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Dissonant Futures: Occupational Trajectories, Gender and Class in Contemporary Municipal Adult Education in Sweden

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to problematize the ways class and gender are played out in adult students' narratives about their occupational choice and future. Drawing on Beverly Skeggs, we analyse how students think about future occupations, what motivates them towards these and how they are able to form their future in relation to them. Taking on Sweden as a case, our results show that students' narratives on their future occupations are classed as well as gendered. In their vision of future occupations, working-class students tend to focus on occupations helping and caring for others, while middle-class students tend to focus on work more as a means of fulfilling themselves as individuals. These differences are also gendered. Female students are more likely than their male counterparts to picture their future occupations in relation to having children and a family. This tells us that in the female students' narratives, there tends to be a strong focus on caring – for their families as well as in future occupations.

Key words: adult education; adult students; gender; class; respectability; caring

Introduction

The aim of this article is to problematize the ways class and gender are played out in adult students' narratives about their occupational choice and future. The context of the study is Swedish municipal adult education, a place that serves, amongst other things, as a second *a second chance* for adults who have either failed previous schooling or who have come to Sweden for other reasons, primarily because of migration (Sandberg et al. 2015). The overarching aim of Swedish adult education is to help students build a future, by providing the knowledge necessary for adults to enter and remain in the labour market, as well as to live and manage life as citizens in society.

In recent decades, the conditions for building a future in terms of planning one's future

occupation, have become more uncertain and precarious, particularly for youth and young adults from working class families (cf. Tovatt 2013; Beach and Dovemark, 2016). In recent decades, there have also been wider political changes regarding labour market policies, in Sweden as well as elsewhere (cf. Henman and Fenger 2006; Larsson, Letell, and Thörn 2012), where the political focus has gradually shifted from being mainly concerned with the lack of employment opportunities to a lack of employability among the citizens, where more focus has been placed on the ability and responsibility of the individual to become employable (cf. Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Hörnqvist 2010; Vesterberg 2016).

In line with such changes, there has also been an increasing emphasis directed at the labour market function of adult education (cf. Fejes 2006, 2010; Nicoll and Fejes 2011; Field, 2006; Rubenson 2009; Brunila 2011), where the aim of adult education has primarily come to be conceptualised in terms of fostering an employable workforce. As a consequence, the target groups for adult education in Sweden are those considered as being at risk of social and societal exclusion, such as the unemployed, migrants, single mothers and individuals on social benefits, as well as those at risk of losing their jobs and thus in need of re-training (Fejes 2006). Adult education has thus, for a long time been a context where the working class, not seldom the unemployed, have been able to find a new path into another future (see e.g. Ward and Taylor 2014).

There is an extensive body of literature dealing with issues such as occupational choice and career aspirations in general. This literature has shown that occupational choices are based on both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Fejes and Nicoll 2010). These choices have been explained in different ways: by referring to rational decision-making (for an overview, see Billett, Newton and Ockerby 2010), by referring to social structures and processes (Simpson 2005; Gottfredson and Lapan 1997) and by referring to personal values and life histories (Billett, Newton and Ockerby 2010; Fejes and Köpsén 2014). In societies strongly

characterised by increasing individualisation and individual freedom of choice, occupational choices appear to be neutral, as if success as well as failure in terms of careers should be ascribed solely to the capacities of the individual (or lack thereof) (Evans 2002).

In literature on the relationship between learning and occupational aspirations, there has been a call for the development of a more situational understanding of this relationship, focusing on how occupational choices are actually made, and what motivates individuals to choose (to learn) certain careers (Billett, Newton and Ockerby 2010). This poses a question about which student groups are in a position to form their own career future, given the importance of class and gender (Brannen and Nilsen 2002a, 2002b, 2005). This call is of special relevance to (Swedish) adult education, where the stated aim, laid down by law (Sandberg et al. 2016), involves broadening (social and democratically oriented opportunities for) occupational choices for all students enrolled in this form of education funded by public means. As mentioned, career aspirations are related to a range of interconnected factors, among them gender and socioeconomic status, but also race, occupational and educational levels in the family, and expectations of parents (Rojewski and Yang, 1997; Lidström 2009; Lundqvist 2010). Of these factors, Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996, 63) argue that ‘Gender is clearly one of the most powerful of all influences on vocational behaviour’. The occupational choices of individuals are formed by gendered societal norms and expectations regarding abilities, skills and competencies for men and women (Gottfredson and Lapan 1997; Teig and Susskind 2008). While women tend to prefer working with interpersonal relations and in occupations involving interaction, aesthetics and helping others, men tend to place greater value on autonomy, leadership and prestige (Abu-Saad and Isralowitz 1997; Fejes and Haake 2013).

