

## The Return of Character: parallels between late-Victorian and twenty-first century discourses

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### **Abstract**

There has been an increasingly common trend in the UK to identify character skills and traits as the basis for various individual successes and achievements. In education policy and employment services, character has been linked to the making of successful, morally aware, employable and socially mobile citizens. This article explores the late-nineteenth century use of character discourses, focusing on the economist Alfred Marshall. During this period character was associated with future-oriented subjects – those displaying provident and thrifty habits and dispositions – and held particular class, race and gender prejudices. The article draws parallels between this late-Victorian approach to character and the ‘return’ of character in twenty-first century education and welfare-to-work policy, in particular where cultivating character is linked to improving employability and social mobility. We can make productive comparisons between character’s Victorian legacy and its re-emergence more recently amid increasingly moralized discourses around poverty, inequality and unemployment. In doing so, we might better understand the historical antecedents to stigmatizing character discourses today, insofar as they leave the burden of responsibility for particular social outcomes in life and the labour market with individuals and their ability to cultivate their own human capital.

**Keywords:** Character; Victorian; Alfred Marshall; social mobility; employability; human capital.

## ***Introduction***

In January of 2016, British astronaut, Major Tim Peake, sent a tweet from the International Space Station, orbiting Earth in the thermosphere: ‘Character is important – a CV may get you the interview, but character will get you the job. #CharacterMatters2016’ (Peake, 2016). The missive from space was timed to coincide with a ‘character symposium’ organised by the UK Department for Education (DfE) and opened by then Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan. The symposium preceded the end of a funding period for the DfE’s Character Education Grant programme, which in 2015-2016 awarded bidders with individual grants valued between £50,000 and £750,000 from a dedicated £3.5 million pot of money (which rose to £6 million for 2016-17). The programme set out to ‘fund projects which help develop a set of character traits, attributes and behaviours in pupils that underpin success in education and work’ (DfE, 2015). It was part of an increasingly common trend, present since at least the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government’s period of office, to identify character skills and traits as the basis for various individual successes and achievements (Bull & Allen, this issue). In education and employment services character has served as both an explanation for, and solution to, various social mobility and employability problems. Outside of those who are currently involved in advocating it, however, the concept of character has received insufficient critical sociological and historical attention (see, however, Ecclestone, 2012; Suissa, 2015; Gillies, 2016).

This article explores some of the historical legacy that accompanies the idea of character, concentrating in particular on how evaluations of character have been attached to ideas about work and foresight or future-orientation, which are in turn connected to improved social mobility and employability. It identifies character as a Victorian trope and draws parallels between earlier understandings of character and the form in which character has re-emerged in the twenty-first century. As Gillies notes of character discourses, ‘threads from the past stubbornly remain’ (Gillies, 2016: 12), and it is these threads which are picked up and examined here. The historical focus of the article is on a Victorian-era economist – Alfred Marshall – because he identified and championed particular future-oriented economic subjectivities associated with character that were reflective of the late-nineteenth century, and that belong within a lineage of human capital approaches. This represents an original contribution to our understanding of character today; research to date on character that identifies its relationship with the concept of human capital has not yet explored the historical antecedents of these connections.

Considerate of protestations that character education today bears no similarity to Victorian conceptions (Kristjansson, 2013), the argument advanced here

is that there are useful historical parallels (as well as differences) to be identified in looking at character and the wider collection of traits it is associated with – including perseverance, grit and resilience, which are said to form a collection of ‘character skills’ (Heckman & Krautz 2013); that linking character with social mobility and employability has echoes of the late-Victorian/Edwardian voluntarist tradition; and that the weight of focus on certain virtues betrays an individualizing approach to social questions typical of arguments that promote the idea of human capital and cultivation of the perpetually future-oriented entrepreneurial self. In addition, there is a concern that the focus on building character in education policy reflects the individualized focus on psychological traits within employment services and welfare-to-work programmes.

The article proceeds in four further sections. The first section gives an overview of some of the actors involved in promoting character education today and common claims that are made about its effects. The second section explores late-Victorian character discourses, focusing in particular on understandings of future-oriented subjects and ideas about the work ethic within the work of early neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall. The third section returns to the present day, exploring echoes of these Victorian discourses within character and the associated dispositions promoted alongside it today. The final section concludes by considering the future of character, noting how far it has travelled in national and international policy discourses but acknowledging its limits.

