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Perceptions, prejudices and possibilities: young people narrating apprenticeship experiences

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ABSTRACT

There is growing international interest in young people's post-compulsory education pathways. In contexts of 'widening participation' as university is increasingly 'normalised', how do young people choose alternative routes into training and employment? While in Britain apprenticeships are a key aspect of government strategy, there are many challenges still associated with these schemes including low pay and inconsistent training. Drawing on longitudinal data from our qualitative research with young people on apprenticeship schemes in London, we use narrative analysis, informed by Goffman's theory of stigma, to explore how young people narrate and navigate the tensions between apprenticeships as opportunities to 'learn while they earn' and university degrees as the prevailing 'gold standard' of achievement and future success. Our findings show that while these young people were aware of the challenges associated with apprenticeships, they used specific rhetorical devices to reclaim the normalcy of their training pathways as 'sensible' and 'mature' choices.

Introduction

There is a growing body of international literature on young people's decision-making about post-compulsory educational pathways (Atkins 2016; Holmegaard 2015; Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš 2015). Much of this literature focuses on factors that shape access to and decision-making about higher education (Brooks and Everett 2009). In many countries, policies to enhance participation in higher education have been broadly successful in raising the numbers of young people going to university,[1] leading some commenters to refer to 'an explosion in higher education' (Wolf, Domínguez-Reig, and Sellen 2016, 25). Widening participation means that university now appears more attainable for young people from previously under-represented groups including ethnic minority groups (Takhar 2016). Nonetheless, it is clear that some groups continue to be under-represented, especially in the most prestigious universities (Boliver 2016; Reay et al. 2001).

The expansion of higher education has been part of neoliberal agendas, underpinned by concepts of international competitiveness and employability, framing education almost entirely in terms of economic value and the needs of employers (Brooks 2013). In neoliberal economies, policy-makers tend to construct young people as 'rational informed consumers' in highly competitive educational markets who, given all the necessary information, should make the 'right' choices and manage their own learning (Atkins 2016). For example, in Australia, in the context of widening participation, going to university has become 'normalised' (Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš 2014); thus, young people who do not pursue full time post-compulsory education may become stigmatised (Mallman and Lee 2016; Stokes and Wyn 2007).

However, it has also been argued that as more young people obtain degrees, the goalposts are shifting through 'credential inflation' (Brooks and Everett 2008). When the numbers of graduates increase, having a degree ceases to be a mark of distinction and competitive labour markets demand additional qualifications such as unpaid internships (Leonard, Halford, and Bruce 2015).

Nevertheless, while degrees no longer guarantee graduate-level employment, they continue to enjoy high esteem (Mallman and Lee 2016), especially in contrast to other non-traditional routes. While vocational routes such as apprenticeships remain highly regarded in countries like Germany (Brockmann 2013) and Switzerland (Mazenod 2016), this is not the case in many other countries (Atkins 2016). In South Africa, for example, despite government policies to promote vocational training, apprenticeships are still stigmatised and perceived as an inferior qualification (Odora and Naong 2014).

In Britain, the Conservative Government has a target of three million new apprenticeships by 2020, with apprenticeships to be given the same legal treatment as degrees. Through the apprenticeship levy, the government plans to raise £3 billion a year by 2021–22 (Powell 2017a). Nonetheless, concerns have been expressed about poor-quality training in many apprenticeship programmes (Ofsted 2017) and the willingness of employers and young people to participate in apprenticeships (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012). Over the last 20 years, successive governments have sought to increase take-up among young people through state-funded schemes involving 'continuous waves of reform' and rebranding (Mazenod 2016, 108). Recent apprenticeship policies focus on raising standards and improving quality by introducing minimum durations of training schemes: for 16–19 year olds, apprenticeships must last at least 12 months. In addition, apprentices must be employed for at least 30 hours per week and must receive a minimum of 280 hours of guided learning in their first year, of which at least 100 hours must be off the job. Apprenticeships also have to offer training in English and mathematics if the apprentice has not yet achieved minimum qualifications in these subjects (Powell 2017a).

However, apprenticeships are still 'not a mainstream pathway for young people in England' (Mazenod 2016, 106). In 2015/16, still only 6.9% of 16–18 year olds opted for apprenticeships (Department for Education 2017b). The recent focus on apprenticeships in government policy has to be viewed in the context of declining funding for vocational education, a decline in the quality of vocational provision, on the one hand, and on the other an expanding degree-level tertiary education which became very expensive for both taxpayers and students due to high university fees, and a large number of university degrees that do not provide worthy return in earnings and jobs (Wolf, Domínguez-Reig, and Sellen 2016).

