstances beyond their control.

## **7.2 What are the structural constraints encountered by RPs?**

My fieldwork revealed that the RPs' transition pathways and the 'choices' that they made, were often shaped by a range of gendered, classed and ethnic dynamics, which served to either close down or, in a few cases, open up opportunities.

Structural constraints determined RPs' educational pathways from relatively early on. Several secondary schools attended by RPs reflected wider observations about the links between material disadvantage and low educational attainment. Classed and ethnic processes determined the levels of support that RPs received from their teachers to succeed with their educational objectives. For instance, the most solidly middle class RP, Tanya (W16) spoke of support from her father and school, reminiscent of Aapola et al's (2005) observation of 'joint projects' to ensure educational and employment success for middle class girls. The narratives of several working class RPs, on the other hand, indicated that educational opportunities were closed down by the ways in which they were positioned by their teachers, according to negative classed and ethnic stereotypes.

Whilst RPs all partook in increased opportunities for FE, including academic and vocational courses and apprenticeships, their experiences were shaped by gender, social class and ethnicity. Working class RPs of all ethnic backgrounds enrolled predominantly in ‘utilitarian’ vocational education or training courses. Although vocational courses and apprenticeships were originally designed for, and were popular with, ‘less academic’ RPs, these did not guarantee employment. Indeed, training courses were sometimes proposed in the absence of viable employment opportunities. Regardless of whether they pursued academic or vocational pathways, the majority of RPs chose to study ‘feminised’ subjects, which are linked to lower waged employment. With regard to course choices, there was some observed variation by ethnicity, with white working class RPs tending toward studying childcare and black working class RPs toward studying health and social care.

‘Choices’ of whether or not to pursue HE were determined by prior academic achievement, attitudes towards cost and debt and reluctance to leave local support networks. Lack of academic confidence and fear of debt were frequently cited disincentives. The few RPs who pursued HE all did so at post-1992 universities, which Furlong and Cartmel (2007) argue may disadvantage them in the labour market when competing against graduates from older, elite universities. Reflecting earlier educational choices, most also studied ‘feminised’ subjects at university (such as education and physiotherapy) or non-feminised courses, such as criminology, which often lead to gendered jobs. Without access to parental financial support, most RPs were forced to undertake term-time employment, which could create competing pressures with studying, with potentially detrimental results. This is illustrated by Lisa’s (W22) experience of dropping out of university to work full time to support her ill mother. Although a reluctance to leave the local community and support networks dissuaded some RPs from going to university, the majority who pursued HE enrolled in universities in

different cities. However, local support networks often served as a pull back home after, or before, completing studies.

RPs' employment opportunities were also shaped by structural constraints. The sectors in which most of the RPs aspired to work were often 'feminised' and in some cases (for example, hairdressing and physical training), also heavily classed (for instance, 'body work' positions involving intimate physical contact between workers and those being cared for). Employment prospects were largely dependent on local structures of opportunity. As the RPs' narratives indicate, these existed predominantly in the hospitality and retail sectors, offering low-skilled, low-waged work with little or no opportunity for upward wage or employment mobility. Once in these jobs, unpredictable work rotas prevented RPs from engaging in additional training or internships, which could potentially provide valuable work experience leading to other employment opportunities. Additionally, without access to parental financial support, fear of debt (or prior debt, accrued from earlier educational engagement) served as a disincentive to gaining additional qualifications. While RPs without credentials were most vulnerable to unemployment or low-skilled, low-waged and insecure work, obtaining advanced qualifications was not a guarantee of securing related employment, as Jayne's (W22) experiences indicates.

Independent household formation was influenced by a number of structural constraints. The emotional and material resources available to RPs from their families affected many aspects of their transition to independent living and, without access to familial financial support, many RPs remained living in the parental home. Since most RPs lived in sole-parent families, this was true regardless of social class, although parental social class positioning also indicated that downward mobility was a more common experience than upward mobility which could create financial hardship. Many RPs had fragmented housing pathways after moving out of the parental home. Lacking the financial resources to live independently, they



frequently moved back with parents when experiences of education, employment or relationships ended. Despite articulating normative aspirations for home ownership, none of the RPs had access to parental financial assistance, without which the dream of owning their own home might remain elusive.

Although most RPs desired motherhood, they also expressed an acute awareness that becoming young mothers without completing educational qualifications or gaining employment and achieving independent living, was likely to result in ‘struggling’, something all RPs wished to avoid. Heavily classed attitudes towards young motherhood, unplanned pregnancy and abortion were observed, which also shaped the RPs’ decisions when faced with unplanned teenage pregnancy. Despite not wanting to struggle, attitudes of ‘fatalism’ and the stigma associated with abortion meant that many RPs would continue with an unplanned pregnancy, even though early entry into motherhood can make it harder to escape welfare dependence and experiences of poverty.

### **7.3 What strategies are employed by the RPs as they make their transitions to adulthood?**

The RPs consistently employed reflexive strategies along their transition pathways, intent on making the ‘right’ choices to maximise their own life outcomes. They all aspired to financial independence through paid employment and considered FE key to achieving this. Most made utilitarian ‘choices’, studying subjects they believed would lead to employment, although ethnic variation was observed. As mentioned, several black working class RPs studied health and social care courses, intending to gain advanced credentials in their desired subjects of nursing, midwifery and radiography, which could lead to social mobility. Many white working class RPs, on the other hand, studied childcare which, while not leading to social

mobility, enabled them to gain a valued position in the community despite a history of weak academic attainment.

There was no evidence of strategic choices to pursue ‘welfare benefits lifestyles’. Instead, the RPs employed reflexive strategies to maximise their chances of paid employment in order to achieve financial independence. These strategies included weaving together seemingly disparate courses and experiences into a cohesive narrative and studying a range of qualifications to prepare for uncertain futures, as well as pursuing HE. Of those who went to university, some chose funded courses to minimise the accrual of debt. Several RPs prepared back-up plans, in case their first choices did not work out. These reflected some classed differences. Middle class Tanya’s (W16) strategy was based on the construction of a hierarchy of subjects ranked by perceived difficulty, which all entailed the pursuit of HE. By contrast, working class RPs, Soraya (B18) and Emily (M18), abandoned HE plans and chose to pursue apprenticeships instead.

