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## ‘WE CAN GET EVERYTHING WE WANT IF WE TRY HARD’: YOUNG PEOPLE, CELEBRITY, HARD WORK

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*ABSTRACT:* Drawing on 24 group interviews on celebrity with 148 students aged 14–17 across six schools, we show that ‘hard work’ is valued by young people in England. We argue that we should not simply celebrate this investment in hard work. While it opens up successful subjectivities to previously excluded groups, it reproduces neoliberal meritocratic discourses and class and gender distinctions.

*Keywords:* celebrity, effortless achievement, gender, hard work, neoliberalism, social class

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research studies in secondary schools in England have consistently shown that ‘effortless achievement’ is the most valued way of producing academic success (Archer and Francis, 2007; Francis *et al.*, 2010; Jackson, 2006; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mendick, 2006; Walkerdine, 1989). In particular, Jackson’s (2006) study of laddish behaviours in schools documents the *effort* that goes into performing *effortless* achievement by young men and women, as all ‘work’ must be concealed from view. In this context, ‘hard work’ is the province of the ‘less intelligent’, opposed to ‘effortless achievement’, and read onto female bodies and working-class bodies by teachers and peers (Walkerdine, 1989). While some studies have found female and/or working-class students building learner identities based in hard work, from Willis’ (1977) ‘ear’oles’ to Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) ‘academic achievers’ and Walkerdine’s (1989) ‘sub-teachers’, this has not displaced effortless achievement from its dominant position. Archer and Francis (2007, p. 66) identify a trichotomy of Western education discourses of students shown in Table 1. ‘Ideal’ students are naturally talented, innovative, active, independent, leaders and normal; ‘pathologised’ students are diligent/plodding, conformist, passive, dependent, followers and Other; ‘demonised’ students are naturally unintelligent/lacking ability, peer-led, anomic, ungovernable, anti-social/rebels and Other/abnormal. These three categories align with ethnicity,

TABLE 1: *Trichotomy of discourses about pupils* (Archer and Francis, 2007, p. 66, emphasis in original)

'Ideal' pupil	Other/pathologised pupil	Demonised pupil
Naturally talented	Diligent/plodding	Naturally unintelligent/lacking ability
Innovative/initiative	Conformist	Peer-led
'Outside culture'	Culture-bound	Victim of 'bad' culture
Leaders	Followers	Anti-social/Rebels
Enquiring/engaged	Deferent, unquestioning	Problematically challenging and disengaged
Assertive	Unassertive	Aggressive
Independent	Dependent	Ungovernable
Active	Passive	Anomic
'Normal' sexuality	Asexual/oppresed/repressed	Hyper-sexuality
<i>Normal</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Other/abnormal</i>
<i>(White)</i>	<i>(Asian/Oriental)</i>	<i>(Black/White working class)</i>
<i>(Outside class/middle class)</i>	<i>(Deserving poor)</i>	<i>(Underserving poor/underclass)</i>
<i>(Masculine/masculinised)</i>	<i>(Feminine/feminised)</i>	<i>(Hyper-masculine/Hyper-feminine)</i>

social class and gender, with the ideal student position mapping to White, middle class and masculine; the pathologised position to Asian/Oriental, deserving poor and feminine/feminised; and the demonised position to Black/White working class, underserving poor and hypermasculine/hyperfeminine. Given this body of evidence associating hard work with Otherness, we were surprised to find young people aged 14–17 in our study of celebrity and youth aspirations repeatedly affirming the value of hard work within group interviews.

Studies of post-16 education in England, have suggested that the position of hard work shifts in the move from compulsory to post-compulsory education (e.g. Power *et al.*, 1998). However, no previous studies have found, as we did, a universal valuing of hard work among young men *and* women, from middle-class *and* working-class backgrounds, on *both* sides of the divide between compulsory and post-compulsory education. In this article, we explore this commitment to hard work critically, presenting the evidence for it whilst also interrogating it for its gendered and classed effects and the ways in which it is interwoven with neoliberal power relations. Specifically, we analyse the relationship between hard work and neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and ask who – which classed and gendered subjects – gets to count as 'hard working'.

