Minding the Gap? Young People's accounts of taking a Gap Year as a form of identity work in Higher Education

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Published in *Journal of Youth Studies,* 14(3): 341-357

Introduction

A Gap Year, or Year Out, is a break in an educational career that is usually taken between leaving school and beginning study at university (Jones 2004). It represents, therefore, an interruption in institutional transitions and consequently in some young people's transitions to adulthood. Such transitions remain a core area of interest in the sociology of youth, forming part of a wider debate about changes in the status of contemporary young adulthood. Whilst there is a growing consensus that transitions are more individualised and diverse when compared to those experienced by previous generations (for a discussion see Furlong and Cartmel 2007), some writers point to the continuing significance of structural constraints, particularly social class inequalities (MacDonald and Marsh 2005, Molgat 2007, Côte and Bynner 2008). The sociological analysis of the Gap Year provides a frame to consider such debates, but particularly to add to those concerning the significance of Higher Education in young people's transitions to adulthood (Brooks 2009).

University students are in a liminal life course position, neither dependent children nor fully independent adults (Arnett 1994). Previous research suggests that these young people experience considerable instability in their identities as they try to come to terms with their changing status (Scanlon *et al.* 2007). This is affected by changes in living

arrangements (Holmstrom *et al.* 2002, Holdsworth 2006), friendships (Brooks 2005), as well as concerns about future employment (Henderson *et al.* 2007). Thus, entering Higher Education represents a 'critical moment' in young people's lives (Henderson *et al.* 2007), although one that is inevitably refracted through the prism of other social identities, including, but not limited to, social class, gender, and ethnicity.

This paper is concerned with the role of a Gap Year in the context of Higher Education. Previous research has tended to focus on the Gap Year either as a form of social class positioning (Simpson 2005, Heath 2007) or a forum for undertaking transformations in identity during early adulthood (Beames 2004, Bagnoli 2009). This paper considers these two approaches, but argues that there is another possibility: that accounts of Gap Year experiences are used by young people to undertake forms of identity work within the context of Higher Education itself. The notion of identity work used here owes much to constructionist notions of the self, which postulate that identities are not fixed or pre-determined, but are negotiated and achieved in specific contexts, for specific purposes (for discussion see Walseth 2006; Watson 2008).

The paper begins with an outline of previous research concerning the Gap Year, before delineating the theoretical and methodological approach of the empirical study discussed here. Subsequently, the paper demonstrates how three psychosocial attributes, confidence, maturity and/or independence, redolent in talk about the Gap Year, are used by young people to undertake forms of identity work related to the context of Higher Education. It is argued that this talk produces two forms of distinction: a life course distinction, whereby a past self is compared to a present and future self; and a social distinction, where the self is compared

to others. These two forms of distinction, this paper concludes, have consequences for these young people's emerging social class and age identities and consequently for broader debates about transitions to adulthood.

Positioning the Gap Year

It is difficult to discern when the Gap Year emerged as a phenomenon, although it has been suggested that it was during the 1960s (Jones 2004). Its antecedents can be found in the aristocratic Grand Tour of the 18th and 19th Centuries, together with the Oxbridge examinations system (Jones 2004, Simpson 2004a, Heath 2007). Taking a Gap Year has become a notable feature of the cultural landscape of those intending to continue their studies into Higher Education and is promoted, in newspapers, books and on the internet, as a means for them to develop themselves, making them more mature, independent and confident, and potentially more employable[i]. Recent media stories have, moreover, suggested that concerns about unemployment in the current economic downturn are leading young people to consider taking a Gap Year or extending their current one to 'ride out' the recession (Press Association 2009). In addition, taking a Gap Year, whether to work or travel, in the UK or overseas, is increasingly being promoted within Government policies as a means of encouraging volunteering and citizenship amongst young adults (Heath 2007).

