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Identity construction among disadvantaged young adults

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“A whole new future” – identity construction among disadvantaged young adults

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how disadvantaged young adults construct a positive work-related identity in their transition from unemployment to employment, and what enables or constrains a successful transition.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 apprentices of a reemployment program (Jamie Oliver’s Fifteen). The qualitative data were complemented by data on participants’ reemployment status one year after the program ended.

Findings – Identity construction was not preceded by clear motives or “possible selves.” Rather, serendipitous events led to participation in the reemployment program, after which provisional selves seemed to emerge through different pathways. The data also suggested that disadvantaged young adults had to discard their old selves to consolidate their new identity.

Research limitations/implications – A successful transition from unemployment to employment may require that old selves must be discarded before new selves can fully emerge. Given that our qualitative design limits the generalizability of the findings, the authors propose a process model that deserves further empirical examination.

Practical implications – A clear employment goal is not always required for the success of a reemployment intervention: interventions should rather focus on accommodating the emergence and consolidation of provisional selves. Yet, such programs can be simultaneously effective and unhelpful: especially group identification should be monitored.

Originality/value – Most research assumes that people are driven by specific goals when making a transition. The current study shows otherwise: the factors that enable or constrain a successful transition are not to be found in people’s goals, but rather in the process of identity construction itself.

Keywords Careers, Adolescents, Career development, Career guidance, Work identity

Paper type Research paper



A major part of who we are is defined by what we do. Work is a central component of our identity, and its presence or absence can have serious consequences for our psychological health and well-being (Jahoda, 1982). In fact, having a positive work-related identity (i.e. a favorable self-definition that is tied to participation in work activities; Dutton *et al.*, 2010) is related to various positive outcomes such as the ability to adapt to new work settings, job satisfaction, confidence in making career decisions, and employment (e.g. Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Skorikov and Vondracek, 2007; Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003).

However, individuals may fail to construct a work-related identity and rather focus on alternative social identities that are unrelated to being employed (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This is especially the case for young adults who experience significant challenges in the occupational world, such as labor market discrimination, little access to work opportunities, and negative family experiences (Chaves *et al.*, 2004). Instead of providing the necessary stimuli for constructing a positive work-related identity, the environment of these disadvantaged young adults produces stimuli to disconnect from future vocational plans and to form other negative social identities such as gangs (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2015), which hinders their chance to obtain stable and meaningful employment (Diemer and Blustein, 2007).

The interventions that have specifically been developed to help disadvantaged young adults transition from unemployment into employment are mostly aimed at developing occupational and social skills (e.g. Blustein *et al.*, 2000). Making a successful transition, however, requires more than developing such skills. For example, knowledge of slicing techniques is an indispensable skill for working as a chef, but rather useless when one does not want to work at all. Because disadvantaged young adults are supposed to think of themselves as being able to work and to structure their lives around a job, a successful transition also requires the construction of a new self-concept in relation to the occupational world (van Hal *et al.*, 2012) or, in other words, the construction of a positive work-related identity.

While identity construction has been examined in a range of professional settings and career transitions (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016; Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Pratt *et al.*, 2006), very few studies have examined identity construction in the transition from unemployment to employment – let alone among disadvantaged young adults. As such, research provides little direction on the mechanisms by which disadvantaged young adults construct a positive work-related identity, nor on what enables or constrains a successful transition (Ibarra, 2005). Hence, the main purpose of this study is to explore how disadvantaged young adults construct a positive work-related identity during their participation in a reemployment intervention (called “Jamie Oliver’s Fifteen”).

This study is important for several reasons. First, a positive work-related identity is a crucial determinant of employment and of young adults’ future perspectives (Diemer and Blustein, 2007). It is therefore vital to advance our understanding of how such a positive work-related identity is constructed. Second, work-related identities are created and altered in social interactions with others (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Yet, it is exactly the social context that may hinder stigmatized groups such as disadvantaged young adults in their transition process (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007). In this study, we particularly focus on detailing the process by which negative identities are replaced by positive work-related identities. Third, it is crucial for the success of reemployment programs to understand the processes that differentiate disadvantaged young adults who are able to find employment from those who fail to do so. Hence, we also explore why some disadvantaged young adults are able to complete the transition to employment whereas others fall back into unemployment.

Disadvantaged young adults

Disadvantaged young adults face numerous barriers in entering employment and in sustaining a fulfilling career. They often lack work experience, qualifications and/or education and, therefore, confidence (Diemer and Blustein, 2007; Sirin *et al.*, 2004). This group of young adults is generally categorized as “high risk non-college bound youth” (Worthington and Juntunen, 1997), “urban youth” (Chaves *et al.*, 2004), or “young people

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)” (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). The profiles of these individuals tend to look the same: predominantly young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds with career trajectories that are characterized by various short-term unskilled jobs and spells of unemployment. Additionally, they have no or low income, low educational achievement, and strained familial relations (Bynner and Parsons, 2002).

A considerable proportion of this group of disadvantaged young adults fails to establish employment and faces a high risk of long-term unemployment, aggravating their problems even more. This failure to gain critical work experience is damaging for their chances of employment, as well as for making a satisfactory adjustment to adult life (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). Additionally, the concentration of unemployed young adults in particular locations increases their difficulties of finding employment even more, as it fosters the social identification with other unemployed young adults (Schels, 2011). Specifically, exclusion from the possibility to construct a positive work-related identity directs young unemployed adults’ attention to alternatives to form their identity, reinforcing the appeal of street culture and “culture of poverty”: the phenomenon that young adults place little value on employment when they experience unemployment among their friends and families (Lewis, 1968). In fact, the context in which these unemployed young adults live may pressure them to disidentify from their vocational future and develop identities that are unrelated to work (Chaves *et al.*, 2004; Diemer and Blustein, 2007; Ogbu, 1989; Sirin *et al.*, 2004). Arguably, to be able to transition from unemployment into employment, these disadvantaged young adults need to shed their – often negative – identity and construct a more positive work-related identity.

