Subjective understandings of young people's agency: concepts, methods and lay frames of reference

1. Introduction

How do young people experience, perceive and orient to the contexts in which they are growing up and how does this relate to societal changes? This has been an important question in youth research over many decades: from structural accounts of school to work transitions in the 1960s and 1970s (eg. Roberts 1968) to 1980s concerns about declining demand for young labour and related household and familial transitions (eg. Irwin 1995) to the growing interest in individualisation (eg. Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Across re-framings, sociological researchers have remained centrally concerned with the link between individual volition and wider social forces, most especially in relation to the reproduction of class related inequalities. From the 1990s onwards, and influenced by the argument of a societal shift to reflexive modernity (Beck 1992), many youth researchers have explored the extent to which young people's subjective experiences, attributions of meaning, values and orientations have become more individualised. They have argued that this does not reflect greater autonomy in an objective sense. Young people commonly accord to themselves agency and autonomy yet their life chances, and the kinds of choices they are able to make, are fundamentally conditioned by social structural circumstances and their own, classed, position within society (Macdonald and Shildrick 2018, Furlong et al 2011, Threadgold and Nilan 2009, Brannen and Nilsen 2005, Roberts et al 1994). Accordingly, there emerges a conceptually puzzling disconnect between objective constraint, tightening inequalities and highly unequal life chances on the one hand and their subjective apprehension and assertions of agency on the other.

For many analysts the apparent disconnect between objective circumstances of constraint and inequalities and optimistic, agentic, understandings stems from paradoxes of modern social arrangements and their cultural framings. Class identification has become less salient in contemporary society and people are said to be more likely to see themselves and others as authors of their own (mis)fortunes (Beck 1992, Furlong and Cartmel 1997). The UK exemplifies this well as educational and welfare policy framings and cultural and popular discourse more than ever laud merit- based criteria for social success with responsibility for its achievement increasingly weighted towards individuals. However young people face extensive difficulties securing decent work, young people's earnings relative to older employees have continued their long run decline (Resolution Foundation 2018, Irwin 1995), labour force progression pathways have been undermined and many young people move into low paying jobs without prospects (Keep and James 2012). In the accounts of young people and their parents, researchers have identified and analysed ambivalences and a disconnect between objective constraint and subjective understanding of opportunity, reflecting the wider paradoxical situation in which many young people find themselves (eg. Cahill and Cook 2019, Snee and Devine 2018, Luttrell-Rowland 2016). Whilst lay ambivalences certainly exist, I ask if their significance is overstated and whether they partly reflect our conceptual frameworks. I argue that we can more fully access and interrogate lay saliences and perceptions of social arrangements, structural constraint and inequalities. People's

subjective understandings are complex and multi-dimensional. They reconcile seemingly discrepant (individual agency vs social structural constraint) explanations of individual outcomes in ways which are not sufficiently understood.

Research into young people's subjective orientations echoes other traditions of research in identifying a 'switch' in public perceptions: where people understand macro level arrangements with reference to social structural processes and understand individual level experiences with reference to agency and self determination. I argue that this 'switch' is, at least in part, a product of empirical and analytic categories and overstates the apparent disconnect between objective circumstances and lay subjective understandings. Drawing primarily on UK data I argue that, as analysts, we need to more fully apprehend people's own frames of reference and work on the methods and categories through which we access and re-present them.

2. Social change and subjective understandings of social conditions

2.1 A weakening subjective apprehension of social structure?

For Gullestad a 'constellation of changes' through the 20th century underlay a long run shift in values away from obedience and towards 'being oneself' (Gullestad 1996: 39). Her account echoes Alwin's (1988) American evidence of a long run cultural shift in socialisation with parents increasingly valuing independence in children over obedience. 'Being oneself' has arguably, been supercharged by a set of late modern neoliberal imperatives, especially in the UK. The valorisation of individual autonomy and agency in society has been a central theme within youth debates over recent decades. Researchers ask how young people are situated by social, economic and cultural changes and how they bring meaning to their experiences. Beck (1992) influentially described a change in the mode of societal reproduction in which individuals have become 'disembedded', forced to resolve systemic contradictions as individuals, constantly required to make choices and decisions yet ones which remain fundamentally conditioned by unequal positions. For Heinz (2009: 397) '*the individualization thesis has become a prominent companion of youth transition studies in the past decades*' and Beck's arguments prompted extensive debate regarding the relationship between individual agency and social structural processes (eg. Threadgold 2011, Brannen and Nilsen 2005). So too arguments about the role of reflexivity have animated discussions about individual agency and people's ability to reflect upon, and by implication act to change, their social position. Youth researchers have argued that greater reflexivity does not augur greater autonomy but, rather, aligns very closely with objective, classed, possibilities (France and Haddon 2014, Threadgold and Nilan 2009) and that types of reflexivity are contextually shaped (Caetano 2017, Nico and Caetano 2015).

