Re-imagining social mobility: the role of relationality, social class and place in qualitative constructions of mobility

Abstract

Discussions around social mobility have increasingly gained traction in both political and academic circles in the last two decades. The current, established conceptualisation of social mobility reduces 'success' down to individual level of educational achievement, occupational position and income, focusing on the successful few who rise up and move out. For many in working-class communities, this discourse is undesirable or antithetical to everyday life. Drawing upon thirteen interviews with nine families collected as part of an ethnographic study, this article asks, 'how were social (im)mobility narratives and notions of value constructed by residents of one working-class community?' Its findings highlight how alternative narratives of social (im)mobility were constructed; emphasising the value of fixity, anchorage and relationality.

Three key techniques were used by participants when constructing social (im)mobility narratives: the born and bred narrative; distancing from education as a route to mobility; and the construction of a distinct working-class discourse of fulfilment. Participants highlighted the value of anchorage to place and kinship, where fulfilment results from finding ontological security. The findings demonstrate that residents of a working-class community constructed alternative social mobility narratives using a relational selfhood model that held local value. This article makes important contributions to the theorisation of social mobility in which it might be understood as a collective rather than individual endeavour, improving entire communities that seek ontological security instead of social class movement and dislocation.

Keywords

Social mobility; social class; value practices; kinship; selfhood; place; fulfilment; success; relationality

Introduction

Social mobility has been a central tenet of social policy with cross-party support over the last two decades (Lawler and Payne, 2018). The significant political attention garnered by social mobility has notably focused on mobilising the 'socially excluded' and disadvantaged (Lawler, 2018). The policy narrative claims that social mobility within the United Kingdom (UK) is falling and more support is needed to help those at the bottom work their way to the top. It can be difficult to critically research social mobility when many of its associated features sit so easily in lay understandings of social justice (Calder, 2016). This discourse appeals to all political parties despite the vast amount of evidence to the contrary around the feasibility of 'equal opportunities' to alleviate structural inequalities (Littler, 2018; Reay, 2013). Success within this understanding of social mobility is conceptually narrow, reduced to individual level of educational achievement, occupational position, and income (Reay, 2018). This individualistic discourse is not accessible or even desirable for many people in working-class communities who often construct alternative value practices (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs, 1997). Despite this, current social mobility studies rarely move beyond the established conceptualisation of social mobility. This article aims to illuminate how the dominant mobility discourse is negotiated by members of one working-class community, arguing for the re-imagining of social mobility on a

collective level that recognises the value inherent in narratives constructed outside of the dominant symbolic.

Drawing upon a small-scale qualitative study, this article seeks to investigate how social (im)mobility narratives and notions of value were constructed by residents of Hiraeth[i], a small, working-class, urban suburb which ranks as one of the most deprived communities in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). Although an ethnographic approach was taken to the research, this article primarily draws upon data created in family interviews. Nine families took part in the research, totalling twenty-five participants and thirteen interviews. The findings illustrate the importance of the familial bond and 'keeping close' within many participants' narratives, alongside working-class discourses of fulfilment that were decoupled from wealth and work. Many participants drew upon the heteronormative 'born and bred' narrative to demonstrate their deep-rooted attachment to place (Taylor, 2010). As will become clear, Hiraeth residents developed their own value practices through constructing narratives of fixity, anchorage and relationality.

The findings presented here reveal that the dominant, individualistic discourse of social mobility was not invested in by Hiraeth residents; and that success and fulfilment were constructed through alternative narratives of relationality and place-attachment. The dominant conceptualisation of social mobility often reproduces compartmentalised notions of social mobility, overlooking relationships between people and places; however, a working-class discourse of fulfilment was drawn upon by participants. Instead of attempting to discover ways to help working-class people 'fit' into this narrow, individualising narrative, this article aims to redefine the narrative, allowing for a multitude of value practices and trajectories to be recognised (Fishkin, 2014). Therefore, instead of encouraging individuals to rise out of their class to improve their 'selves', the findings presented indicate that a wider, collective understanding of social mobility is required. Here, I demonstrate that a focus on ontological security, belonging, and 'relational selfhood' is more conducive to understanding social mobility as the meaningful, collective improvement of (rather than departure from) people's lives and living conditions (Bradley, 2018; Reay, 2018).

