ARTICLE

INTERNALIZED FLEXIBILITY AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION: SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES TO ADULT TRANSITIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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Abstract: This article presents the preliminary findings of a study which explores attitudes to striving amongst thirty-six young middle class adults aged between 22 and 32 in the Republic of Ireland. It draws heavily on a similar study conducted by Bradley and Devadason (2008) which found that young people negotiating complex adult transitions in the UK responded with internalized flexibility (optimism, adaptability, and resourcefulness). Striving in all contexts is based on a set of contingent expectations that if the individual tries hard to achieve certain goals, specific or general results will follow. However, the collapse of the banking system, subsequent economic recession and housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland since 2008 have dramatically altered the contingent expectations on which striving of young adults within Irish society has been based since the 1990s. This study asks if those negotiating adult transitions have responded with internalized flexibility in this transformed economic context. It also examines whether the significant inter-generational disparities in the rewards delivered by striving which have emerged since 2008 (Chailloux Klein and Wilson 2016) have led to increased levels of relative deprivation (Gurr 1970, Bernburg et al 2009).

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Introduction

The term 'striving' is defined as 'exerting oneself vigorously or trying hard' and has been at the core of theoretical considerations of work and the labour market since the 18th century. For a significant proportion of Irish middle class children raised in homes and education systems which place considerable emphasis on achievement, they are engaged in the process of 'striving' before they become self-consciously aware of it (Devine 2003, Nixon and Halpenny 2010). The demand for striving is not only woven through the curriculum of the school system but also evident in the whole range of competitions and exams which are embedded in sporting, musical and other extra-curricular activities (Growing Up in Ireland 2016, Brennan 2014). Striving takes place within a specific cultural context which presents the individual with a set of contingent expectations. These

expectations posit that if the individual tries hard or strives, they will be able to access a set of rewards (Berkert 2012). These expectations are created through subtly transmitted codes communicated at the earliest stages of a child's life by parents, caregivers and teachers (Loeb et al. 2007). In adolescence, these expectations are often articulated more explicitly through school cultures, and educational policy which sets out frameworks to reward the striving of students (Bates 1984, Carr 1991). However, the contexts in which these expectations are created can change profoundly over a short period of time. Perhaps the most glaring example of this sharp shift occurred in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s where students who strove to achieve within a communist state educational framework found themselves having to adapt very quickly to the realities of post-Communist free market economies (Meredith and Steele 2000). However, the Republic of Ireland, between 2008 and 2016, also provides an interesting context in which to explore how expectations, which are undermined by rapidly changing economic realities, can impact on attitudes to striving.

In January 2007, the Republic of Ireland was ranked as the sixth richest country in the global wealth league by Standard and Poor's credit rating agency ahead of the USA in 11th place and the United Kingdom in 18th place (Donovan and Murphy 2013). The Irish economy had been growing steadily since the mid 1990s and the state had made significant investment in higher education (MacSharry and White 2000). This burgeoning economic growth provided a range of opportunities for young Irish graduates (Gunnigle and McGuire 2001). These graduates were then in a strong position to buy homes as banks created very favourable lending terms to enable young people to enter the housing market (Kitchin et al. 2012). However between 2008 and 2010, the sets of expectations on which this

striving had been built were shattered. The property bubble which had emerged in Ireland led to a crisis within the Irish banks which threatened the stability of the European banking system, prompting Ireland to enter a Troika bailout programme in 2010 (Donovan and Murphy 2013). Under the terms of the agreement, taxes increased, public services were significantly cut and greater labour market flexibility was introduced into the workplace (Allen and O'Boyle 2013). Unemployment rose from 4% in 2007 to 14% in 2012 rapidly contracting the opportunities available to middle class graduates. Emigration levels which had plummeted during the so-called Celtic Tiger era rose dramatically (Kenny 2012). In addition, the construction industry collapsed resulting in a cessation of home-building for a number of years and a subsequent housing crisis from 2014 onwards (Lyons 2017). Therefore, if the process of striving is based on a set of contingent expectations, the economic and societal conditions in the Republic of Ireland which underpinned the striving of young people shifted dramatically between 2008 and 2016.

