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Journal article

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Confronting myself: Using auto/biography to explore the impact of class and education on the formation of self and identity

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Abstract

In this paper I illustrate how auto/biography, drawing on feminist research methodology, enabled me to chronicle and theorise the lived experience of class relations in the academy. I explain how auto-diegetic auto/biographical doctoral research has provided me with 'both a mode of representation and a mode of reasoning' (Richardson, 1997, p. 28) which was therapeutic, reflexive, as well as agentic to help me understand the sense of displacement in the academy and how I used my doctorate to redress that.

Keywords: Auto/biography; Honneth; recognition; the self; un miraculé

Introduction

I am an academic; a 'supreme classifier amongst classifiers' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. xi). I have travelled so far from the life in which my habitus was formed it could even 'be described as miraculous' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992, p. 117). In this article, I present the lived experience of a presumed 'other', une miraculée an educationally highly successful member of a disadvantaged group, who has survived and thrived in the education system despite the unjust distribution of symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), via an auto/biographical exploration. The auto-diegetic nature of the research in which; the author, the narrator and the protagonist is identical (Lejeune, 1989) was a unique feature of my thesis. It is a story – my story - of class transition, from extreme poverty and illegitimacy to working in an elite occupation in a university, and the ensuing paradoxes and dilemmas of my experience as lived.



I argue that my analysis of my own class transition reaches beyond my personal experience to present a 'collective story' 'a story which tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces' (Richardson, 1997, p. 14); in this instance academics from the working-class. Sadly, this is not a position I face in isolation; over the past four decades, working-class academics have been writing about the 'cruel duality' (Law, 1995, p. 1) of being a working-class academic in higher education. Collections of stories edited Ryan and Sackrey (1984), Dews and Law (1995), Mitchell, Wilson and Archer (2015), and Binns (2019) have all illuminated the enduring middle class myopia that persists in higher education institutions, and the sense of displacement and marginalisation that many academics from working-class backgrounds suffer when entering academia.

It would be obtuse to deny that it is the combination of all my identities; gender, class, race, age, and physical ability that have had an impact on my life at one time or another; the intersection of realities co-exist, overlap, and conflict. As Crenshaw (1989) argued, belonging to multiple social groups means that all humans have the potential to be targeted by multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. Whilst occupying a privileged white group, both gender and class have yielded different and often separate influences over the course of my life at different times, and despite living and working in highly gendered environments (both masculine and feminine), over the course of my lifetime, gender oppression has been completely subsumed by oppressive incidents based on my social class. I am not suggesting that I abandon completely any notions that there is intersectionality between gender, race and class at a macro level, but it is the dimension of class based on a lack of capital at a micro or individual level that has had most impact on my 'self'. Of course, focusing on class will almost inevitably obscure the discussion around gender inequality in academia, but I feel I am justified in maintaining this position as the voice of the working-class academic is rarely heard.

As I chronicled my life in my doctoral study; I theorised my assumptions using a layered account (Ronai, 1995) in which I layer my memories with a critical commentary, and reference to the main theoretical frameworks. As part of this endeavour, two phases of the research emerged naturally and organically from the research activity itself. In the first phase of the research, using a chronological account of my childhood, adolescence and my early career, I scrutinised the formation of the primary habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) fashioned on economic, social and cultural deprivation and illegitimacy. In phase two of the research data, I examined my current context as an educated working-class woman, working and studying within the academy simultaneously. Whilst I offer a short summary of my biography growing up, the main focus of this paper is how I used my doctoral study to explore the self and the way I was positioned within the academy.

Bourdieu, argued that potential human agency against structural determinism is dependent on our capacity for reflecting on what has made us who we are (Grenfell, 2008). Surrounded by people with established and inherited social and cultural capital in academia, feelings illegitimacy resurfaced. I had to do something to assuage the feelings of imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). So I decided to embark on a PhD to attempt earn my legitimate place in the academy. At the inception of my research study in 2011, I decided, as a teacher educator, that I wanted to examine the agentic power of post-graduate education on in-service teachers. However, early in the research process I was confronted with my own research bias. I was forced to acknowledge that concealed behind the research question was an attempt to identify and explore my own subjective experiences of class and education. Thus, my auto/biographical research emerged out of the iterative process of doing research whilst also engaging in the process of living my

life (Muncey, 2010). As I wrote about my own educational history, I realised that feelings of illegitimacy and inauthenticity were not merely idiosyncratic character traits, but were also influenced by systemic practices within the socio-political context within which I lived and worked.

