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Agents of transition? Young workers experiences of using private employment agencies in three Midlands cities

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been given to young workers' uses of private employment agencies as part of their job search and this paper seeks to rectify this omission. It does so by presenting a critique of recent interventions into the sociological debate about young people's agency, especially as this applies to the transition from education to employment. By drawing upon recent realist sociology, the argument is developed that recent debate presents either an over-socialised or individualistic account of young people's agency unable to establish meaningful accounts of young people's decision-making and action. In contrast, the social realist emphasis on the reflective and deliberative human agent is used to construct an alternative understanding of young people's decisions to use employment agencies by emphasising the importance of reflective deliberation, subjective intentionality and opposition. These themes are then explored by drawing on a large qualitative research project funded by [funder name] the Economic and Social Research Council and providing unique and original data of the experiences of 134 young people making transitions into precarious employment in three cities in the Midlands of England.

KEYWORDS

- Agency
- precarious employment
- transition
- work

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This paper examines young people's experiences of private employment agencies¹ in three cities in the Midlands of England. Its context is the growing influence of private employment agencies over the entry to work. Estimates of the number of agency workers are imprecise, not least because many workers remain unaware of their agency status, but the Labour Force Survey shows an upward trend (Forde and Slater 2014) and industry data claimed, for instance, that there were 1.155 million individual UK agency workers 'on any given day' in 2015 (International Federation of Private Employment Agencies (CIETT), 2015, p. 10). This same data confirms the polarisation of agency workers noted elsewhere into 'the routine peripheral workers and outside experts [who] occupy very different positions in the labour market' (Purcell, Purcell, and Tailby 2004, 709). According to CIETT, three quarters of agency assignments are low or medium skilled, primarily in the service (52%) and manufacturing (36%) sectors; 51% last for under 3 months, including one in three that do not extend beyond 1 month; and females are over-represented (55/45%).

Dis-aggregating this data by age is problematic, but the 'intense relationship between young workers and temporary employment' is regularly noted (e.g. Nunez and Livanos 2014, 45). The ILO (2009, 34) calculates 'that the majority of agency workers are below the age of 30' and the Taylor Review of *Modern Working Practices* suggests something similar when it reports that one-third of zero-hour contracts are held by 16–24 year olds (the mean for all workers is 11%) and one in five zero-hours workers are still in full-time education (Taylor 2017). Elsewhere, private employment agencies, those 'giants shaping the global labour process', have been likened to gatekeepers to a 'precariat' dominated by young people and admission to which, 'for the majority, [means] the future promises a stream of temporary jobs with no prospect of developing an occupational career' (Standing 2011, 54).

Private employment agencies are usually conceptualised as one point of a three-way (Cantwell and Power 2016), tripartite (Fu 2013) or triangular (Håkansson, Isidorsson, and Kantelious 2012) relationship between employer, agency and worker. Much is known about the agency-employer apex of this triangle and especially how agencies are significant beneficiaries of employers' search for greater cost control and labour flexibility (Purcell, Purcell, and Tailby 2004; Forde 2001). Attention to the employer-worker apex further reveals how US employers regard agency staff as 'warm bodies' (Parker 1994, 53), while UK claims that they have a 'secondary status' (Grimshaw et al. 2016, 211) is substantiated by evidence of how the search for efficiency and flexibility falls most heavily on those who do the work (Forde 2001). Case study research in high-end hotels (Knox 2010), health and social care (Cantwell and Power 2016) and the public sector (McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2008) underlines that agency workers mainly fulfil short-term and unspecified contracts of unpredictable quality.

The third point of this triangular relationship – the agency-worker apex – has received no attention, however, and this is one focus of this paper. Specifically, given their importance as points of transition into precarious work, a central concern of this paper is why young workers are turning to agencies in greater numbers. A further concern is what they make of this. In suggesting answers, the paper presents new research data, but before this is detailed a further aim is to provide some conceptual clarification. To understand why some young people choose employment agencies as part of their job-search inevitably requires attention to their decision-making and so ultimately to questions of their agency. In the following section we therefore argue that recent debate about young people's agency can learn much from social realists in general, and the arguments of Margaret Archer in particular, and the emphasis they give to the interplay between the subjective causal powers of human agents and the objective properties of their social contexts. The lessons learned will then be used to explore data on young people's uses of private employment agencies in the Midlands of England organised around the themes of reflective deliberation, subjective intentionality and the formation of alternative orientations. The paper then finishes with some concluding comments.

