Chapter 8
Beyond Individualisation: Human Strivings for Control of Their Lives

Throughout this volume, personal accounts offered by different social actors have shown how past habits and routines are brought into the present and how future possibilities are envisaged, all within the contingencies of the present moment as events unfold day by day in people's lives. Personal accounts show how people's priorities, pre-occupations and beliefs play out in the shifting social landscapes of real life.

This penultimate chapter shows how 'social regularities', the patterns of engagement in work and learning revealed by large-scale survey research become much more difficult to interpret when they are connected to the voices and purposeful activities of people moving in their various, highly differentiated social landscapes. This is because survey or observatory research at national and trans-national levels rarely offers convincing accounts of localised social and cultural variations or recognises how changes in the social landscape trends can be linked to the contextualised exercise of human agency. The analysis of empirical encounters in a range of settings can shed new light on questions about human agency, the beliefs people have about their abilities to control their lives and the extent of individualisation in the modern lives. This process leads to an elaboration of the concept of 'bounded agency' as an alternative to 'structured individualisation' as way of understanding the experiences of people in changing social landscapes. How does what people believe is possible for them (their personal horizons developed within cultural and structural influences) determine their behaviours and what they perceive to be 'choices'? Accounts of the ways in which individualisation processes have deep structural foundations in gender, social class and ethnicity have an important role in illuminating the power relations that exist in the wider society. These accounts, however, by focusing on factors that reflect and reproduce the underlying structural features and regularities of the social world, tend to downplay the everyday dynamics of the social landscapes in which people move. In these landscapes, spaces open up at the 'meso'-level for variation and incremental change over time through the exercise of human agency.

The chapter is in two parts. The first part looks back over the comparative exploration of the life and work transitions of youth and early adulthood up to the mid-20s in contrasting socio-economic contexts. The second part focuses on adults. While earlier life experiences can bring stability or instability to the adult life course,

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trajectories diversify and branch out in so many directions that typologies or pathways become crude or meaningless. Systematic comparisons of adult populations of the kind carried out in the Anglo-German studies do not exist, although work value studies of Super and Sverko (1995) do give some sense of the social regularities in adults' perspectives and how these relate to their socio-economic context and past experiences. There is much evidence on adults' experiences of working life and their engagement with the social practices of work. Some aspects of adults' experiences, particularly those least powerfully placed in the social landscape, transcend national and cultural differences despite substantial variations in regulation and custom. Yet agency in adult life also operates through meso-level engagements in and through the social world, the environments and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social landscapes. The second part of this chapter shows how this evidence too points towards bounded agency as a lens through which the dynamics of work, learning and social responsibility can be viewed.

8.1 Exploring Human Agency: Comparative Life Transitions Approach

Looking at the phenomena from a perspective which starts with agency, without losing sight of structuration, the possible explanations appear more multifaceted. Agency is 'bounded' in different ways. Some of the empirical encounters with young adults certainly show patterns of belief, behaviour and action in the social world that lend support to Goldthorpe's (1998) thesis that a subjective process of weighing up situations leading to 'rational action' is taking place. The seeking of routes back to 'standardised careers' among the young Germans contrasted with the trial and error in seeking labour market openings in the English groups, and both make sense when set in their respective cultural and socio-economic contexts. Both also explain how 'social regularities' occur in outcomes. For these young adults and their peers in employment and in higher education, the labour markets and other features of the social landscapes in the three cities displayed different pathways and openings which offered apparently 'rational' options. But these were differently framed and perceived according to the position and orientation of the viewer. Options visible to some were invisible to others. Decision-making was also subject to all of the complex 'contingencies of the present moment' that occur in the lives of young people. These, from time to time, can have critical and life-changing effects particularly in the lives of those in the most precarious and vulnerable positions, who are the least cushioned from negative consequences as our research into individual personal histories showed (Evans et al. 2000a). In this respect, Bourdieu's accounts of how horizons are shaped are powerful in understanding how structures are represented and reproduced in the socially positioned lives that people lead (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). What they miss, however, is an analysis of the dynamics how horizons change over time.

A perspective on agency which includes but is not defined by 'rational action' and which views people as social actors interacting within and moving through a social

landscape suggests that exploration (a) of differences in orientations to life project planning within and between generations and (b) the effect of cultures operating in the different institutional settings of higher education, employment and unemployment schemes may offer further explanations of the social regularities apparent in the evidence.

The Anglo-German survey evidence that I have drawn on throughout this book had some of its foundations in the earlier comparative studies that focused on the shaping of careers and initial ‘routes’ into the labour market in the ‘twinned’ labour markets of Bremen and Paderborn in Germany and Swindon and Liverpool in England. Through this earlier research, contrasts were first drawn between the ‘accelerated’ transitions of England when compared with the ‘extended’ transition experiences by young people in west Germany (see Evans and Heinz 1991).

Analyses in these original Anglo-German studies generated theoretical constructions concerning the relationship between transition behaviours, as important elements of the young people’s personal histories, and career outcomes. This became a particular focus for further analysis and a core theme in the *Becoming Adults in England and Germany* (Evans and Heinz 1994). ‘Transition behaviours’ referred to the patterns of activity people adopt in attempting to realise their personal interests and occupational goals within social requirements and structural opportunities. They were ‘a more or less adequate set of solutions to problems that started with education achievement, vocational choice, looking for a training place, applying for jobs and qualifying for promotion’. Transition behaviour may change in the case of failing to achieve the intended result at any stage of the process and can be linked with career trajectories.

Four broad trajectories satisfied the conditions of comparability between the countries: (1) the academic mainstream leading towards higher education, (2) training and education leading to skilled employment,[i] (3) other forms of education and training leading typically to semi-skilled employment and (4) early labour market experience of unskilled jobs, unemployment and ‘remedial’ training schemes. Four transition behaviours were labelled *strategic, step-by-step, taking chances* and *wait and see* behaviours. These were activity patterns that young people tended to adopt when moving along trajectories into the labour markets.

The extent to which young people succeeded in developing longer term occupational goals depended not only on their past socialisation in family and school, but also to a large degree on the way their identity formation had been linked to challenge and rewarding experience in the passage to employment itself. If a young person embarks on this risky voyage in a clearly defined progression of qualifications, based on his or her decisions, this tends to bring stability to the unfolding life course. If a diffuse, short-term sequence of activities is embarked on in a way which is reactive to immediate job demands and upheavals, the risks are far greater. Self-confidence both in youth seems to arise out of success in completion of tasks, from vocational choice to labour market entry. As youth shades into adult life, confidence continues to stem from cumulative experiences of success in roles, from feelings of control in personal decision-making about jobs and job changes as employment structures and work contexts change. The development of

so-called action competences appears important here. 'Strategic' and the 'taking chances' behaviours can be interpreted as expressions of an active kind of individualisation. There is a more passive kind of individualisation in which the person is carried along in socially accepted transition patterns, without a sense of ultimate goal or overall direction. Lack of material and social resources can act against both strategic and risk-taking behaviours. Transition behaviours that are characterised by 'step-by-step' or 'wait and see' patterns are linked to a passive kind of individualisation.

As shown in Evans and Heinz (1994), individualised career paths and life plans do, to some extent, cut across trajectories and do not necessarily comply with the expectations of parents or employers. The timing of transition is dependent on the available jobs and the cultural norms about transitions, which influence the decisions of young people. For example, in England, parents and young adults often see early transition to an independent employment status as most desirable. Extended vocational training and academic education are also seen in terms of quick accession to the desired occupational status and the economic independence that goes with it.

Many young people, especially from working-class backgrounds, meet training schemes which are in 'lieu of work' with reluctance or even distrust, because they are afraid that their expected independence will be curtailed. Furthermore, they look for other sources of identity stabilisation – that may be decoupled from the transition to employment – when they fail to achieve entry to work status. This may be achieved, for instance, by setting up a household, getting married or parenthood.

