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## Telling lesbian stories: Interviewing and the class dynamics of 'talk'

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### Synopsis

This paper explores the unseen ways in which the power relations of class may influence the 'telling' of lesbian stories in research interviews. It draws on in-depth interviews with 24 self-defined lesbians in a UK study investigating the effects of sexual identity and social class on psychosocial health. Utilising Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class, the class differences which arose in the talk of the lesbians interviewed are analysed across three areas: class discourses, linguistic capital and class habitus. In doing so, it is suggested that the research interview opens up spaces for articulation which facilitate the narratives of lesbians from more privileged class positions but which are less inviting spaces for the telling of lesbian stories from disadvantaged class positions. The paper concludes that attention must be paid to 'classed' talking practices to ensure that the stories of lesbians with the least social advantages are heard.

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### Introduction

This paper explores the class differences which arose in the 'telling' of lesbian lives in an interview-based study conducted in the northwest of England. The complex power relationships involved in interviewing are well-explored territories within feminist research (Finch, 1984; Frazer, 1988; Mason, 2002; Oakley, 1981; Ramazanoglu, 1992; Wise, 1987). However, to date, there has been relatively little written about the class dynamics of using interviews to research women (for exceptions, see Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1991; Lawler, 2002; McRobbie, 1982; Reay, 1998b; Reynolds, 2002), and class remains virtually absent from methodological discussions concerning lesbian and gay empirical studies.

The spaces for lesbians to speak about their lives are often very limited. They face constraints which do not 'weigh' (Bourdieu, 1999) on the communication of heterosexual women. Open everyday interaction, in most cases, has to be negotiated within the taken-for-granted assumptions of heterosexuality. An opportunity to speak freely, without guarded assessment, about the particulars of living life with an 'othered' sexual identity presents itself rarely. Perhaps, as a consequence, studies have reported the willingness and eagerness with which participants tell their stories to lesbian and gay researchers (Dunne, 1997; Heaphy, Weeks, & Donovan, 1998). As Skeggs (1994) comments, research participants are not passive and there is frequently a degree of reciprocity between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview may

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provide lesbians with space and time to talk, be heard, and at some level, validated (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001).

Drawing on qualitative interviews from a study exploring the ways in which lesbians of various class positions keep psychologically well, the paper demonstrates that the interview is a space of articulation for lesbians which may be mediated by social class. Bourdieu (1999, p. 615) argues that it is the 'most disadvantaged' who make use of the interview space to articulate themselves and their points of view. The research reported here found the opposite. It was the working-class respondents who tended to be uncomfortable and uncertain in the interviews. The middle-class women were much more likely to welcome the opportunity to talk openly about their lives. The experiences and data from this study suggest that social class operates in hidden ways which influence the stories lesbians tell in the interview interaction.

### Talking and telling: the stream of power

Feminist methodology has long been concerned with the ways in which power may impact upon what can be said (and heard) in an interview. Interview methodology is premised upon the assumption that it is possible to investigate the social by asking people to talk (Mason, 2002). Researchers have therefore stressed the importance of paying attention to the power relations of language and talking when interviewing women (Devault, 1990; Mason, 2002; Mishler, 1986; Standing, 1998). Mason (2002, p. 237) elucidates:

it is important to engage with the 'politics of talk', and to recognise that what counts as language, who uses it, what is its nature, what it can mean and do, are not merely part of a neutral and given reality, but are products of power relations and struggles.

Despite feminism's concern with the multiplicity of power in language and talk, social class remains at the margins of methodological and theoretical discussions (Bradley, 1996; Lawler, 2000; Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 1996; Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997). As Hooks (2000, p. 5) writes, 'class is a pressing issue, but it is not talked about'. Social class is also sidelined

in theoretical and research debates on sexuality (McIntosh, 1997). Critics have warned of the dangers of ignoring class while researching and theorising sexuality (Collins, 1990; Hennessy, 1995; Maynard & Purvis, 1995; Moran, 2000; Plummer, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Weston & Rofel, 1984; Zimmerman, 1997), but so far, social class has yet to be taken seriously as a contemporary site of disadvantage and advantage which positions lesbians unequally or as a power dynamic which may influence the telling of lesbian stories in research settings.

