

## **“Fuck It, Shit Happens (FISH)”: A Social Generations Approach to Understanding Young People’s Imaginings of Life After School in 2016-2017**

**Patrick Alexander**, Oxford Brookes University

**John Loewenthal**, Oxford Brookes University

**Graham Butt**, Oxford Brookes University

### **Abstract**

This article uses a social generations approach (Woodman & Wyn 2015; Furlong et al 2011) to explore the lives of young people transitioning to life after schooling. Drawing on ethnographic research in England during the geopolitical uncertainty of 2016-2017, we track the trajectories and narratives of six individuals. The research begins with final year pupils in schools talking about their futures, during and after their A-Level exams. We then follow these individuals on routes to Higher Education and employment, exploring how they are socialised into imaginings of the future and/or struggle to inhabit these futures. A deeply-ingrained, modernist, neoliberal reckoning of future time is normalised through experiences of schooling. However, this logic is troubled profoundly in the transition to life after school. Young people’s experiences in an unpredictable present run in stark contrast to the ordered trajectory of future action they have been socialised to expect. Amidst this uncertainty, ambivalence towards shaping the future (‘Fuck It, Shit Happens’) can in some ways feel like the most agentic stance to take. A social generations approach to understanding youth transitions reveals how we must critique the very concept of ‘the future’ if we are to understand the reality of youth transitions in the present.

**Keywords:** youth, futures, uncertainty, transitions, ambivalence, social generations

### **Introduction**

More than a decade ago, Furlong and Cartmel’s second edition of *Young People and Social Change* (2007) was influential in contributing to a growing consensus about the uncertain nature of youth transitions in contemporary, late modern Western societies. The conditions of the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992) offer up to young people a proliferation of opportunities for the future (Giddens 1991), but this diversity of individualised choice is underpinned by inequity of access and a profound uncertainty of outcome. Mapping significant shifts in the experiences of young people since the 1970s, Furlong and Cartmel argue, as have many since (for example, Wyn & Woodman 2006; Woodman & Wyn 2015), that the global spread of neoliberal political and economic discourse has led to circumstances of rapacious precarity for many young people. This is evidenced as much in unstable labour market conditions as it is in health and educational outcomes, and in new manifestations of ‘youth culture’ (Furlong 2009). Such conditions are markedly different from those experienced by youth prior to the 1970s, and as such contemporary youth may experience a ‘new adulthood’ that is radically distinct from adulthood as experienced earlier in the

Twentieth Century (Woodman & Wyn 2015). A social generations approach as defined by Woodman and Wyn (2015) (see also Woodman & Wyn 2006; Furlong et al. 2011) helps to complicate this picture further by challenging the often-oversimplified distinction between ‘transition’ and ‘cultural’ analyses in youth studies, instead championing a convergence of the two to illuminate the culturally and historically specific nature of experiences of social reproduction, articulated in relation to generation.

In this article we apply a social generations approach to the findings of an ethnographic study into youth experiences of transition to life after schooling in England during the years 2016-2017. We begin with a critical framing of a social generations approach, emphasising the importance of taking into account modernist, neoliberal reckonings of ‘the future’, and of socialisation through schooling into future-orientation, as aspects of how a sense of generational identity is shaped (Leccardi 2017). This is followed by a description of the *Imagining the Future* research project and a reminder of the broader political and economic context in which the research occurred during 2016-2017. In the third section of the article, we present a series of narratives from the research, beginning at the end of schooling and following different individuals in the twelve months that follow. In particular, we explore the novel forms of uncertainty that define youth experiences of transition in the present, emphasising that uncertainty itself is an increasingly unpredictable quality in young people’s lives. This has profound implications for how ‘the future’ emerges as an organising concept in the lives of young people. In turn, we present examples of young people dealing with new experiences of uncertainty with a mix of ambition, anxiety, and ambivalence. In a world defined by unpredictable outcomes, ambivalence can feel empowering and is captured neatly in the phrase ‘Fuck It, Shit Happens’ (FISH) - a relatively common saying at the time of the research that runs contrary to the more popular, idealistic ‘You Only Live Once’ (YOLO). We conclude by arguing that a social generations approach is a useful means of understanding contemporary experiences of uncertain youth transition, particularly when combined with a critical framing of ‘the future’ as an organising concept in the lives of young people today.

### **Orienting a Social Generations Approach to ‘The Future’**

Building on the legacy of Mannheim (1952), a social generations approach (Woodman & Wyn 2015) begins to challenge the limits of thinking in terms of transitions because it takes as its starting point the notion that there is convergence between the so-called ‘transitions’ and ‘cultural’ traditions in youth studies (Furlong et al 2011). The benefit of applying a social generations approach here is that it highlights the generationally peculiar nature of the experiences of transitions that young people describe in the narratives detailed below (negotiating life after school and reconciling the tension between anticipated and lived experiences of the future), while also affording an analytical frame that requires a consideration of the broader historical, political, and economic conditions that bring about ‘youth transitions’ as lived by the participants in this research (the growing uncertainty of the period 2016-2017). Contrary to the prevailing view in psychological research (see, for example, Arnett 2004), a social generations approach

also challenges the fixity of the notion of transition. Rather than seeing transition as a static, abstracted process that happens to young people, a social generations approach allows a nuanced approach to transitions as processes and experiences that are constructed in ways idiosyncratic to the generation for whom they take place. Such an approach also troubles the notion that ‘adulthood’ is a coherent category experienced in similar ways across generations (Woodman & Wyn 2015).