Estimates suggest that up to 250,000 young people take a Gap Year each year in the UK (Jones 2004), although the figure taking a pre-university Gap Year is likely to be lower. Heath (2007) proposes that approximately 45,000 young people take a pre-university Gap Year each year; a figure based on official statistics concerning deferred entry into Higher Education and those provided by commercial and charitable organisations that arrange and

run Gap Year activities, so called Gap Year provider organisations. To put this in context, figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS 2008) suggest that there were approximately 457,000 accepted applications to UK universities in 2008/9; taking into account the estimates provided by Jones and Heath, this suggests that anywhere between a tenth to a half of all UK undergraduate students could have taken a pre-university Gap Year.

Whatever the exact figure, previous academic studies of the Gap Year have generally concluded that it is an exclusive, class-bound phenomenon that perpetuates distinctions (Jones 2004, Simpson 2005, Heath 2007). Using data from Gap Year provider organisations, Jones (2004) has argued that gap year takers or 'gappers' are overwhelmingly middle-class, white, mostly female and from Southern England. Young people from other class and ethnic backgrounds, he suggests, are under-represented. Yet this may be an oversimplification, since young people from other social groups may well take a Gap Year, but its form and how they organise and classify it, might not be captured by official statistics or Gap Year organisations. Certainly costs can be prohibitive. Recent estimates suggest that the average 'gapper' spends £4,800 whilst travelling. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that young people from less privileged backgrounds are choosing to work during a Gap Year as a response to the UK Government's introduction of higher tuition fees in English and Welsh universities[ii]. For these young people, taking a Gap Year offers them the chance to save some money before going to university.

Heath (2007) argues that a Gap Year is viewed, both by young people and gap year organisations, as a means of 'gaining an edge' over others. Heath is drawing here on

'positional conflict theory' (Brown *et al.* 2003), which postulates that recent changes in the labour market have increased competition for graduate jobs between different sections of the middle-classes. Educational credentials are no longer a guarantee of success; university students must therefore seek to gain advantage through alternative channels, including developing a suitable 'personality package' composed of communication skills and character traits favoured by graduate employers. Heath (2007) asserts that this is precisely what the Gap Year offers university students: an opportunity to acquire a 'personality package' that will facilitate entry to Higher Education and ensure that young middle-class people gain suitable employment when they graduate.

Heath's assertion has been supported by other research, including that of Simpson (2005 p. 451), who claims that "(t)hird world travel experiences act as cultural capital, giving one something to display to peers …a way to claim new friends"; a social network that will be used to actively gain material advantage in the future. However, this process is not always guaranteed; sometimes stories of such exploits are viewed as demonstrations of a misspent and wasted youth (Desforges 1998). The assertion that the Gap Year is exclusively about building cultural capital, that it is used as a form of social class positioning is, therefore, not straightforward. The context in which Gap Year experiences are recounted appears to be important.

One context that other studies have focused on is the position of the Gap Year in the life course, occurring as it does when young people are becoming adults. Beames (2004) study of a Raleigh International Overseas Expedition, for instance, utilised Van Gennep's notion of a 'rite of passage', a model of identity work that encompasses stages of separation,

transition and incorporation. Beames concluded that the separation stage was present amongst his sample; that is, they undertook significant identity work during their expeditions. However, their ability to incorporate their new-found identities was problematic. This was because when they returned home after their travels they went straight to university and failed to have their new-found confidence and independence validated by significant others, such as their parents. Thus the final incorporation stage of the 'rite of passage' model was missing.

Whilst Beames study is useful for conceptualising the Gap Year in ways other than social class positioning, applying such a structural, anthropological model to the diverse experiences of a group of contemporary young Westerners is problematic, as Beames (2004) himself has noted. Re-examining this data using a social interactionist framework (Pike and Beames 2007) has demonstrated how young people use their stories of travel as performative devices to manipulate a situation or interaction, particularly to build 'aspects of character' that they thought would enhance their employability. However, it is important to note that in both studies, young people were not specifically interviewed in the context of Higher Education; that is, whilst at university. In this respect, the analysis is somewhat decontextualised.