This revaluation of hard work among young people parallels similar moves within wider society and UK policy. Littler (2013) in her analysis of the shifting meanings and uses of meritocracy identifies 'hard work' as central to how it

operates within Labour and Coalition policy. In particular, she identifies it at the heart of Prime Minister David Cameron's claim that Britain is an 'aspiration nation':

'Aspiration Nation' as a rhetorical strategy, and as an expression of meritocratic feeling, connects self-belief and aspiration with the trope of hard work. It is striking how, again and again, 'hard work' combined with self-belief is employed by an unprecedentedly privileged cadre of politicians and millionaire elites to justify their position and success and to prescribe this as the route for others. 'Working hard and wanting to get on' is the way to progress. (p. 67)

The strap-line for the 2013 Conservative Party Conference was 'for hard-working people'. Politicians have positioned this focus on hard work as a challenge to dominant values, particularly among young people. For example, after the 2011 riots/uprisings across England, Conservative politician, Iain Duncan Smith, said: '*X Factor* culture fuelled the UK riots ... Kids are meant to believe that their stepping stone to massive money is the *X Factor*. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work. We do not celebrate people who have made success out of serious hard work' (in Wintour and Lewis, 2011). *X Factor* is a popular UK and international television singing contest. Here, it stands in contrast to hard work as a space of easy and vacuous fame. This theme of hard work is clear in the policies of the Coalition government, within which the Conservatives are the lead partner. For example, the restructuring of the social security system has been rationalised in terms of making work pay, not by raising wages but by reducing benefits and restricting access to them (DWP, 2013). The idea of 'hardworking people', which saturates the Coalition's political register, constructs a binary opposite: lazy people, those who do not work hard or perhaps do not work at all. This opposition is encapsulated in the frequent political sound bites pitting 'strivers' against 'skivers' (Gillborn, 2010; Reid, 2013). In this way, measures, such as social security cuts, that exclude parts of the population can be justified. As Jensen (2014) has identified in her analysis of 'poverty porn', there is a willingness across the political spectrum 'to conduct welfare debate by dividing worker from workless – rather than examining the deeper problems of work in a neoliberal economy'. The relationship between young people's take-up of discourses of hard work and wider processes of social inclusion and exclusion runs through this article.

A final important context for our work is the broader shift in the youth labour market. As early as 1997, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) identified that extended transitions between youth and adulthood were part of an increasingly fractured, risky and insecure job market. They, among other writers such as Bauman (1998), pointed to the individualisation of young people and the requirement that they construct themselves as entrepreneurs of the self. Insecurity and individualisation have increased in the wake of the 2008 global economic downturn, with unemployment rising and wages falling more rapidly for those in their 20s than for older workers (Resolution Foundation, 2013). MacDonald (2011) in

comparing youth unemployment now with that in the 1980s notes many continuities alongside three key shifts. These are: that the slow transitions from education to work characteristic of the middle class have become problematic (not just the fast transitions characteristic of the working class); that graduate unemployment has increased as the proportion of graduates has risen from 8–10% of the cohort to about 45% and that there are a large number of no-skill jobs despite the policy focus on building a knowledge economy. As graduates are increasingly taking non-graduate posts, the rewards of a degree are less even as, with growing fees, the costs are higher. It is against this backdrop of the broken contract between the economic and education systems that we have seen an emerging focus on hard work.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This article draws on a larger study of ‘The role of celebrity in young people’s classed and gendered aspirations’ (<http://www.celebyouth.org>). Our research questions are:

- (1) What discourses of aspiration circulate in celebrity representations?
- (2) How do young people use these discourses in constructing their aspirations?
- (3) How are the discourses of aspiration in celebrity and their uses classed and gendered?

We understand aspirations as multiple, shifting and produced through discourses, where discourses are historically and culturally specific configurations of meanings that make some ways of thinking possible and others impossible (Foucault, 1972). Discourses can be used to position ourselves and to judge others and their hopes and dreams. Thus, aspirations are the result of active work by individuals, but are also shaped by relations of power and by discourses within schooling, family, peer and popular cultures. Within this celebrity is a discursive and disciplinary field where social distinctions are made and relations, behaviours and people are given or denied value (Tyler and Bennett, 2010). Thus, we see young people’s talk about celebrity as ‘performance practices’ through which they position themselves and others (Duits, 2010, p. 249). Celebrity provides a set of resources through which young people engage in ‘identity work’, including their sense-making around success, failure and their imagined futures. Methodologically, we used a multistage, approach, combining group and individual interviews with young people aged 14–17 with textual case studies that analysed the representation of 12 celebrities across three key sources, including films, music videos, the *Sun* newspaper, Twitter and YouTube. In this article, we focus on the group interviews in order to look at the generation of collective talk around the value of hard work. However, findings from the other two data-sets support those reported here.

