Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class

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ABSTRACT

Emotional and psychic responses to class and class inequalities are routinely relegated to the realm of individual psychology if they are addressed at all. All too often in sociological research such psychic responses are individualized, pushed out of the wider social picture. However, in this article, I argue that there is a powerful dynamic between emotions, the psyche and class inequalities that is as much about the makings of class as it is about its consequences. In contemporary British society social class is not only etched into our culture, it is still deeply etched into our psyches, despite class awareness and class consciousness being seen as 'a thing of the past'. In the article I draw on educational case studies to demonstrate some of the ways in which affective aspects of class – feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition, abjection and the markings of taste constitute a psychic economy of social class. This psychic economy, despite being largely ignored in both everyday commonsense understandings and academic theories, contributes powerfully to the ways we are, feel and act.

KEY WORDS

class consciousness / emotions / social class / the psyche

Introduction

Class could be something in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman:

> … a way of growing, feeling, judging, taken out of the resources of generations gone before. (Jackson and Marsden, 1964: 172)

According to Mike Savage (2000) class identities are to be found in practices and accounts of practices. They are also, I would argue, to be found in how individuals think and feel about those practices. In fact there is a circularity at play here. It could be argued that it is class thinking and feeling that generates class practices. At the very least there is a generative dynamic between thinking, feeling and practices. The focus of this article, then, is class thinking and feeling – what I term the psychic landscape of social class.

In many ways this is a speculative piece of work. I want to retrieve the unretrievable, to uncover what is often denied, overlooked or buried in examinations of social class. The contemporary orthodoxy is that class consciousness and class awareness no longer exist.

Yet class consciousness as articulated in earlier sociological theory has always been problematic, seen narrowly in terms of a politicized understanding of class location (Marshall, 1997; Wright, 1979). Social class was abandoned as a category at precisely the point at which the working classes were seen to have sold out to the Right and therefore could no longer be said to have a class consciousness. As a result the emotional experience of being classed has never been satisfactorily addressed. Theories of class consciousness, which always focused on the working classes and apparently support working-class experience, could be said in retrospect to have failed to examine it at all. In contrast, I want to argue for a different kind of class consciousness, which, while often unrecognized, still pervades our inner worlds and outer practices; to recognize that class is always lived on both a conscious and unconscious level. My contention is that beneath socio-economic categorization, underneath class practices, lies a psychic economy of class that has been largely invisible in academic accounts and commonsense understandings.

Emotions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities appear to lay firmly in the realm of individual psychology. All too often in mainstream sociological research such psychic responses are individualized, pushed out of the wider social picture. The exception is feminist work spanning Carolyn Steedman's and Valerie Walkerdine's seminal writing in the 1980s to that of Steph Lawler and Bev Skeggs in the 2000s (Lawler, 2000; Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Steedman, 1986; Walkerdine, 1984). This work, all by educated working-class women, has played an important part in expanding understandings of social class to theorize class as implicit in everyday social processes and interactions. Such conceptualizations challenge some of the central grand narratives of sociology with their concern only for whether or not the working classes exhibited class consciousness in the sense of a politicized awareness of their social positioning. Drawing on this body of feminist theorizing and my own earlier work, I want to argue that emotions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities contribute powerfully to the makings of class.

In contemporary British society social class is not only etched into our culture, it is still deeply etched into our psyches, despite claims of classlessness (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Andrew Sayer's (2005) treatize on the moral

significance of class allows us to map out a psychic landscape of class, one that joins socio-economic categorization, the static safe characteristics of social class, with far more dangerous mobile, affective aspects. He writes about the varying degrees of resentment, defensiveness, guilt and shame that characterize different class positions:

> Insofar as actors recognize the arbitrariness and injustice of natal class, and the ways in which it influences individuals' lives – and it is hard for them not to – it can prompt guilt, shame, resentment and defensiveness, and the balance of these feelings and the ways of handling them are likely to vary according to class position. (Sayers, 2005: 201–2)

In doing so Sayer provides a productive starting point for psychic conceptualizations of class. However, there are other emotions – envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment and pity that also contribute to the affective lexicon of class. Apart from the feminist work cited earlier, affective aspects of class – the place of memory, feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions and the markings of taste – have traditionally been ignored or downplayed in UK analyses of class. However, there does appear to be an important shift as a new sociology of social class (Ball, 2003; Charlesworth, 2000; Lawler, 2000; Reay, 1998, 2005a; Savage, 2000, 2003; Skeggs, 1997, 2004) has begun to carve out a space for affective dimensions in analyses of class. Also Bourdieu and his colleagues' (1999) classic *The Weight of the World* focuses on affective aspects of class. It documents the 'positional suffering' (p. 4), despair and misery of the French working classes that comes from lack of recognition and low social standing.

