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Social class and models of agency: Independent and interdependent agency as educational (dis) advantage

Sarah Jay | Orla T. Muldoon

Abstract
Social class continues to be associated with achievement in school and attendance in university and higher education. This qualitative study explores this phenomenon, and reports three focus group interviews with middle and working class secondary school students, in Ireland. We explore cultural and identity factors in educational settings. Specifically, our analysis orients to the models of agency experienced by these students. Middle class participants express independent agency in education, through norms of choice, control, and freedom from constraints. In contrast, working class students orient towards an interdependent model of agency and express psychological, social, and material barriers to opportunity in education. However, independent neo-liberal individualising and meritocratic discourses were expressed by both groups, suggesting the models are complicated and nuanced. Nevertheless, it is concluded that cultural fit and identity compatibility in educational settings, broadly, constitute middle class advantages and working class disadvantages.

KEYWORDS
independent agency, individualising discourses, interdependent agency, social class
INTRODUCTION

Despite many well-intentioned policies to tackle inequality in education, social class remains a persistent structural force, which shapes and predicts achievement outcomes. This is true in the United Kingdom (Reay, 2006), the USA (Sirin, 2005), Canada (Lehmann, 2009), and the Republic of Ireland (Williams et al., 2011). Recent evidence in Ireland shows that by the age of nine, a child’s reading and mathematics ability is best predicted by their mother’s level of education (Williams et al., 2011). Furthermore, those who do not complete their schooling are disproportionately working class (Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

However, it would be wrong to state that achievement in school is determined absolutely by class background. More accurately, the material and sociocultural conditions of class contexts influence actions, understandings, and perceptions that in turn become normative and appropriate (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). In this way, middle class experience and resources bring with them critical objective advantages in the shape of financial, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These resources may also promote hidden psychological advantages and encourage a sense of power, entitlement, and control over situations and context and thus a sense of independence from social constraints (Kraus, Rheinschmidt, & Piff, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012). On the other hand, the resources and opportunities available in working class contexts tend not to promote social separation but interconnection and reliance upon others. Stephens and colleagues (2012) propose that these differing modes of action are interdependence and independence. The working classes tend to operate through norms of interdependence where it is normative and appropriate to respond to the expectations and influence of others, the context, and adjust to fit it. In contrast, the middle classes behave in terms of independence norms. The individual is separate from context, and preferences and goals are constructed as freely chosen, with a focus on influencing and standing out from others (Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Importantly, neither interdependence nor independence is more effective, natural or normal (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Neither is inherent in individual psychology, they are sociocultural orientations shaped by available resources and experiences within sociocultural contexts (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). However, as the neo-liberal individualising agenda dominates society, and its institutions, (Lynch, 2006) independent agency may be the presumed standard for everybody (Walkerdine, 2003). The present paper aims to explore these suggested different models of agency that may be potential psychological advantages and disadvantages for educational outcomes. We carried out focus groups with young people, from middle and working class backgrounds, who were in secondary school. Education is a particularly fruitful domain to examine these processes because it is constructed as a site of possibility where class can be overcome (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Moreover, psychological research that spotlights class inequalities in education is important because psychology has tended to reinforce and strengthen such inequalities by framing differences in outcomes as deficits within working class students (Day, Rickett, & Woolhouse, 2017).

EDUCATION, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

In order to understand how class shapes agency, attention needs to be paid to the resources that are available in different class contexts. For instance, the positive resource potential of social relationships, often termed social capital, is available in both working and middle class contexts. However, the types of social capital available in working and middle class contexts tends to be different (Humphreys, 2011). Bonding social capital, which is close connections between similar individuals and homogenous groups, is prevalent in working class contexts. As its name suggests it acts like social glue enabling reciprocal helping and community embeddedness. Nevertheless, bonding is distinct from bridging social capital. The latter is loose connections and networks between diverse individuals and heterogeneous groups, which bolster mobility and opportunity, and is more common in middle class contexts (Warr, 2005). Importantly, such resources influence how people are able to act, and over time, this understanding
of agency becomes valued, appropriate, and normative. In social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) parlance, these norms and values become part of class identity content.