On difference and the 'self'

From a feminist ontology, like many feminist academics, I have become receptive to arguments about the self, because in order to understand my self it is important to think about how I see myself in relation to a different interpretation of the world founded on profoundly different material and experiential positions (Stanley, 1995).

To this end I turned to Mead's (1934) theory of mind, self and society. Mead (1934) contended that the self is not there from birth, but the self, though stable, is a continuous concept which emerges from social interactions, such as observing and interacting with others, responding to others' opinions about oneself, and internalising external opinions and internal feelings about oneself. Mead's model provides a useful framework for the narrative constructions of self; it allows for human agency, eschews any notion of a fixed self, and acknowledges the reality of past events and experiences (Jackson, 2010) offering a psychosocial concept in which the self is perceived as an experiencing subject that has a coherence but also a sense of flexibility. Mead (1934) also believed that knowledge of the self and others develops simultaneously and neither can exist without the other; 'the process of becoming is always in motion' (Muncey, 2010, p. 23).

However, 'self' has recently become of more interest to contemporary sociologists, particularly in relation to education. Nias (1989), draws on the work of Mead (1934) to describe the concept of self as simultaneously socially constructed (the 'me'); a multiple or 'situational self' which 'may alter as we interact with different people in varying contexts' (1989, p.203), and an autonomous self (the 'I') a 'substantial self' which is more entrenched as it relates to 'a set of self-defining beliefs, values and attitudes' (Ibid.).

Like Nias (1989) I argue that my self is simultaneously socially constructed with the more entrenched 'substantial self' which I argue aligns closely with Bourdieu's conception of the habitus; 'a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action' (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 43); and a self that I have developed as I have seen myself through the eyes of a set of common expectations that others have about actions and thoughts within a particular society (Mead, 1934). As I impart later, this has been particularly problematic as I have entered the academy, because despite professional and academic achievement I lacked the internal acknowledgement of my accomplishments.

Introducing my theoretical friends

Initially, I turned to Bourdieu as a preliminary sensitising framework to analyse the structural forces that had impacted on my life. Alongside Bourdieu's ideas about habitus, field and capital, which helped me to identify how the structural and objective forces of growing up in economic, cultural and social disadvantage had shaped the 'habitus de classe' (Bourdieu, 1984), the conceptions of symbolic violence and misrecognition became significant as I began to analyse my everyday classed experiences growing up and significant, more recently, within the academy.

While higher education is now actively welcoming students from diverse educational, social, and economic backgrounds, it still predominantly employs middle-class academics. As my narrative goes on to demonstrate, even today within academe, some groups or individuals are often misrecognised by the dominant majority who offer demeaning, confining or inaccurate readings of the value of the 'other' (Bourdieu, 2000). Furthermore, symbolic violence which is often 'unrecognisable and unacknowledged' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 216-17) towards those of us who are seen as the 'other' is still enacted on a daily basis.

However, describing the nature of 'being' of a working-class teacher educator was not as straightforward as I anticipated. Bourdieu's theory, whilst offering an explanation for the substantial self, did not sufficiently address the subjective experience of people like me, *les miraculés* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), who achieve despite the odds in the education system. Thus, I sought a framework that could help explore not only how structural forces had positioned me as working-class, but also what had motivated me to overcome these societal barriers. This meant looking at how social interactions, especially how I had internalised external opinions about myself and responded.

Like Bourdieu, Honneth argues that disrespect '*mißachtung*', arises from cultural and symbolic exclusion (2007) anchored in social structures that systematically deny the members of denigrated groups equal opportunities for participation in social life which can result in a loss of self-respect and self-esteem for the individual (Honneth, 1995). Honneth adds that disrespect is accomplished through institutional individualisation in which processes are intended to hinder or prevent individuals and groups from sharing their experiences of injustice (Honneth, 2007).

