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Furlong, A. (2009) *Revisiting transitional metaphors: reproducing inequalities under the conditions of late modernity*. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (5). pp. 343-353. ISSN 1363-9080

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/30514/>

Deposited on: 21 June 2010

# Revisiting transitional metaphors: reproducing social inequalities under the conditions of late modernity

Andy Furlong<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper focuses on some of the conceptual implications changes in youth transitions over the last 40 years. I argue that changes have often been exaggerated with researchers too enthusiastic to jump on theoretical bandwagons without due regard for empirical evidence. While I suggest that there are important changes that impact on the ways in which social classes are reproduced, involving a *perception* of increased opportunity and greater scope for individual agency, a degree of class-based convergence and illusions regarding the disappearance of class, I will argue that the new mechanisms lead to the re-establishment of very familiar patterns of socio-economic inequality which can largely be understood by employing established theoretical ideas. While biographical approaches are regarded as useful, the continued use of social class is defended.

## Introduction

As part of the early development of what became the ESRC 'Youth, citizenship and social change programme', Karen Evans and I wrote a paper entitled 'Metaphors of youth transitions: niches, pathways, trajectories or navigations' (Evans and Furlong 1997). In that paper, we traced changing perspectives on youth transitions from the 1960s to the 1990s by looking at the metaphors used to summarise typical sequences of events involved in processes of social reproduction. We suggested that, in the 1960s, work on transitions tended to have a strong psychological underpinnings with processes of integration being seen in terms of clear routes leading to occupational 'niches'. Influenced by the work of Havinghurst (1948) and Erikson (1968), there was an emphasis on growth task models in which young people's routes were linked to the successful accomplishment of a developmental project which resulted in the establishment of a vocational identity. In the 1970s, with a rise in youth unemployment resulting in more complex transitions, 'routes' and 'pathways' became the favoured metaphors. This shift in thinking did not simply reflect changes in transitional contexts, but also reflected new ways of thinking that were influenced by sociology and which placed less emphasis on subjective orientations in shaping transitions and placed more

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: Professor Andy Furlong, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon St., Glasgow G3 6NH Email: [a.furlong@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:a.furlong@educ.gla.ac.uk)

emphasis on opportunity structures (e.g. Roberts 1975). By the 1980s, with transitions apparently having become increasingly complex and protracted and unemployment continuing to rise, 'trajectory' became the predominant metaphor. Underpinned by structuralist interpretations, the term implied that transitional outcomes were strongly conditioned by factors such as social class and cultural capital and were therefore largely beyond individual control. By the 1990s, with the rise of post-modern perspectives, structural explanations fell out of fashion and new metaphors were introduced that revolved around the idea of 'navigation'. Individual agency was given much greater prominence and transitional outcomes were increasingly linked to factors like judgement, resilience and life management skills.

These interpretations of youth transitions are affected, on the one hand, by objective changes in the experiences of young people, driven by labour market conditions, institutional arrangements and norms relating to engagement with education and training. In other words, they attempt to relate normative experiences to opportunities to apply agency, or conversely, to the power of social structures to shape outcomes. On the other hand, we have to be aware that interpretations can be influenced by theoretical fashion in ways that can distort explanation and understanding. In this context, researchers may come to exaggerate the impact of structure or agency in specific eras due to their tendency to work within contemporary theoretical paradigms.

If the concepts through which we express our understanding of youth transitions are in any way adequate, they should remain effective unless profound, epochal, social and economic transformations push a metaphor to the limits of its elasticity. Indeed, metaphors of transitions should be dynamic concepts which are capable of informing our knowledge of new or unfamiliar circumstances: that is their purpose. An effective metaphor must be able to go beyond the descriptive and should represent an analytic tool that helps guide and inform research in a period of change. If socio-economic changes, such as a restructuring of the labour market, lead to the widespread abandonment of an earlier model, then that model was either inadequate in the first place or the changes taking place are so far-reaching that they understandably render previous models invalid, especially if changes radically increase or decrease the scope for agency.