Most of the RPs dealt with the prevailing sense of insecurity and uncertainty by engaging in strategies of ‘deferral’, that is, not thinking about the future, or short-term planning in order to remain flexible enough to respond to unexpected obstacles or challenges. Although longer term planning has been observed by Evans (2007: 86) to generate greater stability, this often requires the sort of emotional and material support and resources not always available to the RPs. Instead, RPs tended to employ strategies for securing financial independence and survival which often made sense in the short term, but could constrain their opportunities over the longer term.

In the absence of local opportunities for upward wage or social mobility, the aspiration of ‘getting away’ was articulated by many RPs. Since this aspiration was seldom reinforced by concrete plans, it is unclear whether it constituted a real escape strategy or an imagined flight

through daydreaming. Regardless, in the absence of abundant opportunities for ‘getting ahead’, articulating the desire to ‘get away’ was a means by which the RPs could disassociate themselves from others in the community who were deemed to be ‘getting nowhere’.

The employment of reflexive strategies with regard to independent household formation was particularly evident in RPs’ views on motherhood. The role of motherhood was greatly valued in the community, and among RPs. While many desired to become mothers, most also cited the desire to be financially ‘settled’ before doing so. Whilst most RPs desired financial independence through paid employment, a handful wished to be stay-at-home mothers, but only if they had a partner who was able to financially support the family. Reliance on social welfare benefits in order to support families was not an intentional strategy that any RPs articulated. Indeed, it was often denigrated. Thus, it is likely that any future dependence on social welfare benefits would result from a lack of better alternatives. It is also likely, however, that the RPs who embarked on teenage motherhood would be forced to claim social welfare benefits to support their children, at least temporarily. As MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 136) observe, entering into teenage motherhood without first securing educational qualifications and employment makes it more difficult to escape the poverty and the welfare trap. While teenage-mother-to-be, Evie<sup>59</sup>, hoped to implement a strategy to avoid this by returning to college and securing employment after having her baby, it was not possible during the fieldwork period to assess whether or not she would ultimately be able to do so. The following section illustrates how an intersectional lens contributed a greater nuance and depth to some of these findings.

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<sup>59</sup> As noted in Chapter Six, Evie is a second-level pseudonym, used to protect the RP’s anonymity.

## 7.4 Theoretical contributions: what does intersectionality reveal?

This study makes an original theoretical contribution as it argues for a study of youth transitions that deepens the structure and agency debate through incorporating *intersectionality* as a core theoretical and methodological concept. In her postscript to the edited volume *Framing intersectionality: Debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies*, Crenshaw (2011b: 232) writes that:

For me what is valuable isn't the doing of theory *per se* but determining whether the theory in question is useful in highlighting particular kinds of problems that are obscured by the toolset we normally employ in our academic and political work.

As this doctoral research study demonstrates, intersectionality can usefully inform transition studies by creating more nuanced accounts of how young women's experiences, the (often elusive) choices they are faced with and the reflexivity that they employ are shaped, in specific, and often contradictory, contexts, by the convergence of their gender, social class and ethnicity. This is crucial since, as Crenshaw (2011a: 25) points out, although multiple structural inequalities intersect to create particular experiences, they are often treated as mutually exclusive and some are, therefore, likely to become obscured. The value of intersectionality as a theoretical concept is underpinned by its commitment to retaining the focus firmly on the multi-dimensional nature of structural constraints that affects young women's life chances. As such, it enables more nuanced narratives, which examine not only how the convergence of multiple inequalities create young women's transition experiences, but also how these can lend understanding to the differences and complexity *among* and *between* women (Davis 2008: 70).

A purely gendered lens sheds little light on the RPs' educational disengagement and low academic achievement in the context of a discourse which positions young women overall as educational successes. Moreover, without a structural framework, such an approach may feed into narratives of individual choice and responsibility that shift the blame on to the RPs

themselves, as they themselves often did, for outcomes that are beyond their control. Shifting the analytical lens to illuminate the influence of social class reveals a more nuanced, though still incomplete, understanding of the structural dynamics in operation. Adding the third dimension, ethnicity, highlights further crucial differences that emerged between the RPs.

In the sphere of educational opportunity, intersectionality shed light on how processes of ethnic and classed positioning by teachers shaped RPs' access to support and resources that shaped their learner identities, their academic success and post-compulsory educational opportunities as well as their responses to these. It revealed how support from her father and teachers encouraged the most middle class RP, Tanya (W16), to strive for educational and occupational success through HE in the non-feminised sphere of the sciences. Although she suffered from the (typically gendered) phenomenon of low academic confidence, not pursuing HE was not an option for her and all her back-up plans involved HE. She was less concerned about what 'career' she ultimately worked in, than many working class RPs who chose to study 'utilitarian' subjects.

In contrast, the narratives of several working class RPs revealed that negative, stereotyped positioning closed down desired academic pathways and required RPs to create alternative educational and occupational strategies. There appeared to be a specifically ethnic dimension to these stereotypes, with white working class RPs positioned as 'inadequate learners' and black RPs as 'troublemakers'. In this context, the FE course choices made by RPs also take on particular significance. Though the majority of working class RPs chose 'utilitarian' and often 'feminised' courses intended to lead to employment, there was, as noted earlier, an ethnic dimension to their choices. Most of the white working class RPs wishing to study childcare disclosed weak educational histories and did not plan to pursue HE. By contrast, the black working class RPs all aspired to study at university, many on health and social care courses including nursing, midwifery and radiography. This indicates that white and mixed

parentage working class RPs with previously low levels of academic engagement and achievement strove for occupations that required minimal educational qualifications but still accorded them a valued position within their community. Despite the ways in which they may have been positioned in their earlier education, black working class RPs, on the other hand, viewed further and higher education as a route to social mobility. However, increased costs of HE and declining guarantees of postgraduate employment may be changing black women's attitudes towards higher education as a route to social mobility, at least with regard to health and social care professions<sup>60</sup>.