Given this dramatic shift, the study set out to examine the objective experiences and subjective understandings of striving amongst thirty-six Irish middle class adults aged between 22 and 32. A number of key objectives framed the research. It sought to

- map the evolution of attitudes to striving during the course of youth transitions

- To assess whether interviewees responded to the challenges encountered during these transitions with internalized flexibility in the transformed Irish economic context

- To explore whether the considerable differences which underpinned the contexts of their transitions compared to previous generations had generated unmet expectations which might be

contributing to a growing sense of relative deprivation

Thus, the study seeks to make a contribution to the growing debate about education, employment and precarity in the Republic of Ireland (Murphy and Loftus 2015, Wickham and Bobek 2016). It focuses on how individuals understand their own striving in light of changing economic realities which challenge their long-standing expectations of how their efforts will be rewarded.

Adult Transitions

There is a substantial international literature on adult transitions into the workforce (Ashton and Field 1976, Bates 1984, Furlong and Cartnel 1997, Brooks 2009). Studies of European youth transitions from the 1970s onwards have placed particular emphasis on class differences where the distinctive pathways of highly educated middle class individuals are contrasted to those of the lower middle classes and trajectories towards unskilled or semi-skilled work. Key themes within the literature include levels of pay, job security and conditions of employment and gender differences in adult transitions.

Since the 1970s, increased levels of education, difficulties accessing housing and the de-industrialization of the global North have led to lengthening adult transitions (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998, Arnett 2015). Young people tend to remain at home or in full-time education for longer periods. Entry level positions have become increasingly poorly paid or unpaid. Once individuals have made the transition to the workforce, their access to jobs is structured by greater levels of precarity and instability (Kesisoglou et al. 2016). Michael Tomlinson (2013) notes a pattern of 'increasingly delayed entry to the labour market, is itself, the by-product of the breakdown of traditional pathways and employment channels that directed young people's school to work transitions' (2013,

131-2). Accompanying all these macro changes to employment patterns is the increasing encroachment of neo-liberalism into the interior world of the individual (Ehrenberg 2009). Specific discourses in relation to striving have become particularly evident in both education and welfare settings. Emphasis has been placed on the 'effortful citizen' who is responsible for themselves and adopts an entrepreneurial approach to building their career. Dardot and Laval note that the individual in a neo-liberal economy 'who wants to improve his lot, must construct means-end frameworks in which he will have to make his own choices. He is not a passive maximizer, but a constructor of profitable situations that he discovers through his alertness and which he can exploit' (2014, 112) Individuals, of course, do not blindly accept these discourses and negotiate or resist them in accordance with their own desires and orientations. Ball et al (2000) and Brooks (2009) have examined how friendships and lifestyle choices which also shape the internal subjectivities of young adults interweave in a powerful way, with external demands to strive within labour market contexts. Thus, the process of striving is the outcome of a continuous tension between these external contexts and internal impetuses.

Much of the literature on young adult transitions focuses on the objective destinations of young people seeking to find their place in the world rather than their subjective experience of this process (Ashton & Field 1976, Furlong and Cartnel 1997, Anderson et al. 2002). This study focuses on one specific aspect of that subjective experience. Essentially, it explores participants' attitudes to trying hard and their responses to the outcomes of their efforts within a context of significant economic turmoil in the Republic of Ireland between 2008 and 2016 (Allen and O'Boyle 2013, Blythe 2013). The process of striving can be understood from at least two positions. The

desire to strive can be rooted in a need for goal attainment and the positive affirmation internally and externally which the individual gains through the process (Emmons 1989). However, striving can also be embedded in a desire to manage more negative emotions linked to anxiety about one's status in the world, one's self-worth and self-image (Strauman 1996). Anthropological evidence suggests that not all societies' value striving (Linton 1936). Some cultures and economies offer greater rewards for striving than others or place greater emphasis on ascribed rather than achieved status (McClelland 1961).

