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Art work or money: Conflicts in the construction of a creative identity

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Abstract:

The identity projects of novice creative practitioners must take account of the economy of art work. It has been suggested (McRobbie, 2002a) that in the contemporary cultural industries in the UK, a new understanding of the connection between creative work and money has replaced past 'anti-commercial' notions. This claim is investigated through a narrative-discursive analysis of interviews from a longitudinal study with current and recent Art and Design postgraduates. Their ongoing identity projects are shaped by established understandings of creative work and the prospects it offers for earning and employment, and also by more local discursive resources given by personal life contexts. An analysis of two interviews with a single speaker shows how these resources are taken up within her ongoing and distinctive identity project. Both old and new repertoires of art and money are in play in her talk. She must negotiate dilemmas and potentially troubled positionings in order to reconcile a creative identity with relationships and responsibilities towards others. Coherence is only achieved momentarily and is disrupted by new life circumstances. By investigating an identity project at the level of talk, the analysis shows the complexity of the speaker's work to construct and claim a creative identity. (199 words)

Introduction

Art work and its practitioners carry a special status. As Howard S. Becker discusses, artists are assumed to possess ‘rare powers’ (1982: 14) and, in return, they receive some tolerance if they live outside the ‘rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense’ which constrain the rest of society. He argues that ‘Works and makers stand in reciprocal relation to one another’ (1982: 356) so that ‘If you do it, you must be an artist. Conversely, if you are an artist, what you do must be art.’ (1982: 18); this suggests that it will be important for aspiring artists, even more than for novices in other fields, not only to produce appropriate work but to take up an associated new identity. Angela McRobbie (2002a: 527) proposes that in the ‘new cultural economy’ of the United Kingdom over the last decade, the ‘specialness’ of the artistic or creative practitioner has been extended to people working in a very wide range of fields, including art, fashion and music, so that workers, especially those who are young, are attracted to the contemporary creative industries by the freedom and status associated with a particular artistic identity, that of the *auteur*.

These cultural industries are regarded as highly successful. They have been estimated to ‘account for 8% of the UK economy’ (NESTA 2006, p.2) and ‘more than 5% of GDP’ (Leadbetter, 2004). They ‘employ more than a million people in over 110,000 businesses’ (NESTA, 2006, p.1)¹, many of them working in short-term, project-based jobs on a freelance, self-employed basis. This situation has been presented positively as offering flexibility and freedom, and as the model for the future of work, especially when linked to the ‘knowledge economy’. However, critics point out that many creative workers have very limited job security and are low-paid or even unpaid². McRobbie argues that the artistic identity of the *auteur* reconciles new creative practitioners, at least for a time, to poverty or an uncertain income.

This article differs from much of the recent research on the cultural industries and creative economy in its methodological approach, derived from narrative and critical discursive psychology³. We use a fine-grained analysis (Taylor and Littleton, 2006) of interviews to investigate the identity work of people at a point of career transition, from postgraduate study to a professional life as an artist or designer. We show how a creative identity project is shaped by the understandings of art and creative work

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which prevail in participants' different life contexts. On the one hand, there are commonsense or 'social' resources which include expectations of the kind of employment uncertainty associated with the contemporary creative industries and also, conventionally, with the creative life. On the other, there are more 'local' resources given by the personal contexts of participants lives. Both are brought together in the construction of a distinctive personal identity. We are particularly interested in conflicts around money and creative work and in the continuities which are constructed in our participants' talk about their lives as part of their identity projects.

The economy of art work

In his classic exploration of the social nature of art work⁴, Howard S. Becker (1982) suggests that

'Fully developed art worlds ... provide distribution systems which integrate artists into their society's economy, bringing art works to publics which appreciate them and will pay enough so that the work can proceed' (1982: 93). In using the term 'artists', Becker is not making an aesthetic distinction, for example, between an aspiring and an accomplished practitioner or between someone producing 'fine art' as opposed to 'craft'; it is part of his argument that these distinctions shift as art worlds change and different kinds of work are recognised or excluded⁵. He suggests that artists, or creatives, who cannot live by selling their work may obtain support in other ways, through sponsorship or patronage or the state⁶. Becker makes clear, however, that it is not necessary for an art world to be fully developed for art work to proceed: many artists will continue their work without being integrated into an art economy. They find financial support from other sources, including activities, such as teaching, which may or may not be linked to their art world (1982: 95).

