Article

Sociology

University and the Pursuit of a 'Career' for Working-Class Youth in Deindustrial Rochdale

Sociology
2025, Vol. 59(3) 424–441

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00380385241289297
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc
Sage

Amit Singh
The University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

This article examines the way in which working-class young people in Rochdale, a former industrial town in the north-west of England, imagine their future transitions from college to work through qualitative research at Rochdale's only A-Level college. It explores how students' aspirations to attend university reflect their desire for a 'career' in the absence of alternative forms of work and as a symbolic marker of upward social mobility that is subsequently differentiated from other forms of work as a form of distinction, as a great deal of emphasis is placed on the moral and cultural worth of a 'career'. In doing so, this article highlights how such perceptions are shaped by the material conditions faced by these young people, such as inequality, financial precarity, and relative poverty against the backdrop of deindustrialisation.

Keywords

career, class, gender, neoliberalism, place, work

Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to the literature focusing on how young people perceive work in the post-Fordist landscape (e.g. Brown, 2003; Farrugia, 2019, 2021; Weeks, 2011) through the qualitative exploration of working-class young people in the former mill town Rochdale. It does this against the backdrop of major shifts in the labour market that have place-based dimensions, not least deindustrialisation, which essentially eradicated traditional working-class jobs in towns like Rochdale that are said to have been 'left behind', a term increasingly invoked 'to capture the plight of especially former industrial and rural places negatively affected by austerity, globalization, economic and technological change' (Pike et al., 2023: 1). There is a need to focus on how

Corresponding author:
Amit Singh, Sociology Department, The University of Manchester, Oxford Rd, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.
Email: amit.singh-2@manchester.ac.uk

this context shapes young people's aspirations for work and education, as well as the opportunities they believe are available to them in towns like Rochdale, which to date remains an understudied phenomenon despite the political and academic focus on 'left behind' towns in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and the 2016 Brexit vote (Pike et al., 2023). As Lee Major reflected to the 2021 Education Select Committee, 'The place and community in which you live has a profound impact on your aspirations and attitudes towards education, and we still do not know enough about that.'[1]

This article responds to this context through exploring how working-class A-Level students in Rochdale aspire to attend university to enable them to embark on a 'career', which was used as a stand-in for upward social mobility and was differentiated from other forms of work. It argues that this is a response to material conditions, a lack of alternatives in the context of industrial decline, a response to wider neoliberal narratives of self-actualisation and improvement (Farrugia, 2019; Giddens, 1991), as well as an attempt to garner value, self-respect and dignity otherwise denied (Sayer, 2005; Sennett and Cobb, 2023). It does this against a policy focus on how working-class students in London go to university in large numbers, while those in the deindustrialised north are said to have a lower valuation of higher education and are thus less likely to aspire to university (Gov UK, 2021; Sewell et al., 2021). This article argues that students in Rochdale aspire to attend university as a result of a lack of alternative options, particularly in the absence of familial or social networks that they can draw upon, which perversely will likely see them caught in the 'opportunity trap' (Brown, 2003), as an increasing number of graduates compete for a decreasing number of graduate jobs; in the north-west of England 40.6% of recent graduates work in non-graduate jobs.[2]

This article begins by outlining some of the broader economic shifts that have impacted the wider world of work in the context of neoliberalism, as well as how this has impacted class identifications, which is of particular importance in a former industrial town like Rochdale, before briefly outlining some related shifts in higher education. It then offers methodological reflections, situating the college and the town of Rochdale. The empirical sections begin by outlining how students imagine a 'career' particularly in relation to other forms of work, as they distinguish between a 'career' and a 'job', making value judgements based on this. It then looks at how place shapes their perceptions of 'careers', particularly in the absence of overt parental intervention. Finally, it examines how the pursuit of a career has a gendered dimension to it for three working-class female students, whose perceptions are shaped in part by their mothers' own experiences of family life, work and education, framed by the students as a desire to ascend their current positions. These desires are not manifest as seeking riches or fame but rather as living a modest, secure and comfortable life.

University and Career Seeking in the Changing World of Work

Occupation has historically been bound up with class, with various attempts to define class placing significant emphasis on occupation (e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Savage et al., 2015). The sort of work people do has been central to their social positioning over time bringing with it moral and cultural judgements about perceived social importance (see Savage et al., 2015: 35). The association between work and class has not abated despite drastic economic shifts over recent decades that have altered the nature of work people do in Britain (with significant implications for class categories), particularly the onset of neoliberalism.

Broadly, neoliberalism is an 'ideological project and governmental practice of mandating submission to the "free market" and the celebration of "individual responsibility" in all realms' of social life (Wacquant, 2009: 1), that involves aggressive deregulation, a turn towards foreign investment, the gutting of social welfare and the stripping back of workers' rights (see also Harvey, 2011). The aggressive deregulation and related deindustrialisation overseen by Margaret Thatcher led to large swaths of working-class jobs that might be passed down through generations (e.g. Willis, 1977/1981) being wiped out and replaced with increasingly flexible and precarious forms of work with fewer workplace protections and stagnating wages (Hall, 2011: 715).