### ***Advocates of Character Today***

Character has increasingly become a target for government and other actors, who link it to the making of successful, morally educated, employable and socially mobile citizens. Advocates of character education argue that it makes for an effective response to social and moral breakdown: the financial crisis and corruption in the banking sector; the riots in London and elsewhere in 2011; and the MPs expenses scandal are all cited as issues for which character education provides answers. This range of areas in which character is claimed to matter indicates its amorphous and malleable nature and applicability as a concept. As Nicky Morgan said in her speech at the aforementioned character symposium, ‘there is no one clear definition of character ... We don’t want to set down rigid guidelines on this because character isn’t a one-size-fits-all concept.’ Rather, she added, ‘[i]t’s a combination of the traits that set people apart so they can achieve their dreams’ (Morgan, 2016). While there have been efforts to define character more precisely in lobbying for its inclusion in education policy, it has travelled to a range of policy areas and arguments.

Character holds a unique place in today's vocabulary of psychological and moral goods in part because of its long and diverse history. Frank Field MP, former poverty czar under the Coalition Government and Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, has previously evoked the nineteenth-century origins of the term. He said in 2010, at the launch of the think tank, Demos', 'Character Inquiry' report that, '[t]he major reason why Britain is rougher and more uncivilised than it was in the early post-war period has been the collapse of the politics of character. These politics dominated the debate from the mid-Victorian period up until the middle of the last century' (Field, 2010). Character, then, can operate as a fluid motif among arguments about inequality, the role of the family, and social and moral breakdown, sometimes absorbing earlier (eighteenth-century) discourses of manners, refinement, politeness and distinction (Klein, 1989), as well as national or civilizational difference (Mandler, 2006).

Recent research into character has been conducted by a number of different organisations across a range of the political spectrum. This includes think tanks such as Demos (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009; Lexmond & Grist, 2011), the Young Foundation (Roberts, 2009) and ResPublica (ResPublica, n.d.), who over the last decade have each dedicated streams of work to character and character education. Debates have also taken place between different sectors; the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility published a 'Character and Resilience Manifesto' in 2014 (Paterson et al., 2014) that drew together contributions from academia, think tanks, educators and the voluntary sector (see Burman, 2018 in this issue). Character and 'character skills' have increasingly been used interchangeably with 'soft', 'non-cognitive' and 'social and emotional' skills in government commissioned research (Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Goodman et al., 2015; NatCen, 2017), business association literature (CBI, 2016) and studies for international organisations such as the OECD that recommend fostering it as part of the supply-side skills agenda within schooling policy (OECD, 2015).

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, based at the University of Birmingham, has had its definition of character widely adopted, including by the DfE under the Coalition Government (Jubilee Centre, 2014). The Centre adheres to a specifically Aristotelian or 'neo-Aristotelian' approach to character education, which contends that character is always in some ways being shaped in schools – 'caught' rather than 'taught' (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 3) – and seeks to consciously educate it around sets of virtues: moral, civic, intellectual and performance. One of its flagship reports provides a summary of these four sets and their respective purposes: '[m]oral and civic virtues are essential to a good communal life; intellectual virtues are dispositions pertaining to inquiry, understanding, applying knowledge and respect for evidence; and performance virtues provide the strength of will to achieve goals,

whatever they are' (Arthur et al., 2015: 9). The Centre has sought to set itself apart by maintaining its commitment to a wider and conceptually deeper understanding of character and virtue.

Important differences exist across these different actors in terms of institutional background, the intellectual justifications they use to advocate for character, the various ends they focus on and the means by which they argue character education should be conducted. The focus in this article, though, is on a common set of claims that link certain character traits with social mobility and employability.<sup>1</sup> Across the policy and research literature, one can find claims relating to the positive effect of character on earnings, employment outcomes and social mobility. The APPG Character and Resilience Manifesto (Paterson et al., 2014), for example, repeatedly cites complaints from major employers and business organisations like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) concerning the lack of employability skills, including character, among young people.<sup>2</sup> The malleability of character noted above means that an abundance of traits can be brought under its rubric, sometimes giving the sense that it is anything and everything that could be desired from a 'good citizen', and especially from a 'good worker'. There is an 'almost limitless universe of the 'non-cognitive'', notes one literature review, and '[o]ne could go on adding any characteristic that is rewarded in the labour market' to a list of desirable traits (Joshi, 2014: 4).

