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Article

Inequality talk: How discourses by senior men reinforce exclusions from creative occupations

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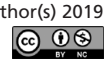
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Abstract

Cultural Studies has drawn attention to the way that cultural and creative industries are marked by significant inequalities. This article explores how these inequalities are maintained, through fieldwork with senior men making decisions in cultural and creative industries. Drawing on 32 interviews with senior men across a range of cultural and creative industry occupations, conducted as part of a larger (N = 237) project, the analysis shows that misrecognition and outright rejection of inequalities are now not the norm. Rather, 'inequality talk' and the recognition of structural barriers for marginalised groups is a dominant discourse. However, individual careers are still explained by gentlemanly tropes and the idea of luck, rather than by reference to structural inequalities. The distance between the discourse of career luck and 'inequality talk' helps to explain the persistence of exclusions from the workforce for those who are not white, middle class origin, men. This has important implications for inequalities in cultural production and consumption, and in turn for wider social inequality.

Keywords

Class, cultural and creative industries, cultural production, gender, gentlemen, inequality, professions

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Introduction

> *The thing that will get me fired is if I bankrupt the place, the next thing that will get me fired is if the work is no good. Beyond those two, inclusion, inclusivity and making sure that we as the National Theatre represents the nation as it is, which includes 50.4% women, is the most important thing*. (Rufus Norris, Artistic Director, National Theatre)

> *Diversity really matters – for me and for the BBC. As an organisation, we are here to represent and serve everyone – all the cultures and diverse voices that make the UK what it is. As a creative organisation, we need to tell stories that people all across the country will recognise, will understand and will relate to. And that means having a BBC which looks like the UK and embraces the widest range of voices and views as possible. It also means creating a culture which understands and thrives on our differences.* (Tony Hall, Director General, BBC)

> *I want the arts to be a medium of social progress, not a bastion of privilege, a place for the exchange of creative ideas and skills and the basis for mutual understanding in society. I want an inclusive world, a building that is open to all with a programme for everyone, not an exclusive club.* (Nicolas Serota, Chair, Arts Council England)

In recent years, inequality in cultural and creative industries (CCIs) has become a well-established issue for academic research. However, writing in 2014, Ros Gill demonstrated how a settled set of academic conclusions on the exploitative and unfair nature of cultural labour markets had not been taken up and accepted by those working in CCIs. Indeed, a range of research has suggested inequalities are supported by a myth of hard work, talent and equality and diversity within individual and collective rhetoric about cultural and creative work (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017; Littler, 2018).

It seems as if this lack of recognition has shifted. Our introductory quotes suggest senior voices are now committed to changing the makeup of the set of occupations and industries that are crucial to reflecting and representing society. We have chosen the three carefully: they are all highly successful, senior men in decision-making roles within cultural and creative organisations. Leadership and decision-making positions in CCIs have traditionally been some of the least diverse parts of the sector. Thus, they are most likely to be occupied by those fitting the dominant 'somatic norm' (Friedman and O'Brien, 2017; Puwar, 2001, 2004) of white, middle-class origin, maleness. What is striking about the three men's comments is how inequalities in the sector are at the forefront of their rhetoric, and placed as central to their mission at the National Theatre, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Arts Council England.

This might be good news and cause for celebration, as examples of key decision-makers responding to structural inequalities dominating cultural production. We now see an evolution in the sorts of postfeminist and post-multicultural downplaying, ignoring, or even contesting of inequalities identified by Gill (2014), McRobbie (2007), Banet-Weiser (2018) and Malik (2013), whereby misrecognition of inequality, with a focus on hard work and talent being rewarded, has been supplemented by explicit recognition of structural inequalities in cultural production. In this article, we sound notes for caution, showing how the recognition of inequality is not enough to ensure social change. Crucially the recognition of inequality may be, in itself, a potential strategy for ensuring the continued dominance of already powerful social groups (Mellinger, 2003; Saha, 2018). Analysis of

senior men's own narratives of their career biographies, and explanations for their position and success, demonstrates a considerable distance between their rhetoric and their understanding of how occupations need to change. This 'inequality talk' is thus an important new discourse for understanding how, despite the public proclamations and sincere intentions of senior men, the current settlement excluding women, ethnic minorities and those from working-class origins (O'Brien et al., 2016), may persist.

