

The troubling concept of class: reflecting on our 'failure' to encourage sociology students to re-cognise their classed locations using autobiographical methods

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Biographies

Celia Jenkins is a principal lecturer in sociology and women's studies at the University of Westminster and specialises in the sociology of education. Her research interests include higher education pedagogic practice and the experience of teaching and studying sociology in changing times. Most recently, she has been addressing the relationship between religion and higher education and is about to start an anti-discriminatory action research project with London's Turkish-Kurdish community, focusing on disaffection and identity issues for their young people.

Joyce Canaan is a professor of sociology at Birmingham City University. Her research centres on higher education learning and teaching in the increasingly precarious and disciplining university system. As an academic activist, Joyce views critical pedagogy as enabling the prefiguring of a higher education system that prioritises people over profits, the collective over the individual. Joyce is currently researching the possibilities of the new student movement, as well as strategies for implementing and reflecting on progressive alternatives to the current university system.

Ourania (Rania) Filippakou is a research fellow in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. She has a specific interest in the interrelations in contemporary policy discourses and their effects on the character and purposes of higher education. Ourania has concentrated her efforts on the contemporary quality agenda in higher education and is particularly concerned with the ways in which the idea of quality is being constructed and the political struggles that have encompassed the process of the changing agenda.

Katie Strudwick is a senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Lincoln. Her research interests focus on core issues in the ever-changing agenda of higher education, particularly the role of employability and skills in the social sciences. Her current research interests address pre-entry students, parent perceptions, and the motivations of higher education.

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Abstract

This paper provides a narrative of the four authors' commitment to auto/biographical methods as teachers and researchers in 'new' universities. As they went about their work, they observed that, whereas students engage with the gendered, sexualised and racialised processes when negotiating their identities, they are reluctant or unable to conceptualise 'class-ifying' processes as key determinants of their life chances. This general inability puzzled the authors, given the students' predominantly working-class backgrounds. Through application of their own stories, the authors explore the sociological significance of this pedagogical 'failure' to account for the troubling concept of class not only in the classroom but also in contemporary society.

Key words: autobiographical methods, social class, critical pedagogy, teaching, learning

Introduction

This paper began when we (Joyce, Celia, Katie and Rania), discussed our commitment to autobiographical methods, as sociologists and as teachers/researchers based predominantly in post-1992 UK universities. As teachers, Joyce, Celia and Katie encourage students to use sociological insights to understand their experiences and find that many are able to reconsider the gendered, sexualised and racialised processes with which they forge their identities. Despite studying class in a similar way, and being encouraged to think about all these processes reflexively, students often maintain that ‘class doesn’t matter’, and therefore do not consider what we call here ‘the class-ification process’.

We contend that class as a process operates relationally, as do gendered, sexualised and racialised processes. Lawler (2008: 142) notes: ‘There is an anxiousness at the heart of *all* identities. Far from being stable, coherent and unproblematic, we might see identities as always built on an edgy repudiation of a variety of ‘threats.’ Lawler further notes that, in recent years, class distinctions have become ‘displaced onto individual persons (or families) who are approved or disapproved, considered as ‘normal, or considered as faulty and pathological’ (Lawler, 2008: 126). This is worrying given the growing stratification of the university sector and the likelihood that students will face further stratification in the job market after graduation. Little (2010: 12) recently observed: ‘University used to be a class barrier in itself; it now reflects, within student bodies [at pre- and post-’92 institutions], the various gradations of our class system.’ Thus graduates from the post-’92 universities where Joyce, Celia and Katie work are likely to be perceived in the labour market as having less cultural capital than graduates from pre-’92 universities. Rania found similar responses in the research context:¹ students questioned about their lives were

¹ Rania is a research officer on a three-year ESRC-funded project, ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality in first degrees’ (grant no: RES-062-23-1438), based at the University of Nottingham.

not able to conceptualise class as a key determinant of their life chances. This general inability has puzzled us given that many of our students come from what we consider to be working-class backgrounds (often being the first generation in their families to attend university and with parents having jobs such as factory workers and low-level support or service workers).

