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Masculinity, subjectivity and neoliberalism in men’s accounts of migration and higher educational participation

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In this article, I explore men’s educational experiences and aspirations in the context of UK policy discourses of widening participation and migration. Critiquing discourses that oversimplify gendered access to higher education, I develop an analysis of the impact of masculine subjectivities on processes of subjective construction in relation to be(com)ing a university student. Neoliberalism and self-regulation emerge as significant themes by which the men make sense of their educational experiences and aspirations. Widening participation policy discursively constructs the subject as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘with potential’ and responsible for self-improvement through participation in (alternative forms of) higher education (HE). The concept of diaspora illuminates the complex ways the men reconstruct their traumatic experiences in terms of hope and possibility, across different cultural spaces and expectations. A key question is how do the men construct and make sense of their masculine subjectivities in relation to diasporic experiences and aspirations to become HE students?

Keywords: masculinity; subjectivity; aspirations; neoliberalism; access and widening participation; migration; diaspora

Introduction

In the context of growing concerns about men’s participation in higher education (HE) (e.g. Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2005), I explore men’s experiences of participating in alternative entry courses in London. I focus on the formation of gendered subjectivities and aspirations in relation to men’s access to higher education and ‘diasporic experiences’ (Brah 1996, 15). I draw on research involving in-depth interviews with men from a range of different ethnic, generational and national backgrounds, to examine the men’s narratives of migration and trans/nationality, which emerged as a major theme in the data. The men, all categorised as home students, were undertaking either an Access to HE course or a Foundation programme within five case study London colleges and universities. The paper conceptualises the formation of masculine subjectivities in relation to the complex migration stories that the men describe in the interviews. Feminist concepts of diaspora (Brah 1996) and subjectivity (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Butler 1990; David et al. 2006; Davies 1997; Skeggs 1997, 2004) are used as tools to theorise the processes of inclusion and recognition at play in the men’s accounts and to consider

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the ways diasporic experiences shape the fluid, changing and contradictory formations of subjectivity and aspiration produced through educational access and participation.

Diaspora is both a social condition and process, which helps to explore ‘the destabilising effect of transition and movement of the individuals’ cultural certainties’ (Anthias 1998, 565). Importantly diaspora emphasises the formation of subjectivity as constructed in and through difference, where the diasporic subject is positioned as the Other. Jackson argues that the diasporic subject participates in education with the understanding that ‘they have been admitted under sufferance as long as they conform to dominant constructions of what it means to be a learner, and what counts as knowledge’ (2007, 10). Subjectivity illuminates the complex formation of identity as tied in with the ‘paradoxical conditions through which the accomplishment of subjecthood is made possible’ (Davies 2006, 425). Constituted through discourse and what Butler calls ‘performativity’, subjectivity disrupts notions of identity as fixed and stable. A central concept of subjectivity is recognition, which is achieved through the dual processes of submission and mastery. The subject both practices agency and intent whilst also being subjected to the discourses that name and position her/him.

The background context for the paper is the national project to widen participation in the UK (e.g. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003b; HEFCE 2006). I interrogate hegemonic concepts of widening participation and its framing discourses of globalisation and neoliberalism, to draw attention to the ways these discourses might contribute to the men’s self-understandings as men and as students.

**Contextualising access to higher education: neoliberalism and discourses of derision**

Struggles over access to higher education have a long history, with different concerns emerging in policy over the past century. In the recent UK context, such concerns have been expressed by the New Labour government through the discourse of ‘widening participation’ (Dearing 1997; Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 1998; DfES 2003a, 2003b, 2006). Widening participation (WP) has been identified as a crucial part of a broader higher education mission, with a particular concern for widening access to those individuals who have been under-represented in higher education. For example:

> Widening access and improving participation in higher education are a crucial part of our mission … Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness. (HEFCE 2009)

The Higher Education Funding Council for England provides the following guidance for those accountable for WP strategy in their institutions:

> The principle underpinning this guidance is that resources should be targeted at learners with the potential to benefit from higher education who come from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly these learners are from lower socio-economic groups (groups 4–8 in the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification, NS-SEC), and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low. (HEFCE 2007, 8)

The targets, or subjects, of WP policy discourse are those individuals who are identified as both disadvantaged and as having the potential to benefit from HE. The problematic
nature of judging who has potential, and who does not, is silenced in the policy discourse. Potential is assumed to be an inherent quality in individuals that can be objectively identified through fair and transparent mechanisms, criteria and frameworks. Furthermore, the WP discourse tends to be couched in deficit terms, so that those deemed to have the appropriate levels of potential to benefit despite being disadvantaged, are often perceived to suffer from low aspirations (see e.g. DfES 2006, 11). Thus, a main focus of WP policy is on changing individual attitudes, for example by ‘raising aspirations’, of those constructed as having potential but low aspirations (Burke 2006; Burke and Jackson 2007). WP policy tends to locate the problem of HE non/participation in those individuals who lack the right attitudes, aspirations and values.