Constructing a positive work-related identity

Although individuals are strongly motivated to maintain their current identities, identities can and do change (Petriglieri, 2011). Literature on identity construction posits that a certain event (such as a threat or a career transition) helps individuals to see the need for identity change and encourages the creation of “possible selves”: ideas about who one wants to become, likes to become, or fears becoming (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Markus and Nurius, 1986). During transitions, people often develop multiple provisional constructions of possible new identities (i.e. provisional selves), which remain provisional until they have been rehearsed and refined with experience. These subsequent possible selves are end states that drive identity construction and serve as a future, goal-oriented component of the self-concept. The essence of identity construction lies in bridging the gap between one’s current and one’s desired identity, which is achieved by strategies such as identifying and imitating role models, experimenting with new behaviors, and evaluating progress toward the desired identity (Ibarra, 1999, 2003, 2005).

To date, the findings on possible and provisional selves have been limited to professionals in transition from one work role to another. For example, in a study among medical residents, Pratt *et al.* (2006) showed that identity violation triggered the process of identity construction. Identity construction, in turn, entailed a process of adapting, enriching, and refining the current identity to accommodate (new) work role demands. However, it is questionable whether this process of identity construction can be extended to other transitions, including the difficult transition from unemployment to employment for disadvantaged young adults.

Identities are generally constructed in social interactions with others: people’s social relationships can, for example, affect the creation, selection, and retention of possible

selves (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007). However, disadvantaged young adults often have limited employment opportunities, place little value on employment, and experience unemployment among themselves, their friends and families (Blustein *et al.*, 2013; Bynner and Parsons, 2002). As such, there are few opportunities to form the possible selves that drive regular identity construction. Hence, the process of constructing a positive work-related identity among disadvantaged young adults may be different from regular identity construction. Moreover, transitions motivated by possible selves or internal (employment) goals may follow a different course than transitions motivated by external pressure to participate in a reemployment program. Unfortunately, research to date provides little direction on the social processes of work-related identity construction among members of stigmatized groups, let alone on how the factors that motivate identity transition affect the construction process (cf. Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007).

The current study

How do disadvantaged young adults construct a positive work-related identity? The current study takes a qualitative approach to answer this question. We deliberately chose to use a qualitative approach for three reasons. First, a qualitative approach is particularly useful for exploratory investigations or when existing research does not result in clear theoretical expectations (Rynes and Gephart, 2004). Second, identities are often articulated as narrative stories and are strongly shaped by one's motives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Ibarra, 1999; Savickas, 2012). As such, a qualitative approach can provide adequate information for exploring and understanding how motives and social context can shape the process of constructing a positive work-related identity. Finally, when it comes to designing reemployment interventions, studying individual narratives of the experience of a successful reemployment program may provide better insights than solely examining the effectiveness of these programs.

Methods

Context

In order to explore identity construction among disadvantaged young adults in the transition from unemployment to employment, we used a purposive sample of interviewees (Stake, 1995). This sample comprised one cohort of disadvantaged young adults participating in the reemployment program called "Fifteen." Once per year, disadvantaged young adults can sign up for this program. If there are no physical or psychological boundaries to participate, they are selected to enter the program. We figured that participation in this program would be a deliberate attempt of disadvantaged young adults to transition from unemployment to employment, which should provide sufficient information on their motives and the processes of identity construction. The Fifteen project was founded by Chef Jamie Oliver who aims to help disadvantaged young adults find employment in the catering industry. This project seeks to address the complex needs of this group in overcoming the aforementioned barriers and uses its restaurants to provide them with the necessary training and education to become a professional chef. The foundation's mission is to inspire disadvantaged youth to believe in themselves and in the possibility of becoming chefs (Jamie Oliver's Fifteen, 2015).

Apprentice programs such as Fifteen accommodate temporary paid work while improving future perspectives in a supportive environment. The program includes training and personal development activities, which can help to build confidence and

which give an experience of a genuine workplace for a genuine wage. The one-year apprentice program starts with eight weeks of basic cooking lessons, in which theory is immediately applied in practice in the restaurant's kitchen. After these first two months, the remaining ten months consist of three days of on-the-job learning and two days of studying in small groups. After 12 months of extensive training, students graduate as qualified chefs and receive a licensed diploma.

Taken together, Fifteen aims to give disadvantaged young adults the opportunity to participate in society and to stay away from the dangers of long-term unemployment by placing them into a genuine employment environment. Fifteen aspires to remove the factors that bind these young adults to their previous lifestyle, by changing their economic situation (giving them a real wage and the opportunity to achieve one), their social situation (placing them in an environment with others who want to work), and their personal situation (helping to change their lifestyle toward learning and achievement) (Mitchell-Lowe, 2008). We believe that the context of Fifteen's apprentice program yielded an excellent opportunity to examine the identity construction of disadvantaged young adults.

Sample

The 30 apprentices were asked if they wanted to participate in an interview about their motivation regarding Fifteen's program. All apprentices participated, although one later asked to disregard the interview for this study. This resulted in a sample of 29 participants, of whom 19 were male and ten were female, between the ages of 17 and 29 years ($M = 22.21$). The majority of participants ($n = 27$) had finished high school and about half of them ($n = 16$) had started basic training, vocational training, or a bachelor afterwards, but only four of them had completed their degree. Length of unemployment varied from three to 60 months ($M = 28.79$ months) and working experience differed between five and 70 months ($M = 28.62$ months). One year after the interviews, 21 participants (72.41 percent) had successfully obtained their degree at Fifteen, from which 5 (17.24 percent) had found unstable employment and seven (33.33 percent) had found stable employment.

Data collection

Data were collected primarily through the use of face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviewer (the first author) conducted all 30 interviews over the course of six weeks (approximately five interviews per week), one month after the program at Fifteen had started. The interviewer spent part of the day participating in apprentices' courses, small breaks and lunch breaks for additional participant observation. Being part of the group allowed the interviewer to familiarize with Fifteen's program and more importantly, with its participants. Participants were explicitly informed before data collection started that the interviews were confidential and unrelated to their prospects at Fifteen's program. Interviews were conducted in a closed, soundproof room to ensure complete confidentiality. Before the start of the interview, participants were asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. Interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hour and were audio-recorded. The interview protocol focused on identity construction by questioning students about their past, present, and future (see the Appendix). Prior to data analysis, the interviews were transcribed by five independent, paid undergraduate psychology students. Interviews were labeled with each respective recorder number to ensure full anonymity. Approximately one year after the apprentice program had ended, information was gathered through Fifteen's database on participants' graduation and employment status.