This paper explores how we, as teachers/researchers, understand the significance of our seeming ‘failure’.² We view our wish to understand these limits as pedagogically and sociologically important. Pedagogically, as we show below, these limits suggest that autobiographical³ methods, informed by insights from feminist and critical pedagogy, offer students the opportunity to rethink their lives using more critical frameworks and to embrace learning as a challenge with which to more fully recognise their sense of self. Sociologically, as we have come to realise through researching this paper, these limits indicate a more pervasive shortcoming in wider society, reflected in the discipline, regarding theorising and understanding class. We note that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and Harvey (2008, 2010) have recently pointed to several sociologically interesting responses to class in our society. There has, over the past 30 years, been a pervasive societal silence about or denial of the significance of class or there has been the claim that ‘the category is so confusing and complicated (as if the other categories like race and gender are not) as to be analytically useless’ (Harvey, 2010: 232). This silence, denial or

The project is examining the quality of students’ experiences of studying sociology at four universities that are differently positioned in higher education league tables. This is an ongoing project and the analysis provided here represents Rania’s views and not necessarily those of the wider team.

² We put the word ‘failure’ in quotation marks because we see our lack of success as indicative of wider shortcomings that we address in this paper.

³ Stanley (1992) uses the concept ‘autobiographical methods’ to cover all the ways of writing about a life, suggesting that the distinction between autobiography and biography is unimportant. This is useful here as we are referring to both in our teaching and research activity.

confusion among our students, then, speaks to a wider phenomenon beginning to be addressed by these and other social scientists.

The paper has four main sections. We first address autobiographical methods of teaching, learning and research. Second, we discuss the emancipatory potential of autobiographical methods when underpinned by critical pedagogy and their implications for authoring and evaluating the self as teacher/researcher. Third, we explore examples of applications of autobiographical methods in our teaching and research to illustrate our 'failure' to engage students in re-cognising their social class locations. Fourth, we consider why class remains a troubling concept sociologically, in order to contextualise our 'failure' to make class matter to many students. We conclude by suggesting that, as recent social science analysis indicates, our 'failure' may be due to factors far beyond our immediate control and that autobiography remains a powerful pedagogical tool with which to address this issue and others with students.

Autobiography as a pedagogic tool

For us, autobiography is an epistemological concept concerned less with what is written about a life or by whom than with different ways of writing/visualising and describing lives, which highlight how the personal can be seen as political in and through relationships between individuals and social structures (Stanley, 1992). This definition helps us (Joyce, Celia and Katie) encourage students to develop their 'sociological imaginations' (Mills, 1970), locating their biographies in wider historical and social contexts. Our teaching is further informed by feminist and critical pedagogy, using autobiographical methods (encompassing secondary sources like biographies and primary sources such as autobiographical essays and life grids) to engage students' sociological imaginations. Such methods can encourage greater critical reflection on and realisation of the relationships between student and tutor, or researcher and

researched. In class and assessments, when we ask students to examine aspects of their lives, they produce the kind of muddled and fragmentary analyses that Maclure (1993) describes as ‘mundane autobiographies’⁴ with which students consider their experiences in wider social and cultural contexts. Deakin Crick (2009: 187) suggests that the journey of the ‘self’ can be pedagogically questioned by encouraging students to reflect ‘backwards’ on their identity.

