'The New Degree?' Constructing Internships in the Third Sector

Pauline Leonard
University of Southampton, UK

Susan Halford
University of Southampton, UK

Katie Bruce
Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu), New Zealand

Abstract
The recent economic recession has impacted substantially on the graduate labour market, with many graduates now struggling to find secure employment in professional careers. In this context, temporary, unpaid 'internships' have emerged as increasingly important as a 'way in' to work for this group. Yet while there has been much media and policy debate on internships, academic consideration has been scant. This article begins to address this knowledge gap by drawing on a study of interns in a third sector environmental organisation. The research findings reveal that unpaid internships were rationalised through a complex mix of political motivations, career ambitions and lifestyle aims, but these intersected in important ways with social class. These findings are not only of empirical interest, contributing to our knowledge of graduate negotiations of precarity, but also of theoretical value, extending our understanding of young people's agency and motivations in transitions into work.

Keywords
class, degrees, graduates, internships, precarity, recession, third sector, transitions, work, youth

Corresponding author:
Pauline Leonard, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK.
Email: pleonard@soton.ac.uk

Introduction

A key consequence of the recent economic recession has been the tightened squeeze across all levels of the youth labour market, from school leavers to graduates (AAT, 2013; Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). With the economic and social changes of the past 20 years already deleteriously impacting on youth employment within western economies (Mills and Blossfeld, 2005; Price et al., 2011), the financial crisis has further exacerbated young people's experiences of joblessness, precarious work and protracted transitions to secure employment (Bradley and Van Hoof, 2005; Furlong et al., 2011). While young people of all social and educational backgrounds now face unprecedented challenges in the transition from education to employment, the labour market for graduate entrants has become particularly problematic in the last few years, with many struggling to find secure employment in the professions for which they have invested (Tholen, 2013). A joint investigation by the Institute for Public Policy Research/Internocracy found that for certain careers, particularly those which are more competitive or deemed attractive, such as the 'third' sector, law, media and creative industries, temporary, short-term, unpaid or low-paid roles, collectively known as internships, are becoming increasingly common entry-level routes for graduates (Lawton and Potter, 2010). Indeed, and of even more concern, for some professions, such as politics and veterinary science, these insecure forms of employment may be becoming the only 'way in' (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). With recent estimates (Graduate Prospects, 2011) claiming that 45 per cent of British graduates now move into jobs through this route, it would appear that internships are forming a new level of credentialism: in short, a 'new degree'.

The increasing precarity of young people's progressions from education to work has been predominantly conceptualised within the broad theoretical church of 'youth transitions', which draws on ongoing structural changes in western industrialised economies, combined with neo-liberal discourses of individualisation, to explain the rising insecurity and non-linearity within life courses (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). With lifelong durable employment already declining across all industrial sectors, economic fluctuations fan the necessity for flexibility in the negotiation of work further, not least by young people vulnerable to heavy-handedness by employers (Price et al., 2011). While theorists such as Bauman (1998) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 2009) have argued that shifts towards individualised decision-making weaken the traction of traditional class and gender-based life scripts, recent evidence (Tholen, 2013) confirms that opportunities continue to be inflected by social background, even for those supposedly at the upper end of the labour market, such as graduates. Individualism remains 'bounded' by social biography, as young people negotiate the recession according to their capital and resources (Evans, 2002; Mont'Alvao et al., forthcoming).

However, in spite of the profound and intensifying pressures on young people in the labour market, it is clear that their lives are not 'all about work'. Recent research (e.g. Dedman, 2011; Hodkinson, 2012) reveals how leisure, consumption and style continue to be central, shaping youth identities and lifestyles. Thus while work and leisure are often conceptualised as distinct and separate areas of young people's lives, it is clear that some base their choices about work *in tandem* with those about culture and identity, such that employment in the 'new economies of style', for instance, may be particularly desirable. In spite of their precarity, 'twilight' jobs in music, dance, fashion and so on may promise

blended lifestyles and an escape from traditional biographies (Ball et al., 2000; Gunter and Watt, 2009). Furthermore, young people's leisure time is not, of course, limited to consumption and style. Many young people, especially graduates, are *also* engaged in a wide range of political and ideological causes, such as environmentalism, feminism, anti-consumerism and volunteering (Brooks, 2009; Manning, 2010; Rochester et al., 2012). As yet however, the extent to which young people's career decisions may be based in concert with these social, political and/or ethical affiliations remains unexamined.

