

A phenomenological reinterpretation of Horner's fear of success in terms of social class

Jo-Hanna Ivers & P. Downes

Abstract The current study developed the concept of fear of success that was originally examined by Martina Horner (1970; *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 157-175, 1972). The key dimension in Horner's (1970; *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 157-175, 1972) studies was gender. The key dimension in the current study was social class. It was hypothesised that individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds fear that, for them, success will lead to alienation from their community, and the loss of identity and loss of overall sense of belonging within their culture. The majority of the previous studies were based in the USA and examined fear of success using objectivist conceptions of success and quantitative methodologies. Eleven participants took part in the current study, three males and eight females. Two-phase qualitative interviewing was employed as the primary source of data collection in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the constructions and experiences of the participants in relation to success. The majority of participants believed that they would have to make vast life changes, in order to facilitate their views of desired success. The participants' fear was rooted in what they perceived as the "consequences of success". These participants occupied a "trade-off mindset"; for these young people, success meant leaving their family, friends, community and culture behind. The thought of losing this "connection" and sense of belonging was expressed with noticeable anxiety.

Keywords Social class . Identity. Hybridity. Phenomenology

J.-H. Ivers (*)

Department of Public Health & Primary Care,
Trinity College Centre for Health Sciences, Adelaide & Meath incl., National Children's Hospital
Tallaght, Dublin 24, Ireland
e-mail: jivers@tcd.ie
URL: http://www.medicine.tcd.ie/public_health_primary_care/

P. Downes
Educational Disadvantage Centre, St Patrick's College Drumcondra,
Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland
e-mail: paul.downes@spd.dcu.ie

Introduction

Horner's (1970, 1972) "fear of success"

The concept of fear of success was first examined by Martina Horner (1970, 1972) almost 40 years ago, when she looked at the stereotypes and biases which discouraged both men and women from pursuing careers in non-traditional fields. In her study, Horner (1970, 1972) specifically examined stereotypes and biases that were discouraging women from pursuing a career in medicine, a traditionally male-oriented field. At the time of Horner's study, less than 10% of doctors were female. Furthermore, the number of women accepted into medical school was limited to 10%/15% (Eagle 2003). Horner (1970, 1972) concluded that women have "a motive to avoid success or a 'fear of success'". They feared the negative consequences for their succeeding in traditionally male domains. Such fears are based on societal expectations. Horner (1970, 1972) identified fear of success as a psychological barrier to women's participation and advancement in the workforce and in society at large (Horner 1970,1972). Horner's findings were considered as a psychological explanation for women's failure to achieve success at the same level as men in society (Eagle 2003).

Contextualising success

Success is a multi-faceted concept that may be perceived in several ways: financial success, academic success, emotional success or life success in respect of parental skills, interpersonal skills and inter-relational skills; or in cultural terms of intelligence, beauty, criminal activity and sports ability. Horner's (1970, 1972) research on fear of success does not clearly examine the subjective nature of success. Instead it alludes to a mainstream understanding of success that is better matched with middle class values, i.e. professional job, good standard of education, marriage, children etc. By contrast, a working class perspective of success appears to be far more subjective in nature. Success has many degrees of complexity and may be derived from various identities, roles, belongings and/or material objects (Anderson 1999). There is a paucity of studies of fear of success in young working class people. The losses as well as the gains involved in educational success and upward mobility for working class young people needs to be explored.

The relationship between educational attainment and socio-economic status in Ireland

Only a minority of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds succeed in the third level education system in Ireland (Gorby et al. 2007; O'Connell et al. 2006; O'Brien 2005; Combat Poverty Agency 2003; Clancy 2001). These findings highlight the direct relationship between educational advancement and socio-economic status. It has been suggested by many theorists that social class is the focal point of the Irish educational system (Tormey 2007; O'Brien 2005). The parallel between social class and educational success is manifested in the continuing disparity between the participation, performance and achievement of working class students and their middle class peers (O'Brien 2002).

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), working class students who participate in third level education will have to "abandon particular characteristics of their class, namely their thoughts, perception, appreciation and action" (p.107). Once educated, they cease to be working class. Their defining identity, in terms of the social class, is automatically changed by virtue of their educational success. This view is echoed by Lynch (1999) in working with a working class Irish sample. According to Lynch (1999), there is no other

marginalised group for whom this holds true to the same degree. This presents the working class student with an enormous dilemma—to stay outside of the system and challenge it, or to participate and be excluded from challenging the system. Lynch (1999) explicitly echoes Bourdieu, when she adds “if the working classes become ‘assimilated’ by the system they are no longer part of their class, as their ‘structural relationship’ to education has changed” (p.126). This change brings with it isolation—an isolation that Lynch (1999) asserts does not occur with any other marginalised group within education. Lynch (1999) asserts that working class students do not “give up” on the education system in some “predetermined way”. Rather they negotiate and inhabit the education system and evaluate the opportunities that are open and those that are not.

