Chapter 2
Taking Control?: Early Adult Life in Contrasting Social Landscapes

2.1 Introduction

As the exercise of control and the ability to influence life chances increase from the late teenage years to the mid-20s, much can be learnt from the experiences and perceptions of young adults about the processes involved. According to evolutionary psychologists, humans are 'hard-wired' for progress by the maturational tendencies of the young to reject the status quo and strive for change (OECD 2007). Many developmental psychologists have explored these processes, but few have explored them internationally with differences in the social positioning of young people in view. The focus on adolescence in much youth research has also missed the most informative time – when young people achieve adult status and come up against the realities of the labour market. The years between the late teens and mid-20s can be regarded as a pivotal period in the life course, during which young people exercise their personal capacities for change. They often do this through resistance, pushing the boundaries and taking risks, shaping social and cultural practices as they engage in them, individually and collectively. These social and cultural practices are highly differentiated by social group and position in the social landscape.

In all European countries, young adults are experiencing uncertain status and are dependent on state and parental support for longer periods than would have been the case a generation ago. Faced with changing opportunity structures, people have to find their own ways of reconciling personal aspirations with available opportunities and their own values in the domains of education, consumption, politics, work and family life. Achievement and recognition of adult status comes at different times to different spheres of life.

Social changes in the inter-related domains of work, education, family and community all affect transition behaviours, which themselves reflect personal identities and aspirations as well as the opportunity structures with which young adults are faced. The social dynamics against which policies and programmes are assessed have to include growing individualisation of the life course (Evans et al. 2000b; Dwyer and Wyn 2002).

Families can impede or support the transitions of early adulthood. For many young adults, the experience of physical separation from the family for extended

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periods may result in improved understanding and appreciation and is part of the process of negotiating independence, as Evans (2001d) have shown. For others, escape from the parental home is seen as the only way to achieve a sense of self and to exercise choices, however restricted these may in reality be. For some young adults thrown back into involuntary dependence on family through welfare policies, prospects for achievement of independence and citizenship may be impaired. It can be argued further that it should be a basic social right not to 'have to rely' on their family because alternatives do not exist (Finch 1996).

In the context of social changes and individualised transitions, the parental role becomes even more one of support rather than guidance. Few parents have experience of the options facing their children because of the pace of change in all aspects of work and education. Policies in many parts of Europe have progressively increased financial dependence of young people on their parents as access to unemployment benefit has been removed and training rates have assumed parental support. The interconnections between the three main transitions (or 'careers') of the youth phase become significant here, as Coles (1995) has argued:

– education, training and labour market careers (from schooling to post-school education and training and jobs);
– domestic careers (from families of origin to families of destination); and
– housing careers (from living dependent on families to living independently of them).

Young people's sense of control is crucial to the way in which they negotiate their environments in work, education and their personal lives. This chapter explores to what extent 18–25-year-olds feel in control of their lives in higher education, unemployment and work settings. The processes by which young adults become independent, effective and engaged in the social world or become marginalised and excluded from it are central concerns in all societies. This chapter provides both local and international perspectives by focusing in more detail on young people in the three city regions introduced in Chapter 1. These are regions experiencing economic transformations in England and Germany, which also encapsulate features of the wider socio-economic dynamics of their national context and socio-political histories: Derby, Hanover and Leipzig. Empirical encounters which explored the experiences of young adults in these contrasting socio-economic environments also laid the foundations for rethinking how feelings of control and agency play out in different phases of the life course, providing ideas and perspectives that can be elaborated or challenged in the light of new evidence gathered from encounters with mature adults in other contexts.[i]

The perspectives of these young people on their lives and those of their generation showed that

- Young adults experience a clear sense of control, allowing them to exercise their personal 'agency'. However, their proactivity and independent behaviour are restricted by social and institutional factors. Their agency is 'bounded'.
- Almost all recognised the overwhelming importance of qualifications in influencing their chances in life.

- Longer amounts of time spent in education and training do not lead to increased feelings of dependency on the family.
- German respondents were more aware of the effects of gender, ethnicity and social class than those in England.
- Young women felt more of a need to prove themselves, were more politically active and expressed a heightened sense of agency.
- Unemployed people mainly attributed their failure to a lack of opportunities, qualifications or experience.
- In the highly structured German system, people could hold external factors responsible for failure, allowing them to develop a positive sense of self and a belief in collective action. In contrast, the English system – which claims that opportunities are open to all – makes it more likely that individuals will blame themselves for failure and see themselves alone as having to provide solutions to difficulty and failure.
- Young people in employment were generally optimistic, attributing their circumstances to their own plans and interests. German respondents expressed strong feelings about stability and predictability, while their English counterparts relied more on chance in the search for work.
- Most research participants attached considerable importance to the following factors in forging an independent pathway in adult life: individual effort, working hard and gaining qualifications. Social connections, image and self-presentation were also recognised as influential factors in affecting one's opportunities in life.

2.2 The Wider Significance of Comparisons Between England and Germany

2.2.1 Rapid Changes in England and Germany

Both England and Germany are experiencing rapid social and economic changes that are making the transitions of early adult life more uncertain. Changes in technology and work organisation are creating new and higher requirements for skills and knowledge. At the same time, entry-level jobs are increasingly hard to obtain. Competitive pressures on companies and individuals are increasing as barriers to trade are reduced, public sector activities privatised, restrictions on international capital flows removed and economic activities increasingly globalised.

In 1999, politicians faced high levels of youth unemployment:

- Every fifth young adult under 20 in the European Union was unemployed.
- Youth unemployment in Germany stood at 11%, slightly higher than the general unemployment rate. The rate in the eastern states was double that in the western states.
- In the UK, youth unemployment was 14%, double the general unemployment rate.

European policy makers were faced with accelerating social inequalities and the risk of widespread social exclusion in this age group. In response, a number of programmes were launched to create better education and training opportunities for young adults, both at the national and the European level. At the same time, policy makers promoted the exchange of experience in different countries in order to learn from others' ideas and models. A recent example of this approach is the modelling of the German JUMP programme (Youth with Perspective) on the British New Deal system.

JUMP and New Deal have had similar approaches and the same aims: to widen opportunities for young adults in the training and labour market. However, they originate from different socio-economic settings, which represent the main alternatives in the European Union with regard to training and education.

2.2.2 Regulated Germany, Diverse Britain

Germany has a highly regulated transition process for young adults based on occupational structures and the apprenticeship system, while Britain has a diverse and unregulated approach to young adult transitions into the labour market. In addition, England has market-based policies, while Germany has a highly institutionalised system, challenged by the effects of reunification of East and West.