The analysis presented in this article contributes to emerging literature on graduate experiences of the labour market in recession (ONS, 2013; Oreopoulos et al., 2012; Tholen, 2013) by exploring the practices and meanings of internships. While there has been much media and policy debate, academic consideration of graduate approaches to job seeking in the current climate has been somewhat scant (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Vuolo et al., 2012 provide important exceptions). Sociological investigation, qualitatively exploring graduate attitudes and experiences, has been particularly limited. Here we address this gap in knowledge. Drawing on our recent research conducted with graduate interns and staff working within a third sector environmental organisation in East London, we explore how this form of unpaid, temporary work is constructed and experienced. The third sector provides an interesting context here: long regarded as offering valuable opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds to gain work experience through volunteering, it has recently, and somewhat controversially, joined other sectors in the specific targeting of elite graduate skills via unpaid 'internship' schemes (Perlin, 2011), framed as offering something 'over and above' ordinary volunteering (Ellis Paine et al., 2013). In a sector where employees are commonly viewed as motivated more by ethical and political commitments than career ambitions or financial reward (Amin, 2009), how is this 'new' form of employment conceptualised by both interns and the organisation? The research reveals that structural factors were significant on both sides. For the organisation, internships offer a cheap means by which to access valuable graduate skills and gain capital in an intensely competitive environment. For the interns, while political motivations *are* drawn upon in justifying their career choices, often flying in the face of concerns about payment or job security, their centrality intersects with personal resources (capital) and background (habitus); in other words, *social class* (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus while in other research on worker reflexivity it has been suggested that social class remains unacknowledged (Atkinson, 2010), in this case, the privileges, performances and boundaries of class were strongly recognised. Rather than eliciting a '*faux reflexivity*' (Atkinson, 2010: 421, emphasis in original), our young interns' conceptualisations of the uncertain graduate labour market were framed through a *class-conscious* awareness. Alongside class, '*youth*' was also articulated as a key source of capital, exploited not only by the interns but by the organisation as a whole. These findings are not only of empirical interest, contributing to our knowledge of graduate negotiations of precarity, but also of theoretical value, drawing together hitherto fragmented conceptualisations of work transitions, subcultural affiliations and political engagement.

Theorising Young People and Work

In recent years, young people's transitions into work have been dominated by conceptualisations of unpredictability and risk. As neo-liberal contexts and post-industrial labour

markets increasingly replace standard employment with flexible work, ephemeral jobs and precarious careers (Heinz, 2009), ongoing, reflexive and individualised planning and negotiation are necessitated by all (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992); but for young people the impetus is increasingly placed on them as individuals to scout for opportunities and tailor their own life trajectories (Heinz, 2009; Price et al., 2011). Shifts towards individualisation weaken the normative force of social structural positions produced through inter alia class, gender, religion, place and community, meaning that routes to adulthood are marked not only by increased choice and autonomy, but also by multiple, fragmented and evermore extended transitions within education and work, as well as other spheres of life (Helve and Evans, 2013).

While profoundly influential, these explanations have been heavily critiqued. A principal concern is that they 'mute and obscure' (Cohen and Ainsley, 2000: 80) class, race and gender-based structural inequalities which continue to wield considerable influence over the lives and actions of young people. Risk, it is argued, is in itself *socio-structurally* differentiated, and class, in particular, 'still plays a significant role' in youth transitions into precarious labour markets (Shildrick et al., 2009: 459; see also Roberts, 2012). However, research here has tended to focus on *either* the highly successful middle classes *or* the under-privileged, worst-off sections of the working class, producing a 'missing middle' in our knowledge about young people who are merely 'getting by' in 'ordinary' work (Roberts, 2011; Roberts and MacDonald, 2013). Yet as the recession bites, 'the middle' is widening to include graduates, for whom additional credentials are becoming increasingly necessary to secure graduate-level jobs.

A second criticism is of a narrowly economistic interpretation of young people's lives, in which waged labour is prioritised as the 'ultimate goal' (Cohen and Ainsley, 2000: 80). Yet recent research (Dedman, 2011; Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007) on youth cultures demonstrates that fragmented and extended youth transitions have led to fundamental impacts *across* lifestyles, with leisure, consumption and 'styles' based on music, fashion, dance, computer games and so on revealed as powerful resources by which young people give meaning to and shape their identities and lives. Although also accused of underplaying the significance of class and other social inequalities (Bennett, 2011), this research has highlighted how shared experiences of social exclusion, for example through unemployment, may lead to the category of 'youth' itself being 'strategically deployed' as a cultural identity and, even, as a form of micro-political resistance (Raby, 2005). Illustratively, Du Bois-Reymond (1998) reconciles the structural underpinnings of youth transitions with the making of cultural identities by identifying a 'post-adolescent' subculture of middle-class 'trendsetters' who resist their parents' 'nothing but work' lifestyles. Constructing their lives through a more mixed model, these young people attempt to make work more acceptable through its integration with cultural preferences such as music or travel.

While youth leisure is usually conceptualised as dominated by 'style', further research (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2004; Harris, 2009) demonstrates that young people *also* have considerable investments in civic participation and post-material causes, such as volunteering, environmentalism, anti-capitalism, anti-warfare and online political engagement. However, literature here also tends towards bifurcation: on the one hand, young people's political affiliations are conceptualised as independent from, and different to,

adult/mainstream political engagement based on employment-oriented models (Manning, 2010), while, contradictorily, youth volunteering is bound up with policy debates about enhancing employability (Ellis Paine et al., 2013; Newton et al., 2011). Admittedly, the figure for those claiming career motivations *is* higher among 16–24-year-olds (27%) than all volunteers (7%), but this is still relatively low compared to other reported functions such as 'improving things' (56%) (Low et al., 2007). Through further investigating young people's motivations for unpaid work, this article makes a contribution to debates on the nature of volunteering, as well as to gaps in knowledge on young people's work choices, and the role which *political*, as well as cultural, identities may play here.

