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Reclassifying Upward Mobility: femininity and the neo-liberal subject

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ABSTRACT While the concept of class does not sit easily with a very changed labour market in which traditional markers of working-class masculinity have been eroded and many people would not define themselves in class terms, the differences and inequalities associated with class have certainly far from disappeared. This article aims to explore how we might think about the ways that ‘class’ enters the production of subjectivities in the present. In particular, the article explores the way in which narratives of upward mobility are lived as success and failure, hope and despair, for some young women entering the labour market in Britain at the turn of the millennium. The multiplicity and fracturing of past and present, belonging, not belonging, the dreams, aspirations and defences are explored in some detail.

Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, the moment of post-war Britain, there was considerable emphasis on the possibility of escape from the working class on the basis of an upward mobility made possible by educational success within state grammar schools. Discussions of upward mobility focused entirely on the working-class boy (Douglas, 1964; Halsey et al., 1980) and the production of a more egalitarian society based on occupational mobility. This fitted neatly with a clear concern about the male manual worker as the bearer of working-class identity. Alongside this was a clear implication that working-class men were the carriers of resistance and radicality, with women often being understood as a conservative force. Indeed, Douglas saw the position of the mother as central to the possibility of successful upward mobility for boys. Thus, within these discourses, women could never be unproblematically the bearers of working-class identity (Reay, 1998). Indeed, many media portrayals have presented women as the driving force for respectability and upward mobility (pace Hyacinth in the television classic Keeping up Appearances) and, as Beverley Skeggs (1997) demonstrates clearly, the issue of respectability is an important one for working-class women in the present, who are marked more by the categorisation of their sexuality (rough/respectable/slut) and by the possibility of...
entry into upward mobility through their production of themselves as worthy of marriage to a middle-class man. Skeggs's (1997) study of working-class women's concerns about being judged in relation to entry into a department store brings this issue into very clear focus. While for many working-class men and women in the post-war period, there was a conflict between working class belonging and educational and occupational aspiration, I would argue that it was women who were always positioned more ambivalently in relation to class in the first place, and whose combination of pain and desire went largely unrecognised. At the turn of the millennium, a very different political and economic landscape configures the place of class differently.

In this article, I want to explore how we might understand re/classification and femininity through the positioning of the female worker as the mainstay of the neo-liberal economy, and the place of upward mobility through education and work as the feminine site of the production of the neo-liberal subject. As the recent study by Walkerdine et al. (2001) makes clear, educational attainment for girls in Britain is still deeply and starkly divided on traditional class lines, so that the possibility of entering the new female professional labour market is still incredibly difficult for young women from families who, in 1970s terms, were judged as working class through parental occupation and education. While this article does not address those educational trajectories explicitly, it seeks to explore the intersections of gender and class by thinking about the new labour market demands as demands for upward mobility. While it can be argued that social mobility itself has not increased, the number of working-class women entering service work has. This kind of work, together with the increase in access to university, provides the possibility of a life envisaged as much more tied to the possibilities of being traditionally related to middle-class status. Thus, the new labour market demands can be understood as aiming to produce a subject in the image of the middle class.

My own work on class began with an attempt to explore 'being working class' as an aspect of my own subjectivity, an aspect hidden and occluded by my status as a middle-class academic and also as the object of a surveillant gaze within social science research (Walkerdine, 1991, 1997). This was very caught up with an understanding of the issue of upward mobility and the terrifying invitation to belong in a new place, which was simultaneously an invitation to feel shame about what one had been before and indeed to understand the people with whom I had grown up as part of a growing political problem, a conservative and reactionary force, not the bedrock of a revolution. While economic issues are deeply implicated in this work, the issue of subjectivity does not entirely depend upon them: the place of the past in the present, within a change of class and status, seems to me to be of huge importance now in relation to a changed economic organisation. However, it is also important in relation to the changed political context of neo-liberalism on the one hand and the shifting points of production and consumption and movements of peoples, brought about by late modernity and globalisation, on the other.

