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## Furthering alternative cultures of valuation in higher education research

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### ABSTRACT

The value of higher education is often implicit or assumed in educational research. The underlying and antecedent premises that shape and influence debates about value remain unchallenged, which perpetuates the dominant, but limiting, terms of the debate and fosters reductionism. The article proceeds on the premise that analyses of value are not self-supporting or self-referential but are embedded within prevailing cultures of valuation. It contends that challenging, and providing alternatives to, dominant narratives of higher education requires an appreciation of those cultures. It therefore highlights some of the existing cultures of valuation and their influence. It then proposes Sayer's concept of lay normativity as a culture of valuation and discusses how it translates into the practices of research into higher education, specifically the practice of analysis. The discussion is animated by detecting the presence of lay normativity in the evaluative space of the capability approach.

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### Introduction

Mills (1959) maintains that '(t)here is no way in which any social scientist can avoid assuming *choices of value* and implying them in his [*sic*] work as a whole' (emphasis added). In this paper I go further, arguing that educational research on higher education does not pay sufficient heed to the *cultures of valuation* (Haiven, 2014; Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014) in which it is embedded. Cultures of valuation furnish the context for judgements about value, act as mechanisms through which value is attributed and offer lenses through which it comes to be recognised. My interest therefore is in the antecedent influences cultures of valuation exert on educational research on higher education, and specifically on analyses of its value. I proceed on the premise that research seems predicated on ideas about the value of higher education that are more often implied and assumed than established. Moreover, research on and ideas about the value of higher education that aim to sidestep the prevailing terms of the debate often do so by attending to what higher education might be or ought to be (*inter alia* Barnett, 1990; Blake, Smith, & Standish, 1998; Boni & Walker, 2013; George, 2014; McMahon, 2009; Newman, 1852/2014) rather than what it is (Boni & Gasper, 2012).

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Such visions for an imagined future are essential, but if they remain unsupported by differentiated, empirically defensible accounts about its value in the here and now they can also be summarily dismissed as idealised or ideological.

The paper is organised into two broad sections. In the first I expand on the contentions made above by outlining two cultures of valuation, privileged intrinsicality and (bio)financialisation. I argue that the cultures of valuation in which research is currently embedded are reproducing the very understandings such research may be seeking to challenge or transform. Because I maintain that it is vital to do more than critique, in the second section I outline an alternative culture of valuation, starting with the concept of ‘lay normativity’ (sometimes LN for convenience), that is people’s first-person evaluative orientation to the world (Sayer, 2011, p. 2). I then borrow key concepts and ideas from the capability approach (sometimes CA for convenience) to support a discussion of the influence of LN on research on (the value of) higher education. Through a consideration of the capability approach I show how lay normativity as a culture of valuation can be ‘shown to have happened’ (Thompson, 1966, p. 9) in the practice of analysis of research.

I locate the points I make on the higher education landscape of the UK, or more accurately of England because the paradoxically fragmenting and stratifying effects of globalisation also entail the need for greater attention to be paid to national settings (Goodson & Lindblad, 2011). This does not imply that my arguments are relevant only in this context, but it does emphasise the need for contextual specificity. The paper contributes to an interrogation of educational research in general (Hattam & Smyth, 2014), of research into higher education particularly and ultimately of the value of higher education itself.

## Detecting cultures of valuation in research on higher education

Research on the value of higher education tends to focus on employment and earnings, and/or to be framed in economic terms, as the ‘returns to higher education’ (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011; Department for Business Innovation & Skills [BIS], 2011, 2013) rather than as what matters to people (which may or may not include economic considerations). Moreover this research tends to concentrate on (pre-)applicants to and students in higher education. Although the latter can, at best, only predict or surmise what its value might be, their predictions are often taken as a proxy for knowledge in this context. By focusing on the *prediction* of value we overlook a good number of things: how the value of higher education actually articulates with lived realities; the things that matter to people in their own lives (Sayer, 2011); and the diversity of what matters to people and how that is influenced by social and geographical location. Analyses of the extent to which dominant narratives about value can rise above material reality (Goodson, 2013, p. 13; Smith quoted in Salmon, 2010, p. 5) and how individual notions of ‘value’ are always and already embedded in dominant cultures of valuation are also paid scant regard.