More recently, Bagnoli (2009) has argued that Gap Year travels provide a moratorium in the life course for young people who are intending to continue their education to degree level. Utilising the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), Bagnoli suggests that the Gap Year represents an individualised form of life planning, a forum for young people to reflexively construct a sense of self. Bagnoli does note the significance of social class here, although Heath (2007) makes a more forceful link suggesting that:

> "anecdotal evidence suggests that 'gappers' invariably regard themselves *as more mature* than students who continue directly into university. Certain aspects of this 'identity work' can be mapped directly onto the processes of acquiring certain cultural and social resources, and constitute important forms of distinction in and of themselves" (Heath 2007, p 100 emphasis added).

Heath captures, therefore, an important point: that there is a link between psychosocial development and social distinctions. However, as Heath (2007) herself notes, this needs to be systematically and empirically examined in relation to young people's accounts of their Gap Year. Therefore, although previous studies have made an important contribution to our understandings of the role of the Gap Year in young people's lives, they have not explicitly examined its relationship to Higher Education, nor have they really examined how young people talk about their Gap Year in that context. This omission may be significant because the discourses that pervade accounts of the Gap Year may tell us something about young people's emerging identities and how these identities relate to forms of inclusion, exclusion and change. Before addressing these issues through empirical examples drawn from a study of young people's accounts of taking a pre-university Gap Year, the following section of the paper discusses the approach used in the study.

Studying Gap Year talk as a form of identity work

The data discussed in this paper was gathered using a theoretical and methodological perspective that sought to focus on social action, in situ, as it is accomplished in talk. For reasons of brevity this perspective will not be discussed in detail here (for a discussion see

Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995 and AUTHOR 2009, 2010). However, its primary aim is to demonstrate how identities are worked up and worked out in specific situations, as interactional accomplishments. Consequently, this approach affected sampling, data collection and data analysis.

The Sample

Twenty-three participants were recruited by convenience and snowball sampling and were required to have taken a pre-university Gap Year within the previous five years. Recruitment materials stated that they should have taken a 'Gap Year' or 'Year Out' between school and university, although what activities they had undertaken were not specified. The aim was to sample as many 'types' of experience as possible. Twenty two undergraduate students at two different universities in Southern England were sampled. One was a post-1992 university in the conurbation of a major city; whilst the other was a pre-1992 university in a Home Counties location. These universities are referred to as New University and Old University respectively. They had quite different student bodies, particularly in terms of social class and ethnicity. In sampling from them, the intention was to try to gain a heterogeneous sample. Despite this, two thirds of the sample identified themselves as being either middle-class, or having a middle-class background. This information was ascertained either explicitly, by noting statements such as 'I come from a fairly ordinary middle-class family', or implicitly in terms of the categories an individual used in her talk: for example, 'Dad's a high-flying civil servant'. One participant had already graduated and was working in the legal profession. Two thirds of the participants were female; only two participants, both female, identified themselves as having a minority ethnic identity.

It is difficult to hypothesise why the sample was relatively homogenous, but it supports previous research which suggests that the Gap Year is underrepresented amongst minority ethnic students, young men and those from working-class backgrounds (Jones 2004). One possible explanation is that potential participants may have taken a break between school/college and university, but not categorised it as a 'Gap Year' or 'Year Out'. Indeed, despite choosing these terms on recruitment literature in order to be inclusive, this method of sampling may not have achieved this objective. This suggests that classifying an experience as a 'Gap Year' or 'Year Out' may itself be related to the class, gender and ethnicity of the individual. This conclusion appears to be supported by the story of one participant who came from a working class and minority ethnic background. She sought clarification as to whether her experience was valid within the parameters of the research. The student had spent her year preparing to resit her 'A' levels whilst working part-time in the retail sector. Although it is beyond the remit of this paper, a future objective is to explore how individuals constitute their experiences as a Gap Year by practices of definitional inclusion and exclusion. .

