Title: Boundary crossing and identity re-negotiation in internships: The integrative, future-oriented and transformational potential of interns' identity project

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Abstract

This paper explores students' and recent graduates' experience of boundary-crossing in an internship. It draws on the dialogical approach to focus group to show how young people's reflections on their internship experience suggest the importance of their identity project. In particular, the paper argues that interns' identity projects can be seen as semiotic resources that are (i) articulated, refined or enhanced through internship experience and (ii) driving future cycles of boundary crossing by shaping their plans for the future. The interns' identity project is, on one hand, consequential or emerges from past activities and integrates preference, values and commitments into a coherent narrative whole. On the other hand, the identity project informs plans, preferences and orientations to future and shapes how young people create their professional and personal trajectories.

1. Introduction

Contemporary graduate labour markets can be characterised in terms of 'extended entry tournaments' for highly-skilled and highly-paid jobs (Marsden 2007). This is the result of the changing relationship between higher education and work – they have both decoupled (i.e. unpredictable labour market outcomes for graduates) and tightened (i.e. qualifications are necessary but not sufficient for graduate employment). The protracted transitions from education to work have brought about congested graduate labour markets (e.g. Mason 2002; Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003). As a result, there is an extended and delayed selection process of graduates, whereby employers, in search of 'graduate talent', have begun to use internships as a recruitment strategy (e.g. Coco 2000; High Fliers Research 2015, 2016).

To gain positional advantage graduates are increasingly more likely to 'bear more of the cost of gaining experience' (Mardsen 2007:980). As some researchers have suggested, young people, with the support of their families, tend to take on different strategies to gain a competitive advantage on the graduate labour market (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011). Internships in particular have become an increasingly common way for students and graduates to gain experience at work before their first employment (High Fliers Research 2015). In addition to having positional value, internships can be seen as sites of learning

(Guile Forthcoming) where graduates explore their interests and develop their expertise (Hirsh et al 2015).

In this paper, internships will be seen primarily from the perspective of students as resources that students draw on to make the transition to work and, thus, as sites of learning and identity development. The unequal access to internships, both paid and unpaid, of different social groups constitutes part of the debate related to internships as sites of learning, but are not the focus of this paper (see Perlin 2011, Allen et al, 2012).

2. Boundary-crossing and identity development in internships

Internships entail the process of crossing material and symbolic boundaries between higher education and work. Boundary-crossing in internships can take several forms. Interns may join a workplace and then return to education upon completion of the internship or enter the workplace by joining the same or a different company. This process of boundary-crossing between education and work via internships entails, as I show below, a process of re-negotiation and development of an intern's identity.

Boundary-crossing is one of the key concepts from the early work on the transfer of learning and the horizontal dimension of expertise (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström and Young 2003). It was seen as 'a broad and little studied category of cognitive processes' (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström and Young 2003:4) or a process of 'cognitive retooling' (ibid.) that takes place when a person moves across social domains. Boundary crossing involves 'encountering difference, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore, unqualified' (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström and Young 2003:4). The space between the boundaries of two communities or activity systems is described as a space which is 'complex', 'multi-voiced', and ultimately a 'no-man's land' (Konkola *et al*. 2007:204). Boundary-crossing as a category of cognitive process is especially vital for workplaces that are 'polycontextual'

or that require working across multiple communities of practice to devise new solutions to problems (Engeström et al 1995) and this is increasingly a common feature of high-skilled jobs.

The concept of boundary-crossing has been extended to include different forms of engagement with symbolic boundaries of different sociocultural domains. In their review of the literature by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), boundary-crossing is referred to the experience and recognition of boundaries, managing work across domain boundaries, a form of reflecting on practice and a collective effort to develop new ways of working across boundaries. Boundary crossing between education and work in an internship would entail recognising the difference of purpose and meaning of education and work activities, engaging with this difference and trying to manage it by drawing on and devising new tools (Popov, 2018).

One important distinction that further narrows down what I will define as the internship experience and is informed from the perspective of activity theory, is the distinction between 'work experience' and 'internship'. Work experience is usually arranged by a University and forms part of the formal curriculum (Nijhof and Poortman 2013). In internships, however, the work is negotiated between the company and the intern (Guile and Lahiff 2013; Guile forthcoming). This distinction is theoretically relevant because work placement and internships have different 'objects of activity' (Leontyev 1978). A placement that is part of the curriculum is embedded primarily in the activity of learning in an educational context rather than in the workplace context, as is the case for internships.

