'Middle class by profession': Class status and identification amongst the Black middle classes

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Abstract

Drawing on data collected during a 2-year Economic and Social Research Council-funded project exploring the educational perspectives and strategies of middle-class families with a Black Caribbean heritage, this paper examines how participants, in professional or managerial occupations, position themselves in relation to the label 'middle class'. Our analysis reveals five distinct groupings: those who are 'comfortably middle class', 'middle-class ambivalent', 'working class with qualification', 'working class' and a final group, 'interrogators'. However, we note considerable commonality and fluidity across these groupings in terms of participants' reasons for and, in some cases, hesitancy around inhabiting a particular class location. These responses must be understood in the context of the relative newness of the Black middle classes and respondents' broadly similar working-class trajectories alongside ongoing experiences of racism within a society that privileges and gives legitimacy to a dominant White middle-class norm. For many, there is not a straightforward way to be Black *and* middle class.

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Introduction

This paper draws on data collected during a 2-year project that examined the educational strategies, perspectives and experiences of parents of Black Caribbean heritage. We focus on this ethnic group because of ongoing studies that provide evidence for the relatively low educational attainment of Black Caribbean pupils (Gillborn, 2008; Rollock, 2007; Strand, 2007) and seek to extend existing debates by offering an analysis that attends to the intersecting role of social class in their experiences. This paper considers participants' responses to questions about their middle-class location and perceptions about their class identity.

There is scant British empirical work that explicitly explores race and class positioning within Black families. One exception is a survey-based study carried out by Daye (1994) that examined the relationship between the objective class position of Black participants in professional and managerial positions and their perceptions of race and class and how these have been shaped by racism. Daye reports that experiences such as marginalisation and exclusion continue to create dissonance between these two states. In other words, the effects of racism continue to position middle-class Black people as 'outsiders' irrespective of their class position and can, Daye argues, be seen to advantage the White majority population by protecting valued, high-status occupations. More recently, Archer's (2010) research has focused on middle-'classness' across several minority ethnic groups and Maylor and Williams' (2011) small-scale study of Black professional women found that, despite their occupational status, women tended to deny that any privilege was to be gained from their class position.

Aside from this very limited focus, attention has tended to centre on an essentialised Black working class or to include reference to a Black middle-class demographic only in passing. This absence ultimately renders invisible any serious acknowledgement or examination of a Black middle-class experience, even while studies of the white middle classes proliferate (Ball, 2003; Crozier et al., 2008; Vincent and Ball, 2007). Commenting on this gap in the literature, Phillips and Sarre (1995: 5) insist that, if 'social science has any claims to be an emancipatory activity, it should challenge middle-class Whiteness as a principle just as it refutes it as empirically outdated'.

While differences in definitions of social class must be noted, there are some potentially useful observations to be made with regard to US research. Pattillo-McCoy's (1999) ethnographic study of a Black middle-class community on Chicago's South Side, for example, poses questions similar to those presented in this paper. Pattillo-McCoy notes the connections among the 'normative' requirements for being middle class (e.g. suburban living, speaking 'standard' English, access to 'good' schools), their necessary economic underpinnings and the history

of racism and discrimination, which have led to racial residential segregation in the USA. Pattillo-McCoy's 'middle class' in this context refers to respondents in intermediate (e.g. clerical) and skilled manual positions, which is fundamentally different from the notion of middle class in the UK. However, like Phillips and Sarre (1995), Pattillo-McCoy acknowledges the scarcity of such research focusing on the Black middle classes, arguing that the 'mainstream' still firmly belongs to those who are White and middle class.

Staying within the USA, Moore's (2008) research uses an intersectional approach to identify the ways in which class shapes 'the articulation of a black racial identity' (Moore, 2008: 492). Based on a 3-year ethnographic study of a Philadelphia neighbourhood, Moore distinguishes between two competing forms of African-American middle-class identity: *multi-class* and *middle-class* minded. She demonstrates how, while there are areas of overlap, the former refers to those less securely established in the Black middle classes who have experienced social mobility in their lifetime, providing them with a unique 'outsider-within' perspective. These multi-class participants commended their capacity to operate comfortably in a range of social contexts and to 'code-switch', depending on the conversational situation. Multi-class individuals worked consciously to maintain 'a symbolic and personal connection' (Moore, 2008: 506) to low-income African Americans. Middle-class-minded individuals, by contrast, were more likely to come from established middle-class families and tended to be more aware or accepting of class differences between themselves and less privileged African Americans. They tended also to situate themselves within environments where most of their contemporaries were also middle class. Again, it is important to take account of study- and country-specific definitions of social class. Moore's (2008) respondents were grouped as middle class according to their own determination or based on demographic information (e.g. college education and an annual income exceeding £23,000). While such research may be useful in lending an analytical lens to the British context, it is important to pay heed to these definitional differences as well as to those of socio-historical context. The Black British middle class is considerably newer and smaller than its American counterpart.

As already intimated, intersectionality is central to our analysis, in advancing an understanding of the complex and multiple ways in which not only race and social class come together but the particular historical and socio-political British context – what Dill and Zambrana (2009: 3) describe as 'the historical modes of incorporation' – variously informs the experiences and views of our participants (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). With this in mind, while we seek to explore respondents' views about their class location, we do not presume a fixed, homogeneous Black identity upon which class is imposed. Indeed, there are certain variations across the sample in terms of how individuals perceived the importance of ethnic identity to their lived experiences. However, these variations do not readily or neatly correspond to participants' opinions about their class position. What our respondents do have in common, however, is that they all consider themselves to be of Black Caribbean heritage and it is from this starting

point that this paper is based. In order to lend historical context to their views about class identity, the following section offers a brief consideration of their parents' race and classed experiences as immigrants to the UK.