Non-traditional students are pathologized … as being deficient: in ability, in not having a ‘proper’ educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes. (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003, 599)

The problem of WP is located at the individual level, connecting the subject of WP to historically pathologised subjectivities. Deficit discourses ignore that young people from refugee backgrounds tend to be highly aspirational and motivated, despite the multiple challenges they face, including interrupted education, learning English as a second language and the experience of trauma and violence (Stevenson and Willott 2007, 671).

Although diversity is often celebrated, with universities often promoting their profiles through references to diversity, being seen as ‘too different’ requires technologies of discipline and control. WP policy is embedded in regulatory practices, which aim to ‘fix’ or ‘correct’ the WP subject, so that s/he will fit in to the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a university student. The fixing or correcting is based on an (imaginary) ideal student-subject, associated with normalised values and dispositions, historically connected with the young, able-bodied, middle-classed, white-racialised subject. Although a large body of literature has argued that ‘not fitting in’ or a sense of ‘not belonging’ is a key problem for WP (Archer and Leathwood 2003; Burke and Jackson 2007; Lillis 2001; Reay 2001, 2003), policy individualises experiences of marginalisation, rather than addressing that academic practices privilege subjectivities constituted through particular (exclusive) ontological and epistemological formations. This has led to utilitarian-oriented WP policy interventions, rather than focusing on transforming institutional practices and cultures (Jones and Thomas 2005).

Although WP policy discourse is often articulated in relation to concerns with social justice, it makes clear that new forms of higher education are more appropriate for students from under-represented backgrounds. This has led to the creation of work-based, vocational courses, often located mainly in further education colleges, in order to ‘safeguard’ the traditional honours degree (DfES 2003a, 2003b). The derisive social positioning of students from refugee backgrounds to WP discourses is further exacerbated by the ‘negative publicity in part inspired by government policies on refugees and asylum seekers surrounding popular representations of refugees and refugee communities’ (Gabriel 2008, 266). Such publicity poses those from refugee backgrounds as ‘outsiders with different political objectives, ideals and practices [who] are often thought to represent a particular risk to national security’ (Boyden 2009, 268). Students are thus differentially positioned by WP policy in relation to competing discourses of gender, migration and disadvantage.
Strongly framed by instrumental-oriented national aims, WP policy is explicitly tied to economic concerns of national competitiveness in global markets and the employability of those young people recognised as responsible and included citizens. Naidoo explains that economic concerns underpin policies to widen participation internationally:

Governments across the world are making concerted efforts to boost participation rates in higher education. Government policies have portrayed intellectual capital in the era of knowledge capitalism as one of the most important determiners of economic success. (Naidoo 2003, 250)

WP policy is strongly framed by the ‘logic of neo-liberal globalisation’ (Jones, Turner, and Street 1999, 238) and the key role of HE is continually reiterated in public statements and policy texts as enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Archer et al. 2003; Bowl 2003; Burke 2002; Burke and Jackson 2007; Morley 1999; Thompson 2000). This is tied up with notions of a ‘knowledge society’ in which knowledge is reduced to a valuable commodity. For example, David Eastwood, Chief Executive of HEFCE, explains that:

Higher education makes a major contribution to our economy: well over £45 billion a year, according to some estimates. Many universities and colleges already work closely with employers, through work placements, course development and research collaborations. Such engagement must increase to meet the global challenge for higher-level skills, research excellence and knowledge transfer. (HEFCE 2008, 3)

Such goals for higher education must be understood in the context of a highly differentiated and hierarchical HE system. Research-intensive, elite institutions continue to recruit students largely from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, whilst newer post-1992 institutions are associated most strongly with recruiting students from traditionally under-represented and ‘diverse’ backgrounds. The institutional identities of universities within this differentiated system are strongly tied up with student identities and this profoundly shapes individual aspirations and choices in relation to HE participation (Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Reay et al. 2001) as well as student experience (Crozier and Reay 2008). Such hierarchies are re/produced through neoliberal frameworks, which deploy market mechanisms such as league tables to ‘exert pressure on universities to comply with consumer demand’ (Naidoo 2003, 250).