Another important dimension of boundary crossing in addition to learning is the development of identity. The relationship between identity and expertise development was established by

Lave and Wenger (1991). Envisaged as an apprenticeship-type activity, learning becomes part and parcel of identity development. As Lave later stated:

At the same time we were trying to say that the development of identity in relation to the identities of others was more fundamental than knowledge or mastery. (Lave 2008:284)

Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of learning that entails the process of '*legitimate peripheral participation (LPP')* in a '*community of practice'* helps conceptualise learning and identity development through a relational process of enculturation in knowledge generating professional communities. For graduates entering the workplace this has implications in that graduates are not solely entering knowledge communities, but communities of people acting together and the associated complex social network of relations. Graduates start on the periphery of this practice and with the development of their expertise assume more central roles and tasks. Furthermore, their colleagues in an organisation are carriers of practice and graduates/novices develop their own expertise and professional identity in relation to these experts. However, the situated cognition perspective focused on identity and expertise development *within* practices rather than across the boundaries of practices such as education and work.

The intersection between learning and identity development across the boundaries of practices has been elaborated by Beach (1999, 2003). He argued that when moving across the sociocultural boundaries people experience 'consequential transitions' (ibid.). For Beach, boundary-crossing involves developmental transitions and changing relations with contexts. Transitions can be consequential for graduates as they develop knowledge, identities, and new positions in the world. The last point is particularly pertinent because it suggests that

moving across contexts of education and work in internships enables students to re-position themselves in relation to the world by developing new self-understandings.

In addition to this, Beach (1999, 2003) argued that the development of identity can take place simultaneously, concurrently or mediationally. He particularly saw 'mediational transitions' as transitions to intermediary activities that have an 'as if' character and thus provide simulation of real-world activity (e.g. work). However, in Beach's work (1999, 2000) mediational activities, such as internships, tend to be described as a form of vertical development (i.e. towards knowledge and skill of higher complexity) resulting from simulation of the real activity, or from the periphery towards full participation in the real activity. In this sense an apprenticeship is a better example of the mediational activity in Beach's (1999) model because of the assumption that a person is learning the trade in order to move to the real context of the trade.

In contrast to the immersion of apprentices into the work process, the participation of contemporary interns entails negotiating access and visiting a practice for a limited period of time. Internships, unlike apprenticeship are not mediational activities, because internships do not have to be closely linked with the educational background of interns (Perlin 2011), nor lead to full-time employment. Internships are then not 'as if' activities for the world of work in the way Beach suggested, but rather can occur simultaneously and concurrently with education and entail horizontal development across practices.

Beach's (2003) ideas about consequential transition in an internship were helpfully pursued in Lundsteen's (2011) investigation of internships in banking. The research showed that internships have the potential to be sites of identity development whereby through participation in banking activity, interns decided whether to construct a sense of self as a "banker". This study differs from that of Lundsteen (2011) in its focus on the process of

moving across different practices of education and work and not on the experience of working in a particular industry. As I will show below it is the experience of multiple transitions between education and work that enable young people to develop new insights about themselves and the world of work and, as a result, re-fashion their trajectories.

Thus, internships can be seen as a resource for students and graduates to develop their expertise and their identities by crossing boundaries and 'visiting' a particular work practice. In the research I present below the focus was on finding out how this identity development unfolds over time when moving between education and internships.

2.1. Identity-development across practices: the identity-project and re-negotiation

In addition to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Beach (2003) that suggested the importance of the interlinking of expertise and identity development, identity re-negotiation can be further conceptualised by drawing on two ideas from Holzkamp's (2013) critical psychology, which has seen a recent 'revival' in the English speaking world (e.g. see the 2013 edited collection of his work). These are 'the conduct of everyday life' and 'life-interests'. Both concepts capture the renegotiation implicit in identity development when moving across social practices by articulating the present and prospective dimension of identity, or what I will call the 'identity project'.

