Understanding affluent male NEETs (not in employment, education or training) by choice:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

James Gordon

January 2020

Submitted to the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Counselling Psychology (DCPsych)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jacqui, Julie and Digby for supervising the project. Thank you to Dawn and Sasha for the endless help given in good humour over many years. Thank you to Akshi Singh and Peter Gordon for reading drafts. Finally, thank you to Peter Bailey and Ulla Gustaffson- I would not be here were it not for your encouragement and faith in my abilities.

Statement of Authorship

This dissertation is written by James Gordon and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor of Counselling Psychology. The author reports no conflicts of interest, and is alone responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation.

Abstract

Social scientists have sought to understand young people who are NEET (16-24 year olds not in employment, education and training) in order to tackle social exclusion. Psychological research has been hampered by conceptual difficulties owing to the diversity of entry paths into NEET Following from Serracant (2015) this research aims to focus on a subset of NEETs, affluent males who choose not to work, study or train to better understand their disposition not to do so. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of 8 interviews with affluent male NEETs by choice posited 6 superordinate themes (Working Expectations, Incapabilities, Assisted Living, Alienation, Fragmented Intentionality, The NEET Lifestyle: Sovereignty and Stasis) that centred upon the participants feelings of incapability with the perceived demands of the working world, and the feeling of estrangement from the peers, family and society owing to their feeling trapped in a stunted developmental pathway. Implications of these findings for counselling psychology and the field of NEET and youth transitions research are discussed.

Keywords

NEET (not in employment, education or training), Youth Transitions, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Vocational Identity, Class, Counselling Psychology.

Word count: 59,952

Table of Contents

Introduction

The present study examines the lived-experience of 8 affluent male NEETs by choice to answer the research question: how do these young people come to reject work/school/training and what are the consequences of this rejection?

The topic of this study was chosen as an addition to the extensive NEET research literature which, at the time of writing, lacks any research on young males who have *chosen* not to seek employment, education or training. Young people in the NEET situation have been extensively researched using nomothetic methods (those that aim to establish patterns across large populations), it has been less common to look at particular pathways into the NEET situation and, accordingly, the difficulties that have turned them away from the world of schooling, training or work. In lacking specificity about the differing circumstances in which members of the NEET population are involved I contend that much NEET research fails to demonstrate conceptual clarity. In the last few years there have been efforts to focus more upon the differing pathways into NEET, including those who are NEET by choice. The present study contributes to this understanding with a detailed qualitative study that renders intelligible the concerns and experiences of this group.

The study begins with a critical exploration of the present state of NEET research, taking in both qualitative and quantitative accounts to understand risk factors, the impact of being NEET and research into sub-groups of young people who are NEET. After this survey I make the case for my own study and explain how my epistemic and methodological approach aims to bring greater clarity to the NEET concept. I inform readers of the reasons for my selection of the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the precise steps taken during the fieldwork, interview and analysis stages of the study.

The Findings chapter provides the reader with a rendering of the key themes posited by my analysis of the participants' interviews. Here I shall move from individuals' reports of their objects of concern, to examining what is shared among the accounts of these young men who share in this choice of becoming NEET. The findings, across the six subordinate themes (Working Expectations, Incapabilities, Assisted Living, Alienation, Fragmented Intentionality, The NEET Lifestyle: Sovereignty and Stasis), reveal participants struggling to take up the task of projecting themselves into the future in a manner compatible to their gender and class expectations (a self-led and managed pathway through higher education to a prestigious career). Reported aversive social experiences, supposed constitutional weaknesses or a lack of recognition and support underpin the participants belief that they are incapable of becoming

competent working adults as this would entail increasingly intimate involvement with the Other (imagined colleagues, bosses, clients.) Participant report responding to this crisis in a number of ways, either rejecting the values of the world of work altogether, anxiously trying and failing to establish a programme of radical self-transformation to overcome their difficulties and the pursuit of leisure to temporarily forget their situation. Considerable suffering is reported, a feeling of shame through occasionally seeing themselves through the stigmatising look of their families and wider society for their lack of aspiration. This lack is also troubling in an existential sense, as participants report angst and guilt at their inability to make good on their time, an alarm and disappointment at their growing older without any signs of life progress to show for it.

In the final chapter these findings are contextualised with existing literature to understand their wider significance for clinicians and the field of NEET research.

Definitions

NEET	I use the European Union and United Kingdom Government's definition of NEET. A 16-24 year old person who has not been in education, employment or training for 6 months or more.
EET	I use this term to refer to education, employment and training.
NEET by choice	A young person who satisfies the above criteria for NEET *and* is able to engage in EET tasks but *not* actively looking to do so.
Affluent	This term refers to those living in households where the chief income earner works in the top 3 tiers of occupations in the NS-SEC scale see page 61.

Literature review

There has been insufficient research into affluent male NEETs by choice to inform a counselling psychologist working with this group. In this chapter I survey the NEET research literature to find information that could be of use for the present study and engage critically with its limitations, chiefly: definitional problems, a lack of reliability in many study's sampling methods and a narrowness in the way this complex economic/psychological/sociological phenomenon has been approached.

Owing to the multidisciplinary nature of youth studies and NEET research: covering psychology, economics, social policy, sociology, psychiatry and career-counselling – a flexible literature review strategy was chosen. Initial searches for "NEET" and "not in employment, education or training" using the APA's PsychINFO, PubMED and ProQuest's ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts databases were followed by an iterative citation search using Google Scholar. Following from Williamson (2010) the aim was to learn more about the lived experience of affluent male NEETs by choice through an understanding of:

- Risk factors for becoming NEET
- The psycho-social impact of being NEET
- The features of distinctive sub-categories within the NEET population

Research from the fields of Applied Psychology, Psychiatry, Ethnography and Sociology were initially prioritised to meet this aim. As the conceptual difficulties became clearer it became necessary to contextualise this material with research and working papers from the field of economics and social policy.

Before considering these in turn I wish to address the conceptual difficulties within the NEET research field.

The Unspecific NEET Criterion Concern

There are considerable difficulties for a counselling psychologist who wishes to integrate research on the NEET population into their practice. The quantitative studies below all appear to share a common intensional logic: that the NEET situation represents a problematic transition from a young person's life at school to their life as a working adult (a "failure to launch") and to link this outcome to common psycho-social difficulties in adolescence. These studies share a common sampling issue which I shall call the "unspecific NEET criterion concern." The most common manifestation of the unspecific NEET criterion concern occurs when researchers use 'NEET status' as a dependent variable and include people in this category who report themselves as not in employment, education and training without any reference to the duration or cause of this state. A consequence of this is that someone who has not been engaged in employment, education or training for over 12 months will be counted alongside people who lost a job the week before. The analysis of the relationship between independent variables and this 'NEET status' dependent variable is likely to be diminished in its sensitivity as there is a great variety of circumstances that can be captured with this inclusion criteria. Many of the studies below fail to record a reason for being NEET, being a full-tine carer or being incarcerated provide reasonable explanations for a young person's NEET status beyond the intensional framework of these studies: that NEET is an outcome of mental or behavioural complaints.

This problem with the variable "NEET status" reflects difficulties within the domain of NEET as a whole, since 1999 it has, in Britain, become the paradigmatic indicator of youth social exclusion (Wrigley, 2019) but has, in the process, undergone "conceptual stretching." Sartori (1970) described conceptual stretching as a problem of grouping cases around a meaningful set of shared attributes. A classical category is a set within a population that contains some essential "meanings or attributes that define the category and determine membership" (Collier and Mahon, 1993: 846)- the *intension* of the category. Categories are arranged in a hierarchical model of increasing generality so, for instance, furniture is the super-ordinate category into which subordinate categories such as chairs, tables and desks belong. Conceptual stretching refers to instances when a category taken to describe one set of cases is extended to include those who may be sufficiently unlike the original members of the category for the original meaning to hold. Rather than abandon the category, theorists can adapt the category by moving to a more super-ordinate category that can contain both, losing some precision in the category's intension (Sartori, 1970; Collier and Mahon, 1993). Furlong (2006) that "NEET" as a concept has followed such a course and, as a tool for identifying and helping young people at risk of social exclusion, has become too unspecific:

> "There is an argument here that would suggest refocusing on distinct sub-groups such as the unemployed (particularly the long-term unemployed), young carers, those with disabilities or health problems and those with a history of alienation or disaffection. Labels such as these remind us of the specific difficulties being faced (lack of jobs, lack of childcare provision etc) rather than covering up the issues by the use of a broad term with little public currency and by the inclusion of more privileged minority groups who may be in a position to exercise choice and who, in effect, draw attention away from the majority of NEETs who do not enjoy this luxury (Furlong, 2006; 566).

That these young people are in diverse circumstances was demonstrated by Maschereini and Ledermaier (2016) who used labour force survey responses to attempt to understand the composition of UK young people not in employment, education and training by duration of their non-engagement – 5% were classified as "re-entrants", young people with a firm offer of work or awaiting the beginning of a course to which they were enrolled, 37% were non-engaged for less than 6 months, while 56% were found to have been in the NEET situation for over 6 months (Maschereini and Ledermaier, 2016).

Evidence suggests that a longer-term duration of lacking employment, education and training is more consequential for the person involved. McKee-Ryan et al (2005), demonstrated in their meta-analysis of 13 independent samples of working age men and women (n= 4332) that compared with the more short term unemployed, those unemployed for 6 months or more displayed a far a greater reduction in well-being i.e. poorer physical and mental health (dc = -0.97, 95% CI: -1.26, -0.69, and dc = -0.43, 95% CI: -0.69, -0.17; p= <0.05; Z= 2.75). Studies that fail to include a measure of duration potentially conflate a serious condition with the extremely common condition of unemployment. For this reason I shall describe the following studies in detail, describing the authors' sample, research instruments and findings.

Risk Factors for Becoming NEET- Quantitative studies

Many of the studies below use odds ratios as measure of the effect of a variable on the likelihood of 'NEET status', the strength of the effect can be read by subtracting 1 and expressing the remainder as a percentage, so an Odds ratio of 2.5, subtract 1 = 1.5, reflecting an increase in probability of 150%. The change in probability always refers to a baseline probability, for example, a cannabis user compared with non-cannabis user's probability of becoming NEET.

Something of the challenges faced by NEETs is revealed in cross-sectional studies that compare young people who are NEET with controls. O'Dea et al (2014) compared 15-25 year old NEET and non-NEET self-referrers to walk-in mental health services in Australia (n=679). They found that being male (Odds Ratio = 2.24, 95% CI: 1.51, 3.31), having problematic involvement with cannabis (OR = 1.94, 95% CI: 1.29, 2.90), having criminal charges (OR = 1.09, 95% CI: 0.74, 1.61, all p= < 0.01) significantly (but to a small extent) increased the odds of NEET status, and that the NEET group had significantly higher ratings for self-reported depression (Mean difference = 2.72, 95% CI: 1.73, 3.72) and significantly lower ratings for self-reported social and occupational function (poorer quality relationships, fewer friends, less competence in or less opportunity for work (MD = −11.53, 95% CI: −13.59, −9.48, both p=<0.01) than the non-NEET group (although these differences do not reflect a clinically significant mean difference). In a multivariate model including all of these significant findings, the researchers were able to predict 10% of the probability of being NEET (O'Dea, 2014). These small differences may be explained by the fact that the sample comprised only of those seeking-help for at a mental health service and that 'NEET status' was determined by engagement with employment, education and training over the last month. Gutiérrez-García et al (2018) found similar increased odds for suicidality, disruptive behaviour and substance use in a survey comparing NEET and EET youth in Mexico City, these findings hint at the vulnerabilities of the NEET group as well as tendencies towards addiction and other externalising behaviour.

These comparisons cannot explicate the relationship between these phenomena- these studies may be recording a mental health reduction as a response to being NEET at the time of the study. A solution to this is to examine cohort studies that record a person's mental health status prior to disengagement from education, work or training. Prospective cohort studies have been able to demonstrate a relationship between common mental disorders experienced in adolescence and later NEET status after the end of schooling. However, these studies do not have a standardised definition of NEET (and sometimes use quite idiosyncratic inclusion and exclusion criteria).

Goldman-Mellor et al, (2016) used data from a cohort study of n= 2322 twins born in England and Wales in 1994. 57.7% per cent of those who were not in employment, education or training *on the day of the study* had already experienced more than one mental health problem between ages 5 and 18, compared to around 35 per cent of the EET young people (Goldman-Mellor et al, 2016). Rodwell et al (2017) looked for this relationship in data taken from the 1938 participants in the Victorian Adolescent Health Cohort Study, which ran in 8 waves between 1992 and 2003. Data on symptoms of common mental disorders, delinquent behaviour (a measure covering the frequency of fighting, criminal acts and vandalism) and cannabis use were collected over three years between the ages of 14-17, these were analysed to discover any relationship to the dependent variable which was NEET status. Gender differences in the risk factors were uncovered, with 70% of the male respondents failing to report enough mental distress symptoms to above the threshold that would necessitate a clinical intervention, compared with only 46% of the female respondents. Controlling for the affect of other measured variables including parental education, parental divorce and living in an inner-city area, it was found that the odds of becoming NEET were increased through exposure to the following experiences in adolescence: frequent adolescent cannabis users [adjusted odds ratio = 1.74; 95% CI: 1.10–2.75, p= 0.02) disruptive behaviours (ORadj = 1.71; 95% CI 1.15–2.55, p= 0.01) and persistent common mental disorders (ORadj = 1.60; 95% CI 1.07–2.40, p= 0.05). These experiences cumulatively increase the risk of NEET status but only explain a small amount of the variance in probability.

> The predicted probability of being NEET for young people with none of the adolescent risk factors was 5.2% (95% CI 3.9–6.6%), whereas young people with all three risk factors had a 20.4% (95% CI 13.4–27.4%) probability of being NEET (Rodwell, et al, 2017).

As with the Goldman-Mellor et al (2016) study, a participant was counted as NEET if they were not in education, employment or training on the day of waves 7 and 8 and they did not include a measure of the persistence of this status between these two waves.

One of the difficulties of using general common mental health questionnaires with this group is that adolescence is a period of challenging psycho-social adjustment for many young people and that this only goes on to effect employability (to the extent of becoming NEET) for very few.

> “It’s a period of vulnerability. Changes are happening at the same time, a confluence, a perfect storm: hormonal changes, neural changes, social changes and the pressures of

> life suddenly increase. The changes in the brain mean it is particularly plastic and susceptible to environmental stress. The pressure of schools and exams is increasing. As an adolescent, your mind and cognitive capacity is developing so you're able to reflect on life, the future and your place in the social hierarchy in a more sophisticated way. You're starting to look like an adult. People expect you to behave like an adult, too." (Blakemore in Kellaway, 2018).

One way of getting around this difficulty is examining earlier events that that are known to increase the likelihood of serious mental health outcomes in adolescence. Fergusson et al (1997) used data from the Christchurch Health and Development Study to analyse the effects of mental illness and other risk factors associated with poor mental health prior to leaving school on unemployment and NEET status. This research includes a measure of unemployment duration, adding to our understanding of the NEET population (although the sample were only 18 at the time of the final reported sweep). Increased duration of unemployment was associated with prior mood disorder (of those never unemployed: 11.6% reached the DSM III-R threshold for a clinically identifiable mood disorder before 16, compared with 24.6% of those unemployed for more than 6 months,) alcohol abuse (never unemployed 7.9%, >6 months unemployed 29.2%), other substance abuse (never unemployed 2.5%, >6 months unemployed 16.9%). Family factors that were associated with the NEET outcome were having more than 2 changes of parents, owing to divorce or mortality, before 16 years of age (never unemployed 14.7%, >6 months unemployed 42.1%) family history of drug and alcohol problems (never unemployed 14.8%, >6 months unemployed 45.3%), being in the top quartile for reported parental conflict (never unemployed 23.0%, >6 months unemployed 55%, p=< 0.0001 for all of the above). Other factors were being in the lowest quartile for parental attachment at 15 years (never unemployed 20.7%, >6 months unemployed 40.3%, p=< 0.001), being in the lower quartile of self-esteem scores at 15 (never unemployed 20.4%, >6 months unemployed 38.7%, p=< 0.001) and having parents working in a semi-skilled or unskilled occupation (never unemployed 21.6%, >6 months unemployed 53.5%, p=< 0.0001) (Fergusson et al, 1997). In most instances the presence of these mental health and structural risk factors are between twice and three times as likely in the NEET group as they are in those with no employment difficulties. However, the researchers did not provide a sophisticated enough statistical model to report on the independent effect of these risk factors on unemployment duration – which could have provide a more detailed understanding of the most influential these risk factors, and which are merely consequences of one another. Pinto-Perrira et al (2017) showed small independent effects for children exposed

to “Aversive Childhood Experiences” (such as neglect, abuse and loss of parents) before the age of 16 on employment at 23 but did not record unemployment duration (Pinto-Perrira et al, 2017). Many of these phenomena reflect a serious disadvantage to the psycho-social development of those involved, are likely to decrease the ability of young people to engage with schooling and decrease the likely availability of parents to assist with the task of planning the transition to work.

The small effect sizes in these studies can be explained by the fact that short spells of unemployment, symptoms of mental illness and psycho-social complaints are common in adolescence. However, the above does offer converging lines of evidence to suggest that a relationship between EET difficulties and earlier addictive and substance use behaviours, anti-social behaviour, low mood and self-esteem – especially if they accumulate and are found alongside poor attachment and “aversive childhood experiences.” Fergusson et al (1997) also demonstrate the importance of structural socio-economic factors which I shall explore in the following section.

It is clear that there is a strong case for future prospective cohort studies to disaggregate NEET young people on the basis of the duration they spend in the condition as their needs and risk of distress are greater. The definition of NEET for the UK Government and European Union is that the state should last for 6 months or more, this more specific definition, if used in quantitative research on risk factors would better capture the relationship between mental disorder and/or psychosocial disturbance and faltering transitions from school to work.

Structural Risk Factors

Social policy research has found that a young person’s family background and where they are located on the socio-economic scale increases the likelihood of their becoming NEET.

In the United Kingdom, the social class of a child’s parents has a large impact on the probability of their post-schooling outcomes. Indicators of poverty particularly, have been shown to be highly predictive of NEET status. Feng et al (2015) studied data from the Scottish Longitudinal Survey that links anonymised records from 1991, 2001 and 2011. The researchers were able to model a 51% probability of NEET status 10 years after leaving school using a logistic regression drawing on measures of the following variables: having received free school meals, having been absent for more than 10% of one’s schooling, having

been excluded, fewer than 6 passes of standard grades (Scottish GCSE equivalents), the odds ratio for becoming NEET for those having no passes compared with those with 6 or more passes was OR = 10.36, p= <0.001, a large effect,) and whether there were more than 7.5% of young people who were NEET in an individual's local area (Feng et al, 2015). A lack of school engagement is critical, possessing no qualifications puts young people at a life-long disadvantage. However, school absenteeism of 10% have been shown to have a small but significant connection to high levels of mental health difficulties whilst controlling for receipt of free school meals – which suggests the link between metal health difficulties and poorer educational attainment is mediated through absenteeism to a small extent (Leyera et al, 2019).

Thompson (2009) used data from the Youth Cohort Study, a study of the socio-economic circumstances of 16,000 English and Welsh children of school leaving age collected in 2002 to show that participation in post-secondary education is considerably less likely in the lower social classes. 41.7% of the children of people working in the "lower supervisory occupations" and "semi routine and routine occupations" were not in education (9.6% were NEET,) compared with 17.4% of those taken from the top 2 occupational classes ("lower professional and higher technical", "large employers and higher professionals" - 3.4% were NEET (Thompson, 2009).

Ross (2009) studied longitudinal data of 21,000 children born in the 1989/1990 academic year and was able to discern 4 latent classes of engagement in students from year 9 to year 11, moving, in order of commitment to their school and belief in the importance of post-16 education from "engaged" to "engaged with school not higher education", "disengaged with school not education" and "disengaged." Commitment at school was shown to be related to socio-economic status. The mother's education level, measures of family cohesion, the quality of the parental relationship, the perception of positive regard from teachers, peer group and parental attitudes to the importance of education were all small but significant predictors of the level of engagement. Boys were also more likely to be disengaged than girls, whilst the overall percentage of pupils who were disengaged increased each year from year 9 to year 11 (Ross, 2009). These differences in attitudes towards education among children from different classes have been documented by sociologists for many years (Willis, 1977; Roberts, 2011, Reay, 2006). Generally speaking, it has been shown that the adoption of an attitude that increases (or decreases) the likelihood of NEET is derived from important experiences and identifications to reference people in the young person's life, providing a "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004) a world of possibilities, evaluations and restrictions that circumscribe a

young person's idea of what is desirable and achievable in their schooling and future working lives.

A lack of educational attainment has been shown to be increase the likelihood of being NEET, Thompson also showed that the failure to attain 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or above is a crucial moderator between social class and NEET status. Within the top two classes, 41.9% of those who failed to attain these grades were NEET at 16-17, compared to 7% who attained these grades. This is not considerably different from the NEET rate among those from the bottom 2 classes who similarly did not attain grades beyond the benchmark – 52%, compared to 19.7% who successfully attained them (Thompson, 2009). This finding is supported by Goldman-Mellor et al, (2016) in their cohort study of twins born in England and Wales in 1994 (n= 2322). Within their sample they reported 40% of the 18 year olds who were NEET were found in affluent neighbourhoods (Goldman-Mellor et al, 2016).

Owing to the habitus attitudes towards the importance of education and notions of employment as a means to self-actualisation among the upper and middle classes (Fineman, 1987; Boyle, 2013), as well as the possibility of downward social mobility (Thijssen and Wolbers, 2015; Dolan and Lordan, 2013) these findings raise the question of whether or how meaning of being in the NEET situation among the more affluent classes differ from that of the NEETs from other backgrounds. No research has been undertaken on this topic to date.

Other Personal Risk Factors

Aside from indicators of psychopathology, a range of dispositions have been found to affect the risk of becoming NEET. Research has shown that for some young people, their personal commitment to the institutional goals of their school, realistic planning for their post-schooling future and their personal feelings of control and worth are decisive factors in their transitions into further education and work.

A longitudinal study of five thousand British young people sought to find the independent effects of these traits (recorded during the participants' school years), controlling for educational attainment on the outcome of NEET. They found that reporting of low self-esteem increased the likelihood of being NEET for over one year by 10%, and an external locus of control increased the likelihood by 4.7%. "High effort and diligence" -measured by 7 questions relating to positive attitudes to work, perseverance and ideas of long-term

objectives, was found to be protective against NEET status, reducing the likelihood by 8% (F = (5180) 27.22, p = <0.0001). The combined effect of these traits was found to be a better predictor of NEET status between 18-21 than the level of maternal education and parental unemployment, both of which have been shown above to be predictive of NEET status (Mendolia and Walker, 2015). These are small effects which are suggestive either of the relative strength of structural risk factors over these dispositional ones or that these dispositions are relatively changeable over the adolescent period. In a national cohort study of 9,700 adolescents, Ng-Knight and Schoon (2017) found that for children from lower socio-economic classes, an internal locus of control recorded at age 14 was protective against youth unemployment at age 20 (ß= -0.53, 95%CI: -0.86, -0.20, p=<0.01- one standard deviation of change in internal locus of control leads to a half a standard deviation of change the likelihood of unemployment status), but not so in protecting those from the lowest socio-economic status from becoming NEET, even in a model where academic attainment was held constant (Ng-Knight and Schoon, 2017) As shown in the previous section, the effect of poverty upon school attainment is particularly strong.

Another longitudinal study reported a greater likelihood of a NEET outcome when career aspirations are misaligned with awareness of the required educational and vocational attainment required to reach them. Yates et al found in two cohorts (one born in 1958, the other in 1970) that those with misaligned aspirations during their school years were twice as likely to be NEETs as those whose aspirations were aligned. Those who were uncertain about what they wanted to work as were three times as likely to become NEET than those who were certain. These two groups combined represented 47% of the sample, participants were twice as likely to respond in this way if they were from lower socio-economic groups (Yates et al, 2010). Researchers looking at the complexity and consistency of occupational goals in a more contemporary sample found a general trend in their sample's ideas about their future as a worker (and the commitments they required) becoming more complex as they got older. However:

> ...a sizeable number of our adolescents showed a non-linear pattern of development and still had quite undeveloped occupational identities at ages 19 and 21 (Malanchuk et al, 2010: 108).

Having a vague future occupational identity at this age was weakly associated with decreased self-esteem and increased anger (Malanchuk et al, 2010) and, as another team of researchers discovered, increased the likelihood of having spells of unemployment after finishing

education (Nurmi et al, 2002). A Mexican youth cohort study found that NEET young people who reported "not knowing what to do with one's life" showed a small but significant increase in odds of suicidality, mood and anxiety disorders as well as substance use compared with NEETs who reported being on a career or study break (Gutiérrez-García et al, 2018). Much is made of the importance of dispositional factors (e.g. aspiration, faith in one's abilities, "grit" and a positive attitude to work) as having the ability to unlock a young person from the effects of structural factors. We have seen that self-efficacy, self-esteem, and an orientation towards long-term objectives, what I shall call *immaterial assets*, can compensate for the negative affect of usual predictors of poor educational and vocational attainment to some extent – although the effect of these negative factors clearly accumulate for those whose families live in poverty to the extent that these immaterial assets are no longer decisive.

To summarise my survey of risk factors we find that socio-economic status and educational attainment are particularly decisive factors on the likelihood of an individual becoming NEET. The likelihood of Educational engagement is improved in persons of higher socio-economic status and with higher immaterial assets, and reduced on average by being male, being of a lower socio-economic group (particularly living in poverty), and being poorer in immaterial assets. Mental health difficulties also impact upon immaterial assets (in many cases they are connected as low self-esteem is thought to underpin or exacerbate most common mental disorders (Bentall, 2004)- many of the predictors of NEET above can be seen to attenuate the kind of future-oriented self-engineering practised by those who have higher immaterial assets.

The Impact of Being NEET – Quantitative Studies

Researchers have found that unemployment and NEET have particular negative effects on mental health and well-being and can have a lasting impact upon their life chances.

It has been demonstrated that unemployment is a stressful life event that increases one's likelihood to report symptoms of common mental disorders and have reduced life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan, et al, 2005, Paul and Moser, 2009). McKee-Ryan et al found a significantly stronger detrimental effect for unemployment on the mental well-being of school leavers (*dc* = -0.82, 95% CI: -1.07, -0.55) compared with adults (*dc* -0.53, 95% CI: -0.61, -0.46, $Z = 2.23$,

p = <.05), this is suggestive of previous employment conferring a protective effect on mental well-being, while school-leavers struggle without the recognition that adult employment offers (McKee-Ryan et al, 2005).

There are converging lines of evidence that youth unemployment has a "scarring effect" upon the mental health and employability of the individual – so that those experiencing unemployment in youth, rather than during adulthood, are statistically more likely to experience life disadvantage. Bell and Blanchflower (2011) used data from the 1958 National Child Development Study to examine the effects of unemployment below the age of 23, although duration of unemployment was not analysed the mean number of months unemployed in the sample was 7.8. Using a logical regression model including other variables relating to well-being (such as relationship status, exercise levels etc), with all other variables kept constant it was found that unemployment under the age of 23 had a significant positive relationship with self-reported depression at 50 (ß= 2.52, and a significant negative relationship with self-reported life- satisfaction beta (ß = 2.69) and job satisfaction at age 50 (ß =4.55) (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011).

Fergusson et al (1997) attempted to find the independent effect of unemployment on DSM VI mental disorders by holding the mental health scores and risk factors for poor mental health prior to employment constant. They found that unemployment before the age of 18 was associated with an increased likelihood of anxiety disorders (of those employed only 14.7% reported a clinically identifiable score for anxiety disorders, whilst among those unemployed over 6 months, 27.4% reported this, p= <0.005) and substance abuse (never unemployed 9.1%, >6 months 24.2% p= <0.0001). Estimates of attributable risk applied to their model posited that if those unemployed found work the rates of these conditions in the population would fall by 8-17% (Fergusson et al, 1997).

Concerning the impact of NEET on a young person's future career, Ralston et al (2015) using data from a Scottish birth cohort study found that being registered as unemployed or not in education in 1991 was significantly associated with economic scarring 20 years later. These young people reported occupational success of an average of 10 points lower than similarly educated peers (and controlling for the effect of regional deprivation) on the CAMSIS occupational scale (Prandy & Lambert, 2003). This is the equivalent to the difference between skilled trades such as aircraft maintenance technicians and quarry workers and related trades, or senior officers in the emergency services and leisure and sports managers, a roughly

equivalent drop in NS-SEC analytic class (e.g. lower managerial to semi-routine occupation). The researchers also found that NEET status in 1991 was significantly associated with economic inactivity 20 years later for men ($\chi 2 = 0.21$, a medium effect) and for women $\chi 2 = 0.15$ (a small effect, $p = <0.001$ for both). Spells of unemployment between the ages of 16-24 have also been shown to be associated with lower wages (Arulampalam, 2001) and decreased feelings of job security later in the career (Knabe and Rätzel, 2011).

Taken together these findings suggest that being in the NEET situation has a significant impact upon well-being and one's ability to participate in the labour market into the future. If well-being is improved on re-employment for older workers (Paul and Moser, 2009) but re-employed NEETs are scarred even in their mid-career years then the NEET situation must offer specific challenges to those affected by it.

As in the previous section, the unspecific NEET criterion concern makes comparison between the studies complicated and diminishes their usefulness for informing counselling psychologists and social policy. Taken at face value, however, the quantitative studies above posit that the NEET situation can be both a consequence and a risk factor for a range of common mental disorders and behaviours that attenuate the ability of young person to engage fully with their tasks of transition (either engaging with schooling or with engaging in the planning and application of entering the labour market).

> "NEET is a point on a life course trajectory which, at an individual level, for some, could represent the start of a process of cumulative disadvantage in comparison to peers who are non-NEET. For others, it is likely to be a stage on a pathway in which disadvantage has already begun to accrue. A subsequent, negative, occupational outcome would represent the measurable extent of the difference in cumulative advantage, associated with the different NEET and non-NEET trajectories" (Ralston et al, 2015: 204).

<u>The Impact of Being NEET – Qualitative Studies</u>

Qualitative accounts of the NEET experience offer researchers the opportunity to clarify the meaning the NEET experience has for the people engaged in this situation (Willig, 2013; Kvale, 1994). This can allow a deeper understanding of what it is like to live with the "mental distress"

indicated as a dependent variable in many of the studies cited above. Individuals who are NEET will be unable to specify what an increase in the mental distress by 2 standard deviations above their baseline will be like, but participants can give us a sense of the variety of worries and losses that drive their distress and which will be of crucial importance for any counselling psychologist that encounters them to address.

There have been no qualitative studies on affluent male NEETs by choice at the time of writing, however the experiences of other young people in the NEET situation offer important contextualising data for the quantitative work cited above.

Gaspani (2018) explored the subjective experience of time in 12 people who were NEET (this study, as in other Italian studies on NEETs, includes a wider range of ages than those used on the rest of the NEET literature). Although all of the participants expressed gratitude to their family for their emotional and financial support, many described a palpable anxiety among their co-habiting parents about the son or daughter's inability to find the means to live independently – this was focussed upon difficult conversations and questions about intentions during family time. Some of the NEETs were successful in finding an alternative structure to their time, through volunteer work, sports or creative pursuits, giving these young people a sense of achievement and social recognition. Others engaged in more casual pursuits such as using the internet or television, expressing boredom with the compulsive and insignificant use of time in their lives. Those whose hours were the most out of sync with their friends, families and the institutions that organise time in heteronormative fashion – they were in some cases "critically and consciously opposed to the dominant… temporal models" - expressed difficulty with the task of autonomously managing a new structure (Gaspani, 2018:18). This study adds to our understanding with the finding that a consequence of the NEET situation is an emancipation from the strictures of institutional time and can lead to either creativity or a falling away of satisfying routines in sync with significant others and those of wider society.

Reiter and Schlimbach (2015) interviewed 21 German NEETs in a longitudinal qualitative study over three years following the completion of their compulsory education. The authors attempt to organise the confusion of this period by trying to distil common narratives used by NEETs as they respond to obstacles and justify their decisions (to themselves and others) as the most rational ones. The NEETs are found to be opportunistic and, to an extent, evasive with themselves about the wisdom of particular decisions, often evaluating opportunities on the basis of wishful-thinking and the standards of occupational groups for which they are not qualified. Their life-plans, which have often been hampered by physical or psychological illness, loss or bullying, are flexible and open to

revision to events but are often confused by overestimates of what is achievable from their present starting point (Reiter and Schilmbach, 2014). This research offers an intelligible account of the inner world of a young person in transition, its longitudinal focus particularly helps to track the phenomena of impulsive decision followed by discouragement and guilt that can be held all the while that a belief in a bright future built on hard work (the researchers leave us in no doubt that this is uncharacteristic) and sacrifice is maintained. What is lacking in the narratives is a clear idea of "what do I want to do with my life?" a deliberate attempt to set goals and work towards them. Nonetheless the work is something of a missed opportunity – the researchers' focus on work and school plans leaves out space for an exploration of the kind of narratives that may attach to feelings of inadequacy and falling behind that the interview excerpts suggest sit alongside more optimistic self-talk. As a psychotherapist I have learned to become curious about clients who seem ready to to regale me, often early on in our work, with their big plans and projects. At times like this I wonder how I may have played a part in creating this, how I became a sounding board for these narratives at the expense of things that are harder to talk about. The lack of a discussion on reflexivity in this study strikes me as a weakness as this blind spot may in some part have led to the researchers' observation that members of this sample "have no need, or do not want to talk about this stigmatising experience." (Reiter and Schlimbach, 2015:146).

An ethnographic study of NEETs carried out by Simmons et al (2014) went to considerable lengths to immerse themselves in the lives of 20 working class NEETs in North Yorkshire over 3 years as they attempted to establish lives in an area deprived of opportunities for secure work. Many of these young people faced prior disadvantage which led to difficulties when they were exposed to the poor working environments to which their credentials afforded access. The researchers identify and track the process of discouragement among their sample and foreground it as a defining theme of their sample's experience. Work was seen as a bridge to stability and catching up with what was perceived as the rest of normal society after troubled childhoods. Their early work experiences however, were quickly found to fall short of expectations, the sample describing that their initial goodwill was lost after they encountered alienating, exploitative and insecure working conditions. Lacking recognition, autonomy and a credible path to independence the NEETs found themselves under pressure leading to an exacerbation of their tendencies for withdrawal. After this discouragement the deprived local economy offered few alternative goals around which to rally (Simmons et al, 2014). The paper is not psychological in focus but aids our understanding by offering further evidence for the way in which prior vulnerabilities accrued before the transition to work (the idea of which has been invested with a kind of hope for redemption from these vulnerabilities) can be inflamed by competition and precarious employment.

Rose et al (2012) chose to investigate meaning in the lives of 11, 17-21 year old NEETs experiencing poverty in Merseyside, specifically their understanding of the meaning of: 'social inclusion.' The respondents reported an absence of a particular sort of acceptance, one bestowed by teachers and employers on the basis of skills and achievements. This absence led to a diminishing in their self-worth; they predominantly felt as they were judged to be falling short of expectations of what (now suspicious) others, peers, teachers, family etc felt was normal at their age. A perception of falling behind in society was frequently accompanied by feelings of isolation and insignificance, though some retained hopes of keeping up with 'normal' mainstream society, for many their sense of agency seemed diffuse. The participants reported turning to other forms of recognition, being a good member of a peer group or family member and held these as the most relevant ways to conduct and evaluate themselves (Rose et al, 2012). This study suggests that signs of making progress in life and of inclusion in the community on the basis of achievement matter a great deal to these young people and their absence fuels a sense of inadequacy and not belonging.

All research involves an intensional logic, the taking of a standpoint towards the phenomenon under study. Strong qualitative researchers should always accept this limitation, show evidence of an attempt to critically examine their standpoint and reflect upon how it may a) selectively mediate the contact between researcher and participant, and b) influence interpretation of the data (Yardley, 2008).

Gaspani's work suffers from deficiencies in the first category, their research design suffers from the unspecific NEET criterion concern (their sample includes parents, job-seekers, carers and NEETs by choice) therefore their findings are diffuse, each particular orientation to time is undeveloped for the sake of having to describe the others. Rose et al (2012) produce an affecting portrait of NEET life, though more could have been achieved if this was an explicit goal of the study as opposed to their more limited aims, the relative irrelevance of the social policy concept of "social inclusion" to those whom it supposed to describe.
The other two studies demonstrate deficiencies in the second category, the values of the researchers are quite apparent but their influence on the study's interpretation are not acknowledged or explored. Reiter and Schlimbach (2014) present their case study (chosen as being emblematic of their sample as a whole) as naive and irresponsible, a person who severely hindered himself by his decision to leave school before his final certificate. We learn about his troubled early life but, owing to the social-constructionist methodology of this study, this is held as mostly irrelevant to the participants condition compared with his strategies of

justifying himself to the researchers. On the other end Simmons et al (2014) present 3 troubled but essentially estimable youngsters thwarted by social injustice as they find themselves prey to unscrupulous employers. Researchers seem keen to reveal a headline pathology, be it poor education, social injustice, youthful conceit and present their subjects as victims of this ill. We have two studies on the same population and two very different pictures of the role of agency, the work ethic and vulnerability. These interpretative frameworks detract from the participants as complex, creative individuals in their own right, and this is particularly pernicious when this is done in research on a marginal, essentially voiceless, group in social policy debates already subject to generalisations. The effect is that we lose sight of what NEET means to the subjects themselves.

Disaggregating NEET: Ending the Unspecific NEET Criterion Concern

Increasingly researchers have attempted to develop a taxonomy of people in the NEET situation with a view towards early intervention and targeting of resources. Sachdev et al (2006) sought to understand disparities between the proportion of young people who were NEET in two (now former) Learning and Skill Councils (regional HE planning bodies, delivered as a New Labour Quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation until the organisation was dissolved in 2010). Among focus groups with local Connexions workers the researchers discovered that the key workers posited two main groups of NEETs and managed their provision accordingly to meet the distinctive profile of needs. “Core NEETs” were described as young people coping with circumstances that marginalised them and their families. Pathways into this kind of exclusion have been well-studied; young people are more likely to become NEET if they are reported to have been exposed to the following risk factors (the risk accumulates for the individuals the more of these that apply to their life circumstance): school expulsion, behavioural issues, being known to a Youth Offending Team, poor school attendance, accommodation issues, welfare-dependency in the family, poor basic skills in literacy and mathematics, low motivation and no job aspiration, registration as having a Special Educational Need, being a carer, growing up in an area with a high proportion of other NEETs (Arnold and Baker, 2012; Feng et al, 2015; Coles et al, 2002; Hoggarth and Smith et al, 2004). “Floating NEETs” were described as less deprived but dispositionally uncommitted to work and study. They required less support to get them to the stage of attending courses and many have a history of temporary work or study; yet, for a variety of reasons, they lack the inclination and knowledge to pursue a longer term occupational project (Sachdev et al, 2006).

Similarly Spielhofer et al (2009), in a latent class analysis of 1637 NEETs undertaken on school leavers in the early 2000s found a similar bifurcation. Dispositional (and less strongly associated with obvious signs of deprivation) NEETs comprised two thirds of their sample. This led the researchers to comment:

> "Research studies relating to young people who were NEET were often designed to investigate the issues affecting those in the most disadvantaged of circumstances, and so tended to present a rather narrow perspective" (Spielhofer et al, 2009:3).