Our aim here is thus to take a novel approach to theorising young people and work precarity by building on holistic approaches to work transitions which also take 'cultural practices and identities seriously' (Gunter and Watt, 2009: 516). In other words, we draw together three theoretical strands which are often held distinct in youth studies: the reflexive individualisation of work transitions; the issue-based nature of political engagement; and the ongoing significance of structural factors in the construction of cultural identities to provide a framework to analyse experiences of interning in the third sector. Although we concentrate primarily on the views and experiences of the interns themselves, we also present other voices from the organisation. Combined, the data reveal that these strands not only have explanatory value theoretically, but are also drawn upon in everyday constructions of internships in the third sector.

Methods

The data derive from a wider ethnographic project exploring working lives, identities and careers within third sector organisations in the UK. One of our case studies, 'WasteFoodie',[1] a food recycling organisation, was striking for the fact that graduate 'interns' were integral to performance, branding and sustainability. In our interviews with managers, trustees, paid staff and interns, issues relating to internships were prevalent: this was a 'hot topic'! For this reason, this article takes a case-study approach, valuable for enabling intensive examination and theoretical analysis (Bryman, 2001) in order to reach a depth of understanding. While not enabling generalisability, in the face of a lack of qualitative studies on internships, either within or beyond the third sector, WasteFoodie provides a useful lens by which to explore the issue.

WasteFoodie's core aim is to tackle food poverty by supplying nutritious meals to vulnerable communities at low cost. This is achieved by taking date-expired food thrown out by supermarkets to run two cafés and a range of 'pop-up' eating events. Head Office is located in London's East End and employs five paid staff and five unpaid 'interns', as well as three trustees. There are further local 'spokes' in London and another 13 'hubs' across the UK, some managed by paid staff but most run by volunteers, mainly students but also locals. At Head Office, all the staff, bar the trustees, are young: most are under 30. As part of the methodology, Katie spent several weeks working as an intern at WasteFoodie. She was immediately thrown into a highly diverse range of tasks, working on webpages and funding bids as well as cooking, waitressing and washing-up. Being of a similar age to the staff, she was regularly told that she 'fitted right in' and invited to social events after work. Pauline and Susan also conducted participant observation, helping in community cafés or

at Head Office. Being older, it was made clear we were *not* potential recruits! We all attended board and staff meetings, analysed organisational documents and took photographs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the staff we met: in total six interns, eight volunteers, six paid members of staff (four of whom are ex-WasteFoodie interns) and three trustees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and submitted to close textual and thematic analysis, through Atlas.ti and manually. Following Foucault (1972), we see that the language of interviews does not simply *mirror* the world but actively *creates* it, attempting to impose a possible sense of order on an ever-changing context. Interviews thus offer a valuable means by which to understand how people give meaning to their lives and the social world and conceptualise their decisions and experiences. In what follows therefore, we present our analysis to explore the ways in which both the interns and their paid colleagues and managers interpret the circumstances and experiences of interning as a form of turbulent, unpaid employment.

Interning in 'the Third Sector': 'Something That's a Bit More Inspiring'

Just as the economic recession has led to dramatic changes in the UK's youth labour market, so has it impacted on the third sector. There have been some high profile cuts to funding and organisational closures, but the sector's workforce has nonetheless continued its long-term trajectory of growth in recent years, suffering only a minor contraction of employment in 2010 from which it soon recovered (Skills Third Sector, 2013). Public sector restructuring has led to increased contracting-out to the third sector, broadening its capacity and attraction as an employer. However, much of the workforce growth is in part-time, short-term, temporary work; indeed, employees are generally more likely to be in precarious employment than in other sectors, with over one-third in this category (Skills Third Sector, 2013). Linked to this, the sector has increasingly embraced creative ways of accessing much-needed skill sets in unpaid capacities, such as via internships. A recent study established that 23 per cent of charities used interns in 2012, with another 12 per cent planning to do so (Third Sector, 2013). For many young people wanting to start a career in the sector, internships are fast becoming 'a fact of life' (Gerada, 2013: 3), with the lack of remuneration accepted as an almost inevitable prerequisite (Christie, 2008).

The WasteFoodie internship scheme offers a range of six-monthly posts, unpaid but with a small, weekly expense rate. Broad training is given, as well as experience in a role such as public relations or social media. While graduate skills may occasionally be deployed in these functions, much of the work is mundane: cooking, collecting food and washing-up are daily requirements. The work is 'middling' and 'ordinary' but, even so, Sara, a trustee, reflecting the transitions perspective, constructed these as important 'stepping stones to get jobs'. As such, WasteFoodie is able to attract a steady stream of well-credentialised and highly motivated young people to deliver core functions at minimal cost. However, Amelia, Chief Operations Officer (COO) and an ex-intern, admitted that the recession underpins this, meaning the 'calibre of interns is incredibly high'. Thirty applications may be received per vacancy, mainly from graduates from the 'old universities'. A highly competitive selection process follows, including tasks, presentations and interviews. The result was that the interns had a very specific, and rather limited, biography.

