Psychosocial Aspects of White Middle-class Identities:
Desiring and Defending against the Class and Ethnic 'Other' in Urban Multi-ethnic Schooling

∎ **Diane Reay**
University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT

This article draws on qualitative in-depth interviews with 63 white middle-class families whose children attend inner London comprehensives. The white middle classes, as they are inscribed in policy discourses, best fit the ideal of the democratic citizen – individualistic, rational, responsible, participatory, the active chooser. Yet, narratives of white middle-class choice reveal both powerful defences and the power of the affective. Sublimated in the psyche of the majority white middle classes who avoid inner-city comprehensives and the more inclusive parents in this ESRC-funded research project are multifaceted and differing responses to the classed and ethnic 'other'. This article examines frequently overlooked anxieties, conflicts, desires and tensions within middle-class identities generated by education choice policies. However, the main focus is white middle-class relationships to their classed and ethnic 'other', and the part played by the psychosocial in white middle-class identities and identifications within predominantly working-class, multi-ethnic schooling.

KEY WORDS

psychosocial urban multi-ethnic schooling / white middle classes

Introduction

L ois McNay argues that constructionist approaches, in general, lack atten-
tion to 'the more troubling and destabilizing effects that irrational and
unconscious motivations may have upon an individual's behaviour' (2000:
122). Their preoccupation with the meanings people give to their behaviour and
the discourses which interpolate them tends to mean a corresponding lack of
attention to what Paul Hoggett (2000) terms the power of what is unthought,
unspoken, unthinkable, and unspeakable. I want to argue that shifts in concep-
tions of the citizen and wider social processes of individualization and con-
sumerism, together with the ways in which these influence processes of
educational choice for families, coalesce to generate a set of dynamics that are
both social and psychic. Consequently, it is important to focus on the inner con-
flicts as well as the outer rationalizations.

Wendy Hollway (2004: 7) contends 'we are psychosocial because the real
events in the external, social world are desirously and defensively, as well as dis-
cursively appropriated' and it is this combination of 'the desirous and the defen-
sive' I am trying to elicit in this article. Ironically, although both clients and
professionals in 'the psy industries' are predominantly middle class (Rose,
1989), when there has been a focus on the psychosocial within academic writ-
ing the emphasis has largely been on the working classes – their defences, pro-
jections and paranoia – usually in relation to their ethnic other.

However, social inequalities take shape psychically for all individuals
through binaries of middle and working class, rich and poor, white and ethnic
minority, straight and gay. And as Layton (2004: 46) argues:

> They do so by defining what affects, behaviours, thoughts, and modes of attachment
> and agency are 'proper' to each falsely split half of the pair. Within each pair in the
> hierarchy, a negative cultural valence is assigned to the attributes of the degraded
> identity, a positive valence to the dominant one. Thus these identities are often lived
> as painful, conflictual, binary (either/or) structures.

The process then of internalizing such invidious social norms, even for those
positively positioned by them, is complicated, conflictual, and often painful.

My aim in this article is to uncover some of the conflicts and tensions, as
well as the difficult and uncomfortable feelings that accompany them.

The Research Study

The research is located in three cities, London, Norton and Riverton, but
although the article draws a number of contrasts between the London and the
Riverton and Norton samples it focuses specifically on the London families. We con-
ducted interviews with 63 London-based families (a total of 95 parent and 29 child
interviews). Slightly over half of the sample were self-identifiers, responding to a
Guardian article about the research project which specified that its focus was the

white middle classes. However, middle-classness was also assessed conventionally using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification scheme (NS-SEC) to identify households as middle class, as well as gathering information about both parents' educational levels. In all the families, subjective class definition matched objective socio-economic categorization and in only one of our families were nei-ther parents graduates.

However, conventional approaches to social class are simply a starting point for a methodology that analyses and understands middle-class identity in terms of practices and processes (Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 2004). Ethnographic interviewing practices (Brewer, 2000) that allow for a judicious mix of open-ended questioning and careful prompting and probing have been employed to elicit not only individuals' deeply held values and commitments, but also their ambivalences, fears and anxieties (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The analysis builds on earlier research, utilizing psychosocial approaches that focus on the deep anxieties experienced by the white middle classes in maintaining and reproducing their social privilege (Lucey and Reay, 2000, 2003; Reay, 2004). That research concentrated on the fears, fantasies and anxieties of those white middle classes heavily investing in the pursuit of excellence for their children. In contrast, I draw on psychosocial approaches in order to understand how anxi-eties are defended against by white middle-class parents investing in a different notion of 'the best' for their child: one that valorizes and seeks out difference.

