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'A fish out of water?'

The therapeutic narratives of class change

Abstract

Young people from working class backgrounds remained mostly excluded from the widening educational participation, which characterised post-war Britain. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews part of a wider study about 'Social Participation and Identity' (2008-2009), this article explores the unusual learning trajectories of a group of working class adults born in 1958, who participated in higher education (HE) in a context where most people from the same socio-economic backgrounds did not. Drawing from Bourdieu's social theory, findings suggest that different types of retrospective accounts were mobilised to reconcile working class habitus and the perceived habitus as adults. Most research on working class and higher education focuses on the experiences of youth. By contrast, the use of retrospective accounts of adults has enabled us to capture the implications that the educational trajectories have later in life. We consider these accounts part of wider narratives that we define 'therapeutic'. Therapeutic narratives were employed to come to terms with the ambivalence between a sense of exclusion and the acknowledgment of the opportunities associated with a working class habitus accessing new social fields.

Key words: Bourdieu; habitus; social field; social mobility; higher education; therapeutic narratives; working class

Introduction

‘(...) I got to university and that was the weirdest thing cause I mean I hadn’t--, I was like a fish out of water, I mean I didn’t have the social skills or the kind of family background or anything’ (Man-9)

This article explores the shifting nature of working class identity in the context of changing educational opportunities and social mobility in Britain. It focuses on the experiences of a group of ‘outliers’: working class people born in 1958, who participated in higher education (HE) either directly after completing compulsory schooling during the 1970s, or through lifelong learning. The participation in higher education of this group was unusual compared to their peers from the same generation, who were unlikely to continue beyond compulsory education.

The changes that characterise post-war Britain affected the learning trajectories of those born in 1958 who lived across what Hobsbawm described as the ‘Golden Age’ of industrial expansion during the 1960s and ‘the landslide’ that starting from 1973 opened the ‘Crisis Decades’ (Hobsbawm, 2004). The tripartite division of secondary education, (into Secondary Moderns, Technical Schools and Grammar Schools), which characterised the education system in England and Wales until the 1970s, supported ‘the allocation of young people into labour market niche’ (Vickerstaff, 2003: 271) and thus the reproduction of class disadvantage. The economic shift from the production of goods to services happened in the context of the fast growing economy during the 1950s up to the mid-1970s, when Britain witnessed a general occupational restructuring which led to the large expansion in the demand for high skilled jobs (Themelis, 2008). In line with this, the Robbins Report (1963) sought to promote access to higher education (HE) by extending the noteworthy principle that university places ‘should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Gibney, 2013). However, the outcomes of the report were ultimately disappointing and

the educational expansion of the 1960s, was not accompanied by any easing of access for working class students: 'Between 1961 and 1977 the participation rate for the middle classes rose from 19.5 per cent to 26.6 per cent, but that of the working class rose only from 3.2 per cent to 5.5 per cent' (Simon, 1991: 401). In the 1980s school leavers whose fathers were in professional occupations were still six times more likely to go to university than children in families with parents in manual and low skilled jobs (McColloch, 2011). Even today, these trends have not changed as much as expected to the point that the effectiveness of education for social mobility in the UK has been put into question (Brown, 2013). Based on secondary data analysis, Themelis (2008) criticises the British education system and argues that social mobility in the UK has been the result of the post-World occupational restructuring, rather than the increasing participation in education. Indeed, evidence from the British cohort studies suggest that privileged young people with low academic ability have benefited most from the expansion of higher education, not the most able (Schoon, 2008). Reay (2013) refers to her own personal experience of being an academic originally from a working class background, to illustrate the challenges attached to social mobility via HE. Her personal account provides a starting point from which to explore the implications of class change. As she points out, dominant discourses about the role of education as route for mobility need to be problematized further (Reay, 2013). Drawing from these considerations, this article contributes to the wider understanding of the mechanisms employed by individuals to make sense of their class change and shifting identity. It does so by using intergenerational lenses to highlight the combined role that socio-economic backgrounds, parental aspirations for their children, and educational engagement have on class identity and habitus.

In the article, we draw from semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) between 2008 and 2009 when cohort members were aged 50. This approach enables us to get biographical narratives about the challenges of class change. We first present the theoretical background relevant to

contextualise the research, the methods and sampling procedures. We then focus on the main emerging findings regarding motivations to participate in higher education; the therapeutic narratives of class change and gender dynamics. We finally discuss the implications of continuing education for habitus.