At its core, the process of striving itself involves trying to transform from one's current state to another desire state. McIntosh (1996) argues that at the heart of this process is the recognition of some discrepancy. He comments for individuals who strive

> *As they go about trying to reduce the perceived discrepancy, they stop intermittently and self-focus to assess their progress. Based on this assessment, they make adjustments in behaviour that are aimed at more efficiently reducing the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, and they continue their pursuit. Theoretically, this negative feedback cycle ends when the goal is reached or when people decide that it is unlikely that they will reach the goal and therefore they disengage (1996, 57)*

Given that the bulk of research conducted on adult transitions since the 1980s indicates that they have become 'increasingly complex, uneven and unpredictable' (Tomlinson, 2013), one would imagine that this process of stopping and having to re-assess one's rationale for striving in the face of obstacles would have become more frequent. In their study of 42 young adults engaged in adult transitions in Bristol, Bradley and Devadason (2008) found that many of their participants encountered significant obstacles which forced them to re-assess their striving. For instance, Kara, who comes from an affluent

Indian middle class background, worked in childcare but 'decided that I was going to do a Masters in something, opted for fashion... didn't get it, got completely disillusioned' (2008, 126). However, they found that many of their participants responded with what they described as 'internalized flexibility' to the challenges of dealing with a labour market increasingly dominated by flexibility and precarity. Drawing on Raymond Williams, they describe internalized flexibility as a 'structure of feeling... a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities which gives a sense of generation or period' (Williams 1977, 131). The structure of feeling which they found within their research cohort was characterized by optimism, flexibility and resourcefulness in the face of setbacks. They comment

> *Most faced their futures with equanimity and resourcefulness; conditions that cause concern to their elders leave them undaunted. Whether or not there has actually been a decrease in the availability of jobs for life, these young adults have accepted and internalized the rhetoric of adaptability and life-long learning. The interviews show examples of this 'internalized flexibility' across boundaries of class, gender and ethnicity (2008, 133)*

Significantly however, they also found that the striving of a number of their interviewees, particularly at the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum, was heavily influenced by a sense of expectations about the potential rewards for their efforts. For instance, Andrew an aeronautical engineer who attended an English public school 'gave the impression that everything in his life was carefully planned... and speaks of leaving his company in the next five years if it has not given him the opportunities he 'deserves' to progress' (2008, 127). Thus, the process of striving is heavily linked to expectations of the rewards which participation on the education system and occupational structure will deliver. Beckert notes

For capitalist economies to operate, societies must succeed in inducing expectations in actors that motivate them to engage in the activities on which growth is based... motivating the decisions of economic actors by shaping their expectations and by shaping the social and political structure underlying these expectations becomes one of the major tasks of political regulators (2012, 6).

Not all young adults will internalize the expectations desired by political and economic elites however, their stage in the life-course means that they experience an exceptional amount of pressure to strive (Schnaiberg and Goldenberg, 1989, Scherger, 2009).

The impact of unmet expectations related to striving has appeared in two significant forms in the literature on capitalism and social change. There is a long-established literature within psychology on goal attainment which explores how individuals deal with the consequences of diminished rewards for striving in terms of their mental health (Emmons 1992; Carver & Scheier 1981, Martin and Tesser, 1996). A number of more recent studies on neo-liberal subjectivities also demonstrate how limited rewards for striving can generate significant mental health strains (Ehrenberg 2009, Walker and Fincham 2011). Ehrenberg comments 'Self-control, flexibility of mind and feeling and the capacity for action meant that each individual had to be up to the task of constantly adapting to a changing world' (2009, 185). He notes that depression is often the response of the individual who struggles to cope with these demands particularly when their expectations related to rewards are unmet.

A second area of research where the role of unmet expectations has received considerable attention is within studies on relative deprivation. Drawing on Durkheim, Merton (1968) and Gurr (1970) examined how unmet expectations generated within a context of social comparison can be a significant source of anger and frustration at the individual level and social unrest at a societal level. Bernburg et al note

Relative deprivation implies that economic deprivation has relative as opposed to absolute effects on experience, because the standard of living among the person's reference groups contextualises how the person experiences deprivation... Perceiving affluence among reference groups tends to raise the person's aspirations and sense of entitlement to a comparable standard of living. Hence when people think that referenced others enjoy more affluence than themselves, they tend to feel a sense of injustice and frustration (2009, 1223-4).

