

Work, Employment & Society

<http://wes.sagepub.com>

Fragmented careers?: Winners and losers in young adult labour markets

Steve Fenton and Esther Dermott
Work Employment Society 2006; 20; 205
DOI: 10.1177/0950017006064111

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://wes.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/2/205>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[British Sociological Association](#)

Additional services and information for *Work, Employment & Society* can be found at:

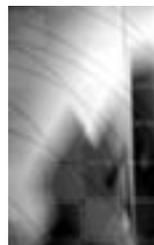
Email Alerts: <http://wes.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://wes.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://wes.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/20/2/205>



Fragmented careers? Winners and losers in young adult labour markets

■ **Steve Fenton**

University of Bristol

■ **Esther Dermott**

University of Bristol

ABSTRACT

It has been argued that people's engagement with work is becoming more like a series of encounters than an enduring relationship. In this article we address the question of whether this fragmentation is characteristic of people in the early stages of their working lives by drawing on a study of young adults in Bristol. We conclude that there is a core of young adults who are employed in a relatively stable pattern, along with a sizable minority, mostly of low paid workers, whose working lives can be described as discontinuous and fragmented. The study suggests that employment fragmentation is concentrated among young adults with less education, and in lower status, lower paid occupations and does not support a generalized picture of uncertainty and discontinuity. These employment patterns among younger people tend to highlight the continuing significance of long-standing social divisions of socio-economic advantage and gender-related disadvantage.

KEY WORDS

careers / employment / flexibility / young adults

Changes in work, labour markets and social solidarity

The study of employment has retained its place at the centre of the sociological imagination (Crompton, 1993) despite significant shifts of paradigm in the discipline. In particular, the works of Bauman (1998),

Beck (2000) and Sennett (1998) have re-integrated employment studies with a broader interest in risk, choice and identity. Additionally, New Labour ideology has re-worked a long standing, and Durkheimian, theme of engagement with paid work as the key source of social integration (Levitas, 1998).

Western labour markets themselves have changed markedly in the last three decades, not least in the accelerated globalization of markets. Key shifts are the increase in service industries and employment in technology and knowledge-based sectors, the feminization of the labour market, the rise in self-employment, alterations in the organization of work time, and the rise of multiple job holders and hyphenated workers on part-time and/or temporary contracts. While it is commonly accepted that transformations have taken place, there are debates about their consequences and extent. Over the last few decades more women, especially those with children, have come to maintain a stronger attachment to the labour market; but women's involvement in employment is not new and especially so among working-class women. Similarly, discussions of working time often emphasize the disintegration of the nine-to-five, Monday to Friday system of work without recognizing that time-shift employment, especially in the form of shiftworking, is hardly new: it is the occupations and industrial sectors in which shiftworking has become commonplace that have changed. Warhurst and Thompson state in their discussion of workplace trends that the sense of comprehensive transformation that is often invoked may be misplaced:

The banal but simple truth is that there is no simple or universal direction ... This should be obvious, but runs counter to the investment in high theory and epochal breaks by those whose job description is to draw 'the big picture', resulting in too many commentators continuing to insist on a coherent transformation package. (1998: 8)

Most commentaries highlight the negative consequences of alleged recent developments. Beck, in *The Brave New World of Work* (2000), speaks of the 'Brazilianization' of the industrialized world, involving the fragmentation and casualization of work; with people having to put together a package of temporary, part-time and other non-standard forms of employment in order to make a living. Some of the major commentators on social change have developed this scenario of flexibility, job shifting and insecurity into a grand picture, as have popular commentators (Elliot and Atkinson, 1999; Leadbeater, 1999; Rifkin, 1995).

Not all discussions of flexibility have portrayed it as a socially disruptive change. Sometimes individuals are seen as having greater choice in how they engage in the labour market. Choosing to become *portfolio workers* (Handy, 1984) with a range of employment contracts, it is suggested, allows skills to be used in a number of settings. People are able to take control of their careers and make career changes with relative ease, creating space for the rise of the entrepreneurial self. Those with scarce expertise or skills may turn flexible labour markets to their advantage (Purcell et al., 1999). More flexible

arrangements over working hours may be highly valued by employees as a means to achieving a better work–life balance (Hogarth et al., 2001).