Agents of transition

Avoiding cultural dopes

Social realists offer a compelling account of human agency. Briefly, this asserts that meaningful accounts of choice require a human agent possessing strong independent powers of deliberation and reflection, an agent capable of subjectively weighing up the pros and cons of particular courses of action, as mediated by the objective conditions she confronts, and then coming to a decision. This, in turn, rests on foundational claims about structure and agency as the primary constituents of society, but where each refer to fundamentally different things. For realists, to be human includes the possession of causal powers and properties some of which are subjective, like the capacity to hold (fallible) meanings about the world and through reflection to evaluate the costs of acting on these. The properties and powers of social structures, in contrast, are fundamentally different. Most obviously, social structures cannot entertain meanings nor act on these, but structure and culture do possess powers to enable or constrain particular courses of action. It is the interplay between this subject-object distinction that social realists assert is necessary to account for reflective human action, where 'deliberation consists in people evaluating their situations in the light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances. Any form of conflation precludes the examination of this interplay' (Archer 2007, 34).

The necessity of maintaining this distinction between young agents who possess strong subjective powers and their objective circumstances is well-illustrated by recent debate in youth studies, often conducted in the pages of this journal. In one notable contribution, 'the unproductive dichotomies between 'agency' and 'structure' (Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 465) are repudiated on the grounds of conceptual confusion and the conflation of agency with resistance. Neither objection is insurmountable, but they are nevertheless used to licence Foucault's and Butler's insistence that the individual has her constitution in discourse and power, where neither 'act as a constraint on a pre-existing agentic subject, but rather act as the conditions for the possibility of subjectivity' (469). They are also taken to warrant a deeper embrace of Bourdieu's lessons on socialisation and his unravelling of how *habitus* effects social reproduction through agents' semi-conscious acquisition of embodied dispositions habituated to their particular roles and relationships.

Realist sociology would counter that if subjectivity is only an effect of discourse, it is difficult to see how some things might matter sufficiently to young people to act upon them, as meaningful accounts of human choice and decision-making require. It is certainly reasonable to regard language as possessing performative powers in which discourse extends beyond description to foster particular dispositions. To conclude, for instance, that particular representations of young women encourages 'feminine' behaviour will surprise very few sociologists of youth. Yet, this type of 'soft' constructionism is dissimilar to the 'harder kinds of identity thinking' (Sayer 2000, 45) proposed by Coffey and Farrugia, where discourse is equated with practice and performativity produces exactly what is intended. Thus rather than crediting young women with the subjective powers necessary to challenge regimes of truth around such things as gender or sexuality, the post-structuralist subjectification of the young agent can paradoxically exaggerate their effect. Indeed, to claim that there is no human being behind or prior to her constitution by society, that the subject only 'com[es] into being through an active engagement with systems of power relationships that pre-exist the individual' (Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 469), risks rendering her 'completely inert' (Nussbaum 1999, no page number). This is because without acknowledging that 'human beings have at least some pre-cultural desires' (ibid.), that the self-possesses properties independent of its representation, it is difficult to know what would matter sufficiently to an actor to move her to resist power's disciplinary effects. On the contrary, to avoid the 'demeaning view of [young] people as 'cultural dopes' passively ventriloquizing dominant social values' (Sayer 2011, 27), and to learn more about why young people oppose, resist or strive to be something different a young agent must be more than an effect of pre-existing discourse. At the very least, she must possess both the capacity to recognise that an injustice has been done to her and that she owns the means to do something about it; that is, she must be a human agent 'one of whose properties is to resist those things done to it which are contrary to its nature' (Archer 2007, 32).

A similar objection applies to Bourdieu's *habitus*, when his realist critics note how the mutual constitution of structure and agency in *habitus* also elide the independent properties of consciousness and intentionality required if 'choices' are to be more than a product of socialisation (Archer 2007; Sayer 2005). Thus, to revisit Coffey and Ferrugia's own example, the discomfort felt by working class young people looking to enter elite universities may plausibly explain their eventual decisions to enter less prestigious institutions. Yet, without the capacity to reflect independently on the socialising effect of *habitus* it is difficult to know why entry into elite institutions is subjectively entertained as an objective possibility in the first place; and then why this objective possibility is then subjectively discounted on the grounds that these universities are *not for the likes of us*. More fundamentally, the very ability of working-class students to anticipate that elite universities might not be welcoming must have as its basis an agent with sufficient personal capabilities to allow contemplation of life outside of her *habitus* by considering, if only briefly, the possibility of an alternative future.

The limits of tradition and impulse

The consequences of denigrating young independent people's subjective powers are further apparent in the debate about youth and reflexive modernisation. Again in this journal, Woodman (2010; 2009) can only defend Beck and Beck-Gernsheim against accusations of voluntarism (e.g. Roberts 2010) at the cost of a hollowed out young agent. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim cannot be guilty of promoting 'choice biographies', he asserts, because they were never interested in the reflexive individual in the first place; indeed, one of Beck's 'primary concerns is pointedly to counter readings of his work that suggest he is claiming the emergence of 'reflective projects' at any level of analysis' (Woodman 2009, 251). What can be said is that a pervasive ambiguity created by *second modernity* has settled across a de-structured and individualised world in which security and predictability for the young are notably weaker. As risk proliferates young people make choices on impulse – 'Beck's reflexivity is not about individual agents knowingly changing things and shaping their own destiny through reflection and deliberation; decisions are demanded and often have to be made quickly without guarantees in a world as full as ever of 'structures' (Woodman 2010, 742) – or by drawing on established routines: 'decisions are demanded and often have to be made quickly without guarantees and will be in large part habitual' (Woodman 2009, 251).