Traditionally, psychological, developmental and functionalist sociological research on youth transitions has regarded as relatively static the stages of the life course through which young people travel on the journey to adulthood (Hall 1909; Parsons 1954). In more recent years, literature on youth transitions has challenged this linear approach, particularly in relation to the complex and individualised ways in which the social identities of young people are constructed during early adulthood and beyond (Beck 1992; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Woodman & Wyn 2015). A contemporary shift away from the ‘traditional’ (but also historically anomalous) 20th century pathway to adulthood – via formal education, permanent employment, marriage, starting a family, and owning property – has troubled the categories of the life course that once gave structure to ideas about youth transitions. And yet, popular discourse broadly continues to adhere to a static model of transition drawn from the above traditions (and particularly from developmental psychology). More recent psychological framings of transition introduce more complex ideas about the progression from childhood, to youth, and finally to adulthood. However, many still rely on a traditional, linear model of progress that anticipates the development of stable adult identities in the future. Côté (2000), for example, suggests an enduring mode of contemporary adolescence that extends into life beyond the teenage years, but which ultimately leads one to a more stable status in adulthood. Others describe the ‘yo-yo’ effect of transitions that involve shifting from more- to less-‘adult’ roles, and back again (Biggart and Walthers 2006), but finally resting in a more stable adult state. Similarly, Arnett (2004) has famously argued for the notion of an ‘emerging adulthood’ that takes many years of challenge and experimentation before a concretely ‘adult’ sense of self emerges. In spite of its capacity to capture greater diversity of experience, Arnett’s approach is characteristic of contemporary psychological approaches that take for granted the coherent and unchanging nature of ‘transition’ as a concept, and which rely on an ultimately linear vision of how one develops from childhood, through adolescence, to a stable adult state. The notion that transition represents a unidirectional, static set of checkpoints on a straight trajectory to adulthood does not go far enough in challenging the fixity of ‘youth’ and ‘adulthood’ as categories of structure, experience, and belonging.

Contemporary youth studies research provides rich analysis that goes beyond a linear, developmental model, leading us instead to explore the variety and commonality of challenges facing young people as they navigate the increasingly untenable regimens of traditional age-based social identity (for example, Griffin 2001; Andreas 2006; Furlong 2015; Woodman & Wyn 2015). Whatever the trajectory, it is clear that contemporary youth transitions are complex beyond the limits of a simple linear model of progression through transitions along the life course. Wyn and Woodman (2006) have argued that research in the ‘transition’ tradition of youth studies is too often focused on the relationship between

social change and shifts in the timing or nature of different points of transition, meaning that the concept of transition itself has remained relatively unchallenged. Such an approach can, therefore, ultimately reinforce a linear view of the life course (Furlong et al 2011). Woodman and Wyn (2015) go on to make the crucial argument that it is essential to move away from a deterministic framing of ‘transition’ if this is to be achieved. To this end, the most powerful aspect of a social generations approach as long-promoted by Wyn and Woodman (2006) is their casting off a focus on transition, and a re-casting of generation as a category that is historically and culturally contingent. As they suggest, ‘The point is that the meaning of generation needs to be distinguished from a definition of generation as simply a succession of birth cohorts. Linking generation with its social and political context means that age is only one relevant feature’ (2006:501). This point is taken on by Furlong et al (2011:361) when they suggest that, ‘the notion of transition has become relatively meaningless conceptual tool because of the increasing lack of synchrony of transitions across life domain.’ They go on to articulate clearly the power of a focus instead on generations (2011: 361): ‘because [a social generation approach] rests on the notion that new and distinctive forms of consciousness are produced by changing social conditions, a generational approach takes account of the role of culture and subjectivities as forces for social change.’ The value of such an approach is evident because it offers the possibility of a richer, more complex account of the lived experiences of young people. However, Roberts (2007) is justified in his critique of Wyn and Woodman’s initial (2006) (and by extraction Furlong et al’s 2011) framing of social generations against a focus on transition. While Furlong et al (2011) may be justified in highlighting the conceptual meaninglessness of ‘transition’, Roberts makes the simple and important point that transitions remain socially very meaningful indeed: most young people still experience and/or imagine them, in one way or another. It is therefore possible to agree with both Wyn and Woodman *and* Roberts in arguing that while *experiences* of ‘transition’ are now characterised by messy, blurred, chaotic processes of change, these experiences are regularly organised and articulated in relation to a persistent *discourse* of fixed, linear, organised transition across the life course. What is largely missing from both arguments is an interrogation of *why* such a regimented discourse of youth transition should persist in a precipitously uncertain world defined by ‘transitions’ that are open-ended, continuous, and amorphous.

The answer to such a question lies in an interrogation of the broader temporal backdrop against which transitions, and generational belonging, are framed. Leccardi (2012; with Woodman 2015; 2017) has championed this kind of temporal approach to youth studies. If in late modern Western society transitions to adulthood may be characterised by an overlapping of qualities associated with ‘adult’ and ‘youth’ identities, this implies a novel and mercurial experience of temporality in the life course that as yet remains to be fully theorized in relation to personhood, social identity, and, importantly, generation (Leccardi 2017; France and Roberts 2014). Research in to the anthropology and sociology of the future (Facer 2013; Miller 2016; Pels 2015) recognises the powerful influence of modernist, neoliberal reckonings of future time in contemporary global society. As Pels (2015) argues, the concept of ‘the future’ shared across late modern Western nation-states is inherently bound to a modernist vision of

social, economic and political order in the present, and therefore is actually better described as a form of ideological futurism rather than an objective projection of future time. If 'the future' is framed as an artefact of power wielded to serve interests in the present, this immediately raises a challenge to the seeming naturalness or inevitability 'transition' and of generation. If 'the future' can be framed in the abstract as a temporal realm the very nature of which is contingent on action in the continuous present, then 'transitions' cease to exist as the already-existing linkages between structural locations organised around stages of the life course; and 'generations' cannot simply exist as prefabricated categories of belonging and social identity. This speaks to the framing of generation put forward in a social generations approach as advocated by Furlong et al. (i.e. that 'generation' does not exist as a unitary category of experience), even if 'the future' is not identified specifically as the concept in need of further critique. What a focus on 'the future' adds is a critical interrogation of how and why young people (and people in general) are so deeply socialised into a temporal framing of the self that expects neat lines of transition and progression even (or especially) when their lived experience suggests that the quest for a 'complete' sense of adult personhood is as illusory as it is elusive.