Documenting the entrenchment of the dominant social mobility discourse

Situating this research: The rise in popularity of 'social mobility'

Social mobility is a term that is habitually used by social commentators, academics, politicians, and the general public. Unquestionably constructed as a 'good thing' to strive for, social mobility has been a key social policy concern across the UK political spectrum. From New Labour's focus on social exclusion, to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's hopes for an 'Aspiration Nation', social mobility has remained central to social policy regardless of the changing economic and political climate (Lawler and Payne, 2018; Littler, 2018). The 'Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission' (renamed the Social Mobility Commission in 2016) was introduced in 2012 through the Coalition government's flagship policy on social mobility headed by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Each year, the commission produces a 'State of the Nation' report highlighting the country's progress on improving social mobility. Theresa May, the Conservative Prime Minister 2016-2019, made it clear that both social mobility and meritocracy were at the centre of her government's aims to deliver a fairer society, which would place the UK as the 'great meritocracy of the world' (May, 2016). Social mobility has therefore been cemented as a core policy concern, gaining the commitment of politicians from left and right.

There is a particular emphasis within the political discourse on certain types of people who need to become socially mobile, namely the socially excluded and disadvantaged. There has been concern over consecutive governments of a growing 'underclass', which they contend has halted social mobility due to individuals' lack of ambition to enter the labour market and come off social welfare payments (Conservative Party, 2008, 2015; HM Government, 2011). Under the Coalition government (2011-2015), a more psychologising and stigmatising discourse began to circulate around the 'character' and personality 'traits' of working-class people and people in poverty, building upon previous governments' vilification of the working-classes (Allen and Bull, 2018; Lawler, 2018). These stigmatising discourses work to locate the 'problem' within the individual, constructing 'deficient subjectivities' which need to be improved (Tyler, 2013). For example, the Coalition government's 'flagship' social mobility policy claimed:

> We have a group of people in our society who have become detached, unable to play a productive role in the workplace, in their families or in their communities. They are often trapped by addiction, debt, educational failure, family breakdown or welfare dependency.

HM Government (2011: 11)

This stigmatising discourse, alongside the notion that the only way to be successful is to become socially mobile, suggests that there is something wrong with individuals' starting places, that there is a lack, and that value can only be accrued by leaving that way of life behind (Reay, 2013; Walkerdine, 2003). In this discourse, being working-class is therefore incongruous with being successful.

Understanding social mobility: Movement, measurement and emotion

The common trope of social mobility constructs self-improvement as progression through education, employment, and income levels, resulting in improved living conditions and a new social class location. The massification of higher education (HE) has been positioned as crucial to improving social mobility because "in a knowledge-based economy, education is the motor that drives social mobility" (Cabinet Office, 2009: 63). With a focus on 'raising' aspirations among the working-classes, the commonly held assertion is that investment in education will lead to a well-paid career, thus resulting in social mobility (Department for Education, 2017; HM Government, 2011). Critics of this approach question the assumption that working-class aspirations need 'raising'; and recognise that HE is a stratified, crowded and competitive marketplace which typically favours those from higher class origins (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Brown et al, 2011). Even so, this social mobility trajectory has been typified as the moralistic, right way to self-improve, reducing the value attributed to alternative trajectories (Fishkin, 2014).

The moral panic around declining social mobility rates is well established. For example, the 2013 State of the Nation report warned that "…stagnating levels of social mobility are a serious concern for the UK. They matter for reasons of fairness: every person should have equal opportunity to fulfil their potential" (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013: 7). Indeed, the common assumption that social mobility is measurable and that social mobility 'rates' are comparable over time holds certain epistemological presuppositions about the nature of social mobility. Typically focusing on intergenerational movements across both occupational and income structures, quantitative measures of social mobility are conceptually narrow by limiting mobility to workplace relations and ignoring the affective aspects of being socially mobile (Lawler and Payne, 2018; Walkerdine et al, 2001).

In recent years, however, there has been a growing qualitative tradition within social mobility studies, which has explored subjective experiences, often drawing upon a Bourdieusian framework

(Bathmaker et al, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Reay, 2018). These approaches focus on the dissociative role of cultural capital and habitus in everyday experiences of social mobility. However, qualitative mobility research can be seen to have started earlier than this, originating within cultural feminist work that draws upon Bourdieu such as Skeggs (1997) and Lawler (1999). The overreliance on Bourdieusian theory in social mobility studies has not gone unnoticed or uncritiqued (Bradley, 2014; Lawler and Payne, 2018). Skeggs (2011) argues that Bourdieu's theoretical framework fails to address the affective aspects of inequality experienced in relation to class, gender and sexuality. A further criticism is that Bourdieu's theory can easily work to attribute those without 'legitimate' forms of capital as lacking and deficit (Bradley, 2014; Skeggs, 2011). Even so, Bourdieu's work has been particularly important for developing qualitative approaches to social mobility research (Lawler and Payne, 2018).

