



## Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

### Dis-identification and class identity

#### Book Chapter

How to cite:

Savage, Mike; Silva, Elizabeth and Warde, Alan (2010). Dis-identification and class identity. In: ed. Cultural analysis and Bourdieu's legacy: settling accounts and developing alternatives. Culture, Economy and the Social. London: Routledge, pp. 60–74.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415495356/>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

**DIS-IDENTIFICATION AND CLASS IDENTITY****Mike Savage, Elizabeth B. Silva, Alan Warde**

Bourdieu's contribution to stratification analysis is controversial. He offered a subtle and complex analysis in his essay 'What makes a social class?' (1987), the significance and coherence of which are lucidly teased out by Elliot Weininger (2005). The analysis entailed the isolation of different types of capital, and the possibilities for their combination, conversion and transmission as they operate across different fields. The essay explicitly rejected the possibility to read off class formation or class identification from distributions of capital. A somewhat different impression is given in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), where the notion of class habitus serves to underpin a fairly simple correspondence between class position and cultural practice and within which actors' reflections on their class identity have little part to play. The results of this disjuncture may be partly understood in the context of the relationship of Bourdieu and his school to mainstream European stratification theorists. The latter criticized Bourdieu for lack of theoretical and technical rigour and sought to exclude his approach from wider consideration. In turn, Bourdieu ignored substantive sociological issues upon which that orthodoxy thrived. One such issue was class identity, a phenomenon which had always intrigued positivist approaches to class analysis, because of the lack of correspondence between 'objective' characteristics and

'subjective' perceptions of class location. Bourdieu, of course, considered one aspect of his general theoretical contribution to be the overcoming of such a distinction and hence probably never recognized it as a relevant problem. However, other scholars inspired by but not aligned with the Bourdieusian programme, of whom there were many in Britain, were concerned to examine the alignment between his work and mainstream class analysis and make connections between them (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Devine et al., 2005; Savage et al., 2005, Le Roux et al., 2008). One topic for such attention became class identity, or more specifically 'dis-identification', which concept was used as an orientation to contemporary debates in Britain.

Prompted by high profile claims that we now live in a 'classless society', yet mindful of great, and intensifying, social inequalities, sociologists in the past decade have explored the means by which people identify with, and more generally talk about social class (for examples see Savage, 2000; Devine, et al. 2005) This body of work has generated a large measure of agreement about the paradoxical and ambivalent features of contemporary class awareness. At one level, the idea of class seems to be widely understood and is clearly recognized as an important feature of social inequality. Yet, at the same time, people are generally reluctant to identify themselves unambiguously as members of social classes and class identities do not necessarily seem highly meaningful to them. This seems different to the main emphases of the classical tradition of post-war British sociology and cultural studies which emphasized how distinctive class cultures were related to structural class inequalities and political mobilization (Marshall, et al. 1988; Devine and Savage, 2005; Reay, 2005). This recent work, often indebted to the arguments of Pierre Bourdieu, focuses

instead on evasions and ‘dis-identifications’ from class (Skeggs, 1997 and 2004a; Bottero 2005, Payne and Glew, 2005).

Taking stock of this recent revival of interest in class identities, we explore familiar questions using detailed survey and qualitative (interview and focus group) material generated as part of the ‘Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion’ (CCSE) project to offer an account of the nature of contemporary class awareness.<sup>1</sup> Do people in the UK feel that they belong to a social class, and if so, which ones? To what extent are such identities meaningful, and do they incorporate class terminology into their talk, whether through survey responses, in qualitative interviews or focus groups?

In the first part of the paper we examine key unresolved issues in arguments about ‘dis-identification’ from class. Secondly, we report on the evidence from class consciousness gathered from the survey material generated as part of the CCSE project which points to strikingly limited amounts of overt class identification. Thirdly, we examine the ‘class talk’ evident from both focus groups and interviews to review the forms and contexts in which the term class is explicitly used currently by people in the UK. Here we show that very few people willingly and unreservedly claimed direct class membership, especially of the middle class, except when this is defined fluidly, for instance as part of a ‘mobility story’. In that sense we argue that ‘dis-identification’ is at least as pertinent in distancing people from middle-class identities as from stigmatized working-class ones. This ambivalence demonstrates how our research participants sought to distance themselves from direct class

categorization, while personally often simultaneously being well aware of the existence of a 'politics of classification'.