Archer (2003) for example notes that the working-class respondents in her research ‘seemed to value higher education in primarily economic and instrumental terms’ (p. 123, emphasis added), ‘(e)choing, to some extent, dominant government rhetoric’ (p. 23, emphasis added). But she also points out that many of these respondents did differentiate between the personal, the family and the state in their assessments of economic value. This confirms Sayer’s (2011) contention that people ‘regularly engage in reasoning about how to value things’ (p. 23), and that arguments about valuations in everyday life are not ‘merely

arbitrary, a matter of assertion or power' (p. 23). Archer's respondents were clear about this (value equates to the potential to support family). But they could have little idea about the experience of higher education prior to entering a higher education institution. Nor could they have experience of being a graduate or of having a degree (Jenkins, Jones, & Ward, 2001). Therefore they had to avail themselves of prevailing and dominant discourse *to some extent*, to fill the gaps left by their lack of actual experience or knowledge.

It is vital not to (mis)take this reading of Archer as critique, particularly as the study expands the parameters of what might legitimately be included in analyses of value. Archer's study serves here as a vehicle to highlight the absence of a lexicon of value that fully and unambiguously expresses what matters to the individuals concerned. I will return to this point in the second part of the paper but first I set out two prevailing cultures of valuation and their influence on the shape and direction of research on higher education.

## Two cultures of valuation

In this part of the paper I focus on two cultures of valuation specific to higher education. The first of these, what I term privileged intrinsicity, is epitomised by the primacy of ideas about the inherent, even transcendental value of higher education. Its influence on evaluations of higher education is manifested through the articulation of a sense of loss and nostalgia, and an often unarticulated, but nevertheless strong, feeling of its inherent superiority to economic discourses. The second culture of valuation to which I attend here is (bio)financialisation or 'the financialisation of everyday life, subjectivity, ecology and materiality' (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 973). This might be seen as diametrically opposed to privileged intrinsicity in that it expresses the idea that 'the worth of goods, things, activities and spaces can be essentially translated into financial evaluations' (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 974, emphasis in the original). However, Halsey, Heath, and Ridge (1980) are to my mind correct in identifying a tendency in academic educational research (and this might more readily be identified as a generally pernicious academic habit) to adopt dichotomised positions, which in turn excludes, or at least circumscribes, the possibility of nuance and complexity. Therefore these two cultures of valuation do not exist at either end of a spectrum but actually in relation to each other. The intrinsic worth of higher education is to a great extent recognised as such inasmuch as it is 'other' to ideas about value that can be expressed in financial terms (although it must be noted that (bio)financialisation as a culture of value attaches a price even to intangibles such as knowledge).

### *The culture of privileged intrinsicity*

I have devised the concept of privileged intrinsicity with reference to Scott's (1995) criticism that the 'massification' of higher education has led to nostalgia for the days when higher education was an elite pursuit. It signifies that there is an often unchallenged assumption that higher education, like education, is valuable in and of itself. This idea is deep seated and both colours and contextualises this area of educational research. A commonality of understanding concerning the concept 'higher education' is assumed rather than established and there have been relatively few works that attempt to theorise higher education (Scott, 1995; Walker & Boni, 2013).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the absence of empirically defensible theories of higher education, to suggest that higher education might not serve the interests of particular constituencies can too easily be construed as a 'backlash' (University Alliance, 2014), or as an attempt to place higher education beyond their reach (Watts, 2009). When Wolf (2002) suggested, for example, that '(j)ust because (education) is valuable, it does not follow that yet more of it is by definition a good idea; that any addition, any increment, must be welcomed' (p. xi), she felt she was being judged as 'somewhere between an animal hater and an imbecile' (p. xi). As Lilley and Papadopoulos assert in respect of biofinancialisation, but the salience of their argument might easily be extended to other cultures of valuation including privileged intrinsicity, 'even those social groups that are potentially able to challenge its legitimacy cannot do it without challenging their very existence' (2014, p. 975).