We begin by discussing the literature on inequalities in the CCIs, with a particular focus on recent work that has highlighted the absence of recognition of inequality in CCIs. We then move to discuss methods and the importance of specific theories of gentlemanly repertoires within professional, successful, men's narratives of their careers. These theories are especially important as they are the counterpoint to the 'inequality talk' we identify in our interviewees' discourses about the sector. The article then presents four key themes from the data: the striking *absence* of misrecognition or ignorance of inequalities in the creative industries; the idea of 'inequality talk' and acceptance of the structural barriers to a more diverse creative sector; how this inequality talk was not deployed to explain individual career success, rather, gentlemanly narratives of luck were the frame for explaining working life; and the limited capacity to change what were seen as good and socially important industries and occupations. What is clear from this analysis, as developed by a detailed focus on data from one respondent towards the end of the article, is that 'inequality talk' is an important discourse for men in positions of power in CCIs. In effect, their, in some cases detailed, knowledge of structural inequalities added force to the sense that they, as individuals, had little capacity or power to effect change, despite being in hiring, commissioning, or otherwise crucial decision-making positions. The implications of this new discursive formation, and its relationship to analysis warning of the risks associated with postfeminist and post-racial discourses in both creative industries, and more generally for a society confronting rising inequality, are discussed in the concluding comments.

Unspeakable inequalities in CCIs

There is now a rich and extensive set of research on CCIs. While some of this work has focused on definitional issues (e.g. Campbell et al., 2018) or theorisations of creativity (Campbell, 2018; Osborne, 2003), there has been a recent and extensive focus on inequalities in the sector. There has been extensive work on the demographics of CCI occupations, demonstrating exclusions and underrepresentation according to class (O'Brien et al., 2016; Oakley et al., 2017), gender (Conor et al., 2015) and race (Nwonka and Malik, 2018; Saha, 2018). Much of this work has sought to account for the unbalanced workforce of cultural and creative occupations, highlighting the norms of maleness, the expectation of excessive working hours, the hidden barriers associated with middle-class occupational cultures, along with examples of hostility or outright discrimination against those who do not fit a white, male, middle-class origin 'somatic norm' (Bull, 2019; Childress, 2017; De Benedictis et al., 2017; Gerber, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Randle et al., 2015; Saha, 2018; Scharff, 2017). What all of this research demonstrates, irrespective of theory, method, or dataset, is that CCIs in the United Kingdom (and internationally) are marked by significant inequalities.

Three authors are especially important from this literature, working within the cultural studies tradition to focus on how inequalities associated with gender and race are replicated. Gill (2014) and Malik (2013) have both made crucial interventions to explain how the structural inequalities outlined in research on creative and cultural work are rendered as secondary or irrelevant in the language of practice and policy for the CCIs, and McRobbie's (2007) theorisation provides the framework for connecting this CCI-specific research to broader social struggles in employment, education and consumer culture.

In Malik's work (also Nwonka and Malik, 2018), the focus is on the way in which recognition of racial discrimination has been made difficult, if not outright impossible, by the rise of both the framework of diversity (Ahmed, 2007) and the idea of creativity in cultural production. 'Creative diversity' (Malik, 2013) as the dominant frame for discussing inequalities associated with race and ethnicity 'signifies a post-multiculturalist, falsely post-racial understanding' that seeks to suggest struggles for equality are now settled and past. Post-racial understandings of cultural production, particularly those in broadcast policy, mean discrimination and exclusion is made, as Gill notes with regard to sexism and misogyny, 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014).

McRobbie (2007) and Gill (2011, 2014) have analogous perspectives on the issue of gender inequalities, with the latter focused on CCIs and the former on the more general social position of postfeminist discourses. They were both intervening against popular (e.g. Sandberg, 2013) and media discourses that suggested sexism was, increasingly, no longer an issue in work places and that the struggle for equality was being won. This 'postfeminist' set of discourses assert the end of structural sexism, across a range of industries including media and technology. Both reject these claims, demonstrating a new set of demands on women to be 'top girls' in the labour market, in education and in consumer society (McRobbie, 2007), and to render sexism 'unspeakable' in CCIs such as the radio industry (Gill, 2011, 2014). Gill's (2014) work is particularly important in this context, as she identifies how the post-feminist moment in creative industries occludes the 'subtle yet virulent forms of sexism' that are entrenched in creative workplaces. The result is that workers adopt the language of openness and faith in talent and creativity to explain their and others' success, a powerful 'myth of inclusivity' that leaves structural inequalities not only unchallenged, but also reinforces and replicates them. Inequalities are thus 'unspeakable' for creative workers in the post-feminist and post-racial workforce.

