Intersections of Ageing, Gender and Sexualities

Almack, Kathryn, King, Andrew

Published by Bristol University Press

Almack, Kathryn and Andrew King.
Intersections of Ageing, Gender and Sexualities: Multidisciplinary International Perspectives.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/80512.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80512

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2784240
Introduction

This chapter highlights the central importance of social class and mobility, looking particularly at changes in the education system in the 1940s which gave rise to schooling opportunities and practices that transformed the classed lives of the majority of my participants: lesbians and bisexual women born between 1940 and 1958. Participants’ mobility, their ‘transgressions’ of the boundaries of class, gender and sexual identity, intersected to position them as ‘different’ or out of place across their life course; in Bourdieusian terms creating within them a disjuncture or ‘cleft habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2004; Friedman, 2016). Here I explain how my participants’ understanding and subjective experiences of their own class, gender and sexual identity changed as they were transformed by movement across fields against a backdrop of rapid social and cultural transformation in the UK. Rather than adopting Bourdieu’s description of the habitus as ‘cleft’, with its suggestion of a division, split or rupture, I use the term habitus dislocation to signal the weight and enduring consequences of displacement created by multiple mobilities; the pain of being out of place in so many fields, for such a long time. This phrase, literally meaning ‘placed apart’, reminds us that when something is dislocated, although it may appear the same, it is always a little bit weaker and more vulnerable. This chapter deploys the concept of habitus dislocation to expose the difficulties and ‘cost’ of social mobility and as a way of understanding how multiple mobilities and repositionings in different fields render individuals ‘fish out of water’. My research suggests that the habitus dislocation that results from movement through such diverse fields of origin and destination is so powerful and so toxic it has motivated participants to seek and create affinity groups where the anxiety and isolation associated with habitus dislocation – the hidden, but persistent, injuries (Sennett and Cobb,
Intersections of ageing, gender and sexualities

1977) of class, gender and sexual identity transgression – are alleviated through social interaction with other, similarly placed individuals.

Methodology

The study recruited 35 participants from London and the South East, Yorkshire and Lancashire. The participants, who all identified as white, attended a range of social groups. The average age was 64, with only two participants aged over 70. Twenty-five participants (71%) were single. The majority of women identified as lesbian with only two women identifying as bi/queer. No trans women participated.

To tease out some of the inconsistencies created by asking participants to self-identify their social class, I also employed a more objective typology. Drawing on McDermott’s (2010) framework, I adapted the category of ‘working-class educated’ to make it more relevant to the educational opportunities open to this generational cohort. Extending the category to include college or the acquisition of professional qualifications as well as university attendance, reveals an extraordinary level of social mobility. Five participants lacked any further or higher education or professional qualifications, and can thus be identified as working-class. Four participants would be classified as middle-class, with the remaining 26 out of 35 (74%) participants located in the category ‘working-class educated’. This figure is a testament to the widening of educational opportunities in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is also an indicator of a potential site of habitus dislocation; many working-class educated participants lacked the economic, cultural and social dispositions to guide them through this new field, leaving some disappointed and others feeling trapped between two worlds, never comfortably fitting in either.

I used qualitative in-depth interviews which lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the scripts returned to the women for checking and amendment. The data, which is anonymised to preserve the identity of the women and the groups they attended, was thematically analysed. Initially, my aim was to investigate the significance of the social and support groups attended by participants; asking about loneliness, group composition, benefits conferred and class differentials in experience. The majority of my participants were socialised at a time when homosexuality was seen as deviant or disordered behaviour and the ‘heterosexual assumption’ (Weeks 2015: 54) prevailed. Many participants lived lives of full or partial self-concealment, socialising with other ‘like-minded’ individuals in same-sex, same-sexuality groups and venues. However,
while the interviews did reveal the benefits derived from groups, the participants’ preference for exclusively lesbian or mixed company, they also generated conversations about ageing, gender, sexual identity, education, social class and mobility and, most significantly, the intersection of these diverse, multi-layered and complex aspects of human experience. Ultimately, my research turned out to be less about groups and more about the life-course experiences that led these older lesbian and bisexual women to seek friendships and social interaction predicated on shared age and sexual identity.