In Germany, the process of becoming an adult was shown to be more protracted, with the duration of vocational education training (VET) and higher education defining the timing of this transition. The cultural expectations mean that the majority of the young generation serve an apprenticeship or pursue academic studies without the feeling of being socially dependent. They have a socially recognised role as an apprentice or as a student. The minority of young people who are channelled into schemes or casual jobs after having left school have the difficult problem of legitimising their social status, because they cannot rely on an institutionalised 'pacing' of their transitions. Thus, they are in a situation where transition behaviour may be reduced to 'wait and see'. By contrast, young people in England are treated as adults at 16, whether in post-16 educational institutions, training schemes or the labour market.

The suggestion put forward, on the basis of the initial Anglo-German research, that the less institutional English framework might encourage reactive transition behaviour eventually proved to be an over-simplification. 'step-by-step' emerged as a common transition behaviour in both countries. In England, 'step-by-step' was encouraged by the fluid nature of the opportunities available. In Germany 'step-by-step' was encouraged by the highly structured system which offered alternatives in a longer timeframe for decision-making. In both countries, relatively few young people had crystallised their occupational goals. Where they had, proactive strategies were encouraged by the German arrangements which set out clear and regulated pathways and criteria for achieving them. For those with clear occupational goals in England, the ways of achieving them were often less transparent, and

'step-by-step' was often, but not always, the response. Risk-taking was also encouraged in both countries, in different ways. Experimentation was possible within the institutionally supported transitions of Germany. In England the 'taking of chances' tended to be confined to the buoyant labour market. In both cases, recovery would be possible, by virtue of institutional support in Germany and the operation of strong local labour markets in England. The risks were, therefore, calculated ones, unlikely to be fatal if things went wrong.

The interplay of the person's initial trajectory (through education and into the labour market) with the behaviours adopted during transition produces career patterns. These can be progressive, stagnant or interrupted. They may involve upward or downward drift. Career outcomes depend not only on the transition behaviours of young people but also on the institutional and labour market settings and social support available. Transition behaviours are influenced by labour market conditions, institutional structures and the operation of social networks.

As Roberts (2000) has argued, Britain and Germany (despite being untypical within the wider Union) have come to represent the main socio-economic alternatives 'on the agenda' for the current and prospective member states of the European Union. The contrast between the regulated German and unregulated British approaches to young adult transitions found in the 1991 and 1994 studies was maintained and, in some respects, has become more sharply drawn through much of the 1990s. The 'reunification' of Germany from 1990 involved economic and political transformations whose effects will shape the future development of Germany and its place in the European Union for years to come. A new study of Eastern Germany first became possible in the mid-1990s, enabling comparisons to be made with Western Germany and England.

The eastern and western parts of Germany shared a common culture but operated in totally different socio-economic systems. West Germany and Britain had different versions of the same socio-economic system, but different cultural histories. Britain and Eastern Germany have experienced, from different starting points, strong effects of market forces and deregulation of previous systems. The research team started by investigating young adults' experiences of both smooth and broken transitions in the new *Länder*. Continuities and discontinuities were seen through the eyes of key players, including vocational trainers, and placed in context through structural data and reports.

When, in the early 1990s, the economy of the new *Länder* underwent radical structural changes, the workforce was substantially reduced, and in parallel, the western 'dual system' was implemented. The research in Eastern Germany, started in 1997, shows that although labour market conditions require 'flexibility' and 'new ways of thinking' from the young people and traditional routes can be transcended successfully, the rules of the game are still set by the dual system. Taking this into account, the studies focused on (1) the effects of the weakness of the dual system under the existing financial and economic conditions, (2) directions young people in the new *Länder* took in order to navigate through new education, training and employment structures and (3) new transition behaviours into and out of employment with regard to career outcomes.

Through 24 case studies, backed by survey and structural data, it was possible to extend the previous Evans and Heinz analyses.

Where Eastern German young people had experienced most or all of their training since 1990, after the political changes, they showed few differences of perspective from their West German counterparts. In the old *Länder* of Western Germany, the labour market is itself changing. Uncertain transitions and 'transitional' status were also increasing. These forms of transition, as they increased, were also gradually becoming less stigmatised. Previously they were taken as indications of failure and lack of achievement and served to trap young people into vicious circles and downward spirals from which it was difficult to escape. The transitions were now becoming closer to their English counterparts, experienced as interim states from which upward or downward chances could flow. 'Taking of chances' was more likely to produce upward movement where safety nets were in place and mistakes were therefore not fatal to career prospects or where occupational markets were particularly buoyant (e.g. in some growth areas such as insurance). As with their English counterparts, risks taken were usually calculated ones, unlikely to be irrevocable if things went wrong.

If the 'taking of chances' was likely to produce a worsened situation through lack of social support or depressed labour market conditions, would the 'wait and see' behaviours which lead to downward drift emerge in young East Germans in ways comparable to those first identified in our original Liverpool samples in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

8.2 Effects of Increased Perceptions of Risk on Transition Behaviours

The research in the eastern states of Germany posed the question, 'To what extent do more open conditions created by social and economic transformations encourage greater personal agency?' The findings added support to the earlier findings (Evans and Heinz 1994) which showed that those in 'transitional' positions (which could go upwards or downwards) were more likely to improve their position through active transition behaviours, particularly where backed by family support or personal connections. The combination of 'step-by-step' or 'wait and see' behaviour with the 'taking of chances' occurred frequently, as the person weighed up the unfamiliar situation before taking the chance or proceeded cautiously and step by step having made the first, more risky leap into a more promising position.

Overall, the results supported the hypothesis that the conditions after the political changes in the east of Germany encouraged personal agency among young people whose intended career paths had been diverted or terminated. Some young people were quick to pick up the 'signals' from the system and market that active transition behaviours and 'going for it' are the best ways to maximise opportunity and reduce risks for young people in already precarious positions, particularly where social support means that mistakes are unlikely to be irrevocable. The results also

suggested, however, that the 'open' labour market conditions were not as open as might be expected.[ii] The young people who had experienced 'broken transitions' into the labour market (often through closing down of opportunities in their chosen occupational pathway or state industry) remained cautious about their future prospects, even where they had gained entry to the labour market, reflecting the unstable features of the secondary sector jobs that were most readily available to them.

8.3 Perceptions of Individual Responsibility and Reactions to Systemic and Political Changes

Young people who were in their teens at the time of the political changes had become focused on coping with the here and now in very practical and concrete ways (cp. Leggewie 1998: 25–26). Generally speaking, the views reflected individuals' present experiences of success, failure, setback and unexpected turnings rather than ideological commitment or particular value positions. The perception of some trainers that young people had become alienated from the new system was not strongly apparent, although there was some sense of despondency in the group with broken transitions. Success was often ascribed by young people to luck as well as their own personal characteristics, and failure ascribed both to personal 'weaknesses' and to the problems of being 'only an average person' in a highly competitive economic setting.

The findings drawn on throughout this volume have filled in the theoretical sketch of individualisation processes started in our earlier work, with reference to the work of social theorists such as Ulrich Beck, Martin Baethge and Anthony Giddens. This research has gone further than previous studies in extending the age range up to 25, investigating new labour markets and, most importantly, focusing on the how young adults experience control and exercise personal agency in the extended and multiple transitions experienced between the ages of 18 and 25.

As discussed in previous chapters, the research findings showed how those who are unemployed experience little sense of control over their own situation. Young people from Leipzig and Derby attributed lack of achievement to their own perceived lack of skills in their private and working life and to their own weaknesses, to a greater extent than those in the Hanover group. In Hanover, individualisation of failure was less manifest compared with the two other localities. Young people focused much more on ways in which external factors beyond their control were of importance for an individual's opportunities. They had more critical views of the equality of opportunities and that ability will be rewarded. They score low on agency factors and have a fairly negative view about their futures.

Labour market conditions and socialisation affect the assessment young adults make as to what extent structural or individual factors influence life opportunities. The belief in how open opportunities are for everybody plays an important role for the young adults' assessment for opportunities and control of their lives.