Rania’s qualitative interviewing similarly uses biographical methods because they offer research participants perhaps the most ‘naturalistic’ form for exploring and responding to the researchers’ questions (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Rania and the research team of which she is a member also use these methods because, as feminist research suggests (see Oakley, 1981), they encourage interviewees to identify concepts and contextualise socially shaped aspects of their identities, such as gender and class. For feminist researchers, using narrative constructs through this methodology affirms interviewees’ right to be heard and places women’s voices in a more explicitly political agenda (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Silverman, 2004). In the feminist literature, this autobiographical approach encourages previously marginalised women to critically explore their constructions of their lives (for example, Taking Liberties Collective, 1989; Adams, 1996; Mahony and Zmroczec, 1997). Informed partly by this feminist tradition, Rania asked students to recount their educational and life trajectories through the framework of a life grid. The life grid interview method has been extensively used by health research to gather life-course information and improve accuracy of recall about illness (Blane, 1996; Kuh and Ben-Shlomo, 1997). Rania’s aim has been to produce self-reflexive ‘cultural stories’ of students’ lives (Richardson, 1992, cited in Miller and Glassner, 2004: 130), connecting individual students’ ‘cultural stories’ to their locations in and experiences of pre- and post-’92 universities.

⁴ Maclure (1993: 374) defines ‘mundane autobiography’ as ‘fragmentary, disorderly, emphatically rooted in the prejudices and passions of the here and now’.

Thus, all four of us have found autobiographical methods to offer productive strategies in teaching and research within the broader framework of critical pedagogy.

The role of critical pedagogy in the authoring of the self

As Freire (2006) and others (see, for example, GreenShor, 1999; Giroux, 2005) have long suggested, critical pedagogy underpins teaching and learning practices that seek to engender an appreciation of injustices faced in social, economic and institutional life. Critical pedagogy ultimately seeks to rectify these injustices in and through a dialogue that expands in breadth as it is practised. For the three of us who teach, autobiographical methods, informed by versions of critical pedagogy, have guided our sociology curricula away from the traditional 'banking method' that assumes passivity towards a more liberating 'problem-posing method'. In this method, students tell their personal stories in relation to the history and conditions of their community and wider society, thereby further developing their sense of agency (Freire, 2006). We have found that many of our students develop academically as they reconsider aspects of their selves in and through the sociological literature and come to see sociology's relevance for their self-understandings.⁵

Reed-Danahay (2006: 15) explores the role of auto-ethnographic methods in teaching and student learning, and reflects that these include both self-reference and reference to culture. Deakin Crick (2009) further argues that, in the broader context, there has been a recognisable inclusion of 'personalisation' and 'engagement' within teaching. Both reflections indicate that sociologists should consider the impact of such methods on the subject

⁵ Such defining moments are what make the teaching activity successful in enabling students to critically engage with and apply sociological concepts in order to see beyond personal experience.

and suggest that methods incorporating personal narratives can potentially 'erase the boundaries between the self of the researcher and that of the researched' (Bochner and Ellis, 2002, cited in Reed-Danahay, 2006: 15).

Thus, applying biographical methods, underpinned by critical pedagogy to teaching and learning and to sociological research, offers the opportunity for self-reflexivity, encouraging an authoring of the self. Students are thereby conceptualised as active learners, and teachers are facilitators who listen to the learner, encouraging them to tell their story and to develop it in a fuller context. This fits with Jaros's (2009) point that, rather than use the metaphor of the teacher as a 'top down' provider, it is more appropriate to consider the teacher as a facilitator.

Our 'failure' to get students to engage with class

In this section, we discuss our experiences of using autobiographical methods in teaching and research. We start with Celia's story, which shows how she has 'failed' to shift students' thinking about the significance of class-ifying processes in shaping their educational experience

Celia's story

As a feminist sociologist of education, Celia has taught a women's studies/sociology module, 'Gender and education', for many years. In this module, students write an autobiographical essay drawing predominantly on feminist research to identify and evaluate gendered dimensions of their educational experience. Like Mann (1998), who analysed girls' written narratives of why they chose to continue their education post-16, Celia wants students to engage with the complex ways in which class-ified, sexualised and racialised processes (among others) interact through the prism of gender in their experience. Mann (1998, in Erben, 2002: 90) describes what Celia is trying to achieve using these methods thus:

The life histories suggest that while identity may be conceptualized within large collective identities such as class, race and gender, these elements work together in unexpected and subtle ways. In addition as girls negotiate interactions between the triangle of school, home and friends, perhaps personal relationships give a psychological undertow to the struggle to find an educational identity.

