A MONSTER LURKING IN THE SHADOWS? ONE RESEARCHER’S CRISIS OF REPRESENTING CLASS AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — To consider how knowledge about social class is produced in research and how it can become obscured from view through certain empathic practices of representation.

Methodology/approach — A number of data extracts, generated through participant observation and focus group interviews, are reflexively (re)considered in the chapter. These are drawn from an ethnographic study, previously undertaken by the author with a class of 25 young women in one private, selective girls’ school in the United Kingdom.

Findings — Social class was found to be silenced in the accounts which resulted from the research. This relative neglect is considered to have resulted from the primacy given to gender in a feminist project; to an over-emphasised sense of empathy and due to the desire to build and maintain respect and rapport. Strategies of empathic identification and
representation should not be evaded altogether, but they need to be care-
fully considered (how and why are they used and to what effect?) and
not taken up too readily, so that researchers don’t inadvertently re-
inscribe the inequalities they are seeking to eliminate.

Originality/value — The chapter argues that greater attention needs to
be paid to the class-making practices which researchers and participants
engage in during and after fieldwork. Social class is brought to the fore-
ground in the analyses presented.

Keywords: Social class; gender; reflexivity; feminist research; empathy

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I argue that social class should to be taken more seriously
in feminist (and other) reflexive accounts of research. I contend that social
class is sometimes obscured from view in these accounts because of the pri-

cacy with which gender is afforded. Whilst the fluid, multiple and shifting
nature of gendered power relations may be given due care and attention,
social class can sometimes be left to lurk in the shadows. I suggest that this
can sometimes result in an (over)emphasis on certain feminist research
principles and practices (in this instance, empathy with participants). To
make this case, this chapter draws on research which was carried out some
time ago (2003–2005) as part of a PhD project which was undertaken in
one private and selective girls’ school in the United Kingdom (Allan, 2006).
This research data is reflexively (re)considered. By looking back, I explore
how class and gender were constituted during the processes of research,
and differently interpreted and represented in the methodological and sub-
stantive accounts which resulted from the study. The aim is not to provide
a ‘truer’ or ‘better’ account of the workings of social class in the study.
Instead, these reflexive tales are offered as part of my evolving thinking
about my responsibility in representing this data, and as a way of making
these processes of classed knowledge production more visible.

THE ABSENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS IN REFLEXIVE
ACCOUNTS OF RESEARCH

Whilst many agree that there is no one, correct, feminist methodology or
methodological technique, there is a good deal of consensus surrounding
the importance of reflexivity in feminist research (see Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Letherby, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). As Dosekin (2015) maintains, reflexivity is taken for granted in feminist research practice. Of course, reflexivity doesn’t just take one form: it has been defined and practiced in a multitude of ways, as the various typologies in the research literature attest (Finlay, 2002; Pini & Pease, 2013). Nor is there anything essential to the practice of reflexivity which means that it can only be utilised by feminist researchers. Pillow (2003) comments on the fact that its appeal lies with a wide audience; it is invoked in almost every qualitative research book and article ever written, because it is a tool which is considered to better enable researchers to represent, legitimise or question their research data. Yet, reflexivity’s roots are usually considered to lie within feminist methodological practice (Skeggs, 2002) and it is often deemed a particularly appropriate feminist practice, because of the way in which it accords with wider feminist principles—for example being accountable to research participants and for the knowledge produced in research (something which many male researchers have been criticised for traditionally overlooking, Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998).

Intersectionality is a concept which is regularly mentioned in this feminist reflexive work. It is drawn upon in order to suggest that gender isn’t the only subjective category which matters in research, but that as researchers and participants go about the business of fieldwork, multiple subjectivities and inequalities will interrelate (Gillborn, 2015). It is often the case however, that primacy is still afforded to gender in these accounts. To a certain extent this is to be expected, given the fact that gender has often been the primary focus of the research, and that feminist politics sit at the heart of the research enterprise. Yet some scholars have questioned what this means for our understanding of these other subjectivities and what might happen if we continue to neglect them.

