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Competing voices: a Figured Worlds approach to theorising graduate perspectives on career success

Becoming a university graduate has long been considered the route to individual occupational and social mobility, while educating more citizens has been assumed to add to a nation's human capital and competitiveness. University education has come to be associated with individual and societal aspiration. However, changes in the labour market associated with globalisation, technology, and fears of graduate underemployment have served to question this. This paper seeks to uncover the meaning that individuals construct about their early careers as they navigate such uncertain contexts. It reports on a study based on the graduate population of one university in England. Analysis tests the value of Figured Worlds theory. Using the construct of 'self-authoring', this paper identifies competing voices around employability and career success. Findings reveal how graduates orchestrate varied voices, in order to find ways to figure their experience and what it means to be a successful graduate.

Keywords: career, employability, graduate, Figured Worlds, success

Introduction

Public policy that regulates higher education in the UK and many other market-led countries is framed by human capital theory's emphasis on an educated workforce as a driver of economic growth, alongside neoliberal ideas that consider education as a private good (e.g., Jones, 2013; Marginson, 2019; Uluorta & Quill, 2009) that in the UK, students pay for with income-contingent loans (Tomlinson, 2016). This policy direction is strengthening in the UK with the use of Graduate Outcomes survey data (census of destinations at fifteen months after graduation), and salary data collected via the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data (at one, three and five years after graduation). These will have an increased impact upon how universities are ranked in the UK government's Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) (Department of Business Innovation & Skills, 2016; UK Government, 2019). In this

context, the early and lifetime prospects of graduates are highly politicised and are a preoccupation of government, universities, employers and students and graduates themselves. Government policy narrowly defines successful graduate careers by standard occupational classifications (professional, managerial and associate professional) and how much graduates earn at snapshot periods, which ignores more nuanced success measures (e.g.,Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008) that may have greater meaning for individual aspirations and societal benefit.

Employability policy and practices in universities have evolved in response to such concerns. The word employability is a contentious one with a heavy weight of meaning attached. The tensions about employability and its positioning have long stimulated academic critique (Boden & Nedeva, 2010) and more recently specialist lay commentary has suggested it has become a counter-productive (Grove, 2018) and even a 'toxic brand' (Grey, 2018)for many students and academics. Much activity in universities is around the fostering of individual employability amongst students as a bank of career capital to cash in for a future job. In addition, the notion of institutional employability has evolved as a measure of the quality of graduate employment and further study destinations from specific universities. Employability can appear an impersonalised concept, divorced from complex issues such as values and subjective success criteria that affect individual career aspirations. Arguably, employability's oft overshadowed and more old-fashioned partner word 'career' is less controversial. Although it is debatable what really constitutes a career and who can have one, as a word it has more potential for personal meaning for those who have invested in higher education in a developed country and aspire to have meaningful work.

Much criticism of individual employability relates to fears across OECD nations about the future of work itself. Technology and globalisation appear to threaten

knowledge workers, some of whom risk being replaced by artificial intelligence and robots (Frey & Osborne, 2017). This may have mixed benefits leading to more leisure or community activity for some or adverse income and wellbeing effects for others. The future is uncertain and such changes do support arguments, which oppose any notion that employability can ever be just an individual concern. Added to this, is the overwhelming evidence that competition in the labour market is unequal and that social mobility is in decline (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Social Mobility Commission, 2016). However, despite these contextual challenges, the aspiration to become a university graduate endures; becoming a graduate is widely considered as the route to individual occupational and social mobility.

In this contested context of what a career and/or work can promise for graduates in a developed nation, this paper seeks to uncover the meaning that individuals construct about their early careers as they navigate an uncertain environment. It reports on a study based on a subsection of the 2014 graduate population of one university in the north of England (pseudonym Northcity). The target population for the study were Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and Business and Law graduates. These subject groupings were chosen for the contrast they might provide. The former grouping tend to include subjects which perform poorly in commentary about graduate earnings, while the latter grouping have clearer routes to mainstream graduate recruitment schemes and the prospects they provide. Analysis draws upon *Figured Worlds*[1] theory (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), which synthesises the ideas of Bakhtin, Bourdieu and Vygotsky. The theory questions structure and agency, and I use it here to consider

[1] Figured Worlds written in uppercase refers to the theory as a whole.

how agency may develop as individuals start their work lives, with the expectancy and hope that is embedded therein.

