

Chapter Three: Reaching for the top – middle-class men’s stories.

We start the story of our graduate outcomes with the middle-class men, as our data show them to be the undoubted labour market ‘winners’ of the four groups we discuss. They were most likely to have a clear idea of their career objectives and to leave university having already accessed their graduate paths, through having a job or place on a graduate scheme, a placement or internship that would easily lead to a job, or being signed up for postgraduate study. Like the middle-class women in Chapter 4, they tended to possess social contacts which helped them find employment, and to be aware of the expected cultural behaviours which facilitated them gaining graduate work. However, not all middle-class men conform to this ‘winning’ pattern. Some rebelled and refused to ‘play the graduate game’ (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). Others, especially those who have studied humanities subjects, are uncertain of their career direction. We tell both types of stories in this chapter. We also take care to distinguish between fractions of the middle-class here, since the story is more nuanced than the simple binary demarcation between the working and middle-classes, as this and the three following chapters demonstrate.

This chapter features the narrative accounts of four middle-class young men. Lloyd, who studied English and Drama at UWE, and Adrian who studied Economics at UoB, were both lower-middle-class. Although neither was first generation in their families to attend university (all the parents had) they were generally less ‘established’ than some other middle-class participants in terms of status, wealth and income. The other two young men in this chapter, Sebastian (Geography, UoB) and Dylan (Politics, UWE), had fairly wealthy families, and Sebastian attended a fee-paying boarding school. Dylan went to a high-performing state school in a wealthy area of the home counties; both had parents and other older family members who had been to university. Thus, they possessed the knowledge and necessary resources – more of the valuable economic, cultural and social capitals – to take full advantage of university study, and could ‘concertedly cultivate’ their CVs, using their advantages to pursue career interests and ambitions. These upper-middle-class young men were consequently better placed to further benefit from their time at university than their lower-middle-class and, particularly, their working-class peers, as this chapter will explain.

Lloyd – ‘I just want to stay being a child as long as possible, and not be an adult at all, ever’

Lloyd grew up in a small town in the generally wealthy county of Surrey, although his family was not especially well off; Lloyd’s father worked as an IT network manager for a transport company, and his mother was an occupational therapist; both had attended university. Lloyd had one younger sister who was still at school when he started at on the Drama and English course at UWE in 2010, but who subsequently went to university. In his first year Lloyd lived in the cheapest hall of residence on campus, nicknamed ‘Council Court’ and considered below the standard of other halls. He never came across as an especially enthusiastic or committed student during the seven years of interviews with him. He talked at the initial meeting of deciding to attend university as a way of avoiding more ‘adult’ responsibilities, and this was a recurring theme in each interview up to 2017:

It’s always been expected that I’d go to uni I think, and I’ve never dreamed of not going to uni because that’s too scary, to start work and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, basically (I) just want to stay being a child as long as possible and not be an adult at all, ever.

He talked of being ‘bored at home’, and enjoying living in a city with its enhanced access to the type of cultural activities he enjoyed – theatre and live music for instance. Going to university was a way to enjoy this. He spoke of lacking self-confidence to work full-time in the theatre business; he liked acting, but felt it was ‘a bit clichéd’. In his second year, Lloyd talked of moving into teaching as an

obvious decision for him after graduating, and the idea of working with underprivileged children particularly appealed, as he appreciated the blatant inequalities of the UK education system. He had discovered the Teach First scheme, whereby undergraduates like him could go and work in a school with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In theory this appealed to him but during his first year at university he had been unsure of such a future; indeed, he had been explicit that he did not want to teach, although he was somewhat conflicted

But I don't really want to become a teacher, I don't want to follow the whole English straight to teacher route, which might happen, but it seems like the easy route and the logical route

At a later interview with Lloyd, it was apparent that teaching remained of interest to him, but we sensed he was never committed enough to the idea of teaching to actually do it

Realistically I'm kind of looking at teaching I guess. I've been told I've got quite a lot of patience so that would be a good thing...organizational skills would probably be useful, which I'm not sure I necessarily have the right ones but I think that's an option. And I like kids, I get along with them usually. So yeah I think that's a possibility.

