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‘A Darker Shade of Pale?’ Whiteness, the Middle Classes and Multi-Ethnic Inner City Schooling

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from interviews with 63 London-based families, this article argues that there are difficult and uncomfortable issues around whiteness in multi-ethnic contexts. Even those parents, such as the ones in our sample, who actively choose ethnically diverse comprehensive schools appear to remain trapped in white privilege despite their political and moral sentiments. This is a complicated question of value; of having value, finding value in, getting value from, and adding value. Even those white middle classes committed to multi-ethnic schooling face the perils of middle-class acquisitiveness, extracting value from, as they find value in, their multi-ethnic ‘other’. In such processes of generating use and exchange

value a majority of both the white working classes and the black working classes, those who are perceived not to share white middle-class values, are residualized and positioned as excessive. Symbolically, they come to represent the object 'other' of no value.

KEY WORDS

comprehensive schooling / middle classes / multiculturalism / values / whiteness

Introduction

Mike Savage (2003: 536) argues that 'the unacknowledged normality of the middle-class needs to be carefully unpicked and exposed'. This article also attempts to unpick the unacknowledged normality of whiteness. While whiteness has always been visible to black scholars (Ahmed, 2004; hooks, 1992; Lorde, 1984), it has only relatively recently surfaced as a concern for those who are white. There is a growing literature on whiteness (Back, 2002; Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Giroux, 1999; Hill, 2004; Lipsitz, 1998; Nakayama and Martin, 1997), but still relatively little in the UK context (although see Bonnett, 1997; Byrne, 2006; Garner, 2006; Gillborn, 2005; Haylett, 2001; Puwar, 2004;). bell hooks (1992) argues that privilege habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normative as opposed to the superior. Privilege works in a peculiarly seductive way in relation to whiteness, which is seen to be rooted in a whole range of things other than ethnic difference and skin colour. However, theorizations of whiteness as a privileged identity have been complicated by notions of whiteness as generating intense ambivalences and anxieties, as well as denial and defensiveness (Brodken, 2001; Perry, 2002). It is this multi-faceted understanding of whiteness that the article attempts to work with through a focus on white middle-class identities.

Value lies at the heart of white middle-class identity (Skeggs, 2004). In a class-ridden, racist society, to embody both whiteness and middle classness is to be a person of value. It is also to be a person who makes value judgments that carry symbolic power; a valuer of others. And despite the rhetorical flourishes around difference and diversity, it is sameness that routinely gets valued. A majority of white middle-class parents in the UK seek out schools where there are children like their own (Ball, 2003; Reay, 1998a). This article is about a very different section of the white middle classes. Our ESRC project, part of the Social Identities programme, focuses on the middle classes who are valuing 'against the grain'. They are actively choosing the type of schooling (inner city comprehensives) that most white middle-class people avoid. Such choices generate complex and difficult ambivalences and positionings for the white middle classes (Reay, 2005). They position themselves as 'other' to what they perceive to be normative white middle-class attitudes

and behaviour, often denouncing and always putting moral distance between themselves and the white middle-class majority. Yet, they and their children inevitably constitute 'the privileged other' in the disadvantaged, multi-ethnic spaces that they opt for, at perpetual risk of becoming enmeshed in a colonialist sense of entitlement (Razack, 2002).

This article also generates difficult, uncomfortable feelings, perhaps because it is about 'people like us' – public sector liberals committed to the welfare state and an ebbing collectivity. Driven by the data, the analysis that it develops undermines the integrity of the 'we' that, in optimistic moments, some of the research team and people they know like to think we belong to – a particular fraction of the white middle classes who both pride themselves on their liberal values and are still basking in the glow of cosmopolitan multiculturalism (Binnie et al., 2006). The analysis fractures any easy, comfortable sort of belonging because that 'we' is further fragmented, as our data show, along cross-cutting spectrums. These spectrums represent varying levels of adherence to the comprehensive ideal, differing degrees of commitment to multi-ethnic localities jostling alongside degrees of defencedness, belief in the 'specialness' of white middle-class children (what one mother called her child's 'extraness') and a range of levels of anxiety and fear. It also reveals a degree of instrumentalism embedded within the civic commitments of many of the white middle-class parents. Critics of modernity (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992) have noted the growth of instrumental action at the expense of practices based on intrinsic values. And as Sayer (2005) points out, instrumentalism is to be expected in capitalist societies; whether it is progressive or regressive depends on the values in question and what happens to them.