Maschereini and Ledermaier (2016) made use of European Labour Force surveys from European Union member states to attempt to disaggregate the bloc's NEET population into 7 categories, providing a useful breakdown of the proportion of those young people who are unavailable from the workforce, attempting to engage with the labour and refusing to engage. Those unavailable from the workforce are the ill and disabled or those caring for a child or relative – together they comprised 22.2% of the EU's NEET population (including United Kingdom data), 29.6% of that of the UK. Those engaging with the labour market were those classed as "re-entrants", those with a firm offer of a job, education course or training position that was about to start (EU28: 7.8%, UK: 5.4%), the "short-term unemployed" - those actively looking for work that had been unemployed between 6 months and one year (EU28: 29.8%, UK: 37.4%), and the "long-term unemployed," similarly ready to start work but unemployed over one year (EU28: 22%, UK: 19.3%). The final category are those who are not looking for work – were referred to as "discouraged workers" (EU: 8.5%; UK: 0.5%) and "others" (EU28: 12.5% UK: 8%). Discouraged workers were those who claimed that "there weren't any jobs available" when asked to explain why they were not seeking work, "others" provided other reasons. Speculatively the authors suggest that this final category may comprise of people pursuing "dangerous, asocial lifestyles [or those who are]… constructively engaged in other activities such as art, music and self-directed learning" (Maschereini and Ledermaier, 2016: 36).

What are NEETs by Choice?

This inclusion of two limited measures of the ability and the disposition to seek work, which are themselves datalogical imports from the field of social policy used to determine entitlement to particular welfare benefits, allows us to locate NEETs by choice for the first time – some 8% of the NEET population who are available to work but are not seeking it. There are suggestions that they hold alternative attitudes towards the value or role of work, and the fact that they have chosen to

stop looking for work. However, it is only very recently that this group have been studied in their own right.

The Young Women's Trust commissioned research into female NEETs who were not actively looking for work, the "economically inactive NEETs." They discovered in the 2016 Labour Force Survey 465,000 (though more were likely to have gone unrecorded) such young people, 59% of them were female. They found that many of the 57 women interviewed had assumed front-line caring duties of their children and of physically or mentally ill family members by default – reflecting a gendered division of domestic labour in wider society. Those who were not unavailable owing to caring duties reported that their mental health and a loss of faith in ever attaining secure and meaningful work in the short term as barriers to their engagement to searching for EET opportunities. Low self-worth and disillusionment with education were common, those with employment histories reported dissatisfaction with the precarious retail and service jobs available in their locales. Many of these women were dependent on their families and their day-to-day quality of life varied considerably on the quality of the relationships with those with whom they co-habited (Maguire and McKay, 2017). The research provides useful information to the counselling psychologist about the socio-economic struggles of economically inactive young women – particularly in respect to the reasons for their disaffection and non-attendance of mental health services. Nonetheless, the women with different circumstances are such a diffuse target we learn little about the lived experience of the women in different circumstances, particularly those who are not looking for work because they "...suffered from mental health problems..." (ibid:53). Psychiatric diagnoses of anxiety and depression are referred to but taken as read; the symptoms are described as barriers to be overcome (along with low self-confidence) giving only a cursory investigation of the thoughts and emotions that underpin them. In young women's case there are clear categories within the "economically inactive group", those who are primary care-givers and those who are not – this study demonstrates that this is a vital piece of context. Those who are not care-givers could be referred to as NEET by choice, the choice appears to be a reaction to the perceived difficulty of work in those troubled by low confidence and depression.

Serracant (2015) sought to develop a new sampling method to make it easier to disaggregate the NEET population of Cataluña- particularly to better locate and understand those "who reject the role of studying and working" (Serracant, 2015:7) as a disposition. Using a 2005 Labour Force Survey they found that 2.5% of the 16-29 year olds who were NEET were not seeking work, education or training. The researchers found individuals in "extreme situations" such as addiction and those with a criminal record as well as "long-term unemployed people who have lost interest in

studying or trying to work but who do not necessarily experience distress or poverty in their situation" (ibid, 10). Serracant's strict inclusion criteria in her analysis of Labour Force Data highlights the lengths that are required to allow for an instructive look into the lives of those who share a particular pathway into NEET. Following Serracant, Salvà Mut et al (2017) disaggregated NEET pathways and used these criteria to examine the sample of young people included in their longitudinal study of people born in 1983/4 in Palma de Mallorca. Of the work-refusing NEETs they reported:

> This group is notable for a lower incidence of women and a smaller percentage of the immigrant population or individuals with an immigrant background. This is the group in which fewer youths state that they have difficulties making ends meet, although they do have a lower average household income than the other analysed groups. With regard to educational background, we found a greater incidence of repeaters and young people who consider themselves to be poor students. Their greater number of significant jobs and times unemployed identifies them as having a background of greater labour participation and job instability. Particularly noteworthy is the greater number of disengaged youths who say that they have or have had a significant addiction (Salvà Mut et al, 2017:8).

However, like Maguire and McKay's work, the decision to describe the breadth of experiences of all the different categories of NEET, leaves much detail that may be of use to counselling psychologists missing. The research above has suggested gender differences in the experience of economic inactivity owing to gendered ideas of who the caring responsibilities within families falls to by default, that those who refuse work may follow alternative lifestyles- valuing work and independence differently, and that a constituency of them are financially dependent and not in financial difficulty.

I am not suggesting a scepticism towards understanding people in the NEET situation through social sciences research. Rather that the studies that I have reviewed are mostly incommensurable and lack conceptual clarity. Some of the reasons for this are practical and unavoidable – given that social policy research in the UK and EU only relatively recently coalesced around a shared definition, it is not reasonable to expect that this definition can be operationalised into existing cohort studies. Until this is done these cohort studies should explicitly state they are addressing those phenomena on which they are collecting data, which is youth unemployment. In the following

section I reflect upon how this field has only recently taken strides to a more precise understanding of the NEET phenomenon.

Epistemic Failings in NEET Research

That the NEET phenomena is highly emotive, is reflected in monograph titles such as "Adolescence Without End", "The Jilted Generation", and "Failure to Launch." Part of this is likely generated from public anger at the Global Financial Crisis and the political response towards it. Indeed, young workers have been demonstrated to have been the worst affected (O' Higgins, 2015). Yet young people's labour market engagement has been a battleground for considerably longer than this (Willis, 1977; Winefield et al, 1993). Speculation about the contemporary social-cultural environment and its resultant generational malaise are commonplace in pop psychology publishing (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018; Twenge and Campbell, 2009) drawing upon a deeper storehouse of anxiety about whether our institutions are able to effectively reproduce a new generation of workers and/or moral subjects (see Smith et al, 2011; Coté and Allahar,1994). The seeming explosion in the NEET population during the financial crisis heightened these fears. The subjectivities of people in the NEET situation have become an opportune site for disputes about the contemporary morality of social reproduction. Either young people have been hung out to dry by a society that places economic efficiency above notions of solidarity and support (Howker and Malik, 2013), or young people's difficulties are the fruits of a culture that has lost sight of the importance of hierarchy (Bly, 1997) and rigour (Deresiewicz, 2015) leaving young people self-absorbed and lacking the grit or resilience required for the demands of today's competitive economy (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018; Grubbs and Exline, 2016). The prescriptions for helping today's young people proffered by exponents of these two positions are radical economic and social change for the former (Standing, 2011) and, for the latter, radical personal change in the individual. For these conservative critics, this transformation is necessary to correct attitudes and expectations in a manner that increases individuals' compatibility and compliance with the vicissitudes of the contemporary labour market (Watts, 2019; Freidli and Stearn, 2015).

With a few honourable exceptions, psychologists and psychiatrists gravitate to the latter prescription – research in these fields aims to increase the effectiveness of individual behavioural interventions that can be made by a clinician to help a patient become more autonomous by overcoming their personal psycho-social complaints. This focus on personal distress and treatment downplays the role that social and economic factors can play in human suffering, and are often integral to the

complaints that are heard in the clinic (Parker, 2007; Smail, 2005; Johnstone and Boyle, 2018). Jerome Kagan suggests that this methodological and hermeneutic position is pervasive across psychology research.

> "Most Western psychologists write as if traits, moods, and abilities that transcend settings provide the most illuminating explanations of psychological phenomena… [I contend that] each agent… possesses a large collection of possible brain states, feelings, motives and actions that are ready for expression. Each type of context is associated with a set of probabilities describing the likelihood of a particular outcome" (Kagan, 2012: 69-70).

As I have shown in the above sections on risk factors, there is a presumed relationship between the researcher's expertise (or, in the case of Pinto-Perrira et al, 2017, their own valuable constructs) and this contemporary social problem, and these relationships are sought and measured in extensive cohort studies. Typically rather weak statistical relationships are discovered- I contend that this is because the inclusion criteria for these studies fails to consider the policy context (the definitions of NEET) and historical and social contexts (whether or not a recession affected the cohort, therefore increasing the number and variety of people for whom the dependent variable applies, how NEET or indeed youth unemployment aggregates a wide variety of individuals) of their research. That these aspects have been ignored is how very different young people have often been conflated.

> The usefulness of NEET as a category is therefore compromised through the ways in which disadvantaged people who may lack the resources to navigate transitions or exercise choice are combined with more privileged young people who are able to exercise a significant degree of choice regarding the ways in which they manage their lives (Furlong, 2006: 557).

The role of choice is a key sticking point in the research, because taken together, the NEET population contains, firstly, people who are barred from or socialised into a limited engagement with EET opportunities and, secondly, NEETs by choice who appear to reject them. Contemporary youth transitions have become increasingly individualised, as has the responsibility for investing one's self in acquiring the requisite knowledge to navigate one's own pathway (Giddens, 1991, France, 2007). NEET represents the limit of the "choice biography" from these two directions, presenting shadow aspects of the "emerging adult" thesis with dire consequences for those involved.

The "emerging adult" is an influential construct in the study of contemporary youth transitions, developed to describe and make sense of the greater average length of transition in contemporary Western youth from adolescence into fully realised adulthood (comprising of financial independence, marriage and parenting). Jeffery Arnett suggested that this takes place between the ages of 18 and 29, the duration reflects the complexity of the young person becoming the postmodern subject, one who is required to exercise choice over their own fate in an uncertain world (Arnett, 2000). The emerging adult is a sovereign, autonomous individual who is engaged in self-creation through experimentation with different roles, exploring different career and relationship possibilities before committing to long-term paths. Attainment of adulthood proper is now less marked by reaching a publicly visible milestone but can be said to have occurred when the young person has a subjective feeling of having attained emotional and financial independence from their birth families. Arnett's construct has been criticised for failing to reflect that access to the space for exploration and experimentation is very much circumscribed by one's class position (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). I would like to add my own criticism: assuming that family finances allow and the opportunity to self-engineer is open to a subject (and it is these people of whom the present study's sample shall comprise), this opportunity can be attenuated by a lack of the immaterial assets required to set up one's own reference points. Arnett's successful emerging adult, after all, is an active agent – a being with the self-control and confidence to experiment. Resilient and emotionally well-supported enough by family to overcome defeats on the way to the goal of self-actualisation through work and partnership. This support is derived from the material and immaterial assets in the child's milieu. We have seen in the section above on **Risk Factors**, that access to these assets and dispositions are sometimes attenuated by family, socio-economic, dispositional and psychological factors.

We are uncomfortable enough talking about the economic disparity that individuals are born into, but we at least have a widely understood discourse for discussing them: class (Sayer, 2005**)**. Inequities between immaterial assets are harder to discuss and think about: "aversive childhood experiences", mental illness, social exclusion and NEET – are perhaps the closest we get to capturing these. That this latter form of resource may underwrite the freedom a young person has to experiment with roles, relationships and career opportunities allows space for two disturbing thoughts – from the point of view of the "emerging adult thesis." Firstly, the freedom to create oneself will always be tempered by the hard limit of the availability of material and immaterial resources before one was able to take charge of one's self creation. Secondly, that if choice, in

theory, is meant to take a far more central role in the process of self-creation (in Arnett's theory, old structures like geographic location, social class, gender and ethnicity are rendered as having an increasingly marginal effect upon the process) then individuals are now *compelled* to assume the risk and responsibility for choosing among a vast range of possibilities themselves, even those at a considerable disadvantage. In an economy where the labour market increasingly demands higher education as the price of entry, one's own decisions must be made in the face of considerable uncertainty and precarity:

> "The normal biography thus becomes the 'elective biography', the 'do-it-yourself biography'. This does not necessarily happen by choice, neither does it necessarily succeed. The do-it-yourself biography is always a 'risk biography', indeed a 'tightrope biography', a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" (Beck and Beck-Gurnsheim, 2002:3).

Research suggests that such a settlement has been embraced by most young people who are, on the whole, optimistic about their futures and the extent to which their commitment to hard work will deliver their ambitions to them. The respondents to Fansceschelli and Keating's qualitative research into young people's beliefs about the future commonly report a belief that a mindset can be commanded into being that will help them overcome all obstacles and that the will power to achieve this was among the decisive factors for their future security (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018). But concern has been raised over the lack of feasibility in many young people's understanding of their chances in their preferred parts of the labour market. (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Brown, 1999; Mann et al, 2013), and this is becoming increasingly prevalent among parents and teachers (St Clair et al, 2011). Real terms cuts to the education budget in the United Kingdom has left 83% of schools without a careers advisor (Unison, 2014). It is also the case that access to the kind of work young people desire, work as a calling or means to self-actualisation, is unequally distributed (Frayne, 2015; Standing, 2011), the preserve of the most materially and immaterially privileged and that many young people find themselves trapped in a working world for which they were unprepared (Princes Trust, 2018).

That inequality hampers success through socially-mediated processes runs counter to dominant narratives in our culture:

> "People can perfect themselves if they try hard enough – perfection being measured in terms of success and power. All too easily equated with economic success and financial power, these two factors combine to generate the new goal in life… Conversely,

> everyone who fails must be weak characters, if not downright parasites, with dubious norms and values. (Verhaeghe, 2014: 77)"

I am not suggesting that anyone in the NEET research community is not motivated by a desire to aid understanding for the sake of helping young people in these challenging circumstances. Critical psychologists, however, posit that there is always a risk of othering marginalised groups in the practice of psychology and in psychology research (Smail, 1998; Parker, 2007). Owing to the fact that the individuals in this situation are young, not visible (except as a statistical measure of economic performance) and highly transient, they are in a marginal position relative to the highly qualified people who study them. It is in situations such as this that psychological research risks what critical psychologists describe as *epistemic violence* (Teo, 2008) to its subjects. This occurs through the intensional logic of the research design, the interpretation of data and discussion sections - all interpretative exercises that can offer opportunities for the researcher to miss important elements of the phenomena under study.

In the case of NEET research, owing to the limited picture that we have, speculation about the subjectivities of those in the NEET situation fills in the considerable gaps and interpretation (as I have shown in the qualitative section) may fall into the already polarised discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor. The idea that long term unemployment results from a series of overly negative attitudes about work – has led to a range of interventions to attempt to shift this attitude (Dean, 1996; Friedli and Stearn, 2015; Department of Work and Pensions, 2015). It is perfectly reasonable that a government should seek to minimise the proportion of those who are dependent on the state, and it is also the case that the majority of people who are prevented from working by their mental health complaints state that employment, education or training is a personal goal- *given suitable preparation and rehabilitation* (Secker et al, 2001, Bond et al, 1997). However, given the increasing emphasis on employment as a path to recovery we may be putting the cart before the horse when it comes to NEETs. In the United Kingdom's case, I contend that employment-focussed short term therapies and a punitive welfare entitlement regime appears to fly in the face of the evidence I have presented on NEET: that poor educational engagement, aversive childhood experiences and common mental disorders in adolescence are predictive of NEET status. In the, unfortunately mostly unheeded, words of Yates and Payne:

> "Although this group of young people do seem to be at risk of some form of social exclusion… it is not necessarily the fact that they are not in employment, education or training that is the most salient or useful fact for professional services to know about

them. It is indeed possible that a rigidly focussed concern with the NEET status of such young people risks diverting attention from other, more immediate and threatening risks that might exist in their lives, and which might require more urgent or sustained intervention" (Yates and Payne, 2006: 338).

The evidence for the claim that employment on its own has a beneficial effect on mental distress is mixed. Among unemployed adults, although those re-joining the workforce has been shown to alleviate depression and mental distress (Paul and Moser, 2009; McKee-Ryan et al, 2005) it has been demonstrated that this effect occurs only when unemployed persons enter into jobs that are personally relevant and secure (Chandola and Zhang, 2017; Bjarnason and Sigurdardottir, 2003). This relevance is conditional upon a self-knowledge which, under optimal circumstances, occurs in adolescence and early adulthood according to most theories of vocational psychology (Super, 1957; Savikas, 2002; Gottfredson, 2002) this is gained through an exploration of the self through key relationships – with friends, family and educational institutions (Brown, 1999, Eccles, 2009). NEET is when individuals who are impoverished of these relationships may enter the policy radar for the first time, but their lack of EET engagement is likely to be only the latest thing with which they require support.

Finally, within the category of NEET are people who appear to act against one of the most prevalent values in our society, the NEETs by choice who appear to have stopped or given up on the process of working itself. The fact that NEETs by choice appear to lack a work ethic, an identification and striving towards paid work as a central commitment of one's time (Weber, 2002/1904; Weeks, 2001), makes them subject to considerable cultural stigma (Frayne, 2015, Tyler, 2013), their framing as the undeserving poor and a rhetorical justification for the reduction in welfare payments has come from the top of government (Coote and Lyall, 2013). Serracant argues that to include this group among others under the NEET category, makes researchers more liable to consider other NEETs with structural barriers into EET (if her native Cataluña is counted as a country, its youth unemployment rate would be the 2nd highest in the EU) as sharing in this lack of desire to work or study (Serracant, 2015).

It is surprising, with the amount of interest in changing the dispositions of long term unemployed people (to make them more amenable to the demands of the labour market) and the volume of research that has been undertaken into young people who are NEET, that there has been no study to date that looks at the dispositions of this group. In the process of trying to understand the experience

of male NEETs by choice, one has to take a decision whether to consider the hikikomori research literature. The *hikikomori* are mostly male and, owing to their decision to avoid the world of work and education, live in a dependent relationship with their parents into late adolescence and beyond. There are differences in emphasis between the research community investigating *hikikomori* and NEET researchers, the former have taken greater strides to ask questions about the social and cultural context into which these young people attempt the transition into adulthood.

Hikikomori research

The Japanese phenomena of *hikikomori* (literally translated as 'pulling inward, being confined') refers to young people, the majority of whom are male, withdrawing from the world of work and/or schooling and becoming recluses in their family home for an extended period of time. This psycho-social complaint is more prevalent in affluent families (Umeda and Kawakami, 2012) the retreat from society is enabled by the ability of the family to be able to absorb the cost of the dependent child. According to Psychiatrist Tamaki Saito these young people lose contact with others and develop increasingly rigid and circular behaviours of hiding, negative self-talk and psychological ailments (such as insomnia, social phobia, and addictive behaviours). Paradoxically they also present a restlessness in their thinking, a strong desire to return to the world side by side with a belief that they are incompatible with it (Saito, 1998). Another key feature is a lack of trust in peers, parents or the rest of society (Yong and Kaneko, 2016; Hattori, 2006; Saito, 1998). There has been considerable effort to understand the core features of the withdrawal behaviour, as some youths appear unaffected by this mental distress, maintaining friendships outside the home, some simply live in dependence and refuse work, about which they hold highly ambivalent attitudes (Koyama et al, 2010). NEETs exist in Japan who do not display the key *hikikomori* withdrawal behaviour, researchers have found that the groups share similar negative attitudes about society and their compatibility with it (Norasakkunkit and Uchida, 2015).

The Japanese Government's most recent survey estimated that some 541,000 people aged between 18-39 were *hikikomori* (Kyodo News Agency, 2015); the male to female ratio of this population has been estimated at 4:1 (Saito, 1998). Japanese Government Health Ministry guidelines state that *hikikomori* should only be diagnosed in the absence of "schizophrenia, mental retardation and other mental disorders" (Teo, 2010: 180,) although, in practice, it is hard to separate the withdrawal behaviour on its own when many of the patients express anxiety about others and a preference for social isolation (Teo, 2010). The reclusive behaviour may, in some cases, represent the patient's

self-protection strategy consistent with the sequelae of a number of psychiatric disorders such as social phobia, autism spectrum disorders and depression. Although psychopathology has been found in greater proportion in the *hikikomori* population than the rest of society, there exists a large constituency of these young people who do not meet current diagnostic criteria, and their numbers appear to be growing (Koyama et al, 2010). This has led some researchers to question whether it is more constructive to consider the social disaffection and withdrawal as a culture-bound syndrome in its own right (Saito,1998; Borovoy, 2008; Teo and Gaw, 2010). This position is somewhat undermined by a growing body of research identifying the behaviour of withdrawal in Western countries such as the United States, France and Finland, societies which lack Japan's distinctive communitarian and Confucian heritage (Kato et al, 2011; Duverger and Guedj-Bourdiau, 2013, Husu and Välimäki: 2016).

Many researchers who have sought to study the early life of their *hikikomori* subjects identified insecure attachment arising from emotionally unavailable parents (Hattori, 2006; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013, Suwa et al, 2003). Maternal panic disorder (adjusted odds ratio 6.64, 95% CI: 1.13–39.08, p= 0.036) and any other maternal mental illness (adjusted odds ratio 5.94, 95% CI: 1.06–33.32, p= 0.043) were more likely to be reported in the family histories of *hikikomori* vs non-*hikikomori* 20-50 year olds, (Umeda and Kawakami, 2012). This lends some weight to the attachment thesis as mothers who experience mental illness are less likely to be able to attend to their children's needs (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1989). Insecure attachment styles increase the probability of defensive reactions to psycho-social challenges when the child meets the competitive climate of Japanese schooling. Insecure attachment is also associated with a greater risk of being a victim of bullying (Kõiv, 2012; Kokkinos, 2007). Bullying was experienced by over half of Hattori's 35 *hikikomori* cases and a recent qualitative survey of 4 *hikikomori* and content analysis of online discussions found that it the decision to stop participating socially began with feeling haunted by a social defeat, such as a betrayal, exploitation or humiliation (Hattori, 2006; Yong and Kaneko, 2016).

Umeda and Kawakami also found that having a father who had completed university (adjusted odds ratio 6.0, 95% CI: 1.6–22.9, p= 0.009) was also more likely in the *hikikomori* sample (Umeda and Kawakami, 2012), these medium-strength effects lend weight to those who argue that affluence is associated with a greater likelihood for *hikikomori* pathways (Saito, 1998) and offers and explanation for *hikikomori*-like behaviour outside of Japan. Similar findings on mental distress in affluent families were uncovered by Luthar et al (2013), who found higher levels of delinquency and substance use in young men whom believed they were subject to high expectations about their

future achievement from parents who were emotionally unavailable (Luthar et al, 2013). The account of Suwa and Suzuki (2013), based on their clinical work, suggest the way this pressure manifests in the subjective experience of the *hikikomori*. The researchers observed that the young people had an "envisioned ideal path" they have fallen from owing to defeats or a defeat without a struggle – this ideal future self was one that originated from the desires and goals of young person, comprising personal, parental and societal ideals. In spite of not participating in society, the authors inform us that *hikikomori* maintains investment in the ideal future self and frets about how it can be reached from their current circumstances. Avoidance is a strategy of preventing the ideal self being tested and possibly empirically shown to be unfeasible through social and occupational failure. The parents often reflect back this image (for it is usually an internalisation of their wishes) and the belief that it is still attainable (Suwa and Suzuki, 2013). The account is plausible but readers are offered no way of verifying these claims- they provide no data and make reference to no other research or related psychological constructs. The theory bears resemblance to the work of Markus and Nurius's "possible selves", these are cognitive constructs of the individual in a future in wanted or unwanted scenarios. They have been found to exert a negative influence on self-esteem and motivation according to their valence and the dysjunction between the present circumstance (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Boldero and Francis; 1999). Could the perfect become the enemy of the good when it comes to a young person trying to envision and commit towards the transition from school to work in these families?

A possible pressure on these 'envisioned ideal paths' are historical reforms to the Japanese economy in the wake of the country's recession of the 1990s. In line with many Western economies, the Japanese Government relaxed regulation of its labour market to allow for new kinds of investment and employment contracts that demanded fewer obligations from employers. This has led, as in other economies (Standing, 2011) to a bifurcation of the labour market – secure salaried jobs in corporations or the professions on one hand, and an increasing number of jobs with insecure contracts and low wages in other sectors. Increasing competition for a smaller number of secure jobs has led to increased pressure on the young people to achieve the highest grades in school in order to avoid downward social mobility. With the opportunity structures more tentative and a family expectation that may not consider these contemporary developments these young people must engage in the unfamiliar and uncertain task of crafting their own future in the manner more akin to contemporary Western young people, described above. The *hikikomori* are those who do not feel equal to this task and get stuck in a psycho-social moratorium which eventually becomes their daily life (Furlong, 2008; Tovionen, 2012; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013).

The greater incidence of *hikikomori* males, lends some support to the idealisation/ambivalence hypothesis, although not an exclusively male phenomena, there are different levels of feasibility in the gendered ideal images in households in which a father's income is sufficient to support a family. The Confucian-character of the pre-modern Japanese culture posits ideal gender types which are, on the whole, fairly similar to those found in Western culture (Williams and Best, 1990) – men are meant to be rational, confident, dominant – to be leaders, achievers and decision makers and head of the household (Zhang et al 2005; Sugihara and Katsurada, 2002). What differs between Japan and the West is the speed at which discrimination concerning a woman's ability to participate equally in the workplace has been tempered at the cultural and labour market level. Japan sits at 117th/ 149 on gender parity on metrics of 'economic participation and opportunity' whilst the UK is 52nd (World Economic Forum, 2019). Women are overwhelmingly represented on internal corporate tracks that lack the possibility of promotion to management roles. (Kawaguchi, 2015) Gender and class expectations combine in the influential middle class ideal type of the hard working 'salaryman' – the male corporate manager or professional who dedicates a life time to his company and is rewarded for his diligence with lifetime employment and perks. These jobs follow from a narrow path of success in exams, attending an elite university and a quick entry into a corporation. This post-war ideal for the middle-class remains an influential ambition in affluent families – failure for a son to follow this envisioned ideal path is considered by many parents and children themselves as a failure, despite the liberalisation of the economy rendering this pathway less feasible (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003; Jones, 2006).

Can the above inferences drawn from *hikikomori* research help us understand male NEETs by choice in the UK? There are many cultural differences in education and in norms between the two countries. Researchers have shown evidence that young men in the UK have an overall less engaged attitude towards education and the values of academic attainment. Qualitative researchers have identified norms where students who are seen as conscientious and hard-working are commonly derided as falling short of hegemonic masculine ideals. Indeed, the more desirable masculine qualities were found to be insouciance and disengagement from the institution (Mac and Ghaill, 1994; Frosh et al, 2002). Frosh et al (2002) showed that British boys constructed a complicated middle ground between these norms and a more furtive desire to secure good qualifications (a desire attributed to meeting their parents' wishes). Roberts (2012) attempted to focus on young men pursuing this middle ground and found that "going-through-the-motions" and a short-term focus on the GCSE exams led to an ambivalence about committing to future career plans (Roberts, 2012).

The policing of masculine norms in Japan is different, pressure is placed upon those who do not adhere to the competitive ideals of the institution by other students; unmannerly and non-conformist behaviour is heavily discouraged. Generally speaking, Japanese children are more receptive to the goals and means of education (Borovoy, 2008; Norasakkunkit and Uchida, 2014) which may heighten the sense of crisis and transgression for young people who feel they are unable to achieve on an academic pathway. Western culture is more accepting of young people transgressing conventions, in fact their pursuit of distinctive lifestyles and identities is often celebrated (Featherstone, 1991; Willis, 1990). The idea of a moratorium – the gap year and experimentation with different jobs and careers, reflects an ease among middle-class parents of children needing time and space to figure out what they want to do, who they want to be in the future (Arnett and Fishel, 2014; Dubois-Raymond, 1998). However, this comes with its own risks: for young people, contemporary adolescence with its freedom to experiment with roles, leisure lifestyles and possibilities..."may end up being the most destructive or wasted period of their lives" (Coté and Allahar,1994: 74-75).

Whereas Japan posits the stable managerial/professional career as a masculine ideal type in its cultural imaginary, the Anglosphere posits the more individualist figure of the entrepreneur as its folk hero. This figure is radically unconventional compared with the salaryman – a self-creating individual, not necessarily requiring a typical education but an initiative for spotting opportunities in markets and the ability to market and manage oneself to capitalise on them (Faludi, 2000; Kelly, 2006). I am not the first to point out that as the zenith of the individualist self-creation, this figure inspires but also offers a distorted sense of the feasibility of successful entrepreneurial enterprises and a de-legitimisation of the role of the social. Society, it's laws, conventions and ethics- become positioned as a deadening source of rules to be broken rather than a foundation upon which an economy, and a life is built (Armstrong, 2005).

As counselling psychologists we should also be critical of accounts that rest upon universalist assumptions – such as that NEET by choice is a result of laziness, depression or an unfeasible ideal image of a future career, whilst also avoiding simplistic cultural-psychological accounts that imply straightforward interpellation from the culture to the individual. I venture that we may learn more about the rationalisations and challenges of male NEETs by choice if we focus on them as historically situated beings involved not in an abstract process of cultural transmission but as persons attempting understand and survive their milieu, however fallibly.

Methodology and Methods

In the previous section I have criticised the approach that has been taken to researching the phenomena of people living in the NEET condition. In this section I will outline the present study's methodological approach and justify why this was a relevant and useful approach to take at this time. I shall then provide a description of the procedures undertaken to gather a sample, their data and the way these were analysed.

Research Question

In the literature review section I argued that the research into NEETs, and NEETs by choice in particular, is at a state where it would now be opportune to conduct a study into the lives of affluent male NEETs by choice using a qualitative psychological research method. Qualitative psychological methods allowed the present study to offer an account of the participants' "local reality" (Guba and Lincoln, 94:109), objects of concern, and the way they rationalise their disposition towards work, allowing me to ascertain answers to significant questions left unanswered by previous research on the topic, such as 'what meanings do members of this population ascribe to employment and the task of finding a place in the world?' It is concerns such as these that will bring people like my participants into psychological treatment and if we understand them better we may be better able to assist individuals who comprise this group. The research question is as follows: How do male NEETs-by-choice come to reject work and what are the consequences of this rejection?

Phenomenological Methods

With questions of perceptions, attitudes and identity at the forefront of my inquiry phenomenological research methods lent themselves to the present study. Phenomenology is an activity that derives from philosophical attempts to understand the creativity of human consciousness as mediator of the world for subjects (Warnock, 1980). At phenomenology's heart lies the ontological proposition that what we perceive of the world is the sum of the object and our own mental conception of it – a chair cannot be viewed in its raw objectivity without us recognising

it as a chair – with all the personal and cultural referrants this entails. Our referral to these depends upon our history and current intentions: be it hunting for somewhere to sit down or as an object of metaphysical contemplation.

Researchers using these phenomenological methods in psychology aim to describe and sometimes interpret the lens through which persons perceive the world, appreciating that this matrix of meanings is the product of an entire life of experiences and that is continually revised as the living person acts towards personally significant ends. Phenomenological researchers attempt to render the uniqueness of the lens through which our shared world is perceived. They do so by eliciting rich, autobiographical description from research participants about their experiences – which is then engaged by researchers who attempt to suspend pre-suppositions on the topic under investigation (Ashworth, 1996; Spinelli, 2005; Smith et al, 2009). Phenomenological researchers engage in idiographic enquiry (Finlay, 2011), the pursuit of knowledge through an analysis of single cases (compared to nomothetic enquiries which study abstracted phenomena across populations (Thomae, 1999). Those that favour an idiographic approach argue that it is through studying the subjectivity of individuals trying to live in their contexts that we can bypass the atomism of subjects implied by nomothetic approaches. The focus on those variables that are measurable and testing relationships between these parts neglects how these parts might fit into a meaningful whole differently across subjects in the sample under study and can subtly change our conception about what it means to be human (Gigerenzer, 1996). By focusing on the subjective experience we can interrogate concepts of human agency, reflexivity and conscious thought in context and uncover whether these key human experiences confer validity on psychological constructs, or suggest other ways of conceptualising behaviour (Holzkamp, 1991).

Phenomenological methods do not attempt to derive the veracity of claims about the external world (such as “there are no jobs”) but rather elicit what it is like to live in a world that appears in such a way (Finlay, 2011). An individual's lifeworld (the world given to the subject through their understanding) is not solipsistic, it is understood through symbols which are gathered from culture and are thus accessible and interpretable but only by another living person’s lens (Geertz, 1973).

This raises the question of the role of interpretation and the validity of the subsequent data; I shall address this through the remainder of this chapter. On the role of interpretation and the researcher more generally, phenomenological research has approached this question in different ways.

‘Descriptive’ phenomenological researchers aim to provide an intelligible reformulation of the key meaning units expressed about an object of concern by their participants. Interpretation must follow what has been expressed in order to avoid contamination of the participant’s meaning (Giorgi, 1985; Todres, 2005). Following Edmund Husserl, these researchers believe that it is possible to reach the real “essence” of a particular experience beneath all interpretations. They posit a pre-interpreted base upon which all interpretations set their foundations and suggest that these are the “true beginnings” through which we can approach overworked scientific paradigms with a new point of departure (Husserl, 1965; 146). Practically, with regard to a topic under investigation, these researchers attempt to suspend their own interpretations entirely, in so doing they can distil the essence of what is being described among a group of participants to find what is common across different appearances of the phenomena in the sample (Langdridge, 2007; Ashworth, 2003; Wertz, 2005).

The attempt to attain a kind of methodological “purity” with regard to psychological phenomena has been criticised as being naive about the role of the researcher (allowing interpretation to enter the analysis unannounced (Paley, 2016) and capable of producing merely superficial new knowledge (Rychlak, 1988). Curiously, one of the most influential Descriptive Phenomenologists appears to suggest considerable leeway for the researcher in the analytic aims towards which descriptive phenomenology may be utilised:

> “In our view, the everyday world is richer and more complex than the psychological perspective… and thus this description could be just as easily lend itself to a sociological or anthropological analysis depending upon the interests of the researcher and perspective toward the concrete description that is adopted.” (Girogi, 1985;11)

Giorgi states that a rendering of the description is always undertaken in the interest of the researcher and the stance that they take towards the phenomena under study. I disagree that this can be commanded out of the interaction and the pure phenomena rendered.

I took the view that I would not have been able to approach the fieldwork without being conversant in the “psychological perspective” - only thus was I able to provide a reading of the data that can cautiously shed light on “preoccupations, influences and viewpoint[s] of the researcher within... [my] intellectual community” (Tomkins and Eatough, 2011:8). As my participants sought to idiosyncratically sort their ideas in response to a question I asked of them during the interviews– I too reacted to these expressed ideas, formulating questions and making choices about how to

proceed in order to best illuminate my research question – derived from a reading of available literature. The facts of my even getting in front of the participants is not something, I believe, that can be simply "bracketed" or commanded away from the interaction and analysis.

Interpretation cannot be avoided, and in the case of poorly understood population, they matter a great deal so it was important for me to approach interpretation carefully. The literature review uncovered a lack of clarity in the NEET research field, which I, along with others, (Mawn et al, 2017; Yates and Paine, 2006) argue results from a poor conceptualisation of this group and their experiences from the outset. One explanation of this is provided by Teo (2008) who contends that researchers on marginalised groups bring and reproduce social-historical assumptions that reflect imbalances of power to cast these groups as 'other' (and in need of psychological correction). Teo states that this flows from a *hermeneutic deficit*, an institutional blind spot in mainstream psychology that fails to address how interpretations are made and used (e.g. ethically) in research design and dissemination (Teo, 2008). I have shown that this ethical dimension to interpretation has too often been ignored by NEET researchers, leading to all kinds of problems in understanding the group. Foreground the hunt for evidence of depression, inconsistency, conceit etc and you will find it. In my willingness to report back to colleagues, I should therefore take considerable care to avoid absorbing the frameworks of understanding held by the community uncritically and be able to justify my interpretative strategies as being able to provide access without burying over the participants' experiences. Though it does not solve the above epistemological/ethical problem at a stroke, I decided that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al, 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2003) offered the most compelling settlement between presenting meanings in lived experience whilst offering the opportunity for greater access to these through accountable interpretation.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter referred to as IPA) shares an ontological position with other phenomenological methods: that the subject perceives, thinks and acts within a personal and intersubjectively-derived interpreted world – IPA maintains an emphasis on the importance of idiography and phenomenological enquiry to understand personal interpretations of worldly phenomena. However a third epistemological influence on IPA is that of the field of hermeneutics, a branch of philosophy that developed out of attempts to develop a systematic theory of the interpretation of texts following the Reformation – its modern incarnation extends to debates

around the correct way of interpreting all human behaviour and products (Mueller-Vollmer, 1986). Later heremeneuts were bolder, arguing that interpretation is a fundamental part of human experience (Heidegger, 1927; Gadamer, 1985), that the solid ground of the disinterested observer of the natural science research is therefore unavailable to humans studying humans. Access to humans, their minds and words is granted by dint of access to ourselves and our own – to hermeneuts, "words are not bottles; every individual must intuit meaning for himself [sic]" (Barfield, 1928:133).

A hermeneutic turn in phenomenological research methods thus entails the use of interpretation, avoiding arbitrariness by rendering the use of interpretation explicitly and ensuring that interpretation is used principally to grant greater access to the participant's experience (Smith et al, 2009). IPA researchers, therefore, use hermeneutic strategies in interpreting interview transcripts (see the **Analytic Strategy** section). The utility of such an enterprise, however, depends upon the extent to which language can be seen as giving direct access to the individual's inner-experience. The relationship is seen as uncomplicated in most forms of IPA though this assumption is challenged by relativist social-constructionists who argue that it is language itself which constructs our inner and outer worlds into meaningful sense for us (Burr, 2003). This tradition sees language as a product of cultural and political narratives, and a qualitative analysis following this approach would focus upon the subtext of language resources used to construct a personal narrative. Phenomenological methods are criticised by this tradition as naively accepting that inner-experience can be captured in language (which is not disinterested), they believe description of inner-states is a semantic and political activity, making it fruitless to explore the inner world (Willig, 2013). I reject this relativist position. If I limited the analysis of the interviews to public speech strategies I would have lost sight of powerful motivating factors that lay outside text that were, nonetheless, important physical and social protagonists within the participants' lives. These can include the results of past actions, the possession of emotions, and socio-economic forces. Manifestations of these forces appeared in awareness to a different extent in different individuals owing to their idiosyncratic exposure to and appraisal of these forces. This knowledge of the world and knowledge of themselves was private and fallible but real insofar that it was an account of reality. These clearly motivated the participants to act in ways that were both personally significant and real. Accounts of a lifeworld are best elicited and explored through the consciousness of the participant which, necessarily fallibly, are articulated through language; and this can only take place through the medium of an encounter with another fallible human being using the same language.

I want to highlight my approach as being that of a minimal hermeneutic-realist (Dreyfus, 1991, Tomkins and Eatough, 2011) as opposed to a realist (an unambiguous connection between the outer world and mental life, thus language can give us direct access to the individual's inner states) or critical realist (there is a real inner world but it is opaque owing to language). A minimal hermeneutic realist would argue that the frame through which we question reality is itself interpreted, that neutral access to an unadulterated reality is an impossibility (Dreyfus, 1991), social scientific access is therefore never a neutral act, its participants are always producing an account of themselves for the sake of the research questions. A strength of IPA in this regard is that it favours the use of questions that invite the participant to describe their experience, rather than establish facts (Smith et al, 2009). In IPA, researchers examine the use of language and non-verbal expressions with a view that they are presently assembled expressions of inferences about their perception, values, and feelings. Because we do not believe there is a straightforward correspondence between what is said and what happened we permit ourselves to interpret the accounts. Minimal-hermeneutic realists argue that a particular interpretation's value is judged by the extent to which the interpretation proves to be a closing that is practically useful out in the world (Bernstein, 1983; Caputo, 2018.)