The concept of the 'conduct of life' encapsulates the idea that when moving in and through different sociocultural contexts, a person exercises 'specific integrative sensibility and a way of sense-making' (Højholt and Schraube 2016:6). This means that 'many personal concerns are pursued across several contexts and in varying ways as people move from one context to another' (Dreier 2003:24-25). The conduct of everyday life is 'connected to the subject's conception of his/her history as well as future. It is related […] to a broader imagination of how we see the world and what we want with our life' (Højholt and Schraube 2016:6). The

concept suggests that identity development through internships can occur through the integration of new insights about oneself as a result of moving across contexts and the existing commitments and concerns that one pursues when crossing boundaries between different contexts (e.g. values, orientations, narratives and discourses that form understandings of the self and the world).

The concept of 'life interest', one of the foundational assumptions in Holzkamp's work,[1] describes the tendency to ensure well-being in the future and '[to] gain influence over their life prospects' by 'achieving control over the resources of satisfaction – that is, the conditions upon which one's possibilities for living and developing depend'. Incapability to advance one's life interests is perceived as the ultimate 'injury to my subjectivity' and, on the contrary, that 'overcoming this dependency [on others] is virtually identical to the prospective possibility of developing my individual life quality' (Holzkamp 2013:20). The concept of 'life-interest' suggests that an under-appreciated aspect of individual agency in capitalist economies is the need to ensure one has opportunities in the future to pursue the values, commitments and identities that are important to the person.

Therefore, in a contemporary context, boundary crossing between education and internships and from one internship to the next has potential for identity-renegotiation because it enables the restructuring of the 'identity-project' of interns. The identity project provides consistency, purpose and direction to boundary crossing across internships by integrating new insights about oneself and existing values and commitments. Moreover, the identity project is also developed as a result of boundary-crossing in different internship settings. The identity project consists of beliefs related to present and future-oriented questions such as "Who am I? What matters to me? Who do I want to become? What kind of person do I want to be?".

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[1] For Holzkamp life interest is the 'sole material *a priori* in a science of the individual' (Holzkamp 1983: 350 in Holzkamp 2013).

The identity project is both an integrative and future-oriented resource that enables young people to move forward when making decisions about transition from education to work.

3. Empirical investigation of identity re-negotiation through boundary-crossing in an internship

The research presented here forms part of a larger mixed-method research project on the learning challenges in graduate expertise development (Popov, 2018). In particular, the focus of this paper is on the concept of 'identity-project' that emerged from the analysis of participants' reflections on identity re-negotiation in an internship. Drawing on dialogical methodology, the assumption following Markova et al. (2007) is that a focus group method provides reflective space for participants to talk about the unfolding of their identity projects in relation to their experience of internship. In this reflective space, insights and topics are achieved collectively, thematised in relation to the focus group interaction and imbued with social knowledge that participants brought with them.

3.1. Dialogical methodology for focus group method

The main method for collecting data in the research was focus group discussions. Typically, the focus group method is an informal group discussion around a topic selected by the researcher (Wilkinson 1998) and offers researchers an insight into the interpretative aspects of social life and the interaction among participants (Kitzinger 1994; Bloor, Frankland et al. 2001). The method is not commonly used in post-Vygotskian research relative to other methods such as in situ observations and interviews. The rationale behind the choice of focus

groups was to (i) gain insight into a variety of reflections about the experience of internships in a larger number of cases and (ii) develop an understanding of the aspects of the internship experience that are common or unique among the focus group participants. The focus group provided the interactional aspect of the unfolding group discourse and the range of experiences, narratives and knowledge that would have been difficult to capture with individual interviews.

The value of the focus group method for sociocultural approaches is highlighted by the dialogical researchers whose work is underpinned by the assumption of the interrelationship between discourse, action and activity (e.g. Markova 2003; Linell 1998). Dialogical authors, such as Markova *et al.* (2007), have shown that focus groups can be seen as 'societies in the miniature', because they provide a window into the collective, socio-cultural realm ('generalised possibilities') and the local, unique and individual realm (individual in the sense of individual realisation of the generalised possibilities). They showed that to research discourse on internships in a focus group is not to the detriment of 'double dialogicality' of discourse. The notion of double-dialogicality rests on the assumption of mutual interdependence between micro-level situations of talk and action, on the one hand, and macro-level activities on the other (i.e. double dialogicality of discourse and cognition). It is on the basis of the double dialogicality principle that the focus group could be understood as 'society in miniature':

In our view, taking full consideration of the context in which focus groups take place and of the discursive processes at work in no way excludes the fact that participants of focus groups, as members of various social groups, share a great deal of social knowledge and participate in social life on the basis of implicit knowledge and routines (Markova et al. 2007:50.)