There is, furthermore, a strong relationship between career aspirations of individuals and the socioeconomic status of the family (Sellers, Satcher and Comas 1999; Mau and Bikos

2000). Socioeconomic status has been shown to have an impact on knowledge about, experience of and also stereotypes about various occupations, which in turn has an impact on career aspirations (Herr and Cramer 1996). Individuals belonging to families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have knowledge about and also actively choose professional occupations, while the career aspirations of individuals from low-income families tend to be more tied to the experiences of their relatives and friends (Brown and Barbosa 2001).

On the basis of previous research, this article approaches occupational choice as a component of individual life histories, embedded in specific social structures and contexts (Reay 1995; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). The article is a response to the argument that there is a need for greater focus on the learning careers of individuals, and how these careers are connected to wider social structures, in order to understand the how and why of occupational choices (cf. Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Billett, Newton and Ockerby 2010).

The overall aim of this article is to analyse in what ways class and gender plays out in adult students' narratives about their occupational choice and future.

Respectability, Caring, Class and Gender

In order to analyse how class and gender plays out in adult students narratives about career choice and the future, we draw on the work of Beverly Skeggs' (1997), and her thoughts about the relations between work, gender and class. Here, the concepts of *respectability* and *caring* are of specific interest, as these highlight the importance of current social norms regarding what *kinds* of work that are considered desirable and normal among different individuals and groups in society, and how these norms are formed by class and gender. As illustrated above, occupational choices are affected by, and intimately related to, social

structures as well as social norms (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). According to Skeggs (1997), the same applies to career aspirations, that are often associated with a range of interrelated factors which lead to a close connection between gender and class. Class not only functions as a standard for organisation, enabling specific modes of social mobility, but also replicates at the most intimate level, where disbelief, worry and anxiety may inform the construction of subjectivity in terms of specific registers of career aspirations (Skeggs 1997).

Skeggs (1997) developed her ideas in a study of unemployed women in England, following them from their enrolment on a caring course at the local college through their trajectories into the labour market, family and education. Skeggs argues that using *woman* as a classification always already involves processes related to class, and that these processes produce real and concrete effects that women have to relate to in their everyday lives. Effects that run through and into the very subjectivity in question. Out of this quite severe and thorough process being a woman and being respectable can, according to Skeggs, be related to a vital distinction; that between caring *for* and caring *about*. Caring for refers to the actual tasks involved in caring as part of women's subjectivity, while caring about refers to a social disposition and comes into being as a relation between the one who cares and the one cared for (Skeggs 1997; see also Fejes and Nicoll 2010). The supremacy of the subjectification through caring comes forth in, as Skeggs (1997, 62) puts it, 'the seduction of caring may be that it offers a means to feel good, even morally superior'. Here, respectability emerges through identifying with a caring self, which is both socially and ideologically infused. Interestingly, according to Skeggs (1997), the intermingle between caring and respectability for women stands out as being actualised primarily in the working class. This is so as the middle and upper classes have a 'gender-classed' predisposition that produces a subjectivity that involves *already* feel respectable, while the working-class women have to earn their respectability. This earning has to be done through accomplishment, which brings out the

actualisation of a certain accomplishment – labour. Respectability thus is distressing for mainly working class women, whose respectability does not involve an assertion of having respectability. As a consequence, they risk being seen as pathological or abnormal, which calls for certain direction and action taking regarding the accomplishment of respectability through labour.

In line with these theoretical and empirically underpinned assertions of the differing strands between working and middle class women, respectability is constantly a symbol and a measure of class, a standard to which aspire. Not least because *without* respect women, as well as men, are seen as having little social value or legitimacy – whether it is related to labour or not – and adult education has been shown to be helpful in paving new ways for students that previously experienced felt as being outside of society with little value (Sandberg 2016). Focusing on the working class woman, the norm of working and – further – contributing to society could be seen as being stronger among the working classes in general than among the middle classes. Skeggs (1997) argue that respectability is something that has to be earned among the working class women, while the middle class constitute the norm for achieving this. It is thus a matter of already being the norm (middle class) or aspiring to become the norm (working class). Obviously, such generalizations have its limits, but can be used to analyse the differences in the students' reflections on future occupations and why these are approached differently.