Contemporary discourses about careers and employability

Perspectives and ideas about employability and careers are diverse and can be observed in literature from labour market studies, management and organisation studies, sociology, psychology, education and social policy and career guidance and coaching (Christie & Burke, 2018; Hirsh, 2016; Inkson, Dries, & Arnold, 2015). In undertaking this study, I sought to consider how the meaning that individuals confer is influenced by prevailing ideas and discourses. I go on to outline some of these, which appear within relevant scholarship and research.

The notion of the 'individual career actor' has attracted considerable attention in literature from management, psychology and career guidance with the generation of lists and inventories that can assess features associated with individual employability and adaptability. Terms such as the boundaryless career orientation (Rodrigues, Guest, & Arthur, 2014), the protean career (e.g., Hall, 2004) and career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) have evolved which emphasise individual self-determination with the implication that individuals have the capacity to influence their destinies. Such writing does go beyond a simplistic depiction of employability as just being about skills and attributes, rather preferring to give emphasis to the mix of interests, abilities, skills, values, and personality that can influence career paths. An extrapolation of such individualistic discourses dominates in popular self-help careers literature and idealised advice to career-seekers about how to compete for a job is commonplace (D'Alessandro, 2008; Gibson, 2012; Purkiss & Royston-Lee, 2014). Such ideas resonate with what some politicians advocate that 'anyone can do anything if they just work hard enough' (e.g., Daily Telegraph, 2016) as well as fashionable ideas about "Grit" (Duckworth,

2016). Writers from sociology and cultural studies (Biressi & Nunn, 2014) have criticised such ideas pointing out the risks of focusing on the individual which ignore structural inequalities. Arguably, even benign talk of values and subjective success criteria, are merely a gentler manifestation of a neoliberal emphasis on the individual as the only solution to all their own career challenges This discourse risks leading individuals to incorrectly blame themselves for lack of career success (e.g., Gershon, 2017; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The normalisation of such individualist perspectives have also been shown to be culturally-constituted when compared to other nations which have more collectively-based assumptions about careers (Chudzikowski *et al*., 2009).

In a similar vein, other writing from organisation studies and sociology illuminates the social construction of employability, and how this influences graduate behaviours as well as perceptions of graduates. Brown, Hesketh & Williams (2004) have identified the player/purist typology in which the player is associated with positional competition and knowing how to adopt tactics in order to compete for jobs. In contrast, the purist is associated with a belief that competition is meritocratic with an implication that being true to oneself should result in fair career outcomes. Tholen (2014) has observed that graduates are represented as victims and responsible agents in public and media discourses. He describes victims as being presented as the unlucky ones subject to an unfavourable context and to be pitied if their degree does not lead to a successful career, whereas responsible agents are expected to take full responsibility for their own career trajectory. The responsible agent represents a neoliberal extension of the concept of the individual career actor, whereas the victim resonates with how precarious the labour market is becoming especially for new entrants who want to grow a structured career (Howker & Malik, 2010; Standing, 2014).

Other recent sociological writing has used the work of Bourdieu to consider the 'feel for the game' in relation to careers and employability and focuses on inequalities. Drawing upon the Paired Peers Project[2] findings, Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller (2013), observe how individuals are positioned unequally in the ability to mobilise capitals in competition for jobs. They trace individuals' own explicit awareness of how this happens in which students from advantaged backgrounds have access to more valuable capitals and possess a habitus which confers greater self-confidence to play the game. With a similar focus on how individuals reflect upon context, Tomlinson (2014) has observed how lack of desired success can lead some individuals to conflate disappointing progress in the job market with a sense that somehow their university degree may have been mis-sold to them.

Methods

The context of the study was a subsection of the graduate population (2014) of one university in England, for which this study uses the pseudonym, Northcity. The university has a fluctuating mid ranking status. It has courses that are more vocationally oriented and describes itself as one that draws upon many non-traditional students. Professionally, I am familiar with Northcity, therefore the research project has characteristics of insider research (Mercer, 2007). The study was mixed methods one but this paper draws upon data from twenty research interviews, conducted between eighteen and twenty-two months after graduating.

