# Chapter 8
# Transitions from higher education to employment among recent graduates in England: unequal chances of achieving desired possible selves

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## Introduction

This chapter uses the concept of possible selves to examine processes of making the transition from undergraduate study to the world of work in England, focusing specifically on career futures in the accountancy sector. Inequalities in access to high status professional careers in sectors such as finance and accountancy have been identified as a significant policy concern in the UK (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; Milburn, 2012), with research by Ashley et al. (2015) providing evidence of the sort of practices in firms that contribute to unequal access to these professions. In this chapter, we examine the issue from the perspective of graduates themselves, and consider how they experience transitions through undergraduate study and into these professions. We focus on the negotiation and construction of possible selves, and provide insights into how structures and social practices interact with subjectivities and the dispositions of individuals, in ways that enable or inhibit the realisation of desired possible selves, paying particular attention to the role of gender, ethnicity and social class.

The chapter is based on data from the Paired Peers project (2010-2017), a longitudinal study of young people who studied at the two universities of Bristol in England, which followed their progress through university and into the world of work following graduation, and which had an explicit focus on social class, gender and mobility. Our analysis focuses on three participants in our study, all of whom wished to progress into employment in a Big Four Accountancy firm[1]. The lens of possible selves allows us to draw out both the affective and material dimensions involved in the construction of possible career selves over time. Our analysis highlights how an imagined future in an elite accounting career is made possible or impossible through a combination of the ways in which individuals are able to mobilise and cultivate suitable capitals as a result of structures and opportunities at university, their

capacity to 'package' personal capital in order to succeed in graduate recruitment processes, and their sense of fit with practices in the workplace, all of which interact with longer term more subjective processes of constructing possible career selves. The chapter therefore aims to provide a different narrative on 'the mobility experience' (Friedman, 2014: 360) to that presented through analysis of statistical data, and offer insights into how individuals experience mobility and how they make sense of social trajectories, 'not just through 'objective' markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artifacts of class [and in our study gender and ethnicity]-inflected cultural identity.' (Friedman, 2014: 352)

*Overview of chapter*

The next section of the chapter outlines our use of possible selves as a framework for examining the construction of graduate careers. In the following section we discuss recent literature on graduate careers in the professions. We then outline our methodology before presenting an analysis that focuses on the experience of three participants in our study who hoped to progress to careers in Big Four accountancy firms. In the final sections we discuss how we have put 'possible selves' to work within a framework of analysis that takes account of structuring features of social spaces, therefore using possible selves to consider psycho-social and subjective processes of mobility, without losing sight of the important dynamic between structure and agency.

## Possible selves and the construction of graduate career futures

The concept of 'possible selves', first introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986), originates in social psychology. The concept encapsulates ideas of what a person would like to become in the future (the ideal self), what they fear becoming (the feared self), as well as what they in reality could become (possible self) (Markus and Nurius, 1986). As a lens for analysis, possible selves places an emphasis on the temporal, proposing that a person's aspirations, motives and goals involve a complex interplay between representations of the self in the past, present and imagined future (Henry and Cliffordson, 2013; Markus and Nurius, 1986). In the field of psychology, researchers have argued that constructions of possible selves can influence self-esteem and academic achievement, playing a cognitive and affective role in

motivation, leading to a strong impact on how an individual initiates and structures their actions, not only in realising ideal possible selves but also in preventing feared ones (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Markus and Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman et al., 2006; Ruvolo and Markus, 1992). It is argued that the more developed a possible self is, the more this motivates a person and encourages goal-directed behaviour towards desired results (Oyserman et al., 2002; Oyserman et al., 2004). So, for example, in the context of our study which focuses on graduate careers, a targeted approach towards job applications has been identified as a key determinant of a positive employment outcome, enabling a smooth, linear trajectory to a graduate career (Shury et al., 2017).

