The Fate of Social Character in an Age of Uncertainty

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Abstract

This article develops the long-standing sociological tradition of 'character studies', arguing that the accelerated change and associated uncertainties central to late modern life have been accompanied by what we refer to as a new *opportunity-directed* form of individuality. Engaging with Sayer's agenda-setting return to the subject, we acknowledge the ideological uses to which the promotion of this characterological form may be put, but argue that its core qualities can help suitably situated persons negotiate radical uncertainty via a reflexive, future-oriented commitment to agency. Despite the advantages of this orientation in the contemporary era, however, we conclude by suggesting that opportunity-directedness is associated with certain 'pathologies', involving psychological costs and social inequalities, that raise questions about its desirability and sustainability.

Keywords

character, opportunity-directedness, Riesman, social change, uncertainty

Introduction

Seeking to revitalise sociology's engagement with the subject of 'character', Sayer (2020) accounts for the recent unpopularity of the concept by highlighting the ideological uses to which it has been put, and exploring how its populist deployment relies upon under socialised views of individuals that obfuscate structural inequalities. This is evident in the history of 'poor blaming', condemning the destitute as morally culpable for their poverty, that re-emerged during the 1970s alongside the neo-liberal

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assault on welfare (Welshman, 2006). The unpopularity of studies into character is also apparent in the discipline's preference for notions such as the habitus which provide more structural accounts of dispositional qualities. Dissatisfied with the level of generalisation core to such approaches, however, Sayer (2020: 462) utilises virtue ethics to examine in more detail those qualities that 'involve and promote flourishing (eudaimonia) or suffering'. 'Character' is valid sociologically, he concludes, as a means of exploring how social circumstances *and* human agency shape individuals' morally and socially significant evaluations of, and actions towards, themselves and others.

Sayer's argument is a timely reminder of why the analysis of individual dispositions should not be left to psychology. Nevertheless, his focus on 'moral qualities' (Sayer, 2020: 461), alongside popular (mis)uses of 'character', bypasses the main sociological tradition of character studies. Early examples of this genre include Cunliffe's (1968) *Soldiers and Civilians*, Gerth and Mills's (1953) *Character and Social Structure*, Lasch's (1991 [1979]) *The Culture of Narcissism*, Mead's (1942) *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, Mills's (1951) *White Collar*, Potter's (1954) *People of Plenty*, Riesman's (1969 [1950]) *The Lonely Crowd* and Whyte's (1956) *The Organization Man*. These studies examined warfare, commercialism and family structure, the service sector, social roles and the narcissistic preoccupation with self that superseded the culture of competitive individualism. Yet each was concerned with 'grasp[ing] history and biography and the relations between the two' via those *personal qualities common to significant numbers within a particular culture* (Fromm, 1960 [1942]: 239; Mills, 2000 [1959]: 6). Highlighting the dispositions and views shared by groups of individuals, this sociology of character has a distinctive remit to Sayer's (2020) analysis of moral virtues/vices, yet importantly refuses to assume the high levels of societal-individual congruence that render problematic popular explications of the habitus (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 13).

It is against this background that we explore the present-day significance of sociology's long-standing concern with character. We begin by analysing this tradition's rise, revisiting Riesman's (1969 [1950]) hugely influential account of 20th-century other-directedness. Riesman's study remains relevant because it highlights the sociological value of ascertaining diverse characterological forms, and explores the potential psychological costs of any socially structured qualities linking individuals to a socio-economic system. We then identify a *new characterological form* that illuminates the personal consequences of structural changes across contemporary societies. This necessitates engaging critically with theorists of change, risk and uncertainty, in explicating the contours of an emergent *opportunity-directed* character. Founded upon a reflexive, future-oriented commitment to agency in contexts of radical uncertainty, these characterological qualities enable suitably situated individuals to pursue their priorities across various domains, but have as their counterpoint particular 'pathologies' in terms of psychological costs and social inequalities. In conclusion, we argue that the fate of character remains vital to sociology, highlighting what forms of individual flourishing and decline are most feasible and developing, albeit via a different route, Sayer's agenda-setting evaluation of the subject.

The Rise of Social Character

Sociology's concern with character originated in classical writings on how the economy, social (dis)integration and science shaped people's responses to modernity. Analyses of alienation, anomie and egoism became disciplinary motifs in part because of their implications for individuals' sense of belonging and inner cohesion. Yet the most explicit example of this classical interest was Weber's (1991 [1904–1905]: 162) analysis of the 'methodical' Puritan 'character of worldly asceticism'. Crucially, Weber was sensitive to the enabling *and* potentially damaging features of social character. As Portis (1978: 116) observes, recognising the advantages value-consistent personalities yielded for Puritans, politicians and scientists within disenchanted times, Weber understood that their unremitting discipline risked 'hysteria, compulsions, phobia' and other symptoms.