Certainly important socio-economic changes have taken place over the last 40 years, whether or not they can be seen as representing an epochal break is somewhat dubious. Those of a post-modernist persuasion would accept the case for such a transformation, arguing that it is no longer possible to predict individual life chances or lifestyles using information about social class, gender or other structural variables (Lyotard 1984). Other theorists are more cautious and either see no reason to abandon perspectives that prioritise structure over agency, or, whilst accepting the idea that structures have changed or become less significant, are disinclined to recognise the case for epochal change (Lash 1992).

In this paper I review evidence on changing transitions over the last 40 years and draw out some of the conceptual implications. A central argument is that, to an extent, changes have often been exaggerated with researchers too enthusiastic to jump on theoretical bandwagons without due regard for empirical evidence. While I suggest that there are important changes that impact on the ways in which social classes are reproduced, involving a *perception* of increased opportunity and greater scope for individual agency, a degree of class-based convergence and illusions regarding the disappearance of class, I will argue that the new mechanisms lead to the re-establishment of very familiar patterns of socio-economic inequality which can largely be understood by employing established theoretical ideas. Forms of consciousness may have changed, but people's locations within power structures still impact strongly on life chances.

### **What's changed and why is it significant?**

While there is an ongoing debate about the theoretical significance of the changes that have occurred over the last 40 years, on an empirical level we can agree that young people are remaining in education for longer and, as a result, entering the labour market later. Whereas 40 years ago most young people in the UK left school at the age of 15 or 16, today relatively few complete their education at the minimum age and more than four in ten enter higher education (Hayward *et al.* 2004; DfES 2005). Employment contexts have also changed with opportunities in manufacturing having been replaced by jobs in the service sector that require very different skill sets. These changes have led to the suggestion that transitions have become more protracted and increasingly complex. At the same time, it has been argued, quite rightly, that there has been a longstanding tendency to understate the protraction and complexity of transitions in the 1950s and 1960s. As Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) demonstrate, 'one-step' transitions were far from universal and 'golden age' transitions frequently took some years to complete, often involving complex patterns of movement as young people settled into the labour market. Guided by theoretical paradigms, prior to the 1990s, researchers tended to seek out simple stratified routes within their data and made sense of any apparent complexity by constructing typologies that highlighted the commonality of class-based experiences rather than focus on individualised pathways (e.g. Ashton and Field 1976). In contrast, the search for complexity in contemporary contexts has been driven, in part, by theoretical paradigms that stress the fluidity of modern life contexts while rejecting structural perspectives.

In the context of education, the increase in contact with schools and colleges has important theoretical implications which relate to processes of social reproduction in both subjective and objective contexts. With the increase in educational participation affecting young people from all social classes and with schools organised in ways that have led to more extensive cross-class socialization, on the surface there seems to be a weakening of class-based segregation in the education system (Biggart and Furlong 1996). Forty years ago, secondary schooling was often segregated along the lines of social class in ways that virtually represented a form of social apartheid. With the introduction of comprehensive schools, it became more common for children from working class and middle class families to attend the same school, although a degree of

class-based segregation was achieved through streaming, through patterns of neighbourhood deprivation and through the maintenance of a fee-paying and grant maintained sector which helped maintain a separation between the upper middle classes and the less privileged (Croxford and Raffe 2005). Today, although most young people experience post-compulsory education and many progress to higher education, class-based experience are still evident: elite routes through the upper secondary school and into the most prestigious universities are still dominated by the middle classes, while secondary routes involving repeat examinations and, perhaps, progression to sub-degree courses or undergraduate study in one of the ex-Polytechnics are largely the preserve of the working classes and lower middle classes (Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Callender 2003). Such divisions are largely maintained through patterns of attainment, which are conditioned by social capital and access to economic resources, although there are also subjective dimensions of stratification which, for example, involve qualified young people from working class families avoiding elite institutions and courses and selecting those with a greater representation of their class-based peers (Forsyth and Furlong 2000; Furlong and Cartmel 2009).