There is a long history of developing psychoanalytic insights into relations of race and ethnicity, which illustrate how racialized identities are formed in a relational dynamic of fear, power and desire (Fanon, 1969), but very little scholarship on the workings of the psyche in relation to social class (although see Lucey and Reay, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001). All too often this is seen as a micro issue, the concern of sub-disciplines of psychology such as psychotherapy, if it is viewed as a concern at all. I want to argue and make a case through my data for broadening out conceptualizations of class and establishing the psychic economy of class as a legitimate concern for sociology. We need more understanding of how social class is actually lived, of how it informs our inner worlds to complement research on how it shapes our life chances in the outer world.

On a conceptual level, by drawing on Bourdieu's concept of field (1993) and Sayer's careful analysis of moral responses to social class (2005), we can map out a psychic economy of class where a combination of arrogance, satisfaction, contempt and pride constitute an exclusivist middle-class position in the social class field and a mix of guilt, defensiveness, empathy and conciliation go to make up the 'middle-class egalitarian' (Sayer, 2005). Similarly a varying combination of resentment, envy, pride and anger constitute the solidarist fractions of the working classes while their more individualist peers are character-

ized by a mix of deference, envy and shame (Reay et al., 2005). This is not to assert that other emotions are not at play for all these groupings, of course they are. Rather, following Sayer, I have tried to identify the predominating psychic responses that characterize the various positions in the social class field. This is a theoretical mapping of the emotional life of class and one that Sayer addresses in his 2005 book *The Moral Significance of Class*. My purpose is slightly different – to begin to uncover the psycho-social dynamics of class by drawing on data from a number of recent research studies that I have worked on. I understand psycho-social dynamics of class to be the complex, difficult and nuanced ways in which class thinking, feeling and practices both generate and are generated in and through each other.

Emotional Dynamics of Social Class in Schooling

My area of specialism is sociology of education and all my empirical data relates to schooling. However, I would argue that the educational system is a social context where the workings of class are not only concentrated and made explicit but are also heavily implicit. Schools are the repositories of all kinds of fantasies, fears, hopes and desires held by individuals and social groups (Shaw, 1995) and consequently schooling is a fertile ground for exploring psycho-social and emotional aspects of classed identities (Lucey and Reay, 2000, 2002). In the rest of this article I draw on six case studies from over 10 years of researching social class in education in order to attempt to bring to life some of what I term the psychic economy of class. In particular, I focus on fear and shame, what Jacqueline Rose (2004: 12) calls 'the darkest, most discomforting colours of the psyche'. At the same time I recognize the inadequacies of my efforts – that this is an incomplete mapping – a sketch of part of the terrain that loses much of the richness, depth and detail of the broader psychic landscapes of social class. These case studies are merely pointers towards different types of class thinking and feeling that characterize different positions within the field of social class. The research projects the case studies come from include four large ESRC projects and two smaller projects both funded by King's College, London.[1]

In the following excerpt from a King's funded project on children as consumers,[2] we can glimpse working-class resentment and a degree of envy and anger, while there is evidence of middle-class defensiveness and the specificity of middle-class readings of space and place. We can also trace a class consciousness that, while rarely recognized in academic texts, nevertheless still has real effects. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman (1986: 111) points out:

> When Wilheim Reich considered the formation of class-consciousness in children (and it is extremely rare to consider it as a learned position in this way) he dismissed

envy as a usable motivational force, despite knowing that poverty, which naturally gave rise to envy is never absolute but always relative to those who have more.

