Exploring Complex Transitions: Looking Back at the ‘Golden Age’ of From School to Work

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ABSTRACT
Using data from a little known project, ‘Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’, carried out in Leicester between 1962 and 1964, this article aims to re-examine the extent to which transitions during this time were complex, lengthy, non-linear and single-step and explores the assumed linearity and uncomplicated nature of school to work transitions in the 1960s. It is argued that earlier research on youth transitions has tended to understate the level of complexity that characterized youth transitions in the early 1960s and 1970s. Instead, authors exploring transition during this period concentrated on ‘macro’ or more structural issues such as class and gender. It is suggested that transitions in the 1960s were characterized by individual level complexity that has largely been ignored by others exploring school to work transitions.

KEY WORDS
Norbert Elias / risk and individualization / young workers / youth transitions

It is now well established that the way youth transitions are conceptualized has changed over the last 30 years or so (Evans and Furlong, 1997; Lawy, 2002; Layder et al., 1991; Roberts, 1995). Evans and Furlong (1997) reflect on this change by documenting the metaphors emerging from the different theoretical approaches of the last 30 years. They argue ‘each metaphor represents ways of analysing and understanding the young person’s interactions with his or her social milieu and typical sequences of events between adolescence and
adulthood’ (Evans and Furlong, 1997: 17). For example, they suggest that youth transitions were categorized first as niches in the 1960s and then pathways in the 1970s, as trajectories in the 1980s, before moving on to the more reflexive and post-structuralist metaphor of navigation in the 1990s. In turn these metaphors have given rise to newer metaphors such as structured individualization (Nagel and Wallace, 1997) and rationalized individualization (Furlong et al., 2002).

However, underpinning these different metaphors is a view that the individual experience of the transition has indeed changed and that the transitional experience of contemporary young people is markedly different to the experiences of previous generations of youth. The implication is that school to work transitions have moved from being a mass, straightforward, linear and ‘single step’ process (albeit mediated by family background, class and gender) to a complex, fragmented and individualized process dependent on the navigational and negotiating abilities of young people (Cartmel et al., 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Whereas once young people could leave school, often without qualifications, now young people face uncertainty and have to navigate their way through a variety of experiences and transition options, always reflecting on the risks involved. Young people entering a local labour market no longer share common transition experiences with others as transitions have become more individualized:

Analysis of the contemporary situation of young adults highlights an increasing fragmentation of opportunities and experience; the processes of youth are highly differentiated, reflecting and constructing social divisions in society in complex ways … As possible pathways out of school have diversified, young people have to find their own ways forward and their own values in education, consumption, politics, work and family life. (Evans and Furlong, 1997: 33)

The evidence put forward to support the view that young people’s transitional experiences have changed usually appears in the form of drastic labour market transformations (Ashton and Lowe, 1991; Roberts, 1995, 1997), the rise in youth unemployment (Furlong, 1993; Roberts, 1997), the emergence of youth training schemes, the increased availability of post-compulsory education (Furlong, 1993; Roberts, 1997), changes in social security legislation (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Pilcher, 1995), and the increased complexity (and risk) of choice (Lawy, 2002; Nagel and Wallace, 1997). However, with new studies collecting reflexive accounts of past transitional experiences, and via the secondary analysis of historical young worker data, it has become possible to re-examine the individual transitional experience and question the extent to which past youth transitions were individualized and complex. For example, Vickerstaff (2001: 3) has explored the assumed linearity and uncomplicated nature of transitions for post-war apprentices. In this research she has demonstrated that past transitions were anything but straightforward, unproblematic or single step. For some of the respondents in her study, the experience of apprenticeship was
unpleasant, violent, fragmented and as much the result of ‘chance’ as choice. She suggests, compared to contemporary transitions:

The range of choices may have been different, leading to a greater homogenisation of possible pathways and individuals may have had less expectation of being able to design their own trail but the individual still had to negotiate and manage their own trajectory, whether it was of their own choosing or not. Indeed, the absence of apparent choice might be hypothesized to have brought its own risks and dilemmas. (Vickerstaff, 2001: 3)