The types of activities undertaken by the sample were divided almost equally between those who worked in the UK and then travelled overseas, and those who worked exclusively in the UK, although there was considerable variation in the forms of employment that they had undertaken. Only one participant spent her entire Gap Year undertaking voluntary work overseas.

Interviews were unstructured and lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. At the start of each interview, participants were invited to tell the story of their Gap Year/Year Out, although a topic guide was employed to prompt for the following details if necessary: family

and educational background; reasons for gap year; unexpected events; decisions about university; university experiences; and thoughts about the future.

Approach to data

The interviews were viewed as active discursive spaces for the production of accounts, representing the interviewer and interviewee's (cumulatively 'members') understandings of the situation in which they were located, rather than as forums to uncover objective 'truths' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Baker 2002). Analysis of these accounts drew upon membership categorisation analysis (MCA) [iii] (for examples see Lepper 2000, AUTHOR 2010, Stokoe 2003); a method which explores the categories and attributes that people use to represent their taken-for-granted knowledge of the social world. Categories can be people, places and objects, whilst attributes are actions or characteristics that are linked to categories. MCA has been described as the exploration of 'culture-in-action' (Baker 2000) because it examines how cultural understandings are carried by discourse and reproduced and transformed in use. Unlike previous research, which looked for emergent themes using grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis (Beames 2004, Simpson 2004b, 2005, Bagnoli 2009), the approach used here was primarily concerned to examine the identity work undertaken during the interview, as a situated accomplishment, together with its wider sociological significance.

Confidence, maturity and/or independence in Gap Year talk

Mindful of the approach outlined above, it was noted that participants frequently made reference to confidence, maturity and/or independence in their accounts, although maturity

and confidence were mentioned on more occasions than independence. Previous research has indicated that young people frequently refer to these psychosocial attributes when seeking to gain recognition for their adult status (Baker 1984, Hockey and James 2003, Holdsworth and Morgan 2005). In essence, therefore, the precise meaning of these terms is, it is noted, less significant than their mobilisation in discourse: as resources for doing identity work, principally related to age. Indeed, it is the rhetorical use of these terms that is most significant for this paper: how participants related them in relation to different aspects of Higher Education and consequently as means of creating distinctions.

Confidence, maturity and/or independence and gaining entry to university

Some participants linked their Gap Year experiences with developing or restoring confidence, maturity and/or independence, which they believed was necessary for gaining entry to university. Rachel came from a middle-class background, had attended private school and was currently in her second year at Old University. She explained that when she finished school she was undecided about her future and went travelling around the world during her Gap Year, as both a leisure pursuit and to give her an opportunity to reflect. In response to a question concerning how these experiences affected her decision to come to university, she suggested:

962: Rachel: but travelling definitely made me realise that university was right for me
963: I knew that I wanted to come back and get a better education really
964: so erm (1.) yeah (.) yeah I'm glad I took a Gap Year
965: 'cos even if I had come to university and not travelled as I'd be doing coming straight from school
966: Int: yeah
967: Rachel: I just don't think I was mature enough
968: I'd had enough
969: I'm really young for my year

970: so (.) already I knew I was just like (.) I just wasn't ready at all
971: but the Gap Year definitely matured me a lot

It is notable that Rachel does not simply claim that her Gap Year made her decide to come to university. Beginning at line 965 she extends her answer by referring to a lack of maturity, which she subsequently attributes to her chronological age. Thus, the value of her Gap Year, possibly challenged by the question, was defended in terms of how she developed a psychosocial attribute that she believed enabled her to gain entry to university. A similar response was made by Hannah, but in relation to confidence. Hannah came from a middle-class family and was in her final year at New University. Unlike Rachel, she had not achieved the 'A' level grades she had hoped for and took a Gap Year, working in a hotel in France, in order to improve her language skills.