Method and Analysis

This article draws on data from a larger study on citizenship formation within and beyond adult and popular education (see Sandberg et al. 2016). This project engaged in the elicitation of student narratives about what it means to be a citizen and what they themselves say they do 'as citizens' within as well as beyond their studies, i.e. 'the doings of citizenship'. The article

is more specifically based on a field study conducted in 2013 and 2014, in a school for Municipal Adult Education (MAE) in a large city in Sweden.¹ The data consists of observations in the classroom as well as interviews with in total 37 students. The school was chosen due to its size, providing a range of courses with potential data access, as well as a site where access was granted. One of the authors followed two teachers in social sciences in their work, focusing on three classes of students. Students were selected based on a convenience sample, where those willing to participate were engaged in interviews. The interviews were recorded in order to capture the students' reactions after the results were presented. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed in verbatim. The student interviews focused on questions about what students considered to be of importance regarding educational learning for their presumptive occupational futures, inside as well as outside (Swedish) adult education. Among other things, the student interviewees spoke about why they had taken up adult education and about their aspirations for the future.

Based on an initial qualitative thematic analysis of the data, using the software program Nvivo, three distinct ways of describing the future, and one's occupational choice, stood out. Firstly, work is construed, by working class as well as middle class students, as a norm. In order to be normal, one has to have a job. This is the reason to be enrolled in adult education. Secondly, there was a strong focus among students on describing occupational choice as an obligation, a way to pay back to society, e.g. by choosing occupations focused on caring for others. Thirdly, there was a group of students who spoke of occupational choice and their future in a much vaguer way, where issues of self-realisation was in focus. When taking a closer look at these interviews, it became clear that the differing ways of describing occupational choices were very much classed and gendered. Class was here based on the

¹ The project followed the ethical guidelines for research published by the Swedish research council, including informed consent and anonymity. Accordingly, in the article the name of the city, the school as well as of the students have been omitted for anonymity reasons.

students' own description about their background, first and foremost in terms of their parents' occupation and education.

In the following, we will elaborate on our analysis. Firstly, we focus on the way work as norm and work as a means of helping others is shaped in student narratives. Secondly, we focus on identifying how class and gender is played out in these narratives.

Work as a Norm

A recurrent theme in the adult students' descriptions of work, the future and their enrolment in adult education is that work is pictured as a norm. To work is something that is not only desired but also part of normality. In terms of being part of society, the normal member of society is construed as a working citizen. 'As a citizen, it is your duty to get a job', Johan states. 'There is, like, an expectation that you are supposed to do something, there is a duty...' The spirit is the same in Stefan's narrative :

All citizens must have a job to be able to live together in society. It is your way of contributing to society. . . If not, there would not be a society, [i.e.] if we did not have work. That is what everybody strives for, everyone studies to be able to work. That is what everyone assumes.

Stefan departs from the notion that society is almost exclusively based on and fuelled by work. He and several of the other adult students see themselves as not living up to this norm, and this is partly why they have enrolled in adult education. Many of them have previously found themselves in a very precarious situation in the labour market, where some of them had insecure jobs, and others were unemployed. Katarina tells us about her working conditions before she enrolled in adult education, which at the same time serve as an implicit motivational ground for their educational choice:

I would start working at 10.00 and be back home at 22.00 in the evening. Then I told them that this

did not work, and I would call the work environment authority. I think that I was really clear about this because I think that young people are being used on the labour market from an early age, and it is horrible. And I think I have been involved in trying to counteract that, but then you will be fired directly if you have an opinion.

Katarina describes, as do some other students, her prior experience of working as a direct reason for choosing to take part in adult education. 'After months I just wanted to study, that was the only thing I wanted to do'. Against the backdrop of previous labour market experiences in the near or distant past, studying seems to be more or less necessary to be able to compete for more decent working conditions. This story about previous experiences of working life also resonates in Stefan's description:

You must take what you get. Now it is really hard in the labour market. I have jumped between lots of jobs. The longest time I have had a job is for about a year. So that is why I am studying, to get a job for a longer period of time.