The Research Study

The study employs in-depth qualitative research methods to document and understand the contribution principled choice and ethical dispositions make to white, middle-class identity formation. Using choices in relation to urban schooling, it examines the social actions, and the orientations, commitments and motivations underlying them, of white middle-class parents faced with dilemmas of ethical choice. The aim is to investigate how such practices are related to a wider sense of identity and identification, and the extent to which these are influenced by class fraction and ethnicity.

Our sample includes approximately 120 white middle-class families. Overall, we expect to conduct approximately 250 interviews. The project focuses on three urban areas: London and two provincial cities (Norton and Riverton). This article is based on the London sample and draws on the analysis of interviews with parents in the 63 families we have interviewed to date, a total of 32 fathers and 63 mothers. Although there are quotations from only 25 of these interviews, the themes they raise are saturated in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and can be found to varying degrees in both Norton and Riverton as well as the London data (see Crozier et al., 2006; James et al., 2006).

Slightly over half of our sample were self-identifiers, responding to a *Guardian* article about the research project which specified that its focus was the white middle classes. However, we also assessed middle-classness conventionally using the Registrar General's classification scheme (social classes 1 and 2) 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 neither parents graduates (a household where the father is an actor and the mother a choreographer). 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, 1998b; 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 ambivalences, fears and anxieties about acting in contradiction to normative white middle-class behaviour. In order to capture these more psycho-social aspects of identity, we followed the analytic approach outlined in Hollway and Jefferson (2000). Our intention is to develop theoretical understandings of the ways in which social privilege is both maintained and challenged in the context of multicultural urban schooling. In the rest of the article we draw on our empirical data first to indicate the high value attributed to multicultural schooling, mapping out positive aspects of parents' self-interested altruism, before moving on to discuss more problematic aspects of white middle-class omnivorousness, in which the differential values attributed to classed and raced others is often strongly related to the extent that these others share the same or similar values.

Adding Multicultural Value

Culture has become a central site for the exchange of value. As Skeggs (2005: 47) asserts, culture can be converted into a highly mobile commodity and is regularly used in trans-national advertising to generate multicultural appeal. However, cultural differences have rarely been analysed in terms of their appeal to members of the majority white culture within educational fields. Yet many of our families do feel passionate about the need to produce well-rounded, tolerant individuals, and see multi-ethnic comprehensive schooling as an important component in this process. They speak of children who are 'socially fluent and adaptable', children who become 'more resilient'; this resilience is sometimes counterposed to the 'softness' of children who attend selective and private schools. In particular, multiculturalism is seen as an important value reflecting inclusivity in a diverse, global world. This positive value in comprehensive schooling emerges strongly in the words of Avril Smart, one of the parents:

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 arrogant or not appearing arrogant. There is some kind of modesty that some people might see as them not being confident. You are not being educated to be a woman of the world; you are being educated to take your part, a place. And I think there 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. (Avril, journalist)

We glimpse, throughout what Avril Smart says, a sense of attending comprehensive schools as almost a humbling experience for the white, middle-class child; one that makes children both better people and better equipped to understand and respond to ethnic diversity. Here we are presented with a progressive, inclusive image of 21st century citizenry in which comprehensive schooling is seen to play a key role in promoting cultural openness and understanding. As Edith Jennings asserts below, this is a case of putting rhetoric into practice, of living as well as espousing democratic, civic values. These parents are emphasizing a social and cultural fluency in which an active engagement with difference is signalled as a highly-valued attribute:

I think we would automatically spout all the stuff about the importance of cultural and social differences but I don't think it would mean much to our children if we sent them to either private or selective state schooling. Sending Jack to the local comprehensive means that we mean it. (Edith Jennings, university lecturer)