This article develops this theorisation of inequality in creative work as unspeakable in two ways. As our review of the literature indicates, there has not been as much focus on those running the CCIs, as opposed to those who are excluded. This is, as we have noted, for very good reasons, given the inequalities in the workforce and the sorts of subtle barriers affecting those furthest from the 'somatic norm' of white, male, middle classness that dominates senior decision-making positions. However, it does create space for work looking specifically at what senior decision-makers think and understand about inequalities. Second, as we discuss in the rest of the article, our fieldwork with this strata of CCIs suggested they were very forthcoming about inequalities, superficially differentiating themselves from the idea of unspeakable inequalities found in Gill's (2014) research. How to explain this difference and distinction is a second important research question.

As we demonstrate, inequalities may be 'speakable' for senior men in CCIs, but this does not mean they are likely to change. This is because what we describe as 'inequality talk' is at once a discursive strategy important for continued success in CCIs, and a way of distancing from the continued 'unspeakablness' of inequalities in our respondents' own narratives of their careers.

Studying 'senior' men in cultural and creative occupations

We draw on data from a mixed-method study of creative and cultural workers in the United Kingdom. Our participants were initially recruited to an online survey advertised under the headline 'Do you work in the arts, culture, or creative industries? Take our survey on diversity in the sector', hosted at the *Guardian* during 2015 (for more details on the original survey, see Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). The online survey attracted 2487 unique responses, and included a question about whether participants would be willing to be interviewed. A total of 237 interviews took place during the summer and autumn of 2016, with the aim of constructing a dataset representative of the demographics of CCIs in the United Kingdom (O'Brien et al., 2016), along with specific boosts for underrepresented groups, such as women of colour. The sample of 32 'senior' men is drawn from this original interview dataset.

The interviews consisted of four main sections. Participants were first asked to tell the interviewer about themselves, and to tell their life story as they saw it. Prompts were only very rarely necessary as participants were able to narrate their life histories at length, albeit in different ways. Participants were then asked about their work, covering both their current work and the work they'd done in (and out of) the creative industries up until that point, including questions on whether they thought they'd been successful, and what they thought constituted success. After this, they were asked directly about issues of inequality, such as whether they thought they belonged to a social class, and how important they thought axes of inequality such as ethnicity and gender were in contemporary Britain. Finally, they were asked about their own cultural tastes and practices. Interviews were a mixture of in person, over the phone, or via Skype, lasting around an hour.

The age range of the sample is between 26 and 86; half of the samples were between 36 and 50 at the time of the interviews. All but 4 held university degrees, with 10 holding postgraduate qualifications. All but one of the interviewees in the sample were white.

The sample is drawn from across the different elements of the CCIs, but disproportionately represents the creative and performing arts, consisting of 3 people working in advertising and marketing, 2 in design, 5 in film, television and radio, 2 in museums, 12 in performing arts and music, 6 in publishing and 2 in visual arts. Information technology (IT), crafts and architecture are therefore missing entirely. As a result, our 'senior men' are closer to the ways in which the CCIs are imagined in policy circles (Campbell et al., 2018) than the IT and computer services-dominated economic reality.

Beyond this, boundaries of sectors and specific occupations are relatively fluid and poorly defined. While some members of the sample have clearly defined occupations in clearly defined sectors – for example, an editor working full-time at a publisher – others hold jobs that consist of several different responsibilities that cut across occupational

classifications, while yet others have portfolio-based careers that cut across different sectors of the creative industries.

Only 8 of the 32 senior men reported having earned more than £30,000 a year from their creative work in the previous 12 months; while this is likely to be an underestimate, with some participants having retired and others opting not to reveal their income, it nonetheless raises questions about how 'senior' our senior men are. In this instance, the seniority reflects less their financial situation and more their position as key gatekeepers. For some, this was as managers, hiring and overseeing staff. For others, it was as creative directors in a range of CCI productions, taking decisions about, for example, curation or content. Finally, some had commissioning or editorial responsibility, and thus direct and immediate control over cultural content on page, stage, screen and in the gallery. Indeed, on this last point, our youngest member of the sample had considerable influence within the publishing industry in his role as a commissioning editor.