The 'therapeutic narratives' of class change

Dominant discourses about social mobility tend to focus on the positive effects of education for class change considered to be a main life improvement. However, these positive effects are only one aspect of mobility and come together with some other challenges. The work of Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1973) during the early 1970s anticipated some of the enduring issues attached to class change. Sennett and Cobb argue that class change leads to 'hidden injuries' that have particular effects on intergenerational relations: the progress of working class children into a new class increases the distance from their parents who are perceived as a burden and a source of embarrassment. In this sense, Sennett and Cobb have been mostly concerned with the 'hidden injuries' caused by different class cultures that socially mobile working class children have to negotiate. Lehman points out that the injuries involve the loss of social capital, which is not automatically replaced by new networks in the new class: 'As students move away from their working-class backgrounds, they do lose networks and forms of social capital' (Lehman 2013, p.12).

The 'hidden injuries' have continued to inform the analysis of social mobility particularly in the context of the wider emotional implications such as the idea of 'habitus dislocation' suggests (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Drawing on Bourdieu, Baxter and Britton (2011) argue that when 'habitus' encounters an unfamiliar field, the 'resulting disjunctions can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty' (Reay et al., 2009a: 1105). Bourdieu defines habitus as 'the system of durable and transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53-55). Dispositions are orientations, 'predisposed ways' or

inclinations of acting in a certain way, which originate in the family during childhood but are constantly negotiated in the interactions with new social fields (Franceschelli and O'Brien, 2014). Therefore, social fields provide the social space and thus the objective conditions where individual dispositions are formed, externalised and reproduced:

'To think in terms of field is to think relationally (...) in analytic terms a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 96-97).

Willis's (1977) famous ethnography of working class boys in the 1970s, *Learning to Labour*, highlights the tension between the young lads' habitus and the educational field perceived as middle-class. Willis concludes that the boys' negative dispositions toward education led to the reproduction of their subordinate status and thus to the reinforcement of the social structure.

Our understanding of the mechanisms underlying class change and its implications for identity draws from Bourdieu's model of habitus, social fields and their reciprocal interplay (Bourdieu, 1990). As detailed later, our respondents experienced a sense of difference and displacement deriving from the working class habitus accessing new social fields via the route of higher education. These feelings of inadequacy gave rise to retrospective accounts feeding into narratives which seek to reconnect with the past, make sense of life changes to create a new sense of identity (Phoenix, 2013). In order to explore how respondents make sense of their class change and its implications for identity, we draw on Silva's idea of (2012; 2013) 'therapeutic narratives' employed in her work about the coming of age of working class young adults in the US. Silva's approach to therapeutic selfhood as 'reflexive and individually negotiated' draws from cultural theorists (Bellah et al. 1985; Illouz 2008) and involves the idea of 'psychic healing' as a way to create a meaningful and coherent sense of self. Silva found that this type of selfhood is now also embraced by working class young adults and not longer a distinctive feature of professional middle-classes. In this sense, Silva catches an apparent

contradiction in the working class language that is shifting away from the traditional collective emphasis toward self-oriented and individualistic discourses. This shift is the result of the wider influence of neoliberalism:

In teaching young people that they alone can manage their emotions and heal their wounded psyches, the therapeutic ethos dovetails with neoliberal ideology in such a way to make powerless working class youth feel responsible for their own happiness (Silva, 2013: 138).

While Silva emphasises the link between therapeutic and individualistic as overlapping narratives, we focus on the self-healing aspect of the therapeutic selfhood. Our data suggest that therapeutic narratives function as coping strategies by which respondents make sense and come to terms with changes in their class identity. By doing so, respondents evaluate their past and attempt to relieve themselves from the hidden injuries of class change. The work of Reay (2009a; 2009b) on working-class students in an elite university, and Ingram's (2011) research about working class grammar school boys display well these complex identity negotiations. Lehmann's (2009; 2013) qualitative longitudinal study of working class university students in Canada depicts more positive therapeutic narratives. In this last case, working class background was mobilised by students to promote a 'moral advantage' characterised by a strong work ethic, responsibility and by valuing real life experiences. This moral advantage was adopted to overcome structural disadvantages posed by class differences.

Reconstructing a sense of agency: therapeutic narratives of class change and aspirations

By providing the individual justifications to the self-transformation produced in the social world, the therapeutic narratives of class change connect emotions to the social structure (Silva, 2013). In many respects, this dynamism reflects the traditional sociological question of

how individual action is possible within the constraints set by the social structure. In Bourdieu's terms, the question of agency and structure embodies the problem of how habitus and fields are reciprocally informed.