Yet, impulse and habit offer meagre pickings when it comes to understanding choices, since neither provide young people the personal wherewithal necessary to make their way. Woodman is correct to comment that 'the relationship and balance between structure and agency is of little interest to Beck' (Woodman 2009, 243), and it is this that explains why Beck's 'active agent is

dispersed into and conflated with his or her risky environment' (Archer 2007, 36). It is this conflation of structure and agency that allows Woodman to flatten the latter into what is ultimately an empty and rhetorical commitment. On the one hand, habit can only ever provide a weak guide to action, especially when young people confront the hitherto unfamiliar, because custom cannot supply the powers of innovation if job-seekers are to make themselves 'employable' or work 'gigs'. Moreover, habit is a weak substitute for conscious deliberation and intentionality, since in their absence it is not clear how a young person might judge if custom provides a good guide to action in the first place. Impulse, on the other hand, seems even more unavailing. Not only does it too prohibit rational deliberation, but it further disavows the personal capacities required to formulate projects or to anticipate the consequences of future actions.

Against voluntarism

The foundational importance social realists give to human reflective decision-making is not to be confused with the voluntarism apparent in the 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2007) thesis, also advanced in these pages. The 'fundamentally psychological orientation' (Bynner 2007, 368) of this position is the foundation of two key claims, the first of which is that young people are actively deferring their commitment to adult responsibilities: 'today emerging adults wish to find a job that is an expression of their identity, not just a way to make money but an activity that is personally fulfilling and enjoyable' (Arnett 2007, 118). A second, related claim, is that these individual decisions *explain* changes at the societal level because existing transitions to adulthood prove 'incompatible with emerging adults' desires to try different possible education and occupational paths until they find one that provides the right identity match' (ibid.).

As social realists point out, however, it is rarely possible to explain decision-making by reference to individual or dispositional factors alone. Whatever the egoistical motivations, choosing to delay family formation or entering full-time employment requires rejecting other *identities* that are in part socially defined by things like workplace hierarchies and caring obligations. Recognition of this alone provides reasonable grounds for maintaining that decision-making is seldom only a matter of temperament and inclination. Moreover, decision-making like this normally requires reference to institutions and processes that are irreducible to individuals, like the influence of algorithms or credentialization over job-search, or the capital markets on which young people ultimately depend for work. 'How individual is the methodological individualists' individual' (Archer 2000, 7) is the question voluntarists like Arnett must answer. Not very much is the compelling reply, when decision-making is inextricably conditioned by norms, power and resources.

Of course, this picture of 'emerging adulthood as a time of self-focused enjoyment as [young people] pursue the pleasures of living in an affluent consumer society' (Arnett 2007, 114) looks even more sallow after the 2008 financial crisis. Nevertheless, the ideal of the sovereign young decision-maker survives, most obviously in neoliberal rationality and its construal of human being as *homo economicus* (Brown 2015). Here, behaviour is determined by the 'preferences' of 'economic man' and many labour economists invoke this to explain the emergence of temporary working (e.g. Cochrane and McKeown 2015; de Jong et al. 2009). In tones similar to Arnett's, it is young worker's desires for 'flexibility and control over how they work' that explains the emergence of institutions like employment agencies able to 'open up work to people with different needs and priorities and at different stages of their life' (Taylor 2017, 46, 28, 7). It is this 'optimistic, preferences-driven approach' that further underpins orthodox explanations of the 'gig economy' that employment agencies facilitate as the instrumental rationality of workers 'seek[ing] for themselves the best possible working conditions and wages even while upgrading their skills or setting up a business for themselves' and in which 'young workers especially are said to want to break free of the confining restraints of traditional jobs' (Friedman 2014, 173). However, this returns us to objections already raised: that human decision-making is rarely explicable by reference to individual or dispositional qualities alone and *homo economicus* is no exception.