Although a key government strategy for youth training and employment, there are still many questions to be answered about the quality and status of apprenticeships, and the experiences and expectations of apprentices themselves. Despite the parity of esteem discourse in government policy (Mazenod 2016), apprenticeships in England continue to be stigmatised (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012) and commonly regarded as 'low status' and 'an undemanding route for low attaining students' (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010, 116). In the academic literature there have been calls for more research to give voice to the young people themselves (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010; Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012). This article responds to that call by presenting longitudinal data from qualitative research with young apprentices across London and across different sectors to explore how they narrate their decision-making process in post-16 education and training. We argue that young people do not necessarily behave as 'active consumers', 'rational informed customers' in the education and training market, but often rely on patchy and incomplete, or even inaccurate information, often rooted in personal anecdotes. Our rich data and narrative analysis offer useful insights into how this group of young people made their choices. Our findings recall the observation of Stephen Ball and colleagues that young people's decisions are informed not just by material conditions but also by their perceptions (Ball et al. 2002).

Using a Goffmanian framework of negotiating stigmatisation and impression management, this article reveals how young people navigate the tensions between apprenticeships as opportunities to learn practical skills while earning a wage and becoming independent, versus the obstacles they encounter on this learning pathway. Their narratives are analysed to explore 'rhetorical and strategic tools deployed by individual members of stigmatized groups in reaction to perceived stigmatization' (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012, 366). Goffman's micro-sociology provides a useful lens through which to analyse young apprentices' negotiation of stigma, performance of roles and presentation of self. However, we are mindful of macro contexts to consider 'how cultural and structural contexts enable and constrain individual and group responses' to stigmatisation (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012, 366). We explore how these young people navigate the real challenges associated with apprenticeships, such as low pay, variable quality training and incomplete information. In so doing, we contribute to international research on young people's access to, perceptions of and decision-making about education and training pathways.

Background on apprenticeships in the British context

Although the notion of a 'golden age' of apprenticeships has been criticised (Vickerstaff 2003), the ideal-type apprenticeship tends to be based on engineering and craft trades whereby young men served their time, mastered a trade and achieved good employment (Payne 1987; P. Ryan 2011). However, with decreasing manufacturing from the 1960s, there was a 'dramatic decline in the number of apprenticeships available' (Payne 1987, 443). In 1994, the British government launched 'Modern Apprenticeships' with the dual aim of improving the country's 'skills base' and re-engaging low-qualified young people back into training (McIntosh 2005). Importantly, these new apprenticeships were designed to cover a wide range of occupations and to be less ethnic and gender specific (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010). However, efforts to expand provision beyond traditional manufacturing meant drawing in new sectors such as retail and business administration which had no history of apprenticeships and did not easily conform to the engineering ideal type (McIntosh

2005; P. Ryan 2011). By 2015/16, three of these new sectors (Business, Administration and Law; Health, Public Services and Care; Retail and Commercial Services) provided 71% of apprenticeship starts in England (Mirza-Davies 2016, 9). As a result, while originally set at NVQ Level 3 (equivalent to upper secondary qualifications), over time Level 2 (lower secondary equivalent) became the norm (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010). For instance, in 2015/16, 58% of new apprentices started at Level 2 (Mirza-Davies 2016, 8). The transformation of the apprenticeship model is also reflected in the 'heavy involvement of private training organisations' (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010, 116). Fuller and Unwin (2009) describe Modern Apprenticeships as 'divesting' employers of responsibility for training and 'diluting' the concept to little more than work experience. We focus precisely on these new sectors that provide most of the growth in apprenticeship provision, such as business administration, health and social care.

There are ongoing debates about the quality of apprenticeship learning in England. A recent Ofsted (2017) inspection of one of the largest apprenticeship providers has found the training 'inadequate'. The report concluded: '[t]oo many apprentices receive insufficient training to develop new skills, and they do not receive enough off-the-job training' (Ofsted 2017, 1). International research contrasts the English 'restricted' work-based training model of apprenticeships with the more 'expansive' educational model in countries like Germany (Brockmann 2013), France and Finland (Mazenod 2016).

Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck (2012) argue that apprenticeships now stand at a crossroads. There has been considerable growth in the range of apprenticeships on offer, especially at lower levels (McIntosh 2005). Hence, 'apprenticeships are heterogeneous with respect to their duration, content and the returns they provide either to the employer or to the apprentice' (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012, 42). In fact, there is so much heterogeneity that Paul Ryan (2011) questions whether what comes under the rubric of apprenticeships nowadays truly constitutes an actual apprenticeship.