A further explanation for the oversupply of applicants is that the third sector is also conceptualised as being 'distinctive' in terms of its missions and workforce (Baines, 2010; Blackmore, 2006). Amin (2009: 31) argues that while third sector work is often 'ordinary' and 'unglamorous', its workers tend to have 'extraordinary' values, seeking 'a different way of working, reward and ethical orientation than in the mainstream or public sector'. However, Amin suggests that there may be a tension between the idea that the sector represents a distinctive set of people and practices and that it acts as a bridge into the mainstream economy for those wanting to enter the workplace. This was not supported by our research. In the main, our respondents revealed that *ethical or political concerns* were centrally implicated in their efforts to gain work experience, and as such they had deliberately restricted their search to the non-profit sector, felt as it was to be more fulfilling:

> The main reason was that I did a politics degree, and there were certain things that I wouldn't necessarily want to go into … I wanted to do an area like environmentalism and work for that instead. Something you could agree with the actual principle of and work to promote that. I think that's why charity work was the first thing to go for. (Luke, intern)

> I've friends who have just become investment bankers … one is an actuary and stuff like that, those sort of routes, like traditional red-brick university career groups. It's very formal, very rigid and a life career plan in a way some people want, but it's not really what I want. One of my friends … he'll have two years' training and exams to become an actuary and then he'll be on a lot of money within five years. I've never really been interested in that sort of thing; I find it all quite boring. Part of it is an ethical thing. I don't necessarily agree with a lot of practices in institutions like that. I didn't want to do it just for the sake of being really well paid. Which kind of left me with either the public sector or third sector in terms of charities. (Charlie, intern)

As such, WasteFoodie's environmental and political missions were key attractions to the interns, and many were passionate about this in their interviews:

> It's always been the thing I wanted to, I like the environment! I like the kind of people who find it interesting as well. I was never going to be a business, city girl. I did English at university because I love reading and writing. But I've always wanted to do something a bit more proactive for my job. And that can be the thing that I enjoy, if that makes sense? That you're actually doing something and you can see the effect on other people. I think that's always the answer: 'I want to make a change.' But everyone always says that! (Amy, intern)

> It was to be part of a campaign against food waste [which] was the main appeal … it wasn't really the money that I needed, it was more the sense of purpose. (Ellie, intern)

> It was definitely something I was really excited about – where you actually feel like you're not just pissing into the wind and you can actually do something. It would be an important aspect of why I was drawn to [WasteFoodie] in the first place – an important part of the appeal of the organisation. (Elliott, intern)

These quotations highlight the fact that these internships were *not* solely seen in instrumental terms, merely as routes by which to gain employability skills and workplace experience. Many of our interns revealed that they had considerable previous experience

of volunteering, community participation and issue-based involvement, forming substantial elements of their 'leisure' time. This was drawn upon to shape their career choices, such that work was seen as a means by which to integrate these affiliations into a broader lifestyle. Thus, for these young people, their commitment to environmentalism and their work for WasteFoodie were bound together with their social lives such that, as Katie experienced, work merged seamlessly into evening and weekend activities and relationships. This finding further challenges employment-oriented understandings of youth political participation which argues that this emerges *from* paid work (Smith et al., 2005). Importantly, our data show that political engagement and active citizenship may well be a route *into* work:

> Dad was always of the belief that we should help people in society. He always drummed that into me, a bit too much sometimes! I was like, 'Yes, dad.' So we always did things as a family, we'd do soup runs and things. Dad was always trying to get me out there, doing something on my own. He was like 'You need to at least do one thing that you're giving back to someone.' So it just feels natural now. I always feel like I've got to be doing something! (Amy)

> After my masters, I took on voluntary work at a city farm and I used to go on Sundays and help bake cakes, and ended up becoming full-time staff for about two years. That gave me a really good background, what a community café is, how it operates. (Ellie)

The fact that the work was unpaid was rationalised by the fact that the sector was seen as highly competitive and that, if you wanted politically engaged, socially worthwhile work, financial rewards had to some extent to be disregarded. Thus while the fact that the internships were unpaid was accepted as almost inevitable, this was tolerated because these are seen as the way in to *this* sector. Importantly, in other sectors, this would *not even be considered*:

> I'm aware of other friends who have done a similar thing – where they've come to London to do internships – because to work in this sector generally seems like your way in almost. I don't have the impression that there are lots of paid jobs in this field, so if you want an opportunity to network and make a bit of a name for yourself then you need to be prepared to work unpaid. That's how I see it. (Ellie)

> I'm not really massively motivated by money. As long as I have enough to live that would kind of be it. So I guess this route is one of the few where you put that to one side. But I wouldn't have done an internship and not taking a wage with an organisation that makes a profit because I think that I would be generating part of that profit for them and then obviously receiving nothing and there was some sort of shareholder who was basically taking what I'd worked for. (Charlie)

However, a key attraction of these internships was that they also held out the promise of a career in the sector in a way that is different to other forms of volunteering. The paid staff were role models: most had themselves started out as interns, either at WasteFoodie or elsewhere; some had done several internships at different charities. As Emma, a Hub Volunteer who was still at university recognised, internships were fast becoming an essential component of a competitive CV for the third sector. After her stint as a

volunteer, she knew that she would need to try to gain an internship, albeit that she was currently at one of the UK's most elite universities:

> It used to be that if you had a degree you would get a decent job [in the sector], now you have to have several internships as well and lots of experience … Internships seem to be *the new degree* in many ways!

