Working-class participation, middle-class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the relationship between working-class participation in higher education (HE) in England and social and cultural mobility. It argues that embarking on a university education for working-class people has been construed in governmental discourses as an instrumental means of achieving upward mobility, or of aspiring to 'become middle class'. Education in this sense is thus not only understood as having the potential to confer value on individuals, as they pursue different 'forms of capital', or symbolic 'mastery' (Bourdieu, 1986), but as incurring a form of debt to society. In this sense, the university can be understood as a type of 'creditor' to whom the working-class participants are symbolically indebted, while the middle classes pass through unencumbered. Through the analysis of empirical research conducted with staff from working-class backgrounds employed on a university Widening Participation project in England, the article examines resistance to dominant educational discourses, which understand working-class culture as 'deficient' and working-class participation in HE as an instrumental means of securing upward mobility. Challenging the problematic notion of 'escape' implicit in mobility discourses, this paper concludes by positing the alternative concept of 'fugitivity', to contest the accepted relationship in HE between creditor and debtor.

Keywords: social class, higher education, Bourdieu, value, forms of mobility, aspiration, symbolic indebtedness, fugitivity

Introduction

In the Cabinet Office's report 'Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility', Nick Clegg – the Deputy Prime Minister of Great Britain – states: 'Fairness is a fundamental value of the Coalition Government. A fair society is an open society. A society in which everyone is free to flourish and rise. Where birth is never destiny' (2011: 3). Participation in higher education (HE), according to this strategy, is one way in which the British government believes social mobility, or 'fairness' (Reay, 2013), may be achieved (see also Milburn, 2012).[1]

This article is concerned with interrogating perceptions of working-class participation in the field of HE in England. It argues that education is imagined by 'pedagogues of progress' (Rancière, 2003: 223) as an emancipatory force, not only in intellectual terms, but in its alleged capacity to endow individuals with social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, working-class participation in HE is understood in governmental and educational discourses in terms of a striving to 'become middle class' (Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2012, 2013) through the accrual of these valuable forms of capital, and the university becomes a type of 'creditor' to those debtors who pursue such 'forms of capital'. Instead, I seek here to challenge assumptions tied up in what Lehmann (2009: 643) terms the 'social mobility project', which he claims 'has at its root a transformation of habitus', by looking at the particular case of Open Book, a Widening Participation[2] project currently operating in four English universities.

I begin below by examining briefly the links between class, education and the 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986), before introducing the empirical context of this article. The next two sections deal with the case study of Open Book. First, I examine the reasons why working-class participation in HE is so closely associated with what I term as the 'forms of mobility'. Secondly, I explore subjective understandings of class and mobility in the field of the university. I conclude by proposing the concept of 'fugitivity' as a new way of thinking through working-class participation in HE, which refuses to legitimize education as a form of class superiority.

Class, education and the 'forms of capital'

Much has already been said about the so-called 'death of class' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) and the rise of individualization and reflexivity in contemporary society (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Although I reject strongly the notion of social class as a 'zombie category' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), these theories have provoked a range of critical responses (Atkinson, 2010; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Savage, 2000) and, according to Savage (2003), have revitalized sociological interest in the cultural analysis of class. While class undoubtedly operates at the level of the economic, to limit the analysis of class to purely objective measures neglects the complexity and lived experience of social class. For this reason, attention to the cultural aspects of class is crucial in order to comprehend how particular attributes, forms of behaviour and types of knowledge become legitimated (Bennett *et al*., 2008; Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990a; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Savage, 2000, 2003; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Willis, 1981; Walkerdine *et al*., 2002). Understanding class through this cultural lens also helps to shed some light on how the relationship between class and education has been theorized and, specifically, the implications of this theorization for an analysis of working-class participation in HE.

HE in England continues to be monopolized by those from higher socio-economic classes,[3] meaning that the majority of students have at their disposal a high 'volume' of different 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987). For Bourdieu (1987: 4), 'agents are distributed in the social space' according to the 'volume' and 'composition' of capital owned (economic, cultural, social and symbolic), as well as the 'evolution over time' of this capital. Indeed, his theory on the 'forms of capital' (1986) highlights the way in which the accrual (and legitimation) of value is inherently contingent: the process of misrecognition identifies certain dispositions as inherently worthy (Sayer, 2005) and inscribes certain bodies as valuable (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), yet what of those bodies that fail to be recognized as such?

The relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a, 2000) provides an idea of the way in which value is unevenly attributed. Habitus is described by Bourdieu as 'a system of enduring dispositions' (1990b: 190), which are fundamentally social and are obtained through 'practice', or ' "knowing how" rather than "knowing that" ' (Lovell, 2000: 12). 'Field' for Bourdieu is a 'network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined', which crucially 'presupposes, and generates by its very functioning, the belief in the value of the status it offers' (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989: 39). Thus, if HE is imagined as 'a field of struggles' (1989: 40), in which participants must compete to accrue educational capital – and potentially 'symbolic mastery' – then those involved in this 'game' (Bourdieu, 1990a) are ultimately invested in the value of the capital and status that such a participation may confer. Archer *et al.* (2007: 221) note that: 'Habitus has thus been used to explain the re/production of classed inequalities in education and how HE is seen as part of the natural progression, a "non-choice", by middle-class students, but as alien and "not for the likes of us" by working-class students'. Highlighting this disjuncture between the habitus of the working-class student and their middle-class peers does in part illuminate one of the key mechanisms by which social class operates; however, such 'stories' are also in danger of constructing the working-class subject as 'deficient' when placed in direct comparison with the middle-class subject of value (Skeggs, 2004).

There exists a significant body of work on the influence of class on the educational experience of young people from working-class backgrounds (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Evans, 2006; Ingram, 2009, 2011; Plummer, 2000; Reay, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Willis, 1981). In terms of working-class participation in universities, there is a danger of imagining working-class culture, experience and lives as being incompatible with the university environment (see Archer *et al.*, 2007; Quinn *et al.*, 2005). In particular, studies on working-class 'drop-out' appear to substantiate claims of incompatibility: Quinn *et al.* (2005) found in their research that working-class students were considerably more likely to 'drop-out' of university courses than their middle-class peers, but that this phenomenon 'functions as a popular "story" about working-class people, arguing that it is one of the most recent manifestations of the way working-class people are

consistently positioned as inherently "flawed" and "lacking" ' (2005: 13). Reay *et al*. (2001: 858) also note 'the continuing and developing forms of stratification within higher education', so that many working-class students entering HE head for so-called 'new' universities rather than elite institutions.

Some literature has focused on stories of academic success by young people from working-class backgrounds (Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2009, 2013; Reay *et al*., 2009); yet, the emphasis has generally been on the upward mobility of these students, and the type of 'management strategies' (Granfield, 1991: 333) that these individuals employ in order to negotiate an unfamiliar and predominantly middle-class environment. In his study of working-class students in an elite university, Granfield (1991: 339) found that such strategies contributed to 'identity ambivalence', and that while newer students 'took pride in having accomplished upward mobility', which resulted in 'a working-class presentation of self', after a certain period of time students were increasingly ambivalent about their working-class identities, and some actively sought to hide their backgrounds and 'pass' as middle class.[4] Such ambivalence is also characteristic of the body of work which examines the predicament of the working-class academic (Hey, 2006; Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997; Nianby and Pea, 2003; Reay, 1997; Taylor, 2010) in professions that have traditionally been occupied by the middle classes.

Introducing Open Book

This paper emerges from a wider study conducted with individuals from 'working-class backgrounds' based in English universities. Through the use of narrative-based interviews, the research examined the various ways in which these individuals were enabled or constrained in their ability to identify in class-based terms. While students and academics were also interviewed as part of the wider study, this article focuses solely on the case of Open Book, a Widening Participation group whose remit is to broaden access to HE for under-represented groups, and to provide support to individuals embarking on university degrees coming from these backgrounds. Open Book is a particularly interesting scheme, in that it approaches Widening Participation from a 'grass-roots' perspective: rather than seeking to speak 'on behalf' of so-called 'non-traditional' students, the vast majority of Open Book employees come from working-class backgrounds themselves, and have personally experienced different forms of material deprivation, discrimination and marginalization in the past. Many of those who have been supported by Open Book as students go on to volunteer or work for the project subsequently.