On a subjective level, the changes in the organisation of education and patterns of participation have a number of important implications. Here Willis' (1977) idea that a clash between the culture of the school and lower working class cultures resulted in a process of resistance, which was regarded one of the key mechanisms which restricted social mobility, needs to be reconsidered. In recent years, the idea that class-based resistance is central to the reproduction of inequalities has fallen out of favour, mainly because education has become much more central to the lives of young people from all social classes who must conform to get by. Even young people who would not regard themselves as 'academic', participate in education for longer periods of time, have become aware of the restricted range of job opportunities available to those without qualifications and adopt instrumental rather than resistant perspectives (Biggart and Furlong 1996).

In this context it can be argued that collectivised, class-based, responses to school have weakened, resulting in more fragmented and individualised orientations (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Sennett 1998). Many of the changes that have taken place have resulted in a tendency for the class-based stratification of routes to become obscure. This blurring of divisions means that both social actors and social scientists can be fooled into thinking that class has lost much of its relevance. In reality, the changes mean that we have to look a little harder to identify class-based patterns in transitions and must accept that the link between social class and identities has become much more complex, with identities constructed in multiple sites and manipulated by commercial concerns (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997; Côté 2000).

A good example of these changes relates to forms of stratification within higher education. While the status of university student was once clearly an advantaged route overwhelmingly dominated by those from middle class families, alongside a small number of upwardly mobile students, today student status is not necessarily a clear

marker of advantaged status. The student body is stratified in a range of ways, divisions include that between elite and non-elite intuitions, between those on vocational and academic courses, between those on courses associated with high-wage occupations and those on courses linked to relatively low wage occupations that have only recently required degree-level entry. Other significant forms of stratification include the division between those living at home and those living independently and between students who work long hours to fund their studies and others whose parents largely cover their costs (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). On the surface, they are all university students and, from a macro perspective, we could argue that the linkage between social class and university entry has weakened significantly over the last 40 years. But we would not be comparing like with like. Within the higher education sector privileged routes that are strongly linked to advantaged occupational positions clearly remain the preserve of the upper middle classes. Moreover, while students may not always fully recognise the nature of class-based stratification that characterises contemporary higher education, they do have a clear awareness of the existence of divisions and of the fact that their own circumstances are not shared universally among the student body. Peer interactions are shaped by such divisions and the language of class is frequently invoked by students as an explanation for differential experiences (Ball *et al.* 2002; Christie *et al.* 2005; Reay 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 2009).

Similar transformations, which can also result in a blurring of class divisions, can be identified in the labour market. On a structural level, over the last 40 years there has been a very significant contraction of the manufacturing sector and expansion of the service sector and processes of globalisation have transformed opportunities for young people (White and Wyn 2004; Kagan *et al.* 2005). Indeed, today's youth grew up in a period in which the occupational structure was undergoing a radical transformation and many of their parents experienced upward social mobility as a consequence of a large increase in what Goldthorpe (1980) referred to as 'room at the top', reflecting a significant increase in professional and managerial occupations, especially within the growing public sector in the post-war era. With a serious decline in unskilled manual jobs in factories and building sites and with education becoming more crucial to labour market outcomes, divisions in the labour market have become blurred and it has become more common for young people from different social classes to spend periods of time working together. In retail environments and in call centres, for example, middle class students frequently work with colleagues from a variety of class backgrounds.

The experience of temporary and precarious forms of employment is also a feature of late modernity that shapes the early labour market experiences of young workers from across the social spectrum: even those from relatively privileged social classes frequently begin their working lives in temporary or unstable positions (Furlong and Kelly 2005; MacDonald 2009). While job titles may provide researchers with snapshot information on occupations which are then used as a proxy for class position, to be meaningful it is necessary to develop a holistic picture of young people's occupations within the contexts of their resources (such as social and cultural capital and qualifications) and transitions. This has radical implications for the way classes are conceptualised because it means, effectively, that a job title cannot necessarily be used

as a meaningful proxy for class without supplementary information relating to the employees interpretation of the ways in which they see it fitting into their life biography (as a long-term proposition, as an insecure position, as a stop gap or as a stepping stone, for example).