454: Int: and er how do you think the experiences you er had during your Gap Year have affected you since?
455: Hannah: yeah well I'm just so glad I did that
456: because like I say after I'd finished my 'A' levels there was absolutely no way I could have gone to Uni
457: I was really gutted
458: and er (.) in fact as soon as I'd come back from France I applied to UCAS
459: Int: right
460: Hannah: I just thought er (.) that was a direct effect like
461: I felt really confident

Although these accounts are distinct and refer to different attributes, both indicate how the value of a Gap Year can be narrated in individualised, psychosocial terms. The Gap Year is represented as a 'critical moment' (Henderson *et al.* 2007) in their biographies, having significance for their future lives. Validating the Gap Year in such a way was widespread amongst the sample, whatever participants' social class background or current Higher

Educational institution. Nikki, for example, came from a working-class family in the North of England. She had spent her Gap Year working in an insurance broker's office in her hometown, which enabled her to rent her own flat. When interviewed she was in her first year at Old University and explained why her Gap Year experiences had, in her opinion, helped her make the significant transition to university:

835: Nikki: I think also (.) if I'd been younger and decided to come here
836: Int: hmmn
837: Nikki: it would've been a lot harder
838: and I think now that I'm more mature
839: I mean (.) I'm twenty-one in sort of a week's time
840: Int: hmmn
841: Nikki: I feel sort of able (.) I feel old enough and more mature (.) and independent to come a long way from home

Whilst we cannot access the accuracy of the claims made by these young women, they were not challenged by the interviewer on these points, their analytical significance is that they appear to endorse the notion that young people use their Gap Year as a means of managing institutional transitions in early adulthood (Bagnoli 2009). They also support suggestions that the transition into university can be a significant emotional experience (Christie 2009). However, by focusing on their talk as a form of identity work in the context of Higher Education, it is arguable that we can see how these young people are using their accounts to emphasise a distinction between a present self and a past self; a past self that was, they believed, unable to gain entry to university. The Gap Year is recounted here as something that both facilitated this transition and ensured that these young people were prepared for university itself. However, these accounts do not indicate why these attributes were seen as necessary for studying in Higher Education.

Chantelle was a third year undergraduate student at New University, who described herself as ‘mixed’ in terms of class and ethnic backgrounds. She had worked as an office assistant during her Gap Year to save money before starting her degree. Responding to a question about why a Gap Year might be significant she said:

780: Chan: erm (.) when you come to university you need to be prepared for y'know total independence
781: Int: hmmn
782: Chan: you don’t get spoon-fed anymore
783: Int: hmmn
784: Chan: and that’s something that a Gap Year will teach you
785: whether you work or travel
786: Int: hmmn
787: Chan: you’re going to be out there on your own

Chantelle’s suggestion that a Gap Year will teach you “to be out there on your own” may be particularly salient for students, like her, who had no family experience of Higher Education. Indeed, other research (Reay *et al.* 2005) illustrates how class, ethnicity and gender all intersect to make the experience of entering Higher Education a more individualised and risky experience for young people like Chantelle. In such unfamiliar environments, accounts of the biographical significance of Gap Year experiences may be one way of illustrating ones sense of entitlement, readiness and belonging. Interactionally, this is affirmed because Chantelle is speaking with authority; she ‘knows’ the importance of the Gap Year for being prepared for university life. Implicitly, this points to something that many participants highlighted: that Gap Year experiences mark out different types of student.

Confidence, maturity and/or independence and different types of student

Most participants discussed confidence, maturity and/or independence in relation to other students. They indicated that these attributes made them distinct from their peers. Two examples are particularly notable here.