Celia's pedagogic strategy is to get students to critically engage with their experience and to be able to articulate this complex interaction of psychosocial processes. Her use of autobiographical methods is also informed by Breckner and Rupp's (2002: 292) finding that producing biographical narratives helps people perceive and respond to social problems better because they view them through the filter of their own stories:

Biographical texts can be regarded as part of the strategies people have developed to get along with their lives, their experiences and the sense they make of them in the context of their biographies.

Celia thus uses autobiographical methods to help students consider their social positions in ways perhaps less damaging than perceiving themselves as victims of gendered, sexualised, racialised or class-ifying processes. This feminist pedagogic strategy has worked well in raising students' awareness of sexual harassment and racialised processes; however, this is not the case for class. For example, with regard to gender, one student, as a result of reading an extract on sexual harassment, was able to redefine her experience with a male teacher who took a particular sexualised interest in her as harassment. Illustrating Breckner and Rupp's point, this knowledge applied reflexively enabled the student to think about the experience quite differently and bring some resolution to her feelings about his behaviour. However, despite being presented with a wealth of evidence indicating that class remains the most

critical factor in students' academic outcomes (for example: Reay et al, 2005; Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Walkerdine and Melody, 2001; Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006), students firmly believe that class doesn't matter. Most subscribe to the ideology of meritocracy and constantly reiterate its premise that individual effort and determination will prevail. Some students do not even mention their class origins in their autobiographical essays, while others simply state it, which is in marked contrast to their treatment of racialised and gendered processes.

Two examples, over 15 years apart, illustrate students' 'failure' to conceptualise the intersection of gendered, racialised and class-ifying processes. A mixed-race, mature British woman student in one of Celia's first classes in the early 1990s reported that she had attended a working-class comprehensive school where the careers teacher told students that they would end up working in the baked beans factory across the road. Celia was struck by the poignancy of this memory for the student and the psychosocial consequences for her of this prediction. While the student never worked at that factory, in taking her degree in her forties, she still sought to prove that teacher wrong. Her description of her experience (and Celia is relying on memory here) was articulated from the perspective of black pupils, although possibly the teacher may have been referring to all pupils, thereby foregrounding class constraints. Celia perceived it as her 'failure' that the student only articulated this experience in racialised terms. While attention to racialised processes was in keeping with the poststructuralist attention to difference at that time (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Anthias, 1998), theoretically, this should have been theorised as the intersection of racialised and class-ifying processes rather than supersede the class dimension.

Celia's second story is of a current (2009/2010) black, mature British student, who described her careers interview in a predominantly white school with a teacher who she felt did not like her. The student had chosen law because

some of her father's friends were in the legal profession (this suggested that her father was middle class or at least accessed professional middle-class social networks). However, the teacher read her grades and told her to be more 'realistic' and consider secretarial work instead. This led to the student losing interest in education. Again, there were significant psychosocial consequences of the teacher's response for the student, who first dropped out of school and subsequently wanted to complete her education. The student was clearly upset by this teacher's comments and, in her essay for Celia, perceived the episode to be racist. She did not mention either the gendered or class-ifying processes entailed, although she said that her mother, who did not work (possibly signifying a middle-class identity), approved the teacher's suggestion. How this sexist assumption on the part of her mother might have impacted on their relationship is not discussed in the essay. Gendered and racialised processes were also evident in the teacher's suggestion of secretarial work as a more appropriate career and imply that she had classified this student as likely to end up in the lower middle-class sectors of the labour market (signifying that the teacher may have interpreted the girl's class position through the structuration of ethnicity as being more significant in determining occupational future than her class position). In both cases, Celia felt that she had 'failed' to get the students to sufficiently interrogate their experience and in particular to understand the psychosocial dynamics of their identities in terms of the articulation of class-ifying processes.⁶