In a more recent study, Angela McRobbie (1998, 2002a, 2002b) investigated the 'new creative workforce' of the United Kingdom's economy in the 1990s. Taking a somewhat different perspective to Becker, she saw creative workers as experiencing in an extreme form the privatised and deregulated labour market which resulted from reforms (for example, to employment law) introduced by the governments led by Margaret Thatcher from 1979. McRobbie studied British fashion design students and

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new designers who faced careers in which they lacked the employment security or collective bargaining power which still prevailed in more traditional industries. She suggests that it is not an exceptional circumstance but normal that creative practitioners in the UK's cultural industries cannot earn a living. Even those who are hailed by the media and the industry as successful may be forced to relinquish the ambition to do their 'own' work and instead take up employment in less creative roles with large retail companies. McRobbie therefore presents a largely negative picture of the prospects for novice art and cultural practitioners, although she does propose that some advantage or opportunity is conferred by education, especially from 'top' universities and colleges.

McRobbie argues that in the highly competitive, de-regulated working environment of 'the cultural sector' (2002a: 523) where most workers are 'freelance, casualized and project-linked persons', many people connive in their own 'self-exploitation' as they pursue self-actualization, in the kind of individualized identity project discussed by Anthony Giddens and others (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2002). She suggests that the apparent possibility of self-actualization through creative work may be particularly attractive to those who had previously experienced barriers to fulfilment through their work, including women and members of ethnic minorities; ironically, however, these are the same people who are most likely to be marginalized by new working practices⁷. Sean Nixon and Ben Crewe (2004) similarly suggest that women (and gay men) are likely to be excluded from advertising and magazine publishing by workplace cultures which favour 'robustly masculine' identities. Their research also found that many workers in those creative industries are employed without security and for little or no money, although with the prospect of high financial rewards for those who succeed.

In Becker's terms, McRobbie's research could be interpreted as a 'snapshot' of transition in an art world. He says that 'Art worlds change continuously – sometimes gradually, sometimes quite dramatically. New worlds come into existence, old ones disappear.' (1982: 300) We could speculate that as part of this change McRobbie's young fashion designers and their peers might in time move into a more established set of relations for the recognition and reward of their work, or alternatively cease to be 'aspirants to the status of art' (1982: 339) and split off as a different category of

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workers, such as craft workers or technicians, perhaps with different expectations and less tolerance of very hard work with limited reward. In fact, McRobbie (2002a) does note two signs of change during her study. The first is the move by the young designers from independent self-employment to (precarious) contract employment with big fashion chains. The second is that creative practitioners pay increased attention to the business side of creative activity which, McRobbie suggests, is 'a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative' (2002a: 521). This second point has a particular relevance for our own study and analysis.

Identity as a self-actualizing project

The notion of a self-actualizing identity project which McRobbie refers to, comes from the work of sociologists who are sometimes grouped as theorists of 'reflexive modernisation' (Adkins 2002). Giddens and others propose that in contemporary or late modern Western societies, there has been a decline in the importance of conventional 'big' categories, like class, which once gave people secure identities and their places in society. They suggest that instead, a process of individualization operates through which each person shapes 'who I am' as their own ongoing and reflexive identity project, including through the construction of a life narrative.

Theories of individualization or reflexive modernisation have been criticised for over-emphasising agency and choice, and for denying the structural constraints which continue to limit people's life possibilities, in the workplace and elsewhere (Adkins, 2002). Such critiques (e.g. Rose, 1996, 1999) point to both the freedoms and the burdens of the reflexive 'self-actualizing' work to make an identity. Valerie Walkerdine (2003) discusses the 'psychologization' which results in difficulties being interpreted in terms of personal failings rather than imposed constraints. In a study of another category of workers in the cultural industries, fashion models, Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (2006) suggest that 'Increasingly, the language of success in numerous occupations and indeed, in life in general, utilises the notion of the self-managing, calculating, rational and 'reflexive' subject. The practical effect is that 'individuals are forced to make their own choices and manage their own affairs' (p.82).

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A more recent argument (Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor, 2007) is that these objections are partly answered if the identity project is approached at the level of analysis proposed by critical discursive psychology (e.g. Edley 2001; Wetherell and Edley 1998). In this view, identity work takes place in talk as a series of situated and reflective negotiations of the possibilities and constraints given by multiple positionings and constructions (Wetherell, 1998). This approach therefore complicates the self associated with the identity project. It emphasises the multiple possibilities and also the conflicts and constraints involved in a speaker's identity work. In addition, it re-introduces the social aspects of identity through a focus on the meanings which prevail in the wider contexts of the speaker's life, for example, around possible life courses and available choices. These are the discursive resources for talking about 'who I am' and constructing a plausible life narrative, both retrospectively and into the future (Taylor, 2003).