Analytic Strategy

The recorded interview was transcribed by me in order that I could immerse myself in the content and process of the interview and record verbal and non-verbal communication as accurately as possible. Initial notes and emergent themes were developed in the margin of a paper print out of each of the transcripts – each participant's case was studied on its own in order that the peculiarities of each were allowed to be analysed. An IPA analysis typically progresses over six overlapping (rather than serial and linear) stages which I reproduce here from Smith et al (2009).

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Initial noting
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes
5. Moving to the next case
6. Looking for patterns across cases
7. Writing up

IPA analysis requires immersion in the text of the interview transcript – repeated and progressively closer reading allows for greater access to the participant's worldview, the meanings and valuations that they use to see, understand and, reportedly, act in the world. The aim is for as coherent and complete a reading as possible (whilst, following from its phenomenological ontology, accepting that no definitive reading is possible). IPA researchers are influenced by the hermeneutic positions of Ricouer and Gadamer (Smith et al, 2009) – that interpretation involves a creative dialectic between reader and text in order to gain greater access to the author's meaning. One may reasonably ask why this is necessary – that surely the content of the transcript contains the required material? Ricouer was sceptical that an author's original intention is recoverable through text, which he considers to be a sedimented layer of symbols which may disclose multiple possible meanings. These can only be inferred- as the ambiguous symbol referring to the inner (never accessible) experience of the author is all that we have to go on (Ricouer, 1974).

Ricouer believed that interpretation of texts is a careful dialectic of suspicion – a critical questioning of the kinds of biases, evasion and inconsistency that could be motivating the author leading us to question whether there are unintended, or hidden latent meanings of a text; and of faith – a willingness to bracket critical assumptions and be ready to hear, understand and believe what is being said (Ricouer, 1970). I, as a being in my own context, am separated by an unbridgeable gulf; what Ricouer would argue for would be the use of my own life as an imaginative and reflective living person, using what shared background I have with the author to try to "enter the world that the text displays and to explore the possibilities this world opens up for… [me]" (Zimmerman, 2015:66). The English scholar Owen Barfield argues that literalism in language interpretation implies manifestly the absurd figure of a speaker without embodiment in history and place. He proposes a similar bridging from the self to the author as Ricouer, through an imaginative participation in the living world of the author opened by key expressive devices – such as metaphor or other figurative language. It is through this access that other ambiguous words and phrases, or those that were first believed straightforward, can be seen in a new light, as a symbol of an inner experience (Barfield, 2013). Such referencing across a text establishes a dialectic between part and whole, referred by hermeneutic theorists as the "hermeneutic circle":

> "...we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the

readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole" (Taylor, 1985:18).

This required me to make as complete and inclusive analysis as possible and behoved me to engage with the reconstruction as a text, potentially to go beyond what was explicitly said. On many occasions participants said things, during parts of the transcribed interview, that meant something to me as I read them, and they took on significance when the whole was analysed together, something that a participant cannot do with their speech. Was this valid? Hans Georg Gadamer (1985) argued that interpretation is always a reconstruction – a "fusion of horizons" of the reader and author and that one's pre-understandings are an initial part of access to a text. Indeed – the research interview itself is an encounter in which the experience of the participant is recreated through the researcher's engagement (Murray and Holmes, 2014). But here a minimal-hermeneutic epistemology and ethics can be of use – if we are aware that this is the extent of our engagement with the participant, we must critically engage with biases (knowing that they can never be expunged) and use them dialectically with the text for the sake of greater access to the experience (Gadamer, 1985). Reflexive engagement was required throughout the research to attempt to find and reflect upon interpretations I made of the text and to critically ask myself whether they were justified by the text or whether they arise from other sources. In the write up stage I made inferences explicit and provided them with supporting evidence from the text in order that the reader could judge whether they were under-determined by the data or not. Kvale argues that the interview, as a linguistically co-constructed exercise that taps meaning rather than correspondence to reality, interpretation must make its own case for validity on the basis of how, through rigour and accountability, the work increases access to worthwhile knowledge that can clarify and advance theoretical understanding (Kvale, 1989).

In light of this, in phase 2, I noted what was being said in a more straightforward expression of objects of concern and experiential claims (Larkin et al, 2006), while idiosyncratic uses of language – more ambiguous and figurative language, non sequiturs and contradictions (and other signs that suggest how are ideas are being communicated) were noted and beginning attempts to interpret them were begun.

Themes were generated through a revision of the notations I had made in phase 2, here the hermeneutic circle became more prominent as parts could be taken from their original context and compared or juxtaposed with excerpts from elsewhere in the text (Smith et al, 2009; Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). Parts of the text that confirm or contradict others were checked with each other,

and their understanding sought by the hermeneutic processes described above. Connections between the emergent themes were sought with the view of condensing them into several categories known as “superordinate themes”.

For this task I used the qualitative research software, Nvivo 10, to create tentative clusters of excerpts that appeared to reflect distinct sets of concerns and claims made within the text- the outcome of the 4th phase was a list or table of “superordinate themes” checked rigorously with reading of the text that comprehensively represented the objects of concern and experiential claims of the single transcript. The write up was presented on a theme by theme basis with excerpts used to illustrate the range of participant experiences of the phenomena. The writing process itself became part of the hermeneutic process – excerpts gained in importance for clarifying the sub-theme or theme, individual or collective experience during the write up. On several occasions this led to a probing and re-organisation of a sub-theme for the sake of the work’s coherence as a whole, allowing the reader clearer access to my own account of the participant’s interpretations (Smith et al, 2009; Van Manen, 1997).

Reflexivity

Primarily I am interpreting the verbatim accounts of the interview for the reader. I intend to generate new knowledge, but the existing literature is an inescapable ground upon which this new knowledge must be placed. I cannot unlearn that there are statistically significant correlations between poorly defined early career plans and future NEET status, I cannot avoid interpreting the participant's account in light of this. As Smith and Osborn argue:

> One is trying to get close to the participant's personal world, to take an 'insider's perspective,' but one cannot do this directly or completely. Access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions; indeed, these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity (Smith and Osborn, 2003: 51).

I can be open to the charge of polluting the participant's account, closing doors while forcing open others. IPA suggests that this is inevitable, suggests strategies to sensitise the researcher to what they are doing to a participant's account but also insists upon owning and documenting the researcher's perspective, allowing the reader to interpret the interpretation and consider other arguments that could be made from the findings. This reflects good practice for qualitative research

(Yardley, 2008; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Elliott et al, 1999) but also makes explicit the horizons of the researcher in the interaction and my intentions for the research (Shaw, 2010). To aid the reader in making these judgements, I include a reflexive statement and an example of a worked transcript in the appendix so that the reader may judge the extent to which bias and/or prior knowledge has influenced the analytical procedure. A clear demarcation of findings and discussion in the write up should demonstrate the extent to which I have not brought in psychological findings from the literature into the analysis, the former section should contain unambiguous statements of inference with supporting evidence from the text, the latter section is dedicated to interpreting the analysis in light of existing theory and research.

I shall attempt to summarise my intentions and motivation to engage in this project as an initial exercise in reflexivity. My experience in education (as a member of staff in several schools and a university) has sensitised me to what I interpreted as short-sighted apathy and tendencies for escapism among young people, predominantly young men, within the NEET age bracket, in spite of all the advantages they possess. I felt disappointment when pupils limited their future opportunities through self-defeating behaviour. I found myself torn between thinking of these young people as victims of an education system that fails to teach self-reliance or as shirkers of self-responsibility. As a man, this behaviour initiated an interest in how these young men thought about competition and finding a satisfactory place in society. Looking critically, I am very much a signed up member of the salaried classes and particular narratives around my place being earned by a form of self-abnegation chime with dominant neoliberal narratives around the value of competition that could cast these young men as an inferior other (Davies, 2016). However, as a former sociologist and independent mental health advocate I am aware that my work may perpetuate imbalances and close down an opportunity to learn about the phenomenon. It would behove me to keep the results of this foray into my motivations very plainly in view and in check, and part of this can be maintained with a research journal in which reflexivity is continuously discussed. However, I must not be under the illusion that I can suspend judgement and that my beliefs and prior knowledge have no influence on the participant and their account. The IPA paradigm recommends that researchers:

> ...reflect on how these shape their research inquiries and… aim to engage with them fruitfully for the purpose of understanding. This means taking a questioning and dialectical stance to these fore-understandings and the material they are seeking to understand, recognizing it is an always-unfinished activity (Eatough and Smith, 2017:6).

Validity

Having explored the role of interpretation and the role of the researcher, I shall now address how I have approached the question of rigour in this qualitative inquiry.

Owing to the subjective nature of the data, the act of its representation and curation in the write up and their dependence on the author's interpretative strategy, readers may find phenomenological research and qualitative research more widely open to the charge of "anecdotalism" (Bryman, 1988), and that these studies lack the reassurance given by large sample sizes that allow for the findings of a study to be generalised from sample to the wider population. Qualitative research will never be able to provide a satisfactory equivalent to the assurances that quantitative research can provide, particularly with respect to correlational and factor-analysed models of construct validity that allow researchers and readers a degree of confidence that their representations of psychological phenomena are valid insofar as the scientific community currently conceptualise the phenomena. Nonetheless, and despite the seemingly less assured ground, qualitative research offers an opportunity to approach a phenomenon in a manner where a subject necessarily responds to the researcher with far greater nuance and with greater degrees of freedom. A far richer and greater range of responses to the research question are possible and "...contextualised way[s] of dealings with motives and dispositions, a sense of place and setting" (Bruner, 1983:136) may indicate what is meaningful to persons living in the context beyond the framework established by a researcher aiming to test a specific hypothesis.

Owing to the fact that the present study is the first to look at people living in this particular context, and that NEET research lacks clarity by virtue of the conceptual difficulties I have identified, the study is focussed upon induction and concept formation. Morse and Mitchell identified key dangers during research design, implementation and analysis for such research – where biases can give the researcher a form of "conceptual tunnel vision." The key question for readers is how can they be reassured that what has been written up has been the outcome of a complete and critical reading of the data which included a systematic attempt to eliminate bias? (Morse and Mitcham, 2002).

Morse (2015) has identified a tendency in the qualitative research community to adhere to checklists (such as those produced by Guba and Lincoln, 1989, and Yardley, 2008) from which researchers can assure readers that their qualitative research project is sufficiently

rigorous. Her difficulty with the way these are used is that, firstly, their use fails to clarify the way aims of a study call forth particular strategies rather than others, secondly, that they often fail to tell us how the research has been shaped by adherence to these standards:

> ...we do not know whether and how the use of these strategies, as presently operationalized during inquiry, affects the process of inquiry (Morse, 2015: 1213).

It is with these two criticisms in mind that I shall address the questions of validity.[1]

As discussed in the interview section, the questions that formed the semi-structured interview were drawn up in light of suggestive findings form the literature review- these questions were therefore grounded in relevant work on the research topic yet left open enough to allow the participants to broadly describe their attitudes and experiences pertaining to this in their own way. Coding of responses began with a systematic attempt to map and then cluster the key objects of concern and experiential claims for each participant to maintain focus on their context and personal appraisal of it. Similarities and differences were noted and, what can only be described as, a period of immersion in the entire verbatim content of the data collection stage began. The key steps to eliminating bias were to continually subject hypotheses for proposed clusters across the interviews to critical questioning from the transcripts themselves, through organising extracts via Nvivo 10 and extensive note-making in a research journal. Such questions included – "can there be a deeper relationship between what participant *x* says about the experience of feeling useless (for example) compared with what participant *y* says about it?" "Is this really about uselessness or something else?" "What does participant *x's* claims about loneliness mean in the light of what he said about this other phenomenon? Are they related?" This kind of questioning allowed deeper hermeneutic access into the material provided by participants which would provide tentative answers to other questions. The coding itself was not limited to what was sought in the questions, for example, what eventually became the subordinate theme **Social Alienation**- where participants describe their long-standing perceptions of being made to feel like outcasts (well before having to consider their occupational future) were generated entirely by a saturation of spontaneous reports (scattered throughout the interview across the sample) about their relationship to others. Ultimately the process led to hypothesis testing that centred on good-ness of fit for tentative codes, some of which were not settled until the write up process itself where I, as a researcher, was engaged in a new relationship with the data. Thus immersion, critical

1 My main effort towards reliability has been to implement a strict theoretical sampling criteria that aims at a homogenous sample of affluent male NEETs by choice from the across the United Kingdom. See **Sample** section.

questioning and bottom-up coding strategies (all recorded and examined in and out of the original context of the verbatim interview accounts) provided a spiral of increased attunement to the data. This process was completed when it was judged that the codes were as complete a rendering of the entire data as possible.

Negative cases were also included, where space allowed, for the sake of undertaking an analysis that represented as complete a reading of the data as possible. Their inclusion within the analysis allowed for the themes and sub-themes to be a product of the differences as well as the similarities in the data.

As a doctoral student at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, I have had the opportunity for peer review throughout the course of the project. Two supervisors have had close contact with interviews and draft analyses during the data collection phases - findings from the pilot and completed phase of data collection were also presented to colleagues and senior academics. Peer review has been key to the refinement of the sampling decisions, my interviewing technique and my coding strategies before the recruitment, data collection and analysis undertaken to produce the present study. In all three pilot interviews and three write ups have been reviewed by four senior academics, each have provided clear critical feedback that has allowed me to view blind spots and assumptions that have stood in the way of allowing participants to describe their experiences fully or clouded the analysis. The analytic strategy of IPA, an imaginative attempt at understanding the world of another, in part, through one's own, runs the risk of researcher "narcissism" (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010) – similarity in a participant's account can foster the belief in sameness, whilst "epistemic violence" (Teo, 2008) is the counter risk whereby differences are othered and considered through a framework of blame or morality. I was appraised of my tendencies to fall into these traps during these peer reviews and I adjusted my interviewing and analytic strategy accordingly. Validity is a historical process (Gadamer, 1985) conditional on a scientific community and its norms for critical examination of my results from those within my field – the eventual status as providing valid knowledge or not...

> "…is conditional not on the subjective self-evidence of the isolated individual but on collective experience, regulated by norms of communication and argumentation" (Bourdieu, 2004: 72).

My desire is to publish the work and enter this conversation with colleagues in counselling psychology and the rest of the NEET research community. To reach this stage my work will

also be read and examined as a condition my entry to the field of counselling psychology and further refined in the light of its examination. I would add to Bourdieu's argument that validity is ultimately conferred on the use that can be made of my findings: do they allow access to the NEET by choice phenomenon for others, can they aid the development of greater conceptual clarity and ultimately provide useful interventions that will assist this group?

Generalisability

The decision to focus upon a relatively small number of cases and the focus on their perceptions and interpretations may lead the reader to question how useful this data could be for the population under study – what is the data and can it be generalised beyond the study? These are wider questions for critical realist and minimal-hermeneutic realist positions – if the focus is on individual interpretations and not direct reality claims then what can be said about the phenomena as the next NEET by choice could have a radically different interpretation?

When participants are describing their context and key events in their life, they are speaking for themselves. However, when asked to address questions they are entering a framework which connects them to a much wider population of individuals – it is my decision to set up a hermeneutic which derives from the research that is already available to us. With these instruments we set up the focus of the lens through which the image can come into view. This image is not the real but an interpretation of the real given for the sake of the research participant's compliance with my procedures. In quantitative research the same measure can be repeated among hundreds to suggest generalisability. Participants spoke within the frame I created allowing me to make a vast number of observations that were capable of being connected through chains of significance high-lighted when I came to read and analyse the transcripts as whole. The themes presented in the next chapter were constructed from a great many of these chains of significance – some of which suggest the relevance of phenomena that the participant's speech merely infers. When these were repeated across the sample these chains of significance, their complexity, the way they connected and their boundaries were suggestive of a form of life. There is variety in the way that these phenomena are perceived and its relation to the whole – yet it is in this variety that the reader can be assured that the concepts "discovered" by this research can be applicable beyond the sample.

Research Design

Sample

My principal efforts for convincing readers of the present study's reliability (the extent to which a study's findings can be assured of being replicable if the procedures are followed) was in the creation of the following sampling method. It is my contention that the reliability of much of the previous research into the NEET condition, cited in the literature review, has been hampered by an over-inclusive sampling strategy. I provide the rationale for my decisions in the following section.

One of the priorities in the design of this research, to avoid the problems identified in the NEET research literature to date, was constructing a set of criteria to find a homogenous sample, where participants shared a broadly similar pathway into the NEET by choice condition. Throughout the literature review concerning risk factors we have found a broad distinction between disadvantaged NEETs and those for whom NEET is the result of a dispositional stance. The literature review has revealed much about the former but very little on the latter and, as I make clear in the reflexivity section, my interest in this topic was initiated by observation of privately educated young people who appeared unable or unwilling to make good of that advantage. In my decision to focus on this disposition I chose to approach this question in two ways. Firstly, following from Maschereini and Ledermaeier (2016) to ask two questions.

1. Are you able to engage in education, employment and training?

2. Are you looking for education, employment or training?

In question 1, participants who are carers, living on state benefits owing to a disability, unable to work owing to Visa or refugee status were excluded, while with question 2, job-seekers

(either short or long-term unemployed people actively seeking an opportunity to leave their NEET condition) were excluded.

Secondly, participants were sought from affluent backgrounds and this was determined by using a common measure of class taken by the occupation of the head income earner of the young person's household. The objection could be raised that this decision represents an arbitrary decision not to hear working class stories or that the decision amounts to something of a retreat from understanding the NEET by choice condition by focussing on a sub-group within the sub-group. I have given considerable thought to these two points and the implications they could have on the impact of this research – at first glance, allowing a more inclusive sampling policy would seem to address these concerns. However, no other sampling criteria appeared better suited and more parsimonious in allowing the research to focus on disposition without the inclusion of many of the other well-studied background factors that correlate with being in the NEET condition (see **Risk Factors** in the **Literature Review**). I do not believe these background factors unimportant, I merely observe, in line with many critical commentators of the NEET research field, that their presence in the same sample as other NEETs diminishes the potential for understanding that can be revealed by studying these groups separately.

> "The usefulness of NEET as a category is… compromised through the ways in which disadvantaged people who may lack the resources to navigate transitions or exercise choice are combined with more privileged young people who are able to exercise a significant degree of choice regarding the ways in which they manage their lives" (Furlong, 2006: 557).

The affluent NEET by choice appears to offer the best lens through which this second group (relatively under-studied relative to NEETs with a background of disadvantage) can be sampled. The existing research into the NEET by choice group undertaken by Salva-Mut et al (2017) and the *hikikomori* researchers have identified that this condition is more pronounced in families who are financially secure, so if I wanted to find a group of NEETs by choice with a greater probability of having homogenous socio-economic conditions, then targeting the affluent group best corresponds to these aims. I do not deny the existence of working class families in which aspiration and the commitment of family resources and esteem to education is as great or exceeds that of affluent families. I could merely find no demographic variable that could succinctly identify them and isolate them from the rest of the working class – whose inclusion may introduce additional variables pertaining to disadvantage (low socio-

economic status has been shown to correlate with lower commitment at school, less possibility or willingness for families to invest time and resources for education, accommodation issues etc) that will remove the focus from disposition. My hope is that these decisions will provide data that will prove useful for future researchers to disaggregate the NEET category and thus aid an increasingly sophisticated understanding of NEETs whether they are advantaged or disadvantaged.

To select for the affluent NEETs by choice, I set membership of groups 1-3 as calculated by the NS-SEC as entry criteria for the sample. These classifications correspond to families where the head income earner works in either: 1. higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations, 2. lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations, 3. intermediate occupations- clerical positions which may offer a relatively high income but over which the work is fairly proscribed, e.g. payroll administrator. These measures broadly correlate with membership of upper, upper middle and lower middle classes (ONS, 2018). This scale is used in the Census and is prominent in international contemporary research into social class (Williams, 2017), allowing for easy comprehension for other researchers who may wish to continue research into this population. These measures have been challenged by recent attempts to re-formulate class in light of the greater diversity and precarity of pathways into employment. Savage (2015) developed a scale that recognised that in the present political-economic environment there was a large constituency for whom cultural and social capital accumulation had become largely separate owing to downward or upward social mobility. However, as the NEETs by choice are typically financially dependent on their household's head income earner, I judged it sufficiently valid to maintain use of the NS-SEC as it provides a culturally neutral manner of introducing the concept of class to participants from which they may, if they choose, elaborate their own subjective experiences of their family's economic and cultural position. The measure is also understandable by laypeople: it can be determined with a three simple questions that the participant can easily answer on the household reference person's behalf for the sake of screening before interview.

To study the disposition of those who are NEETs by choice, it was therefore necessary to determine that participants have not followed the other pathways into becoming NEET: disability, young parenthood, having been a young offender or mental health service user who required detention under the mental health act. Former detainees under the Mental Health Act were excluded as they are likely to have faced challenges to educational and labour marker engagement specific to their complaints, these particular vocational challenges have been researched elsewhere (Borg et al, 2003; Marwaha and Johnson, 2005; Blank et al, 2011).

IPA does not demand a large or representative sample, as an idiographic method it aims to render particular examples of experience intelligible. Smith argues that IPA studies should aim for broadly homogenous samples so that participants discuss different perspectives of the same phenomena, rather than different phenomena (Smith et al, 2009). My large sample for IPA is sensitive to the context of this unstudied group, allowing for a more in-depth look at similarities and differences leading to a more complex analysis that will try to account for possibly contradictory experiences. Nonetheless I took the sixty thousand word limit for the final document into account and decided upon eight participants.

Procedures

Eight young men were recruited, it was necessary for them to fit the classification of NEET (18-24, economically inactive for 6 months or more), from households classified as the 1,2 and 3 from the national statistics socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) and who were available to work and were not looking to do so. My recruitment strategy was to seek participants via snowball sampling using contacts made on anonymous internet forums; those specialising in computer games and sports, as well as those dedicated to discussions on mental health were targeted. My email address was left in these posts so that I could be contacted privately by British users who wished to take part. The content of the adverts was the same, outlining the aims of the study, criteria for inclusion and my email address. The presentation of the flyer and advert as well as the wording were redrafted in the light of comments made by a group of people in this cohort to emphasise what was being asked of potential participants (see an example in **Appendix A**). A fee of £10 was offered to show appreciation for the time taken to answer my questions. When a participant contacted me I arranged a time for them to take part in a brief screening interview – here the inclusion and exclusion criteria were explained and participants were asked whether they had met the criteria, they will also have the opportunity to ask any questions they may have about the research. During this conversation I observed their ability to respond to open questions, their lack of defensiveness over factual questions and willingness to openly describe their subjective experience; I sensitively informed participants, during the call whether, for these reasons, I believed that they may not be suitable candidate for a long qualitative interview. At the conclusion of the call, if satisfied that the caller met the criteria and would be suitable for the interview, and the participant was still happy to go ahead, we arranged a mutually convenient time and place to conduct the interview.

Interview spaces were found across the England and Scotland by contacting local Society of Existential Analysis colleagues and requesting the use of their therapy rooms, maintaining participant confidentiality throughout. In some instances hired office spaces were used when no local therapy rooms could be procured in this fashion. Interviews were recorded on a digital dictaphone pending transcription. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes, the recordings were transcribed and submitted to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Other demographic data were also collected to help provide me with biographical information for reference. Participants were asked for a measure of the duration of their time in the NEET condition, their ethnic background and their qualifications and employment history.

At this meeting participants were given a participant information letter (**Appendix B**) and a form for them to sign in order to demonstrate they have understood the aims and of the study and my agreements concerning confidentiality and have given informed consent (**Appendix C**). At this point the fee of £10 was given and the interview initiated. After the completion of the interview the participant was given a debriefing letter which provided contact details for local NHS and low cost therapy services and helplines, for the participant's reference should they have wished to seek support for any of the issues raised (**Appendix D**).

The Interview

The responses to the analytical questions were of central importance to the research. A minimal hermeneutic realist position rejects the idea of the researcher having an ability to gain unadulterated access to the participant's inner world. Kvale (1994) makes a similar point when he argues that research questions will always have an influence on the research findings. We need to be explicit about the questions and the decisions for including them so that the reader can assess the validity of the findings – their suitability for the research question, in this case, understanding the male NEETs by choice. The criterion for this judgement – according to Kvale- is do these questions yield new and worthwhile knowledge? I have tried to show in the literature review that there are considerable gaps in our knowledge of this particular cohort's values and dispositions towards the world of work. The topics for the interview were chosen to attempt to elucidate upon these gaps. Questions derived from these areas were to form the initial structure of the interview. The initial interview was delivered during a pilot study, which was analysed and written up using IPA methodology. Much of the pilot interview remained in the final set of questions, the key change was to make the question

concerning social class more explicit – as the pilot study participant's stories appeared to contain many implicit class-based assumptions which I failed to grasp during the interview proper.

- The day-to-day experiences of being NEET
- Attitudes concerning school and work
- How being a man helped or hindered their transition into adulthood.
- How has being a member of their social class helped or hindered their transition into adulthood.
- Describe how NEET by choice affects or has been influenced by relationships, principally with family but also peers and employers.
- Attitudes concerning future economic prospects and belongingness.

IPA, like other phenomenological methods, requires an interview style that asks open-ended questions and treats the participant as the experiential expert that the interviewer seeks to understand. A semi-structured interview is favourable to this kind of inductive enquiry as the interview remains focused on the domain of the research question whilst allowing space for the participant to answer in their own way – potentially extending the research domain into unexpected areas. Each participant was therefore asked the same questions in the same order, although individual probing questions were asked to seek clarification of the account being developed. This approach, I believe, allowed me to be able to gather, coherently and as much as possible, the unique qualities of the participant's experience in context. For instance, it was the case that some participants had described their experiences of peer relationships and barely mentioned their family. A tension here would arise within an unstructured interview: to whom do I owe fidelity, the participant's way of choosing to answer the question – in which case the interview will move on, or fidelity to the phenomena under investigation – in which the case some sort of probing would be required to uncover how a participant chose to answer in this way. Interviewing is not a dialogue, it is a structured conversation contracted around the researcher's needs and the participant's consent (Kvale, 2006). Therefore, as part of each briefing I told the participant: "I may ask you to clarify the way you have chosen to answer my questions," and should an event like the one above arise I would respond "I notice that you have spoken a great deal about your peers and not your family, how do you experience these relationships?" If participants feel overly challenged by the interview they have already been told that they may withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence and will be given contact details of relevant local services if they wish to talk further about distressing experiences.

Ethical Issues

In order to ensure the safety of the participants I anonymised all data at the transcription stage and altered any information that may identify individuals in the write up. All audio recordings were deleted after the interviews had been transcribed. Transcripts and documents presented in the write up were numbered and the key to this numbering was saved as an encrypted file. These protocols were made explicit from the beginning and participants were asked to declare whether they were satisfied to proceed on such a basis. Participants were asked to sign a consent form, part of which stated their right to withdraw from the study at any time. It was conceivable that the interview could distress the participants. It would have been therefore necessary to assure the participants of the voluntary basis of their contribution to the study and that they were safe to withdraw throughout my engagement with them. A payment of £10 was be given at the beginning of the interview to avoid the possibility of participants continuing the interview for the sake of the payment, even if distressed. The fee was included in the recruitment strategy after a considerable lack of interest in the initial online phase (out of several hundred views on a UK NEET forum not one response was generated). The group of 18-24 year olds consulted about the advertising were questioned and their suggestion of that remuneration would make the internet post more eye-catching and increase engagement was accepted, the proposal was taken to the ethics board and added to the recruitment strategy.

I made available crisis contacts and contacts for local organisations that offer assistance or counselling for young people's mental health, should the participant have felt affected by the memory of events raised by the interview. I also aimed to minimise the likelihood of this outcome by providing a brief list of topics we would discuss during the screening telephone interview mentioned above, and asked whether participants are happy to discuss such topics, and whether they might affect their emotional well-being (including the possibility of triggering suicidal ideation or self-harm) to determine whether they wish to proceed on this basis at the conclusion of the call. Participants were informed of their right to postpone or terminate the interview should they become distressed. A debriefing letter outlining the aims of study and the methodology in which they have participated was given after the interview. All documentation included the contact details of the university and supervisors should the participants have wished to verify any of the claims made in the documentation or communicate any concerns regarding my conduct.

Findings

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings of the research. For a more detailed discussion of the results, how they might be understood in the light of previous research and related literature, and a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this study, refer to the Discussion chapter. As explained in the Methods and Methodology chapter, the method used in this qualitative study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. These findings relate to the eight male NEETs -by-choice (those who described themselves as able to work and study but currently not seeking a position in the workforce or in education) from NS-SEC scales 1-3 (corresponding to those in the lower-middle to potentially the upper class). The analysis posited 6 superordinate themes.

Table of themes

1. Working expectations	1.1- The Career Agenda 1.2- Defensive Career Planning 1.3- Fatalism 1.4- Failing to Make Them Proud 1.5- Men not at Work
2. Incapabilities	2.1- Social Incapability 2.2- Practical Incapability
3. Assisted Living	3.1- Independence the Prize 3.2- Dependent Adulthood 3.3- 'Me, myself and I'
4. Alienation	4.1- Social Alienation 4.2- Normative Alienation
5. Fragmented Intentionality	5.1- Pulling Myself Together 5.2- Losing the Will

6. The NEET Lifestyle: Sovereignty and Stasis	6.1- Sovereignty 6.2- Lack of Progress 6.3- 'Just Existing' 6.4- Absorption

Presentation of Themes

What follows is a presentation of each of the themes, patterns of objects of concern and experiential claims made by the eight participants in their specific social and existential contexts. These themes are my attempt to render what is collective about these specific claims and perceptions in the male NEETs by choice in the sample, as well as the important differences that develop the theme[2].

1. Working Expectations

Participants report, around the time of having reached the NEET age bracket, an increased awareness of classed and gendered expectations (from educational institutions, society and family) for having a self-led project that will lead them to become responsible men of distinction. In their own individual ways, participants look within and find only a lack of the ingredients that might give them a sign that this transition is possible. The leap of faith that others make in order to manage this transition feels too risky. Fundamentally it is seen as giving oneself over to the Other's demands and the participants feel unready or unwilling to do so. The participants are aware that they are not meeting these expectations, this absence of a project becomes central in the way they imagine are seen by family and wider society – as in some way defective men and failing sons (notions to which the participants resist or acquiesce in their own self-definitions.)

The career agenda details the participants ideas about what a career might demand of them and how they feel that they fall short of the active future-orientation, commitment and management of the uncertain that they imagine is required. **Defensive career planning** contains reflections on how participants fear the modern workplace and how they might avoid its worst vicissitudes. Fearing the responsibility of self-creation whilst lacking the key ingredients, in the **Fatalism** section, participants details the ways they act and hope to proceed in the EET world without agency. The

2 For instance, in the **Incapability** section, many participants report a perception of both social and practical incapability, but several report an ease with one or the other and this provides them with a very different set of possibilities, hopes and aspirations.

final two themes (**Failing to make them proud, Men not at work**) deal with the participants experiences (real and imagined) of being seen and dealt with as young affluent men who have nothing to satisfy the Other's expectations of the participants having an EET project. Participants describe their feelings about these interactions and the various defensive moves or re-evaluations of the self that have taken place.

1.1 The career agenda

In their discussion concerning attitudes to work and employment, participants describe what it might mean for them to have a career. In these accounts, the career is seen as a future-orientation and a commitment to an occupational task that becomes life-defining. It requires the subject who is considering this undertaking to undergo a transformation, one which requires actively giving oneself to a set of demands, with which, for a variety of reasons, the participants feel unable or unwilling to engage.

In the interviews I conducted, a career was given many names: "a big thing" (Oliver and Robbie), "what I want to do with my life" (Colin and Aaron) and "aspiration" (Alfie). Like Robbie's "pursuit in life that brings me some sense of purpose" these statements reflect a view that being in a particular career confers a mature adult identity that becomes tied to the implementation of this occupational activity.

> I know I'm supposed to contribute to society- quote/unquote supposed to but I just lack that feeling. I lack a lot of feelings that normal people have and that is one of them. I think culture... people... they're... the question was always as a kid [in a mimicking grown up voice] "what do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want to be when you grow up?"... And... your your identity and self-worth is supposed to be linked to what your contribution, your labour and I don't really *see* that. I mean I do see it but I don't let it get me down. I mean its really hard to get started...(Alfie, 125).

Alfie's comments tie together observations made by the other participants. Firstly, a sense that a career is about following a track that is set out by others - "culture… people..." those with a stake in the answer to the question of "what you want to be when you grow up." Arriving at the chosen career confers recognition and status that positions you in society in a particular place from which others can draw conclusions about your contribution – and in turn these may be internalised. This question about the sort of project the participants are going to embark upon (what sort of person

will you end up as?) – when engaged with clear-sightedly, is often met with a rather urgent program of self-transformation.

> ...right now, I'm expected to be in education or work, I need to find the way back into it. It's really uncomfortable to do this, leaving this position would be leaving my comfort zone. If there were no expectations I would happily do what I'm doing now, other people have different comfort zones, mine is smaller because I was socialised different. Perhaps I would have reacted to situations in a more appropriate...[way,] having a job or being in education would have been inside of my comfort zone. I would have to make a radical change… (Aaron, 276).

We will discuss Aaron's and other's lack of a sense of capability and the way this impairs their ability to meet their goals in the **Incapabilities** section. This quotation describes the challenge the career agenda presents to the interviewee. The future image offered by a career relies upon a radical transformation today – of one's productivity, life planning and tackling what feels like fundamental inadequacies. It appeared to me that the interviewees felt this as something of a reverse Faustian pact: worldly rewards will be yours tomorrow if you sacrifice your sovereignty today.

> What I'm not going to do is, is sort of suffer in the hope of, in twenty years of it paying off or whatever in the form of, whatever, a family a house or um... some sort of career goal, that's not going to happen (Robbie, 488).

Robbie is the most vociferous critic of the career agenda and gives voice to a fear that is present in the rest of the sample, that this transformation, often of seemingly foundational inadequacies, offers no guarantee of reward. It becomes less of a pact and more a question of *risk.* Faust gains his boon right away, his suffering is deferred. But to leave a comfortable position for merely the *increased probability* of reward – that increase depending on their own shaky sense of what is achievable, has led, in most instances to either a rejection of the goal of gaining a career, or a rejection of the active self-development required, a theme I develop in the section on **Fatalism.**

Several participants speak of a moment where they feel suddenly confronted with the expectation that they ought to "want to be something." This is described as a pivotal difficulty for those in the sample who lack an idea of an occupational goal but have not rejected the idea of work completely.

> [My parents] don't always think small, they are like, "oh, what if you did this?! That's like some crazy big job!" I think they're definitely trying to fire me up. They're definitely trying to get me excited and try to get me like "yeah! I want to be, I want to be this! I want to be a landscaper and do all this crazy stuff!" Just like, you know I feel like if I get my hopes up too much then I will get shot down but they're very up, they're going like "yeah! Go on! Just do it, get it done!" (Oliver, 432).

For Oliver, these demands, this enthusiastic chivvying along are felt as intrusive, the inculcation of a desire that at the time feels bold and outlandish. Signing up to this will bring demands for a commitment to exposing himself to tasks and environments which make him feel incapable. Implied in these quotations is a hesitancy about a developmental milestone which requires taking ownership and responsibility for something and seeing it through on one's own initiative. Oliver suggests that there is an emotional component to this – an enthusiasm that might allow one to pursue the course of action in spite of anxiety and set-backs, something which feels dangerous or hubristic in his current demoralised state. Colin reports that the lack of this accomplishment – the active taking up of a commitment to an occupational future, has led to him feeling alienated from a sense of progression in life:

> It feels like I'm at the end of my life. Up until now I've been just getting on with it really, with school and college, but I was doing something. I was just going through the motions... I went through college- now it feels as though there's no clear thing to work towards. Because, like, when you're in school, you're working to go to college, do well in your exams and that. In college you're working towards getting a job or go to uni or something. And I just hit a dead end after that… It's just stress though, innit, I mean, I don't know where I want to go, no-one else is going to- I'm not being spoon-fed, it's on me (Colin, 73).

A lack of agency is a core component of Colin's suffering, making him feel that he has wasted the three years of his time as a NEET. Try as he might he cannot find the answer to the question "what do you want to do with your life?" He reports distress at the continued presence of this question, felt as a demand (in those moments when he cannot absorb himself in other activities) and the absence of the ingredients with which to attempt an answer.

Alfie's assessment of his university career also illustrates the qualitative difference in the demands between doing well in a school subject and giving oneself to an occupational future – as well as reflection of a previous strategy running out of road:

> ...engineering was like my last, the last thing I was good at, and I was good at it in college but transitioning into university was a different environment and I just didn't have the discipline or the want or the passion for civil engineering and I failed my first year. I gave it a second bash but also failed that, like I didn't even show up to the exams, because I was just so, like hopeless and struggling... (Alfie, 10).

The "discipline or the want or the passion for [x]" is a clear statement of what is at stake when the participants begin to feel that they are being expected to "want to be something." Personal agency, a kind of enthusiasm and a commitment to getting to the goal have been a welcome addition to Alfie's life of late as he reports on his lately discovered desire to train become a British Sign Language Interpreter.

> I think I could muddle through, I could eventually get my dream job, I'm still, hoping out for that... The path to the future is quite over grown, quite obscured, there are little dots of path about the place in the middle of the forest but I'm still finding my way through it (Alfie, 236).

For Alfie, after years of stasis and considerable feelings of inadequacy, he reports a sense of direction, hope and a willingness to face the risks entailed in reaching this positive future image.

Among other participants, 'the career agenda' is seen as a set of attachments to a limited and ideological image of a future self that unnecessarily binds the individual. Participants Robbie and Ben report contact with working people and their assessment of the worthiness of career-mindedness and the happiness of the people involved has influenced their own rejection of this idea.

> I've got multiple friends... like mechanical engineers or accountants um, so... some of them now have several kids, they have a wife and um some, you can tell, they are not exactly cheery chappies. They've a lot of debts they're living with after buying a house for 350, 400 grand house and earning 40 grand a year and still, you're in a sense indebted, especially when you have kids. Then you're in this process where you have to keep on the train, there's no getting off so that is in itself very stressful... that definitely feeds back and in some ways reinforces my belief that the stress of these things potentially outweighs the rewards, as they stand (Robbie, 202).

From Robbie's perspective, to have "made all the right steps" entails the loss of one's sovereignty and to then end up trapped is a risk that is not worth taking, particularly from his position of being protected from the vicissitudes of having to earn his own subsistence through his family's wealth. Robbie's belief that work, schooling or doing anything following another's schedule is "inherently stressful" is supported by his perception of the misery of those who represent the end-product, the assorted career-people in his life. The increased responsibility of "taking the right steps" amounts to a finger trap to him it involves giving up freedom that others are too willing to sacrifice for the sake of a predictable working life. Of course, these accounts touch on more than attitudes towards careers. They are profoundly connected to questions of both economic and emotional dependence, and attitudes about autonomy, which I discuss in the **Assisted Living** section**).**

1.2 Defensive Career Planning

All but one of the participants reported negative beliefs about the world of work in general and only two participants were able to provide positive specific future images of a fulfilling working life for themselves. The world of work is seen as place where one's vulnerabilities will be exposed. These imaginings are connected by a demand from others for something that the participants believe that they lack or that they are not ready to offer at this moment in time. In his interview, Simon described himself as suffering from depression and a feeling of being unacceptable to others throughout his secondary school life. His experiences and his perception of himself have been long-standing, and this has led him to engage in what I term, defensive career planning.