The focus of many qualitative mobility studies is on individuals' difficult experiences of social mobility, accepting the notion that social mobility is an individual responsibility and experience. The attention given to education and employment again exemplifies individualistic experiences that underpin the narrow conceptualisation of social mobility. Despite the critique provided here, it is undeniably imperative for sociologists to continue highlighting the structural barriers that close off individual social mobility to those who desire it. This established field is essential in outlining the myth of meritocracy and the inequalities faced by marginalised groups (Littler, 2018; Reay, 2018).

In this article, however, the aim is to theoretically push the boundaries and framing of social mobility, to give a voice to those for whom the established social mobility narrative is not desired. It is an invitation to think critically about the individualistic framing of social mobility. Through an interrogation and development of the concept of social mobility, the findings demonstrate the need to broaden understandings of social mobility to incorporate a multitude of values and trajectories. As Tyler (2013: 12) argues, "what many disenfranchised people actively desire is not *flight* but rather *anchorage"*.

Social mobility: The view from two differing models of selfhood

Social mobility, as an individualising discourse, hinges on notions of meritocracy and equal opportunities to provide social justice despite not being realistically attainable in a neoliberal society entrenched with structural inequalities (Calder, 2016; Reay, 2013). The increasing focus on the individual has accompanied a political and cultural shift towards responsibilisation and risk management, where citizens are encouraged to invest in a 'neoliberal project of the self' (Walkerdine, 2003). By being adaptable to change, undergoing constant reinvention of the self and risk-taking, individuals are able to respond to the demands of neoliberal capitalism and become socially mobile. Giddens (1991) refers to this as a 'reflexive identity project' whilst Silva (2012) uses the term 'therapeutic selfhood'. This can often require investing in HE, accumulating social, cultural and economic capital, and continually moving to secure job opportunities and career development. As such, this process can be accompanied by uncertainty and unsettledness (Andres and Wyn, 2010). Lehmann (2009), however, recognises that for some from working-class communities this mobility endeavour is encouraged by families to ensure betterment, despite the difficulties encountered.

As the 'neoliberal project of the self' has become reified in social and political discourse, those who do not engage with this model become othered (Skeggs, 2011; Walkerdine, 2003). 'Keeping close' by staying in your home community is deemed as lacking aspiration and braveness to compete in the neoliberal labour market (Mannay, 2013). This paper questions the affiliation of 'keeping close' with lack, arguing for the value recognition of alternative trajectories. For many in working-class

communities a form of relational sociality holds value, as opposed to individualised projects of the self (Walkerdine, 2016). Relational selfhood focuses on relationships with others, ontological security, social fixity and belonging; diametrically opposed to flexible insecurity, social mobility and risk. This working-class discourse of fulfilment is therefore incompatible with the dominant social mobility narrative. This is not to say that lives of residents in working-class communities do not require 'improvement', or that residents do not desire some form of improvement in their living conditions, but that this improvement needs to appear on a collective level, rather than an individual one (Bradley, 2018; Reay, 2013). Social mobility needs to be understood outside of a moralised and stigmatising discourse and be conceptualised differently to genuinely assess the scope of social justness achieved within society. As Fraser asserts, tackling inequalities requires both *redistribution* of wealth and opportunities for success, and *recognition* of diverse cultural norms and values as 'neither alone is sufficient' (2009: 73).

In what follows, I argue that social mobility can be conceptualised as the improvement of entire communities, a collective rather than individual endeavour, which seeks ontological security instead of social class departure. Widened understandings of social mobility will allow for social mobility and thus social justice to be understood beyond the individual, providing a collective yardstick for social justice within a given society.

Methodology

The data drawn upon is from an ethnographic study of one community, 'Hiraeth'. The ethnographic approach entailed fourteen months in the field and the collation of fieldnotes, participant observation, family interviews, community worker interviews, and creative methods. The research focused on how social mobility narratives were constructed, and the inter-relational role of social class, place and gender within these. The findings presented here are a redacted presentation of some of the study's core findings, drawing upon family interviews undertaken. A narrative-discursive approach was taken to data analysis, reflecting the study's social constructionist epistemological positioning.