I had been employed by Open Book in various capacities for four years before embarking on the original study, so all of the project's participants were known to me personally prior to the commencement of the research. A great deal of time was spent discussing family backgrounds, work histories and social interactions, and there was also a kind of 'tacit' shared understand-

ing between us of the multiple forces that intersect to construct what it means to identify or be identified as 'working class' (Charlesworth, 2000). My time spent working with Open Book led me to begin to ask questions about the way in which social class was lived and understood by working-class people attending university, as well as how this participation was construed in governmental policy and by educational professionals. While 'insider researchers' may face particular obstacles (Hendry, 1992; Taylor, 2011), insider perspectives also have the potential to lend a valuable insight into the wider research context. There was a cross-over period of approximately six months when I was both an employee of Open Book and an 'insider researcher', and descriptive fieldnotes (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003) made during this time – particularly those detailing conversations, events and professional activities – were helpful in formulating the direction of the wide research. Writing reflective fieldnotes (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003) helped to work through the conflicts inherent in occupying multiple and overlapping 'roles'. These reflections eventually led me away from participant observation as a primary research method and towards the use of narrative-based interviews in the wider project, where my role as 'researcher' would be more clearly defined for the participants. However, my close familiarity with Open Book provides 'insider' observations to supplement interview material and gives additional insight into the research context. Ongoing conversations with Open Book employees continue to inform my own thinking around the issues foregrounded in this article.

Eight members of Open Book were selected for interview as part of the wider research, five of which are explicitly discussed here. Sampling was based on my existing knowledge of their class location, which emerged through a protracted engagement in professional and social contexts. This method of selection seemed apposite given my interest in the subjective production of classed identities, as opposed to objective measures of social class location. While certain authors have been reluctant to endorse interview as a research method (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Silverman, 2007), the experience of objective, external processes has a profound effect upon subjectivity and the investigation of the subjective necessarily involves distancing oneself from research methods that are interested in establishing 'truth' claims. Since my initial professional interaction with Open Book several years ago, I have been interested in the way in which working-class students and staff are able to inhabit 'certain subject positions' (Byrne, 2003: 31) while interacting in a predominantly middle-class environment. The availability of resources that determine an individual's ability to be recognized as an educable subject within this field is highly contingent (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) and so paying attention to the subjective experience of class has allowed me to explore these contingencies in some depth. It was common during my time as an Open Book employee for those around me to narrate aspects of their lives both personally and professionally. What struck me in particular was the way in which the discursive positions of the speakers

allowed them to tell particular kinds of stories about their lives, and that these stories continued to be strongly classed.

In this article, I discuss the nature of Open Book itself, as well as drawing on material from interviews conducted with the project's Coordinator (Joe) and a selection of the project's other employees (Anthony, Fiona, Neil and Sue).[5] The Open Book workers are educated to at least undergraduate degree level and are employed in HE institutions to undertake various activities, including project administration, outreach work, recruitment, tutoring and student support. It is important to note that these are not merely lay opinions presented here in this article: while the participants reflect on personal experiences, they also draw on professional insights gained from close familiarity with Widening Participation discourses, policy and practice. I am also not seeking to generalize beyond the case of Open Book here, but to allow the specificity of this particular scheme and its participants to help reconsider many of the assumptions that underscore discourses on working-class participation in HE. In the following section, I examine in more detail the relationship between working-class participation in HE and 'forms of mobility' by looking at the ways in which Open Book challenges established educational orthodoxy.

Moving through the landscape of HE: Deficit, aspiration and 'forms of mobility'

Open Book is notable for its educational ethos, which challenges many of the assumptions presented in governmental discourses on working-class participation in HE, and this is in part due to the 'grass-roots' nature of the project. I want to reflect below on the assumptions underlying governmental discourses on working-class participation in HE by reconsidering what I term as 'forms of mobility' through the special case of Open Book.

Contra to the so-called rational action approaches critical of the concept of 'cultural capital' (Goldthorpe, 2007), I see the pursuit of cultural capital in the university as being vital to the way in which working-class participation in HE is construed. Alan Milburn – a Member of Parliament and the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty – states that: 'Social mobility is not just about moving people up the earnings ladder. It is also about ensuring that access to social and educational capital is open to all' (2012: 15). Two key assumptions underscore such narratives: first, that participation in HE by the working classes is an attempt to secure upward *social* – and indeed *economic* – mobility, and that this will result in 'becoming middle class' (Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2012, 2013) by virtue of status, employment type and salary; and secondly, that such a participation – through the attempted accrual of cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) – confers value on all subjects, essentially the potential for *cultural* mobility. Thus, I refer in this

paper to 'forms of mobility' to highlight the multifaceted nature of mobility processes, as well as the way in which the different dimensions of mobility are often elided.