The approach is 'synthetic' (Wetherell, 1998) in that speakers are understood to be already positioned within larger social formations but also active in their identity work and able, within constraints, to position themselves and negotiate new positionings⁸. This kind of approach emphasises the fluid and unsettled nature of the identity project. There is only limited closure on a construction or positioning. As our analysis will show, it is a situated and fragile resolution of contradictions and dilemmas. Our research involves a micro-level analysis of how the possibilities and constraints of contemporary creative careers are negotiated within an identity project. In our view, this overall analytic approach goes at least some way towards answering McRobbie's call for 'a vocabulary and a methodology for tracing freelance pathways in the cultural sector' which can help us understand 'at the level of experience how this terrain is negotiated.' (1998: 523-524)

Researching creative identities

The starting point for our research project is where many creative practitioners begin their careers, at art college. Higher education in Art and Design in the UK is currently being expanded and reorganised, with many colleges grouping as larger HEIs (e.g. as the University of the Arts in London) or in other organisational arrangements (e.g. the National Arts Learning Network) to expand provision and increase recruitment,

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including through widening participation. The 'Art and Design' umbrella now encompasses a huge variety of courses, including Sports Journalism, Product Design and Animation. This breadth could be taken as evidence in support of McRobbie's thesis that the 'new creative workforce' (1998: 3) has been expanded through training and also through the association of different kinds of work with creativity and the identity of the artist.

Our research focused not on undergraduate but postgraduate study, at one of the 'top' colleges referred to by McRobbie (1998). There is strong competition for entry, the fees are high and the study experience is extremely intense. Postgraduate study therefore requires a major commitment from the students. Although some had come directly from an undergraduate degree, many had spent some time away from education. Postgraduate study was a ratification or validation of a decision to pursue a career in Art and Design and call oneself an artist or designer, or, if that career commitment had already been made, an opportunity to work freely and develop one's art work. Postgraduate study therefore functioned for most of our participants as the 'threshold' point for a career in the creative industries and an important point of transition.

Our research project involved two sets of interviews, conducted one year apart. For the first stage, in 2005, we recruited 29 participants. One year later, when we invited them to a second interview, some were still completing their courses and others had been away from study for almost a year. We were able to re-interview 11 of the original participants for the second stage⁹.

The first part of the analytic process involved a close study of the interviews as a single body of data. Our interest at this point was in features which were common to the talk of different speakers, including images, expectations, and connections of sequence or consequence. In the terms of our analytic approach, these mark the speakers' use of discursive resources. In this article, we focus on the resources relating to art work and money, and our participants' talk about the possibilities for supporting themselves as creative practitioners. The second part of the process involved a comparison between the 'paired' interviews, conducted with the same participant one year apart, to explore how these resources appeared within a single

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speaker's ongoing and distinctive identity work. Below, we present in detail our analysis of the interview with one participant, a woman in her thirties who we refer to here as Speaker A¹⁰. We have omitted reference to her particular field of art work in order to preserve anonymity.

Repertoires of art and money

Our research project was conducted ten years after McRobbie's, within the same UK and London-centered context, with creative practitioners working in a wider range of media and fields. Our interview analysis revealed several strong patterns in the way that our participants talked about the economy of art work. The first is that art and money-making are discussed as incompatible and even directly opposed. Following this logic, creative or art work (especially when referred to as 'fine art') is sometimes defined in opposition to commercial or practical activity. An example would be the use of the term 'selling out' to refer to someone who sacrifices the artistic quality of their work in order to make money¹¹. McRobbie, citing Bourdieu, discusses a further extension of this relationship, that failure to make money can even be taken as a marker of artistic success, so that the young designers she studied 'rationalise their own economic fragility by seeing their market failure as a sign of artistic success, or at least artistic integrity.' (1998: 6); however this was not a noticeable pattern in the talk of our participants.

A second pattern in our interview data, in direct contrast to the first, presents earning, for example, by selling work at a degree show, as evidence of success, as if the money validated the creative work. This is, of course, the logic of business and the commercial world. We saw it being used when our research participants spoke as if 'good' art would logically carry a high money value. McRobbie (2002) suggests that it is this kind of thinking which prevails in the new cultural economy as part of a 'new relation between art and economics (which) marks a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative.' However, our analysis shows references to both relationships between art and money in a more complex interplay.

In the terms of our approach, the patterns in participants' talk can be discussed as 'interpretative repertoires'. Edley (2001) defines an interpretative repertoire as 'a

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relatively coherent way of talking about objects and events in the world' (Edley, 2001: 198). We take it to encompass images, logics and even specific terms which are connected by established association (rather than, say, rational argument). Repertoires provide recognisable, even clichéd resources for new occasions of talking about ourselves and our lives. They also make available certain positionings which can be taken up or resisted by speakers. This is not to say that they reflect consensus but, rather, that they are likely to be drawn on by speakers, for example, as containing propositions to agree or disagree with.