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[2] The Paired Peers research project tracked an initial cohort of 90 undergraduate students from different socio-economic backgrounds at two British universities from October 2010 to July 2013. For more information, go to http://www.bristol.ac.uk/spais/research/paired-peers/

All interview participants were 21-25, and were of UK nationality. These shared characteristics were sought in order to allow for comparison. A balanced group was sought which reflected the diversity of the original population: ten men and ten women; seven from a BAME[3] background and thirteen non-BAME; fourteen participants were from Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities disciplines, six were from Business and Law. In addition, selection was skewed to those from a lower social background (fourteen) compared to a higher (six); although within this twenty, there was representation from all six occupational class backgrounds (Registrar General classification). This choice of sampling was made, as existing research tends to suggest that those from a lower social background have greater barriers in entering the job market after university.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone, skype or facetime depending on participant preference. Interview questions were piloted, tested, and sought to capture life history information as well as data about attitudes and influences. The approach to the interviews was informed by biographical interview methods (Burke, 2014; Roberts, 2002) as well as studies that have utilised *Figured Worlds* in research interviews (Solomon, 2012; Williams, 2011). Biographical interviewing provided an ideal way to explore how participants reflect on their past and what has brought them to where they are now, knowing that selective memory can provide valuable if partial and unverifiable narratives.

Ethical approval to conduct the study was organised via the university which sponsored the research through their review process, and additional permission for fieldwork was secured through the university which acted as host. The project was informed by ethical principles that sought to secure informed consent of participants

[3] Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

through relevant information and consent sheets. Data was also handled securely. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed which allowed for scrutiny of content. Pseudonyms were utilised for all names used to ensure anonymity.

Analysis was informed by existing ideas that are prevalent in career scholarship as presented earlier in this paper. Added to this, it was guided by thinking tools associated with *Figured Worlds,* which I will go on to explain. A *Figured Worlds* analysis plays close attention to elements of language, e.g., use of specific vocabulary, the imagery, tropes and repetitions that are used by participants. Analysis required a deep immersion in data which was influenced by established practices in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) and inductive research, so although guided by theory was open to discovery of new patterns. A systematic process of coding and re-coding occurred, culminating in a theoretically sensitised presentation of data. NVIVO acted as a useful organisational vehicle for this coding. Exemplar quotations are used in the findings section.

Figured Worlds theory as a lens for analysis

Instrumental contemporary concerns about graduate employability in universities can limit more critical analysis of graduate attitudes. Therefore I sought out social theory in order to illuminate employability and its relationship to individual aspiration and hoped for occupational and social mobility. *Figured Worlds* theory with its emphasis on how people author themselves was identified, as a novel lens and I will go on to explain constructs and tools from the theory.

Holland and her co-authors (Holland *et al.*,1998; Holland & Lave, 2001) draw on major theoretical and philosophical standpoints across anthropology, cultural studies, social psychology, social theories of learning and development, constructionism, sociology and linguistics. Predominantly, they draw upon Bakhtinian, Bourdieusian and

Vygotskian ideas to argue for a social perspective on identity that frames it as a dialogical performance of multiple selves, continually developed through social engagement. They conceptualise identity as a form of social learning that, 'combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5). The main *Figured Worlds* constructs used in this paper are firstly, 'figured worlds'[4] (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41) which captures the idea of the field populated with embodied and symbolic figures, and cultural models. Secondly, I will utilise the 'space of authoring' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 169) construct which refers to the resources available to author self and 'voices' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 45) and 'narratives' utilised.

