



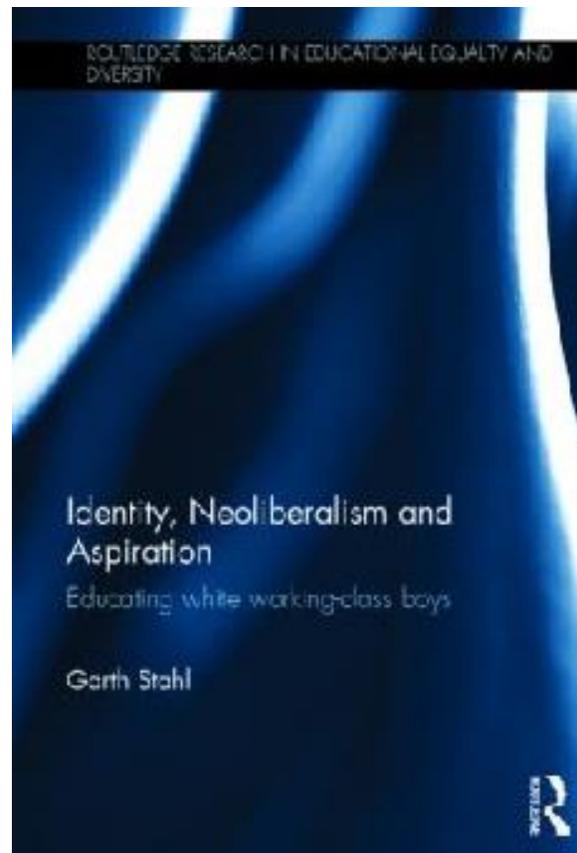
Stahl, G. (2015). *Identity, neoliberalism and aspiration: Educating white working-class boys*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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As the contentions of working men are loudly making headlines across the globe, this book, though very specifically focused on Britain in its content, might immediately appeal to a wide variety of readers in these tumultuous times. The author interestingly adds education to the mix and, suggesting schools play an important part in shaping the self-image of working class young men have of themselves as learners and citizens. Stahl's text, which remains at all times highly conceptual in nature, seeks to examine identity formation amongst white working class British male adolescents. He wishes to explore some of the tensions that are emerging when neoliberalism values and priorities begin to have impact on youth development. More specifically, Stahl is concerned with the role of the school as an institution in the crafting and perpetuation of neoliberal ideals and values; he asserts that these neoliberal norms eventually shape and distort self-perception among these largely disenfranchised youth.



Although the reflection around youth, education, and the working class might be of interest to readers globally, it is important to clarify from the onset that Stahl situates his study in a very specific British context. The notion of “class” therefore has to be examined here within a narrow geopolitical setting; class in the UK represents a rigid, almost caste-like, hierarchy that has been fine-tuned for centuries and has traditionally been conspicuously recognizable from such trivial details as the way one holds a fork or the intonation of a voice. The concepts, research intentions and findings discussed here may, as a result, find little echo in other countries where class exists, of course, but perhaps not in the same formalized way. In fact, it is also possible scholars outside Britain may look at this study with slight hesitation. Focusing on ‘whiteness’ without discussing the inherent privilege of race, even within socio-economically deprived areas, may feel surprising to many for instance in a North - American landscape. In the contemporary U.S. context indeed such a research focus might well be accused of giving validation to some of the rhetoric, described as ‘last cry of the white male’, that has recently made the news post-election in 2016; yet this is not at all that the author is focusing on here. So, while one might be naturally drawn to this book in considering the current debates around about populism, it is important to stress that really the purpose and context here are quite different. The author identifies a section of British youth that— despite its whiteness – very much embodies and reflects the central preoccupation of Critical Theory: oppression and exclusion of a social minority by a hegemonic group that has kept it at bay. The author explains how historically East London and parts of Essex have remained almost entirely excluded by the economic ‘boom’, right through the Thatcher years and the later New Labour prosperity. Stahl focuses on young males in these periphery regions of East London where growth and economic development have been highly selective, and

where ‘class’ has served, it would seem, to perpetuate a stratification in society, and to keep a group very much on the periphery of globalized development.

Stahl’s central contention is that class remains a central tenement in identity building for many British youth. By exploring the ramifications of ‘class’ in the self-realisation of the marginalized East London learners, he highlights its impact as a sociohistorical construct, as well as the relevance of place as an equally pertinent cultural representation. In a nutshell, these are young men who see themselves as ‘working class’ and also live in an area that historically both defines and perpetuates this construct: East London. Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ takes on significant relevance in this theoretical model. This leads the author to a rich and nuanced reflection, of postmodern flavour, on the role that schools play as a vehicle for hegemonic values and discourse, more particularly neoliberal ambitions. He argues indeed that school plays an active role in the perpetuation of the notion of working class, and hence in the way these youths see themselves. Stahl’s book summarizes his PhD thesis and, as such, it is detailed and thorough, but also highly theoretical. Some chapters of the PhD translate better than others into readable book chapters. Chapter 1, which represents the original literature review, is a pleasant read and situates the context efficiently. Chapter 2, which adapts the theory section of the PhD study, is perhaps not as manageable for an audience that expects a mainstream publication on education, albeit an academic one; it is very much the verbatim duplication of the theory section of his PhD. Stahl’s only genuine concession to the book format is mostly dropping the methodology chapter of the thesis entirely, apart from a single page summary (p. 77). This is perhaps a pity as the visual ethnography he uses as methodology is innovative and rich. His use of visual props to get the teenagers to discuss their values, and views on society, transpires in places and does