In general, repertoires have been used as an analytic device for investigating the social resources for people's talk; they are part of the commonsense and everyday knowledge shared across a society (e.g. Edley 2001; Wetherell 1998). However, in relation to identity work and the life narrative, we can also consider the local resources, including repertoires, which are given by more personal contexts of a speaker's life (Taylor, 2006). These include the previous versions of 'who I am' and accounts, for example of significant experiences or memories, which might be cited to support them. Other local resources might include the lore and learning associated with a particular professional training which, like social resources, can function as a storehouse of meanings to be employed in a speaker's identity work. The analysis we present will show both social and local resources in play, and some connections between them.

The first repertoire (art-versus-money) is of art and money-making as opposed activities. The second (money-as-validation) presents earning as a marker of success. The art-versus-money repertoire implies that a choice has to be made between commercial success and doing creative work (that latter often talked about, as already noted, as 'fine art'). It therefore creates a dilemma for speakers. Our participants mentioned several possible resolutions to this dilemma, each associated with different ways of positioning themselves. One resolution is to choose creative work and accept financial insecurity or poverty. This, of course, can lead to further problems as it implies a number of other choices around other life possibilities. These are not the focus of this article although they were discussed in some detail by participants who had already worked for extended periods with very limited earnings, before their postgraduate courses.

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Another resolution to the dilemma posed by the art-versus-money repertoire is through avoidance, for example, when a speaker positions herself entirely in the present and does not project her life narrative into the future, by refusing to discuss plans. This was the resolution adopted by many of our participants in the first interview¹². Again, it is not a positioning which we will discuss in this article, except to note that it has value for students who are fully occupied meeting the immediate demands of their coursework; however this kind of ‘present time’ identity may give rise to other difficulties and dilemmas (cf. Taylor, 2003).

An alternative resolution for the participants was to accept and accommodate the incompatibility of art and money implied by the first repertoire. For example, in looking ahead to employment possibilities a number of students talked about getting a job in which they would also have time to pursue their own creative work. In effect, this amounted to an undertaking to live a double life, that is, to do both creative work and work to earn money, separately. It could also be seen as a double positioning of oneself as both inside and outside the social rules discussed by Becker. This was the choice made by the participant we refer to as Speaker A¹³. Before, during and after her postgraduate studies she continued to work as a teacher. Details of her identity work and how the repertoires appeared within it can be seen in the following extracts from her two interviews.

One creative practitioner’s identity work: The first interview

The art-versus-money repertoire can be seen in the following extract from the first interview with Speaker A:

*Extract One*¹⁴

there’s probably not very many other professions where you become so skilled but have so little reward at the end of it You know if you’re (.) I don’t know a lawyer or kind of doing something (.) which ah (.) like architecture even you know you do a lot of training or a doctor and then you get financial reward for what you’ve done so um that doesn’t happen here (INT:

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Doesn't happen here) No **you have to accept that as a fine artist you gonna get paid peanuts**

[emphasis added]

In this talk, Speaker A positions herself as both a skilled professional and a fine artist, and as someone who could reasonably, by analogy with other professions, expect 'financial reward' for her art work but is resigned to the reality that she will not receive it. The logic of this acceptance derives from the art-versus-money repertoire. She employs the same repertoire again in answer to a question about her plans for the future, after completing her course.

Extract Two

I'm going to stay part-time try and pick up I need to work more though and pick up some extra teaching or maybe some commissions or something like that and carry on doing my art work (.) and see how that goes but **I'm not under any illusions that I'll earn money out of my art work** (.) (INT: Really you don't) Yeah no you have to have something stable The course leader even said you know you can hope to break even (.) and I think if you do that you're successful (INT: Break even in terms of costs and things) yeah (INT: Really) mm (.) (INT: So it's like you're not losing money as a) yeah (LAUGHTER) **yeah if you're not losing money you're successful**

[emphasis added]

Speaker A's plan to proceed as she has already done for several years, by supporting herself through a part-time teaching job while continuing her art work as well, follows the logic of the art-versus-money repertoire: 'if you're not losing money you're successful'. In the wording here ('I'm not under any illusions that I'll earn money out of my art work') she is also positioning herself as 'sensible', as in the previous extract when she said that '**you have to** accept that as a fine artist you gonna get paid peanuts' (emphasis added).

We have discussed discursive resources like interpretative repertoires as social, in that they pre-exist particular occasions of talk and are given by the larger contexts of our lives. However, in this talk we see how the art-versus-money repertoire carries additional associations for Speaker A because she received it as advice from her

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college tutor: it is part of her professional training¹⁵. For her, it is therefore both a social and a more personal or local resource for her identity work.