Rania's story

Unlike Celia, Rania works equally with students from pre- and post-'92 universities. Also, unlike Celia (and Katie and Joyce), Rania interacts with students primarily as a researcher. As such, she has helped student research

⁶ Interestingly, in talking with colleagues about students' operationalisation of class, they also confirmed that students found it hard to relate to class processes as being meaningful to their lives, thereby confirming the wider lack of reference to class as a meaningful category across social science described earlier (Harvey, 2010).

participants produce life grids of their experiences from birth to the present, exploring issues such as education, family, housing, friendship, activities outside education, parents' employment, student employment and health. Life grids help Rania understand students' backgrounds prior to conducting in-depth interviews relating to students' experiences at university, mainly of teaching and learning processes in sociology.⁷ The extracts below come from the second part of a biographical interview with one second-year sociology student in a post-'92 university who was reflecting on her experience as a first-year student.

Twenty-three interviews with first-year students were conducted at this post-'92 institution between 2008 and 2010. The majority of the interviewees were 'local' students and came from minority ethnic communities while only two of them were white English. It should also be noted that most of them (14 out of 23) were first-generation university students. In this context it should be noted that, in the interviews, students referred to the concept of class only 30 times in total, even though they had a compulsory module which focused on class. Most of the students referred to that module because they found it 'difficult to relate to'. In the first extract, the student describes why she chose to study sociology and how it relates to her identity as a Muslim:

I've been interested in Sociology since Year 10 [...] And I thought it was something that I could relate to my life as well. I thought that if I studied Sociology it would make a difference and it would make changes in people's lives for the better. Coming from an ethnic minority and being a female and being a Muslim I thought that many other people in my position would be at a disadvantage because you are taught that you have to be middle class to achieve a higher standard of life and I just thought about the labelling in school and then the labelling within society that affects a person's educational achievement and I thought that if I

⁷ The analysis provided here represents Rania's views based on the interviews she conducted rather than the analysis of all the completed interviews, as this is work in process.

learnt about it and if I understood about it then I could teach other people to make a difference and not accept their stereotype and to prove people wrong that just because I am from an ethnic minority, I am Muslim [I don't have to fit their stereotype].

This quote demonstrates that class was something that this student was taught about in sociology and was not fixed – at least among the middle class – although note that the student only discussed middle classness as a quality of others, implicitly positioning herself as working class.⁸ Other aspects of her identity – being a young Muslim woman from a British minority ethnic background – had greater meaning for her. This was similar to Celia's findings. When pressed later in the interview to talk about what it was like for her to study at university, she acknowledged that a class dimension marked her experience as different from that of middle-class students:

I also see a class difference as well because I'm the first one in my family to come to uni and I haven't got that sort of guidance or support from my family. Whereas some other students here you know that their parents went to university and their brothers and sisters went to university and so it's like, financially, they are not struggling and, emotionally, they are not struggling.

This quote provides an insightful articulation of the emotional and cultural capital that privileges middle-class students relative to her – although we see once again that she does not explicitly state her own class location, which is hardly surprising and similar to what Celia found. Nevertheless, the fact that the student could articulate class relations sociologically suggests that one-to-one interviews offer an opportunity for students to probe more deeply into their

⁸ Silence about being working class fits with the post-Bourdieuian literature that has explored the ways that working classness is pathologised in the media and in wider society (see, for example, Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 2008).

individual lives and be more reflexive than in the classroom context where, more often, only fragmentary snippets of their lives are raised in seminar discussions.⁹ The additional fact that this student articulated her class identity in a one-to-one interview could also suggest that students from less privileged backgrounds might not want to discuss their class position in a classroom space with more privileged students.