Again, adult education is described as a necessity in order to avoid having to jump between different occupational strands. Education appears to be an unavoidable problem solver in their work-related future trajectories. In light of this, using Daniel as an example, adult education is seen as a possibility for the work future, as a (rather forced) second occupational, dignifying chance:

I have no other choice. I can't find a job. So what am I supposed to do? I was at home for a year and I did not do anything. So it feels good to do something. Get up at 7.00 in the morning and head out and have something to do. Then be tired in the evening instead of being tired at 4.00 in the morning. We have this thanks to the Swedish system. If not, I might have become an alcoholic, or

whatever, if I were to sit at home for two more years. I would then need social assistance and just sit at home. So it is because of the system I have received a second chance.

Daniel expresses great appreciation for this second chance through adult education, which he considers to be quite unique to Sweden and its welfare model. He speculates that, without it, he would probably be somewhere else, doing other things. The opportunity to continue his education as an adult is thus considered of great importance for the future. In his narrative, education is depicted as fundamental both for the individual and for society. It is a way for the individual to find a job in order to 'become somebody' rather than nobody. Because welfare consumes resources, every individual member of society needs to attain a job in order to contribute with taxes. Adult education here stands out as a means of taking responsibility for both the individual students' own life and for society. In another illustration of this, Tina considers herself primarily responsible for making herself employable:

Overall, I think that you need to deal with your education to become a better citizen, because I think that having a job and contributing to the welfare of society by paying... I mean that is what makes Sweden go round. And we have quite a large welfare system that relies on a lot of people working and paying taxes, and therefore I think that you deal with your life and choose to get an education... we become better citizens when we deal with our lives.

Tina considers it necessary to get a grip on her life in order to be a good citizen, which means studying, eventually getting a job and paying taxes. By escaping her present way of living and engaging in adult education, she can contribute to social welfare and thus enable society to develop.

Taken as a whole, the analysis shows that the students consider adult education an unavoidable tool in becoming a better member of society, which is something several of them

have not achieved before according to their own narratives. Adult education becomes a problem solver, saving them from a precarious labour market and paving the way to a more stable and more dignified job, which in turn is part of their self-realisation. In being offered this shift of possibilities for the occupational future, the adult students tend to see adult education as a necessary key to feel as members of society.

“Doing the right thing, giving something back and being helpful”

The students also repeatedly describe adult education as a door to the future. This is described not only in terms of dignifying societal contribution, but also in terms of willingness to help and to care, as well as a need for self-fulfilment. Yet, this seems to be a more general result of entering adult education and does not seem to have anything to do with the specific subjects being studied. For many students, they are at MAE to study courses which they previously failed in upper secondary school – adult education as a context in itself seem to provide a door to the future. In stressing these concepts, Joni says that ‘education influences the future greatly’. When Katarina talks about adult education, she contrasts her current situation as an adult student with her situation in upper secondary school: ‘In upper secondary school it is more about fellowship. You need to be part of something. Here it is more about going and doing your thing, because you think about yourself and your future’.

The students portray an array of different scenarios for the future, starting with specific, individual experiences, situations in life and feasible occupational expectations. Even if the future they imagine is specific to some extent, some apparent leitmotifs emerge in the narratives about the future, including the significance of doing the right thing, giving something back and being helpful. Maria is one of the students who expresses a strong desire to help, considering being helpful the most significant aspect of how she sees her future. Finding a meaningful job is the most significant aspect in her reflections on the future. For her,

a meaningful job is one where she has the opportunity to help other people. Where and how this helping is to take place is not particularly important:

Maria: What I'll be doing in 5 years? I will be 26 then. I don't know. I hope I will be happy. That's about it. I don't think that, I don't know, it is important to give back to society, or, it is important to help out. I think that is very important. It does not matter what it is you do.

Researcher: Is your hope to have a job where you do that?

Maria: I think it is easy to get a job, but to figure out what you really want to work with is a bit harder. But I hope I will do something, I think that is something everyone has, wanting to do something meaningful. Something I find meaningful.

Within the student narratives about choosing a future occupation which gives them opportunities to be helpful and 'give something back to society', two key occupations emerge – social work and teaching. Both these occupational preferences can be gazed in light of class and gender, which is subject for the further analysis.

Class, gender and occupational choice

In the following, we will focus on how class and gender play out in students' narrative. We specifically focus on the desire to help and self-realisation.