Class/ification

The use of the term 'class' as a mode of classification is taken to have begun with Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army in the nineteenth century, and was therefore always a moralised category. The mapping of areas of cities in terms of the spread of disease, and of crime, went alongside the emergence of psychology as a tool for the classification of types of personality and intelligence. Sociology and psychology became the twin disciplines through which class was produced as a truth through which the urban
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population of industrialised cities could be managed. This mode of classification of the population became, following Marx, also the basis of an emancipatory politics and an account of economic exploitation and oppression. It seems to me that there are two issues at stake here: the first is an understanding of the historicity of the use of class in technologies of subjectification and the second is the way in which the economics of capitalism have and have not changed. When I and others wish to hang onto the use of class in relation to subjectivities, it is because the exploitation and oppression which class politics signals, though changed, has not ceased and no other political discourse has emerged to explain or mobilise around these issues, that is, the issue of inequalities associated with social and economic difference. It is how such differences and the oppression and pain that they bring can be spoken, that we need urgently to address inside a political space that seems to deny its existence at the very moment that class is taken to be an anachronistic concept. However, a theorisation of class as a universal concept of sociology, an overarching discourse of the subject, is rendered deeply problematic by post-foundational theorising within the social sciences and humanities. The issue becomes one of how it is possible to think about both the place it has in the making of subjects now and the possibility of talking about exploitation and oppression in terms of social, cultural and economic differences which have not gone away and which therefore need to be understood as a central part of any politics in the present. So, my interest here is the discourses and narratives through which class has been understood and the place of those in producing modes of subjectification and subjectivity, including the meaning and possibility of upward mobility. The history of technologies of classification would allow us to understand the changed ways in which class has functioned as a technology of the social and of the subject. While this short article is not the place to rehearse an understanding of the emergence of class as such a technology or to chart the historical changes in the discourses of classification, I do want to suggest that a shift in modes of regulation which we might think about coheres around the movement from practices of policing and external regulation to technologies of self-regulation in which subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for their own regulation and the management of themselves is understood as central to a neo-liberal project in which class differences are taken to have melted away. The neo-liberal subject is the autonomous liberal subject made in the image of the middle class.

The emergence of systems of classification in English cities cohered around area and the person. So, for example, a concern with the spread of disease and crime, by mapping parts of cities, was mirrored by a set of scientific discourses concerning the criminal. Thus, the inauguration of the twin poles of sociology and psychology set the stage for the ways in which class was to be understood and utilised as a technology of social regulation in the twentieth century. By the 1950s, there was concern with post-war occupational class mobility, where mothers were understood as central to the good academic performance of working-class boys (Douglas, 1964). By the 1960s, these had developed into studies of maternal deprivation, with debates raging about the relative importance of nature and nurture in producing an intelligence that would allow mobility through education (Bowlby, 1971). Increasingly, the social problem of inequality was understood as produced through the pathologisation of working-class practices, which were understood as simultaneously reproducing poverty and inequality at home, school, work and also as producing affluent workers (Halsey, 1980), with the embourgeoisement and the 'end of the working class' (Gorz, 1982) being incessantly announced.