In terms of those subjective categories which might have been overlooked or ignored, Gillborn (2015) points out that dis/ability is rarely ever critically reflected on. Social class might have received slightly more attention, but there are limits to these discussions too. Van Galen (2004), for example, contends that there has been precious little discussion about the ways in which class might work to shape academic research, or about how researchers might be located in these class relations (see Mannay & Creaghan, 2016; Stahl, 2016). Van Galen (2004) calls for a new research agenda which properly acknowledges social class—one which doesn’t just name class when it is witnessed in the everyday interactions observed in the field, but which actually seeks to examine its workings.
In her discussion about the lack of substantive and theoretical attention paid to social class in research of English education, Reay (2006) refers to social class as the ‘zombie stalking English schools’. Here she draws on Beck’s (2004) analysis of class as a zombie category. Beck argues that it is a zombie category because it does little to help explain people’s experiences of social life in late modernity. Reay draws on Beck’s arguments in order to argue the polar opposite. She maintains that, not only do class inequalities persist in the contemporary English education system, but they continue to grow. Reay (2006, p. 289) insists that social class should be reclaimed by educational researchers, as a central concern, so that it no longer remains the ‘troublesome un-dead’ of the English Education system, nor becomes a ‘monster that grows in proportion to its neglect’. In this chapter I’d like to extend this idea in order to account for the neglect which has sometimes been shown to social class in representations of research. Like Reay, I argue that if it continues to be overlooked, then it is possible that it will come to take on a monstrous presence. Our hush might work to inadvertently re-inscribe those inequalities which we are seeking to deconstruct or eliminate.

REFLEXIVELY ACCOUNTING FOR POWER AND PRIVILEGE

In this chapter I reflexively (re)consider my own practices of representing ethnographic research from a PhD project which was undertaken with one class of 25 young women in a private, selective girls’ school in the United Kingdom. As the researcher I spent several months observing the girls in their last year of junior schooling (aged 10 and 11) and during their first year in senior school (aged 11 and 12). I talked to them in focused group interviews and on an individual basis in narrative interviews which focused on the photographic diaries which they had compiled over the course of the research. The project sought to explore class, gender and academic achievement — the ways in which these subjectivities were constituted in this setting (Allan, 2006, 2009, 2010).

The private, selective girls’ school was considered a unique context in which to explore these important questions about the production of class, gender and achievement. But as this chapter will demonstrate, social class was not given the same attention as gender (or achievement) in the final substantive representations of the data, or in the methodological reflections which resulted from the research. In this chapter I explore this relative neglect, in order to consider the ‘truths’ which were, or were not, being told about social class in these representations.
This is not the first reflexive account of research undertaken with participants who might be considered privileged. There has always been a tradition of ‘studying up’ within sociology, even if this has waxed and waned over the years (Becker & Aiello, 2013; Kenway & Fahey, 2014). This does not mean, however, that social class has always been central to these analyses. In some of these accounts, power, rather than social class, has been the central focus. A common concern raised in these accounts, for example, is the amount of power ‘held’ by the research participant relative to that of the researcher—a supposed inversion of the ‘usual’ power relationships which play out in a research project.

Of course, power is often considered central to the process of class-making. If, for example, we understand social class as Bourdieu (1987) does, then it might be considered as a structure of relationships involving a symbolic struggle for capitals in social space. This acquisition of capital is the means by which individuals may gain power, status and recognition in society. A focus on the power relations which play out in research might, then, also be considered a focus on social class. Yet neither power nor social class are usually conceptualised in this way in these accounts. The fact that class is implicit, rather than named, also means that these analyses may inadvertently push class further into the margins.

Stich and Colyar (2015) take this argument a step further, as they too take issue with the way in which class is conceptualised and invoked in these accounts of ‘studying up’. Their argument is that the very notion of ‘studying up’ is dependent on a hierarchical and substantialist understanding of social class and power—that is the idea that one group might hold more power than another, and that certain boundaries can be drawn around these groups so that individuals within them may be understood as occupying distinct classed categories. Whilst such accounts may help to draw our attention back to power and privilege, Stich and Colyar’s (2015) argument is that class rarely becomes the object of their analysis. Instead class is portrayed as fixed, static and a seemingly ‘natural’ property of individuals. The ‘elite’ are constructed as if their power naturally emanates from their position. The end result is that class privilege may actually be re-inscribed.

