



‘Where are all the men?’ working-class male students and care-based degrees

Craig Johnston ^a and Simon Bradford ^b

^aDepartment of Health and Community, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK; ^bDepartment of Clinical Sciences, Brunel University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article draws on data from a small qualitative study of men on care-based degree pathways in one university in England. There is little research that specifically considers the experiences of working-class men on these courses. The article explores aspects of men’s experiences and responses to so-called ‘active learning’. It considers knowledge in care-pathway pedagogy and how students on these programmes are enabled to draw on both disciplinary and practice-knowledge. The article argues that active learning must go beyond a dominant preoccupation with self-development to initiate students into disciplinary knowledge appropriately recontextualised for their practice careers. Classed and gendered classrooms are an example of where this might occur. Implications for access and participation and for teaching and learning on care pathways are identified.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 April 2021
Accepted 29 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Masculinity; higher education; social class; active-learning; knowledge; pedagogy

Introduction

The landscape of working-class men’s knowledge acquisition within care-based degree classrooms is presently poorly described and analysed. Understanding the subtle, often invisible, barriers that await them on care-based degrees remains limited (Torre 2018). Research in this area is set against a policy framework that encourages innovative forms of learning to engage ‘non-traditional’ learners (Quaye and Harper 2020). Subject areas (like Health and Social Care) straddle an abstract/ practical knowledge divide. Researchers have been slow to investigate how *some* forms and iterations of social difference impact on student experience and how creative pedagogies might effectively prepare students for occupational practice. In professional education, working-class masculinities have often been overlooked. In some care-based settings imputed masculine traits are regarded as desirable, encouraging bravery, independence, and rational thought in small children, or have grown in significance through policy drivers around male recruitment and discourses of tough ‘male role models’ (Wright and Brownhill 2019). Working-class masculine identities seem somehow to be located *separately* in the actual site of work (perhaps as an obstacle, impediment or even an individual strength) rather than being understood as integral elements of social identities that alert students (men *and* women) to the structures and relations of power in which care work is set. Scope exists for analysis of working-class male involvement in care-based classrooms, how men are positioned and position themselves in relation to female-dominated disciplines, their peer groups and teaching staff. These men’s experiences as learners cannot be understood without taking account of the ways in which class and gender intersect in their lives. In turn, their experiences

CONTACT Craig Johnston  craig.johnston@winchester.ac.uk  Faculty of Health and Well Being, University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester SO22 4NR, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

and acquired knowledge have important implications for their work as novice and emergent practitioners. This article draws on a qualitative study of working-class male undergraduate students enrolled on care-based professional courses at one university in southern England.

We map working-class men's experiences of active learning used on their care-based degree programmes and explore the positioning of working-class male students in female-dominated classrooms, their relations with peers and their views of prevailing pedagogic practices. We outline how expressions of social difference underlie students' experiences and explore how these are understood by male students. We consider the role that active learning pedagogies might have in helping students to recognise how social difference shapes their learning. Finally, we draw some broad conclusions about the 'professional self' and the acquisition and importance of disciplinary knowledge in supporting novice professionals.

Working-class men in care work and active learning

Although men's presence in care work and in higher education (HE) within the UK (United Kingdom) remains limited their significance as policy-drivers has grown. Entry rates to English universities are *'increasing three times faster for women than for men'* (UCAS 2018, 13). The Education Policy Institute (2020) indicates that some care-based settings have become female dominated. For example, the proportion of men working in secondary schools fell to 35% since 2010 and declined to 13% in primary schools from 2015. Research suggests there are complex economic, cultural, and social dimensions to this (Warin 2018). Some researchers have suggested that masculinity is not seen as an important matter, teaching staff may not be confident in addressing it in classrooms or some students on care-based degrees may be offended by discussing it (Tucker 2015). The justifiable focus on gender and race as salient social categories in HE, epitomised in calls to decolonise universities, has led to class losing analytical traction. However, the material impact of class continues to affect students' potential and is experienced subjectively in aspects of identity and objectively constrained in relation to the unequal distribution of capitals (Bourdieu 1986) through patterns of denial or access to material opportunities, most conspicuously in the labour market. This is also shaped by popular cultural representations of these men as ignorant, racist, or stupid (Wright and Brownhill 2019, 48; Jones 2011). Class is significant in limited recruitment of working-class men to HE, especially to care-based degrees. Class differences have been found to have an impact on levels of student integration and on these students' feelings about 'fitting in' (Reay 2017). Many feel *'estranged from the language, culture and practices'* of university life (Mann 2001, 10).

Despite commitments by successive governments in the UK only, *'10% of men from the most disadvantaged backgrounds go into higher education'* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016, 37) and many men on care-based degrees rely heavily on proficiency in hands-on *practical* activities to construct their professional identities (Ward 2018). UK policy starts from various assumptions of deficit and working-class men's perceived lack of aspiration and motivation (Best 2017). This has facilitated pedagogies that embody, apparently progressivist discourses based on 'student-centredness' under a broad rubric of 'active learning'. These are believed to effectively engage students (Misseynani and Miltiadis 2018), particularly those considered to be 'disadvantaged'. The underlying view is that disadvantaged students (variously defined) are not engaged by pedagogies which fail to prioritise concrete experiences and real-life worlds (Laker and Davis 2011).