Many publications connect character with success in the labour market and later earnings success citing the work of economists of education from different backgrounds, but often with reference to the work of James Heckman (see Heckman & Kautz, 2012, 2013). Heckman sits in a lineage of University of Chicago economists – including Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz – who have developed human capital theory, a neoclassical economics approach to issues typically considered outside the purview of economics such as crime, education and marriage. Human capital understood in basic terms describes the investments individuals make in themselves or that are made in them – their education, their training – that offer a productive or pecuniary return at a later date (Sweetland, 1996).<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps the example par excellence of what is known as 'economics imperialism', the cannibalization of, in particular, other social sciences by economics (see Fine & Milonakis, 2009); indeed Heckman himself has called Becker's approach 'a brilliant example of abductive economic science at its best' (Heckman, 2015: 6). Further, it has been typically associated, most famously in Foucault's lectures on the *Birth of Biopolitics*, as a neoliberal understanding of parental attention, care and education as *investments* (Foucault, 2008). Here, it is a concept that will be traced to Victorian understandings of character and social progress in the work of Alfred Marshall.

The focus on character as an explanation for and solution to issues of social mobility and employability risks ignoring or actively displacing the structural aspects of poverty, inequality and unemployment. As it has gained more traction in policy circles, there is a need to question the concept politically. The suggestion is that in its emphasis on individual virtues, psychological traits or skills as markers of success, it risks perpetuating existing discourses that individualize responsibility for a highly unequal society and economy. Indeed, it is evident even among some of character education's advocates that the risks of instrumentalising character traits and individualizing social problems are very real (Arthur et al., 2016; Jubilee Centre, 2016).

There is not space here to weigh up the evidence on non-cognitive or soft skills and how exactly they play a role in determining the life chances or later earnings of children, neither is this the aim of the article.<sup>4</sup> Instead, through contrasting historical and contemporary character discourses, the intention is to highlight antecedents to an agenda in education and employment policy today that threatens to shift responsibility for inequality and unequal labour market outcomes onto disadvantaged working-class children and their families. The next section sets out these historical antecedents as they existed in the late-Victorian period.

### ***Victorian Character Discourses***

Character was a recurrent theme, a trope in the work of various social reformers of the Victorian era in Britain, and it held significance across the political spectrum, from liberal political theorists such as Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and T.H. Green to socialists associated with the Fabian Society (Collini, 1985: 30; Ball, 2000). Because of its salience and use across this political range, Collini has urged that it should not *merely* be seen as 'a weapon fashioned to suit the purposes of middle-class moralists frightened by the possible consequences of the poor's apparent indifference to respectable values' (Collini, 1985: 48). Yet, there is no denying that it held an overriding position in the thought and texts of social reformers who held a paternalistic concern for cultivating the character of the poor and unemployed. Among such reformers were Bernard and Helen Bosanquet, who led the voluntarist organisation, the Charity Organisation Society (COS), focused on character as the determinant of individuals' circumstances and as 'both means and end of social improvement' (Collini, 1976: 92).

There is a long history of English or British 'national character' (see Mandler, 2006; Romani, 2004) which is difficult to separate out from the use of character as an explanation of within-nation differences between social groups and classes. In the

late-Victorian and Edwardian period, it had an intimate relationship to hopes and fears about the British Empire, built on the belief that imperialism and character existed in a 'fundamentally symbiotic relationship' (Cain, 2007: 255). This relationship could also be viewed in negative terms, though, as per eugenic anxieties about the 'fitness' and 'efficiency' of the working classes that were catalysed by defeats in the Boer War (Mackenzie, 1976: 515-6; see also Roberts, 2004). Fears about degeneration of the population were foundational to the emergence of the Scouting movement in the Edwardian period, which sought to instil self-discipline and obedience and improve the moral and physical health of the nation (and particularly of working-class boys) through education in character and physical activities modelled on public school ideals (Rosenthal, 1986).