A sociological reading of possible selves looks to how the structures of a particular social space frame and constrain the selves that are perceived as possible to imagine and become (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). We draw on Bourdieu's work in our analysis, whose concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) is a helpful reminder, that external 'objective' structures are not simply the context in which individuals seek to construct possible selves, but become embodied in individuals' dispositions, in their subjectively experienced horizons for action, and their sense of what is both possible and impossible for them to be and become. This sense of what is possible is linked to knowing the rules of the game, and having a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998: 83), which helps to maximise chances of success (see Chapter 7 in this volume). In the context of graduate career pathways, locating the concept of possible selves in an analysis that takes account of the structures of the social space enables us to highlight on the one hand how a 'successful' trajectory to a high status career is enabled by a strongly developed possible career self, which encourages purposeful, goal-directed activity towards that career. On the other hand, having a focused approach with a clear career plan requires knowing the rules of the game and having the resources to play the game effectively. For those without such resources, it is much more difficult to follow a smooth and linear career trajectory. Our data suggest that a strong possible career self constitutes a valuable form of capital in its own right; it enables individuals to envisage and plan for a career future, and can be packaged as a desirable attribute in a context of intense competition for graduate jobs (see Tomlinson, 2008).

In order to locate our use of possible selves in relation to the focus of our study, in the next section we discuss recent literature that demonstrates the unequal picture of access to the professions for graduates in the UK, before moving on to present the experience of the three participants in the Paired Peers project, who hoped to progress to high level careers in the accountancy profession.

**The context for possible career selves in the finance and accountancy professions**

In the UK there is now extensive evidence that careers in key professions including finance and accountancy, and particularly high status careers in these professions, are not equally open to all. There are continuing patterns of inequalities based on class, gender and race in the occupational destinations of students (HEFCE, 2015), and in earnings associated with high status professional careers (Britton et al., 2016). Analysis of quantitative data from students who graduated between 1999 and 2009 (Crawford et al., 2016; Macmillan et al., 2015; Macmillan and Vignoles, 2013[2]) finds that three years after graduation, more socio-economically advantaged graduates (those whose parents have higher status occupations themselves or those who come from areas with higher levels of HE participation[3]) are more likely to be in the highest status occupations. Furthermore male graduates are around 2.3 percentage points more likely to enter the highest status occupations three years after graduation compared to females, and Black graduates are 2.7 percentage points *less* likely to enter the highest status occupations than their white peers (Macmillan and Vignoles, 2013: 9). The researchers conclude that: 'These findings provide powerful evidence that degree attainment is not enough to equalize socio-economic differences in early career entry into elite occupations.' (Crawford et al., 2016: 564)

With regard to the accountancy profession specifically, Ashley et al. (2015) report that while leading accountancy firms do not publish social mobility data, the information gathered from firms in their study suggests very marked inequalities based on type of school attended, one of the markers of socio-economic status used in England. They found that up to seventy percent of job offers were made to graduates educated at a selective state or fee-paying school in a single cohort, compared to four percent and seven percent of the population as a whole attending such schools. The same pattern applied to university attended, with typically

forty to fifty percent of applicants at leading accountancy firms educated at a Russell Group university[4]. These Russell Group applicants received between sixty and seventy percent of all job offers. The high proportion of applicants from these universities was a direct result of elite firms' recruitment and attraction strategies, which comprised campus visits and targeted advertising specifically aimed at these students. The advantages of coming from a more privileged social background for gaining employment in a top firm were therefore enhanced further by attending a high ranking university. Moreover, Crawford et al. (2016) find that even among those attending the same (high status) university, attaining the same degree class in the same subject, those from more privileged backgrounds were more likely to access the top professions.

A number of ways in which these patterns of privilege are sustained has been identified in recent research studies. Opportunities for internships during undergraduate study now form an increasingly important form of capital to list on a graduate CV. While the availability of internships with top graduate employers has increased, the Sutton Trust (2014) reports that 31 per cent of these roles continue to be unpaid, making them out of reach for those without the resources to support themselves while doing unpaid work. Moreover, research into educational elites in France and England has found that students at elite universities mobilise existing and new networks and connections to arrange *exclusive* internships, which position them favourably for entry to the labour market (Tholen et al., 2013). Notions of top talent in recruitment processes compound these advantages. Duff (2017: 1082) reports that the Big Four accountancy firms employ a discourse of hiring "the brightest and the best" to satisfy perceived client demand, and look for elite credentials to demonstrate the prestige and specialisation of their workforce. Ashley et al. (2015) find that at interview, companies look for non-educational skills and attributes, such as the capacity to present a "polished" appearance, display strong communication and debating skills, and act in a confident manner. Employers interviewed for their research admitted that their practices of associating talent with attributes that align with middle-class norms and behaviours may disadvantage talented students who have not benefited from similar educational advantages or been socialised in a middle-class context, no matter how great their aptitude for a professional career in all other respects (Ashley et al., 2015: 11).