The intersectional approach also established analytical connections between the various aspects of RPs' transition pathways, which may otherwise have remained obscured. A purely gendered lens may have attributed the relatively large number of RPs citing themselves as the least successful person they know, as a gendered phenomenon in the post-industrial city. Nevertheless, intersectionality revealed classed and ethnic differences with regard to how the RPs responded to their earlier experiences of stereotyped positioning and how these created diverse understandings of their own positioning with regard to notions of 'success' and 'failure'. Mainly white working class RPs labelled themselves as the 'least successful' person they knew. By contrast, black and mixed parentage RPs all named someone else. It is likely that white working class RPs internalised negative positioning imposed upon them by their teachers during secondary education and interpreted resulting academic and occupational limitations as due to their own 'shortcomings'. Black and mixed parentage RPs, on the other hand, were perhaps more likely to reject imposed stereotypes, as found by Mirza (1992), and, therefore, less likely to engage in self-blame if structural constraints derailed them from their educational and occupational goals.

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<sup>60</sup> Attitudes toward studying health and social care may also be affected by recent government proposals to replace nursing and midwifery grants with student loans.

Intersectionality also furthered understanding of aspects of independent household formation, particularly with regard to attitudes towards marriage, motherhood and financial (in)dependence. In addition to highlighting the heavily classed attitudes toward young motherhood, unplanned pregnancy and termination, it shed light on how diverging attitudes towards financial autonomy in the context of marriage and family formation, resulted in different aspirations and strategies for RPs from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. Preferences for relationship and financial autonomy were visible among many RPs, though more pronounced among the black and middle class or university-educated RPs. This may have been a result of investment into HE to achieve social mobility, as well as greater barriers to employment for black men, historically more accepting attitudes towards alternative family formation, and notions of women as breadwinners within the black community. White working class RPs with weak educational histories and limited occupational options were most likely to consider stay-at-home motherhood an attractive option. This was, however, also contingent on having a (male) partner as breadwinner, indicating more traditional gendered attitudes towards both family and employment.

Through employing an intersectional lens, it became clear that although the RPs engaged in constant exercises of reflexivity and strove to make the ‘right’ choices, they did so in contexts which were highly bounded and shaped by their own position in the matrix of gender, social class and ethnicity. These findings reveal what can be gained from applying intersectionality to the study of youth transitions in terms of a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of young people’s experiences, as well as how similar situations may invite different responses, depending on the context.

## 7.5 Empirical contributions

Empirically, this study contributes to the growing, but still nascent, body of research that focuses on young women's transitions to adulthood as a worthy field of study in its own right. Whilst women have been included in the interview samples of several valuable recent transition studies, their overall experiences are often subsumed into conclusions about 'young people' that fail to adequately capture the gendered dynamics of young women's unique transition experiences and the ways in which these are further shaped by the intersections of social class and ethnicity. This study suggests that by focusing on young women's experiences, and understanding these through an intersectional lens, important nuances can be uncovered which illustrate that 'growing up girl' (Aapola et al 2005) does not constitute one homogenous experience.

This study also builds on the seminal research carried out by McRobbie (2000) and Griffin (1985) of young women growing up in Birmingham during the 1970s and 80s. Despite these pioneering studies, there has been little research on the transitions of young women in the city in more recent times. This is somewhat astounding given that Birmingham is the UK's second largest city and that the post-industrial context has altered significantly since these original studies were carried out. Murray and Gayle (2012: 9) note that the study of youth transitions can serve as a 'barometer' for measuring social change, and this study provides useful insights into the transitions of young women at a crucial time in Birmingham's history. The processes of de-industrialisation that were taking shape when McRobbie and Griffin carried out their research have vastly reconfigured Birmingham's economy and labour landscape. The problems caused by high youth unemployment and the emergence of the city as a low-wage economy, have been intensified by economic downturn and the coalition government's austerity agenda, which disproportionately affects women (Fawcett Society 2012: 3). Despite increased opportunities for young women to gain further and higher



educational qualifications considered essential for securing high-waged, skilled, quality work outside the home, credentialism has become increasingly costly, with fewer guarantees of secure employment at the end. Moreover, the very educational institutions and programmes created to widen access to opportunities have often reinforced traditional gendered, classed and ethnic hierarchies and inequalities, albeit under the veneer of increased equality. Simultaneously, young women's experiences of education, employment and independent household formation continue to be intimately linked.

The findings from this study have relevance beyond the realms of academia. Significantly, they challenge many prevalent media myths about young women growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, such as 'benefits scroungers' and teenage mothers seeking 'benefits lifestyles'. The more nuanced analysis that emerges from this study contributes to the growing body of work on young women's transitions, which can provide policy makers with a more in-depth understanding of the key issues that affect young women from diverse backgrounds as well as the lived implications of their policy-making.

This study began in 2010 during a period of profound socioeconomic and political transformation in Britain. This will, no doubt, continue to alter the context in which young women grow up. As such, the study also serves as a useful baseline for further research into how widening inequality, the ongoing 'feminisation of poverty' and the heightened impacts of austerity continue to affect young women's transitions to adulthood in the post-industrial city.