All of the interviewees have been given pseudonyms, anonymised and stripped of identifying data. The interviewees were conducted on the principle of non-attributable comments, reflecting our interest in structures and discourses, rather than named individuals.

There are potential limitations to the dataset. In the first instance, it may be the case that the data are skewed by self-selection, as the interviewees were willing to take part in a research project that was explicit about its interest in inequalities (although this was only the subject of the later part of the interview). There is thus a question of *who* is involved and if they are representative of the sector. Second, given the nature of the research project, the interviewees may have played up, or given an unjustified prominence to their awareness of inequality in the sector. Third, the broader context matters. The interviews were conducted in 2016, which saw Trump elected in the United States, the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, and was a year after #OscarsSoWhite had a major impact on public consciousness of diversity in film, but several months before #MeToo and the public revelation of the behaviour of Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey (and others) in the film and theatre industries.

These potential limitations are important to keep in mind. They are part of the reason for using the quotes which open the article, to illustrate that recognition of inequality is now the public position of key senior figures in the United Kingdom's CCIs. This alleviates some of the concern that the interviewees may be unrepresentative of mainstream positions in the CCIs. Second, the nature of the overall sample, reflecting a range of ages, career stages, CCI occupations and demographics, gives us confidence that we have a representative subsample for this discussion. Finally, our interpretation of the data focuses on career biographies and the connection between these narratives and the men's 'inequality talk'. This is important as we are not only presenting the views of our interviewees on inequality. Rather we are situating the data in a more general tradition of research on professional careers.

Thus, to interpret the narratives of these senior men, specifically in order to understand how they narrate their own careers in contrast to their views on the sector, we draw on recent work exploring professional men's discussion of their careers and success. This work is framed by more general research on how individuals understand social divisions and inequality. Miles and Savage (2012) and Miles et al. (2011) have explored how

successful professional men narrate their careers, as part of a contribution to understanding experiences of social mobility (Friedman, 2016). Here, they point to the persistence of a specific mode of discourse, that of the 'gentlemanly motif'. This is marked by modesty about one's own success, the importance of luck in explaining professional careers and the unstatedness, or downplaying, of individual agency 'in the dice game which is held to determine one's prospects in life' (Miles and Savage, 2012: 597). For Miles and Savage, this is a means of resisting classification and quantification in a modernity marked by audit and measurement. We draw on the idea of the gentlemanly repertoire of luck, self-effacement and a resistance to vulgar brash claims about individual talent or deservedness, to help explain how our respondents told stories about their own success, in contrast to their more detailed engagement with unequal social structures characterising CCIs.

Some of the distance between the social structures privileging successful professional men in their careers and their understandings of their own biography are not specific to this demographic or occupational group. Indeed, there is a rich tradition of research, and set of debates, about lay perceptions of social structure and their place within it, so that specific starting points are difficult. However, the most recent iteration can be traced back to Savage et al'.s, (2001) assessment of the rise of 'ordinary, ambivalent, and defensive' modes of discussing class set against claims of the death of class in British society (by theorists such as Beck, 1992). In turn Bottero (2004) and Payne and Grew (2005) sought to add nuance to understandings of how people seek to claim ordinary or normal identities in the face of an unequal social settlement. The recent contributions of Irwin (2015, 2018) and historical work by Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2017) make it clear that people are at once highly aware of the unequal and hierarchical nature of contemporary Britain, while at the same time seeking to make moral claims about their ordinary and 'middling' status.

As a result, some of the data from our senior CCI men might be explained by the broader social trend of narrating oneself and as ordinary and in the middle of the social structure, even as social inequality is recognised. However, there are specifics to which Miles and Savage (2012) and Miles et al. (2011) make us attentive. The gentlemanly mode of discourse is especially important, allowing our interviewees at once to recognise the problems of inequality in CCIs but still leave those issues as unspeakable thanks to the 'luck' that explains their success. To demonstrate this, we divide the data and analysis into four key themes: how misrecognition and outright rejection of inequalities was unusual or rare in the sub-sample; how inequality talk was the more usual way of discussing cultural and creative occupations, with recognition of structural barriers across CCIs; how gentlemanly tropes and the idea of luck explained their own success, and thus separated and distanced them as individuals from the inequalities they described; and their own limited capacity to effect genuine change in the context of a set of occupations they felt were 'the good guys'. We address each in turn below.