The majority of our parents expressed similar sentiments to Avril and Edith. Yet as Sayer (2005) argues, while it is analytically possible to abstract out the moral from the instrumental and the conscious from the habitual, in practice the two are complexly inter-related. Multiculturalism may be valued in itself, as may be understanding other cultures so as to be able to better relate to other people. There is, however, an important difference in principle between the moral and conscious articulation of such 'valuings' and, on the other hand, holding them *in the knowledge* that (or even *because*) they gain an advantage vis-à-vis others. So inner-city multi-ethnic schooling is seen to be a good thing in itself but also to be important for acquiring an understanding of, and proficiency in, multiculturalist capacity. Among the high principles, moral integrity and openness to cultural diversity is a powerful strand of calculation regarding the gains to be made from multicultural urban schooling. Our data reveal how both civic commitment and a self-interested altruism can be woven together in a complex amalgam:

Sophie will be, already is, totally different to us, all our friends are white and middle-class, hers are from all sorts of class and ethnic backgrounds. And to be honest I'm quite uncomfortable with people from different backgrounds. I never had the experience either at school or university and we didn't want that for Sophie. We wanted her to be a fully paid up citizen of the 21st century and I think she is and that is all down to the school. She has a real social confidence and can get on with anybody. (Richard Harding, barrister)

There are shades here of Van Zanten's public sector urban professionals with their cosmopolitan view of contemporary society, and an instrumentalized view of local multicultural state schools as 'major agents of preparation for this heterogeneous type of modernity, typical of metropolitan areas' (Van Zanten, 2003: 119). Tolerance, understanding and proximity are all valorized as positive, and clearly there is much to be commended in white middle-class practices of sending your child to multi-ethnic urban comprehensives, but such practices are also motivated by self-interest as well as more selfless civic motives. As Gibbons (2002) argues, the ethic of multiculturalism reflects the realities of professional life and increasingly needs to be espoused in order to secure professional success. The global economy requires individuals who can deal with people of other races and nationalities openly and respectfully. So within the professional social fields these parents inhabit as workers, multiculturalism is increasingly a source of cultural and social capital.

In common with many of the other families, Richard Harding's reflections on his daughter are also redolent of omnivorousness. North American research (Erickson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996) and more recently work in the UK (Warde et al., 2000) maps out a particular kind of middle-class self formation, the cultural omnivore who can access, know, take part in, and feel confident about using, a wide variety of cultures from high to low. Sophie, is a classic middle-class omnivore. She is an accomplished pianist, loves classical music and the theatre but also enjoys Black music and clubbing and has many friends from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. She has also been predicted four As at 'A' level and intends to study English at Oxford. Sophie, like many of the other white middle-class young people in the study, is 'a real multicultural kid' (Marcus Smedley, bank manager) but also one who, through her cultural activities, remains firmly embedded in white middle-class social networks. This ability to fit readily and easily into very different social milieux is characteristic of many of the young people in the sample. Dan Adkin's comments about his daughter exemplify this omnivorousness, but it is also evident across the transcripts:

Emily for example goes to a school where predominantly it's a kind of working-class environment, a lot of children come from difficult yes difficult, disadvantaged domestic situations. And it's roughly 50 percent non-white. And so she's got this kind of middle-class background and goes on middle-class holidays with a middle-class family, and has got reasonably wealthy grandparents who have left an inheritance for her kind of thing. And she goes and spends several hours a day with people who come from very different backgrounds, so she's exposed to both and is totally comfortable with both. (Dan Adkins, teacher)

Yet, despite varying degrees of social mixing with the classed and racialized other across the sample, the white middle-class young people remain firmly and primarily anchored in white middle-class networks (Reay, 1998b). The white middle-class interest in difference and otherness can thus also be understood as describing a project of cultural capital through which these white middle-class families seek to display their liberal credentials and secure their class position

(Bourdieu, 1984; May, 1996). The ability to move in and out of spaces marked as 'other' becomes part of the process through which this particular fraction of the white middle classes come to know themselves as both privileged and dominant (Razack, 2002).