The term 'social character' itself, however, was developed in the 1930s by Eric Fromm. A member of the Frankfurt School, Fromm (2002 [1956]: 190) engaged with Marx and Freud in focusing on features of personality, shaped by social structure, ultimately adaptive to (if not necessarily reproductive of) society's functioning. While this analysis resonates with Weber's suggestion that Protestantism helped people cope with market economies, it departs from his concern with 'hero ethics' limited to a minority (Farris, 2013). As Fromm (2002 [1956]: 76, emphasis in original) states, social character is not an ideal, but '*the nucleus of the character structure . . . shared by most members of the same group* in contradistinction to *the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture differ*'. The existence of social character across a section/ class of people does not, therefore, necessitate Weber's Puritan archetypal consistency, but countenances variation in how its common elements are incorporated into contrasting subjectivities.

Social character thus provides a link between institutions and individuals without suggesting people are identical. As noted above, neither does it assume characterological qualities are sufficient to reproduce society. Drawing on Spinoza, Fromm argues that change can occur first because life possesses an active striving; providing individuals with the potential for transcending characterological forms (a striving evident in the alienation Fromm (2002 [1956]) identified within capitalism). Second, character can itself stimulate change when institutional developments damage people's class/status position. Fromm (1960 [1942]: 182–185, 244, 2002 [1956]: 79) explores this in terms of the old German middle classes after the First World War; a characterological group whose dissatisfaction provided a basis for fascism.

Riesman's The Lonely Crowd

Having highlighted the general significance of social character, understanding its contemporary relevance requires us to revisit the best-known example of this genre. Riesman's (1969 [1950]) *The Lonely Crowd* drew on Fromm, but was itself hugely influential (and sold nearly one-and-a-half million copies before the end of the 20th century) in exploring those characterological forms that replaced the 'tradition-directed' orientation of pre-modernity (Gans, 1999: 283). Furthermore, it identified shifts in character associated with a 'post-industrial' USA marked by major growth in white collar

employment, 'emotion work', the service sector and in knowledge/communication jobs (Hochschild, 1983; Wrong, 1992). These developments resonate in the contemporary economy, and provide a context against which subsequent changes and their characterological consequences can be highlighted.

Riesman's primary focus is the 'inner-directed' social character dominant in 19th-century middle-class America and its replacement by an 'other-directed' type suited to mid-20th-century corporate capitalism. *Inner*-directed qualities developed during the Renaissance, but flourished as the extension of markets, social differentiation and finally industrialisation facilitated mobility, technological change and mass production (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 11). In such circumstances, it became common for middle-class parents to socialise children with qualities enabling them to utilise opportunities not yet 'fully determined' (1969 [1950]: 42). Equipped with a work ethic oriented towards achieving by 'doing' – in which production is 'seen and experienced in terms of technological and intellectual processes' – the inner-directed instrumental drive resembles a 'psychological gyroscope' oriented towards the 'push for success' (1969 [1950]: 111, 16).

The sociological parameters of inner-directedness can be clarified further with reference to sociology's long-term recognition that characterological forms provide a medium for the crystallisation of both personal 'I' perspectives, and group or 'We' perspectives towards the self and other (Elias, 1991). While the qualities associated with inner-directedness are not devoid of 'We' considerations – themselves being 'implanted early in life by . . . elders', and evident in the internalisation of general norms sanctioning technologically driven production and entrepreneurial activity (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 15) – they do signify what has been analysed as a gradual shift in balance during that period away from group concerns and affiliations, and towards the self as possessing greater autonomy and responsibility (Elias, 1991: 184, 196). Within an expanding competitive market society, moreover, Riesman (1969 [1950]: 41) views this increased *relative* emphasis towards the socially sanctioned, internally driven, 'I' central to inner-direction as necessary for survival.

The conditions conducive to this characterological form did not, however, last. As consumer culture expanded, alongside heightened emphasis on the presentation of self, an increasing gap emerged between societal institutions and inner-directedness (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 18). Amid these circumstances arose the 'other-directed' character, oriented towards and attuned to the *interactional qualities* that facilitated smooth relationships with colleagues and others. This search for approval and 'fitting in' competed with and gradually became more important than an inner drive for instrumental success within productive spheres (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 21).