Unspeakable inequalities?

As our review of the literature has noted, we might expect those at the top of cultural professions, particularly those with decision making, hiring and programming responsibilities to play down inequalities and stress the importance of talent and hard work.

However, this was rare from our interviewees. As the following section shows, *recognition* of inequality and structural barriers was much, much more common. However, it is worth noting where the minority rendered inequalities unspeakable and the sorts of ways they did so. Here, we can see Gerald, a white middle-class origin designer in his 40s, questioning the existence of inequalities:

> *I don't think there is an issue at all of class. I don't think there is an issue at all with background. I don't think there is an issue with any kind of social strata. I think the [design] world is incredibly open and actually, there's a pretty low entry-level which allows many different people to access it . . . Gender lines, I think it's actually now more female than male . . . it's at least 50/50.*

This sense, that creative occupations were open, irrespective of class or gender, was rare. What dominated the data was a more complex version of 'inequality talk'.

Inequality talk

In contrast to Gerald, recognising and discussing inequality was a dominant mode of discourse for our interviewees. This manifested in three ways, as an analysis of problems in the interviewee's industry, for example Robert's discussion of the inequalities marking the publishing industry (and his frustration and disappointment about that fact):

> *I find one of the huge negatives across this as an industry, as a sector, is the lack of diversity in terms of ethnic diversity across the industry, across all levels. Everybody in publishing is white. I mean, well, not everybody, but ridiculous proportions . . . More than that, there are gender inequalities at the higher levels . . . the majority of people are women, but not in the boardroom . . . historically the successful people were white men, there's probably a class element to that too.* (Robert, editor, white middle-class origins, 20s)

Robert's sense of frustration at inequality in publishing was echoed by John. He was more explicit in feeling the need to try to challenge and change the inequalities he saw in both the television and publishing industries:

> *I'm conscious of the space I take up I think and try not to. I try to champion new items through the new screenwriters, new actors who haven't come from the conventional background that most actors and writers have . . . I think in terms of TV there's still a lack of representation. It's improving, but I think possibly worse than on screen is behind the scenes. If the commissioners are all white and middle class, then their tastes are going to a point reflect that, and even their attempts at diversification are still coming from that perspective. So, they will commission something that they think is diverse or is catering to or reflecting a certain part of the audience perhaps, but it's still their idea of what it is.* (John, journalism, white middle-class origins, 40s)

However, even when inequality was recognised and foregrounded in discussions of working in cultural and creative professions, talent and hard work were still seen as vital to success (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). In Nigel's comments, we see echoes of Gerald's insistence that his industry was open with low barriers to entry. Nigel, even in recognising the clear gender disparity in the film industry, still held on to the importance of talent

as a key part of success, suggesting class barriers might be rendered irrelevant by talent, even where gender was still a source of discrimination:

> *I just think talent doesn't see class in that anyone can be born talented . . . Sex, I think does, I think from my experience, I have a lot of female friends, I would say that opportunities are still fewer for women, particularly, if you will, behind the camera. If you go on a film set there's still probably only 10% of women in the crew and writers and directors as well . . . So that does still have an effect.* (Nigel, film and TV director white, working-class origins, 40s)

This position is in line with recent work suggesting many in the CCIs foreground talent and hard work to explain career success, irrespective of their race, gender, or class (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). However, even in the attachment to talent there is still recognition that women face discrimination in the film industry, and that talent is not enough to overcome barriers, unlike in the case of class.

The lucky gentlemen producing culture

If the majority of our senior cultural and creative men were aware of, and keen to challenge and change, inequalities in their occupations, surely this is grounds for good news and celebration? Moreover, it might suggest that inequalities are no longer 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014), perhaps in response to the way inequalities in the sector have been highlighted by media and academic discourses in recent years. However, as the comments from Nigel gesture towards, the belief in the role of talent is still a powerful force in the creative sector, reinforcing Gill's (2014) analysis of the marginalisation of the realities of sexism in CCIs. Faith in talent is coupled with a powerful sense that cultural and creative work are 'good' occupations, important to social change and ahead of other professions in terms of diversity and equality. Crucially this position, common across our interviews, is placed in the specific context of the continued effacement of the role of inequality in their *own* career success. This leads to an important set of divisions in their understanding of inequality, echoing much of the discussion of class and inequality seen in the debate between Savage et al. (2001) and Payne and Grew (2005), and recent work by Irwin (2015, 2018). Creative and cultural industries are narrated via problems of inequality, but those problems are outside of individual senior men's own lives and careers. The explanation for their success, rather, lies in the gentlemanly narratives of luck discussed by Miles et al. (2011) and Miles and Savage (2012).