Recent comments by Peter Brant – the Head of Policy (Adults) at the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission – on the Commission's new blog appear to underline this point:

> It seems likely that worries about 'not fitting in' will be one reason why highly able children from less well-off backgrounds are less likely to apply to the most selective universities. It probably contributes to a lack of confidence amongst those who are upwardly mobile as they struggle to adapt to their new social environment with detrimental impact on their ability to reach their potential. And the lack of effective networks and advice to help navigate this new alien 'middle class world' probably make it more difficult to translate high attainment into success in the professional jobs market. (Brant, 2014)

Brant does acknowledge both the classed nature of HE – a 'middle class world' – and the 'middle-class professional backgrounds' of many educational policy makers, and this does not seem to be disputed, even by the government. However, his comments have been controversial for a number of reasons,[6] and they highlight how the *purpose* of HE is disputed, as well as the contentious relationship between HE and 'forms of mobility'.

What, then, is the point of a university-level education? The Open Book mission statement is adamant that 'education is an end in itself' (Open Book Mission, 2010). Yet a type of means-end instrumental rationality (Reay, 2012) tends to be employed in educational policy documents, where HE is seen as a means of fulfilling 'potential' or of achieving 'success in the professional jobs market' (Brant, 2014). This is illustrated by The Bridge Group, an 'independent policy association' launched in 2010 by Alan Millburn, whose aim is to 'promote social mobility through higher education' and who provide policy guidance to the government. Their report 'Bridging the Gaps' (2011) understands social mobility as a way of 'improving life chances and harnessing abilities and strengths for societal progress' (2011: 6). It goes on to explain:

> One of the most common ways of realizing social mobility at an individual level is through capable people from disadvantaged backgrounds gaining access to high-status occupations. The vast majority of professional roles require advanced learning and university degrees and, therefore, universities play a critical role in opening doors to leading careers and in promoting social mobility. (2011: 6)

The implications of this conceptualization are summed up neatly by Archer and Leathwood (2003: 176), when they note how:

dominant government discourses have framed working-class participation in higher education as a way of achieving 'change'; that is, for working-class participants to change themselves and the national and/or local population by becoming more educated, skilled, affluent, socially mobile, 'civilized' and (implicitly) middle class.

Significantly, this was a perspective keenly felt by the Open Book participants. Joe is the founder and Coordinator of Open Book, born in the early 1960s and raised in the vicinity of the university where we first met a decade ago. Joe was particularly concerned by the invocation of 'mobility' in educational discourses. As he phrases it: 'implicit in [the concept of mobility] is the idea that one [class] is superior to the other and that what you're aiming for is not to better your conditions . . . not to become educated, but it's to become middle class'. This point is supported by Lawler (2000: 126) when she notes that the solution to the ' "problem" of working-class people' has been found not in merely redressing inequality or tackling discrimination but in 'mak[ing] them more like their middle-class counterparts'. Similarly, Reay (2012: 594) argues that 'education policy . . . focuses remorselessly on social mobility and raising working-class ambitions in the narrow sense of becoming middle class'. When HE is understood in an instrumental manner, then it is easy to appreciate how a university education becomes a 'tool' for enabling the different 'forms of mobility'. Why, then, should 'becoming educated' be mistakenly conflated with 'becoming middle class'?

'Aspiration' is explicitly mentioned by the government as impacting upon two of their 'Social Mobility Indicators' (2013).[7] At the time of research, Open Book was funded by a HEFCE Widening Participation initiative called *Aimhigher*[8] and the local regional network of educational institutions working towards the initiative's objectives was known as *Aspire Aimhigher*. The names in themselves are telling. Perry and Francis (2010: 10) note how 'working-class underachievement' is framed 'as a primarily *cultural* problem'; the presupposition is that if the working classes could only try to '*aim higher*' and raise their aspirations, then they would surely do better educationally (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). The 'deficit' perspective of working-class culture (Francis and Hey, 2009; Perry and Francis, 2010) implicitly endorses the value of middle-class forms of culture and knowledge (Reay, 2001). This is also symptomatic of a wider trend of individualism in contemporary British society, where the onus is on the individual to aspire to secure their own success while structural constraints remain down-played (Reay, 2013).