There was a spatial element to these processes with many of these industries located in the north of England. Anoop Nayak (2006: 814, 817), for instance, has explored how in the north-east the end of industry ushered in a new service sector economy, with young men now caught in 'a changing world filled with table-waiting jobs, public administration, bar work, call centres and humdrum service sector employment', as he notes a 'shift from coal mining to "clubbing"'. Previously, these young men would have found plentiful employment working in traditional industries, yet this is no longer the case as they are now 'viewed as unskilled, unemployable, redundant youth' (Nayak, 2006: 816). A similar context can be observed in Rochdale, a town that once had a thriving textiles industry before deindustrialisation, predicated on the colonial trade of cotton (Kalra, 2000). Deindustrialisation in Rochdale resulted in the mass closure of factories and mills, leading to huge job losses and rising unemployment (Penn et al., 1990). These jobs were not replaced, in part because the economy became increasingly oriented around the City of London as the nation's financial hub through aggressive deregulation (Peck, 2010), while newer service sector jobs in Greater Manchester were predominantly located in the city of Manchester, not peripheral towns such as Rochdale (see Dodge and Brook, 2016).

The disappearance of traditional forms of labour has significantly impacted the lives of working-class young people who are faced with an increasingly complex labour market, and are less well adept at adapting to structural shifts than the already dominant classes. In this context Farrugia (2019, 2021) has written about how young people interpret work within the post-industrial world, as he identifies how they find themselves faced with 'increased levels of employment insecurity' as 'unemployment and underemployment have become structural features of the contemporary labour market' (Farrugia, 2019: 1088). Not only has neoliberalism drastically altered the nature of work, but it has also shifted how we understand work, as part of the neoliberal 'valorisation of individual responsibility' (Valluvan, 2019: 124). Work now offers young people the promise of social mobility under the auspices of meritocracy, where a failure to fulfil reflects a failure of the subject, rather than of an unfair society.

A 'career' then emerges as a vehicle to facilitate personal fulfilment and social mobility. Per Young and Collins (2000: 5) 'career can be seen as an overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual's life'. All of this intersects with how, as Farrugia (2021: 859) notes, 'while a "career" characterised by stable and predictable progression has become more structurally difficult to achieve, notions of employability, personal value and self-realisation through work appear to be becoming increasingly critical to the identities of contemporary youth'. This is the reality that my respondents are grappling with, as a failure to achieve a career is seen as a personal failure to self-actualise adequately.

All of my respondents spoke of a 'career' as something one achieves through attending university, reflecting the salience of wider narratives that have associated university education with higher wages (Brown, 2003). With the expansion of universities since 1992, as well as the eradication of traditional working-class jobs, once associated with steady income, job security and respect, increasing numbers of working-class students are attracted to university in the absence of obvious alternatives. Yet, the result of this rapid expansion of the university sector has eroded the so-called 'graduate premium' (see Evans, 2023), meaning that university is no longer directly correlated with a graduate job as it would have been in the past. Graduates, particularly working-class graduates, now find themselves caught in the 'opportunity trap', as the market for elite jobs becomes increasingly congested with graduates who know they must go to university to compete but are increasingly unlikely to achieve a well-paid middle-class career (Brown, 2003). As a result, it is now increasingly important to pick the right degree at the right university, which is easier for middle-class students who have tacit knowledge of how to navigate the labour market, as well as an understanding of the requisite work experience and extra-curricular activities required to gain a 'career' (see Bathmaker et al., 2013). Working-class students, on the other hand, meet an increasingly complex labour market that devalues degrees attained at so-called post-1992 universities, the universities that working-class students are most likely to attend (Reay, 2017), and now require more than just a degree itself to differentiate between potential employees in a crowded job market.

Methods

The material presented in this article is derived from an ongoing multi-site research project examining how working-class young people navigate their transitions out of college into the world of work and/or university across four sites in London, Rochdale and Morecambe: one sixth-form college in London, one sixth-form college and one vocational college in Rochdale and one vocational college in Morecambe. The project aims to examine how working-class young people respond to changing labour market conditions and how these responses are mediated by race, class, gender and place.

This article draws on the insights of students interviewed at Newgate College (pseudonymised), an A-Level college in Rochdale, a former mill town in Greater Manchester, in the north-west of England. Students involved undertook a demographic survey to measure class, followed by a 40–60 minute semi-structured interview in which they were asked questions about their lives in Rochdale, their views on education, their perceptions of work, as well as their plans and aspirations for the future (both short and long term). I interviewed 10 students at Newgate College, with an even gender split: seven students self-identified as white British, two as British Pakistani and one as white Georgian. All respondents were 17 or 18 years old in either their first or second year of college with plans to then attend university. All names are herein pseudonymised.

The demographic questionnaire aimed to ascertain class by first asking students to identify their class and then to explain their answers, before asking about parental occupations, parental level of qualifications, whether they lived in social housing or not and whether they were eligible for free school meals. The government uses free school meal eligibility as a measure of class (e.g. Gov UK, 2021), which sets an incredibly high bar for eligibility, as household income must be below £16,100 per year. Six of the 10 students I interviewed at Newgate College had been eligible for free school meals. The focus on parental levels of qualification and occupation drew upon Friedman and Laurison's (2019) approach in their study of the class ceiling. The questionnaire was aimed at enabling me to garner the material conditions in which students grew up, as well as to ascertain the levels of cultural, social and economic capital the students had access to growing up, an approach that draws upon the work of Bourdieu (1984) and was emphasised in the British Class Survey (Savage et al., 2015).