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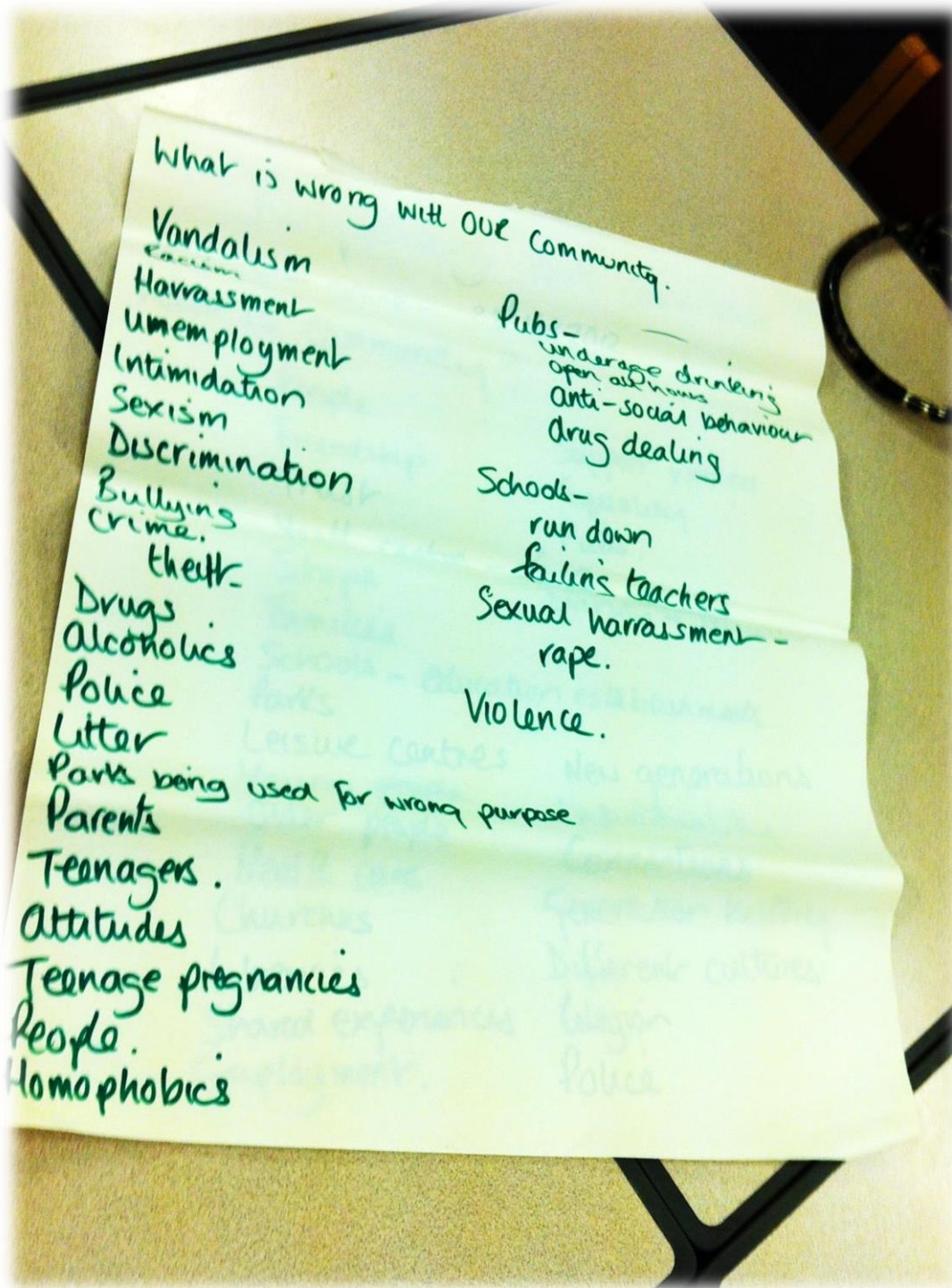
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**Appendix A: Negative and positive aspects of Midford articulated by members of MYC girls' group during a community regeneration consultation**