Recent research therefore suggests that for graduates who are not from highly advantaged backgrounds, and who have not been able to mobilise resources to their advantage during their undergraduate study in order to position themselves advantageously for a future career, imagining a possible self in professions such as accountancy and finance is not encouraged by the practices and cultures of these sectors. Graduates who are female and/or from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds are additionally disadvantaged. In the next section, following an outline of our methodology, we present an analysis of three participants' experience of seeking to construct future career selves in the accountancy profession.

**Methods**

The data presented in this chapter are from two phases of a longitudinal qualitative study (the Paired Peers project, funded by *The Leverhulme Trust*), which followed the progress of a cohort of students through their undergraduate study in England and into the labour market. Phase one (PP1) (2010-2013) tracked an initial cohort of ninety middle-class and working-class students from eleven academic disciplines studying at the two universities in Bristol: the 'elite' University of Bristol (UoB) and the 'post-1992' University of the West of England (UWE). Phase two (PP2) (2014-2017) followed fifty-five of the original cohort over their first four years of life post-graduation[5].

The main method of data collection involved in-depth biographical interviews of one to one and a half hours, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews were face-to-face in phase 1, and were either face-to-face, or conducted via Skype in phase 2, as participants were spread geographically across the UK and other parts of the world. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using NVivo software, based on a content analysis approach, using thematic codes which were agreed through discussion in the research team. These codes were identified from a combination of reading the data, our reading of existing research literature, and the use of a conceptual frame that drew on the work of Bourdieu, which made us alert to issues of habitus, capitals and social field. In order to code, classify and analyze data we followed an abductive approach, by systematically employing the thematic codes that were identified prior to analysis while also being alert to

subsequent themes that could arise from the data. Codes that were used for the analysis in this paper comprised: Career Development, Employment (Hours, Job experience, Recruitment, Salary), Future, Identity (Self-identity, Social identity, and Work identity) and Transition from University to Work.

Fourteen of the participants in the project progressed to employment in the finance or accountancy sectors. Of these fourteen, seven were categorised as coming from middle-class backgrounds and seven from working-class backgrounds; nine graduated from the University of Bristol (UoB) and five from UWE; ten were male and four female. Two were from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, one working-class male participant and one middle-class female participant. Here we present the experience of three of these students, who have been selected because they all aspired to work for a Big Four accountancy firm while at university: Nathan (UoB, Law, middle-class, white), Leo (UWE, Economics/Finance, working-class, white) and Carly (UoB, Economics/Finance, middle-class, Black African).

**Nathan: successfully realising an ideal career self**

Nathan came from an established, middle-class background, with parents who worked as doctors running their own general practice. He attended a provincial grammar school and chose the University of Bristol to study Law because it is a "well respected course" (interview 4) and the degree would enable him to achieve his career aspiration of working in the City, while leaving options open if his career plan did not work out.

From the very first interview with Nathan, he spoke of his determined and careful career planning, and of his aspirations for an ideal career self, running his own business. This strongly developed sense of possible career manifested itself in determined planning to work hard and independently throughout his degree in order to achieve the highest grades possible:

> there's another lawyer in our accommodation who I get on quite well with and
> we just go to the library and just do work sort of like 9 to 5 kind of thing, eat
> lunch, go to lectures and then prepare for tutorials and then come home at
> night and just sort of chill out. (Interview 1)

Nathan described himself as "competitive" (interview 1), "incredibly career-focused" and "driven" (interview 4), and he was well aware that a degree was not enough to succeed in the graduate recruitment game:

> by the time you get to the stage of applying for things academics are taken as a given, like 2:1 is the minimum expectation. Everyone has a 2:1 at least. Everyone has As at GCSEs, you've just got to try and differentiate yourself by doing something extra like Investment Society, or an internship, or I do mooting in my spare time. (Interview 4)