To become a more attractive option, apprenticeships need to provide high-quality learning in order to 'rid itself entirely of any stigma attached from it being considered a second-best alternative to the academic pathway by either young people or employers' (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012, 53). On the other hand, Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch (2010) question employers' commitment to delivering high-quality training. De-regulation of the labour market and its impact on insecure and flexible working may make employers reluctant to invest in developing their staff. Rather than raising the status of apprenticeships, these trends in recent years have tended to 'doom' vocational training 'to be perceived inferior' (Mazenod 2016, 109). This problem is exacerbated by the low pay offered to many apprentices, a minimum of only £3.50 an hour for 16–18 year olds[2] (Powell 2017a, 5), significantly lower than the London living wage of £9.75 per hour.

Our study explored precisely these issues through in-depth, longitudinal research with young people on a range of apprenticeships across London. It has been suggested that 'the situation concerning apprenticeships is particularly critical in London in the context of high unemployment, child poverty and the media attention on youth crime' (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2010, 118). London has one of the worst records in England on measures of youth unemployment (L. Ryan and Lőrinc 2015).

All of this provides the context in which our participants were constructing their narratives. Before presenting these narratives we briefly describe our research study.

The study

Our data were collected as part of a large international, EU-funded project, Reducing Early School Leaving in the EU (RESL.eu) 2013–18, aiming to provide insights into mechanisms and processes that influence young people's decision-making in relation to education, training and labour market transitions.

Our study was undertaken in London during 2015–2016. We identified apprenticeships in diverse sectors including childcare, health and social care, Information Technology (IT), business administration and sport (sectors which have experienced growth in new apprenticeships, as shown in previously mentioned statistics). We conducted focus groups in two different settings: a childcare apprenticeship from North London, and an IT-related programme from South London. In addition, we interviewed nine apprentices from five different programmes; six of them were re-interviewed approximately six months later. Altogether, 17 apprentices took part in this research, attending a mix of Level 2 and Level 3 programmes.

We invited participants to take part in the study through their apprenticeship programmes, hence they were largely self-selecting. Thus we make no claims to the representativeness of our 17 participants. They were mainly female (11 participants) and ranged in age from 16 to 24, but most were younger than 20 years old. Given London's diversity, it is not surprising that the participants varied by ethnic group: three self-defined as White British, one as White other (Romanian), one as Arab, two as Asian-British, three as mixed (White/Black) ethnicity and the remaining seven as Black Caribbean. They varied greatly regarding their previous educational attainment: some had only completed GCSEs, while others had obtained A-levels. While socio-economic background can be difficult to ascertain, based on parents' occupations the majority had a working-class background, with only one participant indicating middle-class status.

Narrative analysis

Interviews and focus groups were conducted at the apprentices' training or learning sites. These were fully transcribed and two forms of analysis conducted. First, narrative analysis was used to explore how participants told their individual stories. A second level of thematic coding, using both a priori and newly emerging themes, was carried out using NVivo10 software across all transcripts. This combination of analytical frameworks enabled coding within and across transcripts to identify whole narratives as well as themes shared by all participants.

As mentioned earlier, there is growing international interest in how young people narrate their educational choices (Holmegaard 2015). Narratives contain key defining features of character, plot line and transformation, revealing 'the significance of context, contingency, constraint and opportunity' (Mason 2004, 166). But these are not individualised plot lines, narratives are usually 'grounded in changing webs of relationships' (2004, 167). As noted elsewhere (L. Ryan 2015), a narrative approach is especially insightful when exploring how social actors talk about processes of negotiating and expressing identities through everyday interactions in particular social settings. Hence, while young people frequently present their post-compulsory choices as personal and individual, their decisions are usually informed by networks of family and friends (Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe 2008), and framed by particular socio-structural constraints (Atkins 2016). Thus, narratives need to be understood

within specific socio-structural contexts. The wider macro context shapes how personal stories are told (Ball et al. 2002; L. Ryan 2015). Against the backdrop of concerns about the enduring problems and shortcomings associated with apprenticeships, students need to present their decision as 'sensible' (Holmegaard 2015) as well as 'feasible' (Brooks 2002). In this article, we use narrative analysis as a device to explore how our participants make sense of the world and understand how this informs their decision-making.

Our analysis revealed interesting contradictory narratives across the data-set. On first reading, young people seemed very positive about the benefits of apprenticeships, although they had often encountered negative reactions from teachers, friends and even family members. They were mindful of the low esteem attached to apprenticeships, and had to navigate potential stigmatisation carefully, by adopting a positive presentation of their apprentice selves. However, on further analysis, especially of follow-up interview data collected six months later, it became apparent that the apprenticeship experience was not always positive; accordingly, ongoing impression management was required.