In Extract Three, also from the first interview, she also refers to the importance of earning in the context of her family while she was growing up:

Extract Three

I had a good um art teacher at school (INT: Right) who was really encouraging and um I thought I might want to be a graphic designer or some kind of advertising creative (INT: right) and **that was probably pushed by my parents so that you could get some corporate (.) kind of finances behind you** (LAUGHTER) (INT: Is that was they were (.) you know) yeah **money was always an issue you know** (INT: Yeah) **that I shouldn't waste my skills and and not earn money (.)**
[emphasis added]

It is likely that her parents' concern, about her not earning money, itself derives from the art-versus-money repertoire. Their 'issue', that she 'shouldn't waste ...skills and not earn money', belongs to the opposing money-as-validation repertoire. In this extract, as with the tutor referred to in Extract Two, we see again how the social resource has become part of her personal history and a local or personal resource for talking about herself. The personal contexts inflect the resources with further associations: from the tutor, the art-versus-money repertoire implies that the choice should be made for a creative identity, against earning; for her parents, following the money-as-validation repertoire, she will need to account for failure to earn (because she does have skills which must not be wasted), rather than failure to pursue creative work.

We can also see in Speaker A's talk, in the wording which we have already commented on, a different repertoire which we could refer to as a repertoire of sense and responsibility: ('**I'm not under any illusions** that I'll earn money out of my art work'; '**you have to accept** that as a fine artist you gonna get paid peanuts' – emphases added). It is this repertoire which makes available the sensible or responsible positioning noted above. This is the positioning which Speaker A takes up

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in her resolution of the art-versus-money dilemma: she will ensure a reliable income by maintaining a second, demanding career, as a committed teacher, alongside her art work. There is a marked contrast here to Becker's positioning of an artist as outside the social rules. Speaker A's identity work brings together creativity and responsibility, reconciling the different repertoires given by her professional and family contexts and avoiding, for now, a choice between them.

Interestingly, the third, sense-and-responsibility repertoire can also be seen in Speaker A's descriptions of her art work:

Extract Four

I'm quite a **motivated and ah kind of political** (.) sort of person **my work's quite social it's got** (INT: Right) **a social conscience to it** (INT: That sounds really nice) and I think that's ah that's another reason why I want **You know I don't want to say oh look at my creativity I'm a great artist and I'm so skilled at making beautiful pictures and my art has never really been very beautiful** (INT: Mm) **it's ah usually a bit more gritty** (INT: Right) **and um ah** (.) **contemplative** (INT: Right)

[emphasis added]

In this talk, she constructs her work as 'political' and possessing a 'conscience', and as 'gritty' and 'social', rather than 'beautiful'. 'Beautiful' here is a negative description, implying superficiality and a turning away from what is important. There are clear parallels with the way she positions herself as a creative practitioner and the position she has taken up around the art and money dilemma.

We have noted that for Speaker A, the resolution to the dilemma around art and money-making was to attempt to accommodate both in her life, as distinct activities. In her first interview she described the difficulty of sustaining this double commitment throughout her postgraduate course:

Extract Five

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INT: Mm (.) do you think (.) I mean you're working to fund here you're working two days a is that right (A: Two and a half days) two and a half days a week in two days (A: Yeah) right do you (.) how do you think that's affected you being (.) here on the course

A: It's affected my stress levels and um I was ill I've been ill off and on since Easter I'm better now but I had sinusitis and um (.) you know healthwise it really affected me um and I could put that down to stress from work and lack of support from work um (.) ... building up to the show um so I just had too much on and then got ill (INT: Oh dear) over Easter and then just kind of didn't manage to shake it off until a few weeks ago (INT: Oh dear) so that had an effect on my final work because I'm not a hundred percent happy with the [work] that I've got in the show

Speaker A's attempt to reconcile an identity as a creative practitioner with the responsible positioning has itself created difficulties for her, with negative consequences for both her health and her creative work. Her positioning as sensible and responsible is troubled (e.g. Wetherell, 1998; Taylor, 2006), in that it could be potentially challenged by others, including the interviewer: the resolution to the dilemma has only been partial because she has not managed to present her best work in the vital end-of-course degree show. McRobbie suggests that for the designers in her study the self-actualizing identity project became one of self-exploitation, and we can see similar problems for Speaker A.

Sustaining the double commitment: The second interview

At the time of the second interview, Speaker A had completed her postgraduate course and had nearly a year of subsequent career experience. Her talk inevitably referred to the current circumstances of her life but also showed consistent patterns in her ongoing identity work. In Extract Six, from this second interview, we can see a restatement of the art-versus-money repertoire in strikingly similar terms to the first interview, indicating how her tutor's words function as a local resource. She also positions herself once more as sensible.