The Classed and Racialized 'Others' of White Middle-Class Multicultural Identity

Lying beneath omnivorousness and inclusive multicultural attitudes and practices are more instrumentalized, and at times fearful, impulses and attitudes. The instrumentalization, the extracting of value from others, is never far from the surface as a number of parents reflect on the 'value-added' gained in terms of confidence and self-esteem that comes through attending schools where many of the children are far less privileged:

The funny thing is, something I didn't realize is, I think it is very good for their self-esteem, I mean we are free-loading in a way, partly because they have got all these opportunities and a lot of them are cheap and/or free, but also they are top of the tree academically at a school like that and if they went to another school they would be average ... But I think they think they are great and so that is very good for their self esteem. (Sally Rouse, secondary school teacher)

And:

Bryony has come out very confident because she was top of the pile as well in that school and she overcame all her fears and worries at the beginning and has come out extremely well-adjusted socially and emotionally, very confident and knows where she wants to go. (Julian Drew, senior arts manager)

More buried are the fears. We glimpse white middle-class fears of potential danger from the negative influence of white and black working-class peers on their own children's attitudes and behaviour. But more common are fears of a negative impact on children's educational attainment as a result of being in pupil peer group cultures where educational achievement is seen to be insufficiently valued. This is most clearly articulated by Vickie, a charity worker:

There's fear, a fear that you're sending your child into a lesser environment, somewhere where they're not going to be able to do as well.

Such fears are simultaneously rational and irrational, and perfectly understandable. Our parents constitute a fraction of the white middle classes who are actually facing up to fears prevalent among the white middle classes more generally. However, both sets of fears also reveal something more troubling, the ways in which black and ethnic minority children are often used symbolically to put even greater distance between the white middle classes and their other 'other', the white working classes. So in a significant number of the transcripts a segment of the ethnic minority children are separated out from the excess of

blackness and come to represent the acceptable face of working classness, and of ethnic/'racial' difference, they are the children who are 'exceptionally bright and very nice', 'are doing the best', those who are a paler shade of dark, and come from families 'where the parents really care about education', 'have high aspirations' and 'are really ambitious for their children' – the 'model minority' (Leonardo, 2004: 129). This is a status, however, not attributed to all minority ethnic groups. As Paul Western differentiates:

Whereas you go to beyond where the secondary school is there's a council estate and it's very much a white school but it is in terms of class very working class and it's very much not aspiring middle classes, whereas the school that Hal went to a lot of the parents aspire very strongly for their kids. (Paul Western, photographer)

Within dominant symbolic systems the aspiring ethnic minorities are ascribed with moral value, despite, or we would argue because of, their ethnicity. This is perhaps unsurprising, especially as research has consistently documented that economic migrants adopt middle-class values towards education often regardless of class position (Chen, 2004; Tomlinson, 2005). They also stand out from the working-class majority (both black and white) because of shared values. They are perceived to be committed to the same values as these white middle-class parents. They too have an aspirational habitus (Baker, 2005) which, despite their difference, makes them not too different, unlike the white working class who are seen to be 'beyond the pale'. So, for many of our parents, the aspirational ethnic minorities come to be defined as good and having worth in a middle-class process of drawing boundaries and attributing value. And, while recognizing the deep-rooted institutional racism within the labour market, such ethnic ambitions and aspirations are slowly being realized as a disproportionate number of upwardly-mobile young people are from ethnic minority backgrounds. A recent study (Ridge, 2005) found that 56 percent of people from Indian working-class families take up professional and managerial jobs in adulthood, while, more generally, new generations of not just Indian but also Chinese, Caribbean and African families are moving ahead in the employment market (Platt, 2005).