The reluctance to place social class as a category of analysis within research frameworks investigating the lives of those with marginalised sexual identities is exemplified by Plummer's (1995) important book, 'Telling Sexual Stories'. In this work, Plummer is centrally concerned with how power influences the process of talking about gay life and other sexual stories.

The story telling process flows through social acts of domination, hierarchy, marginalisation and inequality. Some voices—who claim to dominate, who top the hierarchy, who claim the centre, who possess resources—are not only heard more readily than others, but also are capable of framing the questions, setting the agendas, establishing the rhetorics much more readily than others—(Plummer, 1995, p. 30).

Plummer locates both personal and social power as significant to the stories which are told, but he is not more specific about in what forms hierarchy and domination materialise. Apart from sexuality, Plummer barely elaborates on how other forms of social power such as race and gender shape the telling of sexual stories. Social class, as a dynamic of inequality, does not feature in the debate. The interviews with lesbians from the research discussed here suggest that the telling of lesbian stories, in a research environment, may be connected to the class resources an individual possesses (McDermott, 2003). These complex issues will be explored further in the paper.

### Social class, sexual identity and Bourdieu

Sexuality and social class are not very often held in the same research frameworks. Theoretically, the

current dominant terms of debate for sexuality and social class do not fit easily together. The postmodern insights of queer theory and sexualities studies are antithetical to the modernism of social science's conventional approaches to social class. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, the methodological discussion regarding social class and lesbians' interview narratives is framed by Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class and by recent feminist adaptations of his work (Lawler, 2000; McNay, 1999; Reay, 1998a, 1998b; Skeggs, 1997). In particular, the paper draws upon Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital and habitus and feminist insights on the discursive constructions of class and gender.

#### *Linguistic capital*

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of capital is a metaphor for social power, and he identifies four main categories: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. In Bourdieu's schema, an individual's place in the social world is structured by the differential distribution of capital. It is capital which serves to reproduce class distinctions and defines who profits in any given field. Skeggs (1997, p. 10) explains:

Class positions are not just relative forms in social space, they are institutionalized positions: the cultural capital of the middle classes can offer substantial rewards in the labour market

Linguistic capital is part of the dominant classes' legitimated cultural capital which 'families hand down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 66). Bourdieu (1984, p. 55) states that the 'linguistic ease' and 'linguistic competence' (p.65) of the middle class distinguish them from working-class people. Feminist work on class and education has illustrated the ways in which differing access to cultural and linguistic capital serves to reproduce class inequalities in education (Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 1998b; Standing, 1998; Walkerdine, 1985). Standing's (1998) work on lone mothers' involvement with their children's schooling revealed that without knowledge of legitimated speaking and writing conventions, they were unable to challenge the negative representations of lone mothers.

Frazer's (1988) study of girls talking about class argues that class differences in participants' inter-

view talk can be partly explained through variations in 'communicative competence', that is, 'the ability to use the appropriate way of talking, the appropriate words with appropriate meanings, according to context' (Frazer, 1988, p. 357). The discussion here uses Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital to explore the ways in which class differences in 'communicative competence' may impact upon the interview talk of the lesbians in the study.

#### *Class habitus*

Habitus is part of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class which attempts to account for individual action at an everyday level. He conceives habitus as a 'socialised subjectivity', a way of describing the embodiment of social structures and history in individuals which in turn influences 'practice'. Bourdieu (1977, p. 76) states:

Habitus is a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures

Habitus is an interlocking set of tendencies which operates from within individuals to guide practice—what one does in everyday life—but it is not strictly individual or fully determining of human action. Habitus accounts for human action which is neither the result of the mechanical submission to social structures (without agency) or rational conscious choice (without structure). The 'social' embodied in habitus predisposes, rather than determines, practice. Habitus functions as a 'matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83) which mediates our interaction with the social world.