### **Social class and the process of individualisation**

It is from these new complexities that confusions about the lives of modern youth arise. If we can no longer make straightforward statements about young people's transitions or likely destinations from readily available information about their current circumstances (such as occupations or educational status), does it mean that analysis that takes structural locations as a starting point is outmoded, or does it mean that we need to develop more adequate ways of representing divisions such as social class? I would suggest that sociologists have been somewhat negligent when it comes to the development of their key concept and that contemporary representations are somewhat ill-suited to the modern world. It is misleading to assume that occupations can be regarded as an unproblematic proxy for class, especially in youth and young adulthood, and it is important to explore ways of representing subjectivities. This is not to argue that class is dead, merely to suggest that conceptual representations are often inadequate. After all, if inequalities can be linked to positions in the socio-economic order and involve the reproduction of power relations through the mobilisation of resources, then there is no substance to the argument that class has become irrelevant.

Part of the confusion about class that comes across in work on youth transitions relates to the influential idea of individualisation, which has been taken from the work of Beck and Giddens, and the ways in which it has been interpreted and applied. For some commentators, including myself, the idea of individualisation does not imply that class structures have weakened or disappeared, while others, such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), clearly think that individualisation is a process whereby agency takes precedence and structures assume a secondary, and much reduced, position. It is important to address this confusion so as to be clear about the relationship between the processes of individualisation and the significance of class-based inequalities in late modernity.

Beck himself is quite clear that social class has become a 'zombie' category' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 201): an idea that lives on in the minds of sociologists but one which has no relevance in late modernity. Describing modern contexts as 'capitalism without classes' (1992: 88), he argues that in all aspects of their lives people have to chose between different options, including the social groups with which they wish to be identified.

With the decline of class and status groups the individual must become the agent of his or her own identity making and livelihood. The individual, not his or her

class, becomes the unit for the reproduction of the social in his or her own lifeworld (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 202).

Beck, however, is not arguing that social inequalities become weaker or cease to exist in late modernity, his argument is that inequalities, which display an 'amazing stability' (1992: 91), are manifest at the level of the individual rather than in at the level of the social class or group: hence the term individualisation. As subjects become disembedded from social class, they are forced into situations where they must reflexively construct biographies as a way of interpreting a diversity of experiences in situations where risk is all pervasive.

The difficulty with Beck's position relates to the idea of presenting social class as a meaningless concept (a 'zombie category') while at the same time admitting that inequalities may be arranged in a way that closely resembles their distribution within class society. If inequalities cluster in ways that resemble class society, on what basis can we argue that class is dead? The problem is, as Atkinson argues, that Beck has 'no consistent or convincing conception of what is supposed to have died' (2007: 358). In responding to Atkinson, Beck (2007) fails to take the opportunity to move beyond a 'caricature' of class or spell out in a precise manner the ways in which power relations in capitalist society have changed so as to render structural oppositions between groups and their social and cultural manifestations obsolete.

While Beck fails to spell out his views regarding the nature of the relationship between social structures and subjective orientations that characterised class society, the clear implication is that, for classes to exist in a meaningful way, forms of consciousness are necessarily linked to collective locations. In other words, distinct class cultures must exist. Where forms of consciousness, attitudes and lifestyles are not clearly connected to structural locations, then Beck seems to suggest that classes are empty constructs. The problem with this argument is that, as a starting point, it takes a dated stereotype of class (one which has not had much currency outside of close-knit occupational communities, such as mining towns, since WWII) and then uses this as a 'straw man'.