The neoliberal framework has shaped the discourses around what it means to be a student in higher education, with students often constructed as active consumers of educational services, taking responsibility for their own learning as independent, autonomous and self-directed individuals. [Yet,] the construction of a ‘normal’ student persists, and is reinforced by the classification of others as ‘non-traditional’. (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003, 598–9)

Concerns about and attention to inequalities and processes of identity formation are largely rendered invisible in neoliberal policy discourses, which position individual students as ‘consumers’ of, and equal players in, a free market of higher education. Higher education is presented as a meritocratic system, which benefits from market-oriented principles. This has led to contradictory claims, on one hand, the idea that society is now ‘classless’, while on the other, ‘class is invoked in moves to draw young people from deprived areas into HE’ (Lawler 2005, 798). In similar ways,
concerns about gender have receded in debates about access and participation, but have recently re-emerged in a panic about women’s participation rates increasing in comparison to men’s (Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) 2009; Quinn 2003).

A growing body of international literature critiquing contemporary WP policy and practice has interrogated the dominance of individualist approaches, framed by neoliberal perspectives, which fail to take account of deeply embedded and complex histories of exclusion, inequality and misrecognition (Currie, Thiele, and Harris 2002; Howie and Tauchert 2002; Maher and Tetault 2007; Morley 2003; Thorat 2007; Watson 2003). The hegemonic discourse of ‘employability’ places an expectation on individuals to ensure that their skills are up-to-date to meet the needs of increasingly unstable and highly competitive employment markets. In this way, WP policy can be seen as part of the broader neoliberal technologies of self-regulation (Walkerdine 2003, 239), which operate to shift responsibility from the state to the individual. Relations of structural inequality and processes of cultural misrecognition (Fraser 1997) become hidden in individualist WP policy discourses, compelling individual ‘learners’ to respond to fluid, competitive and unpredictable economic conditions. The neoliberal project of self-improvement through participation in learning is presented as available to all who have the potential to benefit, regardless of social positioning and volatile economic conditions.

In the context of widening participation, the government provides the opportunities, and it is up to the individuals to take them up, to aspire to greater things, to develop their own potential, to strive for economic and other benefits for themselves whilst contributing to the good of society and the economy. This vision of limitless potential and individual advancement is rooted in a fantasy of classlessness, based on the myths of meritocracy (Young 2001), where individuals can attain their dreams of fulfilment and prosperity. (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003, 599)

The unequal material, emotional and discursive risks involved in participating in such self-improvement projects are silenced in policy debates about WP. However, concerns about men’s participation in higher education are explicitly articulated in ways that deserve critical attention and analysis.

Men’s participation in higher education and subjective construction

As women’s participation in higher education has dramatically improved, there has been a growing concern about men’s participation rates. A recent report claims that men are now educationally disadvantaged and this could have far-ranging implications for men’s future social position (HEPI 2009). Feminist scholars have pointed out that after centuries of exclusion from higher education, it is striking that as soon as women demonstrate achievement, there is a strong political outcry that refocuses the agenda on the needs of men. This oversimplifies the complexities of inequalities in higher education, posing women’s recent achievement in simplistic terms of a battle of the sexes. The report by HEPI focuses on GCSEs as the primary site of ‘men’s disadvantage’, whilst research on gender and education has revealed that privileged constructions of masculinity might cause (some) boys and men difficulties in developing student dispositions. Furthermore, Leathwood and Read point out that:

Although in many countries women are now in the majority at first degree level, they are not in all, and in some countries the proportion of women has declined since the 1990’s – a pattern that has occurred historically at different times in different places. (2009, 46)
The claims being made about women’s rising position in HE have emphasised particular statistics, whilst ignoring complex gendered patterns within universities, including important intersections with age, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, race and sexuality. A recent report by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU 2008) has in large bold text ‘41.6% male, 58.4% female’ on the cover of its report. This sends alarm bells ringing about a growing gender gap in higher education, in which women are seen to be doing far better than men. Yet, the breakdown of the statistics in the body of the report shows a far more complex picture. For example, subjects continue to be gendered, with Science, Engineering and Technology subjects being constituted of a predominately male student body and women making up the majority of the student body in subjects allied to medicine and education. The gendering of subject choices revealed in the ECU report is confirmed by wider literature. For example, on a global scale, women represent less than a quarter of students on average in engineering, manufacturing and construction, and only about a third of students in agriculture and science (UNESCO 2008, cited in Leathwood and Read 2009); 35.9% of all female undergraduates study part time, compared with 28.7% of male undergraduates, according to the ECU report (2008). The gendered constitution of academic staff exposes further complexities in relation to the men in crisis discourse. Although women make up 42.3% of academic staff, only 17.5% of heads of department and professors are women; 41.8% of women work part time, compared with 26.9% of men and of academics earning over £50,000, 21.6% are women and 78.4% are men (ECU 2008, 2–4).

