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**Title of paper:** Class matters in the interview setting? Positionality, situatedness and class

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*Abstract*

*In this article we argue that despite methodological and analytical advancements in the field of social class research, these developments have not lead to a wholehearted discussion about class positionality and situatedness in relation to interviewer-participant dynamics. Despite – or perhaps due to – this methodological gap, there remains an unspoken expectation that class matching, particularly when investigating working-class groups and practices, is desirable as it engenders empathy on the part of the interviewer which allows for openness on the part of the participant. The team of four interviewers reflect upon their varying experiences of conducting interviews about class with a group of middle- and working-class students at university, arguing that even if class matching between participant and researcher were possible, shared class position does not necessarily equate with similar life experiences, or enable a strong rapport nor a more ethical analysis or understanding of working-class people's lives. We explore some of the complexities regarding the class-related positions of the researchers and the participants and consequently advocate that class researchers engage in reflexive practices in order to explore the myriad ways in which the researcher's own class history and current class position both advantage and disadvantage the research process, often in unpredictable ways.*

Introduction

Currently in the UK, class is gaining increased attention within the discipline of sociology. Offering a critique of the emphasis on individualism and loosening of ties to kin and community found in the work of Giddens (1994) and Beck (1992), and as a reaction to the 'death of class' thesis (Pakulski and Waters 1996), this resurgence of class scholarship has been led by a small 'school' of British feminists, most of whom utilise Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Skeggs 1997; Reay 1998; Lawler 1999; Walkerdine et al. 2001; Anthias 2001a; 2001b; Devine 2004). These works have challenged conventional, male-stream definitions of social class (Goldthorpe 1980) by focusing on class as an ongoing process, which is experienced subjectively, within arenas other than employment. In particular, auto/biographical accounts of class mobility as experienced by women from working-class backgrounds (Mahony and Zmroczek 1997) have explored the ways in which class and gender intersect, and the importance of the subjective or psychological dimensions of class. Many of these debates have problematised the notion of a working-class academic (Wakeling 2010) or have focussed upon the ambiguous nature of class as experienced by academics from poor backgrounds, highlighting the complex experience of belonging to both the working- and the middle-class but not entirely fitting into either.

However, despite these important theoretical and empirical advances, discussions about class research methodology have only very recently begun to emerge. Many

researchers have recognised the importance of identity, subjectivity and the 'felt' dimensions of class, and use qualitative methods such as ethnography, focus groups and in-depth interviews (Skeggs 1997; Lawler 2000; Walkerdine et al. 2001). However, this emerging methodology for exploring class has not necessarily made analysing or accessing class any easier. As Ball (2003: 175) notes, class identity research has 'been beset with problems of measurement, method and conceptualisation'. It is not only academics from working-class backgrounds that find categorising their class position difficult. Virtually all class researchers in the UK have reported that accessing definitions and experiences of class is difficult, with both middle- and working-class respondents from all class positions denying the relevance or existence of class, or when asked to define themselves, disidentifying from a class position (Savage et al. 2001; Devine 2004; Ball 2003). Not only are the middle-class defensive and the working-class embarrassed about their place on the social hierarchy (Sayer 2005), but a general decline of class identity or politics following the neo-liberal assumptions of 'meritocracy' has rendered social class inequalities invisible (Skeggs 1997).

Considering the growing attention to 'new' class studies in recent years, and the way in which class researchers – particularly feminists – have written reflexively about their own experiences of class, one surprising omission in this emerging work on class research methodology is an examination of  positionality and situatedness. With the exception of Reay's (1997) and Skeggs's (1997) in-depth discussions and some brief notes by others (Tang 2002, Bettie 2003, Mellor 2010, Evans 2010) there has been very little material reflecting on class dynamics within the research process. Despite this methodological gap, there seems to remain anecdotal preferences amongst class