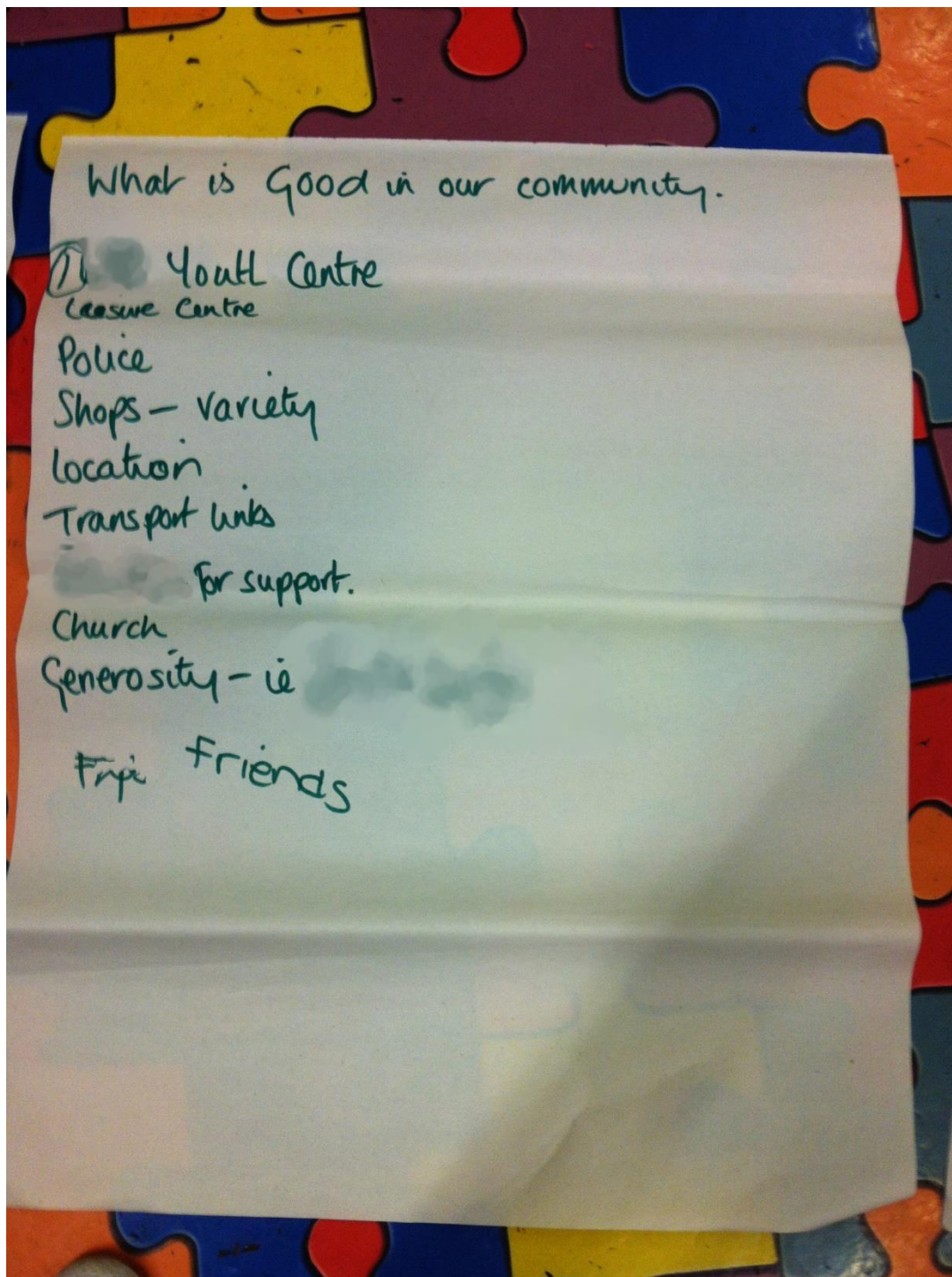
**"What is wrong with OUR community."**





**“What is Good in our community.”**

(identifying information has been blurred)



## Appendix B: Overview of research participants

### Overview of research participants: age, neighbourhood, ethnicity

Name	Number of interviews	Age at interviews	Neighbourhood	Ethnicity
Anika	2	18/19	Weston	B
Cassie	1	15	Midford	W
Daisy	3	17/18/19	Weston	W
Ellie	2	14/15	Midford	W
Emily	3	16/17/18	Midford	M
Jayne	2	22/23	Midford	W
Jenny	2	20/21	Midford	W
Jess	1	16	Midford	W
Lindsay	1	24	Weston	W
Lisa	2	22/23	Midford	W
Lucy	1	21	Midford	W
Rachelle	2	15/16	Midford	M
Sarah	2	18/19	Midford	W
Shanelle	2	18/19	Weston	B
Soraya	3	18/ 19	Weston	B
Talia	2	17	Midford	M
Tanya	1	16	Midford	W
Tina	2	18	Midford	B
Xyleah	2	20	Weston	B
Total	36	-	-	-



### Overview of research participants: social class

<b>Name</b>	<b>Primary parent's occupational class</b>	<b>Secondary parent's occupational class</b>
<b>Anika</b>	Lower-middle class; moved to precariat	N/A
<b>Cassie</b>	Lower-working class	N/A
<b>Daisy</b>	Middle-middle class	Middle-working class; moved to lower-working class
<b>Ellie</b>	Middle-working class	N/A
<b>Emily</b>	Middle-working class	Middle-working class
<b>Jayne</b>	Lower-working class	Upper-working class
<b>Jenny</b>	Middle-working class	N/A
<b>Jess</b>	Middle-working class	Precariat
<b>Lindsay</b>	Middle-working class; moved to precariat	Middle-working class to precariat
<b>Lisa</b>	Upper-working class; moved to precariat	Middle-middle class; moved to lower-working class
<b>Lucy</b>	Lower-working class	Middle-working class
<b>Rachelle</b>	Lower-middle class; moved to precariat	N/A
<b>Sarah</b>	Middle-working class; moved to lower-working class	Middle-working class
<b>Shanelle</b>	Middle-working class	Upper-working class
<b>Soraya</b>	Middle-working class	Upper-working class
<b>Talia</b>	Lower-middle class; moved to precariat	N/A
<b>Tanya</b>	Middle-middle class	N/A
<b>Tina</b>	Lower-middle class	Middle-working class
<b>Xyleah</b>	Precariat	Upper-working class

## Overview of research participants: education pathways

Name	Post-16 path	Education
<b>Anika</b>	Fragmented	Dropped out of health and social care college course to work. Re-enrolled to study health and social care at a different college during following year.
<b>Cassie</b>	n/a	Still in secondary school
<b>Daisy</b>	Fragmented	Dropped out of hairdressing course due to health reasons. Started hairdressing apprenticeship but quit after a few months. Re-enrolled in college to study maths and English.
<b>Ellie</b>	n/a	Still in secondary school
<b>Emily</b>	Linear	Studying Level 2 Childcare in college
<b>Jayne</b>	Fragmented	Dropped out of sixth form after first year. Studies forensics at college. Graduated from university in another city with a degree in criminology
<b>Jenny</b>	Fragmented /interrupted	Excluded from secondary school. Excluded from two college courses.
<b>Jess</b>	Interrupted	Dropped out of college childcare course.
<b>Lindsay</b>	Fragmented	Dropped out of sixth form. Returned to do university access course as mature student. Studies physiotherapy at local university.
<b>Lisa</b>	Fragmented	Completed sixth form. Dropped out of university sports course twice, first time due to mother's illness, second due to employment pressures.
<b>Lucy</b>	Fragmented	Completed sixth form. Completed Level 2 Sports course. Plans to return to Level 3 college education after struggling to find employment.
<b>Rachelle</b>	n/a	Still in secondary school
<b>Sarah</b>	Fragmented	Completed 2 apprenticeships after leaving school. Studies Art and textiles in college. Received acceptance to study fashion at university in a different city.
<b>Shanelle</b>	Fragmented	Taking a break after studying health and social care at college.
<b>Soraya</b>	Linear	Waiting to begin apprenticeship after studying dance at college.
<b>Talia</b>	Fragmented	Excluded from secondary school. Dropped out of performing arts course college due to health reasons Currently re-enrolled to study catering. Plans to study 'loads of other courses'
<b>Tanya</b>	Linear	Studies A-levels at college. Hopes to go to university.
<b>Tina</b>	Linear	Studies health and social care at college. Hopes to go to university.
<b>Xyleah</b>	Linear	Studies primary school teaching at university in a different city after completing college.