It is these processes which, we could argue, have reached their zenith in what has been termed neo-liberalism. By now, the subject is understood by many sociologists (e.g.
Giddens, 1994) as having been completely freed from traditional ties of location, class and gender and to be completely self-produced. The affluent worker has given way to the embourgeoisement of the population and so the end of the working class is taken to have arrived. Freed from the ties of class, the new worker is totally responsible for their own destiny and so techniques and technologies of regulation focus on the self-management of citizens to produce themselves as having the skills and qualities necessary to succeed in the new economy. So, for example, in an Australian pilot study of the new workers (Walkerdine et al., in preparation), a secretary in her thirties describes her continual overwork in a succession of jobs. In each she thinks herself not good enough and in each she gradually works longer and longer hours in order to perform her job to the standards she sets. In each job too the managers she works for gradually begin to pile work on her and ignore the huge number of hours she is working because she is so good. When asked in an interview to explain why she works like this, she uses a psychological narrative which relates to her relation to her father and his idea that she was never good enough. One of the many interesting aspects of this is that not once does the secretary refer to a discourse of exploitation: it becomes the Othered and suppressed discourse. Any problems are caused by her failure, her pathology or her standards, not by the impossibility of the amount of work she is expected to do or the exploitative way in which the managers benefit hugely from her overwork. So, what I am saying is that the sets of political and economic changes which have led to neo-liberalism (the loss of power of trade unions, the end of jobs for life, the increase in short-term contracts etc.) have emerged alongside a set of discourses and practices already well in place, but in which certain discourses and practices of class which stress class as oppositional have been replaced by those which stress that the possibility of upward mobility has, in a sense, now become a necessity.

Nikolas Rose (1999) argues in respect of the relation of scientific psychology to liberalism that 'the new forms of regulation do not crush subjectivity. They actually fabricate subjects—human men, women and children capable of bearing the burdens of liberty' (p. viii). He later talks of 'the obligation to be free', through the celebration of the values of autonomy and self-realisation, in which 'each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization' (p. ix). Although Rose is talking about the project of liberalism in general, I argue that these forms of regulation are becoming more intense in the present period because of the huge changes taking place in the global labour market. In this context, the nature of work is being transformed in terms of the kind of work available, its gendered nature and its contractual basis, and the forms, imperatives and distributed outcomes of education are also in a period of major transformation.

Jobs for life are being replaced by a constantly changing array of jobs, small businesses and employment contracts. In such an economy, it is the flexible and autonomous subject who is demanded to be able to cope with constant change in work, income and lifestyle and with constant insecurity. It is the flexible and autonomous subject who negotiates, chooses, succeeds in the array of education and retraining forms that form the new ‘lifelong learning’ and the ‘multiple career trajectories’ that have replaced the linear hierarchies of the education system of the past and the jobs for life of the old economy (cf. Giddens’s [1991] ‘reflexive project’ of the self as a key marker of this new period of history; Gee’s [1999] ‘shape-shifting portfolio person’; du Gay’s [1996] ‘entrepreneur of oneself’). It is argued that these times demand a subject who is capable of constant self-invention. Such a subject is presumed by, as well as being the intended product of, contemporary forms of education and training, and is a subject who is propped up and
supported by a whole array of psychological support, most particularly forms of
counselling and therapy. Thus, psychological practices have a central role in that they
have to constantly prop up the self-invented subject. While self-realisation is what
is expected of the life project and one in which success is judged by the psychological
capacities to succeed, the ability to handle uncertainty, the never knowing where
work will come from etc., in fact produces an almost inevitable failure that will be
lived as a personal failing, hence the necessity for forms of counselling and therapy
intended to prop up the fragile subject, to keep the illusion of a unitary subject intact.
Containing this kind of subject and the containment of fracturing and fragmentation is
a key task for neo-liberal and globalised economies which are no longer willing to
provide long-term forms of support. The issue is that, in the Foucauldian sense, the
practices of subjectification produce a constantly failing subject who has to understand
their position in essentially personal and psychological terms. It is, of course, a deep irony
that the subject of neo-liberalism is actually produced as multiple, having to cope with
existing in a number of different discourses and positions: the subject who is supposed
to be able to choose who they are from a myriad offerings, who can make themselves.
But, this subject is actually also supposed to be sustained by a stable centre, an ego
capable of resilience.

