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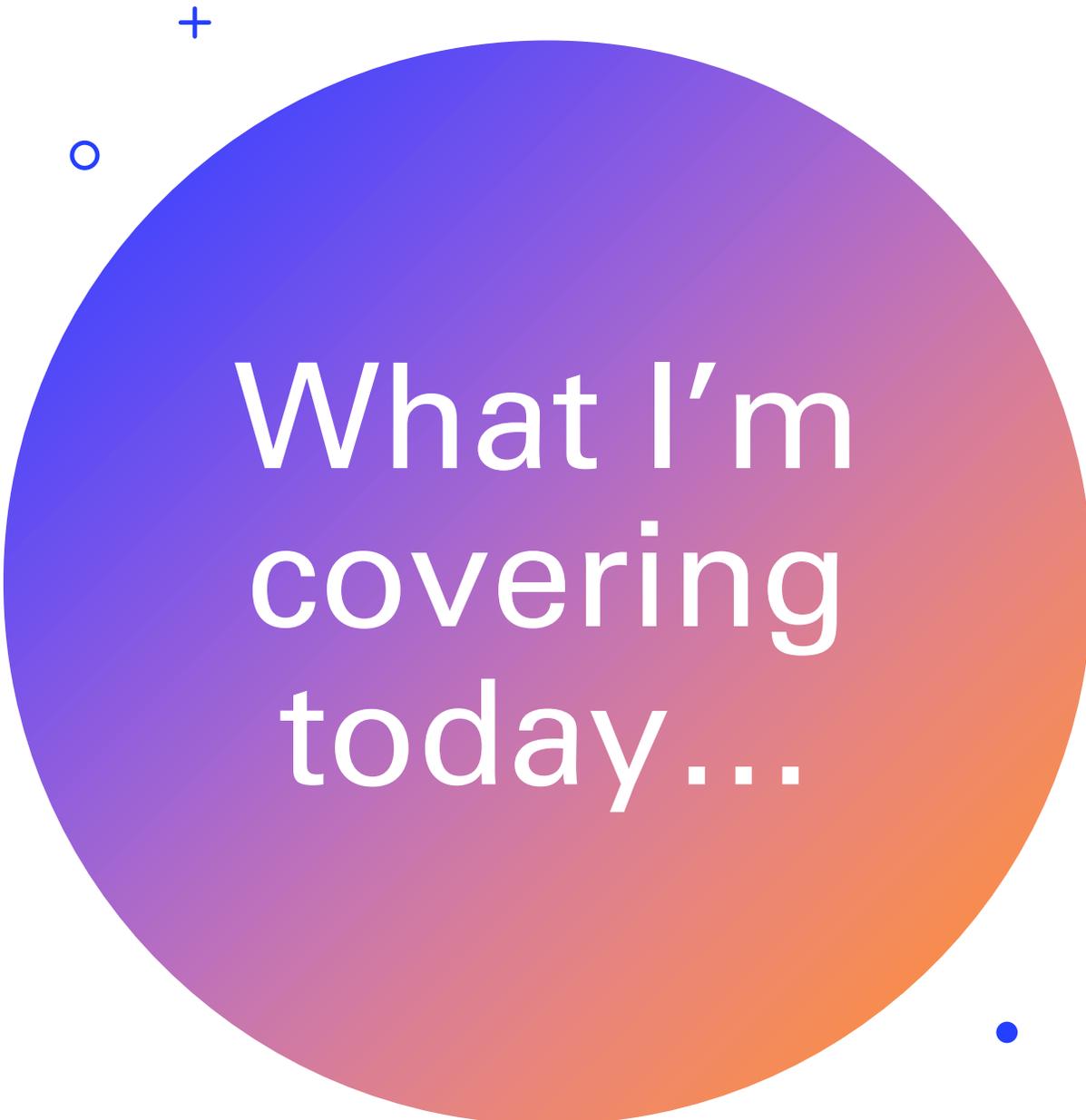
What I'm covering today...