Newgate College is the main A-level college in Rochdale. I gained access to the college through a sociology teacher, who helped me to arrange interviews. As well as conducting interviews, I ran weekly sociology enrichment sessions at the college with year 12 A-level students. All of the students I spoke to live in Rochdale, a town that was once the 'engine house of the industrial revolution[3], but now suffers from the 'blemish of place' (Wacquant, 2007), as one of the UK's most 'in decline' towns (Pike et al., 2016), and in the context of wider racialised moral panics over supposed 'Islamic grooming gangs' (Tufail, 2015). In many senses, Rochdale is an archetypal 'left behind' town in the north of England that is spoken up in government narratives around educational attainment, class and 'aspiration', due to its position as a deindustrialised town in the north of England and the emergent focus on 'place-based inequalities' that maps geography onto class (e.g. Gov UK, 2021; Sewell et al., 2021).

The Importance of a 'Career': Value, Distinction and Respectability

While all of the students I spoke to told me they wanted to go to university to embark on a 'career', none – bar one student – had concrete ideas about what this 'career' would look like, or how to get one. Students simply believed that going to university would lead to a career, which reflects what Lauren Berlant (2011) describes as the 'cruel optimism' that pervades social life under late-stage capitalism, as students saw a career as a means to achieve the 'fantasy of the good life', which for them meant achieving a middle-class life that was otherwise denied to them. In part, this 'cruel optimism' was fuelled by the fact that all but two of the students would be first-generation university students. The only exceptions were Lila and Cathy, who were both in receipt of free school meals before their respective mums attended university as mature students when both were 'at school', as a project of social mobility to escape financial precarity as single mothers. In Bourdieusian terms all students had a belief in the 'game', what he refers to as 'illusio', and a subsequent 'inclination' and a 'desire' to play the game without questioning the premises or the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 2023: 150), which have shifted in a changing graduate labour market and against the backdrop of the expansion of universities in recent decades, which in turn have weakened the 'graduate premium'.

Ayesha is a working-class student in receipt of free school meals who was born and raised in Rochdale. Her parents were both born in Pakistan, having settled in Rochdale as a result of 'chain migration' (Kalra, 2000), following familial networks to the area, with her mum moving to Rochdale 'aged seven or eight', and her dad arriving 'in his early 20s'. Ayesha's mum 'doesn't work' while her dad works in one of the few remaining textile factories in the area. Within our initial interview, Ayesha repeatedly invoked the idea of a 'career' in vague terms, as something one attains after attending university.

> Ayesha: Because my mum stopped education after college, she wants us [Ayesha and her siblings] to carry on. And in this day and age too, you need a degree for most jobs as well. So I think if I didn't go to university and did an apprenticeship she wouldn't mind that either as long as I'm still doing something.
>
> Amit: So do you think it's important to do something?
>
> Ayesha: Yeah. Well I don't want to sit around and do nothing.
>
> Amit: What's wrong with doing nothing?
>
> Ayesha: I don't know, I feel like I should either be like, if I'm not working then in education or if I'm not in education then working.

Ayesha's account demonstrates the wider cultural pull of intertwined neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and hard work, as she stresses how she does not 'want to sit around and do nothing'. Rather, she wants to be someone who takes control of her life by doing 'something', which is understood as working or being in education as a means of self-improvement. This distinction between those who 'do something' and those who 'do nothing' is an example of what Andrew Sayer (2010) describes as 'moral boundary drawing' as Ayesha distinguishes between different types of citizens; those who are respectable and valuable, deserving of dignity and those who are not (Sayer, 2005). Here we see how class – and class inequalities – are drenched with moral judgements, as those who do not work are denigrated as skivers and benefit cheats (see Tyler, 2013), which ignores the structural reasons behind why some people do not or cannot work and is a discourse drawn upon by Ayesha despite the fact that her mother does not work.

More broadly, this desire to attend university reflects Sennett and Cobb's (2023: 183) observations that 'there is indifference to those who do not move ahead' within society as there is a belief that someone 'can be respected only as they become in some way distinctive, as they stand out from the mass'. Historically a university degree would make someone distinctive but the aforementioned changes in the labour market and the expansion of universities means that a degree no longer does the distinction work it once would have. As Bourdieu (2023: 190) notes, 'once a capacity is universally shared . . . it loses its faculty of distinction'. Resultantly, there is a need to find other means to distinguish oneself through the mobilisation of relevant social and cultural capital that can be converted into the requisite work experience, internships and the right extra-curricular activities, which are the result of someone's class position (see Abrahams, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Lareau, 2011; Rivera, 2015). These processes obviously disadvantage working-class students as what is most important is the levels of social and cultural capital prospective employees have available to them, manifest as embodying the relevant cultural norms and ways of thinking that unfortunately are understood as middle class.

Not only is value associated with those who work, but particularly with those who have careers, as careers were constantly invoked by the young people I spoke to in contrast to a 'job', which was constituted as undesirable, menial work. In this sense, career seeking was about 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984), allowing students to differentiate their future selves from those who do not have careers. Ayesha subsequently tied attending university with getting what she called 'an established career'.