Like Bourdieu, Honneth (2003, in Fraser & Honneth, 2003) criticised theories of class struggle which assume an objective standard of morality based purely on economic difference, but he goes on to argue that Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory fails to address the complexity of individual and intersubjective experiences. Instead Honneth (1995) unites a theory of psychic development with a theory of social change to conceive recognition as the overarching moral need. In this way Honneth's theory of recognition, provides a conduit between structure and agency (Fleming & Gonzalez-Montegudo, 2014). But Honneth's conception of recognition has been criticised, most notably by Nancy Fraser (2003, in Fraser & Honneth, 2003) for ignoring consequences of inequalities in income and wealth. Fraser (2003) contends that although these two types of deprivation; recognition and distribution of economic wealth, are often interwoven, they should be theoretically separated. However, Honneth (2003 in Fraser and Honneth) asserts that even questions of distributional justice can be better understood in terms of normative categories that come from a sufficiently differentiated theory of recognition. Favoring a 'moral theoretical monism' (Ibid., p. 157) in which 'recognition' acknowledges both the cultural and the material, Honneth continues to assert that they should be examined together.

Like Hegel and Mead, Honneth stressed the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person's identity (Anderson, 1995 in Honneth, 1995). Honneth's (1995) theory starts from the Hegelian idea that identity (what I am presenting here as the situational self) is constructed intersubjectively, through a process of mutual recognition. Honneth (1995) maintained that citizens morally require recognition from others, and people must be recognised for their identities to be fulfilled (Anderson, 1995 in Honneth, 1995). Honneth (1995) suggested that through three different types of social interaction: loving concern, mutual respect and societal solidarity individuals develop three differentiated forms of relation-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, respectively.

Honneth (1995) drew on the object relations theory of early childhood experience developed by Winnicott (1965) to claim that the first, and most basic form of relation to self, self-confidence, is based on the right to exist and is gained in primary affective relations of love and friendship. Honneth (1995) suggests that the next form of positive self-relation, self-respect, derives from our awareness of being a morally accountable subject through the mutual respect and recognition of the other as a moral agent, in the context of civil society. And the final level of relation to self relates to self-esteem or self-worth. This, claimed Honneth (1995), is dependent on an awareness of having capabilities that are good or valuable to a concrete community. Like Mead's (1934) theory of self, Honneth's theory of recognition fully acknowledges the embodied, affective and normative nature of social practice assuming that to develop their identity, people depend on the feedback of other subjects, and of society (Honneth, 1995). In this respect, who we are depends on our relationships and sense of belonging; recognition is visceral; it is something that is embodied and shapes the self.

Auto/biography as enquiry - bringing a private life into public knowledge

My research project was founded on my own feelings of illegitimacy as a senior lecturer within the academy. So, to tell the story of 'who I was' to 'who I am now', in a bid to address issues around misrepresentation and exclusion, I embarked on an auto/biographical journey into myself, whilst engaging a 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959/2000). From the position of the other, I drew on a feminist epistemology, arguing that if we are to address issues around misrepresentation and exclusion it is important to build knowledge of the other from their actual life experiences (Brooks, 2007) which for me was shaped by poverty and illegitimacy.

All too often, educational research appears to be disembodied and to have no vitality, but the efficacy of biographical research is that it enables people to construct and reconstruct themselves in particular contexts and in processes of social interaction (Bron, 2007) through an exploration of how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings (Ibid.). And despite criticism of reverence and solipsism, I assert that the 'personal and the everyday are both important and interesting, and ought to be the subject of enquiry' (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 118). As my experience, as an academic from the working-class constitutes a different way of viewing reality, I maintain that it requires an entirely different methodology. Situated in the tradition of biographical research, my auto/biographical research provides an empirically grounded critique of the life of an individual in a particular life context (Merrill & West, 2009) and 'a rigorously inductive route' (Alheit, 1994, p. 20) to explore complex individual life stories within social contexts (Merrill & West, 2009). Stanley and Wise (1993) assert that feminist research challenges the binary ways of understanding the relationship between the body, the mind and the emotions. They argue that feminist research should be concerned with emotional vulnerability because emotion is a legitimate source of knowledge, and go on to assert that any epistemology that fails to recognise that is flawed.