For the paid staff, while they were pleased to be earning at last, the fact that charity work is less well paid than other sectors was also accepted as a choice they had made, justified by the sector's ethics:

> I wanted something that was a bit more inspiring, you could go home and actually feel satisfied with the job you do. But when my friends leave their work at six and earn double my salary … I don't know, I think that obviously the money, you have to make a decision that you are not going to earn as much as some of your friends, and it is still a difficult decision, actually more so now than I thought it would be. Because a lot of my friends earn a lot more than me and I probably am better qualified than them, I think I am probably one of the only ones that did a masters, but I only did that because I love history, I knew it wouldn't really get me anywhere. I don't know, I think I have always wanted to do a job where I actually feel a lot of self satisfaction for it. (Grace, paid Hub Development Officer, ex-intern)

Gaining entry to work, and a sector, with a 'sense of purpose' was thus a key theme across the sample, revealing how these young people were seeking to blur the boundaries of career and other social and political ambitions. However, deferring earning is clearly more of an option for the privileged few who are supported by private means. For those in less affluent circumstances, the need to find work trumped political concerns. For Elliott, solidly identifying himself as working class, the key driver was to find *any* work, because he had started 'panicking about what you're doing after you graduate … at that point I was just terrified about spending another six months bumming around wondering what I'm going to do with my life'. He was attracted to charity internships solely because a friend suggested:

> They can often be less competitive but better, just as good, if not better experience because they're often small and they actually use you and you'll actually get experience … it wasn't like I'd made a conscious strategy of what I was going to do at any point … it was simply following one person's advice that this might be a good thing to do and I was chasing up anything I thought might work out.

Elliott's less strategic approach to his transition from university to work suggests how reflexive choice may be on a sliding scale, computed in relation to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). As Atkinson (2010: 421) argues, 'behind each biographical event in the interviewees' life courses, whether dominant or dominated, lurks the continuing effects of structures of class difference'. With this we would agree. However, while Atkinson (2010: 421, emphasis in original) found a '*faux reflexivity*' among his research participants, by which class was misrecognised within broader narratives of unbounded choices, our respondents revealed a thoroughly *conscious* recognition of the place of class within the construction of life projects.

Internships and Social Class: 'They Tend to Be Very Much Like Me'

While non-payment disadvantages all those doing an internship, there is growing concern at policy and campaign levels that the practice discriminates against those who cannot afford to work unpaid (Christie, 2008; Intern Aware, 2013). Research on this issue is scant, but emerging evidence suggests that the ability to secure internships is unequally distributed, strongly mediated by social class, ethnicity and educational background, with graduates being the most likely and sought-after interns (Perlin, 2011). Amy, an intern whose parents were both doctors, acknowledged how her class was reflected in the biographies of her intern colleagues:

> They tend to be very much like me, recently out of university, from quite a middle-class background. And very enthusiastic about [WasteFoodie] and about organic food, and about farming, and all those kind of things … interns in general, that tends to be the demographic.

Yet while Amy was clearly under no pressure to rush into paid employment, supported as she was by her parents, others were more daunted by the unpaid nature of third sector entry routes. Emma, a student volunteer seeking a charity career, resented the fact that interning is a classed choice, open only to a few:

> It feels like the people who have the most money get to go to university to get the internships … Maybe there should be part-time internships, maybe people could be given loans … I'm not saying you should have no cost for yourself and that it should all be free, but it should be affordable, approachable because they are so valuable, they are really, really good. I think it's a shame that more people can't have that opportunity and it's just down to money.

The unpaid nature of internships thus differentiates young people's experiences of them. While some were living with family and friends, able to commute on a daily basis, the personal and financial costs for others were higher. Ellie had no private financial support and was surviving her internship by sleeping in a squat and working at weekends on the festival circuit. The result was that:

> Days feel very long. I've got a bit of a double life going on … so my mind keeps switching between the two! I also think I should devote some time to improving the quality of my home life, you can't squat forever, but normally by the time I get back eventually I can't really be bothered to sort out looking for places…

In some contrast too was Elliott, who draws on contradictory discourses to describe his situation. Although very conscious that his class background has not delivered the cultural capital he sees existing among his university peers, he still positions himself as individually responsible for remedying this fact:

> I'm going to sound like a prick but [my background's] quite working class and I think this is something important about the whole internship system in general. I'm not even for a second complaining about anything at all but it's just kind of how it kind of goes. Basically my generation where I come from are the first to really do A-Levels, let alone go to university. So in that sense there wasn't really sort of a pattern for us to emulate in terms of, like, do this.

When I was applying to university I was literally just blindly looking through prospectuses, I didn't have any idea. I have a distinct memory of my sixth form tutor asking me, 'Do you want to go to a campus uni or a college uni?' I just didn't have a fucking clue what she meant! Just went, 'I don't know'. And I just realised sort of how out of my depth I was at that point. So that goes again for what you do after uni really. I didn't really know about graduate schemes, how you go through and I'm not blaming anyone, it's just as much my fault, you have to be proactive and go and do this, but a lot of people, especially since I met people in uni from different backgrounds, seemed to have an innate knowledge of how you get on in life and what you do.