Beck's position in relation to class consciousness as the essential ingredient which validates class analysis comes across clearly in his reply to Atkinson. Beck (2007) uses the example of the distribution of university places to drive home his position on class, class consciousness and individualization. While there are clear inequalities in university entry which result in relatively few young people from poor families gaining entry, in Beck's view this situation does not provide evidence of the persistence of class nor does it undermine the theory of individualization because such a perspective is underpinned by a flawed assumption relating to the link between class cultures and class positions. In other words, neither young people nor their families make decisions about university entry on the basis of perceived class membership: decisions are not framed by class. Yet this position is flawed in two important respects. First, most class



theorists would argue that social classes exist in situations where locations in a socio-economic structure shape life chances, irrespective of whether we can identify a set of cultural perspectives that neatly map onto such divisions (e.g. Wright 1977). Second, research on youth (and other groups) continues to show that many individuals do have a basic awareness of the ways in which their lives are shaped by unequal opportunity structures (e.g. MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2009). To be clear, this awareness (which can be expressed by individuals in rather vague terms) relates not just to the inequalities that can be attributed to individual circumstances, but to the structural patterning of inequalities along the lines of class, gender, 'race' and so on.

In *Young People and Social Change*, (Furlong and Cartmel 1997 2007) a set of ideas was developed to explain the relevance of class in understanding the lives of young people in late modern societies. The central argument (which respects some of the key themes introduced by Beck without arriving at the same conclusions in relation to the supposed death of class), rests on the idea that young people are increasingly seeking individual level solutions to situations that are still clearly class-related. In our view, this is clearly a structured process and certainly does not carry the suggestion that individualisation is 'simply a subjective phenomenon concerning self-identities and attitudes alone', as Atkinson (2007: 353) and Woodman (2009) suggest.<sup>2</sup> What we termed the 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity refers to a growing disjuncture between objective and subjective dimensions of life whereby underlying class relationships may be obscured as a result of a diversification of experiences. With young people following a much greater variety of educational and labour market routes, they are increasingly encouraged to seek solutions on an individual, rather than collective, basis even though outcomes are strongly conditioned by factors like social class and gender. This does not signal the death of class or invalidate approaches that utilise information on structural location as a way of understanding outcomes, nor does it suggest that young people lack an awareness of the link between resources and life chances.

The other misinterpretation of my position is one that suggests that, by emphasising the continued importance of structured outcomes, I have a tendency to neglect the role of agency in youth transitions (Evans 2002 2007). On the contrary, my position is that while outcomes are largely determined by a set of structural resources and contexts, personal agency is central to the mobilisation of capacities and, hence, the reproduction of inequalities (Furlong *et al.* 2003). In this context I fully accept Evan's ideas regarding the role of bounded agency in transitions. For Evans, 'bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions' (2007: 93). Such a view is fully compatible with my own and does not lead to the rejection of the validity of class analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> Beck (2007) makes the same point, but I suspect that this erroneous interpretation is taken from Atkinson without any attempt being made to personally interrogate the ideas.

For Evans, the idea of 'bounded agency' is built around the view that young people's actions are guided by 'past and imagined future possibilities' relating to their 'subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate' (2007: 92). In other words, there is no incompatibility between the idea of biographical negotiation and modern notions of class. Class analysis does not imply structural determinism and, drawing on ideas about biographical projects, is fully compatible with Evans' work on bounded agency. Moreover, by pulling these ideas together more systemically, we can develop transitional models that can be applied effectively to contemporary as well as to the immediate post-war situations. In other words, it offers the potential to build a robust model to guide future research.

### **Building conceptual models**

The introduction of the idea that modern transitions can be thought of as biographical projects led to the metaphor of navigation that started to become fashionable in the 1990s. Perhaps expressed most clearly in the work of du Bois Reymond (1998), researchers began to argue that there had been a shift from 'normal biographies' (regarded as structured and linear) to 'choice biographies' which were much more fragmented and driven by choices made by young people as active and engaged agents. While du Bois Reymond certainly recognised that the scope to construct choice biographies was shaped by factors like class and gender, in Beck's work these structural constraints are either absent or very much secondary to agency (Roberts, forthcoming).<sup>3</sup> Yet biography is a useful concept and, in my view, fully compatible with the idea of bounded agency and with the retention of structural concepts such as social class.