Stanley (1995) asks her readers to consider if there is a feminist auto/biography. Her response is that there is a distinction between feminist authored research and feminist subject in research. Feminist authored research, she argues, can offer a distinctly feminist approach for writing auto/biography which can attend to both process and product, self and other ideological representations and its construction (Ibid.). The use of the slashed term 'auto/biography' from a feminist epistemology proffers a theoretically informed

research approach which draws on Stanley's (1993) assertion that our understandings of our own lives will impact on how we interpret others' lives. Stanley's conception of auto/biography encapsulates feminist approaches to research which attempts to raise the consciousness of the position of women (Ibid.).

Stanley (1995) suggests that a crucial element of feminist auto/biography includes an 'a priori insistence that auto/biography should be treated as composed by textually-located ideological practices [...] and analytically engaged with as such' (1995, p. 253). For me auto/biography offered a genre of autobiographical research that exhibits multiple levels of consciousness focusing on the inter-relationship between the constructions of one's own life and the lives of others, connecting the personal with the social and enabling an understanding of sociocultural and psychosocial dynamics in people's lives (Merrill & West, 2009). It allows for an exploration of key factors such as the interplay of structure/agency, of gender/class/ethnicity and a particular habitus, and the development of identity/selfhood, grounded in the narratives of lived experience (West, 2014).

Auto/biography enters that contested space between the socio-cultural and the psychosocial (Stanley, 1995) so challenges the conventional boundaries of tradition autobiography. So, rather than seeing auto/biography as a way of retreating into personal inner subjectivity, I saw it as a means to explore intersubjective relations (West, 2014). Auto/biography 'refuses any easy distinction between biography and autobiography instead recognising their symbiosis' (1995, p. 127). acknowledging that the biographical self and autobiographical self can overlap, and when writing about the self it cannot be written without acknowledging the variety of social network of others that a life moves between (Stanley, 1993). Auto/biographical research is thus an interactive process shaped by the researcher's 'own history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 9).

Using auto/biography, I wanted to advance the boundaries of autobiographical research to show that auto-diegetic auto/biographical research can be written by the self, about the self and still be valid and robust. Thus, auto/biography, as I have applied it, challenges the idea of a single, stable or essential self (Stanley, 1995) and instead draws on the intersubjective nature of a life as lived. Writing auto/biographically enabled me to question the established distinctions between the self and other; public and private; and, the personal and political (Stanley, 1993) as I tried to name and reclaim my experiences as an academic from the working-class.

Although auto/biographical research appears to convey lots of academic freedom, it also carries significant responsibilities. I feel obliged to concede that writing auto/biographically was immensely emotional and the temptation to hide from the data was, on occasion, almost irresistible. While there is a wealth of ethical guidance for researchers who are writing biographies, or collecting autobiographical narratives of others, there seemed to be a distinct lack of guidance for researchers who, like me, are writing an auto-diegetic narrative, I found that I have had to make my own way through the issues, as they arose, which proved to be an invaluable but challenging experience for a new researcher. Despite the urge to present myself as a competent, controlled, knowledgeable and confident doctoral researcher, I chose to write a rich, open and full representation of my experience that includes the self-doubts, the mistakes and the paradox in thoughts and feelings. In this way, the data ceased being abstract and theoretical, and instead became a series of more passionate, critical ideas that grew from personal incidents, relationships and episodes from which later theorizing emerged. My intention was to write evocatively and provocatively, to tell a story from the position of the 'other' that offers a new perspective on social life and social processes (Ellis &

Bochner, 2000). I aimed for a self-conscious approach to writing, acknowledging the relationship between the research process, the writing process and the self, which has emphasised the emotional and personal dimensions of the research (Coffey, 1999).

To conclude, auto/biographical research, and the life history in particular, was aligned well with the conceptual framework for this study, which attempted to understand how I had made class transition within social structures and contexts through enaction.