We no longer have a large manufacturing base which provides the pivot for an
understanding of social stratification based on class divisions. What used to be the
working class is now dispersed into service industries based on individual contracts,
piecework, home work and work in call centres, with jobs for life having disappeared.
Women’s employment is divided between those who have education and skills to enter
the professional and managerial sector and those who leave school with little or no
qualifications and enter a labour market defined mostly by poorly paid, often part-time
work, little job security and periods of unemployment. We are witnessing the complete
collapse of civil society, thus, the attempt to further develop the psychological and social
characteristics of the Robinson Crusoe economic man of liberalism (even if that man is
now female) has to be created at this conjuncture as a subject who can cope without
strong community roots or ties, hence the desire to make subjects responsible for their
own lives through networks of ‘social capital’. This leaves us with a situation where
governments are grappling with the need to find ways to keep the social and political
order among people for whom all the previous practices of social and community
cohesion, including class and trade union membership, have been largely destroyed and
where the massive sell-off of public utilities to bolster finance capital has meant the
decline of welfare provision. I want to put these changes together with the place of
psychology needed to prop up the autonomous and self-invented subject that Rose talks
about. One way in which governments can keep order is to make citizens responsible for
their own self-regulation by producing discourses in which success as a constantly
changing successful entrepreneur of oneself is possible. Psychology has a central role in
providing both the discourses through which the psychologised self is understood and the
clinical discourses and practices which put that subject together again after the inevitable
failure. Equally important are the discourses through which that success and failure is
understood and therefore the techniques of self-regulation and management which both
inscribe the subject and allow him or her to attempt to refashion themselves as a
successful subject: the subject of neo-liberal choice. While the failure of this project is
inevitable because the autonomous and multiple self is an impossible fiction, it is a fiction
constantly held up as possible. Discourses of this impossibility function as counter-
narratives, which I think we are beginning to see in an anti-globalisation politics which takes as its first refusal the refusal to consume and therefore to become that subject. However, most likely are the many narratives of failure lived as psychopathology and inadequacy and the practices and discourses which defend against failure by the bolstering of a subject position which denies the possibility of failure or contradiction.

So, in this context, upward mobility becomes a central trope of classification in which women and the qualities ascribed to femininity have a central place. The centrality of psychological discourse for explaining as pathology distress experienced by working-class women in their bid for upward mobility, or even simple respectability, is made clear by Walkerdine (1991, 1997; film, 1991), Skeggs (1997) and Lawler (1999). I would argue further that it is the qualities ascribed to femininity which are understood as the central carriers of the new middle-class individuality, building upon the long-established incitement to women to become producers of themselves as objects of the gaze. They are to look the part, sound the part and, moreover, they can make themselves and their homes over to conform to this middle-class aesthetic.

The concept of the 'makeover' has been a staple of women's magazines for many years (I remember wanting to turn my and my sister's shared bedroom into a 'bedsit room' with the aid of furniture rearrangement and 'scatter cushions' in the early 1960s, and of course, even at that time I studied the hair, dress and make-up makeovers offered to readers and longed to rearrange my own appearance to be prettier and more fashionable, and took pride in making my own clothes in fashionable styles). So, today, television viewers are incited to rearrange their homes to make them fashionable, even if they have little money, by utilising leftover pots of paint and scraps from the garden shed or storeroom. We could hardly argue that these incitements are new but I think they are now more intense (there are at least four weekly programmes on home makeovers on commercial terrestrial television in Australia), and in some sense, unlike earlier moments, the upwardly mobile subject has nowhere else to go. In a 1997 BBC television series called The Missing Postman, the gendered nature of the problem of the change in the labour market and subsequent problems of finding work becomes clear. A redundant postman becomes a hero because he refuses to give up, becoming a fugitive by delivering his last sack of letters by bicycle all over the country. His wife, by contrast, while he is away, transforms herself into a fashionable interior decorator by doing a complete makeover on her home. While he is unable to let go of the position of masculine working-class subject and, in fact, has no other job to go to, her makeover is a sign of her new and more exciting place within the new economy and the relative positions of (working-class) women and men within it. So, if the working class, as understood typically in terms of a male manual worker, allied to trade union struggles and a particular form of politics, barely any longer exists in the West, what was once understood as upward mobility takes on a different and more central place, a place in which both women and men are incited to become self-reflexive subjects, to be looked at and in that sense feminised and in charge of their own biography in Rose's sense, but in which the feminine takes on a particular significance. So, we have the erosion of a discourse of the working class, which is also pushing onto women the old place of the displacement of radicality onto a middle-class conservatism, while at the same time bringing in values of emotionality, caring and introspection—the values of a psychology and interiority usually ascribed to women. Women can thus become understood as the carriers of all that is both good and bad about the new economy in the sense that the erosion of a discourse of classed identity can also be seen as a feminisation. In this sense, we are certainly not
witnessing any lessening of inequality or exploitation—far from it—but I would claim that this inequality is differently lived because low-paid manual and service workers are constantly enjoined to improve and remake themselves as the freed consumer, the ‘entrepreneur of themselves’. I want therefore to understand the discourses and narratives through which ‘upward mobility’ is lived for women in the present.