Data analysis

We drew upon the advice of key qualitative researchers (e.g. Gioia *et al.*, 2012; Rynes and Gephart, 2004) to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and plausibility of the interview data. Nvivo9 was used to code and organize the data thematically and with reference to the existing literature (King, 2004). Data analysis consisted of three stages. The first stage involved descriptive interpretations of the data, using the terms of the participants themselves (Strauss and Corbin, 1990): the transcripts were reviewed by detailed reading and were manually coded by the first author to understand how participants got to know about the program and why they applied, their experiences in the reemployment program, and their future plans. These first-order codes were then converted into second-order themes. In this second stage, the first and fourth author together identified key themes with reference to existing literature (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). Drawing upon key research on career transitions (e.g. Savickas, 2012) and identity transitions (e.g. Hogg and Terry, 2000; Ibarra, 1999) as a way to understand participants' identity construction and possible enabling/constraining factors, we defined three main themes: participants' motives to enter the program, their identity-related discoveries during the program, and different methods through which they aligned their self-concept with the occupational world (i.e. constructed their work-related identity). Finally, the first author assembled the themes into two overarching dimensions: the emergence of a work-related identity; and pathways of constructing a work-related identity.

To complement the qualitative data from the interviews with information on participants' career trajectories, we compared the narratives of participants who remained unemployed after the program to the narratives of participants who had found unstable employment, and to participants who had found stable employment. This additional data allowed us to incorporate career-relevant information and to capture what enabled or constrained a successful transition to employment.

Results

Two main findings became apparent in the course of our analyses. First, the data revealed that participants were not necessarily driven by specific motives or a desired "possible self." Instead, a new identity seemed to emerge during the program rather than actively pursued. Second, the data revealed several ways in which participants' work-related identity emerged. These pathways corresponded to previous research on identity construction (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Pratt *et al.*, 2006; Van Maanen, 1998). However, our data indicated that the identity construction of disadvantaged young adults additionally required that they decreased the salience of their former unemployed identity in order to consolidate their emerging work-related identity.

The emergence of a work-related identity

The interview data yielded little indication that participants had a clear motive or desired possible self at the moment of applying for Fifteen's program. Rather, almost two-thirds of the participants (18 out of 29) indicated that their motive for entering the program was somewhat serendipitous:

Pfew, why did I apply [...] nothing in particular really. I just applied because I thought: it's better to do something than to do nothing. It wasn't like I thought at the time: I am very motivated, I want to work! It was more like: it seems like a good idea to do something instead of just sitting at home (male participant, 19 years old, graduated, unemployed).

Table I provides additional quotes. Note that these quotes mostly referred to interview questions about participants' past. In general, we could not distill specific motives or "possible selves" from participants' narratives about their motivation to enter the program. To the contrary, it "just happened to come along." In fact, participants indicated a lack of reflection upon their options and possible futures. When asking them what they would have done if it were not for Fifteen, they answered that they "would probably still be at home on the couch," "would hang around on the streets", "would lie in bed a lot" or that they did not know nor could imagine.

These findings imply that there were no clear motives or events that triggered the transition from unemployment to employment – at least not at the start of the program. However, most participants (24 out of 29) indicated that they did develop a future career perspective by participating in the program:

[...] it's more like [...] being here has opened up a whole new future for me. A future with a career (male participant, 18, graduated, stable employment).

Reference question	Lack of clear motive (18/29)	Reference question	Emerging work-related identity (24/29)
Past	"So I thought, if this information brochure on Fifteen ends up in my mailbox, it must have some sort of reason. I just went to the introduction day because it sounded like fun. The more they told me and showed me about the program, the more I started to like it. And I could even see some sort of future in this" (female participant, 23, graduated, unstable employment)	Present	"[working is] something to live for again, something that I like doing" (male participant, 26, graduated, unknown)
Past	Q: "Why did you choose Fifteen in particular, and not some other program or job?" A: "Because this is the only thing that came along" (male participant, 23, dropped out)	Present	"[...] you know, I would never have expected to like this, to want to be a chef in the future. But I do" (male participant, 21, graduated, stable employment)
Past	"I got the information brochure about the program and thought: let's try it. Let's see how it'll work out. [...] It was the first time I heard about Fifteen and I just thought: this sounds ok" (male participant, 22, graduated, stable employment)	Present	"I can see myself doing this type of work in the future" (female participant, 21, graduated, unemployed)
Past	"It was a bit of a coincidence, but I'm happy with that coincidence either way. I just liked the idea of the program, but I didn't really think about it, I didn't know anything about it" (male participant, 22, graduated, unstable employment)	Present	"I found something that I would like to do in the future. This is much better than sitting at home" (female participant, 23, graduated, unstable employment)
Present	"I never really wanted to be a chef or to work in the catering industry. But now that I'm here, I think, why not?" (female participant, 20, graduated, stable employment)	Future	"This [being employed] is who I am and want to be. I don't want to depend on social benefits anymore" (female participant, 22, graduated, further education)

Table I. Sample quotations from participants' narratives referring to their motives for participating in the program and their emerging work-related identity

As illustrated in Table I, participants referred to the increasing importance of work in their narratives about their present lives and future perspectives. Thus, despite the fact that participants were not actively pursuing possible selves, they did show signs of an emerging work-related identity during the program. In the next section, we will discuss the ways through which their work-related identity seemed to emerge.

Pathways of constructing a work-related identity

Participants' work-related identity emerged through four different pathways. The first pathway ("competence") centered around changes in perceived competence in performing work-related tasks. The second pathway ("role models") involved identifying with emergent role models. The third pathway ("group identification") involved two types of group identification: identifying with positively regarded others in the group or distancing from negatively regarded others in the group. The fourth pathway ("comparison") involved comparing their current identity to their former identity as a disadvantaged young adult. Table II provides sample quotations for each pathway.

Competence. One of the circumstances that prompted the emergence of participants' work-related identity was by discovering their own competence. Participants indicated that by engaging in and familiarizing with the tasks of being a professional chef, they had started to realize their potential and had started to value working as a chef. More importantly, the belief in their ability to become a professional chef enhanced their commitment to this type of career as a possible and preferred course of action:

I would never even have wanted to work in a restaurant, but now I know that I can. Doing all this stuff here, learning how to cook, plan, cut, make something that my friends and family and other people might enjoy. Now that I know, I would love to become a chef (male participant, 18, graduated, stable employment).