The Psychic Costs of Ethical Choice

The research project focused on a very specific fraction of the white middle classes: those who send their children to urban comprehensives. At the time the fieldwork was conducted (2004–5), 90 per cent of the comprehensives the London families sent their children to were performing at or below the national average (54% 5 A*–C at GCSE). Children in the vast majority of the families were attending comprehensives that would be termed ordinary or 'bog-standard' (Miles, 2007). These then are families who have chosen against the middle-class grain, often out of strong moral and ethical inclinations. However, ambivalence lies at the very heart of inclination (Adkins, 2003) and what the data show are the psychic costs of ethical choice and often a more than fleeting ambivalence in relation to their children's schools and particularly the other children that attend them. They are managing deeply felt and unresolved tensions in relation to their children's schooling. The white middle-class subject produced through 'acting against the normative middle-class grain' is split, divided between the acquisitive self-interested self and a more altruistic, public-spirited self and has to live with the tensions generated through the contradictory interplay of cooperation and competition, consumerism and welfarism (Miller, 1993).

These are the white middle classes who do not have the fortress mentality of the majority white middle classes. While exclusion remains a crucial strategy for 'fearful' middle classes (Vincent and Ball, 2006) in ensuring the social and

educational reproduction of their children, the middle classes in our study are not pulling up the barricades, but boldly, or in few cases rather hesitantly, going where most white middle classes fear to tread.

Interiority and exteriority are both important in understanding the emotional politics of class for our sample. I am attempting to bring together the interior processes of the human mind, both individual and group emotions, with those that relate to the exterior, the public arenas of the social world, in order to examine structure and power. As Elliott (2004: 51) asserts, 'who one is in a structured world of social differences is an indeterminate consequence of structures that, in turn, have the symbolic power they do because of the human subject's psychic openness, unconscious representations and emotional investments'. In particular, the emotional responses and intensity of middle-class education strategies are powerfully affected by the context of welfare arrangements within which they have developed (Maloutas, 2007). Oria et al. (2007) stress the increasing tension for the middle classes between private aims and collective responsibility as a growing neo-liberal ethos displaces the egalitarian reflexes associated with former welfare arrangements. Neo-liberal discourses of choice, individualism and competition are now hegemonic, framing contemporary understandings of the self and how the self should engage with education and the social world more widely. The contemporary era is one pervaded by 'amoral familism' (Banfield, 1958), which, as Rodger (2003: 416) argues, 'is the antithesis of social solidarity and commitment to the common good precisely because it is grounded in the family rather than the community'. The norm, not just among the middle classes, but increasingly across society, is to support common welfare projects only if they are perceived to be in the personal interest of the individual and their immediate family. Our families, in struggling against that norm by sending their children to inner-city comprehensives, become the middle-class equivalent of Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) working-class educational 'outsiders on the inside'. They then are 'insiders on the outside', particularly the 28 families sending children to demonized, predominantly ethnic minority comprehensives with results below 40 per cent 5 A*–C at GCSE. Even of those families sending children to higher performing comprehensives, all, apart from five, had children attending schools with over 50 per cent ethnic minority intake. However, I am focusing on a different sort of interior and exterior to Bourdieu's educationally disadvantaged and while they for the most part cannot bring the outside with them, the middle-class families nearly always bring the inside, in the form of their social privilege and middle-class connections, into the urban comprehensives their children attend. I am not suggesting this is an easy process but rather one suffused with ambivalence and resultant tensions. There is a difficult dialectic between openness and protectionism, respect and disdain, acceptance and condescension in play for most of these middle-class families, with, for the most part, positive affective responses to 'the ethnic minority other' while 'the classed other' is greeted with more wariness.

All the families are potentially dealing with the psychic costs and tensions of having different notions of 'the best' for their child to those normative within white middle-class culture. As one mother succinctly pointed out, 'Not everyone can have what is best because the best is an exclusive thing'. Yet the sample was far from homogeneous. The 63 families were differentiated by different positionings on a range of cross-cutting continuums. They range from the established upper middle class where even grandparents attended elite universities to tenuously positioned new arrivals in the middle classes; the UK equivalent of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1979) 'inheritors' and 'newcomers'. There were also varying degrees of commitment and ambivalence to comprehensivization, as well as a range of levels of detachment and embeddedness in localities. However, the focus in this article is the psychosocial affective continuum with, on the one extreme, the supremely confident relaxed parents who know their child will do well wherever they go to school and, on the other, the highly anxious, often mothers, who feel compelled to micro-manage their child's comprehensive school experience. While this psychosocial continuum does not map readily onto any of these other continuums it does have a strong connection with the levels of perceived risk involved for parents in making non-normative white middle-class educational choices. In turn, levels of risk are connected both to degrees of security and establishment as middle class and to the level of educational attainment and market positioning of the comprehensive attended.

So, levels of anxiety and defendedness across the sample were related to levels of risk involved in making 'non-normative' choices for 'people like us', and these in turn were connected to, although not determined by, levels of economic, social and cultural capital. While the more overt signs of anxiety were most apparent in the narratives of the more recent arrivals and less secure members of the white middle classes, we also, at times, glimpse anxiety and fear in the transcripts of the securely established middle classes. For example, Catherine, whose parents and grandparents attended university, talked about 'the danger' of sending children to schools where 'there are too many working classes'. She perceived such schools as characterized by indiscipline, but more crucially as places where children like her own would no longer be seen as 'the norm'.

