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Elective identity, social segregation and parental choice

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The problem associated with the allocation of children to their schools is widely characterised in terms of segregation and unequal access. The outcome of the allocation process tends to be that children are segregated in a variety of ways. Who is segregated from whom, and to what extent, varies across countries and between localities (Jenkins, S. et al 2008). In different national contexts racial, ethnic, religious, residential and occupational groups may be segregated and often overlap and their relation is complex but invariably children from more affluent families with more highly educated parents in higher status occupations tend to be educated separately from those less affluent, less well educated and in lower status jobs.

The problem of unequal access arises because children from less affluent backgrounds tend to achieve lower levels of attainment partly because they attend lower performing schools. This is widely taken as conclusive evidence that children from some social groups gain access to better educational provision than do others. This conclusion is uncomfortable for political elites who legitimate the status quo as meritocratic and is a focus of criticism by those who know it is not and are concerned to enhance social justice through greater social mobility.

Class is deployed to explain unequal access to education including to the good (or better) schools. Those on the political right tend to blame working class parents' for lack of ambition for their children and their inability or unwillingness to gain access to the good schools. Critical commentators tend to blame the middle class for disproportionately getting their children into the better schools (Ball 2003) and schools for covertly selecting them (West and Hind 2003; Pennel, West and Hind 2005 and 2006).

Parents differ in their parenting practices including the level of engagement with choice of school and this has been found to correlate with social characteristics of groups that are broadly categorised as middle and working class (Reay and Ball 1997; Ball, Braun and

Vincent, 2007; Echols and Wilmms 1992; Gewirtz et al 1995; Lauder et al 1999; Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008; van Zanten; Seppanen, P. 2010; Simmola, H. 2010).

Stephen Ball and others (Gewirtz et al 1995; Ball 2003; Lynch and Hodge 2002) further argue that middle class parents actively seek to capture access to the best educational sites and trajectories and effectively exclude the working class from some schools. This work sets parents' educational practice in a wider context as a means by which relatively advantaged parents' strategic purpose (the reproduction of their advantaged position) is achieved. For example the marketisation of education in England and other developed countries offers strategic advantages to middle class parents who are more willing and able to engage with market choice. This strategy is enacted at individual, institutional and national levels and implies some kind of co-ordinated, collective action.

But, there are difficulties in coherently conceptualising quite how it is collective. Following Bourdieu's seminal contributions there has been a reinvigoration of class as a key concept (Crompton 1998; Reay 1998a and 1998b; Savage 2000; Skeggs 2004; Sayer 2005). The new cultural concept of class focuses on the experience of differential social positioning and emphasises qualitative evidence of classed experience rather than the statistical analysis of large data sets and pre-determined categories. One's class position is a matter of the subtle interplay of different kinds of resource (social, financial and educational) in particular contexts. It is what Bottero calls individualised stratification (Bottero 2004), achieved through the mediated action of each individual seeking to maintain or advance their interests as they perceive them. The strength of this form of explanation lies in replacing pre-determined class attribution with processes of stratification within which power and advantage operate in a variety of ways. The reinvigorated notion of class is fluid and mutable. Particular affiliations, collective action and social regularities are to be discovered empirically after the fact.

But a difficulty of this approach is adequately to acknowledge the heterogeneity of behaviour of groups defined, if defined at all, on the basis of financial and educational capitals. The

search for class fractions is one response to this difficulty. But, it is one thing retrospectively to describe where individuals' or families' interests fit objectively in the interconnected field of occupation and residency, and to specify the status and power they have relative to others, and quite another to identify the elective identity of individuals and how this determines those with whom they wish to express solidarity and those others from which they wish to distinguish themselves. For example empirical studies and surveys (Gewirtz et al 1995; Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008) show that the school choices and what we might call the educational practice of most parents is associated with (is predicted and statistically 'explained' by) their social characteristics. But there is a proportion of poor parents living in neighbourhoods with other poor parents with similar sets of social, educational and material capital who want access to schools populated by families more affluent and privileged. They are opting for exit rather than solidarity with their neighbours and may be described positively as aspiring parents or negatively as social climbers. What class do they belong to? What is their imagined solidarity group?