Some of the paid staff at WasteFoodie *also* showed themselves to be uncomfortable about the practice, and had clearly also struggled with this aspect in their own biographies:

> There's a problem with interns … which is that only quite well-educated rich people can come and do internships with us. It's a completely prohibitive system. (Amelia, COO, ex-intern)

> I couldn't have done it without [my redundancy money]. I felt I learned a lot about myself when I first started here because you start realising things about your background, other people's background … it was an eye-opener, really, meeting other interns, because I met a lot that were doing internship after internship and I was like, 'How are you physically paying for that?' and they basically come from money, so they can do it, and it's not right that that's the case, it shouldn't be. It's just how it is but, at the same time, it's just not really very fair that the people that get into the sector are people that have come from money because they can afford to do it, and that's a bit of a problem, I think, really. (Megan, Hub Officer, ex-intern)

In spite of these reservations, it is clear that the organisation has benefitted significantly from the flow of highly qualified graduates, predominantly from middle-class backgrounds, willing to offer their skills and time for minimal remuneration. Within the third sector more broadly, many contest that unpaid internships are a fair or acceptable practice and decry that the sector has turned to these (Intern Aware, 2013). Indeed, one of the trustees, George, displayed substantial ethical concerns about the antithetical nature of internship practices to the aims of the sector:

> Something that feels odd or wrong about the third sector – the sector that legally exists for the purpose of public benefit – is being exclusive in that way, risking being the exclusive preserve of people who can afford to do unpaid internships for a while. I don't think it will become that, but I think there's a danger that that's how it can be seen and it might miss out on quite a lot of talent that way. I don't know. The internship issue is a tricky one everywhere at the moment, and people campaign for paid internships, and that kind of thing. I think we're quite reliant on them here. I hope we give them a good deal in return.

George's misgivings were only partly shared by other managers. For the Chief Executive, Josh, the economic climate has presaged a 'needs/must' mentality: 'From a personal point of view, I'm not really happy with this, but from an organisational point of view it needs to be done.' Indeed, WasteFoodie sustains itself on a model of unpaid labour: without interns and volunteers the workforce would be so small that survival would be questionable. However, from Josh's point of view, WasteFoodie delivers such a unique

cultural and social lifestyle to its staff that niceties such as pay can be justifiably out-weighed. He himself attempts to exemplify how work, green politics, everyday practices and social life can be seamlessly integrated: an achievement which he believes is genuinely worth interning for. Critical here are the cultural identities associated with *youth*; a social category immensely valued by Josh and used calculatingly in the branding and design of the organisation. For Josh, the youth of the workforce represents the 'essence' of WasteFoodie, albeit that this is manufactured through a stereotypical set of characteristics: high energy, creativity, innovation, independence, flexibility and freedom from the burdens and boredom of middle-aged responsibility. Adulthood and youth were thus constructed as *antagonistic* positions, with Josh showing himself to be 'suspicious of the whole concept of adulthood; people lose their playful attitude and become serious, boring and responsible. These qualities have a negative connotation. Being young means behaving inconstantly and playfully, feeling restless, without any commitments' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 74).

To be selected, interns had to be 'young enough, forward thinking, creative enough, independent'. It was this youthful energy and willingness to blur the boundaries of work and life which made the organisation distinctive: 'we have a new product, we have a new way, we're hip, we're young, we're hipster like!', Josh exclaimed.

For Josh, Waste Foodie is therefore not only a place of work, but a lifestyle, almost a 'cult … but in a good way!' It was this imagination of the third sector, far removed from the 'unglamorous' tag (Amin, 2009), that sat well with many of the interns' own ambitions:

> I think instantly you realise it's very young … which makes it more attractive for someone coming out of university because there's more like-minded people rather than being thrown in a traditional office environment, with people who've been there forever and stuff like that. (Charlie)

Conclusion

The economic downturn has undoubtedly led to a decline in employment opportunities for graduates seeking entry into the labour market (Tholen, 2013). In certain sectors, such has been the expansion of unpaid and lowly paid entry-level jobs, that a period of 'internship' is fast becoming regarded as an essential credential for accessing paid employment (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009): 'the new degree'. In this challenging context, the dominant representation of graduates pervading policy and popular media is as *victims* of ineluctable market forces, stripped of choices, preferences and ambitions. However, the interns at WasteFoodie suggest a somewhat different picture. It is clear from our case study that *some* young people retain a sense of agency and purpose which may override decisions based on economic factors alone. Thus, although internships are forms of employment which carry high risk, in WasteFoodie they nevertheless became highly sought after, imagined as offering '*a different way of working, reward and ethical orientation*' (Amin, 2009: 31, emphasis added). Extending other research on youth transitions which acknowledges the roles that cultural style may play in career choices (Ball et al., 2000; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), our study

demonstrates that the meanings of work, and an ability to blur work with other social and political identities and ambitions, were key aspects sought through these young people's decisions about their careers and futures, even if this involved rejecting some of the traditional privileges available to well-qualified graduates. Indeed, it was through the ways in which the political and cultural values and motivations intersected with work by *all* the staff at WasteFoodie that the unpaid status and 'ordinary' work of the interns was legitimated, sustained and, even, glamorised. Internships were constructed as offering *more* than just workplace experience and training, but a means by which to bring identities and spheres of life together; a desirable bridge by which to transition into adulthood. While aware that internships are potentially an exploitative tactic by which to access valuable skills and time at minimal cost, this was rationalised through their construction as a unique opportunity by which to be proud of being young, 'green' and politically engaged. In other words, if these young people *had* to do another 'degree' in order to secure the sort of work they desired, then they wanted to make sure this was going to be one they wanted to do!