seem both successful and fascinating. Section II showcases the findings per se and is perhaps the most enjoyable part of the volume. Though, of course, it is wise to forewarn the reader that these findings are, again, academic: Stahl confirms that his use of Bourdieu fits his observations and enables us to understand how these adolescents see themselves. There are no “findings” in the real sense of the term if the reader expects hands on tips or a pragmatic reflection on school reform. This is not – and has never been – Stahl’s objective. The work in this sense remains entirely theoretical and one might wonder if it is concrete enough to be of any use to a practitioner. In chapter 5, which focuses on social class and educational engagement, Stahl has retained much of the qualitative material in the form of large interview segments and this makes for a rich and insightful portrayal. He returns to this format in Chapter 7, which targets aspirations; it is probably this flavour that will appeal most to readers as it offers tangible immediacy with the young men’s discourse and experiences. Nothing concrete, however, flows from this and it serves as a mere window into the qualitative data collected.

It is interesting to note that some of the students selected in Stahl’s study were schooled in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). As such, his sample overlaps on a population that is often referred to in the UK as having Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). While many of Stahl’s conclusions are interesting, particularly in term of the ‘disconnect’ between school and individual aspirations and identity, it is tempting to query whether ‘race’ is in fact that relevant in the observations being made and the conceptualization offered. Ecological literature in the field of BESD has long highlighted the lack of fit which that may exist between school and learner and can may lead students to be viewed and labelled as ‘challenging’ (Visser, Daniels & Macnab, 2005). An ecological interpretation of the disconnect experienced

by learners who feel inherently marginalized at school, goes beyond socioeconomic status, race or gender, and might offer a wider scope to Stahl’s assertions.

While Stahl’s focus on neoliberalism and its impact on schooling is not a new in educational research, the study’s specific focus on white youth does remain problematic, particularly in the wider Brexit landscape. The impact of neoliberalism on the intergenerational marginalization of these white East London youth is effectively showcased. However, the fact the book entirely ignores the effect of ‘race’ as a tool of oppression against the ‘other’ within this disenfranchised socioeconomic enclave, arguably betrays to number of ‘blind spots’, such as ignoring how the anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization push-back has itself recently become a tool of marginalization and social injustice. Socioeconomic environments such as those described in the study have indeed leant hard towards Brexit, and the xenophobia on display within the British ‘working class’ since has been well documented (Mortimer, 2016). Stahl does acknowledge the literature on this phenomenon (p. 124), but decides to look beyond this, at how these white youth ‘other’ various groups and trends – including hyper-masculinity. He makes the conscious decision to examine the process of ‘othering’ widely, and hence decides to look beyond xenophobia. For example, he later discusses the ‘othering’ of ‘emos’ and the emotional punk subculture in chapter 6, in his discussion on “reaffirmation of self”, but he surprisingly does not discuss race, gender or sexual orientation. Does this ‘meaning making’ described by Stahl not itself raise social justice issues and pose significant societal threats? Stahl decides to remain silent on the question, and will perhaps be criticized by some readers for excessive leniency. His biography reveals the author has worked for over half a decade as a teacher in the context he describes. He has undoubtedly grown to feel a degree of empathy and has bonded with these otherwise

likable teens. He therefore understandably wraps, in a degree of gentle benevolence, some of the worrying observations he makes about the way these teens exclude others and reject diversity. Readers may not end up being as forgiving, or share this empathy.

Finally, of course, women are entirely absent from Stahl's study. Is this because his primary professional rapport had been established with young males only - hence making this focus more convenient for the purpose of data collection - or does Stahl assert that the processes analyzed are only relevant to British working-class males? The volume leaves these questions unanswered, and the exclusive focus on the male gender will leave the reader puzzled and raise numerous questions concerning the role and

status of female learners in this vision of the British 'working class'.

In a nutshell, many postmodernists will, in all likelihood, enjoy the sociological flavour of this text and the highly theoretical focus on the 'big picture': how does a social construct such as class in turn shape self-perception and self-realization. Critical theorists will probably deplore the lack of reflection around social justice implications of the phenomenon described: a social class marginalizing others, even if it is itself the victim of a harsh post-Thatcherite exclusion from wealth. As for classroom practitioners, they will feel rather short changed and empty handed, as there are really no immediate or tangible take-aways here offered for the field.

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