Over the past decade, feminist scholars have extensively critiqued mainstream explanations of boys’ underachievement at school, which tend to pose boys and girls as in competition and opposition through the narrative of a ‘crisis of masculinity’. Epstein et al. (1998) identify three main perspectives running through the crisis of masculinity narrative. The ‘poor boys’ perspective constructs boys as victims of the education system, due to the perceived feminisation of education and schooling. This perspective best characterises the position taken by HEPI in its recent report (HEPI 2009). The ‘failing schools failing boys’ perspective blames poor and ineffective school management for boys’ underachievement. The ‘boys will be boys’ perspective constructs boys as biologically less disposed to studying than girls, although maintaining boys’ natural intellectual ability (Epstein et al. 1998). Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman explain that by the late 1990s, boys’ underachievement was largely understood in terms of a lack of positive male role models in schools, boys’ problematic behaviour in classrooms, and the impact of feminism (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002). The recent attention to men’s ‘underrepresentation’ in HE builds on such assumptions and dangerously recasts a battle of the sexes. This not only undermines the importance of girls’ and women’s achievements in recent years, which should be celebrated, but implies that women’s success must be read as a direct threat to men’s social position and status. This ignores the important, rigorous and sophisticated analyses contributed by feminist scholars to deconstructing gendered discourses, subjectivities and relations and to developing a rich and nuanced understanding of the discursive constitution of masculinities within educational sites and the effect of this on boys’ schooling.

Questions raised by feminist scholars draw attention to the interconnections between masculinity and other formations of subjectivity, which profoundly shape their dispositions to learning (Archer 2003). The tensions exposed by feminist research between some formations of masculinity and school culture, raises ‘questions about the possibilities of bringing together white working-class masculinities with educational success in inner-city working-class schooling’ (Reay 2002, 221–2). Such
questions shift the focus away from damaging constructions of a sex war and towards
the important development of sophisticated levels of analysis that will shed light on
boys’ and men’s complex relationship to education and learning. A central question
of the ESRC study I draw on here is: How do men construct and make sense of their
masculine subjectivities in relation to their aspirations to become HE students?

To address this question, I draw on the analytical tools of feminist concepts of
subjectivity to consider the ways the men are subjected to the dual processes of
mastery and submission in their struggles for recognition as potential higher education
students. My analysis is framed by a critique of wider policy contexts in the field of
higher education, which are significantly influenced by the orientations and concerns
of neoliberal political perspectives and values. This feminist post-structural analysis
of the men’s accounts I hope will be useful in disrupting hegemonic constructions of
the ‘WP student’ and problematic assumptions about men’s relationship to higher
education as ‘in crisis’ (Burke 2007; Epstein et al. 1998; Quinn 2003).

Butler’s concept of subjectification emphasises the dual processes of submission
and mastery in relation to acts of recognition (Butler 1990; David et al. 2006).

Central to the dual process of submission and mastery in the formation of the subject are
the mutual acts of recognition through which subjects accord each other the status of
viable subjecthood. (Davies 2006, 427)

I argue that WP policy and practice is implicated in the dual processes of submission
and mastery in the formation and recognition of the WP subject. The men participating
in my study are subjected to a range of WP ‘activities’ and practices, designed in relation
to regulatory WP policy discourses. Those recognised as ‘WP students’ as ‘under-
represented’ and ‘disadvantaged’ (see e.g. HEFCE 2006) are subjected to the ‘disci-
plinary gaze’ (Foucault 1984) of WP policy discourses. To be recognisable as a
subject of this policy, the person must be subjected to the discourses of disadvantage,
re/positioning the WP subject as the different and ‘Other’ (Said 1977) of educational
policy, yet actively engaged in a project of self-improvement through educational
participation, mastering the skills needed to succeed (e.g. DfEE 1999). As Stuart Hall
importantly highlights, identity is always constructed through difference and in relation
to the ‘Other’ (2000, 17). The subject of WP policy is positioned through
difference and the ‘polarizing discourses’ that are entangled with the imaginary ideal-
student subject; the traditional, standard, 18-year-old student (Williams 1997, 26). The
subject of WP, struggling for recognition as a viable student-subject, attempts to avoid
the subject positioning of ‘Other’, the identifiable ‘non-standard’ subject of the often
derogatory discourses of WP, which are embedded in classed and racialised assump-
tions about lack and deficit (Williams 1997, 25).