He explained how he invested in cultivating his chances for success while at university:

> obviously applying for internships, because that's the main way in that industry that you get a job. Like learning in my spare time, I'm studying at the minute for a Certificate in Corporate Finance, which has slightly fallen by the wayside because the volume of work at the minute is very intense. Also Investment Society, so helping other students get into the industry or get interested about it as well, so looking through CVs and things like that. What else? Like mooting, things like that, just things that build up your CV really, all the things that I'm doing at the moment. (Interview 4)

This capacity to mobilise and cultivate suitable capitals, all geared towards an ideal future self, was demonstrated further in the way he described the process of securing a graduate job in a highly prestigious investment bank. His comments below suggest that he is already a 'fish in water', and can take for granted that his confidence as a middle-class male will work to his advantage:

> So through like Investment Society and talking to people on the stands, I got chatting to him [senior member of investment bank 1]. And then chatted to him at an event as well, got his card. Then I was in London so I thought "well I've got an hour before my interview with [investment bank 2]" [….] So I went to his office and phoned him up and asked him if he would come for coffee. And he did, so we went for coffee, had a chat - about football actually. […] And after that conversation I got an e-mail about 3 days later […], asking me to attend the final round interview. (Interview 3)

Nathan graduated with a first class honours degree, and moved into employment with a top investment bank. In his first year, he was top ranked and got 80-90% of his salary as a bonus, reaching an annual salary of nearly £100,000. He said he was headhunted daily by private equity firms and hedge funds, but chose to remain in his existing post for a little longer, while at the same time starting to get involved in the start-up scene in order to begin his own business as he had originally planned, and materialise his ideal self (interview 7). After two years at the bank, Nathan changed company and became a Hedge Fund Asset Manager, partly for promotion and better pay (£60,000 plus 100% bonus), but mostly so that he could work shorter hours than the 12 hour days he had been putting in. He saw this new job only as a temporary one: "I still don't think I will be here in my new job for ever because my longer term game plan had always been to go and try and do something entrepreneurial" (interview 9). After less than a year he left the company on very good terms in order to set up his own company with a friend. When he was asked how he imagined his future self, he said:

> hopefully I will still be doing something I love, whether that is because I'm still running the company and it's grown and we're in the US or we're in Asia and I'm working with great people that I enjoy working with. Or it's not that and I've managed to find my way back to another finance job. (Interview 10)

This process of following a smooth and carefully planned path to success and the realisation of his ideal self, was considerably different to the unfolding of Leo's career, to which we turn next.

**Leo: impossible ideal self and the construction of a realisable alternative**

Leo came from a working-class family. His father was a train driver and his mother was not employed outside the home, and he grew up in an economically deprived area of South Wales. In his first interview, Leo described his ideal future self as an aeronautical engineer. However, he was unable to pursue this goal, because he needed a maths A-level to get a place on an engineering degree and he had dropped maths at the age of 16. No-one had advised him of this at the time, and subsequently he could not envisage postponing university for two years in order to study for a maths A-level.

He progressed to UWE to study economics and finance, but was ambivalent about a career in this area, not least after working in an accountant's office during a gap year before university, which he described as 'dull'. Even though he recognised that this work experience was very useful in terms of his CV, he struggled from the very beginning to see a future work self in accounting:

> I     Have you got a career in mind?
>
> Leo    Not really no, it's quite daunting. But I didn't enjoy accounting all that much so I don't really want to go back to that route. (Interview 1)

Throughout his studies Leo achieved high grades (first class honours). However, he did not invest in building his professional profile and cultivating additional capital. He did not participate in any societies (he joined only the climbing society towards the end of his second year), and he had little time to take on an internship as he worked in bars and supermarkets during term-time and during his summer vacation.