scholars for class matching in qualitative research, particularly when the research involves working-class participants. For instance, during a meeting with the advisory body for our research project, conversation focused upon the difficulties of interviewing elite students and it was suggested that the more overtly working-class researcher amongst us conduct interviews with the working-class students, leaving the researcher deemed able to 'pass' as middle-class to interview the more privileged students. This preference for class matching seems to be guided by the assumption that if interviewed by a middle-class researcher, differences of power and privilege in the research setting could inhibit (or even harm) marginalised groups and further, that middle-class researchers may be unable to adequately understand or represent others' lives. Some of the problems of middle-class researchers working with disadvantaged groups are highlighted by Hey (2008) in her critique of Gillian Evans' ethnography on working-class groups in Bermondsey:

> Instead of a commentary about a shared world, so to speak, what we get is a sort of postmodern romance of the dark night, as plucky Gillian gets down and dirty with the 'common as muck' folks who live and play hard – a sort of *Shameless* but with subtitles. […] I do not usually sign up for an identity politics of research (that is, only the white working class or, more likely, the ex-white working class can research the white working class, etc.), but Gillian Evan's look onto the 'others' is figured so often in the persona of an embodied intrusive 'superior' presence that, despite herself (see the introduction

to the paperback edition), her account works to further

diminish those already disadvantaged. (Hey 2008: 575)

The assumption that class matching is preferable in all cases also, quite conveniently, lets the guilty, middle-class, defended interviewer off the hook. Rather than adopting a 'damned if you do' or 'damned if you don't' position on this kind of positionality itself, reflecting on the class dynamics between interviewers and participants allows an exploration of the ways in which particular data on class can be and is being produced in the research process. As social researchers, it is important to consider how our own experiences have shaped our ways of seeing and acting and the ways in which our own habituses – to use a phrase from Bourdieu – shape data production/collection. Bourdieu defines the concept of habitus as the internalisation of schemes of perception, conception and action as generated through experiences in the world and states that "one of the functions of the notion of habitus is to account for the unity of style, which unites the practices and goods of a single agent or class of agents" (Bourdieu 1998: 8). In terms of this paper the concept of habitus can help us to think about our ways of knowing and the ways in which our conceptions of the world are made evident in our interactions with our participants, constructing relationships of power. To overlook these power relations, as Sarah Evans (2010) argues, 'would be to enhance the position of privilege with respect to the respondents already entrenched in the research relationship' (2010: 56). In this paper, we therefore seek to expose the unspoken dimensions of interview dynamics in order to highlight the potential advantages and limitations that inhere in class imbued interaction.

Before moving on to outline the study and to discuss our post-fieldwork reflections on class and the relationship between researcher and participant, we critically analyse the literature on positionality and situatedness in relation to interview dynamics, concentrating in particular on the debate about 'matching' researcher with participant. We also explore debates on the objective and subjective dimensions of class for academics from working-class backgrounds, which cast doubt upon the possibility of class matching in research.

Working-Class Academics: Reflexivity, Power and Privilege

The literature on interpersonal dynamics in fieldwork has flourished in recent years. The legacy of this corpus can be traced to second wave feminist debates (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984). These writers suggested that due to a shared experience of womanhood, a more in-depth understanding would result when female researchers, rather than their male counterparts, interviewed women. Most recent discussions about positionality have focussed upon race/ethnicity or nationality (especially in relation to white researchers speaking to minority groups) and the complex ways in which these positions intersect with other identities (Carter 2004; Egharevba 2001; Hall 2004) or on gender (Tang 2002; Archer 2002; Hopkins 2009). Other works have explored positions of religion (Bolognani 2007; Mellor 2010) and sexuality (Browne 2003, Yip 2005). However, the assumption that 'matching' researchers with participants is optimal has been strongly challenged by virtually all writers in this corpus (Carter 2004; Egharevba 2001; Hall 2004; Rabe 2003; Subedi 2006, though see Shah 2004 for an alternative perspective).