Yet, despite Catherine's fears, it could be argued that the white middle classes have colonized normativity. Middle-classness in the contemporary is about what is normal, good, appropriate and proper (Skeggs, 2004), while whiteness is also about a normalcy that historically has meant a displacement of race onto racialized others (Byrne, 2006). And while the growing literature on whiteness is endeavouring to make whiteness visible as a racialized identity (Frankenberg, 1997; Perry, 2002; Ware and Back, 2002), it still has a lot more work to do before there is a discursive shift that opens up whiteness as a range of racialized subject positions. For many, the white middle classes continue symbolically to represent the ideal towards which others should aspire; paradoxically the social grouping with all the culture but none of the ethnicity. Both middle-classness and whiteness then are positioned as the universal and, as Lucey et al. (2003) argue,

the universal marks the particular as the particular in order to attain its hegemony and with that evades the universal's own particularity.

Middle-classness traditionally has also been about containment and restraint; in fact these qualities are part of the reason the middle classes have come to represent the social ideal. As I alluded to earlier, it is the working classes who have always been portrayed as repositories for excess (Carey, 1992; Stallybrass and White, 1986). However, I would argue that emotions and affect seep beyond the edifice of 'the rational subject', and this seepage is often most visible in the narratives of those white middle classes from working-class backgrounds. Yvonne was a coal miner's daughter before becoming a dancer and marrying a middle-class man. When her oldest daughter went to Copethorpe comprehensive it was bottom of the LEA league table with 17 per cent A*–C at GCSE. At the time of Yvonne's interview the local newspaper had an article on Copethorpe entitled, 'Worst in London: Secondary school exam results hit rock bottom' on the front page. The newspaper was lying on Yvonne's kitchen table while I interviewed her. Throughout her interview Yvonne reiterates her deep commitment to comprehensivization but this strong commitment is in constant tension with Yvonne's fear of the consequences of acting on her belief:

> I was totally freaked out by the whole prospect of secondary school and all Tanya's friends went to Drayton Park and I thought I was like minded with these mothers, but it wasn't until the secondary school thing I thought no, they are not and I was panicking about it and Tanya wanted to go to Drayton Park, she said her friends were picking their school and why couldn't she pick hers. I said Tanya they are not picking their school, their mum is picking their school and if you go to Drayton Park, their mum will have picked your school. I said I don't believe in segregation of any kind, whether it is single sex, faith schools, fee paying, whatever people do to divide us, and I wholeheartedly mean that and so you have to go to a mixed school with no special faith where there is a mixture of kids and this is our local mixed school. (Yvonne)

The calm reasoned explanation Yvonne provides Tanya belies her panicked anxious feelings about school choice. In many ways Yvonne is one of the least ambivalent of the parents. She is passionately committed to comprehensivization and told me that 'there is no way I'd move my kids. I think it is the responsibility of parents like us to make sure these schools improve'. Yet despite her resolve Yvonne found the transition process, in her own word, 'excruciating':

> When her primary class went to visit, Tanya was terrified because it was chaos. Not just that, the kids were pretty crazy, they weren't in the classrooms, the ones in the classrooms weren't getting on with their work and the teachers didn't seem to have much control, it was just chaos. I rang up the head and said I came today and do you know, we want to send our daughter to this school, we really want to support this school because everything we believe about putting into your community and not taking from it, this encompasses everything we believe, we want to come, and we will help and I said look today was a complete disaster and my daughter already asked not to go to school and had to listen to her friends saying oh why are your parents sending you to that crap school my mum would never let me go. And we

> are getting flak from them and then we are getting her here and it was a disaster. So it was just excruciating.

Yvonne's investment in doing what was best for society rather than just her own children was producing considerable anxiety not only in relation to her daughter's fraught experience of their local comprehensive but also in terms of her own self-perception as a mother who, in sending her child to what is perceived to be 'a bad school', may herself be seen to be 'a bad mother'. We can see very clearly the conflict and tension between being a good citizen and a good parent (Oria et al., 2007):

> She went on the first day and literally I was not sleeping at night and everything I was really worried. And I am not a worrier, I am really not, but the first day she went, I took her there and me and John both took her and she went up the stairs to the door to the assembly hall and she didn't know anybody and she walked off and her face, I will never forget her face and she went bye mum and then I went and worried all day, all day I was looking at my watch and worrying.

As Ball argues (2003: 162), concerns about getting it right and doing the right thing are engendered and reinforced with social networks. If middle-class parents, in part, become moral subjects by learning and acquiring behaviours and attitudes from others in their class setting then when those others in Yvonne's words 'peel off for the private and selective state sector' parents like Yvonne are left with both a sense of abandonment and also anxiety and guilt. There is no reassurance of community.