It is plausible that these benefits and drawbacks of labour market change may co-exist. Bauman (1998) and Sassen (1991), both emphasizing the growth of new and profound inequalities, offer stark portrayals of a new phase of globalizing capitalism marked by a sharp polarization between an elite of high earners, who monopolize stable employment, and a casualized mass of workers subject to spells of unemployment and underemployment, other forms of insecurity, and the threat of poverty. Burchell et al. (1999), using subjective measures of how workers feel, rather than criteria such as length of job tenure, have shown that *the sense of insecurity* increased among professional level strata during the 1990s, while falling among traditionally less secure manual workers. They suggest the current emphasis on insecurity may be in part because the groups now experiencing it are those who gain most public attention.

With changes in the structure and organization of paid employment, it has been suggested that the virtual or imminent demise of *jobs for life* and the demand from employers for flexible and transferable skills has weakened individuals' identity with a trade or profession. Bauman's thesis posits that a society based on production has been replaced by one where consumption is primary in defining our identities; people's relationship to their employer, occupation, and the world of paid work in general has fundamentally altered. Sennett's (1998) indictment of contemporary work relations argues that flexible capitalism has brought an end to coherent work histories for everyone, leading to anxieties in individual lives, and exposing even the most privileged to insecurity and uncertainty. The argument contends that changes in employment have removed this basis of identity, leaving people in a position of limbo without a firm grounding from which to act out their lives, implying the 'corrosion of character'. In Sennett's own words,

Flexible capitalism has blocked the straight roadway of career, diverting employees suddenly from one kind of work into another ... people do lumps of labour, pieces of work, over the course of a lifetime. (1998: 9)

Flexibility and fragmentation have been accompanied by a certain structured individualism.

Our study is about young adults rather than the labour force as a whole. While some older workers may still be in protected employment, young adults are the ones struggling to gain a foothold in the changing system. Roberts (1995) has argued that the key to employment change for young people is that in the context of new forms of employment, young adults do not experience working *together*, as they might have when large local employers dominated many labour markets:

a crude measure of individualization is the proportion of age peers in a person's social network with whom he or she shares a common biography having grown up

in the same district, attended the same schools, and entered similar types of employment at the same ages. (1995: 113)

Changes in employment, therefore, are viewed as having consequences for people's identity, sense of attachment to and commonality with others, and their simple ability to participate in the world of consumption. These changes may have a certain generality but they are also likely to be differently experienced by individuals who have more and less advantaged positions within the labour market. This article will assess to what extent patterns of increased fragmentation of work careers are present among one particular group of workers – young adults – and explore whether there are significant differences between the more and less advantaged segments of the young adult population.

Young adults' transition to work

The literature suggests that, in a picture of discontinuous working lives, we should expect high levels of job changing as an indicator of the absence of stable employment or the prevalence of fragmented employment careers. The comments thus far referred to the labour force as a whole, but young adults (see especially Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) may be particularly affected by these changes. In choosing to focus on the employment trajectories of young adults, one rationale was that as a group who have entered the labour market within the last two decades (respondents were aged between 20 and 34) their experiences might be expected to reflect the general state of employment trajectories under current labour market conditions. As they have been in employment only during or since the most recent period of significant change, they may have career patterns that are untouched by the dominant models of previous decades. Youth labour markets have been particularly subject to interventions in training and into-work schemes, and most recently in the expansion of higher education. But this study draws on young people up to age 34, thus going beyond the typical transition period and including older young adults whose job patterns may have begun to stabilize.

However, the picture with young adults is more complicated because of not only a generational but also a life-stage effect. A high degree of job changing has been seen as a distinctive feature of young people's employment throughout the whole post-1945 era. This can be viewed either as a normal stage of immature labour market behaviour when job experimentation is acceptable, or as a response to the limited jobs available to many young people. In more recent decades, youth researchers have pointed to the lengthening of the transition to work period, both with an extension of the length of time in which young people stay in education and, for those not in education, the increase in training initiatives.