In short, most youth researchers agree that young people's lives and futures remain shaped very profoundly by classed relations of inequality (eg. Macdonald and Shildrick 2018). However, researchers also generally posit that both material and ideational changes are linked to more individualised subjective orientations amongst contemporary young people who foreground individual agency, choices and personal responsibility in pursuing their day

to day lives and plans (eg. Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Mendick et al 2015). These accounts suggest that the drivers of socio-economic inequalities have become more opaque due to the diversification of young people's pathways from education into the labour market and to changing discourse and policy framings which emphasise individual responsibility, social mobility and the importance of merit in social success (eg. Mijs 2016). Research, then, has turned to the question of whether, and how, young people recognise social structural constraint or identify with neoliberal merit based framings of success and failure. Commonly researchers are sceptical of a wholesale 'buying in' to this individualised framing and find a complex amalgam of values and beliefs: for example insistence upon (at least for oneself) agency, alongside recognition of wider social constraint. I turn next to how researchers describe and analyse these amalgams of belief. Rather than attempt an overview I take a small handful of interesting studies in order to reflect on some wider questions about the articulation of subjective orientations and objective conditions.

Influentially, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) identified a disconnect, between young people's objective positioning and their subjective understanding of the conditions shaping their experiences, which they characterised as an epistemological fallacy. This describes "..*a growing disjuncture between objective and subjective dimensions of life whereby underlying class relationships may be obscured as a result of a diversification of experiences*" (Furlong 2009: 349). Here class is not a collective identity and class processes have become more opaque. Critics charge that this kind of account presents young people as naïve regarding the forces which shape their lives (eg France and Haddon 2014), although Furlong (2009) sees the epistemological fallacy as consistent with young people having a good grasp of the ways circumstances and resources impact on their life chances. In this there are some parallels with the work of France and Haddon themselves which I explore below. I want to ask if, in this and other recent sociological work, there is an overplaying of the tensions which are held to characterise lay accounts. In exploring these studies in some detail I am not arguing that they warrant particular criticism, indeed they are extremely insightful and exemplary in the richness of empirical data they share. They are of especial interest in their analyses of neoliberal orthodoxy and young adults' and their parents' understanding of their social position and prospects. I explore them in some depth because their research data dovetails with other data which I present later. However, I have drawn rather different conclusions from empirical evidence, arguing that apparent tensions within lay accounts may in part stem from our analytic framings.

2.2. Reconciling subjective orientations and objective constraint through naturalisation

France and Haddon (2014) ask whether the notion of an epistemological fallacy projects a picture of false consciousness amongst young people. Influenced by Bourdieu, the authors assert a connectedness between objective circumstance and subjective orientations. They argue that young people have individualised understandings of their own success and failure but that they also see broader macro level forces at work and have a good understanding of their own social situatedness. France and Haddon draw on Bourdieu's arguments of habitus in their analyses of subjectivities and their embeddedness in constraint