Yet while our evidence to some extent supports the conceptualisation of a late-modern 'choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 22–3), it also reveals 'how traditional social characteristics continue to shape these … developments' (Roberts, 2012: 391). The ongoing salience of structural factors, and the ways these mediated choice-making to produce differences between the interns, underscores the fact that '*class still matters*' (Roberts, 2010: 143, emphasis added). However, and importantly, both the interns and paid staff at WasteFoodie recognised this, with many of their narratives about their own choice biographies and those of others displaying a thoroughly *class-conscious reflexivity*. Integral to this were informal understandings of the importance of capital. As far as they were concerned, the third sector was not, and should not be, constructed as 'unglamorous' (Amin, 2009), but as able to deliver desirable resources by which to position themselves, albeit from differentiated starting points. The fact that a WasteFoodie internship was seen by other interns as 'one to be jealous of' as Amy put it, friends were 'all a bit envious', added to the sense that they were accruing valuable social and cultural capital: not only did it offer a sense of 'getting in' and 'getting on', but also 'getting ahead' of their peers (Bynner et al., 1997).

Class was not the only structural factor which was deployed within individual narratives or by the organisation, however. 'Youth' was also revealed as an aspect of identity which was deliberately mobilised by WasteFoodie, itself a 'young' organisation, in an effort to secure expertise, status and power within the highly competitive third sector context. Third sector organisations increasingly need a distinctive image by which to secure funding and resources and, by conflating the organisation with youth, WasteFoodie were not only able to brand themselves as 'hip' in an often 'unglamorous' (Amin, 2009) market, but were also able to attract a constant flow of highly qualified labour keen to position themselves as part of the WasteFoodie cultural and political lifestyle. Far from being 'invisible' (Griffin, 1997) therefore, youth was an important resource for the construction of identities and the performance of working lives on both sides, and one through which, intersecting with political beliefs, a degree of resistance could be imagined towards the normative marginalisation of young people within the labour market.

The fact remains, however, that unpaid internships are far from good practice. However hard these young people might work to construct their internships as desirable, that for some young people at least, it is unpaid, temporary employment which is seen as 'the new degree' – the way for young people to access third sector careers – is a factor which needs to be addressed if third sector organisations are to benefit from the skills and talents of *all* young people, regardless of social background, as well as confirm its reputation as an ethical employer. A firm commitment to fairly paid work and properly remunerated entry-level training opportunities for all young people is now urgently demanded.

Acknowledgements

Funding

Note

1.   All names of organisations and people are pseudonyms.

References

AAT (2013) Is a university degree the best route into employment? Available at: http://www.aat.org.uk/about-aat/press-releases/university-degree-or-vocational-qualification-route-to-employment

Amin A (2009) Extraordinarily ordinary: Working in the social economy. *Social Enterprise Journal* 5(1): 30–49.

Atkinson W (2010) The myth of the reflexive worker: Class and work histories in neo-liberal times. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(3): 413–29.

Baines D (2010) 'If we don't get back to where we were before': Working in the restructured nonprofit social services. *British Journal of Social Work* 40: 928–45.

Ball S, Maguire M and Macrae S (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16*. London: Routledge.

Bauman Z (1998) *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: SAGE.

Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (2002) *Individualization*. London: SAGE.

Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (2009) Global generations and the trap of methodological nationalism for a cosmopolitan turn in the sociology of youth and generation. *European Sociological Review* 25(1): 25–36.

Bell D and Blanchflower D (2011) Young people and the Great Recession. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 27(2): 241–67.

Bennett A (2011) The post-subcultural turn: Some reflections 10 years on. *Journal of Youth Studies* 14(5): 493–506.

Blackmore A (2006) *How Voluntary and Community Organisations Can Help Public Services*. London: National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Bourdieu P (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: SAGE.

Bradley H and Van Hoof J (2005) *Young People in Europe: Labour Markets and Citizenship*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brooks R (2009) Young people and political participation: An analysis of European Union policies. *Sociological Research Online* 14(1): 7.

Bryman A (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bynner J, Ferri E and Shepherd P (1997) *Twenty Something in the 1990s: Getting on, Getting by, Getting Nowhere*. Gower: Ashgate.

Christie F (2008) *Career Pathways for Graduates into the Voluntary/Community Sector*. Manchester: University of Manchester.

Cohen P and Ainsley P (2000) In the country of the blind? Youth studies and cultural studies in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies* 3(1): 79–95.

Cunningham S and Lavalette M (2004) 'Active citizens' or 'irresponsible truants'? School student strikes against the war. *Critical Social Policy* 24(2): 255–69.

Dedman T (2011) Agency in UK hip-hop and grime youth subcultures: Peripherals and purists. *Journal of Youth Studies* 14(5): 507–22.

Du Bois-Reymond M (1998) 'I don't want to commit myself yet': Young people's life concepts. *Journal of Youth Studies* 1(1): 63–79.

Ellis Paine A, McKay S and Moro D (2013) Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond. *Voluntary Sector Review* 9(4): 355–76.

Evans K (2002) Taking control of their lives? Agency in young adult transitions in England and the new Germany. *Journal of Youth Studies* 5(3): 245–69.

Foucault M (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon.

Furlong A, Woodman D and Wyn J (2011) Changing times, changing perspectives: Reconciling 'transition' and 'cultural' perspectives on youth and young adulthood. *Journal of Sociology* 47(4): 355–70.