Simon, a year 6 pupil at Overbury, school is one of two middle-class children in a discussion group, which also included three working-class children:

> Diane: What do you like about the local area Simon?
>
> Simon: Not much, not much at all.
>
> Andrew: There's the theatre in the Strand, you like that.
>
> Simon: But that's not local is it … The local area is congested. It makes it very crowded in the morning and noisy and things.
>
> Mia: No it isn't, your house is quiet. Your street is very quiet.
>
> Simon: Once you get down my street it is. Once you get down my street it's quiet, but … And it is polluted. When you get to the main road it's very polluted.
>
> Lennox: But you don't live on a main road. Your road isn't polluted. It's all quiet and posh.

This short piece of interaction, while never mentioning class, is infused with class symbolism and class envy and antagonism. Andrew's first comment is a veiled reference to Simon's social positioning and his possession of a very different kind of cultural capital to that which the working-class children possess. None of the three working-class children in the group had ever been to the theatre, apart from a school visit the previous year. The working-class children go on to dispute Simon's reading of the local area not because it does not reflect their experiences of the locality – it does. Rather, he is not articulating his own more privileged relationship to local spaces and places and they all interject to modify his version so that it reveals rather than elides his privilege.

If such responses were only visible when issues of relative advantage and disadvantage were raised, then a case could be made that social class only has intermediate and fluctuating efficacy in daily interactions. But the working-class children's resentment and antagonism towards Simon was reconfirmed time and time again in over 30 days of observation in his classroom. What the class teacher called 'unwarranted bullying' was a consequence of class envy, resentment and anger towards the most socially privileged child in the classroom, a child who was universally called 'poshie' by the other children. We have an accepted, acknowledged script of racism and sexism within education but classism has never been part of the agenda. However, reflexive practitioners in schools as well as researchers who have spent any concerted time in classrooms and playgrounds (Hey, 1997; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Willis, 1977) know it pervades schooling and is exacerbated when one class is in a significant majority compared to the other.

While the history of working-class schooling in the UK (Hurt, 1979; Jackson and Marsden, 1964; Vincent, 1989) has recognized, although often unsatisfactorily, the lived experience of class, it was two American studies that first charted the powerfully affective dimensions of social class (Rubin, 1976; Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Both studies demonstrated in different ways that

social class could be a felt injury. In the next case study I focus on injuries of class that are enshrined and perpetuated through policy.[3] Particularly stark is the damage generated by the increasing surveillance and regulation of pupils' learning. There has been a long history of regulative and interventionist education policy aimed at raising the achievement of working-class children (David, 1993; Tomlinson, 2001; Vincent and Warren, 1999). However, this surveillance has continued apace under the New Labour government. Research commissioned by one of the UK's teaching unions, the National Union of Teachers, in the summer of 2000, calculated that 'the more educationally successful students can now expect to take more than 75 external tests and exams during their school careers' (Smithers, 2000). Such assessment procedures are implicated in technologies of subjection (Foucault, 1977) and the struggle to gain 'intimate and secure' social relations – intimate because they feed into the ordering of subjectivity and secure because of the apparent naturalness of the categories they generate (Donald, 1985; Rose, 1989).

They also have powerful emotional consequences – of anxiety and discomfort – for all children. However, the paradox of our contemporary English assessment regime is that, while the stated aim is to raise the achievement of all children, one consequence of the growing preoccupation with testing and assessment is the fixing of failure in the working classes. In the two quotes below we can see the panopticisms of every day (Foucault, 1977: 223), which make description through examination 'a means of control and a method of domination' (p. 191):

> Hannah: I'm really scared about the SATs. Ms O'Brien [a teacher at the school] came and talked to us about our spelling, and I'm no good at spelling, and David [the class teacher] is giving us times tables tests every morning, and I'm hopeless at times tables, so I'm frightened I'll do the SATs and I'll be a nothing.
> Diane: I don't understand Hannah. You can't be a nothing.
> Hannah: Yes, you can, 'cause you have to get a level like a level 4 or a level 5, and if you're no good at spellings and times tables, you don't get those levels, and so you're a nothing.
> Diane: I'm sure that's not right.
> Hannah: Yes it is 'cause that's what Ms O'Brien was saying.

and:

> Sharon: I think I'll get a two, only Stuart will get a six.
> Diane: So if Stuart gets a six, what will that say about him?
> Sharon: He's heading for a good job and a good life, and it shows he's not gonna be living on the streets and stuff like that.
> Diane: And if you get a level two, what will that say about you?
> Sharon: Um, I might not have a good life in front of me, and I might grow up and do something naughty or something like that.