Often, ideas about character were bound up with a focus on different experiences of time: character could represent a personal disposition founded upon restraining impulsive behaviour and cultivating habits that demonstrated willpower and a preparedness for an uncertain future; contrasted with this were images of fecklessness, impulsivity and incapacity for self-maintenance (Collini, 1985: 34; Behlmer, 2000). This is particularly evident in how character was attached to ideas of thrift and saving, but it was also obvious in the relationship between character and ideas of the work ethic. The inability for poor and working-class people, or people of other races and civilizations, to form a proper relationship to the future, to be future-oriented, beyond a relatively short horizon, could be asserted with reference to their incapacity to save or their aversion to work (as supposedly demonstrated, through circular argumentation, by the prevalence of poverty and unemployment among certain groups).

Character was imbued, then, with particular judgmental conceptions of economic subjectivity, and more generally used to hold up an ideal of self-sufficiency. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it displayed a deep connection to bourgeois virtues concerning industry and saving, and the virtue of prudence which was associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie in nascent capitalist markets (McCloskey, 2006). Here it is argued that there is worth in highlighting how character entered understandings of modern economics within the late-Victorian period in order to explore its antecedents to human capital theory and contemporary claims about character as a catalyst for increased social mobility. We can concentrate on one economist in particular, associated with the foundation of the neoclassical tradition in economic thought: Alfred Marshall (1842-1924).

Marshall is credited with being foundational to the 'neoclassical' approach to economics and indebted to utilitarian understandings of human action. He is also perceived as one of the first advocates of human capital (Sweetland, 1996) and

discussed the importance of educating character in his most famous book, *Principles of Economics*, first published in 1890 (Marshall, [1920] 2013). He exhibited an attachment to the idea of character as a determinant of behaviour and economic action – especially saving, and supplying one’s labour – but believed, contrary to those who understood it as entirely innate, that character could be shaped, cultivated and educated. Finally, he had a close affinity to Victorian philanthropy and private charity, particularly through his sympathy for the understanding of character held by the COS mentioned above (Collini, 1985).

Character was used by Marshall and other economists in the late-nineteenth century to explain the supply of labour and how it differed for different groups of people. The ideal economic man would supply his labour based on the marginal disutility of work: ‘the painful exertion which we undergo to ward off pains of greater amount, or to procure pleasures which leave a balance in our favour’ (Jevons, [1911] 2013: 167). This represented the elaboration of a kind of utilitarian work ethic based on the balance of pleasure and pain. Yet for early neoclassical economists such as Marshall and W.S. Jevons such a work ethic was on display among certain groups but not others. For Marshall only ‘those whose mental horizon is wider, and who have more firmness and elasticity of character’ would respond to rising wage incentives to work, a group which excluded ‘the more ignorant and phlegmatic of races and individuals’ (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 438-439). This represented, essentially, the elaboration of a deficit model of character which targeted non-white populations, the working classes and underclass groups within society.

For Marshall, ‘exceptional treatment’, could be reserved for those deficient of character, the ‘Residuum’ of persons who are physically, mentally, or morally incapable of doing a good day’s work with which to earn a good day’s wage’ and ‘a paternal discipline something like that which prevails in Germany’ was recommended (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 594). He thus negotiated what was a deep contradiction at the heart of Victorian liberal government, defined by ‘the century-long paradox of securing pastoral care for the building of character in a nation of allegedly [already] self-reliant individuals and communities’ (Goodlad, 2003: xiv).

Marshall argued for education as an essential part of the development of strong character. In his encouragement of such provision he saw education as a basis for national industrial efficiency: ‘the wisdom of expending public and private funds on education is not to be measured by its direct fruits alone. It will be profitable as a mere investment, to give the masses of the people much greater opportunities than they can generally avail themselves of’ (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 179). Increasing opportunities generation after generation, and the march of ‘mechanical progress’,



especially for the children of unskilled or semi-skilled workers, would also require a particular form of learning:

Education must be made more thorough. The schoolmaster must learn that his main duty is not to impart knowledge, for a few shillings will buy more printed knowledge than a man's brain can hold. It is to educate character, faculties and activities ...