He did not appear to have any exposure to accountancy-related jobs, which may well have contributed to the difficulty in imagining a future work self in the sector (Hardgrove et al., 2015). His family did not have social networks that could help him with gaining access to future employment in this area as he explains here:

> I     And in terms of your parents and stuff, you know with their sort of jobs and things, are there any links that they could ... I know your dad works on the railways […]
>
> Leo    I'm not sure how their recruitment system works. I don't think, yeah, I don't think, it's all done from like central offices so it's not….
>
> I     So it's not like 'Here's my lad, he wants a job'.
>
> Leo    Yeah, it used to be like that, but no. (Interview 7)

He did not have a sense of how he might use opportunities such as the Milk Round (where employers visit universities as part of their attraction and recruitment process):

> I     Did you go to Careers Fairs or the Milk Round?
>
> Leo    Milk Round? No. I went to the one Careers Fair when it was in the ECC [University Exhibition and Conference Centre] but I didn't stay there very long, I didn't think I got much from it. (Interview 4)

Even towards the end of his studies, Leo told us that he did not think he was investing enough effort into applying for a graduate scheme:

> Another thing that I was meant to do is apply for grad jobs. I've only applied for two, and got turned down for one, still waiting on the other one, but yeah I haven't really put as much effort into finding a graduate scheme as I should have. (Interview 6)

Despite graduating with a first class degree, Leo's progression to graduate employment did not follow a linear and smooth trajectory. Over the summer after graduation he was offered the opportunity to attend the assessment centre for one of the Big Four accountancy companies. However, he was unsuccessful and "out of desperation" (interview 7) he turned to casual unskilled work (first as a delivery driver for 6 months and then in a post-room for another 6 months). He was not in a position to take time out to think through an ideal future career, with no-one who could support him to do this, and he struggled with searching for jobs that related to a graduate career self:

> I       So this sounds quite clinical now, but have you got a strategy for
>         where you want to go next or...?
> Leo     No, not at all.

He eventually quit his job in the post room, and started applying for jobs in accounting, but after "a few dozen" unsuccessful applications, he was under pressure to find a job as he had spent all his savings. He managed to get a fixed-term contract in a university research grants office. This invigorated Leo's interest in the sector and gave him a career pathway to follow. He began to envisage a future work self in a finance department of a university – it appeared viable and offered a structured career route:

> somewhere like where I'm working now would be good, […] because you could like work up, there's like loads of opportunities in the university. In the Finance department alone there's like 160 people or something. (Interview 8)

A priority for Leo was financial stability; he wanted to "get somewhere permanent and settled", as he felt that only then would he "be able to look forward" (interview 8). At the end of his fixed term contract, Leo was offered a permanent post and he started applying

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internally for higher positions in the Finance department of the university. This was not, however, a story of finally working towards an ideal self. Leo did not feel "particularly driven" towards his career, and he still felt that career planning "always seems like something for further in the future" (interview 10). Nevertheless, while Leo's narrative was not a story of imagining and working towards an ideal career self, the secure post that he eventually achieved, with structured opportunities for progression, provided the conditions which enabled him to look towards a realisable career future. For Carly, the final participant considered in this chapter, both the process of transition through university, as well as the move into employment, were much more difficult and uneven.

## Carly: future imperfect - finding a way to a viable possible self

Carly was from a middle-class Black African background. Her parents moved to England from Nigeria when her two brothers were very young, and Carly was born and raised in England. Carly defined herself as British - 'I'd say pretty much the only thing Nigerian about me is probably just my parents and my skin tone' (interview 9), and she closed down any further discussion of her ethnicity. There was a silence about her Nigerian family background until several years after graduation, when she expressed an interest in knowing more about the family's Nigerian origins.

She attended a local comprehensive school, and in her first interview, she explained how she had imagined a possible future self, studying English and creative writing. However, her family appear to have dissuaded her from a route that did not offer an obvious career future. Since she was also good at maths, her elder brother encouraged her to consider accountancy. In Year 11 at school he helped her to secure work experience in a Big Four Accountancy firm, and when we first met her, it appeared that her ideal future self now was to follow in her brother's footsteps:

> I So what made you think of doing Accounting and Finance?
>
> Carly Well I just thought....like Maths has always been my strongest subject so I just thought "OK what's the first thing I can think of" and yeah I thought it was quite a good choice for like a degree, maybe a career as well if I fancied it.

I        Did you talk to your brother about it?