The importance of perceived competence has been widely acknowledged in identity research. Given that a new role requires new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and social interactions, a transition is likely to change someone's self-definition and thus to influence his or her identity as well (Hall, 1995). Also, working on new tasks changes people's skills, behavior, and attitudes, which may help them to construct their identity (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). The role of "working and doing" is therefore emphasized as an important factor in the construction of a (new) identity (Van Maanen, 1998). Indeed, our participants indicated that newly acquired skills changed their perspective on employment and contributed to their emerging work-related identity. Since "working and doing" lies at the core of Fifteen's program – it gives young adults a chance to gain work experience in a genuine workplace – it is not surprising that participants' changing perceptions of competence played an important role in the emergence of their work-related identity.

Role models. The second pathway through which participants' work-related identity emerged was by discovering role models, the most popular role models being either Chef Jamie Oliver or the chef at Fifteen's restaurant:

It really just started here. The chef is showing us who we can be and what we can do. What we can achieve. And that makes you think: wow, that is actually quite a lot! Well, that gave me a future, an example of what I want to become. I also want to be a chef, a teacher (male participant, 21, graduated, stable employment).

When talking about these role models, participants indicated that the role models helped them to "make the shift" from an unemployed, stigmatized person to a person

Table II.
Sample quotations
from participants'
narratives referring
to pathways of an
emerging work-
related identity

Reference question	Competence (12/24)	Reference question	Role models (7/24)	Group identification Reference question	Identifying (16/24)	Reference question	Distinguishing (14/24)	Reference question	Comparing identities (16/24)
Present	"I didn't know how to cook in a professional way, you know, with schedules and stuff. I didn't know what I was doing. But now, I learned how to work more careful, with a planning, and I know how to cut properly. I feel more and more like a real, professional chef. I like that feeling" (male participant, 21, graduated, unemployed)	Present	"He is so much more than a teacher. Some people just see him as a teacher, but I can see more than that. He wants to achieve something, that is clear. He wants to be the best. I want to be like him" (male participant, 22, graduated, unstable employment)	Present	"It's like, it's what they tell you about the others. There are more people here like you, there have been others like you that are now working as a chef. It makes me believe that there is hope, because there must have been someone like me among them, the others are like me. And they made it or are going to make it. It helps me to believe that there is a chance for me as well. That I am like the others" (female participant, 22, graduated, unemployed)	Future	"I have friends at home who are still unemployed, still sitting at home. But I'm not like that you know, that's not me anymore. What if you're thirty, or forty? Are you still going to sit at home? I just want to work, be a chef, have a salary, provide for my future family. You know, save money and stuff. Be able to do nice things in life" (male participant, 21, dropped out)	Future	A: "I want to get rid of it, I would really like to get rid of that stigma." Q: "What stigma?" A: "Of being disadvantaged, of being unemployed. Of course, I have had problems, but doesn't everyone? They have a mental picture of who I am. But I'm not anymore. I won't be that person anymore. I will become a chef, and I will have a future" (female participant, 22, graduated, further education)

(continued)

Reference question	Competence (12/24)	Reference question	Role models (7/24)	Group identification Reference question	Identifying (16/24)	Reference question	Distinguishing (14/24)	Reference question	Comparing identities (16/24)
Present	"It's more like [...] you think you will never be able to succeed and then all of the sudden, it's working out [...] you may have some competencies after all that you were unaware of before. Things you thought that you would never be able to do. It makes me want to try new things, and learn new things, because now I know that I might actually be good at this. It gives me confidence to do something that I'm good at, I never expected that" (male participant, 24, graduated, stable employment)	Present	"But Fifteen, you know, Jamie Oliver has founded Fifteen. No one has ever done that before, like he helps unemployed youth. I respect that. It makes me want to work harder, because, you know, Jamie Oliver has given me the chance. Others don't give you a chance because you have a stigma, and then you can never get a job. But Jamie Oliver doesn't care about that" (male participant, 21, dropped out)	Present	"There are other guys here that really want it. That motivates me as well" (male participant, 29, dropped out)	Present	"Yeah, well, those people are [...] Those people are here and they can be demotivating, it's exhausting. They just talk all day, if the chef is teaching us something, then they talk through his story. It makes me wonder [...] why are they here? That's just useless. I don't do that. I listen and learn. I want this to be useful" (female participant, 22, graduated, stable employment)	Present	"I don't need no kick in the ass anymore. I used to. I used to really need a kick in the ass to get out of bed. Now, I just get up. Because, you know, if I'll screw this up [...] what else would I possibly do then?" (male participant, 24, graduated, stable employment)

*(continued)*Identity
construction

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Table II.

Table II.

Reference question	Competence (12/24)	Reference question	Role models (7/24)	Group identification	Reference question	Distinguishing (14/24)	Reference question	Comparing identities (16/24)		
Present	"I just didn't know that you could learn to be a professional chef, without experience I mean. If I had known this from the beginning, that even I could learn it and be good at it, I would have tried it already. But I didn't know, so I didn't try and stayed where I was" (female participant, 21, dropped out)	Past	"Jamie Oliver is the only one that gives us, people with problems, a chance, an opportunity. The others just look the other way or send you someplace else" (male participant, 20, graduated, unknown)	Present	Present	"It's nice to meet people who also want to work, who also want to do something with their lives. But, who also have a background. But not in a way that they get stuck in it" (female participant, 29, dropped out)	Present	"Sometimes it's like working with a bunch of children. Not everyone of course, but some of them [...] they are not serious about this. But I don't care, I'm here for me now" (male participant, 26, graduated, unstable employment)	Future	"If it weren't for Fifteen, well [...] to say it bluntly, I would **** up my entire life again. Without Fifteen it would only get worse instead of better, and now it can finally go better instead of worse" (male participant, 17, graduated, unemployed)
Present	"They teach you how to be a real chef, how to act like a real chef. That even I can do what a professional chef can do. That's different from other places where I've worked. It also fits me, this is what I need" (male	Present	"I'm not sure [...] I think I was motivated before, but now [...] With the chef, or Jamie Oliver, I didn't know them before, but now that I do, now that I do I have a goal" (male participant, 22,	Present	Present	"Well, the thing that really drives me to come out of bed in the morning, is that we're having so much fun. We're such a close group. That could really help me get through the difficult parts in the future" (male	Present	"There are some guys here who are just unwilling, who don't even try. And I think that is such a shame. Why are they even here? Give the people who do want to achieve something a chance. [...] I think they're here	Present	"Why would I ever give this up? Why would I throw myself into that mess even further, instead of trying to climb out of it?" (male participant, 20, graduated, unstable employment)