Much research on higher education is critical of the (over)emphasis on its instrumental value, particularly in terms of preparation for the employment market. At the same time this research leaves untroubled the notion that higher education has inalienable value and, perhaps in combination with the vested interests of the academic community, critiques remain within a culture of privileged intrinsicity. This culture is made known through its opposition to instrumentalisation. I am not implying that higher education never is or should be an end in itself. But it is one thing to say that higher education has intrinsic value; it is another to transform this claim into an entire culture of value attribution. This transformation serves to regulate the depth and reach of analysis and commentary in (at least) three significant ways.

First, this transformation disavows the ways in which higher education always and already has instrumental value and a purpose, whether that be the satisfaction of an individual thirst for knowledge or a love of study; the provision of policy solutions to concerns about social mobility, social justice and the needs of the knowledge economy (Bowes, Thomas, Peck, & Nathwani, 2013); the maintenance of class privilege; or some other noble purpose (Robbins, 1963). An instrumental purpose may be more or less quantifiable, but that does not legitimise discounting certain forms of instrumentality while criticising others. Moreover, the contemporary foregrounding of one instrumental purpose of higher education, namely its value to the economy, can be seen as a mere shift in emphasis rather than a rupture with the past (McNicol, 2004). And yet instead of tracing undulations in the meaning of value, arguments tend to proceed on the assumption that conceptualising higher education as a tool for the achievement of personal or political goals is something novel, representing a break with the past (Blake *et al.*, 1998; Bradford & Hey, 2007; Stevens, 2004).

Second, transforming the claim for the intrinsic value of higher education into a culture of value attribution privileges a particular form of higher education, often labelled a 'liberal' higher education. This is a broad term, which on its most basic interpretation foregrounds the study of subjects that have no explicit vocational or technical focus. A liberal higher education is not without instrumental value inasmuch as it serves the formation of the 'well-rounded citizen', a term which is not only value but class laden (Bradford & Hey, 2007). This kind of education is positioned as intrinsically more valuable than others. In conjunction with a perceived shift to the instrumental purposes of higher education, the tenor of the critiques becomes one of 'grief for lost intimacy' (Scott, 1995, p. 7). This is evident for example in Barnett (1990). He states that the 'historical conception of higher education as standing for intrinsically worthwhile ends – essentially the idea of liberal higher education – is being *lost from sight*' (p. x, emphasis added). Missing from such accounts is the possibility that a

'liberal education' might be 'rooted in subtle and stealthy socialisation and acculturation rather than explicit intellectual formation' (Scott, 1995, p. 2).

Third, eliding the specific meaning of the value of higher education within a more expansive and general notion of value ignores the experience of some groups of students, erasing the role and mediating influence of gender, class, (dis)ability and ethnicity, and pre-empting what might actually matter to people (Sayer, 2011; Watts & Bridges, 2006). For some students, study for instrumental reasons – because it leads directly to a job for example (Bhatti, 2003) – or because it is necessary for entry to a particular profession (Milburn, 2012) might be more valuable than study for knowledge acquisition per se. The benefits of a liberal education cannot be assumed to apply evenly.

Failure to focus on the contextualising culture of valuation here does a disservice to the agency of individual actors, and it isolates those actors from the forces that are brought to bear on the processes of individual and collective value attribution. For example, criticising the emphasis on employability in higher education fails to address how being ill-equipped to deal with the stratifying effects of a globalised labour market impacts more negatively on some people than on others. Privileging the intrinsic worth of higher education therefore omits, or at the very least truncates, questions about who is doing the valuing, from which vantage point, for what reason and at which point in time. It assumes instead a set of universal, inviolable and often invisible criteria for judgements about value that are largely impervious to both historicity and to the multiplicity of social conditions and human life.