In his book *Why Men Rebel* (1970), Ted Gurr notes that instead of the individual internalizing their disappointment related to unmet expectations, groups of individuals externalise their anger at elites who have denied them the rewards to which they believe they are entitled. Thus, given the turmoil in the Irish economy since 2008 and increasing concerns about intergenerational justice, this study draws on both the concepts of internalized flexibility and relative deprivation to understand attitudes to striving within Irish adult transitions.

Irish Adult Transitions and Striving

This project was designed as a pilot study for broader transnational research collaboration on the theme of striving. Thirty-six middle class young people were interviewed in the three major Irish cities - Dublin, Cork and Limerick. These young people were aged between 22 and 32 and were subdivided into three categories: 22-25 (N=12) 26-28 (N=13) 29-32 (N=11). The sample was controlled for gender (17 - identified female, 16 – identified male, 3 - identified other), all participants described themselves as white Irish. Each interviewee was asked a series of questions about striving in terms of early years' socialization in the home and school system, their career choices and expectations in their late teens, their workplace experiences and current employment prospects and finally, their expectations for the future. Following

the model established by Bradley and Devadason (2008), participants were asked a series of questions designed to establish whether they exhibited 'internalized flexibility' as a core response to the challenges of adult transitions in Ireland. The interviews concluded with a broader set of questions about Irish society and the levels of rewards offered to those who engage in striving. Findings presented focus on three themes: (1) the evolution of attitudes to striving from early years socialization through to current educational and employment experiences; (2) the presence or absence of internalized flexibility as a response to the challenges encountered during the striving process; (3) evidence of relative deprivation given the intergenerational disparities in the rewards of striving which have opened up in the Republic of Ireland since 2008.

Evolution of Attitudes to Striving

Thirty participants interviewed believed that their striving was strongly influenced by early socialization processes in a pattern relatively typical of the European middle classes (Vincent and Ball 2007). Dylan from Dublin's Northside who is studying physiotherapy says 'I was the oldest and I remember my mam having all these educational toys and the two of us saying the alphabet and her saying I would know my letters when I went to school and I'd be the cleverest clogs in the class- it meant a lot to her'. In terms of school experience, the period of middle childhood (particularly from 8-10) appears to have be central in terms of growing awareness of the pressure to strive. Sinead who is training to be a teacher in Limerick comments 'I wouldn't have thought about it in the junior classes, I was too busy having a good time but from second or third onwards, we had these weekly tests and you really had a sense of the pecking order in the class and being expected to work to keep up'. This monitoring of performance in school was also reflected in the home culture where parents would check

test results and reward good performance. Sean, a youth worker in Cork notes 'I would do my homework at my granny's house after school and she would check my homework diary, my mum was just too tired in the evenings'. Noelle who is participating in a bank graduate recruitment scheme in Dublin comments 'I remember bringing a test home and we had to get them signed and I always did well in my maths test but I did badly in this one and you could just feel the disappointment in my parents, it was like "you really should do better"- no shouting just quite disappointment which I think was worse'.

As participants moved from primary to secondary level education, there was less emphasis on parental monitoring of performance and growing personal commitment to striving. Sean notes

I think when I went into secondary, I just wanted to have a laugh with my friends and enjoy life but as the junior cert came along, it all started to get a bit real. You'd notice some of the other lads were really starting to think about their own plans. One guy Pete wanted to be a vet and he really started to get his shit together. The lads would be messing away during the day but they'd be at home in the evening and the work would be done – I think a penny dropped for me around the age of 15, that I'd have to start making more of an effort. It came on gradually but yeah that's probably when I started to try hard

Eighteen participants identified transition year in secondary school as a key point where they began to consider their career choices as they committed to work placements and subject choices for the Irish Leaving Certificate exam. Dylan tells how

the teacher, Mr Casey came in at the start of transition year and I'd always liked him and he asked us about what we wanted to do for working experience. I panicked 'coz I didn't have a clue and when he came to me I said I'd like to be chef coz my cousin is a chef and he put that down in his book so then I was like "oh

fuck, I'll be stuck in some kitchen" so I went home that night and really started to think about it and at the end of the week, I went to him to talk about been a physio. My dad is a selector for a county GAA team and I'd always watched the physios and thought I'd like to do that so it all went from there really.