> [On choosing an apprenticeship after leaving sixth form college]... Maybe I felt like it was a good transition between education and work, I don't think I wanted to shift straight into work entirely because if I was getting paid a proper wage there would be much higher expectations of me and less room for failure (Simon, 81).

Defensive career planning, on the basis of the participants' belief about their **Incapabilities**, is represented in six of the participants' accounts which offers something of a rebuke to the idea that "the world is your oyster." To these participants, career planning is less about choice and aspiration and more to do with finding the least painful way to subsist. Both Ben and Colin

who claim extreme social and practical inadequacy have ruled out whole occupational sectors in order to avoid working in close proximity to others. Colin in particular seems stuck in imagining an occupation for himself that balances prestige with a lack of public exposure.

> I have thought about going to uni but I'm not really sure what I'm going to do. There's so much that I could potentially do, I tried thinking about ruling out those things that I think are impossible for me to do. Anything involving human communication, or anything where I'd have a lot of people relying on me to do summat very well and not fuck it up. I think I would just completely fucking crumble under pressure (Colin, 201).

A fear of failure and a fear of getting trapped into positions with which the participants believe they cannot cope comes from very general images of the modern workplace in the knowledge economy. It is a place to which, from their current position, they feel incapable of belonging.

1.3 Fatalism

The majority of the sample report either a fatalistic approach to their employment, education and training experiences or a belief that fate will somehow militate to end their time in the NEET condition in the future. Simon reports that his university failed to provide him with an adequate teaching experience on his Game Design BA undergraduate course, sending inexperienced teachers and replacing lectures with online tutorials at a time when the university was reportedly being restructured.

> It felt like a joke. I felt like I was basically paying for something I could have gotten online for free. The degrees in that field don't hold a lot of weight from what I know so I would have at least wanted to be getting a quality teaching experience.
>
> I: I hear you. Was it part of your plan to have a career in this field?
>
> At the time, yes, although my desire was soured a bit due to the poor teaching experience I had. When it came time for me to look for work I would have been happy with a standard office job (Simon, 44).

“Soured a bit” appears an understatement, considering that later in the interview he reports that this setback spelled the end of this aspiration. Comparing this statement to those made by Alfie before and after his attachment to the idea of a career as a BSL Interpreter, Simon’s

account lacks the agentic commitment to take up the goal for himself: the university's failure left him with no option but to lower his sights. The university's failure is not described as catastrophic, but as something to adjust to – his new plan was to find an office job, a structure rather than a purpose, into which to insert himself.

That a change in the economic conditions that underpin their dependency could force the NEETs into the labour market is a belief held by half of the sample,

> In the future, I think like eventually, something will happen, it ain't going to go on exactly as it is, something is going to fall into place somehow by then, I'll get some kind of job probably. Even if it's just wasting away in like a supermarket, it's probably how it would work. I think that's how it would happen eventually (Colin, 266).

The economic conditions underpinning their dependency are very different, but the participants share a belief that their subsistence may require an unhappy engagement with the demands of the working world that they are holding out against. Something else is also closed down by this possible scenario, the ability to remain in unproductive time. This will be explored in greater depth in **The NEET Lifestyle** section, but for at least some of the participants, the loss of potentiality that is suggested by this stage in their life is not altogether unwelcome.

> I am worried that I will be in a harmful position, if I'm not able to force myself to become independent. I think, um, definitely the shyness has definitely increased, I was breaking out of my shell before uni and everything has been going downhill since then. I worry about that carrying on and then I will be in a very tight spot financially for the future. This is why I think I probably will get out of this situation, there's going to be a point where I'm just going to be pushed into stopping being a NEET basically (Aaron, 308).

What Aaron voices particularly well is that the NEET period is seen to contain dangers that the lack of structure entails. The extracts from interviews that I have presented and discussed above show how my interviewees, who perceive themselves as lacking the capabilities or capital to be able to launch and pilot themselves confidently in the manner the career agenda requires, nurture a hope for the future where they may parachute among others who will not demand too much from them. Fatalism allows the participants to avoid the anxiety of being a subject by being an object to which that career events happen to attach.

1.4 Failing to make them proud

Participants feel as though their decision to be NEET by choice is depriving the family from the shared glory of the participants attaining a particular level of prestige in their EET endeavours. This generates a range of responses: distancing from family relationships, deception and/or interpellation of imagined sleights against one's moral fibre. Oliver reports feeling the weight of his parents expectation upon him given that he appears to have inherited his architect great-grandfather's artistic gifts.

> There was definitely a huge thing where... my... great-grandfather was an architect so, you know, my family was always like: "Ooh! Maybe you're going to be an architect like him!" and stuff like that. So that was definitely something they always hoped for me because that would be really nice, that would be great if you just, you know followed in his footsteps and stuff. Because I had this ability with drawing. So that was definitely like a big expectation just doing something big like that… I appreciate that aspect but, um, yeah. I don't want to go crazy for it because I don't expect much anymore (Oliver, 425).

Like Oliver, four of the participants report a feeling that their choices are being evaluated against an ideal of male achievement in relation to a prestigious calling, something they could be but are failing to become. Oliver's sense of having come to a halt in his life is disrupted by the family's mooting of an ambitious long term project that feels far beyond his present sense of capability. However, with no news of an alternative project he feels problematised and feels the need to put up boundaries against his parents' scrutiny.

> I kind of just keep to myself a lot more. You know, I don't want to, I don't always open up to them and I don't talk to them about what is happening and because of, you know, the discussion about jobs, it's just kind of like, that's... conversation about them just makes me uncomfortable, so it's caused a bit more of a divide so it's like I just don't want to hang around with them for too long because "oh! What if they ask me about this?", that's going to freak me out because I've not got too much going on (Oliver, 409).

Impression management and distancing from his parents has been a strategy that Oliver has used for some time:

> ...as I got into being a teenager I started to feel a bit more, you know worried about myself and the way I acted, I, I like I felt like, you know, I didn't want to tell them things because I felt like, it might not be interesting to them. So I stopped talking to them as much… And, you know, since a young age my big sister was quite, you know, a bit bad and she got into trouble. So my whole kind of thing was always, "Oh I'm going to be good, I'm going to stay out of trouble, you know, I don't want to cause any issues so I'm just going to step away and I'm going to be good." But I feel that this has led to me distancing myself too much. Like, I don't want to bother them at all and that leads to me not being there (Oliver, 396).

Oliver reports a tendency not to "want to bother them at all" and "not cause any issues" in order to meet the parents' perceived needs for a quiet life. He describes a project to become a good son and to hide his growing sense of self-consciousness and unease. Today, this strategy is believed to have an immediate cost to Oliver- an unwanted reading of his moral fibre regarding his desire to find work in the face of a lack of job-hunting news...

> Sometimes you do sometimes get a little pressure like "why don't you do anything, why don't you try?" Um, and there is a place in the family where it does, hey also seem to be on that, kind of like "are you even trying?" Like... a lot of the time people think I'm, I'm, I'm lazy because I, because I'm not, like, I'm not working and I'm not, like, pushing really hard to like get a good job. It feels like I've been disrespected, it just makes me feel, you know, it makes me feel worse about the situation and getting a job, it's just kind of like "oh well, no, I'm not lazy, I am trying, I do want to do this." But then of course it plants the seed of doubt, maybe I am just being lazy and procrastinating and not even trying. Even though, you know, I, I feel like I am, to some degree, I can see where they come from sometimes where it is like, it doesn't feel like you're trying (Oliver, 444).

Here Oliver reports a mixture of doubts and indignation to this kind of attention from his family. It seems as though he has a very different view on what constitutes "trying" - as seen in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section, Oliver reports that he currently hopes to marshal his resources to care for himself and not become too despairing and to start applying for work again. Owing to the distance he keeps from his parents, this work is not seen, only the lack of job-hunting news is. This work is delegitimised and the lack of effort in the job market (which has led to this despair) becomes foregrounded in his own evaluation of his time.

For Aaron, he fears that his decision to drop out of university will be seen as perpetrating an intergenerational injustice – that he failed to make use of the advantages given to him by the sweat of his father's brow (a minicab driver who set up his own firm).

> It's hard to imagine telling him [his father, who doesn't know that he is no longer enrolled in university], he tells me that he came to this country so that I could have a better future, he works really hard, he constantly tells me this, he does crazy shifts and crazy times. He expects... or he expected me to do better (Aaron, 200).

Once again, Aaron reports feeling in the spotlight to perform for a particular set of expectations without room for failure. He describes, with regret, that his response to the failure to meet these expectations was to lie to his family and friends about attending university even after he was dis-enrolled.

> My younger sister is starting university next year and she's always asking me questions about university life and I just lie. My friends also think I attend university. I'm lying to everyone and I should feel like shit, but I've been doing this for over a year now and I just feel numb about it (Aaron, 381).

Like Oliver, in order to meet expectations of the role in which he has been placed he has to lie and live with internal moral condemnation. Aaron had been pretending to visit university for over one year at the time we spoke. As seen in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section, he has thought about suicide as a way out of the impasse if he is unable to find a way back into the EET world. He expresses a wish to find an independent space, away from his mistakes and his parents' expectations, to start again and begin to find out who he wishes to become. His plan to do so, however, requires him to throw himself back onto the expectations of a new set of others and force down his feelings of anxiety while he does so.

> I felt really uncomfortable, being forced into these situations [attending job interviews, interacting with relatives at a wedding], but I just did what I was expected to do, behaved how I was expected to behave. So right now, I'm expected to be in education or work, I need to find the way back into it. It's really uncomfortable to do this, leaving this position would be leaving my comfort zone… (Aaron, 275).

Aaron does not express, during the interview, any other possibility with The Other than to force himself to fit their expectations, withdraw from them completely or die.

Participants are aware that they are falling short of family expectations for their EET activity which increases their sense of estrangement from their parents. As demonstrated in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section, most of the participants experience themselves as knowing how to use time responsibility whilst also feeling that their ability to act in this way in practice is compromised through an ambiguous attachment to the outcome and the discomfort of working towards it. These factors are generally not well articulated and not shared with family members (either through deception or avoidance of the topic,) although some family members seem more amenable to these ideas than others. Those with family members who are less amenable experience alarm as they fail to find the prestigious son with a future commitment that they are looking for. Relationships are felt to be strained as these participants experience scrutiny over their commitment and moral fibre, the lack of these factors and a sense of intergenerational injustice makes these participants feel considerable shame.

1.5 Men not at work

Participants report beliefs that the NEET condition is made worse on account of expectations and attitudes towards men and employment. Among nearly all of the participants there is a perception that as men they are held to a higher standard viz. accomplishments, motivation and activity.

> ...society really doesn't appreciate people like me. We're often referred to as man-children and... I guess, men are expected to be competent and driven and engaged in life, striving for success... If we don't fit that image we are pretty much considered man-children (Edward, 281).

These are common views throughout the sample: firstly, that their dispositions toward the world of work fall short of masculine norms; secondly, their reliance on support (or needing support) is more stigmatised because of a cultural norm. There are no accounts of direct gender policing or direct gender socialisation from others – this belief, rather, appears gleaned from observations of the world outside.

> The difference with men and women is actual social things, I feel like it would be easy for a female to, like, be in a relationship with someone than a male. Entertainment and

> social media and all that just says that "women are the pinnacle" and all that and that men are always left to the side. I don't really resent it, I don't really care but... I think women have something we don't that makes them more in demand (Ben, 258).

Ben is describing how he feels being a man has hindered his working life. The comments make sense in light of the ostracism he reportedly experienced earlier in his life and the adoption of an outcast role he recounts in the **Alienation** section. As a male, it appears he feels less socially desirable, that less time and understanding is afforded to men in general – making him, specifically more rejectable. Many of the sample report this view, that females are more likely to be seen as socially desirable, approachable and social – and receive on average more compassion and understanding. Oliver suggests that this may be a factor in his inability to gain access to employment in the service sector. Robbie has more of a natural experiment in his family, he has a younger sister who has moved out of home and works as an estate agent. Though reportedly happy for her success he reports that the possibility of her one day deciding to turn her back on the working world, like he has, would be appraised differently by his father.

> So nowadays its certainly easier to be a female, there's a lot more compassion extended towards females, they're not expected to be the ones necessarily that get the job – that's probably a cultural hang up but, it's still there that women should be protected a bit more… the man had to go and find the job and find a woman to bear his children, so that attitude has definitely, at least not on the surface, is ingrained in my dad to some extent and it definitely influences how he interacts with me. I think it would be a lot easier for my sister to be completely NEET um, than it is for me, although it isn't too bad for me (Robbie, 350).

Robbie suspects that his NEET condition irks his father and that if he and his sister's circumstances were reversed, then all would be well. His sister could call upon family compassion less controversially, this is tied with ideas of reproduction and who should be the one in heterosexual couplings to be out there, finding work for a family.

As with the family expectation several of the participants suggest that this is not necessarily something entirely external that they feel is illegitimate, participants report some of these attitudes with respect to themselves

> I guess if there was any gender guilt, I felt bad that... I wasn't contributing to human knowledge since there were many great men in the past who did… (Edward, 226).

Edward's suggestion that he is not contributing to human knowledge is odd given his reported feelings towards studying, and human society more generally described in the **Alienation** section. Yet, like others in the sample, there is a part of him that feels like he has let himself down because he has not been able to reach the apex of achievement like other men.

The participants report a belief that they are stigmatised as men in the NEET situation as they are falling short of an expectation, held within their families and the wider society- that they should be independently out in the world and generating wealth so that people can depend on them. The lack of this independently manned project that could deliver the participant to this point, is interpreted as a crucial criteria for becoming a mature, self-reliant man. Being an 18 year old or more male does not seem to accord this recognition, instead they feel stigmatised as 'man-children', non-becoming men. All the participants assert that they may have unmet needs for compassion (and that there is some injustice that their failure, in comparison with females, attracts greater stigma), yet most also buy into the idea of their non-becoming independent and successful and feel guilty and a sense of disappointment that they fall short of this standard.

2 Incapabilities

All of the sample report a belief that one or more long-standing personal deficiencies uphold their situation as NEET by choice. These deficiencies are believed to not only circumscribe their free choice in pursuing employment, education and training (as suggested above)- most in the sample believe that they lack foundational capabilities that would allow them to participate in adult society. These are sometimes framed through the discourse of mental health and, more frequently, reported as a kind of mysterious lack of capability in particular contexts – contexts which the sample deem essential for making progress in life. I have, for the sake of analysis, clustered these concerns into two categories – **social incapability** and **practical incapability**, the former pertains to a lack of social ease and the latter to perceptions of the self as incompetent. Both are are seen as critical obstacles to being able to bear the anxiety of taking strides into the EET world, this lack means they will not be able to do what the Other expects of them. This sense of deficiency, as seen in **defensive career planning**, inhibits imagining and deciding on a project, as well as causes serious and disheartening anxiety to participants in their initial EET endeavours.

2.1 Social incapability

For all but three of the participants, a key difficulty in imagining making life progress is the perception that they live with serious difficulties with social interaction. For three of the participants, this difficulty is felt to be an essential part of their personality and they report considerable disturbance in the company of non-intimates.

> I really don't like to be the centre of attention, like, in any situation. It's been like that even since being a little kid. I'd like, once, gone to answer the door with my mum or something, this is like when I was a very small kid. But I'd answer the door with my mum and I'd hide behind the door [laughing.] It's just, being shy and anxious has always kind of been how I am, is kind of what I'm trying to say, I guess... (Colin, 102).

Colin's story of failure to behave appropriately in this early scene in which he was centre stage is, I infer, laughed at as the fearful reaction appears to derive from such a quotidian and risk-free event. However, he expresses a belief that is held throughout the sample, he is fearful of particular kinds of social situation which he prefers to avoid if possible; these fears are long-standing. Many of the participants report moments of either embarrassment, ostracism or social failure from their earlier lives that became influential in the formation of a socially incapable self-concept.

> It was one of those things where I didn't like being around groups, but that made me seen as a weirdo which kind of hurt me a lot when I was younger but.. by the time I hit, like, secondary school I would say I didn't really care. And maybe they [his primary school peers] did have a point but, I also just didn't care about the point. The point was be social, if you're not willing to socialise with people you probably should just be an outcast (Ben, 56).

The majority of the participants report feeling that they see themselves as outcasts, socially awkward or shy as a stable quality of their personality. The sample see themselves as different from others, and for some, beyond-the-pale. Interactions with non-intimates are, on the whole, regarded as fearful and threatening. The mental strife in such situations is often reported alongside a desire to hide. Aaron described an excruciating experience of this on his first day of university which became defined by an old feeling of appearing out of sync with others' expectations.

> I was late to the [first] lecture, I was about 10 minutes late. The class was watching a video... the only empty seat was at the front, er and it was just really embarrassing, um, the seat was next to a girl- she had her bag on the seat. It was just really, urrgh, really embarrassing… I thought: "oh God, I'm going to have to be *that* guy, who comes in late."… I've been in similar situations before but they, I just kind of manned up and didn't care about it but for some reason, now... I didn't know these people, these were all strangers, a new setting, a new environment- so it was definitely a bit more scary. Walking up to the chair I was just... I didn't look around I just kept my head straight, it was that same feeling of people watching me, quite similar to paranoia. A large group of people just watching me, I don't think they cared that much but I still felt like that. I felt their judgement and I felt like I just wanted to hide, but I'd already committed to the chair- so I felt, like, forced to dig myself an even deeper hole….I was being forced to stand out and be independent and I felt like a fool in front of all these strangers (Aaron, 95).

Aaron reports that this feeling of embarrassment caused him to leave university. Despite perceiving his response as irrational the mental discord of the moment – where he stood in the spotlight in a divergent, individual manner seemed powerful enough to overrule the rational and set him on an entirely new NEET by choice life course. The account typifies the way that these fears prevent these participants from feeling as though they belong in an EET environment. As reported in the **Alienation** section, these participants feel that they are outsiders, constitutionally different. This belief gives them a diminished legitimacy in the perceived social economy of any future workplace. They believe that they are likely to fail to sufficiently control the social scene, meaning that their "feeling generally unacceptable to others" (Simon) could translate into a dangerous future involving financial ruin.

> I hear a lot that people often get fired just because they're not socialising with everyone and things like that. But my mum works in the [Civil Service branch] and she said that people were being fired because they stank a bit and nobody was happy to be around them, stuff like that which is... you know, if they're getting on with work I don't see why any of that matters. I told you that I'm naturally the outcast in all of these sorts of situations... but you're at risk of losing your job… because people don't like you... that's not a stable way to live (Ben, 111).

All the participants bar Edward (who claims to have been friendless between the time he moved to England and his forays onto a NEET Discord server last year) report key friendships with people

where they can be themselves. Yet all of the participants describe lacking social skills – these appear to reflect something other than the bonhomie that arises spontaneously from life-long friendships. They are described as a sensibility that can be deployed to manage involuntary sorts of socialising with others (strangers, acquaintances and colleagues). These deficits are often linked to aversive social situations (or in Aaron's case, having a mother who "did everything for me") during their childhood and adolescence, engendering a stunted development of these abilities.

> [A turning point has been] from childhood to adolescence, just like, not developing your social skills to actually deal with people, I probably would be more well-adjusted to like actual doing a lot if I had actually developed those skills but I think it's too late for me and I don't want to at this point (Ben, 121).

Ben describes his belief that he has made a conscious choice to turn away from others owing to these painful experiences of ostracism. In its place is an involuntary self-reliance which hardened into an apathetic "me vs. the world" position – with a loss of attachment to the mores of wider society (this latter aspect will be explored in the **Alienation** section). This may be part of the reason why the sample are generally pessimistic about their ability to be able to develop the requisite social skills that might help them in future scenarios. Aaron is different. As described above, he believes that expunging his shyness (he believes only he can accomplish this and had not sought help at the time of the interview) is a pressing piece of business to be completed alongside those that must be dealt with at the present developmental milestone.

> I know friends who have immigrant parents who also have high expectations of their children. But what I think now is that I have to live with that expectation at the same time as having to somehow beat this shyness, so I have it harder than my friends (Aaron, 203).

As described above in the discussion on **defensive career planning** – these participants feel severely compromised in their ability to perform in a way they imagine will be acceptable in the knowledge economy. This is, after all, a place where your value depends upon your ability to stand out and communicate.

2.2 Practical incapability

Aside from the social stipulations of the world of employment, education and training – all but two of the sample report beliefs that they lack sufficient competence to be accepted as workers. These beliefs range widely from the assessment made by three of the participants that they are mentally unsuited for work, owing to psychiatric diagnoses they've received or because of impaired motivation, to feelings of being unskilled, incompetent or in the grip of a crisis of confidence. Those participants lacking a sense of competence feel confused about their next step, the possession of skills and competencies renders an image of where one can be useful, a belief that these attributes are lacking makes one a novice of everything and there is therefore no group of adult working Others with whom they can identify.

Focus, motivation and tenacity are considered key assets for the successful realisation of an employment, education or training venture – they are key to being able to give oneself to a task. It is in the context of demoralising EET experiences in the past that three of the participants have come to see themselves as lacking these assets and that they are, consequently, unequal to the demands of future EET ventures. Important questions of agency are raised as these participants view this lack as resulting from impairments rendered by mental illness – their NEET status becomes seen as an interaction between an intrinsic health state and what are seen as stress-inducing environments.

> Before I'd have agreed that I had problems focusing, certainly at school and things, I had 40% attendance. Um. But I would have said that was through legitimate boredom or like, I could focus on things that I wanted to etc.… [A recent Ritalin prescription] had a really profound effect on cognition and the way you approach a problem. It has allowed me to focus a huge amount more and engage with things on a deeper level and I will admit that's probably a significant factor in why I got so little enjoyment from and avoided work at school, or have done up to this point- there was a lot of negative feedback because these are all places where you have to focus and be bored for extended periods of time (Robbie, 80).

Robbie is unsure about the extent to which ADHD was a factor in his disengagement with school, his experiential claims here and elsewhere appear more to do with a struggle with submitting himself the discipline required to meet the demands of secondary school. Throughout his interview, his abiding stance appears to be a refusal to give himself towards a task unless it is more or less on his own terms (see **Sovereignty**). His view is that he has been pushed out of EET situations owing to an interaction between his intrinsic mental state – one

of fragmented attention, and the rigidity of our current system of state schooling being unable to accommodate him.

> ...a lot of people like myself could not find a place in the rigorous and disciplinarian nature of school... It was a big factor in de-motivating me, if school had been this engaging place where you learn about things that are really going to be truly relevant in the world, where you learn about careers and... and the fact that you're part of society and you probably should engage in it and it should engage with you and you're not this individual that, any way... so in that sense, school probably had a big factor in de-spiriting me to some extent or introducing this nature that going to school or work is an inherently stressful and negative thing (Robbie, 333).

He considers that this failure of schooling (and of society) merits his stance towards the world of EET – that it is manifestly a drain upon well-being. It can't allow people like him to develop and live in a way compatible with their own sensibility. Owing to the homogenising tendencies of the world of work, his perceived impairments make him feel more likely to burn out than others. Simon also holds to this view. Reportedly living with depression since childhood, he struggles to see himself as being able to belong practically to the world of work.

> ...it can be pretty difficult to do what is considered the norm by society when your mind isn't in the correct state to function properly in that society.
>
> I: How do you think your mind falls short of that state?
>
> Personally, I'm just too depressed to cope with the stresses of work without wanting to kill myself. Not having that kind of responsibility makes my depression bearable (Simon, 144).

For Simon, the combination of depression and his, as yet, medically unexplained health condition that leaves him fatigued after a long night's sleep- render him incompatible for the demands of work. As mentioned in **Defensive career planning** his ability to meet these demands is felt to be too unreliable and the risks involve a dangerous collapse in his ability to cope. For Simon and Robbie the stresses of EET activity involve having to put one's mind and body in the service of another's schedule, another's agenda – the sacrifices these entail and their constitutional weaknesses make choosing not to pursue this activity an act of self-preservation.

Feelings of competence are considered valuable assets which beget accomplishments and allow people to persist in the face of competition. Colin, Alfie and Oliver describe feelings of inadequacy and uselessness born of their lack of accomplishment. There's something of a cyclical nature to these reflections, Colin believes that confidence in one's self-efficacy is key in the process of becoming motivated to carry forward one's plans and intentions.

> I just have never felt motivated to do anything really. It holds us back. I have ideas for music and art, like but I think a fair bit of it is that I just don't think I'm good enough at it really. I've been doing it for years really but I still don't feel like I know what I'm doing very well. I do know 'what I'm doing' but as in like, I don't feel like what I'm making is good enough as opposed to what anybody else is making (Colin, 162).

Without a belief that his artistic and musical ideas have a reasonable chance of success – Colin believes that these ideas become far less likely to bear fruit. I mention this because he chooses to answer questions about ambitions, skills and confidence with reference to his musical ability, which appears to be his passion. Even here, his lack of belief in his competence has held him back. His musical ability can only boost his self-confidence if it is recognised by others. Oliver's story tells us about what is at stake in being un-recognised. After finishing his A levels, Oliver failed to accomplish his wish to become a full-time barman, he felt that his inability to get the hang of the job and become skilled at it fast enough was key in getting the sack. He reports his experience of receiving the news and his immediate response:

> They said "Oh yeah right, we're going to have to let you go" and it's like "oh!" you know, "what's wrong with me?" Like, how could I have fixed it, I know that if I kept working there I could have picked it up better and I, I would have done more but, it just created this feeling of like "I'm a failure, I'm not good enough" I've, like messed it all up, just a very big kind of like "oh, I'm a big idiot and look, I've ruined my life," kind of thing (Oliver, 256).

There appears to be something quite total about the conclusions Oliver draws from this event. Lacking recognition as competent by these employers and being rejected appears to have led to the fear that there is something unacceptable about himself: fundamental deficiencies that exist outside of his will to correct. As seen in the **career agenda** section, Oliver became wary about becoming enthusiastic about other vocational projects and had given up looking for

work three months prior to the interview. He appears stuck in a cycle of perceived incompetence.

Being stuck in a cycle of incompetence (owing to a belief of being skill-less and having no accomplishments) and the subsequent drop in motivation to risk gaining accomplishments has left Colin, Oliver and Alfie demoralised and unable to see themselves as useful in a work context. Colin illustrates this when he reflects on the self-improvement motto- “tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life” and describes how hollow it feels for him, of how absurd it would be to pretend one can act in this purely agentic manner and leave the past behind.

> I'd have to change every bit of behaviour I have and win everything. It's a lot to change. There's a lot to flipping your life around, it's huge. I'd have to be able to start talking to people and pick up useful skills- I haven't got any at the moment and nobody has really helped me do that (Colin, 259).

To change every bit of behaviour suggests a belief that his current habits are seen as diametrically opposed to that of the image he has of those who have success in EET ventures. He has to learn to inhabit an entirely different world and part of that is to generate the currency that matters in this world, the skills that make him useful to others. There is a lack of specificity to this notion of how to improve his situation in relation to skills. Having no skills gives him no preferential path into the future – he is a pure novice, he’s at square one in potentially thousands of journeys to becoming skilled. Likewise, Oliver:

> ...the future, it's such a mystery because I've not really got anything right now. I could, go in whatever real direction I wanted (Oliver, 501).

To illustrate this I want to present Ben as a negative case – he has been employed in more work places than the rest of the sample combined. He reports confidence in his technical ability and an intrinsic interest in machinery.

> When I was in school I found it really interesting in playing around with mechanics, electronics, using machines like um, lazer milling machines I had quite a lot of interest in that, quite a lot of fun too. So I have the interest in, like, doing that as a living, like, machine work or even just like getting a small workshop and messing around with stuff (Ben, 380).

Ben reports a self-reliance and ease with his current situation as he has carved out a place for himself – he feels as though he does not have to court anyone's favour and has a sense of specific routes into the labour market.

> I don't take looking for jobs seriously, I'll look for work but just because of how [2 seconds pause] awkward it is, for the niche I have to look for is, it's more of a waiting game so I don't really try all that hard (Ben, 340).

Ben believes that despite being anti-social he can be of use to someone, he is already on a journey and consequently desirable to a specific industry sector. For Oliver, whose entry into the world of employment left him with demoralising feelings of incompetence, he is left with considerable angst about how desirable he is to the employers he meets for interviews

> ...maybe I didn't say enough, I didn't ask enough questions, things like that, just... you know maybe I don't seem driven enough, maybe I seem a bit, like weird or something. I just gives general worries about the way I present myself, just like "was *that* the issue?" Or was it something I said? I also worry about how I present myself, I want to be seen as friendly, I want to be seen as nice, I like, I always worry, "oh I hope I wasn't rude, I hope what I said didn't upset someone" (Oliver, 541).

These feelings of low worth derive from experiences of labour market failure, stasis and the perceived lack of having something to offer an employer. Being in a cycle of incompetence has inhibited half of the sample from making further ventures into the labour market believing that to do so will risk only further stress and rejection. The lack of efficaciousness in a particular vocational field leaves no identification to a particular group of workers and a desultory and even fearful connection to the world of work in general.

3. Assisted Living

This section illustrates the participants' reflections upon the state of dependence. All the participants, to varying degrees, are uneasy about being in a position of financial dependence upon their parents. In **Independence the Prize** I examine participants' fantasies concerning financial independence from their parents. In **Dependent Adulthood** I examine the participants' volunteered moral reasoning about their dependency and these positions' relationship to the guilt and shame felt at being seen as developmentally stunted and selfish by others. Finally in '**Me, myself and I'** the

participants describe their perceptions of living with a lack of emotional or practical assistance from their caregivers, describing an absence of caring or mentoring figures in their lives who may have given them (through this sort of assistance) the skills, assets or support that would have mitigated some of their anxieties. In the face of this absence, participants report the deployment of a strategy of a brittle kind of self-reliance.

3.1 Independence the Prize

Financial independence is prized by all of the participants, even among those who report feeling untroubled by their dependency. Participants suggest that living on their own and having income will give them a greater sense of autonomy and a sense of self-esteem connected to living in a manner congruent with their ethics (in contrast to living in dependency).

For Robbie and Ben, those who report feeling the least disquiet about their current states, independence represents being able to live their current lifestyle without the limits imposed upon them by those they live with.

> I definitely want my own place, there's lots of stuff, you know, everyone's weird, I guess it's like there's a lot of stuff I would like not to, like, subject my family to, I guess [laughs].. I just feel like everyone in my house they just try to, like, they just stick... my mum's always in her bedroom, I'm always in mine, my brother is in his sort of and none of us interact with each other. None of us really like do anything and it's really like... I feel just like the freedom to do... like whatever you want, even if it be fucking absurd or being able to live like you really want but you can't really do it with other people around, you need a room or space, privacy and all that shit to do what you really want (Ben, 202).

The lack of interaction with his family members, coupled with his perception that their scrutiny of his behaviour represents an impediment to his autonomy, is consistent with his strategy of desiring strong boundaries with The Other, described in more detail in the **Alienation** section. What Ben "really want[s]" is relayed elsewhere in the interview, he would like to be able to dedicate "an embarrassing amount of time" into gaming as well as having more opportunity for withdrawal for the sake of managing his mental state. Financial independence would remove the social obligation implied in living with his mother and

brother in the family home all together. At times these relationships are perceived as stressors, at other times, a limit to his desire for complete autonomy.

For other participants – financial independence enables the ability to be able to make progress towards desired milestones. Colin, for whom making progress in life would require “a complete flip” of many of his habits and insecurities, feels that long term relationships are currently out of his reach.

> [On “starting a family”] Not ready for that at all! I think I would need a stable career with a decent amount of money before I met someone. Show them that I could give them, any kids and my family a decent life. I feel you need to be at a certain spot before you start a family. As a NEET also, you're just not interesting to most people as well, like you've got nothing to say or contribute and you can't afford 'owt (Colin, 237).

Financial independence offers the ability to make long term commitments to a partner in the future. His present lack of funds and belief that his current static life style gives him nothing to talk about gives him insufficient capital in the marketplace of relationships.
For Oliver, still reportedly recovering his self-esteem after his sacking, financial independence offers him the opportunity to carve a space out for himself that is accountable only to him.

> I feel like quite a burden a lot of the time and, yeah I'm just, yeah I don't want to be dependent on others. I feel bad because it's not my house, it's where live, it's my home but it's not my house. I, I would feel better if I had an apartment that was "yeah! This is my place and I paid for it and the plates and bowls, I paid for those, the mess over there, that's mine, I made it." Like, it would feel better if everything was mine, so I took responsibility for it rather than, you know, feeling like, I, I, I'm a burden and I'm living in someone else's space (Oliver, 475).

The sense that he is living from the generosity of his parents is, as we shall see below, felt to be illegitimate – his move to insisting on paying rent from his wages as a full time barman (a job for which he expresses considerable enthusiasm) and then returning to the previous arrangement – those of his school and college years, is reminiscent of the return of the prodigal son. Financial independence gives the choice to pursue his own enthusiasm legitimately – reinforced with every possession that his wages could procure.

3.2 Dependant Adulthood

All of the participants report beliefs that they are considered controversial and morally dubious by significant others or society at large. This perception that they are failing to meet expectations and the feelings this evokes will be described in more depth in the **Working Expectations** section. In this section I explore the participants' reflections on who bears the cost of their choice to be NEET, whether or not this could be considered morally sound and feelings connected to these appraisals.

> I've never felt shame or embarrassment living rent-free mainly because if I wasn't in this room it would be mainly lying empty so it's not like I'm disadvantaging them it would just be boxes and shit stored in it. I use a very small amount of electricity, I don't turn the heating on and… far more food rots in the fridge and counter top than I consume. Um. So I don't ever feel guilty, I didn't feel like I was taking anything that wouldn't just go to waste if I weren't there (Robbie, 427).

Robbie reflects a view shared by many of the participants – a feeling of being fortunate to be in a position whereby they are able to rely upon their family's surplus wealth so that they can avoid the anxiety and constraint of participating in the labour market. Robbie elsewhere articulates a common fear that the participants have and is described in the **Fatalism** section, that one day these circumstances might come to an end – either with the death of a parent/partner or through being forced into earning his subsistence in a sink or swim scenario.

> I'm not happy about being dependent but I am happy about the outcome that I've got because of the dependency. I mean... you see how government is, everyone just does the opposite of what the last party in power did so it's, you're at the risk of the government just going "oh, right, there's too much for the taxpayer to pay for" and just completely annihilate my benefits… It's only a matter of time before you're fucked over on benefits... I'm not worried about being ruined so much, but I keep it in the back of my mind or something where, if it does happen, I have to try and find work where I'm not going to be unhappy and want to shoot myself doing (Ben, 234).

Ben reports a belief that that his dependency on the state protects him from being solely responsible from a world where risk and competition are vital for subsistence. The "outcome" of the dependency is his current NEET by choice lifestyle in which he is sovereign over his time and where he can insulate himself from the stress of being obliged to work in a manner

not on his terms (in Ben's case, working with a large amount of social interaction). It is a form of protection that he feels his family (80% of his unemployment benefits are reportedly given to his mother as rent) is able to provide between him and the risk of being forced into a working situation that compromises his preferences.

All but one of the sample report, nonetheless, feelings of shame and embarrassment over some of the facts of their dependency. Oliver reports that he believes that he has outgrown a more juvenile form of relationship to his parents, unlike Robbie he believes that his parents should be remunerated for his rent and food costs. His un-anticipated sacking and subsequent period as a NEET reversed the new settlement with his parents – leaving him with an uncanny feeling of having regressed.

> I feel guilty for taking from them because I feel like it's not earned. And that's odd because being cared for whilst I was in secondary school was something normal and you don't think about it. It's just like "hey, those are my parents, that's how things are." But now, I'm an adult, I should be... working for myself. Rather than still having people look after me (Oliver, 491).

There is a grudging sense that there is a dysjunction between their physical age and the appropriateness of economic dependence on their parents. As we see in the **Working Expectations** section, Oliver (19) feels as though this dependence comes attached with entering back into his parents' orbit, requiring him to live (uncomfortably) with their scrutiny about his career ambitions. Robbie (24) has chosen a relatively ascetic lifestyle to lessen the "emotional burden."

Robbie also has a view over how the period of dependency can and should be enjoyed. He reports a belief that, being in the position as his parents' dependent necessitates reigning in his desires for social activities. He describes a development in his moral position vis the morality of dependency.

> But certainly whenever I wanted to go with my friends to go on holiday in those early days or, um I'd want to go to the cinema, go out for a meal or things and asked for money, when I was younger, when I was still like 19 to 21, it wasn't that big an issue because I still sort of felt very much like a child... I just felt and acted young, it wasn't until my early 20s that I started to feel "well, yeah obviously I can't ask for things, money for entertainment, I should..." and that's when I started doing things here or there, if I was asking for any sort of money. (Robbie, 433)

…

> ...obviously it's embarrassing and its unfair, but its more that it's embarrassing, um it's just that I don't feel that that's... um, I do have a sense, believe it or not of some sense of integrity, that if I wanted to um go out and get drunk or go out and have a nice meal or something, I should in principle, at least, do something...whenever I've got a wee bit of money from my Dad I've always done some sort of work (Robbie, 177).

Like many of the other participants, he believes that his maturation correlates with a new ideal concerning parental support and independence. This is reported as a spontaneous feeling of guilt at commandeering his parents' money for hedonistic (but, for an adolescent, socially important) activities. This is affirmed as an expression of "integrity" but it is also presented as a rather joyless example of 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' as it opens the space for the kind of intrusive attention about Robbie's life progress mentioned in the **Failing to make them proud** section.

Three of the other participants report occasional feelings of guilt for not being able to support themselves and that this is a drain on their sense of self-esteem. For Edward, like the others, he reports evaluating his current state from a position of a more universal moral position, that of "is it right for me *as a member of society* to be living like this?"

> I mean again there's guilt that I'm draining resources whilst providing none myself but I do make an effort to help, I cook and clean and do other stuff that needs to be done around the house. I guess I would feel more bad if it wasn't close family I was leeching off but, *sigh* it does feel a bit of guilt that I'm not better human or person, you know supporting myself, carrying my own weight. If I was to keep on living I... definitely want to become a more functional person in society and provide for myself. I think that would probably do my self-esteem some good but... I'm not sure how to re-integrate (Edward, 315).

Edward reports a hierarchy of "leeching" in which it would feel worse to rely on the state rather than on immediate family (he lives alone with his mother). Edward's belief is that this feeling of guilt cannot simply kick-start efforts towards becoming financially independent – he believes that other more fundamental work is required to improve his social capabilities and sense of alienation. Similarly, Simon, reflecting on the imputation of laziness to him by relatives asserts his belief that work, at his present level of health, would be more harmful than helpful.

> ...not everyone is a position to 'just get a job' (Simon, 277).

We have seen how the participants have justified their dependency. Many of the participants believe that they are unable and/or unwilling to bear the mental cost of participating in the labour market at present and that others must pay for the cost of their living as a result of this. This state of affairs, which places them out of sync with the norms connected to independence for people their age – particularly those living from their parents income alone, is responded to with feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt.

3.3 'Me, myself and I'

All participants report a perception of an absence of explicit guidance or emotional support from adults that might have helped to prepare them for the transition from school to work. It appears that this absence implies, for the participants, a license to be free to choose to follow their desired occupational path – whilst also implying that it is their responsibility to organise and execute a plan.

> No-one really [has helped me think about careers], not anyone I can think of, I kind of think I've been left to myself most of the time...
>
> I: How have your father or mother, who both have careers, talked to you about what you might want to do in life or how you might go about it?
>
> They haven't spoken to me about it really. I haven't got a bad relationship with them or anything, I'm definitely on good terms. I'd say I'm definitely closer to my mum, it's not like I don't get on with my Dad. I can't remember arguing with them but we, I don't know, we've not talked about that (Colin, 179).