**ATTEMPTING THE IMPOSSIBLE: REFLEXIVE RE-TRACING**

In line with Stich and Colyar’s (2015) call for researchers to re-imagine studying up, this chapter explores class somewhat differently, and foregrounds
it in the analyses represented. Researchers and research participants are not regarded as bringing classed identities with them into a research project, as if they were fixed and always already constituted. Rather, class is understood as the effects of the discursive practices which are enacted in the very acts of researchers and participants ‘doing’ fieldwork (Best, 2003; Pawluch, Shaffir, & Miall, 2005).

The task of re-tracing and mapping out the contours of these subjective relations is a tricky one. It is especially hard to ‘look backwards’ and to create a retrospective account of research because there is a risk that researchers will be tempted to tell singular tales of subjectivity which fix people in place (Adkins, 2002) or to tell ordered and coherent tales which ‘smooth over’ the partialities, inconsistencies and contradictions (Skeggs, 2002). And yet, this sort of reflexive re-tracing is an important undertaking, particularly owing to the researcher’s epistemic responsibility for those who they report on and for those who read the ‘truths’ that they represent.

I offer this account in this spirit — with the knowledge that the narrative developed here is inevitably partial, and that it cannot lay claim to a full understanding of the subjectivities constituted in the process of the research (Gonick, 2003). But the chapter attempts this re-tracing anyway. It seeks to explore the ways in which the researcher came to see, know and represent class. It seeks to examine the ways in which the researcher and the participants were constituted in the class-making practices which occurred as part of the research and its representations. It does so, because to fail to do so would be to feed the monster that lurks in the shadows: to collude in the silence surrounding social class; to act as if it didn’t matter; to fail to recognise the researcher’s own role in constituting these truths and the privileged positions which are inhabited and which help to maintain this silence (Van Galen, 2004).

A CRISIS IN REPRESENTING SOCIAL CLASS

My reflexive musings on the ways in which I had represented social class in my research began with the comments of another. In this case, I was jolted into action by comments from the external examiners who assessed this PhD research. To use Fine and Weis’ (2000) analogy, the comments worked like a ‘speed bump’: forcing me to slow down and reconsider the practices and processes which I had engaged in. The comments, themselves, were offered in the form of a question: Did I think that I had been overly
nice in the way in which I had represented the young women who had participated in my study? Whilst the question was afforded quite some time in the viva (the thesis defence) and was ‘chewed over’ in relation to a number of different aspects, by and large I was left to interpret this question for myself. Why was it that another might consider these representations to be overly nice?

At the time I attempted to cobble together an answer for my examiners. What this answer was, I am unable to recall. But after the excitement of the viva had resided, I returned to ponder the question once more, eventually resting on the notion that this was predominantly a question about social class, and whether I had evaded some of my responsibility as a researcher to explicitly examine the class-making practices which I had witnessed and had played a part in constituting during the research. Looking back from this new vantage point, I began to see ways in which I might have worked to silence social class in the representation of the data and how I may have treated it somewhat differently to gender.

As I began to reconsider my representations of the data, it was those instances where the young women had talked most explicitly about social class which were easiest to identify. These were instances when they had used a sort of ‘class vocabulary’ (e.g. words such as chav, townie, pikey) in order to laugh about ‘others’ who they saw as different from themselves (Tyler, 2008). These also included instances where they utilised this vocabulary to talk about fictional television characters in a similar manner. One example being Vicky Pollard — a character from the television comedic sketch show: ‘Little Britain’. Vicky Pollard was a character who was portrayed in the sketches as an overweight teenage girl, with bleach blonde hair and a penchant for pink tracksuits and the phrase ‘yeah but, no but’. Over time Vicky also came to be portrayed in the show as a single teenage mother, to a number of different children. Vicky was often the ‘butt’ of the jokes which were shared among the young women in my research interviews, partly because of her clothing (‘Who would honestly wear that!’) but also because of her assumed sexual promiscuity (‘She is so common that she just doesn’t care who she sleeps with or what happens’).