We consider agency as 'bounded' (Evans, 2006) and therefore as a process which is temporally embedded in the lives of individuals through 'the incorporation of past experiences in the body' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 978). However, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue, individuals are not simply pulled into routines but rather they are able to mobilise previous formative experiences to address present contingencies in line with what they perceive their current possibilities are. Aspirations reflect 'projectivity' as the future-oriented dimension of agency (Ibid). Projectivity is not just an individual site disconnected from history and previous experiences, but rather it relates to the social fields, including family (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

In this sense, children's aspirations are a powerful mediator of the effects of parental socio-economic status in shaping adult attainment. As drivers of future attainments, aspirations incorporate the interplay between structural and individual conditions. Evidence suggests that young people from working class background who express high aspirations for the future, are more likely to achieve a higher social status later in life than their less ambitious peers (Schoon, 2006; Schoon & Parsons, 2002) and are more likely to be returning to education after leaving school early (Schoon & Duckworth, 2010). However, Clair et al. (2013) found that even though the most disadvantaged young people are able to exercise agency and produce 'aspiration narratives', their achievements result from the resources attainable and the social contexts where these resources are mobilised. This is to say that aspirations are only partial drivers and that the achievement of successful educational and employment outcomes depends on negotiating a complex range of factors including access to material resources and cultural capital.

The paper seeks to explore the drivers behind participating into higher education and the implications of class change for identity and habitus. Nonetheless, differently from most of the current research on mobility and higher education which has looked at the present lives of young people, our study has the advantage of exploring the changes in habitus across the time from childhood to adulthood. By focusing on adults aged 50 years old, it is possible to explore the implications of participating in higher education for identity and class change as reflected by their biographical narratives. Therefore, the study seeks to address three main research questions:

1. What influenced and motivated 1958 NCDS cohort members from lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate in higher education??
2. What were their learning experiences according to their biographical narratives?
3. What were the implications of their educational journey on their class habitus and identity?

Methodology and sample

The article employs a qualitative driven mixed method approach, which uses data from the NCDS datasets at age 16 and age 50, to stratify the selection of follow-up qualitative interviews conducted as part of a related project (Social Participation and Identity). NCDS is one of Britain's richest research resources for the study of human development, following the lives of all persons living in Great Britain who were born in a week in March 1958 (Ferri, Bynner, & Wadsworth, 2003). 'Social Participation and Identity' is a qualitative follow-up study which draws from semi-structured interviews with NCDS cohort members born in 1958 (N=220) conducted to 'investigate the association between individuals' social mobility experiences and the patterns of social participation' (Elliott, et al. 2010: 3). Linking NCDS data collected at age 16 and age 50 to the interview data, we were able to identify 20 cases with information on

experiences of respondents from working class backgrounds who participated in higher education. Our selection included those who gained a degree as well as five working class respondents who completed A levels. We first considered selecting only those with degrees, but after a preliminary analysis of the interview data we decided to adopt more of a purposeful sampling approach (Coyne, 1997) and included five extra cases of cohort members who achieved A-levels but did not complete higher education. These extra cases were important as examples of drop-outs and also provided accounts in relations to their experiences in grammar schools.

To identify the social class of origin of the cohort members, we used the parental occupational status as measured by the Register General Social Classification using the age 16 NCDS dataset and we selected cohort members whose fathers were in skilled, semi- or unskilled manual labour, in agriculture or farming. We also considered the cohort members' employment at age 50. In addition, we have taken into account the aspirations that the parents of cohort members had for their children, enabling a wider conceptualisation of class beyond the most used occupational schemas (ie. Goldthorpe, 2010).

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). A combination of 'free' codes and other codes developed from our theoretical framework was applied using NVIVO software. The themes were used to organise the data and identify specific narratives adopted to make sense and create meanings. These narratives were then explored and analysed in depth.

The sub-sample

Analysis of the NCDS 1958 cohort datasets at age 16 and 50 suggests that only a small proportion of cohort members from lower socio-economic backgrounds had gained a degree level qualification by age 50: 11 per cent of cohort members from working class backgrounds

had got a degree by the time they turned 50 compared to 25 per cent of those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (whose fathers were in professional and managerial professional jobs).

Overall, 61 of the 220 cohort members interviewed for 'Social Participation & Identity' were from working class backgrounds: only 15 of them achieved a degree and other five achieved A-Levels. Lifelong learning was important for this group and the majority (nine) of those who continued in HE did so as adults. Amongst those who did not go to university, two found work straight after the end of secondary school and one of them explained how he was discouraged to continue studying by his father; one male participant failed his science degree and then moved into full time employment; two women got married straight after finishing secondary school and left education. We must note that parents of the selected cohort members had high educational aspirations and the majority of them wanted their children to continue after compulsory education up to university level. This was different from other working class members in 'Social Participation and Identity' who had low or no qualifications whose parents expected them to leave school at minimum age. The 1958 NCDS cohort did not include many respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds (about 4 per cent) because of the demographics at that time. Our sub-sample reflects this wider trend of the larger dataset and only one participant was non White British from Indian ethnic background. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of our analytic sub-sample.