### **Dis-identification?**

Since the 1990s British sociologists have probed an intriguing paradox: that while social inequalities in life chances have intensified, there actually appears to be limited, and possibly declining, overt class consciousness and awareness (e.g. Bradley 1996; Skeggs, 1997; Savage, 2000; Crompton, 2008). Some sociological theorists have argued that class awareness has declined as a result of globalization, the emergence of reflexive modernity, and the development of consumer cultures, especially through the way these encourage individualization (Giddens, 1991b; Bauman, 1998). More recently however, critics have emphasized that class identities have been re-made rather than eradicated, less along lines of collective and solidaristic sentiments and more through individualized emotional frames (Savage, 2000). Interview data have been mobilized to demonstrate how the minutiae of class hierarchies continue to inform the making of differences in daily life, much of which has been influenced by feminist concerns (Bradley, 1996; Devine, 1992; Lawler, 2000; Savage, et al. 2001; Walkerdine, et al. 2001; Payne and Grew, 2005). Similar findings have been elaborated on the basis of ethnographic evidence (Skeggs, 1997; Hey, 1997; Charlesworth, 2000; Evans, 2006), surveys (Savage, 2000; Heath, 2008), and historical and documentary analyses (Savage, 2005b; Savage, 2007; Lawler, 2008).

Arguments about ‘dis-identification’ stem from Beverly Skeggs’s (1997) pivotal work, based on a longitudinal ethnography of young working-class women in the Midlands in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Skeggs argued that class is absolutely central to the lives of the young women. Yet, so powerful was class as a structuring feature, that the women themselves could not easily articulate an account of it. Instead, they were more vested in respectable and feminine identities which were more legitimate and socially acceptable. Elements of this approach which emphasise the mismatch between objective life chances and people’s subjective awareness of class can be traced to Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, and now forms the current orthodoxy in the UK (for other similar statements, Walkerdine, et al.1997; Hey, 1997; Reay, 1998b; Savage, 2000; Savage, et al. 2001). It is also increasingly influential in other countries, for instance Chile (Mendez, 2008) and Denmark (Prieur, 2008).

However, the ‘dis-identification’ argument raises a series of important critical issues. We highlight four of them.

1. It can be used to justify ‘false consciousness’ models of identities, which allow researchers to read behind what people actually say in order to reveal a ‘deeper’ identity which is only accessible to the skillful researcher. The issue here is how one handles what is said by respondents. In her chapter on ‘(Dis)Identifications of Class’, few of Skeggs’s (1997) participants actually mention class at all, and the focus is on how notions of moral worth and value are talked about in more elliptical ways. Although this demonstrates very effectively the power of stigmatizing and moralizing forces, it is contestable whether class

is the fundamental underpinning of their discomforts. Alternative concepts, such as status, might do the job equally well. Most importantly, and in keeping with feminist arguments, it may be preferable to avoid seeing 'dis-identification' as an absence of class identity and instead demonstrate the positive and performative ways that class is actively effaced, exploring the precise terms in which class is dissimulated. Investigation requires probing to determine whether when people discuss moral and political issues associated with inequality they are actually using a form of class-based frame of reference, even if not overtly using class terminology.

2. It is not clear whether dis-identification is restricted to those holding working-class identities. Are the middle classes, who presumably feel less stigmatized, less likely to dis-identify from class? Or, is there a more general process by which everyone feels that they need to distance themselves from the more overt language of class? For example: 'Who would want to be seen as working class? (perhaps only academics are left)', Skeggs muses (1997:95). However, not all of the working class 'dis-identify'. Survey evidence typically indicates that over half the population continues to see themselves as working class, there having been only a moderate decline in working-class identification since the 1960s (Evans, 1992) despite de-industrialization and the shrinking numbers of manual workers. As Mike Savage and colleagues (2001) argued, there is also a tendency for the contemporary middle classes to reject direct middle class identification through focusing on their 'mobility stories'.

3. What is the relationship between class and other inequalities, notably gender? Possibly the working-class women studied by Skeggs are more likely to dis-identify with the working class than are working-class men? However, ethnographic evidence, for example that presented by Simon Charlesworth (2000), does not suggest that young working-class men are particularly proud of being working class. Nor does survey data necessarily suggest that on the whole women are less likely to identify as working class than men (see the discussion in Heath, et al. 2008).