Using data from the little known project from the 1960s, this article aims to examine the complexity of past transitions and to question their assumed linearity. The argument offered is that previous research on youth transitions has understated the level of complexity that characterized youth transitions in the early 1960s and 1970s. The individual level complexity that underpinned school to work transitions is documented from the secondary analysis of the 1960s data. For many in this study, the transition process was not as smooth, uncomplicated or as linear as has been previously argued. Throughout this article the concept of a ‘golden age’ is used as a shorthand term to describe the post-war period (between the 1950s and the late 1960s) which has been characterized by many authors as a time of mass employment and straightforward school to work transitions (Vickerstaff, 2003). Certainly in Leicester, the focus of this article, the 1960s was a period of excellent employment prospects for young unqualified workers with the wealth of low-skilled jobs available and a low rate of unemployment (Pye, 1972: 375). However, this orthodox view of the past ignores the fact that many local labour markets were characterized by large fluctuations in their buoyancy and prosperity. Even in the Leicester labour market of the 1960s our data reveals that there was a fear of unemployment regardless of those accounts which suggest that during this ‘golden age’ jobs for school leavers were plentiful (Kiernan, 1992; Roberts, 1984, 1995; Unwin and Wellington, 2001). Indeed, as Pollard (1983) has argued, unemployment elsewhere was substantial during this period, suggesting that the young workers’ fears were justified.

**Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations**

Approaching his final year in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester, Norbert Elias was successful in applying to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) for a grant of £15,000 to fund the project ‘Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’. Better known for books like *The Civilising Process* (2000[1939]) and *What is Sociology?* (1970), undertaking a large-scale, government-sponsored survey on youth transitions may seem something of a departure for Elias who tended to support his works with the secondary analysis of historical data. However, whilst Elias’s writings on young workers remain unpublished and embedded
within his own notes, minutes of meetings and memoranda, Goodwin and O’Connor (2002) and Krieken (1998) argue that the transition from childhood to adulthood is closely interwoven with Elias’s other sociological concerns. For example, Elias suggests that human beings are ‘interdependent, forming figurations or networks with each other which connect the psychological with the social, or habitus with social relations’ (Krieken, 1998: 49) and

... it is the web of social relations in which individuals live during their most impressionable phase, that is childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon their unfolding personality in the form of the relationship between their controlling agencies, super-ego and ego and their libidinal impulses. The resulting balance ... determines how an individual person steers him or herself in his or her social relations with others ... However, there is no end to the intertwining ... (Elias, 2000[1939]: 377)

Elias conceptualized the intertwining as the inter-relationship between sociogenesis (the processes of development and transformation in social relations) and psychogenesis (transformation in habitus that accompanies such social changes) (Krieken, 1998). In this sense habitus is not inherent but ‘habituated’ and becomes a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience. In Elias’s work, childhood is the main ‘transmission belt’ for the development of the habitus (Krieken, 1998: 156). The ‘Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles’ can be seen as a project through which Elias sought to gain further support for his own theorizing and therefore, it has both historical and theoretical significance for those interested in his sociological enquiry.

Picking up themes from his other writings, Elias argued that the transition from school to work not only required the young person to learn new technical skills and the skills required to do the job but also to make adjustments ‘to relationships with older workers, supervisors ... learning new codes of behaviour’ (Elias, 1961: 1). For Elias this transition process was not a smooth one and he speculated that many of the young people would experience difficulties, anxiety or even ‘shock’ when entering the adult world of work. The reason for this is that schools do not prepare young people for adulthood or work. Elias suggested that:

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

To explore these issues Elias collected data via interviews with a sample of young people drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of all Leicester school leavers from the summer and Christmas of 1960 and the summer and
Christmas of 1962. The target group was to include all those with one year’s further education. This sample was then further stratified by the school attended (secondary, technical, grammar or other), by the size of firm entered in first job and whether they were trainees or not. The sample was divided up into five sub-groups and using a table of random numbers a target sample of 1150 young people was identified. The sample is summarized in Table 1.

The research team completed 882 interviews from the 1150 individuals. Except for the sample of cases used by Ashton and Field (1976), the bulk of the interview data has never been fully analysed or published. In the mid-1970s, Ashton archived the interview schedules, where they have remained untouched until recently, when 851 of the original interview schedules were rediscovered.

Initial analysis of the data has revealed that the project provides a fascinating insight into the individual experiences of young people during the transition from school to work during the 1960s and facilitates a re-examination of

| Group          | Original Target Sample | Archive Sample |
|---------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Pilot Study   | 28                     | 0              |
| Practice*     | –                      | 16             |
| Actual Study  |                        |                |
| ‘A’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with less than one year’s further education. | 330 | 243 |
| ‘B’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with more than one year’s further education. | 160 | 130 |
| ‘C’ – boys who had left school in summer or Christmas 1960, with less than one year’s further education. | 300 | 202 |
| ‘D’ - girls who had left school in summer or Christmas 1962, with less than one year’s further education. | 200 | 155 |
| ‘E’ - girls who had left school in summer or Christmas 1960, with less than one year’s further education. | 160 | 105 |

Note: * The practice schedules appeared to be ‘dry-run’ interviews with actual respondents. Some vary in the degree to which they were completed. †Totals including practice/pilot surveys.
transitions made during this period. In this article we now go on to use the data to explore the following questions:

1. To what extent were transitions in the 1960s ‘non-linear’, involving breaks, changes of direction, extended or repeated periods of unemployment, frequent moves between jobs, returns to education and training after labour market participation and any unusual sequences of events (Furlong et al., 2002)?
2. To what extent were transitions in the 1960s homogenized or differentiated at the individual level?
3. To what extent were transitions in the 1960s single step or prolonged?