or opportunity. They exemplify their argument through the cases of two young adults and their mothers. I describe one of these family pairings in order to provide some more concrete reference points for my discussion. Young people's recognition of structural forces is exemplified, in France and Haddon's analysis, in the case of a young man called Lennie who had a difficult relationship with school and embraced a counter-cultural anti-school masculinity in his younger years, following a pattern of being in trouble and being excluded from school. He was now pursuing college training with a view to securing work in the building sector (France and Haddon 2014). The authors describe the participants' accounts of structural processes and constraint, including Lennie's mother's struggle with his primary school in pressing his case. Although she believes that he holds some responsibility for his actions, his agency appears somewhat muted relative to the force of difficult circumstantial and relational factors (the death of his father, labelling by teachers, influence of friends). Lennie himself accepts his best likely future lies in pursuing a building job, perhaps as a labourer. For France and Haddon this exemplifies the power of doxa, an acceptance and seeming naturalization of what the system has to offer him *(after Bourdieu 1998, cited by France and Haddon 2014). From this perspective Lennie's account exemplifies an "..ascension to neoliberal orthodoxy in the educational field, and an acceptance of his 'failure' based on the premise of individual competence*" (2014: 311)

In this account the participants recognise wider constraint but personal success and failure become naturalized as individual responsibilities. The analysis builds on Bourdieu's arguments about the internalisation of objective social positioning, through habitus, so that subjectivities coincide with objective conditions. The authors offer a powerful account of people's recognition of social constraint, as <u>social</u>, and their simultaneous acceptance and internalisation of the limits thereby imposed upon them. Thus for France and Haddon "*(n)eoliberal principles exist not only objectively, in terms of agencies, rules and policies, but have also become subjectively embedded within individuals*" (2014: 318). On the face of it, Lennie's apparent acceptance of his position might be puzzling given that he has been constantly undermined. In the Bourdieusian analysis, the objective and subjective are conjoined through the naturalisation of his disadvantaged position. Yet there is an alternative reading if we reconsider the participants' responses to constraint. For example, Lennie's mother had clearly fought back very hard (if unsuccessfully) against school policies and judgements she saw to be harmful to her son. Lennie himself appears to have, at school, rejected a system in which he was penalised. In accepting his likely employment future, he appears to make a pragmatic judgement about the options available to him. France and Haddon effectively show extensive coherence between subjective orientations and social class positioning of individuals within their study, a 'fit' between expectations, actions and extant constraint and opportunity. However, I wish to ask if it is necessary to mobilise 'naturalisation' as key to the explanation.

France and Haddon build on Bourdieu's account of doxa and the naturalisation of wider forces of class domination. For Bottero (2020) Bourdieu's framing is problematic. She argues that people 'go along' with harmful inequalities less through naturalisation and more through the accomplishment of everyday action and through their entanglement in practical constraint. That is, to understand why people accede to practices or collective arrangements

they recognise as harmful does not require that they internalise legitimating ideologies or naturalise domination. Indeed for Bottero (2019: 14) such arguments are hard to sustain in light of evidence of an extensive understanding and criticism of dominant narratives: "*Members of subordinate groups often recognise —all too clearly—the arbitrary nature of privilege and disadvantage, but must still negotiate environments in which their disadvantage is individualised and naturalised by others. There is a fundamental tension in arguments of naturalisation, therefore, which argue that it is people's misrecognition of inequality which serves to reproduce it but founds this in processes which rest on subordinates' recognition of, and adaptation to, such arrangements*". That is, young people (as all of us) may be critical of social arrangements which undermine them but practical constraints mean that they nevertheless act in ways which reproduce those conditions: "*people develop a 'realistic' sense of what is possible and so often 'go along' with practices they do not necessarily commit to or support*" (Bottero 2019: 11). This argument suggests that young people recognise constraint but also live by it without necessarily naturalising it.

Other recent perspectives on youth subjectivities also posit a partial naturalisation of wider arrangements evidenced through young people's apparent faith in current discourses of social mobility and of merit, especially the power of hard work. Researchers interrogate a tension between the popular belief in the power of individual, agentic and merit- based drivers of success and, at least partial, recognition of their false promise. Researchers ask how these apparently contradictory beliefs sit side by side. I consider two linked analyses from a study which offers valuable insights into complexity and nuance in people's accounts which the researchers see to hold divergent, if not conflicting, understandings of individual agency and social structural process. However, I argue that in retaining a particular sociological language of class, there may be a risk of overplaying the degree of ambivalence and tension in young people's, and their parents', accounts of their prospects.