Cultural constraints on education

In their study on inequality in higher education and social class barriers for Irish students, Lynch and O’Riordan (1999) found that social and cultural constraints were of considerable significance. They found that the impact of poverty was “direct” and “immediate” and that it created cultures that fostered “a lack of ownership”. The sense of discontinuity between community, home and college was increased by the lack of accessible, accurate information about higher education. Previously, Taylor et al. (1995) worked with a similar sample as Lynch (1999) of young working class people in North America. The participants of this study were living and attending school in an inner-city area. They came from working class backgrounds and were all economically disadvantaged and at risk of early school leaving. Taylor et al. (1995) examined these participants’ idea of success. They found that participants had very definite ideas of success, which included money, power, independence and respect. They believed that the path to achieving this came through gaining an education that would lead to a professional career. This chosen path, however, was not without consequences—namely, isolation, loneliness and exclusion.

Crossing over: existing between two classes

Drawing on a longitudinal study of middle class and working class girls growing up in British societies, Lucey et al. (2003) implicitly builds on the work of Lynch (1999) and Horner (1970, 1972) by focusing on those few working class women who manage to get to university and face the prospect of a “professional” career. The authors examine the concept of “hybridity” as it is used, to denote shifts in the structure of modern-day feminine sensibilities and argue that, although hybridity may be a social and cultural fact, “in this psychic economy there are no easy hybrids” (p. 288). They interrogate the concept of “hybridity” as espoused by cultural theorists in relation to new forms of ethnic subjectivities hybridity. They argue that it is a useful concept in exploring the experience of individuals in the context of shifting economic and social relations and this adds another dimension to theories of fragmentation (Lucey et al. 2003).

Lucey et al. (2003) highlight the massive shift for working class young women moving into the intellectual domain, characterising it as one that requires an “internal and external makeover”. The authors only examined females in their study. The process of educational success and of social mobility involves crossing borders of social class, gender and ethnicity. It also involves negotiation between competing demands as other spaces and other possibilities are opened up. Lucey et al. (2003) suggest that although “the notion of ‘upward social mobility’ is the desired outcome of educational policy. However, discourses of social mobility tend to harbour denials of the losses that are fundamental to and

unavoidable in the change, even when those changes are desired, and of the enormous amount of psychological work involved in transformation; and the cost of that work” (p. 285). These losses, Lucey et al. (2003) argue, are a heavy cost for the educational success achieved and, thus, social mobility can provoke ambivalent feelings in families, such as anxiety and pride. Moreover, the authors note that by declining to take notice of these feelings vital aspects of the experience are being ignored. Lucey et al. (2003) stress that although these feelings are experienced psychologically they are, however, produced socially and, therefore, must be understood as “profoundly psycho-social” a perspective also central to understanding Horner’s (1970, 1972) fear of success. They suggest that, when examining the pathway from primary to third level education, the middle class participants mirrored that of a “conveyor belt”, while the working class participants were full of anomalies and contradictions (p289).

Carter (2005) in the US offers another perspective on the negotiation goes on for a non-dominant group. In her study she refers to cultural difference, individuals fall into one of three categories: “Cultural Mainstreamers”, “Non-compliant Believers” or “Cultural Stradlers”. Cultural Mainstreamers accept that non-dominant groups should be culturally, socially, economically and politically assimilated. Non-compliant Believers understand what cultural behaviours lead to academic, social and economical success, nonetheless favour their own “cultural presentations”. Non-compliant does not signify anti-intellectual; however these students form a collective oppositional identity to the dominant culture. Whereas Cultural Stradlers bridge the gap between the Mainstreamers and the Non-compliant characterised by bi-cultural perspectives they are strategic movers. Instead of rejecting their own culture they embrace a bi-culturalism that leads to successful participation in both. Interestingly, Carter (2005) found males were more likely to be ‘Non-compliant Believers’ this oppositional identity was also found in earlier finding by Willis (1978) examining aspirations in the UK with a male only sample

The current research will explore the challenges faced by young people in Dublin’s north inner-city in order to achieve academic success. It is envisaged that what has been constructed as “success” by the individual is an intensely emotional process. This is a demanding and exacting process for an individual, both psychologically and socially. It is hypothesised that individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds fear that success will lead to: alienation from their community, loss of identity and/or connections to that community and the loss of their overall sense of belonging among their peers, friends and family. No previous research has focused on “fear of success” and the experiences of young people in Ireland.

Methodology

The theoretical approach adopted in the current study is a phenomenological one. Phenomenology is based on the idea that experience, rather than simply factual content, reflects situations. It is an attempt to perceive the world as it appears to the individual. This approach involves an epistemological commitment to the validity of the lived experience of individuals, as an important truth in and of itself, whether or not it correlates with an external world reality. This phenomenological approach is not making ontological truth claims such as those sought in the phenomenological tradition of early Heidegger (1927); nor is it a search for phenomenological “structures” of experience, whether in a Husserlian sense of interrogating intentionality or an early Heideggerian one of uncovering structures of being. It is a phenomenological tradition resonant with that of Laing’s (1960) attempt to engage with people’s experience, a phenomenological approach echoed by Downes (2003) for the lived

experience of heroin addicts in Estonia and Latvia. The way in which an individual tells his/ her story is influenced by his/her experiences but is also shaped by social norms and the views of others, and the wider society. Subjective viewpoints of Dublin north inner-city young people were sought by employing a phenomenological approach.