Whilst the notion of teaching remained an option, albeit not an especially attractive one, Lloyd was unsure which age group appealed to him the most

I feel primary school is too young in a way...Secondary school, I think it's also where you lose more kids from the educational system. I mean in my school a lot of people dropped out in year 9....And then people lose interest and they're going to lose interest in secondary school rather than primary school. It's weird, because I remember being in secondary school and watching supply teachers and thinking "oh God I don't want to do that ever", because it just looked painful, especially if you had like a rough class. But at the same time I kind of feel those are classes which are more worthwhile in a way....I don't know what you call it, the careers day, like at (university campus), I talked to a bloke from...I think he described it as kind of like a charity called Teach First, where....they take students, they take just graduated students and take them to...poor areas where they don't have much attendance and stuff and try and get them to put their enthusiasm for their course across to the other students, to try and increase like, I suppose, people from poor areas getting into education, which I think's really important, I think it's really good.

Despite liking the idea of teaching in principle, and certainly valuing it as an important role in society, Lloyd felt that he lacked the self-confidence for it:

I mean whether I could actually stand up in front of a class of people who don't want to be there and probably hate my guts, I don't know, I'm not 100% sure. But at the same time I think it's something that would be worthwhile doing, and it would be really good and I'd feel proud of doing that I think. But whether it would be good for my mental health or anything I don't know.

Lloyd was a keen musician who played in bands throughout his time at university (and subsequently after graduating). He also liked writing and suggested journalism appealed to him as a possible career choice too. He specifically explored the notion of becoming a music journalist, and took a short course on it, which also involved attending a festival and writing a review of bands he saw there for a national newspaper work-experience training scheme. Lloyd also got an opportunity to

work for a day with a local BBC TV culture show, and the chance to work in the summer on an internship with them.

Even towards the end of his time as an undergraduate, Lloyd remained ambivalent towards his career options

I don't know...the idea of having one career for life just sounds very dead end, very like "this is what you're doing, stick with it because you don't have any other options". Having said that, I don't know why I feel like that because both my parents have, and it's not like I've had early influences of them changing jobs a lot, because I don't think they ever have been out of work at all...which is lucky obviously, very lucky. I just want to be one of those people who's done everything in a way - which is not going to happen...I think being a teacher for the rest of my life is a bit weird so.....I've never really known what I'm going to do after uni, so the idea of being unemployed for a bit just seems realistic...Obviously I'd like to be able to have a career, move out of my home, have my own house, get a car ASAP, but I don't know if that's going to happen....realistically.

Lloyd returned to his family home after graduating and took a number of short-term and part-time jobs, but then came back to Bristol and moved in with some university friends. He had secured a position on a graduate internship in a Communications and Marketing Department, a role which eventually turned into a permanent position. This role involved working with journalists, both briefing and being interviewed by them and speaking on behalf of the employer. He was still considering taking a postgraduate journalism course, and had dismissed the notion of teaching.

When we last heard from Lloyd in autumn 2021 he was still living in Bristol, renting a property with his partner, and working as a media relations officer for a government body, a secure and permanent role and earning around £35,000.

Lloyd differed significantly from the other middle-class young men whose narratives feature in the chapter in a number of ways. He lacked the clear 'sense of entitlement', drive or self-confidence of the two upper middle-class participants, Sebastian and Dylan, and also the career focus both Dylan and Adrian demonstrated throughout their period of involvement with the project. For Lloyd, university was a means of deferring adulthood and the increase in responsibilities that would inevitably accompany it, a largely middle-class approach to life; he didn't face the economic imperative to earn a living as many working-class young men did.

Adrian – a Socially Conscious Economist

Adrian, who grew up in inner-city London and attended what he characterized as a fairly rough and generally low-achieving comprehensive school, studied Economics at UoB. He estimates that from his school year group of around 300 students, only about 40 progressed to university; this contrasts with Lloyd's school where the majority progressed to university, and both Sebastian and Dylan's schools, where just about everyone did. Adrian's parents are Irish immigrants 'the children of cleaners and factory workers', with his mother working as a primary school teacher, and his father as a quantity surveyor. Like Lloyd at UWE, Adrian also lived in the cheapest student accommodation at UoB, and his residence was known disparagingly as 'Poverty Hall'. Both were comfortable with their decision to choose the accommodation they did, both at the time, and subsequently, when reflecting on their time as a student.