The Desire to Help

Several of the students talk about a future occupational trajectory as a social worker. Juan is one of them: 'Within five years I really hope that I will have finished studying to become a social worker'. For him, this future work scenario is largely about wanting to take responsibility and contribute to society, not just rely on others taking responsibility for him and for the society he lives in. Juan continues:

It is very easy to say 'it is society that should take responsibility' . . . but I can also contribute to society. . . I cannot just take for granted that society should always help out. I will also have to contribute with something because if we all think like that. . . nothing will come out of it.

In Juan's description, the choice of a future occupation is not only about his own individual career plan. It is also about wishing to contribute to society. This desire to contribute and help out can be seen in several of the students interviewed. For instance, Ana talks about wanting to study in order to become a social worker: 'I would like to work with people and I want to help them, contribute to society in such a way that I feel I am helping them out'. In her case, the choice of a future occupation is closely linked to making herself available to other people, which entails enjoying listening to and talking to them, in order to help them, and in this way sharing her own experiences of life:

I enjoy listening to other people's concerns, and I like to comment and to help out through my own experiences. I also like to connect these to their problems and like saying to them that this is how I did it, or if my parents did it like that you can try that and, like, do it like that.

Ana's motives for her choice of future occupation are similar to Shirin's. Her first choice is eventually to become a social worker, which is to be realised through the enrolment in adult education. This is her reason for applying to higher education, and specifically the social work programme, where she is currently listed as a reserve. If she is not accepted for the social work programme, she will either try again or apply for the teacher training programme. Her choice of the teaching profession is motivated as follows:

I wish to share my knowledge... that's why I come here, to learn and maybe spread this learning

further, as a teacher, because as a teacher you have an important role from the start, so to speak, for young children for example, pre-school...

Shirin considers this in the light of her role as a mother – taking her own experiences as a mother as a starting point. Having experienced motherhood, she says she ‘knows’ how important the role of the teacher is.

Taken together, the desire to care and to help other people is highlighted as a prominent theme in the adult students’ narratives about work, the role of education and the future. There are different nuances to this desire to help and to care about others to ‘make them’ able to live their lives, and this desire is linked by a theme of self-fulfilment. More precisely, they reach self-fulfilment *through* their ambitions to help and care for others. This fulfilment is further linked to the importance of dutiful (working and civic) action in their lives, described as integral to civic life, addressing a usefulness far beyond their occupational choices

The desire for caring is played out in relation to both occupational trajectory and the family. As highlighted above, the adult students repeatedly emphasise caring in relation to other people. Alongside the occupational preferences of social work and the teaching profession, this emphasis is also important in their trajectories of their future work. Interestingly, this identified urge in the students’ occupational trajectories of the future is especially strong among the interviewed women with a working-class background. Alice is one of these women. She considers adult education to be an undeniable step to a change of direction in her working life. Through adult education she aims to study to be either a dental nurse or a pharmacist:

Alice: I have taken a break from my current position. I work 100 % in the home care sector, so I have taken a break to study for one semester at MAE.

Researcher: But why are you studying?

Alice: This autumn I am thinking about applying to become either a dental nurse or a pharmacist.

Researcher: Okay.

Alice: So, I'm studying the subjects required to apply for these two programmes.

Frida, another student, responds in the following way to the question of what she will do in the next five years: 'Then I'll have a baby, a 5 year-old, and hopefully I'll be studying'. Frida is pregnant at the time of the interview, so for her, children and family are a vibrant part of the future that she imagines. Her trajectory of the future involves having a family and a job, preferably as a physiotherapist, as training and health is very important for her:

Right now I am learning to become... a physiotherapist [...] I would like to work with people who do my exercises, and are on a diet and so on. Being in health education or, like, something that makes you feel good... taking care of your body, because I find things like that fun and I do these things regularly myself.

On the same question, Bodil responds that in five years she will have had an education and will hopefully have a private company of her own. Like Frida, she focuses on the body and health, talking about running a spa or being a skin therapist:

The goal is to start my own business in the future. But then you want to establish a family and other things, maybe, because it is such a long process to get your own business up and running. So, first education and then a job. So I'll probably be working in five years' time.

In Bodil's case, establishing a family is also, like work itself, an important part of the future she envisages. When she talks about her future family and working life, she therefore considers two elements necessary to make them compatible – work and family. Like other

students, Bodil's desire to work with people is strong, and is based on how she pictures herself as a person: 'I think it is fun [to work with people] because I am very sociable and love to talk to people. So this is partly why I'm choosing this kind of occupation, because it will give me a lot back as well, to receive'.