Highlighting the increased job changing that occurs at the early stages of engagement in the labour market, Booth et al. (1997), using retrospective work

history data from the British Household Panel Survey, found that while individuals hold an average of five jobs over their lifetime, half of these job changes occur in the first 10 years of employment. Comparisons between young people and all people in the labour market on the extent of job changing in a single year tend to reinforce this finding. For the labour force as a whole, the Labour Force Survey of 1991 found that 85 percent of men, and 84 percent of women, still had both the same employer and the same occupation as they had had a year before, which seems a fair level of job stability. Wallace's (1987) survey of Isle of Sheppey school-leavers found less than one-third in the same job after a year, with the majority having held two or more jobs. This compares with the earlier findings of Newton and West (1982) in their survey of Nottinghamshire school-leavers in the late 1970s, which suggested greater job stability. They found that 78 percent were still in the same job nine months after leaving school and 60 percent after 30 months. The highest reported number of job changes for an individual was four (but with only three cases out of 144). Gallie et al. (1988), drawing on the *Employment in Britain* survey data of the early 1990s, point out a cohort effect combined with a gendered dimension. On job insecurity, they noted the increased experience of unemployment among the most recent birth cohort in the survey: their major argument was that men, especially young men, were experiencing a decline in job stability and that consequently there is more job changing – both in the sense of movement between employers and in terms of changing from one occupation to another.

Although the orthodoxy of a golden age of unproblematic transitions to which the present youth labour market is compared has been challenged (Vickerstaff, 2003), many youth researchers have pointed to the lengthening of the transition to work and the growth of precarious employment opportunities in youth labour markets (Coles, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Hollands, 1990; Pollock, 1997; Roberts, 1995).

This may indicate that frequent job changing is readily understandable, even if it is only a shift from one poor job to another. The less rewarding the work the less bound to it the individual feels. Wallace (1987) suggests that the fractured relationship to the labour market that is especially prevalent among young people should be seen as a rational response to the low quality work available.

Methodology

The research reported in this article, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, was carried out in 2000–2002 by way of: 50 initial screening or 'scoping' interviews with young adults aged 20–34; an interview-based survey of 1100 respondents; and follow-up qualitative interviews with 80 of the survey respondents. In the present article we draw upon our quantitative survey data.

We will put a *general* claim to the test of some specific empirical data. This general claim is that work careers have become more discontinuous and less stable. We test this by examining the number of jobs that have been held by young adults, with the amount of job change taken as a main indicator of instability in employment. Here, we were faced with a decision about how we were to treat full-time student respondents. It was not surprising to find that a substantial proportion, 17 percent of our initial sample of 20–34 year olds, were students. However, as we were specifically interested in labour market participation as a main activity status, all respondents currently in full-time education were excluded from our analysis.¹

Job changing is a good measure of the phenomenon of lower attachment to the labour market that we are interested in exploring here, as it covers both a) individuals who are either forced into making job changes through redundancy or by the end of short-term contracts, and b) those who choose to switch jobs because of changing personal preferences and/or job opportunities. Our indicator for extent of job switching will be the number of jobs reported by respondents (since leaving continuous full-time education). Respondents were asked to think of a change of employer, and a significant change of occupation with the *same* employer, both as job-changes. Employer-change is thus treated as job change whether or not the occupation is constant. Our analysis will refer to number of jobs, although strictly speaking it examines number of jobs *minus one*.

The second indicator of *fragmentation* that we examine is the pattern of part-time and full-time employment. However, exploring part-time work also allows us to explicitly examine differences related to respondent sex among employed youth. In Britain, the greater part of part-time work is carried out by women, with 43 percent of female employees working on a part-time basis beside only 9 percent of men. We should note here that not everyone, and certainly not all women, would regard part-time work as undesirable; some people may regard it as a life-style choice, or as a feasible option for maintaining long-term labour market involvement. The largest group of men working on a part-time basis are those aged under 25 and the gap between men and women in this age group is reduced to 15 percentage points (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003).²