I have not always been who I am now

I was born out of wedlock to a young unmarried mother in 1960s England, at a time when single mothers were considered immoral and were often consigned to homes for unmarried mothers, or even mental institutions. Discourses surrounding single mothers was and sadly is still denigrating

...lone mothers have been regarded as members of an underclass, spawning anti-social children and corroding the nation (Edwards & Caballero, 2011, p. 531)

It was, and still is, a fact that one's life chances are strongly affected by a person's natal class and the inequalities that follow (Sayer, 2005). I grew up knowing that my family was abnormal; being the child of a single mother in the U.K. in the 1960s not only invited stigmatisation, it also meant I was raised in poverty. Thus, my primary habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) was formed in the context of low economic, social and cultural capital.

In households like mine existential threat was a daily occurrence. Furthermore, I am certain that my mum was acutely aware of how she was positioned within the 1960s discourse of the traditional family. At that time, the notion of the good mother was framed by class relations in which working-class women sought to prove themselves as adequate to the standards of the middle-class 'other' (Skeggs, 1997). Our place in society is defined by other people who impose on us definitions and values relating to class, gender, race, so as children, we learnt our place in the social order from our immediate environment. Being the child of a single mother in the 1960s invited stigmatisation and I grew up knowing I occupied the associated social position of female and working-class with the associated ways of knowing.

Success at school mattered, 'I had a moral obligation to be intelligent' (Trilling, in Hoggart, 2009, p. xvii), because my mum, was keen to surmount the stigma of being an unmarried mother and instead show the world that she was respectable (Skeggs, 1997), and was able to make a valid contribution to society (Honneth, 1995). Thus began my desire for academic achievement. But despite academic success, at the age of 16 years, I did what many educated working-class young women did when they left school at that time, I went to work in a bank. Many of my co-workers were graduates and I *found myself in a position where* I was amongst the middle-class. I was good at my job, but the social divide between some of us was unmistakable. I felt everything about me typified coming from low-socio status; my clothes, my accent, my lack of education, my appreciation, or lack of it, of high culture and fine dining. Over the course of ten years I tried to dis-identify and dissimulate (Skeggs, 1997) from my original social position in a bid to blend in and assume the symbolic codes of the middle-class environment, but still lacked academic capital.

After ten years of corporate life in which I never felt that I was making a worthwhile contribution to society, I made a full-time return to higher education. And after four years

of self-funded study, during which period I held down as many as four precarious jobs at the same time, I qualified as a primary school teacher. For the first time in my working life, I felt a sense of purpose and a sense of recognition (Honneth, 1995). Using Honneth's theory of recognition I can now understand that loving concern came from the pupils I taught, and their parents, which brought with it a greater sense of self-confidence. Furthermore, the mutual respect of my colleagues enabled self-respect, and I was able to recognise for myself that my teaching was enabling children to learn which contributed to feelings of self-worth (Honneth, 1995).

Now, as a Senior Lecturer in Education, my role as a teacher educator affords me some feelings of self-confidence, self-esteem and, self-worth (Honneth, 1995). The 'loving' relationships I have with my students are very important to me and I know that I am esteemed (Honneth, 1995) by my students. I recognise and value their autonomy and agency, and encourage them to have a strong sense of the ethical and moral responsibility to their own students when they are teaching. This aspect of my work holds meaning for me, because I feel like I am making a worthwhile contribution to the teaching community, and society, enabling the students to fulfil their potential for educational experiences, as indeed I have, that engenders an improved sense of self-worth (Ibid.).

Illegitimacy and integration fatigue

However, despite professional recognition, I feel I am never free of the judgements of 'generalised other' (Mead, 1934) that positions me, not just as different but, as inferior or inadequate in the academy (Skeggs, 1997). Entering the academy illegitimately, through the service entrance, with professional qualifications rather than an academic profile has compounded feelings of not belonging, especially since the institutional habitus, the set of dispositions of an institution, of the university, conveys a character deeply rooted in middle-class values (Reay, 1998). Even in a modern post-1992 university, like my own, in which more of my colleagues come from non-traditional academic backgrounds, class is still a complex marker of the 'other' (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994). I have had to acculturate to the middle-class institutional and intersubjective norms, tastes, jargon, body postures, ways of knowing, and values, just to fit in and get on. But despite this, the culturally marginal like me, and others like me, who have a strong sense of social justice, are often misrecognised through cultural and symbolic exclusion (Honneth, 1995). Our voices are silenced by those in authority rendering us invisible, as the diary entry below shows.