Sharon is talking about herself and one of the middle-class boys in her class. She provides a poignant summation of class destinies and how they are tied to academic achievement, illuminating how class has entered psychological categories

as a way of socially regulating normativity and pathology (see also Plummer, 2000). Both white working-class girls have already internalized an understanding of their low achievement as pathological. As their quotes illustrate, at the micro-level of the classroom there are regular glimpses of the normalizing and regulatory function of testing on children. However, although children expressed anxieties across class differences, it was not the white middle-class boys panicking about being exposed as no good through the new assessment procedures. Rather, it was the black and white working-class girls agonizing that they would be 'a nothing'. And the risks of finding they have very little value are disproportionately high for such working-class girls. These girls, in the context of schooling, inhabit a psychic economy of class defined by fear, anxiety and unease where failure looms large and success is elusive; a place where they are seen and see themselves as literally 'nothing'. As Annette Kuhn (1995: 97–8) writes:

> You can so easily internalize the judgements of a different culture and believe – no, know – that there is something shameful and wrong about you, that you are inarticulate and stupid, have nothing to say of any value or importance, that no one will listen to you in any case, that you are undeserving, unentitled, cannot think properly, are incapable of 'getting it right'.

These working-class girls, at age 10, have already internalized the judgements of a pernicious, inequitable educational system; one that flaunts its elusive meritocracy while continuing to reward those who already have the educational resources the system is meant to provide (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Charlesworth (2000) writes about the sense of nothingness, of fracture and damage that characterized his working-class respondents' sense of being, and the two girls express a similar sense of abjection, 'the invisibility of lacking an identity invested with a value recognized by others' (p. 93).

The Petty Mundane Everyday Humiliations and Slights of Social Class

The examples above are perhaps extreme cases illustrating the depth of the psychic damage social class inequalities can inflict on both working and middle-class children. However my data was also permeated by the petty mundane humiliations and slights of social class that infuse both interactions between teachers and pupils and those between pupils. Class recognitions, visceral aversions and feelings of inferiority and superiority are routine everyday aspects of school life. The examples below are drawn from an ESRC project on pupils' perspectives on their teaching and learning[4] but there were many similar examples across all six research projects. In the two excerpts below a group of ethnically mixed working-class students talk about their teachers:

> David: Some teachers are a bit snobby, sort of. And some teachers act as if the child
>   is stupid. Because they've got a posh accent. Like they talk without innits and

> mans, like they talk proper English. And they say – that isn't the way you talk
> like putting you down. Like I think telling you a different way is sort of good,
> but I think the way they do it isn't good because they correct you and make
> you look stupid.
>
> Matthew: Those teachers look down on you.
>
> David: Yeah, like they think you're dumb.
>
> Candice: I'm not really comfortable asking for help from the teacher. I don't know
> why. But it's because they don't listen to you. I just prefer to talk to my mum
> and dad and my brother.
>
> Carlene: With your parents, because with your parents you've got a special bond.
> You can tell them stuff. With the teacher you don't have anything. You can't
> exactly tell them how you feel, that you're stuck on something, can't actually
> speak to them.
>
> Candice: They look down on you.

While the working-class secondary-school pupils poignantly talk about being 'looked down on' by their teachers and other more privileged students, their sense of unfairness is sometimes matched by the very different sense of unfairness of middle-class students.

Below we glimpse the contempt, arrogance and sense of being better of a group of white middle-class girls in a social mixed classroom:

> Emma: We aren't treated fairly by the teachers
>
> Fran: No because they sit us next to people who are stupid so that we can help them
> but it doesn't help us.
>
> Jasmine: They do it for their benefit not our benefit.
>
> Emma: And if they are going to waste like half our time that we could be learning,
> helping someone else, then we are just like, we might as well be the teacher then
> and not do anything.
>
> Katherine: We're not learning cos we're helping other kids
>
> Fran: And it's annoying having to help other people.
>
> Emma: Why should we help the dumb kids?
>
> Megan: They should put everyone in groups of cleverness.