From School to Work: Linear and Smooth or Non-linear and Complex?

Furlong et al. (2002) reflect on transition experiences that can be defined as either linear or non-linear. They suggest that linearity involves fairly smooth, straightforward transitions from school to work in which there are no major breaks, divergences or reversals (Furlong et al., 2002: 7). However, they note that this has changed over time and once uncommon experiences, such as unemployment, have become normalized. They suggest, for example, that few young people have managed to avoid unemployment altogether and a young person now ‘who has a short period of unemployment between leaving education and gaining a job can still be seen as having made a linear transition’ (Furlong et al., 2002: 7). Conversely, they argue that non-linear or complex transitions ‘involve breaks, changes of direction and unusual sequences of events’ (Furlong et al., 2002: 8) and can include extended or repeated periods of unemployment, frequent moves between jobs and returns to education and training after periods in the labour market (Furlong et al., 2002: 8).

Using this typology, Furlong et al. (2002) have successfully questioned the assumed non-linearity and complexity of all contemporary transitions and argue that some young people still follow smooth and linear routes. They suggest that the routes young people take still depend, to some extent, on educational attainment, gender and class, arguing that ‘those who experience complex transitions tend to be disadvantaged educationally and socially and are over represented in areas of deprivation’ (Furlong et al., 2002: 13).

Given Furlong et al.’s (2002) critique of the assumed non-linearity of current transitions, it is possible to question the assumed linearity of past transitions using the same typology. This typology implies that the transitions of the 1960s were linear and straightforward, involving no major breaks, divergences or reversals. It would also be fair to suggest that a linear transition of the past would not have involved any periods of unemployment or employment breaks,
changes of direction, frequent moves between jobs or returns to education as, at this time, these were relatively uncommon experiences.

Frequent Job Moves

Data relating to the number of jobs held immediately after leaving school and prior to the interview is presented in Table 2. Usually the respondents were interviewed within one to two years of leaving school and as such the number of jobs broadly represents the numbers of jobs held in their first two years of working life. Data on the number of jobs held is presented by gender, age and education.

At the time of the interview the majority of the young workers were still in their first jobs, although a sizeable group had worked in at least two jobs. Interestingly, the numbers of young people who had held four or more jobs is not insignificant. Whilst the data provides no evidence of young people returning to education, this data does suggest that some of the young workers did engage in frequent job moves, with many of those interviewed changing jobs

| Table 2 | Number of jobs by gender, age and education |
|---------|--------------------------------------------|
| **Gender** | | | | |
| Male | 63.0 | 22.1 | 9.2 | 5.7 |
| Female | 46.1 | 27.3 | 16.5 | 10.1 |
| **Age** | | | | |
| 14* | 33.3 | – | 66.7 | – |
| 15 | 57.5 | 30.0 | 5.0 | 7.5 |
| 16 | 61.8 | 22.4 | 9.9 | 6.0 |
| 17 | 62.1 | 29.1 | 5.8 | 2.9 |
| 18 | 49.8 | 24.1 | 16.6 | 9.6 |
| 19 | 68.9 | 17.8 | 8.9 | 4.4 |
| 20* | 100.0 | – | – | – |
| 21* | – | 100.0 | – | – |
| **Education** | | | | |
| More than one year’s Further Education | 77.7 | 18.5 | 2.3 | 1.5 |
| Less than one year’s Further Education | 53.8 | 25.0 | 13.2 | 8.1 |
| **Total Percentage** | | | | |
| | 57.3 | 24.0 | 11.5 | 7.1 |
| **N** | 488.0 | 204.0 | 98.0 | 60.0 |
| **Missing** | = 1. |

*Note: The numbers in each of these categories was very small (2–3 in each).
anywhere between every month and every four to six months. Indeed, taking the sample as a whole there were a small number of individuals who had held between seven and 11 jobs between leaving school and the time of the interview.

There is an important gender difference here, with girls experiencing a greater number of job changes than boys in the same period. Over 43 percent of the girls interviewed were on their second or third job and 10 percent were on their fourth job or more, whilst the majority of young males were still in their first job, 37 percent had held more than one job and nearly 6 percent had held four or more jobs. Given the fact that the majority of these young workers were actually in their first year of employment, for this small group it implies a job move at least every three months.