The 'could be' or 'should be' of being a graduate

In relation to the first construct of 'figured worlds', the most important figures to consider are those which individuals may draw upon for their own identity and how they imagine themselves. This tool of 'the figure', which Holland et al (Holland et al., 1998, p. 271) use is influenced by Vygotsky's ideas about the power of symbols. For this study, the figure of 'the Graduate' is a powerful symbolic figure against which individuals author themselves. Being a graduate has both material and symbolic implications that vary depending on subject studied and university attended. It is associated with a host of varied expectations in terms of what the potential returns of a degree may be: e.g., 'the Oxford graduate' or 'the Northcity graduate', 'the Arts graduate' or 'the Law graduate' evoke different ideas about status, success, ability and talent. 'The unemployed graduate' is a symbolic figure which can be associated with

[4] 'figured worlds' written as lowercase refers to one of the four main constructs of the theory.

personal and societal failure.

The rite of passage of becoming a graduate has a long history, e.g. evocatively illustrated in the 1960s film The Graduate (Nichols, 1967), in which the lead character has just completed his degree and returns home to a party celebrating his graduation. Such a depiction epitomises the figure of a graduate as one of expectancy and hope, on the brink of a new life for themselves. This depiction is not just a private one but is also social; collectively graduates and their destinies act as a touchstone for what the future may be like for us all. More recent popular culture depictions of the figure of the graduate are more ambivalent (e.g., Bissett, 2011; Killeen, 2015), but retain hope and expectation (sometimes cruelly dashed) at their core. Society invests considerable hope in graduates; the word itself invokes a certain status and aspiration that is not accorded to other leavers of cycles of education/training such as school leavers or completing apprentices.

The space of authoring

The construct of the 'space of authoring' and its partner phrase 'self-authoring' bear a strong Bakhtinian influence with a specific focus on the language individuals use in this process in which they respond to the imagined figure of being a graduate. Holland *et al*. define 'space of authoring', explicitly drawing upon Bakhtin's way of describing how persons/collectives operate in the world:

> The world must be answered – authorship is not a choice – but the form of the answer is not pre-determined. It may be nearly automatic, as in strictly authoritarian practices or it may be a matter of great variability and most significant to a single person's address. In either case authorship is a matter of orchestration: of arranging the identifiable social discourses/practices that are one's resources (which Bakhtin glossed as "voices") in order to craft a response in a time and a space defined by others' standpoints in activity, that is, in a social field conceived as the ground of responsiveness. (Holland *et al.*,1998, p. 272)

A key tool within 'space of authoring' is 'dialogism' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 169) which captures the notion that individuals always exist in a process of addressing and answering within a context that can include specific interlocutors but also the wider imagined social context in which they find themselves. Bakhtin coined the terms 'addressivity' and 'answerability'(Holland et al., 1998, p. 177), arguing that no-one speaks as a free-floating individual separate from the context they inhabit. Many graduates will be conscious of how they are perceived and anticipate answering questions such as 'what will you do with your degree' to a wide range of people.

Bakhtin also used the terms 'authoritative discourse' and 'internally persuasive discourse'(quoted by Holland et al., 1998, p. 182), which describe the different discourses or voices that individuals may draw upon. Authoritative discourse refers to dominant ideas and ways of thinking which are hard to resist and can lead to individuals being 'ventriloquated' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 185) by dominant voices. I would argue that employability can be considered an authoritative discourse; with its focus on exhorting individuals to become successful and employable which demands good academic credentials, relevant work experience, a range of extra-curricular activities and interests, impressive skills and attributes, not to mention a perpetually adaptable and pro-active personality and unwavering work ethic.

'Internally persuasive discourse' contrasts with this. An 'internally persuasive discourse' suggests some cognitive struggle with authoritative discourses, through which process individuals can begin to express discourses that they are inwardly convinced of or have generated themselves. According to Bakhtin and which Holland *et al*. (1998) follow, this terrain has scope for creativity. Often this creativity occurs in the process of orchestration of existing discourses, some of which may appear contradictory. Using Bakhtin's terminology, Holland et al. describe this as

'heteroglossia' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 182) and can also be referred to as 'multi-voicedness'. Such an approach resonates with calls in careers literature for a fostering of 'critical consciousness'(Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016, p. 137) as a moderator in managing transitions.

