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Constructing early graduate careers: competing voices of employability/careers

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Aims for today's paper

- Outline the research project this paper originates from:
 - Question/s
 - Context
 - Research design
- Introduce Figured Worlds theory
- Findings – the voices of employability and careers

Research question/s

- How do graduates reflect upon and explain their early career experiences, in a contemporary context in which uncertainty is a prevailing feature of the labour market?

Project context

- 2014 graduates of two schools of study at one northern English university.
- Graduates of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities and Business and Law.
- University with many non-traditional students, especially in relation to age and social background.
- Last cohort not to pay higher tuition fees in England.
- Major metropolitan area.

Project design

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- Data collected in first two years after graduation.
 - Survey at 16 months – 148 respondents (12.5% of population)
 - Interviews at 18-22 months - 20 participants (balanced sample)

Contextual literature

- Diversity and uneven returns in the graduate labour market (Purcell et al. 2012, Green and Henseke 2016, **Tholen 2014**)
- The limits of a boundaryless career (Hall 2004, Rodrigues et al. 2014)
- The contested nature of employability in higher education (Artess et al. 2017, Tomlinson and Holmes 2016)
- The deeply social nature of graduate careers (**Brown & Hesketh 2004**, Burke 2015, Finn 2016)
- In search of a new theory of careers advice in times of change (Savickas 2008, Hooley 2016)