The research site: Bristol

The research was based within Bristol, as a case study of an urban labour market that is likely to have been influenced by some of the shifts described above. Bristol exemplifies some of the features of a post-industrial (or at least, post-*factory*) city. It is a thriving city, having a strong concentration of financial and other service organizations with over 75 percent of employment in services. Service employment has grown particularly in two areas: the city centre (for example, a large new development for financial sector offices, Temple Way) and

on the perimeter of North Bristol (for example, Cribbs Causeway, a regional retail centre, and Aztec West, a business park). There has been considerable loss in manufacturing and manual employment (the tobacco industry, central docks), although some elite engineering companies (notably British Aerospace and Rolls Royce) maintain a strong presence. Recent employment growth has been in the typical 'New Economy' areas such as call-centres, leisure and catering, retail, media, and communications, computing and telecommunications: the region in which Bristol is located has the seventh highest proportion in EU Europe of total employment in the IT sector (Jagger and Huws, 2001). In 2000, the overall unemployment rate for Bristol was 4.5 percent (6% for men and 2.6% for women).

Like many 'globalizing cities' (Marcuse and Van Kempen, 2000) Bristol is highly segmented in spatial terms. We therefore chose four contrasting zones for our research which would provide a demographic cross-section and which we hypothesized would contain cohorts of labour market winners and losers. This is not, therefore, a true random sample of the city as a whole but, through the choice of zones, it does incorporate a wide, and sufficiently representative range of young adults to provide a valuable guide to types of work and employment experience. Zone A is an area of multi-ethnic occupation in the centre of the city, which features highly on indices of social deprivation. Zone B houses traditional white working-class and lower middle-class groupings, along with some young professionals buying into the inflated Bristol housing market. Zone C is home to a mix of stable working-class families and more deprived white working-class communities either in newer forms of employment or unemployed. Finally, Zone D is one of the most affluent areas, with a large student population and comparatively expensive housing.

Young adults and the labour market

We first looked at the broad profile of the data with regard to 'job changing' (number of jobs reported). In this analysis, the focal survey question was: *How many jobs have you had since leaving continuous full time education?* This excluded any jobs which were held concurrently with full-time study. Notwithstanding the fact that students' employment may be part of longer-term career development and/or economically necessary, students' part-time jobs seem to us to be a specific type of labour market relationship. To this extent they require separate analysis.

Table 1 Total number of jobs since leaving continuous full-time education

Number of jobs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+
Percent	13	18	16	14	12	7	20

N = 915

We define the 61 percent of the respondents reporting four jobs or less as relatively *job-stable*, given that some element of job-changing can be expected in the earliest period of participation in the job market. Of the 39 percent who reported having five jobs or more, almost half (one in five of all respondents) reported seven jobs or more, suggesting a substantial minority of high job-changers.³

Predictors of job changing

Our judgment of the sociological importance of job changing would be influenced by evidence of an association of job switching with social status as indicated by several measures. Is job switching a general change affecting a) *all* young workers?; is it b) a change restricted to higher status workers?; or is it c) a change limited to lower status workers? If job switching took the first of the three foregoing patterns, that would support one or other of two alternative outcomes: either the epochal shift in the nature of employment for *all* workers; or re-affirmation of the unique nature of youth employment. If this was a pattern restricted mainly to higher status workers, it would tend to confirm the portfolio career hypothesis that young professionals and managerial employees take their skills from one job to another in the acquisition of experience and rewards. But if it took on the third pattern, as a change among lower status workers alone, a rather different hypothesis would gain strong support: namely, that there has occurred a growth of low-paid service employment which does not reward staying put with either a particular job or a particular employer. Of course if low status switching (moving from one poorly paid job to another) and portfolio switching (moving around within a professional market) were both borne out, then this would provide a picture of *general* fragmentation of employment, albeit for different reasons in the lower and upper sectors of the labour market. To study these alternative outcomes we examined job changing in relation to three indicators of status: highest educational qualification, income, and occupation.

It is clear from Table 2 that level of job changing is spread unevenly: there is no support for any hypothesis of a shift towards generalized switching. Firstly, in the case of education, differences are highly significant, as measured by χ^2 ($p < 0.0001$). There is some evidence of higher job switching among the higher educated – at least, a substantial minority of our higher-educated respondents were higher job changers. But this is certainly not the dominant pattern. The clearest pattern is that of an association between job changing and lower educational achievement, thus giving greatest support to the argument that job changing is associated with a succession of low skill and low pay jobs which offer little reward for the ‘sticker’.