Findings and discussion

Initial content and subsequent thematic analysis of interview data revealed the competing voices about the topics of careers and employability that participants draw upon. The literature discussed earlier has revealed the tension between the prevailing discourses in employability debates that it is primarily about the individual and their attributes, which tends to push to the background contextual factors that affect upon prospects. In this study, a complexity of perspectives emerged in how individuals tried to make sense of their own career positioning and this paper seeks to explore competing voices associated with this. The word 'voices' is deliberately used as a *Figured Worlds* thinking tool.

The ways individuals reflected upon their own endeavour and self-determination emerged from interviews. How this was manifest varied, but included (not exclusively): a belief that 'talent would out' and a faith in meritocracy; a competitive perspective which indicated an awareness of embracing tactics to get ahead; a consumerist view about the purchase of a degree and how this has/has not lived up to expectations; and a confidence in being in charge of their own destiny or alternatively feeling powerless in the face of a hostile and crowded job market. Data analysis also suggested the importance of individuals' relationship to family and community in shaping perspectives presented, which can be contradictory to an individualistic discourse, but lurked as a powerful force in how individuals authored their own identity in research

interviews. Holland et al.'s (1998, p. 170) rejection of the notion of 'freewheeling' individualism is pertinent in this regard.

Figured Worlds thinking tools offer a lens to consider such varied voices. The theory argues that it is very common for individuals to draw upon multiple discourses and voices, some of which may be contradictory and the tool heteroglossia captures this friction. As such, they reject endeavours to make unitary or simplify voices that are drawn upon by individuals or collectives. Observation of such competing voices led to a consideration of how to organise and present analysis of data in a novel way that was informed by existing careers literature.

Figure 1 suggests how an intersection of Brown et al.'s (2004) and Tholen's (2014) types can draw out the interplay of voices in how individuals reflect upon their career, while also embracing other concepts from the careers literature discussed earlier. The intention is not to suggest that any individual would fall solely into one of these quadrants but that the voices represented in each quadrant illustrate what individuals are drawing upon and moving between as they make sense of their situation. Figure 1's voices are framed by family and community; informed by an awareness of the deeply social nature of careers and in particular the role of those actors, in shaping individual perspectives dialogically. It risks flattening the complexity of voices, but is presented as a framework to consider the relationships between voices, in the knowledge that an individual may draw upon all the voices simultaneously and/or at different times even though they appear contradictory.

Insert figure 1

I will go onto elaborate on this figure, detailing how each quadrant can be distilled and illustrate these four different voices through the words of participants.

Descriptor words and a summary phrase for each were crafted to describe more accessibly how each voice might be summarised. Attention is also paid to the rich depictions of family and community, which act to qualify any freewheeling individualism.

Voice 1 (Idealistic)

This voice surfaced across many participants, as a confidence in an individual's ability to determine their own destiny and be true to self with an implied hope that society is meritocratic in order to allow for this to happen. This voice is resonant of the pro-active and values-led protean career orientation (e.g., Hall, 2004) but also popular literature about being your authentic and best self (Purkiss & Royston-Lee, 2014). Although common amongst creative graduates, it was not exclusive to them. I have summarised this voice in figure 1 with the phrase: '*If I am true to myself, I can control my destiny',* and have called it idealistic as although appealing, it does not seem very pragmatic or realistic.

Matthew's[5] words are used as an exemplar of this voice. He espouses a strong entrepreneurial attitude and has been self-employed in music promotion since graduating, making the choice while in his final year not to apply for graduate schemes. His work originates in a particular enthusiasm he had for a genre of music.

> Sure, well because I was getting involved in the music industry during my final year at university, things were taking off at an impressive rate, so I made the decision to not apply for typical sort of graduate schemes, which even at the time felt like a huge risk, but I felt like I'd found something that I'm passionate about…

[5] Matthew – Business Management, white British, social background - unskilled

Added to this he does have a faith in having a career that is something you love doing and uses a familiar trope to convey this:

> I've always been told; if you work on something you enjoy, you'll never work a day in your life.

A *Figured Worlds* analysis seeks out such tropes in language, as suggestive of the potential for individuals being 'ventriloquated' by a discourse, in this case an idealistic one about life and work.