Talking to us during his first year, Adrian suggested his career goals were reasonably broad, but had a clear focus

It changes a fair bit, but I'm looking a lot at the moment into trying to get work in charities and development, or maybe working in Government in like the Economic Service or the Diplomatic Service or something like that. But hopefully something that I might be able to travel a bit would be kind of the area that I would be looking to getting into. And I think International Development is what I'm kind of leaning towards, that sort of development organisation in charities.

Adrian worked in bars to help fund his way through university, since he felt he couldn't afford not to. This issue framed his disposition towards internships too. He realised how valuable they were in terms of securing the type of work he was interested in, but did not feel he could afford to do them

I think for a few weeks I really tried to look into internships but...I think there's been loads in the press about it recently as well, that you can't get an internship in a lot of fields unless you can afford to not earn any money, and I don't think I can....I can't afford to get an internship in the charities or some of the NGOs and stuff...they won't pay, so I mean I'm going to have to sort out getting a job... I'd prefer not to do any more bar work over the summer, it just kind of ruins your social life!

Adrian suggested his parents were quite left-wing politically, and committed union members, and he broadly shared their political opinions. He was disappointed that many of his fellow economics students at UoB saw the course primarily as a way to get a well-paid job in finance, rather than doing something he considered socially valuable, and also that the university careers guidance service seemed to echo that

Because as soon as you click "economics"....it narrows everything down to investment banking, consultancy, accountancy or law... And I can't imagine anything worse than any of those jobs. And I got dragged along yesterday, there was a Careers Fair at...Wills Memorial Building...and it was just terrible, everyone turning up dressed up in suits...I cannot imagine working in that sector. But that's the problem....as soon as you say that you do economics to any careers advice people, or online, then it immediately just kind of discounts everything (else).

To Adrian's frustration, even the government careers' portal seemed to suggest that working in a commercial environment presupposed a lack of concern for the bigger social issues that he was interested in.

I had a funny thing actually, the government like jobs website prospects, I went on there and did like a 30 minute test, and there's a section where it talks about what you want out of your career. And you can either pick....you can either be...'altruistic' can be your major point that you want, or you can pick like being 'commercial'.From knowing economics, I like the idea of running a business or something like that, I wanted to be in commercial, but I also wanted to do something that had a good social impact. So I clicked altruistic as well and it immediately flashes up red, as like "you cannot do this in life".

The appeal of both studying and working abroad was strong and he had a real desire to experience life in different countries. Although he didn't do so, he considered spending a semester in his second undergraduate year in Madrid; however, he did undertake postgraduate study abroad, as outlined below. His girlfriend in Bristol was Norwegian, and he enjoyed travelling with her. Towards the end of his second year at university, Adrian's thoughts were turning to possible postgraduate study as a way of helping secure the type of work he was most interested in. Whilst he retained thoughts of

working in a government or other official organisation, he had considered other options based upon his personal interests.

Either...something...Civil Service related, or kind of department of development that sort of thing, but obviously that's quite hard to get into and you often need a PhD....I'd have to see after doing a Masters obviously if I wanted to do that. Other than that it would be...kind of thinking about doing things in the stuff that I'm just more interested for myself, within the music industry or something. I've been in touch with a few different companies, I don't know if you know Spotify? and those sort of things, seen internships there, and I'm looking into the Google internship scheme, but that's quite tricky because they only recruit Oxbridge undergrads.

Adrian spoke of applying for a range of internships previously, without necessarily thinking through the longer term implications of working for the companies or in the industries concerned:

I had a John Lewis internship, it's like a retail management thing, and I applied because I like the company, John Lewis, their ethics, but I've just got no interest in retail management, and I kind of did it....I'd applied for a Rolls Royce one and I was considering some consultancy firms, and I was thinking when I did that "what am I doing, I don't want to be a consultant or anything". And it's just this whole rat race, especially amongst economics you get the investment banking internship and all this stuff...