When I asked the girls to select who would go into the top group they chose themselves and the only four middle-class boys in the class. However, both SATS and end of year 7 test results showed that there were three working-class children, one girl and two boys, who had achieved more highly than a number of the middle-class students. However, these three had been summarily relegated to the middle group. This is a further example of the ways in which class has become naturalized in educational discourses through its association with achievement and entered into commonsense understandings of ability (Ball, 1981, 2003). Steph Lawler (2000) writes about the ways in which 'cleverness' and 'intelligence' can become metaphors for forms of knowledge that are highly class-specific. In a similar vein, reductionist discourses in which clever becomes correlated with middle class and stupid with working class were evident in both students' and teachers' discourses (Noyes, 2004).

Class Thinking and Feeling Against the Grain

Middle-class emotional responses to social class inequalities and the middle-class psyche have received less attention from sociologists than working-class emotional and psychic responses to class. However, while many middle-class parents opt for safety and sameness (Butler with Robson, 2003), in over 10 years of researching parental choice in education there have been regular examples of Sayer's egalitarian middle classes (2005) and their attempts to confront and engage with difference. This is often an issue of race as well as class and, particularly in the inner city, it is difficult to separate out the two. Yet, such complicated combinations of guilt, defensiveness, empathy and conciliation are most frequently generated in response to social class inequalities in the educational marketplace. It is class rather than racial euphemisms that abound. Below, I draw on data from my most recent ESRC project on white middle-class identities and dilemmas of educational choice (Reay, 2005b).[5] We can see in the following quote Mrs Smart's complex mixture of complicity, guilt and pragmatism:

> I find myself having to be pragmatic in relation to the children's schooling – to make enormous compromises – and do I like myself for it? Of course I don't. It's one of the things I least like about myself.

We can also glimpse both the orientations and motivations of Mrs Smart and the strong emotions underpinning them from what she has to say about her own schooling:

> On passing the 11 plus I was in the A stream and my working-class friends became 'thickos in the dunces' class'. I had to be complicit in that in order to survive, but I knew I wasn't really any cleverer and I started to feel like a cheat – doing well made me feel like a cheat. But I'm also aware that my guilty feelings were nothing in the scale of the damage it did to the working-class girls dumped in the bottom streams. I did manage until 6th form to sustain some of those friendships from primary school but they all left school at 16 and I never really saw them again.

After much of what Mrs Smart terms 'heart rending agonizing' she chooses the local comprehensive for all three of her children:

> I did seriously think at times I was making a mistake. There were times like when Simon had four Maths teachers in one year and Laura got really bolshie and gobby with me, swearing all the time, that I thought maybe I should have done the normal London middle-class thing, you know tried to trade as far up the local league tables as I could. It was when they were with extended family or friends and their kids I noticed the difference. It sometimes made me cringe.

There are strong resonances with Ball's (2003) new middle-class families concerned with 'the release of the person' (Bernstein, 1975: 136). Talking about the decision to send their son to state school Mrs Gosling admits:

> It has caused me a huge amount of personal anguish … going down the road that we go, and we've come across huge pressure from parents and in-laws and the rest

of our family. And a lot of persuasion that we ought to be sending our children to private school. (Ball, 2003: 145)

Similarly, Mrs Smart's struggle to balance the need to meet dominant middle-class notions of being a good parent with her own personal principles and political values generates internal conflict, ambivalence and tensions, and still she feels guilty:

> There is a part of me that feels I've sacrificed them to an unfair system.

> They've all been really happy in school but I still feel they would have done better in the selective system and I have to live with that. My parents definitely think I've made a mistake.

Here we gain a palpable sense of the emotional dimensions of middle-class risk taking (Ball, 2003); of the emotional and psychological aspects of parents and students' behaviour in the education market.

A lack of access to representations through which positive identifications can develop all too often generate negative framed and defensive identities among the working classes which are expressed through shame, disavowal and dis-identification (Reay, 2004; Skeggs, 1997). However in the ESRC transitions project[6] there were examples of working-class white and ethnic-minority children in 'sink' schools expressing a complex mixture of pride, hopefulness and ambivalent defensiveness. These children appear to have managed to escape the damaging process of implicating the self that seems inevitable in our current judgmental and regulatory educational system. Shaun and Lindsey both went to 'sink' inner-city secondary schools. Lindsey to a school that was deemed to be so bad it was closed down and reopened under another guise, while Shaun attended a school under special measures described in the local press as 'a haven for drug dealers'.