### Overview or research participants: housing status<sup>61</sup>

<b>Name</b>	<b>Housing status</b>
<b>Anika</b>	Lives with mother during first interview. During second she splits time between parents' homes. Hopes to live with boyfriend.
<b>Cassie</b>	Lives with father.
<b>Daisy</b>	Recently moved back in with mother. Spent a few months living in shared accommodation whilst working as barmaid in a different city.
<b>Ellie</b>	Lives with father.
<b>Emily</b>	Splits time between mother's house in a different part of the city and grandmother's house in Midford.
<b>Jayne</b>	Lived with fiancé whilst at university. Moved in with mother after graduating from university. Moved back in with fiancé after finding a job.
<b>Jenny</b>	Lives with mother. Briefly lived with boyfriend and in sheltered accommodation when younger after mother kicked her out.
<b>Jess</b>	Lives at home with both parents.
<b>Lindsay</b>	Lives with flatmate. Lived with father in different city for a year.
<b>Lisa</b>	Lived with girlfriend, but moved back home to mother's house after relationship ended.
<b>Lucy</b>	Lives with grandparents after not getting along with mother.
<b>Rachelle</b>	Lives with mother.
<b>Sarah</b>	Lives with mother.
<b>Shanelle</b>	Lives with mother.
<b>Soraya</b>	Lives with mother.
<b>Talia</b>	Recently moved in with mother. Lived with boyfriend's family for a year.
<b>Tanya</b>	Lives with father.
<b>Tina</b>	Lives with mother.
<b>Xyleah</b>	Lives alone in rented accommodation. Previously lived in university halls.

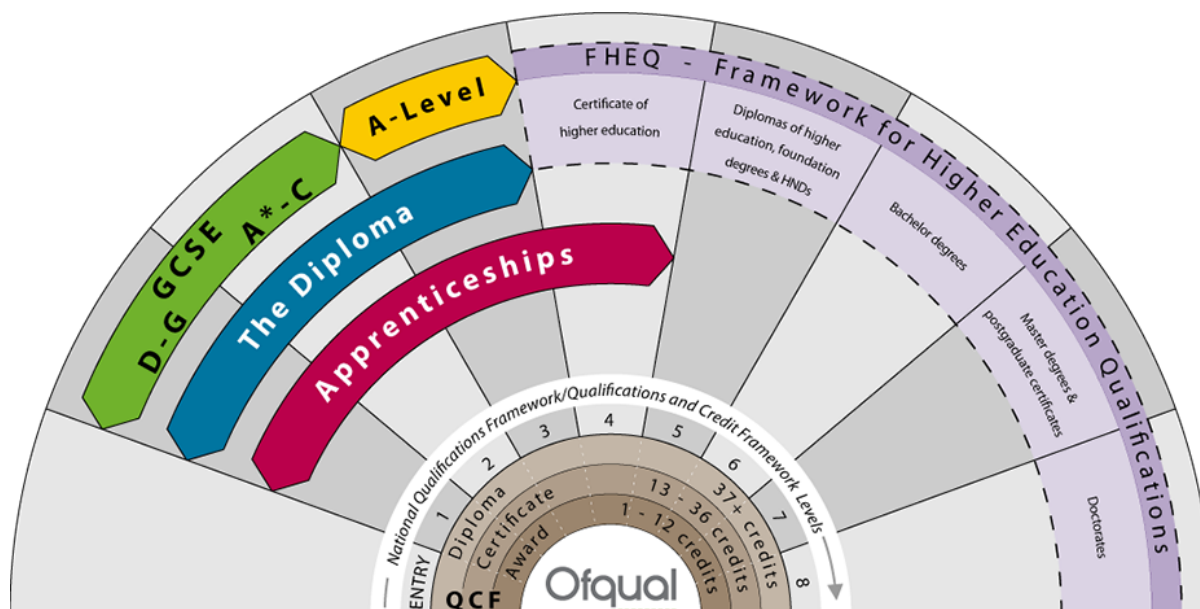
<sup>6161</sup> One of the RPs lived briefly in foster care – I have excluded this data from the table in order to protect her anonymity.

## Overview or research participants: employment aspirations and experiences

Name	Employment aspirations	Employment status during interviews	Prior paid/ unpaid/ volunteer work
<b>Anika</b>	Nurse or midwife	Works part time at fast food restaurant	Waitress in pub. Volunteer assistant dance teacher and unpaid babysitting for family.
<b>Cassie</b>	Work with kids	Not in employment as still in secondary school.	Shared paper round with older sister.
<b>Daisy</b>	Hairdresser	Not in employment due to ill health (first interview) and looking for employment (second interview).	Barmaid. Unpaid babysitting for family.
<b>Ellie</b>	Work with kids	Not in employment as still in secondary school.	No paid work, but volunteers as an assistant dance teacher.
<b>Emily</b>	Work with kids. Own nursery.	Apprenticeship in nursery.	No paid work, but unpaid babysitting for family.
<b>Jayne</b>	Youth worker or youth offending worker	Works as retail assistant.	Worked since age 16 in various service and retail jobs as well as student assistant at university.
<b>Jenny</b>	Singer or waitress	Looking for work (long-term unemployed)	Waitress, retail assistant, cleaner, care worker.
<b>Jess</b>	Not sure. Previously wanted to work with kids	Looking for work after dropping out of college.	No paid work but unpaid babysitting for family.
<b>Lindsay</b>	Physiotherapist	Works in pub	Worked since age 16 in various jobs in catering (waitress, chef), bank assistant and part time youth work.
<b>Lisa</b>	Not sure. Wanted to be a PE teacher when younger.	Works in pub as 'sort of junior manager and waitress'	Worked since age 16 in various jobs in service sector and part time youth work.
<b>Lucy</b>	Personal trainer or gym instructor. Previously PE teacher.	Looking for work (long term unemployed).	Door-to-door sales. Unofficial/ unpaid carer for ill relative.
<b>Rachelle</b>	Dance teacher for children	Not in employment as still in secondary school.	None.
<b>Sarah</b>	Fashion designer. Previously a costume designer for theatre.	Briefly worked in cloakroom in nightclub until it closed down. Volunteers at Midford Youth Centre	Does occasional chores for cash for family member.
<b>Shanelle</b>	Not sure, maybe something in dentistry or radiography.	Looking for health and social care apprenticeship	Telesales, retail assistant.
<b>Soraya</b>	Personal trainer.	No paid employment; waiting to start personal training apprenticeship	None.
<b>Talia</b>	Not sure.	Works as barmaid.	Barmaid
<b>Tanya</b>	Marine biologist,	Not in paid employment.	No paid work, but

	astronomer, or art teacher.		volunteers as children's swim teacher at local leisure centre. Does occasional chores for cash for family member.
<b>Tina</b>	Nurse	Works as cleaner and in call centre.	Cleaner, call centre worker.
<b>Xyleah</b>	Primary school teacher	No term-time work, but works in the pub she used to work in during summers and holidays.	Barmaid/ waitress, coach for young children. Unpaid babysitting for friend.