The rationale for using a qualitative approach is that “it facilitates understanding people from their own frame of reference” (Blumer 1969). A person-centred methodology was used with participants, echoing the approach employed by Downes et al. (2006), with a similar sample of disadvantaged young people in Dublin West. The importance of child-centred and consultation, which ensures that young people are actively consulted regarding issues of their welfare, is well recognised (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989; Downes 2003b, 2004).

Qualitative methodology explores the multiple realities of the participants (Collican 2004). A combination of qualitative methodologies was employed in the current study. A two-phase, sequential approach was used, in order to gain insights into the understandings and experiences of Dublin north inner-city young people regarding “fear of success”. The first phase consisted of the pre-pilot focus group, while the second phase consisted of interviews. The focus group was conducted during December 2006 and the interviews were conducted during March to August 2007.

Sample selection

Gaining access to key informants can prove a difficult task. It often proves even more difficult in the case of marginalised groups. Three key individuals in three local community-based organisations: the NYP 2 (Neighbourhood Youth Project), the LDTF (Local Drugs Task Force) and HOPE (Hands on Peer Education) were approached for help with accessing informants. The presenting sample volunteered to participate in this survey. All of the participants were known to one or all of the key individuals. The use of qualitative methods was employed to select participants for interview. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.28) outline 16 different types of sampling used in qualitative research. The sample of participants that took part in the interviews was selected on the basis of four of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) sampling methods:

- Maximum variation: The principle is that if one deliberately tries to interview a selection of different people (age, gender, level of education, in a couple/single) their answers can give voice and meaning to the individual and wider subpopulations.
- Criterion: All cases meet the same criteria, namely, social class, age and address. All participants came from a working class background. Each participant was aged between 18 and 26 years and all of the participants lived and grew up in Dublin north inner-city.
- Opportunistic: following new leads and taking advantage of the unexpected.
- “The snow ball effect”: In order to reach a marginalised sample the current study employed “snow ball sampling”. Once potential participants were identified, they were asked to identify and recruit similar individuals, in order to increase the overall number of participants.

Participants

Six participants took part in the pre-pilot focus group, four of whom took part in the full study. The other two participants disengaged with the services and were not contactable.

Eleven participants took part in the full study. Creswell (1998, pp. 65 and 113) recommends “long interviews with up to 12 people” for a phenomenological study. For this study, a sample size of 11 was selected (Table 1).

Participant profile

All participants, both male and female, came from a working class background. Each of the participants were aged between 18 and 26 years, the average age was 22.3 years. The educational range of participants varied from early school leavers to third level graduates. Of the 11 participants, three had attended college. Three participants had a family member that attended college, one of whom was a brother, another was an aunt and the third was a second cousin. None of the participants had a parent that attended college. One of the participants who attended college also had a brother who attended college; however, this was 6 years prior to her attending and they did not live in the same house. All participants came from the same geographical area, each one living within a one-mile radius of each other. Three of the 11 participants were unemployed at the time of the study. The occupation of the highest earner in each of the households was semi-skilled. Almost half of the participants’ parents were unemployed.

Data collection

The data collection included a focus group and 11, two-phase individual, depth/semi-structured interviews. Two-phase interviewing was employed. Each of the 11 participants was interviewed twice. The first interview focused on background information, while the second interview focused on the lived experience of each participant. This two-stage interview process allowed researcher and participant to build rapport. There was a gap of 5-10 days between each interview. There were no refusals.

Pilot/focus group perspective

A focus group was employed at the preliminary stage of the study (Kruger 1988). An informal meeting took place between the researcher and a group from Dublin north inner-city. The purpose of this was twofold—namely to establish the best manner to encourage young people

Table 1 Breakdown of participants

Sex	Age	Occupation
F	22	Care assistant
F	22	Unemployed
M	19	Unemployed
F	26	Youth worker
F	26	Apprentice solicitor
F	26	Administrator
M	22	Apprentice plumber
F	26	Student
F	26	Shop assistant
F	19	Administrator
M	19	Unemployed

to talk about their experiences and, in addition, to generate questions and themes for discussion in the individual interviews. Five participants took part in the focus group.

Focus group research includes as many perspectives as possible, seeking to explore attitudes, feelings, beliefs and experiences (Denscombe 2000, p.115) regarding the focus of the inquiry. This interaction between participants emphasises their view of the world, the language they use and their values and beliefs about a situation. This interactive factor also enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences (Gibbs 1997).

Interpretation of data

The interpretation of the data, like the methodology, is rooted in phenomenology. The concept of “fear of success” has not been approached phenomenologically before. Moreover, the studies which have examined this concept have focused on quantitative data. The current study is a reinterpretation of Horner’s “fear of success” in terms of social class.

The phenomenological interpretation process consists of reading, reflecting, writing and re-writing. This enables the researcher to transform the lived experience into a “textual expression of its essence” (Van Manen, 1990). The data was interpreted by employing a revised version of Groenewald’s (2004) phenomenological explication strategy.

Groenewald (2004) deliberately refrains from using “data analysis”, as “analysis” has precarious connotations for phenomenology. According to Groenewald (2004):

The term [analysis] usually means a ‘breaking into parts’ and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon... [whereas ‘explication’ implies an]...investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole’ (p. 7).