It is important to note that all of the work noted above, on how people understand their own lives in relation to inequality, suggests people are unlikely to foreground structural explanations for their lives and rather tell individual, biographical, stories (cf Savage, 2015). Indeed, the individual 'middling' biographical narrative is common even with those at the very top of the social scale (Sherman, 2018). What is notable about our interviewees is the *distance* between their 'inequality talk' about the CCIs, and their understandings of their own lives and careers. It is a striking dissonance, particularly as our interviewees were in positions to effect change in the sector. The dissonance between inequality talk and narratives of lucky gentlemen is crucial to understanding how issues of access to CCI occupations continue.

There were variations in the narratives of luck and the self-effacing mode of delivery. The purest gentlemanly narrative of success, and the contrast with an awareness of inequality, is distilled by Robert. In the previous section, we noted Robert's analysis of the inequalities in publishing and his frustrations about working in such an unequal industry. When asked about his own career, Robert moved away from structural narratives, such as his own white, male, middle classness, and focused instead on a core gentlemanly trope, that of luck:

> *I'm now in a position that is very enviable and relatively senior. Almost entirely through luck, of having been able to rise quite quickly through the ranks . . . possibly other people have had a very hard time of it because they've gone straight to a company where they want to work and found it very difficult to rise through that company . . . I was at a fairly uncompetitive, big company where I was able to rise through the ranks quite quickly and then just say 'Look, I've got this experience, I'll land myself a good job here*'. *I think that's as much through luck as many other factors.* (Robert, editor white middle class origins, 20s)

The contrast to Robert's inequality talk is stark, although, as we have noted, not entirely unexpected. Awareness of structural issues is often in contrast to biographical narrative, whether in terms of positioning oneself within a broader social hierarchy (Irwin, 2015, 2018) or in accounts of career success (Miles et al., 2011; Miles and Savage, 2012).

This frame for narrating one's own success extended into playing down the role of hard work and talent. This part of the gentlemanly narrative is distinct from luck as a driver for job appointments, but foregrounds the sense of gentlemanly, amateur, approaches to work. For example in Jack's contrast between himself and his peers in the television industry:

> *You know it's, I think of myself as having not had a great deal of focus. I recognise that there are other people that have been extremely focused from very early on and focused on succeeding whatever it takes and you know that is their way of doing it, and it is kind of, I would say it has not been mine.* (Jack, film and TV, white, working-class social origins, 60s)

For Jack, the sense of self-effacement culminated in a narrative of effortless success and the luck of being in the right place at the right time or era, even when background or social origins were part of the explanation for success:

> *I was very lucky because both background and confidence-wise and because of the state support in place, and I suppose because I was good enough to get the state support, I was able to do all that. I think I was very lucky. I would never get my job if they advertised it now . . . I had no career plan. I mean I had that lovely optimism you have in your 20's that . . . you just can go anywhere.* (Geoff, curator/museum manager, white, middle-class social origins, 50s)

This narrative of luck, and the gentlemanly fashion of self-effacement, is distinctly gendered. Writing on women developing careers as classical musicians, Scharff (2017) also highlighted luck in career narratives. For Scharff's interviewees 'luck' played an important part of accounting for privileged positions. However, it was luck

in terms of parental affluence and support, and luck as a means of deflecting discussions about the role of social origins in career success. We can see important similarities in the rhetorical effect of 'luck', which can refer to the luck of being born male in a middle-class, well-connected household as much as it can to the luck of being in the right place at the right time. While emphasising luck in one's own experience need not entail explicitly disavowing one's privilege, at the very least it can be understood as a euphemistic account of it. In other cases, however, discourses of luck seem entirely at odds with inequality talk, with participants' accounts of their trajectories almost entirely disregarding the structures in which they found themselves. Thus, luck for our interviewees, for example, Robert and Jack, is also suffused with a specifically gendered, gentlemanly discourse.