## Appendix C: Ofqual's comparison of educational qualifications and education levels



Source: Ofqual website <http://ofqual.gov.uk/help-and-advice/comparing-qualifications/>

## **Appendix D: Interview topic guide**

### **Intro (icebreaker)**

- What did you get up to yesterday? Is this a typical day?

### **Midford/ Weston**

- How long have you lived in [Midford (M) or Weston (W)]?
- Do you like living in [M or W]?
- What are the best things about [M or W]?
- The worst?

### **Education experiences**

- Are you currently in school/ college/ uni? Please tell me about this.
- What subjects do/ did you study?
- Did anyone give you useful advice about what courses to take/ college/ uni/ or future employment? Please tell me about this (e.g., school careers, Connexions, teachers, parents, youth workers, college)
- Will you/ why did you go to university?

### **Employment experiences**

- Do you have, or have you had any part time/ full time jobs? (formal or informal, e.g., baby sitting). Can you tell me about these?
- Do you get pocket money or salary or other source of income? What do you spend this on?

### **Future**

- What do you want to do/ be when you grow up?
- How would you achieve this?
- Has anyone given you any advice about this?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time? What will you be doing? What will your life be like?
- What about 10 years' time?
- How do you feel about the future? Why?
- Do you have any worries/ concerns about the future? What do you look forward to?
- Are there specific things/ events/ milestones for young women on the way to becoming an 'adult'?
- What are the biggest challenges that young women face as they grow into adulthood?

## **Marriage and mothering**

- Are you in a romantic relationship at the moment? Do you see yourself staying with this person?) Have you been before?
- Are you married? Please tell me a bit about this.
- If not, do you ever think about getting married? At what age would you like to get married?
- Is marriage an important part of a relationship?
- Do you want to live together with your partner before getting married?
- Would you like to have children? At what age do you think you would like to do this?
- I sometimes hear people say that women who become mothers at a young age can expect to be single. What do you think about this?
- Would you be a stay-at-home mother? Why/ why not? (How do you think women balance motherhood and employment?)

## **Role models**

- Do you have any role models? (Or, if they don't respond to term role model, who do you admire/ look up to?)
- Who is the most successful person you know?<sup>62</sup>
- Who is the least successful person you know? (Or, who do you look down on?)
- What does it mean to be successful?
- Who do you go to for advice about school/ work? Problems? Other?

## **Free time**

- What do you like to do in your free time?
- Do you watch television? Which programmes?
- Do you buy celebrity magazines?
- How important is going out? Drinking alcohol?
- Who do you spend most of your time with?
- Why do you spend time with your friends?
- How long have you been coming to [MYC]? Why do you come here?

## **Background**

- Which city were you born in?
- Who do you live with? (Are your parents married/ living together? Other relationships/ children/ etc.?)

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<sup>62</sup> Questions on success were amended as interviews went on as RPs themselves asked for, or defined, what was meant by 'success' and 'failure'.



- Do you live in a house or flat? Does your family own or rent? If rent, council or private landlord?
- Which city were your parents born in?
- Do your parents work? If so what?
- What GCSE subjects did you study in school? Why did you study these (and not others)?

**Finally**

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- How did you find the interview?
- Do you want to ask me any questions?
- Would you be willing to participate in another interview later in the research process?

## Appendix E: Interview transcript excerpt, Anika (B19) – discussion of racism in context of British politics

The italicised text in this excerpt indicates the section referred to in the discussion in Chapter Three – the bold text highlights Anika’s responses in this context.

AO: I think...I do think things are changing but it’s [racism] always gonna be there.

AO: Yeah.

Anika: All the time, like because even...even with the government and stuff like that, like it’s always there. *You don’t really see that many black people in government.* But then you’ve got Obama in America. And America’s more, like, developed than we are. Like, *we could get there maybe one day but, like, you never know.*

AO: *Yes... Do you think it would be, like, umm, having a black Prime Minister here in the UK, do you see that happening?*

**Anika: No, never.**

AO: *Do you think really never?*

**Anika: I...I don’t think that will be a possibility at all.**

AO: *Why do you think so?*

**Anika: I don’t know, I just don’t because it’s like...and then at the same time you don’t think any black person would want to be Prime Minister of England.**

AO: *Why do you think they wouldn’t want to be?*

**Anika: I don’t know. It’s just...I don’t know. It’s...I don’t know, it’s just the government is full of white people all the time and, like, they’re always in power.**

AO: Yeah.