Bourdieu's work does not adequately incorporate gender (McCall, 1992; McNay, 1999; Reay, 1998b), and heterosexuality remains unproblematised (McDermott, 2003). However, Reay (1995, 1997, 1998b) and Lawler (2000) have both adapted habitus to explore the complex ways in which the relations of class and gender are embodied and manifest in everyday lives and practices of women. The paper attempts to utilise the concept of habitus to shed light upon the influence of class subjectivities on lesbians' talking practices in a research environment.

### *Class discourses*

Feminist work on class and gender demonstrates that historical and contemporary discourses of social class pathologise the working class as deviant and lacking self-control; they are the 'other' against which dominant middle-class norms are established (Finch, 1993; Lawler, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Steedman, 1986; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Furthermore, evidence from empirical studies suggests that class discourses which are dominated by middle-class perspectives make it more difficult (but not impossible) for working-class women to narrate their personal stories (Lawler, 2002) and generate positive meanings of their lives (Hooks, 1994; Skeggs, 1997). Reay (1999, p. 101) writes of the mothers in her research:

There is an extent to which all women, regardless of social class positioning, inevitably see themselves through middle-class eyes. However, while this constitutes a reassuring process for middle-class mothers because it confirms their normativity, the psychological effects for working class women are likely to be more damaging.

The impact of class discourses on working-class women's articulation of their experiences is also discernible in a research setting. Frazer (1988) argues that the scarcity of class discourses for the working-class girls in her study explained why they were reluctant to verbalise class (see also McRobbie, 1982). Similarly, Skeggs (1997) found that the white working-class women in her research did not talk about class because they actively disidentified with the pathologising category "working class". Lawler (2002) claims that the lack of positive class discourses made it difficult for the women in her research to articulate their upward class mobility except through negative constructions such as 'social climbing'.

As this suggests, making visible the operation of class discourses within a research interview is important to understanding the stories participants tell. In order to explore the complex issues surrounding social class and interviewing, this paper draws on a qualitative study of lesbians' lives. The discussion concentrates on three areas: first, the paper investigates the ways in which lesbians' interview talk may be affected by class discourses; second, it examines the influence of the respondent's linguistic capital on

the stories they tell; and third, habitus is used to consider the impact of class subjectivities on lesbians' talking 'practices' [the influence of social class on the researcher/participant relationship is not discussed, but it is fully acknowledged as important, see McDermott (2003) for discussion].

### **Study outline**

The study was based on semistructured interviews with 24 women who self-identified as lesbians. The participants all lived in the northwest of England and were aged between 21 and 56 years old. The sample was generated using purposeful theoretic snowball sampling (Heaphy et al., 1998; Weston, 1991) from a diverse range of starting points, using informal lesbian networks. The resulting group of women self-defined as white (17), black or mixed race (5) and Jewish (2). Fifteen lived in cities; the other nine women lived in small towns or villages.

The women were from three broad class backgrounds/trajectories: working class (10), middle class (7) and university-educated women from a working-class background (7). Social class was attributed using occupation and education. Women were categorised as 'middle class' if they were university-educated, professionally employed and one of their parents was the same. Women who had no higher education, were non-professionally employed and whose parents were the same were categorised as 'working class'. Women who were university-educated and whose parents had no higher education and non-professional jobs were categorised as 'working class educated'.

The participants were each interviewed once either in the respondents' homes, their friends' houses, workplaces or cafés. The interviews were recorded on a minidisk, and during transcription, each woman was given a pseudonym. Data analysis and interpretation was conducted using grounded theory techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Class discourses and talking practices**

There were marked class differences in the ways in which the women talked in the interviews which were

not accounted for by differences in age and locality (rural/urban). In common with other research on social class and gender (Lawler, 2000; McRobbie, 1982; Reynolds, 2002), the working-class women and some of the working-class, 'educated' women were more uncertain and nervous in the interview. They were often unconfident about their points of view and placed little value on their life experiences, showing surprise that their lives were of interest. In comparison, the middle-class women and some of the university-educated, working-class women were more confident and relaxed within the interview. They spoke with greater certainty and more easily elaborated on their lives.