This discourse intersected with a particular insistence on the importance and difference of creative and cultural occupations. Here, self-effacement and distancing from structural explanations for success gave rise to the belief that doing a creative occupation was 'lucky', and that these occupations could be differentiated from other professions. This is distinct from luck as an *explanation* for career success and opens up the discussion of CCIs as good occupations that are doing 'better' than other professions and industries. Mark and Anthony can illustrate this. Mark was one of the youngest in our sample, in his 20s, but was already an established and successful theatre director. He offered a sense of privilege at being able to work solely from his artistic interests, rather than being constrained, a situation in which social structures easing the careers of white middle-class men in theatre were absent (Oakley et al., 2017; Friedman et al., 2016):

> *I have been really lucky that I have been able to make a career out of something that I have always been interested in and always wanted to do. I have been really hugely lucky to get quite a lot of the opportunities . . . quite quickly. I have had . . . opportunities to make pieces of work that I definitely wanted to make and that felt driven by my artistic impulse and nothing else.* (Mark, Theatre director, white, middle-class social origins, 20s)

The opportunities to make work, and to be driven by artistic impulse, render the imbalances of gender and race in theatre, particularly in writing, absent or irrelevant, exactly the 'unspeakable inequalities' identified by Gill (2014). Moreover, CCIs are marked out as different from other professions, both in terms of doing 'better' on equality and diversity, and in terms of the importance of the social function of cultural production. A long excerpt from Anthony, a museum director working at an institution in an English city shows both of these themes:

> *I've now been there for 10 years, I've started seeing some longitudinal big wins with individuals that we've worked with when they were very young people that have now gone on to do fantastic things. I get to see that first-hand and see the impact that the work that we do has had on people's lives. That, for me, is the fundamental reason why I work in the arts -because I believe in its ability to change people's lives forever, because I've seen it in myself and I can see the opportunity for others . . . I think [inequality matters] less so in our industry because, hopefully, as organisations, we're open to all.* (Anthony, museum director/curator, white, working-class origins 30s)

James' narrative: a lucky gent who can't change inequality in cultural and creative jobs

Anthony's defence of CCIs, the gentlemanly repertoire, and the idea of inequality talk can be fully illustrated by a detailed engagement with data from one interviewee. James was from a white middle-class, professional, household and had attended a fee-paying school followed by an undergraduate degree at one of England's most prestigious universities. He then worked in performing arts, eventually supporting his creative work with a role as an arts manager. At the time of interview he was in his 40s, and occupied a senior role in his organisation.

His narrative of his career trajectory was suffused with gentlemanly modesty. Discussing his application to work at his current organisation, he talked up his lack of knowledge of the art form, playing down the significant professional expertise he had gathered from previous work as an arts manager. While some of this was exaggeration for effect, it is important in terms of the gentlemanly narrative:

> *I knew almost nothing about [the art form], but I thought I would apply for that job and use my ignorance of it as the, sort of, central plank of my application. You know, if I can, through a position of ignorance, talk about [the art form] effectively, then perhaps we can persuade other people who are ignorant about it to understand it. Somehow, that worked.*

In keeping with Miles et al. (2011) and Miles and Savage's (2012), we see James's modesty and distance from expertise or experience, rather a story of chancing his arm and 'somehow, that worked'.

The gentlemanly narrative is important in framing his understanding of inequality. He did not dismiss or play down the structural inequalities in his part of the cultural sector. In fact, he showed an acute and detailed understanding of the problems facing CCIs, albeit tempered by the puzzle of how best to address them:

> *I feel like that question of diversity is a really important one, that I would happily grapple with for a long time, but I feel frustrated that I don't have any answers for it. [at an event] a lot of the room was white, female, middle-aged, and of a certain class. It felt like everyone's hearts were in the right places, and yet, we still didn't know quite what to do about any of it. I want us to do something meaningful, and yet I don't know what the thing might be.*

Even where, in the interview, there might have been moments of postfeminist or post-racial discourse to render inequalities unspeakable (Gill, 2014), James was still keen to show that he understood the issues:

> *let's start with gender, because that's easy: Almost everyone who works in [my artform] is a woman, anyway. So, at least we don't discriminate too badly against women generally, although, having said that, there is still, I think, a disproportionate . . . All the big famous [leaders] are boys, and women do all the real work, and the men do the showy bits on the top . . . I suspect we are not the worst offender of any industry in the world, as far as that goes.*