The role of expectations in these reflections about career appeared to be highly complex as individuals were still in the adolescent stage of the life-course. Cathal, who works as a journalist for an online news website and who is originally from Cork, remembers

Looking back at my expectations, I think on one hand I was influenced very much by a rejection of my parents' lifestyle. I didn't want to be stuck in a three bed-roomed semi-D, I wanted to travel and have an exciting life but that was all based on the assumption that my life ultimately would be better than theirs which I think is probably normal at that teenage stage.

All participants in the study had experiences in the workplace between the ages of 16 and 32. The research revealed surprisingly positive experience of menial service industry jobs – though this positivity may be linked to the belief that these positions were not long - term career choices. For instance, Noelle says

I worked in the shop of a petrol station on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and I loved it. All the lads would be coming in and you'd get to chat to them and I liked working the till and stocking up and the people working there were always really nice to me to yes, it was a positive experience for me.

In contrast, there were fewer positive descriptions of unpaid work experience and internships. Edmund is finishing his training to be a solicitor in Limerick and he comments

I've done a load of unpaid internships in law firms along the way and I think I'd rather be the shit on someone's shoe that do it again. For people who are really busy, you are just a pain in the ass who has to be entertained. For those with time on their hands at the bottom of the food chain, you are someone to torment. And at the end of the

day, you're still doing it for free and they're still doing you a favour

However, nineteen of the participants noted that these workplace experiences provided them with insights into the regulatory, performance management side of work. Fiona who is a junior manager in supermarket in Cork says 'when I went out on work experience, I would just have stood around twiddling my thumbs and my supervisor pointed out that I should look busy all the time even if I wasn't busy, that is something that has stayed with me to this day'.

Overall, there was evidence of both internal and external pressures to strive being experienced by participants in the research from the middle childhood period onwards. During the early years, trying hard appears to have been strongly influenced by external rewards particularly, parental praise. During adolescence, participants began to strive for more diverse reasons, not only to please teachers and parents but to set themselves on a life trajectory. However, early work experiences also appeared to provide them with insights into some of the key challenges of striving in adult contexts. Part-time and unpaid work also introduced them to the significant interpersonal challenges of striving in work contexts with different strata of employees.

Internalized Flexibility and Relative Deprivation

There was considerable variation in the cohort in terms of their responses to setbacks and challenges as they attempted their adult transitions. For the purposes of analysis, the sample was divided into three sub-groups (22-25, 26-28, 29-32) and analysis indicates that while levels of internalized flexibility were relatively high in the 22-25 age-group, this structure of feeling decreased amongst interviewees in the 26-28 who articulated views most consistent with relative deprivation. The oldest interviews (29-32) tended to be less optimistic but also less frustrated. They were either moving towards

the attainment of their goals or demonstrated greater levels of resignation that their striving would not be rewarded in the way they originally envisaged.

 Bradley and Devadason (2008) define internalized flexibility as optimism, adaptability and resourcefulness and there was considerable evidence of these responses to the challenges of entering the workforce in the 22-25 category. Five interviewees were in current employment while four were studying and three actively seeking work. All the employed interviewees indicated that they felt their wage levels were low considering their qualifications and highlighted the intense pressure which accommodation costs were placing on their income. However, they also unanimously believed that their current pay and conditions would improve. In addition, they did not view themselves as being permanently trapped in low-paid jobs. Felim who works in a call centre in Cork comments 'I don't really like the job that I'm in at the moment, it's boring and the pay is crap but I want to go travelling next year so it will do to keep me going until then, I don't view it as a permanent choice'. This approach mirrors the pattern of fractured transitions identified by Bradley and Devadason (2008) which highlighted the significant number of 'switchers' and 'shifters' moved from unsatisfactory jobs to engage in travel experiences.