**Anika: When...like, if they want to do it, you’ve got to be hired to get it but now it makes you think, oh, you...you’re not good enough to do stuff like that anyway.**

## Appendix F: Discussion group layout and content

### Research Discussion Group #1

Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> July: Ideas about future, success, education and employment

	SESSION ONE	DELIVERY	RESOURCES
5 mins	<b>Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purpose of sessions</li> <li>- Dates and times</li> <li>- Break</li> <li>- Consent forms</li> </ul>		Consent forms
10 mins	<b>Ice breaker: TBA</b>		
10 mins	<b>Expectations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do I/ we hope to achieve?</li> <li>- Any fears?</li> <li>- Ground rules</li> </ul>		Large paper and pen
10 mins	<b>Small group exercise: What does it mean to be a successful woman?</b>		Paper, pens, recorders
10 mins	<b>Feedback to large group and discussion</b>		
15 mins	<b>Pizza break</b>		Pizza, drinks
45 mins	<b>Presentation of research and discussion:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideas about success and failure</li> <li>- Attitudes towards future</li> <li>- Post 16-education: goals and real life experiences</li> <li>- Work: goals and real life experiences</li> </ul>		Hand-out, recorders
10 Mins	<b>What next?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce next week's session (role models, marriage and motherhood)</li> <li>- PhD publication/ book publication/ other ideas</li> </ul>		Book examples
10 mins	<b>Q&amp;A and evaluation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Any questions?</li> <li>- Evaluation to help next session</li> </ul>		Evaluation forms

## Research Discussion Group #2

Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> July: Ideas about role models, marriage and motherhood

	SESSION ONE	DELIVERY	RESOURCES
5 mins	<b>Introduction</b> -Recap purpose of sessions - Break - Consent forms		Consent forms
10 mins	<b>Ice breaker: TBA</b>		
10 mins	<b>Expectations</b> -Recap/ amend ground rules - What do I/ we hope to achieve? - Any fears?		Large paper and pen
10 mins	<b>Small group exercise:</b> Discuss statement: “Being a single mother and living on benefits has become a lifestyle choice [for young women]” (Daily Mail 2010)		Paper, pens, recorders
10 mins	<b>Feedback to large group and discussion</b>		
15 mins	<b>Food break</b>		Food, drinks
45 mins	<b>Presentation of research and discussion:</b> - Ideas about role models - Attitudes towards marriage - Motherhood		Hand-out, recorders
10 mins	<b>What next?</b> - Recap book and PhD timeline -Talk about other possible opportunities (10 year research)		Book examples
10 mins	<b>Q&amp;A and evaluation</b> - Any questions? - Evaluation of session		Evaluation forms

## **Appendix G: Consent form for interviews**

### **CONSENT FORM: PERMISSION TO INTERVIEW, RECORD AND USE DATA**

(To be completed by Interviewee – one copy retained by Anna Ornnert, PhD candidate at London Metropolitan University; one copy given to Interviewee)

I give permission to be interviewed for Anna Ornnert's PhD research on young women's experiences of growing up in Birmingham.

(please tick)

YES

NO

I give permission for my interview to be digitally recorded

YES

NO

I understand that the recorded interview will be transcribed, after which the digital recording of the interview will be destroyed, and the interview transcript will be stored in Anna Ornnert's personal archive for the purpose of further research and analysis. The information contained therein may be used in Anna Ornnert's PhD thesis, published journal articles and books or papers presented at conferences.

Signed..... Date: .....

Name: .....

Contact address: .....

Contact telephone number: .....

Under the Data Protection Act 1998, this information will not be used for any purpose other than that stated on this form.

Any queries please contact:

Anna Ornnert

London Metropolitan University

Email: xxxxxxxxx

Tel: xxxxxxxxxxx

## **Appendix H: Invitation letter for discussion groups**

Dear [NAME]

Thanks again for taking part in interview(s) for the research for my studies and book. I would like to invite you to two special sessions of the [MYC] girls' group to talk about the findings from the interviews. We won't be discussing any individual interviews at these sessions, but talking about the overall issues that came up in the research so that I can collect your feedback and suggestions on these before anything is published. The interviews have been amazing so far and I'm really looking forward to your feedback on the findings. I will also update you on the book plans at this time.

The two discussion groups will be on:

Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> July – session on role models, success, education and work

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> July – session on motherhood and marriage

If you can't make it to these sessions but still want to provide feedback, please let me or [LINDA] know and we can make alternative arrangements with you. If you have any questions about your individual interview or have concerns about confidentiality, we can also arrange a separate time to talk about these.

I hope to see you at the girls' group sessions!

Anna xx

## Appendix I: Factors that influenced the discussion groups

During the MYC girls' group discussions, several issues arose, which affected the quality of the sessions as a forum for 'respondent validation':

- (1) During the first session with the MYC girls' group, more young women than expected turned up – there were 16 young women in all (one brought her baby), which was a significantly larger number than is suggested as optimum for focus groups (Crang and Cook 2007). Of this group, ten had taken part in interviews. Linda (who was co-facilitating with me) and I decided to split the group into two smaller groups to discuss the questions I had set. As a result, I was only able to sit in on one of the small group discussions at a time.
- (2) I digitally recorded the sessions, but due to the (untypically) hot weather, and the size of the group, we were unable to use one of the smaller contained rooms and had to run the session in the main hall. This not only affected the acoustics of the recording, but meant that we faced interruptions from other centre users as they came and went<sup>63</sup>.
- (3) Two of the young women were not regulars in the group and brought along two friends (possibly to bolster their own numbers), whilst one regular also brought a friend from out of town. These new faces disturbed the old group dynamic. Moreover, the new women were the more dominant participants which seemed to intimidate the regulars. It was interesting to see how the usually dominant voices were silenced in this context. Additionally, different individuals competed for attention which often took us away from the discussion topics on to irrelevant tangents.
- (4) Another significant issue emerged from engaging Linda as a co-facilitator. Conflicting aims emerged between my research – in which I aimed to engage the young women in discussions so that I could understand their own viewpoints – and Linda's youth work – which aimed to help shape those viewpoints, in particular if the views expressed were deemed to be negative, inaccurate or harmful. At times, the young women's voices were silenced by Linda's

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<sup>63</sup> MYC was a joint youth and community centre and as a result a number of other community members and groups utilised the centre.

interjections and explanations. In hindsight, this might have been avoided if I had been clearer and more up front with Linda about what my aims were for the session. However, there were some subtle power issues at play as well. As I was on her ‘turf’ (the girls group) I also felt uncomfortable about prioritizing my researcher agenda (soliciting the girls’ views whether they were socially acceptable or not) over her agenda as a senior youth worker.

- (5) Finally, during the first sessions with each group it became apparent that I had been overly optimistic in the volume of data that I thought we would be able to cover. As a result, I significantly scaled down the amount of material to cover in the final two sessions.