In summary, the adult students' desire to care is related to certain occupations, such as social work and teaching, as well as to nursery and health promotion. This is further related to a preoccupation with linking different aspects of life together – work and family life are seen as elements which must be integrated. Interestingly, the adult students who express the notion of caring in both working and family life, and helping other people, primarily have working-class backgrounds. They do not only share the idea that work is necessary, which is an integral part of all the adult students' narratives about their (occupational) futures. These working-class women seem to – more often than is the case for the middle-class women – visualise a future occupation that involves caring for and/or helping others as part of a collective civic responsibility. Nevertheless, there are also gender differences, as both working-class and middle-class female students more often include family life in their vision of the future more than the male students. Apart from these differences, there is a general contrast between the way in which students with middle-class and working-class backgrounds reflect on their occupational future.

Self-realisation

Where the prevailing themes in the working-class student narratives involve a desire to help and care by working with people, different trajectories of the future emerge in the narratives of middle-class students. These trajectories are not as concrete or obviously placed in time and space as those presented in the above analysis. Nonetheless, they are worth taking into account as they indicate a clear contrast to the working-class students' reflections on work

and how they envisage their future occupations. Katarina's story is illuminating in this respect:

Researcher: Can you picture your life in 10 years?

Katarina: Hopefully I will be out travelling and working somewhere else perhaps. Eh, I do not want to be stuck somewhere. I want to be mobile and out there working globally, and exploring.

Researcher: Perhaps more education?

Katarina: More education yes, definitely.

Researcher: What are you planning to do when you finish MAE?

Katarina: It's hard. I'll work either in stage production, sound and light or something practical, or interior design. I think I want to do something practical. I don't want to sit in front of a computer and read through texts every day from nine to five – that's not what I'm looking for.

In Katarina's story the future is mobile, and to a certain extent open and unpredictable.

Katarina does not want to be stuck anywhere. Instead, travelling and exploring life and the world is her ideal future, and this mobile trajectory of the ideal future leads her to carve out different future occupations from the ones envisaged by the working-class students. In the middle-class students' visions of their future work, there is no room for family, and no specific desire to help out or care for others. In contrast to the working-class students, they do not consider work to be a key norm with which they must comply in order to reach self-realisation. The type of vision of a future working life which emerges from the middle-class students' narratives is exemplified in Erik's description:

It's always been difficult for me to think about the future. In five years I hope to have found a job, a project or something similar where I can work, where I either have an income from a stable job, but where I can have something where I can use my imagination. I would prefer to work with something creative, or organising development or something like that [. . .] In five years I may not have changed the world. . . I can only do my thing. . .

The future is a difficult issue for Erik. His future scenarios are not particularly concrete, and he has no particular occupational contours. As (also) was the case in some of the working-class students' narratives, he has no ambitions to change the world. But instead of approaching work as part of societal membership, he wants to find a job in order to be able to be creative, and where he has the opportunity to use his imagination. Exploration is central to his narrative. Joni, who also has a middle-class background, has a similar view on her future education and professional life trajectory, when asked how she pictures her life in five years' time:

Joni: Well, I might be about to finish studying Law, or I don't know, but I'm in a, like, period of long-term study – I might be studying, or I might have finished studying.

Researcher: Will you be studying here [mentions a city in Sweden].

Joni: Yes, or abroad. It depends on [the circumstances].

Even though Joni pictures herself studying in higher education, like Katarina and Erik she is not specific about what she thinks she will be studying, or what she will do with her studies in terms of any future occupation. In contrast to the working-class women's narratives, there is no indication about an interrelationship between her becoming a lawyer and helping people or caring for others as part of a social duty or obligation. There is just a brief mention of 'probably' in terms of studying Law, which may indicate that there is not necessarily a very strong relationship between trajectories of future education and profession. As in Katarina's and Erik's cases, neither family nor the desire to help or care form part of their scenarios of the future. Erik and Katarina in particular see the future as largely 'unfilled' in terms of plans or choices of occupation. Even though the career visions of these middle-class students are far from fully-fledged or well developed, they are worth taking into account, as they indicate

tentative differences between working-class and middle-class attitudes in general regarding future occupational trajectories.

These tentative differences include the fact that the middle-class students stress neither a need to *adapt* to pre-existing occupational norms nor a desire to contribute to society of which they are members, which are two topics that are emphasised as being interconnected in the working-class students' narratives. Instead, the middle-class student narratives highlight general, individual preferences, needs and exploration that are not linked to the preferences or needs of society at large, but to their proper self-realisation.