Methods
This paper draws on qualitative research funded by the ESRC on men returning to
study through access programmes. Five case study institutions, providing Access to
HE and Foundation programmes, were selected across North and East London. All the
men categorised as ‘home’ students and participating in access programmes at the
case study institutions were invited to take part in the study. Thirty-nine men agreed
to participate in in-depth individual interviews, followed by small group interviews,
designed to elicit data about the men’s journeys through education, from their earliest
memories of schooling to their present experiences of their access courses. The interviews focused on the men’s relationships, significant memories and turning points, their aspirations and decision-making processes and their sensibilities and experiences as students. The analysis explored the relationship between the formation of masculine subjectivities, which was shifting across space and time, and men’s dispositions and aspirations as students. My analytical approach treats the men’s accounts as part of the broader transformations of the self, linked to difference, and the shifting interplay of history, culture and power. The explorations of the men’s memories of their school experiences were not an attempt to simply recover the past, but to develop accounts that allow an examination of ‘the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’ (Hall 2000, 222).

A research officer conducted most of the fieldwork, although I also conducted some of the interviews. Both of us are women, white and middle class, which raises particular questions about the significance of the research relations in constructing the interview accounts. It further raises issues about the analytical perspectives I have imposed on the data in this paper, although this is also shaped by the specific theoretical frameworks I drew on, both to formulate my research questions (thus framing the interview accounts) and to make sense of the data. The data then are not analysed as reflecting an objective reality but as discursive and partial accounts of the men’s memories and experiences, which are produced in the specific situation of an interview. My own subjectivities and autobiographies are important in multiple ways; not only in shaping my analysis, but also in why I came to this research in the first place. My research interest is shaped by my personal struggles for inclusion and recognition as a viable student-subject, as an ‘Access student’, as well as my experiences of migration and of mothering three sons.

Although all the men taking part in the study were categorised as ‘home’ students, they represented over 20 different countries, with migratory experiences emerging as a key theme. The men’s ages ranged from 18 to 54 and their socio-economic backgrounds were fluid and changing as they moved across different national and cultural spaces. For this paper, I have selected two of the men’s accounts to focus on, in order to provide a more detailed analysis of the processes of subjective construction in an individual’s account of accessing higher education and experiencing migration. My purpose is not to draw attention to and reduce my analysis to a set of common themes running across the whole data set. Rather I want to look at the richness of the two men’s accounts, both to theorise processes of subjective construction, as well as to problematise discourses of WP and to understand the ways the men categorised as ‘home’ students, have a range of other contradictory subjectivities, notably shaped by diasporic experiences, which form their self-understandings as students. This paper will focus on the accounts of Ali and Skiddo, both of whom have migratory experiences but come from different national and socio-economic backgrounds and are generationally different. The men’s names have been changed for anonymity and the men selected their own pseudonyms.

‘Wherever I go I feel home’
Ali fled to Wales from Iraq with his mother at the age of 14. He describes his family background as middle class; both his mother and father were engineers in Iraq. His father was killed in the war and his mother then made the courageous decision to leave Iraq in the hope of a more settled life for Ali in the UK. At the time of interview, he
was a 19-year-old Science and Engineering Foundation Programme (SEFP) student at a university in East London. SEFP is a one-year programme that enables students who have not achieved the qualifications required to take a Science or Engineering degree programme at the University to have a 'second chance'. Passing SEFP allows progression on to the BA honours degree programme.

In the following excerpt from his interview, Ali is discussing what he has learned as a participant on SEFP:

Ali: Yeah. The good thing is that I know what university is like and I know that anyone can be a lecturer because they don’t put any passion in it, anyone can be a lecturer. All they do is just read notes out. So, I’m not joking, I’ve learnt something new, that if anything falls down I can be a lecturer, so that’s the positive … Well, I’ve noticed that the positive things are most, no, many people get a qualification and get a job and they do not deserve it. I’m not a judge, I’m not God, I’m not anyone, but this is what I think.

Ali’s account might be seen as a critique of the hegemonic discourses that shape the processes of recognition of the WP subject; the talented but disadvantaged individual with potential. In Ali’s account gaining a degree provides access to certain jobs whether or not you have ‘talent’. He claims that it is those who do have degrees who probably will not be that talented anyway, challenging constructions of talent and potential at play in educational sites, which are often associated with white racialised and middle-classed subjectivities (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Ali constructs talent as something you are born with but that has little to do with being university educated. He draws such conclusions from his experiences of the teaching on SEFP.

Ali: As I said, I have to give credit to [engineering teacher]. I had a little chat with him yesterday for about half an hour about what I’m going to do later. But what I got from him is that from this qualification, that’s if I finish my degree, not the foundation year, I will be in the top class of people who can get employed anywhere they want. Like, for example, the economics sector and the financial sector, you can get employed if you’ve got the engineering qualifications.