Erving Goffman continues to influence our understanding of self-presentation, the quest for normalcy and the management of stigma and stereotypes in everyday interactions (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012; L. Ryan 2011). According to Goffman, an interaction may be defined as 'the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence' (1959, 15). He uses the metaphor of the stage to consider the 'performance' of an individual in relation to an audience. A social encounter may involve 'role performance' as an actor attempts to control the impression presented to the audience. Goffman thus presents a proactive view of the self, which may resist and even defy social institutions particularly when faced with stigmatisation.

Being stigmatised can involve labelling, stereotyping and loss of status (Goffman 1963). The stigmatised may feel undermined or discriminated. Stigmatisation threatens the labelled individual's moral standing by challenging their moral presentation of self (L. Ryan 2011). Nonetheless, as Goffman notes, 'an individual does not remain passive in the face of potential meanings generated regarding him, but, so far as he can, actively participates in sustaining a definition of the situation that is stable and consistent with his image of himself' (1961, 104). Goffman explores how actors seek to 'reject an image of the self as abnormal' (1961, 50). Attempting to resist stigma, as we explore in this article, may take different forms and draw on different rhetorical and strategic tools (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012; L. Ryan 2011).

Drawing on this analytical framework, we present our findings in three sections to explore how apprentices navigate challenges and opportunities during their post-16 educational and training trajectory, make sense of negative experiences and offer a positive presentation of self, while acknowledging stigma, reclaiming normalcy and engaging in impression management.

Apprenticeships 'a good way to go'

We asked participants about their motivations for doing an apprenticeship. The narrative analysis revealed three distinct but inter-related themes: individual preference, often linked to learner identity; relational influences, friends and family; and wider contextual factors, including structural constraints and policy discourses.

Many participants justified their decision to do an apprenticeship through narratives of personal learning styles. Hope quit her college course in design because she wanted 'something more practical'. Christopher stated:

> … studying, education, it's more theory than practical, so you don't actually get a feel for what it would be like in a work area. So going into an apprenticeship … gives you that knowledge of what it's going to be like in an actual work area, the practical side, not just the theory.

This classic split between theory and practice in education (P. Ryan 2011) underpinned many of our participants' discussions, and illustrates how they constructed their learner identity (Brockmann 2013). Although participants frequently defined themselves through a practical, hands-on learner identity, as discussed later, this was not necessarily a fixed construction. Nonetheless, these narratives provide insights into the self-presentation strategies of participants. These strategic tools revolved around contrasting the academic learning in university with practical learning in apprenticeships. When we asked why she decided to enrol on an apprenticeship, Cynthia immediately replied by referring to university:

> We come from a society where we're supposed to go to university, and university's not always an option, especially for me; I'm not very academic. I don't think I can sit for three years in a lecture with a man talking to me forever.

These narratives reveal how apprenticeships are being constructed in relation to the more familiar route of a university degree. As Mazenod notes, '[a]pprenticeships are essentially only one possible education and training pathway amongst others, and the prestige or status of apprenticeships will be dependent on how the other education and training pathways are constructed and how their value is perceived' (2016, 109).

As noted earlier, while young people often present their narratives as personal and individual, these are usually embedded in networks of family and friends. Reuben's mother works in education; she encouraged him to do an apprenticeship and helped him to access the programme. Similarly, Amber's mother encouraged her to do an apprenticeship. Participants also drew on anecdotal evidence from relatives or friends to illustrate that completing a degree did not guarantee a graduate job. Yazid told us: 'My brother went to university, came out with a qualification, no job, can't get anything, so that's why I did an apprenticeship instead'. Pamela stated: 'I've got a really good friend, he's gone to uni, but he's working in a restaurant'. Maria cited her neighbour who has a degree but 'he couldn't find the job he was looking for'. He told her: 'there's no point to go to university because then you have to pay everything back and … you might not find the perfect job you're looking for'.

Not only did friends and relatives struggle to find graduate jobs, they also had large student loans, as Phoenix described rather graphically: 'They're working in Starbucks with loads of debts hanging over them'. The cost of university was a recurring theme throughout interviews and focus groups. Yazid stated: 'I think apprenticeships are the way forward. Uni, if you go, you just come out with big debt'. Young people in our research seemed to rely on personal anecdotes as sources of information to inform and justify their decision-making.