Interviewees in the 22-25 category outlined many of the challenges which they had encountered during educational and early work experience. Colette who attended a hotel management course says 'well a big obstacle for me was fees, my parents had to get a loan to help me pay for them then just as things were going well, I got sick. In the end I had to switch courses to accountancy but now I feel I'm in the right place and I'm enjoying things'. Dave has just started a job as a computer systems analyst in Dublin has also had to deal with some obstacles saying 'my

biggest challenge was paying for accommodation costs while I was doing internships and finishing college. Then my first job was in an industrial estate and I had to get a car and insurance was huge but I'm managing just about'. Jack an architectural technician appeared to be a more discouraged by his work and educational experiences. He notes 'when I was in college you had to sell your soul even to get an unpaid internship coz there was no building being done and even now the way things are, I thinking of packing my bags which is hard coz I really struggled to get through college and I feel I deserve better'.

In the entire sample, those in the 26-28 category were the most important group in terms of the clash between expectations linked to their striving and the actual results, which emanated from their endeavours. By the age of 26, respondents clearly expected that they would be engaging in jobs which would reflect their long-term career aspirations. They believed that they were entitled to improved pay and conditions but were faced with the relatively low-pay and short-term contracts which had characterized their workplace experiences during the 22-25 age period. Shane works in graphic design in Dublin and says 'When I started I got these really short term contracts and I thought "what the hell, it's a foot in the door" but now it's three years later, I'm on the same money and have no security, I could be turfed out on my ass in the morning, it's just not good enough.' Angela who is working in the airline industry and lives in Limerick says

When you are younger and you get that first job and your car and it's so exciting and any knocks that come your way, you just take them on the chin coz you think things are bound to get better and I was like that in my early 20s. Bur now I've broken up with my boyfriend and I'm tired of being skint and I find I just can't pick myself up in the same way, knocks get me down for months and I'm struggling to get back up again.

There was some evidence that this frustration with these 'knocks' was leading to a broader protest consciousness. Louise a retail manager in a clothes shop in Cork says 'all my family are involved in the water protests but that's really just a focal point for all the anger that's around at the moment. My granddad was a shop steward and in the union so maybe its in the family but I think my generation are getting tired of it all, you can see it all over Europe.' Raymond who works in social care in Dublin says 'I think since the same sex referendum younger people are most aware, we have to get up and protest ourselves or we are just going to be take for a ride, we can change things, that was the lesson of it.' There was also evidence of considerable resentment of those who had gone before and achieved better pay and conditions which were not being offered to younger employees, a view which perhaps reinforces recent concerns about inter-generational justice in Ireland (Chailloux, Klein and Wilson, 2016). Amy who is working as a pharmaceutical sales rep in Dublin comments

My step-sister finished college in 2002. Within a year of leaving college, she had a good job and a year after she put a deposit on a house. She got married before the crash. Now she and her husband are stuck with a huge mortgage but at least they have their own home... I work my ass off and at the moment I don't think there is any chance that I could by a house even though I've had to work a lot harder to get where I am, through internships etc. than she did ten years ago. I just find it hard that a few short years could make such a difference.

Therefore, a number of interviewees had clearly based their striving on a set of contingent expectations which suggested that certain benchmarks or goals would be reached by the age of 26-28. However, for some of them, their expectations were not close to being met.

The greatest variety of experience existed in the 29-32 category. Of the eleven individuals interviewed in this category, five had achieved improved pay and conditions while a further two were hopeful that their pay and conditions would improve in the short term. Three interviewees however were resigned to remaining on low wages and poor conditions and one had opted out of the workplace to start a family. Jamie who is originally from Naas but works in the civil service in Cork says 'I feel things have settled down a bit. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do but when I applied to the civil service, I began to feel now at last I'm on a path. Before I figured it out, I was very anxious about the future.' All participants in this category placed particular emphasis on the pressure which accommodation costs were placing on their income. Elaine comments

I am one of the lucky ones. I have a good job and I just got a promotion but even with my income, I am still living at home with my mother. I want to save to buy a house so I don't want to waste money on rent but it feels like despite all my efforts in school and work, I am back where I was when I was twelve