2.3. Negotiating the disconnect between meritocracy beliefs and social structural constraints

UK government rhetoric, media and policy discourse and normative framings stress hard work and agency as crucial to success in school and work and strongly imply that social arrangements offer equal opportunities based on merit (Mendick et al 2015, Luttrell-Rowland 2016). In interviews with young people aged 15-16 Luttrell-Rowland shows them to hold strongly meritocratic beliefs, foregrounding the importance of hard work in educational attainment and subsequent opportunity. She argues that, in general, they saw their own decision making and life chances to be taking place on a level playing field and influenced by individual diligence and hard work. Young people also described examples of constraint, inequality and unfairness in relation to family and friends' experience of recession, that is job chances could be made and unmade by structural inequalities. She argues that these divergent perceptions were not evidently contradictory to participants because they described the recession, along with its undermining of merit based opportunities, as exceptional. They were at least partly sceptical about individual choice explanations and held more complex understandings linked to the dynamic of daily lives and structural processes: "*[w]hile they*

seem to adopt and take on the market-led language of capitalism (i.e. if you work hard, you can succeed), they recognize the failings of that model and the material experience of a recession" (2016: 345). She suggests that the participants were not wholly captured by this discourse but did not have the language or framing to make sense of the objective discrepancies and tensions which it carries. In their awareness of structural process and constraint, even whilst 'coded' as exceptional, they reveal broader awareness of complexity and inequality (Luttrell-Rowland 2016).

It is important to consider the methodological question of how we best access apparently multi-faceted accounts because, with Luttrell-Rowland, evidence suggests that researchers may overstate the salience of merit type explanations of success and understate lay awareness of structural inequalities. For example, Farthing (2016) critiques the sociological over-emphasis on an individualised mind set amongst young people. She notes youth researchers' consensus that young people assert agency and autonomy in the face of objective constraint, a pattern echoed in her own focus group research with young people: "*it was their choices, actions and decisions that matter in their lives*" (Farthing 2016: 766). Even where she quizzed them about structural factors her participants still foregrounded choice and autonomy. However, where she framed another set of questions around if, and how, policies could make a difference in young people's lives, her participants provided a very different kind of account, foregrounding structural barriers and inequality. Research data reflects very strongly the framing in which it is generated. Luttrell-Rowland positions the 'switch' in young people's accounts between personal possibility and structural constraint as being related to their contradictory positioning between merit discourses and material constraint and suggests that young people lack the language to name the contradictory patterns of inequality and dynamics which they experience. This is echoed in other accounts (eg. Cahill and Cook 2019). However, Farthing's evidence suggests that the apparent contradiction between structural and agentic views partly reflects how our interview questions orient participants and how we interrogate their own frames of reference. Before elaborating this further I turn to an analysis of data linked to the wider study in which Luttrell-Rowland's data is also situated. Again this shows the multi-dimensionality of lay perceptions.

Snee and Devine (2018) explored the views of young people and their parents regarding the youngsters' aspirations and hopes for the future. They argue that belief in hard work and other merit- based criteria for success comprise a neoliberal social imaginary (after Rivzi and Lingard 2010, cited in Snee and Devine 2018). Here, social class has largely disappeared in lay framings of structured inequalities; success and failure are seen as an outcome of personal, individualised and merit- based attributes. Snee and Devine (2018) are drawing on a tradition of influential research with their colleagues (eg. Savage et al 2001), regarding how participants commonly position themselves as 'ordinary working people' and disavow class identities. They draw on this perspective in their analysis of young people and their parents who, they argue, offer individualized explanations of success shaped by the social imaginary in which they "*cannot conceive of how things could be otherwise*" (Rivzi and Lingard 2010, cited by Snee and Devine 2018: 1149). Drawing on Bourdieu 1990, they argue:

"*.. that the denial of class privilege in a period of growing economic inequalities is an example of how the (neoliberal) social imaginary enables the misrecognition of meritocracy, where the social position of both the dominant and dominated is 'earned'*" (Snee and Devine 2018: 1149)

Their participants do recognise contextual factors which influence outcomes: connections, resources and family background. Yet, the authors argue, young people and parents particularly highlight meritocratic factors for educational and job success. People appear to hold personal merit and wider constraint in the same frame of reference, according to themselves opportunities and expectations of succeeding whilst having awareness that others may be stymied by structural constraint. Accordingly,

"[*s*]*ubjectivities of class present a paradox in twenty-first-century Britain, in which people generally object to class as a category because they believe in the principle of meritocracy*" (2018: 1135).