What Colin reports is common for most of the sample, a recollection of not having had an explicit conversation with his parents about his adult future. As we have seen in the **Working Expectations** setting, several participants relate a sense of implied expectations, reporting no explicit suggestion of what might be acceptable or unacceptable. Colin suggests that without this explicit guidance he is left to speculate and draw inferences about their judgement of his ability to manage the effort to launch himself into the labour market.

> I can't imagine my parents are proud of it. I'd imagine they'd want us to be doing something with myself, that's probably the main thing they're disappointed in. My Dad was definitely happy with us when I got that office job- happy that I was finally doing something. Unfortunately it was soul-destroying... (Colin, 189).

It appears that “doing something” is perceived to be highly prized by his parents, yet Colin feels that his great sticking point is his continuing failure to imagine a vocational future for himself.

> I probably should have put some thought into what I was doing in school and college, actually think of something I wanted to do (Colin, 154).

Colin’s act of self-blame reinforces the perception that the responsibility for imagining, planning and executing a plan to reach a vocational future has been entirely his and that the seeds of his current predicament were sewn by a personal failing of his at a much earlier time. This perceived inability to answer this fundamental question appears to hinder his ability to receive help from those who are professionally involved in work coaching.

> I was seeing someone at one point, a career coach and he was like, he was trying to get us into work. But the thing is, they look at my CV and since I did software development in college they go "oh, you clearly want to be a software developer." And that's not exactly true, but I always would just go along with it anyway because it's much easier to say "yes" than it is to say "I have no idea." I was kind of like trapping myself into it. I don't really have a clear goal of what I don't want to do either – I might want to do software design, who knows? (Colin, 87).

For Colin, the lack of self-knowledge required to approve or disapprove a proposal given by a work coach leaves him in a position of having to submit to another’s interpretation of his intentions. The fact that he “might want to do software design” suggests that he feels as though some more fundamental step might be required before he can begin to engage actively with this question and the consequent commitments that follow. I infer that this is Colin’s difficulty in imagining that he will ever be able to do anything competently enough and the debilitating effect this has on motivation (discussed at greater length **Incapabilities**).

Alfie tells us that he felt unprepared for the adult world as well as being blamed for his lack of understanding. When asked: “how much power do you think you have to change your situation?”

> I kind of feel like I don't know how any of this adult world works. I feel a bit like an alien on a different planet. I... had a lot of struggling to understand the world when I was growing up and my parents and other people around me would be like "why *don't* you understand this already?" And I'm just like "I just got here!" [Laughs.] I don't know why I'm supposed to understand this by default, um (Alfie, 141).

Alfie describes a feeling of neglect from the adult community around him, primarily from his family – a lack of being shown how to behave in order to become part of this community, specifically although not exclusively, how to prepare for adult financial responsibilities. Despite Alfie's need of this initiation into the informal knowledge that allows participation in the adult world, his family have reportedly positioned him as the person who is responsible for making up his deficit. Alfie, as reported in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section, therefore feels trepidation at embarking upon 'adult tasks', fearing that he will be caught out by his lack of experience and self-assurance. This is reportedly the loop that leads to his procrastination, fearing the angst and consequences of a long period of neglect of the development of this informal adult know-how.

Edward reports that he was required to adopt the position "me, myself, and I" that gives the title to this sub-theme: without anyone at school or at home taking an active interest in him, his only option was to fall back on his own mental resources…

> I've always had food and clothes and stuff growing up and the physical needs but, I don't know, I never quite felt that my mum was quite supportive, she, like emotionally, like. She never really asked how I'm feeling or doing or what I want to be or, you know, stuff like that. So, again, it's mainly been "me, myself and I" for my entire life having to support myself mentally. There were people in school I would talk to but I never felt close enough to any of them to discuss my feelings so, everything throughout my entire life was just bottled up inside (Edward, 89).

Edward reports being raised by his mother as an only child since his parents separated around the age of 6 years old. Edward feels that the lack of people available with whom to discuss feelings has had an impact on his ability to learn about himself, this he learned after being able to belong to a NEET support community. He makes the connection between an imagined emotional closeness with his mother and the possibility of this relationship elaborating "what

I want to be." Edward's sense of alienation and lack of closeness to anyone left him with few resources and few degrees of freedom.

Participants have reported feelings of being left to their own devices as they attempt to negotiate the transition from schooling to work and that this has had an effect on trust and confidence in the participants' abilities and sense of belonging in the adult community.

4 Alienation

All of the participants report a perception of themselves as presently being an outsider, either socially or with regard to contemporary social and political norms. "**Social alienation"** contains reports of isolation as either a consequence of the NEET period or as something more long-standing- a wish to avoid any further intimate dealings with the Other as their social selves have become equated with how they have been seen historically in aversive situations such as bullying and ostracism. In **Normative Alienation** the participants wrestle with the idea of asserting an authentic project (a way of defining themselves and their possibilities on their own terms) in the face of feeling dragooned into what everybody else expects of them. These participants who have gone the furthest with this thinking consider their novel stance towards the norms of society their proudest intellectual achievement – one that sets them apart from the unreflective and inauthentic masses.

4.1 Social alienation

Two participants reported having become increasingly isolated as a result of being NEET. This is particularly the case for those participants who report friends leaving to go to university, or those who have gone on to participate in education, employment and training.

> So I think the issue of being a NEET is that you can easily become quite lonely and isolated, like because like your bedroom is kind of like your cage in a way, that you're just kind of there all the time and you have no need to really leave (Oliver, 221).

However, the majority of the participants report a belief that their feelings of social alienation pre-date their time in the NEET situation. Five of the participants describe being made to feel socially unacceptable during their schooling through ostracism and bullying. It appears that a particular characteristic is felt to have led to a disruption in the normal social development and left the

participants with a feeling of being “outcast” (Edward, Ben) “unacceptable to them” (Simon) and “closed off from the rest of the people there” (Alfie). These perceptions about feeling lacking before other people are thought to have been influential on their eventual arrival in the NEET condition and foundational of their social incapabilities. Simon believes that his self-confidence never recovered after a long campaign of bullying at his secondary school.

> I've always been pretty scared of failure… Most of my issues probably stem from bullying in school if I'm honest… it was pretty persistent, so my will just kind of got ground down over the years.
>
> How did you feel about yourself whilst this was going on?
>
> It varied from being numb to it to feeling really bad about how people perceived me. They used to call me names like “freak”, “retard” and “gay-boy” so it was a bit difficult to pinpoint what exactly was ‘wrong’ with me because they were never really specific. Just some general sense that I was unacceptable to them (Simon, 88).

The bullying reportedly lasted between the ages 11 and 18, and took the form of name-calling on account of his tallness and uneven physical development. Simon’s believes that the attempt to isolate and torment left him with a lasting lack of self-assurance and a need to carefully avoid putting himself in challenging positions that could expose that unacceptable part to further critical observation.

> I'm still scared of failure to an extent, though... in case it confirms that they were right about me (Simon, 98).

Ben reports another kind of response to growing up with low social stock among his peers.

> When I was in primary school I tried to make friends and that but I started to get anxious and I guess around then I didn't really notice it... I didn't really like going into [big] groups so I wanted people but because I wasn't playing with anyone, talking to anyone...I'm happy on my own….but that made me seen as a weirdo which kind of hurt me a lot when I was younger but… by the time I hit, like, secondary school I would say I didn't really care (Ben, 46).

Ben reveals these early memories in the context of describing why he had considered claiming disability benefits for anxiety and depression.

> I don't really like hanging around people, I prefer, like 2 people and then my cats and that's all I really like. If I run into anything else I just get into anxiety attacks I guess, and really really angry and sad (Ben, 35).

Then as now he reports a palpable inability to participate socially in large groups and consequently, as mentioned in the **Incapabilities** section, an inability to master socialising a large group. Others appear able to impinge upon him in two ways: having the potential to hurt him through ostracism and physically agitate him if they are not met on his terms. At university he reports having taken pre-emptive action to contain unwanted social interaction.

> I went out, like once then the only enjoyable part about it was getting battered… There wasn't anyone I could get close to… my room-mate was really keen to be my friend but I pretty much ignored them and everyone used that big room as a hang out because I just said "use whatever, use my fridge I don't care because I'm going sit in, like, my actual bedroom and not interact with anyone" (Ben, 185).

Fearing anxiety symptoms, seeing himself as an "outsider" and lacking self-assurance in his social skills, he reports feeling unable to enjoy the novel social environment in spite of its composition of seemingly well-disposed others. The perception of "I'm naturally the outcast in all these kinds of situations" in relation to his hypothetically working in an office reflects a disposition, as described in the **Assisted Living** section, to maintain a safe distance from others.

Edward and Alfie describe their schooling as taking place in socially limited environments where they were made to feel unwelcome on account of their essential otherness.

> ...back in year 8 or 9, a history teacher asked if any of us were proud to be British and it didn't really make much sense to me because I'm so multicultural but quite a few people put their hand up. And... I don't know I guess I never quite felt like I belonged to any group and I could see all those young people developing their identities throughout their teens and I... because I was never sure how to form my identity (Edward, 40).

Edward suggests that this lack of inclusion left a break in the development of a social sensibility, noticeable by the fact that others who were more integrated racially and culturally to the dominant culture seemed to develop theirs' and do things that Edward was excluded from doing. As the son of a Dutch speaking Vietnamese adoptee living in a North Western

town, he reported being made to feel isolated from his white British classmates as well as an inability to feel part of the Vietnamese community in the UK. Edward reports the experience of having to find ways to live in isolation as he was unable to find anyone with whom he could belong.

> I kind of spent most of my life, or at least my teens, avoiding other people because I've never really been sure how to bond with others (Edward, 55).

Edward's involuntary self-reliance, a felt sense of a poorly developed social competence and a leisure time spent consuming media appear to feed into each other – furthering the mental distance he feels between himself and others. Edward reports that a sense of community has eluded him until last year when he turned 20 and discovered an online NEET support community.

> I've talked more to people on the server and it's helped me a lot, since there's people in similar situations, I feel a lot more comfortable talking about myself with people, I learned a lot about myself over the last year and a half thanks to that (Edward, 229).

Edward reports a belief that self-knowledge requires another, preferably a community where one feels one's place is secure, where one feels an object of kindness and acceptance for who one is. He appears to recognise the difficult state that he was in as a result of this lack but reports that he felt that he "didn't understand humans" enough to re-join. Luckily the NEET support Discord community were able to meet him where he was.

We have seen that social alienation reportedly begins from a young age and moves to correct it have felt to be highly relevant to some of the sample's present difficulties. It appears to generate something of a defensive involuntary reliance which keeps others at arms-length. Some have found solace in new communities that they were able to find by their own initiative in which they feel more accepted – while others have struggled to make use of even these benign settings to learn how to be with others owing to social anxiety and low self-confidence.

4.2 Normative alienation

Three of the participants report evidence of a more pervasive sense of alienation – that of lacking attachment to the norms of the society in which they live. By some quirk of fate, these participants report having become marginalised from the usual stream of socialisation and they find themselves

unable to accept the norms surrounding schooling, work, self-abnegation etc. as those in the "other people's world." There are notable divergences in these accounts, Edward reports more of a lack of affiliation with society whereas Robbie and Alfie appear to hold the institutions of socialisation and their adherents in contempt. What these accounts share is that the participants believe they have become aware of their own possibilities for defining their situation and attenuating their anxiety through a kind of righteous rejection of the entire EET enterprise and those who enter into it.

Edward reports a lack of affiliation to society and a lack of knowing how he can find a place within it. We have already reported the social alienation he experienced and his lack of a social sensibility.

> I've never really known what I wanted to do with my life so, most of my time was kind of spent alone and well I, I've never really been sure what to live for (Edward, 29).

Owing to the alienation described above, Edward believes that he never developed an image of himself enjoying himself socially in the future. Without this there was little to motivate him to endure the social difficulty of participating in his education.

> I felt like a fraud trying to be normal, pretending to be more socially competent than I was. I was getting no pleasure out of any of it. There was more homework during A levels than GCSE and I couldn't be bothered doing it because again, why bother? Why strive to be successful in society? I didn't understand humans, they didn't always like me, why should I put in the effort when I could just be alone in my room? (Edward, 150).

These early experiences of ostracism, it appears, left him with little hope for being part of humanity in the future on his own terms – just a lifetime of "trying to be normal." Edward reports that retreating from society became a rational choice in this context. Alfie and Robbie, to a differing extent also report a belief that they are made from a different mould from the rest of society. What sets them apart is that this position is held to be a kind of personal credo, born of autodidactic study and reflection, allowing distance from the concerns from others who might live in a more conventional, unreflective manner.

> I believe that there is no god or intelligence watching over us, that the universe is just chaos and we should all be feeling a bit of dread about it- when we die, that's it. I can understand how a Christian might feel guilty about the way I live but there is no "should" for me because there just is no "should" in my idea (Alfie, 185).

Taking these comments at face value, we can see that he describes a more relativist morality as his metaphysical position ("the universe is just chaos") is not one from which a universal morality can be drawn. Therefore dedicating one's life to an ideal (for example, I should tell the truth at all times, even if it will mean I never hear the end of it from my parents) is voluntary and moral choices should be made on a case-by-case, egoist basis. Alfie reports a disdainful view of those who do so commit themselves as unreflective, maybe purposefully so, in order to avoid the "dread" that comes from life's fragility and meaninglessness.

> I think, that I have thought very long and hard about my philosophy for many many years, I don't think those other people, with all those jobs and such have really put that much thought into it, honestly. I just think that they're going with the motions. I think that even if you gave them all the time in the world, I just think that they wouldn't think about themselves like this all that much, because they're too busy doing... um... they would find a way to... fill it up with some small nonsense that doesn't matter. I think (Alfie, 198).

This is quite a clear devaluation of the way most people pursue what they consider the good in life. That people might waste their lives with "nonsense that doesn't matter" or "keep themselves busy" is to suggest that working people's investments and commitments are misplaced. In line with the findings in **the career agenda** sections, work is seen as a numbing of the intellect and spirit in exchange for a limited amount of security and identity determination. It might be argued that his aspiration to become a British Sign Language Interpreter flatly contradicts the above statements – having a "dream job" and "an aspiration" sounds, on the surface, fairly compatible with some of the mottos to which others in the sample respond with frustration and shame at falling short of the kind of agency they denote. However, the way Alfie reports on his episode of failing his first year of university is suggestive:

> I felt like I'd fallen away from the 'other people's world.' Up until then I was pretty much on track with everyone else, I mean, I... there was a lower-6th year in secondary that I basically just wasted because I should have gone to college a year sooner than I did but I was just totally not really knowing what I was really doing. So I just stayed in school. But apart from that I was *on track* with pretty much everybody else and then... [I failed university] and I was just, like: [in a small, sad voice] "I don't know what to do now." "I'm going to have to like... find a *job*?" (Alfie, 276).

Being “on track”, is for Alfie, being rushed into the future without knowing himself – having to make choices on the basis of institutional time, not on the basis of being ready. As can be seen elsewhere in this section and in the **‘Me, myself and I’** section – he feels as though he lacked the correct ingredients to belong to this “other people’s world” - just a lot strongly expressed normative expectations that he should be a particular way. His new aspiration came from years of trial and error (and, reportedly, a considerable amount of escapism). He has found a future that he has faith in, his challenge to others living in society is- can everybody else truly say the same?

Robbie also suggests that “ideology” is a key part of the individuation process and reports that he mostly managed to avoid being drilled into the usual reifications that might curtail individual expression and freedom.

> That creates the setting where my parents are somewhat absent, they're not going to inflict any beliefs, they're not going to impose any ideas of God or state or country or really any ideology so me and my sister were allowed to grow up in relative freedom to find our way in the world so to speak and... [3 seconds] I suppose you might consider it a negative thing if you look at my current lifestyle negatively as most people obviously would, pretty much everyone actually (Robbie, 245).

Robbie seems to suggest that this “ideology” demands that sacrifice is key a part of being able to participate in society. He has been able to see this owing to the quirk of fate of living in a home where this demand was not strongly enforced.

What these accounts share is a sense that these participants have all come to feel that something essential and valuable about themselves would have felt under threat if they continued to participate in the stream of the transition from school to work (under the influence of classed and gendered expectations of arriving at a prestigious career.) It would have involved pretending, sacrifice or a crushing of their sensibilities – it would mean becoming something they are not and losing themselves to the Other.

5. Fragmented Intentionality

For the participants, the pursuit of employment, education and training opportunities, involves anxiety concerning an increasing intimate involvement with the Other. The 6 participants who

report a desire to leave their present circumstances find themselves unable to do so as some other conflicting intentionality takes over and returns them to the state of stasis in which they find themselves. In **"Pulling myself together"** participants describe their efforts to leave the NEET condition and their hindrance by a mysterious inability to simply act in a manner that will be beneficial to them. Instead they find themselves captured by old habits, identifications to the past where their comforting behaviours did not have the disruptive consequences they now do. In "**Losing the will**" Participants describe moments when participants lose an affective attachment to becoming a particular future-self (one identified with **Working Expectations** for prestigious careers as middle class men.) These are key turning points in the participants' lives where they began to question why they should try so hard to enter an unwelcoming world.

5.1 Pulling Myself Together

All of the participants report experiences where their will – or at least a part of their will aligned to doing what they are supposed to have been doing, has been obstructed by some other tendency originating from the self. These include anxiety, vagueness, pessimism, apathy and the avoidance of discomfort. For many of the participants these are the defining features of their incapabilities and these lead them to feel that they are not in charge of themselves. When discussing making changes in their lives to overcome the NEET period, the participants report a knowing sort of relationship to these inhibitory tendencies and a weary resignation to the fact that try as they might, they will not be able to see their way through to making life progress.

> I: What is it that stops you from making those steps?
>
> A: Um... definitely on loop, every day I think "I will do it tomorrow," to cut it down to its very shortest form. Um, I'm thinking there's always more time and I'm thinking like, if I *start* a problem then I find out, part way through the problem, that its more complex than I had realised. Then I feel like I'm behind the start line, like I have somehow gone backwards. So I think there's a part of my mind that is thinking "don't start the problem, don't try to understand it because you're probably only going to go backwards instead of forwards" (Alfie, 157).

Many of these participants talk about "part[s]" of themselves as long-standing obstacles, known weaknesses that compromise their abilities to make changes in their lives. Alfie is talking about figuring out how to register with a dentist and the interference to the plan given by an incorrigible

part. Half of the participants report attempts at a personal project of self-improvement, a self-led mission to overcome these recalcitrant “parts.”

> I: How much power do you feel you have to change where you are now?
>
> [3 seconds] Probably more than I think I actually do, like I don't feel like I can just throw myself into something and instantly do it, instantly do like a good career. But I dunno, there probably *is* something I can do [laughs.] I'm just holding myself back really (Colin, 122).

Colin here introduces the gap between the ideal, the possibility to make a positive change in his life and being hide-bound by his feeling of incapability, his belief that there is nothing he can do where he won’t be horribly exposed to others and the lack of belief that he can accomplish anything successful from his own initiative. Some of the participants report attempts to put these ideals into practice. Aaron, continues:

> I had a diary kind of, where I would write "this is the day where I start working at home or starting a new language." That happens for a few weeks at least and then it stops and I stop being productive. I know there's definitely a point in these projects, it's just that it becomes uncomfortable after a while. I just feel more comfortable playing computer games than learning a language or start working out, especially as I've been playing them my whole life, it's just become a part of me. Also making plans, you have this feeling just after the start, "oh dear this is much harder than I thought it was going to be, I'm going to have to commit to this."… I start feeling fatigued, tired of the new project. I want to do them but um, when I stop doing these activities, I slowly start doing less of it until it gradually stops. There's this motivation factor, there's motivation at the beginning and that motivation eventually dries up and then I just don't bother (Aaron, 328).

The old habit is referred to as a “part of me” - playing computer games is a comfortable identification to the past and the new habit entails the anxiety required to bear the responsibility for seeing this project to fruition. Aaron suggests that the role of motivation is to hold himself in the discomfort for long enough. When asked why he wants to begin learning a new language:

> I don't know, I see myself having this new language in the future, I think doing it will be a good routine and other good routines will come off the back of these... I, I'm breaking out of my comfort zone, I'm excited because I feel like I've taken charge of myself.

Motivation appears connected to an ideal image of a successful end point. He will be enacting something good, regularly and therefore join a trajectory towards becoming a new person (productive and self-creating). There is something of a New Year's resolution feel to this tendency – one that is repeated throughout the sample. A fit of optimism helps raise expectations of remaking the self through the will and in giving oneself to a task or habit. However, for Aaron, much more is at stake as he perceives that these are the projects that will allow him to participate in society (and that many of his other productive habits have atrophied).

> I'm slowly becoming like a crazy cousin I have. He's in his late twenties and has been a NEET since he finished school at 16. He wasted his life being isolated in his room believing in conspiracy theories and has completely lost it. I feel like there's a chance I'd probably become just like him if I don't get my shit together or kill myself. My life was going at an upwards trajectory until university happened and now I'm a pathetic NEET (Aaron, 391).

The consequences of "get[ting] my shit together" could not be starker. It is the difference between future selves – the one he and everyone else wants – that requires an all or nothing effort to overcome his incapabilities (*on his own*) or a future image of a life lost. In a sense, if he were to stay on the continuity NEET side of his ambivalence he will be on a downward trajectory towards ostracism and insanity. Aaron has not ruled himself out yet, he reports that his attachment to "forcing… [him]self to be independent" remains in place. It is dependent on holding himself in the difficult position for long enough to "get used to it."

> I was able to overcome those crappy situations before, my feelings of being awkward and uncomfortable became less difficult. When I first went to the gym, I felt awkward, but now it is in my comfort zone. Going to work at KFC was uncomfortable but then it slowly became my comfort zone. So it is really a matter of getting used to it (Aaron, 291).

Drawing upon other uncomfortable circumstances, where with the help of friends he was able to settle his unpleasant affect, Aaron hopes for a similar toughening of himself in order to become able

to be convincingly in front of others. Pulling oneself together is ultimately a way to pass as normal in front of The Other, preventing those parts from agitating into the equation.

> Well, it's, it's primarily up to me to go out and change my situation but at the same time I am ultimately in the hands of whoever I come across, like if they just want to tell me to fuck off then I have no power whatsoever and if they want to help me then that's great and will be very helpful. [Sigh]... yeah I am responsible for this, I am *lazy*. That is one factor, I am definitely lazy and I procrastinate against everything I've ever done (Alfie, 136).

Like several other participants, the NEET situation is seen as partly resulting from the sum of lazy decisions and that this is simply not good enough for the imagined other. Alfie identifies the difficulty of going against long ingrained habits, and the circularity of I against I. Apart from Edward and Oliver, all of the participants hold a belief that the way out of the NEET situation is something that must come from them *alone.*

5.2 Losing the will

Other participants talk about willpower as a dwindling or spent resource. It appears that there must, like Aaron's language, be an ideal image and that makes the difficulty of actualising it seem worth the effort. But this is something that others have described as being capable of being lost. For Oliver, an initial and successful application of willpower led to a chastening experience in his first full time job as a barman, from which he got sacked. Losing confidence he attempted to find a replacement job but has been unsuccessful for five months and has given up looking for three.

> [My drive has]... kind of been pushed out of me by being made uncomfortable, by you know, the ways of job-seeking. I feel like I'm not fit for it because I'm not selling myself well enough and I'm not, like, pushing really hard for it. So, it's kind of made me lose the motivation to keep hunting and going or my goal (Oliver, 65).

Oliver's feelings towards job-hunting changed, initially he hoped to find a straightforward job where he could serve customers and make a reasonable wage. After getting fired from a job that matched these preferences, and then ignored by the employers he approached – he describes losing heart and believing that his incapabilities (his feelings of being incompetent and unacceptable to others) inhibit him from attaining his goal. This realisation has made him abandon the means of

reaching for the goal. Enthusiasm is seen as a finite and precious resource, something that can be rashly squandered and not something that can be simply commanded into being over and over again.

> You've got the one life, you have to work with what you have. Sometimes I think, some people are just like, "yeah! come on! Do it! Just apply!" you know, "just go out there and and and do it." But there's so much more stress than that and... then I go through all that stress and nothing comes out of it except [sadly] rejection. So it's just like, I try to be, like, "yeah! I'm going to do it! I'm going to go out, I'm going to apply to this place, I really like the look of this place." Like I'm really happy to work there so I make my application, and, then nothing comes of it and then I'm just, I've tried really hard and I've given my all and nothing has come of it (Oliver, 465).

His attempts to mobilise his enthusiasm and create a new ideal image – him being happy to work at the place to which he is applying, must be made in the face of the fear finding only an indifference that suggests to him that what he has in his one life is “not good enough.”

Edward reports losing his motivation to keep up with work at secondary school. He describes a disturbing experience of losing the will to carry on with the routines of his school life.

> There was one night when I was doing my homework, um, I couldn't bring myself to pick up my pen and actually do the work. I... um I sat for hours just looking at the pen. Just like I couldn't make myself pick it up. Um, I'm not sure whether I ended up doing that piece of homework, but I remember a few days later the same thing happened with getting dressed for school. I couldn't put on my socks, and then, I started missing out on lessons and I think, I think that was, or was it? Oh yeah, I stayed off school for, like, two weeks and I don't think I left my room (Edward, 115).

Edward reports this as the beginning of a bottom up alter-intentionality, one that removed him from taken-for-granted activity, produced for the sake of others. Edward suggests in a later quotation that he began to become over-taken by feelings of apathy and an inability to put his mind into the service of schooling.

> It almost felt like I wasn't meant to go back to school at that point, I did anyway, I was on crutches but the depression was coming back and the teachers still had demands for me. I had a lot of homework as it was GCSE time and, well, my mind didn't want to do

> it. I ended up missing homework and the head of year kind of came after me and asked why I didn't do it and I said "because I forgot." My depression wouldn't let me remember anything. It's like almost nothing existed or nothing mattered (Edward, 127).

“My mind didn’t want to do it,” “my depression wouldn’t let me remember” is suggestive of a belief in an escalating process of refusal, the routines and signifiers of schooling began to lose their motivating power. He later suggests that compliance with schooling became simple displeasure, the transactional nature of schooling – obedience for qualifications, a step towards the good life, broke down. This, we shall learn in greater detail in the **Alienation** section, was owing to ostracism and a subsequent loss of attachment to a mainstream kind of life in the future.

> ...because of never feeling part of anything, not really feeling sure that I could feel like part of anything, not even feeling why I should want to or at least try... I guess I just couldn't ever see myself ever being happy doing something and that kind of took away from my motivation (Edward, 203).

Losing attachment to the end point of his educational travails, he lost a sense of whether all of the pain was worth going through, and his feeling of alienation made attending college particularly distressing.

> I remember those days like, I hadn't been to college for like a month and, I was feeling kind of guilty, knowing that I would get kicked out but, I didn't want to go either because, why should I? Like I felt I had the freedom not to, like everyone knows that they have freedom, but I think when depression hit was when I truly realised I had freedom. That if I didn't want to go, I didn't have to go, it was actually something I could do, I can make any decision. I just didn't do it because... I didn't find it pleasurable, it was horrible being at college with all these people… (Edward, 143).

We are back to the reverse-Faustian pact, when belief in the future good life wanes, the participants report feeling unable to cope with the pain and uncertainty of the project on which they embark and fall back upon another intentionality – a favouring of safety, isolation and repose.

6. The NEET Lifestyle: Sovereignty and Stasis

Participants reflect on their present lifestyle as NEETs by choice. Participants suggest that they move between two tracks or times: Firstly, a time of risk, which involves restraint, exposing oneself to the vicissitudes of the Other and engaging in labour-market related activity or preparation. Secondly, the time of repose, involving both freedom from restraint and other peoples' agenda as well as a disturbing sense of stasis.

To become master of one's time and to experience the consequent reduction in tension, stress and worry about how to be in the world of education, employment and training, is posited by the majority of the sample as "the best thing about being NEET." Participants attribute positive experiences, almost akin to liberation, to the times when they finally chose to turn their back on the demands placed upon their time by the EET institutions in which they were previously engaged – these reflections are collected under the subordinate theme **"Sovereignty."** This sovereignty – shutting out of the Other's demands, however, is correlated with stuckness

Among the worst aspects of the NEET condition reported by the sample is the disturbing fact that the subject is inactive during large expanses of time, months and even years. This is frequently inferred from the perception of the progress that their contemporaries are making towards the developmental milestones that have eluded the participants. In "**Lack of Progress"** the participants reflect on the disturbance they feel at growing older whilst feeling ashamed at not being able to project themselves into the future. "**Just Existing"** contains descriptions of the commonly reported unsettling experience of realising the true horror of their angst – the weight of their possibilities, their lack of having a project into the future and the existential guilt that manifests from this stuck-ness. "**Absorption"** with the way that leisure activities are used in an effort to absorb this empty yet foreboding time.

6.1 Sovereignty

Participants report a preference for the NEET condition over being engaged in work, education and employment. A key reason posited is the end of the obligation to adhere to institutional schedules or to the internalised imperative that the present should be used for the sake of making oneself employable. In the latter case, a process of morale boosting or healing is a reported priority.

> I would say, you know, the lack of pressure but, you know, I have the pressure in the back of my mind being, like, you know I need to do something with myself... I, it's just the, you know, the freedom and relaxation... I just enjoy... like not laziness but just, having, having your own time. Like, you don't have, like, massive pressures all around you, you don't have deadlines to meet, it's just like, "yeah, I can just do my thing." I can focus on what I want to focus on (Oliver, 126).

Oliver encapsulates the sense of a release from obligation ("having your own time") that sits alongside a particular wariness ("the pressure in the back of my mind") described in the remaining three subordinate themes in this section. All the participants celebrate the ability to control their schedule – to remove themselves from the stresses of the imperative to produce something for somebody else. The opportunity to "do my thing" is reported as centrally important in the sample – it's a space for them to live in their idiosyncratic manner, pursue their interests unhindered, create, play, become informed via autodidactic learning, participate in online communities and consume media. For those reporting social incapabilities, the NEET period also allows for control over whom one spends time with, allowing a solitary lifestyle if this is desired. In keeping with Oliver's statement, there is a widespread perception of ambivalence towards this sovereignty – the downsides are a sense of stasis, a feeling of a lack of progression and intrusive feelings of guilt and worry about becoming stagnant and mentally unwell. These are described in the following sections. But to illustrate the positive side of the equation I will present the participants reflections on being able to "focus on what I want to focus on", their creative pursuits.

Given the freedom from meeting the demands of a boss, school or a deadline, many of the participants report an increased ability to engage in hobbies or creative pursuits. Four of the participants report being actively involved in creative projects. Being sovereign of their time allows for these projects to be worked on at a pace that is more compatible with their mysterious and capricious creative impulse.

> ...for the most part, like, you know, creative urges come and go. So some days I won't have any, you know, inspiration to do some drawing but then, you know some days I'll be like "ooh, yeah, I want to do this!" and I'll spend like hours on it and I'll, I'll have it on my desk for days and stuff and I'll just, like everyday I'll keep coming to it and working on it and thinking about what to do next and things (Oliver, 149).

The participants sound different as they report these tasks in a way that is hard to convey in an excerpt, there is an excitement and bittersweet flavour that accompany the more readily readable sense of eagerness in freely giving themselves to the tasks. All four participants who engage in creative pursuits describe them as “hobbies.” These participants suggest that the very fact that these tasks are purely autonomous – that the creative process is less about the products but more about the fascination in making them- is the primary reason for engaging in them. Colin and Oliver report feeling a lack of confidence in their present level of ability, that they may not be good enough to be recognised

> I have ideas for music and art, like but I think a fair bit of it is that I just don't think I'm good enough at it really. I've been doing it for years really but I still don't feel like I know what I'm doing very well. I do know 'what I'm doing' but as in like, I don't feel like what I'm making is good enough as opposed to what anybody else is making (Colin, 162).

The participants are not ready to go public with their art yet – and in Colin’s case this seems linked to his sense of feeling practically incapable. These abilities feel like an enjoyable place to absorb attention and to be enjoyed for their own sake. Perhaps, as these participants mention in the **Incapabilities** section, they would be spoiled by the critical attention of The Other. Robbie is adamant that he has no desire to achieve anything with his art, and writing – his motivation is the enjoyable act of doing it as his whim takes him and not being “productive”, economically or otherwise.

> ...it’s not been motivated by an external thing like "I need to be an artist" - no sense, I've a hard drive full of art and a hard drive full of writing that no-one has ever seen. Um, that I've no intention of showing anyone, I've no intention of working towards some sort of level where I'm recognised. I've got no interest, it's always been purely for my own entertainment, it is entirely entertainment, it’s no different from watching Netflix or playing a video game (Robbie, 275).

With no goal, no audience and no judge, projects can be taken up, tinkered with and abandoned at will and one’s resources need never be marshalled for the sake of anything external. There is an absence of any need to compromise. The participants involved in these creative pursuits report freedom and a joy in the pursuit of creative whims and the development of a portfolio of work – something that they believe would be stymied by engagement in EET activity. Nonetheless, it appears that similar doubts about their fitness for

education, employment and training – particularly about meeting the demands of The Other, pertain to their creative work. Hence these activities are maintained as hobbies and their own business.

6.2 Lack of progress

The participants frequently contrast their impressions of how they are managing their lives and those of their peers in language related to movement. Until recently the sample felt that they were moving with them as young people subject to the institutional procedures of schooling. Oliver, at 19, is the youngest in the sample, refers to this explicitly and the way in which his current lack of a future orientation confers a sense of illegitimacy.

> Yeah, that feeling that I was making progress, so yeah, like "I'm living life", you know, I'm part of... you know when you're in school you're part of the system, you're in the structure and I feel like I've been thrown out of that quite a bit. So, I feel like I just want to get back into, the world and, you know be, be, be a person, be a citizen again. Because I feel like, quite a mysterious nobody sometimes because I don't work and I only go out on occasion, like. I feel like I've just been paused for a while. It's just like, you know, everything's standing still so the feeling of not having a purpose and not making progress is quite, you know, it's quite pressing because it's just like "what am I doing?" (Oliver, 508).

“What am I doing?” is a key question that many of the participants live with. It appears, for Oliver, that stepping aside from the agitation of doing the things that may secure him an adult future opens up a sense of illegitimate purposelessness and sense of living outside of developmental norms. Many of the participants reflect on the sense of illegitimacy described by Oliver in terms of lacking maturity. Movement and progress through accomplishments are expected during this period but many of the participants feel as though they are growing older without growing up.

> [On turning 21 in a few days] I couldn't imagine where I would be in like 5 years’ time or something. Like either: be exactly where I am now or be dead. That's all I can see in my head. I think if I got to 26 then and it were like this my life would be a waste, I just don't see anything ahead of us. I absolutely dread being 30 years old, what happens in 9 years? As I get older it just feels like I'm passing by more and more wasted time. People

> say that 21 is a good time to start something but to me that just feels like more pressure (Colin, 245).

The lack of a future project – seeing something ahead, is connected to theme of **the career agenda**. The image held by Colin appears as the shadow side of the positive mature career identity in the future. Like all the participants, Colin reports a fear that the future may be filled with regret over having nothing to show for these years spent in the time of repose. It is felt that the lack of this productive future image has consequences today for Colin – pressure and a sense of falling short which increases his sense of inadequacy. Aaron suggests that this image and continued commitment to it provide a sense of purpose and maturity in which he feels lacking.

> ...working or being in education, you have a secure future. Right now, my future is just up in the air, I'm not really... not really doing anything. When I'm with my friends, they, they're just like me, they act immature when we play video games together, we can be immature. But it's sad because they also have a future, they, I think, it causes me to be anxious around them sometimes, my friends… they were always the smartest kids in my school so, there was also this added pressure of being like them. They were able to be immature and also have a plan and a future, they had direction. Whereas I didn't. I was just childish, I'm still childish, I just hang out and play video games and I have no, no direction (Aaron, 233).

Hanging out and playing video games is a fun throw-back to Aaron's peers, whilst Aaron himself feels as though he has not moved on from those days yet. To Aaron, there's appears to be a certain maturation capital required to belong to this peer group that he (unbeknownst to the others as he had told no-one that he is NEET) lacks, making him an anxious imposter. Meeting on the level of immaturity appears ironic to him. Oliver attempts to meet at the level of maturity with friends but finds that his inactivity leads to a sense of being left behind.

> I do feel, you know, I feel like I'm much more distant to them. Because, you know, I've stayed here and stopped having, like, such, like activity. Like of course when I meet them, when I see them again, I'm like "Hey! They're back! All my friends are here, and finally it's time to go out and spend time with them." But of course, like, there is the aspect of like: "oh, we've been apart for a long time" and, you know, they have changed, they have made new friends, they've had all these experiences. I've not really done much. I've not got much to talk about, I've not got things to discuss (Oliver, 116).

The participants concerned with maturation feel an absence of progress that makes them feel like less legitimate members of their peer group and less mature than their contemporaries. With less time spent in the time of risk, the participants have less to show for their growing older and consequently they feel left behind of their "on track" contemporaries.

6.3 "Just existing"

All of the participants describe an awareness that they are in the present condition as a result of inactivity, described as "doing fuck all" (Robbie), "it's kind of like being stuck where I am" (Colin) or:

> it's not really something that happened, it's more like something didn't happen and this is just the continuation of things (Alfie, 6).

All but one of the participants report experiential claims about suffering connected to their inactivity. Participants report a feeling of stagnancy of their desire and a disquieting restlessness of thought. The most explicit illustration of this theme is made by Colin, who, having failed to decide on what to do with his life and not working for three years reports a feeling of uselessness.

> You feel, well its not really a feeling exactly, you're just useless, aren't you? You're sat around doing nowt productive. You're not really helping out much. I'm not much use to anybody. It's been close to three years, I don't know really, it probably sounds a bit cliché but you just kind of get numb to it, you stop giving a shit. It's not a good thing but, like... you grow numb to the feeling of being useless.
>
> I: What do you think or feel on those days?
>
> Um... its like I can't focus on anything, I guess. I just, I just feel like I would like to spend the entire day asleep (Colin, 58).

Colin relays a feeling of being condemned by the time spent not being productive and, like other participants, guilt about feeling useless and not being able to help himself. The desire for sleep or unconsciousness suggests a weariness with the choice of how to spend time in a moment, where to focus one's attention in a responsible manner ("giving a shit") when he feels so incapable of being

productive. Other participants report that this restless, desire-less consciousness turns inwardly to problematise itself.

> I've stopped putting myself in the stressful, you know, trying really hard to, put myself in that uncomfortable position and get out there, but at the same time, you know I feel like things aren't happening. Like time isn't passing or something. I'm just, you know, you know, it's it's just nothing happens when, you you you don't have a job and you're not searching for one. It's just there's no progress being made whatsoever, so you just kind of feel quite empty.
>
> I: How does that emptiness manifest itself?
>
> Well, when it's like... you don't have like a drive like that or like a force like that in your life then, then you start noticing other things, like "ooh..." because, you know, if I'm not worrying about... you know getting a job and making progress with a job, then, I, I'm worrying about myself, my self-image or my friends and relationships and things like that. It just leads to a lot of focus on the little bubble I have – instead of driving towards more progress (Oliver, 52).
>
> ...
>
> When you're on your own and you're in your thoughts a lot you get depressed because you're just in your head all the time. You're not looking at small things, you're looking at the big picture because you've got nothing to do (Ben, 73).

In these accounts there is an unsettling feeling of angst: being shackled to an unquiet consciousness and being haunted by the compulsive desire to examine, compare and judge itself. There is a sense that the self, lacking projects and reference points along the way– “the drive” mentioned by Oliver, paradoxically, cannot rest and that it looks at things with an increasingly fixed and unsettling perspective.

Participants who report that they are “just existing” report a paradoxical state of stagnant restlessness that appears connected to being sovereign of their time. Without desire and activity to order their time the mind is experienced as engaging in rumination about the self, particularly looking at the self through the lens of guilt and waste.