Recent Black-Caribbean presence in the UK

The majority of our 62 respondents were children of parents who migrated to Britain from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s, responding (like many Caribbeans at the time) to calls for help, from the British government, in addressing country-wide labour shortages (Ramdin, 1987). Making use of their citizenship rights granted under the 1948 Nationality Act, they came with high expectations not only of opportunities within the labour market but of the potential advantages perceived to be offered by the British education system.

In reality, many Caribbean migrants experienced what might be described as class-downsizing, that is having to accept low-status occupations compared with the positions they had left back home. These were posts that even the British White working class had rejected, characterised as they were as labour intensive with low pay and unsocial hours (Fryer, 1984). The prevalence of racial discrimination in employment, housing and policing, as well as other service areas, further reduced the prospect of any 'common consciousness of class' (Sivanandan, 1976: 350) between Caribbeans and the White working classes. The social commentator and community activist Ambalavaner Sivanandan points to the government's readiness, on the one hand, to embrace the Caribbean contribution to the labour market and thus benefit to the economy while, on the other hand, doing nothing to ameliorate the worsening social relations between the Caribbean and the White working-class populations.

This was an era without race equality legislation, which was only introduced in 1966; of fraught relations with the police as evidenced, for example, through 'sus' laws;[1] and of an education system that readily treated Caribbean pupils as 'educationally subnormal' (Coard, 1971; Tomlinson, 1981, 2008). It was the racially minoritised status of Caribbean immigrants and the racism of wider White society, married with their lower occupational status, that contributed to Caribbeans becoming a distinct fraction of the working classes (Ramdin, 1987). However, many within the Caribbean community fought back, resisting the treatment to which they were being subjected. The supplementary school movement, for example, emerged to counter the shortcomings of the British educational system, and various community and political organisations[2] were established that sought to counter racism and advance the interests of the Black community more broadly (Mullard, 1973).

Our respondents grew up in families marked by these histories. We have focused explicitly on those who are now in professional and managerial occupations and yet, even as part of a generation that has in Phillips and Sarre's terms (1995: 54) become 'more credentialised' than their parents, continue to experience disadvantage in the workplace. For example, even when qualifications and experience are

taken into account, Black Caribbean women are less likely to secure high-level roles. Further, even those men and women who manage to obtain professional and managerial positions – the same demographic as the participants in the current research – continue to find that they are treated less favourably than their White colleagues (Cabinet Office, 2003; Clark and Drinkwater, 2007). Given this, it can be argued that the already fragile relationships among earnings, occupation and perceptions of class status (Future Foundation, 2006) are likely to be further mediated by our participants' experiences of racism.

The research

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out with 62 participants who self-defined as Black Caribbean. Aware of the increasing number of Black Caribbeans who have a partner outside their ethnic group,[3] we included families where one or both of the parents was Black Caribbean. Participants were recruited through a range of sources including advertisements on family and education websites and Black professional networks and social groups[4] as well as through extensive use of snow-balling via existing contacts within the professional Black community. Participants were selected following completion of a brief filter questionnaire that asked about their ethnic group identification, the age of their children and their occupation. We were interested in speaking with parents with at least one child between 8 and 18 years, an age range that encompasses key transition points in a child's school career and which would yield useful information about the process of school selection, choice and decision-making. With regard to class categorisation we sought parents in professional or managerial occupations (i.e. NS-SOC 1 and 2) using the Standard Occupational Classfication manuals. Conscious of the negative positioning of Black fathers in many debates on parenting, we sought to ensure that men were included in our sample: 13 of our participants were male. Interviews were carried out in London and other parts of England (e.g. the Midlands, Yorkshire and the East of England). Follow-up interviews were carried out with 15 of the original sample to further explore themes that had emerged from the first meeting with respondents.

Our respondents varied in age, domestic circumstances, education and income. Most (37) of our participants were in their forties, with the remainder spread more or less evenly in the thirties and fifties age groups.

We have information on income from 59 of our 62 participants: the majority of our respondents (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.[5] In terms of education, 49% of the 57 participants for whom we had information held a master's degree as their highest qualification.[6] With regard to occupational classification, we identified those in professional and managerial roles:[7] 15 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).

Respondents varied with regard to the level of detail they were able to provide about the occupations of their parents, particularly prior to migration to the UK. Individual family circumstance and migration came to bear differently on the financial situation and employment opportunities of each family. However, many participants described growing up in relatively poor circumstances, for example their parents leaving school in the Caribbean at 12 or 13 years to pursue largely manual employment, before later migrating to the UK and taking up what would be considered working-class posts (usually in the caring or service industries). Some participants spoke of how their parents, on arrival to the UK, studied or had to retrain while they worked, in order to increase their job prospects.

Our group, therefore, differs considerably from the US groups studied by both Pattillo-McCoy (1999) and Moore (2008). As already mentioned, such key differences in definition reveal the importance of context in class- and race-based research and highlight differences in researchers' use of categories such as 'middle class', making direct comparisons between studies difficult.

Being Black and middle class

Interview data was analysed by hand and using the qualitative software programme Nvivo. We had detailed information about views on class identification for 59 of our 62 respondents. We identified five broad groupings that emerged in response to the question 'Do you consider yourself to be middle class?' and to our coding of themes around social class and 'parent class position':

- working-class identifiers
- working class with qualification
- interrogators
- middle-class ambivalent
- middle-class identifiers.