1. The entrenchment of dominant social mobility discourse

2. Understanding social mobility: movement, measurement and emotion

3. Outline of doctoral study

4. Alternative social mobility narratives: 3 techniques

5. The future of social mobility as a concept

1) The entrenchment of the dominant social mobility discourse

- Social mobility has been a central tenet of social policy with cross-party support over the last two decades (Lawler and Payne, 2018).

- Political attention garnered by social mobility has notably focused on mobilising the 'socially excluded' and disadvantaged (Lawler, 2018).

- This discourse is appealing despite vast amounts of evidence to the contrary around the feasibility of 'equal opportunities' and 'meritocracy' to alleviate structural inequalities (Fishkin, 2014; 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. Not accessible/desirable for all

The Coalition Government's 'flagship' social mobility policy…

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)

2) Understanding social mobility: movement, measurement and emotion

"...*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*" (SMCPC, 2013: 7).

- HE massification crucial for social mobility: aspirations need raising (Department for Education, 2017; HM Government, 2011). Reified as moralistic way to improve

- **Quantitative** social mobility studies: measure rates over time, intergenerational movements across income and occupational structures

- **Qualitative** social mobility studies: pick up on quant's lack of affective aspects of mobility. Dominated by Bourdieusian-inspired approaches (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Reay, 2018), painful mobility experiences

- **Both quant and qual** overlook the role of relationships/attachments to people and places

3) Doctoral study outline

- Ethnographic approach in a predominantly white working-class Welsh urban suburb

- **14 months in the field**: Community volunteering, interviewing/shadowing community workers, interviewing families at home. Some use of visual & creative methods

- 9 families over 13 interviews, 25 participants and over 20 hours of audio-recorded material

- Explored how social class, place-attachment, and gender are interconnected within narratives of **social (im)mobility**, shaping the horizon of participants' trajectories

- Narrative-discursive approach to analysis (Taylor 2010)

4) Alternative social mobility narratives: 3 techniques
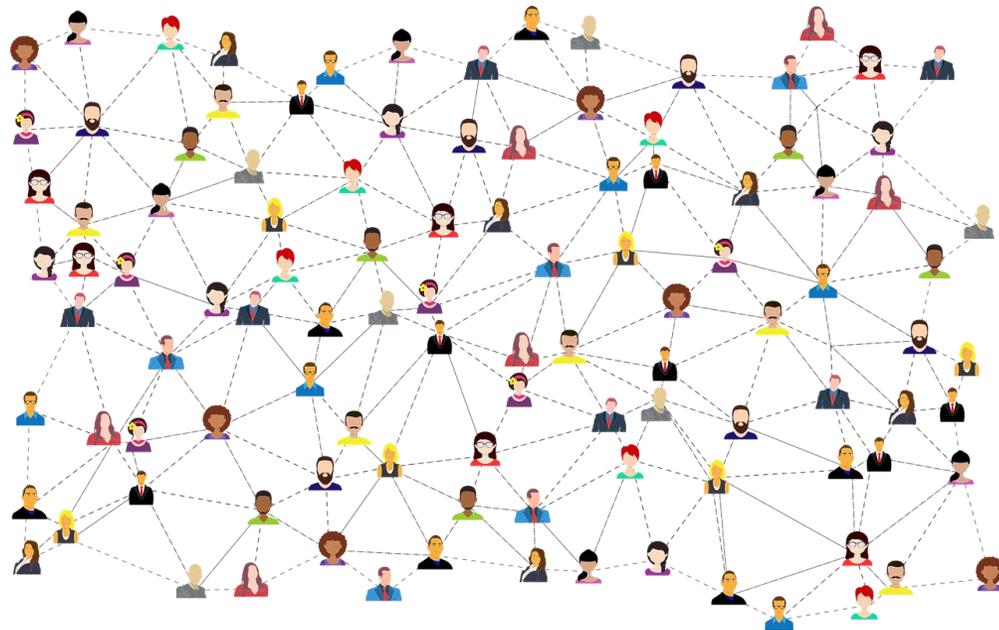
- Narratives constructed were complex, rich and distinct from the dominant social mobility discourse