From Table 2 it appears that most young people had remained in their first job. However, of those aged 18, 16 percent had held three jobs and nearly 10 percent had held four jobs or more. Educational experience also had an impact. The data appears to suggest that those young workers with less than one year's education (in this sample the majority) were more likely to be on to their second or third job whilst those with a higher level of education were more likely to have remained with their first employer.

Frequent Moves and Changes of Direction

The changes in direction that such frequent job moves entailed are also evident in the data presented in Table 3. Although not fully representative of the sample, this data provides some insight into the early career histories of the school leavers interviewed and individual level complexities. This data is typical of many of those young workers who had not remained in their first job. The data in this table is presented in order of job reading from right to left.

The data clearly indicates that some of the young people interviewed did experience significant changes in direction during the early part of their career. For example, respondent A464, aged 16 and interviewed in April 1964, had a total of seven jobs since leaving school 16 months earlier. On average this respondent changed jobs every two months. He started work as a shop assistant before spending one month as a machinist in a large boot and shoe factory. He then went to work in a crisp factory, returning to boot and shoe work for three months before subsequent moves through positions in a plastics factory, a sweet factory and an engineering works before becoming unemployed.

Respondent E87 is similar. Aged 18 at the time of interview this respondent had held nine different positions in just over two years in the labour market. On average she stayed in each job for just under three months. She began her working life as a shop assistant before moving into a position as a cutter in a hosiery factory. She left the hosiery factory because she wanted to become a nurse and then spent six months working as a domestic assistant in a nursing home. She went on to become a machinist in a boot and shoe factory. Subsequently she moved into positions as chambermaid, maid, groom and a hotel assistant before returning to work as a shoe machinist.
Breaks and Unemployment

A further factor identified as being central to a linear smooth transition from school to work is the absence of periods of unemployment or breaks in employment from work histories. The assumption in much of the literature is

Table 3  Job movements

| ID   | Job Types                  |
|------|----------------------------|
| A464 | Shop assistant, Shoe Machinist, Inspector of Potatoes/Crisps |
|      | Boot and Shoe*.Engineering Works, Plastic Works, Manufacturing |
|      | Engineering Works, Unemployed |
| A544 | Boot and Shoe Leather Worker, Bakery Assistant, Hosiery* |
| A601 | Apprentice Joiner Shop Assistant, Trainee Hairdresser, Farm Worker |
|      | Trainee Caravan Fitter |
| A762 | Shop Manager Trawler Fisherman, Apprentice Butcher, Boot and Shoe |
|      | Hosiery |
| A806 | Apprentice Carpenter Grocery Worker, Apprentice Butcher, Grocery Worker |
|      | Labourer, Boot and Shoe |
| B207 | Warehouse Man TV Repairs, Chemist's Assistant, Milkman |
|      | Shop Assistant, Army |
| C331 | Pattern Maker Boot and Shoe, Army, Tyre Fitter |
|      | Packer, Labourer |
| C510 | Van Boy Shop Assistant, Painter, Shop Fitter |
|      | Army |
| C538 | Car Sales Warehouse Man, Warehouse Man, Shop Assistant, Assistant Shop Manager |
| D579 | Hosiery, Shop Assistant, Nurse |
| E87  | Shop Assistant Machinist, Cutter, Domestic Assistant |
|      | Chamber Maid, Maid |
|      | Hotel Assistant, Shoe Machinist |
| Practice | Boot and Shoe Car Wash Foreman, Painter, Driver’s Mate |
|      | Gardener, Ice-cream Seller |
|      | Driver’s Mate, Hosiery |
|      | Driver’s Mate |

Note: * Boot and Shoe and Hosiery have been summarized here as they could involve a number of different functions including cutting, overlocking, stitching etc. All other jobs are recorded according to the respondent’s definition.
that young people in the 1960s moved seamlessly from school to work without a break. From the data it appears that many of the young people did not experience any significant breaks in employment and avoided unemployment. However, this may mean that, for some, unemployment and the fear of unemployment added to the individual level complexity of their own transition from school to work. Indeed, although while perhaps not the norm, individuals in this study did experience breaks in employment and periods of unemployment:

The respondent gave the impression of being very insecure. He had 7 sisters and 4 brothers, but his mother was a widower. For the last few years of his school career, he had lived at a council home because he often played truant from school while he was living with his mother. Since he had been out to work, he had had 7 jobs but he was now out of work ... At the end of the interview, respondent mentioned that he may get a job with a fair that was due to leave Leicester in the next few days. (Unemployed Male, 1964, A464)