In recent years, reflexive reports on the research process have problematised 'matching' on a number of levels. Rhodes (1994) argues that matching interviewers and interviewees assumes there is only one truth to be determined by the research and that subject positions are one-dimensional and fixed. These assumptions may lead both researchers and the researched to imagine that they 'know each other's lives and invite the expectation of particular responses, which can lead 'the researcher into a murky state of complacency' (Beedell 2009:110). During interviews with respondents who had similar life experiences to Beedell (2009: 116) her questioning was often 'rooted in my knowledge of what, potentially, lay beneath'. Personal and collegial reflexivity is key to acknowledging the affinities, dissonances and defences that may influence interactions and can unlock the resources of life experience that reside within every researcher. Reflexive accounts have also critiqued the traditional 'insider'/'outsider' duality, suggesting instead that these positions are not in opposition (Merriam et al. 2001). More pragmatically, identities are multiple and fluid, making it impractical (and probably impossible) to find a researcher that matches a participant on all levels (Archer 2002). Thapar-Björkert and Henry (2004) suggest that rapport between researcher and researched is dynamic, multifarious and unpredictable, and Archer's (2002) discussion of intersecting identities highlights how each researcher has a unique standpoint brought about by the various advantages and disadvantages within each position.

On a more practical level, the possibility of class matching between working-class respondents and researchers rests upon the premise that academics from working-class backgrounds can theoretically be positioned as working-class in the present. However, this position has been challenged by Wakeling (2010) who scrutinises

status and wealth hierarchies in his analysis of Bourdieusian-feminist autobiographical accounts of women academics from marginalised backgrounds, arguing that academics cannot be objectively considered working-class:

> It does not follow that the occupational position and life circumstances of a junior professional such as an academic can be compared to that of someone in a 'solidly' working-class occupation such as a bus driver, cleaner, supermarket checkout assistant or lathe operator. In general, pay and conditions are better in the professions, as are the measurable outcomes for quality of life. (Wakeling 2010: 38)

Citing Adair's distinction between working-class groups to whom educational opportunity is open, and the 'poverty class' (those who are benefits-dependent, as well as materially-deprived groups who cannot access educational opportunity), Wakeling (2010) also challenges the subjective dimensions of working-class identity expressed in these autobiographical accounts, noting that 'there will *always* be someone in more difficult circumstances' (2010: 44).

Power relations in qualitative research are multidirectional, with the various stages of research – from recruitment to dissemination – involving differing power distribution between the researchers and researched (Koro-Ljungberg 2008; Karnieli-Miller et al 2009; Kvale 1996; Brinkman and Kvale 2005). We acknowledge that such power relations can only partly be used to understand how participant accounts are created, but due to the complexities of power and the way in which individuals are differently

placed in relation to class as well as gender, ethnicity and so on, we are limited by space in reflecting on the multidimensionality of power relations. In the analysis and write-up stage, there is consensus within the literature that researchers have a high degree of formal control over the process (Karnieli-Miller et al 2009; Brinkman and Kvale 2005). However, during the data collection stage, Karnieli-Miller et al (2009) indicate that 'control and ownership of the data seem to be in the hands of the participants' because researchers are 'entirely dependent on the participants' willingness to take part in the research' (2009: 282). On the other hand, Brinkman and Kvale (2005) argue that interviewers exercise considerable power during fieldwork because they determine the interview guide and decide when to stop the interview. There has been some attention to the ways in which inequalities such as class or sexuality may influence data collection. For instance, McDermott (2004) suggests that one-to-one interviews – especially those that rely on a level of abstraction – may be intimidating or exclusionary for working-class people. Being relaxed, contented and articulate influences the kinds of accounts told, which according to McDermott (2004), allowed the middle-class women she interviewed to speak for longer and with more confidence than their working-class counterparts. The participant's desire or willingness to 'open up' may also be influenced by the general atmosphere of the location of the interview. For instance, Rapley talks about his fears that his participant was silenced by other people sitting within earshot of the discussion:

> …when interviewing someone in a coffee shop and we turned
>
> to the subject of his sexuality, he began to speak in hushed
>
> tones. After the interview he noted that 'This is a small

community and I don't want to upset future business clients'

(Rapley 2004: 18).