Having given the matter further thought Adrian changed his mind about taking these internships, and again expressed criticisms of his fellow Economics students and their motivations, which he felt were primarily around amassing personal wealth rather than doing something socially useful. His bigger principles about the purpose and value of work came through in his comments

I just got so sick of all the....because the only reason anyone does Economics is to get on to those schemes, and I withdrew all my applications after getting fed up with everything there and looked into kind of companies that I thought "what would I want, if I was going to do something that I would enjoy doing every day what would it be" and that was kind of where I thought about the music route, not directly kind of music industry related but something like Spotify, a company who are kind of open source access to music... I think that's really important. And then again....I don't know, how useful that is as a job in the grand scheme of things?

Perhaps more than the other three young men featured in this chapter, Adrian emphasised the need to align career and family ambitions, like some of the young women discussed in subsequent chapters.

I guess I'd hope by the time I had kids I'd been...doing something I was really enjoying, and that it would be in a company that values kind of their employees having a life. So hopefully it would just be a natural kind of slight lull in terms of career focus, and that then obviously as they get older and go off to university you kind of maybe get back into it. I don't want to be coming home at 8 or 9 o'clock at night and not seeing your kids and then maybe having a few hours at the weekend, I definitely don't want that sort of life. I don't think I had that when I was younger, I think my parents were at home quite a lot, and I know speaking to people who it seems to have really affected them that they didn't see their parents very much when they were younger, and I definitely don't want

to be in that sort of situation. It would be...staying and trying to do the best at what I can do in my career, but also at the same time making sure that I do the best in home.

Adrian was successful in securing Masters' study in Denmark and was seeking to move there straight after graduation when we spoke with him at the end of his undergraduate course, in order to settle before his Masters' began. He considered getting postgraduate qualifications the best chance to advance his career and achieve a position where he could do something socially useful. Part of his rationale for choosing to study overseas was that the course was effectively free, unlike in the UK, and that he could get financial support to study. He contrasted this to the situation in Britain, where, given large numbers of graduates, a postgraduate award would differentiate someone like him from the wider pool, and offer a chance for social mobility. However, the cost of postgraduate study effectively meant that only the already well-off could afford it.

When we next spoke with Adrian in 2015 he was part-way through his Master's degree in Denmark and had applied for a PhD course, which he could study whilst working at a bank – his study was on household finance during times of economic recession, so something he felt aligned with his socially conscious values. Adrian was successful in his PhD application and enjoying his time studying. He had spent time in the USA during his postgraduate studies, but was now sure he would rather live in mainland Europe. He was mulling an academic career at a later meeting, but was unsure just where he might want to live and work longer term

I want to move somewhere near and then I'll pick a job based on where I choose I guess, or some combination of wherever there's an exciting job or where I want to live...I mean...if I could get a good post-doctoral position I would take it, so that would also be an interesting job. But it's going to be difficult because it's never going to be as comfortable as doing a post-doc here in Denmark, financially or workload wise. And then I have a feeling I don't have enough of a desire academically speaking, so it might be too difficult. Otherwise, I don't know, if I can get a position within a bank where I can run some of my own projects because it turns out that banks are pretty interested in the stuff that I do, then that would also be exciting. Otherwise maybe a smaller company. Basically...I want to have a bit more freedom, so a job that is exciting for me is having freedom.

Adrian was still committed to what he considered socially useful work, rather than pursuing a career for primarily financial gain. He was contemplating working in the developing world in the future, or in a socially useful financial company in the UK or Europe.

I think if I have a successful company that people use then I imagine I'd feel like I've made a social contribution...if I'm attacking some issue that people have day to day, whether that be in a developing country or in the Western world...I would see that as some sort of contribution socially for the good

In autumn 2021 Adrian was an academic still working overseas as a post-doctoral researcher after completing his PhD a few years previously. Adrian didn't come from a wealthy background, but he was comfortable enough to not be driven by a need to be financially secure to the same extent as some of the working class participants discussed in chapters 5 and 6, nor did he see earning money as a marker of masculine success like Dylan (below). Adrian had been influenced by his parents' strong political worldview, and sought socially responsible worthwhile employment, through hard work and academic success.