Both Skeggs (1997) and I (Walkerdine 1991, 1997; film, 1991) make a similar point about the unremitting nature of what Skeggs calls the ‘doubts and insecurities of living class that working-class women endure on a daily basis’ (p. 167). Indeed, I argued in 1991 and showed in my documentary film, Didn’t She Do Well, that the understanding of what Pheterson (1993) calls ‘daily routine humiliation’ elicits considerable pain and a whole defensive organisation, sets of desires, avoidances, practices designed to make the pain bearable, to make it go away, to pursue other possibilities of being, to develop practices of being, coping, hoping, longing, shame, guilt and so forth, and that these are understood as personal failures when all there is available to understand these is an individual psychological discourse. In Didn’t She Do Well I explored narratives of upward mobility presented by a group of professional women who had grown up working class in Britain at different historical moments and who had all made a transition to the middle class by virtue of education and professional work. A common theme for these women was the issue of what we might call a ‘survival guilt’ in which they felt that it was not acceptable for them to have survived and prospered when their families, and particularly their fathers, had suffered greatly and families had to live in poverty, illness, doing without. One of the women also talked about the way in which she found life with her parents boring because they had nothing to say and she longed for another life. She saw her chance in the 1960s by reading about becoming an au pair in a women’s magazine. Subsequently, she left home and eventually became a university lecturer. However, as she put it, she could never fully accept the ‘life that she had been given a ticket for’ and in fact worked only part-time so that she never actually had much money and made sure that she stayed close to other academics from the working class. What is clear about her narrative is that she does not want to go back to that place of pain, poverty and silence yet she feels that she has no right to belong in the new place without taking those less fortunate with her. We could understand her strategy of part-time work as being one which meant that she still carried with her something from her parents, that is, their suffering (Ricoeur, 1996). By this act, she still remained their daughter. Upward mobility was something which for her was met with deep ambivalence. She could not go back, but she could also not go fully forward. Her own poverty was the only psychic and material link she had with her parents and could not therefore be severed. This theme is echoed by Lawler’s (1999) work on narratives of upward mobility for women in which ‘the fantasy of “getting out and getting away” may be achieved only at the price of entering another set of social relations, in which the assumed pathology of their (working-class women’s) history and their desires is brought home to them more intensely’ (p. 19).

So, I want to argue that we need to understand upward mobility as having a deeply defensive aspect. The discourses through which to read upward mobility present it as a freeing, a success. This discourse, transported into the popular narratives of a women’s magazine, was what provided a vehicle for the fantasy of moving away from pain and silence and provided a material means for doing so—earning money as an au pair. Thus, defences and desires (which, of course, can also be defensive) work through popular narratives, formal discourses [1].
Changing Places

I will refer to one example from Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) study of transition to womanhood in 1990s Britain. I want to focus on one young woman whose family bought their council house during the period of the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher, which introduced a ‘Right to Buy’ scheme, under which working-class people could become homeowners.

