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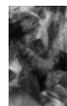
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Race, Class and 'The Harmony of Dispositions'

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Abstract

This response piece is informed by recent public discussions concerning the BBC 'Great British Class Calculator' – a survey which seeks to rethink traditional ways of categorising class for the 21st century. This article focuses on how individuals feel about, and respond to, their class location. Drawing on data from a two-year study about the black middle classes, it is argued that class identity cannot be fully understood without taking account of the intersecting role of race. Specifically, exposing how white identity and white racial knowledge work to inform and protect the boundaries of middle class and elite class positions (to the disadvantage of minoritised groups) remains central to advancing race equity and genuine social mobility.

Savage et al.'s (2013) class survey offers a compelling new insight and extension to traditional methods of determining class location by incorporating a broader analysis that speaks to social, economic and cultural forms of capital rather than mere employment status alone. This proposed new measurement of class also takes account of the expansiveness of our social networks and the variation in the type of activities in which we engage in our spare time. My interest lies in how we perceive, feel and respond to categorisations of our class identity and the extent to which classed capitals are seen to have weight, worth or legitimacy for different ethnic groups. For example, I share the same broad (middle) class location as Tom Heyden, author of the BBC News article 'Class calculator: Can I have no job or money and still be middle class?', in which he comments on the BBC's Great British Class Survey that contributed, in large part, to

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Savage et al.'s (2013) analysis. Both Heyden and I went to a private school and thus are likely to share certain similarities in our cultural and social capital. Heyden remarks of his schooling:

> It wasn't the type of school with Downton Abbey accents.[1] Many of the private school kids talked more like the crack dealers from gritty dramas. Private school kids typically don't want to sound like private school kids. Normally, I don't offer up the fact that I went to private school. (2013: 3)

Even though this is a brief journalistic piece rather than a theoretically grounded academic endeavour, it reveals several noteworthy calculations about the complex and profoundly under-appreciated intersection of race and class. While I do not ostentatiously parade my private schooling at every given opportunity, I certainly do not work to conceal it and, while not steeped in the clipped, precise, period drama tones of Received Pronunciation, I have the type of accent discernibly associated with someone who has been privately educated. Unlike Heyden, I often actively and knowingly[2] deploy both of these capitals to signal my class position to others – specifically, to white others. These *class signifiers* facilitate access to, and a *certain* acceptance within, mainly white (middle class) spaces but crucially, they also disturb and disrupt the fixed, stereotypical perceptions that many whites hold about blacks. If you have not yet guessed, Heyden is white and I am black (Caribbean). It is this – our raced identities – which is the central point of my thesis. The fact of my blackness does not grant me an equivalent degree of privilege as Heyden's whiteness does him, despite our shared class location, since 'to embody both whiteness and middle classness is to be a person of value' (Reay et al., 2007: 1042) in broader society. The fact of my blackness means that whites automatically expect me to not only sound as though I *am* from that 'gritty drama' (hence the surprise at how I really do sound) but to behave that way as well, and they are often ready to treat me accordingly. Yet by deploying my classed capitals as part of my 'public identity' (Lacy, 2007: 73), I can work to minimise the likelihood of racial stereotyping and racism:

> Public identities are (…) purposeful, instrumental strategies that either reduce the probability of discrimination or curtail the extent of discrimination middle-class blacks face in their public interactions with white strangers (…) [Middle-class blacks] assert public identities in order to convince others that they are legitimate members of the middle class. (Lacy, 2007: 73)

Conversely and significantly, it is precisely the fact of Heyden's whiteness which allows him to casually luxuriate in toying with whether or not he feels like deploying his classed capitals. Gender also plays a role here too; the intersection of race (white), class (middle) and gender (male) is reflective of a hierarchical power dynamic that is evidenced – yet seldom named by those embodying that identity profile – across the academy or other sectors. The intention here is not to personalise the role of race and class or trivialise them as individually located preconceptions,[3] rather to draw attention to their structural formation and the ways in which this is reinforced and retained through race inequity. Two key arguments are central here. First, the way in which whites' knowledge about white identity and race – what Leonardo (2009: 110) terms 'white racial knowledge'

– retains a silent but highly formative presence in Heyden's article and in discussions about class generally; and second, as a related consideration, the importance of attending to, and explicitly naming, the ways in which race and class intersect when seeking to elucidate class experience. When I use the term 'race', I am including whites as possessing a racial identity; too often it is seen to refer only to racially *minoritised* groups or people of colour, and whites, notably the white middle classes, are located as being outside of the discussion.