Groenewald’s (2004, p 6-7) explication process consists of five phases: (1) bracketing, (2) delineating units of meaning, (3) clustering of units of meaning to form themes, (4) summarising, validating and modifying and (5) extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

Ethical issues

The study was approved by St Patrick’s College, Dublin City University, ethics committee.

Methodological limitations of the current study

One limitation of the current study is the limited sample size (N=11). This means that the findings may not necessarily generalise to other socio-economically disadvantaged areas in Ireland and internationally, however, may provide a basis for future survey design which may lead to generalisation.

There was a clear gender disparity in responses, with the number of respondents being overwhelmingly female, with almost three times the amount of females to males. However, due to the difficulty gaining access to a marginalised sample it was not possible to obtain a gender of balance. Howard (2002), in his study with marginalised students in the USA, notes the difficulty in recruiting males to participate in research.

While a developmental focus was incorporated into the current study it was done in a somewhat limited fashion, through adopting a range of ages in the chosen sample of 18-

26 years. However, in order to capture developmental factors a longitudinal study would be optimal for a more detailed analysis of these factors, though this was outside the scope of the current study.

Analysis of interview findings

The analysis is at the outset concerned with a phenomenological presenting of the findings in the participants' voices (Downes 2003a). Four major themes emerged from the interviews: Success and Identity, Intrapsychic Dimensions of Success, Interpersonal and Cultural Dimensions of Success and Educational and Institutional Dimensions of Success. From these major themes several subthemes emerged.

Success and identity

Individual constructs of success

Relationships were seen by participants as a key indicator of success. Similarly to Horner's (1970,1972) participants, "marriage" was significantly named by a number of participants. "Education", "Knowledge", "Finances" were also construed as indicators of being successful, echoing Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). These ideas of success, often referred to as "conventional", were very similar to those found by Anderson (1999) and Taylor et al. (1995) in their studies with samples of inner-city young people in the USA.

Personal models of success

Gilligan (1982) and Gilligan et al. (1990): notes the importance of having at least one "strong figure" in an individual's life to ensure healthy development, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood. The majority (n=6) of females named family and friends as their role models:

In the absence of a personal role model all of the males (n=3) mentioned a celebrity: "The Beckhams" (Paul, age 19), "Wayne Rooney" (Gerard, age19).

One participant explains his choice: "*Wayne Rooney—making a career out of football—something that he loved making him and that money*" (Leon, age 22). The absence of a familial or personally known role model for the males is of concern given the particular age of these participants.

Role identification, namely, motherhood was specifically named by one participant. When asked to "Tell me a story or give me an example of when you were successful", one participant stated: "*When I had my kids I was successful.*" O'Brien's (2005) study of working class mothers also found that motherhood and caring roles can be a source of successful identity.

Participants' constructs of not succeeding

When asked to provide five images of not succeeding, responses of "*poor or no education*", "*poverty*" and "*dropping out of school*" were mentioned frequently by participants. Furthermore, "*crime*" and "*drug use*" were also equally emphasised as unsuccessful by participants. This finding offers little support to an earlier finding by Anderson (1999) who suggests inner-city young people in the USA often find successful identities from crime and

drug use. However, a difference between Anderson's (1999) inner-city sample and the current sample is that a majority of the latter held jobs or had higher levels of education, though it needs to be acknowledged that a significant number of the current sample also did not have education beyond the age of 15. Moreover, the males (n=3) in the current study explicitly advised younger siblings against entering into *crime and drug use*.

The majority of females in the current study advised a younger sibling against prematurely "*getting into relationships*" and becoming "*pregnant*" which were seen as a barrier to achieving success, by the female participants. This finding is supported by earlier studies by Taylor et al. (1995) and Cardoza (1991) with similar samples in the USA.

Intrapsychic dimensions of success

The perception of the effects of success on friendship

Similarly to Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, the current study found that relationships would suffer due to acquired success. However, the current participants assumed "dramatic" life changes as a salient part of achieving success: "*I will have to change completely my thinking, attitude and the way that I act*" (Leon, age 22). These participants occupied a "trade-off mindset". For these young people, success meant leaving their *family, friends, community and culture behind*. Most of the participants (n=8) believed that they would endure 'dramatic' life changes, both personal and cultural. The sacrificing of close and personal relationships was specifically named (n=7). Some participants perceived these sacrifices as emotional changes: "*stressed*" (Leanne, age 19), "*depressed*" (Nicola, age 19), while several of the participants used the term "*lonely*".

Three participants responded that significant life changes would be necessary to achieve success. However they viewed these changes as positive:

"You would have to move and you'd never have time for yourself, your family or your friends but it would be great; I'd love it" (Donna, age 22).

"I'd have to move. The kids would have to move school. Everything would be better". (Maria, age 26, mother of two).

"It would be mad, but good". (Gerard age 19).

Perception of alienation as a result of career "successes"

Lucey et al. (2003) note the road to academic success for young working class people is a lonely isolated one; the current study supports these findings. Having established from the participants the perceived changes required to facilitate success, participants were then asked: "How would this [changes brought with success] make you feel?". Most participants (n=9) responded with negative remarks as opposed to positive ones: "*bad*", "*lonely*" and "*isolated*".