6.4 Absorption

Playing computer games, media consumption and long periods of internet browsing are reported by all of the participants. Gaming is evaluated as an activity that is low in value, “mindless” (Oliver), “escapism” (Edward) “distracting” (Robbie) and “a fantasy world” (Ben). Nonetheless, many of the participants report that gaming and the consumption of media have become their primary activity whilst awake.

> No-one questioned me back in school when I was spending, like, 13 hours a day playing games getting, like, no sleep and still going to school, but I, just because now I don't work, I spend exactly the same time but with sleep, now it's an issue (Ben, 227).

Ben’s relationship to the media reflects that of all the sample: gaming has been a leisure activity from long before the NEET period and something of an old friend. The amount of time is not considered a cause for concern in itself, although a couple of the participants suggest concern that their gaming time has increased relative to more outwardly productive tasks.

> I became de-spirited by the personal project thing because I wasn't focusing, I wasn't learning anything really, it was all over the place. I... devolved more into just Reddit and media... so suddenly media became a much large component. Video games as well were improving greatly, becoming a lot easier to run etc., internet improved so all those things meant the media component became a lot bigger and I became much more your classic NEET neckbeard just... browsing media, playing games, distracting myself all day long (Robbie, 118).

The ‘classic NEET neckbeard’ refers to a folk devil from internet culture, typically a geeky, immature, overweight and unkempt- hence ‘neck-beard’, male who escapes from the real world into virtual worlds, impoverishing the former. Robbie describes the increased ease with which his attention can be absorbed by media and its consequent de-valuation of his self-image. Gaming and other hobbies have a soothing function, whilst assailed by the angst and restlessness of “just existing” - the bare facts of their not having made inroads into life is painfully present and the guilt of having been in the time of repose rather than responsibly placing themselves in the time of risk (however incapable they feel about practically doing this). In their own ways, all of the participants report reaching for distractions to absorb attention into something inconsequential and fun.

> Having these, you know, these, like, mindless activities, things that don't take too much focus but they're fun I can... waste time doing them, like it, it, it, leads to me not sitting there thinking about what to do a lot of the time. You know I can just, you know, sometimes I'll get to a point where it is like, "what now, what do I do?" But that doesn't happen too often because, for the most part, it's just kind of like distraction. Like, it's definitely not the best use of my time and if I didn't have it, I definitely just would be sitting around going, like, "I need to change something, I need to do something." But because I have these easy distractions I can, you know, I can just spend my time doing that and kind of forget about other places... other things you know, pursuit of the future (Oliver, 197).

Gaming is described as a reducing the frequency of occasions where Oliver's attention is focussed upon himself, where risk time intrudes and the present becomes a time of imperative. Colin describes his guitar playing in a similar manner – as something to become absorbed in, but this time as a solution to those times where he'd rather not be aware of time passing or when he is at his most despairing.

> If I can just, force me'self to pick up me guitar and get lost in it really- that helps me take my mind off things- it probably the main way I stop thinking about shit. Of how fucking useless I would be- just how little point there is in me existing. The guitar helps me not think about that- as depressing as that sounds (Colin, 68).

To be able to move attention elsewhere and leave the demands behind removes him from dwelling on larger questions and negative answers. The guitar is a long-standing hobby of Colin's and he reports that he is occasionally intrinsically swept up in a creative urge to make music.

However, three of the participants report that they find themselves getting fed up with gaming and other media consumption and fear an ability to enjoy them into the future.

> Sometimes, you can have hundreds of games and then just be like… I don't really want to play any of them. You know you want to play something but you don't know what to pick... I'm just like hunting for one that properly grabs my attention and I can like focus on it and play it for ages (Oliver, 181).

Here gaming is seen as a potentially unreliable source of pleasure and enjoyment, in Oliver's case he wishes for more engrossing games into which he can absorb his attention for more

time. Attention and attachment to those absorbers of attention are seen as unpredictable remedies for the unsettling experience of "just existing."

Conclusion

The participants in this study are part of an isolated and relatively invisible group of young men who view their disposition to reject work as being underpinned by long-standing perceptions of their inability to participate in adult society. The perceptions, which I report in the Incapabilities section, are seen as the outcome of a long period of social alienation from peers, and less commonly a negligent transmission of know-how from parents and schools – that leave these young men feeling as though they lack the basic skills that the adult society, let alone the labour market, requires. Their class and gender position is seen as demanding a prestigious level of career achievement, predicated on an orientation of passion, self-transformation and sacrifice to a future ideal image- to these young men it feels as though this is a demand to become intimately involved with the Other in a way that seems inconceivable and dangerous.

The world of work is considered in the abstract as a hostile place filled with the risk of having one's incapabilities exposed. The participants are aware that they are on a divergent developmental path from the rest of their peers and sense that to returning to the same developmental level will require a personal revolution in conduct. Participants report frequent attempts to execute such a programme followed by failure owing to difficulties resisting compulsive behaviour and a lack identification with the goal of returning to EET.

Discussion

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis that was applied to the transcripts of the eight male NEETs by choice, posited six superordinate themes. The findings and the write up provide a wealth of data on the experience of the participants in the sample. Some of this tallies with existing psychological and sociological research. In this section I shall present each theme in turn and report upon the way it supports or challenges these existing findings as well as the illumination these connections bring to an understanding of the phenomenon of NEET by choice.

Working Expectations

Participants in this study have disclosed a divergent set of dispositions towards work that presently maintain their status as NEET by choice. Four of the participants endorse the statement "I don't presently know what to do with my life", two claim to have attainable job-goals but are more or less tarrying in their pursuit of them and two reject work all together at present owing to beliefs that they cannot manage the demands of having a job (one would prefer not to submit himself to the stress, the other believes it would amount to a dangerous stressor and lead to suicidal thoughts).

Psychologists that have studied the process of the way people choose career have found that the process is deeply connected to perceptions of competence and worth on the one hand and on a person's wishes for the development of a self-concept – tied to prestige on the other (Gottfredson, 2002; Savikas, 2002.)

A disposition towards career indecision, such as that expressed by four of the participants, is not uncommon in the age-group under study, a recent survey of 2200 16-25 year olds found 20% of participants stating that choosing a career path was their most pressing challenge (Princes Trust, 2018). Vocational psychologists have sought to separate the more chronically indecisive from those involved in a more common process of imagining and refining ideas of future occupations through a process of self and environmental exploration (see Super, 1957; Marcia, 1993). Researchers in this field have come to call the outcome of this process an "occupational identity"… "an individual's notion of who s/he would be as a worker, and what kind of work would best suit him/her" (Malanchuk et al, 2010: 99).

Vocational psychologists have determined that the "chronically indecisive" (Fuqua and Hartman, 1983) struggle to make choices across other, non-career, domains of their life. Compared with people who have merely not committed to a career pathway but are otherwise decisive, the "chronically indecisive" report higher levels of anxiety (Santos, 2001; Salomone, 1982), and are more likely to report an external locus of control and low self-esteem (Santos et al, 2014).
The data provided by Colin and Edward in the present study appear to reflect these findings, both report anxiety and low self-esteem across a range of contexts as well as "not knowing what to do" with their lives." "Chronic indecisiveness" does not preclude the accomplishment of choices all together as these persons, like some in our sample, do go on to make commitments to particular education, employment and training pathways. However, longitudinal studies have shown that chronic indecisiveness measured at age 16 predicts lower commitment and choice instability in higher education (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2011).

Participants reported that their decisions to engage in university education were made unreflectively, as a way to meet expectations or leave dispiriting work environments. Barkley-Levenson and Fox (2016) have found an extensive relationship between indecisiveness and impulsivity in a study of 190 adults,

> ...[I]ndecisive and impulsive behaviours both arise as maladaptive responses to the need for deliberation – the same individuals may in some instances respond too quickly when faced with a deliberative decision (resulting in high impulsivity scores) and in other instances hesitate or delay (resulting in high indecisiveness scores) (Barkley-Levenson and Fox, 2016: 5).

These "maladaptive responses to the need for deliberation" are linked to worry, vulnerability and negative affect when having to make a choice. The perception of risk is heightened in individuals who report high "trait anxiety" during important life turning points, such as before an exam (Constans, 2001; Butler and Mathews, 1987). Gottfredson's research on the way young people search for an occupational identity has shown that distress is particularly keen for children of high status families with lower ability, or, like the present study's sample, perceived incapability. Typically, they find themselves having to lower their aspirations to fit with work that is within reach of their sense of capability. The uncertainty and distress mean that a young person seeking to make a compromised career decision is:

> typically unwilling, or unable, to go through the demanding process of gathering and balancing the often vague (their own values) and uncertain (accessibility) information necessary for identifying the best possible choice. (Gottfredson, 2002; 108)

The stress and effort of this exploration can lead to individuals selecting a "good enough" option rather than prolong the uncomfortable searching phase or:

> ...If the individual is not satisfied with the available choices within the social space, he or she will avoid becoming committed to any, if possible. Avoidance may take many forms, including searching for more alternatives, persevering with an untenable choice, reconsidering the tolerable-effort boundary, or simply delaying decisions or commitments (remaining undecided) for as long as possible (Gottfredson, 2002: 106).

In the light of these results the statements given under the sub-theme **Fatalism** – appear understandable – particularly those that suggest that ending up forced to take on a job for their subsistence does not feel, at present, like a catastrophic outcome to be avoided. Having the decision for "what I want to do with my life" taken away would appear to offer some relief.

Self-making

Social scientists have argued that the contemporary transition from youth to adulthood places a demand upon the subject – to become the author of their own lives (Giddens, 1991; Arnett, 2000) – to become:

> the active, autonomous, responsible entrepreneur of his/her own do it yourself project of the self (Kelly, 2006; 24).

In the **Working Expectations** section the participants mostly position themselves as deviating from cultural norms regarding autonomy and self-creation. Without prompting, all of the participants report perceived difficulty with the notion of aspiring, planning and giving themselves to a plan that will carry them over from their education into the world of work. Their lack of accomplishment in this area is frequently described as a defining quality of their NEET condition. The concept of aspiration presented in the findings of the present study are those of affective commitment towards a project of self-development – made more risky owing to the participants perception of their own

inadequacies. Aspiration is a complex psycho-social phenomenon, possessing it is generally lauded in families and the wider culture. It is regarded as a key outcome of education policy, seen as crucial to the knowledge economy and participants base all of their working expectations around the notion. Participants reflect upon it as somehow stepping outside of the flow of one's life involvements, searching within for inspiration, finding enthusiasm and having faith in one's self and the world to the extent that the goal's achievement is seen as probable.

> "...aspiring [is a] relational, felt, embodied process, replete with classed desires and fantasies, defences and aversions, feelings of fear, shame and guilt, excitement and desire" (Allen 2013, 5).

"[D]efences and aversions, feelings of fear" are explicit in the **Career Agenda** and **Defensive Career Planning** subordinate themes, as participants spontaneously describe their imagining of the stresses and demands of the contemporary work place, particularly the office.

Evidence of "classed desires and fantasies" is less explicit – however, four of the participants have attended university and all of those who have not reported that this is held as a possibility. The participants reports of feeling the pressure of "wanting to be something" are reported as imperatives to imagine and attain a 'calling' or, what Treadgold (1999) suggestively calls, a "*transcendent vocation".*

As evidenced in the **Failing to make them proud** and **Men not at work** sections, the participants believe themselves subject to classed and gendered family expectations of attaining a level of prestige, this is felt, in most cases as an unwanted pressure but also as an obligatory reference point against which all other working expectations must be compared.

Middle class masculinities have been shown to be connected with notions of mental toughness (Ingram and Waller, 2014) and the development of a kind of *character* which becomes suspect if the subject fails to achieve below a certain standard – a secure financial independence achieved by one's own efforts (Morgan, 2005). Reay argues that middle class socialisation is typically driven by the desire to create and bolster this character by the inculcation of self-regulation and its importance in fending off the possibility of downward social mobility (amongst other strategies such as using using tutors, "concerted cultivation" of a child's talents in extra-curricular activities or moving into areas with better schools: Lareau, 2003; Reay, 2006; Benson, 2017).

> For many middle-class parents, the imperative to reproduce their privileged class position in their children is profound. And it is in the context of their social class reproduction that middle-class children must prove themselves to be self-regulating, a process that begins in the early years and one which is integral to, and inextricable from, the processes through which the required level of educational success is achieved. (Reay, 2001, p. 341)

IPA cannot be used to make claims about the veracity of what is related in the interview, particularly reports of other people's behaviour toward the interviewee. But the findings suggest that many of the participants sense an expectation that they are required, for reasons of class and gender, to become something beyond what they feel they can be or want to be. This hegemonic masculine position, that of the secure and productive independent man, is conditional on a risky transformational self-project predicated on sacrifice – the means and ends, for the participants in the present study, appear unobtainable and unwanted.

Burke studied a sample of aspiring students and mature students who were to be the first members of their family to enter higher education. She found widespread aspiration for a lifestyle free from precarity, and recognition as a “respectable” man.

> The men, although positioned across different and competing formations of identity, bring into play an imagined hegemonic masculinity in their struggle towards success and respectability. They construct respectable men as university educated, not doing physical work, having a well-paid job, being comfortable but not too wealthy, and having a home and a stable family life (Burke, 2007: 415).

The findings here and in the light of the **Me, myself and I** section, make sense in the light of a masculine class ideal – the entrepreneur. This isn’t to say that there is an expectation for these men to become entrepreneurs but to engage with the process of education, training and employment in an entrepreneurial manner: through an individualised project of self-construction. The shift in the focus of education from learning to promoting skills and employability, it is argued, encourages the creation of an active entrepreneurial subject that is key for the successful transition (particularly for the middle classes) into the world of EET.

> "...[A] subject who should forever be open to and responsive to signals – from the markets, from risks and dangers, from opportunities.... This articulation works to construct a view of the subject as an individual producer-consumer who, in certain quite

> fundamentally new ways is not just an enterprise but the entrepreneur of himself or herself (Kelly, 2006: 24).

Entrepreneurs of the self are necessarily alone, having to take a risk-based probabilistic approach to opportunities – required to develop skills and competencies to make themselves more marketable. University education is a medium through which one can enact many of these imperatives.

> With notions of the market at the centre of government policy, the key role of… [Higher Education] is constructed as enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Burke, 2007: 413).

Nonetheless, for many of the men in Burke's study, "aversive educational memories" were felt to be an obstacle on the path to this respectability. Burke's participants believed that they were "lazy" and disorganised – that the main effort of attaining respectability was the internalisation of a regime of self-discipline. This had to be done alone, the success of this effort of restraint and sacrifice would show that they deserved to belong in Higher Education and this respectable new life (Burke, 2007). There are some parallels between the findings of Burke's research and the present study, particularly in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section – those participants who wished to re-enter the labour market believed this was conditional on their personal project of regaining confidence, instituting autodidactic projects and purging bad habits.

From a demographic perspective, the participants all belong in the intermediary occupations and above by dint of their parents' occupations. Regarding the parents' educational achievement, only two of participants belong to families where a parent had attended university before their 20s (2 other participants had parents who had been mature students). A lack of cultural knowledge of post-secondary institutions by parents has been demonstrated to reduce undergraduate's academic confidence and the sense of belonging in university education at all (Lareau and Cox, 2011; Reay 2011). In all but two of the present study's participants' cases, the NEETs by choice are expected to do something which is not within the lived experience of the family – attend university as an undergraduate and (as seen in the **Career agenda**) gain a prestigious career from having done so. These participants are being asked to "do better" and generate a respectable self-project via higher education in a way their parents had not. Beyond the present sample, this phenomenon has been shown to be widely prevalent among those in the participants' age range – bringing risks that some young people are unprepared for what they are being asked to do. Looking at 3 British cohort studies begun in 1958, 1970 and 1990, Ingrid Schoon (2010) found an increase in the expression of

academic expectations and a reduction in the influence of parental educational attainment upon these expressions – suggesting:

> "the emergence of a new norm of further education for all, regardless of academic aptitude and social background. Given the risk for failure, especially for those who are least prepared for further studies... there is a need to... recognise the role of non-academic skills, such as school motivation. More attention should also be paid to providing relevant information regarding changing education and employment opportunities, how to prepare for the transition from school to work and how to motivate young people in the school context" (Schoon, 2010: 115).

This focus on entrance into university education being an end in itself has been documented elsewhere and has been linked to incoherent transitions and later experiences of vocational drift (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Skorikov and Vondraeck, 2011). The pitfalls of such a strategy can be seen in the present study- particularly in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section. Expectation, in many of the sample's situations feels like a burden to become something they are not, in the absence of emotional assistance with the transition – the participants' autonomous attempts to launch themselves via education have misfired.

The successful aspiring subject possesses both a clear image of the future but also an agenda for the present – that of the value of present tasks and responsibilities for attaining future goals (Walker and Tracey, 2012; Husman and Shell, 2008). The subordinate theme **The career agenda** illustrates that many in the sample feel that this calls for radical yet implausible transformation of their personal conduct. Becoming somebody, means becoming somebody that they are not. And a purely agentic self-transformation is considered improbable by the participants, mostly owing to feelings of alienation, confusion and incapability. This reflects what many critics have indicated as the kind of shadow narrative that underpins the discourse of aspiration – that it "attempts to erase issues of social identity and inequality and positions individual students as 'consumers'... and equal players" (Burke, 2007:414).

> The aspirational self is oriented toward the enterprising and self-regulating individual who can adeptly navigate various hazards and insecurities. Those that fail to manage risk are held solely responsible for their life "choices" and trajectories (Stahl et al, 2017).

Participants report a belief that aspiring and committing to a career are too risky, likely to lead to failure or continuous demand for conformity that will expose their fragile parts, their sense of their **Incapabilities.** Some participants believe in tackling these weaknesses through a project of self-work before embarking on a career, while others have reported a wish to find jobs which would not require this self-work. Both of these positions are reported alongside feelings of shame and guilt – which have appeared to motivate Aaron and Alfie to lie to their families in order to avoid the consequences of their perceived failure. Others, such as Robbie and Ben, reject the career agenda all together.

Incapabilities

The entire sample reported long-standing fears about either their social or practical capability (their ability to engage in work-related performance) or both. A central finding of this study is that the participants have felt deficient as social or practical people for many years and this has pre-emptively circumscribed their belief in what is possible in the transition from school to work.

Social Incapability

The concerns reported by those reporting social incapabilities include a fear of negative evaluations by others, an undervaluation of their social skills and self-focussed attention- all of which undermine spontaneity and confidence in social situations. These subjective phenomena have traditionally been clustered together, into the psychiatric diagnosis, “social anxiety” (Clark and Wells, 1995; Bates, Campbell and Burgess, 1990; Wallace and Alden, 1997, Roa et al, 2007). Two of the participants appear to have researched the condition and believe their experience tallies with the diagnosis, like many people with these kinds of impairments the participants had not sought help, feeling instead a sense of shame and unworthiness (Essau et al, 1999; Kessler et al, 2003).

Research suggests that this state is particularly inhibitive of successful transitions into higher education or employment. Social anxiety has been shown to be, among population and clinical surveys, the common mental disorder (including other forms of anxiety and depression) most correlated with unemployment (Moitra et al, 2011; Patel et al, 2002). Social anxiety is also uniquely predictive, among the common mental disorders, of the avoidance of going onto university education (Kessler et al, 2003) and its presence makes dis-enrolling more likely compared with controls (Arjanggi and Kusumaningsih, 2016). Social anxiety has also been shown to make

individuals more likely to refuse promotions owing to the fear of new social settings in which one will have to manage impressions (Stein and Deutsch, 2003).

These findings all find support in the above research, the participants reporting fears about their social capabilities present wishes to withdraw and avoid scrutiny by The Other and their reflections on the NEET period suggest that this is a way of finding temporary safety. The tendency for the socially anxious to seek more controllable social situations can be seen in five of the participants' reports of **defensive career planning** – the question is not 'what do I want to do with my life?', rather, 'how can I avoid strangers as much as possible?'

Rather than meeting the world as equal existential agents with The Other, the impression given by those reporting social incapability is that the world of EET will be a high risk testing ground for defensive strategies, objectified in the narrow terms of 'how this person will evaluate me in this conversation.' The possibility to be affected by the Other and to learn about oneself in their presence is cut off. A perceived inability to perform as expected becomes a source of distress, the objectification of the Other as fearful becomes reified, and considered behavioural responses for future encounters are deemed to be necessary. The game becomes high-stakes in the post-industrial knowledge economy where:

> …productivity... take[s] the form of co-operative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks." (Hardt and Negri, 2001:294).

In other words, social competence is expected as the price of entry into the knowledge economy, particularly for prestigious positions.

Practical Incapabilities

A key facet of the participants' accounts were a lack of belief in their self-competence, for four of the participants this was of central importance and led to an unwillingness to commit to a job-search, fearing rejection or being overwhelmed by the demands of work. These self-perceptions accord with the work Uchida and Norasakkunkit (2015) who created a scale that could be used to measure "psychological tendencies that are associated with [the] marginalization" experienced by Japan's *hikikomori* and NEETs. The researchers, in their factor analysis separated self-perceptions of competence from perceptions of the work environment – in a manner similar to that posited in

the present study, their 2nd factor "lack of self-competence" contains the following questions which participants respond to using a Likert Scale: - "I think my basic abilities are low," "I think that my knowledge and skills are at low levels," "There are times where I think that I am not needed in society" "Mingling with others is hopelessly difficult for me." In their confirmatory internet survey of 7000 young people, the researchers found that responses to this factor were predictive of NEET and *hikikomori* status.

The data presented by those who report a sense of practical incapability could be interpreted as reflecting what is referred to as *low self-efficacy* – reflecting beliefs about "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (Bandura, 1982: 122), relating to the specific tasks of advancement in employment, education or training, as well as *low self-esteem* – more general evaluative beliefs about the self. This is best demonstrated by Robbie who reports low self-efficacy with regard to his abilities to engage in any kind of work-related activity but an absence of overt self-condemning evaluations such as "useless" (Colin and Edward) and "pathetic" (Aaron). It is quite clear that for Robbie, the lack of EET accomplishment does not impinge upon him in the way as it does with Oliver, Colin and Aaron, confirming a tenet of Savikas's career development theory – that occupational role has greater salience for some in their self-evaluation than it does for others:

> Occupations provide a core role and a focus for personality organisation for most men and women, although for some individuals this focus is peripheral, incidental, or even non-existent. Then other life roles such as student, parent, home-maker, "leisurite," and citizen may be at the core (Savikas, 2002).

Both low self-esteem and low self-efficacy inspire pessimism with regard to EET activities and both form part of a more general "self-concept" with which, according to career development theorists, individuals think about their compatibility with future vocational roles (Savikas, 2002; Gottfredson, 2002). However, it would be important for psychologists working with these individuals to be able to determine what NEETs by choice mean when they say "I won't be able to do that".

NEET by Choice: The Blooming of Developmental Deficits?

Participants in both sections of the **Incapabilities** section report that these vulnerabilities are not felt to be recent arrivals, indeed some are seen as essential parts of the self-concept. Regarding social skills and practical skills particularly, participants seem to hold a view that they have missed out on a period of optimal development for these and they are now too old to develop them or they are too

far behind the peloton of their contemporaries to be able catch up. This perception is compatible with the view of identity development theorists (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Super, 1957) that identity accomplishment is influenced by the extent to which a young person's needs are fulfilled at periods in their life that are defined by changes in cognitive capacity, relational and social expectations. Successful development – where these needs are provided for by caregivers, institutions and wider society allow for the opportunities for growth, self-awareness, learning and recognition of a new capability. Each stage, however, holds risks for these needs failing to be met or, according to Erik Erikson, the crisis that the new social and practical demands engender leads to a solution that is more or less flexible (influenced by the flexibility of socialising agents and the confidence derived from the successful attainment of previous stages) (Erikson, 1968). Stage theorists disagree about which stages promote which capabilities and the present study offers little to recommend one over another, however they offer a compelling frame through which to understand the participants sense of their status of NEET by choice being underpinned by long-standing inadequacy that may be too late to remedy.

These incapabilities are what sociologist Ulrich Beck had in mind when he talked of "the radicalization of social inequalities" (Beck, 2007: 698) at what was then the dawn of what he called "*the risk society*." Choice, in theory, is meant to take a far more central role in the process of self-creation (old structures like geographic location, social class, gender and ethnicity are argued as having an increasingly marginal effect upon the process) so individuals are now compelled to assume the risk and responsibility for choosing among a vast range of possibilities themselves, even those at a considerable disadvantage.

> Institutional guidelines appear on the scene to organise your own life.... The crucial difference is that modern guidelines actually compel the self organisation and self-thematisation of people's biographies. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 23-24)

This requires the kind of self-leadership which is wished for in the participants' statements on **Fragmented Intentionality**, wilful, focussed and self-managing of projects of self-improvement. The sad reality for the participants is that their long-standing incapabilities make even this much harder. Fouad and Bynner (2008) have shown that soft skills such as self-awareness, flexibility and adaptability are increasingly critical for labour market participation and that these are shaped by social contexts (the quality of relationships with peers, family and institutions) rather than credentials – such shaping, as demonstrated in the **Me, myself and I** section, is notably absent from sample. That individuals can be in a position to not want for material wealth yet lack a sense of faith in themselves and the world around

them is at the crux of the NEET by choice position. This dysjunction is best illustrated from an unusual source, Nobel Prize winning economist Robert Fogel in his speculative work on the impact of Evangelism on equality in the United States.

> "To achieve self-realisation, each individual must have an understanding of life's opportunities, a sense of which of these opportunities are most attractive to him or her at each stage of life, and the requisite educational, material and spiritual resources to pursue these opportunities. In the era that is unfolding, fair access to spiritual resources will be as much a touchstone of egalitarianism as access to material resources was in the past.… Spiritual commodities... include the whole range of immaterial commodities that are needed to cope with emotional trauma and that, more often than not are transferred between individuals privately, rather than through the market. Such resources include a sense of purpose, a sense of opportunity, a sense of community, a strong family ethic, a strong work ethic and high self-esteem." (Fogel, 2000:178)

If this reading of the knowledge economy is correct, the participants' lack of these immaterial assets, these capabilities do render the participants at a great disadvantage.

Assisted Living

In this section, participants communicated that part of being NEET by choice involves the taking up a position towards cultural norms surrounding the accomplishment of (or working towards) financial independence by people of their age group. Participants also presented a sense of, whilst having their subsistence taken care of, lacking emotional and practical support from their families, particularly with regard to how to manage the transition from school to work.

Dependence is seen by most of the participants as a moral and personal failing, bringing feelings of shame and embarrassment and a sense of personal immaturity. For some of the participants it is taken to be stigmatising, for others it maintains relationships with the family that are felt to be out of sync with their current wishes for autonomy and self-direction. Dependency is justified on the basis that the participants feel that their incapabilities render them unable to support themselves without serious risks to their mental health. Yet despite the reluctance to assume adult roles on an EET pathway there is a desire by the participants to be recognised as psychologically mature.

Both financial and emotional independence is prized by the participants. The present study lends support to research into the effects of dependence on parents for residence and financial assistance into young adulthood. Dependence has been shown to have a wide range of co-related effects in relation to a young adult's self-concept: lower self-efficacy (Mortimer et al, 2016), increased depressive symptoms in those struggling to find employment (Copp et al, 2017) and increased nonchalance about the timing of projects relevant to attaining full independence (Dubois-Reymond, 1998, Hardie and Stanick, 2012).

It is difficult to contextualise these findings without recourse to norms and evaluations. The attribute of independence is highly valued in the West, and yet as developmental theorists suggest, that physical, emotional and behavioural competencies all grow from an initial state of relational dependence (Winnicot, 1960; Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Erikson, 1968). Adolescence, however, is broadly understood to be the time where these competencies are developed into:

> ...some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood... [This is *identity crisis* associated with the adolescent years, where the subject] must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be (Erikson, 1958, 14).

There is widespread agreement across the social sciences that the economic and social changes following the end of the post-war consensus have led to the extension of the period of adolescence, owing to the increasing difficulty of attaining the culture's psychosocial markers of adulthood (Woodman and Wynn, 2014; Furlong, 2012). Developmental tasks theories differ in their emphases but share the assumption that psychosocial tasks must be undertaken in order for one to be recognised as adult by others and for a subjective sense of commitment to these norms. Completion of these tasks is not a given, they depend upon personal and social resources including the extent to which tasks from a previous developmental period were completed. One of these is the establishment of an orientation towards financial and emotional independence from their parents – it's actualisation is a key achievement in the shift into an adult identity (Havighurst, 1972; Erikson, 1968, Arnett 2000) In the present study, independence is idealised by the participants as a way of managing the demands of others, in less extreme forms it is about being able to attain a level of self-respect and self-esteem that would allow them to face others on more equal terms. Participants who described greater social alienation report that it would allow them to put a greater distance between themselves and unwanted social interaction. There is something paradoxical about these desires,

their fulfilment requires an engagement with others on a level quite out of step from the participants' current lifestyle preferences.

This unevenness in the samples' inroads towards independence can be seen as extreme manifestations of the inconsistency which is a hallmark of contemporary adolescence according to Hurrelman and Quenzel (2015).

> ...adolescence today is characterised by status insecurity. The status passage does not lead to any fixed endpoint. It has lost the notion of a secure and safe transition from one social position to another (Hurrelman and Quenzel, 2015: 265).

It is argued that contemporary adolescents have a less clearly structured transition into gainful employment compared with previous generations, and many lack the will or expectation of financial security to envision founding a family. Meanwhile their roles as consumers and as participants in political endeavours are as developed and perhaps even more sophisticated than those of adults. Some parts of the self are therefore felt to be mature and independent, while other (those that afford recognition of maturity and independence) are occluded. This inconsistency is reported to demand a creative project of self-management...

> depend[ing] on the competence to generally follow societal expectations but also on the competence to manage life's internal and external demands by means of an individually determined standard of implementation of the developmental tasks (Hurrelman and Quenzel, 2015: 268).

An example is goal setting, limiting leisure pursuits and instituting projects to develop soft skills and contacts (Hurrelman and Quenzel, 2015) – which are, as we have seen in the **Fragmented Intentionality** and **Career Agenda** sections, the kinds of ventures with which the participants struggle. However, participants have reported a variety of moral positions which suggest the development of such individually determined standards. NEET by choice and the costs that this has for the individual could be seen as such a standard. Participants tended to respond to questions concerning dependency and their decision to be NEET as requiring moral justification – this was not sought by the interview question, which merely asked whether they had experienced judgement from others. Their moral reasoning that justifies dependency coalesces around two positions, although they are not exclusive.

Firstly, a relativist, immorally inclusive position held by Robbie, Alfie and Ben: that those in the higher echelons of society are unjust and their destructive impact is so great that these participants' dependency is of little consequence or even justified. Personal happiness and freedom are key for the determination of the moral question of dependency, although concessions are made for the sake of family accord (the majority of Ben's benefits as rent, Robbie's housework in exchange for money for entertainment purposes).

Aaron, Colin and Simon and Edward hold to a more conformist position, they are expected to become independent via education and work and accept that they should attend to this. Current dependence is justified as a means to an end – that they currently make use of this reliance upon others to undergo the self-work that they believe is required before they can meet these expectations.

These two positions tally with Kohlberg's earlier stages of moral reasoning – itself a developmental psychology theory that posits that, with increased age, moral reasoning becomes decreasingly egoistic and more inclusive of other points of view and, ultimately, universal ethical positions (Kohlberg, 1984). That the participants reason at a more egoistic or on more conformist levels may be a function of their limited exposure to relationships that provide the impetus for independent moral experimentation. Moral reasoning at the upper, post-conventional levels of Kohlberg's model has been shown to be predicted by attendance of university (Jaffe and Hyde, 2000) involvement in extra-curricular community activities (such as football coaching), political activities (Padilla-Walker, 2016) and by the self-reported quality of parent-child and friendship relationships (Malti and Buchannan, 2010). That these participants commonly report histories of social alienation (and a fear of intimate involvement with the Other) lends weight to these findings and suggests that for NEETs by choice, the decision not engage in EET is regarded as a moral question, though one reasoned from premises whose narrowness reflect a certain ingenuousness and lack of exposure to opportunities for their refinement.

Haidt (2003) argues that the majority of human interaction in which morals are relevant is known through moral emotions – Haidt goes so far as to suggest that moral reasoning is often taken to be an epiphenomenon, our rational faculty's attempt to make sense of this other palpable moral experience.

Alfie anticipates anger at the thought of being held to the standards of "everybody else" with regard to job-hunting success (or lack of it). Edward and Colin's "guilt at feeling useless" -

Oliver and Robbie's "embarrassment", Aaron's self- condemnation "pathetic" is more suggestive of shame. These are all at some level to do with repute and their falling short of expectations that are, we have discovered, congruent with their age.

Thus, for Robbie, embarrassment is elicited when he asks for his parents to give him money for social activities (nights out, pub visits and holidays with friends). It is clear from other parts of the interview that he wishes to avoid the charge of parasitism and to ask for money for purely hedonistic purposes draws attention to this interpretation of his intentional dependency. He reportedly arrived at this new settlement with his parents when he was 21. Haidt suggests that the moral component of shame and embarrassment comes from their action tendencies – the unpleasant feeling is a spur to "generally make people conform to rules and uphold the social order" (Haidt, 2003: 861). However, shame is considered the more disturbing feeling as it correlates with others becoming appraised of a morally defective part of the "self" which may, for instance mark them as an untrustworthy affiliate for future exchange, stigmatised and deserving of scorn and rejection. Another action potential associated with shame is a motivation to hide and withdraw- demonstrated by Oliver's increasingly distant relationship with his parents and Robbie making fewer demands for his parents' money for social pursuits (Haidt, 2003). Moral emotion and their threat to a sense of repute with the family are linked to the failing to meet expectations as mature middle class men, as observed in the **Working Expectations** and **Lack of Progress** sections – participants experience the emotion most keenly through family members calling into question their moral fibre or in the anticipation of this occurring, leading two of the participants to deceive their families about their status.

At the same time, participants report, to varying extents, a sense of being historically left to themselves to arrange the means through which to become EET. A review of the support given to young people during the 18-24 year period identifies two qualitatively different forms of support given by parents: financial support – gifts or loans of money, practical support and co-residency, and affective support- emotional support and advice (Sage and Johnson, 2012). The participants report no want of financial support, most have continued to co-reside with their family in the same configuration as they had done since they were still in school, only Alfie has left home to live with his partner but reports still accepting monetary gifts on his birthday. Participants do, however, report a lack of closeness and very few examples of explicit advice or supportive conversations about career goals (however, it is also the case that some participants appear to be actively preventing the possibility of this, either through deception about their NEET status or by avoiding this topic of conversation).

Unsurprisingly, the level of affective support that a parent offers a young person is moderated by the quality of the parent-child relationship (Parrott and Bengston, 1999). Parent child closeness between the ages of 12 and 18 has been shown to predict the offspring's perceived attainment of entry into adult roles (e.g. co-habiting with a partner, being involved in a career that accords with their aspirations) up to age 26 (Johnson and Benson, 2012). The majority of the participants perceive a lack of closeness with parents: Oliver, Ben and Edward reportedly rarely speak to their parents, Alfie and Aaron limit contact to preserve their deceptions about being NEET by choice, Simon reported that both parents were alcoholics during his school years, Robbie describes his parents as "somewhat absent", while Colin implies the greatest closeness to his parents yet reports never having discussed his career aspirations (or lack of them).

Such an analysis risks simplifying the parent-child relationship over the life course of the NEET by choice, for instance, Oliver reports warmth and closeness with his parents before turning 13, the birth of his younger sister and his growing social unease led to his reported withdrawing from the relationship and entering a more "me, myself and I" position. Such behaviour, as well as lack of success in the world of EET have been shown to increase parental ambivalence towards their offspring (Fingerman et al, 2006). Oliver is the only participant to have provided this much chronological detail about his relationship with his parents – IPA is not designed to offer a 'whodunnit' of who is at fault, but the present study's analysis does convey the sorts of responses that are made to a lack of assistance, a rather fearful and ad-hoc assemblage of values and projects (perhaps made impulsively to avoid pressure from parents).

There are parallels with the work of Luthar et al, (2013) who found that affluent young people were more likely to engage in substance misuse and report a greater incidence of depression and anxiety if they perceived themselves as being subject to high parental expectation for their personal success whilst reporting low parental availability.

Participants suggest that the assisted living upon which NEET by choice depends is an unhappy state of a dependence that feels, to all involved, past its sell-by-date, replete with feelings of shame and having to respond to demands for greater mature self-leadership from a position of felt immaturity and incapability.

Alienation

The participants in the alienation section describe a perception of feeling distant from others and from the norms of society.

Five of the participants reported ostracism from their peers and one reported being bullied throughout secondary school and sixth form college. Rosie Green and colleagues at the National Centre for Social Research found, in their sample of 13,000 British school children, that bullying-particularly being socially ostracised, doubled the odds of becoming NEET at age 16 (Green et al, 2010). Specifically in Simon's case, his reported experience echoes that of a study into belonging and depression – a sense of belonging was found to be the most powerful protective factor that prevented the development of depression in adult-age children of alcoholic parents (Lee and Williams, 2013).

A sense of belonging as an internalised state of being able to rely upon a social network has been of increasing interest to psychologists, particularly in the wake of current interest in *social scaffolding* – the way in which social connectedness and its lack interact with mental health and illness (see Williams et al, 2019). Belonging:

> …can be defined as frequent personal contacts or interactions with another person, ideally, positive but mainly free from conflict and negative effects… marked by stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future (Hindley, 2019, 72).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that the key factor is the sense of predictability of feeling accepted and actively included in a particular social collective's dealings with the world. Indeed, a sense belonging to social groups that are relevant for a child's age (part of a school, a wider network of relatives, organisations, sports teams etc) have been posited as key for a child's social development.

> Children who miss out on positive belonging often cannot relax into their lives in order to take up opportunities for developmental growth. This generally means that they find learning very difficult, and that they behave in such a way that people reject them (Hart et al, 2007: 63).

Indeed, we see that many of the participants who report feelings of being ostracised also report lacking "social skills" which they represent as a key stumbling block within their social incapabilities. This is a key prediction made by Williams (1997) model of ostracism, who argues that the practice signals threat to key needs – belonging, self-esteem, a sense of control and a meaningful existence. When ostracised these needs have to become internalised which can create a viscous circle of withdrawal and further rejection mentioned by Ben and Edward.

> a prolonged lack of belongingness may lead to feelings that one does not belong anywhere; the constant threat to self-esteem is likely to assist in the downward spiral of self-belief and affect resulting in chronic low self-esteem (Williams and Zardo, 2001: 31).

Several participants report a rejection of social norms around the work ethic: particularly those of post-industrial capitalism and the culture of "work-ism" (Thompson, 2019; see also Frayne, 2015; Weeks, 2011). Participants report varying degrees of disdain for those that go through the motions of the **career agenda**, fulfilling its demand to sacrifice comfort, placing oneself into risky and tedious environments without the guarantee of security later on. Participants believe that others are operating under an alienated moral position that has been uncritically absorbed, styling themselves in a manner similar to David Frayne's (2015) research on individuals who have reduced their working hours – as individuals from whom the veil of Maya (in this instance the foregrounding of the work ethic as the value that surpasses all others) had fallen and arriving at their own autonomous moral position.

