Strivers vs skivers: Class prejudice and the demonisation of dependency in everyday life

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the moral dimension of everyday lives, using original empirical material about the judgments we make about others to explore and understand the contemporary nature of class prejudice. In doing so, we pay attention to the relationship between class prejudice and other forms of stigma and discrimination by exploring the complex (re)alignment of associations between different social groups (including working class people, disabled people, asylum seekers) in processes of 'othering' and exclusion. The research highlights the potential shared interest of groups who are demonised for being 'in need' to challenge the contemporary hegemony of the individualised ethic of self-interest which is producing a process of de-socialisation in which the importance of values such as care, compassion and social responsibility risk becoming casualties with inevitable consequences for social cohesion. Rather, the paper concludes by arguing for a re-socialisation of politics that recognises the structural causes of inequalities and which values and promotes understandings across, instead of moral judgements of, difference and our social obligations towards each other.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a focus within the social sciences on 'difference' – in which experiences of prejudice and discrimination have been explored through the lens of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age, and religion/belief, including a concern with the institutional nature of discrimination (Valentine, 2010). The attention paid to these axes of difference/inequality and debates about intersectionality have led to suggestions that the significance of class has become obscured (Lawler, 2005). Indeed, some commentators in both academic and political arenas have gone so far as to claim that class is dead (e.g. Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). This perceived demise of class as a useful category of analysis (notwithstanding notable attempts to defend it e.g. Wright, 1985; N. Smith, 2000; McDowell, 2008) is understood to be a product of the twin forces of individualisation and de-traditionalisation (e.g. changes in property ownership, industrial, political and social organisation) which have emphasised the plasticity of individuals' identities and life chances and portrayed traditional social ties/relations as increasingly redundant (Beck, 1992). Yet, paradoxically this rejection of class has come at a time when there has been a rapid growth in

inequality (Lawler, 2005) and an increased readiness to demonise the poor in political and media discourses (Haylett, 2003; Jones, 2012).

In response a new body of literature is emerging which instead of foregrounding the primacy of employment and economic relations of work, is focusing on the lived experience of class to reassert the contemporary relevance of systems of classification (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005; McDowell, 2008). Here, often drawing on Bourdieu (1984), such research has shown how value distinctions (not just economic but also ethical) are used to categorise and define the relative worth of individuals, demonstrating the dynamic, relational and culturally produced nature of social class. Indeed, Fraser (1997) has argued that discourses of class have changed from a focus on redistribution to a politics of representation.

Influenced by this work, but in particular by Sayer (2005), who in turn took his inspiration from Adam Smith's (1759/1984) thesis on moral sentiments, we focus in this paper on the moral dimension of everyday lives, using the judgments we make about others (how we should live, what type of behaviours are good or bad) and the practices to which these judgments give rise to explore and understand the contemporary nature of class based prejudice. In doing so, we follow McDowell (2008) in recognising the importance of not merely focusing on the working-class per se, but rather recognising intersections between class positions and other

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social relations through our attention to the relationship between class prejudice and other forms of stigma and discrimination.

Whereas Haylett (2003) and Jones (2012) have provided important accounts of the stigmatisation of working-class culture they have both done so by analysing dominant discourses within British political debate, government policy and the media; neither investigated the extent to which such representations are present, mobilised or contested in everyday life. Here, we draw on original empirical research conducted as part of an ERC funded study about lived processes of social differentiation to examine how people define certain groups as less worthy of moral consideration than their own. In doing so, the paper contributes to the field of social geographies by exploring the complex (re)alignment of associations between different social groups (including working-class people, disabled people, asylum seekers etc.) in processes of 'othering' and exclusion. The study of how and why moral judgments become mapped onto particular social groups in everyday life matters because historical research shows that simplistic divisions – such as good and bad – translate into real power differences which can result in the regulation of particular social groups, producing wider social and geographical consequences (e.g. D.M. Smith, 2000; Lee and Smith, 2004).

The research upon which this paper is based involved 30 individual case studies ($n = 90$ interviews) and associated pilot-work with research participants recruited from Leeds, a northern city in the UK. Here, each case comprised (1) a time-line, (2) a life-story interview, (3) an audio-diary of everyday encounters (4), a semi-structured interview about attitudes towards difference, and (5) an interview reflecting on the emerging finding (the origin of quotes used in the paper is identified by this number system). The research participants included those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socio-economic status, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religious/belief, sexual orientation and (dis)ability), whose personal circumstances and lifestyles afford them a range of opportunities for/experiences of encountering 'difference'. The participants were recruited from a survey on attitudes towards difference which was conducted as a Computer Assisted Person Interview (CAPI) with 1522 people in their homes. Through the deployment of cluster analysis, the survey respondents were selected from 8 types of communities (all with varying degrees of social and ethnic diversity) (see Piekut et al., 2012).