The circulation of terms such as 'hard-to-reach' appears to also reinforce this 'deficit' view. In our interview, Joe explains:

And I've said to you loads of times, when we hear of people working in the fields we work in . . . sneering at so-called chavs . . . and then wonder why we don't go running to them to represent us and then have the audacity to sort of go away and debate why we won't work with them, why we won't

encourage it, and they call us 'hard to reach', you know what I mean? And like we've said before time and time again, we ain't hard to reach, it's them who are not doing their job properly . . . if you need to read the latest bit of research to find out how to engage with working-class people, you should be doing something else.

Joe regularly exhibits a great deal of frustration about what he sees as flawed attempts by academics and educational practitioners to try to engage working-class people in HE. The labelling of groups as 'hard to reach',[9] arguably acts to *produce* certain groups as problematic, whilst downplaying the wider structural causes. For Joe, this becomes something of a civilizing mission on the part of government and educational practitioners: 'oh, we'll civilise them [the working classes], we'll show them how to behave'. This allows certain 'solutions' to be presented, such as using participation in HE as a tool to facilitate mobility. I worked with Anthony for a number of years, often on outreach programmes in the local community, and he concurs with Joe's perspective when he describes how such attitudes are not only disempowering (so that some groups 'need help' whilst others are powerfully framed as having the resources to provide such assistance), but neglect the fundamental structural inequalities governing who has access to the 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). I want to suggest that the framing of certain groups as 'hard to reach', or as lacking in aspiration (Francis and Hey, 2009), provides the possibility for governmental experts and educational practitioners to 'endow' those groups with valuable gifts of educational capital (see also Luke, 2008); 'gifts' that are in no way disinterested as they are understood in the instrumental sense outlined above, as a means of 'harnessing abilities and strengths for societal progress' (The Bridge Group, 2011). As Bourdieu (1990a: 126) notes: 'A gift that is not returned can become a debt, a lasting obligation; and the only recognized power . . . is the one that is obtained by giving. In such a universe, there are only two ways of getting and keeping a lasting hold over someone: debts and gifts'.

For Reay (2012: 594), the concepts of mobility and aspiration are used like 'an ideological whip' to attack those who do not engage in education. Participation in HE is thus construed in instrumental terms: as an attempt to escape working-class culture – which is defined, for example, by 'deficit' (Francis and Hey, 2009; Perry and Francis, 2010) and 'lack' of aspiration (Thomas and Quinn, 2007: 85) – and as a way of trying to secure upward mobility. However, as part of its mission, Open Book has made an explicit attempt to avoid the instrumental conceptualization of HE, and has rejected this 'deficit' view of working-class culture through its 'grass-roots' organization and commitment to making explicit the wider structural courses of inequality.

Yet the subjective experience of movement across classed fields for those who do choose to engage in HE is far from straightforward (Atkinson, 2012; Reay, 2001, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2009). For those involved in Open Book, while attempts to accrue 'the forms of capital' in HE have not been instrumentally

motivated, they have certainly been complex. Below I examine the subjective dimensions of engagement in the field of HE for some of the Open Book participants. In particular, I want to think about how their involvement has affected their perception of university-level education, as well as their own class-based identification.

Subjective impressions of class and mobility in HE

So far I have introduced the particular case of Open Book as a way of thinking through accepted understandings between working-class participation and 'forms of mobility'. As I have already noted, the majority of Open Book employees are from working-class backgrounds, so I want to consider now how their own classed locations have affected their participation in the field of the university.

One of the reasons I have been arguing for a closer attention to the multiple 'forms of mobility' – including the 'cultural dimensions' (Scherger and Savage, 2010) – is so that a more critical understanding of working-class participation in HE might be developed. While those who see HE as a tool to enable mobility might be keen to promote the cultural assimilation of working-class students into a predominantly middle-class field (Brant, 2014), this underplays the complex role that processes of legitimation, recognition and valuation play in the formation of class. Even when it is assumed that 'social and educational capital [should] be open to all' (Milburn, 2012: 15), value is not always conferred evenly (Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) and participation in HE is not necessarily a guarantee of legitimacy. As Joe explains, 'People who come from middle class backgrounds will never . . . recognize someone from a working-class background as being middle class, not really . . . you know as soon as you open your mouth, the look sometimes'. Joe draws attention here to his own experience: born and raised in south-east London, he accordingly has a pronounced Cockney accent, which although common amongst the Open Book group, tends to mark him out as being from a different background to many professionals working in the field.