Lisa’s family lived in a Victorian house in a socially mixed area of London, the house having been bought by the council to add to their housing stock at some point. The family bought the house under the Right to Buy scheme and meticulously did it up in the current fashionable style of restoration, with the aid of books on Victorian decor from the public library. During the housing boom of the 1980s they sold the house and moved to the North of England, to the small town where Lisa’s maternal grandmother had grown up, where the houses were much cheaper. With the proceeds of the sale of the council house, they were able to buy a cottage in a village setting, which they set about extending and renovating, also setting up a franchise of the watch and clock repair business that Lisa’s father had worked for in the extension. The cottage had some considerable land on which Lisa kept a horse.

What I want to explore here is Lisa’s narratives of her subjectivity, taken from interviews and a video diary made by her at the age of 18. In particular, I want to concentrate on the way in which she understands herself as a subject as a young child in a council house in London and the transformations she makes to become a young, middle-class country businesswoman in the North.

I want to make some reference to the study of pariahs and parvenus by the sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (2001), who makes a particular case that modernity is the moment of the parvenu. ‘Modernity’, says Bauman:

proclaimed no order untouchable, as all untouchable orders were to be replaced with a new, artificial order where roads are built that lead from the bottom to the top and so no-one belongs anywhere forever. Modernity is thus the hops of the pariah. But the pariah could stop being pariah only by becoming—struggling to become—parvenu. And the parvenu, having never washed out the stain of his origin, laboured under a constant threat of deportation back to the land he tried to escape. Deportation in case he failed; deportation in case he succeeded too spectacularly for the comfort of those around. (p. 225)

What struck me about this powerful passage is that the process Bauman describes as one of a difficult and shaky self-invention is certainly one of modernism, but it is, I think, speeded up and broadened under neo-liberalism—we are all parvenus (indeed, why else should there have been a recent television series called Faking It in which the aim was to see if people could pass for what they are not and get away with it?) What Bauman makes clear, though, is that the self-invention involves a journey, a material and imagined transformation of status. This is certainly what Lisa and her family undergo, but it is also what the apparent classless self-invention involves. The apparently limitless possibilities are all possibilities of being SOMEBODY. What I think Bauman describes powerfully is that the changes in status sanctioned by modernity carry with them some very difficult emotions which the parvenu must always carry with them and which are absolutely central to their beingness. In striving to remake him or herself, the parvenu, according to Bauman, must simultaneously want to belong in some other place, a place that must be achieved entirely through the remaking processes of the subject themselves
and which simultaneously contains the threat of being not good enough and the threat of being too good. How, then, does the subject as parvenu manage to hold all this together without breaking down? If there is no way to go except forward, back being impossible, and yet going forward demands an impossible, shaky act of ventriloquism, then its demands on the subject in terms of a commodification of the self, the constant reinvention, are immense.

Lisa’s family sought to remake themselves as middle-class country people by the purchase and subsequent sale of their council house and the move north. What I want to think about is the way in which Lisa understands her old childhood subjectivity as a working-class girl in a council house and how she understands and fantasises her new subjectivity. I want to argue that she imagines remaking herself and this demands a complete negation of her Other self. She then engages in powerful and pleasurable fantasies about the kind of woman she wants to become. Held inside these fantasies, though, is a painful Other, that which she fears that she is and wants not to be.

Lisa presents to the camera in her video diary a model of an English countrywoman: her hair, the pearl necklace, the twinset. It is as though, for the world, the remake has been a success. Yet, in the interview she tells a narrative of depression, eating disorders and unhappiness set against the relentless story of becoming a horse riding middle-class country lady and a career woman. Everything in the old life is presented as Other. At one point she talks about her father growing up in a council house and that she now looks down on people who live in council houses. Yet it wasn’t just her father, of course, who grew up in a council house, but her until the age of eight. Why does she ‘forget’ this part of her own history? I suggest that she forgets her history for the same reason that she claims not to have had a childhood (‘Once I broke down and cried because I said I’ve had no childhood’; ‘I think I was an adult from birth’), that it is too difficult to bear the fact that she now ‘looks down’ on that part of herself who lived in a council house. Far easier to forget it, claim it didn’t exist in order to better remake herself as the country lady and career woman she should always have been.