**Education, education, education**

While much previous work on cleft habitus has explored the cultural and social schism experienced by working-class students entering higher education, this study shows that the contrast between working-class origins and secondary education within the elite grammar school system of the 1950s provided an equally fertile site for habitus dislocation. Many participants were schooled in a rapidly changing post-war education system; the provision of free grammar school places, as part of the government’s commitment to a universal system of secondary education, profoundly changed the course of several participants’ educational trajectories when they became the first in their families to go to a grammar school, leaving them conflicted and caught between two worlds: ‘neither here nor there’. Regardless of the vehicle or timing of their mobility, I suggest that the fact that at least three-quarters of participants have been socially mobile, mostly through education, has resulted in habitus disruption with consequences that have lasted into older age. Many of the women interviewed referred to streaming and other classed practices of secondary school as diminishing their confidence and eroding their parents’ joy in their daughters’ achievements. For some, social mobility became a ‘family project’; the girls were pioneers bearing the success of their family, even their school, while the financial and social pressures incurred by their opportunity limited the chances of other family members. Kate recalls the pressure of being a working-class grammar school entrant:

‘[T]he ideology and the life-style and the worry about money were all about class. We didn’t have enough money. … That was childhood. It never leaves you. … The children were all what they classically called “first and onlys”. The first child in a mining family or the only child in a mining family … there were eight of us at the top of the grammar
Their difference and the privilege of grammar school was made apparent to working-class girls in many ways, as Clary’s narrative shows:

‘I enjoyed being clever but when I went to grammar school and I was amongst a lot of other clever girls, it was a different story. … They were a lot more sophisticated than I was. I was still reading Enid Blyton and they were reading Jane Austen … One teacher said, “Oh girls who come from [name of place] can’t speak with a good French accent,” so there was quite a lot of stuff, … about my accent and being working-class and seen as being poor.’ (Clary, born 1951, retired counsellor)

Stahl’s (2015: 22) research highlights how education challenges certain dispositions in the habitus of working-class students and is ‘fraught with potential risks and embarrassments’. Grammar school proved to be a site of social embarrassment and disappointment for many participants. With insufficient economic and cultural resources to ease their passage into the new field, their awareness of unaffordable opportunities also generated dissatisfaction with their home circumstances. Nell grew up in a Lancashire mill town. Here she describes the shadow cast over her grammar school years by her family’s economic situation:

‘It made me more irritable, more sort of, “Why hasn’t me dad got a better job?” … I went to grammar school, it was lovely, but I was disappointed when my best friend, well one of my good friends, who was a bit older than me and bigger, disappointed when I got her last year’s frock, last year’s school uniform dresses and things like that.’ (Nell, born 1942, retired senior bank worker)

Far from being a ‘social leveller’, school uniform embodied social and economic inequalities in visceral ways; the pain of the memory was often evident in the recounting of the experience:

‘I tried to fit in. I had a little group of friends … when we got to the third year we were allowed not to wear gymslips and we could wear skirts. You had to wear a navy blue
A-line skirt and I, I had a Girl Guide skirt and they had skirts they’d got from Barrie’s. … And so they used to say “Oh, the wind’s blowing up our school skirts and up Clary’s Guide skirt …”. (Clary, born 1951, retired counsellor)

Feminist writers including Reay (1997) and Skeggs (1997) draw on their own experiences alongside empirical research to examine the gendered aspect of mobility, finding it to be particularly problematic for girls, creating feelings of disloyalty and dislocation (Reay, 1997). Rosie’s lack of the ‘right’ cultural capital was painfully memorable. Her parentage, Eastern European Jewish mother and Dutch father, already made her feel different as a child but school set her even further apart:

‘We went to grammar school but even in primary school we used to have my cousins’ cast-offs so that was difficult, you know, cardboard in your shoes and things. … I felt different ’cause there were a lot of middle-class kids at grammar school so – although I’m grateful to have been there because it gave me my future – so I didn’t fit in there.’ (Rosie, born 1949, retired teacher)

Ivy found grammar school ‘hard’, having come from what she described as a ‘really disadvantaged primary school’. Her sense of pain and the embarrassment created by her dislocation was palpable:

‘I didn’t feel as though I knew the rules. I didn’t quite get how to be like the other girls. I didn’t quite get how to dress or where to shop for clothes … It all felt like a bit of a foreign language. … Getting friends’ parents to drop me off not too close to home and things like that, so that they didn’t see where I lived. … Going to birthday parties and taking a book token and when you get there realising that nobody took a book token to a birthday party… You took make-up and things like that but my mum had bought me a book token to take.’ (Ivy, born 1955, had been made redundant from her job with a charity shortly before the interview)

Fifteen of the participants went to university or college straight from school and another 15 obtained degrees or professional qualifications as adults. Aspirant but uneducated parents often lacked the dispositions to support their daughters’ progression in the way that more middle-
class families took for granted. Ivy’s career aspirations foundered at the intersection of her gender and class:

‘[W]hen it came to choosing careers, girls were channelled into ... at the grammar school it was nursing, teaching or academia if you were very bright ... I picked up all the stuff about horticulture and I really thought I wanted to go into horticulture but it had all the fees on the back cover and my parents said, “Oh we can’t afford that.” Never realised that we could have got a grant.’ (Ivy)

Some women ended up in jobs they hated, while a few benefited from having enlightened and supportive teachers:

‘Me saving grace was me art teacher who was wonderful and I went to art college from that, thanks to him.’ (Brenda, born 1950, retired policewoman and charity worker)

‘My mother’s idea of aspiring was that I should become a secretary. And I should have left school at 16 and done shorthand typing. But the Head teacher persuaded them to let me stay on in the sixth form and from there to university.’ (Jacqueline, born 1944, retired teacher and therapist)

Despite having attended grammar school, Nell’s future choices were limited by a lack of knowledge about what was ‘out there’ and the absence of female role models. She didn’t go to university, opting for a job in the bank instead:

‘[Y]ou’d no expectations beyond Lancashire working class; you hadn’t been much beyond Manchester. ... I was good at chemistry and physics, maths and things like that. And I didn’t really know what to do to go into the sixth form. I said to my brother “How many women are there at the Manchester School of Technology?” ... He said “None, none.” So ... I didn’t particularly want to be the only woman.’ (Nell, born 1942, retired senior bank worker)

University proved to be another field where the tension of navigating between working-class community of origin and elite institution often resulted in what Bourdieu (2004) describes as a ‘double distance’
whereby individuals are detached from both the fields of origin and arrival; literally, positioned ‘out of class’. Although she went on to higher education and eventually became a teacher and author, Kate dropped out of medical school at the end of the first year, alienated by the privilege and entitlement of her peers: “I couldn’t join the sailing club – I couldn’t afford a drink.” Kate’s interview, resonated with what Lawler (1999: 11) describes as ‘two (related) sets of anxieties’; the fear of returning to working-class poverty set against her sense of being an imposter in her new world. This tension, the sense of being caught between two worlds was not uncommon. Reay (1997: 24) speaks of her own move away from her origins in ‘militant working class culture’ rendering her a misfit ‘out of place and out of time’. Pamela experienced similar feelings dating back to her teenage years. She referred frequently to her subjective sense of difference, ascribing it to her own “eccentricity”:

‘I never went to university – ’cause it was so hard in ’63 – hardly anyone went. And I just knew there was a big difference … I’ve never been particularly *socially fluent*, right?’ (Pamela, born 1945, semi-retired psychotherapist)