- Notions **of fixity, relationality and anchorage** to both place and kinship underpinned many participants' narratives= held local value

- Participants situated themselves as people who **'do not belong' inside of formal education settings**

- This distancing was negated by construction of an alternative narrative which was valorised by participants, **a 'working-class discourse of fulfilment'.**

- Within this narrative, aspiration and fulfilment were linked to being ontologically secure, having enough, and being 'okay' materially and emotionally (Casey, 2008; Walkerdine et al, 2001).

The 'born and bred' narrative

- Discursive resource 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.

LF: 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 [LF: mm] why, you know, *laughs* nowhere else seemed any better so we may as well stay here hadn't we? *laughs* [LF: *laughs*] yeah and my grandparents live in Hiraeth as well so [LF: so you've got a lot of family nearby] yeah, yeah, yeah, both sets of grandparents live in Hiraeth, and my parents, so [LF: oh everyone's here *laughs*]…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 [LF: mm], once you're here, you're here aren't you? *laughs* stay near the babysitters once you have children! *laughs*

Discomfort and distancing relationships to education
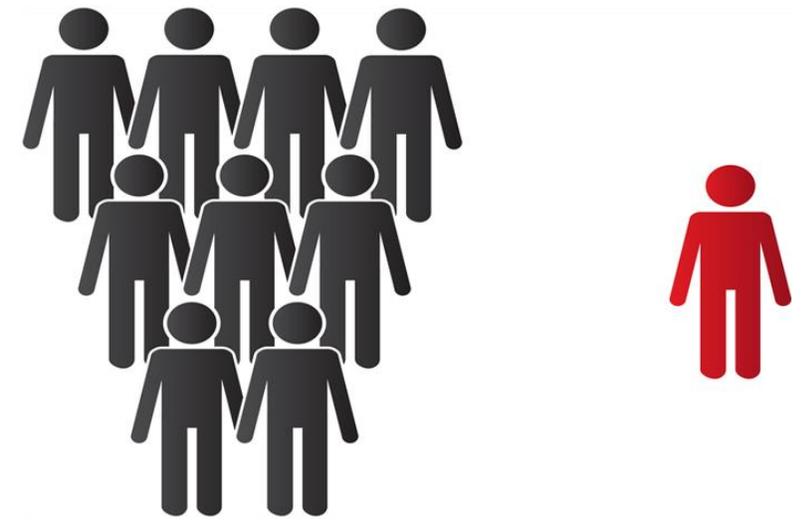
- It was common to hear stories of turbulent experiences of the education system.

- 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).

- Often it is difficult circumstances from which people want to escape, not their families and their values (Mallman, 2018).

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 [LF: mm], that's because I just didn't, just didn't enjoy being at school [LF: 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 [LF: yeah], so eventually managed to finish my um, teaching assistant…

Working-class discourse of fulfilment

- In both their aspirations for their children's futures and reflections on their lives, participants constructed alternative value practices which were associated with success and fulfilment.

- 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).

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

Kathryn: No, none of us need to be rich, you just need to be able to keep a roof over your head
LF: 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 [LF: mm] just as well really, in nursing *laughs* you're never gunna be rich! [LF: no]

5) The future of social mobility as a concept

- Currently lack of **recognition of value** inherent in alternative narratives typically constructed in w/c communities, but also **stigmatisation** of those who stay close to home.

- 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.

- Social mobility could be **widened on a collective level** to incorporate a multitude of values and trajectories (Fishkin 2014; Calder 2016).

- By tapping into residents' strong attachment and belonging to place, investing in and improving **entire communities** will aid feelings of security and ontological belonging that are so valued in w/c communities.

- A **collective understanding** of social mobility could therefore be more conducive in **ensuring significant improvements** in people's lives who reject dominant narratives of social mobility (Bradley, 2018; Reay, 2018).

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

Any questions, please ask ☺

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