Yet, this invisibility, this 'structured blindness' (Mills, 1997: 19) is not accidental. By not making explicit their knowledge of how the world works in racially meaningful ways (Leonardo, 2009), whites are able to make use of, and benefit from, their whiteness as though part of the natural order of things. Further, adherence to this myth of invisibility enables them to collude in practices which 'other' and racially subjugate people of colour and reject their (racialised) experiences as valid. Attempts to 'out' these processes, to name and reveal whiteness are often met with denial or hostility (Picower, 2009; Rollock, 2012). By constructing this 'racial fantasyland' (Mills, 1997: 18) and also determining the rules that govern it, whites are able to retain an invisible or, if present, innocent and 'neutral' role in their relations with other ethnic groups. Within this context, accusations of racism become remade as illusion, as fantasy.

It is precisely these complex intersectionalities of race and class that we sought to examine and name in the two-year, ESRC-funded study 'The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes'.[4] Specifically, we were interested in exploring how race and class shape the experiences of Black Caribbean heritage families as they work to navigate their children successfully through the education system, and whether race or class are more present at given moments. Class status was determined by identifying those in professional and managerial occupations as detailed in the National Standard Occupational manuals and we also collated information about income and highest level of educational qualification.[5]

A key aspect of our study involved asking respondents about their views of their middle class location and their class identity. We were able to identify five broad groupings in response to the question 'Do you consider yourself to be middle class?'[6] For the purposes of this paper, I wish to focus on the largest of these groupings whom we label 'middle class ambivalent'. Twenty-three of the 59 respondents for whom we have data (almost 40%) were categorised in this way. While they report similar feelings of discomfort and ambivalence about owning the term 'middle class' as Savage et al.'s (2001) white respondents, there are fundamental distinctions to be made that pertain to family class background, race and racism.

As a group, our black middle class respondents perceive that they hold little economic and financial power relative to whites and this impacts on their preparedness to self-label as middle class. In part, this is also informed by their proximity to, and memories of, a working class past. Recent reports documenting the high representation of black and minority ethnic groups in low paid employment and the level of unemployment amongst black men also substantiate this (Hudson et al, 2013; Li, 2012).[7] To be black and middle class is also to make relational comparisons in terms of status, mobility and wealth with not just the white middle classes (about which I say more below) but also with their African American counterparts in the USA. These middle class counterparts (family,

friends, colleagues) are regarded as more established, receive greater recognition and have more opportunities for career growth and success. As one of our respondents, Linda (Human Resources Director), states 'there [in the USA] aren't restrictions and here [in the UK] it is a class country. It's about who you know …'. Her observation has some resonance. A recent UK study reveals that black people in the UK are more likely to be unemployed than those in the USA; a discrepancy more pronounced during time of recession (see Ramesh, 2012) and separate research by Li et al. (2008) emphasises the pivotal role of social networks and contacts – that is, social capital – in affecting class stratification and reproduction and the ways these operate to 'entrench privilege' (2008: 407) to the disadvantage of minority ethnic groups (also Li, 2012).

Our respondents speak of the ways in which whites act to protect the boundaries of white middle class spaces, thus, I argue, maintaining the fixedness and exclusivity of their networks in line with Li et al.'s (2008) findings. They engage skills from their 'cultural toolkit' (Moore, 2008: 498) such as code-switching and changing accent (Cassandra, Training Company Director) or speaking the 'language of whiteness' (Jean, College Lecturer) to fit into and navigate white space. This is risky work because while they possess 'appropriate' capitals (education, qualifications, accent, dress) and seek to deploy them to their advantage, recognition and acceptance (by whites) that their capital carries legitimacy is not guaranteed. This is why Michael (Health Consultant), is frustrated by the headteacher's refusal to address the fact that his son had been given a non-speaking part in the school play, despite an outstanding record and several awards in drama: 'if he had blond hair and blue eyes and could act as well as [son], he would have been up there for the whole world to see …'. Michael uses his class resources, though not validated by the headteacher, to move his son to another school.[8] Lorraine (Researcher) speaks of her constant surprise and dismay when her 'closest [white] friends', whom she has known for over 30 years, speak of black people and their ghetto blasters, 'and I say, "Well what are you talking about? Do I have a ghetto blaster?"'. In short, the fact of blackness remains. Skin colour acts as a form of embodied capital that disrupts and lessens the worth of the cultural capital held by black middle classes. They are perpetual outsiders because of their race, irrespective of class status, and this contributes to their hesitation about comfortably self-identifying as middle class. Again, it is important to stress that the decisions and perceptions that lie behind these racial stereotypes and low expectations are seldom explicitly named. Whites make use of the rules governing this racial contract (Mills, 1997) without ever declaring their complicity and presence within it.