The current personal income of the respondent is a further indicator of the jobs market success of the respondent. Grouping income into four bands, we see that the pattern of association between job changing and income is that job

Table 2 Number of jobs by educational, income and employment variables

		No. of Jobs				
		1	2/3	4/5	6+	N
		%	%	%	%	
Educational qualification	No Qualification	11	16	37	36	62
	GCSE or equivalent	7	33	27	33	339
	'A' level or equivalent	12	37	25	26	148
	Degree or equivalent and above	20	39	24	17	433
N = 893						
Annual income	<£6,000	9	36	28	26	265
	£6,000–£11,999	10	27	26	37	215
	£12,000–£17,999	15	34	28	23	173
	£18,000+	18	39	23	20	193
N = 846						
Employment status	Employed	15	34	26	26	660
	Unemployed	6	23	35	37	109
	At Home/Caring	11	42	23	24	97
N = 866						
Occupation type	Higher non-manual	21	34	27	18	290
	Lower non-manual	13	35	25	27	220
	Manual	4	33	26	37	144
N = 654						
Years in Job Market	0–4 years	22	42	16	20	189
	5–9 years	11	32	30	24	277
	10–14 years	8	32	32	29	253
	15+ years	9	24	28	39	139
N = 858						

changing is higher among those who have lower incomes, in line with what would be expected given the results for educational qualifications. Again, statistical tests show this pattern to be one that is most unlikely to have been produced by chance in a sample this size ($p < 0.0001$).

The final indicator of status in the labour market was occupation. Thus far in the analysis, the only respondents who have been excluded are those in full-time education. Therefore, the sample has included those who do not currently have paid work for other reasons. Examination of the level of job changing by employment status indicates (see Table 2) that those presently not in paid work because they have taken on caring responsibilities at home in fact have a broadly similar pattern of job changing to those currently in employment. However, those presently *unemployed* show a markedly different pattern from the other two groups, recording a much higher number of jobs. This suggests that those reporting greater levels of job switching may also have included periods of shifting out of paid work.

Given the previous findings suggesting that there is evidence for the hypothesis of more frequent job switching being associated with young

workers in lower tier jobs, we would expect to find that the level of job changing is associated with type of occupation. Indeed, this turns out to be so, again with strong statistical support ($p < 0.0001$). Those included in the category of higher non-manual workers (managers, professionals and assistant professionals and technical workers) showed the lowest levels of job switching; lower non-manual (administrative, clerical, those working in sales and customer and personal services) and manual employees respectively had higher levels of job changing, with the patterning becoming most pronounced when taking the highest category of job switching. Interestingly, the group comprising manual workers showed little variation between skilled workers and lower skilled/unskilled workers.

In a sample of young adults aged 20–34 years old there is a span of up to 18 years spent in the labour market: the longest span will be for individuals who left school at the earliest legal opportunity (16 years) and who were among the oldest in the sample (34 years). There is a consistent relationship between years in the labour market and the likelihood of a higher number of jobs ($p < 0.0001$). This becomes an important control variable for the regression analysis (see below) as it is possible that low education respondents have more jobs, as the ‘bad jobs’ thesis predicts, but simply because they have been in the job market longer, having left education at a lower age.

The general ‘direction’ of these findings is to suggest that, while multiple job changing is found in all education, income and age bands, it is broadly associated with lower status and lower education. Our data on young adults does not support the argument that job changing is general, i.e. found in much the same way in all occupational, educational or income groups. Nor does it support the portfolio career argument, i.e. that professionals pursue the same occupation but change employers regularly. It is a minority of higher education young adults who show high job-changing. But the data do support the *low status* argument, i.e. that young adults with lower education, in lower income jobs, and lower status occupations, have little investment in any particular job or employment and change jobs more than higher educational, income and occupational groups.