Then there are affluent parents living in neighbourhoods with other affluent parents with similar sets of social, educational and material capital who opt to send their children to less popular and underperforming schools. Many report doing so (Brantlinger et al 1996; James et al 2009 and 2010 ;) for socially principled reasons - they believe it is good for children to be educated in a socially and ethnically mixed community. They are, we might say, also expressing solidarity with some imagined group other than their neighbours. Which group and how is it constructed or represented?

While these anomalous groups are a minority in their putative class they are conceptually troublesome because they bring to the fore the abiding problems of the ontology of class and call into question the deployment of the (often vaguely specified) categories 'middle' and 'working' class as explanatory concepts in the debate on segregation, school choice and admissions (Beck 2007).

In addition I have argued elsewhere that class talk as it is currently deployed sustains rather than redresses significant forms of injustice. The attempt to reduce distributive injustice results in relational injustice being more deeply entrenched. Educational injustice is widely characterised as unequal access to educational capital in the form of credentialised attainment partly as a result of differential access to good schools. Lack of educational capital then inhibits social mobility. But the factors leading to low attainment are deemed to be poor parenting in terms of lack of discipline, cultural barrenness and inadequate lifestyles including diet; parents' lack of aspiration and ambition for their children; peers who reinforce low expectations and inhibit engagement with education; and poor schooling. These factors are predominantly associated with working class families and communities. It is a narrative within which protagonists possess or are given classed identities consistent with their causal roles in the reproduction of educational advantage. The price for finding that the middle class is the strategic and cunning villain is that members of the working class are the hapless and impotent victims. The identities made available to or imposed on working class parents within this discourse are as incompetents, people reckless for the well being of their children, or victims of false consciousness. This is the kind of systematic denigration that amounts to the kind of relational injustice highlighted by Iris Young and Nancy Fraser and others. Fraser defines relational injustice as a matter of disrespect:

...being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions... (Fraser, N. 1996 pp.70-71)

We need a way of talking that retains the critical force of class analysis but avoids importing these forms of disrespect. To gain critical purchase on these representations it will be useful to return to fundamentals, to social ontology.

Social ontology and the constitution of kinds

The plausibility of the narrative of class, distributive justice and schooling depends upon the existence of certain kinds of things and kinds of people and the relations drawn between them - more and less easily educable pupils; working class parents; middle class parents;

engaged, inert, or incompetent parents; good and bad schools; good and bad teachers; us and them. How these kinds come to be constituted is therefore of crucial interest.

The creation of kinds of people

As a philosopher of science Ian Hacking is interested in how knowledge is produced about the kinds of things there are. In a series of studies he has investigated how classificatory practices bring into being new kinds (categories) of people (Hacking 1995; and 2007). He recognises that both kinds and knowledge arise within and as a result of social practices and that some of these kinds are categories of people. He identifies as engines of discovery the practices of: counting; quantifying; creating norms; correlating; medicalising; biologising and geneticising. To these he added three other processes: normalising, which he describes as an 'engine of organisation and control; bureaucratising – an engine of administration; and reclaiming identity (identity politics) which is the 'resistance of the known to the knowers' (p22 Hacking 2005). This last is an instance of the looping effect which is central to Hacking's analysis and is what he signals in the phrase 'moving targets' in the title of his 2007 British Academy lecture *Kinds of People: Moving Targets*. People who are the subjects of these engines of discovery have available to them, and sometimes imposed upon them, with more or less success, certain identities. Examples from Hacking's studies (Hacking 2007) are people who are categorised as obese, autistic, physically or mentally impaired, sexually deviant, or with a multiple personality disorder. Part of the argument of this paper is that these processes of making up people are working within the discourse of education and social justice to constitute a range of kinds of people and makes available associated identities.