The 'middle classes' are the subject of frequent discussion within Open Book. Rather than being strictly defined in specific terms, 'middle class' as a category tends to be understood in oppositional terms by the majority of Open Book employees – that is, as something that they are *not* – highlighting the relational functioning of class. It is important to note that I do not seek to homogenize 'the working class' or 'the middle class' here; class-based cultures are complex and multi-faceted, not uniform tiers in a hierarchy. However, it is significant that the Open Book participants spoke about the middle classes in this way. I believe that this understanding relates to the perceived attitudes of those who seek to 'educate' the working classes, including policy makers, Widening Participation practitioners and university lecturers. Firstly, as illustrated in the previous section, such attitudes have been informed by the types

of discourse that have positioned the working classes as being in deficit through their perceived lack of aspiration or know-how. Secondly, these attitudes also relate to notions of entitlement by those 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127) who possess the requisite capitals never to have questioned their own participation in the field. As Reay (2001: 334) notes: 'Within the education system all the authority remains vested in the middle classes.' Accordingly, it is not surprising that those coming from alternative class backgrounds may feel as though middle-class culture – with its corresponding assumptions, attitudes and types of behaviour – is somewhat monolithic in this particular environment. I also want to emphasize, following Iris Marion Young (1990), that while I am not seeking to 'blame' those involved in the delivery of educational policy or practice for class-based inequalities, 'people and institutions nevertheless can and should be held responsible for unconscious or unintended behaviour, actions, or attitudes that contribute to oppression' (Young, 1990: 135).

How, then, do the Open Book participants respond to what they see as the dominant middle-class culture of the field? Fiona was born in the early 1960s and raised in south-east London. She has memories of riding a bicycle around the turbines in Bankside Power Station where her father worked; the iconic turbine hall now forms part of the Tate Modern art gallery. She is one of the original members of Open Book and holds a master's degree in the History of Art. She explains: 'you're reminded of your class by virtue of the fact that you're coming across people that don't have the same sort of background'. While it is clearly not possible to provide definitive definitions of either working-class or middle-class forms of culture (not least due to their complexity), the Open Book participants perceive substantial differences between themselves and the dominant cultural norms that they have encountered in HE. Some differences are visually marked – such as presentation, style and comportment; others are audible in the form of accents, speech, turns of phrase and humour. The foregrounding of particular values, such as loyalty and respect (see also Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), is key to the dynamic of the group who take very seriously their educational mission and responsibility to one another, but often while trying to 'have a laugh' (Willis, 1981). While the participants enjoy a wide range of cultural activities and have diverse tastes, there is an abhorrence of 'snobbishness' and pretension, attributes that are perceived as being characteristic of the wider field. Trips with students to art galleries, plays and even The Royal Opera House are common at Open Book, but this is never understood as participating in 'someone else's culture', as Joe phrases it. Indeed, the Open Book participants are often reluctant to endorse the dominant norms that they have encountered in universities, and so sometimes the invocation of 'difference' is seen as no bad thing. For example, Sue describes how interacting with middle-class peers and professionals in HE sometimes has the effect of making her 'more working-class'. She first joined Open Book as a student and since graduating from her Creative Writing degree, has begun working for the project. She does not see herself as having

'stepped up the social scale' and instead consciously attempts to avoid being mistaken as culturally middle class, by emphasizing certain traits such as her local accent.

However, being 'reminded of your class' may conversely occur in situations where participants are patronized, stereotyped, or made to feel inferior (and unfortunately participants cited a number of examples of this type of negative experience). Young (1990: 133–134) contends that 'members of oppressed groups' often experience negative reactions, which have the effect of 'throwing them back into their group identity'. This type of identification then is contingent on *being identified* as both 'Other' and subordinate, and sees the devaluation of working-class participants despite their participation allegedly conferring value via the accrual of the 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986).

Processes of class defensiveness and disidentification are well documented (Payne and Grew, 2005; Savage *et al.*, 2001; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997) and it has been argued that one common response to the dominant middle-class norms of the university environment is for working-class students to attempt to 'pass' as middle class (Granfield, 1991) to avoid devaluation. Based on this literature, one might imagine that working-class identities in universities are increasingly hard to find, particularly as participation in HE is often equated with becoming socially mobile. Yet, as Joe notes, 'passing' is unlikely to be wholly successful and this was not a common strategy within Open Book, where there was no aspiration to 'become middle class' (Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2012) in a cultural sense. Anthony, for example, explains that his participation in HE has actually provided him 'with an identity to my class', which had previously been lacking. Born in the 1970s and originally from the north of England, Anthony describes seeing himself as a 'doley' as a young man.[10] However, learning about theories such as Marxism on his criminology degree has equipped him with new ways of making sense of his personal experience and complex societal position, and this does not entail any attempt to disidentify.