So-called active learning includes interactive lectures, experiential learning, and case study analysis (Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin 2010) and is increasingly influential in teaching and learning on professional pathways in nursing, social-work, and teaching. The literature suggests active learning's broadly positive effects on student retention (Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016), critical thinking (Khan et al. 2017), supporting meta-cognitive skills and offering opportunities to promote a curriculum that nurtures *'durable and authentic capacities'* (Barnett and Coate 2005, 64). In further and higher education, active learning is thought to effectively combine key competences and occupation-specific skills on the assumption that these become more embedded in student learning

(Niemi, Nevgi, and Aksit 2016). Little critical attention has been given to assumed benefits to care-based learners, especially those regarded as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Active learning's *'invisible pedagogy'* (Moore 2013, 174) is geared to creating contexts in which students are supported in constructing their own knowledge of the world around them. Arguably, disciplinary knowledge takes a back seat in this (Wheelahan 2010, 132). 'Strong' vocationalism (and some professional education) has often rejected disciplinary knowledge, privileging the development of the apparently *intrinsic* individual capacity of 'the person', what Rata refers to as *'localisation'* (Rata 2012, 18). In effect, this denies students access to 'powerful knowledge' (Young and Muller 2010) and initiation into systematised abstract knowledge to enable students to exercise critical scrutiny, think beyond their current settings and engage with the 'yet to be thought'. Clearly, all occupations require context-specific or 'situated' knowledge (Wheelahan 2015). But, without epistemic access to formal knowledge learners' imagination remains constrained in dealing with concrete, immediate and local matters rather than deploying knowledge that enables them to understand and theorise the complexity of structures, powers, and relations, which shape them and their professional practice. This necessitates the recontextualising of disciplinary knowledge to recognise immediate *and* wider contexts enabling students to understand and distinguish between domains. Critical analysis and reflection on gendered and classed experiences in care-based learning and practice settings offers opportunities to integrate 'abstract' and 'concrete' in pedagogic practice.

The nature and outcomes of care work are invariably contested, often indeterminate and fundamentally ethical. This work is bound up in structures and enactments of power. Disciplinary knowledge is necessary to understand these *impersonal* structures and practices as well as their *material* and concrete embodiments. In professional work, this is fused with capitals constituted in learned skills, aptitudes and dispositions, demeanour, or mode of speech. These more tacit knowledges develop over time through everyday life experiences, in parental or domestic settings, for example, and through practice in care work. Emotional capital comprises emotion-based knowledge, personal management skills and feeling capacities that tie self-processes and resources to group membership and social location. It is *'... embodied and felt, while also managed and strategically used in interactions contextualized by distinct fields'* (Cottingham 2016, 453). Like other forms of capital, it is distributed unequally and emerges in the nexus of micro and macro social structures shaped by gender and class. Care work invokes gendered dispositions, attributes, and cultures (Huppertz and Goodwin 2013) or fixed representations of an essential 'femininity' understood as exclusive to women with emotion and intimacy implicitly antithetical to working-class masculinity (Harland and McCready 2012). The conviction that (all) females are better carers than (working-class) men endorses an essentialist and socially constructed understanding of 'femininity' which supposedly holds an innate advantage over 'masculinity' for guiding practice in caring professions like nursing and teaching. In those occupations, femininity (Huppertz 2009) supports the art or 'mark of professionalism' and offers legitimacy and 'fit' in caring positions (Bourdieu 1986). Shifts in western consciousness (Paechter 2020), men's own personal interest in some caring professions, and work in voluntary organisations (Hussein, Mohamed, and Manthorpe 2016) may enhance recognition of working-class masculinities as well as men's adoption of ostensibly feminised gender norms and practices (Roberts 2018). Yet, representations of gender dispositions, knowledge and skills which connote imputed traditional forms of femininity or masculinity remain venerated and constrictive (Casini 2016). Acknowledging *'... emotional capital may be a dead letter in the masculine, working-class sphere, where physical superiority is more valued than emotional skills and caring'* (Virkki 2007, 278).

Opportunities for individual male students to test new ways of being in learning or workspaces are inevitably mediated by local imperatives, academics, peers, and service-users. Students (like others) are positioned by extant capital, deriving from class or gender, for example, the significance of which becomes evident in the spaces of difference where capital emerges and is deployed. Shifting and contingent class and gender intersections often problematically position working-class male care-work students in study groups. Their presence may involve balancing gender-

specific tensions in which they lack capital. Men sometimes acquire an outsider status in care spaces and their absent legitimacy fosters stigma that can contribute to 'identity bruising' (Foster and Newman 2005) in care-work. Recent studies suggest that education and nursing professions remain potent sites for the entrenchment of gendered difference (Kollmayer, Schober, and Spiel 2018;). Working-class men studying on care courses and entering these occupations may be regarded (by female peers, for example) as manifestly transgressive, whilst also opening spaces in which traditional gender norms may be challenged (Elliott 2016), thereby increasing these men's sense of agency. Questions arise about pedagogic responses to this on care-based courses (Warin 2018, 119).

Research methodology

This article draws from an exploratory small-scale qualitative study of the experiences of working-class men on care-based degrees in one English university. The University has had some success in recruiting from under-represented groups, but working-class male numbers remain low. The research gained Research Ethics Committee approval and ran over two semesters. Participants were recruited from one Faculty that contained the University's care-based degrees. Participants were recruited through emails, campus posters and by visiting specific subject area lectures. The project focused on undergraduate male students from working-class backgrounds, including white and minority ethnic groups. The participants self-defined as 'working-class' and this was embodied in their talk and social practices. Universities define class largely in terms of economic indicators. Family income, for example, is used to target students (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2011). Simple economic data are ineffective in understanding the complexity of class positioning which is also constituted culturally, and marked by forms of identity, embodiments, dress, localised speech and accents, behaviours, perspectives and so on. These are sometimes difficult to capture concretely but combine to form class positions that create patterns and structures of access and denial to capitals of different kinds, including knowledge which itself may confer other capitals. We wanted to explore the positioning of working-class male students in female-dominated classrooms, their relations with peers and their views of prevailing pedagogic practices.