The role of prototypes and stereotypes in creating narratives with protagonists with reasons for action

In Hacking's account (Hacking 1995) of the history of multiple personality disorder (MPD) he shows how, alongside cautious professional definitions of MPD expressed in publications and regulatory documents, there came to be in circulation what he called a prototype of an MPD person. This prototype was articulated and elaborated by authoritative figures within the field, drawing on their experience of particular cases, to capture the set of predominant features of a person with multiple personality disorder. It tended to be presented in the form of an individual case history but was meant to typify, to stand as a special kind of example. Hacking (1995) describes how this prototype was often used in semi-formal professional dialogue and as educational or illustrative devices in lectures. There was no claim that all and every person with MPD would have all of the features of the prototype but it was assumed that they would always have some. Importantly these prototypes served not only to describe but also to explain. They exemplified a typical aetiology, a common medically significant causal sequence – a meaningful narrative.

Hacking was concerned with the part that the circulation of prototypes played in bringing new kinds of people into being. It is a short step from prototype to stereotype. Both are (or shortly become) persistent, preconceived and oversimplified ideas about a category of people. If prototypes endure and become entrenched they become stereotypes. Significant stereotypes are circulating in the debate about admissions and educational inequality. They offer descriptions, and imply explanations and recommendations. They simultaneously characterise the problem and imply the kinds of action needed to redress them. In what follows I offer characterisations of some currently circulating stereotypes of children, parents, schools and residential communities.

Some educational stereotypes, narratives and protagonists

Reports have been commissioned or produced by academics (e.g. Gill 2010; Strand 2010; Gutman, L. M., Brown, J. and Akerman, R. 2009; DCSF 2009; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) to better understand the reasons for the attainment gap between social groups and

(replete with counting; quantifying; norm-making; and correlating) they reinforce the association of categories of parents defined as possessing certain attributes and social characteristics with particular categories of children defined in terms of their attainment (e.g. low attaining or high attaining). Other practices further entrench these associations. For example, the attempt to acknowledge the effect of intake when judging schools through contextual value added measures uses proxy variables such as pupils on free school meals, number of children whose first language is other than English and so on. Scholars have discovered 'skilled choosers' and 'disconnected choosers' (Gewirtz et al 1995) 'alert' and 'inert' clients of (Echols and Willms 1992) more and less strategic parents. The existence of these categories has been reinforced by surveys that confirm the correlation of choice behaviours with the possession of certain social characteristics (Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008).

These engines of discovery have established certain facts about categories of people and alongside them stereotypes have circulated and become entrenched. Being fluid, informal and often oral they can be fully evidenced only by a careful deconstruction of a wide range of official and unofficial texts - a task beyond the scope of this paper. The following are therefore offered heuristically to help consider how far such stereotypes might drive our thinking and to illustrate their potential power. Two important stereotypes are the more and less educable child.

A More Educable Child (an MEC) is able, high attaining, aspirational, well behaved, hard working, and engaged with, and positive towards, schooling. He or she is personally well organised and any special needs tend to arise from dyslexia or physical impairments rather than emotional or behavioural problems. They are well mannered and cultured. They have these characteristics because they have been parented well from an early age, through which they have learnt self-discipline. They have been exposed to stimulating learning experiences, including a richer more elaborate linguistic environment, within their families and continue to be well supported in their education from home. They are usually middle class.

A Less Educable Child (LEC) is less able, low attaining, with limited educational and social aspirations. He or she is badly behaved in and out of school, lazy and disengaged from schooling. S/he is personally disorganised and has more emotional

and behavioural special needs. These problems often arise as a result of poor pre-natal health, poor parenting from birth (including diet) and a chaotic family life where self-discipline and good work habits are not inculcated and education is not valued. They are rough, ill mannered, uncultured, unsupported in their education from home and rebellious or disrespectful towards authority. They are usually working class.

There are accompanying and mutually reinforcing stereotypes of parents. While these stereotypes can apply to both fathers and mothers there is a strong gender theme. Mothers as the main carers of school aged children are the focus of implicit blame or praise. There is the stereotype of working class parents:

The working class mother (WCM) did not take adequate care during pregnancy to avoid drink or to stop smoking and did not provide adequately stimulating early learning experiences. Her emotional life is chaotic and her children are likely to be fathered by different men. Both father (where present) and mother are poorly educated and probably of low intelligence. The family environment is culturally, linguistically and educationally impoverished. The parents either do not value education and therefore do not care which school their child goes to and do not engage with the choice process and so opt for that which is most convenient (usually the closest), or they do value education and wish to choose the best school but lack the ability to discriminate between the good and bad schools and the competence to manage the complex admissions process.