Katie's story

Katie has taught 'Research methods' as a first-year core module in a new university since 1998. Her teaching explores the application of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for students in the School of Social Sciences. Through their understanding of the different forms of qualitative methodologies, for example, students address ethical considerations using autobiographies. These enable teachers/researchers and some students to see students as authors of their own lives and, just as important, as authors of possible social change. Katie has found that structural and cultural work by the students can usefully inform their self-representations, offering some insight into their relevance. Applying critical pedagogy has also enabled students' 'stories' to hold transformative potential, producing knowledge that can be critical of power relations structured by class-ifying, gendered and racialised processes. This is demonstrated by Katie's experience of working with social science students at first-year level, where she and a researcher¹⁰ used life grids to see what students could learn from the process of interviewing one another. This method enabled Katie to debate with the students the ethical dilemmas that they as students and us as researchers and teachers face. The students felt that the recognition and negotiation of interviewer–interviewee power relationships were

⁹ Proof of this self-transformatory potential was evident when a student who had been interviewed by Rania reported back that the interview had enabled her to see her educational life story quite differently when it was brought together as a result of completing the life grid.

¹⁰ The researcher was working with a group of Katie's students in a session on ethics in social science research, using life grids as an exploratory method.

integral to the success of life grids. Similarly, Jaros (2009) reflects on the application of knowledge maps as a 'teaching tool' to demonstrate the link between concepts and constructions of such maps.

In addressing the specific student concerns raised in the seminars, there was recognition that students had to overcome certain barriers to their learning if it was to be transformative. Some reflected on their 'awkwardness' in discussing personal experiences with an interviewer and their concern that such methods could lead to distressing childhood memories being 're-lived' by the interviewee. Through using life grids, the students discussed how such methods might lead to challenges for the researchers, especially in their own discipline of criminology. One strategy adopted in teaching to overcome these concerns was to get the students to discuss the ethical considerations when interviewing an offender, and the implications of this for both the interviewee and researcher. Experiences with Katie's students very much emphasise Deakin Crick's (2009: 187) point about the value of encouraging students to reflect 'backwards' on their identity. In drawing on their own experiences, the students who worked with the life grids developed a greater appreciation of 'self' and the relevance of social constructions in their learning experience. This is shown by the students who reflected on key aspects of their learning history (pre-school) to understand how they saw the learning process sociologically in adulthood. For example, in the discussion following this particular session on life grids, students demonstrated clear insight and personal evaluation relating to the role of education in their lives and how it was useful for them to 'track back' to key indicators in their learning to assess the extent to which they had developed. This practical example demonstrates how such methods can be employed for transformatory purposes in teaching and learning and their use to both tutor and students.

Joyce's story

Joyce teaches a year-long core module, 'Social identities', introduced in 2005/2006, which explores issues of gender, class and 'race' in contemporary Britain. In this module Joyce, like Celia, uses auto/biography,¹¹ as well as critical pedagogy, like Katie, to encourage students to reflect on and challenge their locations in gendered, racialised and class-ifying processes through the sociological literature. During more than 20 years of teaching, Joyce has seen students increasingly view the world as 'natural' and unchangeable – a view Freire (2006) presciently called 'fatalism'. Fisher (2009: 8–9) recently coined the phrase 'capitalist realism' to capture the process by which capitalism now 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' more fully than when Freire was writing, shaping peoples' 'desires, aspirations and hopes' in ways that make it difficult to contest its hegemonic assumptions.

Joyce has consistently asked students to consider how ideas from readings could expand their understandings of their identities in class activities and to explore insights gained through such discussion in essays. Like Celia, her efforts have met with considerable success, at least with regard to racialised and gendered processes, as the following extract from a student's essay in the first year of the module indicates. In this essay, the student refers to her reflection at the end of the first term on an activity which asked students to describe themselves on a post-it note. While most minority ethnic students mentioned their ethnicity, like most other white students, she wrote down her physical characteristics:

... 'female, brown hair, average height'. When looking at the responses of other people, it was pointed out that very few descriptions stated 'white' but many [...] minority ethnic groups [...] stated their race. We discussed that this is due to white people not thinking about themselves

¹¹ Joyce was guided partly by Davies et al (2004: 364), who noted that reflexivity could open up 'new ways of addressing old long-standing questions of how and what we can legitimately take ourselves to know and what the limitations of our knowledge are'.

in terms of race [...] Living in a majority 'white' country and coming from an area with not very many ethnic minority groups, I had never had to classify myself as 'white'.