Carly    Yeah a little bit. Yeah he seemed to get through the course like pretty well, and it's just nice knowing that if I get stuck or something there's always someone who's like been through the same stuff, so that's good. (Interview 1)


She was successful in getting a place to study Accounting and Finance at the elite University of Bristol, but despite this apparently beneficial first step, she expressed considerable uncertainty and fear about her future career self. During her first year of undergraduate study she said 'I just can't imagine myself having a career at the moment' (interview 2), and in year 2, although she aspired to get onto a graduate scheme with a Big Four Accountancy firm, she was unsure whether it was what she wanted or 'just because it's kind of the norm' (interview 4). Reflecting back on her university experience after she had left, she explained how the competitive mind-set of her peers affected her; she found it 'daunting that these like 18/19 year old were already thinking about career progression' (interview 8).


Carly knew what was needed to successfully play the game, and was aware that to build her stocks of capital to enhance her chances of getting onto a graduate scheme with a top accountancy firm she needed to apply for an internship. However, although she firmly defined herself as British and silenced her Nigerian background until some years after she graduated, she found it difficult to fit into the taken-for-granted and 'normative whiteness' (Mirza 2006: 106) of the university setting: 'at home I'm perceived as quite an outgoing person. [….] But it took me two months to just not be awkward' (interview 1). She appeared to invest her time in leisure activities that would make her fit in, rather than engage in the concerted cultivation (Lareau 2011) of desirable capitals through extra-curricular activities described by Nathan earlier.


Moreover, she was not achieving high grades and feared that employers would not offer her an internship (interview 4). This feared self, associated with not becoming an accountant, appeared to have a detrimental effect on Carly's academic achievement. While she continued to hope for a high final grade in her degree, instead of improving, her grades deteriorated

significantly: 'It's kind of like I know for a fact that I can do better. So yeah last year I wasn't very motivated for some reason, which is odd' (interview 5). Having a taken-for-granted successful academic self proved unhelpful when faced with difficulties, and she was unable to work out strategies to get back on track. She explained:

> I just hated asking for help, which is weird because that's why my tutors are there, but yeah, so if I got stuck on something I'd either try to force myself to understand it, or I'd just kind of bury myself away from it. (Interview 5)

Carly graduated with a third class honours degree (the lowest grade for an honours degree), a grade which 'pretty much just wiped out the graduate route' (interview 7). She returned to the family home in the north of England and set about trying to gather as much work experience as she could in the accounting industry, through a variety of precarious, low status and badly paid contracts. None of these posts offered room for development and progression, unlike the graduate schemes that she had imagined pursuing:

> there are a lot of like, say, graduate schemes where you go in and after a year you get this position and things like that, but in this one it's kind of…yeah you can't really see a progression ladder, so it's more just like trying to add value, and when you think you've added enough value then you'd go and ask for a pay rise. (Interview 9)

After two years, Carly found herself struggling with the "ruthless" working culture and corporate mentality of her company (interview 9). The longer she worked in the sector, the more she distanced herself from her aspirations of a future work self in accountancy, yet felt trapped into a place where her horizons for action were limited to her immediate situation:

> just from the environment, I think I'd lost a lot of confidence anyway and I'd kind of put myself in a mindset where I was thinking I'm not really qualified to do anything else. So I had a lot of self-doubt, I was like "where do I go, who else will take me on?" if that makes sense. (Interview 10)

Carly took time off for stress and health reasons, and then returned to work part-time. She then found the strength to change jobs. Her new post did not necessarily require a degree, but she felt much happier, which she associated with two factors. The first was her female manager, who gave her structure and support:

> In my previous job there wasn't like a clear measure of how you were doing, it never really got assessed. Whereas here, like within my first month, I had a meeting and it was like 'so how do you think you've been doing, how's it been going, is there anything we can improve on', so like it was just a lot more structured. (Interview 10)

The second factor was the friendly, non-competitive workplace culture:

> it's quite laid back and there isn't anyone who I don't feel as though I couldn't go to for help. So like I feel more relaxed in myself and I'm asking a lot more questions, and just everyone's quite open with each other as well which is really nice. (Interview 10)

As she began to regain her confidence with the support of her new female manager, Carly started to build a renewed sense of a possible self in the accountancy sector, no longer aspiring to a top job in a Big Four company, but instead to a career that she saw as viable and realisable.