> Amit: What's a non-established career?
>
> Ayesha: Not having a job. I don't know. Like maybe a job you're thinking of just like now, and a career you're thinking like more long term.
>
> Amit: So what's the difference between a career and a job?
>
> Ayesha: If I was working in Tesco, I wouldn't see that as my career. But if I was working in like an actual job . . . but like I don't know how to word it . . .. Like I wouldn't see Tesco as my career because that's not what I want to do long term. I'd see that as just like a small part-time job on the side or something. I do get some people do that full time. But if I went to university and then I work in Tesco, it's like, what did I get that degree for then? Like, I'd want to do a job that I got my degree for. Like, because if I'm going to work hard and to get that degree, I obviously want to do something to do with that.

Ayesha distinguishes between an 'established career', which can be read as professional middle-class employment – 'an actual job' – with working a menial job such as at Tesco, which is demeaned as undesirable, lacking in dignity and worth. This distinction does not start or end with Ayesha, she is simply reproducing what she has been told by the college, her parents and wider social conditioning that champions middle-class professionalised work as respectable and demean blue-collar and menial work. Again, this demonstrates how class is about dignity, or a lack of dignity, as well as about material conditions (Sennett and Cobb, 2023). The pursuit of dignity then shapes the way in which we perceive opportunities and attempt to navigate the social world, as Ayesha's account touches upon the cultural and moral dimensions of class inequalities, which once more resonates with Andrew Sayer's work. Sayer (2010: 163) notes, 'class raises issues of the perceived relative worth of individuals, and about the relation between how people are valued economically, and how they and their actions are valued ethically'. Having a 'career' means to be 'recognised' and to be valued, whereas having a job – akin to working at

Tesco – means to be deemed unworthy, unrespectable and devalued in the eyes of wider society, as someone who failed to work on themselves adequately, but perhaps also a failure in the eyes of oneself, which in turn induces internalised shame (Sayer, 2005).

Moreover, Ayesha's account reflects how it is believed that higher qualifications will translate to better jobs and better earnings, which is increasingly untrue in an ever more competitive graduate labour market, where there are increasingly scarce rewards (Brown, 2003: 142). The reality is that for working-class graduates without internships, relevant work experience, extra-curricular activities, social networks and the 'bank of mum and dad' to fall back on (Friedman and Laurison, 2019), navigating the graduate labour market is marked with disappointment and shame by those who struggle to transition a degree into a 'career'.

Students repeatedly situated a 'career' in opposition to a 'job', which was linked to upward progression, rather than the stasis associated with menial work (such as a job at Tesco). Neil, for instance, told me, 'I'm not sure what in, but I want a career' before going on to describe how a career offers 'an opportunity to move up, something that I can progress in'. Lila, a white working-class student, echoed Neil and Ayesha in her view on what a 'career' was.

> Lila: I think a career you can always work your way up in it, whereas a job like there's only so far you can go in a job.
>
> Amit: What's the difference between a career and a job?
>
> Lila: Well a career, say you have a law degree, you can always work your way up to from a solicitor to a barrister to a judge. Whereas a job, there's only so far promotion wise that you're going to get. So I think a career is the better option.

It is telling that Lila draws upon the legal profession as her example, a profession associated with high wages and high social value. This example demonstrates how Lila sees a 'career' as respectable, professional middle-class employment that involves a university degree. Like Neil, she posits a 'career' as involving constant upward growth through 'promotion' and 'progress'. This contrasts with Lila's current part-time job as a waitress, where she deems there to be few potential options for progress, as we see the notion of progress, both personal and professional, as being central to how these working-class young people articulate their thoughts about the world of work. As will be explored later, Lila draws upon the legal profession as her mother has pressured her into becoming a lawyer.

Regardless, aspiring for a 'career' offers these students a way to imagine themselves 'living a worthwhile life' (Sayer, 2005: 954), which involves 'progress' and 'moving up' as opposed to the stasis of menial work (such as at Tesco). Importantly, this was about the material conditions in which these young people grew up. Neil, for instance, a white working-class student on free school meals discusses a career in direct relation to his parents' experience of working low-paid jobs and the financial situation borne out of this. His dad is currently unemployed and his mother works in a care-home:

> I don't have many concrete aspirations, it's just kind of like abstract ideas of you know, 'success'. I guess just like going to university and you know, having those qualifications, having a career based upon those qualifications, because neither of my parents went to uni they worked low-paying jobs for the majority of their working lives, so just moving up from that, advancing from that. (Neil)

Neil's high valuation of qualifications exists within a broader climate wherein university degrees are valued, not least for their association historically with the middle classes and subsequently with careers, which Neil imagines as antithetical to the 'low-paying jobs' his parents have worked. He subsequently sees going to university – something his parents did not do – as a way to avoid the same fate, which he does not want for himself, as his aspirations and ambitions are framed by 'moving up' and 'advancing' from his parents' structural position. This speaks to the wider social importance – and value – placed upon what one does for work, wherein a 'career' is seen as more respectable than working menial jobs, but is also linked to higher pay. For Neil, this makes the cost of going to university worthwhile, as he reflected to me, 'the trade-off is worth it because of how the loans work. It's more like a tax on the salary. And the trade-off is a higher salary.' Going to university then, is tied in with gaining employment in a graduate job, even if Neil cannot name a graduate job when discussing his future plans.