The extract below is just one example of this sort of class talk. It is taken from a focused group interview which took place with some of the young women just after they had moved into the senior school. The extract was part of a wider conversation about the pressures of growing up and moving to senior school. In part, the conversation focused on the importance of investing in certain hyper-feminine performances. This was talked about as a pressure to achieve the ‘right’ feminine appearance — as heterosexual and
desirable but not sexually precocious. As the young women talked about clothing and what was or was not suitable for them to wear, they said:

Millie: I think a bit of tart is alright ... I mean you want to look good.2

Joanne: Yes you want to look good, but no, tart is never alright!

Caroline: Yeah I mean Claire from my junior school ... no offence to her but she was really tarty! She had these huge hoop earrings and you could literally put your arms through them!

Joanne: Yeah you are a tart if you wear those earrings and short skirts and stuff. It looks really common ... my Mum says it looks like you have not been properly looked after! It is really townie! Year Seven interviews (January 2005)

Looking back at these comments from a distance, it is interesting to consider how I interpreted and represented this talk (and extracts like this) in the thesis. Here, the extract was followed by a short commentary which started by making the point that ‘Sexy and tarty were positions that none of these girls wanted to inhabit as they were presumed to indicate a particularly shameful type of working class femininity’ (Allan, 2006, p. 189). The commentary then briefly moved on to discuss the young women’s use of the word ‘townie’, suggesting that it was: ‘used by the girls to distance themselves not only from what they regarded to be mainstream, ‘common’ behaviour but also from this supposedly working-class, sexually promiscuous behaviour’ (Allan, 2006, p. 189). Vicky Pollard then got a mention, as a figure through which, I suggested, the young women were able to disidentify and distance themselves from this sort of behaviour. Finally, the discussion was consumed by concerns of gender and age where a conclusion was drawn about their precarious positioning as girls in an age-old virgin/whore binary and as ‘tweenagers’ (i.e. where they were thought to have been positioned as sexually unknowing).

Social class was named in these analytical discussions. The young women’s actions were recognised as a performative, class-making practice (i.e. drawing on others in order to position themselves as ‘ideal’ middle-class subjects). On reflection, however, it isn’t whether or not class was named that interests me. Rather, it is the ways in which these analytical discussions took shape — the language which was used to represent them and the space which they were afforded. For example, the way in which a number of theoretical terms (e.g. ‘positioning’, ‘othering’, ‘disidentification’ etc) were used in the analytical commentary to make sense of this talk. On the one hand, this worked to mark out the young women’s talk as a form of class-making, and it did so by drawing on, and locating it within, wider
social theory. On the other hand, however, it appears to have worked in such a way that it distanced the young women from their talk — it abstracted the data — made it seem one step removed from the ‘real’ social action for which these young women might be considered responsible.

Added to this, the authorial style and tone adopted in these discussions was very ‘matter of fact’ — the text was rational in the way in which it sought to persuade the reader that this was the interpretation which they should accept (e.g. with its claims to theory). It was unemotional and detached — appearing to offer a relatively neutral commentary. At the same time, however, owing to the brevity of the analytical commentary which surrounded the talk, some interpretative space was created in the text. Because so little was said about the participants’ words, it was almost as if the words had been left to speak for themselves. Such rhetorical strategies work to downplay the authorial control — to distance the researcher from the discussion and to leave the reader to assume final responsibility for interpreting the data (Watson, 2009).

The end result is, as my external examiners seemed to suggest, that the young women and the researcher are seemingly ‘let off the hook’ in relation to social class. Gender and age quickly came to take centre stage. It was only these subjective categories which featured in the fuller and final discussions and conclusions presented at the end of the chapter. And in these sections the young women were often named and ‘fleshed out’ more fully (not just referred to as a collective whole, as they often were in these discussions relating to social class). They were also afforded more agency in their actions: For example ‘Yet despite the dominance of these gendered discourses it would be hard to conclude that the girls accepted them without demur …’ (Allan, 2006, p. 190).

