Habitus Disjunctures, Reflexivity and White Working-Class Boys' Conceptions of Status in Learner and Social Identities

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Abstract

The article primarily explores the social class identification of 15 white working-class boys at a high performing school in a socially marginalized area of South London where academic performance was routinely depicted as crucial to economic and social well-being. The research aims to consider the influence of a high performing school on the boys' identity and the relationship between their identity and their engagement with education. First, a brief background on white working-class boys 'underachievement' will provide the context. Second, Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus, institutional habitus and capitals are examined. Bourdieu's class analysis provides a useful conceptual framework to address (divided) working-class masculinities in a high attaining academic institution. Third, semi-structured interviews focused on academic self-concept, social class-identification and subsequent rationales, as well as participants' identification of who they considered to be a student they admire, provide valuable insight into understanding habitus disjunctures and learner identities.

Keywords: White Working-Class Boys; Social Class; Habitus; Reflexivity; Identity

Introduction

1.1 Disaffection from education must always be studied within the broader social context (Humphries 1981: 29) or as Young et al. (1990) argue, 'children reject school in the context of the meaning of education for them within their own society' (4). Education largely remains a place where the working-class majority feel devaluation, 'powerlessness and educational worthlessness' (Reay 2009: 25) and this greatly impacts their identity work and their investment in a system (ibid). This paper intends to address how 15 white working class boys from a deprived area, who attend a higher-attaining school than most in the borough, conceptualize class status in their learner and social identities, and how their habitus is (re)positioned and influenced by the institutional habitus of the school environment. Close attention will be paid to the habitus of a small cohort of white working-class boys in order to understand how their class identity has the ability to influence their learner identity.

Background: White-working class boys, 'underachievement' and identity

2.1 Alongside white working-class girls and Afro-Caribbean boys, white working-class boys typically experience high levels of disaffection toward education in their community (Gillborn & Kirton 2000; Evans 2006; Demie & Lewis 2010) and highly polarized attainment amongst White British at GCSE – a divergence which is largely dependent on socio-economic status as well as the quality of schooling available (Cassen & Kingdon 2007; Strand 2008). Within the state education system of the United Kingdom 'the great majority of low achievers – more than three-quarters – are white and British, and boys outnumber girls' (Cassen & Kingdon 2007: x). In short, a significant reason for why white working-class males underperform is the majority of them attend comprehensive schools that are inadequate. These high numbers raise questions regarding the social and cultural significance of schooling in the lives of young working-class men and the identity work bound to these institutions, where the 'self', as a subjective value, is created through 'different repertoires of social and cultural resources' (Wexler 1992: 7).

2.2 There is a substantial argument that school failure (and success) is 'bound up with the process of

students doing "identity work"' (Smyth 2006: 290). Unfortunately, we know too little of how working-class boys gendered and classed identities foster their engagement with the daily processes within their schooling. We also know very little of the institutions' capacity to influence working-class habitus. While the disaffection and underachievement of white working-class boys is a significant issue, not all white working-class boys follow this trajectory of disengagement, and the use of habitus may extend our knowledge of why some 'comply, conform and get on' (Brown 1987).

Bourdieu's conceptual tools

3.1 Following the Marxist hermeneutic, Humphries examined the question of how closely 'pupil resistance may be related to the nature of deeply rooted class structures and relationships' (31) from 1889–1939. His work intended to personalise the often 'depersonalizing imagery' of the working-class. Humphries rejects relativist and interactionist theoretical models while re-affirming 'class-based interpretation of its behaviour, which will situate resistance within various class formulations and relationships, showing continuity and similarity between working-class youth and parent cultures' (24–5, 1–2).

3.2 Bourdieu's class analysis is valuable in addressing the subjective experiences of class, especially (divided) working-class masculinities in a high attaining academic institution (Reay 2002). However, Bourdieu's tools have been often contested and not carefully defined (Thorpe 2010: 193), and at this point it is necessary to outline why the tools are important for this analysis of gendered and classed identity construction within the field of education. Through the use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, an engrained blend of individual history and collective history which orient individuals to their social world, I intend to further my understanding of how gendered and classed dispositions are (re)structured through social experiences. Habitus becomes active in relation to field and habitus leads to different practices depending on the state of the field as '…both concepts of habitus and field are relational in the additional sense that they function fully only in relation to one another' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 19). While it is also essential to consider internalizing structures, habitus does react to the solicitations of the field in a roughly coherent and systematic manner (ibid: 19). In my understanding of my participants' learner identities, habitus allows for agency and choice but also recognizes that choices are restricted by socio-economic predisposing individuals toward certain ways of behaving.