Individual mobility is often constructed as a reason for continuing commitment beyond compulsory education. Middle class students are expected to progress to college to maintain their advantaged position; the reproduction of privilege is juxtaposed with the threat of downward mobility (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Gillies, 2005). For working class students, college may seem like entering middle class space and identity (Lehmann, 2009). This may be experienced as relinquishing their social bonds and may be something that they and their parents express conflict over (Thomson, Henderson, & Holland, 2003). Also, qualitative and ethnographic research consistently highlights the structural (financial, social, and cultural) “capital disadvantages” experienced by first generation working class students in higher educational settings (Lehmann, 2009; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001).

This work also highlights the pain and discomfort known as “the hidden injuries of class” that working class students express because they leave their familiar identity affirming contexts. Quantitative longitudinal research supports these findings. For example, middle class students enrolled in higher education report identity compatibility with university whereas working class students did not (Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008). Furthermore, middle class students, but not working class students, report this perception of compatibility and had social capital in the form of multiple extracurricular group memberships that protected them from the reduced well-being experienced as a result of transitioning to higher education (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Similarly, in college, working class students were more likely than middle class students to experience classism, reduced sense of belonging, and intentions to dropout (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). Our contention here is that higher education sociocultural contexts are structured by class and may not accommodate aspects of working class identity, which may heighten working class students’ uneasiness or incompatibility in that setting.

Walkerdine (2003) suggests that the archetypal middle class persona is an individualised (neo-liberal) subject. Brought up in relatively affluent material and social conditions, middle class socialisation patterns promote children’s uniqueness. Middle class children may choose what to eat, who to play with, and what activities they like. They are taught the world is a safe place (Kusserow, 2012). Such opportunities enable children to develop confidence, a sense of influence, and control (Stephens et al., 2012). We suggest that this context enables norms of independence that foster a sense of security, ownership, and entitlement to “pave your own path.” Education is the bridge to get there.

In contrast, growing up with restricted material resources, with fewer financial safety nets and less predictable environments, working class children may be socialised into a very different kind of individualism. Such a context may promote compromise and suggestions that the world does not revolve around them. Parents may also focus on toughening their children because the world is potentially dangerous and uncertain (Kusserow, 2012). Because choices and influence are constrained by external factors, they must pay attention to the situation, and others’ intentions and emotions, to achieve their own goals (Kraus et al., 2012). For this reason, we suspect that this working class group are more likely to express norms that centre on interdependence.

Similarly, cultural capital appears to differ by class context. Cultural capital encompasses experience, practices, and tastes as well as academic ability, vocabulary, and language skills (Lareau & Weininger, 2003) that are valued in the education context. Middle class parents are able to pass on cultural capital gained through their own higher level of education and express expectations that influence their children’s transition towards higher education. In contrast to stereotypes that suggest the working classes do not value education (Gillies, 2005; Reay, 2006), working class parents have aspirations for their children but are less able to influence their children’s education trajectories because they have not had access to the cultural capital and practices mobilised by middle classes (Scherger & Savage, 2010).

3 | THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Economic uncertainty and increasing competition in constricting job markets (Côté, 2005) mean academic and vocational qualifications have become progressively more valuable, if not a compulsory requirement for gaining
employment. In Ireland, where the current study was undertaken, goals are to expand working class participation in higher education from 33% to 54% (Higher Education Authority, 2015).

Given this policy agenda, our interest is in exploring the possibility that different models of agency may be at play for working and middle class secondary school students as they engage with the education system and talk about their futures. These models of agency may constitute additional subtle advantages and disadvantages that warrant further attention. This study therefore aims to investigate orientations towards independent and interdependent agency through an analysis of interview data with a cross section of school pupils from relatively advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Participants

Three focus group interviews, involving 20 participants (10 females and 10 males), were conducted. Participants were from our target group of 15- to 18-year old pupils and were enrolled in one secondary school and one second chance education centre in Limerick City, Ireland. All participants were at the end of or had completed a compulsory 3 years of secondary school that culminates with junior certificate examinations at around age 16 years. Most Irish young people stay in secondary school for a further 2 years and take leaving certificate examinations at around 18 years (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Higher education in Ireland is provided by seven universities, 14 institutes of technology, and seven colleges of education. The universities are afforded high status due to their academic focus; the institutes of technology and colleges have a vocational focus.