In contrast, social class was somewhat silenced, both in terms of the literal number of words that were offered up in the analytical discussion of the data, and due to the tone, style and representational strategy adopted. Only certain ‘truths’ about social class were told; other possibilities were evaded, negated or silenced. The emotional disgust and disdain which the young women expressed in their talk about appearance, for example, managed to pass by with little comment or critical reflection. This potentially means that their talk could be interpreted (by those reading these representations) as inconsequential, or as a form of light-hearted jest which wasn’t really meant to wound or to injure (particularly owing to the fact that it was often based on fictional characters). The young women’s words are not represented in such a way that they might be considered a form of class abhorrence which work to interpellate others in injurious ways
(Hayward & Yar, 2006). And, if like Tyler (2008), we understand this talk to be performative in nature, then these representational strategies and the ‘truths’ and silences which they produce, really do matter.

**REPRESENTING ACCOUNTS WHERE CLASS IS INFERRED RATHER THAN EXPLICITLY NAMED**

Whilst there were several more extracts like this which were represented in the PhD thesis, the young women’s discussions were not entirely dominated by this sort of class talk. On the whole, such explicit and crude references to class were hard to come by. This may be for a number of reasons. Not least because, as Skeggs and Wood (2004) suggest, everyday representations of class are often ‘re-routed’ so that class is not specifically referenced in conversation (Devine, 2004). As I have argued elsewhere (Allan & Charles, 2013), it might also be due to the fact that class isn’t always constituted in the same way in contexts like the private, selective girls’ school.

Indeed, in looking back at this PhD data, it was often easier to find extracts of talk where class appeared to be silently inferred. Elsie’s story is one such example. It is a story which was recounted to me by a group of young women in one of the focused group interviews (though parts of the action were also observed). During one week in the summer term of Year Six Elsie had been subjected to a number of jibes about her size and her weight. On a number of previous occasions Elsie had managed to ‘laugh off’ comments like these — working to expel the comments through her use of humour. For example, in one instance I had observed her running around the classroom, with her arms flailing and legs kicking behind her, as she shouted to her friends ‘Well it’s a fact, just as flamingos can’t fly, Elsie can’t lose weight’.

But on the occasion which was reported to me in the focused group interview, Elsie had broken down in tears. According to the young women reporting the incident, the comments had ‘got the better of her’ — she could no longer ignore the fact that her friends wished to confront her about her ‘weight issues’. I was told that Elsie’s friends had told her that she wasn’t taking sufficient responsibility to manage her ‘weight issues’. After some negotiation, and a lot more tears, Elsie apparently responded to her friends by saying that she would work with them to manage her weight. She acceded to the idea that they would put her on a strict diet for the rest of the week, which consisted mainly of apples, oranges and water, and that
she would spend each lunch time sprinting around the school field with them. Later that week Elsie’s friends also signed her up for the local charity race so that she would ‘have a goal to work towards’ and so that she could work with them to raise money for others ‘who were less well off’.

Not surprisingly, the analysis which surrounded this narrative in the thesis centred on it as matter of health, fitness and bodily surveillance:

What Elsie’s case study demonstrates is the ways in which these discourses of health and fitness were taken up by the girls’ own peer group and reinforced at the micro-level of the school. It shows the intense surveillance that the girls were subject to in their daily bodily practices and in their maintenance of slim and ‘healthy’ physiques. The girls in this school invested heavily in these discourses and in practices of bodily transformation; their bodies were to be viewed as projects of self-improvement that needed constant work in order for them to succeed (physically) in the future. (Allan, 2006, pp. 157–158)

Later on in the chapter, this analysis was extended so that the action is explained as a form of gendered policing and surveillance. It is only in a later publication that the narrative was re-told and considered as a performative production of social class. In this chapter, the analyses focused on Elsie and her friends’ involvement in the charity race. The discussion proposed that, the act could be read as a genuine commitment to social service, but also a practice of class-making: ‘allowing the young women to demonstrate themselves as both worthy and healthy citizens — taking responsibility for their own health and the health and well-being of others’ (Allan & Charles, 2013, p. 346).