3.3 Operating unconsciously and consciously, habitus is multifaceted: it is embodiment, agency, a compilation of collective and individual trajectories, fluid/restrained and an intricate interplay between past and present. Most importantly the field structures the habitus, and the habitus contributes to making the field meaningful. To view habitus as overtly unconscious and pre-reflexive underestimates the actors' rationality and reflexivity (Sayer 2005: 16); therefore, there is an argument that habitus operates on an unconscious level unless confronted with a field that causes agents to self-question and develop new facets of self. After all, in his analysis of social groups, Bourdieu recognizes a degree of uniformity but then also recognizes diversity between members as individual social trajectories emerge from one another (Reay 2004: 434). According to a Bourdieusian analysis, people operate within structural constraints of which they are largely unaware and are pulled by forces that they actively and consciously manipulate. Criticisms of Bourdieu have argued that habitus fails to allow space for this kind of conscious, calculative decision-making – the space where there is a dialectical relationship between objective structures and internal subjectivities (Nash 1990; McNay 1999).

3.4 In an attempt to access habitus and the shifts within habitus caused by the tension between the institutional habitus of the school and the habitus of the boys, semi-structured interviews focused on my participants' (1) academic self-concept, (2) social class-identification, (3) subsequent rationales and (4) participants' identification of who they considered to be a student they admire. All four areas, as sites of habitus structuring and restructuring, are integral to the boys' engagement and disengagement with education where they are an axis for an interplay between learner and social identities.

White working-class boys and habitus disjunctures

4.1 Through an exploration of 15 boys' identity work in a high performing academic institution in a socially deprived area, I was able to glimpse how habitus disjunctures occur during the formation of habitus and become constitutive of habitus, arguably restructuring the boys' logic of practice. Habitus can be viewed as a continuum where, on one side, habitus can be replicated by encountering a congruent field that reproduces its dispositions or, on the other side, it can be transformed (Reay 2004: 435), as habitus carries with it the seeds of new responses that allow it to rebuff, resist and possibly transcend social and economic conditions (Bourdieu et al. 1993). One of the strengths of habitus 'is its ability to function without introspective scrutiny, below the level of conscious reasoning and deliberate will to action' which often gives the impression that one's actions and dispositions are in effect instinctual (Coles 2009: 39). The habitus, whether individual or institutional, is always permeable and responsive to the social world, being shaped and reshaped.

4.2 As Bourdieu makes clear, 'when habitus and field do not accord there are inevitable conflicts and disjunctures' (Reay 2008: 93). It is also important to note that disjunctures can foster alterations and transformations, and habitus only becomes transformative when the unthinking habitus is jolted into consciousness (Reay 2004: 436). For a working-class boy to invest with his education he must enter into a negotiation with a complex dynamic of school quality, peer/family influence, social capital and cultural capital (Hollingworth & Archer 2010). Furthermore, I would argue this process of reformulation between social and learner identities is rooted in their academic self-concept, their own social-class identification and subsequent rationale as well as their conception of students they admire. These significant factors impact the potential degree of their academic engagement. The prerogatives of the schooling – the habitus of the institution – create disjunctures in the habitus of these young males and form a new awareness of their classed social identity and their identity as learners:

> …habitus produces practices and representations which are available for classification, which are objectively differentiated; however, they are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning. Habitus thus implies a 'sense of one's place' but also a 'sense of the place of others'. (Bourdieu 1989: 19)

Working-class students in their schooling may find their habitus pulled in incompatible directions. When the habitus and field do not align, '[s]uch experiences tend to produce a habitus divided against itself, in a constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (Sayer 2005: 26). Working-class students are not passive in their educational experience; they balance their academic engagement with their subjective life worlds, in search for 'spaces' where they can utilise capitals. Our understanding of this dynamic is crucial to the study of engagement and so-called underperformance.

Institutional habitus, divided habitus and 'caught in the middle'

5.1 Ingram (2009; 2011), in her study of white working-class boys from a working-class Belfast community attending two very different schools (one selective, one non-selective) writes of the mediating impact of each institution on the habitus of her participants. Ingram asserts 'For many working-class children, locality, identity and educational success are all powerfully connected' (422) and stepping outside their local geographical context becomes a difficult negotiation. In the context of school, 'a child's individual habitus is mediated through the institution, the institutional habitus restructures the child's habitus' (Ingram 2009: 424), as every habitus – being ***generative*** – has the potential to structure. Within the selective grammar school, Ingram observed working-class boys' habitus undergoing forms of mediation and negotiation. Her participants were able to carefully articulate the sublimation of their own habitus structuring, aligned ***with*** and ***against*** the tough-boy 'smick' (2011).[1] Using a combination of classroom observation, focus group and plasticine model making, Ingram illustrates the working-class boys' habitus tug (when pulled by forces of different fields simultaneously), destablised habitus (when 'no one knows who you ***actually*** are') and disjunctive habitus (when the divided habitus causes division) which were largely processes centring on legitimating being both clever and working-class.