She describes the village in which she lives as being close to the area where the BBC television series *Heartbeat* was filmed. This is a nostalgic fictional series about a country police force and community set in the 1960s, which presents a cosy, friendly and white rural England. She presents the village where she lives as full of friendly locals, who hail her as she passes on her horse. She reads the magazine *Horse and Hound*, a conservative and upper-class country magazine favoured by the hunting, shooting and fishing set. She presents herself as totally immersed in the community and describes how she, like the locals in the nearby small town, crosses over the road so as not to walk directly in front of the local Indian restaurant to show the Asian owners that they are not welcome. Yet this is a young woman who grew up until the age of eight in a multicultural inner-city setting and who, by her own admission at interview, knew all about Indian festivals like Divali and Indian deities. It is as though Lisa wants to be more local than the locals (an idea that Bauman works with) and to do so, she must take another subject position that risks negating her past. The past therefore has to be reworked. I suggest that Lisa’s statement that she didn’t have a childhood is an attempt to operate as though there were no Other to have to dismiss. Its only remnants, then, are the depression and eating disorders—testimony to the problems of living this identity as though it were all there were. As with the women in *Didn’t She Do Well* and those interviewed by Lawler (1999), the present is lived in relation to the shame of the past and the fear of exposure and ridicule.

But, in addition to this, she is attempting to create herself as a career woman with
certain tastes and style, what I think we can term a whole aesthetics of herself, to remake herself in the image of the country middle-class career woman:

I want the business to grow and I want to say—I think the main point is that making a name for myself, because you know as—you know, you're getting more money round here—you've got big cars and you've got bigger houses and people are starting to take a note of you, yeah—and I think that sort of the most important thing to me is my status.

I've got lots of suits—a lot of business suits. When I'm out with my friends I like to be the person that turns the heads rather than my friends.

She works with her father, training to be a horologist (the term she uses rather than a watch and clock repairer). She likes to wear business suits, fantasises a 90 year-old billionaire with a heart defect as her 'ideal man', never having children, living in a stylish and uncomfortable house and driving a Mercedes:

I love looking the part, and I can't wait to drive the Mercedes ... I'll look the part when I step outside the Merc.

I argue that she performs this aesthetic, this commodification of herself through the complex manifestations of signs, discourses, practices, narratives, that constitute her immersion in this life, yet everything that is not present in this performance contains that other narrative, the narrative of being Other, now pushed into the place opposite to the position she now holds. Her world, her self is marked as:

Country
Middle class
Conservative
Successful
White
Adult and away from
The city
Working class
Childish
Black
Unhappy

Little by little in the interview, a story emerges in which she is rejected for being overweight ('"you're fat, you know", "oh go away!") , rejected for being a Londoner ('they would say "she's a Londoner, keep her out"'), depressed ('I literally nearly had a nervous breakdown'), not eating ('I lost so much weight and I thought this is great you know, I can do this again like yeah—and that's when I just started going around with just like a packet of crisps for the whole day and I was feeling dizzy and sick and I thought, no, this isn't right') and feeling that she had no childhood, is tired of trying to succeed and longs to be accepted into this new place. So the narrative of the parvenu, the mimetic narrative which aims to produce as reality that identity which she fantasises being ('I'll probably have a very sort of flashy, sort of snobby lifestyle'), is a narrative which displaces and avoids the rejection which accompanies the narrative of Otherness, the narrative condemned to psychopathology because illness (depression and eating disorders) is the only way in which it can be spoken. Only the relentless pursuit of this new narrative identity and the 'success' implied within it can quieten the other insistent
narrative in order to attempt the impossible task, as Bauman says, the complete displacement of the what one was.