Young people in Germany were increasingly caught in a double bind: a hostile labour market which effectively excludes unqualified young people but which can no longer sustain the training routes and social support previously provided for the large majority. The striving for work identities, so strongly fostered by German culture and tradition, does not diminish, and there is evidence of growing frustration among marginalised and excluded youth. There is, at the same time, a growth in casualised work opportunities available for unqualified adults, producing a situation which begins to mirror the British. Ways into the labour market are becoming diversified and more dependent on displaying the characteristics employers want, as well as qualifications. These trends are most marked in the former east, but signal wider trends throughout the FRG.

The evidence from the Anglo-German studies taken together, shows that active transition behaviours are important in overcoming setbacks for those already in precarious situations. The active transition behaviours most likely to overcome setbacks are those associated with taking chances in fluid and changing labour market conditions. Structural factors, however, remain highly significant in the shaping of life chances, and we find with Martin Diewald (2000) that the transformations are not such that release of new forms of individual competence leads to major reallocations of social position.

When they are unsuccessful, the outcomes of ‘taking chances’ are likely to be downward movements from already precarious situations. Young people take calculated risks, but under very different individual pressures and circumstances. Decision-making is relative to their personal horizons and the subjectively perceived range of education and employment options available to them. While these decisions are not *determined* by social class or by the dynamics of the labour market, they have *structural foundations* which are manifested in life experiences and destinations in primary and secondary labour markets. Policies which promote action competences and active behaviours have to recognise the ‘risk’ side of the equation and ensure adequate support if young people are not to be further disadvantaged by accepting the message that their own shortcomings are to blame for predicaments which are beyond their individual control.

However, institutional and material resources to cope with everyday life and to prepare for the world of work are far less available for the young in eastern Germany. The transition to work and family life used to be much more continuous than in the west. They took the normative steps faster than their contemporaries in the old federal states: VET, employment, marriage and parenthood were coordinated in such a way that adulthood was reached in the work-conscious German Democratic Republic several years earlier than in West Germany. The age of achieving adult status was closer to British than to West German norms, at the time of the reunification. Today the young generation, after socialism, has had to shift to what Heinz called the ‘transition rhythm’ of West Germany. This requires many individual decisions in a much less transparent social environment. Moreover, the extension of the transition to adulthood has to be subsidised by the institutional help of the welfare state for quite a number of young people who are not yet in the employment system.

Many young people who have responded quickly to systemic and market changes have taken chances, in individualised ways. They need to have non-stigmatising forms of material support readily available, to ensure that they are not stretched beyond their capacities to deal with difficult life situations unaided.

In short, an unreformed dual system cannot be made to work in labour market conditions such as those emerging in Eastern Germany. Stop-gap measures may fuel the polarisation into primary and secondary segments of the labour market, thus heightening social inequalities.

8.4 Individualisation Revisited

Policy implications are immediately apparent, but what of the contributions to social theory?

Pathways to work have become more socially segmented and the risks of under-employment and joblessness have increased and widened in scope, to touch the lives of vocationally and academically qualified young people and adults (Heinz 1999; Cote 2003). Only at the extreme ends of the spectrum of advantage and disadvantage are pathways and destinations relatively unaffected by the social changes of the time. For many, social and gender inequalities restrict the possibilities to take advantage of career options, even where these are apparently available.

These and other comparative analyses showed that more differentiated accounts of 'individualisation' are needed, which do not fall into the trap of assuming uni-linear modernisation in the developed world and uncritical application of the *Beck's* version of reflexive modernisation in other societies.

The research drawn on throughout this volume has revisited and sought to elaborate the theoretical sketches of human agency offered by *Beck* through exploration of the different dimensions of agency and control in human lives and through a range of 'empirical encounters'

8.5 Adults' Experiences of Working Life and Learning

At the outset of this chapter, I pointed to the ways in which 'social regularities' revealed by survey research become much more difficult to interpret when they are connected to the voices and purposeful activities of the social actors moving in highly differentiated social landscapes. This applies particularly in the domain of research into work, where the human agency of employees is sometimes acknowledged but rarely explored or well understood. Business and management texts often ignore the experiences of the employee. Research carried out in the broad field of industrial relations focuses increasingly on the tensions involved in controlling and disciplining a workforce while releasing its creativity. These tensions are manifestations of the conflicts inherent in the wage relationship. The interests of employees are fundamentally different from those of their managers and employers, and their

power is much more limited. There are also at least three distinct rationalities operating at work (Noon and Blyton 2002). These often compete, and none is dominant. For example, different rationalities at work are reflected in perceptions of time and space. Employees personalise their working environments and shape the timing and phasing of their work in ways that are shaped by rationalities profoundly different from those of their managers, for example. This reflects the complex demands that capital has from wage labour:

> the need for consent as well as control, for cooperation as well as compliance leads to relationship based on negotiation and tension between different groups and rationalities, rather than imposition of a dominant rationality (Noon and Blyton, p. 338).

Management often has difficulty in accepting the existence of multiple realities at work. Approaches that emphasise common interests and pay lip service to employee consultation while downplaying or ignoring power differentials invariably end in contradictions. Industrial sociology focuses on the exploitation inherent in capitalism. Survey findings that reveal employee experiences of satisfaction and fulfillment through their work are explained away as expressions of false consciousness. This also leads to contradictions of another kind, as those held to be so easily duped are also those on whose empowerment and radical action the future is argued to rest. These are oversimplifications, but serve to underline the point that employee voice and worker agency need to be attended to more seriously.

In line with the thesis of this volume, employees' experiences have to be understood in the context of their immediate social landscape, including the dynamics of the employing organisations and the communities in which they operate. This level is most germane for understanding how human agency can be exercised, while recognising that macro changes in the organisation of work are themselves part of the wider social context and sources of at least some of the social dynamics at work.

8.6 Changes in the Experience of Work

Much attention has been paid to ways in which competition has led to changes in the way work is organised. Less attention has been paid to how these changes at work are experienced, although the two are, of course, inextricably linked. Continuous pursuit of performance improvement and reduction of unit costs have far-reaching consequences for employees' experiences of work. They are reflected in management strategies at company level, in changes in regulatory frameworks that govern the employer–employee relationship and in priorities in education and training systems.

Work has become more precarious in the high-insecurity societies of the west. Although the degree of heightened insecurity varies substantially between USA and European countries, the trend is broadly recognised as welfare systems are 'reformed'. Work becomes intermittent for some, intensified for others. Move towards new forms of work is associated with fragmented, smaller, high-tech

organisations with decreasing regulation, offering part-time short-term employment contracts – making insecurity and vulnerability one of the dominant realities of the work of the future.

Earlier chapters have shown that work is not wholly undertaken to fulfil economic needs. The majority of people say that they would work even if there was no economic need. There is a moral dimension to work that is reflected in intrinsic needs and motivations, and the universal need for the social interactions afforded by work is an important element of this Jahoda (1979: 77).

The concept of 'skill' is also changing as the organisation of work changes. The ways in which skills are recognised or overlooked have important effects on the ways people move in social landscapes. There is much controversy about what skills are and how they should be measured.

Perspectives (of economists) that see skills as residing in the job, and those (stemming from psychology) that equate skills with individual attributes, are often criticised for ignoring the social and historical development of the different conceptions of skill (Rainbird 1997). Skill is a powerful concept since it implies a measure of the worth. The skills that are recognised and rewarded reflect the power and influence of social groupings. They are used by different interest groups to claim status, preferential treatment and higher rewards. This is illustrated, for example, in the valuing of cognitive attainment over practical and vocational abilities, in restrictions in entry to occupational and professional groups and in the attribution and reward of skills according to gender. Gender has been critically important in defining skill, which has often been determined by the sex of those who do the work rather than its content. This impacts particularly on the gendered division of labour, as discussed in Chapter 6. 'Emotional labour' has entered the vocabulary of work research. Perspectives on the role of emotion in work that focus exclusively on the exploitative nature of emotional labour can potentially be illuminated by reference to employees' experience of work. Evidence from empirical encounters including some of those outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 have shown that emotional labour can be can be seen as a source of satisfaction for some while course of dissatisfaction and alienation for others (Hochschild 1983; Wouters 1989). Noon and Blyton argue that the evidence on the extent to which emotional labour is particularly exploitative and damaging to psychological well-being in the workplace is inconclusive. For some individuals who strongly identify with their work role and for whom the emotional display rules entailed in that job are fully consistent with their personal values and identity, emotional labour is part of job satisfaction and may have attracted them to apply for the job in the first place. In these cases, Noon and Blyton argue, the performance of such tasks is likely to enhance rather than reduce psychological well-being. As with counselling occupations, however, this does rely on appropriate regulation of the job demands and employee entitlement such that psychological and physical demands do not over-burden the individual or team involved. Given appropriate regulation of these roles and tasks, the major issue that has to be resolved is that of equity in recognition and reward. Emotional labour plays an increasingly important role in service occupations but has not been accorded prestige or skilled status. What counts as skill is defined by social relations and power structures. In

this context, emotional labour is often portrayed as something women are naturally good at, an innate ability rather than an acquired skill to be rewarded.