Both England and Germany had centre-left governments with the declared aim of reducing social inequalities, at the time of the research. These policies aimed to achieve this through new opportunities for individuals to work and learn rather than through traditional policies and mechanisms. This has involved moves towards the reform of welfare and social insurance systems combined with a sustained increase in employment. Both governments called for substantial contributions from their education and training systems. England is expanding further and higher education and has introduced the 'New Deal' for unemployed people, while Germany has revived the alliance of federal government, industrial associations and trade unions.

At the same time, governments in England and Germany ask for more individual engagement and call upon people, young adults in particular, to 'take control of their lives'.

In England, in 1997, the newly elected 'New Labour' government reasserted this commitment, referring to the creation of new agencies as the next step in the transformation of what was essentially a passive benefit system into an active welfare state, to create a society of opportunity, fairness and mutual responsibility.

> We want to give people the chance to fulfil their potential. We want to raise people's expectations and their self-belief, by giving them the tools to help themselves.
>
> (Blair 2002).

In addition, 'better and more responsive' services would be tailored to individual needs and asking the question 'What can we do to help you become more independent?' (DWP 2001).

Engagement lies at the heart of newly introduced programmes in England, especially Connexions, which emphasised re-connection for young people into social life and their active participation in shaping the services provided for them (DfES 2001b). Alternatively, the German government continued to use special measures to support and reinforce the traditional pathways into the labour market, while emphasising young people's own responsibility to take advantage of opportunities.

How do 'agency' and 'structure' affect the views and experiences of transitions into work of 18–25-year-olds in England and Germany?

- **Agency** refers to the young person's sense of control over his or her life. Agency can move people out of predicted pathways. It operates within socially constructed limits and possibilities and also through chance.
- **Structure** refers to the young person's awareness of input from national and local institutions, the effects of labour markets and broad social influences such as gender and social class.

These factors are central to many of the debates about the effectiveness of education and the kinds of resources and support needed in early adult life, in Europe and internationally. They link with questions about the extent to which young people have control over their own career destinies. In general terms, a confident, optimistic young person is more likely to feel in control of his or her transition through education and training and into work than a less-confident, pessimistic young person. Particular systems may foster or discourage a sense of personal control. Differences in perceptions of control among three groups of young people in England and Germany - those who are employed, unemployed and in higher education - can be expected, but what lies beneath these differences?

The research asked:

- How do young adults experience control, and how do they exercise personal agency in their personal lives?
- What subjective views do they associate with choice and determination under different social and cultural conditions?
- What are young adults' beliefs about their future possibilities?
- How far do they feel in control of their lives?
- What is the interplay between these subjective views and age, gender and social class?

This involved rethinking the concept of agency as a process of social engagement, shaped by past habits but also projected into the future in the form of young people's aspirations and their perception of future possibilities. These perceptions and beliefs about future possibilities shape

- how they respond to day-to-day situations;
- how they recognise and make choices; and
- how they respond to chances which arise unexpectedly.

2.3 Transitions Involve Negotiating Different Structures

Previous studies have looked at the ways individuals negotiate and experience structures and opportunities in the early years of adult life. One such study in England was the ESRC 16–19 Initiative, a report of which was published as *Careers and Identities* (Banks et al. 1992). It was a multi-disciplinary study of young people, which mapped the economic and political socialisation of young adults. Further examples are the Anglo-German Studies, as reported by Bynner and Roberts (1991) in *Youth and Work: Transition to Employment in England and Germany*, and Evans and Heinz's (1994) *Becoming Adults in England and Germany*, which compared career trajectories and institutional structures for transitions in these two countries.

Both the UK and German systems were found to have strengths and weaknesses. In general, transitions to work in England tended to be 'accelerated', whereas in Germany they were more 'extended'. These studies used an innovative methodology of cross-national matched sampling (Evans and Heinz 1993). They provided much useful statistical evidence and contributed to the development of the notion of a *career trajectory*. These trajectories describe broadly similar routes to employment which have their origins in structural factors such as education, family background and focused attention on 'the predictability of ultimate destinations in the labour market' (Bynner and Roberts 1991, p. xvi).

These studies emphasised the importance of structural factors in young people's lives, including social class, gender and ethnicity, and the influence of economic features such as labour markets and unemployment rates. A number of metaphors have been used to describe these socially structured transitions, including niches, pathways, trajectories and navigations, all of which draw attention in different ways to the operation of factors which lie largely beyond an individual's control (Evans and Furlong 1997). The concept of *individualisation*, which suggests that progress through education and into working (or non-working) life, is based on complex interactions of individual agency and structural influences.

The German sociologists who first developed the idea that people of all ages in contemporary society are increasingly going through a process of 'individualisation' linked this to the dissolution of factors traditionally seen as determining many aspects of life in industrialised societies – class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles.

Baethge (1989) took these ideas further by applying them to young people in industrialised societies. He referred to 'the disappearance of class-specific socialisation structures' and to a new trend of 'double individualisation' (Baethge 1989, pp. 28–31), which involved

- the disintegration of broad social classes into individualised sub-groups and
- the formation of individualistic identities at the expense of collective identity.

More recently, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argued that these accounts of individualisation are misleading. They claim that the social world has only come to be *regarded* as unpredictable and filled with risks that can only be negotiated on an individual level, while in fact, structural forces operate as powerfully as ever and the

chains of human interdependence remain intact. An aim was to show how these theoretical notions come to life in the discourse of the young people who participated in the research.

To explore the extent to which these seemingly opposed theoretical accounts of recent social trends adequately reflect young people's perceptions and experiences in everyday life, the three economically and geographically distinct areas – Derby in England, Leipzig in Eastern Germany and Hanover in Western Germany – afforded multiple possibilities for comparisons and contrasts. All are currently undergoing profound economic transformations and restructuring of traditional industries. However, the eastern and western parts of Germany share a common culture, but had totally different socio-economic systems under communism. West Germany and Britain had different versions of the same socio-economic system, but different cultural histories. Britain and East Germany have experienced, from different starting points, strong effects of market forces and deregulation of previous systems. Yet government policy in both countries has been focused on 'people taking control of their lives'.

2.4 The Significance of Subjective Viewpoints

The issue of the degrees of control people exercise over their lives and career destinies is central to much of the literature on transitions into the labour market and on employment in adult life. Much hinges on the significance of individual choice in the transition to work, along with the importance and relative influence of national and regional contexts such as the local labour market and structural factors such as gender, ethnicity and class. However, there is often a tension between an individual person's response to such questions and the evidence provided from broader social and economic trends and patterns. For instance, a young person will typically be optimistic and, when asked, will respond that he or she is in control of his or her life course and that occupational success is largely based on individual effort. In contrast, there may be a considerable amount of data and theory which suggest that many young people have only limited chances of conventional success in the labour market due to the operation of broad, socio-economic influences. The same applies to adults, as Billett (2006) has shown in his accounts of adult workers, and as shown in later chapters of this book.