Motivations: why did they go into higher education?

The sociological problem about agency and structure provides the theoretical grounding to frame the question of why cohort members from working class backgrounds participated in higher education. The interview accounts suggest two main explanatory narratives: personal motivations to continue education and references to social factors and the structural

dimension. The narratives about personal motivations to continue education varied from wanting a career to the need of fulfilment and the quest for independence:

‘Well I thought, well you know, I just can’t stay doing this because if you want any kind of future you’ve got to go and do something with your life, I would have been stuck in dead end jobs, so that’s when I got to about mid-20s, I thought I’ve wasted enough time because I was looking back thinking, well it’s like six years now since you’ve left school and you’ve not really progressed anything, so’. (Man-2)

Interest in the subject and improving personal skills were also quoted as the reasons for wanting to continue education as well as a more general ‘passion for learning’:

‘I liked learning, I liked learning, hmmm, and I used to--, I used to go down to the library an awful lot, once a week generally and I’ll take out books (...) and I would just sit and go through them and read about them and find out about them. And I enjoyed learning.’ (Woman-17)

The motivations to continue were often intertwined with the explanations of why some respondents left education early and went back to it later in life. A female respondent left school at 16 to contribute to the family finances, she then started a family and had two children before going back into education later in life:

‘No, it was a financial thing, again because my parents had no money and I felt that I should go to work. (...) well I don’t know if I would have gone to university, but certainly, hmmm, one of my teachers strongly tried to persuade me to go onto sixth form and do A levels, which I didn’t. I mean I went back to night school and did them later on. Hmmm, but no, at the time it was very much a conscious decision by me to bring some money in, hmmm.’ (Woman-4)

Other motivations focused on the role of social and structural conditions as affecting the learning trajectories. Family background but also parental expectations were described as the triggers of certain turning points in the educational journeys:

‘I mean my parents didn’t have much education but they always backed us up, you know (...). They were very supportive of education, very, very much so. I think, well they kind of felt like they missed out. My parents were kind of very bright people of the generation that didn’t have the same chances we did, you know, they had to leave school at 14 to look after their families’. (Woman-15)

While Willis’s ethnography of working class boys particularly emphasised the counter school culture as characterising working class values and aspirations, interviews with this small subsample of cohort members suggest there were aspirational working class parents. These parents had high educational aspirations for their children who were encouraged to continue education after 18 years old:

‘I’ve had a really wonderful childhood, wonderful parents, they didn’t have two pennies to rub together. But education was important to them and they brought four children ... cause that was our goal wasn’t it in those days, and... and I think we all achieved what they wanted us to achieve. So I think that’s wonderful’
(Woman-20)

Cohort members from families with higher educational aspirations, demonstrated awareness of the differences in the intergenerational opportunities that were open to them compared to their parents:

‘They (parents) were very supportive of education, very, very much so. I think--, well they kind of felt like they missed out, I mean my parents were--, my parents were kind of very bright people of the generation that didn’t have the same

chances we did, you know, they had to leave school at 14 to look after their families.’ (Woman-14)

In this sense parental encouragement to continue education incorporated the hope for social mobility. The value of their working class backgrounds and roots embodied by the family, is present in the narratives about ‘keeping a working class habitus’ described later.

However, parental aspirations were not the only way family background influenced the educational journeys of cohort members. The interview of another female participant shows how continuing education and schooling ‘set her apart’ from the rest of the family:

‘I actually felt my parents were like deviants, you know, like I used to think I was adopted, or hoped I was, and that my sister [laughs]--, shouldn’t laugh really, threw a brick, a plastic brick through the window and she said, “you think you’re dead posh with your voice and your skirt,” [laughs] shouldn’t laugh really. But--, and it was just the school, I felt like I’d found myself at this school, do you know what I mean?’ (Woman-15)

Similarly to Willis’s idea that some aspects of working class culture tend to support a ‘counter education’ attitude, there were other families that were less supportive of their children’s education:

‘So then we grew up and it was always--, you know, schooling was non-existent, we never got any homework help so I just bummed out of school, I just kind of can’t be bothered. So I never did very well at school, so I’m not blaming them (parents), I’m just, that’s the way we were working in a business and they were working hard to make money (...).’ (Man-12)

One female respondent, who went into higher education later in life, explained how her father’s emphasis on work was opposed to her aspirations about studying:

'(...) Because he (father) would work and early shift, maybe six o'clock, and then to make the money up he'd work a late shift. So we'd be in bed by the time he got back home again. So there was that that was instilled, you know, you work, whatever happens, you work'. (Woman-3)

However, our analysis suggests that 'counter school culture' is not an inherent characteristic of low aspirational working class people, but rather the consequence of families lacking the cultural and economic capital required to navigate the education system and therefore to be able to support their children within it.