Gerada C (2013) *Interns in the Voluntary Sector: Time to End Exploitation*. London: Intern Aware/Unite.

Graduate Prospects (2011) *Real Prospects 2011: The Reality of UK Graduate Employment*. Birmingham: Prospects House.

Griffin C (1997) Youth research in the 1990s: Time for (another) rethink. *Sociological Research Online* 2(4).

Gunter A and Watt P (2009) Grafting, going to college and working on road: Youth transitions and cultures in an East End London neighbourhood. *Journal of Youth Studies* 12(5): 515–29.

Harris A (2009) Young people, politics and citizenship. In: Furling A (ed.) *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Heinz W (2009) Youth transitions in an age of uncertainty. In: Furlong A (ed.) *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Helve H and Evans K (eds) (2013) *Youth and Work Transitions in Changing Landscapes*. London: Tuffnell Press.

Hodkinson P (2012) Beyond spectacular specifics in the study of youth (sub)cultures. *Journal of Youth Studies* 15(5): 557–72.

Hodkinson P and Deicke W (2007) *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*. New York: Routledge.

Intern Aware (2013) Why unpaid internships are wrong. Available at: http://www.internaware.org/about/why-unpaid-internships-are-wrong.

Lawton K and Potter D (2010) Why interns need a fair wage. *IPPR and Internocracy*. Available at: http://www.ippr.org/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/Why%20interns%20need%20a%20fair%20wage_1788.pdf.

Low N, Butt S, Ellis Paine A, et al. (2007) *Helping Out: A National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving*. London: Cabinet Office.

Manning N (2010) Tensions in young people's conceptualisation and practice of politics. *Sociological Research Online* 15(4): 11.

Mills M and Blossfeld H-P (2005) Globalization, uncertainty and the early life course: A theoretical framework. In: Blossfeld H-P, Klijzing E, Mills M, et al. (eds) *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society*. London: Routledge.

Mont'Alvao A, Mortimer J and Kirkpatrick-Johnson M (forthcoming) *Economic Recession and Youth Labor Market Outcomes in International Perspective*.

Newton B, Oakley J and Pollard E (2011) *Volunteering: Supporting Transitions*. London: vInspired.

ONS (2013) *Full Report-Graduates in the Labour Market 2013*. London: ONS.

Oreopoulos P, Von Wachter T and Heis A (2102) The short and long term career effects of graduating in a recession. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4(1): 1–29.

Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009) *Unleashing Aspiration*. London: Panel on Fair Access to the Professions.

Perlin R (2011) *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*. London: Verso.

Price R, McDonald P, Bailey J, et al. (2011) *Young People and Work*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Raby R (2005) What is resistance? *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(2): 151–71.

Roberts S (2010) Misrepresenting 'choice biographies'? A reply to Woodman. *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(1): 137–49.

Roberts S (2011) Youth studies, housing transitions and the 'missing middle': Time for a rethink? *Sociological Research Online* 18(3): 11.

Roberts S (2012) One step forward, one step back: A contribution to the ongoing conceptual debate in youth studies. *Journal of Youth Studies* 15(3): 389–401.

Roberts S and MacDonald R (2013) The marginalised mainstream: Making sense of the 'missing middle' of youth studies. *Sociological Research Online* 18(1): 21.

Rochester C, Ellis-Paine A and Howlett S (2012) *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Shildrick T, Blackman S and MacDonald R (2009) Young people, class and place. *Journal of Youth Studies* 12(5): 457–65.

Skills Third Sector (2013) Workforce almanac 2013. Available at: http://www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk/research_policy/workforce_almanac_2013/.

Smith N, Lister R, Middleton S, et al. (2005) Young people as real citizens: Towards an inclusionary understanding of citizenship. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(4): 425–43.

Third Sector (2013) The rise and rise of the unpaid charity intern. Available at: http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/Management/article/1207509/analysis-rise-rise-unpaid-charity-intern/.

Tholen G (2013) *We need to talk about graduates: The changing nature of the UK graduate labour market*. SKOPE Monograph 15.

Vuolo M, Staff J and Mortimer J (2012) Weathering the Great Recession: Psychological and behavioural trajectories in the transition from school to work. *Development Psychology* 48(6): 1759–73.

Pauline Leonard is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Work Futures Research Centre, University of Southampton. She has written extensively on issues relating to work, careers, inequality and diversity in both national and international contexts. Her most recent book is *Migration, Space and Transnational Identities: The British in South Africa* (with Daniel Conway,

Palgrave, 2014). She is continuing to research young people's working lives and prospects as part of the ESRC LLAKES Research Centre, UCL Institute of Education.

Susan Halford is Professor of Sociology at the University of Southampton, where she is also Director of the Work Futures Research Centre. She has longstanding interests in the dynamics of power, inequality and social change as these operate both in everyday working lives and through different forms of organisational practice. Much of Susan's recent research has focused on digital transformations in the workplace and this has led to a wider interest in the politics of digital data and artefacts, which she is pursuing through the Web Science Institute at Southampton.

Katie Bruce is a senior analyst at the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu) in New Zealand. Here Katie works to increase the use of evidence across the social sector by promoting debate on key issues and working closely with the New Zealand government and academics to facilitate the use of evidence in decision making. At the time of data collection Katie worked as a research fellow at the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Southampton.