In winter 2012–2013, we carried out 24 group interviews across six 11–18 co-educational state schools, 2 in each of London, a rural area in South-West England and Manchester (a city in Northern England). We purposively sampled two schools in each area using national data on Free School Meals, attainment and ethnicity to ensure that the study's participants were broadly representative of local demographics. In each school, we carried out four group interviews, two with Year 10 students (aged 14–15) and two with Year 12 students (aged 16–17). Most groups contained six students and all but two were mixed gender. In total, 148 young people participated in 1 of the 24 groups. These interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes each.

We developed good relationships with the gatekeepers at each school and worked with them to select participants to encourage a diversity of young people, rather than staff picking the 'best' students. Before taking part, participants were asked to complete a short biographical questionnaire. The participants were made up of 81 females and 67 males; 82 were White British and 62 from a mix of Black and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds, including 27 Asian (predominantly Pakistani and Indian), 9 Black (Caribbean and African), 7 Somali, 5 Afghan and 9 who identified as 'mixed'; 63 of the participants said that at least one of their parents had been to university and 64 that none had, with the remainder unsure or choosing not to answer.

We used the group interviews to examine the shared negotiation of meanings around aspiration and celebrity. We began by asking participants to identify those celebrities who they most liked and/or disliked, moving on to ask them to describe an 'ideal celebrity'; talk about what makes someone a celebrity and elaborate how they consume celebrity. Although these topics were covered in each of the groups, we often allowed the discussion to be led by participants.

These group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then coded using the computer package NVivo. We developed codes top down from our research questions (e.g. gender; social class) and bottom up from the data (e.g. body modifications; hard work). When coding, we each worked through all 24 interviews focusing on about a third of the codes and adding in new codes in our specific areas as needed. We then took all the material generated within a particular code and produced a summary describing how this theme occurred within the data, and identifying and exemplifying key discourses within the talk. We are using a rhetorical approach that 'sees thinking as being essentially formed within discourse ... [and] assumes that common-sense thinking is fundamentally argumentative and is composed of contrary, or "dilemmatic", themes' (Billig, 1992, p. 15). This requires us to trace discourses as they come into being in the cut-and-thrust of discussions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). At each stage, we are comparing our findings by the class and gender of the participants. We have attempted to assign class using a Bourdieusian framework (Bourdieu, 1984). Within this, class position is interpreted not just through a subject's location within economic structures (indicated by parental employment) but also by their relationship to cultural capital (forms of knowledge and skills)

and social capital (networks of support and influence). However, given that we have only incomplete data from the biographical questionnaire on postcodes and parental occupations and higher education experience, sometimes participants' class positions are unclear.

'Hard work' emerged as an important theme within the group interviews, not just within its own dedicated code but also through its use within the rhetorics encountered within other codes. As we show in [Section 3](#), our young participants valued hard work and those who they see as exhibiting this trait. We then problematise this commitment to hard work focusing on the ways that it intersects with and reproduces social class and gender inequalities. In illuminating this uneven ascription of 'hard work' within young people's celebrity talk, we suggest that this sets limits on how young people imagine their futures and so on the pathways available to them. We are attempting an intersectional analysis that explores how class and gender operate simultaneously and in relation to each other. In doing so, we focus our analysis on this intersection, while also mindful of how class and gender relate to other social structures notably race.

Serious critical work on intersectionality requires us to do more than merely cite the difficulties and complexities of intersecting identities and oppressions, it challenges us to detail these complexities and account for how categories and inequalities intersect, through what processes, and with what impacts. (Gillborn, 2010, p. 5)

### 3. YOUNG PEOPLE'S INVESTMENT IN HARD WORK THROUGH CELEBRITY TALK

In contrast to political pronouncements, the young people in our study showed a strong investment in hard work as central to, and necessary for, future success and happiness. We can see this in the following extract:

Dave: I think it can go two ways: you're either a celebrity who's earned what you have, or you're a celebrity who got lucky.

Interviewer: ... so for those who've earned what they've got, what's that through, do you think? Is it talent or hard work?

Dave: It's talent. Talent, obviously. Like Usain Bolt, he is, he has a lot of talent for running, but he also has to train that talent for I think it's been 12 years that he's competed.