Like Joe and Fiona, Neil was born in the early 1960s in south-east London. After beginning his career in a cardboard box factory, he moved on to work in the printing industry in the 1980s. At the time of research, he was completing a master's course as a mature student whilst also working for Open Book; he has since graduated and still works for the Project. He describes his degree as having allowed him to 'become the person that I was always meant to be', yet this relates to how the course has facilitated the development of his writing; significantly, he remains reluctant to endorse the actual qualification with any inherent value. Neil's narrative was typical of the Open Book responses, in that he still continued to strongly identify with his working-class background and was particularly resistant to endorsing the cultural norms of his department and his peers. Neil describes his participation in HE as leaving him 'on the cusp': he experiences what he describes as 'apathy' from family and friends outside of university, but also cultural misunderstanding from some individuals within the university. However, this does not lead to disidentification, as

he states: 'I'm staunchly working class and I'll never be anything but that.' Indeed, it was interesting for me to hear from the participants that their interaction with middle-class professionals and peers in HE had largely left them feeling *more* working class. Despite their academic success and employment in HE, all of the Open Book participants interviewed continued to identify strongly with their working-class roots, and this was also characteristic of the wider Open Book group.

Joe specifically defines himself as 'an educated working-class man'. However, this type of identification does not always go unchallenged, and this relates to a perceived incompatibility between education and working-class backgrounds. Fiona explains: 'I've been accused of being middle class because I've got an education and I always say, well, does that then mean that you [can] never have an educated working class?' This is a common concern of Open Book: certain pursuits, including education, have consistently been misrecognized as the legitimate preserve of the middle or upper classes in Britain, an enduring misunderstanding when one looks at how working-class participation in HE is currently construed in the government's educational policy (see Brant, 2014). Arguably, then, the Open Book group face something of a conundrum: while they have pursued valuable 'forms of capital' (Bourdieu, 1986), they also reject the legitimacy of their creditors' cultural dominance through their continued identification as 'working class' (and their concomitant refusal to embrace middle-class cultural norms). Indeed, previous research has explored how the working classes may reject the legitimacy of 'the dominant symbolic' and, in so doing, may fashion an alternative set of cultural values (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

The classed environment of HE has made participants acutely aware of their own divergent backgrounds, but rather than encouraging disidentification (as a response to negative valuation, for example), these encounters seem to have encouraged the fostering of class-based identities for this particular group. I have attempted to demonstrate here how understanding working-class participation in HE as a tool to facilitate upward mobility is problematic: the Open Book participants do not aspire to become culturally middle class, and they reject the legitimacy of the classed, cultural hegemony of this field. I conclude below by asserting that Open Book's particular form of engagement in HE should be understood in terms of a fugitive evasion of inequality.

Conclusion: moving from escape to fugitivity

I have examined in this article how the spatial movement of those from working-class backgrounds into the predominantly middle-class field of the university is often conflated with multiple 'forms of mobility'. Through an examination of the case of Open Book, I have problematized assumptions in governmental and educational discourses, particularly those which construe

working-class participation in HE as an instrumental way of achieving upward mobility. HE has also been conflated with the cultural project of aspiring to 'become middle class' (Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2012); yet, as I have shown, none of the Open Book participants sought to do this. In fact, most were upset that the pursuit of knowledge and education had been misrecognized – or 'rubber stamped', as one Widening Participation officer affiliated with Open Book described it – by the middle classes as their own. Instead, engagement in HE is framed by Open Book as 'education for education's sake', based on the understanding that the pursuit of knowledge should be open to all. As Joe contends: 'I don't want to be middle class, I've never aspired to be middle class ever . . . so to me it's about social equality, not about social mobility.'