Lisa wants to be a businesswoman, which is not the same identity as a villager—she wants to have a particular position—one of high status and a lifestyle that demands money and high levels of consumption, which are to be financed by the marriage to the billionaire. It is not just fitting into the village, but this other fantasy of the businesswoman that is important. They intersect to inscribe her and she reads the village through *Heartbeat* and *Horse and Hound*. Work is central now and so the creation of a desirable work identity is crucial for her, as for all the young women in the study. It is through becoming the businesswoman that she is able to finance the consumption that she fantasises. It seems as though it is the business suits, flash cars and stylish home that create in fantasy the possibility of an Other space, an Other life, a life in which depression and eating disorders do not exist because this is the life of wealth and success. Thus, what I am saying is that it is the fantasy of being that Other, the desire to be that Other, which is absolutely central for us to understand. It is how that desire positions her in the practice of working, of upward mobility, produces the practices of self-management through which she can be inscribed in those identities to which she aspires. And always this desire must be set against its Other, that which it defends against, the other positions—not only, I think, that which she has left behind in London but what it would mean not to have money and wealth. These other positions are to some extent medicalised and psychologised and presented in the form of illness: depression and eating disorders, the available ways for articulating and living the impossibility of success, of arrival, of being a unitary subject.

As Gonnick (2001) says, to 'become somebody', the task of neo-liberalism, is an impossible task, revealing ‘the delusionary character of self-determining, individualistic and autonomous ideas of subjectivity’ (p. 204). What the examples reveal is the problem of contradiction between positions, possible identities, identifications and the shaky move between them. Bauman (2001) calls this ‘ambivalence’, that is, the discursive place where there is a slip or sliding, ambiguity between classifications. It is this, not this. He argues that discursively this is a problem for narrative organisation in that it is difficult to hold something as existing within opposing narratives and discourses. He argues further that the single and simple discursive classification is what makes possible the fiction of the rational unitary and autonomous subject—I am this. Therefore the failure to classify, that he calls ambivalence, is experienced as great pain and anxiety for the subject because it is lived as a failure to become the desired singular subjectivity, the subjectivity that one can consume oneself into being. By contrast, he argues that unemployed people experience complete boredom and breakdown because they cannot become a consuming subject, the subject for which happiness is apparently possible—I will become this person and then I will be happy ever after. So, the goal of happiness is invested in the endless becoming of the unitary subject through turning oneself into a commodity and thereby owning the means to consume. It is a pleasure endlessly displaced and postponed, glimpsed in snatches of holidays, acquisitions as though it were life. It contains failure inside it as an inevitability. It is that failure which psychology is constantly asked to remedy. I suggest that this gives us a glimpse of how class is both lived and elided within the present and allows us to understand the discourses and narratives of the upwardly mobile neo-liberal subject and the problems and the necessity to work with the complex intersection of narratives and discourses, Other and occluded narratives, through which gendered and classed subjectivity within the present might be understood.
NOTE

[1] Although psychoanalysis classically understands the defences as constituted through a process of a universalised developmental sequence and therefore prior to the secondary influence of discourses and narratives, it could be argued, following Lacan, that the mobius strip of inside and outside, in which the inside is the outside and vice versa, provides a way of moving beyond such a position. However, Lacanian work still retains a central discourse of a universal human subject which is in opposition to discursive and narrative approaches’ refusal of interiority (see Walkerdine, 2002). In using the term ‘defences’ here, I am wanting to suggest that there are non-conscious, non-rational connections between discourses and narratives and that these are held in a complex relationship and that some kind of understanding of these connections is necessary beyond an account of narratives and discourses. I recognise that the issue of the relationship of a concept of defences to a more general psychic organisation is important, but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore it.

REFERENCES