Jerome: Do you remember that thing we watched in German, where the, *The Life of Usain Bolt*, and he trained so hard that he actually vomited.

(Year 10, Manchester, White British, mixed class)

The opposition with which Dave starts, between deserving celebrities ('who've earned what you have') and undeserving celebrities ('who got lucky'), was pervasive across our data (see also Allen and Mendick, 2012). Although Bolt's talent is important for Dave, it is through working hard day-in, day-out, that he earned his success. Vomiting appears as a sudden visceral manifestation of the extent of his training and serves as evidence of his pushing his body to its limits and hence of his worth. Here, as

elsewhere in our data, hard work has a temporal dimension: it needs to be regular and maintained over long periods of time.

Across our data, hard work is repeatedly spoken of within a broader rhetoric of individual strength, resilience and agency. Thus, it figures as a way of overcoming obstacles, as when Anjali (Year 12, Manchester, Somali, working class) explained that she likes US President Barack Obama because ‘he show us like that we can get everything we want if we try hard’. Similarly, Roman spoke about how the life of African American singer Etta James showed him that ‘you always have to stay strong’:

Roman: If you’ve watched the new *Cadillac Records* [film], Beyoncé starred as Etta James and she just showed her life and how it was for her as a young woman trying to get into the music business ... and how men would just like think ‘oh yeah women, all these women can’t do what we can do and all’. And it’s just like, that really like showed me that no matter what comes in your way, you can always get past that, and you always have to stay strong.

(Year 10, Manchester, British Pakistani, working class)

In these and other extracts, individualised practices of ‘working hard’ and ‘staying strong’ figure as ways to overcome structural disadvantages. As Roman puts it, ‘no matter what comes in your way, you can always get past that’. The talk of Obama and James reference and draw on struggles for race and gender equality, but in ways that depoliticise them, eliding wider inequalities by emphasising the heroic individual who succeeds against the odds. Thus, while we want to acknowledge young people’s commitment to hard work, we also want to look at it critically.

In young people’s talk about hard work, we can see them negotiating their investments in neoliberal discourses of meritocracy where success can be achieved regardless of one’s background. Popular culture has a pedagogic and disciplinary role in propagating these dominant discourses, *both* drawing from *and* exceeding policy:

Neoliberalism has been engaged in constructing new entrepreneurial identities and re-engineering the bourgeois subject. ... we detect similar tendencies: in consumer and celebrity cultures, the drive for instant gratification, the fantasies of success, the fetishisation of technology, the triumph of ‘life-style’ over substance, endless refashioning of the ‘self’, the commercialisation of ‘identity’ and utopias of self-sufficiency. These ‘soft’ forms of power are as effective in changing social attitudes as are ‘hard’ forms of power. (Hall *et al.*, 2013, p. 19)

As Hall *et al.*’s use of scare quotes suggests, distinctions between soft and hard forms of power are problematic, but they do indicate how consumer and celebrity cultures are often dismissed (in academia, as elsewhere) in contrast to the ‘hard’ powers of the legal system and the economy. One of our aims in this article is to show the significance of celebrity talk as space in which dominant neoliberal discourses are re/produced, as collectivist stories are replaced by individualist ones. In these, struggle features as something to be overcome, located in the past,

rather than something to be lived with and through in the present. These discourses construct inequality as part of the old world, with only ‘melancholic migrants’ or ‘feminist killjoys’ remaining ‘hung up’ on discrimination, fixated on finding racism and sexism where they ‘no longer exist’ (Ahmed, 2004).

It seems that young people must look to themselves as the source of their own failure or success, whether they are in education or employment. Success is increasingly characterised as only achievable through the deployment of one’s personal, private resources of passion and drive. (Biressi and Nunn, 2013)

Celebrity encourages and celebrates the notion of self-regulating, autonomous, individualised subjects, who are free of constraints. Poverty, unemployment and other forms of ‘failure’ are understood as the result of individual pathologies (laziness, irresponsibility and so on) and poor ‘choices’ rather than inequality and discrimination (Gillborn, 2010; Tyler, 2013).

The distinction with which we started this section – between deserving and undeserving celebrities – is central to these processes of individualisation. A discussion of UK musician Ed Sheeran’s journey to fame in the one all-female group (Year 12, South-West, White, mixed class) concluded that ‘he worked his way by just playing all the time in gigs and on the streets, and then, he got signed’. Another participant added, ‘I think he actually deserves to be famous, because he worked really hard for it. Whereas someone like [teenage Canadian musician] Justin Bieber has never really had to work for it’. Such comparisons and juxtapositions of the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ occur often in the data. The sense of injustice directed at celebrities, like Bieber, gaining fame and wealth when they ‘never really had to work for it’, and the sense of justice associated with Sheeran’s fame, reflect wider meritocratic discourses.