This growing reflexivity about racialising processes was less apparent with regard to class. From 2005/2006 through 2008/2009,¹² most students said in essays and class discussions that, while they could discuss class-ification sociologically, they found it difficult to identify with personally. The following three comments come from 2008/2009 essays, with two referring to required small-group wiki work on the VLS Moodle:

1. During class we had reflected back on our class positions and [...] we all agreed that class did not affect our lives, but it was very much existent. When considering my own social class, I see it [...] as not having a very large presence when it came to my identity.
2. In our Moodle [wiki] group discussions we established that we would associate with our gender or ethnicity more than the class we belong to. I feel that this is because our gender and ethnicity are obvious [...] yet our class would be difficult to illustrate.
3. When we discussed the notion of our own class [in Moodle wiki groups], most people mentioned money, education, values and morals as elements which define people's class status. We found it hard to decide which category of class we belonged to, and even when we thought we knew, it was hard to clarify why we thought that [...] Class is also a difficult topic for people to broach with others as 'in many social situations it would be considered insensitive to refer to class' (Sayer, 2005: 1).

The first extract above is indicative of others, in that the student does not seem to find sociological ideas about class significant to herself/himself. Interestingly,

¹² Joyce aims to write another paper about why her efforts to challenge students about class in the 2009/2010 academic year were more successful than in prior years.

the second extract suggests that this student, and the wider group in which they worked, found class more difficult to understand than either gendered or racialised processes. The third extract adds to the second, suggesting that not only is class difficult to understand, but students had difficulties locating themselves in the class system. This final extract explains this point by referring to Sayer's (2005) observation that university students today find class difficult to talk about because one's class location so evidently privileges some people over others.

Joyce is currently exploring factors that enabled class to be more clearly recognised by students since 2008/2009. Her analysis suggests that factors external and internal to her pedagogy have contributed to this shift. Interviews conducted with 2009/2010 graduates indicate that students were becoming more aware of class as class became more noticeable after the economic crash of September 2008, and as students, their families and/or friends subsequently experienced job losses. In addition, Joyce began to challenge students' contradictions with regard to their own class positions more explicitly from 2009/2010. For example, when students said that they sought middle-class jobs after graduation, Joyce suggested that this indicated their current working-class location – an observation that started an interesting discussion to which other students contributed (Canaan, 2011). As this latter example indicates, asking students to reflect on their autobiographies when discussing social class (as well as other classificatory processes) points to the power of the autobiographical method, something which Celia, Rania and Katie also found.

Class as a troubling concept

Why does class seem to be a more elusive concept for our students/research participants to grasp than racialising, gendering or sexualising? We will suggest that locating class in a wider historical and sociological context provides

answers to this question. Historically, we have little doubt that Margaret Thatcher's insistence that we are all individuals (and families) who shape ourselves rather than being shaped in and through relations with others has been made real, rendering class-ification processes invisible. Thatcher started restructuring social democratic welfare state institutions into marketised or market-like institutions which later Conservative and Labour governments developed further. For example, Tony Blair's declaration that New Labour wanted to achieve 'true equality' suggests that government exhortations for us to see ourselves as individuals with seemingly limitless possibilities to compete encouraged the belief that class was irrelevant to one's chance for 'fulfilment' through knowledge and opportunities:

[E]qual worth, an equal chance of fulfilment, equal access to knowledge and opportunity [...] Equal rights. Equal responsibilities. The class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has only just begun.