Dylan – ‘I’ve always been driven by success’

Dylan’s parents were both retired business people, although his father worked in a consultancy role ‘to prevent himself getting bored’. From the opening exchanges of the first interview we had with Dylan, who was at UWE, his drive and determination to be ‘successful’ shone clearly. And his definition of success, in marked contrast to both Lloyd and Adrian, was clear – to be rich, and he saw studying Politics as a good way to achieve that:

I just think I’ve always been quite driven by like success and like my dad did well in business...so I always wanted to kind of emulate that really - well I don’t feel like I need to compete with him but I always wanted to kind of do well really, like I’m quite success driven, money driven I suppose some people would call it, but yeah I’m prepared to work hard for...I’ll put in the hours to earn a lot of money. I want a good career really, and I thought that Politics is something that is a good degree, it’s not like a namby-pamby degree that I think some people seem to take. And I don’t know, I just thought it fitted quite well and I can use it, I can take it on to maybe do a Law conversion and then go to Bar School.. But at the moment, yeah, it was just something that I thought I could fit into a career and try and go quite far with it hopefully.

Dylan’s mother had taken a Business Studies degree in her mid-20s, but his father had not attended university, rather he ‘started as an apprentice and worked up really basically right from the bottom to like the President of Europe in the company, so he did it the old school way’. His mother had ‘worked for about two years’ before quitting to look after Dylan, and had not worked since. When we first met Dylan he was unsure about whether he would like to work in finance in the City, or be a barrister. Even at the start of his first year Dylan had secured a future internship in a large international investment bank through a friend of his father who was head of the internship scheme there. Unlike Lloyd and particularly Adrian, Dylan did not have to take part-time employment whilst at university ‘I’ve never really had to work....my mum and dad would always pay for stuff I wanted to do’.

When we spoke with Dylan at the end of his second year, he was torn between three possible career routes, a Law conversion course followed by Bar exams to become a barrister, share and stock trading or brokering, or an internship at an investment bank. His choices were framed to an extent by the fact his parents lived near London and were well connected in those circles. He had access to two of the highly competitive and sought after investment bank internships through his parents’ acquaintances, while their neighbour was a barrister who had promised to help him into the career if that’s what he decided to do. His parents were also wealthy, and were keen to support him in his aspirations. His father had agreed to go into a joint share ownership arrangement with him. Dylan also considered himself quite entrepreneurial, enjoying ‘wheeling and dealing’ and looking for ways to make money – he said he was ‘obsessed’ by the ‘thrill of chasing money’.

I like starting little money-making schemes and stuff, and I’ve always kind of done that as a kid, you know in summers and Christmas, like buying and selling stuff and whatever. And I’ve got a few like projects....well they’re kind of on the back burner while I’m at uni, but like websites and stuff that I’m looking to start. And like that’s something that I’m kind of interested in, and I’m probably going to have some time out after uni and I just want to do it just for the experience of starting up, registering a company, being my own boss... and if something came of it then brilliant...hopefully we’ll start the next Facebook!

By his final year Dylan had decided against trying to become a barrister, deciding it was too competitive (as did Francesca who features in Chapter 4, and Kyle in Chapter 5), and was looking specifically at either foreign exchange trading (for which he was seeking internships), or the entrepreneurial business self-starting route he had mentioned previously. In terms of the foreign exchange trading he was pulling in all the favours he could through his family connections, and also planning to move back home to his parents' house due to its relative proximity to London's financial district. Once again he was enjoying access to advantages that relatively few of his peers had:

I'm going to go home I think, because we live quite near central London, so kind of what I want to get into is centred in London, so it's really quick to get to, like Canary Wharf and the financial district. So it just makes sense to go home really, and it means I can live at home and not have to pay rent.