As knowledge has become commodified, the tacit dimensions of knowledge present in all kinds of work are increasingly seen as having the potential for commodification. This means different things to different social actors. For employees as holders of the tacit knowledge, does this mean they can claim a commodified exchange value for their knowledge through accreditation? For managers and employers, the issue is whether and how such knowledge can be appropriated. Knowledgeability, when seen as a resource to be exploited, is only part of the long-term relations of exploitation in capitalism. When knowledge workers assume increasingly important, pivotal positions in workplaces and organisational environments, the control and manipulation of information becomes a critical factor.

Employees navigate the conflicts inherent in the employment relationship, surviving by consent and resistance. Resistance and strategic compliance can take many forms, and the ways in which they are acted out in different social landscapes involve layers of meaning and the different rationalities described earlier in the chapter. Behaviours such as joking, gossiping and rule bending are not always problematic for management – each can be interpreted as complex forms of compliance or resistance according to the work context.

A more significant challenge in many workplaces is that the way in which celebration of 'diversity' has been embraced has fuelled the wider shift of focus from the collective workgroup to the individual employee. It shifts attention from shared disadvantages in the workplace to differentiation of individual attributes and 'needs'. When difference is celebrated, the imperatives of fairness and equity of treatment may be downplayed and obscured. The significance of shared knowledge and interdependencies of role are understated. It is in this context that 'self-directed' learning has sometimes been uncritically adopted (see Chapter 4). Plurality is a better aim than diversity (Noon and Blyton 2000), because plurality encourages a focus on commonalities that cluster people by shared experiences and goals as well as by positive recognition of difference.

At least as much work activity takes place outside paid employment as within it. Activities and experiences that constitute hidden work include domestic work, caring for young, elderly or disabled relatives, voluntary and community activities. Hidden work and visible work spheres are inter-related, in that work in the visible work sphere impacts on work in the home and vice versa. There is a substantial impact on those who carry out caring responsibilities on their paid employment in the 'visible' work sector, as cases in Chapter 4 showed.

8.7 The Individualisation Thesis Revisited

The research findings drawn on throughout the earlier chapters enable comparisons to be made of the experiences and orientations of people in a matrix of institutional settings and localities which structure experience and action in different ways,

focusing on the 'social regularities'. This helps to generate insights into relationships between people's feelings of control in their own lives and the underlying structural features of their social landscapes. Gender and social class differences in feelings of control and other indicators of agency become apparent and contribute to improved understandings of the factors involved in becoming socially defined as independent and personally effective or (conversely) marginalised in different settings.

8.8 Agency and Feelings of Control

Agency is often understood rather simplistically as input from individuals to various social processes, emphasising those aspects of social engagement which are predominantly individual, creative, proactive and involve resisting external pressures. The expanded concept, of agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) in which past habits and routines are contextualised and future possibilities envisaged within the contingencies of the present moment, leads to a socially situated understanding of human agency. Agency is influenced but not determined by structures; it involves internalised understandings and ways of interpreting the world as well as external actions. These are developed in and through social practices in multiple environments and social settings as people move in social landscapes. The dynamics of social landscapes thus both generate and encapsulate the limits and the possibilities of human agency.

The concept of 'control' is closely related to conceptualisations of human agency. Control beliefs as can be understood as subjective representations of [the person's] capabilities to exercise control (Flammer 1997). This is distinct from the actual exercise of control, which can be considered as the regulation of process. According to Flammer, control beliefs can be conceptualised as a composite of contingency and competence beliefs. Contingency beliefs are beliefs in the probability that certain actions will affect outcomes in particular ways. Competence beliefs are the beliefs people have about their capabilities to act in ways which will produce the probable outcomes. The distinctions between contingency and competence in Flammer's work are paralleled by the identification of two components in the work of Bandura (1995). Bandura has characterised control beliefs as a combination of expectations: 'response-outcome' expectations plus efficacy expectation. Flammer's work concentrated on the development of three dimensions of control beliefs: the ontogenic development of the structure of control beliefs, individual differences in the strength of control beliefs and the 'micro-genesis' of a given control belief. A fourth dimension is discussed only briefly: variations in the strength and domains of control beliefs for different age groups and cultures. The present research is centrally concerned with this 'fourth dimension' in ways which are informed in part by the prior work on the structural composition of control beliefs. The composite 'control belief' is a personal construct which is linked to environmental influences in complex ways and is differentially constructed throughout the life course and in different domains of experience.

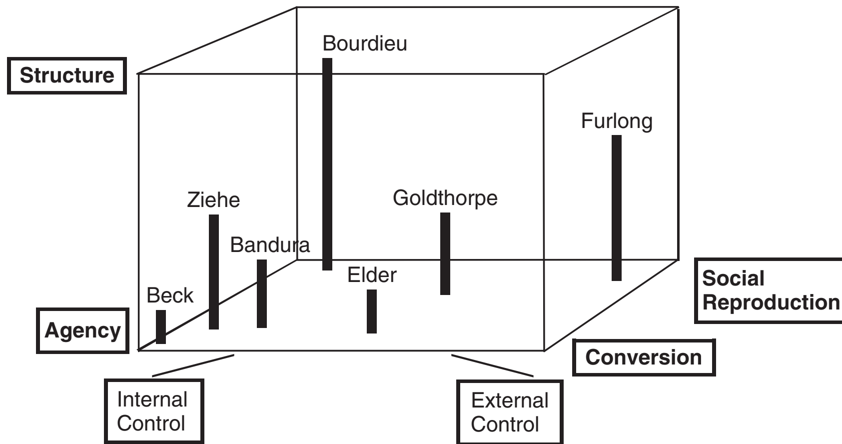

Fig. 8.1 Conceptual schema for structure-agency

Throughout this volume I have focused on control beliefs, agency and those attributes and behaviours which imply agency and feelings of control. This enables interdisciplinary exploration of theoretical standpoints through empirical encounters. A conceptual schema for investigation of the individualisation 'thesis' can be represented as a cube. This representation attempts to captures and locate theories which explain structure and agency in different ways and allows the individualisation theses of Beck (1992; 1998) and Baethge (1989) to be viewed as theoretical sketches to be explored and contested. These and other theoretical stances within the dimensions of structure–agency, internal–external control and social reproduction–conversion are shown in Fig. 8.1.

8.8.1 Conceptual Schema for Structure–Agency

Theoretical perspectives which consider the inter-relationships between society and human agency can be located in relation to these three dimensions.

The first dimension is that of social/structural determinism versus individualisation and reflexivity in social biographies. As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, the development of the individualisation thesis is accredited to a number of German sociologists, and the usual starting point is Beck's outline of a new type of society based on 'reflexive modernization', which he called a Risk Society (Beck 1992; 1999). The notion of a 'risk society' has been applied to increasing uncertainty and fragmentation experienced by many people in the unfolding of the life course. Individualisation is part of the dissolution of the traditional parameters of industrial society, including class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles: 'These de-traditionalisations happen in a social surge of individualization' (Beck 1992: 87). Within the 'individualized society', the individual must learn 'to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own

biography' (p. 135). Baethge (1989) took this thesis further by applying it to the situation of youth in industrialised societies. He made reference to 'the disappearance of class-specific socialization structures' and to a new trend towards 'double individualization' (Baethge 1989: 28–31). The latter trend involved, first, the structural disintegration of social classes or strata into 'individualized' sub-groups and, second, the formation of individualistic identities at the expense of collective identity. These perspectives stress the need for new categories because the old labels or descriptions of youth transitions simply no longer fit and have lost their explanatory power. There may well be an acknowledgement within this perspective that inequalities remain – indeed very few writers in the field would argue that *inequality* has disappeared – but social classes are now diffused and have disappeared. As proponents of the idea that people are agents actively and individually engaged in the construction of their own biographies, Beck and Baethge are thus positioned close to the base of the cube.

