

How young adults cope with employment uncertainty

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Young adults don't necessarily have 'identity crises' when it comes to flexible labour markets and job insecurity, concludes a new study published by Bristol University.

The study, *Constructing coherence: young adults' pursuit of meaning through multiple transitions between work, education and unemployment* by Dr Ranji Devadason in the Department of Sociology is published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies*.

The interview-based study was conducted with young adults, aged 20-34, in two cities, Bristol and Gothenburg, Sweden. It asked them about their experiences in education and the labour market.

The study found that despite experiencing discontinuity and uncertainty in their working lives, many create continuity and meaning by piecing together episodes of employment, unemployment and education in their biographies.

Some commentators suggest that the contemporary economic climate prevents people from being able to create meaningful life stories for themselves. Because 'old' industrial capitalism created 'jobs for life', workers in the new flexible economy are thought to be racked with identity crises and self-doubt. These developments are thought to have particularly profound negative consequences for young entrants to the labour market.

However, this study reveals that young adults demonstrate an inversion

of old capitalism's values. The notion of a working life that is linear and cumulative is downplayed in favour of a life characterised by new experiences, challenges and continual personal development. In fact, changing jobs, moving on and avoiding monotony require less explanation – amongst young adults – than getting stuck in one job for too long.

Yet, whilst this is true for those who are able to reconcile personal goals with available opportunities in the labour market, others, particularly those who remain in low-paid, routine jobs for extended periods, often become disillusioned when they make limited progress towards their goals. This is particularly the case for those whose ambitions lie in artistic, creative and/or highly competitive fields.

Dr Ranji Devadason, commenting on the study, said: “Despite the negative predictions of some commentators regarding ‘identity crises’, wrought by increasingly flexible labour markets and following job insecurity, the study highlights the resourcefulness and buoyancy of most young adults who are able to interpret disruptions in their employment as avenues for personal development, which ultimately serve to enhance their working lives.”

Source: University of Bristol

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