Displaying affinities with Fromm's (1997) 'marketer' and Mills's (1967 [1946]) 'fixer', other-directedness evidences a keen disposition towards emotion work, as illustrated by Goldsen and Low's (1946) study of the length managers went to to gain the approval of colleagues. While inner-directed managers could relate to workers impersonally, via performance metrics, other-directed managers are 'compelled' to undertake impression management because they belong to 'a system that has sold the white-collar class . . . on the superior values of personalization' (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 265). This heightened significance of others is suited further to an era in which advancing

secularisation, mobility and immigration accelerates value diversification (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: xxxiii). In these circumstances, sincerity and tolerance replace instrumental determination as prime qualities of worth, and the balance between 'I' perspectives and 'We' perspectives undergoes a relative shift towards the latter as the ability to operate with group perspectives becomes increasingly important to the individual's capacity to survive and flourish within their surroundings.

Having highlighted the sociological relevance of characterological forms, Riesman notes the psychological costs of socially structured qualities linking individuals to socio-economic systems within modernity. Inner-directeds tended to feel *guilt* when deviating from the achievement path set them, rendering relaxation problematic despite its value for well-being. Occupational failure could also erode inner-direction, 'overwhelm[ing]' individuals with a sense of inadequacy (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 125). Other-directeds, in contrast, were prone to *shame* if their 'approval rating' dropped (shame being *the* other-directed emotion, involving self-monitoring from the standpoint of others) (Scheff, 1988: 398). The reliance of other-directeds on approval also problematises attempts to enjoy leisure as an intrinsic good (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 126). These challenges were heightened by the other-directed sense of existing without a stable core to their identity, resulting from a surplus of distinctive 'We' over 'I' perspectives on the self, and by living at a time where creeping uncertainty regarding the future problematised long-term commitments (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 25,138). The significance of these contrasting psychological challenges was such that Riesman linked them to the discipline's concern with suicide rates (Durkheim, 1952 [1897]).

Identifying inner- and other-directedness as ideal types, Riesman explores how actual individuals exist as 'winners' or 'losers' in relation to these characterological forms. Despite their psychological challenges, the 'adjusted' individual who internalises essential features of the dominant character enjoys a degree of congruence between outlook and socio-economic demands, facilitating productive expenditures of energy. In contrast, those anomic in relation to dominant social character suffer. So too do those who *over adjust* and are unable to act creatively when problems arise (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 244). In this context, Riesman (1969 [1950]: 257) argues that the real winners in the characterological stakes are those relatively 'autonomous' types who retain some independence from prevailing social character.

This recognition of relative autonomy within characterological forms is emphasised in Riesman's prefaces to later editions of his study, where he identifies growing tension between emergent institutional structures and other-direction. Observing rising levels of reflexive self-consciousness, Riesman (1969 [1950]: 259) suggested that individuals in the latter 20th century may enjoy more choice over the content of 'I' perspectives, and the extent to which 'I' perspectives or 'We' perspectives predominate in specific situations. Nonetheless, those who engaged subsequently with Riesman's arguments downplayed this relative autonomy. Meštrović (1996: 66) suggested the other-directed character had become a 'post-emotional', anomic victim of social changes. Equally pessimistically, Lasch (1991 [1979]: 66, 118) suggested that other-directedness had degenerated into a narcissistic struggle for survival wherein expressions of 'autonomy' constitute short-term attempts to accumulate power glossed by a facade of cooperation.

Sociology's interest in characterological studies has, as Sayer (2020) suggests, faded in recent decades (echoing only occasionally from those who lament the difficulty of achieving *any* character – viewed in terms of consistent values and commitments – within a flexible economy (e.g. Sennett, 1998)). Nevertheless, a range of influential sociological analyses from the 1990s made central the theme of individuals struggling amid the risks and uncertainties of modern life. While not engaging directly with 'character', they focused on how individuals can potentially exercise types of autonomy akin to Riesman's (1969 [1950]: 257) notion of creative independence.

These foundational theories of late modern society are well known, and have been criticised for the 'false universalism' of the individualisation thesis with which they are associated (Skeggs, 2004). Instead of dismissing them, however, we suggest their analyses contain a valuable focus on the importance of individuals assessing and utilising future opportunities that points towards the emergence of a *new* type of social character differentially evident in people depending upon their social position. Whereas the ultimate logic of the individualisation thesis looks forward to the disappearance of socially shared personal qualities, our argument here is that late modernity stimulates elements of an increasingly common orientation towards life.

Social Change, Risk and Uncertainty

Writing towards the end of the 20th century, Bauman (1997), Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) developed the now pervasive idea that late modernity is saturated by risk; an argument reflected subsequently in analyses spanning warfare (Singer, 2009), health (Scambler, 2019), financialised capitalism (Beunza and Stark, 2004) and the precariat (Standing, 2011). For Giddens (1991: 111), this saturation becomes central in societies 'taking leave' of their past, and 'opening' themselves to 'problematic future[s]'. Technologically powerful expert systems, for example, increase knowledge and productivity but introduce high consequence risks. For Beck (1992: 57–58) and Bauman (2005: 19), similarly, industry and science are no longer safe sources of wealth, but, 'turn normality into hazards overnight', making life a 'high wire' balancing act.