We have shown both the prominence and value given to hard work in young people’s talk, and how this downplays the structural inequalities that shape education and career trajectories. However, as we show in Section 4, these very structures, notably of class and gender, shape what gets counted as hard work, and so who gets seen as hard-working and who can be dismissed as following easy, and so valueless, routes to fame.

#### 4. SOCIAL CLASS, GENDER AND THE UNEVEN ASCRIPTION OF HARD WORK

In this section of the article, we attend to the uneven practices of evaluation within young people’s celebrity talk. We argue that female and/or working-class celebrities are more often denied access to this position and suggest this has implications for how young people’s aspirations are formed and valued. The working-class young women in Archer *et al.*’s (2010, p. 70) study of ‘at risk’ London school students largely produced ‘glamorous’ working-class hetero-femininities, combining ‘elements of Black, urban US styles (notably “bling” fashion) with “unisex” (although often coded as “male”) items of sportswear (such as Nike trainers or tracksuits) and hyper-feminine “sexy” clothes, make-up

and hairstyles'. These served as a form of capital within their friendship groups but were constructed by teachers 'as both overtly and *overly* sexual and ... positioned as antithetical to educational engagement and success' (p. 71, original emphasis). We found similar judgements operating in relation to celebrity.

Female celebrities adopting 'glamorous' working-class hetero-femininities were usually named as worthless and 'famous for nothing'. Their location within celebrity hierarchies is captured by Dave: 'Reality TV stars and models like Kim Kardashian, they're at the bottom of the celebrity pit ... they've done nothing'. Later he explained:

Dave: The Kardashians are only famous for really stupid reasons as opposed to athletes who are famous because they worked really hard for four years; and they come from another Olympics, they compete and work really hard against other athletes ... and then they get some kind of recognition.

(Year 10, Manchester, White British, working class)

By implication, Dave constructs the reasons for the Kardashians' fame as 'stupid' because they do not involve hard work. As in the next extracts, the Kardashian family, particularly its most visible member, Kim, was frequently referenced as the epitome of undeserved fame.

Edward: Isn't she only famous coz of the whole thing?

Interviewer: Sex tape, yeah.

Edward: Yeah. [laughs]

Sasha: I can't stand her.

(Year 12, London, Black African, Pakistani, Sinhalese/Sri Lankan, mixed class)

Naomi: I just think that there's people who work really hard to become someone ... say like a really famous actress she's not just become famous she's had to work to be ... It's not just about the famous part, but she's had to work to be known that she's good at something .... Whereas they are just famous for being who they are really: being a Kardashian.

(Year 10, Manchester, White British, middle class)

Similarly, we see in the following how UK Reality TV star Kerry Katona was derided for her illegitimate fame alongside Kardashian:

Julia: Kim Kardashian, but like the whole Kardashian family, because they just sort of are out to go on TV and shout at each other a lot and it just winds me up.

Dumbledore: People who are famous for being famous, who haven't actually got any talent whatsoever.

Julia: She's famous because she walks around half naked, that sort of thing.

Jinny: What's her face, Kerry Katona. What did she do to get famous?

(Year 10, South West, White British, mixed class)

While most of the women judged in this way came from working-class backgrounds, Kim Kardashian's intersectional position is more complex. She is wealthy so has high economic capital but her cultural capital is devalued within

dominant discourses of work and success. She embodies the ‘excessive’ femininity discussed earlier and is racialised through her Armenian background and her high profile relationships with Black men (Huffpost Celebrity, 2013). The association of her work with her body, through the sex tape, formal and informal photo shoots in revealing clothing, and via performing herself on a range of Reality Television shows, renders this as ‘non-work’. Kardashian was also talked about in terms of nepotism and unfairness in a way that members of the royal family and ‘respectable’ celebrity-child Jaden Smith were not, again reproducing class inequality via notions of not working hard enough.