Our sampling process was further refined by recruiting participants who were first in their immediate or extended families to go to university. Participation in HE is a UK Government indicator of social mobility. We selected students from four different disciplinary areas with consistently low numbers of male students: Initial Teacher Education (Primary), Social Work, Health and Social Care, and Childhood Studies. Statistics, published by the UK's university admissions service (UCAS 2018), indicate that women dominate these traditionally feminine degree courses.

The research involved 12 students on care-based degree pathways, with two focus groups, and 4 semi-structured interviews, each lasting about 45 minutes. The participants included 4 from BAME backgrounds, 8 were white, 4 were final year students, 5 were first-year and 3 were second-year students, with 3 mature students. Interviews formed the first phase of data collection half-way through the academic year. Interviewees were invited to participate in a group interview at the end of the academic year, several accepting that invitation. Participants were asked about decisions to undertake care-based degrees (e.g. what motivated you to choose Childhood studies?) and how they were supported pedagogically and socially (e.g. in what way is gender addressed in lecturers?). These questions focused specifically on classroom settings, but the researcher (male, white and identifying as working class) supported participants in offering accounts of experiences across multiple domains of university life. The rationale was that focus groups stimulate critical discussion and reflection, developing and clarifying preceding topics through interaction that might not emerge in single interviews. The interview and focus-group data constitute reflexive accounts that exemplify participants' complex lived experiences (Flyvbjerg 2001, 237). Focus groups offered participants an opportunity to share exclusionary experiences of which they might otherwise be unaware. Our theoretical interests in social difference and pedagogy shaped the collection and subsequent analysis of data across two semesters. This meant the students had participated in various learning

experiences in the semester cycle. Data were collected by voice recording and transcripts were thematically analysed, focusing on students' classroom experiences. Work on the transcripts fragmented the data so that a broadly inductive analysis was possible through a form of 'open coding' (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 12), with categories of meaning emerging through reading, reflection comparison and re-reading. Immersion in the data sensitised the researchers to a range of codes (key ideas, phrases, and expressions) that were progressively drawn out from the data. Several key themes, made up of generalised groups of codes (Choak 2012, 102), emerged from analysis and coding. The researchers compared their individual readings of the data to generate codes and themes. We discuss three emergent themes that distinguish these men's positionings in classroom practice and their pedagogical implications: *belonging and disclosure, participation in the classroom, and academics in the classroom*.

Belonging and disclosure

Questions of student identities quickly emerged in the interviews. Students recounted a common early experience of discovering that they were one of few men in their class. They recounted examples of *'not really fitting in'* or *'I didn't know if I would ever fit in here'*. The absence of men created anxiety over belonging and its significance for learning seemed clear. Sam considered his own position early on the course:

My first thought (on induction day) was, 'where are all the men?' ... I know one guy who left the course because he just felt out of place (interview).

Focus group participants were conscious of classrooms unsettled by gender division and their own uncertain positions within them and marked by an acute awareness – often for the first time – of 'being different'. As Emile pointed out *'I think a lot of new students worry about friendships ... you kind of expect these types of courses to be mainly for girls ...'* (focus group).

Trust, loyalty, and informal support is vital in the retention of these students (Field and Morgan-Klein 2012), as is the stability of friendship (exemplifying social capital) for minority group participants in HE (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012). In attempting to increase belongingness research participants talked about creating spaces where they felt comfortable, and their presence was legitimated. This was sometimes expressed in what participants' described as 'banter'. Banter has a long history of defensive male self-definition and working-class solidarity, through distancing from middle-class culture. This working-class 'lad' identity strengthened a sense of place and belonging in the classroom. It also constituted difference and distance from *other* values of compassion, trust and collaboration understood as synonymous with care discourses. An underlying double-bind exists where the means to achieving place and belonging simultaneously distances and alienates.

Tensions emerged around masculinity in relation to care work, rather than gender as an abstract property. A female peer asked Kevin in class, *'are you doing a teaching degree to be a head-teacher?'* (interview). Kevin identified the assumption that working-class men were somehow trespassing in the classroom and in care-based professions, that their presence was an encroachment or merely a route to something else. *'There is a tradition. I mean, that a woman is always going to be good at care-type work, which is not always right, but lots of people do think in those ways'*. Toni reflected on the problem of 'losing face', *'... some (working-class) mates don't get why I am here (university). At least here I get a chance to get into something that is missing when you step out of being a "guy" ... I'd never talk about teaching or working with children with them'* (interview). It was ironic that Toni's motivations were questioned by female peers, as he saw it essentially contesting his position – his belonging – in the class. One participant also noted, in an interview, that his own male identity in a female dominated profession might offer an advantage as he entered the labour market.