There has been no attention to class and location of the interview in relation to data production/collection but the recent exploration of institutional habitus in relation to choice of educational institutions, and experience of those institutions, points to the significance of how an individual feels they 'fit in' to an environment (Ball 2003; Ingram 2009).


Having explored the literature on reflexivity, situatedness and power relations, we will now outline the research project from which we draw our reflections before considering the researchers' positionalities and habituses in relation to the interview experience. The study is a three-year Leverhulme funded project entitled "Paired Peers", which explores the experiences of a group of 90 middle-class and working-class students throughout their undergraduate studies. Half these students study at the University of the West of England (UWE) – a post-92 university – and the others are students at the University of Bristol, a pre-92 institution. Focusing upon classed experiences, identities and positions, we have currently completed the first year of research which involved a biographical and a semi-structured interview (of about an hour long) with each student. In addition, some students have also completed journals and photo diaries. The team of four researchers worked hard to put students at ease before beginning the interview, for instance offering the students refreshments and 'nibbles' – though these were rarely accepted – and making time for a brief chat (for example about the weather, how they are settling in to university life, asking whether they found the location of the interview easily or whether they had any questions

about the research). Throughout the interview process, the interviewers gave very little explicit information about their own experiences or lives to the participants, however the subtle cues of conscious and unconscious dispositions are significant here to the way in which team members' class positions were read and understood. There are powerful, complex and unspoken ways that the body is marked by class distinctions (Skeggs 1997) and the way in which representations of social class in England are linked to a hierarchy of social worth and intelligence through accents and vocabulary, dress, mannerisms and so on (Hey 1997). Yet as interviewers we often found it difficult to immediately recognise the class background of the students on first meeting them, perhaps due to a generic student 'look' or perhaps because we are no longer tuned in to such class distinctions among this age group. We expect that the students too often struggled to place the interviewers' class backgrounds. Our interviewer team is homogeneous in that we are all white women aged between 22 and 50. However, there are differences in class background and nationality. Nicola is Northern Irish and Jody, Jessie and Phoebe are English, and three of us – A, B and C – are from working-class backgrounds. What follows is a brief individual exploration of our class positionings before an analysis of the ways in which class was significant to our interviewer-participant dynamics.

A Class Act?

**Jody**

When I began the "Paired Peers" project I was apprehensive about interviewing middle-class participants. Coming from a working-class background (but having a mother who gained a degree in later life and who now has a professional job), having attended low-performing schools and having a strong regional accent I was concerned

that some students from very privileged backgrounds may not speak as openly or honestly as they would to a researcher from a similar background, perhaps preferring to talk about issues that they imagined I would agree with to create a pleasant and jovial atmosphere, rather than to reveal feelings that could cause disharmony. On the other hand, I felt confident at the prospect of interviewing the working-class respondents, expecting that our similar class backgrounds would necessarily allow for greater rapport.

**Nicola**

My previous research has focused on working-class young people yet, unlike A, I did not feel uncomfortable with interviewing middle-class students. I attended a selective grammar school in Northern Ireland where many of my friends were from middle-class backgrounds. I studied art and literature at university, have acquired objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) in the form of degrees and have travelled extensively (middle-class cultural capital?) and so felt that I had acquired the 'right' cultural capital to 'fit in' with middle-class students. The complexity of my class position perhaps allows me to have a degree of flexibility in habitus (Ingram 2011), allowing me to make shifts in manner of expression in accordance to the habitus cues from the participant. However, my Northern Irish accent may have affected students' perceptions of me, depending on their conceptualisation of the significance of regional accents.

**Jessie**

Being young and a recent graduate from the University of Bristol I expected that social class would not be the defining factor for building rapport with the participants.