This view of focus group discourse as being simultaneously produced in relation to the collective (e.g. societal discourses and narratives about internships) and local interaction (the 'face-to-face' and 'here-and-now' contexts of focus groups' dialogue on the topic of internships) among individuals and settings (Grossen and Salazar Orvig 2011:497) could be seen as a methodological expression of the dialectical relation between the collective and individual in thought, action and speech (e.g. Stetsenko 2010). Extrapolating from this, Markova *et al.* (2007) developed a focus group approach that sees focus groups as sites of 'holistic communication', where social knowledge is shared and transformed among the participants.

In particular, four key principles of this approach frame focus groups in the following ways and serve as tools for the analysis of focus group discourse (see Table 1 in annex). First, focus groups are hybrid speech genres without particular conventionalised form of talk. Which speech genres will be used by the participants will depend on the 'external framing' of the focus group (e.g. what researchers state as the purpose and goal of the discussion, the setting in which the focus group is conducted, etc.) and its 'internal framing' or a range of individual presuppositions about what is expected of them. For this reason, it was important to begin each focus group by clearly describing and discussing the purpose of research and the group discussion.

Second, focus group discourse draws on social and cultural knowledge which participants have to draw on in order to make their point, and agree or contest with others. This could involve a variety of narratives, beliefs, representations and knowledge about internships and their purpose and value. This was the focal point of the analysis presented below.

Third, focus group participants are conceptualised as heterogeneous thinkers with the ability to think together (e.g. interdependently co-constructing meaning), think from different

discursive positions and represent different and sometimes contradictory stances. In taking different positions, participants are said to reveal different forms of socially shared knowledge. This means that topical episodes presented are a collective achievement of participants and the moderator not a sum of individual contributions. Individual trajectories are described to contextualise their contribution, but the unfolding of discourse is unique and a collective product.

Finally, from the dialogical perspective focus groups are characterised by circulation and transformation of ideas. Ideas in dialogue are proposed, taken up, get transformed and contested, and participants may use discursive devices and positions (analogies, metaphors, citations) to construct a topic. Topics are dynamically developed throughout the dialogue and intertwined with managing relationships, identities and emotions. This suggests that the analysis needs to take into account themes that connect different topical episodes and discursive tools that participants use to make their points.

The four focus group principles formed the backbone of the analytical approach. For the purpose of this paper, the analytical focus will be on the societal and experiential knowledge that participants shared about internships and the effects they had on subsequent choices. The rhetorical and discursive devices used to make points and circulate ideas are important, but beyond the scope of the paper.

3.2 Participants

The data presented here stems from two focus groups (N=6) out of five focus groups in total (N=16). The excerpts from the two focus groups were selected as representative and illustrative of the themes in all five focus groups (see Table 3). Focus group discussions were

conducted with students and graduates of the Russel Group of Universities in London in

2016. Participants' educational backgrounds were varied and included Engineering,

Economics, Arts and Sciences, and Journalism. The intention was to have a heterogeneous

composition of focus group participants with a variety of experiences and educational

backgrounds when this was possible. The focus group participants' degree and occupational

domain of the internship is presented below in Table 2.