This is a classic problem not only for social and educational researchers, but also for everyone working to support young people and adults in work and social settings. Policy makers tend to use large-scale surveys as evidence on which to base their policies. Only recently, in the work of the Social Exclusion Unit for example, have they begun to listen to people's views as well. It has now become clear that there are often major differences between individual/subjective viewpoints and the findings of larger-scale social and structural patterns and trends data.

It is one thing for academics to write about relatively abstract concepts of career trajectory, transition behaviour and individualisation, but quite another to draw out empirical evidence about these concepts from the experiences and observations of

people themselves. Researchers need to consider how to discover, articulate and map people's attitudes and beliefs relating to their education, training and career opportunities and particularly the part people themselves play in creating these opportunities. Many people will not be able to see the point of abstract enquiries about individualisation and structures, but are more likely to have plenty to say about concrete aspects of their lives such as the type of employment they desire, decision-making processes in their personal lives and their experiences of work and the labour market.

By listening to the views of young people about such issues, the research strategy linked theoretical concepts with the real-life experiences of young adults experiencing transitions, setbacks and opportunities.[ii] With the co-operation of the college and university principals, their heads of department and the subject tutors, chambers of commerce, labour administrations and a range of voluntary and community organisations, the research put together groups of research participants (sample populations) that were broadly matched by age group (18–21 and 22–25), gender and types of educational and employment setting. These structured samples allowed direct comparisons across the cities and settings. In all, 900 young people took part in the study; at least 100 young adults in each city, in each of three contexts – education, work and unemployment; 900 in all.

2.5 Pressures, Constraints and Resources

This section brings together evidence for the view that young people in all three cities were aware of being affected by factors such as locality, gender, race, social class and family situation. The following section brings together young people's views on the role of agency, in the form of a sense of control over one's life and the ability to take decisions. However, it was not always easy to separate out of their accounts influences derived from external sources and inputs from the young people themselves; some of the responses illustrate how both types of influence were simultaneously present in the decision-making process.

The survey showed that young people experience pressures and constraints and make use of resources stemming from a variety of structural factors. These include their background – social class, gender and ethnic group – and opportunities in the form of education, training and their local job market.

2.5.1 Perceptions of the Effect of Area on Employment Opportunities

In choosing an area-based research design, it was the premise that the structural and cultural features of area, city and labour market are likely to impact in important ways on the experiences, perceptions and decisions of young adults. This underpinned the choice of the three cities. Figure 2.1 shows the responses to the question 'To what extent do you think where you live affects your chances of getting a job?'

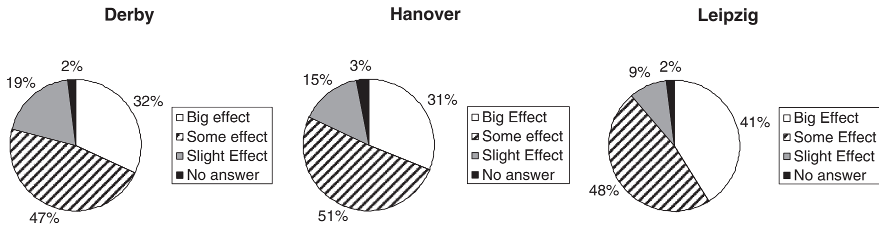

Fig. 2.1 Numbers who think that where you live has a 'big effect' on getting a job

Although only about one-third of the whole sample saw area as having a 'big' influence, more respondents in Leipzig, particularly in the higher education and employment settings, saw area of residence as having a big effect on their employment prospects. Over 40% of our respondents in Leipzig chose this option, compared to just over 30% in Derby and Hanover. This may reflect a continuing awareness in the Leipzig group of the dramatically changed labour market situation in which they are operating, 10 years after the collapse of communism.

One in four young people in both the Derby employed and unemployed groups thought that where you live has only a slight influence on your chances of getting a job. In fact, labour market differences between areas are at least as great in England as in West Germany, probably more so, but young people's awareness of their impact appears to be less in England. However, we also found that unemployed young people in both England and Germany were the least likely to consider leaving home or moving from their home areas in search of work, a finding which needs to be explored more by both researchers and policy makers.

As can be seen from Fig. 2.2, a higher proportion of German respondents stressed the importance of all the structural factors – social class, gender and race or nationality – than their English counterparts. However, to put this into perspective, both

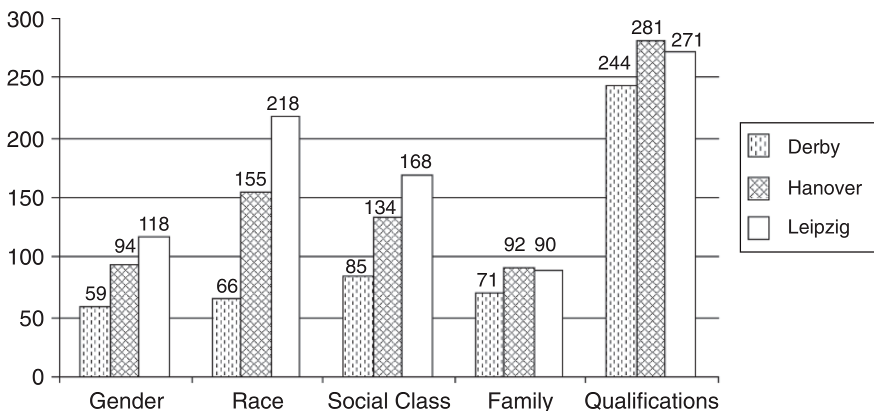

Fig. 2.2 Young people's beliefs about the effect of different social characteristics an opportunities in life

English and German young people perceived educational qualifications as considerably more important in determining their life chances than any of the social characteristics we asked about. This tendency to ascribe primary importance to their own educational efforts seems to lend support to the idea that young people see agency as primary. This will be explored further in the section on 'Agency, control and views of self', Chapter 6 (gender) and Chapter 8 for young people's awareness of the influence of social class, gender and race or nationality. Views on the importance of social class varied markedly between settings. Views on race varied markedly according to ethnicity and locality, as expected. Just over one half of ethnic minority respondents to the survey in the English city thought that race had a considerable effect in shaping life chances.

2.5.2 Young People's Views on the Influence of Family Background and the Influence of Peers

About 40% of the research participants reported that they had permanently left their parents' home. Slightly more of the Derby respondents had left home, compared with their Hanover and Leipzig counterparts.

The overall impression, derived from both the survey and interviews, was that the relationships between these research participants and their families tended to be based on support, advice and encouragement, usually without too much pressure on them to follow particular pathways. Figure 2.2 shows that less than one-third of the respondents from all three areas felt that family background – as distinct from social class – was important when looking for a job. Nevertheless, it appears that families do have considerable *indirect* influence; the interviews revealed many ways in which the social resources of the family shape young people's views of the future and provide useful contacts through social networks. This suits young people at a time when they are striving to establish their own adult identity and commensurate levels of independence. Support from the family was felt to be there if they needed it, but at the same time they felt they were free to 'make their own way'. They felt that their educational and occupational destinations were under their own control and that they were free to seek advice outside the family, from official sources and from friends.