We carried out a further test of the principal socio-economic status and education variables in relation to job-changing; income, occupation type, and education were included in a logistic regression model, along with sex. A categorical variable based on number of years in the job market was also entered into the regression model in order to control for the time-opportunity to have job changes. The dependent variable for number of jobs reported since completing full time education was re-coded into two categories indicating a lower (1–3) or higher (4+) number of reported jobs.⁴

A positive relationship between the number of years spent in the labour market and the number of jobs held was duly found. Interestingly, however, the only significant relationship is at the stage of 5–9 years in the labour market. This may suggest, in support of other findings on young people’s employment, that there is not a steady increase in the number of jobs held

Table 3 Logistic regression to predict number of jobs (low/high)

Variable	B
<i>Educational Qualification</i>	
Base: No qualification	
GCSE or equivalent	0.525
'A' Level or equivalent	0.228
Degree or equivalent and above	0.113
<i>Income</i>	
Base: <£6,000	
£6,000–£11,999	0.839*
£12,000–£17,999	0.990**
£18,000+	0.567*
<i>Occupation</i>	
Base: Higher non-manual	
Lower non-manual	-0.121
Manual	-0.325
<i>Years in job market</i>	
Base: 0–4	
5–9	-1.458**
10–14	-0.510
15+	-0.127
<i>Sex</i>	
Base: Male	
	0.158

* significant at 5% level
** significant at 1% level

over period spent in the labour market; instead, most movement is concentrated in the early stages of the period. The socio-economic and education variables had the predicted relationships with job changing, with higher levels of qualification, higher levels of income and higher status occupation all being associated with a lower number of jobs. However, only income produced a statistically significant relationship. While education, occupation, and income are likely to be highly correlated, income appears to be the most important factor.

Job shifters

Frequent job switchers are defined as those who have had 6 or more jobs since leaving full-time education (240 respondents). As the previous analyses indicates, those who have had a larger number of jobs tend to have lower

Table 4 'Job shifters' by father's occupation: residential zone

		<i>Job shifters</i>	<i>All respondents</i>
		%	%
Father's occupation type	Manager/professional	20	33
	Other non-manual	20	19
	Manual	35	33
	Not in employment/not present	25	16
<i>N</i>		234	1086
Residential zone	A	43	27
	B	14	25
	C	31	24
	D	12	24
	<i>N</i>	240	1100

educational qualifications and slightly lower incomes than the respondents as a whole; furthermore, they are more likely to be working in manual occupations.

The importance of inherited advantage and disadvantage is indicated in the data through the relationship between father's occupation and job switching. What is noteworthy is the much smaller percentage of job shifters whose fathers were employed in managerial or professional occupations during the period they were at secondary school, and the much higher figure recorded for those who stated that their fathers were unemployed or not present during this period.

Contrasting the home locality of the frequent job shifters with that of the respondents as a whole shows that these individuals are much more likely to live in zones A and C: zones known to be relatively disadvantaged communities within Bristol. This additional material appears to reinforce the association between job switching and disadvantage among young people in Bristol.

Part-time employment

Those who display the most fractured employment trajectories are the least advantaged in terms of income, educational attainment, and class position, rather than being associated with the high advantage average portfolio worker. However, job changing is only one index of job insecurity. Some indicators of employment fragmentation, such as the number of individuals in risky business enterprises (Beck, 2000: 84) are difficult to measure. But part-time working is an important and accessible indicator, to which we now turn.

Fourteen percent (158 respondents) described themselves as being in part-time work (29 hours a week or less), with the great majority (93%) of these

Table 5 Part-time employment by sex

		<i>Working part-time</i>
Sex	Male	13
	Female	87
<i>N</i>		158

working between eight and 29 hours per week. The overwhelming majority of those in part-time work are women, as Table 5 shows. Of all female young adults in employment 40 percent were working part time and this compares with just 7 percent of men. Those who defined their activity status as full-time study are certainly a source of part-time employees, but their work activity was not recorded in our data. For young people, the combination of full-time study with some level of part-time employment may be increasingly common. These individuals are likely to be both women and men and, because of their educational advantage, they are more likely to do best in the labour market in the long term. However, this article focuses on those who have completed full-time education and on young people for whom the impact and reasons for part-time work are likely to be different.