In narrating their decision-making process, young people often refer to what 'seems feasible' (Brooks 2002) and least risky in specific socio-structural contexts. Their anecdotes reflect the reality that degrees do not necessarily lead to graduate employment (Leonard, Halford, and Bruce 2015). Most participants came from working-class backgrounds where families had limited financial resources. The young people's considerations about education and training were underpinned by the desire to a secure job and a decent income. As

other researchers have noted, young people from working-class backgrounds may be more mindful of the economic risks associated with particular pathways than their middle-class peers (Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš 2015).

Participants' narratives were clearly framed by wider social contexts, especially the fiercely competitive job market: 'there's a lot of people looking for jobs, so it's hard to get one' (Stanley). In particular, they highlighted lack of experience as a problem encountered by young job seekers: 'employers look at work experience because they don't want to employ someone that doesn't know what they are doing' (Reuben). Indeed, research suggests that employers are reluctant to employ young people because they are not sufficiently 'work ready' (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012, 49). As Yazid humorously remarked: 'most of the jobs, they ask for too much experience, like they would be asking like "oh, can we have a 22 year old with 30 years' experience"?' In their narratives, the participants presented apprenticeships as a solution to the problem of lacking work experience. Christopher explained:

> Jobs that were being advertised were all looking for people who had experience, at least three years' experience within the working area, and I thought, well, I don't have any experience in working, so an apprenticeship would be a good way to go.

The slogan 'learn while you earn' was often repeated through our study and reflected government-sponsored advertising campaigns. For example, the National Apprenticeship Service promotes apprenticeships as a chance to 'earn while you learn' (Mazenod 2016, 107). Accordingly, Reuben remarked: 'I like to learn while I earn'. Other advantages of apprenticeships, highlighted by participants, included bridging from school to work: 'It's hard to just jump straight into a job, so apprenticeships are pretty good' (Stanley). David added: 'it's good for things like contacts …' Interestingly, these are key attractions of apprenticeships also identified in the academic literature (P. Ryan 2011). These recurring themes throughout the narratives suggest that young people are picking up and re-presenting the slogans and positive attributes of apprenticeships highlighted in advertising by government and training providers, thus revealing how repertoires are shaped by national contexts (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012).

In Scandinavia, Holmegaard (2015) observed that young people want to present their decision-making as 'sensible' and 'meaningful'. In our data, young apprentices similarly sought to present their choices as sensible by drawing on a range of personal, inter-relational and wider contextual factors, including policy discourses. However, our participants' attempts to present positive choices were continually challenged by other social actors. In the next section we explore how participants managed the real challenges, shortcomings and stigma still surrounding apprenticeships.

Being 'looked down on' – negotiating stigma

Despite their earlier positive narratives, participants were aware of the prejudices and negativity surrounding apprenticeships. According to Chloe, 'people kind of look down on it, because they think that you've worked harder if you've gone to uni'. This phrase, 'looked down on', was repeated in many interviews and illustrates the extent to which young people felt that apprenticeships were stigmatised. Kim said 'people look down on apprenticeships' because they are not aware that it is a 'proper qualification'. In her interview, Cynthia remarked: 'I think some people do look quite down on people who haven't gone

to university'. Thus, in the eyes of these young people, one of the main reasons that apprenticeships are under-valued is because they do not offer a degree. This helps to explain their continual juxtaposition of university versus apprenticeship, which was such a persistent theme throughout interviews and focus groups.

In the context of widening participation in higher education and the 'normalisation' of university, choosing an alternative route may lead to stigmatisation (Mallman and Lee 2016). As Goffman (1961) observed, stigma undermines the status of the actor by constructing him/her as 'abnormal'. Thus, while university is regarded as the norm, doing an apprenticeship is judged not only as unusual, less familiar, but also 'inferior'.

It is apparent that young people continually confront prejudice towards apprenticeships. They first encountered negativity in schools: 'they didn't really mention apprenticeships to me … they didn't really mention it at all, they were pushing me more to go for uni' (Yazid). Many participants noted that schools promoted the sixth form and university over all other alternative routes: 'schools aren't really helpful … all they kind of promoted at my school was, literally, go to sixth form' (Siobhan). Several participants observed that the drive towards universities was more in the interest of schools than students: 'to promote their own school' (Shafia); 'so that they can say they've had this many people go to good universities' (Kim). Within the policy of widening participation in higher education, schools operating in highly competitive education markets may be motivated to increase the numbers of their students going to universities (Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe 2008). Hence, schools have a vested interest to promote higher education over other pathways including apprenticeships (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012, 49). There was a shared view among participants that school careers advisors offered limited options: 'once I made a decision and said "I'm going to college", it was like "okay, well, you sort it out yourself"' (Siobhan).