Bounded agency is no agency

For this reason it is worth considering the 'acting individual' of Evans' 'bounded agency' (2002, 261–262) and its seemingly discerning young person 'shaped by the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perception of possible futures'. What this 'bounded agency' means in practice remains opaque, but it is presented as a self-consciously 'middle ground theory' (262) that rejects 'dualistic treatments of structure and agency' in favour of their neat sounding 'interfusion' (261). For all its novelty to youth studies, however, the *interfusion* of structure and agency like this is well known to social realists, as is the difficulties it raises (Archer 2000; Sayer 2000). It involves dealing with the role of external constraints in explaining human behaviour by building them into the constitution of individuals. In effect, the human agent is consumed by her circumstances and the influence of external constraints are reduced to personal qualities, so that, for instance, the normative obligations that go with family formation can be treated as personal attitudes to caring or the lack of decent jobs a measure of an individual's determination to find work. In Evans' case, the incorporation of social and cultural forces into individual qualities is expressed as personal 'control beliefs' (2002, 248) that define the subjective limits to young people's decision-making and which, ultimately, explain how the sum of these individual 'choices' reproduce unequal transitions into adult life.

The problem is, however, that by mixing structure and agency in this way the independent subjective powers necessary if young

people are to be regarded as agents in any meaningful sense are once again denied and 'bounded agency' quickly descends into no agency. As we shall see, the resulting passivity of Evans' young bounded agent is especially apparent in three key respects and in briefly outlining each our intention is not simply to offer critique. Rather, in emphasising young people's reflective relationships with their circumstances, their subjective intentionality and capacity to recognise harm and injustice, our aim is to sketch out how the realist human agent in possession of these strong independent subjective powers provides a perspicacious approach to understanding young job-seeker's orientations to and uses of private employment agencies.

First, in reducing constraints to personal possessions the determining influence of external circumstances on decision-making is taken over by a young person's recognition of what is (un)realistic and so they effectively control themselves. It is acceptance of this that accounts for Evans' lack of interest in how the attitudes and control beliefs she measures come into being, since to do so would mean having to recognise that young people's descriptions and understandings of the labour market – and the place of employment agencies within them – are rarely predefined, but emerge in the course of conscious, ongoing deliberation on circumstances not of their choosing. Of obvious influence here is the socially differentiated access to resources because, to anticipate our argument, it is from reflections on limited employment opportunities, unequal guidance and skewed information that young people's orientations to employment agencies emerge.

Thus missing from the bounded agent is a causal role for young people's intentionality and purpose, and this leads to a second type of passivity. Put simply, if individual reflection and deliberation is taken over by force of circumstances, then decision-making as a meaningful human activity is precluded. Indeed, Evans' proposition establishes young job-seekers as *de facto* throughputs, the passive bearers of their circumstances expressed in the form of personal beliefs that constrain what they subjectively perceive to be possible. Not only does this deprive young people of the initiative and determination that all job-seekers must necessarily possess to find work, but it also erases the struggle and effort this invariably involves. As we shall argue, young people can seldom afford to be passive in their dealings with employment agencies because the obstacles that agencies place in front of their aspirations for work require serious intentional activity if they are to be surmounted.

Finally, it is thus a small, if unintended, step from Evans' passive job-seeker to something like the neo-liberal aphorism that there really is no alternative to market forces. This is because without the possession of strong powers of reflection and deliberation it is difficult to know how a young job-seeker could object to or disapprove of what they encounter, let alone muster any resistance. To proceed on the basis that agency is bounded by circumstances, that individual subjectivity is consumed by contextual pressures, is therefore also to deny young job-seekers the subjective qualities required to form alternative understandings, since 'we do not confront constraints ... rather they confront us and thus we involuntarily "prefer" to reproduce them' (Archer 2000, 73, 74). To follow realists in emphasising young people's independent powers of reflection and deliberation is thus also to take seriously their capacity to recognise injustice, discrimination and hurt. It is to locate firmly in the causal powers of the young agent the ability to be awkward, indignant, oppositional or out-and-out obstructive so often noted in studies of transitions into work (Furlong et al. 2017).

Researching precarious pathways into work

In what follows these three themes are used to organise data on young people's uses of private employment agencies. Funded by [funder-name] the Economic and Social Research Council,² this data comes from a 3-year project investigating young people's pathways into precarious employment in three major cities in the Midlands of England – Birmingham, Coventry and Leicester – and which comprised four sub-projects examining precarious employment from the perspectives of university graduates, employers, and through a comparative study of youth employment policy. This paper draws exclusively on data from a fourth sub-project investigating the experiences of young people aged 16–26 who indicated that they had no intention of entering higher education when first recruited to the research.

For this sub-project, data was collected from a mixed gender and ethnically diverse sample of 134 unique individuals who participated in a series of fieldwork activities organised between 2015 and 2017. In the first fieldwork phase, 10 group discussions of between 5 and 10 participants were held across Birmingham (3), Coventry (4) and Leicester (3) involving a total of 84 young people and lasting between 1 and 2.5 hours. Their primary purpose was diagnostic, understood as mapping local conditions and providing a guide for subsequent investigation (Duneier 1999). These group discussions were then followed in phases 2 and 3 by semi-structured (mainly) individual interviews, lasting between 45 min and 2 h. Phase 2 aimed to complete interviews with 50 young people to explore their transitions into precarious work in greater detail, with phase 3 providing follow-up interviews between 6 and 12 months later (and thus producing a total of 100 interviews). It was anticipated that completing all phase 3 re-interviews was an ambitious objective given the likely instability of some participant's lives, and this proved so. Nevertheless, 27 phase 3 re-interviews were completed from the initial sample of 50 and to make good the shortfall against the overall target, a further 27 phase 2 interviews were completed, making a total of 104 individual interviews.