Here, because of their belief they live in a meritocracy, people disavow class. This both places a weight of causal explanation on meritocratic beliefs and places a requirement on people to express recognition of structured socio-economic inequalities and constraint in the language of class.

Whilst people may not invoke a vocabulary of social class, it is important to further analyse precisely how they do perceive and understand structural processes, constraint and inequalities. In his account of subjective orientations, O'Connor (2015) suggests that researchers may set the bar too high regarding what they expect people to articulate. It may be that the language of class is a case in point. Snee and Devine (2018: 1151) conclude, echoing Luttrell-Rowland (2016), that people are very aware of inequalities and social constraint but their accounts "*highlight the problems inherent in trying to articulate transitions in an unequal system using dominant language*"; that is, because the meritocratic promise is inherently contradictory, so people's beliefs are ambivalent. People may indeed hold an array of views which are vague, ambivalent or contradictory. Diverse evidence attests that people's views are swayed by dominant and harmful discourses and policy framings around merit and value (Taylor-Gooby 2013, Shildrick and Macdonald 2013). However, I argue that lay ambivalence and contradiction stem, in part, from sociological analytic framings.

For example, to require people to identify with and discuss inequalities with reference to social class does indeed set the bar high. It encourages overstatement of lay ambivalence regarding the extent and nature of structured processes and inequalities. Other evidence shows nuanced and often quite complex lay perspectives on structured social inequalities (Irwin 2015). These are not necessarily expressed in terms of class yet the themes offered up are ones sociologists would instantly recognise as being about class. When asked about class belonging and related perceptions, participants in a study conducted by the author varied in whether or not they assigned themselves to a social class but most spoke in detail about what they saw as related issues: to do with resources, inequalities of income and of power, labour worker relationships, differential mortality and moral evaluations of social worth (Irwin

2015; also cf. Payne 2009). Sociologists are very clear that class is a complex, multi-dimensional and, often, culturally loaded term and such elements also characterise public perceptions. Public ambivalence over, or disavowal of class may be a reaction to the overarching nature of the class category as people see it, not the kinds of social processes to which it points. People may or may not identify with class *per se* but they offer detailed accounts of processes shaping class related inequalities.

As methodologists and analysts, we should go further in capturing complex lay understandings and people's own frames of meaning. People appear to hold merit- and non-merit-based explanations to be compatible in ways that current analytic frameworks do not seem to 'allow'. There is value in considering further how merit based and structural attributions sit side by side in lay accounts. This is not to suggest people necessarily have coherent or well developed critical perspectives on the social world or analyse dominant discourses to which they are subjected through the media, policy framings, institutionalised practices and so on. However, through consideration of further empirical evidence, I argue that people's subjective sense of inequalities, constraint and autonomy is less paradoxical and more compatible than represented in recent analyses.

3. Revisiting agency and social structure within lay understanding

In comparison with 37 other countries participating in the International Social Survey Programme, the percentage of people in Britain who see meritocratic factors, such as hard work and ambition, as essential to societal success is very high at 84%. This exceeds the majority of countries yet sits alongside (or is lower than) a number of diverse others including the USA (at 96%) and Australia, but also for example Portugal, Bulgaria, China and South Africa (Mijs 2016). Non-meritocratic factors such as family background, gender and race also rank highly in attributions of societal success: most especially for South Africa and China (at over 90% and 95% respectively). Britain sits relatively low in this ranking yet the attribution of non merit factors as essential to societal success is made still by 50% of the population. Interestingly, in the USA, this is true for 69% of the population (Mijs 2016). Merit and non-merit beliefs overlap with each other at the population level and reflect complex arrays of belief amongst individuals.