As mentioned earlier, participants were quite heterogeneous regarding previous qualifications. Several emphasised that they had the opportunity to attend university: 'I had the option to go to university. I had offers, I got accepted but I didn't want to' (Kim). Chloe made a similar choice: 'my college advised me to go to uni, but I changed my mind. I wasn't too bothered about the cost. I thought it would be more beneficial just going to an apprenticeship'. Maria, who went to sixth form and completed her A-levels, described her teacher's reaction when she announced her intention to do an apprenticeship: 'you're wasting your time, you need a degree'. The perception of 'wasting' time and good results on an apprenticeship was reported by several apprentices. Hope got good GCSE results and was encouraged by her school to do A-levels and apply for university. Her decision instead to do a Level 2 apprenticeship was met with disapproval in her school: 'my pastoral manager, she kept saying, "you're too smart to do an apprenticeship and you're too intelligent"'. In terms of 'presentation of self' (Goffman 1959), these participants all present themselves as actively choosing apprenticeship despite having the grades to pursue university. As Chloe noted: 'we applied for this, we chose to come here and do work'.

Several participants encountered negative reactions from family and friends. In the North London focus group, Kim, the only participant who appeared to be from a middle-class background, discussed the reaction of her parents, who were both university graduates: 'My mum was disappointed … my dad was really not very happy'. Interestingly, in that focus group, another student from a working-class background revealed how the widening participation agenda had changed the expectations of many parents: 'I don't think that's only your family though. I think everyone is programmed to think you must go to university

… I think that's how it makes parents feel' (Siobhan). Indeed, several participants stated that their parents had expected them to go to higher education. In an individual interview, Cynthia described her family's reaction: 'they were all upset with me because I didn't go to university'. Similarly, Chloe described how her friends reacted:

> When I told my friend I wasn't going to uni, she said 'well you're going to be jobless and you're going to be unsuccessful'. I think people have the perception that you're going to be unsuccessful if you don't go to uni.

Nonetheless, as Goffman argued, actors do not remain passive in the face of such stigma but seek to reclaim their moral standing by challenging negative stereotypes and asserting their legitimacy and value. Throughout their narratives, participants sought to dismiss negative perceptions of apprenticeships by claiming the normalcy of this route, especially in relation to university. A recurring theme throughout the narratives was the hard work required of apprentices. This challenged the common prejudice that an apprenticeship was 'easier' than a degree: 'the amount of work that we do is a lot. It's not easy' (Siobhan). Participants emphasised that, in addition to their coursework and assignments, they were also working up to 30 hours per week. Most apprentices commented on how time-consuming their assignments were and the difficulties of completing these while working long hours: 'with this apprenticeship you're working non-stop, so it's very busy' (Reuben).By contrast, participants associated university with partying: 'more young people go to uni for the social life, they see that partying and they say, like, "yes, I want to go to that"' (Yazid). This theme was taken up by several participants:

> Chloe: People go to uni for like the party life and stuff … but then with an apprenticeship you know that you're going to work.

> Stanley: I'd say uni is a lot more social than college. (South London focus group)

Unlike student life at school or university, apprenticeships were presented through narratives of responsibility, maturity and being 'grown up' in a real-life work environment. Cynthia humorously observed that only a few months earlier, in school, she needed permission to go to the toilet, now she was taking responsible roles in a busy hospital environment: 'You've got so much responsibility and it makes you feel that you have to mature'. Similarly, Reuben stated: 'it's kind of made me grow up a bit more as a person'. Yazid, who was doing an apprenticeship at an IT company, specialising in software development, particularly appreciated being treated like an adult, whereas at school and college he felt treated like a 'kid'. Even though still a teenager, he now had a responsibility in the workplace. He had learned to organise his own time and take responsibility: 'you're more mature here than college basically'. As observed elsewhere (Fuller and Unwin 2009), 'maturation' is a key feature of the apprenticeship model; emerging as a key rhetorical device in the narratives.

So far we have discussed how participants presented positive narratives of apprenticeships to counter negative stereotypes and challenge stigma. However, probing beneath the surface, especially in the follow-up interviews, revealed more complex challenges.

'A step backwards to move forwards' – negotiating challenges and opportunities

As noted earlier, there are many challenges associated with apprenticeships, not least of which is low pay. While all of the participants were being paid, many were earning the

minimal payment at the time of the fieldwork, £3.30 per hour. An National Union of Students (NUS) report from 2015 criticised the 'pitifully low' pay of apprenticeships and branded pay rates as exploitative (as quoted in Green 2015). Maria explained: 'I'm being paid the minimum, which is really difficult because by the end of the month, I hardly end up with anything in my pocket'.