(BBC News, 28 September 1999. Available at:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/460029.stm (accessed 25 January 2010))¹³

In addition, continuous declarations of classlessness from politicians, supported by media representations suggesting that migrants thwart working-class efforts to improve their lives (Sveinsson, 2009;¹⁴ Skeggs, 1997), together with the erasure of collectively organised institutions over the past 30 years (Bourdieu, 1998) and lessened trade union activism (due largely to legislative changes introduced from Thatcher onwards), which previously demonstrated working-class strength, might all be factors persuading our students that, at best, class has little significance for them. Furthermore, the students we have been

¹⁴ As the papers in Sveinsson (2009) indicate, 'class' can be spoken about, by the media at least, when preceded by the words 'white working' to effectively differentiate white from minority ethnic working-class people – thereby designating racialised differences as the cause of white working-class continued disadvantage.

teaching experienced an agenda of personalised learning under the Blair government, which could have contributed to flattening their appreciation of class.

Before we become too sanctimonious about students' limits, it is worth recalling that, during the 1980s and 1990s, many sociologists prioritising gendered and racialised processes paid less attention to class. By the mid-1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century, some sociologists argued that class was 'dead' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996), a 'zombie' category lurking around uselessly after its demise (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Class was thought to have died, according to these and other theorists, because struggle, from the 1980s, ostensibly shifted from conflict concerned with redistributing wealth more equitably to new social movements proposing new forms of 'identity politics' (Habermas, 1981; Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1985). Others, like Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991), argued that class was 'dead', partly because, in today's more individualised, post-industrialised, scientifically and technologically advanced world, the greatest threats were thought to come from new, potentially global risks caused by modern science and technology, which would affect all regardless of class.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that classes could not be adequately defined by economic capital; social and cultural capital also needed consideration – that is, those with the greatest economic capital were likely to have the most powerful social networks and wield the greatest cultural and aesthetic knowledge and power. Building on Bourdieu, other sociologists have suggested that these forms of capital together produce ideas of privilege with which 'class-based judgements of 'normality' and 'rightness'', similar to judgments made on the basis of gendered, sexualised and racialised processes, are produced (Lawler, 2008: 125; Skeggs 1997). Class is thus an 'absent presence', produced 'socially while being unnamed', 'through the expulsion and exclusion of (what is held to be) working classness' (Lawler, 2008: 126).

As this brief and partial analysis¹⁵ suggests, class is a more difficult concept for sociologists to articulate in a world where we are all encouraged to see ourselves as individuals without social determinations, as consumers rather than workers. We would draw on Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and Harvey (2010) to add that discouraging individuals from seeing class as a collective identity allows the small and increasingly wealthy elite to continue to accrue greater wealth at the expense of the rest of us. We thus acknowledge that there is a larger sociological project that needs to be explored in future. As we are suggesting, then, our difficulties in challenging students' belief that class does not matter to them is indicative of a much wider problem than we initially imagined. This is suggested by the fact that all four of us found that the students whom we taught/researched had difficulty relating the concept of class to their own understanding and negotiation of their own lives – although, at least in the cases of Rania, Katie and Joyce, students could point to others' middle-class locations. Nonetheless, the strategies of autobiography we all used showed that these students' understandings of their class locations could be challenged to a greater or lesser extent.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that our apparent 'failure' to encourage student engagement with processes of class-ification is not symptomatic of a reductive sociology taught by post-'92 university tutors who limit students' insights to the mundane realm of personal experience. Instead, government and media proclamations of 'the death of class' over the past 30 years have been accompanied by government policies that have dramatically eroded collective identities. Further, until recently, *sociologists* 'failed' to come to grips with class-ification processes, a failure that those influenced by Bourdieu are now

¹⁵ Other theoretical positions could have been explored; this analysis has only considered those our students encounter during their sociology degree course.

rectifying by showing how such processes constituted those deemed outside middle-class cultural, social and economic forms of capital as distasteful beings. Thus, our ability to challenge students' assumptions about racialised, gendered and sexualised processes indicates our success in using autobiographical methods as part of our feminist critical pedagogy, and our 'inability' to challenge students' assumptions (and our own!) about their class locations and about the significance of class generally speaks to factors far beyond the chalkface. We will continue to develop strategies to more effectively encourage this challenge – including asking students to read and reflect on this paper!

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