British evidence on young people's beliefs about getting on in life shows that merit beliefs predominate but non-merit attributions are extensive (Franceschelli and Keating 2018; Irwin 2009). In the 2014 UK Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study approximately 80% of young people thought that both education and hard work were very important to getting ahead in life (Francischelli and Keating, 2018). However, 'knowing the right people' was identified as essential or important by 75% of the young respondents, and nearly 50% identified both having wealthy and having well educated parents as essential or very important (*ibid*). Significant importance is also accorded by young people to familial emotional support for doing well in life (Irwin 2009). The evidence suggests that many young people perceive structural process and constraint as important to societal success and its distribution. However, in people's own lives they particularly assert autonomy and

agency, and see success and failure as a consequence of their own personal doing (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; France and Haddon 2014). I will argue that, in interrogating people's accounts of their own lives and those of close others, it is important to further develop our understanding of the bases on which people arrive at their judgements. If we accept that merit and non-merit beliefs sit side by side in people's accounts this invites interrogation of how they, themselves, understand this mutuality. I consider some of these themes through a brief consideration of data from a study with parents of teenage children. Although I would ideally have parallel data from amongst young adults themselves I offer this data about young people's lives as indicative of a blending of individual agency and structural process in the accounts of young people's parents.

In a longitudinal study of parenting and values across and within social classes, I ran a questionnaire survey of parents whose children were involved in some form of organised leisure activity (Irwin and Elley 2011). Questions which echoed the BSAS were included and participants were additionally asked if they felt each of the factors had retained or changed their importance since they were themselves growing up. Almost all participants thought that a good education was important to doing well in life and 80% thought it very important. They varied more in respect of whether they felt this had changed over time, with working class parents more likely to see it as more important than in the past, as might be expected given an objective increase in the formal importance of qualifications for working class youngsters' outcomes (eg Barham et al 2009). Subsequent qualitative interviews with parents were undertaken in 2008-9, 2011 and 2014 as their children grew towards early adulthood. Parents talked about their hopes and expectations for their children's futures and how they themselves sought to support their children. In their accounts parents very strongly encouraged their children and many of them nurtured 'individualist' agentic characteristics, including drive, hard work and doing well in education. It is important to note that parents were also extremely clear about the value of nurturing in their children pro-social characteristics such as sociability, being a good person and a good citizen (Irwin and Elley 2011).

In their valuing of 'individualist' characteristics, the parents did not set them apart from the structural contexts in which their value was understood to be embedded. For example, they commonly stressed the importance of their children getting good qualifications to do well (although what this meant varied by their social class position). However, such notions of merit-based success went hand in hand with recognition of social structural constraint and change. Many felt that young people are caught in contexts of credential inflation and face much greater competition now in securing decent jobs, for example suggesting that '*Getting decent grades isn't good enough these days because everybody seems to get reasonable grades*'; or '*I think the best way to go ..is to try and just educate yourself as best as possible so that you will have the best chances*' (Irwin 2018a). Some identified the importance of their children getting good qualifications to secure decent earnings in the changing opportunity structure, for example '..*because now the ordinary jobs are getting lower and lower paid, they're actually going down, aren't they, in value?*' (Irwin 2018a). These kinds of responses offer examples of the ways in which parents saw education and qualifications not simply as an individualised and merit based route to success but as a

condition of success in the context of credential inflation and structural change in the labour market. This evidence exemplifies how individual merit and social structural constraint are seen conjointly. Parents were not all swayed by the importance of securing more academic qualifications. Some parents with skilled trades backgrounds were notably sceptical, a position strongly linked to their own trajectory and criticisms of the current over-valuing of academic qualifications ('*there's too many people getting certificates .. but what can they really do?'*). Across diverse contexts and anticipated futures for children there were very varied responses, ones which clearly reflected the circumstances in which the participants were situated and their own familial class and educational backgrounds, biographies and sense of appropriate directions for their children. From their specific and situated perspectives the participants offered detailed accounts of how they saw their children's agency and scope for navigating complex and changing contexts of opportunity and constraint. In these frames of reference there is little evidence of paradox or ambiguity, but rather forms of practical adaptation and response to exigency.

Another example of the conjoint nature of agency and social structural process comes from the participants' accounts of their own position in society, how they saw themselves to be situated relative to others and how their lives have connected to wider continuities and changes in society. Reflecting on social inequalities and their own social situation, participants gave very detailed accounts of the links between their biographies, choices and (mis)fortunes and the wider, and changing, social structural contexts in which these had been embedded (Irwin 2018b). They foregrounded agency to differing degrees, but such agency was expressed in relation to their account of social process, constraint and opportunity, not set against it.