The frequency with which the research participants said *'I'd never talk about'* an interest in the field of care work suggested the extent to which the imperatives of a hegemonic masculinity had been internalised prior to going to university. Toni (above) sees the consequences of normative structures and *natural* dispositions emanating from his working-class male background but was able to place boundaries that marked these off from his 'care work' identity. This pressure encouraged self-disclosure in the focus group and a willingness to share private concerns about gendered and classed learning identities. Self-disclosure in focus group data often challenged the pervasive representation of working-class men as stoic, competitive, and impassive, seemingly far from masculine schoolyard cultures that had censured emotion and repudiated 'feminine careers'. Ryan reflected on his own time at school:

If you were in one class like maths (in school) you were alright (nothing was mentioned), but if you were in like, humanities, you were 'gay'. I think there is shame attached to wanting to do something with children (laughter from the group) ... I am proud to say I want to be a teacher and work with children now ... but it is not easy to say that around my (working-class) mates (focus group).

These reflections were made on the basis of students' immediate concrete experience with no evidence of them having been helped to 'theorise' their experiences or place them in a future-oriented context. The apparently intractable powers that configure the social world and which confront novice practitioners were not identified, class and gender being examples. Good sociology has potential in showing that these are not the consequence of personal failure or shortcoming.

Interviewees identified the importance of what might be regarded as *active learning*, especially strategies that focused on integrating their personal experience with practice and the values underpinning care work. This included little reference to theoretical knowledge. As James explained, referring to the focus group, *'everyone, like this (focus group), supporting and listening to each other'*. Collaborative learning activities that were aimed at enhancing student learning and drawing on students' personal experiences were valued. Yet, it was the *practice* or *mode* of this rather than any particular *content* that seemed important. Developing new acquaintanceships through such integrative projects and discussions connected the students to those around them, stimulating a sense of place and belonging:

What I thought was good was when a lecturer used Kahoot (online platform) in one of her classes. We looked at everyone's reasons for being on the course and we were all the same; we could just relate to each other about wanting to care for children (Jack, interview).

It appeared that at the start of the semester some lecturers had prioritised small cooperative-learning groups as a way to encourage group interactivity. This was not sustained, however, with interviewees identifying less student contact as the year progressed. Like many post-92 universities, the research site may be suffering a shift from *'fat'* to *'lean-and-mean'* pedagogies (Blackmore 1997, 92). This left students' relying on their own psychological and intellectual capitals rather than more active forms of learning in small groups which enhanced relationships. Sustaining enduring social bonds was thus problematic. The extent to which active learning enabled students to theorise their concrete personal and local experiences in wider fields of knowledge, building bridges between the personal and the theoretical or political, or of conceptualising *'... the world outside the confines of (their) own circumstance'* (Rata 2012, 18) remains a question.

Participation in the classroom: trespass and transgression

Interviewees believed they were somehow violating spaces in which they did not belong. Classroom participation both demonstrated and challenged this. Accounts from lone male interviewees reflected anxieties about participation. Jack felt unable to contribute openly and offer his own views and thoughts in class:

I can't say that, because I'm a guy ... you sort of just feel like you can't say anything, you have to just be quiet in classes like safeguarding ... it might be an unpleasant interruption for the girls in my class ... (interview).

Jack's account signals how men and women are caught in gendered discourse that halts discussion and learning. Occasions of being silenced and masking emotions and feelings in some lectures were noted by second and third-year student interviewees. One had shared a recent news item on a social media group about men being frequent victims of gender-stereotypes to gauge the response of his peers. Kevin explained the response, *'my classmates just ignored the article, but others all re-shared another article about men's better (promotional) prospects in schools. It was hard to take in. It is not something I would do again'* (interview).

Tensions arising through gendered or classed representations led to the internalisation of *personal* doubts about belonging and ability to challenge or examine the subtle and often underlying power-plays between male and female students in the classroom. The point here is not whether men have opinions and feelings related to the subject matter that can be openly expressed and with what consequences. Rather, how are students (men *and* women) enabled to move beyond the immediate and personal domain to also understand these experiences in ways that might impact on practice? Understanding the discursive and material impact of social difference cannot be achieved on an exclusively personal or emotional register without active theorising, using disciplinary knowledge to untangle the social relations of class and gender.

Active learning methods were highlighted by students as potential bridges in making connections between concrete personal matters and broader public concerns. As Tom stated:

... [I like] activities, where I have to express an opinion on topics that fire me up ... (like children's rights), it means I have to think about it more than I do in a sit-down lecture. It puts me on the spot and makes me think ... If I come up with ideas in the group and people agree I feel I tend to remember it (interview).

Interviewees consistently pointed to these experiences of sharing, collaborating, and talking in subject specific groups as vital in voicing their opinions, absorbing knowledge materials, and asking questions of them. These groups give students both *social* and *cognitive* presence with potential to counter the sense of transgression that these men recognised. The extent of such problem-solving work varied across the degree pathways but appeared more prevalent in Childhood Studies which is not aligned to the requirements of a professional standards body. These subject specific groups encouraged the provision of space for challenge and being challenged on students' understanding of care-work and its relation to their own identities as learners.

You learn a lot about yourself from other people. It is sort of why I choose to come to university over an apprenticeship ... to learn about these steps before getting a job, like to weigh things up and decide what to do, before you do the wrong thing. (Sam, interview)

Active methods and hearing other students' perspectives led to meaningful personal interaction, especially the joy of being heard and adapting their *'plural and conflictual selves'* (Stronach et al. 2002, 109) to practice through reflection on work placement experiences. Interviewees' *ascribed* gendered identity was sometimes used as valuable capital in schools (Cullen and Johnston 2018). Ryan said, *'I was asked to be a male-role model for 'boys with problem behaviour' and 'to have a bit of banter about football'* (interview). In work placements, some students responded to situations that arose by overemphasising their masculine and classed attributes, such as physical strength, straight-talking, and blunt honesty towards pupils or, as Ryan said, *'acting tougher around them'*. Interviewees indicated that subsequent reflection in large classroom groups was at-times *'unnerving'* and they felt exposed to unjustified (gender-based) criticism of their attempts to actively reframe gender to make it 'work' for them. This largely unacknowledged domain is under-theorised on care-based degree pathways, especially where field placements are not mandatory, such as the Health and Social Care course. This raises questions about the kind of knowledge these students require to respond to such incidents critically and concretely.