Biographical approaches can be used as a way of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change and embedded within a set of circumstances that they may be unable to control or influence. As individuals we reflect on past experiences as a way of framing future plans and try to make sense of our lives through putting together a coherent story. Biographies are lived out within structures that constrain action and involve contexts where resources are linked to opportunity. In this context a number of writers have clearly shown how biographical projects are shaped by factors such as social class and locality. MacDonald and Marsh (2005), for example, argued that among young people in poor neighbourhoods in the North East of England, biographical narratives were 'saturated' by class cultures. Criticising the tendency to overstate the role of agency in some biographical approaches, they argue that

some contemporary accounts of reflexive modernisation underplay the social structuring of the psychic and emotional resources on which reflexivity depends

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<sup>3</sup> Woodman (2009) has argued that the tendency to criticise Beck for the use of the term choice biography is ill-founded and represents a poor caricature of his work.

and overplay the ability of personal life-planning to overcome the class-based, material bases of social exclusion (2005: 211).

Similarly, in their research on working class experiences of education, Ball and colleagues (2002) highlight the ways in which young people incorporate education into biographies in ways which are clearly framed by social class and ethnicity. Active and prolonged engagement in education requires the development of a learner identity, and young people have to be comfortable to describe themselves as students and work out what that means to themselves in terms of involvement in their communities, in the here and now, and in the context of future lives and careers. For Reay (2005), the effective participation of working class students is not about casting aside a working class identity, but is driven by a desire to accommodate their new experiences within a framework that respects their working class roots. In other words, biographies can help us understand young people's lived experiences, but they also highlight the ways in which reflexive projects are underpinned by structural locations. Moreover, the concept can help us come to terms with the ways in which outcomes are not simply linked to the material resources of class, but also to a set of subjective capacities through which individuals are differentially equipped to manage their lives.

## **Conclusion**

By focusing on the development of concepts used by researchers to understand youth transitions, readers would be left with the impression that changes in the experiences of young people over the last 40 years have been so far-reaching that earlier perspectives had totally lost their validity. Such an interpretation distorts reality and partly rests on a tendency for researchers to follow theoretical fashion. Certainly there have been important changes affecting young people's lives, but there are also powerful continuities. Despite a tendency for some metaphors to downplay agency and others to employ weak structural models, transitions have always taken place within contexts that lend shape to experiences, and outcomes have always been conditioned by resources. At the same time, young people themselves have always attempted to influence outcomes, realise their aspirations and move forward reflexive life projects. Indeed, the identity projects outlined by Erikson (1968) are not too far from the idea of biography as developed by Giddens (1991).

Over the last 40 years research methods have become more sophisticated: we are better equipped to explore complex patterns within social life and, crucially, to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis in ways that enable us to contextualise process. With new tools and clearer theoretical understanding, we can appreciate that the transitions made in the 1950s and 1960s were more complex than contemporary researchers would have us believe (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005) while modern transitions remain relatively straightforward for perhaps one in two young people (Furlong *et al.* 2003).

One of the more contentious, and crucial, debates taking place at the moment concerns the relevance of social class in the lives of modern youth. While youth researchers have been fairly receptive to the development of biographical approaches, there is a much greater reluctance to cast aside class or abandon other structural variables. With work on youth transitions having a strong focus on social reproduction and the transmission of advantage, it is perhaps no surprise that social class remains prominent. While Beck (2002) may consider class to be a 'zombie category' that has lost its relevance as a concept that shapes culture or consciousness, youth researchers are constantly uncovering new and rich evidence which illustrates the ways in which class serves as a frame of reference which conditions behaviour. While the language of class may be unfashionable, and while class consciousness might be weak, young people frequently have a broad awareness of the extent to which economic and cultural resources impact on their life chances. The challenge for youth research over the coming decades is to draw on our rich understandings of young people's lives in order to re-conceptualise social class in ways that find greater resonance with the complexity of modern lives.

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