Instead we have a language of panic. Here we can see very powerfully the psychic costs of principled choice in this context. The strategies Yvonne develops for defending against the obviously painful feelings that anxiety provokes are institutional as well as personal. She becomes, like over 60 per cent of our London sample, involved in the school and at the time of interview was chair of the governing body. Of the 63 London-based families in the study, eight (12%) had a parent who was Chair of Governors of the secondary school at the time their child attended.

Anxiety, guilt and contradictory responses are not just the province of the once solidarist working class (Reay et al., 2005). Cathy went to private school as did her husband. She sent her two oldest children to private school before deciding to send Cameron, her youngest, to the local comprehensive. Unsurprisingly, powerful conscious and unconscious conflicts cut through her narrative:

> They are very seductive the private schools, they sort of, you know, seduce you into thinking they're the best and I think it's, yeah you could say it's racism it's classism at the start, but it's fear, it's fear that you're sending your child into a *lesser* environment, somewhere where they're not going to be able to do as well.

Here Cathy indicates her awareness of prevalent middle-class fears that state comprehensives are in some way inferior. She is clearly struggling against these perceptions, but such internal fears and defences are supported in the wider

social world through discourses which themselves contain enduring fantasies about the inferior intellectual capacities of the working classes (Carey, 1992). Cathy's 'lesser places' reveal 'the middle-class use of class as a defence, to create the illusion of superiority and false confidence, warding off fears of failure and inadequacy' (Ryan, 2006: 60). What is also evident in the quote below, and the later example of Ollie, is that the white middle classes do not view the majority working-class white and ethnic minority students in their schools as people they easily fit in with.

> You know also he was the only, he was alone, he didn't have a single mate, he didn't know anybody, he was by himself, whereas virtually everybody else came up with a peer group, so he was sitting by himself and you know he is very white and he's very middle class. So looking round, all the groups are mixed, there isn't a sort of 'white middle-class group' he could go and slot himself into … So I think he found it really difficult. I know he did, it was horrible, we used to walk to school and it was a nightmare. The first term I just felt sick, the whole time. I would like it to be the norm for people to go to their local school and not to be scared in the way that I was scared. I would like people like me to send their children to Broomwood and not be scared. I think a lot of my fear was irrational. I'm sure it was. *I didn't even go and look at the school,* so how rational can this be? (Cathy)

Cathy, like many of the parents, is ambiguously positioned and expresses a great deal of ambivalence. At different points in the interview she talks about 'the terrible terrible reputation of local state schools' and her sense of panic when considering them as possibilities for her own son. On the one hand she projects her discomforts onto lesser people in lesser places, those through whom she can maintain her privileged status (Hughes, 2007). But on the other hand she adopts a strong moral stance in relation to 'the good society' and asserts that if she wants society to be more equitable then she needs to act in certain ways despite her fears. This tension between doing the best for one's own child and doing the best for wider society was there, to a greater or lesser extent, for all the parents. They were managing the psychosocial strains of trying to behave ethically in a situation that is structurally unethical, in terms of entrenched inequalities, and radically pluralistic, in terms of different moralities and value systems (Sayer, 2005).

Objectifying the Classed Other

Within private and selective schools the middle classes are one of a social group or collective of individuals that offers 'the two fold blessing of being someone and not having to be alone in doing it' (Berking, 1996: 199). For these families, and particularly those choosing the lowest performing schools, that is not the case. We can see this very clearly in Cathy's description of Cameron's isolation. It is also apparent in Ollie's account. Ollie, who achieves four As and a place at Cambridge, is at a school at the bottom of the LEA league table. While we

cannot determine from Cathy's words whether Cameron's isolation is chosen or imposed, isolation for Ollie has a distinctly ambivalent character; it is both imposed and deliberately chosen. In the quote below he articulates clearly a boundary-drawing process that separates him off from his ethnic minority working-class peer group:

> I did my own thing but with lots of support and like yeah, I was never held back and I was always really pushed by my teachers. In class things I always felt a bit uncomfortable because I would always be kind of straining myself from sounding like a twat (laughs). But in general I was, allowed to write like a twat in my books and I just got on with it. I am not saying I found things easy it was just that I compelled myself to do more than anyone else did. Like I just worked longer, it's kind of like a neurosis.

He hints at some of the costs in this process but his father, himself from a working-class background, makes them more evident when he explains why Ollie dropped out of a gifted and talented leadership programme:

> Anyway they wanted three kids for this gifted and talented leadership scheme and he was chosen for one of them and I remember him coming home and saying 'oh great'. And the next day he was just crying for no reason at all and so they took him to the office and it happened again. And so they took him to the doctor and they arranged a visit, it was amazing, within a week with the educational psychologist. And then we got six sessions with him and me almost straightaway and it turns out that I had been putting too much pressure on him and that was the last straw.