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have argued that these accounts of individualisation are based on an epistemological fallacy. The social world has come to be *regarded* as unpredictable and filled with risks that can only be negotiated on an individual level, while structural forces operate as powerfully as ever, while the chains of human interdependence remain intact. Furlong and Cartmel are thus positioned high on the structure/agency dimension. Billett (2006) also contests the individualisation thesis but offers a more reflexive account and less deterministic account of the ways in which these human interdependences shape and remake aspects of the social world.

An underlying aim of the research woven into this volume has been to explore how people who are positioned differently in relation to the demands of working life experience control and exercise personal agency, exploring the subjectivities associated with choice and determination under differing structural and cultural conditions. What kinds of beliefs and perspectives do people have on their future possibilities? How far do they feel in control of their lives? What is the interplay between these subjectivities and social characteristics of age, gender and social class? How does what people believe is possible for them (their personal horizons developed within cultural and structural influences) determine their behaviours and what they perceive to be 'choices'.

The second dimension emphasises internal versus external control processes. Bandura, Elder, Flammer and other 'efficacy' researchers have emphasised internal processes of the 'acting individual' in relation to the external environment. There are limitations to personal control in all domains of life. There are some aspects of environment and personal circumstance that are extremely difficult to change. Others can be overcome by the exercise of initiative and learning. Rothbaum et al. (1982) distinguished between primary and secondary modes of control. People exercising primary control try to change their environment in ways which they feel will better fit their aspirations. Or they try to change their environment to fit with their subjective perceptions. Secondary control operates in reverse, by changing subjective perceptions, aspirations and interpretations to match the environment. When primary control fails or is expected to fail because of the obstacles the individual

perceives to be operating, secondary control comes into play more strongly. Flammer hypothesises that a gradual shift from primary to secondary control can be expected over the life course. It can also be expected that there are large individual differences in the limits which are encountered early in adult life and that these also very between different socio-economic and cultural environments. Human development in the first three decades of life involves increasing individual control and beliefs. Beliefs in a certain amount of control become important for well-being (see e.g. Connolly 1989). Studies of over-estimation of control beliefs have shown the developmental value of high-control beliefs (p. 85). Over-estimation of control increases scope for further development in children. It has been argued that schooling fails to maximise human potential by reducing control beliefs for significant numbers of children. Heikhausen and Krüger (1993) and Heikhausen and Schultz (1997) have also shown that desired attributes are seen as more controllable than undesired ones among younger, middle-aged and older adults. People who are directly affected by important changes hold higher control beliefs in relation to these changes than people who are not yet directly concerned with them. This applies particularly to life course transitions. People also have illusions about control, which go beyond simple over-estimation. People sometimes believe they are exerting control even over clearly random events. Taylor and Brown (1988) have reviewed evidence of control illusion as it relates to judgement of the future. Most people believe that things will improve for them in the future, that their own future will improve more than that of others and that there is a lower likelihood that undesirable events will happen to them. It is held that control illusions are important for personal well-being as well as the ‘capacity for creative and productive work’ and the ability to care for others. What are the conditions under which individuals develop beliefs in high or low control? Flammer comments that research has mainly centred on educational environments and has not examined what he terms the ‘broader ecology of socialisation’. Whether a person underestimates or overestimates their extent of control is very consequential on their experiences and socialisation. For young people, how far they succeed in developing longer term occupational goals depends not only on their past socialisation in family and school, but also to a large degree on the way their identity formation is linked to challenge and rewarding experience in the passage to employment itself (Evans and Heinz 1994)

Social biographies of individuals are linked to social structures, the environments and institutions of education, the labour market and civic society and the changing conditions they encounter in their day-to-day lives. They are also linked to cultural norms and expectations and how these intersect with institutional structures. Sociologists who emphasise internal processes of the acting individual alongside reflexivity and individualisation are positioned at the intersection of agency and internal processes. Those who place emphasis the external limits on internal processes are placed at the intersection of structure and external processes.

The third dimension places the focus on social reproduction versus conversion, exploring the degree to which social mobility and transformation can be attributed to individual and collective scope for action. The original position of rational choice or rational action theorists was that people tend to act in ways which are rational in

the situation in which they find themselves. In arguing for a ‘privileged’ theory of action, development of this theoretical line has had to accommodate the numerous cases of action which are apparently not rational by objective criteria. The arguments that such actions are always subjectively rational, that is that they appear rational from the actors’ point of view, weakens the theory as a sociological theory of action unless the systematic tendencies are investigated and explained. Based on law of large numbers, Goldthorpe (1998) has emphasised the overriding importance of analysing the conditions under which actors come to act, from the sociological perspective. He argues that people act systematically, rather than just idiosyncratically, in a way that is subjectively rational. He argues that sociologists should ‘concentrate their explanatory efforts on the situation of action rather than on the psychology of the acting individual’, aiming to show how social, structural and processional features of a situation may cause the actor to make choices which are not objectively rational, but are rational from the actor’s point of view (i.e. subjectively).

Rationality in action is seen as situationally rather than procedurally determined:

> it is far more illuminating to investigate empirically, across societies and cultures, those more particular structures and processes – at the level of social networks, group affiliations and institutions – by which patterns of action are guided into conformity with specified standards of rationality or are deflected from them
>
> (Goldthorpe, p. 189 [Footnote 15])

Furlong and Cartmel’s emphasis on structural determinants, external processes and social reproduction places the ‘epistemological fallacy’ argument towards the back right hand intersection. While Bourdieu’s (1993) emphasis on social reproduction is also high but emphasises subjectivities of the acting individual and explores agency in relation to ‘habitus’ and ‘field’.

8.9 Understanding Social Regularities and Individual Action

A better understanding is needed of the relationships between social regularities that are apparent in the broad landscape and the individual and collective action of the social actors as they move in that landscape. In looking at individuals, within the perspective of structuration, it is possible to develop hypotheses about the structuring effects of contexts while focusing on personal and collective experiences of agency. The integrative concepts are those of control and agency. As Elder has observed, all social transitions entail some risk of losing personal control. How this is experienced and acted upon depends on biography to date and on material and social situation. Our expanded concept of agency sees the actors as having a past and imagined future possibilities, both of which guide and shape actions in the present. Actors also have subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, which affect how they act. Their agency is ‘socially situated’. This has placed the spotlight on the experiences people have of exercising control and agency in chosen cities and work settings and how this links with the ways in which they are socially positioned as employees, learners and citizens.[iii]

8.10 Shared Experiences of Gender

Chapter 6 shows how many people, particularly young men, believe the effects of gender in life chances are outweighed in importance by the effects of educational qualifications, effort and performance. There was awareness that particular sectors of the labour market remain biased towards one or other sex. Beyond this, more subtle forms of sexism were seen to be operating, such as people being stereotyped by the way they look and women having to perform better than men in order to gain an equal degree of respect. There were frequent references to 'competence' overriding other factors, but within an overall awareness that there are differentials in the levels and status achieved by females and males in employment and the economy.

More generally, there was awareness of gender alongside the individual attribution of success, with a sense of acceptance by both young women and adults that a reality of working life is the need to prove oneself more as a female. While quite powerful discourses around gender emerged in many of the empirical encounters, there were differences in emphasis in the perceptions of scope and limits for choice and equality of treatment between individuals.

The demands of childbearing and childrearing were at the forefront of the thoughts of the German young women. In the German interviews, although women were generally seen as having the same chances as men at work, the view was often expressed that women must at some point 'choose between work and family'. Many more women than men gave priority to 'child-rearing possibilities' as something they wanted from work in all areas, but more in Germany than in England. However, the largest proportion in any group who considered this a priority was 50% (Leipzig females in higher education). There was little evidence of the emergence of the 'new man' who pays close attention to family considerations.