Part-time working in Britain is strongly associated with women combining childcare with involvement in the labour market, and this probability is

Table 6 Women's employment status by presence of child under 16 in household; educational qualifications; occupation type

		<i>Employment status</i>	
		<i>Part-time</i>	<i>Full-time</i>
		%	%
Child under 16 in household?	Yes	78	17
	No	22	83
	<i>N</i>	137	162
Educational qualifications	No Qualification	6	3
	GCSE or equivalent	5	26
	'A' level or equivalent	21	12
	Degree or equivalent and above	22	58
<i>N</i>		134	157
Occupation type	Higher non-manual	22	52
	Lower non-manual	58	43
	Manual	20	5
<i>N</i>		137	160

pronounced among the respondents: 78 percent of women working part time were co-resident with at least one child under 16.

These findings suggest that part-time work is the domain of a particular segment of the working population; but it does not seem to indicate any particular association with any of the three potential explanations for job switching described above. However, looking more closely at the patterns of part-time employment reveals that it is more common among those women with fewer educational qualifications, and with jobs in occupations ranked lower on the occupational scale. The results are especially noticeable with respect to degree level qualifications, with 58 percent of women who were working full time holding a degree compared to only 22 percent of those working part time. Therefore part-time employment may be an option, like job switching, that is more often chosen when employment brings fewer rewards and/or future employment possibilities are viewed as limited.

It is plausible that these variables are interlinked but, without either longitudinal data (in order to determine the sequence of events) or information on motivations, the processes are difficult to disentangle. For the young women in this study, while over two-thirds of those in higher non-manual occupations did *not* have children, over two-thirds of those in manual occupations did. It may be that women who have relatively few employment opportunities are more likely to choose motherhood as a career option; or it may be that part-time work, viewed as a realistic option in order to combine work and family life, is more readily available in lower status, lower paid occupations, with women transferring to these kinds of jobs after having children.

As anticipated, almost all part-time workers in the sample are women with children. This points to the continuation of a long-standing division in labour participation rather than the product of any new flexibility. Additionally, there is also support for the interpretation that job fragmentation, as exemplified by part-time employment, is more likely to be concentrated among those who are relatively disadvantaged in terms of educational qualifications and find themselves in lower ranked occupations.

Conclusions

Survey data on job shifting among young adults in Bristol does not provide evidence in support of any simple claim that peoples' work lives are increasingly fragmented. Although a small number of high educated job switchers are to be found, the data do not provide support for the hypotheses either of a *general* pattern of job shifting, or of the professional portfolio career. The most evident job switching is among those young adults with least advantages in the job markets, that is, low-educated young adults in a succession of low-pay posts. These are the actors in the labour market with the least to gain from investing in a long stay with a single employer; to what extent people view themselves as

choosing their way through job and career options is a question better addressed through a qualitative study.

The data do not support the speculative theorizations of work, insecurity and fragmentation which have been advanced in some recent accounts of post-industrial work. If anything it is an old story that is supported, of insecurities and fragmentation among those with the fewest cards to play in the jobs market. The absence of a dominant pattern of uncertainty, insecurity and fragmentation is quite evident in our data. Overall we may further conclude that the disorganized and disturbing qualities of contemporary work are considerably exaggerated, at least among young adults in Bristol. Most work histories are relatively continuous, with the exception of those who are least able to gain from the market.

We were not able to examine here the extent to which people *choose* to move jobs and/or occupations, or what kind of narratives they develop to reflect upon their own experience in the flexible labour market. However, our findings suggest – and they do so in unambiguous terms – that when job changing does occur among young adults it is most prevalent among the least advantaged. Thus, the forms of fragmentation which occur are largely negative in their consequences for many individual employees: they are either imposed by employers on those least able to resist; or constitute a mode of resistance or adaptation adopted by powerless workers. The question that remains to be explored through more qualitative study is how these young people view their current employment situation and their job and career prospects for the future.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on research carried out under the ESRC funded project *Winners and Losers: Young adults' employment trajectories*, project number: R000238215.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the whole research team: Harriet Bradley, Steve Fenton, Ranji Devadason, Will Guy and Jackie West.