Both of Neil's parents left school at 16 to enter the world of work, perhaps reflecting a time when such jobs were more plentiful than they are today. Neil did not consider following their footsteps, nor did they encourage this. Crucially, his father is out of work, so it was not that he could follow in his father's footsteps, as the young people in Willis' (1977/1981) study did, which partly explained why working-class boys got working-class jobs. This is something that was expressed to me by Ana, a white working-class student on free school meals who was born in Georgia but came to Rochdale aged seven. Her mum is currently out of work while her dad works in a local factory. Ana frames her intention to go to university to garner a career in relation to a lack of familial and social networks. As a migrant, Ana does not have pre-ordained routes into work:

> I think especially just because I don't have connections here like my parents don't have connections. If maybe like Dad owned a business I'd go into that. I know a lot of people have parents to connect them with things. I have some female friends that like their mums are technicians and like beauty stuff and they're going into that, but my parents don't have any of that. I don't have those connections. So for me it's like universities kind of feels like the only way. (Ana)

Ana intuitively describes how she is partially pursuing university because she has no other potential routes into the labour market, outside of pursuing menial work. This is an important and often ignored explanatory factor into why so many children of migrants are inclined to pursue university, as they see few alternative routes into work, as a result of a lack of relevant social networks in addition to wider societal xenophobia and racism. Yet, this is routinely ignored within wider discussions around the aspiration and educational attainment of migrants and ethnic minorities. This was also true for other students whose parents did not have those routes, even students who were white such as Neil, as those jobs are less plentiful than they would have been in the past.

Place and Perceptions of Work

None of the students I spoke to saw their 'careers' taking place in Rochdale, which was presented as a place with limited opportunities and a place absent of 'careers'. Tommy, a white working-class student told me, 'this is my home, but there isn't anything here. There is nothing here.' Similarly, Ana, remarked 'there's not a lot to do in Rochdale, there isn't very much opportunities'. This was a sentiment echoed by all of the students I spoke to. Though no students could tell me where their future 'careers' would take place, they all felt confident that they would not be located in Rochdale.

> Amit: Would you want to work in Rochdale?
>
> Ayesha: I don't think so. Well, if I found a good job and I was enjoying it and everything is fine but for what I want to do, I don't think I'll find it in Rochdale. because I don't, like, I don't really want, like the stuff that is already here is not stuff I really want to do, like, you know, work in the police stations or something I don't don't see myself working there.

Ayesha once more differentiates between different types of jobs, situating the sort of work in Rochdale as being reducible to just the police, or forms of menial work that do not require degree qualifications. Lila, who as noted works as a waitress in Rochdale, similarly emphasised how there were no careers in the town, only jobs for young people, such as the one she currently has: 'There are only opportunities for young people because there's restaurants and food chains and stuff like that, so young people can get jobs in that, but that's it.'

Without the City of London to frame aspirations and without tactical parental intervention or familial and social networks, the main way in which students developed a knowledge of 'careers' was via the college who put on various career days for students, as well as bringing in guest speakers to talk about the type of work they do. This takes on added importance for first-generation students who lack tacit knowledge about transitions to university and graduate employment. This is why none of the students, barring Lila, had parents who had laid out potential career options for them, as captured by Neil.

> Amit: Have your parents presented any career options to you?
>
> Neil: No, it's it's yeah, they're there very much. Like 'it's up to you', that kind of thing. They're happy with with whatever I like. So they haven't like presented anything. Oh, 'go down this or that'.

Neil's experience contrasts starkly with middle-class students whose parents engage in what Annette Lareau (2011: 5) describes as 'the transmission of differential advantages to children', through the processes of intense 'concerted cultivation' that give middle-class young people advantages throughout education and then in the labour market, as well as a sense of entitlement. Here the college attempts to fill this gap, offering regular ‘monitoring’ sessions with students where they talk to them about career pathways and routes out of college. Ayesha’s account here is reflective of this, as she told me in abstract terms she wanted to ‘go to university and get a degree and then maybe get a job to do with like research or civil service, something like that’. Interestingly, the civil service was only on Ayesha’s radar because of a recent assembly.

> Ayesha: That was only something recently because we had an assembly of someone who works for them and she kind of gave like a introduction to it. And I haven’t done much research into it yet, but it’s something I am thinking about.
>
> Amit: What sort of civil service job was it?
>
> Ayesha: Yeah, to be honest, she kind of talked about it like in sections but like I don’t know exactly what but something to do with that. I think she worked for pensions.
>
> Amit: what drew you to that?
>
> Ayesha: Well, I want to do a job that helps people. I feel like civil service is what does that. So I think if I did work for civil service and I was like helping people or doing a job that’s going to support people and stuff like that, I’d be happy with that

Ayesha’s interest in working for the civil service was relaid in only the vaguest terms, as it was not something she had considered before she applied for university. We see, though, how it is the college that provides students with options about routes into work, which is particularly important in the absence of parental knowledge of working transitions (which middle-class students benefit from) or a perceived surplus of available careers such as in London. Even then, Ayesha’s understanding of what this civil service job entails is not very well developed, but relates to her desire to do something that involves ‘helping people’, rather than being associated solely around material gain. The only student I spoke to with a tangible plan was Sana, who wanted to go to university in the north-west to study nursing, with the goal of becoming a children’s nurse. Otherwise, students had only the vaguest plans for their future, except for knowing that they wanted to go to university to achieve a career.