Limerick is a highly class segregated city (McCafferty, 2011); therefore, for cross-sectional comparative purposes, participants were recruited on the basis of the area in which they attend school or education centre. For the sake of anonymity, the names of areas and school have been changed. Participants were not asked to self-identify in terms of class; therefore, we cannot situate our participants with complete certainty. Two focus groups occurred in "Waterside," a school located in a relatively affluent area and populated by predominantly "middle class" pupils (N = 14). One focus group occurred in the second chance education centre situated in a disadvantaged area and attended by "working class" pupils (N = 6). Participants in second chance education had either left school at age 16 or been excluded.

4.2 | Procedure

Focus groups were chosen as the method of investigation to facilitate a less intimidating and more open forum for discussion for adolescents, than one-to-one interviews. Group discussion also facilitates disagreement, interruption, and countering through which participants may be able to express negative stereotypes or taboos such as classism (Holt & Griffin, 2005), which may be considered inappropriate for interaction in the one-to-one interview context. Conversely, focus groups may also provide a context in which stereotypes can be challenged and resisted. Therefore, as well as potentially facilitating a diversity of accounting practices, focus groups are potentially empowering for participants who wish to air their views and express their feelings about such stereotypes.

Gaining access to schools was challenging, with most (90%) principals declined participation upon phone contact. The principal or education centre coordinator who did agree, invited participants, who self-selected, after the study was explained to them. There are particular ethical considerations in this study as the participants were minors. First, parental or guardian and participant consent was obtained on an opt-out basis. In addition, participants were reassured that participation was voluntary, the research was not for the school or education centre, and the principal or coordinator would not hear the taped conversation. On a prearranged day, focus group discussions took place between six and eight participants. The discussion followed a semistructured format with questions orientated
towards the purpose of education, aspirations, and expectations towards higher education and their occupational futures. The focus groups lasted 40 min, the length of a lesson.

4.3 Analytic method

All discussions were taped and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and compatibility with the full spectrum of possible ontological and epistemological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus here was on the participants’ employment of discourse to express agency in educational settings. We were interested in how practices, sociocultural contexts, and conditions enabled participants’ expressions of agency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The assumptions made here are critical realist. This position presupposes a “reality,” which is inevitably shaped by both psychological and wider social causal mechanisms. Social behaviour however occurs in “open systems” underpinned by “tendencies” rather than “determined” reality (Houston, 2001). Critical realism strives to identify these mechanisms and challenge them when they lead to oppression.

The data were read carefully by the first author and coded for instances of norms and shared values around education, choice, and aspirations; normative construction of behaviour; independent or individualised orientations; and interdependent or community orientations. After this process, both authors reviewed extracts that clearly demonstrated these codes in relation to agentic talk. Extracts were grouped into themes where there were comparable instances between the groups, participants were discussing the same topic, and similarities and differences were apparent. Extracts were included that had comparable instances of one form of agentic talk, “individualising independent discourse” and/or “community-oriented interdependent discourse” in relation to education and aspirations for the future.

5 ANALYSIS

Three key themes directly relevant to this study were identified: talking through different lenses, no alternative, and a bridge or a bond. The first theme shows that despite a common expression of individualising ideologies across the groups, they seemed to be talking about the opportunities in education for themselves and others, from different perspectives. The second theme shows that the pressure to gain qualifications for future employment was also common for both groups, they expressed no alternative than to continue in education. However, the third theme shows how the social capital available in their distinct contexts is different and this shapes their trajectory through education.

5.1 Theme 1: Talking through different lenses

All participants expressed individualising discourses such as personal determination, choice, and desire, but these constructs were more prevalent in the talk of the middle classed participants. The working class participants expressed more awareness of psychological and structural barriers to success.

5.1.1 Middle class

Alongside individualised discourses, discussions about meritocracy in the education system were prevalent in the middle class participants' talk. Only one participant highlighted structural barriers to university for less privileged students.