5.2 Ethnographers have documented the significance of friendship groups and social positioning (Willis 1977; Mac an Ghaill 2000, 2008) within the school and how boys seek to validate their habitus and make sense of their disjunctures between their own habitus and the field. Mills (1959) reminds us 'Much of human life consists of playing...roles within specific institutions. To understand the biography of an individual, we must understand the significance and meaning of the roles he has played and does play; to understand these roles we must understand the institutions of which they are a part' (161). Therefore, the white working-class boys' roles (learner, 'tough guy', etc) in their high-performing institution was an essential part of the research agenda, as was how the institution potentially structured the students' habitus and sense of 'self'.

5.3 In contrast to work done by Gillborn and Kirton (2007) on white working-class boys' perceptions of their own educational disadvantage, all my participants considered the institution to be a place where they could gain qualifications, with many participants even arguing that the banding/streaming system was fair and designed to motivate. Given the quality of the academic environment, I would argue the participants were working through barriers, working through the habitual unthinking habitus, with a 'willingness to make an effort in school, albeit limited' (Brown 1987: 3). In short, the institution was arguably a site where there was potential for transformative habitus (Mills 2008) and, through the data, we will see inklings of this transformation.

5.4 Through my data I show that in a 'good' school working-class boys contend with complex 'identity work' – the analysis will focus on the disjunctures between field of the school and the working-class masculine habitus. These particular boys are caught in the middle and their habitus is pushed and pulled, or 'tugged' along. The habitus of these young men is an ongoing process composed of many competing dispositions (Ingram 2011). It is essential to consider the powerful influence of field and institutions, specifically how institutions can impact habitus and how habitus can be ***activated*** in the field.[2] Obviously this small group of white working-class boys in this part of South East London are exposed to competing fields which push them – to varying extents – to operationalise their capitals, as well as their unconscious 'feel for the game'.

The study

6.1 While a common criticism of school case studies is that they stop at the school gates, I am considering the influence of institutional habitus and, therefore, an effort must be made to capture the school and locale. Located in one of the five boroughs London Challenge identified as containing 'the areas of most challenge' (Brighouse 2007) with an unemployment rate well above the average for London and England, the South London school environment was co-educational, with approximately 1000 students aged 11–19, of whom almost 900 are in Years 7–11. The community is traditionally white working-class, and the site is a community school with a good reputation and 'strong ethos' according to its most recent OFSTED report. Almost two-fifths of the students are of ethnic minority background, the majority being Afro-Caribbean. One third of the student body is entitled to free school meals, and one third of the students have documented special educational needs. GCSE results in the school remain well above the national average, approximately 80% 5 A–Cs, with girls outperforming boys. Interestingly, within the borough (the wider field) in terms of ethnicity, pupils of White Origin achieve far less 5+ A–C (including Maths and English) than pupils of Mixed Origin, Asian, Black and Chinese. The white working-class also dramatically underperform below the average for London and England by 10–12%.

Additionally, boy pupils in the borough at the end of Key Stage 4 Achieving 5+ A–C (including Maths and English) are at 32.9%, compared to the London Average of 43.6% and the England Average of 42.4%. Within this school site white working-class boys performed better academically alongside other students than the other schools in the borough.

6.2 The participants for the study, who were in Year 10 and approximately 14–15 years of age, were selected by their Free School Meals status with an effort to get an even distribution from across the timetable, Sets 1–4 and Sets 5–8. Students were interviewed in the school. I acknowledge that in educational research there is 'no single scale of social class categories that is universally recognized' (Gillborn 2009: 21) and, by identifying participants through the use of FSM, some revealed that their parents were employed in jobs requiring some post-16 education. This highlights a problem with FSM which has the potential to become a 'simple binary division' (Gillborn 2009: 20–21), a 'blunt instrument' for social class analysis (Strand 2007: 33). However, what is most essential here is that I actively worked to not select participants based on poor behaviour or lack of engagement in an effort to learn more about the heterogeneity of white working-class boys' educational experiences.