Instead I hoped that my knowledge and experience of the university would help me to connect with all interviewees and to enable a deeper understanding of the context of their narratives. However I also expected that having a working-class background would enable me to build a strong rapport with students from poor backgrounds. Initially I too was worried about interviewing elite students (especially males) due to the way in which my class, age and gender may position me as inferior.

**Phoebe**

I might be categorized as 'established middle class' since my grandfathers were professional and technical men, and both my parents went to university after the war. As middle-aged, and middle-class, my main concern was that the interviewees' relative youth might dispose them to position me, like their lecturers, as a 'superior', assessor and judge of their worth, so it was my intention to be explicit about my role as researcher, bound by confidentiality. As an older woman, I was also aware of the potential for students to position me in a maternal role which while not ideal and contingent upon the maternal associations of the interviewees, might have more productive potential.

**Post-interview reflections**

One year on, the interviewing team have found that classed interview dynamics are much more fluid and unpredictable than first thought. Because of the complexity of the students' and team members' varying positions, these divisions are neither clear cut nor certain. Our team's experiences of interviewing both working-class and middle-class students suggest that as researchers we *all* inhabit positions which work to both shut down and open up discussions, regardless of the participant we are

interviewing. This is a finding that has been reported in most other reflexive discussions about ethnicity and gender (Hall 2004; Archer 2002; Tang 2002).

We found that one advantage of the interview relationship between the middle-class respondents and the researchers from working-class backgrounds was that these encounters often enabled the middle-class students to challenge representations of themselves as privileged. For instance, Liam (interviewed by Jody) disidentified (Skeggs 2997) with class privilege and emphasised the sacrifices his parents made in order to afford to send him to a prestigious private school:

> Obviously my parents have had to make big sacrifices for me to go there. Most of my friends live in very large houses…which are sort of very rich parts of [city], have lots of foreign holidays. For instance we can't afford foreign holidays now. We had to re-mortgage our house because of the credit crunch because obviously lots and lots of people were getting credit against the value of their house because of the housing bubble and the credit crunch hit us quite hard, like it hit many of your average families up and down the country.

This is data that might not have been produced if Liam had been interviewed by a fellow middle-class researcher from a similar background and in this instance he might have preferred to emphasise his privilege rather than his family's sacrifices. Another example of this phenomenon is in relation to aspects of upper middle-class life that were (considered) alien to us. Some of the wealthier participants explained at length specific issues such as the public/private school system, extra-curricular events or aspects of their home life, perhaps because they sensed our unease and imagined

we were not privy to such information. For example, even though the interview questions did not touch upon this issue, Edward (interviewed by Nicola) challenges misconceptions of the select independent school, Eton:

> People ask me whether you had a top hat - that went out in the 70s. And the idea of having sort of a first year who sort of went and....sort of was your slave, that also went in the 70s. It was really good fun. […] Yeah I really enjoyed it, it wasn't like....there weren't sort of Bentleys everywhere and people weren't flashy, it was a genuinely nice place to be and I wouldn't have changed it for the world, I really wouldn't.

On such occasions Nicola's, Jody's and Jesie's's situatedness as 'outsiders' when interviewing middle-class respondents opened up accounts, allowing interviewees to discuss aspects of their lives they may consider 'obvious' (Reay 1996).

Nevertheless, at other times, Nicola, Jody and Jessie's 'outsider' status worked to close down interactions during interviews with the middle-class participants. However hard we tried to remain impartial and detached in the interview setting – a technique we had been encouraged to use in our undergraduate research methods classes – it is possible that these students sensed our feelings of unease, irritation or bitterness in response to their accounts. We noticed that on several occasions middle-class interviewees 'skipped over' particular details such as school name, parents' professions or financial support, or spoke quietly when mentioning these issues (these subtle cues of body language and speech were noted by the interviewer), perhaps due to embarrassment or perhaps aiming to downplay their privilege in order to promote

rapport when being interviewed by the working-class researchers. This indicates a shift in power differentials in the interview process with the interviewee assuming control of the rapport-building process, normally seen to be the role of the interviewer.