However, both children managed to sustain an optimism of the will despite their circumstances. In the two excerpts below they dispute dominant representations of inner-city schooling, which are powerfully classed, and by association, invidious and judgmental understandings of children like them:

> Everyone said Sutton Boys was a rubbish school full of tramps and low lifes but they were wrong. I've done really well here and so have a lot of the kids. (Shaun)

While Lindsey has a similar positive tale to tell of Phoenix Academy:

> Diane: So how would you describe the average child in your school?
> Lindsey: A mixture of a lot of things, a bit loud but sometimes a bit quiet and successful, maybe, I hope.
> Diane: Do you remember Jordan saying it had lots of rough kids?
> Lindsey: Yes, but I don't think that's right because I'm not from a very good background because around my area there's always police up there and there's lots of violence and drugs but we've got a nice flat. We live in a block of flats that's very unhygienic and scruffy but inside we've got a nice flat so you can't say rough just from the outside.

Both children challenge hegemonic representations of the working classes and their schooling. While they are miles away from Hebdige's subcultural working class they too are trying to 'recognise and rise above a subordinate position that is not of their own choosing' (Hebdige, 1979: 139). However, in doing so they confront a difficult task of psychic reparative work; a making good of what is uniformly depicted as bad. As I have argued elsewhere (Reay, 2004: 1012):

> There is no getting away from the consequences, both psychic and material of being positioned at the bottom of the secondary schools market. While we can see in their narratives a compelling drive towards a useful integration, connection and reparation … these children are still the losers in the educational game.

The Emotional Costs of Becoming Different

Finally I want to write about the difficult negotiation of the emotions, negative as well as positive, that are aroused when aspirations and educational success mean becoming and being profoundly different to your family and friends[7] (Lucey et al., 2003). Discourses of meritocracy encode working classness as something that has to be left behind; as Skeggs (2004) argues, as fixity so that mobility can occur. While rational choice theory (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1998) banishes emotions from decision making, filling the space of choice with rational calculation and strategic goals, the choice to both move away and become different to the natal family can evoke powerful feelings of anxiety, loss, guilt and fear alongside the more accepted emotional responses of hopeful anticipation, excitement and pride. This 'emotional tightrope' was evident in the narratives of working-class students applying to go to university (Reay et al., 2005):

> Yes, it's been really really difficult. It ended up being really stressful because I was doing it in such a void. It's been really scary thinking that you could have made the wrong decision, very anxiety inducing … I think it's more difficult if no one in your family's been there. I think in a funny sort of way it's more difficult if you're black too … Because you want to go to a good university but you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb. It's a bit sad isn't it. I've sort of avoided all the universities with lots of black students because they're all the universities which aren't seen as so good. If you're black and not very middle class and want to do well then you end up choosing places where people like you don't go and I think that's difficult. (Candice, black working-class student, predicted two As and a B at A level)

There is a class difference in both the range of emotions articulated by students and how the same emotions get expressed. Although nearly all the students expressed a degree of anxiety and anticipation, the middle-class students were often more tempered in their expression of emotions and I would argue that this is because there was less at risk for them in the choice process. Their resources of cultural, social and economic capital helped to alleviate feelings of risk, fear, shame and guilt (Reay et al., 2005). In contrast, the working-class students,

facing a strange and unfamiliar field, were often plagued with anxieties. In the quote above, Candice displays 'the anxiety about the future characteristic of students who have come from the social strata that are furthest away from academic culture and who are condemned to experience that culture as unreal' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 53). Seamus also found the whole process 'scary':

> It is very very worrying because I haven't got any safety nets any more. I really don't know what I'm going to do if the worst happens, if I don't get the grades for university. I am really really scared. It really is scary. (Seamus, Irish working class)