Demographic details of participants are presented in Table 1 and these help convey something of their diversity. Our three research cities are valuable sites for researching young people's transitions into precarious work since each city is 'youthful' when

compared to the United Kingdom as a whole, and this is partly explained by their relatively large ethnic minority populations (Leicester City Council 2017). Thus while we do not explore in this paper the influence of ethnicity on these young people's search for work, the data does capture important elements of the shared experiences of an especially diverse groups of young people as they seek entry into the lower echelons of their respective labour markets.

Table 1. Participant details ($n = 134$).

Gender		
	Male	71
	Female	63
Age		
	16–18	66
	19–21	45
	22–26	23
Race/ethnicity		
	Asian	33
	Black	11
	Black Afro Caribbean	12
	White	74
	Other/unknown	4
Location		
	Birmingham	41
	Coventry	48
	Leicester	45

Participants were recruited because they had already experienced precarious employment or were likely to do so in the near future. Precarious employment is a contested term (Bessant 2018), but here it identifies young people who, when we first met them, were enrolled on public and private sector education courses and training programmes leading to low level vocational qualifications, or third sector employability programmes offering literacy, numeracy and life skills. Also recruited were young people on apprenticeship programmes in small and large public and private sector organisations that did not guarantee a job on completion; and these same employer organisations provided introductions to their young workers employed on fixed-term or temporary contracts, as well as those working part-time. Also included are young people with a history of intermittent and unstable employment, and/or long spells of unemployment who were recruited through third sector organisations, the Employment Service and local authorities.

Choices shaped: 'and Click, That's All I Do'

To understand our participant's decisions to use private employment agencies, their influence over job-search needs to be recognised from the beginning. Capturing the thoughts of many, Bless³ (female) – at 18 already an experienced user of agencies – told us, 'I think there's loads [of agencies] actually ... when I was online [searching for work] there was loads on there'. As she explained, 'my mum started [working] through an agency, a few of my friends, other friends have started off with agencies as well, so I think there's loads of them out there, but I think ... they're more online nowadays'. With tongue only slightly in cheek, Ella (female, 18), too, volunteered that, 'I could say I've used them all, I've got an account with them all'; and Aqeel (male, 18) reflected that, 'I'm starting to think that [an agency] is the only way in which to get employment ... now I'm thinking that's the only

way to get employment for now'.

Prevalence should not be confused with preference, however, and as our discussion proceeds our participant's ambivalence towards agencies will become clear. Nevertheless, briefly noting this antipathy at the outset underlines how these young people's beliefs are neither fixed or predetermined, but emerge out of sometimes long-standing and careful deliberations on their circumstances. Especially salient is the repeated failure to find work by other means, 'doing it on their own' as Libby (female, 21) phrased it, by making direct applications to employers, trudging around high streets and city centres distributing CVs, tapping up friends and relatives for contacts, or simply asking on the off-chance. The outcome of this is more often than not rejection and disappointment born out of a repeated experience of trying and failing. In Libby's case the search for work had produced no more than 'a few weeks of seasonal employment since leaving school' some 4 years earlier, a progressively frustrating experience that she self-consciously associated with her change of mind about using agencies. A similar connection was made by Rose (female, 23) when she also explained defiantly that, 'I've never been to an agency ... [because] my mum worked for one and they, like, laid her off after three weeks of her, like, working there'. Yet, she too later recalled how her frustration with sporadic employment punctuated only by spells on government schemes had tempered her enmity, but how it was the formal direction from her Employment Adviser to register with agencies or risk losing her unemployment benefits that had been the deciding factor: 'you're like a target for them to get you off their list ... they'll send you to like [agency name] ... there's about 10 or 11 agencies [on road name] and they [Employment Service] say, "hand your CVs in and if you get a call back then fair enough"'.

If lack of viable employment alternatives proves influential in their deliberations over how best to get into work, then so do family and friends. Here, an initial reluctance to approach agencies might undergo revision following positive testimonies from trusted friends or the insistence of increasingly anxious parents. Jim (male, 20) was one to recall modifying his views about agencies following advice from a concerned friend: 'he told me they were OK ... he gave me a number of [agency name] ... I called it ... it's quite easy, you find out if you get the job sort of straight away'. That many of these friends and family had themselves used agencies added further weight and reassurance, and thus further underlines how deliberations take place in situations where access to information and resources is already skewed. As Aafa (female, 18) recalled, 'she was really worried about me ... it was my mum [who] got me to join her agency ... she was with an agency [at that time]'. Extended family members might exert a similar influence, like when Aqeel (male, 18) recalled the persuasive intervention of his mother's brother following a prolonged spell without work: 'I didn't want to ... [but] he said to me, why don't you join an agency? ... he was with the same agency ... that I then joined'.