Important work has already been done to establish a dialogue about youth transitions, uncertainty, and the future (Leccardi with Woodman, 2015). In connection to a traditional view of what the future looks like for young people, Woodman (2011) suggests that current research predominantly focuses either on the capacity to plan for the future, or the extent to which conditions of uncertainty and/or the abundance of future choices make it impossible to plan. While useful in complicating what the future looks like through the eyes of young people, this distinction between planning and not planning – or even between idealistic planning and effective, agentic planning – is still too narrow in its conceptual focus. Instead, Woodman argues, drawing on Bourdieu, that choices about the future are derived as much from reasoned, explicit plans as they are from habitus - from a wide range of socially constructed dispositions about the future that while not necessarily coherent still represent a kind of framework for thinking about the temporal and spatial dimensions of one's social identity. Indeed, they might even represent a framework that is in fact more suitable in its flexibility to the precarious conditions that they find themselves in. Put another way, it does not make sense to plan for the transition to a new phase of the life course if one's experience of this 'transition' is incomplete, complex, and continuously unfolding into new, present-continuous articulations of plans already passed.

A social generations approach offers one means of engaging with this complexity. It is crucial, however, to add to the social generations approach a consideration of how notions of futurity and aspiration shape generational experiences. As suggested above, Leccardi (2015) has championed such an approach, framed by processes of 'biographical projectuality' (casting personal narratives into the future), 'situationalism' (dwelling on an extending present) and, following Harvey (1990) and Rosa (2008), the acceleration of time under conditions of globalization. Leccardi argues convincingly for the notion that each generation develops its own representation of time, in keeping with a social generations approach that emphasises the uniqueness of generational experience in response to novel social and cultural

conditions. Leccardi (2017) helpfully links socio-historical time with biographical time in this way to demonstrate how the lived and narrated experience of individuals gives shape to generational experience, and vice versa. Further, Leccardi notes how 'Millennials' (like those in our study) experience a representation of time that privileges the present. The compression of space and time through processes of recent technological change and globalization makes for the rapid incorporation of the immediate future into the present: via digital media especially, the gap between action and intended outcome is made vanishingly small. Such a framing of representations of time among millennials rings true in the present-oriented, ambivalent, 'FISH' tendencies of our own participants below. However, it is also important to recognise the enduring power of modernist discourses of the future in the lives of young people, based on long-term planning for later individual success. Just as Roberts (2007) argues for the importance of retaining a traditional framing of transition in order to understand how young people are socialised to think about the life course, so too is it important to recognise the deep engagement that young people have with modernist ideas of linear, inevitable future time. It is the tension between an extending present and an ever-encroaching future that is at the heart of the analysis that follows. Other research exploring new configurations of social identity in relation to the future helps to complicate further, along these lines, how we may better understand how young people give meaning to their experiences of becoming adults in the imagined future (Alexander 2017, Carabelli & Lyon 2016, Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016, Cook 2019). Miller (2015) and Amlser and Facer (2017), for example, engage with the emerging field of 'futures literacy' and the need for critical perspectives on how 'the future' is framed as an anticipatory field for young people, particularly through education. This research explores the relationship between supposed continuous phenomena – those actions, like growing older, or belonging within a generation, that we may imagine as predictable and resultant of prior actions – and phenomena characterised as discontinuous (future actions that we must imagine, but for which the outcomes are not certain). Facer (2013), among others, has highlighted the prevalence of discontinuity and uncertainty (particularly future uncertainty) as defining characteristics of contemporary social worlds, where seemingly continuous phenomena, including uncertainty itself, cease to be predictable. For young people navigating the already uncertain waters of early adult life, the increasingly blurred line between continuous and discontinuous future activity raises profound and unsettling questions about what can be predicted in the life course. How, then, do young people make sense of the (discontinuous) future, particularly given the conditions of increasing uncertainty and precariousness that they experience in the present?

### **Methodology and Context: Life After School in Particularly Uncertain Times: 2016-2018**

In order to explore the above question, we will now draw on the findings of a project entitled *Imagining the Future: Youth Transitions in Urban and Rural School Contexts*. The project aimed to record how young people at the end of schooling were planning for and imagining life after school, with a particular focus on differences between urban and rural contexts. Beginning in June 2016, we conducted semi-structured

interviews in one school in an Oxfordshire market town, and in two schools across London. From this cohort, we followed seven individuals who opted-in to continuing with the research, conducting interviews and observations with them over the course of the year as they made the transition into first full-time jobs, unemployment, university, and other things. A third and final cohort includes a group of seven university students (originating in six different locations across the UK and recruited to the project during their first weeks at university). We join their stories in their first term at university as they make sense of new lives and new futures in London (across two university settings). Participants were approached at a series of open freshers events and given full information about the research project before being asked to take part. Adopting this broad and extensive approach to interviewing offered a rich and valuable record of how imagined futures were formed at the end of schooling, and how they came to be inhabited, altered, or unravelled, as these young people made their way into the first few months of life after school. Overall, the project included 27 semi-structured group and individual interviews of between 30 and 60 minutes, and 10 'field' days of participant observation (across university and school contexts predominantly in Oxfordshire and London but also in new contexts of transition including Manchester and Aberystwyth). The project received full ethical approval and was conducted according to the exacting standards of Oxford Brookes University research ethics committee.