But even in this analysis, the young women’s actions are recognised in such a way that only certain interpretations are able to surface. The young women’s behaviour was not, for example, considered as a form of ‘fat shaming’ which might work to silently infer class through moral judgements about excess and laziness. The young women’s reactions, of disgust towards Elsie’s ‘out of control’ body, were not recognised in a way in which they might be understood as part of a pernicious practice of class boundary making, where Elsie’s ‘friends’ were able to position themselves as morally superior, responsible, middle-class subjects against Elsie’s body (which was found to be lacking both class and femininity).

Once again, the commentary which surrounded the incident adopted a ‘neutral’ style where the young women’s actions were not subjected to a great deal of critical reflection. If anything, the commentary might be considered to work in such a way that these young women are represented as members of an injured party (i.e. subject to the unwieldy power of these discourses and the overpowering, ever present gaze of these forms of
surveillance). As such the text might be considered to re-inscribe power and privilege, for as Tyler (2008) points out, it is in claims to injury and wounding that subjects are able to make a case for their own entitlement and gain further access to political power.

**REPRESENTING REFLEXIVE NARRATIVES**

In this section I wish to draw on one final set of examples from my representations of this research — this time drawing from my own reflexive accounts. From these I wish to explore my own implicatedness in these class-making processes, and the ways in which social class was neglected here too, for these reflexive narrations were also constructed with gender as the primary focus. My reflections largely centred on the ways in which I felt I had been multiply and differently positioned as a ‘girl’ or a ‘woman’ in the research.

These included, for example, a discussion which focused on my experience in a religious education lesson, where I felt I was ‘hailed’ into a position as a heterosexual woman by one of the teachers, as she asked me to tell the class who my ideal (male) marriage partner would be. These reflexive accounts also focused on the ways in which gender was negotiated with the young women in the study, as they asked me questions about romantic relationships, friendships and family, in an attempt to understand who I might be, and I asked questions of them.

Age was something which I also called into question in these reflexive accounts. For example, in one account I drew on an instance when I felt that I failed to be positioned in relation to age in the way that I had intended. This was an account of a time where I realised that the clothes which I had carefully selected to wear in the field (which I saw as ‘young’ and ‘trendy’ but ‘still professional’) had been interpreted differently by some of the young women (as ‘mumsy’, ‘practical’ and ‘not remotely fashionable’ — owing to the fact that the items appeared similar to the work wear commonly worn by their mothers).

Looking back through these reflexive accounts, what I notice is that social class was not once named. Whereas I had (at least) acknowledged it in relation to my participants, here I had completely neglected my own involvement in these relations. My original field notes were also silent on this. And yet, there are moments from my fieldwork which could be interpreted as forms of class-making practice. Some of these are probably
instances which I have since come to feel, experience, remember and recon-
struct in these ways. These include, for example, details and actions which,
at the time, felt quite insignificant.

As Coffey (1999) suggests, researchers are quite prone to considering
their actions in the field as insignificant, or simply as part and parcel of
getting the business of fieldwork done. Yet these actions often play an
important role in the ways in which our subjectivities and our research are
constituted. The name which I used/was attributed in the field was one of
these details which seemed quite insignificant at the time. I had introduced
myself to my research participants as ‘Sandy’ (the name which I was most
commonly known by and was used by friends and family from a young
age) but I noticed that the staff only ever used my full name, ‘Alexandra’.
At most I experienced this as a minor irritation whilst in the field; as some-
thing which I just had to get used to and which was probably to be
expected, since it was my ‘official’ name (i.e. that which appeared on docu-
ments like the CRB² form, which were logged at the school). Whilst I am
aware that we can never fully know anyone’s intentions behind their
actions, and that intentions are not always realised in social action anyway,
on reflection I wonder about the role which class played in these practices.
Was Alexandra considered a more formal and also, therefore, a more
suitable/proper name for me to be attributed in this context? It is certainly
a name which is considered to signify ‘tradition’ and ‘respectability’, owing
to its usage among royalty, and it was one which was shared by a number
of the pupils in the school.