Participant pseudonym	Degree	At the time of the focus group	Occupational domain of their internship(s)
Focus Group 1			
Participant 1 (P1)	BA Electrical and Electronic Engineering	Third Year BA	Automotive company
Participant 2 (P2)	BA Electrical and Electronic Engineering	Second Year BA	University department, small consulting company
Participant 3 (P3)	BA Arts and Sciences	Recent Graduate	Management consulting, Publishing, Film industry
Focus group 2			
Participant 1 (P1)	BA Economics and Management; MA Public Management	Student	A trade office of an embassy
Participant 2 (P2)	BA in Social Communications	Student	Global consumer goods company, a charity
Participant 3 (P3)	Graduated from BA in Journalism and Media	Recent Graduate	Corporate communications in a small organisation and in a global information technology company

3.3. Data collection

Participants were recruited with the help of the University of London Careers Service. An

invitation to participate in research on the experience of internships was included in one of

the careers service newsletters. In addition to this, an invitation to participate in research was

put on the notice boards on campus and in two nearby student halls. A token in the form of

£20 Amazon vouchers was offered to incentivise focus group participation as this is a

common procedure in focus group research (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2007). The selection criteria were that they had experience of at least one internship in the UK and that they were either current students or recent BA or MA graduates. This provided a common basis for discussion or what is referred to in the literature as 'group homogeneity' (Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook 2007). The composition of focus group was not predetermined and depended on the availability of students and graduates.

Discussion procedure. The topic was introduced and the ground rules of focus group was set out (e.g. anonymity, confidentiality, verbal code of conduct) in line with the ethical principles of focus group research (Bloor, Frankland et al 2001). Moreover, it was made clear that the group moderator was to have minimal input in their discussion. The following prompts guided the focus group discussion: Reasons for deciding to do an internship, insights, understandings and perplexities which they took away about the work performed during the internship, and the effect that the internship had on their future (degree and career) plans.

These prompts enabled participants to actively reflect on: the importance and value they assigned to boundary crossing, what they learned from transitioning to working during the internship and from their short-term immersion in occupational practice , and the effects the internship had on their future plans as related to their degree and their career. The four prompts outlined above were the main questions posed and they served as guides the moderator introduced. After the focus groups, participants were debriefed and reminded of the ethical concerns such as to respect privacy and anonymity of focus group participants outside the research context.

3.4. Data Analysis

The dialogical assumptions and the four dialogical principles of the focus group method informed the framework for the data analysis. In particular, the use of various forms of

sociocultural knowledge and understanding that was foregrounded by the focus group participants was the focus of the analysis. The sociocultural knowledge about internships can take the form of beliefs, narratives, experiences and it is drawn on to engage in a discussion on a particular.

The strategy for focus group discourse analysis combined a conventional thematic analysis with dialogical elements. The coding procedure as suggested by Markova et al (2007) was followed and involved reading through the transcripts, labelling the topical episodes or stretches of dialogue that are joined by a topic the interlocutors were thematising. The analysis involved identifying the content of topical episodes and exploring how the content was thematised. For instance, whether it involved using the voice of an employer, own experience, or making evaluations and judgements (in line with the 'heterogeneity of subjects' principle), and what the common underlying assumptions were (in line with 'socially shared knowledge' principle).

Then the topical episodes under the same overarching 'theme' were grouped (e.g. the theme of internships as opportunities to enhance one's self understanding). Subsequently, the themes were compared across all focus groups. Themes and topics pursued in all focus groups are presented in Table 3.

4. Findings

In this section two excerpts from two different focus groups will be presented as representative examples of how the theme of internships as sites of identity re-negotiation were thematised. The theme of internship as a site of identity re-negotiation was evident in all five focus groups. To contextualise the theme of internship as means of identity re-negotiation, Table 2 shows the list of topical themes and episodes for both focus groups. In what follows I will present two excerpts that relate to the category 'the effect of internship on

subsequent work and education plans' and thematise the idea that the experience of
internships enabled students to re-negotiate their self-understanding and fine-tune their
subsequent trajectories.

Table 3. List of topical episodes and themes in five focus groups related to identity re-negotiation

The meta-categories and focus group prompts	Themes	Topical episodes in focus groups
The effect of the internship upon returning to education / subsequent plans	internship repositioned in relation to their degree	Degree became a resource: - to develop professional judgement - to develop knowledge and interests that are not work-related - to be more critical of the degree and consider ways it could be improved
	internship repositioned in relation to work practice	Subsequent internships and/or degree became a resource to: - try on and explore another professional identity
	internship repositioned in relation to their self-understandings and trajectories	Subsequent internships and/or degree became a resource to: - modify a career path (e.g. by enrolling in MA degree, changing focus of BA degree and/or applying for internships in different industries, different companies) - develop a sense of what one is interested and who one is / what one stands for

Excerpt 1:

The following excerpt is from a focus group discussion between an Engineering (P1), Electrical Engineering (P2) and interdisciplinary liberal arts BA degree (P3) student. The engineer (P2) is in the final year of her studies and completed in placement in a large company in which she interned in several departments. The second participant (P2) was a second-year student who worked as an intern in a research role at his University followed by another internship a year later in a small consulting company. Participant 3 was in the final year of his studies and had three internships in different sectors including publishing and consulting. The following excerpts occurred an hour into the discussion and were preceded by the prompt 'what did you get from the internship?'.