**** had a good school career, and with five passes at GCE started out with the intention of making a good career for himself. He was very pleased to get the position with a firm of chartered accountants and felt he was on the road to becoming a professionally qualified man. It came as a great shock when he was dismissed for having a Saturday job on a market stall. He was unemployed for five weeks and had to take a job simply to earn some money. (Clerk, 1963, B155)

It also appears from the data that the fear of unemployment was a real issue for some of the young people. As the quotes below illustrate, a group of the respondents professed their anxieties about being unemployed when leaving school or becoming unemployed in the future. For some the concern was so great that they took the first job that they could:

... respondent has had fears of unemployment and general economic insecurity. It came out several times in the interview. As his father realised ... respondent has also been afraid of becoming a drifter, if not a ‘delinquent’ ... (Apprentice Gas Fitter, 1963, A532)

Worried when it came to leaving school in case he didn’t get a job: took the first he could get because it was better than being unemployed. (Trainee Knitter, 1963, A636)

I used to worry that I would get the sack because I wasn’t underlined. [Did any boys get the sack?] Oh yes. (Stock Controller, 1963, C509)

In this study, the respondents were asked whether they had secured a job while they were still at school or whether they secured the job after leaving school. Over 170 respondents reported that they did not secure a job until after leaving school. The length of time after leaving school until they found work could vary anywhere between two and five weeks or between two and six months. This suggests that quite a sizeable group did not leave school and walk straight into a job. As the interviewer notes record:
... after leaving school – he couldn’t get a job to start with so he had an uncle in carpentry who took him around with him and gave him pocket money. (Motor Mechanic, 1964, A344)

Or as a respondent suggested:

Long time after I left. Two months [Didn’t you have job during that time?] No. (Boot and Shoe Worker, 1963, A944)

In terms of movements between their first and second job, 117 of those who were in their second job suggested that they only heard about the current position after leaving their previous position. It is also clear that some of the young people in the survey experienced periods of unemployment.

Straightforward Transitions?

A key characteristic of non-linear transitions is the risk and uncertainty experienced by the young person. Again, the assumption here is that young people making school to work transitions in the 1960s did not experience the process as being characterized by risk and uncertainty. Instead it was relatively straightforward. However the data for this study suggests that some of the young people did indeed perceive the risks and uncertainties of life beyond the school playground and, as with Vickerstaff (2001) and Carter (1962), quite a large proportion of the young workers did not feel that they had been prepared for entering employment for the first time. The respondents were asked ‘when you were at school, what were you told about work?’

That it was terrible, had to work long hours. Pretty general idea that it was a horrible thing to do, that nobody would ever want to leave school when been to work. (Receptionist, 1963, E590)

We had a few talks but very little really until you come to the real thing. Went on a few trips but they never really told you much. (Hosiery Packer, 1964, A836)

YEO told us it wasn’t as easy as it seemed to be. When at school tend to see just payday side – don’t look into hours and how hard you have to work. (Grocery Worker, 1964, B266)

That I would wish that I were back at school. (Butcher, 1963, C711)

For many, their preparation for working life was ad hoc and was largely dependent upon the whims of the teachers, schools and youth employment officers. For others, the mere prospect of entering employment brought with it feelings of risk and uncertainty.

I had no idea what it would be like. It’s like going to a new town – you just don’t know what it’s going to be like. (Trainee Electrician, 1963, A536)

I thought I’d have to work quite hard – If I didn’t work fast enough I’d have to leave the job. (Shoe Worker, 1964, A531)
I was a bit frightened going into big factor y and not knowing anybody, and people being older than you – not quite sure what to expect. (Knitwear Machinist, 1964, E334)

During the first few months of work the risk and uncertainty remained for many. For example, a large number of those who had left school to become apprentices experienced real anxiety and a heightened sense of risk in simply getting their apprenticeship papers actually signed. The risk for these young workers was that without the signed apprenticeship papers they could lose their job, have difficulties in gaining access to college or, as one respondent reported, they would be ‘mucked about, the new lads are used as cheap labour’ (Cabinet Maker, 1963, C125).