Such accounts appear bleak, but Giddens and Beck also emphasise the enabling features associated with these circumstances. For Giddens (1991: 3–5, 224) the reflexive management of risk and colonisation of the future that contemporary institutions seek is mirrored in the reflexive project of the self; a project involving the recovery of previously suppressed moral/existential questions. This is reflected in Beck's (1999a) concern with how individuals use risk politics to shape their identities, while Archer's (2003, 2012) later realist analyses develop this picture, albeit in a distinctive direction. Critical of the psychologistic elements in Giddens's and Beck's notion of 'extended' individual reflexivity, Archer (2012: 32) nevertheless shares their concern with the growth of deliberative orientations. Here, it is the situationally varied logics of opportunity endemic to chronic institutional change, and its associated uncertainty (distinguished from risk by its resistance to rational calculability; Knight, 2006 [1921]: 19–20), that necessitates a radical process of internal deliberation in which people must rely on their *own* cognitive resources if they are to navigate successfully their surroundings (Archer, 2012: 4, 9, 42).

Despite their differences, these theorists also converge in mapping the erosion of previous social class, community and other bases of identity. Each additionally emphasises an emergent, *reflexively shaped future-orientedness* as what can be seen as a characterological requirement amid the demands of chronic change; an orientation evident within a growing number of empirically informed studies situated in and beyond the West. Ranging across the possibilities and constraints associated with shifting conceptions of gender (e.g. Choi and Luo, 2016; Gaetano, 2014), and ageing (e.g. Caetano, 2017; Pickard, 2016), the restructuring of newly gentrified communities (e.g. Patton, 2014), radicalised religion (e.g. Maqsood, 2013; Marti, 2015) and the changing forms of identity work required in organisations (e.g. Brown, 2015), the capacity of individuals to 'mentally project [. . .] the self into new situations, such that the mind rehearses and thus acclimatizes itself to the new patterns of action it would then adopt' is identified as an increasingly common and important quality (Archer, 2003: 76).

This emphasis on personal, future-oriented reflexivity is crucial to our argument, but needs supplementing. First, while theorists of late modernity tend to equate deliberation with rational cognitive inner-dialogue, it is important to recognise Burkitt's (2012: 467) argument that the inescapable emotional responses accompanying our interactions with other people inevitably infuse our thoughts with an affective 'colouring'. Thus, while the reflexive deliberations of two individuals may in certain circumstances possess similar symbolic content, they can be permeated with radically contrasting significance as a result of the emotional legacy of their biographical relationships. Emotions are not simply a 'commentary' on our concerns, but shape their subjective content, weight and consequences in terms of our tendency to act in particular ways (Burkitt, 2012: 463). This does not reduce the importance of reflexivity, but enables us to clarify what it involves.

Second, our emphasis on reflexive opportunity-direction does not imply the *complete* eradication of other-directed elements to late modern character. Giddens (1991), for example, utilises a psychological model of 'ontological security', wherein identification with 'the other' is foundational for displacing anxiety. Relatedly, Beck (1999a) validates the importance for identity of mutual adjustment, with interpersonal accommodation occurring within new forms of intimate relationship and in environmental/other groups arising within risk society. Despite his pessimistic assessment of consumer society, Bauman (2002) hopes that impulses of 'being for' the other may mitigate the fear of contemporary life. It is also important to remember that critics insist that gender, social class and other long-standing sources of collective identities still influence personal qualities (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; De Beer and Koster, 2009).

The persistence of certain other-directed and collective sources of character does not, however, invalidate Archer's (2012: 64) observation that social change has eroded *stable* 'generalized others' and associated patterns of socialisation. As Archer's (2003: 293, 2012) interviews suggest, many individuals equipped to prosper in late modernity are not concerned to adapt or gain approval through in-group status, but choose those with whom they associate according to their *own* internally deliberated ideals. Yet if these individuals are determined to relate to others on their terms, this is not a return to the 'gyroscopic' orientation of Riesman's inner-directeds. While the inner-directed gyroscope was implanted firmly in individuals by agents of socialisation (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 42), Archer (2012: 39) insists that any 'psychological compass' suited to morphogenetically

induced uncertainty needs to be renewed and adapted through constant internal deliberation. What we have here is a development of Riesman's (1969 [1950]: 257) suggestion that individuals were gradually gaining more flexibility vis-a-vis characterological forms.