Extract Six

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the course leader said to us you know expect it would be nice to just make your work and have it um break even so there you go you know that's someone who's very established (INT: Yeah) ...[details of the tutor's career]... and uh he said that was his advice so **I'm not under any illusions that** (INT: Yeah) it's **it's going to be my only kind of income** [emphasis added]

The similarities to the previous interview show the significance of rehearsal in the construction of identities. However, her identity work must also accommodate new choices because by the time of the second interview, there has been a dramatic change in her circumstances. She has, in short, been extremely successful. In just under a year she has had several exhibitions, in two countries, received considerable recognition for her art work, including awards, and made money. While this is obviously positive, it also calls into question the logic given by the art-versus-money dilemma and her choice to maintain her teaching job. At different points in the interview, she responds to the new circumstances in different ways. In Extract Seven, she again discusses the problems of her double work commitment. However, in a return to the sensible and responsible positioning, she then justifies continuing it with a reference to stability, a regular income and a pension.

Extract Seven

INT: Gosh and you're still managing to do the 2 ½ days (teaching)

A: Yeah I'm finding that quite um difficult...[*she details problems with her teaching job*]... (.) and also swapping between doing my own work and um trying to switch my head into teaching mode and it's quite difficult to (.) but **it's good to have a regular income and you know I've got a pension attached to that as well** and um although I've made some money **this year** I've sold a lot of work that I've made over the previous three years so (.) I have to start making more work again and um that could take some time to kind of (INT: Yeah) (INAUDIBLE) um (.) **I just want to make sure that I've got something regular and stable really** [emphasis added]

While welcome, the success challenges the logic of the art-versus-money repertoire by which Speaker A has positioned herself and therefore, potentially, the identity

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project within which she brings together her creative identity with that of herself as sensible and responsible. She avoids this potentially troubled positioning by re-asserting the logic of the art-versus-money repertoire when she limits the financial success to ‘this year’, questioning its sustainability. She returns to the sensible and responsible positioning in her references to the desirability of a ‘regular income’, ‘pension’ and ‘something regular and stable’. In doing so, she plays down her success, minimising it, as shown in Extract Eight, where she attributes it simply to luck:

Extract Eight

I've been incredibly lucky I think (INT: Of course) more lucky than most people

Discussion

Our analysis does not fully support McRobbie's (2002) claim that past ‘anti-commercial’ notions of creativity have been superseded by a new understanding of the connection between art work and money. Instead, we have found both old and new repertoires of art and money in play. For the particular research participant we have considered in detail, Speaker A, the art-versus-money repertoire was not only a social resource (part of common sense or taken-for-granted everyday logic) but also a local resource, associated for her with the professional context of her postgraduate training. It was also part of the context of her growing up, as was the opposed money-as-validation repertoire. Our analysis shows how these resources are taken up in her identity project and shape the creative identity she constructs for herself. The dilemma posed by the art-versus-money repertoire is, for Speaker A, inextricable from a creative identity. Her resolution to the dilemma it presents is one chosen by many others, that is, to lead a double life in which she maintains her art work and a distinct working life to earn money. She justifies this through another repertoire, of sense-and-responsibility.

Positioning herself as sensible and without illusions affords Speaker A control and choices about her current and future life. In addition, there is a connection between the responsible positioning she takes up in relation to the art-versus-money dilemma and the way she positions herself in her creative work. Having accepted that she is not going to make a living through her artwork, so that she needs to earn money in

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another way, she does so through teaching, maintaining a demanding job alongside her creative work, even throughout her postgraduate studies. And in her creative work, she positions herself as having a social conscience, for example, as producing 'gritty' rather than 'beautiful' work. Responsibility is therefore an important part of the identity she has constructed, positioning her both socially and locally, bringing together social and local resources around money and the nature of her creative work and affording coherence and continuity to her identity project.

An additional point is that at the time of the interviews Speaker A's home situation was no longer with her parents but with a partner with whom she shared the costs of their flat, including payment of the mortgage. She referred in the interviews to her responsibility for paying her share; this, obviously, was part of her commitment to the money economy of their household. But she also made references to what we might call an 'emotional economy', for example, when she talked about her problems during her postgraduate course and the help her partner had given her. He had been, she said 'very very supportive' but 'I can tell that he's at the like end of what he can offer ... you know I can't ask for any more'. This is another example of responsibility as a personal rather than a social positioning and one which may have particular relevance for women.

In the two interviews, conducted a year apart, we see how the responsible positioning creates further dilemmas for Speaker A. First, her decision to live a double life leads to practical problems; her efforts to do two kinds of work strain her strength and energy, resulting, for example, in her illness at the time of her degree show. The resolution to the dilemma has resulted in the kind of self-exploitation noted by McRobbie. In contrast to the positioning outside the rules which Becker described, or the *auteur* identity discussed by McRobbie, this is not an identity of freedom but of huge constraint.