Lack of job opportunities, pressure from the benefit authorities, spells on government schemes and the guidance of family and friends are familiar factors conditioning young people's job-search decisions (Furlong et al. 2017; Shildrick et al. 2012) and their influence on deliberations about employment agencies are similarly telling. Less familiar but increasingly important, however, are the pressures on decision-making established by agencies themselves, especially through their on-line presence (Scholz 2017; Wood et al. 2018). For our participants at least, thoughts about job search were heavily influenced by the internet in ways similar to that described by Sophie (female, 18): 'I've got an iPad, so I get my iPad, [and] type in[to] Google: "jobs in Coventry"'. To seek work in this way seemingly extends choices, as search engines return literally millions of pages of results. Yet, the dominance of private employment agencies at the top of the search results underlines how the terms upon which young people contemplate their entry to work is already established, this time in ways that are algorithmically determined. Agencies' influence over job-search deliberation is further strengthened by their on-line platforms, where clicking through the search results leads to eye-catching websites that, after easy registration, lead job-hunters to results that are, once again, algorithmically organised. Once registered, thoughts about work agencies are further coaxed by 'constant emails' (Mark, male, 19), SMS alerts and (less frequently) telephone calls suggesting possible vacancies, the seeming ease and simplicity of which is further alluring: 'you don't really have to go on and type in the website every time [you login], the applications [i.e. vacancies] are just available there, click on it and you can just apply there, so that's easy as well' (Parveen, female, 21). 'And click, that's all I do', was Danielle's (female, 21) pithy summary, a theme she returned to later: 'It's quick, it's easy and it's just like you can just click on something ... you can apply for like 10 jobs in the time it would take you to hand-write one application form'.

Struggling into work

Emphasising how participants are necessarily engaged in a deliberative relationship with their circumstances is therefore needed to comprehend decision-making around employment agencies and, in doing so, it further makes clear the conscious activity that this involves. Indeed, decision-making means effort and struggle on the part of job-seekers, even in those relatively rare instances when employment agencies might expedite the rapid entry into work. Thus, those like James (males 21) might enthusiastically tell of how 'a quick interview' with an agency 'had led [equally] quickly to a job', but he was equally alive to the 'flurry of activity ... I was going crazy [putting in the effort]' that this required. More specifically, Gray (2002) has established how agencies can moderate the obstacle of an employer interview for those like the long-term unemployed who carry a stigma with them into the labour market, but what she neglects is the purposeful endeavour required of job seekers. Aidan (male 18) was one to note that: 'there wasn't an interview. I just had to go there and they just took my passport, everything, and they just go, "you're gonna' start

working in about two weeks” (Aidan, male, 18); but he was also clear that, ‘there’s nothing promised, nothing’s promised ... you’re always after jobs ... and like always applying on the websites online’. There was very little that was passive about Bless’ (female, 18) regular work for an agency supplying the hospitality sector, which she had doggedly pursued to overcome the bias she felt employers held against the ‘young and inexperienced’ and to ‘updat[e] my CV ... that’s all I can do, I just try my hardest’.

To make decisions like these therefore requires a subjective intentionality and self-conscious purpose not easily reconciled with the over-socialised bounded agent. On the contrary, our participants could rarely afford the luxury of being passive because using an agency, more often than not, meant negotiating obstacles and barriers to some of their most basic aspirations for work. For instance, employment agencies seldom provided a predictable or certain source of employment, as when Charlie (male, 21) explained, ‘the only problem with agency work is they [i.e. employment agencies] tend to mess you about. One-minute work can be there, then work can maybe disappear’. For Diane (female, 21), too, ‘it’s the same thing, like one day you have a job and then the next day they’ve not got anything for you’. Agencies were similarly unable to accommodate basic aspirations to work in particular occupations and sectors or, as importantly, avoid particular types of work. As Damon (male, 19) put it: ‘you’re getting all these other ones [i.e. job alerts] flooding in and you don’t wanna waste your time on them, because they’re either, ‘ah, can you do delivery driving?’ ... and it’s like, I haven’t got a [driving] licence ... well, that was a fucking waste of time’. Damon’s irascibility found a parallel in the mocking tones of others.