> The homogeneity of the dispositions associated with a position and their seemingly miraculous adjustment to the demands inscribed in it result partly from the mechanisms which channel towards positions individuals who are already adjusted to them, either because they feel 'made' for jobs that are 'made' for them – this is 'vocation', the proleptic assumption of an objective destiny that is imposed by practical reference to the modal trajectory in the class of origin – *or because they are seen in this light by the occupants of the posts* – this is co-option based on the immediate *harmony of dispositions* – and partly from the dialectic which is established, throughout a lifetime, between dispositions and positions, aspirations and achievements. (Bourdieu, 1979: 110, emphasis added)

While Bourdieu does not make explicit mention or acknowledgement of the way in which race intersects with class in the formation and reproduction of class capitals (Savage et al., 2013), in conceptualising black skin as a form of embodied capital and by drawing upon analyses of the way in which social capital is restricted to those with the most 'harmonious' fit, it is my thesis that race – in the form of white identity and whiteness – is, in fact, quietly present in his work. The dispositions that are seen to comprise 'fit' are exactly those which keep the black middle classes on the fringes of middle classness. I posit that these are the same dispositions which contribute – at least in part – to the reasons for such a small percentage of minority ethnic groups in the 'elite' category of Savage et al.'s (2013) seven classes. In fact, too often our attention and critique in debates about equality is on those lower down in the power structure. Understanding and deconstructing the manifestation of whiteness amongst the elite and the ways in which they police the borders of their privilege and power is crucial to challenging inequality and advancing genuine social mobility.

The impetus for this discussion piece has been a demand for the explicit naming of whiteness and the characteristics of white racial knowledge in debates around class. The intention has not been to merely fix the analytical gaze on the ways in which race and class intersect for the black middle classes and how this shapes their views about being middle class, or indeed the fact of the extra work in which they are obliged to engage to seek some level of acknowledgement within (mainly) white spaces. While this is important, to only do this with no attention to wider context would surely contribute to their being Othered through the façade of an uncritical theoretical lens. Rather, their experiences and accounts act as a stark and necessary reflection of the ways in which whiteness continues to be insidiously and silently enacted. As Leonardo (2009: 111) argues 'whiteness is (…) vulnerable when knowledge about its unspoken structures is formulated and used to subvert its privileges'. The reminder then is that the 'homogeneity of dispositions' associated with position and social hierarchy is remade and reinforced along the axes of *both* class and race in unspoken acts of cultural distinction that serve, primarily, to advantage the white middle classes and the white elite.

Funding

Notes

1. *Downton Abbey* is an English period drama which documents the lives of an upper-class family, who own Downton Abbey, and their servants. Class, status, hierarchy and power are key themes. Race is not explicitly mentioned but until recently (with the addition of one black male actor) the main characters were all white. See the blog discussion piece about whiteness in television dramas, including *Downton Abbey*: http://mediadiversityuk.com/2013/09/14/poc4culturalenrichment-watch-downton-abbey-now-with-a-black-character/ (accessed 27 September 2013).
2. That is not to say that these acts are always conscious. My accent forms a natural part of my embodied capital.
3. Heyden's piece merely serves as a useful tool through which to articulate my argument. A similar exercise (regarding the invisibility of whiteness) can easily be carried out in relation

to prevalent debates about women and feminism. Listen to BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* as an example.

4. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no. ESRC RES 062-23-1880). The project provides the first detailed insight into the perspectives, strategies and experiences of middle class, Black Caribbean heritage families in the UK, as they seek to navigate their children successfully through the education system. Researchers, in addition to myself, were Carol Vincent, Stephen Ball and David Gillborn.

5. Fifteen respondents were categorised as 1.1 (e.g. senior officials in national government; personnel, training managers); 15 as 1.2 occupations (e.g. university researchers, professors; local authority education professions); and the majority, accounting for 32 respondents, were classified as 2 (e.g. teachers, head teachers; health professions). We also collated information on income and hold data from 59 of our 62 participants: the majority (21 parents) earned between £36,000 and £50,000; 16 earned between £51,000 and £65,000 per annum and three earned in the highest bracket of £81,000 and above. In terms of education, 49 per cent of the 57 participants for whom we had information held a master's degree as their highest qualification. Thus, our measure of class status follows the more traditional economic model referred to by Savage et al. (2013).

6. For details see Rollock et al. (2012).

7. While not disaggregated by ethnicity, Savage et al.'s (2013) article reveals that minority ethnic groups are mainly categorised as 'emergent service workers', characterised as having a modest household income, limited savings and likely to rent.

8. It is important to be mindful of the continuing, historic debates around low academic attainment for black pupils. Researchers (e.g. Coard, 1971; Gillborn and Rollock, 2010) point to several reasons for this, amongst them low teacher expectations.

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