Participants defined as working-class or middle-class identifiers were the least ambivalent in their identification and were relatively few in number: 4 and 12 respondents, respectively. Middle-class identifiers tended to accept the label 'middle class' by making factual reference to income, the size of their home, occupation or pastimes. This was considerably different from the majority (23 of our 59 participants, almost 40%), whom we define as middle-class ambivalent. Participants in this category tended to regard themselves as middle class but did so with some degree of reservation or hesitation. While existing research on the class identification of the White middle classes has also pointed to their hesitation and ambivalence (Savage et al., 2001) we argue, as will become evident below, that the reasons informing these perspectives for our respondents fundamentally differ

because of the particular intersection of their histories, identities and experiences as racially minoritised people.

We term a further 12 respondents 'working class with qualification' to encompass those who, while initially ascribing to a label of 'working class', proceeded to qualify or expand this to better reflect their personal circumstance. For example, Janet[8] (journalist) described herself as 'working class but with middle class values'; another, Richard (charity director), drew on his working-class upbringing and the fact that his parents still lived in council accommodation to make the argument that his sheer proximity to 'working classness', despite his objective class status, rendered problematic any straightforward identification as middle class.

Finally, we categorise eight respondents as class 'interrogators'. That is, they were not, during the course of the interview, able to align themselves with any specific class position. Instead they responded with considerable reflection and thoughtful analysis about the meaning of class, which sometimes included questions about their relationship to it. In certain instances, this was informed by evocative memories of a working-class childhood and upbringing that continued to resonate deeply despite a later transition to a middle-class occupation, a more comfortable home and an affluent lifestyle. In other situations, the very notion of a Black middle class was perceived to be meaningless – a contradiction in terms. Such was the case, for example, for Regina (teacher) who insisted that, while as a group the Black community had made some educational progress, members could not demonstrate the same level of financial and economical mobility or security as their more economically stable and powerful White counterparts. This point is also conveyed by Daye (1994) regarding the relative economic powerlessness of her Black middle-class respondents despite their class position.

These five categories provide a useful foundation from which to engage and analyse the data. However, it should be noted that the boundaries between the groups are not fixed or marked by respondents' location. As we will show, these are fluid and porous, reflecting considerable similarity across the groups in reasoning, feelings and thoughts about class. Accordingly, we arrange the analysis that follows thematically rather than subscribing tightly to the groupings outlined above. We reveal moments of tension, ambiguity and sometimes conflicting perspectives held by the same individual, as participants worked to make sense of their class position within British society. This reflects social class as a 'relational, emergent, contextual, dynamic, localized' process (Ball, 2003: 175). As with those in Daye's (1994) study, for our Black middle-class respondents there are yet further complexities in defining social class that are made awkward by the specific British context: memories, values and connections to a working-class past and ongoing incidences of exclusion from White middle-class spaces.

The British context and class location

For some respondents, questions about whether they considered themselves to be middle class were influenced by distant memories of debates or readings about

social class in sociology classes at school or college or by the broader British political and class agenda against which they attempted to assess their personal situation. Such awareness by no means offered a satisfactory resolution to their analysis as a range of additional factors, such as the interrelated role of the specific country context, often came to bear on these individual memories, perceptions and understandings. For example, Juliet speaks of the ways in which various forms of capital, all of which she argues might be said to relate to social class, are imbued with differing legitimacy according to the norms of the country in question. In her interview, she describes her mother as coming from a lower-middle-class background and emphasises the importance to the family – and she is referring here to the extended family – of education, with many members having attended university. She also provides considerable detail about the forms of historical and political knowledge and networks of 'people like us' readily accessible to her as a child. Yet Juliet is hesitant to describe herself as middle class precisely because she recognises the different value such capitals have (Bourdieu, 1993), when taken alongside the family's financial situation, within the British context:

> . . . as I grew up I felt myself to be culturally Caribbean middle class not English middle class. Caribbean middle class but poor in Britain. (. . .) there has been a lot more economic mobility [for Blacks in Britain] but that doesn't necessarily equate with class mobility. (. . .) for example (. . .) I had a very strong sense of having come from (. . .) a good family in the Caribbean and having a certain social standing so (. . .) I would see it in terms of like Pierre Bourdieu's stuff around cultural capital; there's a sense [in the Caribbean] of the class cultural capital is greater than the economic. . .[9]
> Juliet, academic

Country-specific differences in the cost and standard of living and societal values come together in complex ways to shape understanding and feelings about social class. This was a subject echoed by other participants especially, although not exclusively, where individuals had direct or formative experience of having lived abroad. For example, Monica (teacher), who self-defined as working class, spoke of having enjoyed, when younger, a middle-class lifestyle overseas that would not have been available to her family in the UK even if her parents had secured the same occupations. Another respondent, Ray, who is hesitant about describing himself as middle class, outlines the various factors that feed into reflections about his class position:

> . . . an article I read recently (. . .) suggests, based on my income, I am middle class. It placed me in the top 10% of earners in the country. Even though I have argued that class is more than income, all sociological codifications I have seen have placed me in that category despite my discomfort and wriggling. To console myself I rely on the fact that my parents were working class with 'middle class aspirations' which makes me a result of their aspirations. I have multiple identifies: I am middle class by

profession, working class by birth and attitude and African Caribbean by culture, history and social experience.