All the students across social class were dealing with the pressures of having to get good enough grades and, to different degrees, were attempting to grapple with 'risky opportunities' (Beck, 1992). However, only the working-class students used such powerfully emotive language of fear and anxiety. Young people from established middle class backgrounds, where there is a history of university attendance, far more often have a coherent story to tell about university choice; one with an easily discernable plot and a clearly defined beginning and end, despite episodic uncertainty and stressful periods. The discourses that they draw on are ones of entitlement and self-realization. There is no lurking guilt or shame. There are also often extensive familial reserves of expertise and support to call upon. Unlike in Seamus' case, if the worst happens there are safety nets. No one talked of 'being scared' or 'in the dark'. The 'void' Candice talks about is for middle-class students filled with relevant cultural, academic and social capital. In their texts, choice is presented as rational, orderly, clear-cut, almost beyond question, very unlike the chancy, uncertain process Candice and Seamus are caught up in. The feelings evoked are overwhelmingly optimistic – excitement, satisfaction and pride.

In contrast, below we can see how unfamiliar the class culture of the old universities can be for working-class students, and the powerful negative emotions evoked by confronting a strange and alien environment:

> I was put off Goldsmiths', the interview there was really, really stressful. It was like what I'd imagined to be a conversation round a dinner table in a really upper-class, middle-class family and I was like 'Oh my God, I'm not ready for this. This is not for me'. It was awful. (Maggie, white English working-class FE student)

Working-class students, particularly those like Candice, Maggie and Seamus who are aiming for elite universities, are having to juggle a welter of negative emotions alongside the positive feelings of excitement, pride and hopeful anticipation they share with middle-class students. There is no need to emphasize the class nature of these anxieties because Candice articulates this clearly: 'I think it's more difficult if no one in your family has been there'. She also asserts that 'In a funny sort of way it's more difficult if you're black too' illustrating the ways in which class and ethnicity are interwoven in the higher education choice process, and how their effects can amplify and deepen anxiety and fear.

Emotional capital (Reay, 2000, 2005a) and its lack is also at issue here with family emotional assets of confidence, security and entitlement in relation to the field of higher education all playing a part. Middle-class emotional resources, particularly those of elite middle-class families (Allatt, 1993, 1996), alleviate stress and anxiety. In contrast, working-class students felt a great deal of stress and anxiety when encountering the unfamiliar field of higher education. However, beyond fear and anxiety there is another emotion that compounds working-class disadvantage. Shame and the fear of shame haunts working-class relationships to education (Plummer, 2000; Reay, 1997). The conundrum for many of the working-class students was that they were caught between two opposing shames. First, there was the shame of over-reaching and failing. This sense of failure was not simply academic, it implicated the individual far more holistically in that a number of them seemed to feel that they failed to be the right person for traditional universities even when their level of achievement qualified them to apply. But if the first shame did not engulf, a second shame, evident in the quote below, threatens:

> At the end of the day you want to say you've been to university and be proud of it, when people put their little university in brackets it's like that's where I did it. Not do it in really messy joined up writing so they can't understand it because you're ashamed of where you went to. (Angela, Irish working-class FE student)

So even successful working-class students, the ones who escape 'being a nothing' still often have to deal with the shame and embarrassment of not being good enough.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to make links between individuals' inner emotional worlds and external social and structural processes in order to illustrate some of the ways in which class, just as much gender and race, is implicated in psychic processes and the fashioning of the self. One outstanding anomaly in relation to class is that, while over 80 percent of the UK population agree that we live in a class society where class divisions have grown, few of them are prepared to admit that class has any impact on their own lives and relationships (Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 2004). Class may be out there but individuals seem to believe it does not touch them personally. It has taken no hold inside. There may be class practices, and nearly all individuals can identify some, but there is often a staunch denial of class thinking and feeling, especially one's own. Yet, as is evident in all the data that I have drawn on, class is produced in a complex dynamic between classes with each class being the other's 'Other'. Class practices (Savage, 2000) contain the very emotional dynamics that produce class relations as well as within class practices themselves.

While dominant discourses argue that individualism has displaced social class, making it largely irrelevant in contemporary society, I have argued that

class operates just as powerfully at the individual level as it ever did on a collective level. It troubles the soul and preys on the psyche. And although the orthodoxy when emotions and the psyche are raised in relation to social class is that it is a matter of working classness, I have tried to show that we are all implicated regardless of our class positioning. As Annette Kuhn (1995: 98) asserts:

> Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being.