(Marshall, [1920], 2013: 597)

This reflects his desire to see national moral development alongside higher economic wellbeing, and the responsibility of the educator to impart the personal tools, with their civilizing overtones, to attain such development. As a rough assessment or measure of character and a yardstick of such social progress, he employed the idea of 'vigour'. Vigour was a distinctly manly property, a kind of moral and 'nervous strength' – 'resolution, energy and self-mastery' – which was innate to certain races but could also be fostered by climate, occupation, living conditions and, importantly the influence of family (Marshall [1920], 2013: 161-162).

Parents were given ultimate responsibility for bringing up children in a healthy, civilized manner. Raising children to a high standard required that they possess 'a certain habit of mind which is as yet not very common ... the habit of distinctly realizing the future ... [a habit that is] seldom fully developed except among the middle and upper classes of the more cultivated nations' (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 180). Consideration of the future in this regard required parents to bear the burden of reproducing the labour supply: 'the investment of capital in the rearing and early training of the workers of England is limited by the resources of parents in the various grades of society, by their power of forecasting the future, and by their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children' (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 467). Failure to make the appropriate sacrifices, most common in 'the lower ranks of society', would yield an intergenerational problem of the ill-educated, improvident poor. As Marshall warned: 'this evil is cumulative' (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 467-8).

Marshall argued that mothers were responsible for creating and maintaining a 'true home' and 'investing their efforts in the personal capital of their children's character and abilities' (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 570; Marshall & Marshall, 1879: 12). His arguments that women should remain housebound, and that they should ensure the decent upbringing of their offspring, who must attend school 'with bodies clean and fairly well fed' (Marshall, [1920] 2013: 594-5 fn2), are a reflection of his bourgeois Victorian values and class bias. These views were also reflected in the social casework approach of philanthropic organisations, in particular the COS, which

employed home visitations to determine the deservingness of poor families for charitable relief based on physical evaluation of the household, assessments of character and whether or not parents displayed evidence of self-support and foresight (Behlmer, 2000; McKibbin, 1990: 170).<sup>5</sup>

In the Victoria era, then, character served a role in stigmatising and judgemental perspectives of different classes, identifying reasons for poverty and unemployment among their habits and dispositions. For Marshall the possibility of educating character existed, but it would begin from circumstances in which members of the working class and underclass (and those of other races) lacked foresight and a certain work ethic. Furthermore, the burden of material and moral improvement was placed on the family, with the responsibility for cultivating character falling on parents, and mothers even more so.

These were views typical of an era coming to terms with ‘social’ questions, yet defined by a form of liberal government that constantly sought to limit interventions to the promotion of self-governing ideals and institutions. Character was integral to a liberal ethos or art of governing, which, as Rose has argued, sought ‘to avoid the twin dangers of governing too much, and thereby distorting or destroying the operation of the natural laws of those zones upon which good government depends – families, markets, society, personal autonomy and responsibility – and governing too little, and thus failing to establish the conditions of civility, order, productivity and national wellbeing which make limited government possible’ (Rose 2004: 70). In this next section, the article turns to examining parallels with these Victorian conceptions of character. It highlights the continued focus on perceptions of the future and the central role of parents and the family in building character.

### ***Character returned***

The re-emergence and salience of character in UK policy discourse might usefully be interpreted within a broader shift in the last decade towards psychological governance, neuroscientific explanations of social outcomes and various behaviour change policies (Davies, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Gillies et al., 2016), as well as the emergence in tandem of a ‘therapeutic turn’ in education policy and practice, and therapeutic approaches to social justice (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015). From the 1990s onwards, efforts to (re)introduce a nineteenth-century concern with ‘educating the emotions’ drew on neuroscience, psychology and business and economics literature to legitimate a focus on social and emotional development instead of moral education (Dixon 2012). Character education today, as alluded to above, resuscitates an explicit focus on *moral* education (most prominently in the neo-Aristotelian guise of educating virtues). But it also

incorporates the business case for character using the literature that links attitudes and personality traits, soft skills and human capital formation to social mobility and employability (Jubilee Centre 2016: 4). The self-governing ideals of character traits and skills fit with what Rose has labelled 'ethopolitics', where the 'sentiments, moral nature or guiding beliefs ... have come to provide the 'medium' within which the self-government of the autonomous individual can be connected up with the imperatives of good government' (Rose 2001: 18).