6.3 After consent was obtained from parents, classroom observation was the first stage in the data collection process. As attitudes and perceptions are actively constructed in social contexts, it is critical to observe participants amongst their peers. Schensul (1999) notes 'observation is always filtered through the researcher's interpretive frames'; my intention was to use these observations to access the boys' perceptions of the lesson, their role in the lesson and their understanding of the expectations in the lesson. While classroom observations provide a picture of how participants construct their identity in relation to the structure of the school, this study intends to elicit perception and attitudes and use of interviews remains an essential method. Identities do not simply reveal themselves in interviews; they need to be developed reflexively and interviewers need to consider their role carefully in the interview process (McLeod 2003). When studying class, 'We must remember that 'class' is always about more than simple social description, and that class labels are not just attempts to reflect the social world, but are also attempts to shape it' (Bottero 2009: 14) and for this reason the discussion of social class was set aside for the one-on-one interviews.[3] At no point in the research process were the boys made aware that they were selected on their FSM status, however they were asked their own social class identification. Pseudonyms will be used in the presentation of the data.

The data

Academic self-concept

7.1 In contrast to the findings of Strand's large-scale quantitative study (2008), all 15 white working-class boys in the study, minus one, identified themselves as 'able' when asked 'What type of student do you consider yourself?' The self-identification would suggest they had a high academic self-concept regardless of their placement in the timetable, and there are many possible classed and gendered theories for this identification worth exploring. The consensus surrounding their proclaimed 'able' status possibly indicates a protective response to having a low academic self-concept, or a defensive mechanism to protect against the sense of shame that can result from a systemic focus on 'survival of the quickest' in which the working-class are at a disadvantage (Boaler 1997). Alternatively, the term 'able' could be used by the boys as synonymous with 'ordinary' and actually the resisting of labels (Savage 2005) which will be analysed later in this paper. From a socio-psychological perspective, the boys' could have been enacting effortless achievement, a behaviour driven by the motivation to protect their social-worth rather than their self-worth (Jackson 2002: 46). From follow-up questions, there was a firm belief from my participants that if they applied themselves to the task they would be successful, but there was also clearly a protective element in operation.

7.2 A further possible reason for consistently identifying themselves as 'able' could be the field itself, specifically the good academic reputation of the school, whereas Strand's (2008) research on white working-class underperformance focused on failing schools. Each participant was well aware that they were at a school that was of higher quality than most in the borough. While the boys readily adopted the label of 'able,' they 'chose' whether or not to apply themselves to the tasks, preferring to only work hard in subjects they enjoyed or 'got on' with. By not engaging with academic work that they found challenging and where there was a risk of being unsuccessful, the boys could continue to conceptualise themselves as 'able'. 'Risk' here is two-sided for if they were successful and the capital that was valuable in the field was generated, the expectations would be raised and they would be required to negotiate the achievement ideology (MacLeod 2009) and "'buy in' – or invest further – to dominant conceptualisations of education as enabling class mobility' (Archer et al. 2001: 442). This possible explanation provokes thinking about the institutional habitus of the school to affect the boys' habitus.

Social-class identification

7.3 While the participants commented on a range of issues, what was most fascinating – in light of the contentious conceptualisation of habitus as transformative (Mills 2008: 79) and the power of reflexivity as capital – was the social class identification the boys had of themselves and the supporting rationales. When interviewing participants' regarding their social class identification, discussions were shaped by their sense of potential future expectation, misrecognition, ignorance and denial, which all played a role to a varying extent. By far, social class identification was the most sensitive part of the interview process where students often became terse. I recognise that the participants were young, and perhaps lacking the skills to articulate class; however, that does not necessarily mean that their 'class antennae' (Sayer 2005: 15) were not in operation. Savage (2005), on his revisit of Goldthorpe et al.'s *Affluent Worker Study*

(1968), writes:

> It is clear from the fieldnotes that questions on class identity often provoked puzzlement and confusion. Admittedly, with only a very few exceptions, respondents had heard of the concept of class, and nearly all could articulate some kind of view about it. However, respondents stumbled over the questions. (936)

Social class is obviously very different today than it was during Goldthorpe's 1960s Luton-based study. With my data, there was a dis-identification with class at times, but that it was more complex than avoiding stigmatization and conflated by the overlap between social and learner identities. The views of my participants as to what makes a person upper-class, middle-class and working-class were sometimes well established, but they were always more hesitant about identifying themselves by their social background and, occasionally, even sceptical of the existence of social class altogether.