The inequitable operations of social class damage all of us regardless of where we are positioned in the social field. But it is the most vulnerable, the working classes, who are made to bear the greatest psychological burdens of an unequal society. As the case studies I've drawn on demonstrate, class is deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity even when it is not acknowledged. Class is a powerful psychic force, the stuff of conflict, both internal and external:

> Class formation is a dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic. To ignore this is to work uncritically with the categories produced through this struggle which always (because it is a struggle) exists in the interests of power. (Skeggs, 2004: 117)

Just like sexism and racism, social-class inequalities do terrible damage, but unlike sexism and racism they continue to be condoned, even accepted as normative. We have long established discourses of race and gender equality although western society still has a long way to go before practice matches theory. However, class inequalities are rarely questioned, individualized out of our collective conscience. As Andrew Sayer (2005: 306) concludes 'Class is quite properly an unsettling subject, one that prompts feelings of shame as well as self-justification. We are shamed by class because it is shameful'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   There is no space to outline in any detail the methodologies of the different studies but they are to be found in other publications, most notably Lucey and Reay (2002); Reay and Arnot (2004); Reay et al. (2005); Reay and Lucey (2003); Reay and Wiliam (1999).

2   I spent six weeks in Autumn 1997 in a year 5 classroom collecting observational and interview data. Twenty-seven children were all interviewed twice individually and twice in focus groups as well as completing short questionnaires. All interviews were taped and transcribed in full.

3   This study was carried out over a term in 1998 in two year 6 classrooms. I collected both observational and interview data, interviewing all the children both individually and in focus groups. All 62 interviews were taped and transcribed in full.

4   This ESRC project was conducted in 2003–4 with Madeleine Arnot in two secondary and two primary schools and employed a range of methods (observation, individual and focus group interviews and questionnaires). The research methods and methodology have been written up in detail in Reay and Arnot (2004).

5   This project, which is being carried out in collaboration with Professor Gill Crozier of Sunderland University and Professor David James of the University of West of England and is part of the ESRC social identities programme, involves interviews with at least 130 families who have chosen urban comprehensive schooling in three urban areas: London, Bristol and Newcastle.

6   This study was carried out with Helen Lucey. Phase 1, from 1998 to 1999, took place in eight primary schools in two London boroughs and data was collected using focus group and individual interviews. We chose to use focus as against group interviews because of our specific research interest in interaction between participants. We wanted to ensure a forum in which children could both build on, and challenge, each others' perspectives. Our main sample included every child in the year 6 of these primary schools, totalling 454 children between 10 and 11 years old; a total of 77 focus groups in all. In phase 2, from 1999 to 2000, a group of 45 was selected to constitute a target group to be followed through their move into year 7 of secondary schooling. These 45 were individually interviewed either three or four times over the course of the two years, as were a subsample of their parents. Year 6 primary school teachers and the year 7 tutors were also interviewed. All interviews were taped and transcribed in full.

7   The research team for the project comprised myself, Jacqueleine Davies, Stephen Ball and Miriam David. The data collected included both qualitative and quantitative material. After piloting, a questionnaire was administered to 502 students across six institutions, using tutors to select representative tutor groups for us. The questionnaire deployed a variety of elicitation exercises. Individual interviews were then conducted with 120 students. These were all taped and transcribed in full. At first those who had volunteered through the questionnaire were interviewed, but then attempts were made to broaden the sample to both address imbalances, notably in relation to gender, and to include a range of interesting cases, for example, first generation students and Oxbridge entrants in state schools. Staff were interviewed in all six institutions (15 in total), as well as a sub-sample of 40 parents. Supplementing these three data sets were field notes from participant observation. I attended a range of events in all six institutions, including Careers evenings, HE careers lessons, Oxbridge interview practice and tutor group sessions on the UCAS process. Grounded coding techniques were employed in the analysis of interview data. All the data was entered into NVivo, which allowed for the verification or disconfirmation

of the relevance of issues emerging through manual coding. NVivo also allowed for a number of frequency counts in relation to the interview data and was used to search, sort and manage the data base.

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