Melissa ... you get emails like this job’s available near you, blah, blah ... this job suits your description and you are probably doing something [i.e. studying] for health and social care, and it turns out to be photocopying or something [Laughter]. (female, 17)

Ella They send me chef ones and I was like, I can’t even cook scrambled eggs! [Laughter]. (female, 18)

To choose an agency therefore requires active struggle against obstacles long familiar to young job-seekers [Furlong et al. 2017; Author A Mizen 2004] and this includes problems associated with their chronological age. Katherine’s (female, 18) experience had made clear to her that, ‘agencies do not help you if you’re under 18. When you’re above 18, it’s when you go into the agencies’. Aafa (female 18), too, had been told she was ‘too young ... to get anything’ when she tried to register with an agency before her 18th birthday, while Sahib’s (male, 18) offer of employment was quickly withdrawn after he confirmed his date of birth: ‘I presented my CV, presented my passport, and then when I showed them my passport they realised “oh, you’re 17, you can’t do this job” ... so then I was like, you know, left with no choice but to leave’.

Participants also had to reckon with the limits imposed on their capacity to combine work with further education or training. Many recounted how they had responded positively to demands to make themselves ‘employable’ (something else that required effort and intent), but only to find agencies unreceptive to their desire to earn and learn. This became clear to Aafa (female, 18) almost immediately after her online registration with a large national recruitment agency when the vacancies she was directed to conflicted with her college commitments: ‘the jobs that came up ... were either too far [away] or I needed to be available for more hours of the day’. Even where agencies proved more accommodating this was rarely sustained. Having combined agency work with further studies after leaving school, Bless (female, 18) later described receiving frequent requests to work at ‘short notice ... [the agency asks] “can you work today, or later today?”’. Bless conceded that she ‘fe[el]t a bit bad sometimes’ when prioritising her studies and was certain there had been negative consequences for her: ‘I feel like they don’t ask me as much now. I don’t know what the reason is, but maybe because it’s ... I tell them I have ... college now, full-time’.

Experiencing injustice: disposable commodities

Recognising the existence of constraints like these certainly provides a rebuke to accounts that reduce young people’s agency to an effect of social forces, since they also make clear the intent and purpose that the decision to use employment agencies requires. In fact, there is little evidence that these young job seekers are ‘controlled’ by dispositional qualities and beliefs conducive to their routine or involuntary acceptance of employment agencies as key brokers of the entry into work. On the contrary, we noted from the outset widespread suspicion and hostility towards employment agencies and it is this contrariness, this refusal to reconcile themselves to employment agencies, that especially underscores the need to keep the young agent differentiated from her social context. This is because resistance or dissent, however fleeting, has to come from someone who possesses the subjective powers to recognise injustice and discrimination, who can hold an awareness that things might somehow be different, and who owns the personal powers to resist and oppose.

Capacities like these are writ large across our participant’s understandings of employment agencies, as the previous discussion so clearly suggests. They are most clearly visible, however, in the widely held conviction that agencies are exploitative and that they engage in cynical and disingenuous operations, like underhand advertising and misleading recruitment practices. Diane (female, 21), for one, was convinced that agencies ‘falsified’ their vacancies after learning from a friend ‘who used to work in an agency’ that their prominently placed advertisements ‘are not actually jobs, [they are used] to encourage the right people to come in so

they can say, "well, actually, we've not got a lorry driver job, but we've got this" ... it's false advertising'. Others detected similar sharp practices like the overlap, duplication and recycling of vacancies to inflate the quality and quantity of placements on offer. This was Melissa's (female, 17) conclusion from using several agencies to widen her job-search: 'I get like five emails [from different agencies] about the same job'. Chloe (female, 17), too, was convinced that, 'most of them have the same jobs on there, that's what I've noticed. Like the same job will come up five or six [times]'; and in Danielle's (female, 21) experience, 'half the time you're applying for the same job 10 times over. So, you might think like, ah, yeah, I've applied for 10 jobs [but] you've probably applied for one, maybe two, jobs'.

Others spoke of having been recruited on false premises. In one example, Damon (male, 19) told how he had reluctantly accepted a zero-hour contract as a 'driver's mate' as a 'temp-to-perm' position, but how it was then terminated after 3 months of sporadic employment. Katherine (female, 18), too, recalled how her partner had been promised that his placement with a large automotive parts manufacturer would become permanent, only to hear after the Christmas shutdown that his job no longer existed:

So, that's why I think they promise all this stuff and it's actually nothing they've explained to you, 'cause once you've been promised all this, you're thinking yes, this is gonna be a great job. You go for it and obviously they've [i.e. the agency] already had the commission...

