
Abstract

TITLE: The female experience of class mobility

In Swedish with summary in English

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This is a dissertation about women's experiences of their own upwardly class mobility. The study is based on qualitative life history interviews with fourteen women who have changed class, born in the range of the late 1920's to the mid 1960's and brought up in working class families and environments. The women have undergone higher education and professional careers, and currently belong to the middle or upper classes. For some of them, the class change took place in combination with marriage into a higher social class. The interviewees had educational, social, cultural, or caring professions. All of them had substantial work and life experience. They were mothers and were currently or had previously been responsible for raising their own children.

The purpose of this study was to investigate women's class mobility. This was carried out by studying the women's individual approaches, actions and strategies applied in their class mobility. The structural conditions and circumstances for the class mobility were also studied, and the class mobility was studied in terms of life long identity development.

The theoretical basis of the study stems from critical realism, the realistic social ontology and identity concepts of Margaret Archer and the theoretical development of Pierre Bourdieu. This theoretical foundation has provided the study with an in-depth understanding of the female class journey by emphasising relationships between the individual and the social and historical conditions, and simultaneously via analytical differentiation between various influencing, emergent factors. This has enabled the scrutiny of internal, dynamic and morphogenetic relationships. The class journey is seen as a process of change that builds on the individual's interaction with surrounding structural class-, gender- and time-bound conditions that enable, motivate or limit behaviours. This process of interaction and the inner dialogue constitute the breeding ground of the class journey, as well as of the social and personal identity.

In the study, structures of class and gender are made apparent through the interviewees' experiences. Societal development, structural transformations of educational systems have impacted on the female class mobility. Current social democratic political intentions and drives for equality, the expansion of the public sector and the welfare state have also had a major impact on the professional and educational opportunities of these women.

The change of class mobility gave rise to inner emotional developmental processes as well as external change of professional position. It was built on the women's reflexivity, intentionality and power of action. For the women, the class journey was a personal and searching development that has occurred in small and different steps.

The study reveals that the women have had a life-long experience of being an outsider, and not really belonging either in origin or in the newly acquired social position. On the one hand, it provided them with an analytical perspective, resulting in commitments and abilities that have found a professional or familial expression. At the same time, the class mobility brought feelings of insecurity and anger – as well as a constant wondering of the actual social belonging. The inner experience of the class mobility affected all situations, marital relations, child rearing, occupational choice as well as the contact with family and relatives.

Class mobility, which is a self-actualising process of development, builds on the personal drives of these women. From a long-term life perspective, the women have finally found professional positions in which their life experiences function as resources to them. As the years go by and through their reflexivity, the women have developed an understanding of the self and an acceptance of their destiny as class changers.

KEY WORDS: female class mobility, life history, critical realism, agency, inner dialogue, analytical dualism, social class, women's life.