For two participants these perceived changes took more of a positive stance:

"They will see me less but it will be good for me. I will be appreciated" (Donna, age 22),
"Good, it would be great for the kids" (Maria, age 26).

Generally, participants perceived the road to "success" as both lonely and isolated—one that is rife with ambivalence of wanting, on the one hand to be socially mobile, financially secure, attain dreams, yet, on the other hand, having to sacrifice relationships and endure lonely isolated conditions to achieve success.

Perceptions of the need for change

Unlike Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, when asked how these changes (success) would impact on their lives the current participants predominantly responded positively. The majority of participants used the terms "great" or "good" and appeared to welcome this change. However, some participants appeared to be more ambivalent, the following illustrates the ambivalence: "They would be good because they could have what they want, no worries. The kids could go to good schools. And bad, because they wouldn't get to spend time with me and we would grow apart" (Maria, age 26).

Participants' fears of success

Unlike some of Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, all of the current participants, when asked, could imagine themselves being successful. However, similarly to Horner's (1970, 1972) findings, the perceived effects of success were named in terms of social and emotional "consequences". Participants predominantly responded with: "loss of connection" in terms of "community", "friends" and or "family". "Growing apart" was equally mentioned a significant number of times.

However, it is notable that, unlike Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, the current participants perceived consequences of success were more intrapersonal than interpersonal. While Horner's (1970, 1972) participants' perceived consequences were limited to romantic rejection, the current participants' consequences were much broader, in that they believed that they would lose their entire social network, namely family, friends and community. This finding is perhaps better supported by the work of Macleod (1987) and Carter (2005) also in the USA. Macleod (1987) found that for some of his participants, professionalism could be perceived by peers as betrayal of [black] identity, while Carter (2005) suggests that ultimately for young working class students, achievement is shaped by "non-cognitive factors" such as "fitting in".

These perceived consequences were mainly negative and often greater than their perceived gain—a gain that Reay (1998) and Holloway (1997) suggest that young working class people might be too willing to pass over. This is illustrated by the following:

"Fear of not succeeding—letting people down—fears of losing everything that I have chasing a dream and for what?" (Leon, age 22). Once again this either/or scenario appears; there was a sense amongst participants that if they left their communities they felt that they would lose their connection with their peers as they would no longer have anything in common with them.

One participant explicitly named the perceived loss of cultural identity as her biggest fear: "Of forgetting myself, fearing that I won't fit in, this is my biggest fear" (Laura, age 26). This finding resonates with an earlier finding by Taylor et al. (1995) with a similar sample in the USA, where the authors asked their participants what they would imagine would stop them from completing their education, the participants responded with the idea of: "Getting above myself" and "forgetting my roots". What was fundamentally different from Horner's participants was that the current participants feared maintaining the status quo. When asked how not "succeeding" would affect their family and friends, all of the participants said that nothing would change in their lives if they did not "succeed". Friends and family "would be the same", thus, allowing them to continue to exist in their "comfort zone" as Kohn (1977) would suggest. However, the current participants appeared to struggle with the status quo, when asked what they feared participants predominantly (n=6) feared: "things stay the same" in one participant's words: "That I will go nowhere in life, that things stay the bleeding same" (Paul, age 20).

Nevertheless, there was a lot of ambivalence displayed in many of the participants' responses. While they feared the perceived losses that would come with success, they also feared failure and the idea that things would stay the same. Lucey et al. (2003) working with a similar sample of inner-city disadvantaged young people in the UK found similar ambivalence among their participants, wanting and desiring but struggling with perceived losses. In the current study this finding was predominantly found among the younger group (18-22 year olds). They appeared to be more ambivalent—wanting and desiring but not acting. Some of them found themselves in what Lucey et al. (2003) refer to as the trap of “available”, but nevertheless “inadequate discourses” (p.288). All of the participants, except one, were either involuntarily unemployed or in a job that they had expressed dissatisfaction towards. This ambivalence was also apparent when participants tried to imagine themselves in a situation, having achieved their desired outcome. When asked how their success would make them feel, “*anxious*”, “*stressed*”, and “*happy*” were words voiced by the many of the participants.

Participants' hopes, dreams and aspirations

Within the current sample almost half of the participants (n=5) were actively pursuing or had fulfilled their “dream of success”. These had achieved or were pursuing success in the educational or work contexts, although there was diversity in these achievements by traditional conventional standards; some having attained prestigious educational qualifications while others were pursuing traditional work in care or having only recently returned to education. None of the men saw themselves on this [successful] road “actively pursuing success”.

Having identified the participants who had conventionally succeeded (n=1) or were “actively pursuing success”, (n=4), the question was then asked: “If you had to do this [go through process] again would you?”

One was confident she would do it again: “*Yes I would [do it again]. I love my job*” (Charlotte, age 22), “*I suppose so. I do not know, cos I am only starting, so I would say that*” [laughs] (Nicola, age 19).

The others articulated the difficulty they faced when trying to achieve their dreams, with little or no sign of assistance, as illustrated in the following voice: “*No, I would stay in school and make them believe in me, cos it was too hard and long the route that I took*” (Lisa, female age 26, participating at third level). This echoes the findings of Boldt (2000) who found that young people in Dublin inner-city expectations are limited by insufficient support and encouragement.