I have developed a strong sense of my identity as a teacher educator; in what I think is important. But how do I hold on to that in my own beliefs about what I think is important in the face of the drive for school-based initial teacher training and so much technical rationalism. I speak out but it is clear that this has become a constant source of conflict with the expectations of colleagues, especially senior management. (RD: July 2013).

Despite my efforts to assimilate a middle-class habitus (Bourdieu, 2002) I was constantly reminded through intersubjective relations that I couldn't 'do middle-class right' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 82). It seems that despite my best efforts, I do not have 'the set of distinctive features; bearing, posture, presence, diction, and pronunciation, manners and usages' 'without which.... all scholastic knowledge is worth little or nothing' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 91). As feelings of illegitimacy and imposterism endured, my habitus

began to operate at a conscious level; I started to theorise the events that were causing me to question my position in the institution and society as a whole. Through a Bourdieusian lens the feelings of illegitimacy could be conceived as part of the hysteresis effect (Bourdieu, 1984) in which people who share dispositions that are dissonant with the field experience negative internal sanctions (Bourdieu, 2000); the ‘emotional residue’ (Friedman & Laurison, 2019) of a working-class upbringing.

My position in the academy requires a considerable amount of emotional and psychological effort to navigate spaces that continue to be shaped by and for the institution of the middle-class, white man. It was the symbolic violence wielded through the lack of respect ‘mißachtung’ (Honneth, 1995) in which I am made to feel that my contributions are not valid because they do not fit in the normative values of the faculty that had the biggest impact on my self. Middle-class values were used to create a barrier to ward off dissent within academe, silencing those of us whose ideas go against the dominant view. This expression of symbolic violence, based on a dominant yet implicit understanding of what can and can’t be said and done (Bourdieu, 1991), has only served to reinforce feelings of being an imposter. So, despite being more than qualified, I subconsciously internalised feelings of the middle-class hegemonic practices that led me to see myself as less worthy than my colleagues. My interactions were often fraught with anxiety and tension, as I struggled with feelings of being an imposter.

Furthermore, over the years, being silenced continually has led to crippling self-doubt which has led me to commit acts of self-elimination (Bourdieu, 1977) including promotion and leadership posts through either rejecting opportunities or not seeking them out. This is borne out of self-protection, either because I feel that I do not possess the qualities, skills and attributes or the necessary social and cultural capital to undertake the task. This latent effect of imposterism legitimates the ‘class ceiling’ as it appears that those from working-class origins lack the drive, ambition and resilience to reach the top (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). In the process of being silenced I had stopped even bothering to raise questions about the hegemonic practices in initial teacher education and how these were reinforcing social inequalities. The contradictions, ambivalences and paradoxes between my working-class beliefs and values and this middle-class milieu has led to integration fatigue (Anderson, 2009) and has continued to endorse feelings of inauthenticity and illegitimacy.

Despite assimilating myself into the institution to some degree, in a bid to gain legitimacy and banish the sense of displacement, I, like many people, especially women who suffer from imposter phenomenon, felt I must prove to myself that I am as good as or better than the ‘other’. So, at great risk to my self-esteem I embarked on a Doctorate.

The PhD and me: Making the road by walking

In this section I share the emotional politics of embarking on doctoral research, from the perspective of someone who feels that she has entered the academy illegitimately. I hope to illustrate some of the mundane, but highly charged, everyday occurrences that underpin doctoral work using illustrations from the reflective diary I kept as I struggled with notions of self and identity during the endeavour.

I am struggling emotionally. Undertaking a doctorate is complex, emotionally difficult and messy. It has positioned me in a liminal space; a space where I am moving between teacher educator and academic; I no longer feel like a teacher of teachers but have not yet acquired the full legitimate recognition of an academic. (RD: December, 2016).