Ray, head of service (public sector)

Ray's analysis of his class location provides an evocative example of the realities of the ways in which the intersections of place, class and emotion come together to forge an identity that is complex and multi-layered. Formal markers of social class, which attempt to render him straightforwardly middle class, are mollified by the class status of his parents and his Caribbean identity. Values and perceptions about class and race are central. As with many other participants, 'working class' is a childhood identity that is seen to have associations with hard work but also with honesty, integrity and good will, what we might think of as 'moral capital'. In turn, these attributes are perceived to be and experienced as at odds with middle class-ness, a class location which itself is seen to be deeply infused with Whiteness. We return to this subject later. There is an additional aspect to Ray's subjective class positioning that pertains to his cultural identity and his experiences of racism. Having spent his pre-teens in his place of birth in the Caribbean, he is able to provide a perspective of how he is situated differently in the British context as a Black man, describing in one example the lower expectations that would have existed for him from teachers had he been schooled entirely in the UK. He notes therefore that his 'social identity is significantly affected by racism' so that his reflections of self, what he describes as his 'affiliations', are 'race based rather than class oriented at least when I am in Britain'. This speaks clearly to the significance and prevalence of racism within the British context (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001), and we can see how, alongside other aspects of his being, racism stimulates in Ray a self-identification whereby any comfortable association with being middle class in the British context carries considerably less resonance.[10]

Our respondents also noted differences in terms of the economic and financial mobility and success of the Black middle classes in America. This served to further obfuscate any coherent conceptualisation of a Black British middle-class identity. Again, race and class work here at multiple levels and in complex ways. For Brenda (head of research, voluntary sector), for example, the African American middle classes are a more clearly defined group with discernible, 'typical' attributes operating within a broader country ethos in which success is publicly lauded and encouraged. This contrasted with the lack of coherent voice and reservation in celebrating success that, she felt, was evident amongst their Black British counterparts. The sentiment about opportunities for progression in the States was echoed by Linda, who explained:

> . . . you can live out there in middle class (. . .) very affluent [areas] like Mount Vernon – it's a very affluent area in New York (. . .) [also] Atlanta (. . .) they've lots of Caribbeans there. . . .For some reasons the Caribbeans that have gone to the States have done great, as opposed to here and Canada. (. . .) They go there, they work, they achieve because I think that is what America is about. It's about if you can do

it . . . There aren't those restrictions and here, it is a class country. It's about who you know . . .
Linda, human resources director

In this sense, our respondents are arguing that success in British society is seen to rely on 'class-specific forms of sociability' (Ball, 2003: 80) that are perceived to be less salient and less restrictive in America. Interestingly, Whiteness retains an invisibility in these analyses about America even though both the African-American middle class and the Black British middle class are operating within sites in which social class and race are intimately intertwined.

Black working class histories

Four respondents described themselves as unambiguously working class for reasons that included a lack of higher-level qualifications and having to struggle financially. For Maud (university administrator), the term working class was an obvious and simple reflection of the fact that she needed to work for a living, irrespective of the professional categorisation into which her occupation placed her. However, there are also working-class values and lifestyles, developed within the social field of the family, that come to bear on class affiliation:

> I think that the principles and values that my parents taught me and my grandparents taught me stand me quite firmly as being working class (. . .) Integrity, being a good person, loving your family, loving yourself, loving (. . .) each other, protecting your family, working hard, providing for your family and (. . .) education has definitely been a focus in my family.
> Maud, university administrator

Again, we witness more evidence of the moral capital seen to be embodied within a formative working-class identity. There is a kind of embodied heroism that encompasses certain values around integrity and selflessness, which unproblematically and unquestioningly are seen as exclusive working-class terrain. These are principles and versions of morality that have history, that have been handed down from previous generations and which still 'live' and retain legitimacy in the new middle-class lives of our respondents. Such feelings are not limited to those who unambiguously describe themselves as working class. For Gabriel, whom we have defined as hesitant about his middle-class identification, there is a related concern not to be dismissive or exclusive:

> when I see myself as middle class I don't think of the situation of being working class which I understand, I have experienced, I think I have escaped (. . .) but by escaping it am I closing the door behind me and saying to people that I perceive as not part of the Black middle class or the middle class? Am I communicating to them rejection or

indifference or condescension? All those things that I have experienced working when I have been firmly deemed as working class.
Gabriel, education consultant

The proximity to a working-class past enables the retention of a moral capital that is characterised by continued sympathy with and commitment to the priorities and concerns of the Black working classes (Small, 1994) despite the new class location. It speaks to a notion of a collective Black identity, the borders of which are delineated by a struggle that has been both racial and economic and which make up the shared 'moral imagination' (Sayer, 2005: 144) that Gabriel is concerned not to have left behind or to scorn. Similar versions of this morality are clearly conveyed by Cynthia, who also defines herself as middle class.

On paper yeah, I'm middle class but I come from working class stock. (. . .) 'you got to work for everything you need' that was my parents. 'You don't get anything for free; you don't put anything on credit. You save up for it; you buy it cash in hand.' I can just hear my parents now.
Cynthia, teacher

In a similar vein, Nigel (human resources manager) recalls his working-class childhood of having to carry clothes to the laundrette, having to queue to collect fuel for the paraffin heater, his mother having to balance four jobs. These histories make up the working-class habitus of many of our respondents. The immediacy of stories, memories and advice from a working-class past makes, for some, any absolute separation from a definition of working class seem disloyal and represents a form of dislocation from a formative previous self. There is an element of overlap here with Reay's recollections as a White woman coming from a working-class background and moving to a middle-class occupation (Reay, 1997), although the relative power of Whiteness as compared with the racially minoritised position of our respondents means that any direct comparison of views and feelings about class transition must be exercised with care.

In addition, while the relative newness of their middle-class status could, for some of our respondents, be accepted as indicative of professional achievement, there was acknowledgement that it did not necessarily accompany automatic financial security. A lack of generational wealth or 'cash in the attic' also threatened any ready comfort with a middle-class identification. As Margaret (senior corporate manager, private sector) argues, most middle-class Blacks are only 'one or two pay checks away from being working class'. This financial fragility of Black families relative to White families, despite similarities in income, has been researched and commented upon by Oliver and Shapiro (2006) with regard to Black middle classes in the States. For our respondents, it clearly contributes to the continued salience of a working-class history in their lives.