The research site

Hiraeth is a predominantly Welsh, white working-class community in an urban suburb of a south Wales city. Using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), Hiraeth ranks as one of the most deprived communities within Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). The suburb is home to around eight thousand residents but was initially a small agricultural community. As agriculture made way for more dominant forms of industry in the 20th century, such as the steelworks situated in the inner-city, Hiraeth became an 'overspill' community shipping in buses of workers to the city. The suburb is mostly reserved for residential dwellings, with a mainstay of shops down the high street on the west of the community. Both owner-occupier (over two-thirds) and social renting (about a fifth) figures are higher than city-wide figures, suggesting that Hiraeth is an area of interesting economic contrasts.

As much of the political discourse focuses on the 'lack' of the working-classes, it was essential to situate the research in a working-class community. The area was chosen due to its overlooked and under-researched status. Hiraeth contrasts with many marginalised areas which are hyper-stigmatised and consistently represented negatively (e.g. Byrne et al's 2016 work on Merthyr Tydfil). Hiraeth therefore suited the requirements of this research.

Recruiting families for interviews

The rationale for interviewing families came from insights gained from community workers, who shared that many families stay in Hiraeth for generations. It was this fixity, as opposed to mobility, that I wanted to explore. I took a pragmatic and opportunistic approach to recruiting participants utilising a variety of methods, relying on snowball sampling to build-up participant numbers. Participant demographics are available in the supplementary material. Although participant occupations may indicate that the sample is working-class, the research went beyond conceptualising class as solely a measure of occupational level. Class is subjective, tied up with an array of moral norms and values, and the approach taken in this research was to explore class in the everyday, as dynamic and relational (Skeggs, 1997).

I spoke to nine families over thirteen separate interviews, with a total of twenty-five participants and over twenty hours of audio-recorded material. The sample size is small. However, talking to various family members ensured generational breadth. The sample has weaknesses, such as the overrepresentation of over-seventies, homeowners and a very distinct ethnic homogeneity. This reflects the demographic make-up of the area and the difficulties of recruitment. Similar to Degnen's (2005) work, I do not believe that the older age of some participants led to only certain narratives being constructed as there was generational consistency across narratives, even when younger generations were interviewed separately to their elder relatives. Further research could build upon these weaknesses to develop a wider picture.

The study was not aiming to be representative of the narratives of all Hiraeth residents, or all working-class communities. There are, nevertheless, analytical insights to be gained from the small selection of narratives constructed for this research. There may be some similarities between Hiraeth and other forgotten, disadvantaged communities, although we must be cautious when making such comparisons and generalisations, as there are always social, cultural and historical differences.

The family interview process

Twelve of the thirteen family interviews took place within the family home. Unstructured interviews were deemed most appropriate as they allowed participant freedom. Eight of the family interviews were conducted with multiple family members present. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Narrative-discursive approach

A narrative-discursive approach was taken to data analysis (Taylor, 2010). Discursively analysing participants' speech enabled an exploration of how notions of social mobility were interpreted and constructed in the social context of the interview. This approach highlighted how dominant narratives and discourses were drawn upon, accepted, and rejected in the construction of narratives that help participants make sense of their lives (Skeggs, 1997).

Hiraeth residents' alternative social mobility narratives

The narratives constructed throughout the family interviews were complex, rich and distinct from the dominant social mobility discourse. Notions of fixity, relationality and anchorage to both place and kinship underpinned many participants' narratives, and it was these notions that held local value. There was also a distancing constructed through some participants' narratives, as they situated themselves outside of the dominant discourse, as people who 'do not belong' inside formal education settings. This distancing, however, was negated by the construction of an alternative narrative which

was valorised by participants, what I have termed a 'working-class discourse of fulfilment'. Within this narrative, aspiration and fulfilment were linked to being ontologically secure, having enough, and being 'okay' both materially and emotionally (Casey, 2008; Walkerdine et al, 2001). The following three sections explore these findings in closer detail, drawing upon excerpts from participants' narratives.

The 'born and bred' narrative

For many participants, a central resource drawn upon was the born and bred narrative. This discursive resource was used by participants when recalling memories of their lives as a way of constructing continuity in their narratives, demonstrating attachment to place through length of residence, close kinship ties and a sense of anchoring (Degnen, 2005; Taylor, 2010). The born and bred narrative held value within Hiraeth, and interviews demonstrated a strong attachment to place despite the dominant social mobility narrative's focus on individual movement and improvement.