Two were ambivalent because of the difficulties they faced: “*Yes, but, I would do it differently. I would stay in school, repeat my Leaving [State Qualifying Exam], and go to third level straight after—not have a baby. It was too hard through the back door system*” (Laura, female, age 26, single parent).

“*I do not know. It was so hard working and going to college, only if I could go full time. Otherwise it's so hard*”. (Jane, female, age 26, returned to education to complete her degree in Social Science).

Participants' earlier aspirations

When asked, “When you were younger what dreams would you have had for yourself”, participants named a range of dreams that were in accordance with their current perceptions of success. These responses could be categorised as reflecting their current views of

success: “*To be a successful professional*” “*Be happily married*”, and “*To be financially comfortable*” were mentioned a significant amount of times.

Childhood aspirations did not differ greatly, when compared to current aspirations although participants appeared to be fatigued. When asked how had their dreams changed from when they were younger, the majority of participants talked of how their dreams had not changed (at least in memory) from when they were younger, although they did believe that achieving them had become somewhat of a ‘*struggle*’. Achieving success had proven “*harder*” than they had anticipated this is illustrated in the following participants’ voices: “*Only the route that I had to take in order to get there, it was far longer and harder than I have every imagined it would have been*” (Jane, age 26, returned to education, obtained a degree). “*It has just got lost, it was so hard*” (Lisa, age 25, returned to education, participating at third level). This is a finding that resonates with an earlier finding by MacLeod (1987) who notes the struggle of a group of males in a similar context in the USA. He found the majority were unable to attain success as the *struggle* proved too much, and where participants did attain success it was a somewhat diluted version of their earlier aspirations. This finding also supports Carter (2005) who found that males were more likely to be “Non-compliant Believers” whereas females were more likely to be “Cultural Mainstreamers”. It suggests that females accept that non-dominant groups should be culturally, socially, economically and politically assimilated and act accordingly.

Participants’ expectation for the future

There was a clear division by gender, on the subject of internal or external attributes required to become successful. The majority of the females believed that they would attain success through “*hard work*” and “*determination*”. While the male participants in the study believed that their fate was in the hands of someone else, “*hoping*” to be given the “*chance*” or “*opportunity*” to do something. This external attribution of success lends support to Kohn’s (1977) and MacLeod’s (1987) findings that working class males believe that the fate of their life chances is controlled externally. In a study with a sample of males from a disadvantaged community in North Dublin, Owens (2005) also found her participants attributed success to external forces, “*hoping*” that they would “*be given a break*”. In similar vein, Downes (2003b), in a study of Russian speaking heroin users in Estonia explored the concept of “*fatalism*”, i.e. assessing individual’s belief in their ability to control their fate. He also found that fatalism was highly prevalent among the males in this study.

Interpersonal and cultural dimensions of success

Community relations

The majority (n=7) of female participants highly valued the community that they came from and the relationships that they had within it. When asked what they liked about their community, participants mentioned: “*connection*” and “*a sense of ‘belonging’ ‘the people’, and ‘the support’*” a significant amount of times, while the other female participant valued the physical aspects, more specifically the “*pubs*”.

The males in the study all (n=3) replied with “*nothing*” when asked what they liked about their community. Both Fisher (2002) and Sarason (1974) emphasise the psychological importance of belonging to a community and that process providing vital supports, namely identity, a social network and social outlet.

The perceived impact of aspirational changes on relationships

Perceived alienation from community was specifically named by participants, in relation to career success. This [career success] brought with it an enormous sense of loss. When asked: “How will these changes impact on your friends?” participants again named the loss of relationships with friends, while expected, dramatic effects on social and emotional life were also named. One participant further articulated this parting: “*Change the whole person that I am and how I am with them. It will be difficult*” (Leon age 22). When asked about the impact of success on their relationships most of the participants (n=7) used the phrases: [we would] “*drift apart*” or “*grow apart*”.

One participant spoke of the pressure between domestic duties and study: “*Between study and the baby I had no time for my friends. The relationships broke down*” (Laura, age 26, sharing her difficult experience of being a mother, maintaining relationships and undertaking a degree). Cardoza (1991) working with a similar sample of females in the USA, notes “domestic labour” had a sharp negative impact on degree completion.

Perceived impact of career “success” on family relations

At a first glance the participants’ perception of the impact of success appears to be positive. When asked: “How will your success impact on your family?”. The majority (n=6) simply responded “*good or great*”, however, upon further reflection they were ambivalent as illustrated by the following: “*Good and bad*” (Nicola, age 19). Other participants viewed the impact of success from their families’ perspective: “*Ok, they would be happy for me. I would be staying out of trouble. My Ma wouldn’t be as worried as much*” (Leanne, age 19).

Although these participants’ responses were mostly positive, there appears to be some ambivalence as to how they would be in this “successful” situation. This ambivalence is resolved somewhat by being given the opportunity to support their loved ones: “*Good—you could give them [family] more [materially]*” (Leon, age 22). “*They would be good because they could have what they want, no worries, go to good schools. And bad because they wouldn’t get to spend time with me and we would grow apart*” (Maria, age 26).