However, there were other fieldwork ‘moments’ which were felt, at the
time, to be part of a class-making practice, but which were ‘overlooked’ in
my representations. In part this may have been because they were consid-
tered too shameful — as identifications which heavily contrasted those prin-
ciples I held most closely as a critical feminist researcher. These were often
moments where I felt myself to be positioned in privileged and powerful
ways. An example of such a moment might be when a teacher would posi-
tion me as a ‘clever girl’ and would ask about how my own autobiography
fed into the research.

Such moments created a range of complex responses. I was irritated that
I had been ‘fixed’ in this way and (at least, in my head) I struggled to
position myself differently (e.g. as a less privileged other who, owing to a
background in state schooling, had not been offered the resources and
opportunities to ‘get ahead’ in life that these young women had). I was also
annoyed that they positioned me as part of a homogenous group, and that
they saw this as such an unproblematic position to inhabit. And yet, I also
experienced it in intensely pleasurable ways too, because it was a socially viable and privileged position to inhabit (Youngblood-Jackson, 2008). It was a positioning with which I sometimes acquiesced because of the ways in which it enabled me to build and maintain rapport with those in the school, and because it allowed me to be recognised as a respectable, responsible and capable ‘can do girl’ (a figure, which numerous scholars have suggested, is held up as the ‘new’ normative, middle-class ideal).

Of course, not all of the moments I might look back on and (re)consider as ‘classed’ were experienced in entirely pleasurable ways. There was a time, for example, where I declined to drink tea with the head teacher in a research meeting. Through the head’s reaction to my actions I quickly realised that this was not the ‘done thing’ and that such social ‘niceties’ were expected on these occasions. This is a moment which haunts me for different reasons — because of my failure to position myself in ways which would be recognised as ‘classy enough’. Such moments serve as important reminders of the complex, messy and momentary negotiations which take place in the field, and the fact that we don’t come to our research context with subjectivities which are fixed and finalised. They also remind us of the excitable nature of discourse — that the effects of our words and actions are often unknown and unpredictable (Butler, 1997).

However, it is the pleasurable moments which we, as researchers, are often more prone to overlook. And it is for this reason that we might need to pay more attention to them. As Youngblood-Jackson (2008) suggests, such moments might lead us to different understandings of self and subjectivity. In the examples outlined earlier, for example, we can see the different ways in which researchers might allow themselves to connect with (and be represented as connecting with) their participants. In these instances, it would seem that I was happy to connect with my participants as young women, but that I wasn’t prepared to connect with them in classed/privileged terms. As a critical researcher I did not want to recognise or represent myself as citing, enjoying and benefiting from the same hegemonic discourses (Dosekin, 2015).

**DISCUSSION**

The point of this chapter has not been to tell a straightforward tale of social class in this research context, so that this new reflexive narrative might replace a previous iteration as a better or truer account. We can
always look back at our data and see things ‘anew’. But these new readings aren’t necessarily better or more legitimate, particularly if we believe that we can never completely stand outside of our social worlds in order to fully understand them, or to reach the ‘true’ meanings of social action just by looking more closely and for longer (Skeggs, 2002; Youdell, 2010).

The point was also not to tell a simple tale of a privileged group of research participants who, on close inspection, can be seen to engage in hateful class talk; or a confessional tale of a researcher who, much to her own shame, enjoyed moments in the field which she perhaps shouldn’t have, or wasn’t expecting to. Indeed, I have argued here that no one came to the research with a fixed classed identity, and that class wasn’t finalised in the research process either. The examples drawn on here are to be understood as moments of talk and action which worked to constitute the researcher and the participants as ‘classed’ in multiple ways.

The point of this chapter has been to reflexively reconsider a set of research representations in order to explore how social class came to be constituted, seen, interpreted and represented. This exploration was concerned with the ways in which certain subjectivities came to be recognised and represented in the text, and with particular effects. The argument which I have put forward here is that social class was often not extensively represented in these accounts because of the intense emphasis on, and space afforded to gender. Furthermore, I have argued that the use of particular textual strategies to represent the data meant that only certain readings of class were likely to be generated as a result.