A general disquiet was evident in focus groups and interviews about a variety of unresolved gender-related concerns from work placements. For example, while Kevin was on a school-placement one parent, worried about her daughter working alone with a young man, had spoken about this with the supervising teacher. Kevin talked about the scrutiny to which he had been

subjected but was unable to theorise the complexity of the assumptions made about him, his identity, and how gender and class positioned him within the placement institution. Discussing this in a focus group Kevin's account was personal, understated, and suggested bewilderment:

I wasn't sure how to feel ... Maybe, they were thinking that a young male teacher is a bit strange ... I just felt self-conscious and irritated. I mean, you just do not know why.

It is important not to oversimplify the tension of being gender-conscious on placements and how these experiences were never really worked through in classrooms. Other interviewees referred to a reluctance to admit to similar gendered incidents. Emile commented:

I mostly share my own experiences with my girlfriend ... I'd be unlikely to talk to anyone else about it ... I thought, maybe it is just there (that particular institution) (focus group).

Thus, 'personal matters' were retained and attended in the personal domain. In discussing these responses, interviewees were worried about how they would be able to manage these situations emotionally. As Emile explained, '*most people would prefer to ignore it*' reflecting Clough's observation that working-class men have 'difficulty in articulating difficulty' (Clough and Barton, 1998,27). This may also suggest the creation of spaces in which the additional pressures faced by men can be explored (Brownhill 2015). Gender-equality and 'feminist' themes were apparent to interviewees as elements of curriculum but invariably understood as being 'about women', as though gender was an exclusively feminine matter. Space in which the disciplinary and practice implications of masculinity (for men and for women) could be considered seemed to be absent.

Academics in the classroom

Academic staff were vital to students' sustained engagement in these programmes. Students' willingness to engage and learn was correlated with positive classroom experiences, especially positive views of academic staff. Interviewees wanted to emulate and reciprocate the pedagogic experiences to which they were exposed, embedding practices of care, trust, and reciprocity within networks of social exchange that shaped active learning pedagogies in the classroom. This suggests the significance of academics in the pedagogic process. Their role entails aspects of curriculum design, modes of transmission and criteria for evaluation (Moore 2013, 128), often seemingly implicit in the settings described.

The class is just more relaxed when you learn in smaller group activities. Normal (traditional) lectures are too serious. I feel a bit inadequate. For me, an activity is better as it gets me to do stuff I could use in a job, but it was good to know the lecturer on another level ... to know they are 'down to earth'. I could ask questions straight, ones that might be seen as stupid (to peers). That helps. You can have a laugh too. All that makes you want to learn and listen ... you don't want to let them (the lecturers) down once you get to know them as people and you know they are sound. (Toni, focus group)

Stimulated by relationships with tutors, this sense of obligation increased students' motivation. Tutors' professional experience – part of the 'pedagogic text' – was acknowledged alongside more personalised aspects of the connections that were predominantly valued by students, especially classed forms of talk, presentation of self and relaxed modes of interaction. This was invariably bounded in narratives of informality. For example, lecturers used work-related stories that invoked the personal domain, particularly those that challenged perceptions of men's positions in caring work. As Ryan said, this was something '*I can really relate to*' (focus group). Practice stories gained students' attention and interest. Male guest lecturers' presentations that included their own lived experiences of caring work were inspiring.

I like it when guest lecturers come in and use case studies that are in the news ... makes class interesting ... Real-life examples are good ... Like, how to deal with difficult situations ... What I said before (earlier interview), being asked to be role model in a school ... not something I ever thought much of but when a (male, guest) real teacher started talking about in class recently, it clicked. (Ryan, focus group)

Tutor-student relationships were instrumental in students developing a reflective security in their gendered and classed positions and capabilities. Two interviewees' thought that male tutors would be on their side or more sympathetic to them than female tutors and perhaps offer a solution to their sense of isolation or misplacement. As Jack said, '*at least they might understand how you are feeling*' (interview). Tutors' lived experiences offered insights into the social and emotional dimensions of male caring work that, otherwise, may have been missing in the curriculum. Though valuable, that did not always resolve the question of classed and gendered misplacement. Toni and Emile described a male tutor's influence.

I saw he had gone through the shit himself. I've learned a lot from seeing and hearing that because I can tell he had pulled himself apart emotionally, and worked out how to deal with it . . . (Toni)

Yeah! How he dealt with situations as someone like us might, you know, be knocked back. He described how the voice in his head was dealing with situations and then who he reacted so emotionally and openly as a professional. It made me imagine myself in that situation. (Emile, both focus group)

Students recognised some tutors' ability to work reflexively with them, helping them to imagine being a working-class male in care settings and connecting that with the expectations of care-work. These 'accomplished others' become the sometimes idealised 'privileging pedagogic text' (Bernstein 1996, 172) through which knowledge is transmitted and acquired, becomes integrated with practice and, perhaps, contributes to countering discourse that silences the thoughts and concerns of working-class men.