### ***The culture of (bio)financialisation***

In the previous section I argued that privileged intrinsicality as a culture of valuation is to some extent salient precisely because of the prevalent idea, even fear, that the value of higher education is being reduced to the economic and the mercantile. However, the reduction of the value of higher education to its 'contribution to more general economic and social redistribution' (Preston and Green, 2003, p. 4, cited in Department for Business Innovation & Skills [BIS], 2013) itself reflects embeddedness in a particular culture of valuation that might be described as financialisation (Dowling & Harvie, 2014; Haiven, 2014; Martin, 2002), but which Lilley and Papadopoulos (2014) designate as 'biofinancialisation'. They summarise biofinancialisation in the following way:

The underlying logic of the culture of (financial) valuation is that the worth of goods, things, activities and spaces can be *essentially* translated into financial evaluations.... Financial value is here used to express the primacy of investment value over other values (aesthetic, use, moral, ecological, material, cultural) that predominantly assess the future monetary profit to be gained from potentially any field of life or the environment. (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 974, emphasis in the original)

In short it is not only that financialisation *pervades* everyday life (Martin, 2002) but that 'the very ontology of our everyday lives' (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 972) is transformed into transactions only calculable in financial terms. Biofinancialisation articulates the penetration of finance into the very recesses of subjectivity. This argument echoes through Bradford and Hey's (2007) discussion of the contemporary landscape of subjectivity, that these days 'it seems impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful' (p. 596). The measure of success is calculated in financial terms such as the value of assets or the size of income. What is more, 'although different scales



of evaluation are by definition incommensurable ... the worth of almost everything ... is in principle transferable into one single logic of financial value that is potentially tradable in the market' (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 974). Hence, the 'wider benefits' of higher education such as 'improved health outcomes' are framed as 'the reduced likelihood of requiring public sector assistance in relation to healthcare' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011, p. 11) with the concomitant savings in spending thereon.

Such evaluations in themselves may be said to be simple expressions of the political economy of higher education rather than the manifestation of a culture of value attribution. However, it is pertinent for analyses in this arena that (bio)financialisation itself also relies on 'privileged access to education and socio-cultural capital' (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 977). In other words there is a dynamic between the criteria for evaluation, the methods of evaluation and the object of evaluation. Hence it is not simply that economic evaluations of higher education reflect the financialisation of everyday life; they 'perform and reproduce' it (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 980).

This becomes apparent in the kind of language used in political rhetoric about the value of higher education (and I remind readers here of the specific setting of my arguments in the context of higher education in England). It is audible even in statements that purport to transcend the economic and the instrumental. There is reference for example to the '*rich* cultural scene and social scene' (Directgov, 2012; emphasis added) that university (much used but erroneous shorthand for higher education) provides. The use of 'rich' rather than say 'diverse', 'fertile' or 'expansive' is telling, as are references to 'realising one's potential' because of the primacy of investment value over other values. Indeed much of the political discourse regarding the social and personal value of higher education constitutes an 'ideological displacement' (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) in which the influence of (bio)financialisation as a culture of valuation is nevertheless apparent.

(Bio)financialisation therefore has a theoretical function inasmuch as it explains the origins and use of economic and mercantile measures in evaluations of higher education. Nevertheless questions remain about 'the enormity of the embrace' it describes (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 982). How great is the potential for the evolution of alternative cultures of valuation and how might this then influence research? It is to this question I turn in the second part of the paper.

### **Towards an alternative culture of valuation**

Lilley and Papadopoulos (2014, p. 980) state: 'our semiotic-ontological access to the world is organised through cultures of valuation to such an extent that one cannot simply withdraw from these cultures without dismantling one's own existence'. In other words, it is not sufficient to critique existing cultures or the way they shape and direct research into higher education. '(M)anifestly superior successor systems or practices are needed before it becomes rational to remove what we have at present' (Sayer, 2011, p. 227). Therefore I am proposing that lay normativity as culture of valuation, based on Sayer's (2011) concept of the same name, can serve as a culture of valuation that can influence the way in which value is understood and researched.