We have outlined some of the complex and multiple axes of consideration that come into play for our participants as they seek to make sense of their

class position. We have noted that, despite their professional/managerial occupational categorisation, most of our respondents view their own class position differently. An important distinction is to be made between objective measures of class, as designated by government occupational classifications, and affective measures that pertain to feelings, histories and experiences of class. There is a messiness to this. There is no distinct set of rationales for affiliating to a particular self-ascribed class location. A respondent who comfortably self-defines as middle class might call upon a history and moments that for another contribute to the very reasons for *resisting* a middle-class identification. Therefore, we argue that the social boundaries of this newly emerging Black middle-class positioning can be said to be conceptualised in line with Bourdieu's analogy of 'a flame whose edges are inconstant movement, oscillating around a line or surface' (Bourdieu, 1987: 13). The very line or surface that serves as the origin for their class position is itself shifting, unsteady, as our respondents attempt to mark out and stand comfortably on a new Black middle-class terrain that is grounded in the values of, and connected to, their past. This is even while recognising that, as we will see in the next section, they have experiences that often differ from those of working-class Black people.

Defining the boundaries of the Black middle classes

Additional aspects of the intersectional complexity of class identification are evocatively conveyed by Janet (journalist), who, in describing herself as 'working class but with middle class values', is one of our 'working class with qualification' respondents. Encouraged to give examples of these values, Janet refers to certain forms of cultural capital that she positions as more or less acceptable and worthwhile:

> our son saw a Butlin's Holiday on television and said 'why don't we go there on holiday it looks good?' and (...) my husband said 'I don't wanna go there it'll be covered in people who just wanna drink lager every night and are covered in tattoos [laughs] and watch *EastEnders* and [son] was like, 'what are you talking about?' [laughs] (...) I just said 'well because it's just that we think the kind of people who go to those places don't really think like we do'.
> Janet, journalist

There are judgements and values made in this marking out of class boundaries. Certain acts – 'a couple of foreign holidays a year, reading' – have, for Janet, middle-class status and are assumed to have inherent value, and hence legitimacy. She states, amongst the middle-class pursuits of her family, that they watch television but only a certain amount and that not only can 'they not bear soaps' but she does not know 'how people watch that sort of thing'. Janet performs a certain hierarchical class exclusion – what Lacy (2007: 75) terms 'exclusionary boundary work' – to set herself apart from working-class others. Janet reveals a lifestyle based on arbitrarily perceived categorisations of performing and not performing

specific acts of class *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1993). This class inclusion/exclusion discourse is evident, as we note above, in her remarks about Butlin's holidays, which provide a powerful example of an activity not pursued by 'people like us' and, crucially, act as a subtle lesson in class politics, taste and 'modes of consumption' to her 9-year-old son (Bourdieu, 1993: 37). Janet does not display any of the common discomforts associated with Savage and colleagues' (2001) research that asks (White) participants about class but instead, in order to delineate the reality of her own class position, embraces its arbitrary relationship to status and worth as legitimate, acceptable and unproblematic (Sayer, 2002).

Also evident in Janet's accounts about social class is the absence of a discourse of financial struggle, which characterises the comments of some of our other respondents, notably those who self-define as 'working class'. Janet is financially secure enough to be able to make certain choices and to have a particular lifestyle. Yet she self-defines as working class because in quite crude economic terms her occupation serves as her only means of income.

This does not, however, complete our understanding of Janet's views about her class location. The reasons why she also aligns herself to middle-class values are multi-layered, complex and intersectionally informed by the aspects of race and class inequity and worth (Sayer, 2002) that exist around her. Later in the interview, for example, she describes the characteristics of the employees in the large, mainly middle-class, multi-national organisation in which she works. Speaking to the intersecting role of race with class, she observes that, while most of the employees are White and middle class, there are, by contrast, a number of Black people who work in the 'canteen or in the post room and (…) tend to be cleaners'. Only a few Black people, and she includes herself within this, occupy higher-status positions *despite* possessing relevant qualifications, education and experience. Inequities of race therefore surface irrespective of the cultural capital that she and her Black colleagues possess. Reflecting on the reasons for this, she comments: '[middle-class White] people tend to choose what they understand and what they know and they don't in a sense relate to you in the same way'. Therefore, Janet's class identification as 'working class but with middle class values' is not only shaped by a distinction against a particular working-class demographic but also informed by the race and class dimensions of her workplace where, even though she enjoys a degree of status (relative, that is, to the majority of Black employees), she is cognisant of what might be defined as the *race and class limitations* imposed by a glass ceiling beyond which sit a White middle-class majority.

Isolation

Located in the margins of Janet's account is an additional subject to which several participants referred, namely isolation. This manifested in some instances as participants recognised and sometimes resisted that they were (becoming) *class distant* from friends with whom they had grown up but who were not going through a similar shift in class location and associated tastes, interests and pastimes.