4. Finally, what is actually meant by class labels, notably middle class and working class, which have always been the two most popular ways of defining one's class identity? Savage et al. (2001) argued that it is less important to focus on the precise class label used, and more on how people narrate class; the major difference being between those who were confident enough to use class labels reflexively and those who feel defensive and prefer to avoid being positioned in class terms. The latter are often concerned to emphasize that they are 'ordinary', which they do either by adopting a middle-class label (taken to mean average, typical or normal) or a working-class one (also taken to mean typical because 'most people work').

To explore these issues further we use results from the CCSE project whose mixed method research design offered some considerable advantages (Silva, et al. 2009). The project comprises survey data (from a nationally representative sample of 1564 respondents in the UK, and an ethnic boost sample of 227 individuals). It also includes qualitative interviews with 44 householders (22 of whom also answered the questionnaire, making it possible to



link their survey and interview accounts) and 11 members of the British 'elite'. It also contains data from 25 focus groups involving 143 participants. The survey focused on respondents' cultural taste, knowledge, and participation in the areas of visual art, reading, music, sport, television and film, and embodiment. While we do not report our detailed analyses of this material here (see the comprehensive account in Bennett, et al. 2009), we should note that the study demonstrates that class does have a primary and powerful structuring effect on cultural tastes and participation. We therefore take it as given for the purposes of this paper that class is objectively very important in affecting cultural practices and life chances. Our focus in this chapter is on how the research material - survey responses, interviews and focus groups - convey popular understandings of class and class positions.

### **The limits of class identity: survey evidence**

The survey contained two relevant questions about class identity: whether respondents thought of themselves as belonging to a social class, and whether or not they did, which it would be if they had to choose.<sup>2</sup> This last question mirrors similar questions asked on numerous other British surveys (for instance *British Social Attitudes* survey, see Heath, et al. 2008) and allows us to make some comparisons with other survey analyses.

One intriguing finding is that only 33 per cent of our sample thought of themselves as belonging to a social class, the lowest level ever found in a UK survey - considerably below

the figure of 45 per cent which was found in the survey conducted at a similar time and reported by Anthony Heath and colleagues (2008). Why might our responses be lower? Perhaps the positioning of this question after a battery of questions about people's cultural interests somehow discouraged respondents from expressing the feeling that they belonged to a class, maybe because they had been made more aware of the power of cultural classifications and hence wanted to avoid – through refusing a class identity – the impression that they themselves were directly involved in processes of classification.

Responses to this question are structured partly in the manner anticipated by Skeggs (1997). Those who are most structurally disadvantaged - the young, the poorly educated and women - are the most likely not to report a class identity. The proportion of those who feel they belong to a class drops to 22 per cent amongst the 18-24 year olds, 29 per cent amongst women, and 28 per cent of those with no educational qualifications. Higher levels of class identification are exhibited by men (37 per cent), those over 65 years of age (37 per cent), the professional and executive class (38 per cent) and university graduates (39 per cent).

### Identification and class identity

| Categories         |                 | Belongs to a class | Does not belong to class | Total   |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------|
|                    |                 | %                  | %                        | Numbers |
| Gender             | Men             | 37                 | 63                       | 708     |
|                    | Women           | 29                 | 71                       | 849     |
| Age                | 18-24 year olds | 22                 | 79                       | 144     |
|                    | 25-34           | 30                 | 70                       | 295     |
|                    | 35-44           | 34                 | 66                       | 314     |
|                    | 45-54           | 35                 | 65                       | 266     |
|                    | 55-64           | 33                 | 67                       | 238     |
|                    | 65-74           | 37                 | 63                       | 168     |
|                    | 75+             | 37                 | 63                       | 129     |
| Occupational class | Professional &  | 38                 | 62                       | 360     |
|                    | Intermediate    | 32                 | 68                       | 446     |
|                    | Working class   | 31                 | 69                       | 708     |
| Educational level  | No educational  | 29                 | 71                       | 417     |
|                    | 'O' level       | 28                 | 72                       | 371     |
|                    | 'A' level       | 32                 | 68                       | 210     |
|                    | Vocational      | 37                 | 63                       | 169     |
|                    | University      | 39                 | 61                       | 356     |
| Total              |                 | 32.5               | 67.5                     | 1557    |