7.4 Arguing for a more cultural component to class than Bourdieu, Marx or Savage, Skeggs states 'working-class men can use class as a positive source of identity, a way of including themselves in a positively valorised social category' (2002: 74) as opposed to working-class women. Prior to conducting this research I expected, given the history of the docks in South London, to see a lot of explicit working-class pride; however, at no point did working-class pride play a role in the discussions with participants. The inability to access working-class pride explicitly could be possibly due to the dramatic shifts to the composition of class where identity, becoming more pluralistic (Arnot 2004: 36), is defined by 'new relations of commodity and electronic cultures' (Willis 2004: 185). While the lack of the articulation does not necessarily mean working-class pride was not present, it does indicate that social positioning and employment are perhaps no longer areas for valorisation. The reluctance of my participants to identify themselves as 'working-class' aligned with Savage et al.'s (2001) work, where they assert 'to confront class, as it were, threatens people's fragile sense of self-dignity' (878). Most found it difficult to self-identify their class status or to discuss working-class culture within their community. After all, Willis (2004) himself said, 'most young working-class people in the United Kingdom would not thank you now for describing them as working-class' (185).

7.5 Out of the 15 boys in the data set, four of the boys of the Set 1–4 identified themselves as 'working-class' which could have indicated a sense of awareness but also a desire to be seen as a 'working person' (Surridge 2007: 220). Interestingly, all of the boys on the lower side of the timetable identified themselves as middle-class. It could be inferred that the boys on the Set 5–8 did not want to be seen as a lower ability student, and their social class identification was perhaps a defensive response. Set 5–8 participants' 'middle-class' identification was perhaps out of a desire to be considered 'ordinary' or in the 'middle' (Savage et al. 2001). Savage et al. (2001) assert: 'what seemed to matter more for our respondents was being ordinary' (2001: 887) and 'this can be seen as a strategy to resist the dominance of cultural capital. Ordinariness is also an example of the overlap between social and learner identity. By being ordinary, people try to claim to be just themselves, and not socially fixed people who are not "real" individuals but rather social ciphers' (2001: 889) where they are 'devoid of social distinction' (Savage 2005: 938). It becomes a process of 'middling' a negotiation of labels:

> Alfie: *I say middle-class because it's in the middle. (Set 5)*

Reay and Lucey (2000) also found working-class children living in inner-city council estates dis-indentifying from their social class status: 'Class has always been a key mechanism that individuals utilize in placing themselves and others. We suggest that, in calling themselves middle-class, these children are attempting to transcend the limitations of the place in which they find themselves' (416). My participants experience a similar process in transcending social location as they often contradicted themselves in a love/hate relationship with their neighbourhoods, particularly in the lower sets where there was less social mixing with middle-class students. In their self-identifications, Aiden endeavours to negotiate his positionality:

> Aiden: *Middle-class 'cause I don't think I'm higher than everyone and I don't think I'm lower class ... (Sets 5–7)*

Identification becomes, for Aiden, a system of ducking and diving these labels, negotiating a non-class class. For participants in this study, this social identity influences the learner identity. Studying 'class consciousness involves going beyond studying how someone identifies as a member of a class, and examines the extent to which a person's view about class forms part of a coherent social outlook which can be said to be consistent and organized in terms of class' (Savage 2000: 37) and the next section intends to address this.

Social class rationales and defining class

7.6 At first many of the boys cited economic capital as the main difference in social class, but, when asked follow-up questions, admitted they associated certain behaviours and work ethics with different social backgrounds. Frequent representations of the working-class as 'devalued' (Skeggs 2009: 88) could have influenced participants' hesitation in identifying their working-class status. The phrasing of the question was 'Given the categories of working-class, middle-class and upper-class, what social class would you consider yourself and why?' Responses to this question capture how the boys both perceive and understand social class:

> Joe: *I would consider myself as middle-class because I've been brought up in the way like that. And also the way my family is. (Set 5, 6)*

and:

> Mason: *Umm… I'd say middle class because the school that I go to is not got the most amount of money. It's not a private school…'cause I'm not rich. (Set 5, 6)*

and:

> Jack: *My family background is like … well, my dad used to own houses and like little shops – that's like middle-class. (Set 5)*

While the literature has captured the white working-class male bravado well (Willis 1977), even Willis admits that the 'lads' were largely unaware of their social status: 'a working-class hero may well be something to be, but it is an essentialist construction of discourse, not one of the ethnographic presentation and analysis' (Willis 2004: 178). From Willis's Marxist perspective, 'underperforming' boys are evidence of the success of capitalism in recreating its workforce and hence itself. Yet, the use of Marxism (Willis 1977; Humphries 1981) as a theoretical tool has faced criticisms of neglecting the complexity of educational experience. Not all working-class pupils fail academically and some do not partake in the development of an 'anti-school subculture yet still fail' (Brown 1987: 25). However, Charlie and Scott, two students in Sets 1–4 who identified themselves as working-class or 'wanting to work' (Surridge 2007) stated:

> Charlie: *I say working-class because… We don't live in a massive house and we work to earn our money. (Set 1, 2)*

and:

> Scott: *Probably working [class], probably. Because you got to work. I'm not exactly all posh and that. (Set 1, 4)*

7.7 Scott and Charlie's awareness indicates a degree of reflexivity where they are beginning to understand the social space and their position in it – I will argue this reflexivity is both a capital and part of the (dis)engagement puzzle in the discussion section of this paper. While there was a lot of ignorance surrounding social class, 'posh' people were consistently viewed as a negative and often coupled with 'looking down' on people, which was universally considered to be a deplorable trait.