Kardashian along with working-class women such as Katona, UK Reality Television star, and model Katie Price and US musician and talent show judge Nicki Minaj attracted particular disgust, linked to their perceived inauthenticity. Price’s negative evaluation was commonly linked to talk about her over-the-top dress, inadequate mothering and multiple relationships with men (see later) and Minaj’s to her artificial and excessive look and body. Authenticity, or being yourself, is central to contemporary selfhood and so the label fake, which attached to both women via cosmetic surgery, suggests a failed self (Allen and Mendick, 2013). The only male celebrity who was regularly viewed as undeserving was Justin Bieber (as given earlier); he was often feminised, with young people identifying his ‘girlie’ sound, ‘soft voice’, ‘scrawny body’ and ‘little muscles’.

Thus, young people’s constructions of hard work mean that the labour involved in producing one’s physical appearance (Skeggs, 2004) and nurturing family relationships (Reay, 1998) is disappeared, devaluing these activities. However, our aim is not to argue the respective merits of these celebrities, or to compare activities as diverse as running a country, making a sex tape, parenting a child, competing in the Olympics and starring in Reality Television, in relation to the work involved. Rather, we want to call attention to the significance of class and gender – and specifically the classed and gendered body – to these evaluations of hard work and deserved success. Our data suggest that these women are positioned as impossible or failed subjects. We also see how celebrity reproduces broader configurations of ‘respectable femininity’, which regulate young women’s conduct, in which Black and White working-class women are constructed as sexually immoral, excessive and deviant: the ‘constitutive Other’ to the ideal neoliberal subject (Skeggs, 2004; Weekes, 2002).

Returning to Archer and Francis’ trichotomy of discourses of students mentioned in Table 1, these celebrities align with the ‘demonised’ category. Those hard workers examined in Section 3 map to the middle group of diligent workers, which contains many women and people from working-class and minority-ethnic backgrounds, the ‘good’ girls and ‘deserving’ black and/or working-class boys of celebrity, that, in addition to those mentioned earlier, includes Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Tom Daley and Will Smith. While their position is established via continual comparisons (such as that between Ed Sheeran and Justin Bieber, cited earlier) and so perhaps carries an ever-present possibility of failure, this

represents a significant shift for they are *not* pathologised; indeed, participants frequently cited them as ‘ideal’ celebrities.

However, Archer and Francis’ ‘ideal’ group have not completely disappeared. One name came up more often than any other when we asked young people to discuss their ‘ideal’ celebrity: US billionaire, technology entrepreneur and philanthropist, Bill Gates. Across the data, White middle-class men, including many technology and social media innovators like Gates, were prominent within the talk about celebrities who had achieved success for the ‘right’ reasons and through the ‘right’ routes. They were associated with success achieved on the basis of intelligence, skill and passion (Allen, 2013). Their fame and wealth were seen as a deserved by-product of their skill and talent rather than an aim in and of itself. These comments are typical of those about Gates: ‘he’s more famous for what he’s like built, rather than for doing anything else so, yeah ... I would say he is talented’ (Year 12, Manchester, White British, middle class) and ‘he created one of the most used things in the world, and the amount of money he’s given away to charity is just ridiculous’ (Year 12, London, White British, unclear class). Women are completely absent from this elite group, and talk of ‘talent’ and ‘creativity’ signal discourses of natural intelligence, which continue to exclude women and those from working-class backgrounds (Mendick, 2006). Female participants were also markedly absent from the talk about these celebrities. Hard work takes a background role in this talk, but even here their achievement is not valorised for its effortlessness.

Thus far, we have focused on mapping the dominant discourses of hard work, showing how, even as they make available successful subjectivities to those previously excluded from them, they simultaneously re/produce dominant distinctions around class and gender. However, discourses are never deterministic, as Foucault (1976, p. 95) said: ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’. Indeed, we did find moments of ambiguity and contestation over what and who could be the subjects of hard work, but these were, as Foucault’s words suggest, always constructed within, and in relation to, the dominant discourses of hard work. In Section 5, we explore in detail one such moment in order to ask ‘how can we work the power relations [around hard work] by which we are worked and in what direction?’ (Butler, 1997, p. 100).

## 5. STRUGGLES OVER ‘HARD WORK’ AND ‘HARD WORKERS’

In this section, we analyse one instance of contestation in order to explore the limits of hard work discourses, and the routes through which the ‘demonised’ can gain value. We also point to a relationship between these challenges to dominant discourses and the classed and gendered positions of those participants speaking them. Here, we draw on Skeggs and Wood’s (2012, p. 59) study of women’s class-differentiated readings of Reality Television, which showed that popular cultural texts generate ‘differently resourced reactions, characterised by

contestation, ambivalence, resistance ... judgments depend on forms of connection between text and viewer, and how these thread back to their own narratives, social positions, investments and the capitals they bring' (see also Allen *et al.*, 2014).