Ali both takes up and challenges hegemonic constructions of talent and potential at play in WP policy discourses. As the ‘masterful’, included subject, Ali ‘creates an illusion of autonomy that masks and disavows dependency on others, and by implication, on the need for inclusion’ (Bird et al. 2009, 47). He reinforces constructions of talent as innate and natural, rather than as sets of legitimated skills and knowledge learned and developed through access to valuable resources, such as high-status forms of education. However, he interrogation taken-for-granted links between talent and being a university graduate. Ali simultaneously positions himself as a recognisable subject of the discourses of talent, potential and employability, which underpin WP debates. In so doing, he is able to take up a recognisable masculine subject position, locating himself potentially as amongst the ‘top class of people’, whilst also taking up discourses of instrumentalism in becoming employable in financial fields of work. In so doing he repositions himself as a recognisable and autonomous university student, concealing his dependence on the very discourses of ‘talent’ that he critiques (Bird et al. 2009, 52).

The family is a key site of subjective construction and the negotiation of acceptable forms of educational and career aspirations for the men. Mothers particularly have a central presence in the men’s accounts of their educational experiences and
aspirations, which were linked in to the kinds of men they wanted to be. Refugee mothers occupy a specific location, in negotiating their inclusion through the display of mastery as the ‘good mother’, who is central in disciplining her child to assimilate the subject positions and values deemed to reflect the nation-state. A feminist analysis helps to take account of the complex power relations within families and the gendered relationship between mothers and sons, and their racialised positioning within the wider context of discourses of migration. Mothers are subjected to contradictory discourses, which position them in precarious ways in relation to their son’s aspirations and sense of self. Mothers have to negotiate a fine line between regulating and policing their sons, who are often constructed (and construct themselves) as ‘lazy’ and ‘unmotivated’ (see e.g. Burke 2009), whilst also being caring, nurturing and supportive. It is important to note here, that I have a particularly strong sense of empathy to Ali’s mother in relation to my own experiences as a mother of sons, and in negotiating the contradictory expectations of disciplining and nurturing. My empathetic positioning to the data must be read into the analysis I offer here.

Ali emphasises his mother’s important influence in his choice of what and where to study. In his account, his mother is unable to strike the almost impossible balance of simultaneously being a friend and a responsible parent. Ali describes the double-edged sword of parental expectations, and relates his difficulties with A levels as an effect of the pressure his mother exerted over his schoolwork. In this way, Ali is able to project his struggles at school on to what he constructs as his mother’s inappropriate expectations, which to some extent protects his position as a deserving subject of WP policy.

Ali: I would say my mum, she had a big influence, because I always had to do … she asked me if I had done my work or had not done my work, how am I doing in the school, am I doing fine? … even though when somebody insists that you have to do the work you start to hate it. That’s one of the reasons now I find it a bit hard with A levels, to keep up with my work, because always I’ve been told – we came all the way from back home, here, for you to study and to be better. And that put more pressure on me. And when you pressure someone he wouldn’t do as good as he wants.

Ali also talks about his admiration for his mother, who was able to overcome what he describes as a set of catastrophic events, and through her own determination made the decision to come to the UK to escape the ‘constant pain’ of living in invaded Iraq. He explains that his mother comes from a wealthy backround and became a single mother after the death of his father. Concerned for Ali’s safety due to the war, she made the ‘tough decision’ to move to the UK. Ali explains that his mother had specific aspirations for him to pursue a career in medicine, while Ali wanted to go into physics. Although he was not motivated to study, he put effort into his GCSEs because it would have been ‘cruel’ in his eyes to do any differently considering the sacrifices his mother made to seek refuge in the UK for his safety.

Ali: Yes, even though I was trying to do something in physics I didn’t tell my mum. She always wanted me to be a doctor, or something prestigious. So I had to just say – OK. That’s when I really tried … actually from GCSE I started to drift away from my studies, trying to avoid the subject, because my mum, she tells me to go and study. I tried to avoid it. So when it came to doing the other subjects, it would be a bit cruel if I said for my mum, because it was for myself. But I would say for mum, because I know she got through so much hassle to get us here. But I thought it would be rewarding, even though I didn’t make it. Still I passed.
Ali explains how he came to decide to pursue engineering, which involved sensitive and careful negotiations with his mother. Engineering, he explains, fits in better with his ‘personality’ than medicine, and he again takes up neoliberal discourses around entrepreneurialism, individualism, ambition and self-determination. This exposes the complex processes involved in aspiration-formation, which in Ali’s case, is linked to his mother’s perspectives, her auto/biography and its relationship to his experiences, his subjectivity and hegemonic discourses around acceptable careers for young men in the UK.