These class differences in the women's interview talk may be connected to circulating discourses on class which, critics such as Reay (1999) and Skeggs (1997) argue, promote 'middle-class' norms and pathologise working-class ways of being. In the following interview extracts, Michelle and Hannah tell their 'coming out' stories. Michelle is working class, white, 27 years old and works in a warehouse.

*Liz:* Can you tell me about the first time you thought you were gay? Like how old you were and what you thought?

*Michelle:* I was about seven, erm there was this girl, I think it was junior school and erm, I dunno you know when you play games when you're in junior school and things like that and it was like nurses games and things like 'you be the doctor and I'll be the nurse'.

*Liz:* So when did you think you were gay?

*Michelle:* I didn't think I was gay then but I knew that I liked girls better than I liked boys, I suppose I didn't know much about being gay at that age anyway.

*Liz:* It'd be a bit surprising if you did at that age (both laugh). So can you remember the time when you began to think 'oh maybe I'm gay' or something, you know put a name to it.

*Michelle:* Probably at the age of about 15 or 16 (pause).

*Liz:* So what happened to make you think that?

*Michelle:* I started playing (sport) (laughs) no erm, I dunno really its just erm a group of people I went round with and things like that (pause).

*Liz:* What were they like?

*Michelle:* Erm (long pause) The group of people I went round with at (sports club) half were gay and half were straight (pause).

*Liz:* Were they the first gay people you knew?

Michelle does not easily verbalise her coming out story to me. She is hesitant, pauses often and I have to move the story along by prompting and asking questions. Michelle was clearly nervous at the start of the interview and she told me that her life 'wasn't very exciting'. Throughout the interview, I felt that she was concerned she said the 'right thing'. In the above extract, she twice responded to my questions with 'I dunno'. It underlines her uncertainty as she endeavours to articulate her experiences, as a working-class woman, of initially identifying herself as a lesbian. A different interpretation might be that as an educated researcher, I am presuming that Michelle has a coming out story and it is meaningful to her. However, personal testimonies of coming out stories of women from working-class backgrounds confirm their importance to lesbian identity (Penelope, 1994; Raffo, 1997).

Compare the halting, uncertainty of Michelle's 'telling' to the verbosity and confidence of Hannah who is of middle class, white, 26 years old and a student.

*Liz:* Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about the first time you thought you were gay?

*Hannah:* Okay.

*Liz:* How old you were?

*Hannah:* Erm, seventeen, er, was good friends with this girl when I moved to college at sixteen and she came out to me, erm, there'd been kind of, this strange relationship going on with us for about a year, we were just friends, and I was with this guy and she started to talk to me about stuff, and.

*Liz:* About her feelings for you?

*Hannah:* No, about somebody else that she was with and I was really intrigued about this woman in leathers on a bike with a flick knife, dealer and de, de (I laugh), all these stories erm, we started hanging out more erm, cos we became more friends because of this, cos we'd had an argument in the past, and we didn't speak to each other for five months or something as you do when you're sixteen.

*Liz:* Yeah, that's a long time.