As the project title suggests, from the outset the research had a clear spatiotemporal focus and we intended to explore how the future might look similar or different depending on school location. While space (and related issues of velocity, escape, return, and refuge) remained an important part of the research, we quickly learned that a rural/urban distinction was not a useful starting point for discussion. This was not least because many young people articulated imagined futures that transgressed the imaginary line between what counts as 'urban' or 'rural' space, or where they were 'from'. This led to a much more fluid approach that instead privileged a focus on imagined futures, taking into consideration space where this came up as a theme of importance for participants themselves.

Much more important as a theme explicitly raised by participants was uncertainty. The broader political and economic framing of the research presented a series of events that protracted significantly a sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and ambivalence among our participants. The extent to which global social, cultural, and political structures were unsettled in these years deserves recounting. The project began on the cusp of the European Referendum, which quickly became known as Brexit as our participants added the finishing touches to their A-Level revision in June and July of 2016. The referendum result in favour of leaving the European Union was unexpected by many of our participants, all of whom, being under eighteen, had no part to play in determining this profound political shift. The pound slumped against the US dollar. In 2016, as at the time of writing, the political and economic impacts of the 2016 referendum were unknown, establishing a deep level of economic and socio-political uncertainty to the experiences of youth transition that we captured. During 2016 and 2017 a range of other events resulted in further uncertainty of national and global scale. In January 2016 Junior Doctors signalled chaos in the UK National Health Service (NHS) by instigating the largest strikes the sector had seen in 40 years. In 2016-

2017 the world was gripped by the presidential campaign and eventual inauguration to the White House of then infamous-celebrity businessman Donald Trump. Trump's improbable but overwhelming success in this campaign threw into disorder the political establishment in the United States, and ushered the current so-called 'post-truth' era of fake news, populist political movements, and the mainstreaming of far-Right political views. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal gathered momentum in 2017, raising unsettling questions about how the Brexit Referendum was decided and the US election won, and what was the 'real' nature of voter perceptions of reality filtered through their favourite social media apps. Uncertainty at this existential level – literally the prospect that individuals may not think what they think they think for themselves – also underpinned the experiences of transition that we captured in our research. In short, at a structural level, this was a time when new manifestations of uncertainty were bedding-in as a normal part of how society seemed to be working, with the hallmarks of a chaotic, Right-leaning postmodern discourse anticipated by scholars writing earlier in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (for example, Latour 2004). At the cultural level, 2016 was also a time of upheaval, with the demise of a long list of seemingly immortal-status pop and 'youth' icons, including Muhammad Ali, David Bowie, and Prince, to name but a few. These broader social and cultural factors were important to take into consideration in the personal narratives of the participants involved in the research. A social generations approach is useful in this sense because it allows a consideration of how broader structural conditions of uncertainty pervaded the already uncertain processes of transition experienced by the young people that we interviewed. Moreover, a social generations approach allows for a detailed consideration of how young people make sense of uncertainty in their lives as it occurs at different scales, from the geopolitical to the banal and every-day - or what C. Wright Mills might describe as the confluence of 'public issues' with 'private troubles'. Even where participants did not directly reference these themes, the length of this list is important to emphasise the overarching sentiment of precariousness and unpredictability that prevailed in 2016-2017 – a sentiment that now even only a few years later has taken on the guise of normality in public discourse. What emerges in the narratives that follow is a mix of ambition, anxiety, and ambivalence; and, importantly, such sentiments are rarely mutually exclusive. In part three of this article we explore these themes in the trajectories, movements, reflections, and aspirations of a number of our informants.

### **Fuck It, Shit Happens (FISH): Making Sense of a Future After Schooling**

On a warm summer afternoon, Sarah and Anne were sat in a seminar room at Oxford Brookes University to talk about how they were thinking about their futures after school. They were from a small market town, both 17 years-old, and at the end of Year 12 at the time (the penultimate year of secondary school in England). They had spent the morning making a collage of future-focused messaging from university prospectuses, most of which suggested that university was a location of prestige and promise where individuals would be able to inhabit the best future version of themselves. Such messages served as a



useful jumping off point for exploring a theme at the heart of the research: namely, the tension between seemingly certain futures as presented in school discourse and in Higher Education, and the increasing ambivalence and anxiety of young people towards future-planning based on their own experiences of a time of heightened uncertainty. Towards the end of the interview, Sarah and Anne introduced a new phrase to sum up the sense of ambivalence that they shared towards the future: Fuck It, Shit Happens (FISH). At the time, this was a well-established but lesser-known slang acronymic phrase commonly used in contradistinction to the much more popular, idealistic phrase 'You Only Live Once' (YOLO). The phrase was used light-heartedly by them in the interview, and 'FISH' exists in popular culture above all as a wry, ironic tagline for internet memes that show individuals working hard at not caring about the serious future implications of action in the extending present (for example, procrastinating about exam preparation by binge-watching box-sets on *Netflix*; or generally choosing not to care as the most empowering choice when things go drastically wrong). While light-hearted, the phrase FISH was poignant for the research: it neatly summed up the ambivalence of some of our participants when discussing their plans for the future. Interestingly, such a stance was not mutually exclusive to also planning carefully and having deep investment in one's plans for the future. It is this seemingly incongruous tension that we explore in detail in the remainder of this article.