Whether or not they normally thought of themselves as belonging to a class, all respondents were asked in the follow-up question to say which class they thought they belonged to. An unusually high proportion, eight per cent, refused a class identity even when prompted (the usual figure is below five per cent). The general patterns thereafter are similar to findings from other studies. Two thirds identify themselves either as middle or working class, with those identifying as working class (41 per cent) easily outnumbering those who see themselves as middle class (27 per cent). If one puts together all the working-class labels (including lower working-class, three per cent, upper working-class, nine per cent), then 53 per cent identify as working class, compared to 39 per cent who claim to be middle class (including 10 per cent lower middle-class, and two per cent upper middle-class). Hardly anyone thinks they are upper class. The extent to which middle-class labels remain relatively unpopular is striking: unlike most other nations, the British still do not adopt middle-class identity as their ‘default’ position (see the comparative discussion in Zunz 2002).

### **Class talk: the power of classification**

Our qualitative data generally bear out the survey findings regarding the relatively muted character of direct class identification, but with some important caveats and qualifications. We found relatively little explicit reference to class in the interviews, but the notion was addressed more frequently and directly in the focus groups whose members had the chance to engage collectively with each other. This contrast reminds us that different methods

themselves are conducive to producing different kinds of class accounts (see Silva et al. 2009). In only two out of 11 'elite' interviews and in 17 out of our 44 household interviews was 'class' mentioned at any point by the interviewee. For the elite interviews these two cases emerged spontaneously out of discussion. For the household interviews, references to class usually arose in response to a question at the end, where the interviewee was shown a card with different classes on it and asked to pick which, if any, applied to them (see question in note 2), although this question was not systematically asked in every case. Only in five cases out of 44 did the interviewees introduce the term 'class' themselves in their discussion, where it invariably served as an adjectival qualifier. For instance, Maria, a teacher from a northern city, referred to her mother growing up in 'working-class inner-city'. Jenny, a writer, talked about 'working-class' music. Vasudev, an owner of a small business, talked about his house being in 'not a very upper-class area'.

By contrast, the term class was explicitly used more frequently by participants in focus groups, where it features in 13 out of the 25 groups. Only Amani, in the women professional focus group, explicitly denied class belonging: 'I do not fit into any class.' However, the idea that class is of limited importance was quite widespread. The 'business elites' group seemed to think that class has disappeared, and there were other instances of this opinion among 'professionals' and the 'Black middle-class'. However, class - with a qualifier like working or middle - was used on many occasions (as an adjective) to explain differences in behaviour. It was often used after the fashion of lay sociology. In all but two of the focus groups where the term is used, people demonstrate that they know how to use the concept of class to classify people or practices. That means that the term class is used to

talk about others more than about self, more as an account of ‘the world out there’ than something which is directly relevant to the personal experience of any individual in the group.

CCSE has an unusual resource to employ since ten of the interviewees who were asked about class had also previously answered the survey, allowing identification of discrepancies between what was claimed in these two research encounters. Interestingly, two out of the ten actually changed their class identification at the interview (from middle to ‘upper working’ class in the case of Jim Shaw, a building consultant and from working class to ‘lower middle class’ in the case of secondary school teacher Rita McKay).

When asked about his social class Jim Shaw, a retired, affluent contractor who had worked in the building trade changed his mind about whether he was middle class: ‘I would say upper working-class’. Discussing how he might feel in a potentially embarrassing social situation of a vignette, he emphasized that you ‘take me as you get me and that’s it.’ ‘I wouldn’t say we like to be flash or anything like that, we just like to be normal’. ‘...we never go out of our way just to say to people look at us, we’ve plenty of money sort of thing you know.’ Jim is one example indicating the muted appeal of middle class identity partly due to its assumed association with snobbish characteristics. Even the well off who could have chosen to pass themselves off as middle class if they had wanted to, found this a problem to negotiate.