*Hannah:* It was when you were in the same class with somebody, like starring opposite each other, I was always quite intrigued by her, at the time I was like long blond hair, short skirts, really feminine, could get any

guy, wrap them round my little finger, did all the games but, yeah, slowly it kind of, I don't know if it ever really crossed my mind, it kind of, our relationship, kind of, became more important than my boyfriend, and, I think we, she wrote me this letter, this really amazing long letter, quite a few but the third one was, was how she had started to feel towards me, and why we'd fallen out was because I'd been going out with this boy, that she was jealous about, I didn't realise like, a year ago, and it said like, when, these are all my feelings de, de, de, really beautiful and I got to the bottom, and I'd really like to kiss you when you read the end of this letter...*(continues)*

Hannah has little trouble verbalising her first thoughts on experiencing same sex attraction. Her coming out story is told quite effortlessly in comparison to Michelle. In this extract, I spoke three times: first to ask the initial question, then to get a point of clarification and finally to make a reassuring comment. I do not have to agitate and drive the narrative, Hannah does this herself. Perhaps she is more practised at telling her story. I think the ease with which she speaks is due, in part, to her privileged class position which means her 'telling' is facilitated by access to dominant class discourses which normalise middle-class values and self (although Hannah's identification as lesbian positions her outside those norms in terms of sexuality).

In addition, the fluency of Hannah's coming out narrative may be further authenticated by drawing upon increasingly visible representations of lesbian lifestyles and identities which present white, educated, professional lesbians as the norm (Binnie, 1995; Faderman, 1991; Field, 1997; Gluckman & Reed, 1997). Hennessy (1995) argues that the prominence of the most privileged segment of the lesbian population in consumer culture may have the effect of consolidating a class specific notion of 'being' a lesbian. So, Hannah can make sense of, and validate, her coming out story through access to both positive class discourses, and to a lesser degree, positive representations of lesbian life. For Michelle and the other working-class women interviewed, they were less likely to be able to draw upon positive discourses and representations of their class or their sexuality, making it more difficult to authenticate their stories, and hence, their 'telling' tended to be more uncertain.

### Linguistic capital and the resources for 'telling'

The differences in Hannah's and Michelle's 'telling' may also be connected to the possession of linguistic capital. In an interview setting, where spaces are opened up by the interviewer for the interviewee to articulate the self, the *act* of talking is likely to be easier for those participants who have the resources (linguistic capital) for speaking. The middle-class women from this study spoke with more confidence, needed less encouragement and their answers were usually expansive. The length of the interviews is an example of how interview talk is facilitated by linguistic capital. The working-class women's interviews lasted for the shortest amount of time. On average, the middle-class women's interviews were 40 min longer and the university-educated, working-class women's were 30 min longer. This means, quite literally, that the middle-class women's words take up more space in the research process. It takes longer to conduct the interviews and transcribe them, and they generate more data (volume wise) for data analysis.

The interviews revealed that all of the middle-class women and some of the university-educated, working-class women had moved through social spaces, such as employment and education, where linguistic capital is highly valued and rewarded. Nearly all the middle-class women were employed (or had been) in professions which required a sophisticated level of communication, and they were often in positions of authority. They had experience of professional interview settings and seemed untroubled communicating in such an environment. For example, Lucy, middle class, explains how she approaches her sexuality and disability in the workplace:

...I mean I'm not saying I'm super confident, don't get me wrong, what you do, is you measure a situation don't you, you use your experience and skills to work out how you're going to manage a situation or a discussion or a conversation, so... something may be said about bloody cripples... so maybe using my sort of disability politics to have a conversation to perhaps challenge an assumption...  
*(Lucy, 35, white, solicitor)*.

Lucy's extract displays the linguistic competencies of the middle class, which enable her to

exercise some control and authority within social interactions. This control is further illustrated by Lucy declaring in her interview that there were certain topics she was unwilling to discuss. In contrast, the working-class women interviewed had limited linguistic capital and little opportunity to acquire such resources. They had few educational choices and rarely worked in areas of the labour market which valued linguistic capital or rewarded it. For the working-class women, the research interview is more likely to be associated with situations where they may have little control and where they are 'forced' to talk about themselves (Skeggs, 2002). For example, in the following extract, Amanda, who is working class, describes her experience of job centre interviews:

*Amanda:* ...I find it fucking quite weird the way people look at me, or you know view me, you get called into the dole for like fucking Restart interviews and all this, and I always do their head in, cos they call me over like Miss, and I'll walk over and they're like that, you know thinking they've got this lad there, and they're looking at the forms and you say to them 'that's right', do you know what I mean?