## Discussion

Our three narratives provide insights into the interaction of cultural, structural and social processes that contributed to the development of the career identity and future work selves of these young graduates. Nathan's case study highlights the virtuous circle of access to suitable resources, such as networks, that offer 'glimpses of the future', and support the development of strongly focused motivation (Hardgrove et al., 2015; Henry and Cliffordson, 2013). His established middle-class background meant that he was a fish in water from an early age with regard to constructing a desired possible career self, and as a result knew the steps he needed to follow in order to achieve it. Furthermore, any expression of a 'feared self' was more an articulation of 'plan B', involving strategies to get back on track, and to revise overall goals based on experience. His smooth and linear trajectory meant that only four years after graduation, he was already starting to materialise his ideal self, very different to the experience of Leo and Carly.

Leo provides a strong contrast to Nathan. His apparent ambivalence and wavering motivation towards a future career could easily be read as a deficit in young people from working-class backgrounds to envisage a possible future self. But, as recent research on aspirations emphasises, it is not *having* aspirations that are the problem, it is being able to realise them (Thornton et al., 2014). We would argue that Leo's narrative demonstrates the importance of the sorts of resources, starting in the family, that are taken-for-granted by Nathan, in the construction and realisation of possible and ideal future selves. Throughout Leo's narrative there are examples of how easily aspirations can be disrupted by events in a person's educational and subsequent employment career, that turn a possible future self into an impossible dream. Despite Leo's interest in engineering during upper secondary education, he was not advised that he needed a maths qualification and was effectively excluded from following this path. Once at university, he was expected to make his own luck, and while an undergraduate, there appeared to be a vicious rather than virtuous circle of lack of exposure to his proposed future occupation including opportunities for internships, that produced faltering motivation. On graduation, he did not progress smoothly to a graduate career, but spent a year in precarious, low-skilled jobs. However, once he did obtain a graduate job, he then began looking for ways to progress his career, benefiting from the structured pathways of progression within his workplace.

Carly's narrative points to the hidden injuries of race, despite her middle-class background. Her experience suggests that middle-class resources are not an automatic answer to achieving an elite graduate career, highlighting the psycho-social aspects of the development of career identities, and pointing towards the ways in which these have material effects on an individual's progress. Her silence concerning her ethnicity is not surprising, as she attempted to fit into what we have described elsewhere as the 'whiteworld' of university life in Bristol (Bathmaker et al., 2016, chapter 7), and this silence was possibly part of her struggle to fit in with her career-driven peers. Trying to reproduce her brother's successful career path did not enable her to maintain her motivation, and her academic progress faltered significantly. Like Nathan she moved into precarious employment with limited career prospects, which had a detrimental effect not only on the construction of a possible self in the accountancy sector, but also on her mental health. Like Nathan, she also benefitted from more enabling structures

and cultures in her subsequent workplace, which eventually opened up the possibility of constructing a viable future self.

## Concluding comments: Putting 'possible selves' to work

In this chapter we have sought to put the concept of possible selves to work within a framework of analysis that draws on the work of Bourdieu, and takes account of the structuring features of social spaces, that create inequalities in the positions and practices that are possible for different agents within those spaces. What our analysis suggests, is that in Bourdieu's (1997) terms a strong possible career self could be viewed as a form of capital in its own right, which brings advantages in particular social fields, and which is unequally accessible to all. The concept of 'possible selves' on the other hand, has enabled us to articulate the psycho-social and the subjective in processes of mobility. In combining these conceptual resources, we have sought to engage with the important dynamic between structure and agency in the development and progress of graduate careers.

## Acknowledgements

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[1] The Big Four Accountancy Firms are the four largest accounting firms that dominate the industry (PwC, Deloitte, EY and KPMG).

[2] The research study by these authors uses data from from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency *Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education,* for students who graduated in 2006/7.

[3] Socio-economic disadvantage here and in HEFCE (2015) is based on HEFCE's measure of participation in HE in local areas (POLAR3). Quintile 1 is an area of lowest participation, and therefore most disadvantage; quintile 5 is an area of highest participation, and therefore most advantage.

[4] The Russell Group describes itself as a group of 'world-class, research-intensive universities', and consists of 24 UK universities (http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/ Accessed November 2017).

[5] For details of participant recruitment, the status and reputation of both universities, as well as the operalization of social class, see Bathmaker et al. (2016).

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