However, Matthew also expresses doubt about the pathway to individual fulfilment he was so optimistic about. He is experiencing disenchantment with the precarity of his work situation and doubts that being true to his interests in music will lend itself to the security he would like. Specifically, he is aware of the poor health of his mother who he is increasingly responsible for and even talks about his hopes to have children in the future and the desire he has to provide financial security for them, which may compromise his desire for the individual self-expression he has so far followed in his career.

Voice 2 (Tactical)

The tactical voice summarised by the phrase '*I need to work out how to win at this game'* in figure 1 is the most pragmatic of the voices drawn upon by graduates. It recognises that positional inequality is intrinsic to society and individual capacity and use of resources can assist in taking responsibility for playing the game required. This voice resonates with popular depictions of competitive individual employability (D'Alessandro, 2008) in which mobilisation of capitals is required (e.g., Bathmaker et al., 2013).

Rachel's[6] words illustrate this voice. She has sought work that can ensure financial independence rather than for a personal passion. She made a major decision to leave a solicitor training position in order to move into recruitment consultancy, which promised speedier financial rewards. She reflects on her departure from law saying what she had thought at the time: 'do you know I hate this', which contributes to a need to justify how she explained her decision to her family at the time for stepping off a prestigious career path. She compares herself favourably to her sisters who according to her do not share her commitment to being economically independent. She also criticises friends from university who moan about their lives but are not doing much about it. She uses a familiar trope 'to provide for my children' to justify her position.

> Yeh, absolutely, because I've come from a wealthy family so I've always been given everything that I needed. I was always, I had a decent phone and we had nice holidays, we've got a place in Spain that we go to as well and coming from that sort of background I was always very much of the mind-set, I want this for my future, I want to be able to provide this for my children, I don't want it to stop… I'm the independent one in the family.

Her tone is self-congratulatory, however, she firmly recognises her family's support in her career which serves to qualify her espoused independence. In particular, her mother's intervention at a critical point in securing a key placement opportunity is mentioned. She is aware of some of the advantages she has had and is proud of her Jewish background and speaks with humorous warmth when she comments:

> I come from a Jewish family so everyone has an input into everything basically [LAUGHS]. Yes, everyone has an opinion and wants to get involved into any sort of decision that's made.

[6] Rachel – Law and Criminology, white British, social background - professional

Voice 3 (Self-critical)

The self-critical voice responds to a belief that society is meritocratic, and therefore any lack of career success is fundamentally due to individual suitability. This voice is resonant of a neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility that risks leading to a flawed self-blaming (e.g., Gershon, 2017; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). I have distilled this into the phrase: *'What have I done wrong?'* in Figure 1.

Of all participants in the study, Alice[7] was one of the most self-critical. She gives numerous examples of what she sees as her unsuitability for jobs e.g., 'I've not got the right voice', 'I'm not a stunner', 'I'm not the smartest person', 'I do lack confidence, I am always doubting myself…and that's probably a turn off for an employer'. She compares herself unfavourably to her peers who have been more successful, some of whom started applying for jobs in their final year which she now 'regrets' that she didn't do. She concludes that employers:

> 'are going for people who have got something about them a bit more than me I think, who are just a bit more with it and just a bit more intelligent in that area'.

As such she is not happy and has slipped into feeling that others will see that she has failed, and berates her own lack of courage to get her career on the track she wants it. She uses familiar tropes such as 'I need to get out of my comfort zone' and 'not that I care what people think', though in the case of the latter, she clearly does. This self-criticism occurs although she has done a lot to develop her own employability and is experiencing the discomfort of shifting career interests.

Alice depicts her family with ambivalence, and they seem to contribute to her self-critical voice, while also seeking to protect her. Her mother who she has returned home

[7] Alice – Media Production, white British, social background – skilled manual

(small town in northern England) to live with after university is presented ambivalently as both an 'anchor' and 'annoying'. Alice reports on her mother's scepticism about her travelling for interviews for media and music events jobs:

> 'she says it's silly me travelling to all these places to go for interviews, it costing too much. She says, unless it's for a full time job that you're going to get well I just think it's silly you going down'.