Dylan told us his parents 'own quite a few flats' in London which he could use, but he preferred to move back to their house after graduation. He had investigated starting a tech firm aiming at political advertising to engage young people, but that didn't take off despite having 'met with some MPs'. Later he took a role with a brokerage selling investments in precious metals, and then moved to a foreign currency trading company, a job he had partly acquired through family contacts. He was in a brokering role when we spoke, and had ambitions to become a dealer and then a trader, slightly different roles carrying increasing levels of status and reward. Dylan also suggested he still fancied creating a financial services technology start-up firm, and was continually working on possible ideas.

When we last heard from Dylan in autumn 2021, he was living with his long-term partner in their own property close to his family. He was a senior treasury manager for a finance company and earning over £100,000. Dylan epitomised the form of masculinity whereby success is measured by wealth (Ingram and Waller, 2015), and he seemed desperate to be seen as successful in the eyes of his father in particular.

Sebastian – A 'hippy musician in corporate clothing'?

Whilst Dylan's family were probably the wealthiest of the four young men in this chapter, which afforded him various advantages both whilst at university and following graduation, Sebastian's probably had the highest levels of upper-middle-class social capital. In his own words he had had 'a very, very incredibly middle-class upbringing', having attended a preparatory school, then an independent school as a boarder. Sebastian's father was a partner in a law firm, and his mother a teacher, and both had gone to university themselves, his father to Cambridge following his own experience at an elite boarding school in London. He said his parents were both 'very, very cultured': 'they've definitely tried to pass it on to me which is why I'm sort of interested in Indian classical music and going off to study that and things, just really oddball things'. They had, for instance, encouraged both Sebastian and his younger sister to study music when young, and supported them in their sporting interests too.

Sebastian, who studied Geography at UoB had set himself very high standards academically. In the opening few minutes of his first interview he suggested

If something had gone horribly wrong in my exams and I got 3 Bs - which still like wouldn't be terrible - then I'd probably want to sort of re-take... because I wouldn't want to be on a course which was only 3 Bs requirements I think, to be honest.

Sebastian was a highly accomplished musician, who taught guitar and other stringed instruments as a way of paying his way through university. He was also paid to play gigs and as a session musician in a recording studio, and he funded a trip to India to study the sitar. He had contemplated a career in music after graduation, but was also considering training as a management consultant for a major commercial services company when we spoke with him in his second and third years at university, largely since it was more secure employment. He also felt that, as someone who loved music, he didn't want to tarnish or taint his enjoyment of it by having the pressure of needing to earn a full-time living through it.

I do want to earn some money and it's a very risky career move. I don't want to get bitter about music or feel I have to do something like, I mean teaching is fun just because I really believe in what I am doing. Like I want to pass on the skill that has sort of given me so much. That's the only sort of cross over between sort of a commercial aspect of music that I do. Like I quite like being completely free, being able to play the music I want to and not sort of feel I have to do anything which is nice.

Sebastian liked the idea of travelling for work, especially overseas, and applied for graduate roles with several management consultancy firms with that particular focus in mind. He also applied for the Foreign Office and the wider Civil Service, and hadn't ruled out taking a Masters' degree in a few years' time. As a student Sebastian had also been involved in promoting music and other events, including the Fresher's Ball in his old hall of residence.

In terms of how he felt he had changed since coming to university, at the end of his second year, Sebastian felt he was 'less driven'. He also reflected upon his choice of degree subject

Most people they come to a good university and they are surrounded by people who often are quite driven and they kind of get caught up in that. I'd say definitely I've got less driven. I never was really driven but I always worked hard in school, like I always assumed I wanted to get a really good job and earn lots of money. I nearly chose Engineering or Law as a degree but I kind of worried that if I didn't like it then I would drop out and try and do music as my job, which is probably not a good idea for the reasons I said earlier. So I chose Geography 'cos it's interesting and whatever anyone says about degrees, it's not as hard as Engineering or something and it's part of the reason I chose it. Since then I've realised that I'd be happier if I have a job I enjoy more rather than something that would pay loads more and then like have time for other interests and things as well...I still want to do well, I'll still work hard for things but I'm less driven than before I came to university I think, which most people wouldn't say.