For Sarah and Anne, FISH was used in two interesting ways. On one hand, they made a distinction between a 'YOLO' attitude that they attributed to the drive and ambition of living in a big urban centre (Sarah: 'It's like living the life, making the most of everything you've got...not being tied down...Yeah, YOLO versus FISH!'), and 'FISH' as the stance of their contemporaries who would 'settle' for living out their lives in their small, market hometown. While they saw nothing wrong with coming back to one's childhood village later in life, they regarded as short-sighted, passive, or lazy the prospect of not going out into the world to seek out success in cities like London. At the same time, they also employed FISH to describe the uncertainty that they also associated with taking the more accepted path of success at A-Level, followed by university, and a 'good' job. While they knew that they *should* be following the well-worn path from Sixth Form to university and beyond, Sarah and Anne both demonstrated ambivalence about their commitment to this path and a total uncertainty about what they might study or what jobs they might pursue. Anne described this as a sense of 'floating', of listlessness, while at the same time she recognised that for teachers and parents, a much more certain vision of future ambition was normally presented. It is in this more nuanced, 'floating' sense that the term FISH applies to the narratives that follow.

### **Narratives of Future Certainty**

Others demonstrated much more certainty in their ambitions for life after school. Bradley, a sixth form student in central London, was absolutely committed to a future as an NHS doctor, and was studying the right A-Levels to move onto study Medicine. Kevin, in Oxfordshire, had a clear vision about going into

biochemical research, and was studying A-Level Biology in order to study Biology at university in the coming year. Indeed, Kevin felt he had been oriented towards this particular future much earlier than A-Levels: as he said,

It's quite hard because you're choosing, basically – if you haven't... So, when you choose your A Levels, I chose my A Levels so I could do a degree in Biology. I basically chose my GCSEs so I could do a degree in Biology. So, I sort of had already chosen my degree at 14. And then, by choosing my degree, I've basically chosen what sort of job I'm going to do. So, it feels quite odd, at 14 years old, I've basically decided what I want to – well, yeah, at 14 years old, I knew what I wanted to do. So, it just feels odd that I chose...that you choose that early and then it's...off you go.

Kevin's classmate, Shelly, on the other hand, was adamant by the end of Year 13 that she would ultimately move to the United States and become a clinical psychologist. Hers was a very specific plan, organised years into the future:

[Name of town] is very boring and just quiet. I just really don't like it. Obviously...like I want to be a clinical psychologist...Yeah. Em, that's like my goal. Obviously, you have to dress professional, but then again, it's quite...chill, because if you're working with kids or teenagers, you're not...they want you to be...they want them to be relaxed, so you don't have to be like really doctorish or like really professional because it might make them feel uncomfortable. I know I have to get a postgrad. That's why I've gone to Richmond (in London). I'm going to do undergrad here, but then hopefully postgrad in America. It's an American system, just in London.

Shelly was fully committed to this plan and had invested in attending a private US institution in the UK with the hopes of making herself a more favourable candidate for postgraduate study in the United States four years into the future. In this sense her position was the opposite of ambivalence; and yet when pressed about her rationale for this trajectory, having never yet been to the U.S., Shelly was less clear:

Interviewer: And what's influenced this kind of American goal?

Shelly: I have no idea. I've just always wanted to live there.

Interviewer: Really? Music? Film? Or...?

Shelly: Probably – I watch a lot of movies, so it's probably movies, like that it's got into my head, but, em...I still want to go to America – that's not going to change. Because I wanted to do that before I even had a plan, if that makes sense. So, I like based my uni plans on that. [laughing] Really, I want to go to California. Yeah. That's mainly where I want to go. I would move around different places, but always busy. I wouldn't come back to somewhere like [Name of town].

Moreover, when pressed Shelly also revealed a poignant tension in her perspective on preparing for the future, echoing Woodman's (2011) argument about ambivalence to planning:

Yeah. I think like...if somebody has like no plan, I find it confusing, scary even, because like, to me, I know what I want to do, or at least like an outline. Whereas, some people, like there's people from my school who all have like planned to stay in [name of town] and buy a house, and to me, that's just like...no [laughing]! But then again, if it's like really specific, like, in 2020, I'm going to be doing this, and in 20...like that would freak me out, like you've got to let yourself do other things as well, and like see what happens.

It was interesting to note this seemingly incongruent combination of very certain aspirations with explicitly uncertain motivation, as well as a willingness to embrace a degree of contingency, so long as there was *a* plan. Clearly Shelly was excited by a romantic vision of living California, inspired in part by media consumption but now very firmly based in the reality of her choices for life after school. Shelly's approach resonates with a long history of accounts in the literature (for example Ogbu 1970) that describe a disjuncture between experience, opportunity, and aspiration – in this case, aspiration to a place and career of which Shelly has little or no real experience, but to which she was genuinely, and financially, committed. This version of 'the future' serves as the temporal backdrop for a logic of aspiration that defines what counts as meaningful existence beyond the present. Shelly's narrative reflects an orientation towards the future that demands rational, careful planning in order to achieve her aspirations; but she does so while also embracing a degree of uncertain contingency. Shelly, Kevin, and Bradley demonstrated how they were at the end of their schooling careers deeply versed in a particular vision of what the future would hold; and yet there are also other, more ambiguous reckonings of the future also at play. Kevin, for example, was able to maintain an ambivalent perspective to future planning, while at the same time having a very clear plan for the future:

A lot of people are quite idealistic about the future, so they'll say they want to do X, Y and Z, but in all actuality, a very different [thing] will happen, which is sort of like... That's why sort of looking into the future, of what I'm going to be doing in five years' time, let's say, or what adulthood is even going to be like, it's sort of impossible to say. Like if I was to ask myself 10 years ago, like me being in university would have been...I'd have thought of it like...it wouldn't even have been a thought. Like I remember, when I was in Year 5, thinking about just finishing my GCSEs sounded [nuts/enough], and then, now, here I am, finished my GCSEs and my A Levels, and now I'm doing a degree.