One way in which I might explain my relative neglect of social class, and my use of these strategies for representation, is owing to a well-intentioned, though perhaps over-emphasised and ill-considered, sense of empathy for these young women. Like a number of researchers, I was apprehensive about how I would represent my research participants. This fear was particularly pronounced in relation to social class. I was anxious of fixing myself and my participants in the writing so that we might be interpreted in an entirely negative (and even pathological) light.

In part, this fear was probably due to an immediately practical concern; that these were young women who would likely attend a university in the near future, where they might access my publications and recognise themselves. But my concern was also driven by wider feminist principles of respect and accountability: I didn’t want to betray this group of young women in my representation of them (Lofland, 1971). I had spent a lot of time with them in the research, and they had given a great deal of their time to participate. I cared about how these women might be understood.
by others and I was terrified about representing them (largely because I knew that the meanings which I intended in my representation of them were never guaranteed).

Like Parameswaran (2001) I might conclude that my empathy for these young women sometimes resulted in an evasion of class. I would also conclude, however, that this resulted from my use of empathic strategies for representation too. Indeed, it wasn’t that I hadn’t named class in the text, but that that the representational strategies which I utilised meant that only certain ‘truths’ about social class were seen and represented.

The story I primarily wanted to tell was one of gender: of a heterogeneous group of young women who didn’t always and easily fulfil the normative ideals expected of them, even despite their relatively privileged positionings. This was an alignment which suited my feminist principles. Yet it was also one which encouraged me to overlook other subjectivities which made a difference (Watson, 2009). By representing the young women in these empathic terms I was downplaying some of the contradictions which I had experienced (e.g. my own momentary connections with them in classed terms). Social class was left to lurk in the shadows as I shied away from an analysis which might have made these productions more visible.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In order to conclude on the lessons learned here, I’d like to return to the external examiners’ question which was the impetus for this reflexive re-tracing: Did I think that I had been overly nice in the way in which I had represented the young women who had participated in my study? There is a sense in which this question might be interpreted to suggest that there is a right/wrong way in which to represent data — that the ‘real truths’ of my fieldwork had been evaded in my research. There is also a sense in which we might understand this as being a question about whose side we should take in research — the notion that I took the wrong side as a critical, feminist researcher. Becker’s (1967) article, which asks this question, is commonly interpreted to mean that researchers inevitably take sides and that, for political reasons, this should be the side of the ‘underdog’ (Hammersley, 2001).

However, this is not the conclusion that I want to draw here, and this is not the way I (eventually!) interpreted the question. The point of
the question, for me, was to consider which stories I was/was not able to tell as a result of my commitments to this group. This was more a matter of asking which stories did I hear/see most clearly and chose to represent, and which were cut off/silenced and evaded or left unexplored in the resulting representations. As Watson (2009) suggests, it isn’t that we shouldn’t engage in empathy. Rather, it is that we slide into this practice too easily, and that this only allows us to interpret and represent things in certain ways.

This also means that my arguments shouldn’t be taken to suggest that (feminist) researchers should now spurn gender and completely turn their attention to social class. As Gillborn (2015) suggests, it isn’t that we should prioritise or rank these inequalities as if they exist in some sort of hierarchy. I hope that I have represented my research data in such a way here that they will be understood as moments where class and gender were braided together (impossible to pull apart in analyses). Of course, it is entirely understandable that feminists place a primary focus on gender, and that they wish to engage in empathic relations and representations. But if they are placed at the centre of an investigation, I’d like to suggest that they do so only as a starting point (Gillborn, 2015). They should not take primacy to the extent that they work to overshadow other possible interpretations and representations. We have a responsibility to those we represent in our research, and to those who read it, to be vigilant on a number of accounts. Social class should not be left to lurk in the shadows and to take on a monstrous presence because of a relative neglect.

NOTES

1. Thank you to Professor Louise Archer and Professor Debbie Epstein for putting forward these comments in the viva and in the final report resulting from the examination of my PhD thesis. This is not to suggest, however, that the arguments presented here necessarily align with their views or original intentions in asking this question.
2. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.
3. A Criminal Record’s Bureau (CRB) form is one that an adult in the United Kingdom must submit for in order to be able to work alongside young children.

REFERENCES