Catherine is one of our participants who we have defined as 'middle-class ambiva-lent'. She is 'loath' to call herself middle class, insisting that the label is relevant only to her professional role as a head teacher:

> it's maybe about (…) feeling classless to a certain extent and not wanting to say that I'm not working class because there's something wrong with being working class. To be honest, a lot of what I do is working class, because I'm working class that works (…) but there's a lot of what I do that is deemed to be middle class by profession, so I feel that saying that I'm middle class is almost being pretentious and maybe it's just not me (…) I think it's because it's a comparator to being working class. I don't see anything wrong with being working class either. Because I could stand up somewhere and say yeah, I'm working class, and they'd say no you're not! Sit down! Shut up! You're not working class, you're a head teacher!
> Catherine, head teacher

Catherine, unlike Janet, evidently recognises, rejects and is made uncomfortable by the conflation of class with status and underlying judgements of worth. To name oneself as middle class is 'almost being pretentious', a characteristic with which she does not wish to be associated. Furthermore, and in contrast to Janet, she states later that she goes on the same holidays, reads the same books and watches the same films as 'everyone else'. Since these leisure activities tend to be highly classed, this reveals something of Catherine's desire, as with Savage and colleagues' (2001) participants, to be 'ordinary'. Again, we witness this awkward oscillation between class loyalty and formal occupational classification that leads, for Catherine, to the possibility of a classless state. Her resistance and ambivalence about a middle-class categorisation, not easily conveyed here, were reflected during the interview through frequent pauses, as she ruminated upon and struggled with the line of questioning. However if, as we did with Janet, we probe further about the reasons for her ambiva-lence, we learn something of the way that context informs her feelings:

> maybe it's because it's [calling oneself middle class] not with the masses (…) in this country, with a history of being working class (…) it is something to do with poking your head above the parapet and saying [lowers voice, to a whisper] 'I'm middle class' so you know there's not a lot of us there so maybe it's more comfortable to be with the masses.
> Catherine, head teacher

Some of Catherine's hesitation in naming herself middle class can also, there-fore, be attributed to interwoven considerations of a racialised British identity that historically has been working class. To move beyond this, to 'become' Black and middle class, would be to experience a certain dislocation. Her comments speak to the small size and relative newness of this group and to the lack of a discernible Black middle-class group with which to affiliate. Catherine's comments are also infused with an undercurrent of respect and loyalty to a Black working-class

community that, unlike the Black middle classes, has definable presence, history and significance in the UK and which she may perceive to have supported her own development and her success.

The theme of isolation is also conveyed in the careful and detailed evaluations to be made regarding the management of friendship groups and social events. Some of our respondents speak of having to manage and 'audit' their social lives along the axes of race and social class. They reflect on the challenges of socialising with long-term friends, perhaps from childhood, who have not made the transition to the middle classes or who might not feel comfortable in mainly (White) middle-class spaces:

> Your friendship group – I mean this is the bit that probably causes the greatest anxiety for me is that the more invested you are in middle-class culture the less likely you are to hang on to your working-class friends, because it's hard to integrate everybody, where you live, where you choose to live, (. . .) when I think about my friendship group, it's hard to maintain friendships with people who don't feel middle class or are suspicious of middle-class things. I have one friend, I've known him for nearly thirty years. He grew up in [in care] (. . .) runs a number of successful businesses and to all intents and purposes is a wealthy guy but he is so insecure about being at dinner parties and places and having those polite conversations about bits of literature, art, news, topical stuff.
> Gabriel, education consultant

Evident here are the pastimes, activities and attitudes that are seen to characterise a middle-class way of life and the feelings of exclusion these can stimulate in Gabriel's working-class friends. While Gabriel positions this in terms of distinctions of class, Alice highlights race and issues of what might, on initial reading, be simply conceptualised as challenges to Black authenticity when she recounts similar experiences:

> I have friends who work in clerical positions who would only do certain things. It's really weird. If you try and get them to do something else they don't want to because they feel as though if they were to do it they would be out of place (. . .) they don't understand why I would want to go to a place that is frequented by White people and they see it as a place that is frequented by White people when it is not a place that is frequented by White people. (. . .) if I go to an exhibition or if I go to a gallery for example (. . .). I am not sure if it is because they think that there are certain things that you can't do as a Black person or that actually I know what it is, I think it is because they think there are certain things that you shouldn't do as a Black person but if you were to do these certain things it makes you very 'unblack' to do them.
> Alice, senior researcher

Alice's account reveals the continued complexities of the ways in which race and social class intersect. Certain social spaces that are traditionally considered White

and middle class pose a source of insecurity and discomfort for her Black working-class friends. However, to merely fix the analytical gaze on the reactions and behaviour of Alice's friends and conclude that their concerns are merely about a commitment to Black authenticity overlooks, we argue, the significance of the role and impact of Whiteness and the related contours of power and privilege. The fact that certain spaces have been (are) mainly occupied by the White middle classes also speaks, not merely to differences in pastimes but also to the quiet acts of exclusion – forms of 'class contempt' (Reay, 1998; Sayer, 2005) – that have served to maintain their race and class homogeneity. However Alice, like Gabriel, possesses the cultural capital to allow her to navigate these mainly White terrains if she wishes, although to do so may mean having to abandon Black working-class friends. Yet, as we detail elsewhere (Rollock et al., 2011), even the Black middle classes, despite their resources, are met with certain suspicion and curiosity when they enter these mainly White spaces.

Gabriel and Alice were part of the group of 23 respondents who were hesitant or ambivalent about calling themselves middle class. Our analysis suggests that this is in part because of the struggle in finding a legitimate site of belonging in which to be comfortably Black *and* middle class. In the absence of such a space, to actually label themselves 'middle class' would give uncomfortable affirmation to the fact that they have some different tastes, interests and pursuits that single them out from their Black *working-class* friends.