Where Victorian conceptions of character, including those of Alfred Marshall, often gestured to measures of 'vigour' or a set of general dispositions that could improve the lot of poor and working-class people, the drive for objective evidence-based policy has seen character and its associated traits increasingly subjected to testing and measurement. Character, in the sense of moral virtues, might be read off from moral dilemma tests that expose students to pre-defined scenarios, tracked in big data, its impact uncovered through Randomised Control Trials or potentially explored through MRI scans and neurobiological analysis (see the discussion in Kristjánsson 2015: 71-82; Arthur et al., 2014). Similarly, character skills, in the sense of a collection of non-cognitive skills such as motivation, attitude and personality traits often linked to social mobility and employability, have been measured through self-reported surveys and scales (Gutman & Schoon 2013) and against behavioural outcomes both positive – participation in sports clubs, etc. – and negative – criminal or 'risky' behaviours like drug-taking, as well as earnings outcomes (Heckman & Krautz 2013: 20-21).

Yet, efforts to define and measure character more recently might reflect the late-Victorian obsession with developing a science of character. This desire saw character understood among early psychologists and educators as the organisation and harmony of emotions, the interplay of will and intelligence and the culmination of fostering good habits (Roberts 2004: 184, 189-190). Today character skills are principally understood within the framework of social and emotional skills, including the individual development of: self-awareness; motivation; self-control; social skills; and resilience (Goodman et al., 2015: 15). There is a gendered reproduction of emotional development that translates and toughens up 'soft' skills into hard outcomes associated with individualised, masculine competitive drive (see Burman, 2018) that echoes Victorian manly 'vigour'. Habituation is considered essential within character discourses, and implies socialisation through the performance of desirable behaviours until they are internalised.

The *explicitly* race and class-based focus of Victorian character discourses is no longer present in contemporary character discourses. But in connecting upward social mobility and employability with character, present day agendas implicitly

suggest those groups with low mobility or employment rates lack the personal qualities and behaviours that set privileged classes apart. Furthermore, in both the late Victorian era and more currently, discourses of character arise among circumstances of supposed moral or social degeneration, often connected to the family (Respublica n.d.). Among leading character education advocates, the family is still considered the 'primary institution in the formation and expression of character', and mothers identified as most important in shaping character (Arthur, 2010: 37; see also the analysis of The Jubilee Centre and other groups in Bull & Allen, 2018). 'The school cannot hope to substitute for the family,' the now Director of the Jubilee Centre laments, 'but it sometimes has to compensate for the failure of the family in the formation of character' (Arthur, 2010: 36). These sentiments are echoed in the contemporary economics literature on character skills and developing human capital, where '[s]uccessful interventions emulate the mentoring environments offered by successful families' (Heckman & Kautz 2013: 2). In these perspectives on character we see a reflection of late-Victorian focus on the family and mothers as responsible for individual and social outcomes, with schools as proxy means of character formation.

The focus on character as a determinant of social mobility and success in the labour market also mirrors the turn in employment services towards a focus on individual personality within labour market activation policy at national and international levels (Berry, 2014; Wright, 2016; Triantafillou, 2011). Encouraging the unemployed to work on themselves has long been a part of welfare-to-work policy (Dean, 1995). Increasingly, though, the psychological and personality traits of benefit claimants – including character – have been targeted and measured as part of efforts to work on their employability (Stenner & Taylor, 2008; Friedli & Stearn, 2015).

This shallow conception of performing character has made headway within the 'nudge' approach, which uses a range of behavioural economics insights about how people are influenced by various incentives, norms, cues and contexts to focus on 'changing behaviour without changing minds' (Dolan et al., 2010: 8, 14; Thaler & Sunstein 2008). This would no doubt seem anathema to the Victorians, for whom, instead, reputation was the critical outward-facing projection of inner virtues (Collini 1985: 40). It also draws a distinction between the moral communitarianism of much character education, and the technocratic 'neo-communitarianism' of behaviour change interventions concerned with manipulating preferences to specific policy ends in what are seen as essentially irrational subjects (Davies, 2012). Where character is instrumentalised in this way, including as part of human capital understandings of developing character as labour market investments, it stands in tension with moralised understandings that seek to promote a community of flourishing citizens.