This type of disavowal of being middle class, which is seen to embody a kind of conspicuous display and a contrived way of relating to others (on the historical precedents of which see Savage 2005b), was even exhibited by a young couple who acknowledge their own social and cultural advantages. Secondary school teacher Rita McKay is white, has a rural background and feels at home living in a secluded part of Scotland. She has middle-class professional parents. Her dream home would be bigger but similar to the current one. 'I think I... certainly, you know, I have kind of middle-class values I think, and obviously sort of middle-class profession as well'. The qualifiers are informative. She ultimately refuses to classify herself straightforwardly as middle class, saying 'I think probably lower middle-class'. The same applies to her husband, an agricultural supplies salesman, who prides himself on his cultured upbringing: 'I was brought up to polish my shoes, hence I have never owned a pair of trainers'. Yet he also classified himself as lower middle-class, reflecting:

'I wouldn't say we were well off, we're both from families who own ground, more my side than the other, my father's a fairly large area, but up further north. I don't know maybe a bit of snobbery but salary as opposed to a weekly wage I think comes into it, that's from the old school. [...] Probably social circle, a lot of professional friends, whether it's you know services, school teacher friends, professional on the sales side of things. I'm as happy going to a black tie dinner as I am going to McDonalds and that side so...'

The shifts in self identification represented by Jim and Rita (and shared with her husband) support Savage et al.'s (2001) suggestion that the distinction between middle class and working class may be less salient to people than sociologists might like to think and also implies strongly that research context makes a difference.

Of those ten interviewees, five reported in the survey that they normally thought of themselves as belonging to a social class. Three of these, Vasudev, a business owner, and James, and Jenny, university educated professionals, went on to identify themselves as middle class. However, neither Vasudev nor James incorporated significant reference to class into their interviews about their daily lives and cultural consumption.

Nevertheless, even though our most privileged interviewees did not talk directly about being middle or upper class, this did not prevent some of them from showing distance from, even resentment towards, the working class. In some respects, a desire to evade classification is their overriding concern. Thus Jenny Hammett who studied to be a librarian, and is creative writing tutor for university, as well as a published writer, discussing her taste in music, says when explaining why she does not like jazz, country and western, electronic, heavy metal and urban music, that '... maybe it's more a kind of, I don't know about working class or background thing, I don't know. Having said that my brothers liked country, my sister likes country.' Thinking aloud, seeking to understand the roots of her preferences, she comments that she is working class by origin, though she has identified herself as lower middle class in her survey responses. Yet she is culturally sophisticated. For a dream home she says she would like a minimalist style and cites



projects from the television programme 'Grand Designs' (Silva and Wright 2009). She is an omnivore (see Warde et al. 2007), knowledgeable and engaged with many forms of culture.

Similar tendencies are evident amongst other research participants who express dislike for 'working class' practices but seek to avoid defining themselves as straightforwardly middle class. Fruit Bat, a young laboratory technician talks about 'reverse snobbery': '...I've heard people say that they don't want to go to opera for instance, or theatre because that's above them or you know that's for people with taste and they're not interested in it... which is a reverse of someone wanting to go but not being allowed.' His dream home would be a traditional old fashioned manor house or castle where he could entertain large groups of people. When presented in interview with a list of classes to which he might belong he says:

Oh, I hate classes. Well, I'm definitely not upper class. And I'm not really sure the difference between working and middle class any more because it seems a little bit blurred. ... I'd have to say middle. I think standards have changed so much, it's not a case of having to go down the pit for three days in a row, coming up, you know, back to your bare house and eating bread for tea. ...

Another instance is Cherie Campbell, a heritage worker who is happy to talk about the politics of snobbery, but did not normally think of herself as belonging to a class (she claimed to be middle class when pressed in the survey). In discussing her response to an attitude question in the survey proposing that the old snobbery associated with cultural

taste had disappeared, she changed her mind in the interview in the light of her distaste for the then recent media naming and portraying of working class people as ‘chavs’.

... because they’ve taken to wearing Burberry baseball caps, and this bling jewellery and the gold plated jewellery and all this kind of stuff, ...you wouldn’t say that about a coloured person or somebody on the basis of their sex but I mean just every time you pick up the paper they’re saying nasty things about the chav style, and what they’re really talking about is people, the way people dress in housing schemes and it’s nasty.

These accounts indicate a concern to establish distance from the labels attached to classes when applied to self, even whilst recognizing their applicability to others. In addition they reveal a distinctive feature of contemporary class talk, discernable more generally in interviews and focus groups, which is a concern to resist middle-class identities. By contrast, and contrary to Skeggs (1997) who emphasizes the stigmatized nature of working class identities, we detected a more vibrant and positive evaluation of the ‘down to earth’ values associated with the working class, based around a lack of pretension. Consider Joe Smith, an electrician, ‘... if anyone comes round, they take us as they find us.’ For his dream home: ‘It doesn’t have to be a grand old house or nothing like that, just new, modern and posh!’ His wife Edie comments: ‘We’re just working class, we’re just your everyday, we haven’t got loads of money, we haven’t got, we don’t, no airs and graces, just working class we are.’ A similar form of working class identity was also explicitly and readily

embraced by Joe. The testimony of Jim Shaw (above) also reflects a positive evaluation of working class virtues.