Q: Do you feel independent in the decision-making process?

> Yes, I do. My parents didn't interfere while I was trying to find out what I wanted to do in the future. I found out information about all the possibilities – which by the way are very plentiful – and discovered I'd prefer to work as a computer specialist. I learned about the future possibilities in this field but also about earnings and where you can apply later on and things like that.

Q: How much influence do other people have on your decisions?

> I try to decide on my own. Once in a while I take advice from others but not necessarily from my parents. The person who usually helps me in finding a solution is my older sister.

> I sometimes ask her: 'What have you done in this situation?' or 'Could you help me?' but basically, I try to decide on my own.
>
> I'm not influenced by my parents anymore. The first thing I decided without consulting my parents was my course of study and whether to study at all. I simply don't ask them to give me advice. And I don't want it either. If I really need advice I have girlfriends to turn to. They probably know me better than my parents do. As far as my parents are concerned, I'm still a child. I want to be given advice by people of my own age, from adults.

Others perceived more subtle dimensions when asked about how far their decisions were influenced by parents, as the following sequence of points from one of the Hanover groups illustrates:

Q: How far do your parents influence your decisions?

> Well, in the sense of 'as long as you take money from us you ought to do this or that . . .' I would say I'm not influenced by my parents. On the other hand, I cannot shield myself from it completely. I think there are influential factors that are very subtle, and I can feel as independent as I want – they are there. Sometimes there are situations where I say to myself 'I think you allow yourself to be influenced by other people'.
>
> But being influenced by someone isn't necessarily a bad thing. It starts when you mention something at home and your parents react to it. And that can influence how you make decisions.
>
> Yes, definitely. It can be a positive thing because they know you inside and out.

Others distinguished between the kinds of decisions that had to be made.

> There are different types of decisions. You can make small decisions yourself. But it's different for bigger, more important decisions, for example when you're still living with your parents and want to move out. OK, you make the decision on your own but you talk to your parents about it. Another example is when you're buying a car. With a big decision like that, there's a fear that you could make the wrong decision. So you ask for your parents' or your friends' advice, people who know something about your problem.

2.6 Agency, Control and Views of Self

The young people participating in the research often asserted their individuality and talked in terms of making their own decisions independent of their family, peer group and other structural influences. This section brings together some of the findings which identify similarities and differences in feelings of control, agency and self-responsibility across settings and cities.

2.6.1 Overview: Feelings of Control

Investigating 'Agency'

The concept of 'agency' refers to the beliefs that young people have that they can change things by their own efforts, individually or collectively. It is reflected in aspects of the decision-making process that are personal, creative and proactive and that often involve resisting external pressures. As a first step, analysis of the survey

data identified 12 factors associated with positive and negative feelings of control and agency. They are that the young person

- feels sociable/confident;
- has a fulfilled work life;
- has a fulfilled personal life;
- believes that opportunities are open to all;
- believes that own weaknesses matter;
- believes in the efficacy of planning, not chance;
- believes that ability is not rewarded;
- engages in active career seeking;
- is politically active;
- wants work/training involving helping/caring for people;
- is unlikely to move from home area; and
- has a negative view of the future.

Embedding these factors into individual and group discussions drew out the young people's views about individuality, self-confidence, responsibility and independence, thus gaining insight into their perspectives on agency. In addition, levels of optimism and pessimism were considered, on the basis that if these young adults were generally optimistic, then they must have some expectation that they can overcome negative factors such as local unemployment rates and discrimination. To find out about alternative sources of feelings of agency and being in control, questions were included about how far they saw themselves as active agents in their lives outside work and training, and how this compared with their 'institutionalised' lives and work values.

Figure 2.3 illustrates the ways in which profiles of young people could be compared by setting within area, according to indicators of agency, optimism and pessimism. Similar analyses were prepared for each group and setting. These types of comparison enabled us to gain further insights into agency in personal lives as well as in job markets and institutional settings.

These figures illustrate several interesting contrasts between the attitudes of different groups of young people to issues about work and self-realisation and to the way in which young people seek to achieve their goals in life. Respondents in the two German cities were more likely to have fulfilling experiences in their personal lives than in their work lives, revealing a cultural norm and expectation that one ought to make constructive use of personal time and that not to do so is wasteful (Fig. 2.3). In contrast, young people in Derby felt more fulfilled at work or college, indicating the effect of a freer, less-institutionalised work and education environment which is more responsive to the needs of the individual.

Other indicators of personal agency, such as active job seeking and 'trial and error' in the search for work, are more evident in the English labour market, which has been deregulated for longer and where individualised behaviours have been most strongly encouraged or enforced (Fig. 2.4). However, while the German young people from both Hanover and Leipzig were less proactive in relation to the labour market, they showed higher levels of politically active group behaviours

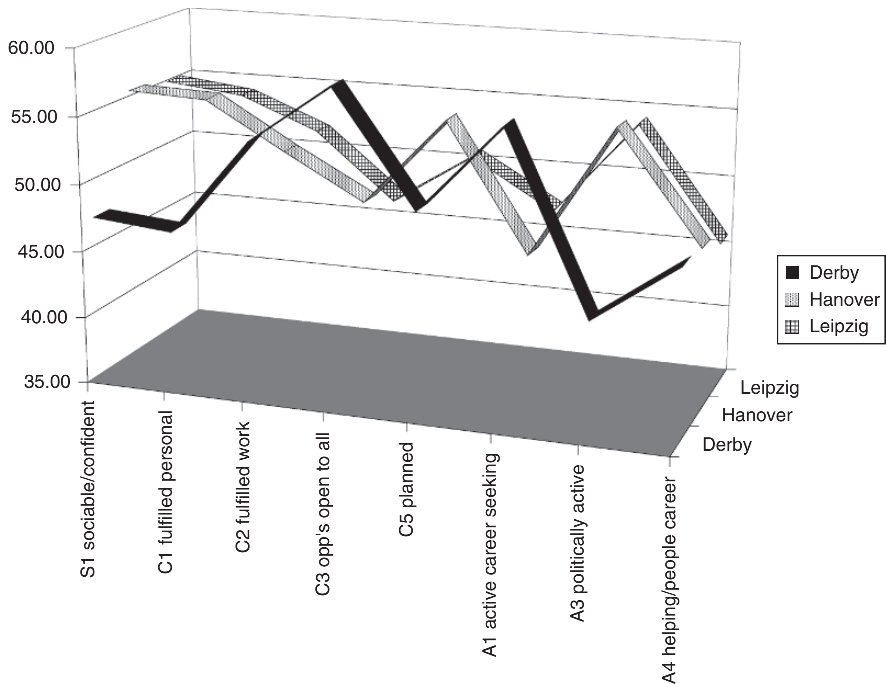

Fig. 2.3 Relative profiles on factors indicating a positive sense of agency and control among employed young people

involving activities such as participation in political events and engagement in political discussions, all of which indicate a continuing trust in collective, rather than individualised, solutions (Chapter 7).