Gender, Careers and Caring Responsibilities

As students spoke to me about their future plans, it became clear that there were gendered dimensions to these processes, with a particular pressure placed on female students who had no other obvious routes into work outside of college. Here, there was resonance with Skeggs’ (1997) seminal study of women enrolled in a further education college that was also in the north-west of England. The social context has changed significantly since Skeggs’ research, which was undertaken in the late 1980s, as young women from working-class backgrounds now enter university at increasing rates with the aforementioned expansion of universities. Partly this reflects a breakdown in traditional gendered roles brought on by deindustrialisation and subsequent economic uncertainty, which has increased women's employment (Walkerdine et al., 2001). This was touched upon by Sana, a British Pakistani student:

> Men tended to be like the main breadwinners but things have changed and it's good things are changing. We need things to change because you can't live on one salary. It's not possible especially with like the cost of living crisis. (Sana)

It is within this context that the young women I spoke to all wanted to attend university as a means to attain a 'career' in ways that were intertwined with their mothers' experiences of financial hardship and the difficulty of undertaking devalued domestic labour, which included raising children. Their mothers essentially warned them off of the life they lived, seeking to encourage their daughters to carve out different pathways. As Walkerdine et al. (2001) found, young working-class women must undergo a process of transformation to succeed in education, but here the process was actively encouraged by the parents. For instance, Ayesha's mum told her that she should 'get a career first, then focus on other things, like having a family' and presented university to Ayesha as something Ayesha should do because she did not have the chance to. This was also true for Sana, whose mother similarly used her own experiences to influence Sana's aspirations:

> My mum ended up not going to college, because of the time . . . I don't know if it was just culturally, but it was perceived that women shouldn't go to college or uni. Once you've done high school, that's it, you get married off. So mum really didn't have the opportunity. She was really smart. I mean, she's still smart now. Like, politics, everything. Just honestly, you wouldn't know . . . But my mum kind of became a housewife. She wasn't always a housewife. She worked at supermarkets and was a seamstress before. (Sana)

Sana gushed with pride when talking about her mother, who despite not attending college or university, has a high valuation of education borne out of her own experiences of not being able to attend college or university. Essentially, her aspirations went unfulfilled because of the time in which she grew up, which is something she does not want for Sana, hence taking an active role in encouraging Sana to work hard at college and go to university to enable her to achieve the autonomy that she was denied.

Cathy, a white working-class student who was eligible for free school meals for much of her school life offered a similar account of how her aspirations and plans for work are framed by her mum's own experiences. Her mum raised her on her own and now works as 'a teacher in a prison' having attended college and then university as a mature student when Cathy was at secondary school. These experiences are subsequently passed onto Cathy and frame how she understands her future.

> Amit: Is it important to do well at school?
>
> Cathy: I'm like 'I can't quit trying'. I need to go to like a good uni and then you can apply for a decent job and then you don't have to worry as much about like finances and stuff.

> Amit: Would you say that you worried about finances before in your life?
>
> Cathy: Yeah, because when I was younger mum didn't have as good as a job . . . like she was in uni when I was in school. She definitely wants me to go to uni. I think she probably would have a go at me if I didn't go . . . She thinks it's really important and she wants me to not have to worry about finances and stuff. Because she had to when she was my age, when she was a young adult.

Cathy's understanding of work and education are framed by her mum's external input, which in itself is based on her own previous material conditions. Her mum is motivated by not wanting Cathy to go through similar struggles that she went through as the sole provider for Cathy and her sister. As such, Cathy views university as a vehicle for a 'decent job' that will enable her to avoid financial worries, a worldview shaped by her mum and by her experiences of growing up in financial precarity. Here the transmission of a high valuation of education is passed on to Cathy as part of a conscious, rather than unconscious process, as it would be with middle-class students, who 'receive the message from birth that not only are they able and clever, but also that their destiny is to go university and become professionals' (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 162).

Like Cathy's mum, Lila's mum also raised her and her three siblings on her own before she attended university as a mature student while Lila was in secondary school and now works 'in accounts', though not as an accountant. As a result she places significant pressure on Lila to get good grades, go to university and subsequently get a good job.

> Lila: My mum, she had a teenage pregnancy with me, so she wants more out of me than what she was able to get for herself . . . She wants me to achieve more and she's very harsh when it comes to relationships and stuff like that because she doesn't want me to get distracted like what she did.
>
> Amit: Did she have a say in what you studied then?
>
> Lila: Yes [laughs]. Originally I chose to do Sociology, Psychology and PE and then mum was like, 'oh, but you always wanted to do law growing up, why don't you just do law?' And I was like, yeah, OK, I'll change it to law, because I thought if I do that I have more chance of, I don't know, achieving higher, but . . . like she really wants me to become a lawyer. But that's just not what I want to do.

Here we see how Lila's mother, like Cathy's, seeks to invest in her daughter to enable her to have a different life than she had lived, which with it brings immense pressure to undertake a law degree, with the view to becoming a lawyer, a profession associated with high salaries, but that has a pervasive class ceiling (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Rivera, 2015). Lila does not even want to do law and her mum's belief that she does is based on the fact that Lila 'watched a lot of law films' as a child so had a fleeting interest in the profession. Lila's mum subsequently seeks to micro-manage Lila's life, by influencing her choices and placing a lot of pressure on her to succeed so that Lila can live a life distinctly different from her own. Here, it is worth noting that common accounts of working-class educational outcomes involve a lack of perceived aspiration passed from parent to child, which in turn places blame on individuals (see Allen, 2014 for critique). Yet, for Sana, Lila, Cathy and Ayesha, their parents had high aspirations for them, which disrupts these wider narratives that have been the focus of policy discussion. They just lack the social and cultural capital that is increasingly important in helping young people navigate transitions out of education and into work, which is a major way in which educational inequalities are recreated (see Irwin and Elley, 2013).