(continued)

Reference question (12/24)	Competence (12/24)	Reference question	Role models (7/24)	Group identification Reference question	Identifying (16/24)	Reference question	Distinguishing (14/24)	Reference question	Comparing identities (16/24)
	participant, 22, graduated, unstable employment)		graduated, stable employment)	participant, 19, graduated, unemployed)			because they have to be. Because reemployment services forces them to do something. [...] I'm here because I want to be here" (female participant, 20, graduated, stable employment)		
Past	"Fifteen, you know, it just came around. I didn't know much about it at first. Like, being a chef: what is a professional chef? I didn't know that. And now, what I learned here, that I can do it and how to do it, that's just perfect" (male participant, 21, graduated, stable employment)	Present	"The chef is really funny and also serious when he has to be. I think he likes his work, which is also why I like it here. It's fun to be here. I want to have that as well, I want to have fun in my work" (male participant, 22, graduated, stable employment)	Past	"I'm always the odd one out in other programs or schools. Even though I'm not that different. But here everyone is the odd one out, so we're all the same and being treated in the same way" (female participant, 21, graduated, unemployed)	Present	"Well, I'm here for me. If they [the other students] want to act like that [talking], it's their loss. But it annoys me when they are not working. Doing something has more pros than cons. But apparently they don't understand that" (male participant, 21, graduated, stable employment)	Future	"I need to finish this. I want to finish it, this time around. I have not made it through with so many other things. And now, you know, I can see a future. I have to, what else would I do? Work on the streets? That's not who I am" (male participant, 19, graduated, unemployed)

with a future and with the possibility to become a chef. Also, the role models served as an example and gave insight into a possible future self. The use of role models is well-established in research on constructing and revising identities. In fact, role models often provide concrete knowledge of what is possible and desirable, thereby guiding the behaviors and attitudes necessary to become the preferred future self (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt *et al.*, 2006). Interestingly, our participants' references to role models were embedded in their narratives on the present and future (see Table II). It seems that participants discovered role models in the first weeks of the program and subsequently used these role models to form possible selves, which may have prompted the emergence of their work-related identity. Thus, these disadvantaged young adults seem to have a rather fluid experience in which they are not guided by role models but rather discover role models as they transition from disadvantaged young adults to employed young adults with positive career perspectives.

Group identification. A third pathway that prompted the emergence of a positive work-related identity involved group identification. Participants either actively referred to being part of a stigmatized group that had experienced the same barriers and had the same goals:

Everyone here has some kind of problem. So, you're not like, special. You're just the same. I like that. Because if you're somewhere else at work – and I know that I have done a lot of bad stuff – then you're working with people who do everything right, I can't handle that. It makes me depressed. You start to compare although you shouldn't. Here, we're all the same and most of us want the same (identifying; male participant, 24, graduated, unknown).

or actively distanced themselves from other group members:

Some of them just call in sick and stay at home, or hang around town. No, I won't do that, I have a responsibility now. If I don't come in tomorrow, I have a problem, and I want to come in, because I like it here. I want to learn how to be a chef (distancing; male participant, 22, graduated, stable employment).

As evidenced by their quotes (also see Table II), participants attempted to identify with other group members ("we're all the same and most of us want the same") or distanced themselves from other group members and/or people who shared their stigmatized identity ("I'm here for me now"). Arguably, this simultaneously decreased the salience of their unemployed identity and increased the salience of their work-related identity: participants identified with group members who also seemed to share an emerging work-related identity and distanced themselves from those who remained part of their former unemployed identity. Additionally, group identification was evident in a more physical manner: during small breaks and the lunch break, participants attempted to stay close to those they wanted to be associated with, and to stay away from those they wanted to distance themselves from. These psychological and physical distancing strategies have often been reported as social recategorization strategies that help members from stigmatized groups to change the social category to which they are assigned (cf. Cohen and Garcia, 2005; Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). For example, people with stigmatized identities can emphasize their distinctiveness from their stigmatized social identity group or emphasize their similarities with more positively regarded social identity groups (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Roberts, 2005).

Comparison. The last major pathway of the emergence of a work-related identity also bears similarities with these social recategorization strategies. Participants explicitly

referred to their identity as a disadvantaged young adult and compared it to their current identity as one of Fifteen's apprentices. By assessing the differences between both situations, they seemed to allow a more positive work-related identity to emerge:

I am so happy to be here. I have thought about it a lot, about that I really didn't want that life anymore, I wanted to die, and then Fifteen came along. It made me so happy. That's why I have to persist. Otherwise I'll fall back into that routine, that misery, I don't want that. I just want to be cheerful, happy with life. Because life can be really good this way (female participant, 22, graduated, stable employment).

In the introduction, we argued that disadvantaged young adults need to construct a new self-concept in relation to the occupational world to be able to successfully transition from unemployment to employment. However, it also seems important that they decrease the salience of their former identity in which employment did not take such a central place (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007). By comparing their current identity to their former identity, participants attempted to do precisely that: decrease the salience of their negative identity to be able to consolidate their emerging work-related identity.