P2: Yea I think that the largest thing that I learned is that large companies are not really my cup of tea, there's a big difference between working for a large company and working for a small company [...] I would eventually want to move in and work with one of their suppliers. they are still fairly large company but they are much smaller than [the company she did her internship in] is and they do a lot more concentrated on the stuff that I am interested is, and so I learned that there is this sort of things that I wanted to do from being in an internship

P3. Yea. I mean, I've varied quite a bit with what I've done and also what I've studied, so it's different from what you guys have done, because engineering is quite set. For me the internship was kind of, one internship I didn't quite like it that much and so I kinda change what I've studied

P1: What made you make the shift?

P3: So I was studying at [University Name] being quite interested in the whole management consultancy thing and then I work with an environment where there is basically only like what McKinsey graduates and alumni and all the companies where we worked for ... I was at a small consultancy consulting on a project ..so I was on that path and ....I just didn't feel we created any value to anyone and that the whole expertise that these guys had wasn't, you know, like, technical or... you know management expertise that they boasted and sold for a lot of money I didn't feel that they actually did help anyone. So it just kind of threw me off from that and after that I kind of re-oriented my degree because in the beginning I did a little more subjects, that were geared toward that like I did a lot of law and economics before and after that I changed; I am doing complete different things;

P1: I had rather different experience than what you had [chuckle] I agree with P2 that a small company offers a lot more focus on the employee than maybe a larger one, so for my internship last year, I worked with [name of the company] which is rather small but fast growing company they are funded by the government and they basically just help UK start ups to be on their feet [...] and what I found is that everyone's ability in that company was really valued, highly valued and everyone was really appreciated. So my point is that, it seems like this that the degree that I hopefully will get next year will be well valued so yea, if anything, the internship just sort of led me to believe that I am doing a good degree.

P2: Yea I think I would stick with the Engineering degree just because statistic wise that you can get the broadest variety of jobs you can get into pretty much anything with engineering, especially with electrical [engineering] you branch into computers, banking, which is pretty much the reason why I chose it in the first place, because more doors open the better, really. I wouldn't change the degree just change the path at the end of it

P3: Yea mine is quite broad, it's complete opposite, it's like doing philosophy?

P1: My brother also works in engineering, and his advice to me was basically if he hasn't taken internships when he eventually got thrown into business he would've just been like 'what the hell am I doing?' So he's like 'do an internship (laughs) so you know what you're doing and you don't get stuck in a job eventually that's not what you want', because you need a taster of, there's so much option with engineering you've got to get a taster of what sort of area you're going to be working in. It's different everywhere. There's so much selection. It would be really easy to pick the wrong industry for you and then just be, you know, sort of stuck for a bit, because student loans you get stuck as well, you can't leave a job.

The key topic that arose in the excerpt is the relationship between the degree, the internship and future employment. In particular, the participants discussed internships as a means of assessing the value of the degree and its relevance for the occupation one wants to pursue. In this excerpt the taken-as-shared assumption that was not contested by any of the participants throughout the discussion was that internships help discover work-related preferences and values, and help avoid choosing the wrong occupation. However, based on their disclosures about specific experience of their degrees, internships and plans for the future, the three participants discovered they had drawn different implications for their subsequent plans. Two participants reflected on the internship as reassuring them that they are pursuing the right occupation (P1 and P2), but disclosed that they need to further fine-tune the right career path within the occupation (e.g. find the type of company and a role they would like to pursue). The third participant discussed how internships enabled him to reveal the career path he wished to pursue and how he drew on insights from the internship to modify the focus of his degree. For instance, by taking different modules and thus carving out new potential occupational trajectories.