Some participants valued celebrities like Kardashian, Katona and Price for being good businesspeople and making it against the odds, recognising their labour as good mothers and sisters. In these instances, participants refused the dominant judgements of hard work, mobilising alternative readings that recognise and value forms of labour usually disregarded or degraded. The discussion we look at is typical of these in the positions constructed. We have chosen it for its atypical length since this allows us to unpick overlapping strands within the same extract. The extract comes from a discussion about Katie Price that took place between Year 12 students in London. Here, White working-class young women, Maive and Luigi, dispute White middle-class Ally's rendering of Katie Price as 'not talented in any way' and 'one of the worst people I've ever seen':

Ally: She's one of the worst people I've ever seen in my life.

Luigi: But doesn't she help people that have got disabilities, like [her son] Harvey? ... she was helping get a school back for people like, coz he had a school, or something, and it got closed down.

Ally: To be honest I don't think she even looks after him properly, let alone other people, so. ...

Luigi: She's got a busy life as well.

Ally: Yeah, but if she, er, she goes on holiday leaving her kids at home with a babysitter. I don't think that's really fair when they're growing up.

Maive: She needs a break. ... She's a single mum with three children.

Luigi: She only goes on holiday to do like, to promote her stuff.

Ally: Not really. Well, that's her fault, isn't it? Well that's her fault. ... It's not like they're going to do it to go out there and earn money, are they? She's going out there just to go and get drunk with her friends.

Luigi: No, she might be promoting. Like I know she went abroad recently to do a modelling trip and stuff.

Maive: But all her money does go to the kids.

Luigi: But to get money.

Ally: Yeah. And how did she used to do modelling? What did she used to do? Oh, just lift up her top, simple.

Maive: Yeah, but I'm not being funny, you always bring in the newspaper [containing topless photos] and flash that around anyway.

Ally: I don't mind, no no, not really. I mean that's one of the worst ways you can earn money. It's a rather sad way of earning money as well.

Maive: I don't think you can judge people.

Ally: She's not talented in any way, is she?

Maive: She's got a good business.

Ally: Huh?

Mavie: She's got a good business.

Luigi: Yeah, she's made a lot for herself, even though she...

Ally: Yeah, she's got a good business, but is it her that created it? And is it her that done all the stuff? No.

Mavie: Yeah, for her kids.

Ally She's not a business woman, I'm telling you know, Katie Price is not a business woman.

Mavie: She owns Mamas and Papas. ...

Ally: Yeah, she can own it, but, I think, oh, she's not a business woman, she's pathetic, honestly.

David: Did she make, or did she buy it?

Mavie: No, she made it all.

(Year 12, London, White British, mixed class)

In evaluating whether Katie Price could be seen as 'hard working' or a 'good mother', participants both create categories and actively dispute their boundaries (Billig, 1992). The persistence of Luigi and Mavie in the face of Ally suggests the collective possibility for claiming value in 'glamorous' working-class femininities. But above all, we would argue that it is their positions as working-class and female that supports their defence of Price, connecting to Skeggs and Wood's (2012, p. 231) findings that some working-class women valued Price as part of defending 'their choice of full-time mothering against aspirational futures for the intrusive relational affective value it offered'.

After Ally denigrates Price, Luigi's opening attempt to defend her focuses on presenting her as a hard-working 'busy' mother, campaigning on behalf of children with disabilities like her son Harvey. Ally's response does not devalue mothering but seeks to reposition Price as an irresponsible mother to her 'growing' children who 'goes on holiday leaving her kids at home with a babysitter'. In the face of Ally's sustained resistance to their attempts to classify Price as a deserving celebrity through campaigning and motherhood, Mavie and Luigi turn to emphasising her *determination to work* for her children ('all her money does go to the kids') and her *entrepreneurial skills*. This is the beginning of a shift in which Mavie and Luigi work to position Price as a businessperson, who's 'made a lot of herself', citing her ownership of Mamas and Papas as evidence. Mamas and Papas, a UK-based business catering for new parents and parents-to-be, has no connection with Price ([http://www.mamasandpapas.com/about\\_us/](http://www.mamasandpapas.com/about_us/)). Although factually incorrect, this claim functions in the group to give credibility to Price occupying a successful subjectivity. Mavie's response to David's question 'Did she make, or did she buy it?' with 'she made it all', finally ends the discussion. While it is likely Ally's feelings towards Price remain unchanged, he is effectively silenced in the group, as David, who normally sides with him, appears convinced.