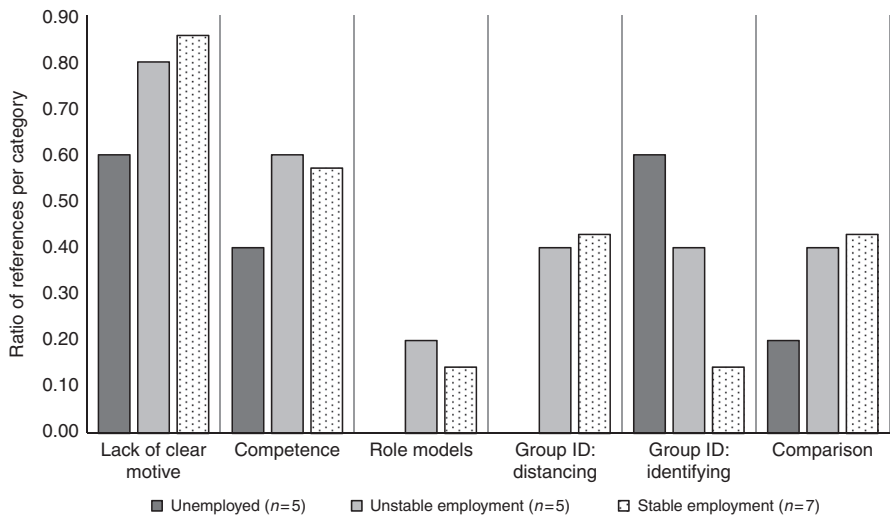
Taken together, most participants showed an emerging work-related identity through one or more of the described pathways during Fifteen's program. Interestingly, this emerging identity was not driven by specific motives or possible selves. Rather, it was prompted during their transition from unemployment to employment. In essence, for disadvantaged young adults, the transition toward a positive work-related identity is not as simple as pursuing goals or possible selves – at least not until the perspective of a possible employed self can become reality.

Additional analyses

The pathways described above focus on the transition process from unemployment to employment. The question that remains, however, is what enables or constrains a successful transition (Ibarra, 2005). To answer this question, we collected information on participants' employment status one year after graduation. We examined the narratives of participants who remained unemployed after graduation ($n = 5$), of those who had consecutive short-term jobs and spells of unemployment after graduation (i.e. unstable employment, $n = 5$), and of those who had found permanent employment after graduation (i.e. stable employment, $n = 7$). Although no conclusions can be drawn from these analyses, they do reveal some interesting patterns. Note that only participants for whom information was available on their employment status one year later were included and that their references to different pathways are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

First, the data revealed little difference between employed, unstably employed and unemployed participants regarding their motives to participate in Fifteen's program: the number of references to "no clear motive" was nearly the same. Second, the pathways competence, distancing, and comparison were mostly referred to by participants who had found stable employment. Remarkably, "identifying" showed the opposite pattern: particularly participants who remained unemployed had referred to identifying with other group members (Figure 1). It seems that emphasizing one's distinctiveness from other apprentices is more important for finding employment than identifying with them – even if those other apprentices are motivated to pursue employment as well.

Figure 1. Number of references in participants' narratives divided by the number of participants in each category of employment



Discussion

The transition from disadvantaged young adult to employed young adult with positive career perspectives is a particularly difficult one. This study explored how disadvantaged young adults constructed a positive work-related identity during their participation in a reemployment program, and what enabled or constrained a successful transition to employment. The results revealed that the construction of a positive work-related identity was not necessarily preceded by clear motives or a “possible self” that functioned as a goal-directed component (Ibarra, 1999; Markus and Nurius, 1986). Rather, participants’ work-related identity emerged through four pathways after the program had started.

These four pathways were consistent with previous research on identity construction (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Pratt *et al.*, 2006). The first pathway comprised a change in participants’ perceived competence in performing work-related tasks. The second pathway involved discovering role models. The third pathway comprised group identification, consisting of two sub-processes: apprentices either identified with other apprentices or distanced themselves from others who remained part of the former identity – both psychologically and physically. The fourth pathway comprised the comparison of the current self to the former self. Additional analyses suggested that the latter two pathways enabled a successful transition to employment, whereas group identification constrained such successful transition.

Theoretical implications

Our findings bear three important contributions to the literature. First, this study shows that the emergence of a work-related identity is not necessarily driven by clear motives or possible selves, and is thus not necessarily a goal-oriented process. Rather, a positive work-related identity may emerge after the transition from unemployment to employment has already commenced. One of the exemplary findings in this regard is that role models were discovered during Fifteen’s program, rather than trigger the decision to enter the program. These results open up the dominant view that planning is the main driver of career transitions, as they show how transitions can unfold from serendipitous events to a

structural change in work-related identities. As such, our study extends existing insights on identity construction to the difficult transition from unemployment to employment, and provides additional empirical support of Ibarra's (1999) proposition that provisional selves are discovered during the transition process itself.

Second, this study deepens our understanding of the crucial role of the social context in identity transitions: it seemed that disadvantaged young adults had to decrease the salience of their former identity to allow the consolidation of a positive work-related identity. In fact, social recategorization strategies seemed to enable the success of a transition from unemployment to employment. This finding further connects the literature on identity construction during transitions (Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Pratt *et al.*, 2006) and identity recategorization among stigmatized groups (Cohen and Garcia, 2005; Derks *et al.*, 2015).

As a third contribution, we bring together our findings in a model that captures the processes of the work-related identity transition that disadvantaged young adults undergo, illuminating why not everyone who initiates a transition also completes it (Figure 2). We suggest that the factors that enable or constrain a successful transition are not to be found in people's motives but rather in the pathways of identity construction itself. That is, the first stage of an identity transition involves discovering provisional selves, which can be triggered by any (serendipitous) event. However, for the transition to propel to the next stage in which the emerging identity can be consolidated, it seems essential that people first discard their old selves. This model may inspire future research to empirically examine the processes and additional conditions that foster or hinder the consolidation of emerging identities.

The emergence of a work-related identity. The current study suggests that there were few goal-oriented motives underlying the emergence of a work-related identity.