However, more troubling are the projections of a number of our respondents. While there is much valuing and validation of the multi-ethnic other, what is also interesting here is what is being displaced and who it is being displaced onto. This is made evident in James Mount's quote below:

Plus, the other factor that goes into making the school actually good is (I don't know if it's particularly politically correct) but actually it is very low on the white trash factor you see. What you've actually got, is you've got people from all over the world basically and particularly you have got the Muslims, about half or a third of the intake or whatever. It has got much more of a tradition of education and like real fascist parents really (laughs) and so actually you don't get the same kind of disciplinary problems. You know they might be poor and they might be refugees but they have still got a very erm positive [attitudes] towards the benefit of education as opposed to like the white trash families basically who are the third generation of Thatcher's dross or whatever. Actually if you get too many of those in the school then that is actually much worse than, people of different colour and races frankly. (James Mount, local government officer)

In James's words we can see a privileging of the white 'multicultural' self through the pathologizing of the 'other'. As Bourdieu argues in *Acts of Resistance* (1998), moral stigma is frequently attached to those who are worst-off in class terms while moral superiority is attached to higher classes, in a process of what he terms 'class racism'. This is what is at work here. In the process of gaining multicultural capital the white working classes are residualized. They come simultaneously to represent excess and nothing, in the sense of having and being of no value. Very similar processes are at play here to the ones Haylett (2001) describes, in which the white working classes are marked as the abject constitutive limit by which middle-class multiculturalism is known and valorized. They are Warren and Twine's 'very white ... naked, pasty, underdone: white white' (1997: 210), embodying a whiteness that is somehow excessive, excrescent and incommensurably 'other' (Haylett, 2001: 360). But the association of excess with blackness never entirely goes away and there is still the fear/paranoia about 'big black boys' or in Steve Davies's words 'racism pure and simple'. Both 'white working-class trash' and 'big black thugs' are positioned here as 'abject', the embodiment of that which is valueless (Skeggs, 2004: 23).

Hierarchies of Value and Valuing

In all of this values are paramount, both in the sense of having the right moral and educational values (the shared values discussed earlier) and in *being of* value. In fact there appears to be a powerful causal relationship between the two, in so far as the multi-ethnic other needs to share in normative white middle-class values in order to be of value, while those unruly white and black working classes who refuse normative white middle-class values come to simultaneously represent excess and abjection (Reay, 2006, 2007). They are of no value. Yet this is not quite as depressing a scenario as the one that emerges in *Class, Self, Culture* (Skeggs, 2004). Nearly all white middle-class families in our sample find value in as well as get value from multi-ethnic, inner-city schooling. As one of our fathers said of his daughter:

We got this validation for the decision we'd made, this boost of the values coming back and being developed further. She is very, very strong in terms of values, civic egalitarian values which is what we'd always wanted for her. (David Johnson, educational consultant)

Another father spoke eloquently of his hopes for the sort of person he hopes his son will become through attending an inner city comprehensive:

I really hoped that he would gain a really good social understanding. That he would be able to relate to ordinary people and that he would have very good attitudes between equal opportunities and to social justice issues. And I wanted him to feel really comfortable in a multi-racial environment that was really paramount to me. And so the social issues were very important to me as much as educational aspiration. (Will Hayes, runs own fundraising business)

This is a slightly different and perhaps more optimistic perception of class and ethnic relations than Skeggs' (2004) analysis. She understands class relations through

the relationship of entitlement that the middle classes have to the culture of others. In her analysis working-class culture becomes a resource for the middle classes to plunder and authorize themselves through as they forge new identities in the making of new markets. However, in our study it is only a section of the working classes whose affect and dispositions are desired; those minority ethnic 'working classes' who are working class primarily in the traditional sense of having few economic resources. They are Byrne's (2006) excitingly different yet acceptably the same 'cultural other'. To a large extent they share the same aspirations, hopes and desires for their children as the white middle classes. Unlike their white working-class counterparts, they offer acceptable aspects of working-class culture 'that can be put to use for the enhancement of the middle class' (Skeggs, 2004: 12)

Furthermore, the white middle classes do not simply want their children to gain from contact with their ethnic other, they want them to be friends. The multi-ethnic other then is not only a source of multicultural capital, it also becomes a symbolic buffer between the pathologized white working classes on the one side and the traditional white middle classes, criticized for their separatism and racism, on the other. Yet, to view the minority ethnic students *only* as a way for the white middle classes to gain multicultural capital would miss out on the gains that work in the other direction, however secondary they may be. We glimpse these gains in what Martha Sage says about the learning benefits an Asian twin has acquired through being placed in a class with a critical mass of white middle-class students:

It's quite interesting because this friend who is Asian and lives on one of the estates is part of Charlotte's little group as it so happens she is a twin and they are in separate classes. The one who's in Sophie's class is doing a lot better than her twin sister. They're not identical twins and there could be all sorts of differences but even Charlotte points to that and I think it is because they have very different friendship groups. (Martha Sage, novelist)

As Martha Sage and her daughter Sophie have identified, learning gains come through mixing with the white middle classes; or to put it in Bourdieurian terms, capitals can move in both directions. In many ways this is an old story. The Sociology of Education has been concerned about the benefits of social mix for a long time (Coleman et al., 1966; Thrupp, 1999), but traditionally the benefits are all seen to flow in one direction from the middle to the working classes, from white to minority ethnic children. Furthermore, the gains from social mix only are seen to work if there is a majority of white and/or middle-class students. What we have here is more symbiotic than parasitic, and far messier than any straightforward, simple process of asset stripping.

For much of the time having value, finding value in, getting value from and adding value to, are inextricably entangled in the data. As Lorraine Reeves states, multi-ethnic schooling is 'good for white middle-class children. It keeps them real', and her sentiments are echoed across the interviews with parents. Nearly all the parents referred to their children's improved skills in dealing with what was termed 'the real world' or 'dealing with real life':

It's important for being able to deal with life. (Jane Watson)

She's got a stronger sense of reality, learning how to deal with all types of people. (Jackie Wells)

It gives them a taste of the real world. (Jane Watson)

She has really understood what life is really like so she is much more worldly-wise. (Liz Welland)

As these quotes make clear, many of our parents welcome the resilience and worldliness that comes with attending inner-city comprehensives. So, threaded through the discourse of valuing the diversity represented in urban comprehensives is a powerful theme of the value gained from diversity that we have discussed earlier. This opens up a tension across the data between two qualities: 'of value' and 'of use'. As Bauman (2001: 164) points out, they are 'notorious for being confounded and confused: is not a thing valuable because it is useful?' But as he goes on to argue, value is the quality of a thing, while usefulness is an attribute of the thing's users:

It is the incompleteness of the user, the dearth which makes the user suffer, the user's urge to fill the gap, which makes a thing useful. To 'use' means to improve the condition of the user, to repair a shortcoming; 'using' means to be concerned with the welfare of the user. (Bauman, 2001: 165)

A different way of approaching what is desired would be to value the other for its otherness, to nurture that otherness and make it flourish and grow. This for Bauman is akin to love and he asserts that 'use means a gain for the self; value augers its self-denial. To use is to take, to value is to give' (2001: 166). We want to argue that there is a deep, irresolvable ambivalence among our white middle-class sample in relation to 'use' and 'value'; between what we have earlier distinguished as 'value in' and 'value from' – a tension between the acquisitive individualized self and commitments to civic responsibility and the common good. As Thompson (2003: 7) argues, 'progressive whites must interrogate the very ways of being good for the moral framing that gives whites credit for being anti-racist is parasitic on the racism that it is meant to challenge'.

In a similar vein, Hage (1998) argues that in the context of multiculturalism the dominant white culture merely and unquestionably exists while migrant cultures exist for the latter. Their value, or more precisely exchange-value (Skeggs, 2004) lies in their utility as enriching cultures for the host culture. For Skeggs, white middle-class multiculturalism is a practice based on creating and managing an economy of otherness. Hage writes about 'productive diversity' or what he calls 'ethnic surplus value' (1998: 128) in which the white middle classes further enrich themselves through the consumption of ethnic diversity. So these white middle classes perched on the moral high ground are left in a quandary that threatens to topple them. Ahmed (2004) points out that diversity all too often is not associated with challenging disadvantage but becomes yet another way of doing advantage, while for Gibbons (2002), diversity for the middle classes is primarily about the acquisition of valuable multicultural global capital.