Returning to Lila, the 'very high expectations' of her mother have come at an immense emotional cost as she is burdened by these high expectations. This is compounded by the significant caring responsibilities she has for her seven-year-old brother, which impacts her ability to secure good grades.

> She encourages me to do get good grades but then she really contradicts herself so she'll be like 'you need to get on top of your schoolwork' and then in the holidays when I got loads, I'm looking after my brother every day in the week and I'm like, 'so how do you expect me to balance it all because I'm tired after looking after him all day?' (Lila)

There is obviously a tension between Lila's mum's high expectations and the demands placed on Lila by her caring duties for her younger brother. Similarly, Sana described herself as an 'informal young carer' for her grandmother, telling me she would 'clothe her, bathe her, everything', all while contending with the demands of studying with little additional support, which she acknowledged impacted her grades. Within the focus on white working-class boys (e.g. Gov GK, 2021; Sewell et al., 2021), there is no attention paid to the added impact working-class girls such as Lila, Sana and so on face, wherein they have to step in to fulfil household labour and care for family members in ways boys rarely have to. Women undertake 60% more unpaid care than men, as caring responsibilities are also more likely to fall on people who live in deprived areas.[4] This burden of unpaid care is the result of decades of neoliberal policies and austerity that have systematically gutted the welfare state, leaving working-class people to fend for themselves in the absence of any free support. The result is helping out with unpaid caring while also attempting to get good grades to enable upward social mobility, with the two tasks inherently at odds with one another. This is just one example of the many invisible barriers that working-class young people face as they attempt to navigate their transitions out of education and into work, as middle-class students do not have this burden and are similarly able to spend their spare time gaining requisite work experience, undertaking extracurricular activities and so on, which increase their employability (Bathmaker et al., 2013) as working-class students are far more likely to fall into the opportunity trap (Brown, 2003).

Conclusion

This article explored the ways in which working-class young people enrolled in college in Rochdale imagined their transitions out of college and into university, as they sought to embark on a 'career', which was understood as a vehicle for upward social mobility. Their perceptions of work, particularly the distinction between a job and a 'career', emphasises the allure of wider theories of neoliberal subjectivity, not least the ingrained belief in self-improvement and fulfilment through work (Farrugia, 2019). However, the appeal of a 'career' was complex, as it was understood as a way for these young people to garner value, respect and dignity that is otherwise denied, which speaks to the moral and cultural dimensions of class inequality (Sayer, 2005; Sennett and Cobb, 2023). Class is about the perceived 'relative worth of individuals, and about differences between how people are valued economically, and how they are valued ethically' (Sayer, 2002), which is why supposed professional middle-class work – a 'career' – was seen as something to aspire to for these working-class young people. Of course, there were material aspects to this, with students believing that a 'career' would enable them to live lives framed by financial security and so on.

Yet, only Sana had a tangible career option in mind, as other students spoke of their future careers in only the most abstract of terms, which reflects the complexity of navigating the labour market for working-class young people in a town like Rochdale, with limited prior knowledge from their parents and limited local opportunities to frame their aspirations. As such, it was believed that going to university in and of itself would enable one to gain a 'career' and advance accordingly. This is unfortunately very unlikely to be the case in a graduate labour market that is orientated towards middle-class students who have the relevant capitals – social and cultural – to 'fit in' at work, as well as the time and economic capital to engage in relevant extra-curricular activities required to stand out in a saturated labour market orientated towards the middle and elite classes (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Rivera, 2015). As Friedman and Laurison (2019) remind us, only 10% of people from working-class backgrounds ascend to Britain's best jobs, and when they do successfully ascend they are paid on average 16% less than their more privileged peers. In the absence of tangible alternatives or tacit knowledge of the graduate labour market, these students are likely to enter the opportunity trap, which is compounded by place, given that few 'careers' are believed to exist in Rochdale, reflecting how the economy as a whole is orientated around London, a city students told me they would not be able to afford to live in.

There was a gendered element to this, as female students I spoke to professed a desire to attend university and get a stable job based on the perceptions of their mothers, who experienced financial insecurity in their own lives and wanted their daughters to be spared this. In Ayesha's and Sana's case, their mums did not work but wanted their daughters to have a career that she was denied by virtue of raising children, while Lila's and Cathy's mothers do not want their daughters to experience the hardship they experienced. The experiences of students like these are routinely ignored amid a particular focus on the educational attainment of white working-class boys (e.g. Gov UK, 2021).

A fundamental problem for these young people is that the world of work is shifting incredibly quickly, and it is always the middle classes who are best positioned to adapt to changing labour market conditions. What does it mean to have a 'career' in a world with decreasing labour rights, increased automation and the outsourcing of jobs? Irrespective, these young people want to be people of value, which for them they associate with working middle-class, professionalised jobs, whatever that entails in actuality. This demonstrates the wider salience of class inequalities and how class-based narratives of value, shame, dignity and so on are internalised and then reproduced through the language by which young people imagine their futures.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: this research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (Grant no. ECF-2023-218).