Our thanks to Nabil Khattab for his assistance with statistical analysis.

Notes

- 1 Other small variations in the 'N' used for individual tables are due to non-response on specific questions.
- 2 27% of male employees aged 20–24 work on a part-time basis compared with 42% of female employees. Among those aged 25–34 the figures are 4% and 33% respectively.
- 3 There is a degree of arbitrariness in dividing count data into categories, but minor alterations to the categories did not substantially alter the results or their significance.

- 4 The regression analysis is based on respondents currently in employment but an analysis including those who are unemployed and currently out of the labour market did not significantly change the results.

References

- Bauman, Z. (1998) *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Booth, A.L., Francesconi, M. and Garcia-Serrano, C. (1997) 'Job Tenure: Does History Matter?', CEPR Discussion Paper no. 1531. London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, URL (consulted January 2005): <http://www.cepr.org/pubs/dps/DP1531.asp>
- Burchell, B., Day, D., Hudson, M., Ladipo, D., Mankelov, R., Nolan, J.P., Reed, H., Wichert, I.C. and Wilkinson, F. (1999) *Job Insecurity and Work Intensification: Flexibility and the Changing Boundaries of Work*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Coles, B. (1995) *Youth and Social Policy: Youth Citizenship and Young Careers*. London: UCL Press.
- Crompton, R. (1993) *Class and Stratification*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Elliot, L. and Atkinson, D. (1999) *The Age of Insecurity*. London: Verso.
- Equal Opportunities Commission (2003) *Facts About Women and Men in Britain*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
- Furlong A. and Cartmel F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gallie, D., White, M., Cheng, Y. and Tomlinson, M. (1988) *Restructuring the Employment Relationship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Handy, C. (1984) *The Future of Work*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hogarth, T., Hasluck, C.P., Winterbotham, M. and Vivian, D. (2001) *Work Life Balance 2000: Results from the Baseline Study*. London: DfEE.
- Hollands, R. (1990) *The Long Transition: Class, Culture and Youth Training*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Jagger, N. and Huws, U. (2001) 'Where the Butterfly Alights: The Global Location of eWork', Report no. 378. Institute of Employment Studies.
- Leadbeater, C. (1999) *Living on Thin Air*. London: Viking.
- Levitas, R. (1998) *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Marcuse, P. and Van Kempen, R. (eds) (2000) *Globalizing Cities: A New Spatial Order?* London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Newton, P. and West, M. (1982) *The Transition from School to Work*. London: Croom Helm.
- Pollock, G. (1997) 'Uncertain Futures: Young People In and Out of Employment Since 1940', *Work, Employment and Society* 11(4): 615–38.
- Purcell, K., Hogarth, T. and Simm, C. (1999) *Whose Flexibility? The Costs and Benefits of 'Non-Standard' Working Arrangements and Contractual Relations*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

- Rifkin, J. (1995) *The End of Work*. London: Tarcher/Pitman.
- Roberts, K. (1995) *Youth Employment and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sassen, S. (1991) *The Global City*. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Sennett, R. (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Vickerstaff, S. (2003) 'Apprenticeship in the "Golden Age": Were Youth Transitions Really Smooth and Unproblematic Back Then?', *Work, Employment and Society* 17(2): 269–308.
- Wallace, C. (1987) *For Richer, for Poorer: Young People In and Out of Work*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Warhurst, C. and Thompson, P. (1998) *Workplaces of the Future*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Steve Fenton

Steve Fenton is Professor of Sociology at the University of Bristol. His research interests include theories of ethnicity; everyday nationalism; majority discourses; labour markets. His current researches examine majority views of multiculturalism and national identity and social class. In 2003 he published *Ethnicity* with Polity Press.

Address: 12 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UQ, UK.

E-mail: steve.fenton@bristol.ac.uk

Esther Dermott

Esther Dermott is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bristol. Her research interests include work, families, intimacy, and the negotiation of time. Her current research examines the effect of parenthood on men's labour market participation.

Address: 12 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UQ, UK.

E-mail: Esther.Dermott@bristol.ac.uk

Date submitted January 2005

Date accepted July 2005