She would prefer her daughter to get a secure local job such as joining the police (in the footsteps of her grandfather): 'so she says, policeman's a good job, that's a secure job.' The strength of Alice's relationship with her mother is evident and it is possible that her mother is concerned to protect her daughter from exploitation, and is upset to witness her daughter's experience which is associated with precarious work and competition for certain jobs, rather than her own failings as depicted in her self-critical voice.

Voice 4 (Context-critical)

The final voice is context-critical summarised with the phrase in figure 1*: 'The rules of the game don't work for me'*. This voice captures an understanding that positional inequality is intrinsic to society and that a game needs to be played; but unlike the tactical voice, individual capacity and circumstances have not led to a desired outcome. This voice is resonant of an individual sense that the external environment is against them, either as a disappointed consumer of higher education (Tomlinson, 2014) and/or as part of the precarious jilted generation (Howker & Malik, 2010; Standing, 2014).

Charlie's[8] words here illustrate this voice. In response to a question about the challenges he faces, he shows an awareness of the contextual barriers to finding secure

8 Charlie – Theatre and Performance, white British, social background - unskilled

employment in the creative/cultural sector, and his frustration at not finding a way through this. In contrast to Alice, he does not doubt the quality of the work he can do.

> Finding people who are willing to pay a fair price for it, that's like the biggest one, because it's all well and good me doing free work and I'm all for it but there's only so long you can do that for before you have to say to yourself, when do I start charging for this… It's just like a perpetual over and over again; oh this person should work for free because they've not got the reputation behind them. No they shouldn't, they're working for you, like if you want quality work produced you should pay these people and that sort of goes, that's sort of my rant when it comes to it basically.

The use of the phrase 'free work', which is used as a critical trope in how the creative/cultural, sector uses workers, allows Charlie to explain his situation as one that is shared by a wider community. He shows political awareness and is aware of his own positional identity as someone from a 'rough upbringing' who is not well connected in the arts. However, countering the context-critical voice, he reports proudly of his own strong creative community and the success he has had. He describes a short film he made:

> Where I grew up, I've had basically quite a rough upbringing, the sort of area I grew up in but fortunately for me I've obviously gained the knowledge to come out of it. So I did a small project for the Pride Festival, it was about two gay friends of mine that I grew up with and that was like my big project. That's the one I made the most money for…

Heteroglossia and an emerging 'internally persuasive discourse'

Arguably, each of the voices described so far stems from answering dialogically contemporary discourses about employability as well as imagined ideas of what being a graduate might be. I will now go on to illustrate an example of a graduate shifting between voices. It is in this territory, where individuals demonstrate contradictions, in what can be considered a self-contest of ideas at times, that analysis can reveal the complexity of the meaning making that individuals engage in and how agency may occur. Self-contest occurs in the orchestration of multiple voices that can allow for the

tracing of the evolution of an 'internally persuasive discourse', in which individuals are testing out and arguing against prevailing discourses.

Anna[9] has applied for many jobs unsuccessfully and feels stuck in the visual merchandising job she has continued to do since she was a student. This disappointment in what she had hoped for as a graduate leads her to orchestrate different voices. She details demanding but 'ridiculous' selection days in which candidates are set a task and then find out in a group if they have been successful in the style of a TV talent show (you're staying, you're going home). She also reports the nepotism of companies, who despite advertising jobs, then fill vacancies with friends and family. The context-critical voice is evident when she describes the Fashion industry as 'toxic, nepotistic and exploitative'. She asks herself 'do I want to be part of an industry that has that kind of toxic kind of environment?' and criticises the discrimination she faces:

> but unfortunately some people do judge you from first impressions and being Afro-Caribbean that is something that I don't think will be portrayed … in the fashion industry as a positive.

However, she moves to a more tactical voice as she wonders what ways can allow her to navigate this, 'Yeh but that's what I've figured out, if no-one wants me, I'll have to do it myself.' She also moves to an idealistic voice when she says:

> you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it… I kind of want to be, I want to be a change, the change that I wish was there when I was younger, if that makes sense…

Anna speaks in explicitly dialogic ways when she acknowledges the influence of her own family's occupational heritage, and reflects back to her own younger self and her own mental health issues.