... you have to push them to sign your apprenticeship ... [What did you do?] You tell them and they put your name down and they forget it you have to keep urging them on and keep telling them till they get fed up and they let you go. [Is yours sorted out?] Yes I keep going up and telling them, but me dad has gotta go up and see him and sign them. [How soon?] It has to be done not much before and not much after 16 because your apprenticeship finishes when you’re 21 1/2 years. (Plumber, 1964, A541)

The only difficulty was getting my apprenticeship papers. It wasn’t difficult getting into tech but I had to go to my boss and ask about apprenticeship on a year’s approval to start with and if you are satisfactory you start apprenticeship. ... [What did you do?] Asked my boss ... he said that at the moment the problem is getting into tech. There was a meeting of apprentices with the boss and he said he could only let a few go and it was a question of who ... the first thing I knew was a member of staff coming to me with the papers and telling me to get them signed. As far as I know there has only been trouble about being an apprentice. (Apprentice Painter and Decorator, 1963, A792)

I was worried about my apprenticeship papers not being signed. After I had been there about 9 months I went to see the boss about it. He said he would make it all right and he backdated the papers for me. (Apprentice Machine Minder, 1963, A866)

**Homogenized or Differentiated Transition?**

A crude measure of individualization is the proportion of age peers in a person’s social network with whom he or she shares a common biography having grown up in the same district, attended the same schools, and entered similar types of employment at the same ages. Virtually everything that every individual does and experiences is still shared with many other people, but nowadays in a variety of individualized sequences and combinations. (Roberts, 1995: 113)

As suggested above, alongside the debates relating to the relative complexity of school to work transitions is an assertion that transitions in the past were more homogenized and less individualized. Roberts (1995) provides a useful discus-
sion of this, pointing to the shared characteristics of a homogenous transition – same biography, similar education, growing up in the same area and entering similar types of employment.

The relative homogeneity of transitions can also be explored using the *Adjustment of Young Workers* data. During the interviews the young workers were asked two questions that could be used as broad indicators of the homogeneity thesis. First, the young workers were asked ‘did anyone else you know have the same sort of jobs as you?’ Such a question touches upon Roberts’s notions of individuals sharing a common biography, growing up in the same area, attending the same schools and entering the same types of employment, as the question is specifically directed at the respondent’s relatives, friends and neighbours. Likewise, the same ‘type’ of employment that Roberts refers to is also captured in this question as it deals with types of jobs rather than with specific employers. The second question deals with the latter issue by asking the respondents ‘was there anyone you knew working in the same firm?’ The data relating to these two questions is presented in Table 4.

From Table 4 it is clear that approximately 50 percent of the young workers in 1960s Leicester may not have made the homogenized transitions suggested by authors such as Roberts. For example, 49 percent of the respondents suggested that they did not work in the same sort of job as their friends or relatives. Although such a question may under-represent the ability of respondents to fully differentiate between types of jobs in terms of their ‘similarities’, such as working conditions and rewards, and so should be treated with some caution, the findings do suggest that past transitions may not have been as homogenous as previously thought. Likewise, the fact that 52 percent of the respondents indicated that they did not know anybody working in the same firm raises questions about the extent to which biographies were shared by those growing up in the same area.

### Single-step or Prolonged Transitions?

Vickerstaff (2001) argues that earlier studies assume that transitions in the 1950s and 1960s were ‘single step’. It is suggested that the buoyancy of

| Table 4 Working with friends, family and neighbours |
|---------------------------------------------------|
| Did anyone else you know have the same sort of job as you (any relatives, friends, neighbours)? | Yes | No |
| 410 | 423 |
| Was there anyone you knew working in the same firm? | 372 | 449 |
| N | 851 |
the labour market in the early 1960s enabled young people to make a direct and single-step transition from school to work. Once the young people had entered work, they tended to leave home, achieve some state of financial independence, marry and have children in a relatively short period of time, making what Coles (1995) has called three interrelated transitions; from school to work, from family of origin to family of destination and from childhood home to independent living. This pattern was particularly true for the working class (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Jones, 1995), with working-class youth more likely to become economically independent earlier than middle-class youth (Pilcher, 1995).

However, 40 years later it has become widely accepted that youth transitions are now extended and more diversified with young people remaining dependent on their families for a longer period of time (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Lawy, 2002; Pilcher, 1995; Roberts, 1995, 1997). The protracted transition from school to work has left young people dependent on the family and state for longer (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Lawy, 2002; Pilcher, 1995), as the possibility of early financial independence has become more remote. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) also suggest that domestic and housing transitions have become more complex. Explanations for such extended transitions range from labour market restructuring, the rise of youth unemployment, changes in social welfare legislation, and the increased numbers of young people staying on in education, either because of limited employment opportunities or because of family pressure.

There is little evidence to suggest that the young workers in Leicester were prolonging their transitional experience by staying on in education, as the vast majority left school at the first opportunity. Indeed, instead of family pressure to stay in education, there was a great deal of pressure from family and friends to leave education as soon as possible. Yet the single-step hypothesis, relating to past transitions, is questionable when one considers the data relating to dependence on the family, financial independence and housing transitions.