These findings support the thesis that highly structured environments are associated, in people's minds, with the idea of reduced scope for individual, proactive effort. In highly structured environments, opportunities are open only for those following clearly defined routes, and consequently, it is those same structural opportunities or barriers that are held responsible by individuals for any failure. This is the case in the two German cities. The Derby evidence suggests that one of the consequences of an environment which fosters a belief that 'opportunities are open to all' is that people blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market. In the highly structured German system, external factors can more easily be held responsible for failure, giving young people greater scope to develop a positive sense of self.

These results can be reviewed alongside those from previous work, which asked whether the more highly structured and regulated German education and training systems tend to foster more strategic planning than the English systems. There are some indications that feelings of training and work pathways 'being planned' are stronger in Hanover, the city which epitomises the structured West German system in operation. Outside the standard career trajectories of education and employment,

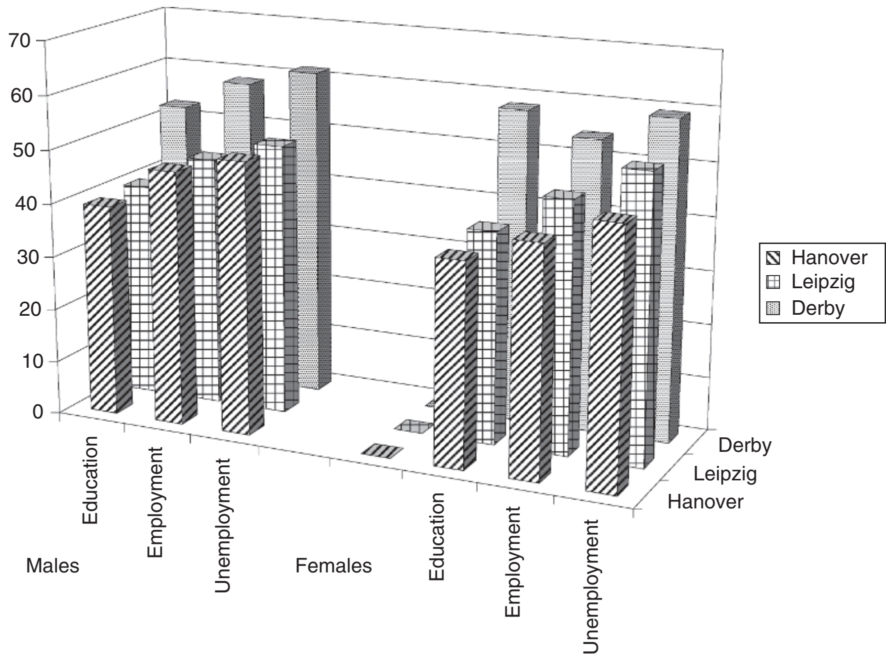

Fig. 2.4 Activity in the search for work

though, the planned career routes appear to break down. But a review of the full set of evidence shows that the main preoccupation of young people in West Germany is still to establish themselves in the standard, institutionalised career paths which have historically carried people into long-term careers in the labour market.

Cutting across these area-based patterns is the fact that the sense of agency and control is affected by whether young people were unemployed, employed or in higher education. The unemployed young people in our study generally scored lower on questions which aimed to tap positive self-image, a sense of being in control, feeling able to be proactive and being optimistic. They also scored higher on factors which indicated a poor self-image and feelings of powerlessness.

There were strong similarities among all the unemployed young people, especially in Leipzig and Derby, who felt that

- their own weaknesses matter and
- chance played the major part in their present situation.

Figure 2.4 shows that the young people in Derby also appeared to take a more proactive approach to seeking work than their German counterparts. This could be because they have to be more individually active to deal with their situation and because of the diverse and often confusing array of options before them. In general, the uncertain status of unemployed young people and their inability to keep abreast of their peers who are in work or establishing homes and families of their own is reflected in a sense of frustrated agency rather than fatalism and in a readiness to buy the message that qualifications can provide a way out of such predicaments.

The overall picture presented by the employed group was one of optimism, and this was irrespective of status or earnings. The large majority, in all three cities, attributed their present circumstances to their own plans and interests. This group manifested relatively high levels of control and agency, but there were some international differences. The young employees in German cities expressed strong feelings of stability, whereas their English counterparts relied more on chance and ‘trial and error’ in the search for work. In the employed groups, the experience of having gained a foothold in the labour market was associated with greater feelings of control and agency than was manifest among peers in higher education and unemployment settings. This is consistent with the evidence that control beliefs are higher in situations of change which directly affect one, rather than in anticipation of change in the future.

The higher education group in all cities reported positive perceptions of their life experiences, including feeling a sense of achievement and high levels of personal responsibility.

Earlier findings revealed the extent to which young people felt that the area they lived in greatly affected their chances of finding a job. Another question aimed to compare young people’s perceptions of the relative importance of area and one’s own personal effort: ‘When it comes down to finding a job, to what extent does success depend upon the individual or on the job opportunities in the area, or both?’ Responses to this question are presented in Fig. 2.5.

In line with findings reported earlier, many more of the Derby respondents indicated that finding a job was mainly down to the individual (37.7% compared to 25% in Hanover and only 17.3% in Leipzig). While the majority of respondents in the three cities see success in finding a job as equally dependent on the area and the individual, 72.3% of those in Leipzig attributed labour market success to the opportunity, or lack of it, provided by the labour market, as much as to individual. However, despite an unemployment rate as high as 18% in Leipzig, only a few Leipzig respondents saw the area as the *primary* determinant of success in finding a job, in common with the other cities. Actual experience of unemployment cut across these findings; unemployed young people in Derby were more likely to attribute their difficulties to the conditions of the local labour market – in other words, their views were more like those of young people in Germany. But the Derby employed or higher education students were twice as likely as their German counterparts to attribute the success in finding a job mainly to the individual, rather than a balance of area and individual features.

Young people’s perspectives on agency were also explored by asking about the relative importance of talent and luck, or chance. The question about whether ‘talent always rises to the top’ produced, in all three cities and settings, responses which emphasised

- the interplay of talent with ‘diligence’ and what you do with it;
- the environment in which you operate; and
- factors which influence whether talent is recognised or not.