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Revealed in this quote, and the one below, is the feeling of uncertainty about entering a new space that is outside of my professional identity as a teacher educator – in which I know I am recognised (Honneth, 1995). Here, I am acknowledging becoming a Doctor of Philosophy is more than merely the acquisition of knowledge, or even being able to demonstrate research skills and critical thinking; it is a lived experience which has the potential to change who I am not only professionally, but also personally.

It is no surprise that assuming an academic identity is proving to be problematic; my working-class background has ill-prepared me for thinking of myself as an academic (Someone who spends time engaged in the doing of the academic reading, writing, thinking, discussing). It seems beyond reach; its achievement frustrated by the demands of numerous tasks which make up my job as a teacher of teachers which do not 'make up' the academic. (RD: July, 2016)

The first thing that happened was that engagement with doctoral research nourished and re-energised me epistemologically, as this quote from my diary shows.

The act of researching for this thesis has propelled me out of my ontological and epistemological inertia. It has given me a sense of purpose when all seems to be lost in initial teacher education. I have read a vast amount, much of which has not even made it into the thesis, but which has had a huge impact on who I am as a teacher educator and as a researcher. Attending conferences and networks has introduced me to an intellectual community of like-minded scholars. Mercifully, I have learned that there are academics everywhere questioning boundaries of our discipline (RD: July, 2016).

The doctorate has been an important source of intellectual and emotional growth; *it* has enabled me to gain a sense of self-respect, and self-worth (Honneth, 1995) as I acknowledge that despite my social, cultural and economic disadvantage, through my own academic effort and attainment. I am still able to enter an elite profession, which is usually mostly only accessible to the middle-class.

Despite the challenges to find time to write, and the moments of fear, inadequacy and failure, undertaking the research is part of the care of the self. It has provided a space where I have crystalised my values and beliefs; understood my desires to be a scholar; learnt to feel less guilty (about everything) and just be me. The PhD is about a process of becoming. As I look at my notes and reflections it reflects a changing identity. As I have read I have changed. As I write I change. My doctorate is providing me with a space to confront my self and provide a sense of personal and intellectual agency. (RD: June, 2016).

However, feelings of being an imposter thrived in the public arena of conferences, not because of my gender but always because of my class. As I began to share my research with other academics at conferences internalised feelings of oppression, vulnerability, humility and inferiority resurfaced; as these diary extracts about a European conference reveal

I always feel vulnerable in these settings. Not because of my gender but always because of my class..... despite working within a university for 10 years I always feel illegitimate, like I am here under false pretences. I feel people can sense the lack of social, cultural and educational capital. Rather than feel proud that I am here by my own virtue, I tell myself that is good for me. (RD: March, 2016).

The anticipated shame of being seen as over-reaching and failing highlighted a sense of class inferiority in my relations with my middle-class peers who I perceived as holding

the ‘right’ social and cultural capital valued by institution, served only to emphasise the fragility of my new identity. Rather than feel proud that I had earned my place by my own virtue and hard work, I felt other academics could detect my lack of social, cultural and educational capital; as this entry from my diary shows

I read an extract from my doctoral research as it existed at that point. The auto/biographical content would make anyone feel slightly exposed. At this point the ‘Reader’ as I will call her detected a hole in my research – her challenge was relentless. Thankfully some experienced academics in the room came to my rescue – I was truly grateful for their support. Later, I cried a lot! For the first time I feel like giving up! I feel so unintelligent, so vulnerable, so exposed but mostly so inferior. (RD: March, 2016).

I had anticipated, and even welcomed, a critique but not a personal attack. I felt this this woman had used her position of power and privilege to expose me as an imposter in a public forum. This serves as another illustration of Bourdieu’s (1994) concept of symbolic violence. This brought with it a loss of self-confidence in my ability to ever be able to reside in the academic field legitimately.