As noted elsewhere (Brockmann 2013; Green 2015), most apprentices are so poorly paid that they can only survive financially by living at home with family. The cost of living in London, especially rent, was a recurring theme. Phoenix noted: 'it's hard to live independently in London as a young person'. He had a full-time job before embarking on his apprenticeship:

> I've had to move in with my brother because the wages that I'm earning here wouldn't have paid the rent of where I was living … But I think, in the long run, it's better. I'm not just taking a step back, I'm taking a step backward and a little side step to move up and then I can move forwards.

With this statement, Phoenix typified the narratives among many participants: apprenticeships were hard work and poorly paid but worthwhile because of improved employment prospects.

Nonetheless, some participants suggested that apprentices were vulnerable to exploitation: 'some employers they didn't know what apprenticeships are, they don't know what's the benefit to their company, like you have someone there you can pay them a low wage, not as a normal person' (Yazid). This quote is quite telling and suggests that apprentices also need to claim 'normalcy' in workplaces.

Apprentices often occupied a somewhat blurry position in work settings: neither fully qualified workers, nor full-time students. This may leave them having to continually re-negotiate normalcy. Pamela, who did an apprenticeship in Health and Social Care, reflected on her workplace experiences:

> Sometimes they would treat you as if you were actually an employee, which is a positive thing, but then they do have to remember that you are just an apprentice so you wouldn't know everything or every process or procedure.

During our repeat interview, Cynthia quoted a work colleague, a university graduate, who appeared to resent that an apprentice was now being trained to do the same job: 'Oh I spent this amount of money on university to do this and you're here doing it'. Amber, who was doing a Sports Apprenticeship and had her work placement in a school, remarked: 'I feel like they look down on me because I'm there training and stuff, because they're all teachers, they know everything about it'. Her use of the phrase 'looked down on' points to the salience of this recurring motif.

As noted earlier, when searching for post-compulsory educational pathways, most participants received little help from school and had to find apprenticeships through Internet searches. Several were confused about the whole application process, as Elizabeth observed: 'it was really confusing for me'. Clearly, there were some risks associated with finding an apprenticeship in such random ways. When we first interviewed Hope, who was doing a Business Administration apprenticeship in South London, she seemed happy with her work experience. However, when we met her again six months later, she had moved to a new apprenticeship with a different provider. She explained that after a few months in her first apprenticeship she began to think that 'something was wrong … I wasn't getting training … my employer wasn't meeting the contract rules appropriately'. After much discussion with the employer and many promises of training which were not met, she decided to leave.

There is concern in the literature about unsatisfactory apprenticeships which do not provide adequate training opportunities (P. Ryan 2011; Brockmann 2013). Hope's experience was a clear example of an employer who seemed to regard apprentices as cheap labour without providing adequate training. Her experiences suggest how random Internet searches carry risks for young people who lack appropriate guidance and sufficient knowledge to ask the right questions and get the correct assurances before embarking on apprenticeships. Because of the variability in the content and quality of training provision across different apprenticeships, with many programmes offering 'inadequate' training and learning (Ofsted 2017), young people need relevant information, guidance and advice to make informed choices.

Several participants were critical of training providers and disappointed with the extent of training (much of which involved completing online assignments), the range of materials and the amount of contact time with tutors. Although Phoenix was enjoying his apprenticeship and learning a lot, he did not get as much hands-on practical experience as he had expected:

> I feel like [training provider company] slightly packaged it to me in a certain way maybe, just to get their numbers up on the course, but, yes, it was my own fault really, to be honest, I should have looked into the course more.

By contrast, the training provided by a Further Education (FE) college was widely praised by participants on the Childcare apprenticeship. They had weekly lectures together in the college and received good-quality teaching and high levels of support from the tutor. Thus regular classroom teaching, as opposed to online training, seemed to be more appreciated by apprentices.

It would be wrong to suggest that participants were all critical of their apprenticeship experiences. Cynthia described how the apprenticeship had changed her life and given her aspirations to aim higher: 'a senior role, like a really higher role, and where people actually look up to you and people who actually depend on you'. Although in the first interview Cynthia described herself as 'not academic', when we conducted the second interview six months later she had begun to think about going to university part-time. Ironically, several young people, who initially were quite critical of university, later began to consider this option. This was often associated with career development and realising they needed a degree to progress in particular careers. It may also reflect the pervasive influence of social pressures to go to university and a sense that one cannot be really successful without a degree. However, it might equally be a sign of growing confidence and self-esteem, and shifting learner identities. This was particularly apparent in the case of Pamela.