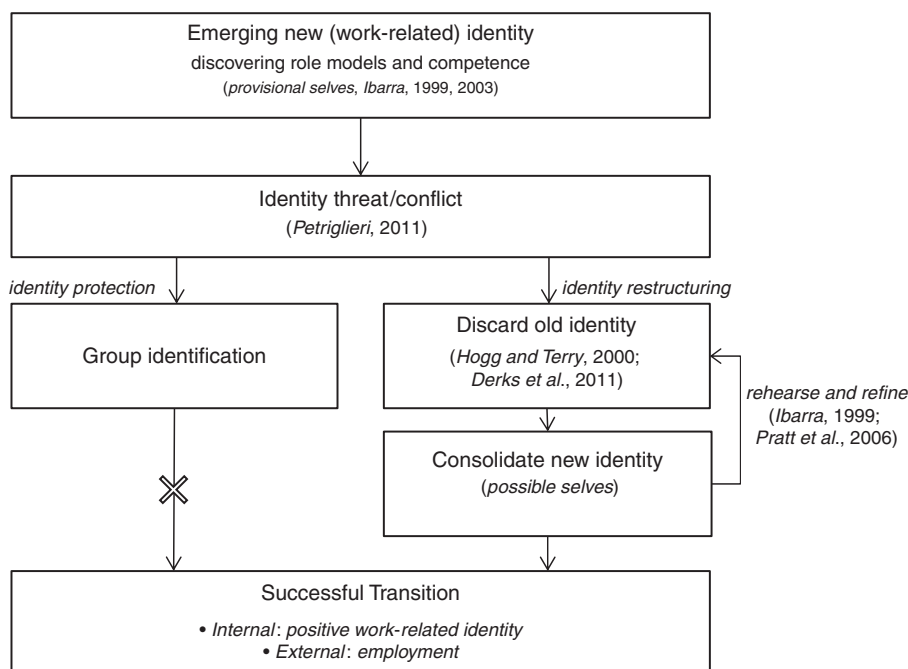


Figure 2. Proposed model of the processes of the work-related identity transition from unemployment to employment

This may be somewhat counter-intuitive. After all, there is a wide consensus in psychology that success of any kind depends on deliberately chosen or given goals (Locke and Latham, 2002). For example, most career research states that the key to making a successful change lies in first knowing what one wants and then implementing the strategies to achieve that (e.g. Savickas, 2012). In other words, individuals with clear goals or possible selves should be the ones to successfully transition into employment. This, however, did not emerge from the interview data. It even seemed that participants' motives – or rather, the lack thereof – at the start of the program were of little influence for their transition process.

These findings fit well with Ibarra's (1999, 2003, 2005) work on identity transitions. According to her, career transitions follow a first-act-then-think sequence: doing comes first, knowing and planning comes second. By doing, people discover provisional selves: they try out activities, reach out to new groups, and find new role models. Identity transition is, then, not a process of swapping one identity for another but rather a process in which possible selves are rehearsed and refined through activities and relationships. Additionally, she notes that either goal or serendipitous event may propel the transition process. Thus, a successful transition depends less on knowing the self and one's goals from the start, but more on being able to rehearse and refine emerging selves until they become robust enough to discard the former self.

In this study, we have provided initial empirical evidence for these propositions for the difficult transition from unemployment to employment and take it one step further by illuminating what may propel such transitions from one stage to the next. We found that the process of work-related identity construction among disadvantaged young adults was not so much initiated by a clear notion of a future self, but rather by serendipitous events that set the transition process into motion. Provisional selves emerged in the beginning of Fifteen's program through discovering competence, role models and/or new relationships, and were then rehearsed and refined during the program (see Figure 2). Before these provisional selves could be consolidated into possible selves and result in a successful transition, however, it seemed essential that disadvantaged young adults discarded their former, unemployed identity.

The transition to employment. Research on identity transitions suggests that transitions are often preceded, motivated, or supported by others. For example, a new social environment can generate new provisional selves and new role models, and can form a substitute community within which the new identity can be consolidated (Ibarra, 2005). Yet, the old social environment may prevent the completion of a transition: people who are initiating a transition may face doubt and skepticism of friends and family who still adhere to the person's former identity (Ibarra, 2003). Our findings illuminate the social conditions under which identity transitions can fail or succeed. According to our findings, these conditions involve social recategorization (Hogg and Terry, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Tajfel and Turner, 1986): old selves must be discarded first, before emerging new selves can be consolidated.

Participants attempted to recategorize their social identity by distancing themselves from their former way of life (through comparison of their emerging work-related identity to their former identity or by identifying with other group members who also wanted to pursue employment) and by distancing themselves from other apprentices (through actively distinguishing themselves from other group members, both psychologically and physically). Interestingly, participants who had found stable employment had more often referred to distinguishing themselves from the group,

whereas participants who had fallen back into unemployment had more often referred to identifying with the other apprentices. It may be that identifying with positively regarded group members – even though they seemed motivated to pursue employment – did not suffice to transition to employment.

An explanation for this surprising finding may be found in minority socialization, whereby group members share their (negative) experiences with finding employment (Heslin *et al.*, 2012). Such group identification may lead people to believe that their efforts in pursuing and finding employment are futile, thereby diminishing their confidence and motivation. Likewise, messages about what it means to be a disadvantaged young adult – including bleak career prospects – may induce the belief of never reaching employment. Thus, apprentices' confidence and motivation to find employment may have decreased due to identifying with other group members.

Additionally, identifying with other group members may actually be a form of identity protection in response to identity threat, rather than a step toward identity transition (cf. Petriglieri, 2011). That is, apprentices may experience a lack of alignment between their emerging work-related identity and treatment by others in their social context (i.e. an identity threat), and may attempt to reframe their identity in a positive way by emphasizing that they all want to pursue employment. This identity protection response, however, may hinder the transition toward employment. To illustrate, in a study on women's transitions to more senior functions, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) showed that women's attempts to remain authentic (i.e. identity protection) hindered their ability to internalize their aspired professional identities. With this in mind, identifying with other group members may hinder the consolidation of a positive work-related identity, and thus the success of a transition (see Figure 2). Indeed, successful identity transitions can require both psychological and physical disengagement from the social relations and context that sustains it (Ebaugh, 1988).

Thus, for a transition to succeed, it seems essential to distance oneself from the former social context. Our results support this proposition: those who distanced themselves from other group members and their former life had more often found stable employment one year after the reemployment program (see Figure 2). This distancing behavior has also been found in work settings among members of minority groups. When minority group members experience identity threat, they attempt to pursue mobility (i.e. transition to another social identity) by distancing themselves from their stigmatized identity (Derks *et al.*, 2015). As such, distancing oneself from other group members in the reemployment program can be seen as an individual mobility response to identity threat. This individual mobility response, however, may not so much depend on how ready and willing they are to pursue employment, but rather on how important the group is to their identity (Derks *et al.*, 2007). In fact, successful transitions seemed to depend less on participants' readiness and willingness to pursue employment (i.e. clear employment goals) but more on the importance of their former identity (i.e. identifying vs distancing from other disadvantaged young adults).