Extract: Focus Group 1 (Waterside)

1 Int: um, do you think, um that all the students of your kind of age group at
2 your stage in schooling have the same chances of going to University?
For most of the middle class participants, the path through the education system was such a clear one that obstacles for students without the financial and cultural capital resources that they possess were not given serious consideration, except by one participant. They appeared persuaded and motivated by individualising discourses that access to higher education is about the personal choice to work hard and be determined (Lines 6, 7, and 9). Participant D attempted a counter argument highlighting financial barriers (Line 10), but this concern was dismissed because “there are scholarships” (Line 12). Participant D then suggested potential obstacles through the need to be “so academic,” perhaps as an individual motivational factor that is unavailable to most students (Line 13). Through individualised discourses, these students are orienting to cultural norms and expectations and construct themselves as independent agents, choosing to put in the effort and determination to do well in school (see Extract 3). Therefore, they can take the moral high ground when describing others through the same lens (Lines 14 and 15). What is not said, but implied, is that to not do well is also freely chosen.

5.1.2 Working class

Universities retain their elite status despite the expansion of the higher education sector to include a wider diversity of students from underrepresented groups. This perception seeped into some of the working class participants’ understandings of the cost of university, making this option too distant in both an objective and psychological sense.

Extract: Focus Group 3 (Second chance)
Initially, class discourse (Lines 3–4: “posh ones”) is used to define and distinguish the type of student who goes to LIT. However, when LIT is compared with UL, we can see that the university is placed in another league—beyond their reach. Structural barriers are alluded to in the perception that financial capital and academic ability are needed to secure a university place (Lines 7 and 8). This is not unjustified as social class remains the best predictor of achievement in Ireland (Williams et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the demographic profile of the student body in universities and institutes of technology are not wholly different (Higher Education Authority, 2015), and the registration fees are the same. But the perception remains, universities are for the privileged, and we can see that in the understanding that UL is a “big fancy place and LIT is thrown together” (Line 15). Psychologically and emotionally, the university is too distant, incompatible, and out of reach. Also, practically, the university is too far away (Line 9). LIT is situated within walking distance of these participants’ neighbourhood whereas UL is the other side of the city, (but only) 4.2 miles or 6.76 km away. Reay et al. (2001) found similar geographical or psychological constraints among working class students in their study of higher education choice in the United Kingdom. For participants in London, even a few stops on the tube constrained the choices of their participants; likewise here, a few stops on the bus is making the university a nonchoice.

5.2  Theme 2: No alternative

Both middle and working class participants oriented towards the value of education and expressed aspirations to acquire the qualifications necessary to be able to secure employment later. There was sense that there is no viable alternative to continued education for either group.

5.2.1  Middle class

Having choice, freedom, and control in the future were the central concerns expressed by middle class participants, and education was the principle route for ensuring those concerns be met. Specifically, “good” jobs will ensure future middle class positions, so for these participants, there is no alternative to doing well at school and going on to higher education.

   Extract : Focus Group 1 (Waterside)

1 H: Like what other alternative is there? like let’s say you don’t get a good
2 education and you don’t get a job then what do you do?
3 Int: yeah
An independent model of agency is running through the concerns of this group and perhaps emphasised by the lingering understanding of Ireland’s recent economic crisis; a lack of credentials is presented as inevitably leading to unemployment, (Line 4, “the dole and that’s about it”). Employment (Line 9, “working out for yourself”) is presented, in response to the interviewer’s individualising prompt about personal meaning (Line 10), as a sense of “achievement” (Line 11) and “freedom” (Line 22) rather than “restriction” (Line 20), whereas unemployment would decrease “responsibility” (Line 13) and increase feelings of being “controlled” (Line 14). Autonomy, freedom, and control are central to the middle class psychological experience of independence (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012), and here, all are presented as important. Furthermore, securing a “good job” (Line 15) would enable the agency, freedom, and control to choose the house and type of lifestyle they present as desirable rather than one that is dictated by necessity and circumstance, that is, state benefits. Unemployment would mean less material resources, but beyond this, the middle class psychological experience would not be available to them. A fear of downward mobility means the choice to go to college is a nonchoice (Ball et al., 2002), and they present no alternative because they express a desire for choice in the future.

5.2.2 | Working Class

The participants in second chance education were as aware, as their middle class peers, of the necessity to acquire credentials for future employment.