Challenging Privilege? Doing Whiteness Differently

Returning to Sayer's (2005) assertion that behaviour is often shaped by mixed motives and influences, while individuals often decide on a course of action because they hope it will have beneficial consequences for them, they are also acting out of a moral sense of the right thing to do. In many of the parents' narratives the effort to do the right thing is difficult to separate out from 'getting the best for my child'. On one level this is because 'getting the best for my child' is itself positioned as ethical behaviour. Problems arise when it is at the expense of others. Yet despite the mixed motives of white middle-class parents, many of the young white middle-class individuals who do attend socially mixed comprehensive schooling, at least from the perspective of their parents, are seen to be developing key citizenship skills of tolerance and understanding difference that are increasingly vital in a society with growing class and ethnic intolerance:

Going to an inner-city comprehensive has made both boys socially able to mix with anybody, having a real understanding and tolerance of other people. Being the kind of people they are I think their sort of moral attitudes are very, very strong. I think they are both very much full of concern for others and they are not competitive in any way. They don't look at life that you know I have got to get to the top I have got to be better than other people. They are both very understanding and definitely don't think they are better than other people. (Sarah Davies, deputy head, inner-city comprehensive)

Roediger argues that whiteness is all about absence: 'It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back' (Roediger, 1994: 13). Such empty identities are ripe for filling in and one of the ways in which white dominance, in the context of urban multi-ethnic comprehensives, is 'rationalised, legitimated and made ostensibly normal and natural' (Frankenberg, 1997: 3) is through processes of 'shading-in', adding 'colour' to the white middle-class self. There is a blurring and shading-in of whiteness that serves to mask its privilege. These omnivorous practices produce alternative white middle-class identities – streetwise, globally knowledgeable, tolerant, inclusive young white middle-class individuals who, in a number of parents' words, are better prepared for a global economy. Sometimes, however, this can become problematic, particularly when acculturation goes too far and white, middle-class children are deemed to be over-enthusiastically playing with other identities. As Lesley Mitchell comments:

I mean Andy can do a wonderful imitation of a South London black kid and that dismays me sometimes I say 'why do you want to talk like that'. But you know I don't think he's going to do it forever because the whole environment is very important and he doesn't come from a home where he is not expected to do well. (Lesley Mitchell, book trade senior administrator)

Implicit in Lesley's words is the white middle-class propensity to move in and out of different, more colourful identities. White middle-class omnivores can dip in and out of black culture, unlike their black working-class counterparts.

Caught Within Multicultural Capitalism

It is important for critical social science, on the one hand, to identify hidden instrumental strategies and power relations behind apparently innocent and disinterested action and, on the other hand, to uncover genuinely unintended advantages deriving from ethical behaviour (Sayer, 2005). Initially, our project was a naïve one, in that we hoped to find in the white middle classes sending their children to urban comprehensives a fraction of the middle classes characterized by altruism and a sense of civic responsibility. We did find those qualities in our sample, and we can see clearly in what parents say about their children some of the intended and unintended gains from ethical behaviour, but their altruism and sense of civic responsibility was tempered by a degree of instrumentalism we had not anticipated. Writing of her American white middle-class neighbours, hooks (2000: 3) argues that:

They may believe in recognising multiculturalism and celebrating diversity ... but when it comes to money and class they want to protect what they have, to perpetuate and reproduce it – they want more. The fact that they have so much while others have so little does not cause moral anguish, for they see their good fortune as a sign they are chosen, special, deserving.

While most of the white middle-class parents in our study did not make claims about their children's 'extraness', their specialness, neither did they seriously question their privilege, even though it was particularly apparent in the multi-ethnic, working-class schools they chose to send their children to. In fact most of the parents, while distancing themselves from the more exclusivist white middle-class majority, continued to deploy their greater economic, social and cultural capital to get more educationally for their own children. While sometimes such practices were accompanied by a commitment and even practices to improve educational resources for other, less-privileged children, on the whole actively seeking to enhance the common good was not normative for this group of white middle-class parents either. Like Butler and Robson's (2003) London middle classes these parents constitute 'a class in and for itself'. There was a multicultural, but only rarely a socialist, egalitarianism. While they were anxious not to refuse or misrecognize cultural others they do not seem to understand the hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1976), especially the injustices suffered by those termed 'chavs' or 'white trash'.