In this paper we employ the UK Office of National Statistics five class system – National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) – to describe the participants' social class. NS-SEC 1 = Managerial and professional occupations; 2 = Intermediate occupations; 3. Small employers and own account workers; 4. Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 5. Semi-routine and routine occupations. In addition, there are two separate categories NWL-TU = Never worked and long-term unemployed; and NC = not classified which includes full-time students, retired, home-makers, job inadequately described, and non classifiable for other reasons (see ONS 2005 for further detail). Of the 30 case-study interviewees who took part in this research half can be defined as 'middle-class' by occupation ($n = 10$ NS-SEC 1, 2 and 3), or were not classified in the survey because they are retired/homemakers or students ($n = 5$) but can be categorised as 'middle-class' on the basis of other data (e.g. previous occupation/education). Just under half can be defined as 'working-class' by occupation ($n = 8$ NS-SEC 4 and 5) or were not classified in the survey but can be categorised in this way on the basis of other data ($n = 5$). Two interviewees had never worked or were long term unemployed.[1] Details of where the interviewees

live have been withheld to protect their anonymity but the neighbourhoods have been loosely characterised by 'class' on the basis of tenure.

All the quotations included in this paper are verbatim. Ellipsis dots are used to indicate minor edits have been made to clarify the readability of quotations. The phrase [edit] is used to signify a section of text has been removed.

2. 'Chavs': Class prejudice and the moral judgement of social and cultural worth

In the 1990s several characters emerged in UK popular culture that typified the prejudices commonly expressed against working-class people. These included the television comedian Harry Enfield's characterisation of Wayne and Waynetta Slob, and *Shameless* a television comedy-drama series set on a fictional social housing estate which centred on Frank Gallagher, an alcoholic and his dysfunctional family. The stereotypical representations of heavy drinking, tracksuit wearing, fecklessness, foul-mouthed behaviour, and benefit dependency portrayed in these programmes was subsequently captured by the nomenclature – 'Chav'. Jones (2012) argues that Chav is a classist insult whose precise meaning changes according to the context in which it is used – but that it is almost always used to demean an individual or a group (albeit Chavs are a group normally assumed to be the 'doers', rather than the recipients of, prejudice). It is a prejudice that was openly expressed – in highly emotive terms (*'scum'*, *'can't tolerate them'*, *'despise them'*) – by participants in our study who themselves came from a range of class positions, including 'working-class' interviewees critical of others in their own communities.

> You see them wearing tracksuits and prejudice does creep in. Automatically, they're labelled as being a Chav - Stella-drinking *scum* [emphasis added]. To look at my little lad, the way he dresses - I look at him sometimes and say to him, you look like a Chav. When we go out anywhere, I make him get changed because I don't want people …seeing him like that. I want to protect him from other people's views (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 4, 'working-class' neighbourhood).
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> I think really the main group of people that *I can't tolerate* [emphasis added], I don't want to accept is the people…that don't do anything, that don't think they have to work, that come from that Chav society (Source 5, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to 'A' level, NS-SEC 5, mixed class neighbourhood).
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> …young Chavy looking men are always more threatening…
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean by Chavy?
>
> …sallow skin, I don't know, wearing sort of like tracksuits, that kind of thing…like they come into [name of shop removed] quite often, in fact I served one this morning. They look tough, they look mean (Source 4, Male, 20–24, white British, NS-SEC not classified: student, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

Although the pejorative use of Chavs is sometimes claimed to be nothing about class such depictions nonetheless constantly invoke class signs and make class distinctions (Jones, 2012). In this sense Lawler (2005) argues that taste has become a displacement of class – simultaneously marking but also occluding it. As the quotations (above and below) demonstrate the participants used a mix of aesthetic, performative and moral criteria to make such distinctions, judging others' ways of looking, being and living negatively by evoking notions of distaste, and disgust (c.f. Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2005). In particular, these accounts commonly mobilised descriptions of *embodied deficiencies* (in terms of dress, weight, skin tone). These in turn were predicated on implied *behavioural faults* – the result of a perceived inferior culture and lifestyle (e.g.

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[1] None of the interviewees self identified as a 'Chav' although several expressed anxiety that they may be defined in this way by others.