In addition to this, all three participants in the excerpt shared what they had learned about themselves in the internships, such as their work-related preferences and values. For instance, learning that small companies are 'for me' because the expertise I bring is more valued unlike the big company I experienced as an intern and learning that management consulting is not 'for me' because the type of work ('does not generate value') and the type of people who work in this occupation ('boastful') do not align with my values. image.

Therefore, the reflections in the focus group indicated that through the experience of internships, the focus group participants have reinforced their values and preference (e.g. I like engineering), challenged their values and preferences (e.g. 'I thought I liked management consulting'; 'I thought I liked big companies') and led them to take on new or more interconnected set of values and positioned them to rethink their future direction (e.g. 'I like companies in which my work is valued', 'my choice to become an engineer is a good one', 'I can see myself as an engineer', 'I need to change the focus of my degree', 'I need to find another internship').

Excerpt 2.

In this focus group two out of three participants (P1 and P2 both female) were completing an MA degree in public management whereas participant 3 (P3, male) is a recent graduate (see Table 2). In this excerpt the emphasis of the topical episodes is on the experiential knowledge that P2 introduced as the focal point to support her evaluations about the career in corporate communication. The other two participants have taken the background role or the role of spectators in the story P2 was sharing. This is evident in the way that P3 is prompting more

explanation and elaboration on what happened next after the realisation that P2 did not want

to live her boss' life.

P2   And actually when I had my final feedback, I was chosen to stay, and for me I felt very free in saying "thank you very much but no, I'm leaving."

[pause]

P3   How come?

P2:   Because I learnt that that was no what I wanted to do. I was working in marketing there and I realised it had too many numbers and I looked at my boss's life and I didn't like it at all, so I said in future I wouldn't like to be in that position.

*   And also I realised working there that I enjoyed the company of other people that were in the sustainability team, and I felt more related to them, and talking in the free moments I realised that I was really interested in non-profit organisations. I even remember having lunch with them and oh yes, that's what I would like to do. Like thanks to this internship I realised this in the break. But it was because of network, informal network.*

*   And then I decided to start working for non-profit organisations, like smaller, where my work would be more valued and where I would have like a direct impact on things. So I decided to change with courage [laughs]*

P3: [Did you go for] the corporate social responsibility?

P2:   So I realised that I couldn't get it, so the closest thing to do that was going to non-profit organisations, so there I started, I remember calling non-profit organisations, "hello, yes I know you have an education programme".

And I remember one for example, I said "oh you will have an event in two months' time, maybe you need help, I can volunteer, I'm a professional, I've just graduated". That's how I started, and I started networking and connecting with different organisations, so that was really nice. I really enjoyed going to events and networking and working with different non-profits working in education, poverty, hunger relief, like totally different things.

The picture that emerges from this excerpt shows an account of how the internship

experience of P2 challenged her existing professional preferences and values and how this led

to her to change her future direction. The participant shares a narrative on how she decided to leave what she had previously considered an attractive 6-month position in an international company after being offered to stay in the same position for an additional six months. She reflects on how she learned that the type of organisations and the career in marketing were not the path she wanted to pursue – by evaluating the life of her boss and her team and imagining what her life would be like. She contrasts this with her experience of feeling a connection with people from another team which enabled her to refine her self-understanding and her occupational preferences and encouraged her to explore a different occupational route. She describes that the understanding of the new direction she was considering as a feeling of relief or 'feeling free' to turn down a prestigious opportunity to continue her work in the same company.

This excerpt also illustrates how the refined understanding of her values and preferences enabled the participant to move forward and plan her subsequent internships. For P2, working in a non-profit organisation became a new goal to pursue as result of learning something about herself in the internship in the corporate sector. She disclosed how she actively sought opportunities in local charities as way to create a new professional trajectory. The excerpt suggests the iterative way in which the professional trajectory is created rather than a predetermined trajectory in which internship is a simulation of the employment that will follow. Similarly, it suggests that young people's self-understandings are fine-tuned and articulated in internships and drive subsequent cycles of boundary-crossing.