## Defining lay normativity as a concept

Lay normativity expresses the evaluative relationship people have to the world. It is derived from the argument that most people make everyday value judgements and, moreover, they do so because they care deeply. This does not mean that we all care in the same or mutually supportive ways or that we care about the same things. Some people may care deeply about that which others may find abhorrent. But most people 'are sentient, *evaluative beings*: we don't just think and interact but evaluate things including the past and the future' (Sayer, 2011, p. 1, emphasis in the original).

And yet social science has a habit of disregarding LN, turning instead to 'concepts such as convention, habit, discourses, socialisation, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power and a host of others' that produce 'an anodyne account of living that renders our evident concern about what we do and what happens to us incomprehensible' (Sayer, 2011, p. 2). They are descriptive rather than explanatory concepts that say little about 'people's first person evaluative relation to the world and the *force* of their evaluations' (Sayer, 2011, p. 2, emphasis in the original). Although he considers 'lay normativity' 'a rather alienated way of describing it' (p. 2), Sayer uses this term nonetheless as a shorthand for the nature and strength of this evaluative orientation.

There are two crucial qualifications in understanding the import of LN. First LN is not synonymous with the expression of preference or choice, or of opinion. This would be to discount the *force* of this orientation, which is imbued with ethical and moral dimensions. This is not to say that LN is something 'other' than the ability to reason and to apply logic. Indeed the distinction between evaluation and reason is a false one, part of a family of dualisms such as fact–value; is–ought; reason–emotion; positive–normative and objectivity–subjectivity that were created at the end of the eighteenth century and which are institutionalised in the academy through the division between social science and philosophy. Sayer (2011, p. 29) also points out that these do not represent dichotomies that are impervious to challenge. Indeed the idea that values are beyond reason is dependent on any number of historically, socially and culturally contingent moves which can be foregrounded and made visible.

The second qualification with regard to LN is that the inclusion of a normative standpoint is not necessarily essentialising. A normative standpoint does not create conditions capable of 'dangerously naturalising and homogenising contingent social forms' (Sayer, 2011, p. 243). Indeed, arguing for LN makes little sense if one ignores the fact that people have their own susceptibilities, as well as manifesting those of the particular society in which they happen to live. It is the situated, dynamic relationship between the individual and his/her circumstances that is of paramount importance here.

## Lay normativity as a culture of valuation

It is important to reiterate that a culture of valuation does not offer criteria that can be applied wholesale to the measurement of value. It is the prevailing wind that sets the course of thinking, the antecedent influence on how value is understood and the lens through which something is seen to count as valuable. In short, cultures of valuation furnish not the 'metrics', but the context for judgements about value. LN functions in this way by foregrounding an evaluative *relationship* to the world rooted in 'everyday thought, practice and social arrangements in order to reveal what everyday thought fails to register' (Sayer, 2011,

p. 216). Like class, a culture of valuation is ‘something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened)’ (Thompson, 1966, p. 9). In this sense LN *opens up* new spaces for considering value and is therefore qualitatively different from a framework that always and already *delineates* an evaluative space.

That notwithstanding, the world is ‘not just any way and not just any action will be successful in changing it’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 222). It is therefore not sufficient to position LN as a culture of valuation without setting out how its relevance extends ‘beyond ideas to practices themselves’ (Sayer, 2011, p. 221). The question, therefore, is how the influence of LN as a culture of valuation translates into the practices of research into higher education. It is to this question I will now turn, focusing specifically on the practice of analysis. I reflect on the influence of LN as a culture of valuation on the *constitution*, the *vantage points* and the *scope* of analysis, and I do so by considering how lay normativity is manifested in the Capability Approach (CA). CA is ‘a new theoretical paradigm’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. x) and evaluative system (Sen, 1999) that is being applied chiefly to development policy but which has also taken hold in academic contexts (Robeyns, 2006), including that of education (Hinchliffe & Terzi, 2009).