Matthew was a white, middle-class student at New University who had spent some of his Gap Year undertaking voluntary work in North America. In response to a question about the legacy of his Gap Year he asserted:

487: Matt:	and there seems to be er (.) I dunno, a sort of difference between personalities of someone like myself who has taken a Gap Year
488:	and someone who has come straight from school
489: Int:	yeah (0.1) what do you think is different?
490: Matt:	it probably sounds really arrogant to say
491:	but I think (.) quite often they tend to be more immature
492: Int:	hmmn
493: Matt:	in a way they lack life experience (0.2)
494:	I mean I haven't got a lot of life experience
495:	but I've got more than the people who come straight out of school
496: Int:	hmmn
497: Matt:	and they still have the same sort of school approach
498:	they tend to be the ones who stay more in groups
499:	and are less willing to integrate with others

Matthew's account highlights how 'life experience' is made an observable and individualised phenomenon for the purposes of making a distinction around the attribute of maturity. In so doing, he indicates that the category 'students' can be heard as a 'positioned category' (Sacks 1995) whereby different members of this category are positioned according to their conspicuous display of an attribute, in this case maturity. Matthew is evidently aware that his description could be heard as a moral judgment since he prefixes it with the claim

that “it sounds really arrogant” (line 490). More significantly, he classifies his peers as having a “school approach” (line 497) indicating that, for him, there is a normative dimension to maturity within a university context. Therefore, by characterising his peers in this manner he further infantilises them, whilst distinguishing himself.

A similar distinction was made by Josh, a middle-class student in his second year at Old University who had spent his Gap Year working in the UK and later travelling around Europe. When asked to explain why he thought students who had taken a Gap Year were different from their peers he suggested:

1438: Josh: I seem to notice that people who have had a Gap Year seem much more mature
1439: I mean I know they’re a year older and everything
1440: Int: yeah
1441: Josh: but even so I think because they’ve either been to work or have been travelling
1442: or (.) they’ve just had that extra experience
1443: whatever they’ve done in their Gap Years (.) it’s kind of (0.1) matured them
1444: and (.) and (0.2) y'know I see the school-leavers
1445: and they’re just throwing eggs about and shouting
1446: and (0.1) I don’t think people that have had a Gap Year and had that extra experience (.) are really like that
1447: I think (0.1) y'know (.) I certainly can’t stand that anymore
1448: Int: yeah
1449: Josh: I may have used to have been like that
1450: maybe not that bad

Like Matthew, Josh makes a distinction between himself and his peers. Here he creates a ‘contrast structure’ (Smith 1978), comparing “people who have had a Gap Year” to “school-leavers” (lines 1438 & 1444). Again like Matthew, he indicates that those who have come to university directly from school are less developmentally prepared for being at

university, but in this case emphasising their behavioural characteristics and emphasising his own difference from this group.

Matthew and Josh both came from middle-class backgrounds, although both were the first people in their families to go to university. Their Gap Year talk appears to adhere to Heath's (2007) model that young people from middle-class backgrounds use their Gap Year experiences to distinguish themselves from others in similar class positions. While not all participants did so, the vast majority, whatever their social class background, sought to make such distinctions. However, their reticence to describe these in purely class terms also supports research which concludes that using Gap Year stories as forms of cultural capital is highly contextual (Desforges 1998). Significantly, it extends this research by demonstrating *how* this can be achieved as an interactional and linguistic accomplishment in a specific context using psychosocial attributes.

Confidence, maturity and/or independence and gaining graduate employment

It was notable that even participants who were reticent to make distinctions between themselves and their university peers, did claim that their Gap Year would distinguish them from others when seeking graduate employment. In effect, whatever their class of origin, and whichever university they were currently studying at, an awareness of their potential class of destination pervaded their accounts.

Nikki was one of the participants who although she thought her Gap Year had changed her, making her more confident, did not believe that it had made her distinct from her peers. Indeed, she claimed that she was pleased that they did not know she was a year

older or had taken a Gap Year. However, as the following extract demonstrates, she did assert that her Gap Year experiences would give her 'an edge' in the competition for graduate jobs:

1668:Nikki it does give you an edge I think
1669: because you are different to everybody else
1670: not everybody takes a Gap Year
1671: Int: yeah
1672: Nikki: everybody goes to university
1673: Int: hmmn
1674: Nikki: well the majority of people anyway
1675: so I think it does give you that slight (.) edge on everybody else