Other institutional factors influencing educational trajectories were described as contextual, or generational. During the 1970s free grants were available to university applicants and were regarded by respondents as triggers of social mobility:

'You know I was--, I was academically talented therefore I went to university on a full grant and I'm kind of now upwardly mobile, you know, I could've done anything and I've done lots of things I wanted to do. And, you know, it's based on having the academic ability to--, to do it but I was on a full grant at university. But politically I've paid it back haven't I, you know, it's--, and that--, actually thinking about it that's quite an important thing generationally, it's our generation that that happened to isn't it?' (Woman-14)

Another respondent also highlighted how structural/institutional factors intertwined with emphasis on the role of free education on social mobility:

Nobody can escape from their generation. Yes I do. A very fortunate generation because with regard to an education we were nearly the last to complete our formal education under the system as it was – where everybody had full grants. I didn't pay a penny for the education that I had. In a way, I came out of the

colleges with money in the bank and I benefited money-wise from going to college. That's the generation that I feel a part of. The generation that succeeded to finish our education without large debts. And in my opinion, education should be free, without a doubt. (Man-8)

In sum, the narratives of motivations reflect that continuing education resulted from the complex interplay between individual agency and structural conditions. The interview data suggest that personal motivations and preferences as 'dispositions' were negotiated within an institutional and generational context, which provided cohort members with both barriers and opportunities for social mobility.

Fish out of water? The therapeutic narratives of being working class in higher education

In exploring cohort members' identity as learners and their experiences of higher education, the analysis is consistent with other research (i.e. Reay 2009; Ingram 2011; and Lehmann 2013). We also found that the 'hidden injuries' of class change were affecting some cohort members dealing with 'fish out of water feelings' and therefore with the difficulties attached to their habitus moving into a new social field. A female respondent describes her sense of alienation from the rest of the school as reflected in her accounts about receiving 'Free School Meals' associated with a stigma of her socio-economic status:

'(...) A big thing at school for me was, we used to have free school dinners and I can always remember having--, at the beginning of every week we used to go--, being called up in the front of the class being given these discs which meant that we got free school dinners. Everybody else had to pay for them or whatever but if you were in a lower class group you were--, you were given the discs at the beginning of the week and everybody knew that your parents--, you were on

benefits and so therefore you were getting free school dinners, you weren't paying for them.' (Woman-7)

In order to make sense of their changing habitus and reflect about their past, respondents developed different therapeutic narratives about their personal 'healing' histories, intended as ways of coming to terms with the past. But how were therapeutic narratives employed to heal the hidden injuries of class change? Some of these narratives highlight a sense of difference between the new mobile self, the family and the community of origin:

'I think my schooling set me apart completely, or my access to education. I think my accent (...) set me apart (...) My father turned up one time at the school as a gardener and I was mortified. (...) So in lots of ways I think I've mellowed over the years but I--, don't know if I was an intellectual slob--, slob [laughs], snob really. Whereas now I just feel I am a working class girl who had access to a brilliant education, you know. (...) I'm very privileged to have had a very good education at pass 11 Plus and I think that, you know, my school was a lifeline for me, I felt safe in school. It was when I went home I just couldn't, you know, it was the thought of going home that used to frighten me'.
(Woman-15)

The case of this female respondent illustrates how a therapeutic narrative was employed to deal with the complexity of a habitus operating in the two different fields of family and school. In this case, the respondent's therapeutic narrative develops around the idea of 'education as lifeline' suggesting the healing role of school able to create a more positive self.