Of all the families interviewed, bar one, there were other family members either living in the same house, on the same street, or in other streets within Hiraeth. Having family near was a locally valued and central facet in the born and bred narrative, through which participants understood their lives and identities (Elias and Scotson, 1965; Mannay, 2013). In her 1972 seminal work, Barker highlighted the centrality of an affective relationship with home within the Welsh context. The home is valorised and the notion of 'keeping close' amongst family members is crucial to maintaining this relationship. Often the family home acted as an anchor, providing stability and consistency for those in the family, and a site of support when needed. This provides continuity to the narratives constructed by participants as proximity to the familial home helped to shape mobility narratives. Rosemary's (married, 70s) narrative demonstrates this when discussing downsizing the family home:

> **Rosemary:** …because they all grew up and they all…and then they were all leaving home, and we moved to a bungalow and suddenly everybody came back home again *laughs* [Louise: oh no!] at one point we had three, three lots in a year! [Louise: oh gosh!] but uh, we built the conservatory *laughs* to give a bit of extra room [Louise: extra space], we had one in each room and that was it! One family! But uh, yeah, they've all had their problems at different times but that's family, isn't it?... Yeah, if you can't go anywhere else you can go home. Even the grandchildren come back to us, don't they Charles?

As Elias and Scotson (1965) argue, neighbourhood and family ties are closely connected and dependent on each other. Similar to their research, it was common in Hiraeth for 'mum' to be the central figure of kinship groups, holding generations of families together within the community. Often childcare was an important factor in keeping close, highlighting the gendered and heteronormative nature of the born and bred narrative. This was evident in Tanya's (30s) account, as she further demonstrated the importance of familial proximity when anchoring herself to the community:

> **Louise:** And why have you stayed?
>
> **Tanya:** Cos, I don't know, I got married at twenty-one so um, we bought our first house in Hiraeth, when we were in our twenties so um, just wanted to stay close to my parents and stuff, it just seemed [Louise: mm] why, you know, *laughs* nowhere else seemed any better so we may as well stay here hadn't we? *laughs* [Louise: *laughs*] yeah and my grandparents live in Hiraeth as well so [Louise: so you've got a lot of family nearby] yeah, yeah, yeah, both sets of grandparents live in Hiraeth, and my parents, so [Louise: oh everyone's here *laughs*] so yeah, and I used to work in Sainsbury's on Cambrian Avenue so [Louise: yeah] so, it was close by and then my husband got a job in um the [local] hospital, so again it's easy [Louise: yeah] so yeah,

we just stayed *laughs* and then we had um, my eldest when I, was twenty-three, so obviously then he started at Hiraeth as well so [Louise: mm], once you're here, you're here aren't you? *laughs* stay near the babysitters once you have children! *laughs*

Tanya's emotional ties to Hiraeth articulated through her affection of her family and her community prevented her from leaving the area to experience the 'unknown'. Such strong kinship networks provide "considerable reassurance and security" (Elias and Scotson, 1965: 47). There is also the practical importance of having family close-by to assist with childcare whilst also strengthening the relationship to home (Barker, 1972).

Familial proximity and keeping close provided both a practical and a sentimental value, as Hiraeth residents expressed how important it is to them to have their family around them. Families discussed the importance of generational traditions and weaved their narratives into the history of the community, strengthening their anchorage to place (Bennett, 2014; Degnen, 2005). Returning to Tanya's narrative, she expressed comfort through the consistency of having her first-born (and subsequent children) attend the same school that she did. Michael and his wife Tracy (50s) also discussed the continuation of the family tradition of attending Hiraeth's local school:

Michael: How many generations of this family have been to, Hiraeth Juniors?

Tracy: Oh, nan started off there

Michael: So nan, nan, your mum,

Tracy: Me

Michael: You

Tracy: Lucy

Michael: Lucy, and now Lucy's children, so five generations

The notion of passing down to subsequent generations the same experiences of older family members was common in families, providing a shared anchor to the community. Here, place can be conceptualised as a gift that is passed from one generation of a community to the next, creating relationships between generations through time (Bennett, 2014). Fixity was not constructed by residents as something to be moved away from, as there was pride in being able to say that there was a continuity and consistency across generations. Maintaining a strong, historical relationship to the community held value across generations of the families interviewed, constructing narratives of fixity as opposed to mobility by drawing upon shared social memory talk (Degnen, 2005).