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the School of Social Sciences ethics committee at the University of Manchester. Ref: 2024-18260-37288. All research was conducted in accordance with the university ethics procedures.

ORCID iD

Amit Singh https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7288-2693

Notes

1. https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1018/html/.
2. https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/1443onslocalemployedgraduatesinnongraduaterolesinpartsoftheuk2021to2022.
3. https://www.visitrochdale.com/about-the-area/about-rochdale.
4. https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf and https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/unpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=In%20England%20and%20Wales%20an,2011%20to%204.4%25%20in%202021.

References

Abrahams J (2016) Honourable mobility or shameless entitlement? Habitus and graduate employment. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(5): 625–640.

Allen, K. (2014). ‘Blair’s children’: Young women as ‘aspirational subjects’ in the psychic landscape of class. *The Sociological Review*, 62(4), 760–779. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12113

Ashley, L., & Empson, L. (2017). Understanding social exclusion in elite professional service firms: field level dynamics and the ‘professional project’. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(2), 211–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015621480

Bathmaker AM, Ingram N and Waller R (2013) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34(5–6): 723–743.

Berlant L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu P (2023) *Habitus and Field: General Sociology, Volume 2 (1982–1983)*. Trans. Collier P. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown P (2003) The opportunity trap: Education and employment in a global economy. *European Educational Research Journal* 2: 142–180.

Dodge M and Brook R (2016) From manufacturing industries to a services economy: The emergence of a 'new Manchester' in the nineteen sixties. In: Brook R and Dodge M (eds) *Making Post-War Manchester: Visions of an Unmade City*. Manchester: Modernist Society, 1–30.

Erikson R and Goldthorpe J (1992) *The Constant Flux: A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Countries*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Evans D (2023) *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petty Bourgeoisie*. London: Repeater.

Farrugia D (2019) Class and the post-Fordist work ethic: Subjects of passion and subjects of achievement in the work society. *The Sociological Review* 67(5): 1086–1101.

Farrugia D (2021) Youth, work and 'career' as a way of talking about the self. *Work, Employment and Society* 35(5): 856–871.

Friedman S and Laurison D (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gov UK (2021) *The Forgotten: How White Working-Class Pupils Have Been Let Down, and How to Change it*. London: House of Commons Education Select Committee.

Hall S (2011) The neo-liberal revolution. *Cultural Studies* 25(6): 705–728.

Harvey D (2011) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (1. publ. in paperback, reprint. (twice)). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Irwin, S., & Elley, S. (2013). Parents' hopes and expectations for their children's future occupations. *The Sociological Review*, 61(1), 111–130. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02139.x

Kalra VS (2000) *From Textile Mills to Taxi Ranks*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lareau A (2011) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2nd edn. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Nayak A (2006) Displaced masculinities: Chavs, youth and class in the post-industrial city. *Sociology* 40(5): 813–831.

Peck J (2010) Zombie neoliberalism and the ambidextrous state. *Theoretical Criminology* 14(1): 104–110.

Penn R, Scattergood H and Martin A (1990) The dialectics of ethnic incorporation and exclusion: Employment trajectories of Asian migrants in Rochdale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 16(2): 175–198.

Pike A, MacKinnon D, Coombes M, et al. (2016) Uneven Growth: Tackling City Decline, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/filesresearch/tackling_declining_cities_report.pdf (accessed 2 March 2024).

Pike, A., Béal, V., Cauchi-Duval, N., Franklin, R., Kinossian, N., Lang, T., Leibert, T., MacKinnon, D., Rousseau, M., Royer, J., Servillo, L., Tomaney, J., & Velthuis, S. (2023). 'Left behind places': A geographical etymology. *Regional Studies*, 58(6), 1167–1179. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972

Reay D (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Rivera LA (2015) *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Savage M, Cunningham N, Devine F, et al. (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century: A Pelican Introduction*. London: Pelican, an imprint of Penguin Books.

Sayer A (2002) What are you worth? Why class is an embarrassing subject. *Sociological Research Online* 7(3): 19–35.

Sayer A (2005) Class, moral worth and recognition. *Sociology* 39(5): 947–963.

Sayer A (2010) Class and morality. In: Hitlin S and Vaisey S (eds) *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*. New York, NY: Springer, 163–178.

Sewell T, Aderin-Pocock M, Chughtai A, et al. (2021) Commission on race and ethnic disparities: The report. March 2021. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331_-_CRED_Report_-_FINAL_-_Web_Accessible.pdf (accessed 2 March 2024).

Sennett R and Cobb J (2023) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

Skeggs B (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: Sage.

Tufail W (2015) Rotherham, Rochdale, and the racialised threat of the 'Muslim grooming gang'. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4(3): 30–43.

Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books.

Valluvan S (2019) *The Clamour of Nationalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wacquant L (2007) Territorial stigmatization in the age of advanced marginality. *Thesis Eleven*, 91(1): 66–77.

Wacquant LJD (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Walkerdine V, Lucey H and Melody J (2001) *Growing up Girl: Psycho-Social Explorations of Gender and Class*. London: Palgrave.

Weeks K (2011) *The Problem with Work*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press.

Willis PE (1977/1981) *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Morningside edn. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Young R and Collin A (2000) Framing the future of career. In: Collin A and Young R (eds) *The Future of Career*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–18.

Amit Singh is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Sociology department at the University of Manchester.

Date submitted April 2024
Date accepted September 2024