The sense of 'not fitting in' also gave rise to narratives about lower levels of self-worth with some cohort members describing themselves as 'not the brightest' or not the 'cleverest' and finding learning quite difficult with implications for their attainment. In this context,

therapeutic narratives were mobilised to explain personal journeys of achieving higher self-worth:

I was never one of the brightest kids. Like, my brother he's an immensely intelligent man, I was never one of the brightest people but of course when you're young you don't realise that, when you're young you're just--, it is what it is. (...) I come to understand and maybe this is one of the key turning points with your life, is when you come to understand how you work, what makes you tick and that some people--, I always assumed it, someone was clever, they were better but of course that isn't the case. (...) It's what they do with it and how they get there and had I not had the self awareness (...) that I've got now when I was younger and obviously not realising where in the pecking order of intelligence one lies, I always assumed that I had to understand how things work before I could do it (...). I can now see that some people actually just pick things up more quickly (...) and some people can actually perform functions without understanding what it is that they're doing. (Man-11)

The passage above suggests how this cohort member adopts a therapeutic narrative to heal the 'hidden injuries' attached to an old low-confident self. The male respondent reflects on his identity as leaner and describes the shift from past self-worthless to a renewed self-awareness. This change resembles his personal story of healing and suggests an underlying sense of resilience.

There were also more positive narratives where respondents recounted their experiences in education in terms of enjoyment and success:

‘I passed 11 Plus, went to grammar school, felt like I didn’t fit in then because all the people that were at grammar school generally came from better backgrounds than I did, but, hmmm--, but I enjoyed it, I did enjoy it.’ (Woman-4)

Those who enjoyed learning spoke about ‘being wise’ and ‘being clever’, liking the social life attached to their education, enjoying finding out about things and developing a genuine interest in the subject they studied:

‘(...) The schooling was good, it was excellent really when I look now and think about the quality of the education, it was excellent and some of the teachers were superb, it was just me, I just had an attitude I think (...). There were lots of practical difficulties in the sense that it was a grammar school where people will pay and we had boarders as well so there were a lot of wealthy people in the school and we were like three poor children so to speak’. (Woman-13)

The accounts about overcoming difficulties or celebrating achievements, reflect the ambivalent nature of therapeutic narrative shifting between the concerns about not fitting-in and the enthusiasm for the opportunities enhanced by education. However, we found that even the more positive therapeutic narratives were stories of resilience where success resulted from the individuals’ endurance in overcoming the injuries of their changing habitus.

Lifelong learning and gender dynamics

Decisions of working class cohort members to continue studying did not always follow linearly the end of compulsory education, but rather happened later on in life as adults. Therefore, lifelong learning was a characterising element of the educational trajectories suggesting that, for almost half of the respondents, the step into higher education was easier as adults:

‘When I was 18 (...) I really didn’t know my own mind. I had no--, I had no focus, I had nothing in my mind that I really wanted to do and I just needed to grow up

a little bit before I knew what I wanted out of life, and it worked out for the best for me, because I was much more prepared to work, I mean (...) I've always worked' (Woman-3)

The lifelong learning trajectories also reflect the influence of gender on respondents' personal biographies. Studies about participation in lifelong learning reveal women increasing participation and their variety of experiences (Benn et al., 1998). In our study, women tended to return to education after having started a family, after the children had grown up or after the failure of marriage:

'I hadn't realised until 26, that was because by that time I'd married, was spoilt terrible and didn't have to work, life was just handed to me on a plate, which didn't do me any good, really. Then I separated and divorced and then I realised that I wanted something out of life for myself, and I wanted to achieve it myself, which I did do (...). That's when I really knuckled down to further educating myself, eking out a career for myself and being totally financially independent, and emotionally independent at that time, then'. (Woman-3)

Women's accounts suggest ambivalence between a strong sense of agency, which involved the search for fulfilment and independence through learning, and the perception of gendered barriers:

'The one thing I regret in my 50 years is not going on to do my Masters after I'd done the degree, but I got pregnant on the degree and I had to fight to go back. After I had (daughter) I took a year out and then--, the guy of the course said, "Well you've got a baby now and you won't be thinking straight and your brain will have been affected by you taking the time off." ' (Woman-15)

‘My dad was really staunchly motivated for my brother, more than, I would say, the girls, (...) it’s just that it was more important for the man, because (...) he believed that the mother should stay at home when the children are born, the male had to make sure he had a good job in order to provide for the children when they came along’. (Woman-3)

These narratives go back to the idea of ‘education as lifeline’ as the way to reassert women’s independence and agency. However, these claims about individual agency have to be reconciled with the influence of structural factors. The discontinuities in most of the women’s learning trajectories were gendered and marked by exclusion and disadvantage.