This stereotype supports the conclusion that either because they do not know how to, or do not wish to, or do not have the financial wherewithal to, or do not have the time, working class parents do not support their children in their schooling effectively. Thus the parenting practices of the working class are to blame for their children's lack of attainment, educational credentials and, ultimately, their weaker command of status and wealth.

The attributes described above tend to be negative and one stereotype of the middle class parent (MCP) is the same set inverted to produce a positive model – the archetypal 'good parent'. However there is an influential negative stereotype of middle class parents.

Middle class parents (MCPs) are pushy, selfish and sharp elbowed. Middle class mothers help in the primary classroom to check out the quality of the teacher, talk up their indignation at the poor quality of teaching in the playground or at coffee mornings, give sometimes intensive support in reading and arithmetic, engage forcefully with school staff to ensure their child's needs (as judged by the mother) are adequately

met, and obsess about gaining their choice of school (Coldron 1999). They strategically seek advantage at the expense of working class parents and children by gaining access to high performing schools and in the process enhance those schools' reputations (Ball 2003; Lynch and Hodge 2002). Some are hypocritical in that they profess liberal views but act in their children's own interests (Brantlinger et al 1996). Even those relatively affluent parents who actively choose low performing schools for ostensibly altruistic reasons (e.g. affirming socially mixed intakes) find their children attract extra resources and attention (James et al 2009; James et al 2010). Their children do not lose out relative to their middle class peers in other schools and do better than their working class peers in the same school. They too are effectively hypocritical.

We should note that these stereotypes of children and parents directly or indirectly invoke other discourses that have their own normative thrust - for example the discourses of ability, parental responsibility, and deserving.

Kinds of schools are constituted through Ofsted inspections. Schools are classified as either Grade 1 Outstanding; Grade 2 Good; Grade 3 Satisfactory or Grade 4 Inadequate. Where a school is graded as satisfactory or inadequate inspectors are also required to make a judgement as to whether the school should be categorised as a school requiring a 'notice to improve' or, at the extreme, put into 'special measures'. In both cases these categorisations activate explicit duties of the Local Authority to intervene to effect improvement.

Stereotypes of teachers circulate and are sustained by these and other categorisations.

Teachers in low performing schools are less well qualified, do not have sufficient skill or energy to compensate for the greater educational challenges facing them and their children (Thrupp 1999; Lupton 2004a and 2004b) and are consequently in danger of being burned out and less effective. They were, or have become, not good enough to get a job in a high performing school (Brook 2008; Brighouse 2007). They culpably develop pastoral values rather than attainment values (van Zanten et al 2009; Power and Frandji 2010) leading to low aspirations for and low expectations of their pupils. They are both a cause and effect of the school's poor performance.

There is stereotyping not just of parents and children but of whole communities. Because social groups tend to be geographically segregated residential areas gain a reputation matching the stereotypes of their inhabitants. In Savage et al's study (2005) of people's

relation to place, the residential choices they make and how they make them we see the operation of self-categorisation. The residents they interviewed constructed stories about them and their neighbours who counted as (and thereby constituted) their imagined community. This included stereotypical identities of the members and of non-members. But a great deal of individual and group work has to take place to reify these imagined communities and personal membership which, being a matter of recognition by others, is essentially defeasible and always more or less precarious. This highlights not only the importance of social sites where individuals can be reassured of their continued membership and can signal their solidarity often by manifesting rejection of the others, but also the ground of social anxiety in the face of always potential marginalisation. A disposition toward solidarity and fraternity is exhibited by members of all communities as a result of the perceived benefits of solidarity but also the effects of social policing and boundary maintenance (Tilly 2004). The social 'policing' is felt by members of both more and less affluent communities and levies a social cost on individuals who step out of line including in terms of school choice. Schools were associated with separate communities and choice of school therefore became potentially meaningful as a means of manifesting membership. On this account choosing a school (and the intertwined choice of residence) are acts that express a desired relation (inclusion or exclusion; solidarity or exit) of the parents to imagined and variously reified groups. It is an act of meaning making and essentially categorical.