As we had expected, the working-class interviewers shared a strong rapport with many of the working-class respondents. As interviewers, we often felt a warmth and intimacy towards these students. Whilst speaking to us, as 'insiders', these students openly discussed very difficult backgrounds and present circumstances without shame, on the assumption that the researcher knew where they were coming from. For example, Zoe (interviewed by Jessie) drew confidence from the fact that the interviewer was from a similar background and had recently been an undergraduate in the same elite university. Zoe's account reveals a desire for other students at university to 'get her' and relate to her experiences. She says:

> I know no-one from my background, and that's why I find it so difficult to adjust, when no-one can relate to me. I've like a really close friend at halls but her dad's just loaded, and she gets me on every level, and she understands, but she doesn't understand because she doesn't have to go through it.

Certainly the interviewer's ability to convey empathy and understanding is crucial in putting participants at ease, but more fundamentally, we would like to argue that this is 'working-class' data that a middle-class interviewer might have found difficult to access, as it not only presents an unfavourable account of the middle-classes, but also makes explicit a dissonance of experience. However, as Reay (1996) has reported, the

potential disadvantage of class matching is that the 'obvious' is not always spoken about and specific details may not be given due to the 'insider' status of the interviewee and we are certain this dynamic influenced the accounts produced as part of this research project.

There were also occasions where the interviewers from working-class backgrounds did not feel they shared a close rapport with students from similar class backgrounds. For researchers, the danger of an expectation of comparable experiences to participants from similar backgrounds is that it can lead to over-identification (Reay 1996). As class is intersected by distinctions of gender, age, ethnicity (and so on), there is no one unitary working-class (or middle-class) position. One example is that some students who came from migrant families or minority ethnic backgrounds indicated that their families had suffered ethnic discrimination in the UK. A non-privileged ethnicity compounds material disadvantage and it is possible to see how this particular intersection of class and ethnicity may result in diverse – rather than similar – classed experiences for white and minority ethnic people. Considering that blame has been laid upon the shoulders of white working-class communities for the rise of urban racism, anti-Islamic rhetoric and BNP support (Haylett 2001), it is entirely possible that the dynamics within an interview between a working-class white researcher and a working-class minority ethnic participant, this shared class background is not a basis on which to build rapport (Mellor 2010) unless the interviewer is able to draw upon other resources to situate the discussion on more advantageous ground. In a similar fashion, we also found that class intersected with gender, often in unpredictable ways. Jody, Nicola and Jessie had at first expected that due to shared experiences, interviewing working-class students would be

straightforward. However, as women, our experiences often diverged and sometimes we found there were fewer opportunities as interviewers to make connections and build rapport with the working-class men as compared to their female counterparts.

Another possible reason for why a shared working-class position did not always lead to greater rapport between the working-class researchers and participants is simply that being from a working-class background did not equate with a class-conscious left-wing politics and being 'working-class' was not a significant self-identity category for many of the students we interviewed, even though class experiences, positions and inequalities were highly significant throughout all the interviews. These students disidentified with the working-class position and asserted more ambivalent feelings towards their backgrounds and current positions, often discussing feelings of shame, envy and the desire to 'escape' (Skeggs 1997; Lawler 1999; Steedman 1986). For instance, Keren (working class, interviewed by Nicola) describes her disgust at friends who have become young mothers, possibly building on myths about benefit claims being a motive for pregnancy:

> I know there are some people that had kids for the wrong reasons. […] I really despise people like that. I despise that, because there's like my niece, I love my niece because I look after her, so you know I can't imagine anyone having a kid for the wrong reason. [I: What's the wrong reason?] One girl's had a kid so she could get a house off the government, like the council, so she can move out. [I: But did she say that's why she wanted to have a child?] Yeah, any day of the week – it's disgusting, that makes me physically sick, I can't….you know.