There was some evidence of resignation and what J.D. McIntosh (1996) describes as rumination or 'repeated reflective thought' on the themes of careers, life choices and pay rather than the anger evident in the 26-28 group. Sheila went to Art College to study ceramics in Limerick. She tells how

After college I was all about doing my art and doing stuff for small exhibitions and I literally starved but I didn't care but then the homelessness crisis started to scare me. A couple of my friends were evicted from their flats so I took a job on a deli counter but I hated it. Now I work in a florist which is much better. The pay is rubbish and it's not art but it will keep me off the streets and I suppose I've accepted the fact that I won't be the new Grayson Perry

Few interviewees in this category believed that their income levels and accommodation would ultimately match those of their parents. This discrepancy in inter-generational experience was the focus of some resentment although a number of

participants acknowledged the significant levels of support which their own parents had given them during the college and early career period. Cathal concludes

I look back on the kid that I was in transition year and I think how naive I was. The other day I looked out the window of my parent's house and a guy a bit older than me was coming out of his house across the road and I was thinking, I would love to be him, I would love to have what he has – a home, a family of my own, a good job. The life that my parents had is now a dream for me and one that I don't think I'll ever achieve if I stay working in this industry [the media].

Therefore, there were some significant differences in terms of the subjective understandings of striving in the three sub-groups of the sample. The 22-25 age-group conform most closely to the experience identified by Bradley and Devadason (2008). Most interviewees were optimistic about their future prospects and they appeared to meet set-backs with resilience and adaptability. The 26-28 age group exhibited less optimism and the combined pressure of low pay, poor conditions and spiralling accommodation costs were generating significant levels of anger and frustration in the group. It was this anger which may contribute to increased levels of relative deprivation and an emerging protest consciousness. Finally, the oldest interviewees in the 29-32 category exhibited less optimism but also less frustration in terms of expectations related to striving. A number of participants in this category had achieved greater job security and improved conditions. Those interviewees who hadn't reached their original goals were more resigned than those in the 26-28 category. They also clearly recognised that their lifestyle may never reach the standards achieved by their parents or previous generations who had made their adult transitions during the Celtic Tiger era (1995-2007).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article presents the preliminary findings of a study of adult transitions in the Republic of Ireland between 2008 and 2016. Two key concepts were used to interrogate the tensions within these transitions related to the process of striving. Drawing on Bradley and Devadason (2008), the study examined whether interviewees responded with internalized flexibility (adaptability, resourcefulness, optimism) to set-backs encountered during the striving process. Because of the dramatic shift in the set of contingent expectations which underpinned the striving of young people in Ireland during this period, the concept of relative deprivation was also applied in order to assess whether unmet expectations were contributing to anger, frustration and potential social unrest.

Analysis of the interview data demonstrated high levels of internalized flexibility in the 22-25 category which gradually decreased amongst older age-groups. In contrast, levels of relative deprivation were highest in the 26-28 age group where there was also evidence of an emerging protest consciousness in relation to questions of inter-generational justice. The oldest participants in the study had either moved to a stage where they felt their striving was being adequately rewarded or had become more resigned to not achieving their original goals and rewards.

As levels of unemployment have decreased steadily in the Republic of Ireland between 2016 and 2017, it is possible that greater employment opportunities will become available to middle-class Irish citizens in these age-groups. Thus, the considerable challenges and set-backs encountered by these young adults as they negotiated their transitions may diminish for the next generation. However, with no evidence of any significant easing of the housing crisis in Ireland, the pressure which accommodation

costs are placing on the incomes of young adults in these age-categories are likely to remain significant for some time to come.

Overall, the research does suggest some legitimate basis for the concerns expressed by the International Monetary Fund (ironically) about the lack of intergenerational justice in their report on the Republic of Ireland in 2016. There was evidence of enough anger, frustration and anxiety in this sample to fuel social protest and only a few participants in the oldest age-group felt their striving was being adequately rewarded. Ireland is unique in Western Europe in its growing young population which is regarded by both economic and political elites as a one of the country's key assets. However, if individuals who are part of this age cohort believe that their striving is being exploited or not adequately rewarded, this group may ultimately manifest a considerable challenge to the neo-liberal orthodoxy embraced by Irish political elites during the crisis.

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