Using nudge techniques, the Behavioural Insights Team, which has worked closely with UK Government since its foundation within the Cabinet Office in 2010, has incorporated a focus on character in several areas of employment services policy. This has included psychometric tests for claimants on their character strengths (see Cromby & Willis, 2014) and using ‘growth mind-sets’ to boost claimants’ character skills and positive attitudes towards job-search activity (Work & Pensions Committee, 2015: 7). The agenda as a whole is designed to get unemployed people to identify their own personality, habits or sense of agency as a major barrier to attaining employment and to have them adopt positive, future-oriented and resilient dispositions. It bears close resemblance to performance virtues such as ‘grit’ (Duckworth, 2016), which was cited as an essential attribute of character under the Coalition Government (Morgan, 2016).

Working on orientation towards the future is a regular feature of character education publications and policies. The Jubilee Centre conducted a feasibility study entitled ‘My Character: enhancing future-mindedness in young people’, which advocated working on virtues (solicited from the young people participating in the study but selected for inclusion by the study’s steering group) including ‘Being Patient’ and ‘Saving for the Future’, the former linked to the virtue of ‘delaying gratification’ (Arthur et al., 2014: 8-9). The Demos report on character goes further by linking the character capacity of ‘self-regulation’ to ‘financial capability’, and by drawing a link between the level of indebtedness that preceded the financial crisis and ‘human frailty in the shape of short-termism’ (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009: 23-4). In assessing the contribution of character to employment outcomes, the report also highlights ‘motivation, agency and application’ as a means to ‘internally drive’ careers at a time of declining upward mobility in the labour market (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009: 25).

We see here a reflection of the late-Victorian conception of character as resting on a proper orientation towards the future, more generally concerning patience, effort and foresight but frequently related to habits of saving and evidence of a developed motivation for work. Again, this is reproduced most clearly in the emphasis on ‘performance virtues’ – virtues such as perseverance, resilience and grit – as instrumental to improving employability and success in the job market or even life in general. The link between character and financial capability feeds into increasingly pervasive efforts at cultivating ‘self-reliant’ and ‘responsible’ individuals through financial literacy, efforts which have the effect of transferring risk and responsibility to individuals at a point in time when collective forms of provision have been radically scaled back (Santos, 2017). In this context, resilience comes to mean the fostering of an ‘entrepreneurial self’ in accordance with neoliberal doctrines of

personal responsibility and preparation for inevitable failure in an unforgiving market economy where expectations of increased future well-being should be closely managed (Clarke, 2015). This is also a reflection of the so-called 'neoliberal' concern with future orientation, where behaviour change policy seeks to adjust for 'future bias', or the tendency 'to favour immediate need and gratification over future planning' (Jones et al., 2013: 3).

Advocates of character education argue that it represents a rejection of a narrow focus on test scores and cognitive abilities, in favour of developing well-rounded, morally educated citizens. Yet the emphasis on the links between character 'skills' and increased social mobility and employability belie an attachment to human capital approaches to education that sees instrumental value in investing in children in order to secure a future productive workforce. Further, it suggests boosting individual opportunity – and individual character traits – at school will engender a kind of fairness that will allow people of all class origins to compete on a more equal playing field in later life. As one prominent British advocate of character education puts it, '[t]he main challenge is to narrow gaps in human capital formation, especially in the first two decades of life' (Reeves, 2017: 93). Linking character with employability and social mobility, however, shifts the burden of adjustment to the structures of an unequal society and labour market today, unfairly, onto individuals and families with fewer resources to weather such developments.

### ***Conclusion***

If we explore some of the threads that run through character discourses historically, there are interesting continuities to pick out. In general, such discourses identify problems of social mobility and success in the labour market as problems of self-governance, and advocate work on particular attributes that make up the good citizen and worker. These attributes have historically been associated with a future-oriented outlook and strong work ethic and advocates of character skills have expounded, in essence, a deficit model whereby the absence or presence of certain character traits goes towards explaining social and labour market outcomes. Historical parallels in character discourses are evident: the qualities of self-reliance and foresight called for by nineteenth century advocates of character are now promoted through appeals to resilience, grit and perseverance.