However, we can see limits to what is possible within this dialogue. Mavie and Luigi were not able to position Price as successful through revaluing her

modelling or Reality Television work, but only by making a claim to her being a creative businessperson. This claim is tentative, being based in an inaccurate but credible assertion that she has built a business based on her mothering. Policy rhetoric often positions motherhood not as a space of hard work but as a failure of aspiration, where young working-class mothers are located as Other to the ideal subject of post-feminist neoliberalism (Allen and Osgood, 2009). But converting the unpaid labour of motherhood – in this case working-class Price’s mother-work – into the paid labour of business does get to count.

While the strategies the young women use suggest that while they value motherhood and position Price as a ‘striver’ for her children, they are required to frame this in relation to entrepreneurship and paid employment if they want to win the argument. Thus, key distinctions around class, gender and hard work remain in place *even as they are challenged*. Again, our point is not to debate the merits of modelling as an aspiration for young women, but to call attention to the ways that hard work and deserved success get read off some bodies and forms of labour and not others. Such readings of celebrity are significant to the ways in which young people produce and evaluate *their own* and *others’* aspirations and educational and career choices.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have argued that, in contrast to previous research into young people’s talk about learning, our data reveal young people’s strong investment in the ethics and ideals of working hard as crucial to achieving and enjoying success. While we do not have observational data that offer insights into whether young people enacted hard work at school and beyond, these data show a significant shift from previous qualitative interview studies in England, particularly given that they come from group interviews. We mentioned earlier that this shift parallels one in policy, we can see other parallels, perhaps constituting a ‘hard work zeitgeist’. Although the near-elimination of coursework from public examinations could be seen as a move away from rewarding hard work, schools are increasingly ‘preoccupied with policies of achievement, particularly public examination results’ (Perryman *et al.*, 2011, p. 179). This, alongside the introduction of high-stakes testing at ever-younger ages, may explain why the post-compulsory focus on hard work noted in some earlier studies has moved down the years. Alongside this relentless focus on credentialism, there have been wider cultural shifts. Gladwell’s (2008) book *Outliers* made available a narrative of hard work as *the* ultimate source of success, as he used diverse examples, from the Beatles to Bill Gates, to show that it is 10,000 hours of labour rather than ‘natural ability’ that lies behind success. Similarly, our analysis of celebrity biographies shows how these rely on backstories that include hard work. For example, the opening page of a biography of ‘self-confessed workaholic’ (Vaughn, 2012, p. 56) Beyoncé tells us:

Beyoncé, possessed two very rare talents. The first was an innate ability to sing and dance, but *the other was probably more important*. Beyoncé knew that talent alone was never enough. Practice, dedication, and sacrifice were every bit as important as raw talent. That she sits on top of the world today validates her sacrifices, even if she's sometimes wistful for the lost years of childhood.

(Vaughn, 2012, p. 7, emphasis added)

We have problematised this investment in hard work, showing how it operates within broader neoliberal practices, which celebrate entrepreneurialism and individualism, whilst obscuring inequalities that limit who can go where in education and the labour market. In doing so, these celebrity narratives of individual achievement via hard work facilitate a shift from structural frameworks for understanding 'success' and 'failure' towards intimate, personal ones. Thus, while this opens up successful subjectivities to more people, exclusions remain. Notably, women and the working-classes continue to be excluded from the realm of intellect and reason, which is coded as masculine, middle-class and White, and White and Black working-class women remain constrained in how and to what extent they can inhabit success.

In looking critically at hard work, we do not mean to suggest that it has no value or that we should not welcome its new positive position among young people. Indeed, we are all invested through own identity work in being 'hard-working' academics, implicitly and explicitly using this to defend ourselves and assert our value. However, 'all social practices are implicated in processes of inclusion and exclusion, so when these practices take on the status of common sense, and even present as emancipatory, it is important to interrupt them' (Hossain *et al.*, 2013). By beginning the task of unpicking hard work, we hope both to highlight who is excluded and included within its boundaries and to open up possibilities for subverting its powerful and seductive narratives of meritocracy.

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