It was often difficult for the researchers not to feel saddened by or frustrated with such accounts. However, considering the potential for negative emotions to be associated with working-class histories/positions and due to a desire for upward mobility, there is no reason why a working-class student would have a strong connection with and an affinity to a working-class researcher (or vice-versa).

Thirdly, it is possible that students had difficulty in 'placing' the researchers' class positions and class histories, just as we had difficulty in placing the participants according to their assigned class position. The class position of researchers from working-class backgrounds is complex (Mahony and Zmorczek 1997) and as Wakeling (2010) suggests, academics cannot objectively or subjectively be considered as working-class. It is likely that some students, rightly or wrongly, simply consider all academics to be straightforwardly middle-class. As researchers from working-class backgrounds, Jody, Jessie and Nicola feel a strong dissonance between their current class status as white collar workers and their working-class backgrounds. On the one hand we are educated, well-paid professionals and have, consciously or not, changed parts of ourselves – such as our dress, accents and so on – to fit the kind of career and future we desire, and in doing so we have inevitably left our working class communities. In our current positions we enjoy some of the benefits associated with a middle-class lifestyle such as greater financial resources and increased freedom at work, and we do not wish to deny this privilege. However, though we have experienced such pleasures, we have also experienced negative aspects associated with class mobility such as the way in which not 'fitting in' can cause feelings such as shame and rage and how a 'clash of cultures' between background and current

location give rise to emotions such as guilt and feelings of deficit. Moreover, we depart from Wakeling's (2010) thesis and would like to draw a distinction between fully tenured, full-time academics and part-time research assistants on temporary contracts. Contract researchers are relatively powerless in the university hierarchies and although those holding PhDs, similar to academics in permanent posts, could be categorised as a class elite, it is less clear how post-graduate students are placed in this schema. One of the team members, a 22 year old self-funded MSc student, was perhaps the closest matched to the working-class students in terms of class position. However, to newly-arrived undergraduate students these distinctions of power in the university hierarchy may not be clear, especially when these students saw we had access to (relatively) well-paid, high-status work in a comfortable office. It is also possible that the dissonance *expected* by working class interviewees could have been outweighed by the reality of discovering young working-class academic researchers in situ. In other words it is possible that the working-class students had their expectations of the researcher challenged by their experience of the interview.

We had started the research with the expectation that shared class position would equate with strong rapport. Even if as researchers we felt a strong connection to some of the students from similar class backgrounds, this wasn't always reciprocated. As expected the three researchers from working-class backgrounds often experienced less warm interactions with the middle-class students. Visceral aversions were not common but at times there seemed a lack of connection or a feeling of – at least from the researchers' point of view – coming from very different worlds. And at times, though on the surface the interactions remained pleasant and lighthearted, other times we felt a positive fascination towards the lifestyles and worldviews described.

These reflections about researchers' class positions are significant to understanding the production of data rand the complex ways in which power is exercised in the research process. We disagree with Brinkman and Kvale's (2005) assertion that interviewers are necessarily more powerful than participants during fieldwork. We found that the interviewees themselves often dictated their degree of participation in the research process, for instance deciding whether or not to attend pre-arranged meetings or in extreme cases, refusing to co-operate by giving very short responses or changing the entire direction of conversation. We considered these subtle and not-so-subtle acts as negotiations of classed power relations yet for longitudinal research in particular, continued participation relies upon strong rapport between researcher and participant and the success of the research may be compromised if participants feel uncomfortable or aggrieved. It is possible that some of the hostility that the researchers from working-class backgrounds encountered during interviews was related to the research topic, our class backgrounds and inferences drawn about our political 'agenda'. We therefore agree with Collins et al's (2005) suggestion that interviewers can be placed in uncomfortable or unequal positions by participants during the fieldwork stage of research.