The family may have a powerful commitment to socialist egalitarianism but as we can see from both son and father's quotes, these principles must be managed in tension with the pursuit of academic excellence, a conflicting desire to be 'the best'. This constitutes a difficult painful enterprise in working-class educational contexts and requires constant vigilance and pressure in and over the child. These processes of stretching the child and ensuring his talents and abilities are fully realized against the institutional odds are both exhausting and isolating. As Ollie says, he 'compelled himself to do more than anyone else'. But this is not simply a self-inflicted disciplinary practice, his father admits that he too 'had been putting too much pressure' on Ollie. This joint pursuit of academic excellence results at one point in psychic collapse.

Ollie's relationship with his classed other illustrates the ways in which, despite valuing the other, there is still enormous ambivalence about children connecting or becoming allied with the working-class majority in the comprehensive schools they attend (Reay et al., 2007). One consequence is the semi-detachedness evident in what he has to say about his comprehensive when contrasting it with the far more middle-class sixth form he moved on to:

> Unlike them I did know the kind of world of Denton and the estates and all of that stuff. Obviously I have not lived there and I've not really experienced it, I am not going to pretend to have that kind of empathy but I certainly know them and I know it is there. In a way that a lot of people just don't seem to and also it being the local comprehensive my conscience was always very clear you know.

Here knowing is not the same as empathizing. Rather, Ollie is demonstrating the dispositions of the white middle-class cosmopolitans that Bev Skeggs writes about. She argues (2004: 158) that 'to be cosmopolitan one has to be able to appropriate, distinguish and claim to know the other in order to generate authority and disposition from this knowing'. And Ollie has this appropriating knowledge that becomes a resource for the self rather than an empathetic connection with the other. But at the same time this is no easy knowing, rather it is undercut by the discomfort of being in culturally different and difficult spaces. This was especially the case for those families whose children, like Ollie, attended schools with a sizeable majority of working-class children (35 of the London families attended schools with at least twice the national average of free school meal pupils). Tricia, a mother whose daughter attended a comprehensive with 52 per cent minority ethnic and 40 per cent free school meal pupils, had a reflexive class analysis. Yet, while she expressed sympathy with the white working classes, she still positions them as a problem to be faced up to:

> They are really an indigenous community and have long histories of being servants to the military and now that military has gone, everything has crumbled around them. They don't have so many jobs. The army has just kind of left them and that's actually an erosion of 100s of years of history. You may not like the attitudes, you may not like the lack, you know, the quite aggressive culture, the racism in that culture, you may not like it, but to pretend that it never existed and that it is unimportant is only to create problems for yourself. And the problems that you deal with – schools, are the only places, I think, the only places, where you actually confront those issues, because particularly state schools are pulling in everybody.

Here, Tricia epitomizes the attitudes and affective responses of many of the parents and children to the working classes, and particularly the white working-class other.

On one level they are to be pitied, and, in common with Ollie, she stresses the importance of knowing and understanding their situation intellectually. But there is also the emotional impossibility of putting yourself in the position of those who are defined in the middle-class imaginary through 'their lack', 'their aggression' and above all 'their racism' (Haylett, 2001). Rather than developing any empathetic understanding, the challenge is to learn about and understand the working classes as a problem to be dealt with. Joan, a Norton parent, expresses a similar condescension laced with distaste and pity:

> I go into school frequently as a governor and I see horrendous children, children that you think what is going to happen to them? Where are they going to go? And my poor children who are really nice have to be in amongst them.

The key distinction here is between 'nice' middle-class children and 'horrendous' working-class ones. Regardless of over 100 years of universal state education the working classes continue to be discursively constituted within the educational field as an unknowing, unreflexive, tasteless mass from which the middle classes draw their distinction (Carey, 1992; Tawney, 1931). Despite these families' left-leaning, communitarian impulses they have complex and dif-

ficult feelings towards their classed other, ranging from Joan's visceral distaste to Ollie's more ambivalent but still defended response. Dealing with the discomforts of privilege in disadvantaged contexts all too often results in varying degrees of repression, sublimation and dis-identification (Skeggs, 1997).

The Desirous White Middle Classes: Positive Identifications with Classed and Racialized 'Others'

At the beginning of the article I talked about both the defended and the desirous white middle classes. However, the majority of the data reveal a defended white middle-class subject with varying degrees of ambivalence and anxiety. In fact, a significant number of the parents talk about the experience of attending predominantly working-class, ethnically diverse comprehensives as if it was the educational equivalent of a medical cure, necessary for producing well-rounded individuals but not necessarily pleasant. We gain a whiff of white middle-class fear of softness; a fleeting anxiety, but one in many of the transcripts, that privilege puts children at risk of becoming flaccid, in some ways weak and lacking in fortitude. This is expressed most vividly by Caroline, a journalist, but was evident in many of the interviews:

> I also feel very strongly that private schooling doesn't prepare you in any way at all for real life once you leave. I mean our best friends down in this road, their daughters are exactly the same age as ours and they go through the private system. And I just look at their daughters and I think at some point you're going to have to leave school and you're going to have to be out there with some rough dysfunctional people and you won't know what's hit you. Whereas my daughter is in classrooms with some very, very difficult behaviour of children, and she's having to learn to concentrate and get on with what she's doing. And I think that is tough for her but she is learning that in order to do well at school she's got to be an independent learner.