There was clear evidence, then, that a linear, rational-choice vision of the future could co-exist with visions of the future that were much more contingent and ambivalent in their framing. The tension

between these ideas is made sensible through a social generations approach because here we can see individuals attempting reconcile their own precipitous progress into uncertain futures against much more stable discourses of how the future is supposed to ‘work’. Articulating biography, or ‘biographical projectuality’, as Leccardi (2012) might define it, in relation to broader social and cultural patterns of change allows Kevin, Bradley, and Shelly to at once retain a generationally characteristic focus on present contingency while also projecting towards a hoped-for stable future (as argued by Leccardi 2015, with Woodman). As we describe in the following section, their convictions about future plans were also to be shaken by broader geopolitical events in the months after leaving school.

### **Life After School: Anxiety and Ambivalence**

As our interlocutors made the transition from the final days of school and A-level results to life after school, we were interested to explore what impact this process would have on the logics of aspiration and imagined futures that they had previously articulated. The narratives emerging from interviews suggested anything but a uniform experience, although many were characterised by a shift towards both anxiety and ambivalence, often in unexpected ways. While student debt, for example, was a cause for concern for some at the end of schooling, in the first months of university it had already taken on a different significance. Shelly, for instance, pivoted again to ambivalence when thinking of her financial position: her perspective on the debt accrued as an undergraduate certainly fit with a FISH outlook. As Shelly suggested, ‘I haven’t thought about the debt, I’d rather go to where I want to go, cos it’s gonna be debt anyway’. Another first year undergraduate, Jack, suggested he’d adopted an ‘ideology of not thinking’ about his student debt: it was, from his perspective, inevitable and beyond his control. Others were much more concerned about future financial prospects, particularly in connection with Brexit. Kevin, for example, saw his anticipated future prospects slipping away as a result of Brexit. When interviewed in October, Kevin had made the move to Aberystwyth University, where his life felt ‘literally like a blur’. On one hand, Kevin was very reflexive about the experience of future-orientation taking place at university, recognising a tension between the explicit future-oriented nature of his academic work, and the present-oriented (and even future-averse) nature of social life while at university. In the latter respect, the experience of university seemed to offer a certain kind of future-proofing – that is, a buffer or bubble within which the pressure to orient towards the future was restricted to the academic content of university life. As Kevin neatly put it,

So, that aspect, the sort of like social, non-academic aspect is very much an impulsive “see how it goes”. But the academic is far more long-term. So, we get warned about assignments that we’re going to be set in the next month and deadlines that are in a month’s time and stuff like that. There’s quite an interesting contrast between the academic foresight and then the, em, the social sort of spontaneity.

On the other hand, he admitted feeling ‘devastated’ by Brexit and its potential, as yet uncertain impact on his future. Kevin reflected, ‘You’re sat here, and you’re watching the pound drop and drop and drop and drop, and you’re like, oh my God, this is the pound that I have to grow up with, buy a house with, raise a family with... It’s really worrying. I’m just starting a degree in Biology. If they started [Brexit] in 2017, it would come into place by the time I graduate. It makes the future a lot more uncertain and hard to predict.’ Kevin was acutely concerned about drying up EU funding for research and limited future prospects if Britain were to leave the European Union. None of these changes were factored into the plan instigated when he was 14 to pursue a career in scientific research.

Less concerning to Kevin was the inauguration of Donald Trump and the political upheaval ushered in with this geopolitical shift. For Kevin, his enduring memory of this event was of ambivalence and entertainment. Kevin was at a party where they were watching the election coverage:

Kevin: But, yeah...people are just like, ‘oh yeah, that’s a thing that happened, and now we’re going to see what happens with it.’

Interviewer: Can I ask what the atmosphere was like when you did your Election party?

Kevin Oh, so good...There were people wearing Trump hats...And then, slowly but surely, it’s like, ah, Trump’s starting to win, he’s starting to win, and everyone was like, “Oh, what’s happening?!” Yeah. It was going crazy. It was good fun. Everyone was like so just like excited by it, and then, in the morning, everyone was like in the 9am [lecture] wondering why they stayed up so late. Most people at uni have got more things to worry about, like after the – like it’s going to affect us in the future, but when you’ve got three...like when you’ve got three 3,000-word essays due in in the next two weeks, you’re like, okay, that was a nice night, now I’m going to worry about this more than who’s going to be running America in February.

This drastic shift between an ambivalent view of the implications of the US election and serious consideration of essay deadlines reveals the multiple levels on which Kevin and others are anticipating the future; and it is poignant that essay deadlines here represent greater certainty than the political establishment. Another informant, Jack, was similarly light-hearted about this globally unsettling event. When asked about the election, Jack smiled as he said, ‘yeah I called it! My mate mike put a 5 pound bet on it and won 25 quid. Which is great, cos now we have a 2<sup>nd</sup> PlayStation controller.’ Within this logic of leisure and fun, we see Jack convert ‘serious’ politics into a more frivolous but still meaningful aspect of his lived experience. In keeping with a social generations approach, the historical and the subjective coalesce, yet with young people appropriating and remixing ‘macro’ conditions according to their own circumstances – from hosting an Election party, to placing bets.