> Alfie: *I would say so. Upper class people are quite… they are a bit like… snotty and a bit up themselves sometimes. Middle class people I would say are easy going people. And working class people I would also say are easy going people but they have that kind of grudge against upper class people who are a bit snotty. (Set 5)*

and:

> Alex: *Yes. Upper class and rich would consider themselves better than the lower class, snobby. (Set 1)*

Social class, whether working-class or middle-class, was not seen as a fixed concept. None of the participants mentioned a desire to rise up in social class, though a desire for financial security was important. In an effort to get students to consider conceptions of social class beyond the financial, I probed my participants further asking them if they had behaviours they associated with certain social classes.

> Sean: *Hmm… Yes and no. In the media, in like cartoons and stuff like that. There is the upper class and middle-class normally looking down and mocking people of working-class. But I think that is gradually disappearing and [becoming] people who have money and property and people who don't. (Set 1)*

and:

> Scott: *Like a working-class person is someone who has to work a lot to get money and food on the table. Whereas a middle-class person would be like slightly more expensive places and talk a bit more properly. Like all pronouncing everything. Not like to stereotype or anything… (Set 1)*

and:

> Daniel: *I dunno because all the classes are really the same. It just depends on how much money they make. (Set 1)*

7.8 The participants' responses on conceptions of social class vary considerably, yet often there appears a belief of people being 'really the same' just with a difference in resources. Larry, a top-set student who was also considered disaffected and had poor attendance, showed in his rationale regarding working-class status and how he positions employment as a way to measure one's self:

> Given the categories of working-class, middle-class and upper-class what social class would you consider yourself and why?
> Larry: *Umm… working-class.*

> and why?
> Larry: *'Cause most of my family work and it's not really a posh area and stuff.*
> What makes a working-class person and what makes a middle-class person?
> Larry: *Just the amount of money they earn.*
> Do certain social classes have certain behaviour you associate with them?
> Larry: *Yea.*
> What would be a behaviour you associate with working-class person?
> Larry: *Umm… kinda like relaxed.*
> What would be a behaviour you associate with middle-class?
> Larry: *People that like work too much. They don't do anything else. They just work. (Set 1)*

7.9 Through Larry's speech, we see a lack of 'class envy' (Reay 2005: 915), almost as if he sees the middle-class as a foreign culture; he also appears to be negatively valuing the middle-class work ethic, claiming the middle-class work 'too much'. McNay (1999) reminds us that in Bourdieu's conception of habitus it is 'realised in "le sense pratique" (feel for the game) a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery', like a 'tennis player whose strokes assume a spontaneous and relatively unpredictable form in a match although they are consciously and mechanically practiced' (101). The habitus is always concerned with the intersection of structure and action: it both generates and shapes action (Adkins 2003: 23). Furthermore, Larry's habitus has a sense of how class operates, and his attitude toward academic work, for him, becomes an éclat process to reaffirm his habitus. Larry had the academic capital, described as 'one of the brightest' in his year group, yet his non-attendance was arguably a resistance to the institutional habitus, allowing him to work/not work at a pace he felt suited his own needs and not at the dictation of the school.

7.10 In the excerpt below, Nathaniel, a student in the same set as Larry, and with perfect attendance, recounts his middle-class rationalization of his social class position:

> Given the categories of working-class, middle-class and upper-class, what social class would you consider yourself and why?
> Nathaniel: *Middle-class because I think I live in quite a nice area. Although my parents aren't paid an awful amount. I think where we are socially is quite a nice place to be. We're not in the Bentley but we're not in the three-wheel-car if you know what I mean. Just in a nice place to be, I think… just a good place in society.*
> What makes a working-class person and what makes a middle-class person?
> Nathaniel: *A middle class person is someone who has quite a nice job, compared to a working class person who might be like a builder or something like that. But also I think middle-class people have quite important jobs like civil servants, social workers, dentists, firemen, those kind of things. And I think below that is kind of working class because it's not a nice job but a physically challenging job.*
> Do certain social classes have certain behaviour you associate with them?
> Nathaniel: *I think so. The thing you notice if you saw a rich person walk past you or if you notice a sort of working-class person walk past you. It's the way they act around people. A posh person might have confidence because of where they are in society and the fact they have a lot of money. They could do certain things that maybe the working-class person couldn't because of their social status. And because of just money. (Set 1)*

7.11 Nathaniel's social class 'literacy', his reflexivity, is more pronounced, and he understands some of the subtle and obvert ways in which class operates; interestingly, his habitus was theoretically more aligned with the school as his mother had some post-16 education and worked as a Teaching Assistant.