Discussion and conclusions

The data presented here raise questions about how social difference, here gender and class, is explored and elaborated pedagogically in classrooms that prepare students for professional practice in social care. We should acknowledge the limitations of this research. It focused on one university faculty and does not include data from women students. However, the purpose of the account is to indicate how class and gender position and shape working-class men's experiences.

Our interviewees' reflections suggest they experienced the effects of gendered and classed identities on participation in academic life and professional formation. Whilst some of their experiences were governed by practicality or a 'logic of necessity' (Bourdieu 1990) in which their learner-identities risk being subsumed by responsibilities and commitments outside the university, a pervasive sense of unease in the classroom was evident. This weakened the development of forms of protection against discrimination and isolation. Male students believed that female students shared popular (negative) representations of men in care-work (Clow, Ricciardelli, and Bartfay 2015), potentially disturbing the formation of trust among students and undermining the creation of more caring masculinities. Importantly, we suggest, both men *and* women are caught up in gendered discourse which impacts on their capacity to understand how classed and gendered social relations produce particular relationships and forms of consciousness. These discourses were explored solely from the perspective of self and their social production and distribution was largely ignored.

There was some evidence supporting the development of 'flexible pedagogic practices' (Warin and Adriany 2017, 139). However, space had not been created or directed by academic staff in which struggles for belonging might be understood pedagogically as 'boundary experiences' marking and marked by class and gender. Rather, such social differences seemed to be understood by academics as obstacles or obstructions rather than resources for enhancing students' knowledge and understanding. Active learning (small group work and discussions, for example), were valued by interviewees and initially, perhaps naturally, focused on *self* as a tool for professional intervention. Calls for trainee teachers, for example, to engage in activities that screen for gender bias (Peeters et al. 2015) leave pedagogic spaces to be filled by the student rather than them becoming engaged in thinking beyond their immediate concrete settings. However, working on social difference starts

with work on self and on students' own experiences and positionings. This can integrate developing understanding of gender or class, for example, as social process or practice and symbolic of social and power relations with implications for professionals and their clients. This is important when professionals move from one practice setting or undertake work with different client groups.

Questions of social difference and its affects cannot be resolved solely in the personal domain. Its source and impact exist beyond personal identities and responses. Social science knowledge is not only important for its content but in offering a mode of reasoning, stimulating a creative imagination and sharpening understanding that goes beyond a particular domain of what is already known. Sociology can support understanding of social difference through powerful generalised concepts: class, gender, or race, for example (Rata 2012, 58) that become available as analytic tools, releasing '... practitioners from anxiety about their own capacity to intervene ... by explaining how power "works" in modern societies' (Bradford 2012, xii). It is unnecessary for students on professional courses to become immersed in 'pure' disciplinary knowledge. Knowledge must be recontextualised to become relevant to specific fields and spaces of practice articulating a dialogue between knowledge and practice. Historically, the sociology or philosophy of education in initial teacher education programmes, for example, has provided for that recontextualization. However, broad vocationalising of professional education and expanding competence-based training has led to these knowledge areas being neglected. In the setting researched here, for example, they were not part of the formal curriculum of any of the undergraduate care-based programmes. Their absence impoverishes curriculum, diminishing practitioners' developing capacities to understand the complexity of practice settings.

Working-class male students' care-sector work aspirations were accompanied by a sense of trespass, of transgressing the margins of social and cultural orders. Boundaries are potentially hazardous thresholds whose '... displacement unleashes danger for someone' (Douglas [1966] 2002, 140). Our interviewees spoke of intense boundary experiences in classrooms and work placements and becoming ensnared in the outworking of class and gender relations: difficulties in locating and understanding boundaries, transgressing boundaries, and receiving sanction or acceptance from others. Rather than being understood solely as troubles, things '*most people would prefer to ignore*', boundary experiences can offer instances for acquiring capacities for critical understanding and access to new possibilities '... *tension points between the past and possible futures*' (Bernstein 2000, 6). Bernstein precisely indicates that boundaries (like those located by interviewees) are to be used pedagogically in the generation of new understandings. As Douglas suggests, and our data confirmed, this can be profoundly discomfiting. Yet, managing these experiences is vital for the creation of confidence that underpins the agency of working-class male students on these programmes, whether in pedagogic space in the university or the work setting. Acquiring and using disciplinary knowledge, '*powerful knowledge*' (Young and Muller 2010, 245), is one means of managing boundary experiences.

Classroom cultures are established by what is understood as important knowledge as well as the practices selected for its transmission and acquisition. These are questions of curriculum and pedagogy and sustaining the distinction between these prevents the collapse of one into the other. Interviewees identified academic staff as using students' lives and experiences as departure points in learning, encouraging participation and valuing their 'hidden voice'. This *clicking* of individual habitus is a form of identification in which a 'kindred spirit' is located, matching or underpinning students' inclination to engage in learning (Bourdieu 1990). Clicking permits students to become absorbed in learning, by offering moments of tacit exchange and realisation. In that sense, tutors themselves became the pedagogic texts through which appropriate or necessary learning is defined in the deployment of a regulative discourse (working reflexively to connect, solve problems, create meaning and participate with and in student's lives) and framed in a broader instructional context through which knowledge and skill is acquired. What is uncertain is the extent to which knowledge (and *which* knowledge) is appropriately framed in order to explore boundaries, in this instance class and gender, for gaining epistemic access to possible futures rather than re-forming a condensed and known personal past. To understand

gender or class as punctuating social or cultural space (and therefore as constituting a power relation), pedagogic practice moves beyond a preoccupation with self and the reduction of knowledge to experience.