Compared with Kevin, Shelly’s perspective on Brexit and Trump was reversed in terms of potential impact on her future. As she put it,

Interviewer: How do you feel about the result [of the US elections]?

Shelly: [Scared]

Interviewer: You're scared?

Shelly: Scared, yeah [laughing]... Yeah, em, yeah. It like changed my mind – didn't change my mind, but it like worried me because I'm supposed to go there for third year, and depending what it's like, it's going to change my decision. Because if it's like...if he does really do the things he says, I don't...I don't really want to live there. So, it's kind of scary [laughing]. It's quite significant, yeah. I didn't find Brexit as scary because there wasn't like... It wasn't like specific groups of people that were being targeted – does that make sense? Like em...so, like the Trump thing, that it's a lot of like minority groups that are going to be affected, whereas like...I don't see Brexit as like dangerous or scary...I wasn't here when the, em, like results came out. I was on holiday, so I didn't get like the... I only had it on social media...but it was still bad.

Added to this larger-scale uncertainty was a certain ambivalence about her initial experiences of life at university. In the summer, Shelly was adamant that she would never go back to her home town; but by November, she was feeling differently:

Strangely, I feel like Oxford is more like home than I did before I started university. Although I love London, I haven't made too many friends at uni, not like the ones I have here so I wouldn't say it feels like home. It doesn't feel as American as I thought it would, if that makes sense...

Only a few months after confirming that she would never give up her plan to move to the US, Shelly was faced with a shift in US politics that led her to rethink in quite profound terms her imagining of where she might be in the future. Uncertainty at the level of national politics rippled into her thoughts about her own future; and at the same time, university was not turning out to be as she had imagined, and this was also troubling aspirations that previously had seemed unshakeable.

### **'Everything and Nothing at the same time'**

Such feelings of anxiety and ambivalence were perhaps most exacerbated among participants who had not decided to go to university after school. Clara, for instance, was a classmate of Kevin and Shelly and started working in an office upon leaving school. Immediately, the process of looking for a job raised questions of uncertainty and unpredictability in the labour market despite having good A-Levels:

Since school, literally, religiously, every day, [I've] applied for like five or six jobs every day, from I'd say like the end of July to...when did I start...like the end of September, and just couldn't get a job, like only just got one at the very end of September, and because they found my CV online, not because I applied for it. So, I've had a hard time basically, because I didn't apply to uni.

When interviewed in the Autumn after leaving school, Clara still felt a strong sense of anxiety about failing to inhabit a linear imagining of the future that leads directly from school to university.

Interestingly, this ‘panic’ about having less direction was also coupled with relief in not having made the decision to continue with Higher Education. And yet in choosing not to go to university, Clara also feels an intense pressure to get a full-time, 9-to-5 job:

I kind of find there is a rush on things...like I kind of feel like, because I don't literally have any idea where I'm going and what I'm doing with my life, I kind of feel like...panicked, I don't know, like I...because I have no idea, I want an idea, and I want to do it kind of thing...because... I have anxieties, and one of the reasons I didn't want to go to university is because... I knew I wasn't ready for it. So, when all my friends are like “Oh my God, I'm going to uni tomorrow!” I'm looking at that tweet like, “oh my God, I'm so glad I'm not!” Like, whew, like, honestly, I feel like a sense of relief just to know that that's not me. ... But the thing is, I also feel like the pressure is like I should have a full-time job, and I should do this and I should do that, so I feel like, at the same time, I'm trying to like...not rebel, but like rebel away from like the normal structure. I don't want the normal like...to have a nine to five job, like...But, at the same time, I feel the pressure is to have one.

Such sentiments clearly chime with Leccardi's (with Woodman 2015) broader points about an accelerated representation and experience of time in the lives of contemporary young adults. At the same time, Clara also registered a profound sense of anxiety in coming to terms with the routines of working life. While at school, which she described many times as ‘hating’, she had longed for the freedom of a paying job, yet she now looked nostalgically back at the structure, purpose, and relative freedom that schooling offered:

...at school, I thought I had like...I woke up, went to school, did my work, and I thought I had such a solid routine there, but then like now... But then, I also had like gaps and had time to do other things, whereas, now, like I feel like I've realised what a routine actually is – like, I get up at six, I go to work for eight, I get home at five, I eat my dinner, and I don't have any time to do anything else practically. I hate it. I want to go back to school really [laughing]!...it's so dull, like... I think the thought of like this for the rest of my life depresses me so much, like almost like you don't want a future if this is the future. Like if every single day, you wake up at six and you get home at five, like if that is the day, every single day, forever, like, nah.

This speaks to the afore-mentioned tension between an expanding present and an encroaching, linear futurity. The dread of the ‘dull’ future that Clara sees for herself in the routine of work is compounded further by a deep sense of uncertainty brought on by leaving school. Clara neatly sums up this feeling as ‘everything and nothing at the same time’: a sense of great opportunity, but also of feeling rudderless and uncertain about what to do next:

Like, at school, everything you had to do, someone told you, whereas, now, it's kind of like...it's now like...where do I go for a job, like what job do I do...? Rather than it's you've got History next and you've got English after that, it's like how do I...like what do I do with my life now? I think like, although Sixth Form was kind of a transition, it's like school, school, school, school, school, stop, what do you do now? Like, literally, it feels like you're just dropped into like everything but nothing at the same time.