So is there an innocent white middle class? One that is not either putting cultural and material distance between itself and its ethnic and classed others by rushing into elite geographical and educationally separate enclaves, or else 'making use' of a conveniently accessible and acceptably valuable ethnic other in order to gain valued global multicultural capital? Certainly, our research indicates that the future-projected, strategizing, capital-accruing self that epitomizes middle-class subjectivity can never be completely held in abeyance. Attending multi-ethnic urban comprehensives becomes yet another, if slightly risky, exciting way of resourcing the middle-class self. There are glimpses of future-projected strategizing in most of the interviews but it is most clearly articulated by Martha Sage:

We looked at our own educational experience and we had both done reasonably well at school and got into prestigious universities and we felt, you know, we were successes of the education system from that point of view. We thought, what in life has ever stood in our way and has it been to do with exam grades and we thought no, actually it's been things that we would rather be better at; it's other stuff, not passing exams. It's to do with social fluency, social skills, time management, self-confidence, knowledge of other cultures and the real world, whatever it might be. We thought that those things if anything are more likely – to come from going to a school like Copeland.

Martha Sage, and her partner, Jeremy, have already mapped out the skills that their children will need for professional success in a multicultural global economy and have calculated that attending an urban comprehensive is a better context for acquiring them than a more traditional grammar or selective school. This is where we come back to the discomfort of our own messy positioning in relation to the research: how to rescue the white middle classes from their relentless acquisitiveness. Those of us, now precariously perched on the moral high ground, who shun materialism and consumerism, who frown on elite choices and social snobberies, often neglect our own consumption of all the 'right on' capitals including multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Despite their espousal of a cosmopolitan identity, there is little sense among our white middle-class families of cosmopolitanism as 'an imagination of a globally shared collective future' (Beck, 2004: 27). While the practices of Savage et al.'s (2005: 206) Mancunians work to efface 'the other', these London families, together with many of those in Norton and Riverton, seem to be directed towards 'consuming the desired other' in an act of appropriation. Cultural validation is entwined with acquisitive valuing. This is mostly a partial and narcissistic valuing; one that is primarily about recognizing a more colourful self in the ethnic other in a process that residualizes both a hyper-whitened white working class and an excessively black black working class who come to share the same symbolic register in the white middle-class imaginary (Haylett, 2001; Sibley, 1995). We can see the paradoxical way in which the embracing of an acceptable ethnic 'other' is, in effect, an excluding inclusivity. 'The "unities" that identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion' (Hall, 1996: 8); and this process of partial inclusion produces the too black working classes and the too white working classes as unacceptable 'others'.

Yet it is important to remind ourselves that these parents are negotiating an impossible situation that individually they can do little to improve. They are left with the quandary of trying to behave ethically in a situation which is structurally unethical (in terms of entrenched inequalities), and radically pluralistic (in terms of different moralities and value systems). The wider social context of structural injustices is bound to throw up impossible moral dilemmas and lead to all sorts of morally inconsistent behaviour. Marx (1997) argued that ethical behaviour is only partially achievable in a society which is structurally unethical in the way it distributes

resources and opportunities and, with them, possibilities for equal recognition. Contemporary society has changed little in this respect. When the white middle classes make choices that are directed towards the common good, greater benefits and value still accrue to them rather than to their class and ethnic others. This is a case of trapped in privilege and constitutes powerful evidence that we need effective policies that work towards the dismantling of economic and social privilege.

We are left with two powerful challenges. First, to develop critiques which, while recognizing how people negotiate inequitable situations, also constantly keep in play the structural injustices within which they are situated. The problems of capitalist multicultural society do not derive from the moral failures of individuals but from society at large. Second, to recognize the complexities of whiteness, and the need for more empirical studies of how whiteness is lived and experienced by different fractions of both working and middle classes, and across different contexts. The research indicates that, while the white group in society share the same skin colour, they are not 'equally white' (Bonnett, 1998). Paradoxically, while the white working classes are perceived to be excessively pale, and are too white to possess dominant cultural capital, the white middle classes in our study accrue valued (multi)cultural capital by presenting themselves as 'a darker shade of pale'.

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