As leading scholars in the study of intergenerational mobility have shown, arguing for investment in education as a *panacea* to stalled social mobility is misplaced or at best severely limited (Goldthorpe 2013). Arguments concerning relative social mobility have long been characterised by a controversial approach that

draws on an ideal of individual merit, which has shifted debates away from equality of condition and towards equality of opportunity (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001: 82). Focus would be best placed on tackling existing class inequality and developing policies that ensure the provision of secure and well-paid jobs and a well-funded welfare state (Nunn, 2012; Bukodi et al., 2016). Such provision appears to have tempered character discourses in the past: as Collini (1985: 49) noted, reflecting on the effects of post-war welfare state-building, 'the growth of security of all classes has given the qualities represented by character less purchase in everyday economic life.' The article has shown how echoes of the Victorian conception of character are present in contemporary character discourses, especially in the focus on improvement of human capital, perceptions of time and the work ethic and the centrality of parental responsibility for social outcomes. There are research opportunities here to further pursue the peculiar marriage of social conservatism – embodied in recourse to the heteronormative family as essential social unit – to the promotion by neoliberal economists of the entrepreneurial self in a context of welfare state retrenchment (Bull & Allen 2018 strike at this connection; for a US history of such relations see Cooper, 2017).

A critique of character education might also form part of a wider problematization of the social mobility agenda itself. Following Berlant, Reay understands the British obsession with social mobility as 'a form of cruel optimism' (Reay 2017: 102) which draws upon fantasies among working-class children of upward mobility by sheer individual drive yet leaves deeper, structural inequalities untouched, including the different private and public resources provided to children from different class backgrounds. Efforts to encourage future-mindedness, of course, must not be dismissed wholesale. But sociologists should critically interrogate these where they imply that failure to self-govern one's emotions and cultivate character skills is responsible for unequal labour market outcomes.

It is difficult to predict the future of character discourses; its support in Government education policy was contingent on Coalition politicians such as Nicky Morgan who increasingly acted as a champion of its cause. It also appears that, despite progress under the Coalition, the character education agenda has failed to really take hold in schools at more fundamental levels.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as a unifying trope for human capital approaches that focus on soft-skills, financial literacy, social mobility and employability, it could still have life, particularly if it remains within the technocratic conceptual armoury of behavioural economics and psychology and the growing field of policy interventions they inform. In this last regard, it might serve as complementary to an aforementioned emerging neurobiological focus on explanations and solutions to poverty, recently evidenced in domestic social and education policy (Gillies et al., 2016) as well as international development policy (Fine

et al., 2016). These developments require attention to the politics of character and the evolving legacy of its discourses to be maintained.

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<sup>1</sup> The literature reviewed in this section and throughout the article has been selected on the basis that it contains statements that link character and character formation/education to improvements in social mobility and/or employability. Such literature exists at a number of policy scales, from UK think tanks to international organisations like the OECD. More international scale studies, or US-based research are relevant to the UK context because we find them cited in UK literature that explores evidence of ‘what works’ in relation to connections between character and social mobility (Gutman & Schoon 2013; Goodman et al. 2015; Joshi 2014; Jubilee Centre 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Reference to employers’ concerns about school leavers and graduates, rather than academic literature, have long been a typical feature of the policy discourse on employability (Brown et al., 2003: 109).

<sup>3</sup> Heckman and Kautz (2013: 8) suggest interventions in the early years of childhood reap lasting character effects which they compare with annual rates of return on investment in the stock market.

<sup>4</sup> There are very important questions of measurement and causality when it comes to linking non-cognitive skills and, say, labour market outcomes, which cannot be addressed merely through the presentation of correlational evidence as currently characterises much of the literature (Gutman & Schoon, 2013). Similarly, if educational attainment is linked to questions of intergenerational earnings or income mobility, as is often done in claims made about social mobility, the data here is notoriously unreliable (Goldthorpe, 2013: 435; Bukodi et al., 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Richmond, an American COS worker influenced by London COS thinkers and a figure considered foundational to professional social work stated that the careful collection of such evidence called for interpretation through ‘characterology’ (Richmond, 1917: 55-56).

<sup>6</sup> A recent survey indicated that ‘[a]lmost all (97%) schools sought to promote desirable character traits among their students, although fewer (54%) were familiar with the term “character education” prior to being approached to take part in the research’ (NatCen, 2017: 6).



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