Talent on its own was not seen as decisive. Most groups also mentioned the importance of social connections, and some specifically emphasised luck, referring

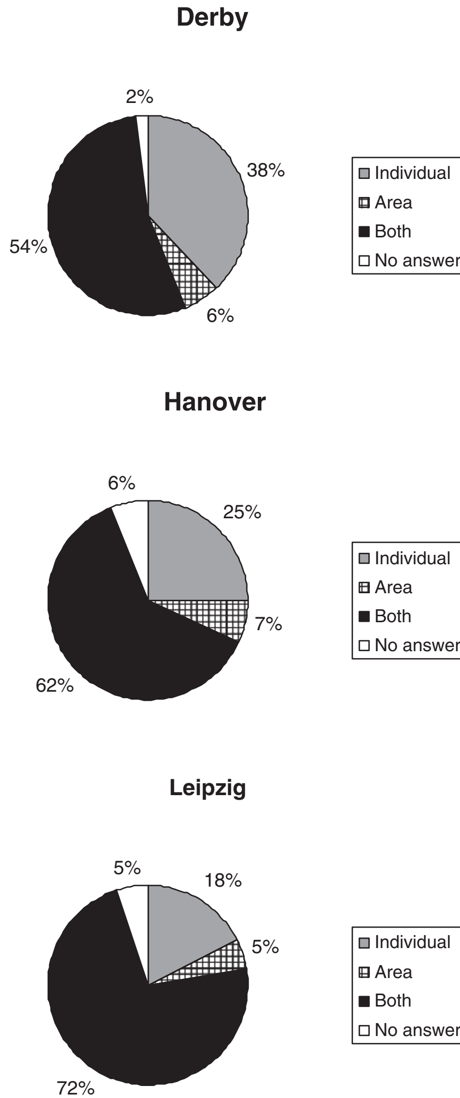

Fig. 2.5 Does finding a job depend mainly on the individual, mainly on job opportunities in the area, or on both?

to employment chances as being like 'throwing dice'. The discussion among the unemployed group in Hanover revealed the interplay of perceived factors.

Q: The questionnaires show that the majority believe talent is a decisive factor for professional success. Do you agree?

> By all means, talent is a huge advantage. And a person is almost invincible if they can combine talent with knowledge.

> It depends where you're working, what the company is and whether you have the chance actually to use your talent.
>
> Talent isn't the only important factor for professional success. There's luck too.
>
> You need luck wherever you go and whatever you do.
>
> For example, you can be a talented linguist, but that talent is useless if you don't have an opportunity to use it, say in an office. But to work in an office you need office qualifications, too, not just the ability to speak a foreign language.
>
> Sometimes you're not given the chance. For example, there are some very talented singers who don't get the chance to show off their talent. And consequently they don't get the chance to be a high-earning superstar.
>
> That's what I meant when I said that luck matters as well.
>
> Being in the right place at the right time. That's important too.

Many believed that luck and chance play a part in finding employment. But the extent to which they 'leave things to chance' varies. As mentioned earlier, reliance on chance rather than planning is one of the relatively few variables associated with being from a manual occupational background. Those in the most precarious positions often emphasised chance rather than planning in their biographies, possibly reflecting their experience of unpredictability and difficulty in controlling events. However, it is at the margins, where young people are most vulnerable to the fluctuations of the labour market, that proactive behaviour can make a difference. Behaviour in response to chances can be critical, as our individual case study interviews have shown (Evans et al. 2000a). The present findings confirm that young people believe in the importance of chance factors, contacts and significant relationships in charting a path into work. The right intervention at the right moment can produce turning points, often in unplanned situations.

2.7 The Importance of Qualifications

It has already been shown that most of the young people in our study, regardless of city or setting, see educational qualifications as of 'considerable' importance in influencing opportunities in life. Of course, the type of education received and the level of qualifications obtained depend on a whole complex of structural factors as well as on individual effort. Home background, social class, gender, ethnicity, quality of teaching, locality and a host of other factors have been shown to have at least some influence on educational achievement. However, in written responses and in the follow-up group discussions, these young adults stressed again and again the importance of individual effort. The need to work hard for qualifications was a prominent topic in the group interviews, as this exchange illustrates.

> Qualifications are not only important for the job market. They are generally important to survive. I believe that if you don't continue your education throughout your professional life, one day you will not be qualified anymore for your job as demands increase.
>
> In particular, specialised qualifications are in demand in businesses. The more specialised your knowledge, the better your chances in the job market.

There were strong suggestions that these young adults generally believed in the idea of a 'meritocracy' and that if you 'failed' (in terms of obtaining qualifications), then this was probably your own fault and down to a lack of effort and determination.

2.8 Self-Confidence, Independence and Responsibility

The respondents' levels of self-confidence in relation to employment issues supported the view that they felt they had been able to take important decisions independently. Approximately half the young people felt that their present position was a result of their own plans, with chance being the second biggest perceived influence, followed by social connections.

In a Hanover discussion group, the following comments were made about self-confidence:

> I think I can claim to be quite self-confident. Nonetheless, I always try to keep it at a moderate level. It would be wrong to seem arrogant to people. I want to find my strengths, which I do – especially in my studies – and let them grow. But on the other hand, I feel the need to scrutinise myself closely, that is, either doing it by myself or letting others do it. That is my aim.
>
> I just thought about something you mentioned: reflection. I'm not very self-confident in some situations, especially when they are new and unknown to me. However, I know a lot of my strengths and weaknesses. I can assess myself well. I love to reflect on things. And that is how I would define 'self-confidence'. When I find myself in a situation where I feel insecure, then it is easier for me to understand myself.

The young people were also asked how often they experienced a range of different types of responsibility at work, in their training schemes or in college and in their lives outside these settings - whether they felt able to set their own goals, felt stretched, felt able to make decisions, felt able to use their own initiative and felt a sense of achievement.

These patterns of responses on questions of responsibility and achievement are dramatically different from those obtained with a younger sample of 16–19-year-olds in an earlier study, (see Evans and Heinz 1994). This found that young people in England felt more stretched and challenged and had more exposure to work-related responsibilities than their German counterparts at that age. We suggested that this was a reflection of the accelerated transitions into the labour market which were still common in the UK at that time, bringing earlier exposure to the challenges and responsibilities of the workplace. We noted that it was probable that young Germans, with longer periods of work preparation with trainee/student status, would experience these responsibilities later and possibly at a higher level.

The more recent study revealed a complex picture among our older age group, which was affected by their experiences in education and the labour market. We found that for those in higher education, young people in Derby were more likely to report taking the initiative and being able to take their own decisions, but German higher education respondents were more likely to report feeling stretched and to experience a sense of achievement, particularly in the Leipzig sample. Initiative and

decision-making also appear to be frequently experienced by more employed young people in Derby than their German counterparts, who, like their counterparts in higher education, were more likely to report a sense of achievement and feelings of being stretched. But all the unemployed groups were less likely to report experiences of responsibility and achievement than the employed and higher education groups. We concluded that the English system does seem to foster characteristics that indicate a greater sense of agency and control, even though the demands made are similar. However, experience of unemployment produces a sense of powerlessness and lack of achievement which overrides national experiences.