Therapeutic narratives of class change: the implications of participating in higher education for the habitus

In the interviews respondents reflected on their class background and whether they believe it has changed throughout life. The narratives about shifting class identity represent different coping strategies by which respondents came to terms with the changes in their habitus encountering new fields. Just over a quarter of the selected cohort members remained attached to their social status of origin and employed the narrative ‘*keeping a working class habitus*’. One female respondent, who got a degree and worked as a teacher still described herself as working class:

I would still like to think I’m working class. (...) Because, hmmm, whilst I was growing up with--, I probably--, when I--, if I was still teaching I probably would be classed as working--, as middle class wouldn’t I? But I think my background and my deep roots are working class. (Woman-20)

Remaining working class involved a sense of loyalty and respect for parental background:

'(I'm) working class. Even though I'm living this big house. I tell the kids, "You and your father are middle class, I'm working class." [laughs] Yeah. I saw how hard my--, I saw how ordinary--, I see how ordinary people can struggle, and my dad worked hard all his life and I don't want to move away from that identity (...). No, I'm working class, I mean I always will be. (.....) I vote Labour, even if they are New Labour. [laughs] (Woman-13)

Even though this group of respondents had a sense of the changes happening in their lives because of education and career paths, they prioritised their roots and found it difficult to associate with a higher social class. In making sense of the working class habitus this narrative involves alienation from middle class cultural elements:

'Definitely not upper class, because I couldn't stand their voice [laughs]. That's the one thing that really irritates me, that funny voice they manage to get. I think it must be trained into them at some school or another. It's a horrible voice, isn't it.' (Man-1)

The second type of therapeutic narrative of class change, '*moving to a middle class habitus*', involves accounts emerging from cohort members (just over a quarter of selected respondents) who emphasised their mobility as a life achievement and felt their habitus had shifted from working class roots to middle class present status. This narrative focuses on mobility and acts as a justification for the shifting habitus. References to the material gains derived by the class change were defining elements of this narrative about becoming middle class:

'Well I do think it's changed from... yes, I mean, certainly my family are working class and I do feel now I'm middle class, yeah. Hmmm. Yeah.

I mean what makes you define the change in class then?

Hmmm, well it--, as well as material things, I've, you know, where you live in and owning your own house as opposed to renting your own house and--, hmmm, Mum and Dad never had any money, you know, there was never any money, it was always a struggle for them, but, hmmm, so it's just interests and the social circles that you move in and, (...)' (Woman-13)

In addition, educational and professional achievements were quoted as the triggers of class change:

'I was born to the working class. My father worked as a lorry driver and mechanic and my mother helped in the kitchens at the primary school. Therefore I was working class. What I am now is middle class, with respect to any defining terms I am middle class and that doesn't worry me at all.

How would you define middle class?

Certainly having been educated to the level of degree or above. Working at a managerial level or higher or being self-employed. Working in the creative sector. Earning a reasonable income, comfortable. Things like that, I think.'

(Man-8)

The cultural change associated with mobility was also important for this narrative. In this context middle class culture came to signify social practices, values and ideas characterising the middle class groups in society. One female respondent appointed 'middle class ideals' as the factors behind class change important for her children's upbringing:

'Like my mum and dad I saw the typically working class how they treat kids and so I am in that I work for a living but I suppose, yeah, I do have middle class ideals in that I always encouraged the kids, I always tried to stimulate their

minds, I always spent hours like trying to encourage and then explain anything'

(Woman-19)

Remaining working class and becoming middle class were the main narratives but there were also other strategies employed to make sense of the changing habitus. The emerging idea of a 'classless habitus' (just a quarter of the selected respondents) reflects a sense of uncertainty about social class as identity:

Do you think of yourself as belonging to a social class?

'No cause I don't really--, they don't exist, I don't recognise them, I think that's what it is and therefore I couldn't probably put myself in them, so no I don't. (...)
I just--, I just feel that that kind of definition (class) is just an odd way of looking at people'. (Woman-13)

Similarly, another respondent seemed to imply that social class is an outdated idea unable to reflect the contemporary social divisions in society:

'I don't think I belong to any particular class now, thought we'd got--, moved away from that type of thinking now'. (Man-2)

The last narrative was the least common and involved a sense of habitus oscillating between class of origin and class of destination. Having a 'cross-over habitus' reflects the negotiations of working class roots and middle class current status. Those respondents acknowledged both a sense of attachment and distance to their class of origin:

'I kind of saw myself as being a crossover between what used to be known as being working class and what used to be known as being middle class, back in the--, that kind of '50s type classification'. (Man-11)

Negotiating class of origin and class destination involved a sense of belonging to both working class and middle class identity:

‘Yeah, so probably I’m linked with a social class, whether I see myself [intake of breath]--, I think, because of my roots I see myself as working class but I live in a very middle class area and associate with very middle class people. So, I think I vacillate. And sometimes upper class people [laughs]. So yes I do, but I don’t see myself as being unable to shift’. (Woman-3)

In sum, these narratives express the multiple ways employed by individuals to make sense and explain the changes and adaptations of their habitus. In so doing, these therapeutic narratives reflect the effort of negotiating the challenges and the opportunities attached to social class change and mobility.