It is important to note, however, that individuals are differentially equipped to engage in and benefit from this forward-oriented deliberation (Shilling and Mellor, 2018). As Sayer (2009, 2020) argues, structural inequalities shape character formation. Nevertheless, the responses to risk, change and uncertainty explored by theorists of late modernity can be viewed as outlining a new '*opportunity-directed*' characterological form evident increasingly across contemporary societies. While Giddens, Beck and Bauman provide important general accounts of these developments, Archer explicates them most thoroughly and it is to mapping and developing the contours of these characterological features that we now turn.

The Opportunity-Directed Embrace of Uncertainty

Charting the qualities of those adept at reflexively orienteering through the mutually amplifying changes and uncertainties they see around them, Archer (2012) focuses on 'autonomous reflexive' and 'meta-reflexive' individuals. While the former 'enthusiastically grasp' a 'future-oriented, deliberative focus on career advancement and a disposition towards social entrepreneurship', the latter tend to focus on reflexive engagements with what Archer (2012: 166ff.) views as progressive socio-environmental change. Despite these contrasts, however, and building on Fromm's (2002 [1956]: 76–77) attentiveness to flexibility in how characterological forms are incorporated into individuals' contrasting subjectivities, these qualities can be considered variations within *one* emergent 'opportunity-directed' characterological form.

Our notion of opportunity-directedness is a theoretical construct which draws on and develops Archer's and Riesman's writings. It resonates with Riesman's anticipation that certain people were developing greater control over characterological forms. Opportunity-directeds possess the capacity to engage creatively with, and navigate flexibly between, rather than be constrained by, 'I' perspectives and (what remains of) 'We' perspectives. This enables them to switch from original, individualistic approaches to those which draw on group norms (albeit norms that are often increasingly transient). Enhancing this flexibility further, moreover, is the fact that opportunity-directed individuals are released from the restricted *ends* orientations dominating inner-directeds (focused on productive success) and that also informed other-directeds focus on mutual adjustment (valued in itself, despite also constituting an avenue for other goals). Instead, their disposition towards the utilisation of opportunities provides a focus on securing the *means* for a wide range of individually chosen goals.

'Opportunity-directedness' also draws on the common features underpinning Archer's (2012: 166–248) most adept reflexive types in terms of the value they place on constructing their identities in relation to a modus vivendi; *a vocation or way of life reflecting their own priorities yet which is in our formulation highly flexible and subject to change in relation to situationally emergent prospects*. This theoretically driven formulation of contemporary social character is deliberately very broad – something that can be considered an analytical weakness as well as a strength – but needs to be if it is to indicate those

common qualities shared by otherwise very diverse individuals. Opportunities here exist in relation to the specific and changing modus vivendi of specific individuals, and are presently developing rapidly in relation to those prospects and constraints emergent in today's shifting social, environmental and economic circumstances.

This notion of opportunity-directedness is refined further, moreover, by recognising that it embraces not only relative *autonomy*, but also the deliberative and emotional qualities involved in *confidence* and *conviction*, and the capacity to *arbitrage* complexity, diversity and transformational instability for individual or collective benefit.[1] The importance of *autonomy* in relation to an economic vocation or different/broader commitment is diametrically opposed to other-directed dependence. Riesman's (1969 [1950]: 21) other-directeds wanted to 'fit in' with the relatively settled, bureaucratised environs of advanced capitalism (Whyte, 1956). In contrast, Archer's (2012: 208) meta-reflexives are 'on the lookout for a vocation' in which they can pursue their *own* priorities, an aim shared by her 'autonomous' type. These opportunity-directeds need to distance themselves from their surroundings if they are to pursue their goals in a context where chronic change is normalised, and to act autonomously in order to take advantage of the 'creative destruction' endemic within current economic developments (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 107; Schumpeter, 1934 [1912]). This distancing evokes Deutschmann's (2011) argument that 'innovation' rather than rationally adaptive action constitutes a positive response to contemporary uncertainties (see also Merton, 1968). It is reflected further in the tendency for opportunity-directeds to have limited friendships, to sacrifice intimate relationships that distract their focus, and in their efforts to be 'indifferent to group expectations' (Archer, 2012: 168–169).

If autonomous action is essential for opportunity-directeds, so is the *confidence* that assists such action. This is anticipated by Schumpeter's (1934 [1912]) emphasis on the necessity of individuals dealing boldly with the uncertainties of capitalism. As Barbalet's (2008: 88) theoretical interrogation of emotion argues, confident deliberation enables individuals to bring a conception of the future into the present by providing an emotionally saturated cognitive 'sense of certainty to what is essentially unknowable, so that assured action with regard to it may be engaged'. This approach also projects the self into the unknown, preparing the ground for shaping what is yet to exist through the 'emotional energy' possessed by the assured individual whose demeanour and ambition is, for Collins (2005), advantageous to goal realisation.

