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### **3. Destined for Success?: Who is made intelligible in the discursive configuration of class and background (0070)**

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There is a complicated history of how intelligence and capacity is marked on different bodies by virtue of sexist, racist and classist assumptions about difference and the social (Gould, 1997). Caroline Pelletier's (2009) recent exegesis of Rancière's philosophical discourse traverses related epistemological ground. She notes how:

'Rancière's argument about education emerges from his critique of Bourdieu, which states that Bourdieu reinforces inequality by presuming it as the starting point of his analysis. What is at stake is the question of performativity, and the means by which discourse has effects' (Pelletier, 2009: 137)

Using empirical data, and theoretical discourse about the social positioning of educationally successful working-class young women (Evans, 2008; Hey, 2009) this paper scrutinizes how we might recast notions of social difference in (and outside) higher education/policy/discourse.

### **3. Destined for Success?: Who is made intelligible in the discursive configuration of class and background**

**Paper**

#### **Destined for Success?: Who is made intelligible in the discursive configuration of class and background**

'[...] universities and colleges have a responsibility to identify the talent and the potential of applicants and to treat all applicants fairly and transparently. Institutions should also recognise that talent and potential may not be fully demonstrated by examination results [...] institutions should explicitly consider the background and context of applicants' achievements.'

(Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004: 23)

The policy discourse of HE has been dominated by: 'widening participation' and 'raising aspiration', targeted at non-traditional students. The question of equity is now further recast as a vague search for 'fair' access by taking 'background' into account. This suggests the triumph of hope over experience, given the persistence of classed patterns of exclusion from and access to HE (Reay *et al*, 2005).

Recent work reveals that there *are* educationally successful working-class young women (Evans, 2008; Hey, 2009). Understanding their 'success' would seem a fruitful point of departure, not least to leaven the tendency to assume *lack* in working class groups. The issue for us in this paper is who is

made visible in this process – when is class recognised? Or, put another way, who is ‘classed’ and who is the classifier? Taking our cue from Rancière’s disruption of critical theory, we occupy the tension between thinking *with* and *against* Bourdieu. We show some of the ensuing fractious relations lived between ‘class’ and academic success. Firstly, in condensed snapshots of Jude and Beth’s narratives about aspiration and destination and secondly, in focussing on Mai, a young working class women of Anglo-Vietnamese ethnicity is rejected from her first preference University but has no way to decode why.

### ***Making Out: Class and Chance***

[...] I’m always having to contend with ‘oh, you’ll never get anywhere,’ and everything like that, but I thought well, ‘I die trying,’ because, you know, if you’ve got a dream then you should go for it.’

(Jude, white working-class)

Jude wants to ‘live the dream’, despite being aware that she is ‘looked down on’ whilst Beth’s view about mobility in her own wider family, involves her simultaneous disapproval of ‘faking’ middle class ‘pretentiousness’ but also contains a confirmatory respect for her cousin’s success in the employment market, gained via the combination of hard work and ‘chance’:

‘They never pretended that they was anything else.’

These young women offer what Sayer (2005) called *lay moral norms*. It is notable that achieving success is seen as a mixture of luck, talent and tenacity : an account blending serendipity and personality. Skeggs and Wood (2008) show that ‘Jordan’ and Jade were esteemed, having managed the move from ‘glamour modelling’ or Big Brother guest to becoming a ‘brand’. The polite classes view this form of ‘celebrity with contempt, (Hey, 2008) but it is perhaps how Jordan and Jade, lay claim to working-class forms of success without compromising their authenticity, which endears them to their fans. Being ‘authentic’ by ‘being oneself’ so rarely works in working class girls favour (Hey, 2008).

### ***The Performative Personal Statement: Making Mai Non-Intelligible***

The extent to which universities use the UCAS personal statement in assessing the ‘aptitude’ of university applicants remains subject to rumour. A recent article (Shephard, 2009) indicated that Cambridge does not use the personal statement to assess potential. Yet, the working-class girls whom Evans (2008) followed during their final A level year had been advised by teachers that *getting the personal statement right* was crucial. What ‘getting it right’ meant was difficult to untangle and they received conflicting advice about how best to demonstrate their capacity.

Mai had failed to get into Queen Mary's College. The head of sixth form, reviewed her application with the researcher (SE) to suggest that the personal statement may well have been read negatively because Mai's nominated extra-curricular activities for example, were not of the 'right' kind. She had not pursued a *Duke of Edinburgh* award, had not recorded extra-curricular sporting or musical success. Rather, she reported undertaking a beauty course in order to help at her father's nail salon, as well as voluntary work helping Vietnamese refugees. This matched exactly Bourdieu's (1974) thesis about the primacy of middle-class 'values' and 'taste' within the education system. Both of Mai's activities were significant to maintaining important relationships and networks in the Vietnamese community but these were non-intelligible/non-transferable within dominant ideas about hobbies (and accomplishments) which go to create the 'right' kind of evidence about the 'right' type of student.

If aptitude and capacity is read from personal statements then the account of the self the applicant presents is likely to remain highly consequential, not least because it offers a 'self' to be read by an admission tutor. The text's authenticity and readability is implicated. Yet, quite how extra-curricular activities come to indicate intelligence and aptitude is unclear. What *is* clear in this instance is that these activities can be used as proxies and symbolic markers that work against non-dominant class and ethnic positions.

### **Conclusion**

Evans' empirical data creates access to the symbolic orders of class taken from different power angles. The lay and institutional gaze show up difference in how and why 'background' is taken into account. One cannot make huge claims from such scant data but snapshots do open up a set of questions about the vested stakes in making class, background and merit intelligible. Policy requires that the Academy 'takes class into account' but it is in merely assuming class as that which is only marked on working class bodies that a metonymic effect of class is installed. This is to mistake a part for the whole. The issues for institutions is to denaturalise their own specific class cultural (privileges) and the bigger question for social policy and politics is to offer a different set of discourse for examining people's pathways through the social – ones that do not mark incapacity as inherent in some groups.

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