This mixture of recognition of inequalities, set alongside the faith that CCIs, or at least the areas James was working and practicing in, were doing better than other areas

of economy and society is an important line of continuity with Gill (2014), McRobbie (2007) and Malik's (2013) work. Insistence that 'hearts were in the right places' sat alongside the belief that 'we are not the worst offender of any industry in the world', with CCIs being better at addressing inequality than other professions. These two points were the context for James's frustration at the lack of change in the CCIs. However, this lack of change related directly to his own capacity to effect that change, even where he had specific power and responsibility for hiring staff or shaping programming:

> *You put out an advert for a junior job at an arts organisation . . . and you'll be deluged with responses. There are hundreds of them. So, what are you going to do? You're going to pick the one with the best education, for the most part. You know, we can talk about diversity all we like, and we can mean it until our hearts are breaking, but in the end, when you've got one post to fill, you really don't want to fuck it up.*

Leading to a sense of constraint and lack of agency in the face of much broader social and economic divisions shaping contemporary Britain:

> *we are forced, and I say this with some caution, we are pretty much forced into maintaining the un-diverse status quo, because the damage has been done before we get to the point at which we could inflict any damage. I dare say, we do our fair share of it.*

The last comment returns to the broader theme of recognition of inequalities, and indeed the taking of responsibility for replicating them, all within a narrative that the CCIs can be defended as both better than other occupations and morally or ethically on the right side of critiques associated with exclusions associated with class, race and gender. In defending the sector and at the same time recognising inequalities, structural barriers remain in place, whatever the new rhetoric of the lucky gents taking decisions in the CCIs.

Conclusion

During 2017, a series of scandals brought to light sexual harassment cases across a range of CCIs. The associated #metoo movement, analysed extensively by Banet-Weiser (2018), sought to give visibility to how various cultural industries were run and organised in ways that had aided and abetted sexual harassment. In some ways, our analysis suggests #metoo will find support and allies from senior men in cultural occupations. However, and in parallel with Banet-Weiser's critique of the mediated nature of modern social movements, our analysis points towards underlying structures that mean this support may not be transformative or revolutionary.

This new mode of 'inequality talk' may contribute to slow or even prevent change. At worst, we might see 'inequality talk' as a means of marginalising experiences of inequality, as those in positions of power insist they understand the problem (Littler, 2018). We did not see extensive evidence of our interviewees seeking to claim expertise on questions of inequality over and above those who face barriers to entry and career progression. Nigel, for example, noted the experiences of his female friends working in film to show his awareness of gender inequalities in that industry. Notwithstanding this, the broader risk is whether recognition is actually a form of inaction. Critical Race Theorists

studying media (summarised in Saha, 2018) have drawn attention to how commitments to diversity and associated programmes and policies have had limited impact on the racial exclusions in CCIs (Mellinger, 2003; Nwonka 2015; Saha, 2018). The rhetorical commitment to diversity stands both in place of formal action, and, more worryingly, as a set of techniques for upholding the existing, exclusionary, settlement. It is clear that our participants are not, as Gilroy (2012) has analysed, speaking of inequality *in order* to leave it unchallenged. Their commitments are sincere. Recognition of inequalities is, however, only a starting point for change.

This is most notable when understandings of structural inequalities were juxtaposed with individual narratives. Our interviewees, who were all in positions to shape creative industries, and thus British culture more generally, played down or ignored the role of structural inequalities in explaining their careers; felt luck and chance were key explanations of their success; and felt there might be little they could do, as individuals, to change the unequal settlement in creative occupations. This last point is especially important, whereby the recognition of inequality within 'inequality talk' becomes a new discourse of justifying barriers and exclusions, much as talent, hard work and creative diversity were for Gill (2014) and Malik's (2013) discussions of postfeminist and post-racial justifications for workplace inequalities. As Friedman and Laurison (2019) demonstrate, creative occupations have a range of hidden barriers associated with embodied forms of cultural capital, such as informal dress, informal modes of communication and cultural and media omnivorousness. 'Inequality talk' may be a new hidden barrier, a necessary discourse for senior men to get in and get on in cultural occupations.

Thus, challenging 'inequality talk' will require more than confronting decisionmakers with details of ongoing demographic, funding, or representational failures. Here, both CCIs and those struggling for change may usefully draw on lessons from other professions (e.g. Ahmed, 2007; Kelan, 2018; Wetherell et al., 1987), if the occupations producing media and cultural representations are to better reflect the society of which they are a central part.

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