Conclusions

This article has explored the shifting nature of working class identity and sought to contribute to thinking about the complexity attached to class change and social mobility. In so doing, it drew on the experiences of an unusual group of British working class adults, who participated in higher education, at a time when the majority of people from the same socio-economic backgrounds did not.

In this specific context, it is important to recognise that Bourdieu’s framework is particularly salient in providing a ‘less taken for granted’ understanding of social mobility, which takes into account the challenges of class change as incorporated by the idea of habitus moving into new social fields. In addition, our article contributes to the understanding of the perceived implications of mobility according to respondents’ own narratives. By extending the idea of ‘therapeutic narrative’ to this new context, we sought to understand how respondents came to terms with the changes happening in their lives after participating in higher education.

Our findings show that respondents adopted therapeutic narratives as explanatory tools to make sense of their individual experiences, to reconcile identities and habitus. Therefore, these narratives combined personal motivations with the influences of social conditions such as family background or gender, which affected the continuity or discontinuity of the educational journeys. Different therapeutic narratives were mobilised to make sense of class change. Most respondents sought to '*keep their working class habitus*' or '*move to a middle class habitus*'. There were also narratives about a '*classless habitus*' which lacked in recognising class as an identity, and of a '*cross over habitus*' which saw social origin and current status as sources of new and fluid identities. These four narratives suggest an underlying ambivalence amongst respondents about how they considered their working class roots. Within this ambivalence, the narratives also reflect a general sense of resilience, which shows how respondents were able to overcome their disadvantaged start in life by drawing on the hard working ethic apprehended in the working class family. Within the debate about social mobility in Britain, these narratives suggest different ways in which class identity matters. Differently from Reay (2009), Ingram (2011) and Lehman (2013) who focus on the experiences of youth at one point in time we have been able to capture the implications that educational trajectories have later in life. Our focus on retrospective accounts of adults has allowed the exploration of how individuals construct their biographical identity, and how the difficulties associated with class change were negotiated with the perceived gains that higher education can produce.

Do the 'hidden injuries' of mobility heal later in life? Our selected respondents reflect a mixed picture: there was a recognition of the achievements deriving from participating in higher education, but none of them appeared to have forgotten the challenges of their journeys. The nature of these respondents, who were 'outliers', is by itself proof that the experiences of mobility discussed in the article were exceptional. Indeed, they happened in a context of

'class reproduction' where only a minority of working class cohort members successfully completed higher education.

Finally, our insights provide scope for future investigation to explore even further how dominant discourses on the role of education as route for mobility can be problematized. As Reay (2013) points out, the focus on social mobility as the way to tackle structural inequalities has policy implications such as the shift away from other routes, particularly taxation and redistribution.

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List of Tables

Table 1: Characteristics of the selected working class cohort members

Gender	Social class father (at 16 years old)	Social class mother (at 16 years old)	Parental expectations (at 16 years old)	Highest academic qualification at 50 years old
Male (1)	Foremen-manual	NA	leave at min age	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Male (2)	Semi skld manual	Personal service	Uncertain	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (3)	Semi skld manual	Inadequate info	leave at min age	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (4)	Skilled manual	Semi skld manual	leave at min age	2+ A Levels, Scot Higher/6th
Male (5)	Foremen-manual	NA	full time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Male (6)	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual	full time education after 18	2+ A Levels, Scot Higher/6th
Female (7)	Skilled manual	Personal service	full time education to 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Male (8)	Skilled manual	Personal service	full time education after 18	Higher Degree
Male (9)	Junior non-man	NA	full time education after 18	Higher Degree
Male (10)	Skilled manual	Personal service	Uncertain	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Male (11)	Work own account (manual)	NA	full time education to 18	2+ A Levels, Scot Higher/6th
Male (12)	Work own account (manual)	NA	full time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (13)	Skilled manual	Personal service	full time education to 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (14)	Skilled manual	NA	full time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (15)	Unskilled manual	Unskilled manual	leave at min age	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (16)	Semi skld manual	NA	full time education to 18	2+ A Levels, Scot Higher/6th
Female (17)	Semi skld manual	NA	full time education after 18	Higher Degree
Male (18)	Semi skld manual	NA	full time education after 18	2+ A Levels, Scot Higher/6th
Female (19)	Unskilled manual	Personal service	full time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual
Female (20)	Skilled manual	Skilled manual	full time education after 18	Degree, PGCE, Other Degree Level qual