Secondly, and ironically, our analysis shows that the responsible positioning is difficult to reconcile with being positioned by others as successful. In the second interview we see that the positive recognition and reward which Speaker A has received for her work since graduating actually trouble the identity which she has constructed for herself. In Extract Seven she re-asserts the need to be responsible. A

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possible resolution to this new dilemma can be seen in Extract Eight in which she draws on a new repertoire to position herself, that of luck. However, as Jean McAvoy (2004) has discussed, luck is a fragile resolution because it does not offer continuity and sustainability. How do you go forward after a lucky break? To attribute success to luck is also to avoid claiming it; the success is attributed to forces outside oneself. In short, the new circumstances at the time of the second interview, including her success, have disrupted Speaker A's identity work and the reconciliation achieved in her earlier talk.

A final point relates to the absence of the kind of established pathway associated with more conventional careers. Rosalind Gill (2007) studying 'new media workers', suggests that one consequence of this absence is that people have difficulty in envisaging the future and embrace exaggerated, polarized fantasies of success and failure. This may be another reason, we would suggest, that success, if and when it does come, appears inadequate and difficult to claim.

Conclusion

This article presents a data analysis from ongoing research which explores the identity projects of novice creative practitioners. There has been considerable research into the cultural industries or creative sector as an area of new employment (e.g. NESTA, 2006; Freeman, 2007). We take the example of one speaker to look at the specifics of the identity work through which she brings together prevailing understandings of her prospects and possibilities, and makes sense of herself and her choices. The speaker is not presented as a 'type' whose overall experience is to be generalised to other women, postgraduates etc. Rather, her talk evidences the resources on which speakers draw and the kinds of identity work these enable or constrain.

McRobbie, investigating creative novices in fashion in the 1990s, suggested that her participants' accounts showed they had resisted being subjectivised by individualising and free market discourses. She also emphasised the multiple identities in play, including those given by race, sexuality, family and class. Our research, employing a different and more 'micro' data analytic approach, produced a detailed but generally compatible picture, in which subjectivising is partial and complicated; our participants

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struggle to reconcile the multiple positionings given by ‘big’ identity categories (such as those associated with family background) with the creative identities which they aspire, as novices, to take up. Our approach complicates the identity project proposed by reflexive modernists and also the individualised positioning which is associated with both the *auteur* identity and the newly de-regulated labour market, as discussed by McRobbie and others.

McRobbie has suggested that the novice creative workers she studied displayed a new understanding of the relationship between creative work and money. Our analysis suggests that older understandings persist alongside the new. It shows how Speaker A’s talk about art work and money connects her individual experience to the kind of employment patterns which are more generally associated with the creative industries. The conflicts in her identity work illustrate wider issues around contemporary creative careers as they appear in her personal experience.

First, in the temporal pattern of Speaker A’s identity work we can see how she attempts to make sense of the absence of an established career pathway. We see a striving for coherence which is only achieved temporarily, with effort and negotiation, and is always disrupted by new points of tension and new circumstances. Each resolution leads to new dilemmas. The story of Speaker A will, of course, continue, whether or not we follow it through our research, but the longitudinal element of our study to date shows the fragility of the continuity she has constructed and the consequent difficulty of projecting it forward, into the future. This fragility may be a feature of any novice situation but we would argue that it is particularly marked in the construction of creative identities.

Secondly, it has been suggested that the cultural industries ‘reproduce older patterns of marginalization’ (2002a: 523) affecting women and workers who are members of ethnic minorities, even though, ironically, creative work may appear to offer particular opportunities to these same groups. The relevant feature in our analysis is the ‘responsible’ positioning taken up by Speaker A and the conflicts it gives rise to. This is a positioning of relationship and interdependence: to be ‘responsible’ is to be responsible for someone else and to take account of their needs. This is also a variation on the ‘psychologization’ noted by Walkerdine (2003) according to which

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external constraints are interpreted as personal problems to be overcome through additional effort. It gives rise to the self-exploitation noted by McRobbie. In Speaker A's case, we see this happening at both the social and the local or personal level. She takes account of her parents (their wishes), her partner (both financially and emotionally), her pupils and work colleagues (for example, by fulfilling her teaching obligations, even when they clashed with her art work), and also, on another level, the people in society for whom life is not 'beautiful'. Although this kind of responsibility through relationship is not exclusive to women and ethnic minorities, we suggest that it may be a burden which they carry disproportionately, with the kind of consequences we have noted.