Figured Worlds

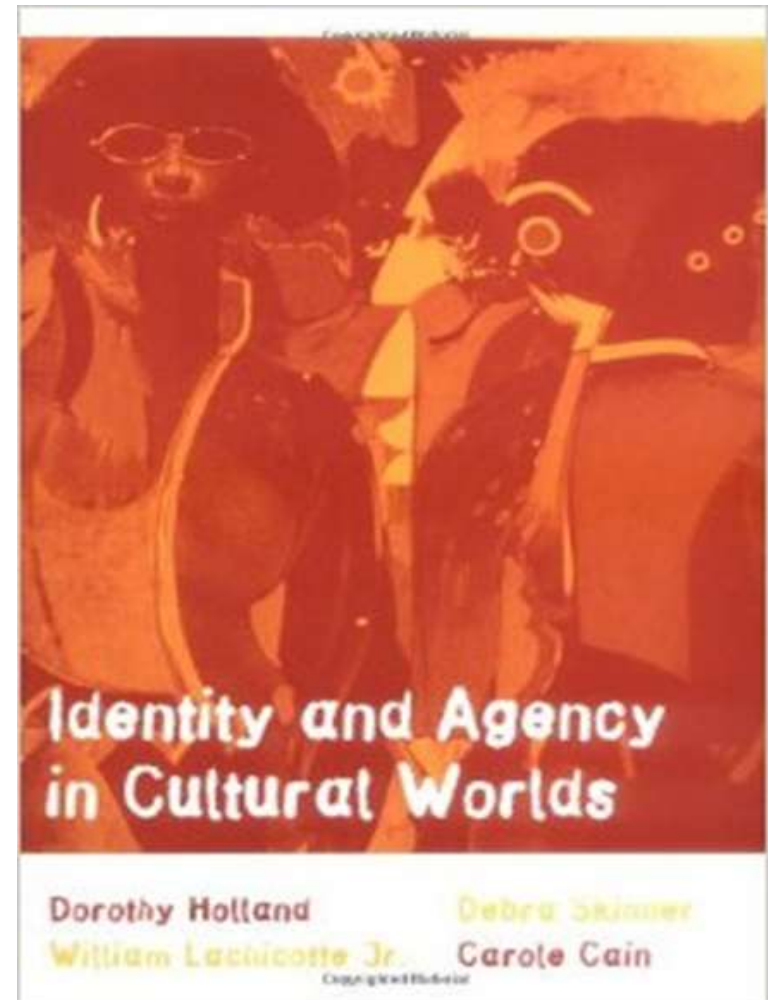
Constructs

Figured Worlds

Positionality

Space of authoring

Making worlds



Holland et al. 1998

3 Key Theorists