Extract: Focus Group 3 (Second chance)

1 Int: what do you think college is going to give you?
2 F: edumaction
3 E: a good education, get a good job
These participants were as keen to avoid the dole queue in their futures as their middle class peers (Lines 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). However, the fears and concerns they expressed around exclusion from the labour market and unemployment largely stemmed from being unoccupied and doing nothing (Lines 12, 20, 21, and 22). Additionally, this could potentially lead to other less “purposeful” ways of spending time on “other things” (Line 13) or worse, “trouble” (Line 23). A good education and credentials are expressed as an opportunity to go out and work “anywhere” (Line 15) and taking the first job (Line 16) rather than being in the privileged position to aspire to the job of choice. There are undoubtedly parallels between the groups; again, these participants are fearful of downward mobility, getting into trouble, and are also motivated to avoid negative outcomes. These participants however live in a context of significant cumulative disadvantage, a situation which may generate strong expressions of fatalism (or lack of control). Autonomy, control, freedom, and independence then are less available to the working class psychological experience and are not presented here as immediate concerns.

5.3 | Theme 3: A bridge or a bond

There was evidence that the types of social capital available to them was distinct, with bridging capital in middle class contexts whereas bonding capital was more common in working class contexts. Social capital is an important resource, which shapes norms of agency and perceptions of opportunities in and through education.

5.3.1 | Middle class

The role of education as central to financial security is clearly evident as is the expressed willingness of these young people to follow work opportunities within Ireland and overseas if necessary.
A: I’d like to be a vet or pharmacy because like my neighbours they’re pharmacists and like they’ve a Jaguar and stuff...laughter... yeah it’d be a nice job

Int: it looks pretty lucrative?

A: Yeah, and apparently there’s like pharmaceutical jobs in Ireland and stuff so

Int: right, is that a consideration?

A: yeah

Int: Is it a consideration for all of you? the thought of

E: not really

Int: maybe trying to get something that keeps you in the country?

E: not necessarily

A: It’s not about keeping in the country it just like I want to be able to have a job when I come out of college, like my brother he was going to do architect but then he changed to doing law because there’s no like jobs for architects anymore because they’re not building anymore so he kind of like changed his mind because he wanted to get a good job

Drawing on available social capital from family (Line 14) and neighbours (Line 1), and the broader labour market (Line 5) the concern presented here was to choose a degree course now that would guarantee a “career” in the future. The focus and priority was career—being able to secure desired and lucrative employment ideally in Ireland (Line 5) or beyond (Line 12). Given this priority, education was presented as a bridge towards securing employment (Lines 13 and 14) and if necessary, away from family, community, and even nation.

5.3.2 | Working Class

In order for these working class participants to progress to higher education, they would first have to complete their secondary education by taking the leaving certificate. This was presented as causing some concern because they would have to leave their current centre, which was situated within their community, to attend another second chance education centre (“the tech”) a few miles away in the city centre.

D: yeah we already have our junior cert done

F: we just want to better ourselves

E: I don’t really, it don’t bother me like

C: don’t bother me either

Int: what about the leaving cert?

D: see half of us won’t even end up doing it because we don’t want to go up to the tech
At the beginning of the extract, we can see tension between notions of mobility and bettering themselves via education (Line 2) and rejecting that as desirable (Lines 3 and 4). For most of the participants leaving the boundaries, bonds and familiarity of their local community were presented as threatening (Lines 13, 16, 17, and 21) and a potential barrier to their progression through education (Line 2). Their focus was on the situation and people in it (Line 9) rather than their own future prospects. The leaving certificate is presented as desired and important (Line 15) but not prioritised over the safety of knowing the people they will study beside (Line 21, “outsiders”). This orientation towards contextual factors and “fitting in” is in line with an interdependent model of agency.

6 | DISCUSSION

All of our participants talked about the value of education for learning and a means for accessing credentials vital for employment. Contrary to stereotypes, working class participants were as keen to avoid unemployment as their middle class peers, and commitment to education was shown by all participants. Analysis of the data revealed distinct ways in which a sense of agency and choice were discussed. There were instances of the individualisation process and notions of meritocracy in both groups’ discussions, which is unsurprising given the prevalence of these discourses. But, these notions were much stronger in the middle class participants talk and were accompanied by a more independent sense of agency. The majority suggested that everybody has the same opportunities to achieve in education, and success is an individual’s choice to work hard and be determined. The working class participants orientated towards norms of interdependence and talked about financial, psychological, cultural, and social barriers they perceive in education.