Evident in Caroline's words is the conviction that an attending inner-city comprehensive is the best preparation for dealing with the real world. This is comprehensivization as providing backbone, ironically in this sense and, in this sense only, the 21st-century successor to the old public schools.

Most of the white middle-class desire for the other was complicated by differing degrees of dis-identification with what was seen to be conventional middle-classness and, in two or three cases, whiteness, although this latter small group of mothers either had ethnic minority partners or mixed-race children. Brenda, who has a black partner and a white daughter from an earlier relationship, makes a strong statement about the desire not to be privileged either in terms of class or race:

> Brenda: She had a group of black friends and so she was she was not seen as like posh like the white middle-class kids.
> Katya: But she was
> Brenda: She was but she wasn't, she was and she wasn't because you know it depends on how you look at it doesn't it. I mean yes she is white but I don't

> think she's, I don't think we are particularly posh and certainly her experi-
> ence growing up has been very, very diverse. You know who our friends are
> and who we mix with is definitely not mostly middle class.

First it is important to recognize that Brenda's daughter is not typical of our
sample. Most of them did mix mostly with other white middle classes. But if we
also look at the psychic processes at play we can see a strong dis-identification
with white middle-classness as a defence against the anxiety of being part of,
and benefiting from, a prejudicial class system (Reay, 2005). She continues
repeatedly to dis-identify her daughter from white middle-classness and con-
vince herself of the success of this dis-identification with 'I don't think …', '…
certainly she is not...', '… she is definitely not...', revealing powerful processes
of disavowal. Like a majority of our sample Brenda has unresolved anxieties
around privilege (Ryan, 2006).

But denial of privilege and powerful psychic investments in dis-identifica-
tions from one's subject position are not quite the same as desiring the other,
and certainly not, as was the case for Skeggs' (1997) working-class young
women, in part a desire to be 'the other'. According to Elliott (2004), one of the
defining characteristics of contemporary culture has been a longing for cultural
difference, for a sufficient sense of otherness, particularly a desire for multicul-
tural communities. So where were the desiring white middle classes in the sam-
ple; those embracing otherness? Christopher Bollas (1995: 22) writes about 'the
ultimately self-enhancing projective identifications by which we invest the
world of external objects with aspects of ourselves'. And we do glimpse self-
enhancing projective identifications, and even at times more socially desirable
empathetic understanding. Avril, who might be best described as upper middle
class as one of her parents was a member of the aristocracy, talks below of both
openness and understanding. While clearly recognizing that whilst other white
middle classes might misread such openness negatively as lack of confidence,
she is very definite that such qualities are positive, that to learn with other cul-
tures rather than of them is an asset:

> There is definitely something about producing a different kind of middle-class child.
> This is a speculation but I think there is definitely something about not being arro-
> gant. There is some kind of modesty that some people might see as them not being
> confident, read as lack of confidence. I think it is a sort of modesty. You are not
> being educated to be a woman of the world; you are being educated to take your
> part, a place. But I think that is one of the most important things. And an openness
> and also I think it is an understanding of others you can only have if you are sort of
> with them all the time. It is something to learn of other cultures, but to actually learn
> with other cultures, of other cultures, it is a completely different thing.

In Avril's words we can see the desire for inclusion and openness; an attempt to
reconcile unity with difference (Hoggett, 2000). Similarly, Maeve, who comes
from a solidarist working-class background, talks of an openness and desire to
understand rather than to know of one's 'ethnic other':

> I know some people didn't send their children to Copeland because they'd heard about it focusing too much on black kids and racism in the school and I just thought I wouldn't want my kids to go to a school where they didn't do that. I thought it was very positive, that's what a good school should be doing and Max had a number of black friends and very positive for them and for Max to see it and to hear about it was good for him. They were able to talk about these things and when he did his sociology research project he looked at the differences between black young people and white young people at Copeland and he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't have been in a school where it was actually seen to be important to do and where they didn't see it as threatening.

A significant minority of our white middle-class parents expressed similar sentiments. A particularly vivid example is Yvonne, who, despite the enormous anxieties we have seen in her earlier quotes, articulates a powerful recognition of the self in the ethnic other:

> I said to my kids 'who do you think refugees are?' If they were bombing this country what do you think we would do? Do you think if I thought there was a chance you might have your leg blown off every time you went to school I would get you out of here? Of course I would, we would go, there are some other people who are maybe not quite as intelligent as us, who would stay here to have less idea about how to motivate themselves to get out, that is who these people are, they are the people like us, from these other countries. When they get here they are like, there is an opportunity for you. And you grab it by both hands.