One characteristic of independence or self-responsibility, we suggest, would be the ability of the young people to make decisions about their own futures and resolve any difficulties that arose in work or life. However, many of the young people interviewed in the young worker project still relied heavily on family members in obtaining work or in resolving difficulties or conflicts at work.

... The forewoman has to sign the ticket if you make your own price out – she signed the ticket and I sent them down then swore blind she hadn’t signed them. My Dad went up because they’d accused me of putting the tickets in which I didn’t ...

(Shoe Worker, 1964, D989)

Father went to see Mr ***** and the Station Master and it was settled by them.
(British Rail Messenger, 1964, A237)

We started at Tech for one year and then he stopped us going the following year. My father got the TU in and the secretary went to see the boss. [Father] got it so that we shall carry on at Tech next September. (Apprentice Compositor, 1964, C693)
Have you had any difficulties in this job? Not really – if I have, I talked to mother or people at work, e.g. problems with tax. (Stockman, 1963, Pilot Survey)

In these examples, the young workers did not attempt to resolve their difficulties themselves and did not display independent behaviour. Instead they relied heavily on the interventions of family members. There are other examples in the data where parents intervene in obtaining employment, getting apprenticeship papers signed, negotiating pay and even helping the employers to discipline the young workers. When asked how they got to know about their first job, such responses were typical:

My dad got the job for me. My dad’s in the job and I’ve been interested in it since I was at school. (Apprentice Joiner, 1963, A821)

Dad got me the job. At least he got me the interview, which I had to go to. Dad works for the gas board. (Apprentice Fitter, 1964, A776)

My mum used to work there and they said I could have a job if I wanted it. (Machinist, 1964, D52)

The influence of personal networks was extremely important amongst this sample and many of the young workers did indicate that their parents, siblings and members of their wider family network had helped them to find their first jobs. Friends were also important sources of information about workplace vacancies. This pattern of obtaining employment through personal contacts has been noted in other studies and can perhaps be attributed more to strong community ties (Grieco, 1987) than to dependence on family. However, we would argue that this pattern, combined with the tendency of the young workers to talk over problems at work with their parents, was an indicator that the important transitional step of ‘disengaging’ with their families of origin (Hubbard, 2000) had not been made.

The single-step hypothesis is also questionable in terms of economic independence. When asked what happened to their wages, the data reveals that far from being domestically and financially independent, fewer than half the respondents kept the money themselves. Rather than paying a certain amount of board and lodging as if they had moved to alternative accommodation, many had to pass their wage packet to their mother or to share it equally with her or, for a small number, give it to their father. Their parents would then allocate a small proportion of the pay packet to the child as ‘pocket money’. For many, their own money was not spent on the pursuit of an independent lifestyle but on ‘sweets’, ‘going out’ and buying clothes, records and cigarettes:

I have £1 she has the rest – she buys my food and clothes out of that. It’s better than if I kept her and gave her board, she’d want my packet and everything else besides. So at moment better to give it to her. (Audit Clerk, 1963, B27)

I get £7 and bring home £6–11 according to tax and I give it to her and she gives me £2–15 spending money. (Mechanic, 1964, C356)
Give it all to her [mother] and she gives me spending money – about a £1 and if I want something. (Hand Finisher, 1963, E476)

For a start until my 17th birthday gave Mother all my wages and she gave me spending money. Started paying board at 17. Now has £2 a week. (Typist, 1963, E386)

These quotes suggest that the young workers had not financially ‘disengaged with their family of origin’ (Hubbard, 2000: 9.7) and illustrate the way in which the young workers to some extent remained financially dependent upon their parents. Equally, in some families the parents were financially dependent on the young worker and relied on their wages as essential family income, supporting parents, siblings and other relatives.

Respondent has morning paper round and keeps this for pocket money. (Mechanic, 1963, A303)

Mother explains that she keeps the money and gives him what he needs as he is not responsible with money. (Warehouse Man, 1963, A372)

Jones (1995) has argued that young workers historically made the transition to domestic independence soon after beginning full-time paid work, however, domestic or housing transitions were not a feature of the young workers’ lives. These young workers had neither financially disengaged with their families of origin, nor disengaged domestically, either by leaving home to live independently or by becoming part of a family of destination. Certainly none of the respondents had made a housing transition; all of the interviews were undertaken in the family home where the respondents continued to live, despite the fact that many were aged 18 or over and three had already married.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of past school to work transitions via a secondary analysis of data from the 1960s. Despite assertions that past school to work transitions were single step, simple and homogenous, data from the Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles project provides clear evidence of frequent job moves (often to very different job roles and different industries), with many young people having four or more jobs within the first year or so of employment. The findings also question the assumed seamless transition from school to work as it appears that transitional experiences during this period were not straightforward. The data reveals that many of the young workers already felt disillusioned with work and were anxious about their future prospects or concerned about their lack of training. Some of the young people had experienced periods of unemployment either before entering work or between jobs. The young people interviewed also clearly felt increased levels of insecurity (and risk) brought on by being out of work, or when threatened by unemployment. Likewise, the view that young people in the past made homogenized transitions to work, sharing...
the same experiences with friends, neighbours and relatives is also problematic. For example, over half of the sample interviewed here clearly had individualized experiences entering different firms at different times during the first years of their working life. The data also suggests that many of the young people in this survey had not made the step of disengaging with the family of origin. They consequently remained very dependent on their parents and family for housing, money and decision-making long after they had made the transition from school to work.