Confidence may be essential to opportunity-directed character, but circumstances of endemic change increasingly require individuals to cultivate an additional quality. This is partly because confidence is a prerequisite for multiple actions in a range of societies – even if just the habitual pre-modern confidence that traditional customs will persist – whereas opportunity-directedness requires a more active orientation to structuring the unknown. At a time when individuals have increasingly to make decisions under conditions of 'radical uncertainty' regarding relationships, economics, finance, government and politics, Tuckett and Nikolic (2017) highlight the importance of enhancing confidence through *conviction*.

Conviction supplements and 'armours' confidence for opportunity-directed individuals determined to shape the temporally unknown. For Tuckett and Nikolic (2017: 502), conviction is most effective when developed into theory-based narratives wherein

individuals draw on relevant information, beliefs, feelings, causal models and 'rules of thumb' in order 'to identify opportunities worth acting on, to stimulate the future outcome of the actions by means of which they plan to achieve those opportunities and to feel sufficiently convinced about the anticipated outcomes to act'. Detailing 'conviction narratives', Tuckett and Nikolic's (2017: 503–504) conceptual explorations include descriptions of asset managers who build portfolios by creatively exploring cases of potential undervaluation in relation to forecasts about the future until they have a cognitive and emotional sense of certitude. More generally, in an era permeated by unprecedented uncertainty, conviction narratives constitute an integral part of attempts by opportunity-directed individuals to *arbitrage the future*.

Arbitrage is usually associated with the financialisation of the economy. Here, arbitrageurs identify opportunities arising from uncertainty by making creative associations between assets in an experimental, theory-driven process that has as its goal the creation of profit. Involving imaginative thought suffused by emotionally guided 'hunches', this process is illustrative of what Soros (2009) calls the new future-oriented 'paradigm of reflexivity' shaping financial markets (Finch, 2007: 134). These arbitrageurs exemplify the reflexive and future-oriented qualities of autonomy, confidence and conviction central to opportunity-directed characters, displaying 'immunity' to the other-directed concern with the approval of others and to the 'old paradigm' of equilibrium-based models of financial trading. As embodiments of an 'alertness to opportunity' characteristic of a broader entrepreneurialism (Kirzner, 2009), however, this form of opportunity-directedness is not confined to the economic realm (Mellor and Shilling, 2017). Miyazaki (2013: 110), for example, explores empirically how social arbitrageurs in Japan routinely seek to shape their futures across career and marriage decisions and, indeed, all areas of their lives. This includes spirituality, with individuals utilising the apparently incommensurate traditions of Christianity and Zen Buddhism with the creativity and emotional tenor they bring to their financial dealings; qualities enabling them to sense the future as populated with novel resources they can arbitrage to their own benefit.

Further emphasising the extensibility of such attempts to arbitrage the future, Seabrooke's (2014) review of relevant theoretical and substantive studies explores how transnational professionals negotiate and project contrasting 'I' and 'We' identities depending on the diverse social groupings they are dealing with, while Carlson et al.'s (2017) interviews illustrate how parents seek to provide their offspring with opportunities to cultivate global skills. These attempts to arbitrage particular futures suggest that opportunity-directedness is not just a theoretical construct but can illuminate trends in people's behaviour. More broadly, such attempts can also be associated with the speculative ambition to overcome limits evident within a broader 'bioeonomics' where life's possibilities are open to conjecture and capitalisation (Lilley and Lightfoot, 2014). As such, while arbitrage is linked to financialised capitalism, it also resonates with wider possibilities of change within late modernity.

There may always have been opportunity-directed individuals, operating within contrasting societies. What identifies them as an emerging contemporary character *type*, however, is the societal demand for this approach across broad swathes of life. The danger here is that individuals unable to cultivate these qualities will be seen as responsible for any misfortunes they encounter, in a continuation of populist victim blaming. Yet as

Riesman (1969 [1950]) argued with reference to earlier character types, common qualities are not shared universally, while the conditions promoting opportunity-directedness inevitably create 'losers' as well as 'winners' in relation to actual individuals.

The morphogenetic disruption of social, cultural and economic life spread through globalisation, for example, is often especially harsh on women whose traditional duties are exacerbated by the need to take on (more) low-paid, demanding work, though it has also been associated with opportunities for the *lessening* of gender inequality (Arora, 1999; Dewan, 1999). Ganguly-Scrase's (2003) research, for example, suggests that for many young women disruptive social change can weaken traditional roles and create a new sense of autonomy with regard to the future. More generally, the dissolution of many 20th-century employment protections evident in the spread of 'flexible' working makes labour for many increasingly precarious and short term (Standing, 2011; Weil, 2014). For those able to exploit it, though, flexibility allows individuals to prosper, so long as they are able and willing to embrace the autonomy such changes offer to reflexively build lives and careers antithetical to the bureaucratised models of the 20th century (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Stone, 2004).