The admired student and 'the duality of the self'

7.12 Though the participants were not asked explicitly about how they balanced their identities (Ingram 2011), an effort was made to access how they perceived an ideal learner identity to expand knowledge of habitus in relation to field. Sociological studies have made it clear that 'social identification, power relations and interpersonal struggles and other apparently non-academic processes also take place during the primary business of schooling' (Wortham 2006: 1), and I would further argue these processes directly impact engagement. To access this ideal balanced identity, the participants were asked to think of a student they admire and say why they admire him/her. While some of the boys identified students who were '*good*' and '*hard-working*', the majority of participants, regardless of their place on the timetable, did highlight the tightrope of balancing of the social identity with the academic identity:

> Joe H: *They have a lot of friends but they do well in class. They get top grades. (Set 5, 6)*

and:

> Larry: *'Cause they're smart but not really… they're smart but they're normal if you know what I mean. (Set 3-4)*

and:

> Alex: *'Cause he's modest and smart. Like he's kind of really intelligent but he doesn't like… (Set 4)*

and:

> Alfie: *I admire this person because they get on with their work and they do well but they have a social life. (Set 5)*

and:

> Mason: *Because they can think for themselves. Because they have as good sense of humour. They don't sort of… they do their work and if they do something wrong they can learn from it. (Set 4)*

and:

> Ryan: *He's easy to talk to. He helps me in class. Umm… he always waits for me after school so I don't have to walk home on my own. (Set 8)*

and:

> Scott: *Because they're smart but they're not – they're not big headed. They're friendly but they don't look down on everyone. Stuff like that… (Set 1)*

7.13 This balancing act, I would argue, is an important facet of the identity construction of white working-class males, and it has possibilities for influencing engagement with education. It has been argued that white working-class boys experience a 'divided habitus' in their schooling, forced to balance between the 'tough boy' on the street and the hard-working, compliant learner, and the balanced identity becomes an ideal (Reay 2002). Within this small data set we see that, when the provision of education is good, they admire students proficient in the 'duality of self' and who are effortless in their identity shifting. They admire students who have the capability to juggle, or perhaps even control, their 'duality of dispositions' within their habitus (Ingram 2011). After all, for the working-class boys in Ingram's study there was a struggle to be both clever and working-class and rejection of the so-called 'smick' identity did not necessarily mean a complete embrace of the 'right' attitude in the field of the school. Working their way through the pluralisms within their habitus (Ingram 2011: 18) was a daily process, as they arguably worked to not become fixed within either the field of the home or the school.

Discussion: considering reflexivity as capital

8.1 In regards to a relationship between engagement and a balanced social and academic identity, Prudence Carter's (2006) work with African-American and Latino youth in Yonkers, New York supports causality. Building on John Ogbu's work, she represents how some students could strategically move back and forth among different fields, turning 'cultural codes on and off' (322). Students who were more academically engaged, which she terms as 'cultural straddlers', were more 'blended' and able to 'identify with their multiple social identities, simultaneously operating in a variety of cultural spheres' (322). Horvat and Lewis (2003) found engagement with the academic to be a gendered process for university-bound African-American females where, depending on the peer group, they camouflaged their academic success or openly shared it. Carter's students have the academic capital and the reflexivity to identity shift between high academic status and high social status (a fluidity which spurred their academic engagement), where the white working-class boys in my study did not necessarily have these facets or the ability to be fluid. Reay et al. (2009) found high-achieving working-class students at elite universities 'displayed the ability to successfully move across two very different fields with what are seen to be classically middle-class academic dispositions' and this 'versatility', which I consider a capital, developed in their early schooling (1105).

8.2 An attempt has been made to show how the participants are on the precipice of accessing reflexivity as capital, how this could possibly be part of the engagement puzzle, and ultimately how accessing reflexivity of social positioning may or may not make a difference to their engagement with education. I utilized four areas of the boys' subjectivities, and what was particularly revealing was how the boys admired a certain learner typology. This self-positioning speaks to respondents' own lives, rather than imposing a category (such as class) which they do not operationalize personally (or only are beginning to).