> "Alienated moral cognition is operating when the values an individual possesses are not the product of their own reflection but rather dependent on external value schemas that are accepted as valid." (Thompson, 2013)

This "moral individualism" is not uncommon among the age-group under study, and quite frequently such views can sit easily alongside otherwise conventional consumerist values (Smith et al, 2011). Looking at the Japanese *hikikomori* phenomenon and using Robert Merton's strain theory to understand Japanese labour market entrants response to the increasing liberalisation of Japanese labour markets (and thus increased uncertainty): found it beneficial to think of the going through the motions group as "ritualists" and the *hikikomori* "retreatists" - those who lack the psychological qualities required to interact well with increasingly competitive dominant social expectations and who reject the means and the goals associated with these norms. In this account: vulnerability, avoidance and expressed rejection of cultural norms are correlated rather than in a sequential causal

relationship, all three feed each other and reduce the possibility of their agency to take a more active stance for or against cultural norms – either to conform or to create some other innovative response (e.g. political or other autonomous projects within the arts) (Tovionen et al, 2011).

Hurrleman and Quenzel (2016) have theorised that adolescents' responses to the uncertainty over the possibility of attaining full independence (in an increasingly competitive labour market and mounting political crises) focus increasingly on leisure and political identities. One manner in which this is achieved is through the expression of a sense of political independence via online forums (Boyd et al, 2011). A sense of belonging as "young contrarians" does offer an opportunity to perform a form of middle class masculinity (the late Christopher Hitchens was mentioned as a role model in Ingrams (2014) study on middle class masculinity), and provides for the subjects' needs for recognition (of one's autodidactic learning) and belonging in spite of lacking independence in the area of work and domestic relationships. Research on what drives people to online communities suggests that users participate in order to find access to specific information, as well as finding social support with like-minded persons who may be hard to otherwise access (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). The endorsement of positions of nihilism, absurdism and even anti-natalism, may well reflect discourse from the online environment in which these participants were sourced (Reddit.com), that may nonetheless find a fertile ground in these participants frustrated sense of independence and fear of failure. Research by Bernard et al (2006) found that normative alienation was associated with greater levels of anxiety and distress unless subjects found an alternative community with whom they shared values and outlook. This is perhaps best illustrated by Edward who reports having made significant progress in terms of his perceived lack of social capability after joining a Discord NEET community and eventually becoming an administrator of his own NEET support server. This loss of faith in mainstream society and turning to other sources of recognition and inclusion echoes the findings of Rose et al (2012), whose Merseyside NEETs turned to family and peers rather than the world of EET. Lacking these options, owing to social alienation, participants appear to turn to alternative online communities for recognition and inclusion.

It may be argued that both of these forms of alienation are responses to privation across the domains, both the social environment that the young people encountered as children and the wider society which appears to provide only conditional welcome on the basis of a work identity which is increasingly difficult to actualise. What appears common is a shutting out of the possibility of being nourished by others – others are too dangerous or too deluded to be capable of helping the

participants. This greatly limits the possibility for resilience – the possibility for a person to find their way to health sustaining resources be they informal personal relationships or professional help.

Fragmented Intentionality

This theme records participants' thoughts about their inability to direct themselves in a manner to reach ideal end points. Wishes to act in a manner to change their circumstances are enacted but felt to be fragile and liable to fail owing to misdirection of energy, hesitation and a feeling of powerlessness in the face of rouge "parts" of the self which are felt to disrupt the outcome.

Participants report a process of idealisation followed by reports of this struggle using metaphors of force and pushing against the momentum of an errant intentionality. Marion Milner's (1934/2011) *A Life on One's Own*, an attempt by the psychoanalyst to render and become present to the meaning of her myriad 'back of the mind' thoughts over the course of 7 years of study, recalls her attempts to understand the workings of "willing":

> It seemed as if I had been used to treating thought as a wayward child which must be bullied into sitting in one place and doing one thing continuously, against its natural inclination to go wandering, to pick one flower here and another there, to chase a butterfly or climb a tree. So progress in concentration had at first meant strengthening my bullying capacity (ibid, 73)

Milner suspects that her lapses of concentration, of which she fought with over the course of her explorations, derived from a feeling of fear and shame at her perceived inadequacies – all of which were to be corrected by this wilful direction of concentration onto material that would make her more acceptable to others. That self-bullying and escape were in, fact, two sides of the same coin:

> The secret of lack of concentration seems to me to be fear, guilt, a continual running away, escaping, hiding – a sense that what one is doing at the moment won't save one, but something else is better – always the thing you are not doing is going to be the only thing (ibid, 72).

Her reflexive project, and the enhanced presence towards these parts this developed, allowed her to gain a greater understanding of the role of her habits of thought, how she could in unguarded moments fall into trains of thought ("a perpetual self-centred chatter") that would make her liable to:

> live in a world of distorted make-believe, cut off from any vital contact between my real needs and my real circumstances (ibid, 157).

Milner's contention, that she found herself controlled and blinded by a Manichean struggle in relation to her will show parallels with the participants in the present study. Her solution, to face and understand the unreflective life of the mind through years of self-analysis appears to be the opposite to the **absorption** in media and hobbies reported by the participants who appear to value the temporary "cut off from any vital contact" between their "real needs" and "real circumstances." The parts described in this section appear to refer to a self-judgemental awareness linked to the awareness of making these unconstructive choices in the past. That these parts are considered hostile and/or ultimately stronger than the will power of the participant is consistent with research into the related negative self-evaluations reported by people troubled by compulsive procrastination: procrastinators report lower self-compassion (Sirois, 2014) greater levels of shame (Fee and Tangney, 2000) and incompetence (Flett et al, 2012).

Sioris and Pychyl (2013) argue that procrastination is a strategy for the short-term regulation of negative affect (when involved in important tasks that demand sustained self-control) and is connected with a number of intra-personal strategies that disconnect the procrastinator from the consequences of their actions on their future selves. We see evidence of this in the present study with participants' reports of **Fatalism** and a desire for forgetting about the future in reported preferences for tasks related to **Absorption**.

Existential psychotherapists believe that this disconnection from a procrastinator's commitment to their future is caused by the anxiety of being truly alone with the responsibility to act at this moment (and henceforth in a step-by-step manner until the job is done) (Holzey-Kunz, 2019; Yalom, 1980). There is no shortcut for Edward to learn Japanese – he just has to keep choosing to study and he will slowly improve, if he continues to choose to invest his time thus, he will reach his goal, choosing to play games will work against this. Choosing not to act responsibly leads to an increase in existential guilt, regret at the unmet possibilities, dredging up painful thoughts of how the procrastinator has wasted precious time and "may be guilty of transgression against oneself" (Yalom, 1980; 277.) Participants appear dimly aware of this fact, as seen in the **'Just Existing'** section, and researchers have shown that tasks are more likely to be avoided by procrastinators if they are perceived as difficult and are tied to feelings of personal regret – that the task is connected to a lost opportunity owing to previous procrastination (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998).

With regard to future orientation, the participant's view of "motivation", "getting my shit together" and "pushing out of the comfort zone" is that of being in possession of a faulty and limited attribute with which to project themselves through aversive circumstances into a brighter future. As the participants suggest this is conditional on an ideal future-self – an enthusiasm has to be brought to bear. Regarding a future EET condition, participants have described in the **Working Expectations** section, that the perception of a future working self is, at best, ambivalent and, in other cases, implausible (particularly seen under the sub-theme **Losing the will**). The lack of a future-orientation (the endorsements of statements concerning future goal setting) has been shown to be negatively correlated with procrastination behaviours, while endorsing statements concerning a fatalistic attitude towards the future and a hedonistic attitude to the present was positively correlated (Ferrari and Diaz-Morales, 2007; Jackson et al, 2003).

The appeal to willpower, particularly the will power that their future selves may be required to apply in a manner that their present selves cannot, appears connected to beliefs of complete self-engineered transformation such as those attributed to successful people in wider society. Furlong and Cartmel (2006) have described this phenomenon as the "epistemological fallacy" resulting from being embedded in neo-liberal discourses of individualisation (e.g. "working hard" is the primary factor for future success – a belief endorsed by 83% of Francischelli and Keating's, 2018 survey of 16-20 year olds), and a lack of awareness of the influence of structural forces on their lives. While Burke suggests that

> 'Successful' individuals as those who are determined to rise above their problems through their own motivation, hard work and discipline. (Burke, 2007).

This appeal is criticised by critical psychologists as locating moral responsivity for inequalities, past traumas and other failures of the social environment as belonging solely to the subject who has to evoke some ephemeral power in order to overcome the consequences of these environmental hindrances.

> ...when there is no power available to the individual from the social environment (either now or historically), there is no further, or ultimate source of power upon which he or she can be expected to call simply by virtue of being human (Smail, 2001, 23)

Thinking in terms of immaterial assets, described in the **Incapabilities** discussion section, as well as the environmental deficits reported in **Lack of Assistance** and **Alienation** that it appears that participants have simply lacked the requisite power and immaterial assets to

effect a change of behaviour – why would they if their beliefs about **The Career Agenda** are so ambivalent?

Thurlby-Campbell and Bell (2017) found this phenomena in their qualitative research focusing on experiences of agency among NEETs (conflating NEETs from many circumstances):

> Parents and families [and experience in school] influence… the... shaping of unique (i.e. heterogeneous) habitual patterns of agency that develop throughout the life course (Thurlby-Campbell and Bell, 2017: 115).

What critical psychologists might say about Milner's efforts were that she was able to progressively make use of the power she had, her education (she obtained a first class honours degree in Psychology at UCL in 1924), self-discipline and considerable gifts for writing to see her through the "doubts, delays, and expeditions on false trails" (Milner, 1934/2001: xxxiii). The participants' perceptions of their incapabilities and their negative perceptions of where their efforts will land them are impediments to their ability to hold themselves in this space of anxiety.

The NEET Lifestyle: Sovereignty and Stasis

Sovereignty

Participants described the gain they received by choosing to be NEET. The world of work is perceived to demand impositions that centre on having to be in a particular place and to interact with people in a way that feels stressful and risky, while others feel that they will be given responsibilities they cannot possibly meet. It appears that not being required to assume obligations toward the Other is key to the satisfaction expressed by participants in this theme.

The way participants describe their pursuit of creative projects – a following of creative mood and a joy in the activity of making it is strikingly similar to the Andre Gorz's conception of 'autonomous activity.'

> To say that autonomous activities cannot have exchange as their goal is not a sufficient characterisation. They also have to be free of necessity: they have to be motivated by nothing but the desire to bring the Good, the True and the Beautiful into the world… to stem from a conscious choice that nothing forces me to make. (Gorz, 1989/2010: 168).

That the participants are free from necessity, at present owing to their dependence, provides them a space for the development of their sensibilities. Psychologists have come to distinguish these sorts of endeavours from more diversionary, coping experiences and that the former can contribute to enhanced feelings of competence and self-worth (Haworth, 1986, Kelly, 1987). The key facets for these experiences, called "serious leisure" by Robert Stebbins and colleagues (see Stebbins 2015) are commitment and self-development of a skill that leads to recognition and admiration.

> The more complicated of them (the serious pursuits) are, in turn, rooted in surrounding social worlds of people, groups, organizations, services, and a unique history. A powerful personal and social identity typically follows from involvement in these activities (Stebbins, 2015: 3).

The present study finds evidence of moments of *enjoyment*[3] by participants involved in these activities, but also reports of fear and unwillingness to present their works – even to assume the identity of artist or musician owing to belief that their work is "not ready" (Oliver), "not good enough" (Ben). It is as if these activities follow a similar fear about their presentation in work contexts – meeting the demands of The Other is either too frightening or too great a compromise to bother with. When the activity is just a hobby, it is protected by incursions of The Other, it remains *theirs.*

Nonetheless, this time in which participants find themselves is replete with its own anxieties. The fact that gaming is used to cope with, whilst at the same time reinforcing existential guilt raises the possibility of an "alienated leisure." This cuts through to how we value freedom and leisure as a society – much of the research on the social psychology of leisure, and a resurgent collection of post-work theorists (inspired by the apparent looming of ever-increasing automation, Frayne, 2015; Gorz, 1989/2010) positions leisure as a good in itself – positive for mental health, relationships and perhaps the place where human beings can be truly human. Why not have as much as possible?

3 Defined by Csikezentmihalyi as leisure moments associated with an increased competence in high investment activity, evidenced by a sense of "forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment" (Csikezentmihalyi, 1992: 46).

In the present study, freedom as an end in itself, freedom from obligation (when one has the "opportunity") becomes a freedom from mutuality, leading to a preoccupation with self-gratification that seems ultimately not particularly free (relying as it does upon the opportunity afforded by their dependence). It does not seem to me as though the participants are particularly free, they are bound in complicated relationships of dependence, prefer fatalism over deliberate action in the public world and use leisure activities to cope with the growing angst and existential guilt. We see, perhaps an extreme version of the use of gaming in Molesworth and Watkins (2016) study of adult gamers – that challenge and progress in games are felt to compensate a lack of control in working life and to fill moments of boredom. This is the kind of "fraudulent freedom" posited by Douglas (1977), passive forms of leisure consumption yield an ersatz feeling of freedom – gratification without the risk of the cost of action in the world – preventing the development of capabilities to attain a more active freedom. Active leisure, such as that described by those involved in creative work involves meeting obstacles and making their accomplishment a capability. Constraint can, paradoxically, increase freedom, as described by Marx in his description of un-alienated labour:

> Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining. But... this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity – and... further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realisation, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. (Marx 1858/1993:611).

The passive leisure described by the NEETs, one where obstacles are ignored in favour of absorption provides an illusory freedom, being away from the time of time risk (and constraint) they find themselves returned to that time when a game can no-longer hold their attention. Plante et al (2019) found that use of video games as a coping strategy correlated with reported symptoms of video game addiction (even controlling for amount of hours spent). The pursuit of the feeling of freedom from constraint as an end in itself leads to the self-absorption and stuck-ness described in **Just Existing** – unanimously cited as the worst thing about NEET by choice. Nonetheless, leisure is currently the only place where they may currently experiment with themselves protected from the critical consequences of their actions of which the sample appear wary. Without the help they require to help them face and overcome their feelings of incapability, the NEET by choice remains a consumer rather than an actor (Kelly, 2019)

Stasis

The participants provide particularly rich description of the feeling of being in stasis within their own lives – they report a lack of activities structuring their lives, a sense of a lack of development and a painful restless consciousness described in the **"just existing"** section.

It appears that participants, despite choosing to leave the constraints of their EET existence, suffer a similar mental disquiet as those who are prevented from participating in EET experiences for other reasons. Jeffry (2010) carried out an ethnography of unemployed Indian male graduates in the city of Meerut, found that frustrated males would sometimes spend years around their former universities engaged in "*timepass."* The young men would engage in fun activities like regular meetings with each other, card games and the sharing of contacts, but also struggled with chronic boredom and frustration with the lack of possibility to engage in something constructive to get their lives started. Timepass became a response to the negative feelings of disappointment but also amounted to a loss of their identity as graduates, the young men... "...had come to imagine themselves occupying a semi-permanent condition of limbo" (Jeffry, 2010; 177). This stillness, desire for distraction and fear that things will never change was evident in the present study.

The NEETs relation of a painful and restless consciousness in "just existing" could be usefully interpreted via the concept of *angst* and existential guilt from the field of existential psychotherapy. For these theorists, following from Heidegger, angst is an emotional state that has an ontological basis – it is a basic, even underlying feature of any human's subjective life as a living individual from which most manage to distract themselves owing to the pull of commitments and the push of the unsettling and anxious feeling angst is. Angst, as it is understood by existential psychotherapists, is the disclosure of "having to be" alive as one's life passes, living as the subject who makes what one is and living the life that one has made so far: "the suffering of one's own being (Holzey-Kunz, 2019: 63-64)." We see an explicit correlation between this construct and the statements collected in the **just existing** section - including both the desire to turn ones thoughts away from this feeling in absorption, and in the thoughtfulness, curiosity and attempts to make sense which is demonstrated by all of the participants in this research. This latter quality comes from an acquaintance with angst:

> "his particular sensitivity makes the mentally suffering person a "reluctant philosopher"... He exists philosophically by experiencing the anxiety-laden truth of his ontological condition in its naked facticity." (ibid, 65).

Such exposure can be a spur to change, in a moment of angst the choices that one has made can be appraised in a mood referred to as *existential guilt* – a guilt at the subject's neglect of responsibility for making their own life.

> "[Existential guilt] wakes us up from the stupor of our life and gives us an opportunity to think about ourselves and how we are living. It is in these moments when we face up to the realities and limits of our existence that we can make authentic choices for ourselves as individuals, to live in the best possible way and to be the best possible version of ourselves. Of course, this might not always be possible..." (Van Deurzen and Arnold Baker, 2018; 42-43).

Indeed, it seems that it is not possible for the participants, according to them and their reported sense of their incapabilities and lack of assistance. These sources of lack provide them with few resources to make the kind of positive free choices- indeed this is something that some participants have reportedly tried and failed to do in the **Fragmented Intentionality** section.

By asking what function is served by this absorption in the sample I posit that the participants have described its function as something like the turning away from this *angst* suffering, which existential theorists suggest is a subject's usual mode of coping with this threatening and demanding experience (Heidegger, 1927/1962). While others have work, the demands of relationships etc, the participants have their hobbies and media use to take flight from these experiences.

The participants report preferences for engrossing, open-ended games, those that contain evolving challenges that take many hours to master (e.g. 'Minecraft', 'Kenshi', 'Runescape.') As activities that absorb the consciousness, video games are activities of absorption *par excellence*. The possibility space within a game is one that is demarcated conceptually from that of the outside world – whilst still maintaining the awareness and intentionality of the subject from this world. This paradoxical nature was understood by Huizinga who referred to the possibility space afforded by games as "magic circles," allowing for the "temporary worlds within the ordinary world" (Huizinga, 1949; 10).

Many participants describe something that amounts to a correlation between perceived social defeat and media use – as if it is some sort of default option. A recent study by Andrew Przybylski and colleagues at the University of Essex found (in both laboratory and home settings) that players were more likely to be motivated to play games that role-played aspects of their ideal self, particularly if they reported discrepancies between their ideal self and their current self. They were also likely to derive more pleasure from games where their experiences of ideal-self and game-self converged than from games from which they diverged (Przybylski et al, 2011). Other studies have found that media use increases with the desire to avoid awareness of falling short of one's ideal or ought selves (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Moskalenko & Heine, 2003).

In the **Fragmented Intentionality** section, participants described their attention becoming more easily captured and personal projects becoming harder to maintain. Ease of use has been shown to increase user findings of immersion in a piece of software – which includes heightened temporal dissociation, focussed attention, heightened enjoyment, curiosity and control (Agarwal and Karahanna, 2000). Natasha Schull, in her ethnography of betting machine addicts, found that the relationship between user and machine was one of temporal absorption:

> The gambling machine is… a reliable mechanism for securing a zone of insulation from a "human world" she experiences as capricious, discontinuous, and insecure. The continuity of machine gambling holds worldly contingencies in a kind of abeyance, granting her an otherwise elusive zone of certainty (Schull, 2012:13).

The extent to which a game is endorsed as immersive, i.e. reduces awareness of one's surroundings and amount of time spent, has been correlated with self-reported addiction-like behaviours in connection to the game – unsuccessful attempts to reduce playing time, missing meals and deteriorating relationships (Seah and Caims, 2008) This result can be interpreted in a number of ways, perhaps these immersive games are sought by people wanting to absorb a lot of time or by those who, like the participants in the present study, feel a sense of alienation from the norms of behaviour in the "human world." The kind of absorption in the possibility space afforded within the game has been linked to "Flow" experiences as first conceptualised by Csikezentmihalyi (1975) which sought to describe a mental space in which an adept enters into an activity (such as an accomplished sculptor working a piece of clay) - characterised by an intrinsic motivation to a task, a feeling of mastery over the activity to the extent that action is linked to immediate and unambiguous feedback, as well as *a loss of self-reflection* and a *distorted perception of time* (Michailidis et al, 2018). It seems clear that incapabilities and a desire for immersion in media are related, gaming and

other immersive media gives the participants a pseudo-autonomy and removes occasions to reflect upon stasis.

Methodological Reflection

My encounters with the research participants left me unexpectedly moved at the extent of the quiet suffering that they related to me. I felt a pang of recognition of the feelings I intimated in the opening reflexive statement – that of disappointment that these young men seem unable to actualise their various talents. My research journal eventually homed in upon this pang, it felt most noticeable, in the interviews and analysis when I found myself asking *how did you become like this?* As the interviews progressed I became aware of the difficulties that the participants' feelings of incapabilities and lack of social support had in all aspects of their lives – nonetheless, I found it hard to accept that they felt so hidebound. In nearly all of the participants I found a likeable, even enjoyable aspect of their character – a seriousness, an emotional intelligence, an idiosyncratic and underdeveloped gift for expression that would reveal something deep-rooted about their worldview, a sense of humour. In short, these young men were not the duds that they believed themselves to be – these qualities were an adequate raw material for them to belong socially, if not practically to the adult world. The participants appeared not to recognise these qualities in themselves, it also appeared they were not recognised by important others in their lives. As I felt this supposed dysjunction I understood how their parents who sense their son's gifts could feel bemused by their son's inability to actualise their potential.

My research journal interrogated whether this pang was something that could interrupt my ability to engage with the participants and their interview transcripts in a scientific manner. Could I become over-credulous and potentially skew the findings to present these young men as victims of social negligence or critically analyse their speech to find evidence that they were, indeed, architects of their own failings? Having personally suffered social defeats, career setbacks and crises of confidence, yet, nonetheless now finishing the final chapter of my doctoral thesis, was I too overly-identified with these people whom I may have become? This is a question than can only ultimately be answered by readers. Throughout the analytic phase I found that this pang contained both personal and epistemic qualities – a *how(?)* that drove both a sense of empathy and a privileging of the lived experience reported by the participants and a *how(?*) that was replete with a desire to understand, gain control and ultimately answer this question like a good empiricist. These are two noble aims– however, they both, on their own represent attempts to leave the hermeneutic circle –

to overcome the lack that is inherent in every interpretation. The first empathetic how(?) could lead me to lose my point of view as researcher and my sense of authorship, the second empiricist how(?) to assume a position as judge of what was relevant and true for the sake of a causal model. As a researcher I had to grapple with the creative possibility between these two poles and avoid tendencies to extremity in either whilst ultimately trying to produce as complete and valid a reading as possible (whilst knowing that this is pre-destined to be incomplete). My affective relation to this research question and the participants has opened the creative possibility for this new knowledge and has shaped the findings and conclusions – I believe my encounter has shed new light on the phenomenon.

Limitations of the Study

Recruitment was the greatest practical challenge to conducting the present study. As suggested in the Findings chapter, affluent male NEETs by choice are socially isolated, and (as I discovered in my initial recruitment strategies during the pilot phase) frequently not engaged with state agencies or third sector organisations working with more disadvantaged NEETs. The only successful recruitment strategy was to enter online spaces frequented by NEETs and to post my recruitment flyers among other threads and chats. The two sources were Reddit.com (a vast network of message and image boards that allows users to subscribe to "sub-reddits"- one of which was r/NEET, to be sent the latest posts onto a personalised feed) and several private servers on the Discord platform (a gaming focussed set of chat rooms with invite-only communities centred around a particular game or hobby – in this instance NEET support groups). Although these communities offered a convenient place to recruit British affluent male NEETs by choice, recruiting solely from such communities offers some risks to the validity and reliability of the findings. The main risk is that the participants could be using a particular shared source of meaning to interpret their NEET experiences which is not shared by other NEETs at all. Reddit in particular also allows it users quick access to a wide range of discourses, critical or fringe ideologies may reinforce an already socially alienated young person in their outsider status whilst it appeared a community norm to interpret descriptions of suffering through the lens of mainstream psychiatric diagnosis. Sometimes I would question, during an interview, whether I was hearing authentic lived experience or a 2nd hand interpretation. A recruitment strategy involving a greater number of sources would have eased this concern – although one might have to be very draconian in one's sampling approach to remove the possibility that this sampling strategy did not simply deliver more Reddit or Discord users.

Another limitation of the study is that the research question (which, I argue in the literature review and methodology section, was timely to ask) was broad. I found myself, during the interviews, pressured for time so that I could hold to the structure demanded by my semi-structured interview paradigm and I found that the participant and I were required to summarise or precis what may have been richer accounts on particular objects of concern (e.g. aversive educational experiences, family narratives etc). In some instances in the interviews participants required time to grasp what was intended by the question, particularly with my question pertaining to the effects of their social class – something that, perhaps owing to the sample's privileged position, did not appear to be clear to them. The broadness of the research question may therefore have led to participants being prevented from providing richer data for each of the topics within the research domain. However, the broadness did allow for unexpected chains of significance across these topics, for instance the **Incapabilities** theme, in several participants' cases, draws from material from all of the interview questions. It is for this reason that I consider these perceived incapabilities as underpinning much of what it means to be NEET by choice – the sample's lack of faith in themselves and in the world beyond them extends into so many seemingly discrete areas of their life (including their hobbies).

Further Research

I believe each of the themes could represent a suitable jumping off point for a more focussed study with this population, however I would urge fellow researchers to keep incapabilities in mind. The way this population uses media for the sake of temporal absorption, for instance, appears to have wider resonance with the currently active field of addictive and problematic media research. A revealing research question might be: what is the process by which media use becomes harmful: what are the thought processes that permit a young person to renege on their responsibility to themselves and what can be done to halt and reverse such a process? My sense is that removing media from someone who feels incapable of living in adult society would be insufficient on its own to restore their willingness to participate in EET. After all this is, reportedly, what has been attempted by the NEETs themselves in their self-led projects of restoration. What has reportedly helped the most has been becoming enthused about a feasible medium-term career plan and a period of relational discovery when a participant reportedly felt like he was among peers for the first time in his life. In line with these findings, removing a self-protective strategy should not be attempted unless there is something dependable to put in place of it.

Implications for practice

My recommendations for counselling psychology practice with this population would be to see the choice not to seek employment, education and training within context – as a protective strategy for avoiding adult responsibilities owing to a lack of faith in their basic functional abilities. It is a sense of lacking in fundamental basic skills of adult participation in society underpins their unwillingness to join the labour force. Intervention should begin with working on these feelings, that appear to beget hopelessness, a sense of otherness from the adult community, shame and, in some cases, cynicism.

It would behove professionals working with this group to understand their own stance towards the morality of the "work ethic". For applied psychologists, who have to sacrifice a lot of years merely for the price of entry to the profession, it may be hard to hear these materially privileged young men express disdain for the idea of sacrifice, and self-realisation through labour in general. I contend that people in this group have more fundamental needs than their ability to get a job or to get on a course (though these may challenge negative assumptions about work if they are connected to a person's intrinsic interest and if the working practices and social environment are supportive – certainly not a guarantee in wide swathes of the labour market (Frayne, 2019). Most of the participants reported a desire to return to mainstream life but feel that they lack the trust in their basic abilities to manage this return: social assuredness, an ability to overcome compulsive behaviour, perseverance and self-efficacy in order to manage new and potentially risky environments. It is for these reasons that their isolated attempts to improve themselves fail. Participants report very tight loops of thinking, unrealistic ideas about will-power and show little persistence. I argue that a trusted psychotherapeutic relationship would be of great use to these young men – here they may be able to loosen these tight loops of thinking, approach unrealistic ideas without fear of humiliation and provide the kind of emotional support that they appear to lack in their relationships with family and peers.

My view on the return of these young men to the labour force is that it should be attempted after an intervention that improves the person's appraisals of their abilities. In some cases, depending on the length of the NEET condition, space should be made for the young person to grieve for what they

have missed out upon. Participants have reportedly lost months (or years) to stasis and compulsive behaviour and have lost a lot before this period owing to social alienation and potentially sub-optimal care and transmission of key immaterial assets from their parents and schooling. A feeling of stasis, growing old, without growing up, is reportedly the most distressing feeling for the participants and excessive media use seemed linked to feelings that correlate quite closely to feelings of Existential Guilt (van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2018) and Existential Angst (Holzey-Kunz, 2019). I believe that grieving for what has been lost would be key for approaching what remains of their lives. This would be important as these participants view of the world of work is not strictly inaccurate, particularly with regard to the kind of work open to people without experience or qualifications. Persons re-entering the labour market may have some hard and life-changing choices concerning their future- decisions that will disappoint family- and disappoint them. However, career knowledge was very low in most of the sample, and I have shown one case where a participant has become enthusiastic about a new career considerably less prestigious than those he first envisaged. A career counselling intervention would be key for helping participants make these difficult choices.

Conclusion

Identifying, arguing the case for identifying and finding male affluent NEETs by choice (not to mention persuading eight of them to participate in an interview) has demonstrated that this is a population with complex needs that is barely visible. Much of this pertains to the choice of these young men to live marginal, mostly private existences, not trusting much of the rest of society. However, as I argue in my literature review, a lot of the social policy and psychiatric/psychology research that has followed from it, has played its part in obscuring these young people from view. The needs of affluent male NEETs by choice may seem to have a lesser claim for attention and interest, especially when set next to the needs of other more deprived socially excluded young people. What I hoped for by focussing upon this group was to understand a different aspect of social exclusion that may pertain to those who do not live in such conditions. I believe that the discovery of the participants sense of their incapabilities, both social and practical, and their sense of having been unsupported during their transition from schooling to work, arguably adolescence to adulthood, shows social exclusion as having immaterial qualities whose uneven distribution may have as profound effect upon the lives of the excluded as those who are materially deprived. The post-industrial knowledge economy demands social and self-management skills as the price of entry, the worker is expected to have discovered this and developed these skills on their own. The

findings suggest that the development of these immaterial assets can be stifled before a person is able to assume full responsibility for this, by poor parent-child relationships, ostracism and alienation from peers and a narrow focus on qualification acquisition in schooling.

What does this mean for the NEETs by choice as they approach the future? For the sample (who believe that the world of work is a scam and that it holds real dangers for the exposure of their inadequacies) I believe a new approach to the Other, particularly risk with regards to the Other, facilitated with a supportive relationship (be it a mentor, psychotherapist, counselling psychologist) would be crucial for the amelioration of their distress. I wish to finish with an illustration of the kind of insight that can come from supportive relationships, taken from 19th century Russian Literature. In Ivan Goncharov's famous novel, the eponymous hero, Oblomov (a member of the landed gentry who lives a life of complete idleness in St Petersburg) discovers that his detachment from the life of the city is underscored by a fear of failure. Oblomov sends a letter breaking off a relationship with his new lover, Olga, believing she has made a mistake in falling in love with him. During an angry confrontation, Olga helps him realise that his motivation was the avoidance of the risk of staking his heart and dreams for a happy future on a living, autonomous person. He has the following insight:

> "Yes, it's not just love, it's true of everything in life… and if you reject every opportunity as a potential mistake, well, then everything becomes a mistake" (Goncharov, 1859/2006:294).

A self-generated insight like this is among the most valuable outcomes of a trusting relationship, where, paradoxically, one can know oneself better than in years spent ruminating alone.

Bibliography

Ainsworth MDS (1989) Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44, pp. 709-716.

Agarwal R, Karahanna E (2000) Time flies when you're having fun: Cognitive absorption and beliefs about information technology usage. *MIS quarterly*, 24-4, pp. 665-694.

Allen K (2013) *Coalition policy and 'aspiration raising' in a psychic landscape of class*. Journal of Youth Studies Conference: Glasgow University.

Allen M (2010) *Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)*. London: Public Health England.
Available from:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/356062/Review3_NEETs_health_inequalities.pdf
[Accessed: 21.04.2019]

Arjanggi R, Kusumaningsih LPS (2016) The correlation between social anxiety and academic adjustment among freshmen. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 219, pp. 104-107.

Armstrong P (2005) *Critique of entrepreneurship: People and policy*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Arnett JJ (2000) Emerging Adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55-5, pp. 469-480.

Arnett JJ, Fishel E (2014) *Getting to 30: A parent's guide to the twenty-something years*. New York: Workman Publishing.

Arulampalam W (2001) Is unemployment really scarring. *The economic journal*, 111, pp. 585-606.

Ashworth P (2003) An approach to phenomenological psychology: The contingencies of the lifeworld. *Journal of phenomenological psychology*, 34(2), pp. 145-156.

Bandura A (1982) Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American psychologist*, 37-2, pp. 122-148.

Barfield O (1928) *Poetic Diction*. London: Faber and Gwyer.

Barfied O (2013) The meaning of 'literal', in
Barfield O (2013) *The rediscovery of meaning and other essays: 2nd edition.* London: Barfield Press.

Barkley-Levenson EE, Fox CR (2016) The surprising relationship between indecisiveness and impulsivity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 90, pp. 1-6.

Bates GW, Campbell IM, Burgess PM (1990) Assessment of articulated thoughts in social anxiety: Modification of the ATSS procedure. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 29, pp. 91-98.

Baumeister RF, Leary MR (1995) The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological bulletin*, 117-3, pp. 497-529.

Beck U (2007) Beyond class and nation: reframing social inequalities in a globalizing world. *The British journal of sociology*, 58-4, pp. 679-705.

Beck U, Beck-Gernsheim E (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage.

Bell DNF, Blanchflower DG (2011) Young people and the Great Recession. *Oxford review of economic policy*, 27-2, pp. 241-267.

Bell L, Thurlby-Campbell I (2017) *Agency, structure and the NEET policy problem: the experiences of young people*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Benson M, Jackson E (2017) Making the middle classes on shifting ground? Residential status, performativity and middle-class subjectivities in contemporary London. *The British journal of sociology*, 68-2, pp. 215-233.

Bentall RP (2004) *Madness explained: psychosis and human nature* (2 ed).. London: Allen Lane.

Bernard MM, Gebauer JE, Maio GR (2006) Cultural estrangement: The role of personal and societal value discrepancies. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 32-1, pp. 78-92.

Bernstein RJ (1983) *Beyond relativism and objectivism: Science, hermeneutics and praxis.* Philadelphia: PA: University of Pennsylvania Press

Biggerstaff D, Thompson A (2008) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 5-3, pp. 214-224.

Bjarnason T, Sigurdardottir TJ (2003) Psychological distress during unemployment and beyond: social support and material deprivation among youth in six northern European countries. *Social Science and Medicine*, 56-5, pp. 973-985.

Blank A, Harries P, Reynolds F (2011) Mental health service users' perspectives of work: A review of the literature. *British journal of occupational therapy*. 74-4 pp. 191-199.

Bly R (1997) *The sibling society*. London: Vintage.

Boldero J, Francis J (1999) Ideals, oughts and self-regulation: Are there qualitatively distinct self-guides? *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2, pp. 343-55.

Bond GR, Drake RE, Mueser KT, et al (1997) An update on supported employment for people with severe mental illness. *Psychiatric Services*, 48, pp. 335–346.

Borg M, Veseth M, Binder PE, Topor A (2013) The role of recovery from bipolar disorders. *Qualitative social work*, 12-3, pp. 323-339.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. New York: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu P (2004) *Science of science and reflexivity*, Cambridge: Polity.

Bowlby J (1988) *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.

Boyd MJ, Zaff JF, Phelps E, Weiner MB, Lerner RM (2011) The relationship between adolescents' new media use and civic engagement. The indirect effect of interpersonal communication with parents. *Journal of adolescence*, 34, pp. 1167–1179.

Boyle D (2013) *Broke: Who killed the middle classes.* London: 4th Estate.

Britton J, Gregg P, Macmillan L, Mitchell S (2011) *The early bird… preventing young people from becoming a NEET statistic*. Tomorrow's People.
Available from :
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lindsey_Macmillan/publication/289521624_The_Early_Bird_Preventing_Young_People_from_Becoming_another_NEET_statistic/links/568e378508aef987e566df99.pdf
[Accessed: 21.04.2019]

Bruner JS (1983) *In search of mind: Essays in autobiography*. New York: Harper and Row.

Bryman A (1988) *Quantity and quality in social research*. London: Routledge.

Burke PJ (2007) Men accessing education: masculinities, identifications and widening participation. *British journal of sociology of education*, 28-4, pp. 37–41.

Burr V (2003) *Social Constructionism,* 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.

Butler G, Mathews A (1987) Anticipatory anxiety and risk perception. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 11-5, pp. 551-565.

Caputo J (2018) *Hermeneutics: Facts and interpretation in the age of information.* London: Pelican

Chandola T, Zhang N (2017) Re-employment, job quality, health and allostatic load biomarkers: prospective evidence from the UK household longitudinal study. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 1-1, pp. 47-57.

Clark DM, Wells A (1995) A cognitive model of social phobia. In
Heimberg R, Liebowitz M, Hope DA, Schneier FR (Eds.) *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment and treatment*. New York: Guilford Press.

Coles B, Hutton S, Bradshaw J, Craig G, Godfrey C, Johnson J (2002)
Literature review of the costs of being "not in education, employment or training" at age 16-18, Brief No: 347, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.

Collier D, Mahon J (1993) Conceptual "stretching" revisited : Adapting categories in comparative analysis. *American political science review*, 87-4, pp. 845–855.

Constans JI (2001) Worry propensity and the perception of risk. *Behaviour research and therapy*, 39-6, pp. 721-729.

Coote A, Lyall S (2013) *Strivers v. skivers: the workless are worthless*. London: New Economics Forum.

Copp JE, Giordano PC, Longmore MA, Manning WD (2017) Living with parents and emerging adults' depressive symptoms. *Journal of family issues*, 38-16, pp. 2254-2276.

Coté J, Allahar A (1994) *Generation on hold: Coming of age in the late twentieth century*. New York: NYU Press.

Csikszentmihalyi M (1975) *Beyond boredom and anxiety.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Csikszentmihalyi M (1992) *Flow: The psychology of happiness*. London: Random House.

Davies W (2016) *The limits of neoliberalism: Authority, sovereignty and the logic of competition, revised edition*. London: SAGE;

Department for Work and Pensions (2015) *Freedom of Information Request*, Whatdotheyknow.com. Available from:
https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/280811/response/692741/attach/html/3/FOI%203042%20Response%20Letter.pdf.html
[Accessed: 21.01.2017]

Dean, M. (1996). Foucault, government and the enfolding of authority. In
Barry A, Osborne T, Rose N (Eds.) *Foucault and political reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government*, 2nd Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Deresiewicz, W. (2015). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. New Yotk: Simon and Schuster.

Dolan P, Lordan G (2013) *Moving up and sliding down: An empirical assessment of the effect of social mobility on subjective wellbeing*. London: LSE.
Available from:
http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1190.pdf
[Accessed 03.03.2016]

Douglas J (1977) *Existential sociology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dreyfus, HL (1991) *Between Man and Nature.* The Harvard Review of Philosophy, 1(1), pp.6–19.

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

Duverger P, Guedj-Bourdiau MJ (2013) *Crise et urgence à l'adolescence*. Paris: Elsevier Masson.

Eatough V, Smith JA (2017) Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In
Willig C, Rogers WS (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Eccles J (2009) Who Am I and What Am I Going to Do With My Life? Personal and Collective Identities as Motivators of Action. *Educational psychologist*, 44(2), 78–89.

Egan M, Daly M, Delaney M (2015) Childhood psychological distress and youth unemployment: Evidence from two British cohort studies. *Social science and medicine*, 124, pp.11-17

Elliott R, Fischer CT, Rennie DL (1999) Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British journal of clinical psychology*, 38, pp. 215–299.

Erikson EH (1958) *Young man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Erikson EH (1968) *Identity: Youth and crisis.* New York: WW Norton & Company.
Essau CA, Conradt J, Petermann F (1999) Frequency and comorbidity of social phobia and social fears in adolescents. *Behaviour research and therapy*, 37-9, pp. 831-843.

Faludi, S. (2011). *Stiffed: Betrayal of the Modern Man*. London: Random House.

Featherstone M (1991) *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. London: Sage.

Fee RL, Tangney JP (2000) Procrastination: A means of avoiding shame or guilt? *Journal of social behavior and personality*, 15-5, pp. 167-184.

Fergusson D, Horwood L, Lynskey M (1997) The effects of unemployment on psychiatric illness during young adulthood. *Psychological Medicine*, 27, pp. 371–381.