But again, the identification with, and valorization of, the ethnic other is accompanied by the denigration and residualization of the white working-classes, those others who are not 'intelligent' or 'motivated' enough to move either geographically or educationally.

Paul Hoggett (2000) argues that in relation to citizenship and the welfare state the key issue is that of difference, the idea of the individual or group who won't fit in. In particular, school choice policies and the construction of quasi-markets (Ball, 2003) reveal powerful kinds of defensive formations. The provocation of anxiety at both individual and collective levels can result in a splitting between 'good' and 'bad', 'us' and 'them' at the levels of schools, students and communities. All the families are struggling with this wider psychosocial context, the macro level, in which collective imaginaries are increasingly about divisions and what divides rather than unity and openness to difference. However, at the micro level, the 'otherness' white middle-class families confront in these urban comprehensives undermines the traditional middle-class confidence about being able to control the educational process and its values, further reinforcing defensiveness and generating anxiety for a majority of the parents. But more hopefully for a significant minority, like Avril and Maeve, anomalies and questions of otherness are construed 'against the grain', 'as novelty, enrichment, and as a focus for the extension of the self's possibilities, as the source of "wonderment"' (Young, 1997). We glimpse a yearning after and for difference.

Conclusion

If we are to develop complex understandings of social reproduction and social privilege we need to give serious consideration to how class and race are lived psychologically and socially (Jones, 2007). As I argued at the beginning of this article, the dominance of post-structural approaches within sociology has meant an undue focus on thought and language, with the meanings people give to their behaviour and the discourses that shape their understandings. However, as Judith Butler (1997: 86) points out: 'the psyche, which includes the unconscious, is very different from the subject: the psyche is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject'.

The middle classes normatively do not do excess and incoherence, both are supposed to be the province of the upper and lower classes. But those of us who are middle class know that excess and incoherence can be part of middle-class identity. Rather, I would like to suggest that normatively excess and incoherence are not owned and integrated. They are the unacceptable parts of middle-class identity, defended against and projected elsewhere, usually on to those white and black working classes who are kept at a comfortable distance. However, these white middle-class families have chosen what is at times an uncomfortable proximity to their class and ethnic other. This generates both defensive anxieties and fears, but also sometimes, and more hopefully, openness and positive recognition.

A crucial social issue then is how to cultivate and grow dispositions of openness and positive recognition of the other, because even amongst this group of left-leaning cosmopolitans they are uncommon and increasingly under threat (Page, 2007). The reasons lie in the relationship between interiority and exteriority I discussed earlier in the article. Within the public arenas of the social, and more specifically, the educational, world, there is a growing emphasis on competition, instrumentalism, and 'being the best' (Rodger, 2003), while the demonization of the working classes, and in particular the white working classes, within official, media and public discourses has increased over the last 50 years (Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 1997, 2004). All these developments have impacted powerfully on the inner dynamics of the boundary constructions necessary to collective identity. Stallybrass and White (1986: 202) describe the middle classes as:

> … a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manners, morals and imaginative writings, in its body, bearing and taste, a subliminal elitism which was constitutive of its historical being.

> Whatever the radical nature of its 'universal' democratic demand, it had engraved in its subjective identity all the marks by which it felt itself to be a different, distinctive and superior class.

The white middle classes sending their children to urban comprehensives are struggling, with varying degrees of success, to resolve the tensions between

desirous openness and sublimated elitism. I would argue that this is not just a challenge only they should be facing, especially when a majority of the middle classes continue instrumentally, and from a distance, to use its others 'in order to play out the disorders of its own identity' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 200). Rather, the challenge for the white middle classes, and for social justice more widely, is how to resolve the tensions between desirous openness and subli-mated elitism to the benefit of all classes.

Acknowledgements

References

Adkins, L. (2003) 'Reflexivity: Freedom or Habit of Gender?', *Theory, Culture and Society* 20(6): 21–42.

Ball, S.J. (2003) *Class Strategies and the Educational Market: The Middle-Classes and Social Advantage*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Banfield, E. (1958) *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. (Research Centre in Economic Development and Cultural Change, University of Chicago) Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Berking, H. (1996) 'Solitary Individualism: The Moral Impact of Cultural Modernisation in Late Modernity', in S. Lash, B. Szerszynski and B. Wynne (eds) *Risk, Environment and Modernity*, pp. 189–202. London: Routledge.

Bollas, C. (1995) *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Personal Experience*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. and P. Champagne (1999) 'The Contradictions of Inheritance', in Pierre Bourdieu et al. *The Weight of the World*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron (1979) *The Inheritors, French Students and their Relation to Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brewer, J. (2000) *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Butler, J. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Byrne, B. (2006) *White Lives*. London: Routledge.