White privilege and moral capital

There are challenges associated with occupying this emergent Black middle-class space that were recounted, sometimes with bemusement, sometimes with pain. To be Black and middle class is, for many, to embody the moral capital of the Black working class that, irrespective of change in class status, recognises and understands humility and the importance of a 'Black community' or collective struggle. Culture and identity, whether described as Caribbean or African heritage, play a role here as do experiences of racism. Taken together these identities create distinct boundaries between the Black and White middle classes; the latter are seen to be advantaged by relative financial security and the capacity to better exercise choice over their own and their children's futures. The White middle classes are also perceived to embody privilege and value individualism. These are characteristics to which the Black middle classes have been subjected and with which they do not wish to be associated:

> I will do dinner parties, and I think yes, I understand that but I didn't grow up with dinner parties. I don't think I ate out until I was in my early twenties. My parents didn't take us to restaurants to eat and didn't stand in the queue saying 'which ice-cream do you want darling?' for five minutes while everybody in the back of the queue was waiting. That did not happen. 'Choose an ice-cream or there isn't an ice-cream!'
> Gabriel, education consultant

This anecdote about ice cream is interesting. Gabriel refers neither to the race nor to the class of the parents and child at the front of the queue, yet the example alludes to the acts of a casual, presumed privilege and indulgent parenting style that is oblivious to, and unconcerned about, the needs of others and which Gabriel situates as firmly outside the norms of his Black Caribbean working-class family. This connects to the notion of moral capital that was discussed earlier. A similar theme is picked up by Femi, who by contrast explicitly names both race and class:

> I see too many usually White middle-class people who don't seem to live in the real world. They just seem to get upset over the most ridiculous things. Like I had it yesterday, [adopts exaggerated 'upper-class' accent] 'do you realise we're only allowed two parking permits where we live!' It's like 'parking permits'? I can't afford a car! I can't even afford the insurance for a car (...) you see them in restaurants letting their kids run absolutely wild. At [daughter's] ballet class they sit and they talk through the children's performances and you look at them and think 'I don't want to be part of your group'...
>
> Femi, college lecturer

Clearly there is a level of essentialising here. However, what is evident is that privilege and financial security are conflated as a form of Whiteness that remains unseen and taken for granted by the White middle class actors in Femi's example. Whiteness operates in this instance to maintain a version of reality in which having only two parking permits is uncritically and quite seriously regarded as a problem, while there is, for Femi, another version of reality marked by not even being able to afford a car in the first place.

The ballet incident is relevant to our understanding of Black middle-class identification on several levels. Her daughter is engaging in an activity that research suggests is 'typical' of White middle-class children (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Yet there is tension for middle class Blacks who enter these spaces. Femi makes connections among forms of parenting behaviour, discipline, rudeness and, again, privilege, which she perceives are embedded in a White version of middle classness and juxtaposed to her form of moral capital. Being Black and middle class she is able to access these White middle class spaces, but she remains at the edges, made uncomfortable by what she finds there.

Exclusion from White middle class spaces

A willingness to describe oneself as 'Black middle class' is also compounded by the reactions of the White middle classes themselves. It is the moments of exclusion and inclusion from White middle-class spaces that respondents spoke of most frequently. This is understandable (though concerning) given the distribution of power and resources within contemporary British society. The White middle classes' monitoring of access to these spaces, and how they treat 'others' once

they do gain access, limits and further restricts the possibilities for our respondents to comfortably belong to one all-encompassing middle-class group. Therefore, we use the term 'exclusion' not simply in a physical sense but also to encompass the psychological devaluing and subjugation of the experiences, perspectives and knowledge of our respondents, who have been positioned as undesirable 'others'. Jean explains:

> ... I've spoken to White middle class people who know my background (...) I've got an education, you know I continue to learn etc. etc. and then there might be still something that they'll say to me that I think 'is it me or is what they've said to me just so not accepting of my experience?' So (...) I'm perceived to be of a certain class by virtue of my race.
> Jean, college lecturer

We begin to see how the views of White society restrict and impose a White lens onto Jean's reality. The capitals that she possesses in terms of education, while they might ease her access to White middle-class spaces, are not sufficient to ensure that her views and opinions are taken seriously. Jean theorises that she is perceived to be a certain class on account of her race. This is interesting. There is an assumption that she must be working class and a related assumption that she must, therefore, lack 'legitimate' knowledge – knowledge worth knowing. A similar argument is advanced by Lorraine:

> I was talking to one of the clinical psychologists I have been working with and we talked about how I managed [my daughter's] behaviour. So I said, 'Well you know I have tried everything, I have done the carrot and the stick, I have tried star charts I have done this, I have done that, I have tried motivating her this way' and she went back and she had weekly supervision and she spoke to her supervisor and her supervisor said, 'Well how did she know to try these things?' [Laughs] And [psychologist] said, 'Well she's an intelligent woman, she has researched, she has read'. But clearly because I was a Black woman, single parent, they assumed I knew nothing about parenting.
> Lorraine, researcher

This example is particularly interesting in the context of debates about educational attainment, Black Caribbean pupils and the need for increased parental involvement. The capitals that Lorraine brings to this situation concerning her daughter (who has learning difficulties), rather than being welcomed as contributing to her daughter's advancement, are immediately met with a level of confusion and suspicion by the supervisor. Lorraine's knowledge is not taken as given. Instead, confirmation is required about how she came to this information in the first place. Lorraine argues that this reaction must be understood in the context of the stereotypical perceptions that exist about the Black single mother as uneducated, unconcerned and uninvolved in her child's education. It is through these

raced and classed restrictions imposed by White gatekeepers that we can better comprehend Lorraine's hesitation to call herself middle class:

> ...I would probably still say I'm working class though that's probably not true, and I think it sounds almost twee to say that you're classless but it almost has to be. I went to [high status British university]. I speak in a certain way so that if people didn't see me, if they heard me on the phone people would probably think of me as middle class. But, despite having gone to [university], and having had the education that I have and the kind of jobs that I've had I still find it hard to describe myself as middle-class and that's to do with my race.
> Lorraine, researcher