Feng Z, Everington D, Ralston K, Dibben C, Raab G, Graham E (2015) *Consequences, risk factors, and geography of young people not in education, employment or training.* Edinburgh: The Scottish Government
Available from: http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/10/2258/0
[Accessed: 21.04.2017]

Ferrari JR, Díaz-Morales JF (2007) Procrastination: Different time orientations reflect different motives. *Journal of research in personality*, 41-3, pp. 707-714.

Fineman S (1987) The middle class: unemployed and underemployed in Fineman S (1987) ((Eds.)) *Unemployment: personal and social consequences*. London: Tavistock.

Fingerman KL, Chen PC, Hay E, Cichy KE, Lefkowitz ES (2006) Ambivalent reactions in the parent and offspring relationship. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 61-3, pp. 152-160.

Finlay L (2011) *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Fitzgerald R, Finch S, Nove A (2000) *Black Caribbean young men's experiences of education and employment*. London: DFEE.

Flett GL, Stainton M, Hewitt PL, Sherry SB, Lay C (2012) Procrastination automatic thoughts as a personality construct: An analysis of the procrastinatory cognitions inventory. *Journal of rational-emotive & cognitive-behavior therapy*, 30-4, pp. 223-236.

Fogel, RW (2000) *The fourth great awakening and the future of egalitarianism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fouad NA, Bynner J (2008) Work transitions. *American psychologist*, 63(4), pp. 241-251.

Frosh S, Phoenix A, Pattman R (2002) *Young masculinities.* London: Palgrave.

Fromm E (1976) *To have or to be?* London: Abacus.

Furlong, A (2006) Not a very NEET solution. Work, *Employment and Society,* 20-3, pp.553–569.

Furlong A (2008) The Japanese hikikomori phenomenon: acute social withdrawal among young people. *Sociological Review,* 56, pp. 309-325.

Furlong A (2012) *Youth studies: An introduction*. London: Routledge.

Furlong A, Cartmel F (2006) *Young people and social change*. London: McGraw-Hill Education.

Fuqua DR, Hartman BW (1983) *Differential diagnosis and treatment of career indecision*. The personnel and guidance journal, 62-1, pp. 27-29.

France A (2007) *Understanding Youth in Late Modernity.* London: Open University Press.

Franceschelli M, Keating A (2018) Imagining the Future in the Neoliberal Era: Young People' s Optimism and Their Faith in Hard Work. *Young,* 26-4, pp. 27–28.

Frayne D (2015) *The refusal of work: The theory and practice of resistance to work.* London: Zed Books

Friedli L, Stearn R (2015) Positive affect as coercive strategy: conditionality, activation and the role of psychology in UK government workfare programmes. *Medical Humanities,* 41, pp. 40-47.

Gaspani F (2018) Young Adults NEET and Everyday Life : Time Management and Temporal Subjectivities. *Young*, 27-1, pp. 1–20.

Gadamer HG (1989) Truth and method. New York: Continuum.

Geertz C (1973) *The interpretation of cultures*. London: Fontana Press.

Germeijs V, Verschueren K (2011) Indecisiveness: Specificity and predictive validity. *European journal of personality*, 25-5, pp. 295-305.

Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age.* Cambridge: Polity.

Gigerenzer G (1996) From tools to theories: Discovery in cognitive psychology. In Graumann CF, Gergen KJ (Eds.) *Historical dimensions of psychological discourse.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Giorgi A (Eds.) (1985) Phenomenology and Psychological Research. Philadelphia: Duquesne University Press.

Goldman-mellor S, Caspi A, Arseneault L, Ajala N, Danese A, Fisher H, Moffitt TE (2016) Committed to work but vulnerable: Self-perceptions and mental health in NEET 18-year-olds from

a contemporary British cohort. *Journal of Child Psychology, Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines,* 57-2, pp. 196–203.

Goncharov I (1859/2006) *Oblomov*. S Pearl Translator. London: Alma Classics.

Gorz A (1989/2010) *Critique of economic reason*. London: Verso.

Gottfredson L (2002) Gottfredson's theory of circumscription, compromise and self-creation Brown D et al (Eds.) *Career choice and development*, 4th edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Green R, Collingwood A, Ross A (2010) *Characteristics of bullying victims in schools.* London: Department for Education.
Available from: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/121/1/DFE-RR001.pdf
[Accessed: 20.19.2019]

Grubbs JB, Exline JJ (2016) Trait entitlement: A cognitive-personality source of vulnerability to psychological distress. *Psychological Bulletin,* 142(11), pp. 1204-1226.

Guba EG, Lincoln YS (1994) Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In
Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (Eds.) Handbook of qualitative research. London: Sage.

Gutiérrez-García RA, Benjet C, Borges G, Ríos EM, Medina-mora, ME (2018) Emerging adults not in education , employment or training (NEET): socio-demographic characteristics, mental health and reasons for being NEET, *BMC Public Health,* 18, pp. 1201–1211.

Haidt J (2003) The moral emotions. in
Davidson RJ, Scherer KR, Goldsmith HH (Eds.) *Handbook of affective sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardie JH, Stanik CE (2012) The role of family context in early adulthood: Where we've been and where we're going. In
Booth A, Brown SL, Landale NS, Manning WD, McHale SM (Eds.) *Early adulthood in a family context (Vol. 2)*. New York: Springer.

Hardt M, Negri A (2001) *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press

Hart A, Blincow D, Thomas H (2007) *Resilient therapy: Working with children and families.* London: Routledge.

Hattori Y (2006) Social withdrawal in Japanese youth: A case study of thirty-five hikikomori clients. *Journal of trauma practice,* 4, pp. 181–201.

Havighurst, RJ (1972) *Developmental tasks and education*, 3d ed. New York: McKay.

Haworth JT (1986) Meaningful activity and psychological models of non-employment, *Leisure studies*, 5, pp. 281–297.

Heidegger M (1927/1962) *Being and time*, J Macquarrie, E Robinson translators. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Henning B, Vorderer P (2001) Psychological escapism: Predicting the amount of television viewing by need for cognition. *Journal of communication*, 51-1, pp. 100-120.

Henwood KL, Pidgeon NF (1992) Qualitative research and psychological theorising. *British journal of psychology*, 83, pp. 97-111.

Hindley P (2019) Belongingness. In
Williams R, Kemp V, Haslam SA, Haslam C, Bhui KS, Bailey S (Eds.) *Social Scaffolding: Applying the Lessons of Contemporary Social Science to Health and Healthcare.* Cambridge University Press.

Hoggarth, L. and Smith, D. (2004) *Understanding the impact of Connexions on young people at risk, Research Brief 607*, Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.
Available from:
http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.623.1209&rep=rep1&type=pdf
[Accessed: 14.2.2017]

Holte BH (2017) Counting and meeting NEET young people: Methodology, perspective and meaning in research on marginalized youth. *Young*, 26(1), pp. 1–16.

Holzey-Kunz A (2019) Philosophy and theory: Daseinsanalysis – an ontological approach to psychic suffering based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In
Van Deurzen E, Craig E, Längle A, Schneider KJ, Tantam D, du Plock S (Eds.) *The Wiley world handbook of existential therapy*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Holzkamp K (1991) Experience of self and scientific objectivity. In
Tolman CW , Maiers W (Eds.) *Critical psychology contributions to an historical science of the subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howker E, Malik, S (2013) *Jilted generation: How Britain has bankrupted its youth.* London: Icon Books.

Huizinga J (1949) *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hurrelmann K, Quenzel G (2016) Lost in transition: status insecurity and inconsistency as hallmarks of modern adolescence. *International journal of adolescence and youth*, 20-3, pp. 261–270.

Husman J, Shell DF (2008) Beliefs and perceptions about the future: A measurement of future time perspective. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18-2, pp. 166-175.

Husserl, E (1965) *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, Q Lauer translator. New York: Harper and Row.

Husu HM, Välimäki V (2016) Staying inside: social withdrawal of the young, Finnish 'Hikikomori.' *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20-5, pp. 605-621.

Ingram N, Waller R (2014) Degrees of masculinity: Working and middle-class undergraduate students' constructions of masculine identities. In
Roberts S (Eds.) *Debating modern masculinities: Change, continuity, crisis?* London: Palgrave.

Jackson T, Fritch A, Nagasaka T, Pope L (2003) Procrastination and Perceptions of Past, Present, and Future. *Individual differences research*, 1-1, pp. 17-28.

Jeffrey C (2010) *Timepass: Youth, class and the politics of waiting in India.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Johnson MK, Benson J (2011) The implications of family context for the transition to adulthood. In Booth A, Brown SL, Landale NS, Manning WD, McHale SM (Eds.) *Early adulthood in a family context.* New York: Springer.

Johnstone L, Boyle M (2018) The power threat meaning framework: An alternative nondiagnostic conceptual system. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.
Available from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022167818793289
[Accessed: 10.05.2019]

Kagan P (2012) *Psychology's ghosts: The crisis in the profession and the way back*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kato TA, Tateno M, Shinfuku N, Fujisawa D, Teo A, Sartorius N, Akiyama T, Ishida T et al (2012) Does the 'hikikomori' syndrome of social withdrawal exist outside Japan? A preliminary international investigation. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology,* 47. pp. 1061-75.

Kawaguchi A (2015) Japanese women face tough reality in work and marriage. *Nippon communications*
Available from: https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a04601/japanese-women-face-tough-reality-in-work-and-marriage.html
[Accessed: 03.01.2018]

Kellaway, K (2018) Sarah-Jayne Blakemore: 'It is, strangely, acceptable to mock and demonise teenagers.' *The Observer*.
Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/mar/25/sarah-jayne-blakemore-secret-life-teenage-brain
[Accessed: 25.04.2017]

Kelly JR (1987) *Freedom to be: A new sociology of leisure*. London: Routledge.

Kelly JR (2019) *Leisure identities and interactions*. London: Routledge.

Kelly P (2006) The entrepreneurial self and 'youth at-risk': Exploring the horizons of identity in the twenty-first century. *Journal of youth studies*, 9-1, pp. 17-32.

Kessler RC, Foster CL, Saunders WB, Stang PE (1995) Social consequences of psychiatric disorders, I: Educational attainment. *American journal of psychiatry*, 152-7, pp. 1026-1032.

Knabe A and Rätzel S (2011) Scarring or scaring? The psychological impact of past unemployment and future unemployment risk. *Economica*, 78, pp. 283-293.

Kohlberg L (1984) *The psychology of moral development*. New York: Harper and Row.

Kõiv K (2012) Attachment Styles Among Bullies, Victims and Uninvolved Adolescents. *Journal of Psychology Research*. 2-3, pp. 160-165.

Kokkinos CM (2007) Elementary school children's involvement in bullying and victimization: The role of attachment style and internalizing and externalizing symptomatology. *Scientia Paedagogica Experimentalis* XLIV 1, pp. 33–49.

Koyama A, Miyake Y, Kawakami N (2010) Lifetime prevalence, psychiatric comorbidity and demographic correlates of 'hikikomori' in a community population in Japan. *Psychiatry Research,* 176, pp. 69–74.

Kvale S (1989) *Issues of validity in qualitative research*. Lund: Chartwell Bratt.

Kvale S (1994) Ten standard objections to qualitative research interviews. *Journal of phenomenological psychology,* 25-2, pp.147-173.

Kvale S (2006) Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 12-3, pp. 480-500.

Kyodo News Agency (2015) *Japan home to 541,000 young recluses, survey finds.*
Available from: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/09/07/national/japan-home-541000-young-recluses-survey-finds/#.XEitfFz7SUk
[Accessed: 10.10.2018]

Langdridge D (2007) *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. London: Pearson Education.
Larkin M, Watts S, Clifton, E (2006) Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3-2, pp. 102–120.

Lareau A (2003) *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press.

Lareau A, Cox A (2011) Social class and the transition to adulthood. Social class and changing families in an unequal America. in
Carlson M, England P (Eds.) (2011) *Social class and changing families in an unequal America.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lee H, Williams RA (2013) Effects of parental alcoholism, sense of belonging, and resilience on depressive symptoms: a path model. *Substance use & misuse*, 48-3, pp. 265-273.

Lereya ST, Patel M, dos Santos JPGA, Deighton J. (2019) Mental health difficulties, attainment and attendance: a cross-sectional study. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 28, pp. 1147–1152.

Lögdberg U, Nilsson B, Kostenius C (2018) "Thinking about the future, what's gonna happen ?"—How young people in Sweden who neither work nor study perceive life experiences in relation to health and well-being. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 13-1.

Luijkx R, Wolbers MHJ (2009) The effects of non-employment in early work-life on subsequent employment chances of individuals in the Netherlands. *European Sociological Review*. 25-6, pp. 647-660.

Lukianoff G, Haidt J (2018) *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. London: Penguin.

Luthar S, Barkin S, Crossman E (2013) "I can, therefore I must": Fragility in the upper-middle classes. *Development and Psychopathology*, 4-2, pp.1529-1549.

Mac an Ghaill M (1994) *The making of men: Masculinities, sexualities and schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Maguire S, McKay E (2017) *Young, Female and Forgotten*. Institute for Policy Research, Young Women's Trust. Available from: https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/young-female-forgotten-2017 [Accessed: 07/04/2019]

Malanchuk O, Messersmith EE, Eccles JS (2010) The ontogeny of career identities in adolescence. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 130, pp. 97-110.

Malti T, Buchmann M (2010) Socialization and individual antecedents of adolescents' and young adults' moral motivation. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 39, pp. 138–149.

Mann A, Massey D, Glover P, Kashefpadkel ET, Dawkins J (2013) *Nothing in common: The career aspirations of young Britons mapped against projected labour market demand* (2010-2020). London: UK Commission for Employment and Skills.
Available from: https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/nothing_in_common_final.pdf
[Accessed: 01.04.2018]

Marcia JE (1993) The relational roots of identity. In Kroger J (Eds.) *Discussions on ego identity*. London: Psychology Press.

Markus H, Nurius P (1986) Possible Selves. *American Psychologist*, 41-9, pp.954-969

Marwaha S, Johnson S (2005) Views and experiences of employment among people with psychosis: A qualitative descriptive study. *International journal of social psychiatry*, 51-4, pp. 302-316.

Marx K (1858/1993) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy.* M Nicolaus translator. London: Penguin.

Mascherini M, Ledermaier S (2016) *Exploring the diversity of NEETs*. Dublin: Eurofund.
Avaliable from: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2016/labour-market-social-policies/exploring-the-diversity-of-neets
[Acessed: 26.2.2017]

Mawn L, Oliver EJ, Akhter N, Bambra CL, Torgerson C, Bridle C, Stain, HJ (2017) Are we failing young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)? A systematic review and meta-analysis of re-engagement interventions. *Systematic Reviews*, 6-16, pp. 1–17.

McKee-Ryan F, Song Z, Wanberg CR, Kinicki AJ (2005) Psychological and physical well-being during unemployment: a meta-analytic study. *Journal of applied psychology*, 90-1, pp. 53-76.

Mendolia S, Walker I (2015) *Do Neets Need Grit?*. IZA Discussion Paper No. 8740.
Available from: https://izajole.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40172-015-0035-3
[Accessed: 02.02.2018]

Michailidis L, Balaguer-Ballester E, He X. (2018) Flow and immersion in video games: The aftermath of a conceptual challenge. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, pp. 1682-1692.

Milner M (1934/2011) *A life of one's own*. London: Routledge.

Milton M, Craven M, Coyle A (2010) Understanding human distress: Moving beyond the concept of 'psychopathology.' in
Milton M ((Eds.)) (2010) T*herapy and beyond: Counselling psychology contributions to therapeutic and social issues*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Moitra E, Beard C, Weisberg RB, Keller MB (2011) Occupational impairment and social anxiety disorder in a sample of primary care patients. *Journal of affective disorders*, 130 (1-2), pp. 209-212.

Molesworth M, Watkins RD (2016) Adult videogame consumption as individualised, episodic progress. *Journal of consumer culture*, 16-2, pp. 510-530.

Morgan D (2005) Class and masculinity. In
Kimmel MS, Hearn J, Connell RW (Eds.) *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities.* London: Sage.

Morse JM (2015) Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative health research*, 26-9, pp. 1212–1222.

Morse JM, Mitcham C (2002) Exploring qualitatively-derived concepts: Inductive—deductive pitfalls. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 1-4, pp. 28-35.

Mortimer JT, Kim M, Staff J, Vuolo M (2016) Unemployment, parental help, and self-efficacy during the transition to adulthood. *Work and occupations*, 43-4, pp. 434–465.

Moskalenko S, Heine SJ (2003) Watching your troubles away: Television viewing as a stimulus for subjective self-awareness. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 29-1, pp. 76-85.

Mueller-Vollmer, K. (1986) "The Historicity of Understanding". in
Mueller-Vollmer, K (Eds.) *The hermeneutics reader: Texts of the German tradition from the enlightenment to the present.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Murray S, Holmes D (2014) Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and the ethics of body and place: Critical methodological reflections. *Human Studies*, 37-1, pp. 15-30.

Ng-knight, T., & Schoon, I. (2017). Can locus of control compensate for socioeconomic adversity in the transition from school to work? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46, pp. 2114–2128.

Norasakkunkit V Uchida Y (2014). To conform or to maintain self-consistency? Hikikomori risk in Japan and the deviation from seeking harmony. *Journal of Social Clinical Psychology* 33-10, pp. 918-935.

Nurmi JE, Salmela-Aro K, Koivisto P (2002) Goal importance and related achievement beliefs and emotions during the transition from vocational school to work: Antecedents and consequences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 60, pp. 241–261.

O'Dea B, Glozier N, Purcell R, McGorry PD, Scott J, Feilds K-L, Hermens DF, Buchanan J, Scott EM, Yung AR, Killacky E, Guastella AJ, Hickie IB (2014) A cross-sectional exploration of the clinical characteristics of disengaged (NEET) young people in primary mental healthcare. *BMJ Open* 4(12).

Office for National Statistics (2018) *The National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC)*. London: ONS.
Available from:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010
[Accessed 10.12.2019]

O'Higgins (2015) *Youth Unemployment*. Bonn: IZA.
Available from: http://ftp.iza.org/pp103.pdf
[Accessed: 14.05.2017]

Padilla-Walker LM (2016) Moral development during emerging adulthood. In
Arnett JJ (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of emerging adulthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paley J (2016) *Phenomenology as qualitative research: A critical analysis of meaning attribution.* London: Taylor & Francis.

Patel A, Knapp M, Henderson J, Baldwin D (2002) The economic consequences of social phobia. *Journal of affective disorders*, 68-2,3, pp. 221-233.

Parrott TM, Bengston VL (1999) The effects of earlier intergenerational affection, normative expectations, and family conflict on contemporary exchange of help and support. *Research on Aging*, 21-1, pp.73–105.

Paul KI, Moser K (2009) Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 74-3, pp. 264-282.

Parker I (2007) *Revolution in psychology: Alienation to emancipation.* London: Pluto Press

Pinto Pereira SM, Li L, Power C (2017) Child Maltreatment and Adult Living Standards at 50 Years. *Paediatrics*, 139(1), e20161595

Powell A (2018) *Briefing Paper: NEET, young people not in employment education or training*, London: House of Commons Library.
Available from: http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06705/SN06705.pdf
[Accessed: 25.04.2017]

Prandy K, Lambert PS (2003) Marriage, social distance and the social space: an alternative derivation and validation of the Cambridge Scale, *Sociology* 37, pp. 397-411.

The Princes Trust (2018) *Youth Index 2018*, London: The Princes Trust.

Przybylski AK, Weinstein N, Murayama K, Lynch MF, Ryan RM (2011) The ideal self at play: The appeal of video games that let you be all you can be. *Psychological science*, 23-1, pp. 69-76.

Ralston K, Feng Z, Everington D, Dibben C (2015) Do young people not in education employment or training experience long-term occupational scarring? A longitudinal analysis over 20 years of follow up. *Contemporary Social Science*, 11, pp.203-221.

Rao, P Beidel D, Turner S, Ammerman, R, Crosby L. & Salle F. (2007). Social anxiety disorder in childhood and adolescence: Descriptive psychopathology. *Behavior research and therapy*, 45, pp. 1181 – 1191.

Reay D (2001) Finding or losing yourself?: Working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16-4, pp. 333-346.

Reay, D (2004) 'It's all becoming a habitus': Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British journal of sociology of education*, 25(4), 431-444.

Reay D (2006) The zombie stalking English schools: Social class and educational inequality. *British journal of educational studies*, 54-3, pp. 288-307.

Reiter H, Schlimbach T (2015) NEET in disguise? Rival narratives in troubled youth transitions. *Educational research*, 57-2, pp. 133-150.

Ricoeur P (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation.* D. Savage Translator. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ricoeur P (1974) *The conflict of interpretations*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Ridings CM, Gefen D (2004) Virtual community attraction: Why people hang out online. *Journal of Computer-mediated communication*, 10- 1.
Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.tb00229.x [Accessed: 06.01.2020]

Roberts, S. (2010). Misrepresenting "choice biographies"?: a reply to Woodman. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13-1, pp. 137–149.

Roberts S (2012) "I just got on with it": The educational experiences of ordinary, yet overlooked, boys. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33-2, pp. 203–221.

Roberson J, Suzuki N ((Eds.)) (2003) *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*. New York, NY: Routledge-Curzon

Rodwell L, Romaniuk H, Nilsen W, Carlin JB, Lee KJ, & Patton GC (2017) Adolescent mental health and behavioural predictors of being NEET : a prospective study of young adults not in employment , education , or training. *Psychological Medicine*, 48-5, pp. 861–871.

Rose H, Daiches, & Potier, J. (2012). Meaning of social inclusion to young people not in employment, education or training. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 22(3), pp. 256-268.

Ross A (2009) *Disengagement from education among 14–16 year olds*. London: National Centre for Social Research, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Rychlak JF (1988) *The psychology of rigorous humanism*. New York University Press.

Sachdev, D., Harries, B. and Roberts, T. (2006). *Regional and Sub-regional Variation in NEETs: Reasons, Remedies and Impact*. London: LSDA [online].
Available from: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/Lsc/SouthWest/swr-lsn-neetstudy-2006.pdf [Accessed: 6.01.2019]

Sage RA, Johnson MK (2012) Extending and expanding parenthood: Parental support to young adult children. *Sociology compass*, 6-3, pp. 256-270.

Saito T (2013) *Hikikomori: Adolescence without end* (Angles J, Trans). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Salomone PR (1982) Difficult cases in career counseling: II—The indecisive client. *The personnel and guidance journal*, 60-8, pp. 496-500

Salvà-Mut F, Tugores-Ques M, Quintana-Murci E (2017) NEETs in Spain: an analysis in a context of economic crisis. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. 37-2, pp. 168-183.

Santos PJ (2001) Predictors of generalized indecision among Portuguese secondary school students. *Journal of career assessment*, 9-4, pp. 381-396.

Santos PJ, Ferreira JA, Gonçalves CM (2014) Indecisiveness and career indecision: A test of a theoretical model. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 85-1, pp. 106-114.

Sartori, G (1970) Concept Misinformation in comparative politics." *American Political Science Review*, 64, pp. 1033-53.

Savage M (2015) *Social class in the 21st century*. London: Penguin.

Savikas L (2002) Career construction: A developmental theory of vocational behavior. In Brown D et al (2002) *Career choice and development*, 4th edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sayer, A. (2005) *The moral significance of class*. Cambridge University Press.

Schneider B, Stevenson D (1999) The ambitious generation. *Educational Leadership*, 57-4, pp.22-25.

Schoon I (2010) Planning for the future: Changing education expectations in three British cohorts. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 35-2, pp. 99-119.

Schüll ND (2012) *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Seah M, Cairns P (2008) From immersion to addiction in videogames In: *People and Computers XXII–Culture, Creativity and Interaction*. *Proceedings of the 22nd British HCI Group Annual Conference on People and Computers:* Liverpool John Moores University, U.K.

Serracant, P (2015). A Brute Indicator for a NEET Case: Genesis and Evolution of a Problematic Concept and Results from an Alternative Indicator. *Social Indicators Research*, 117 -2, pp. 401–419.

Secker J, Grove B, Seebohm P (2001) Challenging barriers to employment, training and education for mental health service users: The service user's perspective. *Journal of Mental Health*, 10-4, pp. 395-404.

Shaw RL (2010) Embedding reflexivity within experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 7-3, pp. 233-243.

Simmons R, Russell L, Thompson R (2014) Young people and labour market marginality: findings from a longitudinal ethnographic study. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17-5, pp. 577-591.

Sirois FM (2014) Procrastination and stress: Exploring the role of self-compassion. *Self and identity*, 13-2, pp. 128-145.

Sirois F, Pychyl T (2013) Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: Consequences for future self. *Social and personality psychology compass*, 7-2, pp. 115-127.

Skorikov VB, Vondracek FW (2011) Occupational identity. In
Schwartz SJ, Luyckx K, Vignoles VL (Eds.) (2011) *Handbook of identity theory and research*. New York: Springer.

Smail D (2005) *Power, responsibility and freedom*. Internet Publication
Available from:
http://s2.bitdl.ir/Ebook/Social/David%20Smail%20-%20Power,%20Responsibility%20and%20Freedom%20-%20Internet%20Publication%20(2005).pdf
[Accessed: 21.05.2019]

Smith C, Christoffersen K, Christoffersen KM, Davidson H, Herzog PS (2011) *Lost in transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith JA, Flowers P, Larkin M (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Sage.

Smith JA, Osborn M (2003) Interpretive phenomenological analysis.
In Smith JA (Eds.) *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*. London: Sage.

Spielhofer T, Benton T, Evans K, Featherstone G, Golden S, Nelson J, Smith P (2009) *Increasing Participation: Understanding Young People Who Do Not Participate in Education or Training at 16 and 17* (DCSF Research Report 072). London: DCSF.
Available from: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11328/1/DCSF-RR072.pdf
[Acessed: 22.10.2015]

Spinelli E (2005) *The interpreted world: an introduction of phenomenological psychology* 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Standing G (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury.

St Clair, R., Kintrea, K. & Houston, M. (2011) *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Stebbins RA (2015) *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time.* New Brunswick: Transaction.

Stein MB, Deutsch R (2003) In search of social phobia subtypes: Similarity of feared social situations. *Depression and anxiety*, 17-2, pp. 94-97.

Stolorow RD, Atwood GE (1992) *Contexts of being: The intersubjective foundations of psychological life*. London: Routledge.

Sugihara Y, Katsurada E (2002) Gender role development in Japanese culture: Diminishing gender role differences in a contemporary society. *Sex Roles*, 47(9-10), pp.443-452.

Super DE (1957) *The psychology of careers: An introduction to vocational development.* London: Harper.

Suwa, M, Suzuki, K, Hara, K. (2003) Family features in primary social withdrawal among young adults. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 57, pp. 586–594.

Suwa M, Suzuki A (2013) The phenomenon of "hikikomori" (social withdrawal) and the socio-cultural situation in Japan today. *Journal of Psychopathology*, 19, pp. 191-198.

Symonds J, Dietrich J, Chow A, Salmela-Aro K (2016) Mental Health Improves After Transition From Comprehensive School to Vocational Education or Employment in England : A National Cohort Study. *Developmental Psychology*, 52-4, pp. 652–665.

Taylor C (1985) Interpretation and the Sciences of Man, in
Taylor C (1985) *Philosophical Papers, vol. 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Teo AR (2010) A new form of social withdrawal in Japan: A review of hikikomori. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 56, pp.178–185

Teo AR and Gaw AC (2010) Hikikomori, a Japanese culture-bound syndrome of social withdrawal? A proposal for DSM-5. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 198, pp.444–449.

Teo, T (2008). From Speculation to Epistemological Violence in Psychology: A Critical-Hermeneutic Reconstruction. *Theory & Psychology*, 18-1, pp. 47–67.

Thijssen K, Wolbers MHJ (2015) Determinants of Intergenerational Downward Mobility in the Netherlands. *Social Indicators Research*
Available from: http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-015-1066-7
[Accessed 03.03.2016]

Thomae H (1999) The nomothetic-idiographic issue: Some roots and recent trends. *International journal of group tensions*, 28(1-2), 187-215.

Thompson D (2019) Workism is making americans miserable. *The Atlantic*.
Available from: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/
[Accessed: 20.10.2019]

Thompson R (2009) Social class and participation in further education: evidence from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30-1, pp. 29-42.

Treadgold R (1999) Transcendent vocations: Their relationship to stress, depression, and clarity of self-concept. *Journal of humanistic psychology*, 39-1, pp. 81-105.

Todres, L (2005) Clarifying the life-world: Descriptive phenomenology. In
Holloway I (Eds.) *Qualitative research in health care.* London: Open University Press.

Tomkins L, Eatough V (2010) Towards an integrative reflexivity in organisational research. *Qualitative research in organizations and management*, 5-2, pp. 162–181.

Tovionen T (2012) Neets, in
Goodman R, Imoto Y, Tovionen T ((Eds.)) (2012) *A Sociology of Japanese Youth*. London: Routledge.

Toivonen T, Norasakkunkit V, Uchida Y (2011) Unable to conform, unwilling to rebel? Youth, culture, and motivation in globalizing Japan. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2, pp. 207-216.

Twenge JM, Campbell WK (2009) T*he narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Tykocinski OE, Pittman TS (1998) The consequences of doing nothing: Inaction inertia as avoidance of anticipated counterfactual regret. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 75-3, pp. 607-616.

Tyler I (2013) *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London, London: Zed Books.

Uchida Y, Norasakkunkit V.(2015) The NEET and Hikikomori spectrum: assessing the risks and consequences of becoming culturally marginalized. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, pp.1117

Umeda M, Kawakami N (2012) Association of childhood family environments with the risk of social withdrawal ('hikikomori') in the community population in Japan. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 66, pp. 121-129.

Unison (2014) *The Careers Service: the Government's Elephant in the Room*. London: Unison. Available from: https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2014/08/TowebThe-Careers-Service-The-Governments-Elephant-in-the-Room-UNISON-Briefing-August-20142.pdf [Accessed: 04.03.2019]

Van Deurzen E, Arnold-Baker C (2018) *Existential therapy: Distinctive features*. London: Routledge.

Van Manen M (1997) *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* Second Edition. London: Routledge.

Verhaeghe P (2014) *What about me?: The struggle for identity in a market-based society.* J Hedley-Prôle translator. London: Scribe UK.

Wallace ST, Alden LE (1997) Social phobia and positive social events: The price of success. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 106, pp. 416-424.

Walker TL, Tracey TJ (2012) Perceptions of occupational prestige: Differences between African American and White college students. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 80-1, pp. 76-81.

Warnock M (1980) *Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watts J (2019) Not in my name, not in my profession's name. In
Frayne D (Eds.) (2019) *The work cure: Critical essays on work and wellness*. London: PCCS Books

Weber, M (2002) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. (Originally published in 1904; first published in English in 1930).

Weeks K (2011) *The problem with work: feminism, marxism, antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries.* Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Wertz FJ (2005) Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 52-2, pp. 167-177.

Williams JE, Best DL (1990) *Measuring sex stereotypes: A thirty-nation study.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Williams KD (1997) Social ostracism. In Kowalski RM (1997) *Aversive interpersonal behaviors*, Boston MA: Springer.

Willams KD, Zardo L (2001) Ostracism: On being ignored, excluded, and rejected. In Leary MR (Eds.) *Interpersonal rejection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams M (2017) An old model of social class? Job characteristics and the NS-SEC schema. Work, Employment and Society, 31-1, pp. 153–165.
Williamson H (2010) Delivering a 'NEET' solution: an essay on an apparently intractable problem. in
IWA (2010). *Engaging Wales' disengaged youth.* Cardiff: IWA.

Williams R, Kemp V, Haslam SA, Haslam C, Bhui KS, Bailey S (Eds). (2019) *Social Scaffolding: Applying the Lessons of Contemporary Social Science to Health and Healthcare.* Cambridge University Press.

Willig C (2013) *Introducing qualitative research in psychology*. London: McGraw-Hill Education (UK)

Willis P (1977) *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs.* London: Routledge.

Willis P (1990) *Common culture: Symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young.* Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

Winefield AH, Tiggemann M, Winefield HR, Goldney RD (1993) *Growing up with unemployment: A longitudinal study of its psychological impact.* Florence, KY, US: Taylor & Frances/Routledge.

Winnicott, DW (1960) Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In
Winnicott, DW (1972) *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. London: Hogarth Press.

Woodman D, Wyn J (2014) *Youth and generation: Rethinking change and inequality in the lives of young people*. London: Sage.

World Economic Forum (2019) *Global Gender Gap report 2018*.
Available from: http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/
[Accessed: 03.01.2019]

Wrench J, Hassan E (1996) *Ambition and marginalisation: A qualitative study of underachieving young men of Afro-Caribbean origin*. London: The Stationery Office.

Wrigley L (2019) (Un)happy 21st birthday NEET! A genealogical approach to understanding young people Not in Education, Employment or Training. *Youth Policy*

Yalom I (1980) *Existential Psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books
Yardley L (2008) Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. in
Smith J (Eds.) *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Yates S, Payne M (2006) Not so NEET? A critique of the use of 'NEET' in setting targets for interventions with young people. *Journal of youth studies*, 9-3, pp. 329-344.

Yong R, Kaneko Y (2016) Hikikomori, a phenomenon of social withdrawal and isolation in young adults marked by an anomic response to coping difficulties: A qualitative study exploring individual experiences from first- and second-person perspectives. *Open Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 6-1, pp.1-20.

Zhang YB, Lin MC, Nonaka A, Beom K (2005) Harmony, hierarchy and conservatism: A cross-cultural comparison of Confucian values in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. *Communication research reports*, 22-2, pp.107-115.

Zimmerman J (2015) *Hermeneutics: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix A: Recruitment Post

Understanding male NEETs psychology research

Are you male, between 18-24?

Have you been unemployed, not in education, or training for more than 6 months? Have you chosen to live this way?

Are you interested in sharing your experiences with me?

I'm doing some research for a doctorate in counselling psychology at Middlesex University and I'm interested in the lives of male NEETs by choice, particularly their views on work, relationships and the future.

I can offer you £10 for an hour to hour and half of your time in a face to face interview. For more information contact me, James Gordon at: neetsresearch@gmail.com

Participant Information Letter

Dear

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the research?
This study is being carried out as part of my studies at NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University.

Many men under the age of 25 are facing difficulties in engaging with the labour market at a time that is crucial for their future chances. NEETs are young people who are not in employment, education or training for 6 months or more. NEETs by choice choose to be NEET and there has been little research so far to understand why this is. My study is designed to see whether there are any common themes running through the life stories of young men facing such circumstances so that professionals may better understand how they may help. You are being asked to participate because you have replied to my advertisement for affluent male 'NEETs' (not in employment, education and training) by choice.

What will happen if I take part?
You will be invited to meet me for a 60-90 minute recorded interview. The interviews will take place at a mutually convenient time and private location. The interview will be semi-structured, in that it will follow along lines similar but not identical to other interviews in the research. You will be invited to tell your story with particular emphasis on your current NEET status and your thoughts concerning the future. You will be asked questions to help you to describe your experience as you have lived it, I will be clarifying and asking you to elaborate on details that you provide – particularly your opinions, feelings and perceptions. We will be discussing family and peer relationships, your time in education and work and your personal feelings. Some of these topics may be difficult to talk about, I would urge you to take care of yourself in the interview, if you feel you need more resources and support I will, on the day, be able to suggest organisations you can consult.

Once the interview is complete you will be given a short debriefing. Your recording will then be transcribed and analysed along with the transcripts of the other participants to inform the analysis. The analysis, where your experience will be compared with others to uncover underlying themes, will be written up and submitted to Middlesex University examiners.

What will you do with the information that I provide?
I wish to inform you of my protocols for maintaining your confidentiality throughout the research process and how long your information will be kept. Email correspondence will take place on a specially constructed email account that will be deleted after the final submission of the study. Should you agree to take part you will be interviewed by me and our interview will be recorded and transcribed. I will arrange a mutually convenient place to do this where our privacy will be guaranteed and you will not be overheard. Your identity will not appear on any document or transcript- for my purposes all research documentation will be numerically coded and the key to the numbering will be kept on an encrypted file, which will be deleted after the analysis is completed. Any reference to you in the final document will take place under a pseudonym and identifiable information e.g. your town/neighbourhood, the name of your school, college or family members will also be altered. Transcription will be carried out by me and the recording of your interview will be deleted after transcription has taken place. By the write up stage your recording will no longer exist and your name and contact details only traceable to this research through the encrypted file.

If my research is published I will make sure that neither your name or other identifying details are used.

Data will be stored according to the UK Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
In the interview we will be talking about personal aspects of your life that you may not be in the habit of discussing often with others. You may find yourself becoming distressed in a way you may not have anticipated before the interview. If so, please let me know, and if you wish, I will stop the interview. I will endeavour to provide you with relevant contact details for organisations that can help, should that be the case. Although this is very unlikely, should you tell me something that I am required by law to pass on to a third person, I will have to do so. Otherwise whatever you tell me will be confidential.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?
Being interviewed about your experience about being an affluent male 'NEET' by choice has no direct benefit, although some may find it an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences, and could find this beneficial. You will also be benefiting the field of counselling psychology by raising awareness of your life experience as a member of a relatively unresearched group.

Consent
You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your personal records, and if you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form before the study begins.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you were recruited from a service: whether or not you participate, will not affect the service you are currently receiving in any way.

Who is organising and funding the research?
The research is self-organised and self-funded for the purpose of fulfilling the requirements of my DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy at NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University.

Who has reviewed the study?
All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC research ethics sub-committee have approved this study.

Expenses

To recognise your time and effort in assisting the research you will be reimbursed £10 at the commencement of the interview – you are under no obligation to complete the interview by accepting this payment.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any further questions you can contact me at my research email:
Neetsresearch@gmail.com
If you have any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Dr Jacqui Farrants
City University London
Northampton Square
London EC1V 0HB
j.farrants@city.ac.uk

or:

The Principal
NSPC Ltd
Existential Academy
61-63 Fortune Green Road
London
NW6 1DR

Written Informed Consent Form

Title of study and academic year:
"Understanding affluent male NEETs (Not in employment, education or training) by choice: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis." - 2017/2018

Researcher's name:
James Gordon

Supervisor's name and email:
Dr Jacqui Farrants, j.farrants@city.ac.uk

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.
- I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and I provide my consent that this may occur.

_____ _____

Print name Sign Name

Date: _____

To the participant: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Health and Education Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits: _____

Participant debriefing letter

Dear

Thank you for taking part in the study, it is important that our work as professionals is informed by the experiences of the people we aim to help and your participation has made a contribution to understanding the issues surrounding 'NEET' and particularly affluent male NEETs by choice.

I wanted to draw your attention to local sources of support should you wish to receive help with coping with any of the issues that we raised today. As a resident of **Lincoln, Lincolnshire** – you are entitled to refer yourself to *Lincolnshire Steps2Change* (tel: 0303 123 4000,) an NHS psychological therapies service that are designed to give local people quick access to counsellors and psychologists if they experience mental distress, you are able to refer yourself by calling them if you wish.

The Mix (formerly *Get Connected*) (tel: 08088 084994) is a national advice line for people under the age of 25 across the whole of the UK, they offer free telephone and webchat discussions with counsellors and/or advisers who may be able to signpost you to services who can help with your particular needs.

Samaritans (tel: 08457 909090) is a 24 hour service where volunteers listen in confidence to anyone in any type of emotional distress, without judging or telling people what to do.

If you have any further questions relating to the research I invite you to contact me on my project email: neetsresearch@gmail.com, my project supervisor, Dr Jacqui Farrants (email: j.farrants@city.ac.uk), is also available to speak to should you have any concerns that you feel you cannot raise with me.

Once again I offer my sincere thanks for your participation with this project

Yours sincerely

James Gordon