5. Discussion

In the current climate of intensified competition for graduate jobs and a delay in obtaining a full-time position upon graduation, internships have emerged as a new form of temporary work that enables them to gain positional advantage on the labour market (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011). The competition for graduate jobs requires considerable commitment and investment of resources from young people and their families (ibid.) and it is plausible that this makes the pursuit of identity projects in internships particularly important.

The work of sociocultural and activity theory on boundary crossing has enhanced the discussion on internships by offering a set of conceptual tools to researchers such as boundary-crossing and identity-renegotiation. From the perspective of learning, interns are boundary-crossers visiting a professional practice where they work for a short period of time and then return to education or move to a different internship or full-time employment. Following from Beach (2003) the movement between activities of education and work can have developmental potential. The concept of consequential transitions (Beach 2003) has been particularly influential in elaborating the interface between expertise and identity development in internships (e.g. Lundsteen 2011) by suggesting that as a result of boundary-crossing individual can develop new positions in the world and re-negotiate their identities.

Based on the focus groups discussions on internship experience, this paper suggests that as visitors in a practice the interns are re-negotiating their self-understandings by confirming, challenging or developing new preferences, values and orientations about the world of work and about themselves. However, as a result of this they also change, fine-tune or reinforce their plans for the future. In particular, the young people's reflections on the experience of internships suggested that interns' identities are powerful mediators that shape their

participation in and across work activities and their future orientations and plans. By visiting a practice and trying on a professional role interns articulate and reveal different aspects of their identity and as a result re-consider their plans and trajectories. This means that re-negotiation of interns' identities is not solely consequential but also future-oriented because it enables interns to move forward and fine-tune their plans and trajectories. The work from critical psychology suggests that identities as self-understandings, commitments and preferences are both the result of people's participation across context (i.e. integrative) and prospective (i.e. future oriented) because they are pursued across different activities.

The term 'identity project' provides a more specific view of identity that has a present and prospective dimension and that is revealed, clarified and extended over time. It could be seen as an important addition to the notion of identity re-negotiation and boundary-crossing in internships. Identity re-negotiation in internships can be understood as a re-working of the 'identity project' during and after the internship that can drive further cycles of boundary-crossing.

Annex

Table 1. The analytical tools for dialogic discourse analysis (adapted from Markova et al. 2007)

Characteristics of focus groups	Analytical categories		Examples of analytical questions
(i) Communicative activity types	i.	Framing: the context or the set-up of the group, the objective characteristics (e.g. gender, age, profession)	What assumptions do participants have about the topic of discussion and how does this manifest itself?
	ii.	Footing: the position or attitude of participants toward the topic of the focus group	What else may play the role in how they approach the topic?
	iii.	Activity roles: different discursive roles that participants can take (e.g. the speaker, the listener, instigator of the topic, the 'devil's advocate')	
	iv.	Social roles: associated with the social position of the participants (father, student, lawyer, football fan)	
(ii) Heterogeneity of subjects	i.	Dilemmas and characters in vignettes: create a form of identification for the participants	Who is doing the speaking?
	ii.	Other's arguments: participants position each other in relation to each other's arguments	Who are they addressing?
	iii.	Discourses: discourses participants are speaking from; imaginary audience they are addressing	What discourses, knowledge and particular positions are they introducing into the discussion (e.g. quotations, represented discourses, fictional speakers, expressions of different points of view)?
(iii) Circulation of ideas and the use of discursive devices used to construct and express a topic	i.	Topics: local, coherent episodes of talk in focus groups about certain events or objects that participants pursue.	What are more general patterns in focus group discussion?
	ii.	Themes: recurring topics in or across focus groups	What is taken for granted, assumed?
	iii.	Discursive figures: tools to a) understand the issue which is discussed (analogies, distinctions, metaphors, examples) and b) bolster argument and argue a point (personal stories, exemplary stories)	Which discursive figures were used as resources to make sense and argue? (e.g. analogies, examples, parallels)
(iv) Socially shared knowledge	i.	Proto-Themata: 'taken-as-shared' or 'taken-for-granted' cultural suppositions from which we think at a particular period of time	What are the underlying assumptions of these patterns?
	ii.	Themata: more general underlying, embedded, cultural assumptions of themes. Implicit premises that 'we think from rather than about'	What is taken for granted, what is assumed?

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