We also compared young people's experiences of responsibility and achievement *outside* the work or training environment. Higher education students in all three cities reported feeling stretched more by their studies than by their life outside, but the other groups felt that their life outside training gave more scope for the exercise of responsibility and initiative. Among employed young people in Germany, the picture is one of lives outside work offering at least as much, if not more, experience of responsibility and challenge than life at work. In contrast, young people from Derby reported that most experiences of responsibility arise in the work setting. The unemployed young people, both English and German, reported much richer experiences outside their training schemes than elsewhere. Again, both current experience of education, work or unemployment and cultural background seemed to affect young people's sense of agency and control outside the work setting.

It was not always possible to disentangle young people's understanding of external influences from the motivation to 'take control' of their lives. Their responses sometimes appear contradictory, as both perspectives are embraced, as the extended extracts on risk and responsibility given in Chapter 1 showed (see page 18).

The concept of 'bounded agency' captures such combinations of agency and structural influences which were often apparent in young people's responses. It emphasises the fact that the young people in our study were undoubtedly manifesting a sense of agency, but were aware of a number of boundaries or barriers which were beyond their control and which circumscribed and sometimes prevented the expression of agency.

2.9 Choice, Optimism and Expectations

In previous research, the belief in the importance of individual effort seemed to be accompanied by the optimism young people felt in relation to their own prospects, whatever the state of their local labour market: whether they lived in a 'depressed' East London borough or in a buoyant labour market in the South-West of England, 16–19-year-olds were primarily optimistic about their job prospects and believed they had a considerable degree of control over their transition to work. We wanted to know whether 18–25-year-olds in our new study would, on coming up against the realities of the labour market, show similar feelings of control over their transitions and future lives. We asked whether this optimism would decline as young people got

older and the realities of the labour market and other constraints were experienced more directly.

On first sight, positive views of prospects again appeared prevalent in responses to questions on employment prospects. One question in the present study asked respondents how confident they were about avoiding unemployment in the future. On closer inspection, the experience of unemployment seemed crucial. Young people in the employed and higher education groups continued to reflect the relatively high levels of optimism shown by our previous full-time education and apprenticeship-based groups, and there were no differences by level of job. However, the responses of the unemployed groups were less optimistic about future prospects and were coupled with an awareness of the part played by structural factors, such as lack of opportunity locally. Thus, it appears that negative views of future prospects do begin to bite in more economically depressed areas among the 18–25 age group, as people come up against the realities of the labour market. Optimism comes to be tempered with greater realism and an appreciation that there may be setbacks, with increasing age and experience of the labour market. For instance, respondents of the Derby unemployed group

- feel ‘forced’ into unemployment schemes and therefore not ‘in control’;
- feel individually responsible for their predicament;
- believe it is down to them to get out of their situation, despite the negative environment;
- experience stress in dealing with their situation; and
- emphasise ‘being realistic’ about what they can achieve.

Nevertheless, one of the most important findings of this study was that young people were rarely fatalistic. While respondents who were unemployed, not surprisingly, saw their futures more negatively than others, a sense of future possibilities and the need to act upon them to overcome setbacks and constraints was apparent in their responses. Even among unemployed young people, responses suggested frustrated agency rather than lack of control or a fatalistic acceptance of things as they are. The overriding perspective of young people is that the future is in one’s own hands, and while setbacks will be encountered, it is down to the individual to find ways to cope and to overcome them.

This is an important finding with significant theoretical and practical implications. It contributes to the theoretical discussion about whether social-structural or individual-motivational factors provide the main explanation of school to work transitions, but it also has practical importance. For example, young people’s conviction that they are responsible for their fates indicates that compulsion in training and employment schemes may be counterproductive, and particularly so in the UK environment where individualisation has gone further than in Germany. Consequently, explanations are needed as to why young people, many of whom have an awareness of external constraints, continue to see the problems and the solutions as lying primarily with the individual. We consider several possible explanations, taken from a range of subject disciplines.

One possible explanation already offered is that these young people have been 'socialised into' a belief in choice. A decade or more of 'enterprise culture' has led the majority to believe that there are employment opportunities available and that they will succeed if they make the individual effort required. This approach can be associated with the notions of a ladder of opportunity and a version of 'meritocracy' that has been transmitted successfully to this cohort of young people. Whether this is desirable is a separate issue. However, believing in choice while at college and then finding out after you have left that your options and opportunities are severely limited because of high levels of unemployment and a depressed local economy does generate new insights and awareness of the structures that operate upon your age group's economic opportunities, as the responses also showed.

A second explanation emphasised the importance young people place upon their social and leisure contexts, as well as upon their job aspirations. The young adults in our study may have been confident partially because of the existence of social support networks provided by friends, peers and family members. Training activities and the young person's social life often overlapped. Some young people's levels of social confidence may have overlapped with or boosted occupational expectations. So it could be that many of these young people were generally confident and optimistic about life, not just in terms of skills developed and qualifications gained.

A third type of explanation attributes the respondents' levels of optimism and confidence to the psychological attributes associated with this age group. At this age, and in these circumstances, young people may feel they have to show reasonable levels of confidence and high expectations. Additionally, group dynamics may have been operating in the interview sessions; for example, it is possible that an admission of a strong possibility of unemployment is less likely within a group than in a one-to-one situation.

Furnham (1991), in a review of the literature on youth unemployment, has shown how a psychological approach may help to explain these types of outlook. He found that attributions about getting a job are frequently internal (relating to personal qualities and abilities) rather than external (relating to environmental or structural factors). Confidence, perseverance and qualifications were all considered to be primary factors responsible for success in finding employment. Yet failure to get a job was rarely attributed to the personal shortcomings of job seekers themselves. Thus, success was attributed to internal factors and failure to external factors.

We found that many young people did attribute success to individual effort and the achievement of qualifications, while at the same time expressing the opinion, for example, that an unemployed person was not really to blame for his or her situation. Interestingly, the view we found in earlier research in England, that 'unemployment was something that happened to somebody else', was not evident in this study. The majority now think it at least possible that they will face and experience unemployment in the future. But when asked to respond to items at the personal level, expressing their own internal feelings, young people in the most vulnerable positions were more likely to believe that their own weaknesses matter. This was not confined to unemployed groups, however. Young women, including those in higher education, felt this more strongly than their male counterparts.

Finally, we also considered a geographical explanation of students' expectations. All the young people in the present study lived in predominantly urban areas with a large labour market and also a large labour supply. While the hunt for work would undoubtedly be competitive, at least there were vacancies to be aimed for, and these could be in a diversity of occupational areas. In Leipzig, which has the highest level of unemployment, the inhabitants, for whom state provision is seen as a norm, perceive the raft of special schemes and programmes introduced by the German government as a kind of 'second' labour market. When expectations of these are disappointed, more negative views set in.