Finally, our analysis of the social and local resources around making art and earning money within Speaker A's identity project at a point of career transition shows a complex interplay; this may constrain the flexibility and adaptability advocated by some commentators as the appropriate strategy for managing the uncertainty of creative employment¹⁶. Margie Wetherell (2003) has suggested that the sort of 'personal order' which psychoanalytic theorists would explain in terms of psychic constructs can alternatively be analysed in terms of the 'discursive styles or routines' which are rehearsed and taken up by a growing child as a consequence of its 'various discursive apprenticeships'. The participants in our project were not children but adult novices; nonetheless, the analysis of Speaker A's talk, we suggest, shows the identity work associated with a particular apprenticeship. This has produced a distinctive creative identity which may not easily be re-shaped as an adaptation to changing employment opportunities in new creative industries.

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Notes

¹ They are also said to have grown 'at twice the rate of the economy as a whole' in the decade up to 2004 (Leadbetter 2004), although Freeman (2007) suggests there was a declining trend from 2001 to 2004 which may or may not have been reversed in 2005.

² See Gill, 2007; Knell and Oakley, 2007; McRobbie, 2002 for discussion of the contrasting depictions. Commentators have also noted the huge variety in the work and employment situations which prevail in different sub-sectors of the creative industries (e.g. Oakley, 2007).

³ There are some similarities in the approach used by Gill 2007.

⁴ Becker uses examples and studies taken largely but not exclusively from the USA.

⁵ We have chosen the term 'creative practitioners' to be similarly inclusive.

⁶ McRobbie suggests that the government funded Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS) was an important form of support in the late 1980s and early 1990s for many of the aspiring fashion designers she studied.

⁷ This claim is supported by more recent statistics on women and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic workers in the creative industries. According to Leadbetter (2004), 'About 4.6% of the creative industry workforce is from an ethnic minority, compared with 7% of the economy as a whole. In London the gap is even starker: ethnic minorities make up 26% of London's population but only 11% of the workforce in the creative industries.' Freeman (2007) says that 'the employment of BAME workers in the creative industries has failed to improve over the last eight years in comparison with London's workforce as a whole, and ...the employment of women in the creative industries has deteriorated absolutely' (p.44) i.e. in the creative industries between 1995/6 and 2003/4 the proportion of BAME workers rose from 11 to 15%, compared to 15 to 23% in the whole London workforce, and the proportion of women fell from 42 to 37%, compared to 44 to 43% in the whole London workforce.

⁸ There are some similarities here to the position taken by Entwistle (2001), discussing dress as 'an important link between individual identity and social belonging.' (47) She suggests that dress is neither wholly determined, for example by discourses of power dressing, nor wholly to be understood as individual expression. Rather dress is 'the result of a complex negotiation between the individual and the social and, while it is generally predictable, it cannot be known in advance of the game since the structures and rules of a situation only set the parameters of dress, but cannot entirely determine it.' (p.51)

⁹ Both interviews were conducted by the same person, an art therapist who had herself studied Art and Design. In the first, participants were asked about their experience before postgraduate study, their current art work, the course, the links (or lack of them) between their creative work and other parts of their lives, and their plans for the future. In the second interview, they were asked about the intervening year and their current situations and plans. The interviews were informal and conversational. They were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

¹⁰ We have not provided other details about Speaker A because our approach explores her identity work *in talk* rather than assuming that the talk is in some way an expression of other pre-existing identities, such as class or ethnicity.

¹¹ Sean Nixon (2006) found this repertoire (although he does not call it that) in play in the talk of advertising creatives who presented commercial and creative work as opposed (p.94). He suggests it derives from the 1960s Coldstream art and design education reforms which divided pure and applied work (p.95).

¹² Gill (2007) notes this as a striking feature of the talk of 'new media workers'.

¹³ We choose this anodyne form of reference in preference to a pseudonym partly because, as Billig (1987) has discussed, pseudonyms inevitably carry specific associations, for example of age and ethnicity, which we want to avoid. More importantly, the approach we employ focuses on the talk and not on the speaker as separate to it. We want to look at the identity work which takes place IN a person's talk rather than that person as the bearer of an already existing and intact identity which is expressed in the talk.

¹⁴ The research interviews were transcribed to include the irregularities of talk, such as repetition, brief pauses, indicated as (.) and strong emphasis, indicated by underlining. Brief comments by the interviewer, where included, are indicated by (INT:...). Some of the extracts presented in the article have been edited down, indicated by (...) and sections have been highlighted in bold to assist readability and reference within the article.

¹⁵ It is interesting that the tutor's voice is one which could be characterised as 'harsh realism'. This was part of a wider pattern in our data. Madge and Weinberger's (1973) study, 'Art Students Observed',

also reports tutor feedback, some of it rather brutal, which apparently aimed at destroying students' illusions.

¹⁶For example, White and White (1993) contrast the careers of two artists. The more successful, younger one is 'a performer ...able to offer what fits' (p.xviii)