By the end of his third year at university in 2013 Sebastian had secured a competitive graduate role as a risk analyst with a prestigious international financial services company, based in their Bristol office, but with the expectation of extensive travel both in the UK and overseas. He had qualms about whether this would suit him in the long term, but felt it would offer additional professional training and valuable skills and experiences for his CV, although he was wary of what he called 'the corporate world'. This was a theme that was revisited repeatedly in later interviews after he had started the job. In the short term, though, he felt this had the advantage of letting him see up close how various businesses worked, which would help him as he finally settled upon a career:

And so after a couple of years I'll know a lot about how other businesses work because I'll have sort of seen them from the inside... I reckon after a few years I might have a

better idea of what I might actually want to do. And it might be this, I might find this really interesting, but it's sort of a good starting point I think.

Sebastian had considered trying to 'make it' as a musician for a few years after graduation, including moving to London to help him do so. However he decided that if he did it would be much more difficult to subsequently enter 'the corporate world' a few years later, when he would be competing for those prestigious career opportunities with more recent graduates. Some of these would doubtless have undertaken a number of relevant internships, whereas Sebastian had tended to spend his summers travelling and playing (or studying) music. He also felt that there was an expectation on him from others to at least try 'corporate life':

The school I went to, and my dad being a lawyer and stuff, it sort of...they don't push me towards it but there's sort of an expectation in the back of your mind that you should try a sort of corporate office job type of thing for a bit at least. And I saw a good opportunity and so I thought I'd go for it. I didn't really expect to get it, but like when I did I was like "well I can't really turn this down, I've got to try it for a few years at least". So I don't know, if I like it I can stay there, it's a very, very open position so I can probably....I can find out what I want to do afterwards. If I like it I could stay for a long time, if I don't, I've got money and a good CV and can leave and do music or something like that.

When we next spoke to Sebastian he had been out of university for a few years, and was still working for the same global financial services corporation. He reflected favourably on his decision to do so rather than try to pursue a career in his 'passion' of music, since he had decided 'I'm just going to keep it (music) as my thing'. He did consider working for a socially valuable non-profit organisation in the future, if needs be in a voluntary manner, something he could fund through teaching or playing his guitar. He suggested

I kind of realised it makes purely more sense to get like a proper job that looks really good on your CV for a few years first, and then do all the idealistic stuff later.

Sebastian also talked of how he used his music to 'de-corporatise' when not actually working, and that it remained still 'a really, really big thing' in his life. He was earning £32,000 two years after starting his job on £22,000, but felt somewhat personally compromised by that and by the future structured pay rises he could expect in the next few years, in terms of the social value of his job:

You can progress very rapidly, like you have to take on quite a bit of responsibility each year. But it's strange, like I definitely do not deserve this salary, like my expertise or working hours or what I can contribute in a kind of wider sense, in terms of the kind of flows in what the company deals with, like we're definitely worth this much but in terms of kind of this comparable to other jobs and what my friends are doing, or the level of expertise they have to have....a lot of my friends are doing PhDs and I guess it is really ridiculous I get paid this much, like it's definitely unfair on virtually every level!

Sebastian had an interesting approach to work, essentially seeking to become very good and efficient at it, not so he could progress in work, but in order to enjoy more free time to escape from what he referred to as 'office life'

I kind of realised that I don't like sitting in back offices doing boring stuff and I like to minimise that time, so I worked really, really hard to kind of build skills to make me work faster. So I think I've got really, really efficient at working...I think I'm the quickest to get

all my work done in the department, which I've worked really hard to do. Like I quite enjoy the kind of strategic working out who cares about what. Like there are a lot of people who will just do every last detail, and again not having like a moral feeling for what you're doing and not really caring. Like I work hard for my colleagues and not let them down and, you know if there's a good manager I'll work hard for them...I don't believe in what I'm doing, so I don't need to do this stuff to the best of my ability. So I'd say I was probably only doing 6 hours a day for most of last year, which probably would have been more like 9 given the work balance, like that would probably be typical ...again that's partly like, if you're doing 9 hour days that would start to get to you, if you're doing 6 then it's very easy to have a kind of several hour stretch to 'de-corporatise', do music. So I've really tried to do that.