Carey, J. (1992) *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. London: Faber.

Elliott, A. (2004) *Social Theory since Freud: Traversing Social Imaginaries*. London: Routledge.

Frankenberg, R. (ed.) (1997) *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Haylett, C. (2001) 'Illegitimate Subjects? Abject Whites, Neoliberal Modernisation and Middle-Class Multiculturalism', *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society* 19: 351–70.

Hoggett, P. (2000) *Emotional Life and the Politics of Welfare*. London: Macmillan.

Hollway, W. (ed.) (2004) *Psychosocial Research*. Special issue of *Critical Psychology* 10.

Hollway, W. and T. Jefferson (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. London: SAGE.

Hughes, C. (2007) 'The Equality of Social Envies', *Sociology* 41(2): 347–63.

Jones, S. (2007) 'Working-Class/Poor Mothers and Middle-Class Others: Psychosocial Considerations in Home-School Relations and Research', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 38(2): 159–77.

Lawler, S. (2005) 'Disgusted Subjects: The Making of Middle-Class Identities', *The Sociological Review* 3(3): 429–46.

Layton, L. (2004) 'A Fork in the Royal Road: On "Defining" the Unconscious and its Stakes for Social Theory', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 9: 33–51.

Lucey, H. and D. Reay (2000) 'Social Class and the Psyche', *Soundings* 15: 139–54.

Lucey, H. and D. Reay (2003) 'A Market in Waste: Psychic and Structural Dimensions of School-Choice Policy in the UK and Children's Narratives on "Demonized" Schools', *Discourse* 23(2): 253–66.

Lucey, H., J. Melody and V. Walkerdine (2003) 'Developing a Psycho-Social Method in One Longitudinal Study', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6(3): 279–84.

McNay, L. (2000*) Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.

Maloutas, T. (2007) 'Segregation, Social Polarization and Immigration in Athens during the 1990s: Theoretical Expectations and Contextual Difference', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(4): 733–58.

Miles, A. (2007) 'What's in it for Us Middle-Classes, Gordon?', *The Times*, 7 November, p. 17.

Miller, T. (1993) *The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture and the Postmodern Self*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Oria, A., A. Cardini, E. Stamou, M. Kolookitha, S. Vertigan, S. Ball and C. Flores-Moreno (2007) 'Urban Education, the Middle-Classes and Their Dilemmas of School Choice', *Journal of Education Policy* 22(1): 91–106.

Page, R. (2007) '"Without a Song in Their Heart": New Labour, the Welfare State and the Retreat from Democratic Socialism', *Journal of Social Policy* 36(1): 19–37.

Perry, P. (2002) *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reay, D. (1998) 'Rethinking Social Class: Qualitative Perspectives on Gender and Social Class', *Sociology* 32(2): 259–75.

Reay, D. (2004) '"Mostly Roughs and Toughs": Social Class, Race and Representation in Inner City Schooling', *Sociology* 35(4): 1005–23.

Reay, D. (2005) 'Beyond Consciousness?: The Psychic Landscape of Social Class', *Sociology* 39(5): 911–28.

Reay, D. (2006) 'The Zombie Stalking English Schools: Social Class and Educational Inequality', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(3): 288–307.

Reay, D., M.E. David and S. Ball (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Reay, D., S. Hollingworth, K. Williams, G. Crozier, F. Jamieson, D. James and P. Beedell (2007) 'A Darker Shade of Pale: Whiteness, the Middle Classes and Multi-Ethnic Inner City Schooling', *Sociology* 41(6): 1041–60.

Rodger, J. (2003) 'Social Solidarity, Welfarism and post-Emotionalism', *Journal of Social Policy* 32(3): 403–21.

Rose, N. (1989) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Routledge.

Ryan, J. (2006) 'Class in You: An Exploration of Some Social Class Issues in Psychotherapeutic Work', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 23(1): 49–62.

Sayer, A. (2005) *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: SAGE.

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.

Stallybrass, P. and A. White (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen & Co.

Tawney, R. (1931) *Equality*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Vincent, C. and S. Ball (2006) *Childcare Choice and Class Practices: Middle-Class Parents and Their Children*. London: Routledge.

Ware, V. and L. Back (eds) (2002) *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Young, I.M. (1997) 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Mutual Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought', *Constellations* 3(3): 340–63.

Diane Reay

Is a Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, with particular interests in social justice issues in education, Pierre Bourdieu's social theory, and cultural analyses of social class. She has researched extensively in the areas of social class, gender and ethnicity across primary, secondary and post-compulsory stages of education. Recent funded research projects include primary–secondary school transfer, choice of higher education, pupil consultation and voice, working-class students in higher education, and the white middle classes and comprehensive schooling.

Address: Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, UK.

E-mail: dr311@cam.ac.uk