The born and bred narrative was an overarching discursive resource used by participants to construct locally valuable identities. The importance of anchoring, keeping close, and the passing on of generational knowledge were crucial to the maintenance of belonging to Hiraeth and to the working-class discourse of fulfilment. It is such relationality to home, community and kin that is overlooked in the normative social mobility discourse. Next, I turn to how participants constructed their relationship to education, one of the 'key drivers' of social mobility.

Discomfort and distancing relationships to education

It was common to hear stories of turbulent experiences of the education system. For many, the focus was on getting out of education as soon as possible to gain some on-the-job training and start earning.

Investing in your family, being 'okay' and having 'enough' in order to avoid daily struggles were often more essential to residents' narratives than individualised projects of social mobility through education (Casey, 2008; Walkerdine et al, 2001). Frequently when further education was attempted, such as Alex (30s) with her A-levels[ii] and Lisa (30s) with her teacher training qualifications, quitting was part of the difficult trajectory:

> **Lisa:** …so, no I didn't particularly enjoy school, I was glad to get out of there, and then when I when I left and went to college I was, that took me years to actually finish the college course [Louise: mm], that's because I just didn't, just didn't enjoy being at school [Louise: yeah] then you have to do work and if I fell behind I used to start panicking and think oh I'll just quit and start again next year [Louise: yeah], so eventually managed to finish my um, teaching assistant…

Lisa constructed her educational trajectory as a struggle, as something she "didn't particularly enjoy", which she was glad to get through. This was common across many narratives from residents, who were happy to get out of the education system promptly as it was something 'not for them', as they positioned themselves as 'other' (Lawler, 1999; Skeggs, 1997).

As social mobility can be such a difficult and wrenching process, especially through the UK's middle-class education system, it is essential to widen notions of 'success' outside of the traditional educational improvement discourse (Fishkin, 2014; Reay, 2018). Often this is not desirable as many working-class parents just want a basic level of education for their children, and for them to fit in and 'survive' school (Gillies, 2005). There is not always the desire to 'escape' and become middle-class, as working-class values are strongly held (McKenzie, 2015; Reay, 2018). Often it is difficult circumstances from which people want to escape, not their families and their values (Mallman, 2018). This can go some way to explaining the strong attachment to place and kinship demonstrated which forms an essential part of the 'working-class discourse of fulfilment', explored later.

In addition to the troubled educational narratives shared by participants, there was often a distancing from university education as it was seen as something that was alien, expensive, and a privilege. Alex (30s), who attended university as a mature student despite not having A-levels, reflected on her mixed experience:

> **Alex:** …I felt quite out of place like, I felt, cos it was obviously I hadn't been in education since I was like, seventeen, and I was twenty-eight, and I, and I felt like, and I felt like it was quite posh as well, um, no, no, no like, no judgement on that but just different to my [Louise: yeah] you know, different to how, what my life was like, and you know, it was, I did find it quite difficult to fit in, especially being a mature student and like class-wise as well, I felt I wasn't [Louise: mm] I felt it was like, full of middle-class people, and I'm not, like, I didn't feel like I was that so you know, I, I, I found I didn't really make any friends in uni, I'm not in touch with anyone from uni I didn't really [Louise: yeah] click with anyone, didn't really, I just kind of, did it and then [Louise: yeah] and I was working as well, you know, so I was working like twenty odd hours a week doing care work as well because like, you know, had to support myself and whatever…

Alex distanced herself from the middle-class university as someone who does not belong on both class and age grounds. Added to this is the financial pressure Alex was under, as she, like many working-class university students, had to work part-time to support her studies (Bathmaker et al, 2016). Although her time at university is described as a difficult transition that entailed periods of unease, Alex later reflected on the experience as "one of the best things I ever did". Similar to Garland's (1994) work with Welsh female mature students, Alex constructed her attendance at university as something which provided an element of self-fulfilment and broadened her knowledge. Although Alex was

grateful for the experience, she was resistant to the dominant discourse which sees higher education as a route to social mobility and moving away from working-class culture, echoing Finn's findings on student mobilities (2017: 750). For Alex, university education was about widening her approach to learning and her degree's intrinsic value, instead of the accumulation of capitals in what Skeggs (2005) terms 'middle-class possessive individualism'. For some in Hiraeth, such as Lisa (30s) and her mother Anne (70s), the idea of doing a degree for its intrinsic value without knowing it will lead to a well-paying career was too much of an economic gamble:

> **Lisa:** I feel like, really, like, realistically, your chances of actually [Anne: yeah, yeah] ending up being [Louise: yeah] you know, an actor and making your living off, off a drama degree [Anne: yeah] is such a big, it's not much chance is it? Maybe teaching and things like that but [Louise: yeah] it must be nice to be able to just do something you love for four years and then not have to worry about getting a job *laughs*

Lisa's account appeared to come from a position of constraint, implying that Lisa has not and would not be able to take such a financial risk, demonstrating how social class can be experienced through exclusion (Mannay, 2013; Skeggs, 1997). Experiences and views of university were therefore complex, difficult to negotiate, and troubled across some participants' narratives. These accounts suggest a distancing from university education, from those who have experience of it, to those who felt excluded from it. The dominant social mobility discourse of escaping your class through higher education was therefore not readily accepted or accessible to all participants in this research. An alternative notion of 'success' was constructed which emphasised the importance of keeping close to family and community, but also disconnected fulfilment from occupation and earnings.

Working-class discourse of fulfilment

In both their aspirations for their children's futures and reflections on their lives overall, participants constructed alternative value practices which were associated with success and fulfilment. As the data has shown, fulfilment, success and ontological security were characterised through relationships with others, rather than status achieved through employment or income. This is arguably an example of the 'hidden rewards' of class which flourish in working-class communities (McKenzie, 2015). Both employment and income status are typically used as indicators of social mobility, as education is epitomised as the way to 'climb the ladder'. For some parents in Hiraeth, however, this discourse was not invested in. When I asked Tanya (30s) what her hopes were for her three sons' futures, the focus was on settling down and being a helping hand in the community:

> I just want them to grow up and be happy [Louise: yeah] innit you know, meet someone nice, get married [Louise: yeah] manage to buy a house *laughs* don't ask me for the money *laughs* um, just be nice people isn't it? [Louise: yeah, yeah]...as I say, helping with the church, helping with the scouts [Louise: yeah] helping with anything else that anyone asks you know [Louise: yeah] so you know, yeah, I, I've always said that if you don't want to go to university that's fine [Louise: yeah], cos obviously we didn't and we've done alright [Louise: mm] but we'll support you.

Tanya places helping others at the forefront of her aspirations for her sons, constructing a relational sociality where value is created through your ties to others, instead of individualised achievements (Skeggs, 2005). Similarly, when discussing her daughter's future, Alex (30s) stated that academic

achievement was "not the highest on my list of the things that I want for her". All parents wanted the best for their children and for their children to be happy, and for most, this did not necessarily require high academic performance or university education. As Pearce (2011: 8) contends:

> People aspire to more than just the chance to get their child off to university and up the social ladder: they are interested in their standard of living, quality of life and the strength of their social bonds.

Often working-class 'success' and 'fulfilment' is focused around being ontologically secure, having enough, and being 'okay' both materially and emotionally (Casey, 2008; Walkerdine et al, 2001). Many people are happy to remain in their class of origin providing their fundamental aspirations are met, and for many, particularly women, these aspirations were to provide a stable home for the family with food on the table and clothes on their backs. As with the working-class women in Casey's (2008) research, fulfilment was often the 'mundane desire to do working-class and woman more effectively', and to ensure everyday struggles over money were eased. There was pride in the fact that fulfilment was decoupled from wealth and occupation.

Often participants provided conclusions to their narratives through reflecting on their overall experience of living in Hiraeth. Mary (80s) and her son Carwyn (60s) reflected upon their lives and their fulfilment:

> **Mary:** …we had a very happy life there [Louise: mm] you know and um
> **Carwyn:** Yeah it's been independent of money hasn't it? Happiness [Mary: yeah] yeah
> **Mary:** It is yeah

This sentiment of being happy regardless of how much money you have featured in several participants' narratives. Reay (2013) argues that the crude desire for money and power only exists among the few, and this desire certainly was not evident amongst participants. It is clear from these reflections that there is pride in being working-class and a sense of mundanity in what constitutes a fulfilled, valuable life (Casey, 2008). Despite the rhetoric of social mobility being focused on moving 'upwards' in relation to occupation, class and income, this does not equate to being happier and more fulfilled (Littler, 2018). As Kathryn (40s) concludes:

> **Kathryn:** No, none of us need to be rich, you just need to be able to keep a roof over your head
> **Louise:** Yeah, and just, have some enjoyment
> **Kathryn:** And people do get carried away with wanting to be rich, I've always been the same, as long as I earn enough, to feed myself and clothe my kids that was [Louise: mm] just as well really, in nursing *laughs* you're never gunna be rich! [Louise: no]

This discourse of fulfilment was constructed in contrast to the individualised social mobility and self-improvement discourse. There was much more focus on relationality, providing for others, and a fundamental sense of ontological security- something which is often unachievable when focusing on individual mobility and improvement (Skeggs, 2011). Income and occupation (and the gaining of appropriate capitals which go along with this) were not the driver of fulfilment or success for some residents within Hiraeth. Value was constructed outside of the dominant discourse, further questioning the conceptualisation of social mobility as an individualised trajectory and endeavour.