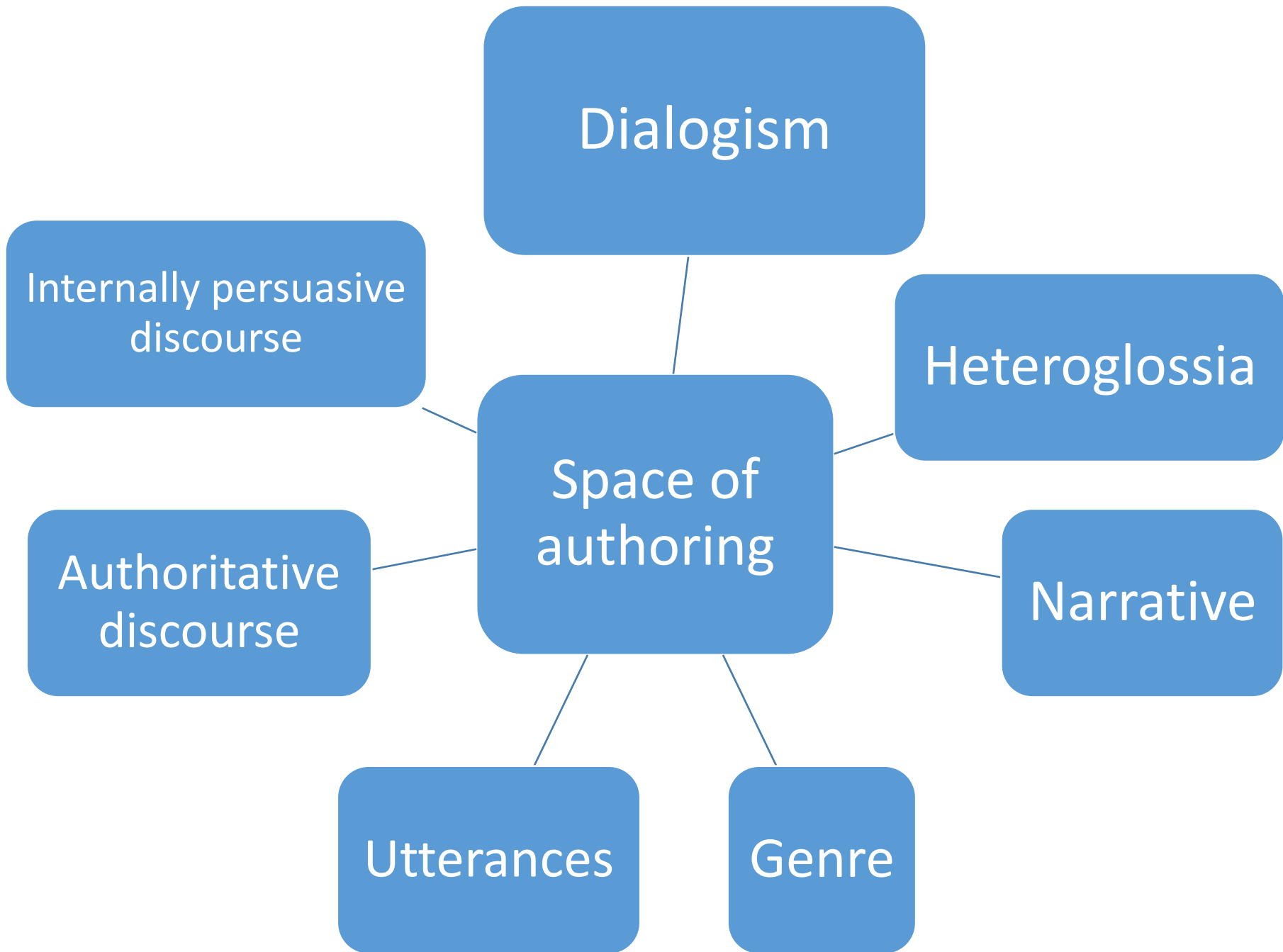
Vygotsky



Bakhtin

Bourdieu





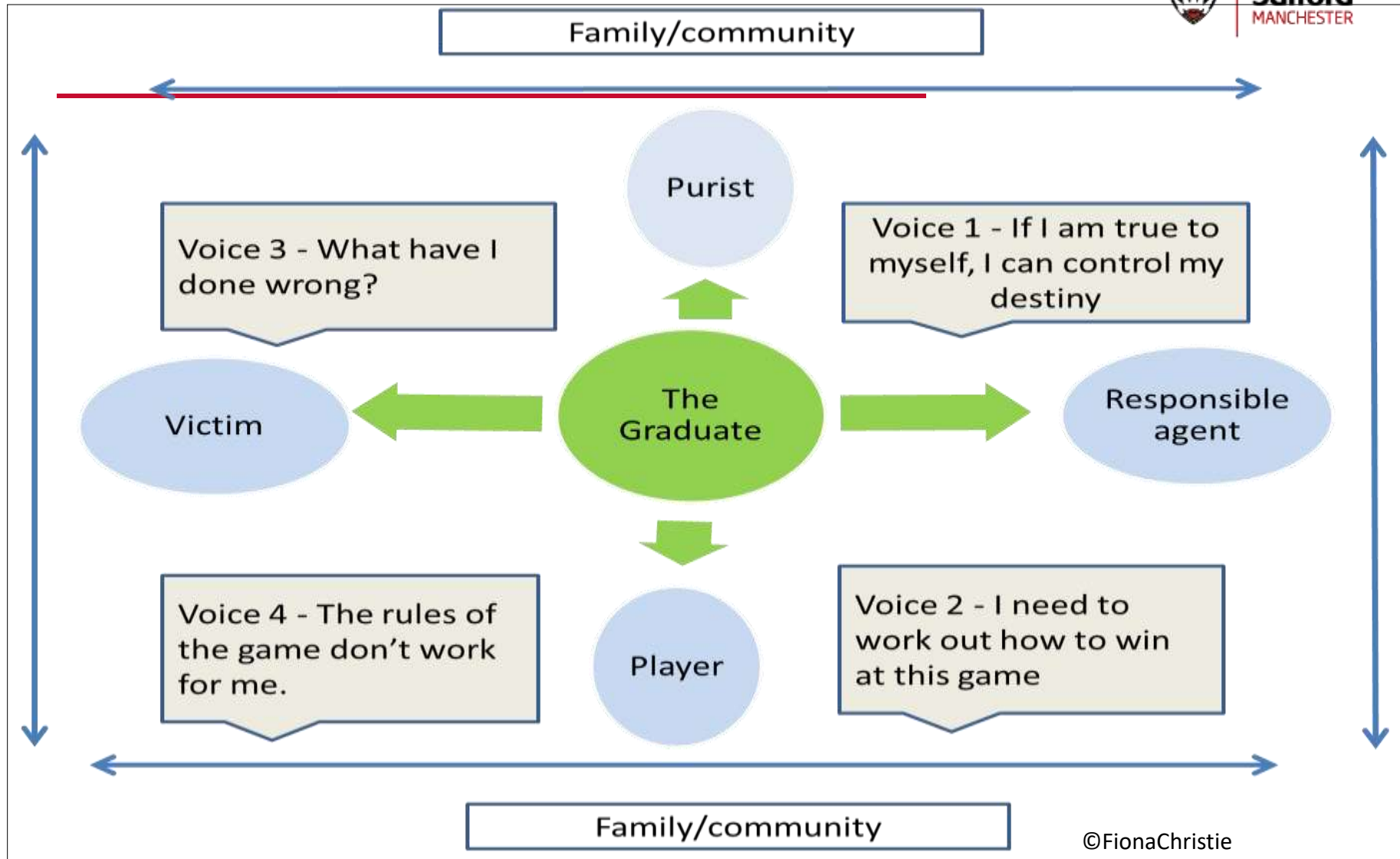
Employability – a possible authoritative discourse