Sayer has noted the ‘complementarities’ between his thinking and that of CA, which has at its heart a consideration of the ‘relation between individual freedom and the achievement of social development’ (Sen, 1999, p. 4). It is also possible to understand CA as a culture of valuation in its own right (Sen, 1999, p. 29) and as culture of valuation in the field of educational research (Hart, 2009, 2013, p. 179) and higher education research (Walker & Boni, 2013). But here I am treating CA as a conceptual and evaluative framework in which the influence of LN can be detected rather than discussing the attributes and merits of CA itself, not least because there is already a significant literature on CA whereas, as Sayer argues, there is still much work to do in foregrounding and developing LN.

Another reason for focusing on lay normativity is that CA was conceived and developed by the economist Amartya Sen (1973, 1999) as an alternative way of thinking about and measuring well-being and inequality (besides the growth of gross national product, or a rise in personal incomes) in the arena of development. Indeed CA is also known as ‘the Human Development Approach’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. x). Therefore its relevance is often to conditions of, sometimes extreme, deprivation. Its application in so-called affluent societies such as in England which is the context for my discussion, is not as well researched or conceptualised, although it has by no means been ignored (Sen, 1983; see also Volkert & Schneider, 2011 for a review of the literature). Nevertheless LN as culture of valuation is apparent in CA concerns with agency and well-being (Sen, 1999), with the quality of life (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) and with human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011) and these, I contend, are able to travel across time and space.

### ***Lay normativity and the constitution of analysis***

Thinking about analysis under the influence of LN entails an interrogation of some a priori ideas that make up notions of value, such as advantage and disadvantage (Hattam & Smyth, 2014), participation, aspiration (Hart, 2013) and success (Bradford & Hey, 2007). It also involves the exercise of practical reason, which Nussbaum (2000, p. 79; 2011, p. 34) describes as ‘being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life’. This in turn requires a degree of reflexivity that is largely absent

from current evaluations of higher education (Walker, 2006). On these terms the value of higher education is not measured on criteria external to the individual, such as how long it takes a graduate to find a job, nor by average earnings, nor by how graduates contribute to the economy, nor whether someone conforms to a pre-determined idea of a 'cultivated' or 'successful' citizen.

Goodson (2014), echoing Mills (1959), also indicates a methodological strand to this point when he insists that 'we have to understand the personal and biographical if we are to understand the social and political' (p. 1). Research often proceeds 'in ignorance or denial of personal missions and biographical mandates', but Goodson argues that these are 'a good place to locate our studies (and indeed our policies), not reluctantly at the end of a process, but enthusiastically at the beginning' (p. 1). Their inclusion implicitly foregrounds the primacy of 'what matters to people', which also implies a greater role for narrative approaches, which are a vehicle for first-person expressions of what is to count as valuable. There is a cautionary note to be sounded here because when we ask someone what matters to them there is the danger that '(w)hat we capture, in fact, is a mediation between the personal voice and wider cultural imperatives' (Goodson, 2005, p. 215) and constraints (see Bridges, 2006; Elster, 1983; Nussbaum, 2000 and Watts, 2009 and 2013 for treatments of the concept of adaptive or adapted preference for example). Stipulating that there must be reason to value something alludes to a complex matrix of individual agency and normative ideas that constitute reasonable grounds for judgement about the conditions in which individuals live.

The influence of LN on the constitution of analysis finds expression in CA in the key concept of capabilities and functionings. Capabilities refer to the substantial and substantive freedoms we each enjoy to live a life we value (Sen, 1992, p. 81) and, crucially, have reason to value (1999, p.18). Functionings are the states and activities (beings and doings) that constitute the life we value (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Sen (1999) states that the evaluative focus can either be on the '*realised* functionings (what a person is actually able to do) or on the *capability set* of alternatives she has (her real opportunities)' (p. 75, original emphasis). The salient point is that value is not measured in terms of the resources that higher education may offer, such as a good job or a higher income. A person may have both and, moreover, feel compelled to pursue both in order not to 'waste their education' (Levitas, 1998). But if they are not leading a life they value – because long hours and a stressful working environment keep them away from the family life they might value more for example – then higher education has not expanded that person's capabilities.