Resistance to middle class identity, when considered together with a second feature, an awareness of the politics of classification, offers a distinctive angle through which to understand 'dis-identification' from class. This may lead either to a reflexive concern to emphasize one's own mobility between classes, or, in some contexts, to pockets of political class consciousness.

One important device allowing people to refuse a direct class identity whilst recognizing how classes involve cultural classification, is the deployment of a mobility story. This allows them to acknowledge that they are now middle class, but as part of a story of how they had risen in the social ladder and, therefore, were not born into privilege. Ali's account, from the lesbian focus group, was probably the most explicit in adopting a middle class identity, but this was premised on the fact that she had not been born into this class.

**Ali:** It's all kind of changed my own taste in a way, kind of thing. But I know that I'm quite middle class actually you know. I'm like from a working class background but, you know..., I go to university, you know, I listen to Radio 4, I like classical music and jazz blah, blah, blah..., you know, I do karaoke as well but you know my... they're tastes like... when I'm myself my tastes are quite to tastes of my family or tastes I was brought up with. I don't feel snobby about other people's choices about that. I just know what I like for myself.

Thus, tellingly, Ali's recognition of her middle-class tastes was linked to an account of her social mobility, so becoming a marker of her achievements and individuality (see also Savage et al. 2001, Savage 2007). We can also see her awareness of the power of cultural classification. Such recognition is evident amongst many of the ethnic minorities. Angela from the Black middle-class focus group is one example.

**Angela:** Yes, yeah, my parents were, without doubt, of working class background and I went to a girls' grammar school in a very nice area of [City], and I went on to quite a nice sixth form and then I got into Oxford, so there was kind of quite a spread in terms of my life experiences based from [City] through to university and then entering the law and I guess that I've made my own personal decisions about what I, what I take on and what I don't. And I feel quite lucky in that I feel I understand um some middle-class. I mean I know that I'm classed as middle class now because of my occupation, but certain things would have been lost on me, I think, if I hadn't had the experience that I have of the educational system.

A further example was evident in the account of Nimesh Gopal, a catering supervisor in the West Midlands, who saw that 'in terms of experience' he was 'made middle class'. 'I would say that I'm a middle class you see. Although I am working class but I have seen life when I was a shopkeeper and other things you see, so I would rather say middle class.' While the location of his home, the cultural capital he displayed, the self-classification of his wife and his job delivering meals on wheels to pensioners all pointed to an objective

working class location, he prefers to name an 'earned' middle-class identity for himself. Overall, no one expressed great pride in being middle class, nor any resultant sense of superiority.

Not all ethnic minority members felt confident enough to deploy the language of class. None of the four Asian focus groups use the term class at all, ethnicity being the primary and fundamental marker of identification. For them, class is clearly not a very significant consideration, or strong identity, at least in relation to issues of taste. Less highly educated and older ethnic minorities were more defensive. Stafford's case is revealing. He is Afro-Caribbean, works as an assembler and welder, is 62 years old and lives on his own in housing association property. The interviewer noted that the experience of being interviewed might have felt 'like a trial' to him. Two exchanges sum him up. Talking about TV viewing he says he does not like to go deeply into things. Talking about his style of dress he says that he prefers not to stand out. 'I'm not from here' is a notion figuring strongly in his account. In the survey he claimed not normally to see himself as a member of a class (though he chose a working class identity when pressed) and he agreed that snobbery was a thing of the past, which he seemed to associate with his experience of work. He said, referring to employers or managers being less aloof and authoritarian: 'they are more approachable now'.

**Interviewer:** ... class distinctions... do you think they're less important now?

**Stafford:** It could be there, depends on where you go. But I think society lose a bit of that now because of the way people live you know.

**Interviewer:** In what way? What do you mean ‘the way people live’?

**Stafford:** Well you have a breakdown, from the hierarchies come down, you have a breakdown in society so – you find they are approachable easily now rather than before.