Concluding discussion

Social mobility, and experiences of departure, have long been understood as complex for working-class communities (Jackson and Marsden, 1966), even so, discourses of individualised meritocratic upward trajectories endure (Littler, 2018). This article has questioned the assumption underpinning both common and academic understandings of social mobility- that it is an individualised experience with narrow parameters of success. Currently, there is not only a lack of recognition of the value inherent in alternative narratives typically constructed in working-class communities, but a stigmatisation of those who stay close to home. The dominant social mobility discourse is individualistic, overshadowing people's attachments to their home, community and family that shape their trajectories and life choices. The findings presented here demonstrate the various techniques used by working-class families in sharing their own stories of social (im)mobility: the importance of the born and bred narrative; distancing from education as a route to mobility; and the construction of a distinct working-class discourse of fulfilment. Participants emphasised the value of anchorage to place and kinship, where fulfilment results from finding ontological security through a model of relational selfhood as opposed to individual improvement through capital accumulation. The findings illuminate both the availability and the weight of alternative social mobility narratives that held local value, suggesting that the concept of social mobility needs to be widened on a collective level to incorporate a multitude of values and trajectories.

It may seem that as participants' narratives entailed stories of social fixity, that they are not narratives of social mobility. Indeed, the findings highlight the value of a relational selfhood model that is incongruent with the dominant, individualistic 'neoliberal project of the self' discourse. The desire of the participants who took part in this research was for ontological security, not social class movement and dislocation. If social mobility is to be a useful tool to assess the social justness of society and carries with it connotations of 'improvement', then this paper argues social mobility as a concept needs widening and re-imagining. By tapping into residents' strong attachment and belonging to place, investing in and improving entire communities, rather than individuals, will aid feelings of security and ontological belonging that is so valued in working-class communities. Widening the concept of social mobility would allow for value recognition of alternative trajectories, reducing the stigmatisation of those who 'keep close' to home. One can only optimistically hope that the result of such investment would be more connected and prosperous communities.

A collective understanding of social mobility would therefore be more conducive to ensuring significant improvements in people's lives and living standards who reject dominant narratives of social mobility (Bradley, 2018; Reay, 2018). Both Bradley and Reay theorise this shift as rising *with* your class, instead of the established narrative of needing to rise out of it. Although I am cautious to draw such idealistic conclusions from one small-scale study, the findings from this research demonstrated clearly that individualised and competitive notions of social mobility were not accepted by participants as they constructed value through more relational narratives. Further research is needed to examine how value is constructed outside of the dominant discourse, to build the case for widening social mobility as a concept. The findings presented here aim to be a building block in this direction, addressing the apparent lack in current qualitative social mobility studies which focus on individuals' difficult social mobility trajectories (e.g. Bathmaker et al, 2016; Friedman, 2014). Instead of identifying how working-class people can successfully 'fit' into the dominant understanding of social mobility, this research has illuminated how an alternative social mobility discourse held value within this working-class

community, demonstrating residents' agency and intention in resisting the hegemonic social mobility discourse.

Social mobility, and its connotations with fairness, equal opportunities and improved standards of living, is hard to critique. Even so, scholars have time and again highlighted that a handful of mobile individuals is not enough to address the entrenched inequalities of the UK's current neoliberal, capitalist society (Littler, 2018; Reay, 2018). Collective and wider understandings of social mobility are therefore important not only to ensure the improvement of living conditions for entire communities, but to recognise the value inherent in alternative narratives. The findings presented here suggest it is vital to widen our conceptualisation of social mobility to give attention to relational and collective notions of success and fulfilment.

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[i] The pseudonym 'Hiraeth' is a Welsh word meaning nostalgia, yearning, or longing. This word was pertinent to the findings of the study.
[ii] In the UK, Advanced Levels (A-Levels) are qualifications undertaken after GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education), between the ages of sixteen and eighteen.

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