Conclusion

This article has problematized the ways class and gender are played out in adult students narratives about their occupational choice and future. We have illustrated how work emerge as norm, as well as a way to care for others in the future. For working class students, this is often shaped as an obligation, as a way to pay back to society while the caring aspect is gendered. Even though both male and female students express caring notions as basis for their occupational choice, for female students, working class as well as middle class, caring in terms of occupation intersect with caring for the family. We have also illustrated how middle class students, often, vaguely express ideas about future occupation, with a focus on self-realisation, and less on work as obligation and paying back to society.

These results endorse tentatively the main findings of previous research on adult student occupational choices and career aspirations, in that they are related to gender and class. In line with Skeggs (1997), we conclude that the female working-class students seem to describe work as a means of becoming somebody who is respectable in society. Aspects of caring and modesty stand out as being of great importance in this process, and at the same time these aspects drive the process itself. Middle-class (female) students, on the other hand, are not as

likely as the working-class ones to pursue these ideals through work. Instead, for them, self-fulfilment tends to be driven by individual self-realisation and the envisioning of a life that is not necessarily aligned with the demands or norms of society in the same way or to the same extent as the working-class (female) students' narratives.

In terms of respectability we may state that being a respectable member of society means, for mainly the working-class female students, working. In the narratives, these students appear to position themselves outside the norm, which is done through descriptions of previous experiences of precarious jobs or unemployment. It is also because of these experiences of being outside the norm, it seems, that they are currently in adult education, as this enables them to get a job and thus fulfil their duties as citizens, which feasibly calls for subjectification through respectability. Through this process these working-class, mainly female students may become 'normal' (cf. Sandberg et al. 2016). Furthermore, we could see how students with working-class backgrounds reflect more intensely than middle-class students on the importance of contributing to society by working. In their visions of future occupations, the former group of students focuses to higher extent on work that includes helping and caring for others, e.g. social work, teaching or physiotherapy than the latter group.

This type of narrative is not found to be equally widespread among the middle-class students. Their visions of their future occupations focus more on individual self-realisation, where the future is less specific and also less settled. These students tend to see the future in terms of the possibilities it offers them to become something other than they are. These futures are often more grand compared to the working-class students' choice of both enrolment in adult education and occupational future trajectories. The way they see their future profession involves a certain level of social mobility, yet their choices are much more modest. If the working class visions of the future is restricted by modesty, expressed as norms and structures and involving contributing to society, the middle-class students do not seem to

be as restricted in their ways of thinking about the future.

However, we could also see how gender plays out in the narratives, not the least in terms of caring. Females, no matter class background, spoke about occupational choice in terms of caring as occupation as well as caring for the family. We here have what Skeggs calls a caring *for* and caring *about*. The women talk about caring for their families, and at the same time see their future in occupations where caring about others is central. Work becomes depicted as something that involves the process of becoming a caring and respectable subject or person. Choosing caring occupations, particularly among female students with a working-class background, may be tied to who they are, i.e. to themselves as people and their own experiences of being a mother. In contrast to the middle-class students, the choice of future occupation among female students with a working-class background does not seem to involve becoming something else, but rather becoming who they already are – i.e. someone who is good at and enjoys caring *for* and caring *about* other people. Our findings thus confirm previous research showing that occupational choices are shaped by gendered norms involving abilities, skills and competencies (Osipow and Fitzgerald 1996; Gottfredson and Lapan 1997; Teig and Susskind 2008).

Implications

In light of these findings, what are the implications for adult education? The students interviewed mainly described their enrolment in adult education as an investment for the future. This is well in line with current political discourse in Sweden, where adult education is understood as a ‘second chance’, offering an opportunity to create an open future and begin a new life regardless of social structures. Going back to the narratives of the students, there is a strong relationship between their references to the past, the present and the future. This observation leads to the feasible conclusion that their experiences from the past are articulated

and interpreted in the present in terms of adult education, with the immediate aim of establishing a specific direction for their occupational future (Brannen and Nilsen 2002a, 2002b).

With the increasing focus on employability in adult education, and its dissonant relations between occupational choice, class and gender, there is a risk that these patterns will be further reinforced. It is therefore important for the labour market that students with working-class backgrounds, particularly women, gain access to occupations characterised by the choices of the middle-class. These results raise further questions concerning the adult education as a means of social mobility.

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