In identifying these stereotypes we begin to grasp the complex process through which school reputations are created and responded to. The reputation of a school emerges from the inter-play of classifications, the practices that legitimate and entrench them and the active social location of individuals themselves (Holme 2002; Coldron et al 2010). It is simplistic to assume that the reputation comes first and a decision by parents follows. Classifications and stereotypes interlock, mutually reinforce each other or otherwise interact and are the focus of struggles. The assertion by a parent that a school has a certain

reputation (is a certain kind of school) may not simply be an act of description. It may also be performative in J.L. Austin's sense (1955) and constitutive in Searle's sense (Searle 2010) if it enacts trust and solidarity by affirming a shared view of the world. Elective belonging (Savage et al 2005) defines those from whom you wish to be distinguished and those with whom you want to be counted. Shared categorisations including stereotypes such as those identified provide symbolic resources that enable elective belonging to be articulated. Choice of some schools and rejection of others is a way of expressing elective belonging and solidarity with your chosen group (Coldron 1999 and Coldron et al 2010). But the actual pattern of positions/relations in specific contexts is complex, and determined by many mechanisms and discourses – material, symbolic, ethical, religious, spatial.

For reasons of social solidarity, social costs, and material considerations the practice of parents from different social groups tends to lead to different judgements of schools and together they create segregated intakes (Coldron et al 2008) and so constitute the performance gradient between schools which makes those at the bottom of the hierarchy vulnerable to the negative categorisations of the regulatory bodies. This hierarchy of institutions together with official classificatory practices constitute the 'objective' grounds for legitimating the characterisation of the problem as the middle class capture of the good schools and the exclusion of working class children. This segregating process is accompanied by demonisation of certain schools and visceral responses of rejection (Lucey and Reay 2002). But good and bad schools are created by the choosing and the choosing is about maintaining social identity (going to schools with people like us) rather than about differential institutional attainment or competition to gain access to the scarce resource of good schools.

These entrenched stereotypes give substance to the argument for the deployment of class in the debate and provide plausible reasons for action by those who accept them as accurate enough representations of the way the world is. Circulated in the popular press, reinforced in

social-interactions, and underpinned by systematic and scientifically authoritative academic study they function as a set of mutually warranting beliefs that underpin the decision making of parents, policy makers and academic commentators. For many already advantaged parents and some less advantaged they justify action to segregate themselves and their children from certain others.

Tilly in *Durable Inequalities* argues that categorisation serves to solve problems. Governments categorise people in order to exercise their power. But people also create themselves as members of categories in order to maximise advantages in particular contexts – his concept of opportunity hoarding. Tilly offers a fluid and flexible account of how categorisation can be used to protect or enhance shared material interests. The process of grouping and collective action focuses on boundaries.

... A category consists of a set of actors who share a boundary distinguishing all of them from and relating all of them to at least one set of actors visibly excluded by the boundary. A category simultaneously lumps together actors deemed similar, splits sets of actors considered dissimilar, and defines relations between the two sets...solidary-competitive interactions form fault lines between network clusters. They also generate stories that participants subsequently use to explain and justify their interactions. The stories embody shared understandings of who we are, who they are, what divides us, and what connects us. (Tilly 1999 pps 62-63)

Creating a category and its boundaries does not necessarily imply homogeneity between individual members of the category other than a perception of shared interest in maintaining the boundary, although empirically homogeneity may develop. What I have tried to show is the processes of making up kinds of people and institutions are acts of categorisation within the popular and academic debate. The boundary work required to maintain the categories occurs at all levels of social interaction - at the micro level in small groups and as part of an individual's meaning making; at the meso-level in small institutions such as schools, factories and universities; and at the macro-level of governance and structural formations such as the political and legal systems. Categories constitute relations between people and

invoke narratives that represent the relations and collective identities of protagonists. It is in the nature of those relations and narratives and identities that they constitute reasons for action, an intention to co-ordinate mutually reinforcing action. Understanding this process is a matter of understanding the ontology of kinds and they are essentially categorical.

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