Markers of biography and embodiment, such as university attendance (and in this case a particularly high-status university), accent and occupation serve to position Lorraine as middle class. Yet at the same time there is for Lorraine 'the psychic refusal of becoming middle class' (Reay, 1997:25), that is a certain discomfort and ambiguity in defining herself as 'Black middle class' because of the specific intersection of her 'race' with her class position. This is, in part, as we have already seen, informed by her recognition that her middle-class embodiment and cultural capital is met with confusion and bafflement by White school staff: 'if I were a middle-class White woman they'd find it easier. I just don't meet their expectations'.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to explore the reactions of Black Caribbean respondents, all of whom are in professional or managerial occupations, to the label 'middle class'. While we have been able to identify five distinct sets of responses (middle-class identifiers, middle-class ambivalent, working class with qualification, working-class identifiers and interrogators), we have been concerned here with the reasons cited for affiliating with these five class groupings. We have revealed considerable complexity in our respondents' class deliberations. They speak of indistinct positioning, of complicated patterns of identification and disidentification, and of inclusion but also liminality. For many there does not seem to be an easy, straightforward way in which to be Black and middle class: histories, cultural identity, the classed British context and racism all intervene to complicate, disrupt and render identities and allegiances uncertain.

Our respondents are concerned about aligning with a class position that is seen to value individualism and privilege, characteristics which are not only embedded in Whiteness but are also regarded as directly at odds with the moral values – for example self-sufficiency, financial and material compromise – of their working-class youth. Unlike some of the theorisations about the White middle classes that have indicated that their identifies are formed in opposition to their working-class counterparts (Ball et al., 2004; Savage 2000; Skeggs, 2004), we theorise that much

of our respondents' resistance to and ambivalence about identifying as Black and middle class is due to a reluctance to align to an identity that might be regarded as in opposition to the Black working classes *and* also to the idea of affiliating with a middle class that hitherto has been intricately associated with Whiteness. Whiteness and the actions of White middle-class gatekeepers play an important role in our respondents' views and feelings about class position. Many spoke of their awareness that the pervasiveness of racism meant that mainstream White society would always place more significance on their race than their class. With such factors in mind, the hesitation on the part of the majority of our respondents to self-define as 'middle class' should come as no surprise, and we suggest that Maylor and William's (2011) thesis that the label 'middle class' represents for the Black middle classes an 'irrelevant subject position' may underplay the relevance of the intersectional complexities that we have detailed here and the emotional struggles, challenges and reflections involved in occupying this transitional class state.

Even though our study comes over 20 years after Daye's (2004),[11] we note considerable similarities in the experiences of the two groups of Black middle-class respondents. Today, there remains a newness to the Black middle classes. As then, they are still relatively small in number and widely dispersed residentially across the UK. Issues of exclusion and marginalisation remain. The Black British middle classes continue to seek a legitimate space with sufficient economic and financial leverage in which they can be 'Black' and 'middle class'. Effectively challenging White resistance to a Black middle-class presence plays an important role in advancing genuine social mobility. With such considerations in mind, we conclude that it is not yet possible to speak of distinct 'class fractions' within the group in the way that Moore (2008) does, nor can we consider that the Black middle classes represent a fraction of the British middle classes. We hope that such analysis may be relevant for the Black middle classes of the future.

Funding

Notes

1. Young Black people were disproportionately prosecuted under Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824, which came to be known informally as 'sus' laws (i.e. referring to the fact that these young people were judged *suspect* and viewed with *suspicion*).
2. For example, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and the Caribbean Workers' Movement (see Mullard, 1973).
3. Nearly half (48%) of Black Caribbean men in Britain have a partner from a different ethnic group, the highest interethnic relationship rate with the exception of those of mixed heritage. The figure for Black Caribbean women is 34% (Platt, 2009).
4. For example, e-newsletters of the Family and Parenting Institute, the General Teaching Council for England and the 100 Black Men of London.

5. Although we have not sought to obtain a representative sample, it is of interest to note, in terms of contextualising our respondents' experiences, that those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly men, experience wide earnings deficits relative to the White population. However, the earnings gap is smallest amongst the Black Caribbean group (along with Chinese and Indians). The largest gaps can be observed for those minority ethnic groups in professional and managerial roles (Clarke and Drinkwater, 2007).

6. Evidence indicates that higher-education graduates find it difficult to secure professional or managerial posts with this tendency being most evident for women, notably those of Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds. Perhaps as a result of this, 'Black' and 'Black British' women are more likely to work in the public sector than men or women from any other ethnic group (TUC, 2006: 10).

7. Professional and managerial occupations tend to be those requiring a degree or equivalent qualification and a significant amount of knowledge regarding the functioning of organisations and business. These classifications of course should be interpreted with a level of caution for our Black middle-class participants. Research evidence continues to point to differences in educational attainment for Black Caribbeans within compulsory, further and higher education, which in turn is likely to affect their prospects in the labour market (Rollock, 2007; Clarke and Drinkwater, 2007).

8. All names are pseudonyms.

9. We use (…) to denote where text has been removed for brevity. Comments in square brackets complete or explain a phrase.

10. While many of our respondents react with caution and hesitation to the label 'middle class', they, nonetheless, possess and work to activate (sometimes consciously) the cultural capital available to them through their class status. Where successful, this serves to help them minimise the probability of racism and effectively navigate wider White society. For discussion see Rollock et al. (2012).

11. The book is based on Daye's PhD research, which was submitted in 1988.

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