Despite the pay-off for those able to embrace opportunity-directness, these examples exemplify the demands placed on individuals by the circumstances associated with this characterological form. It is important for us to examine these in more detail since they can inform our understanding of the relationship between this character and the wider distribution of opportunities and inequalities that shape individuals' capacities to flourish.

Characterological Forms, Social Inequalities and Social Pathologies

Newly emerging characterological forms do not render previous types non-existent – irrespective of the difficulties associated with personal qualities that no longer 'fit' their milieu – but are consequential for social inequalities. In this respect, the disadvantages suffered by Riesman's (1969 [1950]) other-directeds in the current era are increasingly visible in Archer's (2012: 125ff.) 'communicative'-oriented individuals whose deliberations are limited by a desire for connection with *existing* networks. Constantly seeking affirmation from known others, lacking confidence to negotiate uncertainties, these individuals are poorly suited to the flux that makes maintaining relationships difficult, and are poorly placed to exploit opportunities outside their immediate life-world. This is perhaps exemplified by Sennett's (1998) study of the effects of redundancy on workers. So too, according to Fertik (2015), does it apply to those immersed in the social media-driven 'reputation economy' who are dependent for esteem on 'likes' and vulnerable to the fierce demand to comply with collective opinion evidenced in the harassment of those with 'out-group' politics, beliefs or attitudes via platforms such as Twitter (Ronson, 2015). What is evident here is arguably reflective of Lasch's (1991 [1979]: 66, 118) account of the degeneration of other-directedness into a struggle to accumulate power by 'doing others in'.

Even more vulnerable to conditions of morphogenetic change are those Archer (2012: 250, 290) identifies as 'fractured' whose deliberations are shot through with mental distress and ongoing anxiety that often results in self-defeating choices. Such states have

much in common with Beck's (1992: 88–89, 100) account of how the breakdown of conventional collectivities within neo-liberal economies becomes 'transformed into personal failure', with social problems perceived increasingly as 'personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses'.

The translation of 'public issues' into 'personal troubles' (Mills, 2000 [1959]: 8) is anticipated by Fromm's (2002 [1956]: 77) argument that the demands made by an era's normative social character reveal the psychological strains and mental illness from which people are at risk. As we have seen, for Riesman (1969 [1950]: 125–126) failing to maintain the prevailing characterological norm in an era of inner-directedness generated predispositions towards *guilt* and, in that of other-directedness, *shame*. While guilt and shame may not sound like significant pathologies, Riesman emphasised their gravity by connecting these to prevailing suicide rates. In contrast, it is *anxiety* that takes 'centre stage' when handling the 'creative uncertainty of freedom' becomes an essential cultural qualification within contemporary opportunity-directedness (Beck, 1992: 76, 1999b: 13; Giddens, 1991: 80).

It is important to note that anxiety is not an inevitable result of dealing with risk and uncertainty. As Lyng's (2005) analysis of 'edgework' argues, involvement in high risk leisure and other pursuits has the *potential* to provide *identity affirming* 'I' experiences that enhance well-being, and can also prepare individuals for potentially uncomfortable confrontations with uncertainty. For those fractured selves explored by Archer (2012), however, anxiety is stimulated in response to *passivity* or *failure* in the face of potential opportunities. Thus, Neilson's (2015) account of anxiety among an emergent 'precariat' foregrounds powerlessness and the inability to intervene in the changes affecting their lives, though such anxiety also often impinges upon even those able to prosper within the evolving landscape of accelerated change. The sort of arbitraging of identities across social groupings identified by Seabrooke (2014), for example, comes for some at the cost of the high levels of anxiety and stress that continually traversing uncertain norms can induce (Hirsch and Kang, 2015). Relatedly, Sennett (1998: 85, 138) associates rapid change with a sense of disorientation and loss of community. The pervasiveness of anxiety associated with surviving and attempting to prosper within an era marked by flux and uncertainty has, moreover, been linked to a rise in mental health problems including obsessional thinking, ontological insecurity and an inability to function socially; a rise that casts doubts on the viability of demands made on contemporary individuals (Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2016; Neilson, 2015; Roberts, 2017). Opportunity-directedness, in short, is a characterological form possessed of important implications for social inequalities and personal problems.