We became aware of the ways in which interview location impacted on feelings of classed inclusion or exclusion. Due to the way in which class inequalities are manifested, some of the participants might have been intimidated by the interview process and location whereas others may be entirely confident in such an environment (McDermott 2004). Interviews took place at UWE and the University of Bristol. At UWE we used teaching rooms, study rooms in the library and quiet spaces in cafes.

As these areas were modern, informal and were spaces with which the students were already familiar, it is likely that the students were relaxed in these spaces. At the University of Bristol, all interviews took place in our shared office in a rather grandiose and imposing building with a large stained glass window and curved staircase. Perhaps some students were able to feel relaxed in such a place, but in order to diminish the elite atmosphere of this interview location for those students not used to such environments, we tried hard to make the room as cosy and homely as possible by providing hot drinks, biscuits and chocolates, and were pleased that the room – with the armchairs, cushions and posters/postcards on the walls – seemed informal and non-threatening, if a little eccentric and dusty! As a sociology office, the room was stacked with books on class, gender and ethnicity and there were postcards with feminist and socialist slogans displayed on the door and walls. In hindsight, however, we wonder whether our relaxed space might have unintentionally revealed a certain political position or classed identity of the research team (Ball 2003). Counter to McDermott's (2004) findings, we did not notice that those participants of middle-class origin spoke for longer in the interview setting than their working-class counterparts. Perhaps this is because the topic of our research was particularly empowering for some of the working-class students, encouraging them to talk openly rather than working as an intimidating force.

However, we do concede that at other stages, academics have absolute control over the research process. In a desire to counter-act control over the data and to encourage a more equal partnership with participants, particularly those who are disadvantaged, our team is currently planning ways in which to involve some of the participants in data analysis or/and research dissemination such as media engagement or a drama

event. For the interviewees, we are aware of the differential incentives which may arise from participating in the research, in particular the maintenance of cultural and social capitals and ideally both working-class as well as middle-class students would benefit from such activities. At this stage of the project, however, we have various unanswered questions about the way in which we will disseminate findings to the participants in particular, and accept that, perhaps realistically for a project revealing classed privileges and inequalities, we expect that some participants may disagree or feel uncomfortable with the results. It is for this reason that we reject the possibility of inviting participants to be co-analysts, or "full partners" (Karnielli-Miller et al 2009) in the research process as we fear that the desire to protect the feelings of participants would impinge upon sociological analysis (Hoskins and Stoltz 2005).


Conclusion

There has been a powerful but unwritten preference within class studies which promotes the practice of class matching between researcher and participant. There is an expectation that class matching, particularly in relation to research with underprivileged or marginalised groups, enables more respectful research with a stronger rapport between interviewer and interviewee and with the researchers better able to understand and empathise with the experiences of those to whom they are speaking. We have intended to point to several problems with this stance by exploring the intricacies, intersections and complications of class identity and rapport in the interview setting. First, class experiences are intersected by positions such as ethnicity, age and gender, meaning that there is no one unitary class experience. We argue that this allusion of class homogeneity is a limitation that could influence the

data analysis and questioning process (Beedell 2009). Second, class matching may not result in stronger rapport if working-class participants do not consider their class background and current class position to be an important identity category, or if they disidentify with their class position (Skeggs 1997). Finally, working-class participants may not recognise academics as authentically working-class, therefore it may be impossible for academics to be class matched with participants. By exploring our own experiences we have intended to encourage researchers to work with, and reflect upon, their own positions and the ways in which these complex dynamics influence the data produce. Importantly, this paper has added to the growing corpus on class subjectivity and in doing so, we have intended to contribute to the literature on class methodology. In addition this paper asks if the time is approaching to relinquish the attachment to class-matching of social researchers in favour of a broader view that our capacities for reflexivity, empathy, communication, curiosity, analysis and respect together with skilful use of life experience as a resource for rapport-building can, as Bourdieu suggests, "account for the unity of style, which unites the practices and goods" of our own particular "class of agents" – qualitative social researchers (Bourdieu 1998: 8).

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