Men who experienced long-term unemployment found it harder to get into the labour market and find stable employment, and this is the case particularly for males of working-class origin. In some areas in England, women view their futures significantly more positively than males. There was evidence of women behaving with a higher degree of agency than males, at least in some respects. For example, young women tended to leave the parental home earlier than males and were more open to the possibility of moving away from the area they currently lived in. These are examples of agency at an individual level. Young women also exhibited higher levels of collective agency in that they were found to be more politically active. This difference was apparent in the most difficult environments. A possible explanation is that women are more resilient, becoming disengaged less easily than males. Remarkably consistent differences emerged across the three areas between men and women in higher education which appeared to reflect greater agency on the part of female students.

8.11 Shared Perspectives on 'Race' Ethnicity and Nationality

The findings shown in Fig. 2.2 (introduced in Chapter 2), while they are illuminating in general terms, mask the fact that 53% of ethnic minority respondents in

the English city thought that race had a considerable effect in shaping life chances (compared to 17% non-minority) and 30% thought that gender had a considerable effect (compared to 18%). Young people participating in the research had rather less to say on the topic of race than gender and gave fewer examples, except in the East German city, where responses reflected the high proportions who perceived 'race' as important in life chances. Issues of 'nationality' aroused strong feelings and reflected concerns about the 'xenophobia' reported in recent press coverage of developments in the eastern part of Germany. That is not to say that the attitudes were themselves primarily xenophobic. The attitudes expressed recognised that non-Germans suffer particular forms of overt discrimination and that this fundamentally affects life chances. Similarly, discussion of social background is influenced by different meanings in Germany, particularly in Leipzig where class pride (for manual workers and farmers) in the GDR was replaced by class-based disadvantage for the former at least. Insights into this were gained through the questions which asked about influences of family background and obstacles, both material and social, and through open questions about the factors which affect and influence occupational destinations and 'career'.[iv,v]

Social class awareness is shown to be mixed in with family and gender dimensions in complex ways, with much reference to the importance of 'social connections' and the invisible social factors, beyond qualification and competence, which affect success. English research participants were more likely than their German peers to change their job expectations, usually (but not always) in an upward direction. They were also more independent of their parents in all groups. Social class was perceived to be more important in Germany. A minority of participants were willing to talk about their life experiences directly within a social class perspective, but many respondents, especially students in Germany, were aware of the influences and benefits of their parents' occupational background. The effects of 'framing' in limiting what might be seen as possible from any particular social position (Bloomer 1999) came through strongly, but equally there were many indicators that forms of social capital were seen as being convertible and expandable through qualifications, making new connections and taking chances. This came through in the views, expectations and experiences expressed, but class-based limits were widely recognised, with disbelief that 'talent always rises to the top'. One quarter of the young research participants in the English city felt that social class/status 'does not affect your chances in life' although this is higher than the very small minorities of the Germans who were prepared to agree with this statement.

Relatively few of the items and measures designed to identify the dimensions of agency and control in their lives were significantly associated with social class, where this was measured by father's occupation.[vi] There were many more significant associations with the young adults' present career position. Orientations towards long-term planning,[vii] as well as being an indicator of proactivity and of some forms of agency and control are of great interest, given the central place given by Beck and other individualisation theorists to people becoming the 'planning office for their biographies'. These are the theoretical constructs that emphasise human agency most strongly.[viii] A long-term planning orientation was one of the few variables which was significantly associated with the social class origins of the research

participants. Life chances may have become more determined by people's abilities to be strategic in pursuing careers, but this finding has suggested that this is the very characteristic which has structural foundations in social class.

8.12 Agency and Performance in Working Lives

The evidence discussed so far suggests that reflexive processes operate in differentiated and complex ways in relation to the individual's subjectively perceived frame for action and decision. Thus, a person's frame has boundaries and limits which change over time, but which have structural foundations in ascribed characteristics such as gender and social or educational inheritance and in acquired characteristics of education and qualification.

As Roberts (2000) has also shown, adults in market economies, particularly those with broken or 'downward drift' occupational biographies, are unlikely to be able to identify with any stable group which can provide a voice or platform for action. In this and other respects, the hypothesis that a *structured individualisation process is apparent in the experience, values and behaviour of young people* is supported.

I have, periodically, used metaphors to portray and understand shifts in the processes of transitions and the part played by human agency in the course of lives. I have characterised these as 'niches, pathways, trajectories and navigations' (Evans and Furlong 1997).[ix]

The metaphor of 'navigation' was the metaphor which emerged from my work with Walter Heinz and which I extended to 'shooting the rapids' in trying to explain some of the tensions in the ideas of manufactured uncertainty and reflexivity, in my inaugural professorial lecture in 1996. But all of these metaphors underplay lateral movements and 'border crossings' which have become uncovered in the latest research – the importance of the different domains of life, horizons and group affiliations. People as social actors moving in a social landscape is my latest metaphor where internalisation of horizons and possibilities matters as much as external action and change over time.

As social actors in changing social landscapes, people perceive the horizons not only from where they initially stand in the landscape but also according to where their journey takes them. Where they go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves and the terrain and elements they encounter. Their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the resources and help they can call on and those with whom they associate themselves.

The analysis of the research findings has demonstrated the interfusion of agency and structural influences and that contradictions are sometimes apparent in the people's positions, views and beliefs. Dualistic treatments of structure and agency quickly become problematic. In a short report, it has been possible only to convey some themes or 'motifs' emerging from the group interviews. It has not been

possible in an article of this length to do justice to the rich engagements which illuminated many aspects of the analysis. The combined data showed that, despite feelings of lack of control in the least advantaged groups and disbelief in some of the principles of individualism and meritocracy, most research participants attached considerable importance to individual effort and expressed the belief that if people worked hard and achieved suitable qualifications then they should be able to follow their own independent pathway in adult life. Social connections, forging them and 'making them work for you' as well as the importance of image and self-presentation were much emphasised. They are certainly not blind to the influences of economic and social structures, but the least advantaged emphasised that they have to be 'realistic' in their individual aspirations and goals. It was striking that there was little sense of fatalism in any of the interview encounters, with only three interactions out of hundreds coded as displaying fatalistic attitudes. Frustrated agency and struggle characterised the day-to-day experiences of many of the young people who were in disadvantaged situations. In explaining the individual attributions of success and failure within socially structured environments and the almost universal recognition of the importance of 'qualifications', there is a need to look through the lens of agency as a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures, to find the concept of *bounded agency*. These young adults are undoubtedly manifesting a sense of agency, but there are a number of boundaries or barriers which circumscribe and sometimes prevent the expression of agency. The findings also further challenge the simplistic application of the concept of 'individualisation' in differing socio-economic and cultural environments, in ways which imply or assume uni-linear trends within undifferentiated contexts of 'modernisation'.

One of our starting points (Rudd and Evans 1998) was to argue that many studies of youth transitions have underestimated the degree of choice or agency evident in transitional processes. While the 'individualisation' thesis places agency at centre stage, accounts of individualisation and structuration, as Gudmundsson (2000) has pointed out, are no more than theoretical sketches, which can be developed and contested in 'empirical encounters'. This has allowed for the emergence of a range of 'middle ground' theoretical positions (Fig. 8.2).