What is particularly notable here, however, is that Nikki's claim is not straightforward. After the interviewer's muted response to her previous statement (at lines 1672/1673), Nikki reclassifies her point whereby it becomes a "slight edge on everybody else" (1675). In essence, although this supports the notion that the Gap Year can be used to create a distinction amongst graduates (Heath 2007), it indicates the situated, interactional nature of such identity work. This can be exemplified further when examining how participants claimed, during the interview, that their increased chances of employability were already apparent. Matthew, for instance, claimed that the confidence he gained during his Gap Year had helped him with a recent job application:

458: Matt: and it's been a great help with things like job interviews
459: Int: yeah
460: Matt: every job interview I've been to when they've seen what I did in [Gap Year workplace]
461: they've been straight away 'you've got the job'
462: Int: right
463: Matt: it looks really impressive
464: Int: yeah
465: and what er (.) sort of jobs have these been?
466: Matt: some have been odd jobs that you just do as a student

467: Int: yeah
468: Matt: at the moment I'm working for [company name]
469: But I actually applied in the summer to join the [police service]
470: 'cos I'd like to be a policeman
471: Int: Hmmn
472: Matt: And er so I went for quite an intensive interview
473: and a lot of times I kept sort of bringing up this stuff (.) about my experience.
474: Int: Hmmn
475: Matt: I felt confident that I could answer so many different questions
476: And I thinking 'if I'd done this interview a year and a half ago I wouldn't have been able to answer these questions at all'

Here Matthew indicates that his Gap Year work experiences had given him the confidence to answer difficult interview questions for a competitive graduate job. It is notable that his response provokes a question from the interviewer concerning what types of job he had been seeking. Matthew's response is a 'show concession' (Antaki and Wetherell 1999); whilst conceding that some applications have been for "student jobs", the professional nature of the job he recently applied for contradicts this and affirms his earlier suggestion that his Gap Year "looks really impressive" (line 463).

Other participants were more circumspect about the value of their Gap Year for future employability, suggesting that employers were particularly tired of stories of voluntary work. Dan was a middle-class graduate who, when interviewed, was working in the legal profession. He had taken a Gap Year and volunteered as a youth worker in the UK. He suggested that the 'value' he assigned to his Gap Year had changed, becoming less significant than subsequent work experience. Arguably, the context of his identity work was different to the other participants discussed above, who were currently undergraduates. Dan's identity work was related to his current status as an employee. Nevertheless, Dan, and others,

continued to represent their Gap Year as a worthwhile experience, in terms of personal, psychosocial development. Regardless of what type of Gap Year they had taken, whether they had worked or travelled or both, every single participant attempted to make their experience 'work' for them; in short, nobody claimed it had been a waste of a year or something that they had come to regret. All participants suggested that their Gap Year distinguished them either from their past self or from others in current and future contexts.

Discussion and Conclusions

The evidence presented above indicates that when talking about their Gap Year experiences, participants referred to confidence, maturity and/or independence, relating them to people and events in their current biography, such as entry to university and fellow students. They also projected these into their future lives when discussing future employability. Whilst much of the above discussion has concentrated on outlining this identity work in detail, this concluding section aims to consider its wider sociological significance.

The paper supports and extends previous research and writing about the Gap Year, which views it as a forum for undertaking identity work during young people's transition to adulthood (Beames 2004, Pike and Beames 2007, Bagnoli 2009). Gap Year experiences were recounted as spaces in the life course whereby significant biographical changes had occurred: for example, regaining or developing confidence, maturity and/or independence. Similarly, the Gap Year was recounted as a means of achieving a successful institutional transition during this period, by enabling entry to university. As such, it is possible to view accounts of

the Gap Year as forms of biographical reflexion and experimentation, indicative of the individualising tendencies of late modernity (Bagnoli 2009). Clearly, the young people in the sample saw it as *their* responsibility to make a success of their Gap Year; it was *their* actions and experiences that enabled them to grow up, enter university and plan their future lives as adults. Moreover, the data extends Beames (2004) work on the structured nature of these identity transitions. It illustrates that Gap Year related identity work does not finish when young people return to their communities at the end of their Gap Year, but continues in the context of Higher Education itself. In this sense, an interview about the Gap Year, undertaken during one's undergraduate studies, acts as a discursive space for undertaking biographical transitions in situ (for a detailed discussion see AUTHOR 2009).