Conclusion

The sociological significance of character studies for Riesman (1969 [1950]) resided in their capacity to explore the socially structured dispositions, emotions, values, thoughts and actions common to otherwise distinctive individuals across a group, culture or even nation. These common qualities were stimulated by society's institutional parameters, and were necessary for that society to continue along its predominant lines of development.

There have of course been other approaches to the interpenetration of social milieu and individual make-up, yet the notion of social character has advantages compared to its competitors. In contrast to the sense of inevitability accompanying Althusser's (1971) and Butler's (1990) notions of subjects being 'hailed' to subject positions, 'social character' maintains more room for social change. Characterological types are not all-encompassing for actual individuals and can stimulate change within society and be reformed as a consequence of institutional developments. Similarly, in opposition to the notion of habitus, social character does not guarantee the inculcation of a world-view 'beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny' which reconciles individuals to their social position (Bourdieu, 1984: 466).

If the notion of social character is more modest than such alternatives it is, we suggest, more useful. Fromm (1960 [1942]) highlighted how alienation and resentment among character types marginalised by societies' evolving institutions can become potent sources for populist political movements. This is perhaps relevant again in terms of the conservative values characteristic of the 'left behind' American rust-belt that helped Trump to power (Hochschild, 2018), and is also worth exploring in the reaction against metropolitanism and globalisation evident in the UK's 2016 Brexit vote.

Our focus in this article has been on how mutually amplifying social and socio-cultural changes facilitated the emergence of an opportunity-directed characterological form; one able to take advantage of what Archer (2012: 35) identifies as an era dominated by situational logics of opportunity. The approach we have taken differs from Sayer's (2020), and would benefit from future development involving its potentially gendered dimensions in terms, for example, of the ease with which women and men are able to deploy confidence and emotional sensitivity in their deliberations. While we have cited a number of substantive studies that lend evidence to the growth of opportunity-directedness, this could also usefully be explored in a more empirically systematic manner. Despite these qualifications, however, our approach enables us to develop Sayer's (2020) concern with those qualities conducive to flourishing and suffering given that the parameters of social character shape the boundaries in which people's dispositions are formed. In this context, opportunity-directedness expresses an autonomous capacity to engage creatively with uncertainty via a reflexive, future-oriented construction of a modus vivendi that enables individuals to arbitrage complexity, diversity and transformational instability with conviction. This is not the gyroscope of Riesman's inner-directed individual, since there is no one life-course mapped out for anyone. It is a reflexive orienteering enabling individuals to adapt creatively to opportunities in a way that serves their own concerns. For those able to live this way 'winning' can be real: whether in terms of personal satisfaction, political activism or career fulfilment, significant numbers of individuals have embraced contemporary uncertainties in a way that allows them to prosper.

This concern with reflexivity and its relationship to the future is not new. The sociological recognition that characterological forms included 'I' and 'We' perspectives (drawing on the 'I/Me' relationship outlined by Mead and others) acknowledged that individuals apprehended themselves on the basis of group values, aligning future behaviour to existing norms. In a context of radical uncertainty, however, where there are no longer any truly '*generalized* others', the mechanisms for conscious deliberation rest on

the embodied subject's capacity to 'stand back' and become not only an object to their own self, but also a subject actively contemplating the future via an inner dialogue, unconfined to group perspectives, by 'planning, rehearsing, mulling over, deciding, reliving, prioritising, imagining' as well as clarifying, holding imaginary conversations and budgeting options (Archer, 2003: 32, 2012: 76, 129). Given the challenges inherent to this particular form of future-oriented reflexivity, it is hardly surprising that Stone (2004) identifies large numbers of opportunity-directed winners as located in knowledge-based sectors of the job market.

In a context where the essential cultural qualification is the capacity to handle the 'creative uncertainty of freedom', however, some people remain *unqualified*. The 'losers' we have touched on in this pattern of morphogenetic change are associated with an incapacity to exercise agency by force of social or individual circumstance. We also suggested that even the opportunity-directed cannot guarantee their avoidance of the personal pathologies associated with these conditions, conclusions that raise questions about the desirability and sustainability of this characterological form. In this context, the analysis of social character, and its fate in the context of contemporary social and cultural change, remains vitally important to sociology's concern with the modes of individual flourishing and decline typical within social environments.

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Note

1. These qualities do not constitute a variant of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Brockling, 2015), a subject outside the focus of this article. The idea of the entrepreneurial self is tied to the ideology of neo-liberalism. Archer's focus on vocations includes commitments that are *anti*-capitalist, in contrast, and is a counterpart to circumstances of accelerating change that transcend any single socio-economic context. Similarly, our analysis of the qualities integral to opportunity-directedness are not confined to the parameters of neo-liberal societies. Opportunity-directeds are well placed to exploit prospects that arise within market societies, but their personal qualities are not confined to such societies.

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