My examples draw on data from research with parents more than young adults themselves. Age, biography and life course stage are themselves part of how people are situated in society as well as important influences on how they evaluate their situation. Young people typically may be more optimistic than older people (Bradley and Davadson 2008) and prone to overestimate their autonomy and ability to shape their lives whilst parents may, through their experiences, hold a more 'sociological' perspective. Evidence shows that beliefs about the drivers of social success and people's sense of personal efficacy are profoundly shaped by social circumstances and how facilitative these are to individuals' plans (Edmiston 2018; Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Those experiencing extensive constraint nevertheless commonly allude to their agency and self determination, albeit within tightly circumscribed domains of influence (eg Shildrick and Macdonald 2013; Bryant and Ellard 2015). My argument is not that people hold an objectively accurate picture of social structural arrangements and their place within but, rather, that there is value in further understanding varied and complex lay perceptions of such arrangements.

Several theorists have explored people's understandings of their social position and how to get on in life and posited a tension between beliefs in merit and individual agency on the one hand and recognition of constraint and social structural factors on the other. These ambivalences and inconsistencies are seen to reflect lived experiences of a societal contradiction between dominant framings of merit- based success and everyday evidence of

their falsehood. However, the above empirical examples suggest that people often provide nuanced accounts of what they see as an interplay of individual, agentic, characteristics and the social structural contexts in which they play out. In exploring some of the ways in which people hold conjoint understandings of agency and social structure I argue that there is a need for further research into lay frames of reference and understandings of structural process.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed subjective understandings, most particularly the extent to which structural constraint is obscured in society by individualising discourses of agency, self determination and fair chances. The material displacement of economic risks onto individuals and normative discourses and policy framings which posit success as an outcome of individual merit and diligence seem to contribute to individualised subjective understandings of the world in which people foreground agency, choice making and merit-based characteristics as crucial to getting on in life. Nevertheless, researchers have argued that this inappropriately positions people as naïve, and successfully shown that people do recognise social structural processes in general, yet tend to foreground agency in their own lives. For some writers this is a kind of double vision; a sense making which is distorted by the objectively contradictory position in which young people are caught up: managing their lives within a society which promises merit- based success for all but on which it cannot deliver. I have suggested that the distortion arises in part from the analytic framing itself. This is a methodological question: if people hold multi-faceted understandings then we may get very different accounts depending on the questions and contexts in which we ask them. It is also a conceptual question regarding how we access and represent lay saliences. Pursuing this line of inquiry would usefully engage with the argument that people foreground agency in so far as they orient, pragmatically, to those elements of their lives they feel able to influence, a propensity wholly consistent with understandings of constraint (cf. Bottero 2019).

It is important to further interrogate lay frames of reference to better grasp the links between people's subjective orientations and their social position and circumstance. Evidence reveals that people have complex understandings of socio-economic inequalities. It also shows that people often hold agentic, merit- based explanations of success alongside perceptions of social structural process and constraint. Some suggest that this reveals tensions in subjective understandings: people accept a discourse of merit- based agency yet also recognise its undermining through structural social and economic processes. However, I have offered evidence to suggest that these may not be perceived or experienced as contradictory. For example, parents insist on the importance of agency and ambition for young people to get on in life yet also see these as linked to, indeed increasingly necessitated by, social structural changes. It is not my intention to argue that people have a comprehensive view of social arrangements; they often buy into dominant tropes about merit-based success, misconstrue experiences of constraint and pass judgement accordingly. Nor are people necessarily aware of the structural forces which shape their lives: for example, privilege often leads people to see themselves as agents of their structurally supported successes (Brannen and Nilsen 2005, Edmiston 2018). People's accounts are partial, situated and reflect different circumstances

and backgrounds. I have nevertheless argued that we may too readily overstate the significance of ambivalence or contradiction in lay accounts. Widening our perspective on lay frames of reference suggests that people often construe individual agency and structural process as sides of the same coin, at least when it comes to navigating their own lives and supporting close others.

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