Reay (2015: 13) suggests that when habitus is over-extended by movement across fields, the end result is not the smooth adaptation implicit in the notion of the chameleon habitus but ‘struggle and conflict’ resulting in ‘heavy psychic cost’. For three of the 15 women who went to university straight from school, the experience was devastating and they experienced serious mental health issues in their first year. Clary was sent to a psychiatric hospital after her first term at university; the feelings of difference and inadequacy she had previously experienced at grammar school returned to haunt her:

‘Maybe some of it was because I felt, amongst people at university, that I had to work twice as hard to do as well and I spent a lot of time when I’d been to lectures typing up notes afterwards … The feeling I had at grammar school … was more *intense* at university.’ (Clary, born 1951, retired counsellor)

Class differences were not the only elements of struggle and conflict encountered by socially mobile participants. Catherine came from a strong religious, working-class family. When she ‘escaped’ her family’s surveillance at the age of 20, she fell in love with a female student.
She attributed her mental ill-health directly to the suppression of her same-sex desires:

‘I went to college in 1970 and ... I just had this absolutely massive ... breakdown. Which was because I’d had these feelings from the age of 11, probably earlier, for like different girls and then when this happened at college the whole lot sort of caved in.’ (Catherine, born 1950, retired teacher and sexual health worker)

A material world: intersections of gender and class in employment

In addition to the emotional and psychological pain of habitus dislocation, class mobility (and immobility) creates material differences, which accumulate across the life course resulting in economic disparities in older age. Some participants were acutely aware of how their working-class origins had affected their middle-class careers. As a teacher and author Kate was conscious of the kudos her working-class lesbian identity carried:

‘I was kind of the working-class token [...] I served the lesbian slot and the working-class slot so they were sorted.’ (Kate, born 1946, retired author and teacher)

In the 1980s Kate published several books to great acclaim. However, despite her success as an author she wasn’t confident operating in a middle-class world, her working-class habitus and sense of being an imposter still holding her back:

‘I didn’t know enough ... about getting agents or competition to handle that world and it comes back to class. There’s the feeling of “they won’t let you in”. And my mum used to say that, “I’d like to be middle-class but they won’t let you in.”’ (Kate, born 1946, retired author and teacher)

Several participants left school at the age of 15 often with disastrous consequences for their employment prospects and far-reaching impacts on their chances of accruing a living pension. It was evident that while many of the ‘educated working-class’ participants still experience the conflict and tensions inherent in the divided habitus and retain feelings of insecurity about their classed positions, in reality many of them have
had access to more permanent employment and better pensions than those participants whose class location has not changed, resulting in greater financial security across their lifetimes and in their older age.

Michelle just missed out on the extension of the school leaving age, but gained a degree as an adult. Now in her late fifties, and in recovery from cancer, she is still doing a variety of quite physical jobs including DIY, decorating, joinery and gardening:

‘I left school at 15 and I had no qualifications at all so I started out in an office job. I’ve worked in factories, I’ve worked on the buses, I’ve worked for Royal Mail, I worked in a cash-and-carry, in the butcher department … I’ve filled washing up bottles and bleach bottles. I’ve worked on production lines, … I’ve done all sorts.’ (Michelle, born 1956, makes and sells pens)

Susan’s interview had a fatalistic quality; education had no transformative influence on her life. She grew up in (and still lives in) a small Yorkshire town, left school at 15 and saw her factory job, marriage and children as inevitable for someone of her class and gender:

‘I liked school; it were all right. But we only went to 15 so there were no chance of taking any O-levels. […] We just went into local factory, like sewing. ’Cause it were good money, so, that were it. There were no … wanting to get on, it was just in them days … just thinking oh well, you’ll probably get married and that’ll be it. Have kids, that’s how it were.’ (Susan, born 1947, retired factory worker)

This section has illustrated some of the ways participants’ social class was either transformed or held unchanged by the beliefs and practices of the 1950s education system, leading to occupational differences which in turn have had economic implications across the life course. I now turn to an understanding of class as a lived experience, looking at the meaning these (im)mobilities held for my participants.