### ***Lay normativity and analytical vantage points***

Currently much educational research fails to proceed genuinely from the perspective of what matters to the individual, privileging instead particular disciplinary or methodological traditions or conceptual frameworks and/or imposing evaluative criteria, such as income, that are external to the individual. Moreover, measuring value in terms of an expanded capability set and/or realised functionings (Hart, 2013; Walker, 2006; Watts, 2009) does not automatically signal a change in analytical perspective. The measures are still applied to, rather than emanating from, the person. The crucial qualification here is that individuals themselves stipulate that which they value. In this respect embedding CA in LN as a culture of valuation transforms the import of analysis, which in turn sheds light on the *dynamics* of individual freedoms and societal factors.

Moreover, value cannot be understood solely in terms of a person's achievements (Hart, 2013, p. 27) and '(t)he bettering of a human life does not have to be justified by showing that a person with a better life is also a better producer' (Drèze & Sen, 1995, p. 184). Nor can it 'be assumed that time spent in an educational institution (be it a school or university) is commensurate with the expansion of capabilities' (Hart, 2013, p. 46). The crucial point for our purposes here is that LN, the first-person evaluative relationship with the world, sits at the heart of evaluations of what people have reason to value, and in evaluating whether higher education furnishes those possibilities.

In this sense looking out from the vantage point of participants is a different notion from that of 'giving voice' to those currently excluded from research. As mentioned earlier, there is no evidence that any groups or individuals are able to transcend, at least not entirely, the contexts in which they are located. We do better here to aim for understanding the influence of those contexts. 'Giving voice' does not equate to creating the conditions for engaging in meaningful dialogue or for tracing the contours of the relationship between the person and his/her social locations (Pelias, 2015). LN as a culture of valuation does facilitate these actions. Nor is a focus on analytical vantage points a reference to standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1992) because '(c)ontemporary standpoint theorists have denied that standpoints are merely socially located perspectives' (Intemann, 2010, p. 785). Standpoint theory, moreover, 'is accomplished by communities, not individuals' (Inteman, 2010, p. 786), whereas LN foregrounds an individual's susceptibilities to and dynamic with their social and historical locations.

Reference to the primacy of the individual should not be mistaken for the erasure of the social, however. A particular concept of the individual is at work here. Robeyns (2005) distinguishes between *ethical* individualism, which 'makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions' (p. 107), *methodological* individualism, 'the doctrine that all social phenomena can in principle be explained in terms of individuals and their properties' (p. 108), and *ontological* individualism where society 'is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties' (p. 108). Within capabilities, the reference is to the ethical individual. It is not akin to hierarchical, status-dependent social separateness and the individual is not an isolated being but one who has strong connections to the social context in which they are located.

### **Lay normativity and analytical scope**

Research into higher education under the influence of LN entails expanding the reach and depth of analysis to include that which is currently excluded. For example, in social scientific educational research there is currently a greater focus on working-class 'non-participation' in higher education in both policy and research than on middle-class non-participation, reflecting a long tradition in that field of focusing on the 'underdog' (Becker, 1970). It also reflects a concern with 'disadvantage' as potential students from working-class backgrounds are not entering institutes of higher education in the numbers that policy intended. However, this concentration on working-class non-participation and its framing as a sign of disadvantage has tended to perpetuate rather than counter a deficit model of the working classes, particularly the white working classes (Skeggs, 2004), not only in terms of the rhetoric of aspiration (Milburn, 2012) but also as reflecting working-class moral worth (Sayer, 2005). Middle-class 'non-participation' in higher education meanwhile tends to be treated

in qualitatively different ways in both policy rhetoric and in research, and is positioned discursively as 'self-exclusion' for example (Whitty, 2001). When systems and processes of valuation that emanate from sources external to personal values and evaluative relationships are applied in research, working-class practices thus can be, and are, construed as 'other', to those of their middle-class counterparts (Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs, 2004).