Following a decade of political and policy attention to discourses of widening participation, the number of students in English universities from the most disadvantaged backgrounds has grown, a trend reflected internationally (UCAS 2020). Their presence in HE signals the inclusion of their capacities in care-work and in the development of care professions. It entails access to and the use of critical and objective knowledge whose authority lies in the procedures and methods through which it is produced, and which exist beyond its location of production. Such knowledge should encourage imagination and creative practice with client groups. The identification with symbolic rules, grammars and modes of reasoning inevitably entails power relations. Yet, modern education systems are sites for symbolic production and control *and* for the enhancement of agency and potential change. Classrooms are important spaces – fields – in which social difference is played out, often through the deployment of different capitals (Bourdieu 1993) and knowledge forms.

Our work implies change in higher education to ensure that men are able to contribute fully to their courses and to care work after graduating. It will require academics in this field to further develop their theoretical (especially sociological) imagination. More concretely, safe spaces for (all) students to explore class and gender (with other aspects of social difference where necessary) through lived experience *and* theory should be established. Classes identifying the implications of both masculinity and social difference for professional work are a necessary element in courses of professional education. Consolidating disciplinary knowledge with situated practice knowledge, the co-location of the local and the universal, supports students in recognising the general in the particular (and vice-versa) and to theorise their practice effectively.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was jointly funded by the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund and the Access and Participation Team at the host institution.

Notes on contributors

Dr Craig Johnston research interests lie in the study of disability, class and youth culture. His priority has been to engage in research with a strong social justice agenda that addresses social inequalities of all kinds. His most recent research interests lie in policy initiatives that affect young people on the margins of communities, school exclusion, alternative provision, and youth culture.

Dr Simon Bradford research interests include youth and youth cultures, social policy as it affects young people and communities, and professionalisation and professional identities of those who work with young people.

ORCID

Craig Johnston  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4795-2151>

Simon Bradford  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9980-7637>

References

- Barnett, R., and Coate, K. 2005. *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Bathmaker, A., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2011. "Constructions of Class: Defining Students' Social Class in the Paired Peers Project." In *British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference*. London: Institute of Education.

- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control & identity theory*. London: Taylor and Francis
- Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Best, S. 2017. "Aspiration, Abjection and Precariousness: The neo-Liberal Educator's Desire for Compliance." *Power and Education* 9 (1): 37–50. doi:10.1177/1757743817692829.
- Blackmore, J. 1997. "Disciplining Feminism: A Look at Gender–equity Struggles in Australian Higher Education." In *Dangerous Territories—Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education*, edited by L. Roman and L. Eyre, 75–99. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Policy Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1993. *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of a Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. E. Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bradford, S. 2012. *Sociology, Youth and Youth Work Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brownhill, S. 2015. *The Brave Man in Early Years. The Ambiguities of Being a Male Role Model*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Carter-Wall, C., and G. Whitfield. 2012. *The Role of Aspirations, Attitudes and Behaviour in Closing the Educational Attainment Gap*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Casini, A. 2016 Glass ceiling and glass elevator *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* 1–2 . <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegs262>
- Choak, C. 2012. "Asking Questions: Interviews and Evaluations." In *Research and Research Methods for Youth Practitioners*, edited by S. Bradford and F. Cullen, 90–112. London: Routledge.
- Clough, P., and Barton, L. 1998. *Articulating with Difficulties*, London: Paul Chapman.
- Clow, K., R. Ricciardelli, and W.J. Bartfay. 2015. "Are You Man Enough to Be a Nurse? The Impact of Ambivalent Sexism and Role Congruity on Perception of Men and Women in Nursing Advertisements." *Sex Roles* 71 (7–8): 363–376. doi:10.1007/s11199-014-0418-0.
- Corbin, J., and A. Strauss. 1990. "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria." *Qualitative Sociology* 13 (1): 3–21. doi:10.1007/BF00988593.
- Cottingham, M.D. 2016. "Theorizing Emotional Capital." *Theory and Society* 45 (5): 451–470. doi:10.1007/s11186-016-9278-7.
- Cullen, F., and C. Johnston. 2018. "Playwork Goes to School: Professional (Mis)recognition and Playwork Practice in Primary School." *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 26 (3): 467–484. doi:10.1080/14681366.2017.1421569.
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. 2016. "Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice." In White Paper Presented to Parliament London, May.
- Douglas, M. [1966] 2002. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge.
- Education Policy Institute. 2020. "Trends in the Diversity of Teachers in England." Accessed 07 March 2021. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/diversity-of-teachers/>
- Elliott, K. 2016. "Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept." *Men and Masculinities* 19 (3): 240–259. doi:10.1177/1097184X15576203.
- Field, J., and N. Morgan-Klein. 2012. "The Importance of Social Support Structures for Retention and Success." In *Widening Participation in Higher Education. Casting the Net Wide?* edited by T. Hinton-Smith, 178–193. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Foster, T, and E. Newman. 2005. "Just a Knock Back? Identity Bruising on the Route to Becoming a Male Primary School Teacher." *Teachers and Teaching* 11 (4): 341–358. doi:10.1080/13450600500137091.
- Harland, K., and S. McCready. 2012. "Taking Boys Seriously: A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Male School-Life Experiences in Northern Ireland Ulster University." Accessed 01 March 2021. <http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/sociology/research/young.html>
- Horn, L., O. Rubin, and L. Schouenborg. 2016. "Undead Pedagogy: How a Zombie Simulation Can Contribute to Teaching International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives* 17 (2): 187–201.
- Huppatz, K. 2009. "Reworking Bourdieu's "Capital": Feminine and Female Capitals in the Field of Paid Caring Work." *Sociology* 43 (1): 45–66. doi:10.1177/0038038508099097.
- Huppatz, K, and S. Goodwin. 2013. "Masculinised Jobs, Feminised Jobs and Men's 'Gender Capital' Experiences: Understanding Occupational Segregation in Australia." *Journal of Sociology* 49 (2–3): 291–308. doi:10.1177/1440783313481743.
- Hussein, S, I. Mohamed, and J. Manthorpe. 2016. "Male Workers in the Female-dominated Long-term Care Sector: Evidence from England." *Journal of Gender Studies* 25 (1): 35–49. doi:10.1080/09589236.2014.887001.
- Jones, O. 2011. *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working-class*. London: Verso books.
- Khan, A., O. Egbue, B Palkie, and J. Madden. 2017. "Active Learning: Engaging Students to Maximize Learning in an Online Course." *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* 15 (2 107–115).
- Kollmayer, M., B. Schober, and C. Spiel. 2018. "Gender Stereotypes in Education: Development, Consequences, and Interventions." *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 15 (4): 361–377. doi:10.1080/17405629.2016.1193483.