Arguably, the paper extends previous Gap Year research into the arena of research on the student experience. It adds a further dimension to the work of those who posit that this experience is a significant biographical disruption, the negotiation of which requires a range of identity resources and practices (Holmstrom *et al.* 2002, Scanlon *et al.* 2007, Christie 2009). Thus, an account of one's Gap Year and the confidence, maturity and/or independence which it is claimed it mobilises, is one such resource. It enabled these young people to indicate, in this context, that their current self differed from a past self. They had, in effect, become adults. However, whilst age identity constructions, such as these, are situated in context, they are always related to the wider social context and to other social identities.

Previous research contends that the Gap Year is primarily undertaken as a form of social class positioning (Simpson 2005, Heath 2007). The identity work undertaken by the young people discussed here, whatever their social class backgrounds, can therefore also be

heard as attempts by them to add cachet to their skills and credentials and hence their potential for future employability, making them more distinctive when compared to others in similar class positions. Significantly, the paper has shown that the discursive space of the interview and the production of such an account in the context of Higher Education creates a space whereby the 'personality package' that Heath (2007) has discussed can be constructed and displayed. While this has implications for these young people's emerging social class identities, suggesting that Gap Year experiences are used in such an instrumental or straightforward way needs to be tempered by other evidence presented in this paper. Although such distinctions were made by the young people discussed here, they were also clearly aware that these could be heard as moral judgements, which might not be permissible or appropriate for all occasions. Hence, the paper demonstrates that accounts of Gap Year experiences can act as different resources, in different contexts, for different purposes, extending the point previously noted, but not analysed in detail, by Desforges (1998). It is quite probable that young people trade stories of their Gap Year to both distinguish themselves from their peers, as noted above, whilst at other times use them to build bridges or create group bonds. This does not necessarily contradict Heath's (2007) conclusion; rather, it indicates the complex situational and linguistic means by which such distinctions are achieved.

The paper also illustrates how emerging adult and social class identities are 'worked up' in the context of Higher Education, drawing upon ideas of responsibility, hard work, choice and planning. Overall, therefore, the paper extends research on the Gap Year into wider debates about the changing nature of contemporary young adulthood. It appears to

support Arnett's (2000) notion of emerging adulthood: a period of the life course characterised by identity play and lifestyle experimentation. However, it perhaps concurs more strongly with those who suggest that psychosocial markers of adulthood have come to the fore because structural factors have become individualised (Furlong and Cartmel 2007, Côte and Bynner 2008). Explaining, as many of the young people discussed in this article do, that their Gap Year had developed or restored their confidence, maturity and/or independence, whilst linking this to gaining entry to university and to the context of university itself merely illustrates the perceived centrality of such institutional structures to their life chances. For them, the Gap Year played a vital role in this process, enabling them to work through structural factors affecting their lives, but achieved via a narrative of individuality.

The interplay of structural and individual factors could be considered further in future research focusing on the perceived relationship between the Gap Year and employability. This should not only be in terms of whether the Gap Year makes an individual more employable, but how accounts of the Gap Year are used in situations where employability is paramount i.e. job interviews. Examining these situated interactions would, I believe, help us to further consider a point noted by Furlong (2010): how might different Gap Year experiences create new forms of social exclusion in young adulthood? Indeed, despite the perceived ordinariness of the Gap Year, and a growing body of research about it, much useful sociological analysis of it remains to be undertaken.

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[iii] Whilst MCA does not require that all conversation analytic transcription conventions are used, the data extracts in this paper do include pauses, in brackets, timed to the nearest second. Very short pauses are indicated by (.).