Whilst Sebastian enjoyed travelling with his work, he found it was exacting too heavy a price, working full days, travelling on trains and living in hotels around the UK

I mean you're not really working 24 hours but you're on your own in a city and you don't know anyone, so that's when you realise that it can start to get inside you and that, yeah, you realise if you were doing that for months it would sort of start to change you a bit. So...I started to push back and said like I'm not spending my 20s in back offices doing IT controls and then going back to business hotels...That's when you get home and you haven't got the energy left to do fun stuff. Like I've not struggled with spending my evenings really well, again I've tried to make a point of doing that so the corporate thing feels like a sort of weird thing I do for a couple of years, rather than my main thing.

At the next interview in 2016 he was still working for the same firm, but had suffered from tendonitis meaning he had had to scale back significantly playing music. He had also reduced his scheduled working hours to work two weeks in three, and was being paid proportionately less accordingly. He was using his non-working time to develop ideas for helping international development charities, and encouraging social impact and corporate responsibility in large firms. He was working directly with some very senior business people and charity leaders, and really enjoying the voluntary role. He talked of leaving his finance service company and moving into this role in the near future.

The last time we met with Sebastian in the summer of 2017, four years after graduating, he was still at the large corporate firm, earning £39,000 but on a pro-rata basis since he was still working part-time whilst doing voluntary work with the charity sector. He was moving into the field of workplace activism, encouraging people working in big organisations to seek to influence the companies' policies, making them more environmentally friendly for instance. He was using his professional experiences developed from consulting for large businesses in applying 'hard-headed thinking' to pursue charitable causes and social issues. This, plus his music which he saw as essential to his identity and sense of self, was what Sebastian wanted to spend his foreseeable future doing.

I hope I'll be a professional workplace activist in the sense that like I'll have moved enough money and changed our systems so that somebody will just fund me to do this on my own terms, which I will be looking to pursue funds for this maybe late this year, early next year. But as things are so unpredictable I have no idea... I will be definitely working the sphere of global justice, hopefully as a systemic activist of some sort.

Sebastian spoke reflectively of his own advantages: '...and again all this like hippy stuff I can only do because I'm like in a situation of middle-class privilege.' But he considered it incumbent upon

himself to do what he felt was morally right, and to highlight and act upon economic disadvantage nationally and internationally.

By autumn 2021 Sebastian was a self-employed musician, writer and teacher, now living in London, earning 'up to £20,000', the lowest income category of any of our participants. However, he still owned his flat in Bristol which he let out to friends at 'mate's rates'. Sebastian had left the corporate world during the Covid pandemic and was still actively working for social change and to enhance corporate responsibility. He had the capitals to access the corporate world after graduation, but had chosen to turn his back on it. He did, however, have the financial safety net of a fairly wealthy family and his own property, meaning he could follow his passion of music knowing that financial help was close to hand if necessary

Conclusion

The four middle-class young men in this chapter represent different forms of contemporary masculinities (Ingram and Waller, 2014), yet each is informed by a range of factors, including their classed upbringing and the capitals upon which they could draw. Social class is an incredibly complex issue as explained elsewhere in this book. However, the forms of masculinity displayed by the men in the four narrative accounts highlighted in this chapter are undoubtedly *informed* or otherwise *influenced* by their backgrounds.

Both Dylan and Adrian were interested in a career related to finance, but each approached it from different starting points and different dispositions, shaped by their different class backgrounds. Adrian wanted to achieve what he considered a socially worthwhile career, doing so through commitment and hard work, in line with classed political values learned from his parents, and not dissimilar to the values demonstrated by Sebastian. Dylan had the confidence and sense of entitlement to feel he would be successful at anything he undertook, and his father, with a business background, supported and helped him, utilizing his own economic and social capital. By contrast Adrian and Lloyd had to achieve through their own efforts. Such dispositions informed both their classed and their gendered identities.