Nussbaum (2011) has created a list of capabilities that are essential for human flourishing. Although this move has not been universally endorsed, least of all by Sen (2004), it nevertheless shifts the emphasis in discourses of aspiration and in policy. It is no longer taken for granted that higher education always and already provides that which only those lacking in aspiration would reject (a theme in the culture of privileged intrinsicity). Instead higher education is held to account against the extent to which it fosters the specified capabilities. In the capability space, therefore, we can also move beyond an interrogation of the value of participation in higher education, to ask questions about the value of *non-participation* (Watts & Bridges, 2006).

CA therefore does much work in opening out analysis re-focusing attention, and re-framing and re-configuring key concepts such as disadvantage in ways that are steeped in a culture of lay normativity. Taking the expansion of an individual's capability set, or their realised functionings as a unit of evaluation, provides 'a new and powerful vocabulary for re-thinking dominant discourses of HE' and, importantly, 'new *constructions* of HE' (Hart, 2013, p. 179, emphasis added). It creates and invites questions often omitted from analyses of the value of higher education such as 'Of value to whom?', 'aspiring to what?', 'achievement of what?', and 'disadvantaged by what?' Asking the question, 'What matters to a person?' evokes a temporal element frequently missing from educational research. Inasmuch as LN must entail consideration of a person's (changing) relationships over time and their emotions (Nussbaum, 2001) the operation of lay normativity also transforms the import of the expansion of capabilities and realised functionings so they can be seen as more than measures.

## Conclusion

In this paper I started from the claim that educational research on higher education does not pay sufficient heed to the *cultures of valuation* in which it is embedded. I proceeded on the premises that analyses of the value of higher education seem predicated on ideas that are more often implied and assumed than established and look to versions of the future, rather than concentrating on its value in the present. I argued that focusing on the present would first require taking a step back to consider the cultures of valuation in which research on higher education is currently embedded, and the influences they exert on analyses of the value of higher education. I started by considering two such cultures: privileged intrinsicity and (bio)financialisation. In order to 'develop a positive educational project out of critique' (Hattam & Smyth, 2014, p. 272), I then set out Sayer's (2011) concept of lay normativity, foregrounding how it might function as an alternative culture of valuation. Finally I set out how it might be translated into the practices of research on higher education, specifically the practice of analysis. I animated my arguments by focusing on the manifestation of LN in the capability approach and how key concepts in CA might be transformed when embedded in a culture of lay normativity.



I have left a number of points in need of attention and/or further development. First, other ‘cultures of valuation’ could be identified and their influence interrogated. In particular I have introduced only a limited version of the capability approach but noted that it might also serve as a culture of valuation for *higher* education as it already ‘offers a new space to evaluate what is of value in education’ (Hart, 2013, p. 47). This would also include a confrontation with how CA can be applied in contexts of relative privilege, how it accounts for changes over time and how measures of value could be transformed into expressions of value. Second, a research culture that values LN needs to be further evolved and progressed as well as tested methodologically through ‘real world’ projects. Third, we need a clear idea of how existing approaches to the study of higher education fit within this more expansive notion of a culture of valuation.

Despite these limitations, locating educational research within a culture of valuation that not only takes people’s evaluative orientations and concerns seriously but also takes them as paramount at the very least signals a way of ‘thinking against the grain of orthodoxies’ so as to mitigate the ‘damaging effect of foreclosure’ (Hattam & Smyth, 2014, p. 271). Focusing on cultures of valuation in general raises awareness that no analysis of value is self-supporting or self-referential and that all activity, including research, is under the influence of particular cultures of valuation. Embedding higher education research in a culture of LN sidesteps the prevailing and limiting terms of debates regarding the value of higher education and attends to what higher education is as well as what it might be or ought to be. More ambitiously, by providing accounts of higher education that resonate with what matters to them and why, it also has the potential to render its findings of benefit to constituencies currently overlooked, homogenised or essentialised in current research.

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