Choice and independence in their futures were middle class concerns. They were making choices now, which would enhance their autonomy, freedom, and control later in life. Additionally, their perceived control over contextual factors meant their goals of higher education in order to secure “good” jobs were the focus. Interestingly, these norms of independence were presented alongside expressions of no choice, there was no alternative to this pursuit of class reproduction. Fear was evident over the prospect of downward mobility presumably because the material benefits and middle class psychological independence, freedom, and control would no longer be available.

Although choice, independence, and autonomy were presented as valued and a driving force motivating middle class participants, the majority of the working class participants seemed to have much less access to choice, control,
and independence from contextual factors. They also expressed fears towards downward mobility but for different reasons. For them, being in education meant not being idle or getting into trouble, and context was presented as difficult to avoid. Their aspirations seemed constrained by the social and cultural dynamics in situations. Their focus was on people and how they could fit to the situation, or not, which overshadowed their learning goals. Furthermore, the data evidenced some considerations of identity incompatibility with the higher education context, which may be heightened by the norms of interdependence found in the data. Contrary to prevalent assumptions, they appeared to have less access to autonomy and control that individualising discourses present as available to everybody.

Our study is limited because we did not ask our participants to position themselves in terms of class or report objective indicators such as parents' education. Our participants are positioned instead by the area that they live and access education. Nevertheless, these qualitative data support the notion of a more interdependent model of agency as the cultural orientation of the working class students. However, as there was also evidence of individualising discourses in their talk, this suggests this model of interdependence is more nuanced than the quantitative and experimental evidence (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, et al., 2012) has suggested. These individualising meritocratic discourses serve a political purpose; they obscure systematic and psychological advantages and disadvantages, blame working class students for differences in achievement outcomes, and reduce support for positive discrimination programmes. At the same time, they breakdown working class solidarity and cohesiveness necessary to challenge the unequal system. This is borne out here, in the participants' fear of leaving their own areas and expressions of xenophobia towards (working class) "outsiders." Humphreys (2011) found high levels of bonding social capital in working class communities in Limerick, whereas middle class communities evidenced greater bridging capital that facilitates social mobility. This bonding capital appears to be quite localised, limiting horizons to within the boundaries of these students’ community and not stretching to facilitate working class solidarity.

Cultural orientations of independence and interdependence, as normative guides for behaviour, may advantage middle class students who experience a cultural match between themselves and the culture they meet in schools and colleges (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, et al., 2012). Moreover, research in the social identity tradition has pointed to the protective potential of identity compatibility (Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2008) in students’ transition to university. Also, working class students who experience classism in university experience reduced well-being and are likely to drop out (Langhout et al., 2009). Universities can do more to help working class students by providing early orientation programmes that introduce current working class students to new working class students and point out the rules and make navigating university life less intimidating (Stephens et al., 2012). They could also introduce working class staff as support networks to counter isolation and promote more social class research and critical studies in social class to challenge classed social relations. Student handbooks could encourage student community cohesion as well as individuality; also, student advisors could contact beginning students rather than expect students to independently knock on doors and seek out advice.

In conclusion, choice and independence, as acts of agency, are constructed as increasingly important in contemporary individualised neo-liberal Western societies. Objective resources and cultural orientation advantage the middle classes to negotiate their way through the independent pathways now demanded of the young (Walkerdine, 2003). An appreciation of these different agency orientations may help our understanding of social behaviour in the education context and beyond and may be an important contributing factor in the social class achievement gap. It cannot be assumed that all young people feel control over context and situations or desire and are comfortable with an independent model of agency. Working class individuals are more conscious of context, invested in social interaction and empathetic (Kraus et al., 2012). Therefore, if institutions are serious about redressing unequal participation rates, then they must be mindful that interdependence is a normative orientation for working class students' and implement and promote both independent and interdependent cultural practices.
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