Practical implications

This study suggests that disadvantaged young adults require a different kind of help from counselors than individuals with regular career paths. Our findings offer some suggestions on how to stimulate these young adults in their transition from unemployment to employment. First, apprentices often indicated that they did not have clear motives for participating in Fifteen's program. Entering the program seemed to be

a rather serendipitous event, and did not seem to bear many consequences for the remainder of the program. Yet, many training scholars and practitioners view readiness and motivation as a prerequisite for success. Our findings suggests otherwise: a clear employment goal is not always required for the success of an intervention. Rather, such success can be constrained by social identity processes (also see Korte, 2013). This finding is, albeit surprising, important to be aware of in practice.

Second, Heslin *et al.* (2012) questioned whether and when interventions may cultivate a stigmatized identity – therewith negatively impacting participants’ career prospects – or may foster career prospects by stimulating a positive work-related identity. Our data answers this question: such programs can both be effective and unintentionally unhelpful at the same time. To illustrate, identifying with other group members may have cultivated the stigmatized identity and may have been an identity protection response rather than a step toward a transition to employment. At the same time, distancing from other group members may have been an individual mobility response that fostered apprentices’ career prospects. These findings imply that promoting regeneration into employment based on group socialization – as is done in Fifteen’s apprentice program – bears some hazards: especially group identification should be carefully monitored.

Third, interventions may be designed in such a way that they prompt the emergence of a work-related identity by accommodating the possibility for discovering competence and role models. At the same time, interventions may aim to decrease the salience of participants’ former or current unemployed identities. After all, our results suggest that it is crucial to actively withdraw from one’s former unemployed identity in order to transition to employment.

Limitations

A qualitative study like the current study only allows for in-depth investigation of the narratives of a select group of individuals. One disadvantage of this form of research is that the data are unique to the participants and the context in which the interviews were conducted, and can thus not be generalized to a larger population. We do believe, however, that the results have uncovered some interesting leads for future research that could not have been found by the use of quantitative methods. For example, it may be interesting to examine the consequences of a lack of clear motives or possible selves with larger samples and quantitative methods. Likewise, the suggestion that discarding one’s former identity is crucial for a successful transition to employment deserves further examination.

On a similar note, the current study cannot determine the causality or possibly temporal course of the findings. It would be worthwhile to use a temporal approach to examine the order of the pathways through which a positive work-related identity emerges: the order may be more hierarchical in nature than we described. It might be the case that participants first have to discover their competence, can then discover a role model, and subsequently discard their former identity to allow for the consolidation of their work-related identity. This remains something to be examined in the future.

Finally, the identity literature is often unclear about what constitutes the end point of a transition (cf. Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). In this study, we have attempted to provide a rather objective end point of the transition, i.e., apprentices had found employment one year after the reemployment program. However, we have not been able to assess apprentices’ internal identity transition, i.e., their (new) work-related identity

after the reemployment program. As such, we cannot be sure that apprentices also experienced a lasting internal transition and recommend future studies to incorporate both internal and external end points when examining identity transitions.

Conclusion

An identity transition is the movement between one identity, which is shed, and another, which is acquired. However, not everyone who initiates a transition actually completes it (Ibarra, 2005). Unfortunately, very few studies have been able to examine the motives and processes that enable or constrain an identity transition (Petriglieri, 2011). We believe that our study has given a first insight in this matter: the factors that enable or constrain a successful transition are not to be found in people's motives, but rather in the process of identity construction itself. A successful transition from unemployment to employment requires that old selves must be discarded before new selves can fully emerge. As such, decreasing the salience of one's former identity seems to be one of the conditions that help individuals to permanently transition to employment, whereas failing to do so can prevent or set back the transition after initial emergence.

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Appendix

(Part I – past)

- (1) Can you tell me a little about your life before you started at Fifteen? (What did you do before Fifteen?)
 - Which type of education do you have?
 - What kind of work experience do you have?
 - Have you ever participated in similar projects? If so, can you tell me a bit more about that?
 - Why do you receive unemployment benefits?
- (2) What prompted you to apply for Fifteen?
 - How did you hear about Fifteen?
 - How did you get here? (Who made you aware of this possibility? What happened after that?)
 - Why did you apply? (What was your reason to apply at Fifteen?)
 - Why do you think you were selected for the program at Fifteen?

(Part II – present)

- (3) I would like to know about your experiences at Fifteen. What do you think of it so far?
 - What do you do during the week?
 - What are the things you love about the program at Fifteen?
 - What things do you not like about the program at Fifteen?
 - Have you ever had a fight with anyone here (or disagree)? Tell me about it.
- (4) Fifteen is focused on learning how to be a chef, right? After all, you are going to get a chef's degree.
 - What have you learned here so far?
 - What do you expect to learn in the future?
 - What things have you learned here that could come in handy in the future? Why are those useful?
- (5) What do you tell people when they ask you “what do you do”?
 - What do other people (friends) think about you participating in this?
 - How important is working at Fifteen for you?
 - Why do you come to Fifteen every day?
 - Do you feel that you are obligated to be here? If so, by whom?
- (6) It seems like hard work to me, and sometimes quite difficult to stay motivated and keep coming here. Can you imagine that?
 - Do you ever think “I want to quit”? When?
 - What tricks do you use (if any) to persist when it gets hard? (What do you say to yourself?)

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- (7) I can imagine that your life is suddenly quite different than before Fifteen. Can you name some things that are different in your life since you started at Fifteen?
- Why did these things change?
 - Has the way you see yourself also changed since you started at Fifteen?
 - Are there other things you now think differently about (about Fifteen, working, learning, cooking), than before you started at Fifteen? Can you elaborate on that?

(Part III – future)

- (8) Let's talk about what happens when you are done here. Tell me a bit about what you think will happen when you have completed your education here.
- What will you do next? (What is going to happen after this?)
 - If everything would be possible, what would you like to do?
 - What do you find most important in a job?
 - How would you have tried to achieve that without Fifteen?
- (9) Fifteen is a program that should eventually lead to a job as a chef. How do you picture that?
- What do you want to accomplish?
 - How can Fifteen help you with that?
 - How is Fifteen different from other educational programs?
 - What does Fifteen provide that you cannot accomplish on your own?
 - What things do you learn at Fifteen, which might be useful in the future?

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