The existence of 'dead end' training schemes and low-paid, low-status jobs was less obvious in these three urban areas than would have been the case in rural labour markets. In a village, with a restricted travel-to-work area and an agricultural hinterland, the limitations of local job opportunities are obvious. In Eastern Germany, the plight of people in some of the rural areas is extreme. In England, Church and Ainley used this reasoning to explain continued high levels of job aspirations in East London despite increasing unemployment levels in a period of recession. According to Church and Ainley, although the Docklands labour market was very depressed, 'the City and the West End of London represent relatively buoyant labour markets compared to other urban areas and the perceived, but not necessarily real, job opportunities in these areas maintain the aspirations of some interviewees' (Church and Ainley 1987, p. 83).

2.10 The Impact of Employment Schemes: New Deal and JUMP

Research in the 1980s and 1990s (Evans and Heinz 1994) found that many employment schemes in England had the effect of 'warehousing' young people – holding them for a while and removing them from the employment statistics while not contributing to the improvement of skills or achievement of qualifications. In Germany, the metaphor of the 'escalator' seemed more appropriate: young people's skills improved, but did so equally for all groups, without reducing existing inequalities or skilling new workers in line with changing labour market conditions. 'Taking control' showed that, while New Deal and JUMP shared similar objectives, they have been reshaped by old moulds which reflect the structural and cultural features of their settings.

In Derby, low-level training provision which reflects poor opportunities in the local labour market still means that skills are little improved by the New Deal experience, indicating its effects may not be very different from the earlier 'warehousing' schemes. At most, it may help to prevent downward drift in the growing numbers of young people with low qualifications who cannot enter the labour market. In the German cities, the picture of the 'escalator' still applies to JUMP; so far, the skills imparted reflect there is little adjustment to the new labour market situation, and disadvantaged young people remain so, in relation to the rest.

However, 'Taking Control' found that the experience of going through 'New Deal' and JUMP produced similarities and differences in young people's perspectives on vocational training and the world of work:

- All acknowledged the importance of qualifications and a good education in providing a foundation for self-sufficiency. Those who had vocational qualifications or were in the process of achieving them felt themselves to be in control and that their fate was in their own hands.
- Experiences of failure, such as unemployment, were frequently ascribed to external factors, thus preserving some self-esteem.
- Both New Deal and JUMP employ a 'carrot and stick' approach to recruiting unemployed young people, but contrary to governmental rhetoric about 'taking control', these schemes offer only limited choice. Young people may choose whether to accept assistance to employability, but the penalty for turning it down is often severe hardship, and the system offers few alternatives. The rewards offered for accepting are low-level financial support and the possibility of qualifications.
- The structure of the New Deal and JUMP, coupled with the fact that jobs are scarce at the levels needed by their participants, means that insecurity remains about future employment. The English system provides more lower skill jobs, and this channels young people into the labour market more quickly than in Germany, but they are more vulnerable to later downturns in the job market than their German peers.
- New Dealers often felt forced to participate and to accept what was provided by the scheme rather than pursue their preferred subjects. In other words, they often felt the scheme neglected what they thought were their real needs for getting into work. JUMP participants did feel that they were on their way back into an established career, but the extent to which this belief is justified remains unclear.
- However, the shaping of unemployed young people's experiences by policy and provision is only part of the picture. Expressions of belief in opportunities and abilities to control events are also significant: unemployed young people's beliefs about the extent to which opportunities are open to all played an important role in their assessment of opportunities, and the experience of unemployment was mitigated to some degree by supportive personal, family and social networks engaged with in their free time (see Behrens and Evans, 2002).

2.11 Summary and Conclusions

The findings reviewed in this chapter shed light on the ways in which 'meritocracy' is experienced by those in early adult life – a pivotal life stage, at the frontiers of changing work and life expectations that will fundamentally affect their futures.

Most young people attach considerable importance to individual effort and express the belief that if people work hard and achieve suitable qualifications then they should be able to follow their own independent pathway in adult life. They also emphasise the importance of image, self-presentation, forging social connections and making them work for you. But they also have an implicit understanding that when it comes to the crunch, individuals are also dependent on luck and external factors. These might include employers' preferences, recruitment policies and the

state of their local job market and employment schemes, as well as the social characteristics explored in this report. The importance of social and economic structure is still there and recognised by young people, but is being reshaped and re-formed as they realise that, as 'actors' in this social landscape, they have to be 'realistic' in their individual aspirations and goals. The differences between young people in England and Germany reveal the influences of dominant discourses and socio-economic structures in shaping beliefs and aspirations.

These findings have lent support to the idea that a process of structured individualisation is taking place. This is reflected in the beliefs in choice and self-determination that people sustain within the constraints and limits of socially structured environments. They have also shown how, in the perceptions and realities of young people, 'choices' and actions are shaped by past experiences, the chances present in the current moment and the ways in which possible futures are conceived. Most young people have aspirations for themselves, accompanied by a strong sense of the risks they face in work, learning and their personal lives. Risk in the social world is perceived as operating at the individual level; young adults in market economies, particularly those who have experienced difficult transitions, are unlikely to be able to identify with any stable group, which can provide a voice or platform for collective action. Through their accounts, it becomes apparent how social crises can appear to be personal ones that the person must resolve for himself or herself. However, there are some important indicators that perceptions of social risk are held in common and that young people are certainly not blind to the societal forces that sustain inequalities of gender, race and social class irrespective of the extent to which they are themselves individually affected by inequalities of treatment.

People are social actors moving in a social landscape. To extend the metaphor, how they perceive the horizons depends on where they stand in the landscape. The horizons change slowly as they move, sometimes opening up, sometimes closing down. Where they go depends on the pathways they see, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves and the terrain and elements they encounter. Their progress depends on what they feel is important to spend time on, how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and how they engage with others on the way. This metaphor begins to capture the ways in which people's beliefs in their ability to change things by their own efforts are constrained, 'bounded' by features of the part of the social landscape they currently inhabit. Yet these beliefs can also change over time, as people move in these landscapes, influenced by the chances of the present moment, past experiences and the sense of future possibilities.

This chapter has focused on experiences and aspirations in early adult life, a pivotal life stage at the frontiers of changing work and life expectations that will fundamentally affect the futures of all in every stage of the life course. How people's aspirations and their inherent desire to change their lives for the better play out in the contexts of higher education, in adult working life and at the margins of the labour market are expanded in the chapters that follow.

Notes

i. The full data sets and report of these empirical counters can be found in the ESRC data archive, where they can be accessed for secondary analysis. See also Evans, Rudd, Behrens, Kaluza and Woolley (2005), Young People Talking about the Future in Education, Training and Personal Lives, National Youth Agency, for a fuller account.

ii. Questionnaire surveys, focus groups and key informants' interviews were carried out. For details see ESRC Data Archive.