Perceived isolation from community as a consequence of “success”

On the question of what would need to change to become successful, the participants who did not go to college assumed a “*loss of connection*” with the community would occur (n=8). (As previously listed in responses above). It is notable that participants that did attend college (n=3) talked about this “*loss of connection*” as inevitable. The need for connection and sense of belonging was expressed continually throughout the study. Taylor et al. (1995) and Gilligan (1982) both discuss the need for an individual to belong, the need for “assumed connection” (see also Downes 2003a, 2009) as a way of fostering positive adolescent relationships, while simultaneously promoting positive mental health. Moreover, Carter (2005) suggests this “*sacrifice*” is important and is often overlooked by the dominant culture.

At different stages throughout the interviews the group who did go to college (n=3) talked about a lack of understanding from their friends: “*They thought that it was great but some of them didn’t really realise*” (Laura, age 26, sharing her experience of getting her Law degree and the lack of understanding on the part of her friends). “*I didn’t tell them either. I was so ashamed*” (Jane, age 26 sharing her experience of failing a course in college and not being able to tell her friends). “*They thought that I was clever. That was then. Now they slag*

me for being on another planet. They just do not get it” (Lisa sharing her experience of when she returned to education and shared her long-term plans to become a therapist).

The need for peer acceptance and support when overcoming adversity is well documented in psychology (see Roosa 2000; Masten, et al. 1990; Rutter 1987 and Sameroff et al. 1982). Furthermore, Piedmont (1988) in a study of fear of success notes the importance of having peers that understand the stresses and strains of education in order to succeed.

Sacrificing relationships

The sacrificing of close relationships was mentioned as a direct effect of success a significant amount of times. The majority of participants (n=9) assumed that they would no longer “*have anything in common*” with their peers and that this would result in a weakening of the relationship. Two participants took more of a positive stance: “*I’d have to make new friends*” (Maria, age 26). “*The friends I’d have would be successful too so they’d be happy for me*” (Leon, age 22).

Reay (1998) suggests that it is the ambivalence coupled with the perceived losses that is at the core of why so many working class students pass on education. Furthermore, when asked: “How do you see yourself in this situation?” more than half (n=7) of the participants assumed that [career] “success” comes at a high price, namely “*stress*”.

Effects of significant others

A significant number of participants (n=6) noted the support of at least one person in their life as a factor that contributed to their success. In three of the participant’s voices:

“Hard work, well really my friend. She encouraged me all the way” (Jane, age 26 returned to college and obtained a degree),

“Practice, hard work and my Ma. She was a great support” (Lisa, age 26),

“The support of my family, especially my granny. She always said I could be someone” (Charlotte, age 22, working in her dream job).

More than half of the participants cited the support of at least one significant other—a friend or family member—as a factor that contributed to past success. Moreover, Taylor et al. (1995) emphasise the ambivalence that often surrounds these relationships; on the one hand, the individual highly values the relationship and the “closeness”, yet, when faced with a problem they feel as though they could not tell the person, for fear of jeopardising the relationship. This ambivalence surrounding success was echoed in the current study by several participants (n=6). On the one hand, they valued their relations with a significant other and cited them as a contributing factor to their past successes (n=6), yet, when asked about their experience of not succeeding participants said that they could not tell anyone (n=4). This silence was accompanied by feelings of guilt and perceived shame.

Educational and institutional dimensions of success

Education as a key indicator of success

Education was seen as a key indicator for success by these participants. When asked to give examples or tell a story of when they were successful, a significant number of participants

(n=6) instanced an educational experience when they felt that they had been successful, such as:

“When I completed my degree” (Jane, age 26).

“When I was younger, I was really good in school”. (Lisa, age 26).

“When I completed my entrance exams for the Law Society” (Laura, age 26).

“When I finished school” (Paul, age 19).

“When I did my Junior Cert I felt good for this, but the only thing was I did it in prison” (Gerard, age 19).

“When I went back to college [returned to do Leaving Certificate in evening]” (Nicola, age 19).

Other participants (n=5) instanced a personal achievement that they felt that they had succeeded in, such as:

“About four years ago, I had a job. I got on with everyone. It was great. I was successful” (Donna, age 22).

“As a mother, when I had my kids I was successful” (Maria, age 26).

“Last year I scored the winning goal for the cup final. We were losing to a team that told me that I’d never make a good footballer. In the last few minutes I scored and it was amazing”, (Leon, age 22).

“When I was younger I was a disco dancer and when I won competitions I felt successful” (Leanne, age 19).

“When I won All-Ireland Dancer of the Year” (Nicola, age 19).

These findings challenge Kohn’s (1970) suggestion that working class people neither want nor desire third level education and the stereotypical middle class professional jobs. Thus, the desire for change and upward social mobility rather echoes the findings of Downes (2004), Downes et al. (2006) and Downes and Maunsell (2007) with similar samples in Dublin; this research found that at least 80% of the sample in West Dublin and up to 100% of the Dublin South inner-city sample aspired to succeed in education. Moreover, these findings offer further support for Bourdieu’s (1977) work, which suggests that individuals quickly comprehend what conditions make possible for them to succeed and which do not, and do not to aspire to the unavailable. At the time when the current participants were at school, the possibility to further their education was met with insuperable obstacles.