However, three broader conclusions can also be drawn from our analyses. First, whilst most authors agree that youth transitions have moved away from a process that is linear and smooth or uncomplicated to a process that is both non-linear and complex or problematic, many authors have merely confirmed an established view about the past. Indeed, as Furlong et al. (2002) and Vickerstaff (2001) suggest, the consensus view on the changing nature of transitions, from linear and smooth to non-linear and complex, has largely remained unchallenged. Given the individual level complexity uncovered in the transitional experiences outlined above, one has to question why this is. Why have ideas relating to the ‘golden age’ of employment and notions of smooth transitions remained unquestioned? Moreover, why did sociologists at the time choose not to highlight the complexities contained within the data? These can perhaps be explained by the changing nature of the theoretical and methodological approaches to transitions over the last few years, as outlined above. This conceptual shift from exploring the impact of social structure to the more contemporary individualized approaches actually means that in conceptual terms we are not comparing like for like when we compare current and transitional experiences of 40 years ago. To put it simply, those currently involved in trying to understand transitions have become concerned with different phenomena and have different academic preoccupations. Past scholars were not looking for the individualized, subjective, complex transitional experience. The over-concentration on macro-processes as being central determinants of the transitional process meant that the individual experiences were largely ignored or hidden in a broader analysis. For example, in Ashton and Field (1976), the over-riding concern was to explore how an individual’s social and educational experience led to a continuity of experiences at work. Likewise, the dominant structural view of the 1980s viewed labour market destinations as being determined by social forces outside the control of individuals. Evans and Furlong (1997: 18) suggest that, with the collapse of the youth labour market, transition experiences were explained ‘more in terms of structural forces such as social class, race, gender, educational attainment and labour market conditions rather than by reference to individual characteristics or aspirations’.

A related conclusion, therefore, must be that a secondary analysis of old sociological data and the re-reading of classic studies is both worthwhile and insightful. Being able to interrogate historical data with contemporary ideas and concepts has obvious value and can change (or contribute to) previous understandings of the social world (Roberts, 1997). However, with the
exception of Vickerstaff (2001) and the current study, the value of applying and exploring contemporary notions and ideas against the transition experiences of youth for previous generations, and questioning the assumed linearity, has not been considered.

A final, and again related, conclusion is that the interrogation of historical sociological data facilitates reflection on the adequacy of contemporary theories and debates. For example, this data questions aspects of the youth, risk and individualization debates so dominant since the publication of Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992). When Beck locates the problems of risk and individualization in late modernity, there are two assumptions: that the experiences of young people during this time are essentially different to the experiences of those who have gone before; and that the notion of late modernity implies a unique time period separate from other epochs – what Furlong and Cartmel (1997) refer to as the ‘epistemological fallacy of late modernity’. Again, the data presented above challenges these assumptions. Past transitional experiences were not uniformly simple, linear or as single step as previously suggested and many transitions were characterized by individual level complexities similar to those of contemporary youth. This is not to suggest that all past transitions were ‘individualized’ but more simply that the past could be a complex, risky and problematic place for young people making the transition from school to work. Given Elias’s (1987) assertion that ‘one cannot ignore the fact that present society has grown out of earlier societies’ (Elias, 1987: 226), the past cannot be ignored and it needs to be re-interrogated.

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2. Elias’s view that schools and families did not prepare young people for work was central to his shock hypothesis, arguing that it was the disjuncture between young people’s expectations of work and what work was actually like that caused a shock experience. Given that young people had limited knowledge of work, he argued, they had to rely on fantasies that invariably differed from the realities of work. The shock hypothesis now has limited credibility in the study of youth transitions with many suggesting that young people do have a clear idea of what work will be like before they arrive. For example, a number of authors have identified the ‘anticipatory socialization’ or ‘cultural apprenticeships’ that many working-class young people go through as a preparation for
working life (see Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Griffin, 1985; Penn, 1985) and, as such, many young people did have realistic expectations of working life.

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