*Liz:* Yeah, yeah.

*Amanda:* So I think, I dunno, there is always fucking, gonna be a problem unless I drastically change my appearance, and all that, which why should I? (*Amanda, 36, white, unemployed*).

Amanda eloquently relates her Restart interview experiences as a situation where she is judged and has little control in. The interview is a space of articulation where Amanda is 'forced' to tell herself in certain way to ensure she continues to receive state benefits and secure her economic survival. Amanda has been unemployed most her life, her experience of interviews with the welfare system, employment, housing etc., are likely to be connected to feelings of surveillance, judgement and justification. Amanda's account suggests that working-class and middle-class lesbians may have different expectations of research interviews. The combination of possessing few legitimated linguistic resources and negative interview experiences may partially account for the working-class women's shorter interviews and more reticent narratives.

### **Class habits die hard**

Class differences in the telling of lesbian stories in interviews may also be influenced by class habitus. The following discussions with Catherine and Alison regarding the impact of their class background on their current lives give an indication of the ways in which past and present class experiences become embodied and generate class 'distinctions'. What is striking is the contrast between the confidence, self-worth and expectation Alison, who is of middle class, and the confusion and uncertainty of Catherine who is working class:

...I think the positive things that I've gained from it is erm, self-confidence... I think, I had the sort of upbringing which erm, had erm, how can I say it, well you do just get validated really and going to the school that I went to, told you, you are the top two percent, you know, so, the whole kind of middle class consciousness, the whole kind of thing is, you are growing up to be one of the people that runs society basically, that's the message, you're not going to be a pawn, you know you're not going to be buffeted around by the forces out there, you're going to be in charge. (*Alison, 46, white, own business*)

*Liz:* ...do you think that's affected your life in any particular way?

*Catherine:* (pause) Erm, yeah, because I think me dad, has erm, drilled it into us that we are erm, from a good family, you know?... sometimes I think I'm a bit of a snob, you know then, I get confused by it sometimes, and then I'll stand up... sticking up for working class people and single parents and you know like my daughter in law was, well me son's partner, they were fifteen when they had their baby, and then I can speak from a, like something on TV and my father and I was discussing it and we were saying... middle class kids can still go out get plastered, drink champagne, go out with lads but they still go on to the education, you know, don't always get pregnant... (*Catherine, 43, black, cleaner*).

Alison recognises the self-confidence she has gained from her middle-class background. She has a 'classed' self which is intrinsically valued. Bourdieu (1984, p. 56) argues that the middle-class habitus has a 'self-assured relation to the world', with a sense of

entitlement and self-worth which comes from privilege, status and success. Furthermore, the privilege of the dominant classes is that they possess social legitimation which is based on the power of the dominant to impose, by their very existence, a definition of what is valued and authorised which is nothing other than their own way of existing—they are at ease in the social world because they determine the legitimated way of existing in it—it is a self-affirming power (Bourdieu 1984). Within a research interview, the middle-class women's self validation may lend authority and give them confidence to speak expansively, and at length, about their lives as lesbians.

Catherine's account is full of uncertainty about her class positioning and its effects on her. Catherine did not have a clear identification with being working class but understood that this is how she would be categorised. In her extract, she asserts the moral integrity of her family background, she is '*from a good family*'. The importance of claiming value for herself and her family, is partly, I would suggest, a resistance to being positioned as working class, which she knows is a class location judged as deficient. For Catherine and the other working-class women, class habitus does not convey the 'self-certainty of the middle class habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 66) but is more probably a result of anxieties about self-worth and legitimation. Within the interviews for this research, the embodiment of concerns over social inferiority (the working-class habitus) may generate lesbian stories which are uncertain, apprehensive and shorter.