Ali constructs himself as immune to any social constraints because he has a goal and so he is able to overcome anything through his individual determination and self-belief. He fashions his subjectivity in relation to discourses of meritocracy and sees success as available to all men who work hard, adapt to ‘British culture’ and are willing to give ‘whatever it takes’ to succeed. He takes up discourses of inclusion, closely tied in with notions of meritocracy, in which success is ‘no more than the performance of competent work’ and making an effort (Bird et al. 2009, 49). Ali explains:

First of all, when I came from Iraq, for me it doesn’t make a difference wherever I go. Wherever I go I feel home, for some reason I don’t know. People say they are homesick and stuff, but for me I just adapt to it because I have to. Because I’ve got a goal, which is to be successful. So whatever it takes, I will.

The concept of diaspora presents a more positive analysis of Ali’s account. Brah argues that although ‘the word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation …, diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings’ (1996, 193). It is clear that Ali embraces the possibilities of new positive beginnings and develops ways of reconstituting what counts as ‘home’. Adapting is a central device in making this work. These different analyses both apply simultaneously, as Ali makes sense of the different and contradictory discourses available to him in processes of subjective construction and becoming recognisable as a masculine subject in and across cultural, trans/national and contextual sites. This highlights the ways that the subject is bound up with multiple contradictions and everyday practices, which are linked to complex social divisions and inequalities (Brah 2006, 89) as well as the interconnections of history, culture and power in narratives of past places, relations and subjectivities (Hall 2000).

‘When I left there I forgot what I used to do’

Skiddo is a 30-year-old Access to Health Studies, Nursing and Midwifery student at an East London further education college from an African background. Born in Cameroon, he is self-defined working class. At the time of interview, he had been living in England for about five years and came as an asylum seeker with his pregnant wife. In Cameroon, he worked with his father in his business but at the age of 26 experienced a traumatic event as a result of his family’s political perspectives.

Because [my father] was in the opposition party. He was one of the members, so during the election process the ruling party were targeting those from the opposition who had got businesses and got houses, they were burning houses down. That was what happened. And that is why he was killed.

Soon after, he fled to London, and took work as a porter in a hospital, which was how he became interested in pursuing a career as a nurse.
I quite enjoyed it, where I was working, I was part of a team. And the nurses there were so good and lovely, and they encouraged me. I don’t know why. They keep telling me, why don’t you do this and that? I never really had the interest. When I was talking to patients who come, when they come there, feeling bad, and they go away feeling better and you see the joy on their faces. And I imagined being a part of that, it seemed a wonderful thing to do. That was when I developed the interest.

The nurses’ recognition of Skiddo as a potential nurse is important in reshaping his aspirations, and in his pursuit of inclusion and mastery in a new cultural context. Through their encouragement and recognition, Skiddo becomes inspired to explore a new direction in his life. He also identifies the emotional work of caring, often socially constructed as a feminine disposition to labour, as a key aspect of his aspiration to become a nurse. His account suggests moments of recognition and inclusion, which he describes in the familiar phrase of being ‘part of a team’. Unlike Ali, his motivation is constructed in emotional terms of ‘feeling bad’, ‘feeling better’ and ‘seeing joy on their faces’. He also describes his experiences of his course in emotional ways. When he is asked what he has learned in his access course, he answers in terms of gaining broader values as a father, specifically values of love and respect. Yet his account also resonates with Gerwitz’ critique of New Labour policies that are focused on working on the marginalised to become more like white, middle-class parents (Gerwirtz 2001).

At home? You can never compare them because what I have learned here is respect and love, and you don’t have that from the teachers there. If I was back home the love that I have for my daughter, I don’t believe I should have now, because there you just believe everybody is looking after themselves. Some parents, they don’t even see their kids for days, weeks, but they live in the same house, get out in the morning, come back in the night, and don’t even check to see if they are asleep well. Too many things I have learned I can never compare them, because it depends on the society. It is not a bad thing for them, but it is just a way of life in that part of the world.

Although there are generational and trans/national differences in the men’s accounts, related to their experiences of moving across different cultural contexts and relations, there are also important and notable similarities. Like Ali above, Skiddo takes up neoliberal discourses of flexibility, individualism and adaptability in describing his decisions and aspirations but also ideal-type student-dispositions. Both Skiddo and Ali explain their decisions through familiar narratives of positive-thinking, working towards a goal, staying focused and moving forward. They both take up neoliberal discourses in making sense of their migration experiences and in coping with the challenges that face them, both as students and as living in new cultural environments. He talks about self in dis/continuous terms of leaving behind, forgetting the past and looking ahead. Again, Skiddo’s account resonates with Brah’s concept of diaspora, both in terms of coping with traumatic events and with embracing hope and possibility. He holds on, however, to remnants of the businessman subjectivity, which might operate to enable Skiddo to take up discourses traditionally associated with femininity, such as caring for others. Skiddo’s account highlights the workings of ‘mastery through the articulation of normative understandings’ (Bird et al. 2009, 49).