Writing to reclaim the self - assuaging feelings of illegitimacy

Writing an auto-diegetic thesis was a deeply embodied act - where the mind, body and soul worked together to scrutinise both the past and present. It became a means of challenging formerly accepted notions of structural positioning and prompted a set of new narratives about who I am. As I wrote and re-wrote I began to recognise and understand myself in a different light; I saw a human experience – a woman, filled with fear, anxiety, denial and ambivalences, struggling with notions of self. My auto/biographical exploration enabled me to enter a third space which provided a ‘terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate[d] new signs of identity’ (Bhabha, 1994, p.1). And while I wrote tentatively at first, the relationship between the research process, the writing process, and the ‘self’ became stronger, particularly as I found my voice and gained the courage to write about the emotional and personal dimensions of my life, and how this was intrinsically connected to the research process.

Writing auto/biographically for my doctorate took me into the unknown at times; it provided a rare opportunity to raise questions about my assumptions, values and beliefs, and to examine the structural conditions that bestow discomfort and disbelief in my self as an academic. Towards the end, there was a huge sense of working-class honour bound up with gaining the doctorate. My anxieties and fears about completing it increased; there was always a sense that I might get it wrong, and that it will never be good enough to meet the expectations of the intellectual field. But, researching and writing auto/biographically, especially for an academic recognition, proved to be a dynamic, creative process of discovery (Richardson, 1994); it has made visible the structural, intersubjective, and individual processes that have formed my self - it has become a way of identifying and challenging feelings of imposter syndrome, inferiority and illegitimacy, enabling me to re-form my self legitimately. The award has shown me that I can contribute to the academic community that is valuable and worthwhile, providing some antidote to the misrecognition and disrespect (Honneth, 1995, 2007) shown to me as a teacher educator.

Feelings of imposter still lurk in the margins, I still ‘inhabit a psychic economy of class defined by fear, anxiety and unease, where failure looms large’ (Reay, 2005, p. 917),

but I can now safely acknowledge that I have created a 'self' in which I experience the pleasure, as well as pain, in the borderlands of the working-class and middle-class habitus. Traditional research methods easily neglect the moral character of life and experience, but my auto/biographical doctoral study provided me with 'both a mode of representation and a mode of reasoning' (Richardson, 1997, p. 28). Whilst this may be true for all doctoral students, the auto-diegetic nature of my research became a part of me; a means of enabling me to identify and confront feelings of inferiority and illegitimacy. My auto/biography revealed that class transition, for me, was associated with pain, estrangement and feelings of illegitimacy; and in particular how the lived relations of class within the academy had contributed to enduring internalised feelings of stigma attached to being working-class and illegitimate. Writing about my life in my thesis became a healing endeavour strengthening the connections between body, mind and soul, providing a foundation for hope and a source of agency thus proving to be a dynamic and creative method of discovery (Richardson, 1994). It may be risky to acknowledge the emotional dimension of the doctoral education but it is emotion that has been the driving force behind the risks that I have taken; it is the vulnerability and the suffering that is felt in the scholarly pursuit of knowledge that has had the biggest impact on my cognition and allowed for a renegotiation of the 'self' (Winnicott, 1965).

To conclude

Every story told is charged with a special emotional resonance that leaves both the author and the reader enriched, and my story, although a story of one woman from the working-class, could also be representative a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces' (Richardson, 1997, p. 14); working-class academics who have made class transition.

Often the working-class are studied by the middle-class, in which 'we' as the 'they' are treated as a separate species to be observed and studied. Rarely are the people from the working-class allowed to speak for ourselves. Auto/biography offered me a distinct approach to study my human experience and offered important insights in to the complexities of a life lived that would have otherwise be missed or neglected in more objective studies. Being both the researcher and the researched; the subject and the object; the narrator and the protagonist has afforded me a double consciousness; a unique 'mode of seeing' (Brooks, 2007) enabling me to dispute the conventional distinctions between self and other, public and private, and personal and political, and to challenge the idea of a single, stable or essential self (Stanley, 1993). Becoming an academic has provided this platform. And now as my story is told 'it ceases to be a story; it becomes a piece of history' (Steedman, 1986, p. 143).

For me, auto/biographical writing for doctoral study has served as a powerful 'space of resistance' and a 'site of radical possibility' (hooks, 2003, p. 156) and has become a source of social action which has the potential to link knowledge production with healing and reconstruction (Walsh, 1997). It has also brought with it some of the desired recognition that Honneth (1995) argues is essential for human flourishing.

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