Unlike those who were attending university, Clara's narrative of her own uncertain trajectory into the future became more positive in its framing as time went on. By December, Clara no longer hated her job; instead it had become 'quite fun'. Clara had counselling for anxiety as a result of the feelings of uncertainty that enveloped her in the months immediately after leaving school. Now, at the year's end, she felt more comfortable with her choices, and felt happier for not having to focus so closely on an ideal set of future goals. This is not to say that the pressure to follow a linear imagining of the future had gone away; on the contrary, Clara registered a strong push to focus on the next step towards future success. But her own position, a few months into working life, was to focus on more immediate concerns:

And like the thing is, everyone's [kind of] like "This isn't what you want to do forever though, is it, like you can't be there forever and like you've got to have better things in your life", and I'm like...for now, that is just what I want, like I just need to get a bit of money and...like, so what if I'm there forever, like if I'm happy, I don't care. Like...just because...just because I do have – I'm still at home, with the pressures of my parents, who are like, "So, are you looking for another job? Are you looking for something, or are you thinking about going to uni?" and I'm like, "No, I'm just thinking about tomorrow!"

The confidence of Clara's 'FISH' tone in reclaiming the present for its own sake suggests a certain sense of empowerment in being ambivalent about what comes next. Focusing on the present allows a means to resist the otherwise constant pull towards particular 'successful' imaginings of the future – for 'better things in your life'. However, it would be short-sighted to suggest that such a stance towards the future inoculates Clara against the uncertainties inherent to low-paid, casual employment, or the very real prospect of future unemployment (as her job search above suggests). Indeed, the uncertainty that Clara encounters post-school perhaps cuts deeper than the unpredictable shifts and changes experienced by those at university, in part because the experience of university itself acts as a kind of buffer against future uncertainty in the world of work. And yet, Clara is happy because she is not so focused on the 'everything but nothing' facing her earlier in the year: in her own words, 'the only thing that gets me down a bit is that everyone around me is always looking at the future'.



## Conclusions

This article has explored the tensions between ambivalence and uncertainty in the experiences of young people making the transition into early adulthood during the heightened geopolitical precariousness of 2016-2017. Through the narratives and trajectories of Shelly, Kevin, Bradley, Jack, and Clara above, we argue that we can go further still in complicating the picture of how young people imagine the future after schooling. Traditional, linear notions of the life course may encourage young people to think about the future in a straight-forward way that involves a single narrative of self. Along these lines, young people like Shelly, Kevin, and Bradley may be encouraged to work hard at school in order to go to university (in order to get a job); while others, like Clara, opt for getting a job straight away. They may also frame this narrative in terms of a linear progression through spaces – from the parental home and school, to university or work, and often within the transition of moving from more peripheral towns to more central cities. This narrative is shaped by choices and particular trajectories that an individual intends to follow, and while the trajectory is prone to change, this future-narrative is *continuous*, coherent and unilinear, and anticipates a relatively stable set of possible future options. However, young people are increasingly faced with the reality of uncertain futures that do not fit this neat model, as is the case for Shelly. They may go to university, but the experience may be financially ruinous and lead to uncertain job prospects; they may leave school with qualifications, but find no work; as for Clara, they may find work, but realise that many jobs are precarious, ‘dull’, and unfulfilling, or, on the contrary, ‘quite fun’. They may leave school, but remain in the parental home in order to account for increased costs of living or because they are locked out of expensive housing markets. They may move to urban centres in pursuit of dreams, only to imagine a return home because the opportunities they imagined do not materialise. In each of these moves, individual narratives are also shaped by broader societal shifts and structural changes. A pervasive sense of political, economic and social uncertainty reverberates through the trajectories of the young people described above. In short, they find that a preoccupation with planning and preparing for the future during their school years has not necessarily helped to anticipate the uncertain socio-economic conditions of their early adult years.

It is in the direction of a future-oriented, social generations approach that empirical work on youth transitions should move if we are to understand better the temporal nature of social identity for young people in contemporary society. Such an approach draws heavily on Woodman and Wyn (2015) and Leccardi (2017), and takes forward the legacy of Furlong’s seminal contribution to understanding uncertainty in the experiences of young people. As Furlong has long argued (1997), individuals must now negotiate understandings of self in relation to an imagined set of broader social categories – of generation, of school year groups, of ‘childhood’, ‘youth’, ‘adulthood’, and so on – through which age-based notions of belonging and difference are nurtured, reinforced, challenged, and negotiated relationally (Alanen, 2001). While there might be normative assumptions about socially acceptable options that are available for young people at the end of secondary school, the lived experiences of young people are complex and include multiple activities that do not fit neatly with an ideal of what it means to be a ‘young adult’

oriented neatly towards a future that promises 'success' (Furlong 2009). The complexity and import of this tension merits a suitably far-reaching re-conceptualisation of the temporal realms of social identity – a rethinking of what it means to be young, to grow up, and to be an adult, and of how such temporally-anchored categories of subjectivity are reproduced within a generational framing. Exploring these experiences through a future-focused social generations approach helps to capture how young people navigate the space between normative notions of generational identity, and their lived experiences in an increasingly uncertain world. Amidst this rapacious uncertainty, ambivalence towards shaping the future ('Fuck It, Shit Happens') can in some ways feel like the most agentic stance to take as a form of subtle resistance to the encroachment onto the present of a modernist, neoliberal framing of the future. However, so long as this reckoning of the future exacts powerful disciplinary control on how we are able to imagine ourselves beyond the present, such a positioning does not always translate into greater self-efficacy to shape what counts as a meaningful existence for oneself in the future.

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