> Both of my Grandmas were seamstresses and the brand that I want to create is actually named after them…I don't really know how to describe it but I would say

[9] Anna – Fashion, Black Caribbean, social background - skilled non-manual

> that all my friends, my family, my upbringing, it's all directed and it's all reflected through the clothes…

She proposes to build a fashion brand/website with a 'community of positive people' for 'girls exactly like me who struggle with anxiety, who struggle with panic attacks, struggle with fitting in,'

It is possible to observe Anna testing different voices about what it will take to make it in the fashion business. In so doing, Anna shows traces of growing her own 'internally persuasive discourse', which has been triggered by how tough she has found her early experiences in the job market. Her independence and determination resonate with dominant discourses of individualist employability switching between an idealistic and tactical voice. What she espouses 'you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it' resonates with a version of positive thinking that risks ignoring how inequalities impact on what people can and can't do. In contrast, she also demonstrates a strong dependence on her community and wants to be part of 'a community of positive people'. She is engaged in orchestrating different voices around her to make her own way in an industry that she criticises. The development of her own 'internally persuasive discourse', allows her to have pride in the things that have gone wrong for her and the risks she is willing to take in setting up her own business.

Conclusions

Data presented has sought to illustrate the application of specific *Figured Worlds* tools to understanding the meaning that graduates confer to their early career experiences. Identity work is evident as participants grapple with normative ideas of employability and career success and the constraints upon this. All of the voices do illustrate participants wrestling with the discomfort of evaluating themselves against

neoliberal ideas about what success might be, and questions about where responsibility for success (however it is defined) may lie. Unequal access to valuable social capital is suggested in the voices presented here, with less advantaged graduates (e.g., in self-critical voice) finding it harder to draw upon resources to fulfil aspirations. Anna's orchestration of voices, dialogically framed around her family and community indicate her growing consciousness in defining her own success in an uncertain context. Her heteroglosssia allows for an awareness that career success is influenced by both individual and structural factors. I would argue that this movement between voices provides a fertile territory for how agency can develop which offers ideas for practice when working with students and graduates.

The Bakhtinian tools of voice and heteroglossia have proven valuable in theorising how individuals understand their situation and move between different perspectives and the frictions therein. Figure 1's diagrammatic depiction of voices illustrates the inter-connectivity of perspectives upon an individually constituted career. The same career positioning can be considered in contrasting ways depending on the perspective of the career author and/or their observer. For example, the idealistic voice resonates with the values-based protean career orientation (Baruch, 2014; Hall, 2004) and the context-critical voice of precarity (Standing, 2014) and/or being a disappointed consumer (Tomlinson, 2014). Both voices capture materially the same career, as each foregrounds the individual as navigator of uncertain contextual terrain, and present different faces of neoliberalism. Precarity lurks behind positivity, despite graduates espousing a protean orientation, this may not be enough to carve a career in competitive, unequal, crowded and uncertain environments. Meanwhile those who position themselves more explicitly as being in precarious situations, can move to rightly or wrongly, blaming others, such as the university or employer practices.

Problematically, the current policy domain around employability pushes graduates to a context-critical voice, in which graduates are encouraged to expect that studying for a degree may give them a certain outcome as a consumer, and that if this does not emerge somebody or something else is to blame.

Other *Figured Worlds* tools have provided a way to illuminate issues of contemporary concern in novel ways. The idea of the figure of being a graduate and the 'should be' or 'could be' of this provides a useful way to consider what aspirations may exist for those who seek to call themselves a graduate. 'Space of authoring' tools including authoritative discourse, internally persuasive discourse and dialogism have also provided ways to reflect upon how individuals answer current contextual challenges and to what extent they can argue against prevailing ideas. In conclusion, I would argue that *Figured Worlds* offers novel thinking tools to conceptualise contemporary attitudes to work and careers. It provides tools that can unpack taken-for-granted assumptions about dominant individualistic ideas, seeking to steer a path that can acknowledge both the individual and their context. Educators can play an important role in stimulating and supporting the thinking of graduates as they make sense of competing voices, and the typology proposed in this paper offers a tangible framework to surface such discussions in employability and career learning activity.

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