Estimation of the value of education

Education was significantly mentioned as an indicator of success, echoing findings of Carter (2005) and MacLeod (1987) in the USA. Moreover, lack of education was seen as an indicator of ‘not succeeding’ by the participants. All participants explicitly used the words “very important” when asked how important was education. In the words of one respondent: “Very important. It’s the only way that a working class girl can guarantee success” (Jane, age 26, returned to education at age 20). Education was seen as giving “opportunities” and “a sense of achievement” by a number of participants.

Middle class peers

The majority of female participants (n=5) had pre-conceived ideas of what their peers would be like, which were expressed in a negative tone and named in remarks such as:

“Judgemental”, “Snobby” and “Pretentious”. Moreover, they believed they would not have anything in common with them. Downes and Maunsell (2007) highlight the need to engage with a cohort of working class students of similar backgrounds when trying to attract and retain them in third level education. In an autobiographical examination of her own experience as a working class academic, Holloway (1997) comments on this negative association with middle class peers; she suggests that this is because the middle class peers highlight the “otherness” of their working class peers. Looking through the lens of Carter’s (2005) work I guess participants did not manage to negotiate the position of “Cultural Stradler”.

Discussion

Participants associated success with money, education and knowledge. Relationships were also a source of success, particularly marriage. The absence of a personal role model for the males in the study is a worrying issue, given their age. In the USA, mentoring programmes have yielded significant results with similar samples (Deutsch 2008).

Horner (1970, 1972) concluded that women have “a motive to avoid success or a ‘fear of success’”. They feared the negative consequences of succeeding in traditionally male domains. Such fears were based on societal expectations. The current participants did have a motive to avoid success, and this too was rooted in societal expectations. What was fundamentally different from Horner’s findings (1970, 1972) was that a significant number of these young people equally feared maintaining the status quo. “*That I will go nowhere in life, that things stay the bleeding same*” (Paul, age 20). Moreover, the expression of fearing that things would stay the same appeared to cause equal anxiety, suggesting that this sample of young people from Dublin North Inner-city genuinely have a desire to succeed in conventional terms.

Childhood aspirations did not differ greatly, when compared to current aspirations although participants appeared to be fatigued. Generally, participants perceived the road to “success” as both lonely and isolated—one that is rife with ambivalence of wanting, on the one hand to be socially mobile, financially secure, attain dreams, yet, on the other hand, having to sacrifice relationships and endure lonely isolated conditions to achieve success. Alienation and isolation were seen as a direct consequence of achieving success. This ambivalence was also apparent when participants tried to imagine themselves in a situation, having achieved their desired outcome. When asked how this would make them feel, “*anxious*”, “*stressed*” and “*happy*” were words voiced by the participants.

Participants highly valued the communities that they came from and the relationships that they had within them. What was consistently echoed from other themes was the perceived loss of relationships with family, friends and community as a direct effect of achieving success. This was further developed into loss of “*connection*” and overall “*sense of belonging*”. Fear of success was named as the fear of “*forgetting myself*”; loss of cultural identity was seen as the inevitable price of success. Ambivalence was also apparent throughout this theme. Particularly in relation to significant others, on the one hand, they highly valued their relationship and the “*closeness*”, citing them as a contributing factor to their past successes. Yet, when asked about their experience of not succeeding participants said that they could not tell anyone. It is noteworthy that several of the participants were talking about an educational experience that they could not tell anyone about. Furthermore,

the participants that did attend college felt that their friends no longer understood them. The need for better links between the community and education system was evident from participant voices.

Education was seen as a key indicator for success by these participants; they highly valued education and viewed it as a currency to obtain what they desired. However, the cost of education did not permit these young people to stay on in the education system. Education was seen as a luxury, which this group could not afford. Third level education had become symbolic of sacrifice. These young working class people believed that they were faced with a trade-off dilemma; in order to become educationally successful they must sacrifice their relationships with their family, peers and their community. The majority of participants lacked identification in the education system, and moreover, they believed they would not have anything in common with their middle class peers.

Unlike some of Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, all of the current participants, when asked, could imagine themselves being successful. Similarly to Horner's (1970, 1972) findings, the perceived effects of success were named in terms of social and emotional "consequences". However, unlike Horner's (1970, 1972) participants, the current participants perceived consequences of success were as much intrapersonal as interpersonal. Horner's (1970, 1972) participants' perceived consequences were limited to romantic rejection; the current participants' consequences were much broader, they included their entire social network, namely family, friends and community.

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Jo-Hanna Ivers. Department of Public Health and Primary Care Trinity College Centre for Health Sciences, Adelaide & Meath incl. National Children's Hospital, Tallaght, Dublin 24, Ireland. E-mail: jivers@tcd.ie; Website: http://www.medicine.tcd.ie/public_health_primary_care/

Current themes of research:

Phenomenology. Psychology of Education. Addiction and Inequality.

Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:

- Ivers, J., McLoughlin, V., & Downes, P. (2010). Current Steps and Future Horizons for CASPr: Review of CASPr North-East Inner City After Schools Project. CASPr: Dublin.
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Paul Downes. Educational Disadvantage Centre, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland. E-mail: paul.downes@spd.dcu.ie

Current themes of research:

Phenomenology. Psychology of Education. Mental Health and Inequalities within the Education System.

Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:

Books:

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