The accumulated evidence suggests that agency operates in differentiated and complex ways in relation to the individual's subjectively perceived frames for action and decision. Thus, a person's frame has boundaries and limits which can change over time, but which have structural foundations in ascribed characteristics such as gender and social/educational inheritance, in acquired characteristics of education and qualification and in the segments of the labour market into which these lead. In this and other respects, the hypothesis that a 'structured individualisation' process[x] is apparent in the experience, values and behaviour of young people is supported. While structured individualisation accounts for the variety of experiences and incidences of interrupted or broken transitions in all social groups as well as for the class-based and gender-based linkages in planning orientations and horizons,

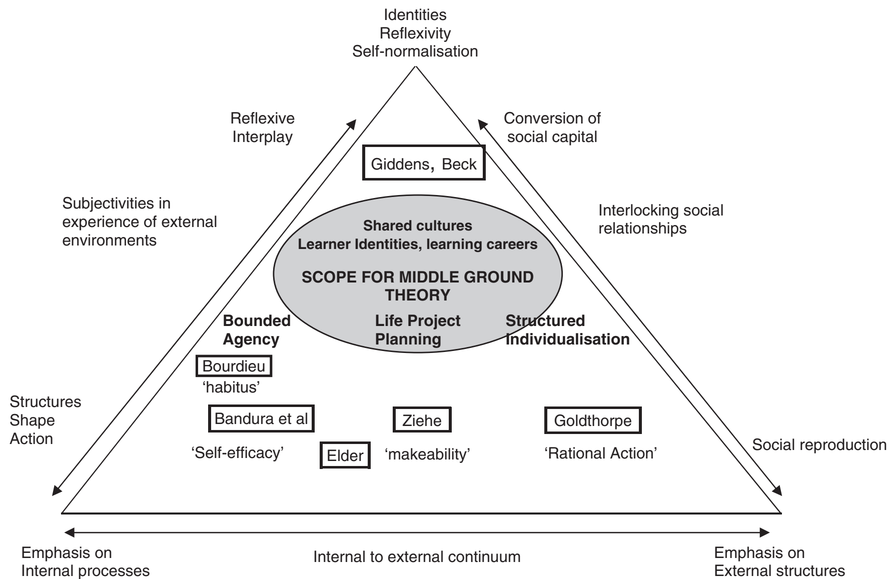

Fig. 8.2 Theoretical location of bounded agency

it shifts the attention back onto the operation of structures rather than focusing attention on how the dynamics of agency and the agency–structure interfusion work in the social world. The expanded notion of bounded agency recognises that the acting individual or group is socially situated, but not socially determined. Agency understood in this way is bounded agency that expresses itself in the social landscape through the dynamics of multiple, interlocking socio-biographical journeys in a social terrain. This makes a conceptual advance in linking social change and individual lives. It goes beyond the 'core assumption of the life course paradigm which asserts that developmental processes and outcomes are shaped by the life trajectories people follow, whether reflective of good or bad times' by examining the possibility that the flows of influence are multiple, sometimes mutually reinforcing and reciprocal. For example, ambitious goals and endeavours are likely to appeal to people who have strong control beliefs and not to those lacking self-confidence. In turn, the progress in working towards goals of this kind tends to further enhance a sense of personal agency. Beyond this, social relationships also structure experience and interlock with personal constraints in complex ways, while external influences and constraints can turn into modes of agency through a process of internalisation. An understanding of how human agency is exercised in working lives requires insights into the realities of work: how employees understand and make sense of their work, how they respond to the structures imposed on them, how they use their skills knowledge and emotions and how they cope with pressure and monotony. It also requires insights into how and why employees suffer injustice and how they represent themselves (Noon and Blyton 2000).

8.13 Evolving Approaches to Understanding People as Agents in Life and Work

Research on structure and agency had already been forced to move in a number of new directions, using new frameworks, terminologies and methods. A number of metaphors have been used to describe such transitions, including niches, pathways, trajectories and navigations (Evans and Furlong 1997). The later studies moved from a concentration on trajectories towards personal biographies, introducing conceptions of individualisation which suggest that progress through the school to work phase is based on more complex reflexive interactions of individual agency and structural influences than are acknowledged in much of the previous work in this field.

Billett (2006) offers a more relational account, arguing that we need to release understandings of work from captivity within either individual or social views by exploring, through empirical encounters as well as theorising, the relational interdependence between the two. Individual constructions of the experience of working life and how people actively engage with work intertwine individual and social contributions as people act, think and feel their way into and through work activities and relationships.

Processes of negotiation between individuals and the social world shape people's experiences of work and working lives from initial entry to experienced worker to the anticipation and actualities of retirement. These processes involve contributions to the reshaping of work practices that occurs as people personalise their workplaces and work together to find new solutions to everyday challenges. These are fundamental learning processes, as people, both young and mature, experienced and inexperienced, increase their human capacities by contributing to evolving work practice. Active engagement remakes practices, and that engagement itself stems from biographical sources as well as situational contexts (see Evans and Kersh 2006).

Different versions of human agency are associated with the different rationalities that operate in and through the workplace. Conflicting interests are played out in the reshaping of work and working life. These are unpredictable in some respects, even though distinct rationalities can be observed. The needs of workers are heterogeneous and so too are the ways in which they negotiate the social worlds of work. Theorists' generalised descriptions of how social circumstances play out for workers require differentiation and elaboration through consideration of the realities as experienced in the social world of particular workplaces.

It is not weakening the social-cultural account to say that understanding the uniqueness of individual engagement is necessary to understand the ways in which (and the extent to which) the wider social world contributes to the reshaping of work and its practices. This takes place interdependently through the highly variable social engagement of individuals. Workers engage in order to stay effective as well as to remake their work practices. The interdependence of workers in achieving effectiveness and in co-constructing work practices reflects both personal and situational inter-relationships.

This interdependence rests at least in part on the worth of the work engaged in, to individuals. This worth is not well reflected in indicators such as hierarchies and rewards. As Billett puts it, ‘If only those engaged in work at the top of the hierarchies were accepted as identifying with worthwhile work and the vast majority of workers would be rendered as engaged in worthless pursuits for only material gains – this is clearly not the case’ (Billett 2006: 263).

Individuals’ sense of self-worth and their own goals are most likely to be key drivers for their engagement in work. People find meaning and purpose and exercise their agency within forms of work which are not highly regarded in terms of their social standing. Different rationalities operate for them, and many people find spaces and means for self-fulfilment within jobs that would be experienced by others as demeaning. Opportunities for individuals to engage in work and ways of working which suit their purposes are relational depending on individual’s circumstances, age, skills, capacities and social circumstances. Yet social regularities do have to be critically examined, to reveal how security of tenure and types of skill that are recognised and attract high pay are distributed by age, ethnicity and social class background. Inequalities according to social positioning are very evident in workplace participatory practices (as Billett terms them). The distribution of invitations, opportunities and support for participation in various workplace practices often reveals insider and excluded groups. This is the dark side of the way in relations between the individual and social play out in particular organisational contexts.

The improvement of performance is a key driver in most contemporary work organisations, with measurement of performance by KPIs (key performance indicators) playing a central part in management strategies. This is part of a distinctive organisational rationality which tends to ignore the significance of employees’ experience of work, has a narrow view of what constitutes the appropriate exercise of human agency (or ‘initiative’ at work) and is often at odds with the rationalities operating in their day-to-day work activities. Foregrounding individuals’ agency and intentionality more will not only humanise, but also lead to, richer learning and less counterproductive effects that stem from imposition of dominant rationality. A desire to ‘perform’ is present in individual’s agency and intentionality. Creating the conditions for performance through engagement is the challenge faced by middle managers, caught in the interfaces of the different rationalities at work. Intentionality, experience and human agency are all present in the work of employees and need to be taken into account by planners and policy makers if they want to optimise engagement of employees in effective work practices. In the social world, people are not compliant to abstract societal goals (Edwards and Boreham 2003). Localised experiences and subjectively defined purposes, individual and collective, lie behind motivation and directed efforts in the workplace and beyond.

There is a need to side see through and beyond blanket assumptions about the disempowering effects of work changes that permeate some aspects of the literature. Work changes are often assumed to have effects that are destabilising and that increase insecurity, but the variety of ways in which work changes are subjectively

experienced is also of interest. Many variables are involved. There is a significant personal dimension that is often biographically rooted. Exploration of the criteria by which individuals come to value their work is instructive. Personal accounts often reveal positive evaluations where one would expect to find the negative. While it is important not to over-emphasise positive accounts, it is equally important also not to dismiss these as false consciousness of the easily duped, but to recognise that the accounts people give of their work represent ways in which different rationalities are negotiated in the social world.