Katherine's reference to finance touches upon another common belief that agencies prioritise profits above the needs of their worker-clients: 'the agency's employing you ... not as an employee, they're employing you as an investment', is how Duhat (19, male) put this. His reasoning was both strong and sophisticated, and it followed from his placement with a large logistics company, doing the same work as their permanent workers paid £10.69 an hour, but 'because we were agency workers we used to [be paid] £6.31'.⁴ It was not just the lower pay that vexed Duhat, but the nakedly exploitative relationship he had to endure, where 'the agency that would eat that couple of pound ... you're making them like £4 every hour'. This conviction that agencies treated them as a commodity was developed by Aidan (male, 18) when he remarked, 'that's how the [agency] business is run because they're making money off you, they're looking at you as, like, an investment ... they're looking at other people [workers] to rob'. Jim (male, 20) was equally emphatic when telling us, 'that [agencies are] more bothered about the money and paying the employee less ... it's like slavery really, ain't it?'. 'Do you know an agency is just a business?', was Iqbal's (male, 21) contention. ' ... [I]t's nothing to do with us ... it's just to make money, nothing to do with sorting people out or helping them, they just get massive contracts and they send you out'.

Indeed, these young people's repertoire of capacity for dissonance and dissent was considerable and it extended to the active conviction that agencies saw them as disposable assets, rather than as workers looking for decent work. In addition to the top-slicing of hourly pay, it was also explained how agencies artificially terminate contracts to bolster their profits and circumvent worker's rights. In one case, Habbab (male, 20) explained how it was his entitlement to a higher rate of pay after 12 weeks continuous employment that explained the decline in offers of work from his agency: 'As soon as our wage is gonna go from £6.31 to like nine, ten pound, they stop phoning us, 'cause they wasn't making no money off us ... then they just find another couple of Tom, Dick and Harrys, yeah, who are hungry for a job'. No participants made the connection between this and the additional rights guaranteed to agency workers under the European Temporary Workers Directive, yet the significance of the 12-week period was clearly appreciated together with the belief that agencies cynically exploited it. This explained for Amir (male, 21) 'why normally they get rid of agency staff ... it makes it cheaper and then they can get someone else for 3 months'. For Diane (female, 21), too, this is why agencies do not offer 'a secure contract, so you can do 3 month's work and then they'll get rid of you and then pay the same [lower] price for somebody else for 3 months'. In Duhat's (19, male) words:

just say that you're about a week away from that 3 months, the agency'll stop phoning you, 'cause what are you making them really, you're not making them nothing, 'cause before that 3 months you're making them like £4 for every hour. Now you're not making them nothing, and they'll not phone you ever again.

Conclusion

When thinking about why young workers use private employment agencies, our argument is that the sociology of youth can learn much from realist sociology. Specifically, by drawing upon realist sociology we have started to map out an approach to young people's agency that avoids many of the recent pitfalls that continue to hinder clearer understandings of how young people actively make their transitions to adulthood. Among its defining characteristics is the foundational significance that realism gives to young people's autonomous causal powers as human beings, like their strong powers of deliberation, intentionality and resistance discussed in some depth in this paper. Perhaps for some, this reassertion of human being is uncontentious, but it is our contention that young people's humanity has been erroneously erased from recent debate, on account of the misplaced conviction that the human self is simply an effect of discourse; or that identities and beliefs are bestowed by structure and culture.

For realists this can never be the case, because without a human agent whose being and nature resists dissolution into discourse and whose constitution is always more than the sum of society's parts, debate about young people's agency will remain stuck in the ruts of over-socialisation and 'cultural doper' that invariably follow the failure to identify those personal human qualities that provide good reason to assume these identities and performances in the first place.

To stress young people's autonomous powers is thus also to make clear how they are genuinely and necessarily active in making their way through precarious worlds. There is no choice but to make choices for the young job-seekers who participated in our study. As we have argued, the realist agent is not a young person to whom things simply happen, one whose understandings, choices and decisions about matters like entry into work are predefined or delineated by their social positions and circumstances. Rather, the reflective young agent of realist sociology is someone with strong powers to make meanings from their encounters and through conscious deliberation arrive at decisions about how best to proceed. It is by attending to these powers that we can discern more clearly the specific considerations and dilemmas involved in this decision-making and learn more about how this is subject to reflective re-assessment over time. Moreover, in taking young people's personal powers more seriously, we have argued that it is possible to make clearer some measure of the conscious intent and purpose necessitated when job-seeking through employment agencies; and, importantly, how this requires real struggle to overcome the obstacles consistently encountered. It is also to offer clearer definition and precision to some of the alternative orientations arising out of these struggles and confrontations, since to hold out resistance requires a young agent with the subjective ability to recognise that they have been subject to hurt and injustice.

Notes

1. A private employment agency includes here any individual or organisation independent of public authorities which provides services for matching offers of and applications for employment, employing workers with a view to making them available to a third party, or other services related to jobseeking, such as the provision of information (ILO 2009). ✕
2. *Precarious Pathways to Employment for Young People*, funded by ESRC (ES/M500604/1). The authors would like to thank the ESRC, young participants and others who helped facilitate this project, and the two anonymous referees for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. ✕
3. All names are pseudonyms. Age is when we first met. ✕
4. £6.31 most likely refers to the national minimum wage at that time for those over 21. ✕

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