Interestingly, some of the women interviewed identified the influence of class background on talking practices. Tracey and Patsy explain:

...a lot of really middle class women, especially upper middle class women, they have this, confidence, they'll just open their mouth whenever they want, they never even have to think twice about what they are saying, they have complete, complete confidence, and that is their up bringing, working class women haven't got that, or they've retrained themselves to be able to be confident to speak, but most working class women they wouldn't say, ... they wouldn't even question their doctor, like my mum would never dream of questioning the doctor, what he says is right, now a lot of upper middle class

women, they've been brought up to question and to speak their opinion... (Tracey, 38, *black, unemployed, working-class, university-educated*).

...if you go to a school where you are with a whole gang of people who are really essentially a gang of achievers...and everybody goes to university or college. ... you sort of grow up with a feeling that, sort of a confidence I think, a confidence to be able to speak to people, and mix with all sorts of folk and just get on with it and not have a problem with that, ... I would never have a problem standing up and talking to people I didn't know or addressing a whole room or telling jokes to people I'd never met before (*both laugh*). (Patsy, 43, *white, business director, middle class*).

Tracey pinpoints the lack of confidence displayed by working-class women (her mother) in an interview situation (the doctors) and compares this with the confidence to speak that she understands middle-class women to practice. She interprets these differences as a result of class upbringing and background. Her reference to 'retraining' talking practice is tied to her own class mobility and university education. Patsy similarly locates her private school education as an explanation for her linguistic ease. Both women point to past class positioning to account for present-day talking practices. As Bourdieu states, 'The habitus—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Tracey and Patsy's narratives illuminate feelings of superiority and inferiority which may be ingrained in class habitus and in turn generate class distinctions in talking practices.

### Concluding comments

Heaphy et al. (1998) urge us to consider the kinds of non-heterosexual narratives that particular interviewing strategies allow for: to think of who can speak and what can be said, as well as who cannot speak and the stories that cannot be told. This paper has attempted to unravel the ways in which social class may have impacted upon the telling of lesbian stories in an interview-based study conducted in the UK. It suggests that there are complex, unseen class



dynamics at work in interviews with lesbians which tend to facilitate the ‘telling’ of middle-class lesbians lives but make interviews less encouraging spaces of articulation for working-class lesbians.

The paper has demonstrated that the eloquence and confidence with which most of the middle-class women and some of the working-class education women told their lesbian stories may be a result of their privileged class position. This class position affords them social advantages which make speaking in a research interview situation easier. They are able to access positive discourses of class which, in part, validate their stories, they have access to the linguistic capital which facilitates their ‘telling’ and their class habitus generates a sense of entitlement and certainty to talk about their lives.

The narratives of the working-class women tended to be shorter and more hesitant because their class position does not afford them the kind of linguistic advantages available to the middle class. The working-class women are less likely to be able to draw upon positive discourses of class (or sexuality) to legitimate their stories, nor do they have the linguistic resources (or opportunities to acquire them) which encourage narration, and they have a class habitus which has a more anxious and insecure relation to the world, generating a more uncertain ‘telling’.

Researchers’ awareness of the impact of social class on the telling of lesbian stories in interviews will not alter the probability that socially advantaged participants may speak more easily in such settings, but it may alter researchers’ interview practices. For example, the research reported here attempted to move away from generalised questions (e.g., what makes you happy as a lesbian?) which rely upon participants’ ability to respond in an abstract way (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Mason, 2002) to using more narrative approaches (Flick, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Jovchelovitch & Buer, 2000). These narrative techniques pose questions as story-telling invitations and anchor questions in the participant’s life stories (e.g., can you tell me about a time when you have been happy?). As such, the researcher relies less on the linguistic resources and confidence of participants to access their life experiences and meanings.

It is important that lesbian and gay researchers pay attention to the class power dynamics of interview talk to ensure that interviewing strategies are developed that

allow the stories of working class lesbians to be told - so that as researchers we hear more readily the silences and hesitations, the reticent as well as eloquent.

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