- Laker, J., and T. Davis. 2011. *Masculinities in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Mann, S. 2001. "Alternative Perspectives on Student Experience: Alienation and Engagement." *Studies in Higher Education* 26 (1): 7–19. doi:10.1080/03075070020030689.
- Misseyanni, A., and L. Miltiadis, eds. 2018. *Active Learning Strategies in Higher Education*. New York: Emerald Publishing.
- Moore, R. 2013. *Basil Bernstein. The Thinker and the Field*. London: Routledge.
- Niemi, A., A. Nevgi, and F. Aksit. 2016. "Active Learning Promoting Student Teachers' Professional Competences in Finland and Turkey." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 39 (4): 471–490. doi:10.1080/02619768.2016.1212835.
- Paechter, C. 2020. "Implications for Gender and Education Research Arising Out of Changing Ideas about Gender." *Gender and Education*. doi:10.1080/09540253.2020.1798361.
- Peeters, J., Rohrmann, T., & Emilsen, K. 2015. Gender balance in ECEC: Why is there so little progress? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 23, 302–314.
- Quaye, S., and S. Harper, eds. 2020. *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Rata, E. 2012. *The Politics of Knowledge in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Reay, D. 2017. *Miseducation. Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. Bristol: Policy Press: University of Bristol.
- Roberts, S. 2018. *Young Working-Class Men in Transition*. New York: Routledge.
- Stronach, I., B. Corbin, O. McNamara, S. Stark, and T. Warne. 2002. "Towards an Uncertain Politics of Professionalism: Teacher and Nurse Identities in Flux." *Journal of Education Policy* 17 (1): 109–138. doi:10.1080/02680930110100081.
- Torre, M. 2018. "Stoppappers? The Occupational Trajectories of Men in Female-Dominated." *Occupations, Work and Occupations* 45 (3): 283–312. doi:10.1177/0730888418780433.
- Tucker, S. 2015. "Three Men and a Maybe: Identity and Privilege in Male Pre-service Elementary School Teachers." *Journal of Men's Studies* 23 (1): 3–20. doi:10.1177/1060826514561988.
- UCAS. 2018. "END OF CYCLE REPORT Patterns by Applicant Characteristics." Accessed 3 July 2021. https://www.ucas.com/file/197261/download?token=yGrM_eUZ
- UCAS. 2020. "More Students from the Most Disadvantaged Backgrounds across the UK are Set to Start Degrees." Accessed 03 July 2021. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-students-most-disadvantaged-backgrounds-across-uk-are-set-start-degrees-autumn>
- Virkki, T. 2007. "Chapter 11 Emotional Capital in Caring Work." In *Functionality, Intentionality and Morality (Research on Emotion in Organizations, Vol. 3)*, edited by C.E.J. Härtel, N.M. Ashkanasy, and W.J. Zerbe, 265–285. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. doi:10.1016/S1746-9791(07)03011-8.
- Ward, M.R. 2018. "Acceptable Masculinities: Working-Class Young Men and Vocational Education and Training Courses." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 66 (2): 225–242. doi:10.1080/00071005.2017.1337869.
- Warin, J., and V. Adriany. 2017. "Gender Flexible Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (4): 375–386. doi:10.1080/09589236.2015.1105738.
- Warin, J. 2018. *Men in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Wayne, J. M. Bogo, and M. Raskin. 2010. "Field Education as the Signature Pedagogy of Social Work Education." *Journal of Social Work Education* 46 (3): 327–339. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043.
- Wheelahlan, L. 2010. *Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Wheelahlan, L. 2015. "Not Just Skills: What a Focus on Knowledge Means for Vocational Education." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 47 (6): 750–762. doi:10.1080/00220272.2015.1089942.
- Wright, D., and S. Brownhill. 2019. *Men in Early Years Settings*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Young, M.F.D., and J. Muller. 2010. "Knowledge and Truth in the Sociology of Education." In *Social Realism, Knowledge and the Sociology of Education. Coalitions of the Mind*, edited by K. Maton, and R. Moore. London: Continuum 110–130