**Theorising class identity: ‘upward’ mobility and habitus dislocation**

In the interviews I asked participants to describe their social class and talk about how and why they self-defined in that way. In addition,
I asked separate questions about family background, education, occupation and lifestyle. I am drawing on an understanding of class as a lived experience and significant axis of inequality; a view conceptualised by Reay (1998a: 259) as ‘a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions’.

Robin grew up in a working-class family where she felt ostracised because she loved music, poetry and reading, in an environment where these pursuits were not valued. Robin’s self-definition as working class bears none of the shame or stigma suggested in other accounts of working-class women (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998b). Living now in a small rented flat, her sense of class allegiance and pride were uncomplicated:

‘Well now it signifies a great pride for me because it’s... apparently there is no working class anymore, which I find astonishing. It’s like when they say post-wave feminism – it’s like almost what the fuck is post-wave feminism? I’m in it I’m working at it. … So this working-class thing that’s becoming a myth is… well it’s not a myth for me and it’s not a myth for lots of people that I know. And it’s always been a pride; I’ve never been ashamed of it.’ (Robin, born 1949, retired women’s charity worker)

Brenda grew up in the North of England in the 1950s. She went to a Catholic grammar school and then art college. For her, class identification was easily calculated. She still saw herself as working class and traced her class identification back to family and school:

‘We lived on a council estate and then I passed my 11 plus and it was oooh... [Jill: ‘What was it like?’] Then you get to school and they tell you you’re working-class.’ (Brenda, born 1950, retired policewoman and charity worker)

Heaphy (2012) found sexual identities to be stronger than class ones for his lesbian and gay participants although he observes the diverse ways in which they articulated, constructed and lived their class identities. Many of my participants offered similarly complex narratives that acknowledged their social mobility and embraced both their past and present classed identities rather than being based purely on ‘objective’ class. While I accept and honour these subjective definitions, they can be misleading and conceal vast material differences and power
imbalances between participants. Here Annie acknowledges some of these contradictions:

‘I would say that I’m working class. I don’t think that I’d be perceived as working class; I think I’d be perceived as middle class. And I think that’s partly to do with my education and the kind of work that I’ve done and quite often people I’ve mixed with. But, for me, I would say I am working class.’ (Annie, born 1951, retired social worker and children’s advocate)

An analysis of participants’ self-definitions, stories of journeys travelled, ambiguous descriptors and sense of allegiance to the working-classes (irrespective of education and occupation) reveals that just under half either self-identified as working class or referenced their working-class roots and history. These narratives were offered in response to my questions about childhood and parental occupation. Participants traced their trajectories through a variety of routes including education, feminism and meeting middle-class lesbians in social groups, and frequently used these stories as a way of positioning themselves. Some of these stories were deeply rooted in emotion and awareness of the classed and gendered limitations for the previous generation.

Traditional studies of ‘upward’ mobility often portray it as a positive, indeed desired state, where the socially mobile easily bridge class boundaries by becoming culturally omnivorous (Goldthorpe et al., 1980). Friedman (2014, 2016) draws attention to mobility’s potential to create habitus separation, suggesting that ‘the emotional pull of class loyalties can entangle subjects in the affinities of the past’ (2016: 1). Some of my participants’ narratives speak to those internal contradictions and conflicts; while acknowledging their now middle-class status and lifestyle they also recognised the social and emotional costs of the painful transition away from working-class origins, often alluding to feelings of attachment or allegiance to their early childhood class and culture:

‘Well I still feel incredibly working class, that’s the education I had or the lack of it, never been to university, so I feel very working class. But I live a very middle-class lifestyle. But I don’t think the two things just come together and merge and make you middle class; I won’t have that.’ (Joyce, born 1946, retired housing manager)
The fact that Joyce retains such a strong sense of her working-class self despite her middle-class lifestyle implies that, as Lawler (1999) suggests, for many people, rather than being attached to external markers – indicators such as employment, housing and the accumulation of material goods – class is in fact inscribed as part of the self. Gina’s movement through the class structure renders her middle-class identity as tenuous and uncertain but she doesn’t feel she ‘fits’ in a working-class milieu; a position she attributes to growing up feeling ‘out of place’. Gina saw herself as middle class now:

‘[L]ook at where I live. Obviously I’m middle-class, right. I’ve got two Master’s degrees; of course I’m middle class. But historically absolutely not. I always feel really intimidated by people with posh accents.’ (Gina, born 1952, full-time hospice counsellor/social worker)

Gina is not alone in her sense of being an imposter in a ‘middle-class world’. Many other women made reference to similar feelings of dislocation, having developed their abilities, skills, attitudes and dispositions under very different social arrangements to the ones they find themselves in as adults. Lawler’s research with socially mobile white British women born into working-class families reveals similar findings. She uses Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital to understand their expressions of anxiety around class about which she concludes:

Although these women have acquired a measure of symbolic and cultural capital, they have not inherited these capitals but ‘bought’ them within systems of education and training, or through the relationship of their adult lives. They cannot fully occupy what Bourdieu calls the ‘habitus’ … of the middle classes. (Lawler, 1999: 13)

Annie and Kate’s descriptions of their positioning as working-class women moving in predominantly middle-class circles exemplify Lawler’s notion that class distinctions are inscribed to the self and cannot just be taken up or left behind. These women acknowledge the disjuncture between their working-class origins and the adult middle-class lifestyles they have acquired through their education, relationships, careers and the subsequent assimilation of the ‘dispositions’ of the middle class. In many cases, they have been professionals operating at a senior level in careers including education, housing and social
work. However, not only do they refuse to identify as middle class but, unlike participants such as Ivy and Gina, their interviews did not resonate with the pain of estrangement that has been associated with aspirational mobility (Lawler, 1999). What they do reveal is a resistance to assume an inauthentic identity, deeply entrenched in a working-class ‘loyalty to self’ narrative similar to the one identified by Stahl (2015):

‘The opportunity may start a journey that takes you away from your roots but it doesn’t change the roots, it changes the label, and I … I won’t change the label. I am who I am … I am Annie and I identify as working class.’ (Annie, born 1951, retired social worker and children’s advocate)

The fact that discussions of class were often accompanied by some kind of contextualising story whereby several participants still claimed a working-class identity while acknowledging their middle-class lifestyles would seem to indicate that a working-class identity remains a source of pride; an important and esteemed category for many of the participants, echoing the work of Savage et al.’s (2001: 885) assertion of inverted working-class pride in their study in the Northwest which concluded that “working classness” is not entirely a stigmatized identity. Two participants identified as ‘educated working class’ (Gina and Jacqueline) and 11 women offered fairly straightforward middle-class/comfortable definitions.

While some studies of education and mobility propose a transformation of the habitus – a movement away from the field of origin and the acquisition of new ways of being – Abrahams and Ingram’s (2013) study of local students entering university suggests that many people who are socially mobile create a ‘third space’ whereby a ‘chameleon’ habitus is possible, adaptable to both the field of ‘departure’ and the field of ‘arrival’. This concept could work to explain Annie and Joyce’s apparent closeness to their milieu of origin and stated ease in moving between working-class and middle-class fields. However, many other participants, including Ivy and Rosie, linked their mobility to fragile class identities, feeling that they were positioned as ‘out of class’ and experiencing a sense of hybridity akin to that discussed in accounts of queer and diasporic unbelonging:

‘[M]y roots are working class and I would like to say I’m working class but I know full well my economic situation means I’m not. But, but it means you don’t fit and there’s an
element of loneliness. Because you’re not one or the other.’ (Rosie, born 1949, retired teacher)

Jacqueline’s social mobility means that she feels most secure not in the new middle-class world or back in the working-class world of her birth but somewhere halfway between the two:

‘I call myself the “educated class” ’cause I think that’s what we are. There’s a certain group of friends I have that I feel the most confident with; the first ones to go to university, the different backgrounds... so I call us the educated class and for whom education has continued to be important.’ (Jacqueline, born 1944, retired teacher and therapist)

My research reveals the sense of difference that emerges through the contradictions of participants’ various positionings as socially mobile, sexual and gender non-conforming adults at a time of rigid and conservative societal norms. Some participants expressed feelings of difference related to their rejection of the prevailing social norms with regard to female roles and appearance, others experienced a profound sense of sexual difference as teenagers and young women; for many their choice to live a lesbian life fractured relationships with parents and siblings and, when shrouded in secrecy and fear, made establishing intimate adult relationships more difficult. For some, social mobility was an early life event; they were propelled via scholarships from working-class family life and primary education into grammar schools with a middle-class milieu. Others encountered middle-class culture through feminist and lesbian groups across the course of their lifetimes. Stories of upward social mobility were threaded through many discussions of family history, suggesting historical and emotional associations as well as a certain precarity in several participants’ class of origin. Class disjunctures leading to misalignments between habitus and field run through the life course of many participants.

I suggest these feelings of displacement can be best understood as another example of habitus dislocation. Bourdieu (1999) recognised its occurrence in cases of long-range mobility when the habitus was unable to adjust to the economic, social or cultural conditions of the new. The habitus of participants such as Rosie, Jacqueline and Gina was extended from its working-class roots, through grammar school, university and middle-class occupations. Not only had they never fully adapted to the new circumstances, but also they were unable to return comfortably to the field of origin, habitus dislocation rendering these
participants emotionally, socially and culturally alienated. Others have experienced similar habitus disruption through their social encounters with middle-class lesbians exposing them to a new, cultural milieu. Bourdieu suggests that these disruptions are not easily resolved, creating:

[A] habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities. (Bourdieu, 1999: 511)

**Conclusion**

This chapter has traced the participants’ journeys through the life course looking particularly at how social class and social mobility has affected their lives. For a few, lack of educational opportunity served to ‘fix’ their lives, rendering them socially immobile and creating economic challenges that continue to accumulate in older age. Participants such as Susan have retained their original class identity but traversed gender and sexuality norms, rendering them ‘different’ from their families of origin, school friends and work colleagues. Others experienced social mobility often as a consequence of access to grammar school and then higher education or via meeting middle-class lesbians in social spaces. Some of these women, for example, Pamela, Ivy and Gina, feel that their class of origin still marks them as being ‘out of place’. Several participants, including Kate, have crossed class borders but claim to retain a sense of being authentically working class despite the social and cultural dispositions of their lives today. I believe that this movement across fields, whether it be socially or through educational or occupational opportunities, has created internal conflict in many participants; their habitus stretched between different fields is not fully adapted to either, leaving them ‘out of place’, neither feeling to belong in their communities and families of origin nor in their new middle-class environments.

While the narratives of aspiration, social class mobility and change offered by my participants are important ones, indicating the social, educational and cultural origins of this generation of elders, they reveal just one aspect of the ‘difference’ that has positioned many of my participants as ‘other’ – both socially and materially – and continues to do so in their older age. Whereas recent discussion of cleft habitus is located in the single field of social mobility (Ingram, 2011; Abrahams
and Ingram, 2013; Friedman, 2016), I suggest that the concept can also be used to understand multiple misalignments of dispositions and practices; through their rejection of traditional gender norms and straight sexual identity many of my participants were caught between a number of social fields and have never shaken off the resulting sense of disequilibrium.

Although there is insufficient space to discuss them here, my participants’ experiences of transgressing gender role and sexual identity expectations in the mid-20th century also contribute to their habitus dislocation. These contemporary mobilities, which have intersected with the participants’ experiences of social class transgression, placed participants into lives where their existing dispositions were inadequate to guide them, where they had no moral or social ‘code’ to follow, leaving them with feelings of dislocation and ‘unbelonging’ that have stayed with some participants all their lives and continue to shadow their later years.

References