8.3 Sayer (2005) has critiqued Bourdieu's argument that habitus is unconscious and pre-reflexive, contesting that it does not account for our conscious deliberations and mundane reflexive internal conversations (28–29). The inception of critical reflexivity lies in the mismatches between habitus and field where there is dissonance (Adkins 2003: 21; Brooks &' Wee 2008: 505). I would argue that reflexivity it part of habitus to varying degrees, especially when habitus confronts a field that challenges it. Through this encounter of habitus and field, the (unconscious) habitus is destabilised and where identity transformation is both vacillating between a desire to ***change*** and a desire to ***maintain***. This destabilisation is more potent with working-class students due to lack of congruency between their habitus and the habitus of the institution (Lareau 2003). However, I remain hesitant in my analysis here because when this 'encounter' occurs, 'Bourdieusian social theory tends to assume that the habitus will adapt or accommodate itself to the field' (Adkins 2003: 36) or the habitus will basically submit itself.

8.4 Threadgold and Nilan claim the reflexive individual negotiation of risk has replaced traditional 'class consciousness'. In this sense, reflexivity embodied the idea of self-referring, even sense-constitutive in a continuous and ongoing way – 'a kind of feedback loop of information and reinvention' (2009: 51). Currently our risk pervasive world forces us to utilise reflexivity – 'making comparisons, getting ideas on how to improve physiology and lifestyle, assessing one's value in the social stakes and so on' – which in itself becomes a form of new cultural capital (Threadgold & Nilan 2009: 53). This reflexivity, where 'the individual will renounce his or her doxic attitude toward the world, or better, toward specific elements or

dimensions of the social order' (Krais 2006: 130) is in no way objectivist or individualized; it is intrinsically linked to the social space (Adkins 2003: 25), social positions and field(s).

8.5 The power of the field to impact reflexivity is apparent in the three different (classed) school sites of Threadgold and Nilan where their participants' ambitions vary radically and where middle-class students are reflexive kings who are capable of taking on late modernity while the working-class students are 'reflexive losers', where, even though they have a degree of reflexivity as part of their habitus, they 'lose' in relation to reflexivity because they are marginalized by a social structure which empowers reflexivity in others" (Adams 2006: 523). Opposing McNay, Sweetman (2003) and Adams (2006) argue the habitus is still pre-reflexive, but interestingly 'the reflexive process, paradoxically, is itself a form of habitus, a required constituent of a particular field…' (Adams 2006: 515). Habitus operates in relation to the field, but habitus also arguably 'ensures that removal from the field – or entry into a new game – will generate a different set of responses dependent upon one's "feel" for the game with which one is now confronted' (Sweetman 2003: 534).

Conclusions

9.1 In this article I have sought to show how 15 white working-class boys' academic self-concept, social class identification and rationales, as well as their perceptions of who constitutes an ideal pupil, to be a significant part of the (dis)engagement puzzle and why some working-class boys consistently reject education. Within the wider discourse on identity construction amongst boys in education, Bourdieu's work has been utilized to show not only how habitus can impact (dis)engagement (Archer & Francis 2006; Archer et al. 2007), but also where working-class boys experience an enormous amount of academic labour as well as 'an intolerable burden of psychic reparative work, if they are to avoid what Bourdieu terms "the duality of the self"' (Reay 2002: 222).

9.2 Arguably, for working-class boys there are many potential barriers to their engagement with education; perhaps the most significant is the duality that burdens working-class boys, the 'habitus divided against itself' (Bourdieu et al. 1993: 511), where working-class boys must keep their identities intact while attempting to position themselves as respectable in relation to the field. Duality becomes a 'constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (Bourdieu 1989: 511). The disjuncture between fields, and between habitus and field, challenges their habitus where they experience a 'plurality of dispositions' (Ingram 2011: 10); in this 'tug' they come to idealize students who can balance the learner and social identity.

Notes

[1][1] 'Smick' is a 'local slang term for someone who typifies a working-class laddish identity in terms of their dispositions, their manner and their appearance' according to Ingram (2011).

[2] As a point of clarification between the terms of institution and field, 'the idea of institutions suggests consensus' while field, which is superior to institution for Bourdieu, is 'a concept that can cover social worlds where practices are only weakly institutionalized and boundaries are not well established' (Swartz 1997: 120).

[3] I was hesitant to discuss 'class' in the focus group in order to avoid an 'us vs. him' mentality, between participants and researcher. Bottero (2009) reminds us, '"Class" is always about invidious comparison, and when people talk about "class" their accounts often shift easily from social description, to social evaluation, to social abuse' (10).

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