In concluding this article, I want to reimagine the working-class participation described here in terms of 'fugitivity'. I use this term in order to avoid the negative language of 'escape' that I believe underscores the discourses of mobility discussed earlier. Moten and Harney (2010: 1) state:

> This refuge, this place of bad debt, is what we would call the fugitive public. Running through the public and the private, the state and the economy, the fugitive public can be identified by its bad debt – but only by its debtors. To creditors, it is just a place where something is wrong, though that something – the invaluable thing that has no value – is desired. Creditors seek to demolish that place, that project, in order to save those who live there from themselves and their lives.

Building on their interpretation of the economic concept of 'debt', I would like to suggest that this place of 'bad debt' may also be relevant to our understanding of Bourdieu's other 'forms of capital' (1986), and that the attempts of the individuals in this project to accrue cultural and symbolic capital through their participation in the field of HE might now be reimagined as a type of 'fugitivity' from their creditors.

Moten and Harney (2010: 1) assert that creditors 'seek to demolish' the fugitive public 'in order to save those who live there from themselves and their lives'. As already noted, the university is often understood as 'saving' the working-class subject 'from themselves and their lives' and this is achieved by transforming them into more middle-class versions of their selves through the provision of the 'forms of capital'. Working-class participants are thus seen as being indebted to their educators, who oversee such a transformation. Yet the Open Book participants have refused such a straightforward transformation in their continued identification as 'working class' and this, I argue, involves a critical subversion of the relationship between creditor and debtor. Working-class participants in HE may quite rightfully be on the run from the types of categorization, inscription and delegitimization that see their lives being devalued across different fields. Certainly for some working-class individuals, this may involve attempts to disidentify from valueless subject positions. However, I argue here that the Open Book participants' attempts to abscond

from negative valuation might better be conceptualized in terms of 'fugitivity' rather than 'escape': their participation seeks a refuge from inequality not through disidentification, but through a refusal to recognize the symbolic legitimacy of the putative creditor.

Open Book has certainly recognized the way in which working-class engagement in HE is construed as an attempt to become legitimate, or as a means of conferring value. For all this, the project also subordinates the terms of a class society by demanding what has traditionally been 'refused' (Bourdieu, 1984: 471) to the working classes (a university education), whilst rejecting the symbolic legitimacy of their creditors. Instead of conceptualizing this participation in terms of social mobility, or a 'heroic' escape (Lawler, 2000) from the working classes, I have suggested that their participation might better be understood as an emancipatory project: a fugitive evasion of devaluation, as well as discriminatory and oppressive positionings, rather than an 'escape' from working-class backgrounds.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. See also 'Students at the Heart of the System' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011: 54), a government White Paper, which states: 'Higher education can also be a powerful engine of social mobility'.
2. Widening participation is defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, n.d.) 'as a broad expression that covers many aspects of participation in HE, including fair access and social mobility'.
3. A HEFCE report (2010: 5) states that: 'For cohorts from the late 2000s, typically fewer than one in five people from the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of areas enter higher education, compared to more than one in two from the most advantaged 20 per cent of areas'. As well as there being a stark difference between the general levels of participation of young people in HE according to social class background, there are also differences in participation levels according to type of institution. The Cabinet Office Strategy for Social Mobility (2011: 5) notes that: 'Almost one in five children receive free school meals, yet this group accounts for fewer than one in a hundred Oxbridge students'. Harris (2010: 94) similarly explains that: 'The most advantaged 20 per cent of young people are seven times more likely to enter the most selective institutions than the most disadvantaged 40 per cent'.
4. Although 'passing' is unlikely to be entirely successful (see Skeggs, 1997).
5. At the time of research, the participants discussed here were aged approximately between 35 and 49 years. They were all born in London, apart from Anthony, who is from northern England, and ethnically, they are White British. The participants cited here have waived their right to anonymity.

6 This is illustrated by responses posted on the blog, as well as some media interest in the implications of his remarks (see for example Graham, 2014).

7 See Indicator 12, 'Progression to higher education by age 19, by free school meal eligibility at age 15' and Indicator 13, 'Higher education participation in the most selective institutions by type of school or college attended' ('Social Mobility Indicators', Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2013).

8 Government funding for this scheme was cut in 2011.

9 Joe is referring here to a conference that he attended on 11 March 2008 at Goodenough College, London, entitled 'Reaching the Unreachable, Teaching the Unteachable. The Labels are Holding Us Back.' For further use of the term, see for example MacDonald *et al.* (2005: 873) who define their participants as 'so-called "hard to reach" young adults'.

10 'Doley' is a slang term for those in receipt of government unemployment benefits (known as 'the dole').

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