Pamela, at age 24 our oldest participant, left school with poor grades and initially worked in a casual, low-paid job before embarking on a Level 2 apprenticeship. When we met her for the second interview, having completed her Level 3 apprenticeship, she was applying to university as a part-time student. Pamela explained that doing an apprenticeship had given her skills and confidence. At school, she had struggled with time management and often submitted her work late; but the apprenticeship taught her how to plan her work efficiently: 'I personally didn't think that I was a person to go to uni, but now I do. So it's kind of like a stepping stone to where you want to get to'.

Sometimes doing an apprenticeship changed participants' learner identity by giving them more confidence in their ability to learn new things. It also gave them valuable work experience so they felt able to balance the much sought-after practical experience with higher qualifications to enhance employment opportunities. Moreover, doing an apprenticeship

made some of them, such as Pamela, realise that in order to progress further they needed more qualifications.

It is apparent that re-interviewing young people six months later reveals the fluidity of career plans. Choice is a dynamic and continuous process and students' choices 'can change dramatically within a short time' (Holmegaard 2015, 1455). The participants often had new ideas about the kinds of jobs they wanted to pursue. It is possible that if we interviewed them in another six months their plans may have changed again.

Conclusion

There have been calls to give voice to young people as they narrate their education and training decision-making (Hogarth, Gambin, and Hasluck 2012). This article responds to that call and in so doing aims to make an innovative contribution by drawing on two bodies of literature, on apprenticeships and on student narratives of post-compulsory pathways, to develop insights into how young people narrate their decisions to do an apprenticeship despite the ongoing challenges associated with that route.

As widely discussed in the literature (P. Ryan 2011; Brockmann 2013) and evidenced by the statistical sources cited earlier, apprenticeships present opportunities but also obstacles for young people. Despite the ideal type of engineering, most new schemes in the United Kingdom are in areas like retail and business administration with little tradition of apprenticeship training. Pay is very low, especially for younger apprentices, and training is of variable quality (Ofsted 2017). These persistent challenges reinforce negative stereotypes among some teachers, parents and young people (Mazenod 2016).

The participants in our study were aware of these issues and the negative image of apprenticeships. They had encountered discouraging reactions from schools, colleges, parents and friends, as well as some work colleagues. Nonetheless, they persisted in their assertion that apprenticeships were a practical 'good way to go', in contrast to the more expensive and risky pathway of university. Acutely aware of the devalued status of apprenticeships, the young apprentices engaged in strategic self-presentations (Goffman 1961). In their quest to resist negative perceptions and the stigmatisation of their choice, they drew on the positive official policy discourse reinforced by widespread advertising campaigns, which provided useful rhetorical tools for them (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012), such as 'earn while you learn', gaining valuable work experience, becoming work-ready and attaining maturity.

These narratives may be read through a neoliberal lens as examples of individual agency and decision-making (Atkin 2016). In the very competitive London labour market, these young people sought to make themselves 'job-ready' by gaining practical qualifications and real-life work experience. However, there is also an alternative reading, a counter-narrative, which indicates the specific structural and contextual challenges facing young people in London today: the extortionate cost of living, especially rents, high levels of youth unemployment and the limited number of graduate-level jobs, despite government claims for the knowledge economy (Brooks 2013).

As British policy-makers attempt to promote apprenticeships, we argue that narrative analysis provides useful insights into how young people present their education and training decision-making processes. Their narratives reveal how they navigate perceived possibilities to make 'sensible' and 'feasible' choices, based on limited information. Such insights can be particularly helpful in indicating what might attract young people into apprenticeships

but also what more could be done to make that process better informed, more rewarding and less risky.[3]

Based on our findings we argue that monitoring apprenticeship accreditation needs to improve to ensure that training is meeting the required standards to address the skills gap. In addition, a single portal application process (like the university application system UCAS) should be introduced, so that young people, their parents and schools have access to reliable information and high-quality apprenticeships delivered by reputable providers. We also think that serious consideration should be given to bringing training back into colleges instead of private, mainly online, training provision. This would also ensure that young apprentices have access to additional support services, such as welfare, safeguarding and career advice, and may help to improve progression from Level 2 to Level 3.

Notes

1. Higher education participation rate of English 18–19 year olds (in UK universities) rose from 42% in 2006/07 to 48% in 2014/15. See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/552886/HEIPR_PUBLICATION_2014-15.pdf (20th August 2017).
2. Rate valid from April 2017. At the time of our fieldwork, the rate was £3.30 per hour. Rates are higher for older age groups. See https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates (20th August 2017).
3. Source: Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/regionalunemploymentbyagex02. (20th August 2017).

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