Goldthorpe's (1998) answer to the agency problem is that a calculation of costs and benefit is involved, while accepting that rationality operates within individuals' horizons and social norms and calling for more cross-cultural studies to illuminate this. The studies drawn on in this volume have not set out to study the rationality, objective or subjective of people's respondents' decision-making, but they revealed the apparent rationality of perceptions and actions in relation to the features of the labour markets involved and their positions in the 'social landscape'. However, these are as well explained by the individually perceived need to maximise their options and minimise social risk as they are by any calculation of 'cost and benefit'. Furthermore, social divisions are becoming obscured by a universalised belief in competence and that this is most advanced in market-oriented environments.[xi] Social differences are perceived and collectively experienced. In interviews and discussions, questions of 'competence, will and moral resolve' permeated and often dominated the discourse. This was particularly marked in extended discussions of gender differences.[xii]

The apparent differences in orientations to 'life project planning' may be explained in part by interactions between the generations and the extent to which parents are able to secure the prospect of 'better lives and opportunities' for their children. The changing but bounded aspirations and expressions of agency may also be explained by socio-cultural influences experienced in their peer groups and institutional settings, as well as by the contingencies inherent in life transitions. There are some important indicators of 'collectivities' in perceptions of the social landscape and common experiences which were well articulated (and may therefore be surmised to be well internalised). Socially bounded agency means that roles and social relations may be redefined as part of the strategy to 'take control of their lives', and these redefinitions may have collective and cultural features. Furthermore, social and cultural inheritance may be converted into action in new but socially differentiated and bounded ways.

The more insecure and flexible systems of advanced liberalism (represented by the English labour markets) necessitate greater proactivity and the maintenance of the positive approach to 'opportunities'. This arises out of individual attributions of success and failure, which are themselves linked with beliefs that 'opportunities are open to all'. But as actors move in these social landscapes, spaces open up for action which is not wholly reducible to the effects of social reproduction or underlying structural features. The concept of 'bounded agency' provides a focus for further consideration of policy issues. Young adults as well as mature adults

do manifest agentic beliefs in relation to work and their social environment, but many encounter frustrations in expressing or acting upon them. There are obviously constraints that affect the young particularly as they try to find and construct their place in the changing the 'social landscape'. There are other constraints that make it very difficult for mature adults who have broken 'career' histories and have spent significant amounts of time out of the labour market to re-establish themselves in occupations and gain just recognition for what they have to offer. Many of these constraints are embedded in the underlying structures and will be very difficult to influence or remove, but others might be reduced through actions of key players at local level, and new policy initiatives or foci can give legitimacy to different new ways of thinking about the predicament of those at the most vulnerable end of society. For example, policies have to ensure that the greatest demands to 'take control of their lives' do not fall on those who are the least powerfully placed in the 'landscape'. This means that agencies working both with young adults and mature adults need to emphasise brokerage and advocacy as a primary aim and function, to the extent that people perceive and experience this to be as real as the emphasis which is currently placed on their 'deficits'.

The process of tracing the pathway through empirical encounters has led from insights into the active and passive forms of 'structured individualisation' towards the concept of 'bounded agency'. It has shown how extended dialogues between ideas and evidence have identified how human aspirations and strivings express themselves in the social landscape through the dynamics of multiple, interlocking socio-biographical journeys in a social terrain. Within reflexive processes of structuration, social relationships structure experience and interlock with personal constraints in complex ways, while external influences and constraints can turn into modes of agency through a process of internalisation. An understanding of how human agency is exercised in working lives also requires insights into the realities of work: how employees understand and make sense of their work, how they respond to the structures imposed on them and how they can use their 'voice' and capacities to personalise practices and act with intentionality and purpose. All of these are rooted in the essential interdependencies of work and in human rationalities that depart markedly from those of performance and competition which permeate business management and government policies.

The responsibilities exercised by people in and through working life entail mutual responsibilities and interdependencies of purpose. Chapters in this volume have uncovered this through the tensions of gender autonomy, democratising workplace practices, widening participation, the personalisation of work and the contradictions of control being demanded of the powerless. Relationships are uncovered between workplace social relations, environments and individual disposition and action in the workplace. In these ways, the 'I' embodies the 'we', that dangerous pronoun of Sennett's. The concept of bounded agency, in moving beyond structured individualisation, also leads towards theories of social action. The interdependencies of everyday life and work provide checks and balances, accommodate difference and create spaces for action in pursuit of social improvements.

8.14 Summary and Conclusions

Previous chapters have explored aspects of individualisation through research encounters – interviews, discussions and surveys – with people different positioned in the social landscape. This chapter has linked these in an extended dialogue between ideas and evidence, to come to a view about the scope people have for fulfilling their aspirations and the ways in which they strive for this through work and learning.

A retrospective review of the life and work transitions of youth and early adulthood up to the mid-20s in contrasting socio-economic contexts has revealed how, if a young person embarks on this risky voyage in a clearly defined progression of qualifications, based on his or her decisions, this tends to bring stability to the unfolding life course. If a diffuse, short-term sequence of activities is embarked on in a way which is reactive to immediate job demands and upheavals, the risks are far greater. Self-confidence both in youth seems to arise out of success in completion of tasks, from vocational choice to labour market entry. As youth shades into adult life, confidence continues to stem from cumulative experiences of success in roles, from feelings of control in personal decision-making about jobs and experiences in job changes as employment structures and work contexts change. The converse is also true as people encounter setbacks in the labour market, which cumulatively undermine confidence as people are positioned as deficient in relation to labour market or system demands. Some aspects of adults' experiences, particularly those least powerfully placed in the social landscape, transcend national and cultural differences despite substantial variations in regulation and custom. Yet agency, the desire to change things for the better through action in the social world, also operates through the connections people forge with each other in the social world, the environments and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social landscapes. The chapter has shown that while human capacities for action are bounded and constrained in the extent to which they can affect people's lives for the better, they are also potent forces in a changing social world.

The lens of the 'risk society' offers a vision of human beings who are condemned to individualisation in order to survive in the modern world. A 'life-world' lens offers a richer vision in which the bounds on human strivings and aspirations are loosened to release creative potential and realise broader and fairer forms of meritocracy. This requires fundamental rethinking of the dynamics of work, learning, achievement and responsibility in society.

Notes

i. Dual system in Germany; work-based training and apprenticeships or further education college learning to vocational qualification in Britain.

ii. The official undertaking by the FRG, as part of the unification deal, that qualifications gained in the east would be recognised in the west, ensures that many of those who were proceeding successfully

towards 'qualified and experienced worker' status in growth areas of the primary segment of the labour market had access to additional training and maximum opportunities to continue on their existing trajectory.

iii. see Evans and Niemeyer 2004.

iv. Ethnicity of the respondents reflected the distribution in the local population in each institutional setting, as far as possible, but the differences in the nature of the population groups and the numbers were insufficient for statistical analysis to be meaningful.

v. Derby has a significant black population, Hanover a Turkish population and Leipzig an incoming population from Russia and some of the other eastern European countries.

vi. After exploring NSEC, we decided to use registrar general's scale for coding of social class, which has in-built problems of comparability because of different definitions of skill level. Because of difficulties of comparing skills level within the manual occupations (combined with a high level of non-response to this question), a fivefold classification has been used for the purpose of analysis: professional, managerial, other non-managerial, manual and never worked.

vii. Composite of items including goal orientation and alignment of career with personal interests.

viii. See Beck (1992), Bandura (1995), Ziehe (1996) and Baethge (1989).

ix. This portrayal and analysis had apparently resonated beyond the English-speaking world, given the reproduction of an edited version in the French language journal *Lien Social et Politique*.

x. see e.g. Heinz (1999a,b) and Roberts (1995).

xi. see e.g. Ball et al. (2000).

xii. Initial findings on gender were presented in American Educational Research Association Conference (2000) and have been elaborated in a chapter and journal article in preparation for publication; we produced an initial pamphlet on emerging findings and secured support for three international seminars and workshops for researchers and users. These were held in Hanover, Leipzig and Derby. Our dissemination programme linked with planned programme events to the end of the programme in 2003 as well as is engaging a wide range of users through presentations and website communications.