**Interviewer:** so ‘they’ being people of higher, higher in the hierarchy or...?

**Stafford:** or could be, it could be other people you get more educated now so you can deliver yourself, so you can approach anybody, you don’t care where they come from or who they are. You just say what you feel or what you like so you don’t subordinate much now.

An overarching awareness of the politics of classification can lead to various kinds of responses, ranging from a refusal of middle class identity, to the deployment of mobility stories, and to various forms of defensiveness. However, in certain situations it can lead instead to a politicized response. This was especially marked in the three Welsh working-class focus groups. They were distinctive in the extent to which they see the social world and the operation of culture in class terms, allied also to a national sense of Welshness. They make quite extensive use of the concept of class, and are clearly aware that class plays a role in the making of personal and social boundaries, and partly as a consequence of the different cultural activities with which classes engage. They talk directly about the stigmatizing power of the middle classes, and the way that elites manipulate cultural and social participation (see also Warde 2008b). Here is an example from the skilled manual workers focus group:

**Moderator:** I don't like talking about social class because it makes us sound like snobs but ...

**BJ** Yeah, but there is a class difference there. There is yes.

**Liz** Definitely.

**BJ** I work for 'Odd-Bins' and I go to wine tastings and people ask me my opinion on wines. Yeah, I go to wine tastings and you meet some quite arty geeks there. And they are all like sniffing the wine.

A similar account was evident amongst the supervisors of manual workers:

**Dai** But ignoring that, the people who go to the opera, they seem to understand where the play takes place. What those people are feeling. And that's not what we do. It's more a social type of thing again. It's been taught to them in their schools.

**Glyn** Again you're talking about a class difference ...

**Dai** I wouldn't say class, I'd say *crachach*. [Authors'note: *crachach* means 'posh']

**Glyn** No, no, it's a class difference. The people that go to this are people... [pause] Convent Garden, for instance, the majority of people that go there, well, they are not short of a few bob. And it's part of their social life. And the ordinary people, I say the ordinary people because whatever we might say about ourselves, working class, others think they are middle class, but a lot of us don't want to mix, not mix, but don't want to be looked down upon.

This group also had a distinctly class based recognition of the power of culture, with a dispute about whether public support for the arts was concerned with subsidising ‘the middle class’ (Dai’s view) or ‘the upper middle class’ (Glyn’s view). However, other disadvantaged groups in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland did not produce this kind of class awareness and resentment.<sup>3</sup> As the reference to *crachach* suggest, there seems to be a distinctively Welsh form of class awareness, one able to mobilize the resources of national identity to buttress class awareness.

It is clear from all these examples that, in talking about class, many research participants understand that a wider politics of classification exists. This may take the lay sociological form of understanding that certain class groups are predisposed to particular sorts of things, a taste for particular sports or musical genres, for example. It may very occasionally (as with the Welsh working-class groups) lead to a politicized analysis in which the state is seen as supporting middle class culture. Alternatively, it may provoke a reaction which is more an assertion of individual exceptionalism, that one’s own particular biography confounds any specific class stereotyping. In other instances it leads to defensiveness. We would argue that this awareness of the recognition of the importance of classification processes is central to how individuals deploy idioms of class in their accounts and equally how they avoid the use of the term. Moreover, we found instances in which these very processes of classification affected the accounts generated in our research as the rules of interaction in focus groups, or in interviews, positioned individuals differently in the research relationship, affecting the topics of talk (see Silva and Wright 2005).



## Conclusions

Although our data have their limitations, we feel confident enough to draw three substantive conclusions. Firstly, claiming a class identity is a minority response if conceived in terms of membership of a class collectivity in the classical sociological sense, especially if the corollary is expressly class politics. Only the Welsh working-class exhibited any political class consciousness. Most people, from all social groups, present ambivalent accounts of class position and location. However, lack of direct awareness and explicit acknowledgement of one's own class membership is mediated by a wider recognition of the cultural politics of class, in which they have a sense of the stakes – snobbishness, elitism, ordinariness, decency, which are implied in the mobilization of class idioms. This demonstrates, following Bourdieu and Skeggs, the importance of the issues posed by 'dis-identification' arguments. People generally recognize that they live in an unequal social world. This animates many people's sensitivity to a wider politics of positioning and classification in which they are keen to find reasons for being themselves outside or beyond social labels, whether by effacing them, parodying them (as in the *crachach* reference) , providing mobility stories to explain how they are transitional between them, and so forth. Ambivalence is then not the product of confusion or ignorance, but actively and creatively produced. It is also a means of elaborating a distinctive social identity which recognizes the pervasiveness of inequality.