Somewhere in every student or graduate's head, there is a governor, an unconscious inner voice sending instructions through the intercom... Every student/graduate's personal governor has picked up instructions from a variety of sources...on what it is to be employable. S/he takes ideas and images from these sources and assembles them into a model of an employable and successful graduate. This ideal includes good academic credentials, relevant work experience, a range of extra-curricular activities and interests, impressive skills and attributes as well as a perpetually adaptable and pro-active personality and unwavering work ethic...

Text adapted from Grayson Perry's *The Descent of Man* (2016, p. 11)

Findings – competing voices



Purist/responsible agent

- “Sure, well because I was getting involved in the music industry during my final year at university, things were taking off at an impressive rate, so I made the decision to not apply for typical sort of graduate schemes, which even at the time felt like a huge risk, but I felt like I’d found something that I’m passionate about... I’ve always been told; *if you work on something you enjoy, you’ll never work a day in your life.*”



Voice 1. If I am true to myself,
I can control my own destiny.

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Authentic?

Player/responsible agent

- “Yeh, absolutely, because I’ve come from a wealthy family so I’ve always been given everything that I needed. I was always, I had a decent phone and we had nice holidays, we’ve got a place in Spain that we go to as well and coming from that sort of background I was always very much of the mind-set, I want this for my future, *I want to be able to provide this for my children*, I don’t want it to stop, and I think, as opposed to my sisters who haven’t 100% taken the same approach as me, um, I’m the independent one in the family.”



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Voice 2. I need to work out how to win at this game.

Tactical?

Purist/victim

- “I’ve not got the right voice”, “I’m not a stunner”, “I’m not the smartest person”.
- “Not that happy, like it upsets me when I talk about it. It’s just frustrating cos I don’t get enough money and, I love living at home, I do like that but I feel like to get somewhere *I need to get out of my comfort zone*”



Voice 3. What have I done wrong?

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Self-critical/blaming?

Player/victim



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- “it’s all well and good me *doing free work* and I’m all for it but there’s only so long you can do that for before you have to say to yourself, when do I start charging for this... It’s just like a perpetual over and over again; oh this person should work for free because they’ve not got the reputation behind them. No they shouldn’t, they’re working for you, like if you want quality work produced you should pay these people”

Charlie, Performance,



Voice 4. The rules of the game don't work for me.

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Context-critical/blaming?

Multi-voicedness (or heteroglossia)

- Shifting between different voices
- Seeking out contradictions
- Dialogic – in response to others

Internally persuasive discourse



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- (Fashion industry) “toxic, nepotistic and exploitative”. “do I want to be part of an industry that has that kind of toxic kind of environment?” (context-critical)
 - “Yeh but that’s what I’ve figured out, if no-one wants me, I’ll have to do it myself.” (tactical)
 - “you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it” (authentic)
 - “but unfortunately some people do judge you from first impressions and being Afro-Caribbean that is something that I don’t think will be portrayed ... in the fashion industry as a positive... I kind of want to be, I want to be a change, the change that I wish was there when I was younger, if that makes sense.” (context-critical/authentic)

No “freewheeling I”

- “Both of my Grandmas were seamstresses and the brand that I want to create is actually named after them...I don’t really know how to describe it but I would say that all my friends, my family, my upbringing, it’s all directed and it’s all reflected through the clothes...” (family-community)
- Her proposed fashion brand/website “community of positive people” for “girls exactly like me who struggle with anxiety, who struggle with panic attacks, struggle with fitting in,” (family-community)

Questions/feedback

- Your first impressions of the value of Figured Worlds as an analytical lens.
- Your thoughts on specific tools – voices, multi-voicedness
- Does my diagrammatic depiction of voices resonate?

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