I would say I am the type of person, I adapt to any situation and any environment very quickly. When I left my country I left everything behind me, but I never thought about who I was and what I left, and stuff. I just think there is a challenge ahead of me. So I would say when I left there I forgot what I used to do. I would think that part of being a businessman inside me, probably might do something part time like that. But now I am focused on doing what I want to do now.
Skiddo positions himself as the masterful, included subject, irrespective of his diasporic experiences as a refugee and his current location as the student marked by discourses of disadvantage, migration and difference. Although the kinds of discourses Skiddo draws on have resonance with the success narratives of neoliberalism, he also re/locates himself firmly in relation to the traditional tribal values of his home community:

Bamlake, Bamlake is a very proud tribe. So I am proud to be a Bamlake. They are business inclined and hard working. Most people from this tribe are always doing well.

In this way, Skiddo constructs his student-dispositions as related directly to the tribal community to which he continues to have a strong sense of belonging and reactivates narratives of the continuous self. Skiddo’s adherence to the tribal values of Bamlake challenges the UK policy focus on the role of individual parents and helps to shed light on the strengths that refugee and minority ethnic students bring to access courses from their experiences of broader forms of support offered beyond immediate family relations.

**Conclusion**

Neoliberal discourses frame WP policy and profoundly shape processes of subjective construction in becoming recognisable as a subject of WP. This involves processes of submission, for example to the disciplinary technologies of WP policy discourses and its associated practices, and to the regulatory constructions of masculinity within a neoliberal framework, including for example, being adaptable and flexible to the requirements of local economies and cultural expectations. Those subjects who ‘master’ the discourses of neoliberalism are recognised as legitimate subjects of Other forms of studenthood, for example the talented and determined individual from a disadvantaged background. However, these processes are fraught and fragile and require the continual working of and on the subject.

The men’s accounts also highlight possibilities of resistance and subversion and the creation of other ways and spaces of being and knowing. For example, they reconstitute understandings of ‘talent’ and ‘home’ in their accounts in relation to their experiences of migration and trans/national cultural contexts and subjectivities. Ali reconstitutes the discourses of talent in ways that both recuperate hegemonic perspectives and rework them to reconstitute a subject position as a successful university student. This is in a context in which students like Ali and Skiddo are in constant danger of being constituted as problem students against the imaginary normalised ideal student-subject, who not only takes on but also embodies middle-classed, Eurocentric and white racialised ways of being. Ali draws on available student and work subjectivities to constitute a recognisable gendered subject position within the university in relation to employability, including the engineer, financial expert and successful businessman, all of which are associated with masculine subjectivities. Skiddo reconstitutes his subject position in relation to his adaptable aspirations, moving away from but drawing on earlier identifications with being a businessman and towards a caring and emotionally oriented set of aspirations, drawing on familiar, disciplinary discourses of learning to be part of a team. Yet, there are elements of resistance here too, as Skiddo embraces traditionally feminised aspirations of caring and loving, which shape his approaches as a father, as a student and as a future worker. Neither Ali nor Skiddo present their experiences as being men in crisis, yet they must take on the self-regulating, self-disciplining and self-determining features of a recognisable and deserving subject within a neoliberal framework. As men, this requires working
against some of the characteristics associated with certain forms of masculinity, often seen as innate, including for example laziness and disorganisation (Archer 2003; Epstein et al. 1998; Jackson 2002).

Shaping the men’s experiences of migration were the highly traumatic events of the loss of a father in terrible and violent conditions. The trauma is somewhat hidden in their accounts, which are presented in highly positive and optimistic ways. The concept of diaspora as about both trauma and hope helps to explain the ways the men attempt to make sense of their past experiences to reconstitute themselves and their sense of belonging in new spaces. Although they present positive accounts of their life histories and their attitudes, this is also tied in with hegemonic expectations about survival of the fittest and individual determination to succeed against the odds (Leyva 2009). The analysis has highlighted the ways the men’s educational access and participation are tied to fluid and contradictory constructions of masculinity as the men negotiate and are regulated by contradictory processes of subjective construction across space and time. Their accounts suggest that aspirations to participate in higher education are fragile sets of negotiations relating to the interconnections of history, culture and power in their narratives of past, present and future places, relations and subjectivities.

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