Second, whereas much of the literature focuses on working class dis-identification, we have evidence of similar processes amongst the middle classes. Those who have benefited most from the remaking of neo-liberal capitalism often seek to efface their own distinctive privileges. Many people continue to find it difficult to claim a middle class identity, resisting being defined straightforwardly as ‘middle class’ in contrast with many other nations, where a middle class identity is often chosen as relatively ‘neutral’ (Devine 2004 and 2005, Zunz 2002). Working class identification is actually more common among survey respondents, and some people continue to take pride in seeing themselves as working class.

Third, and most speculatively, perhaps a comprehensive analysis of contemporary class identities needs to go beyond the concept of dis-identification. Although this concept was vital in generating a more subtle account of class identities, it suffers from the potential problem of assuming a ‘deficit’ view of identity, where the lack of an obvious class identification is emphasized. Following feminist arguments about identity, it is more useful to focus on the mechanisms by which even ambivalent and hesitant identities are manufactured and defined. This, we suggest, supplies an agenda for the study of the ‘politics of classification’, of the way that people today are surrounded by innumerable modes of classification - social, cultural, moral, ethical - which create instabilities and anxieties at the same time as reproducing class terminology.

Finally, on a theoretical note, the phenomenon of dis-identification supplies a reason for agreeing with Bourdieu that orthodox approaches which distinguish sharply between

objective and subjective class are likely to be ineffective, but that nevertheless, paying specific attention to how people understand the attributes of class positions, and how they talk about class, is a valuable focus for continuing sociological investigation. Class identity was difficult for Bourdieu theoretically because he could offer no immediate apparent connection between the combinations of different types and volume of capital of an agent and class identity, other than to appeal to its being intrinsic to class habitus. The view that the concept of habitus presents too passive or automatic an account of the self-conscious actor has led many scholars, otherwise or formerly sympathetic to Bourdieu, to emphasize processes of classification (e.g. Lamont, this volume). This would appear compatible with a recognition that the distribution of capitals within populations provides a useful way to understand structural inequalities (Savage et al., 2005; Warde and Savage, 2010) while still leaving implications for class identity somewhat opaque. One corrective may be to examine the historical record. The analysis by Heath and colleagues (2008) of *The British Social Attitude* survey data shows that since the 1960s, over half the population have typically responded to questions asking them if they normally think they belong to a social class with a negative reply. Savage (2007), comparing the accounts of Mass-Observers in 1948 with those in the 1990s, argues that whereas in the earlier period the educated middle classes thought it was vulgar to talk about class and would tend to give terse and evasive responses to directives probing this issue, by the 1990s, they were more likely to talk, sometimes at length, about their class experiences and identities. If the content of class talk is historically and institutionally dependent then we need both a theoretical framework which accounts for the specific power contexts in which culture operates as a mechanism for classification (cf.

Bennett, this volume) and further empirical work to disentangle the significance of what is, and what is not said.

## **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank Tony Bennett, Annick Prieur and Gitte Sommer Harrits for comments on a previous version of this paper.

## **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> The research team for the ESRC project Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: A Critical Investigation (Award no R000239801) comprised Tony Bennett (Principal Applicant), Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde (Co-Applicants), David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal (Research Fellows). The applicants were jointly responsible for the design of the national survey and the focus groups and household interviews that generated the quantitative and qualitative data for the project. Elizabeth Silva, assisted by David Wright, coordinated the analyses of the qualitative data from the focus groups and household interviews. Mike Savage and Alan Warde, assisted by Modesto Gayo-Cal, co-ordinated the analyses of the quantitative data produced by the survey. Tony Bennett was responsible for the overall direction and coordination of the project.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?’ Yes/No. ‘If you had to choose one from the following, which social class would you say you belonged to?’ Lower working, working, upper working, lower middle, middle, upper middle, upper, none of these.

<sup>3</sup> We did not conduct focus groups with working class participants in Scotland, which might also have produced similar findings. The working class focus groups conducted in England were all from ethnic minority communities. The focus group with benefit claimants in Northern Ireland made no reference to issues of class at all.