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Gay identities and the culture of class

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Abstract

Material queer analyses argue the urgent need to reincorporate class to comprehend sexual (re)formations in advanced capitalism, and some theorists propose a revitalized historical materialism as a framework for doing this. In contrast, this article illuminates the significance of class for late modern sexualities by taking a 'cultural' approach to the issue. By analysing gay men's personal accounts of class (dis-)identification that were told in interviews in Britain, the article elucidates the ways in which class and sexuality were articulated as intertwined, and how class and gay identities were constructed relationally through each other. Specifically, it generates insights into the performativities of classed gay identities; the differential value attached to working- and middle-class identities; and how narratives of (dis)identification often articulate gay and working class identities as relational 'Others'. Contrary to some theoretical and popular notions of gay identities as classless, my analysis shows that class identities can be centrally important to gay ones. While the relationship between gay classed identities and socio-economic positioning is not straightforward, such identities illuminate how cultural, social and economic (dis-)incentives promote distancing from 'working-class' forms of existence and strong attachments to 'middle-class' ones and to the idea of gay class transcendence. Such distancing and attachments are also features of sexualities theory and research that deny the significance of class.

Keywords

class, culture, gay, identity, late modern, sexualities

Introduction

The study of the links between capitalism, class relations and (homo)sexuality has a relatively long history (Adam, 1987; Altman, 1971; D'Emilio, 1983; Evans, 1993; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Hennessy, 2000; Weeks, 1981). For some time, however, the predominant tendency has been to analyse 'queer' lives as if they

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were classless. The reasons for this include the following. First, sexuality theorists' unease about the relegation of sexuality to the 'merely' superstructural in analyses of capitalist orders and class inequalities (for discussions see Adkins, 2002; Butler, 1998; M. Fraser, 1999; N. Fraser, 1998; Hennessy, 1995, 2000; Merck, 2004). Second, the post-structural influence in Queer theory has led to a preoccupation with cultural discourse and the sidelining of the socio-economic and classed experience (for discussions see Hennessy, 1995, 2000; Jackson and Scott, 2004; Merck, 2004; Nicholson and Seidman, 1995; Taylor, 2007). Third, the individualization arguments of late modern social theory have convinced some analysts that material inequalities and class are now relatively unimportant to sexual identities and lifestyles (for criticisms see Adkins, 2002; Heaphy, 2008; Skeggs, 2004; Taylor, 2007).

Despite these developments, 'material queer', 'social postmodernist' and 'situated sexualities' analyses suggest an urgent need to (re)incorporate socio-economic inequalities and class relations. While material queer perspectives promote a turn away from cultural frames and the return to socio-economic ones (Hennessy, 1995, 2000; Merck, 2004; Shapiro, 2004), social postmodernists promote their integration (Seidman and Nicholson, 1995). Meanwhile, situated sexualities analyses adopt integrative frames in exploring temporally and spatially located interactions of sexuality, class, gender, 'race', generation and so on (Binnie, 2004; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Casey, 2004; Heaphy, 2009; M. Fraser, 1999; Johnson, 2008; Johnson and Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2007). Finally, there is an emerging strand of class theory that is rethinking class itself along cultural and discursive lines (see Bottero, 2005; Devine et al., 2005; Savage, 2000). This promotes a form of cultural class analysis that recognizes the continuing significance of 'class' for identity but also suggests that late modern class identities do not map onto objective measures of class in any simple or straightforward way.

Against the backdrop of these debates, this article aims to illuminate the significance of class for late modern sexualities, and the value of the cultural class approach for investigating this. It does so by analysing gay men's personal accounts of their class (dis-)identifications to elucidate how their identities were classed and how they articulated class and sexuality as intertwined. The analysis suggests that far from being of marginal significance to individualized sexual identities, as some theories suggest, class is in fact centrally important to these. It also suggests that accusations that cultural analyses of sexualities cannot grasp their socio-economic and classed dimensions are rooted in misconceptions of both 'cultural analyses' and of 'class'.

The first section of the article introduces the argument that Queer cultural and postmodern analyses ignore class relations, and considers proposals for rectifying this. It discusses the approaches already mentioned, considering Hennessy's arguments as an exemplar of 'material queer' analyses; social postmodernist and late modern individualization arguments for integrating social and cultural analyses and their different implications; and situated studies of classed sexualities. It also discusses the cultural approach to class analysis. I then briefly describe the study that generated the personal narratives of class (dis-)identification analysed in

the article. Forty-eight men were interviewed for a study about relationships and adopted embracing, accepting, rejecting, and ambiguous approaches to class self-identification.

The next section examines the men's embracing, accepting and rejecting narratives to illuminate the performativities of gay classed identities. These generated laterally as well as hierarchically differentiated identities. In contrast to theories that posit gay identities to be exceptionally creative, my analysis suggests that gay classed identities are rather unexceptional in being articulated through discourses of 'individuality' and 'ordinariness'. However, more specific dynamics relating to interplay of sexuality, class and gender were evident where gay men's narratives suggested the diminished value of working-class identities and the high value of middle-class and 'transcendent' ones.

These dynamics are illuminated in the following section where I examine narratives of 'mobile', 'ambiguous' and 'ambivalent' class identities. These were often performative of fairly fixed middle-class identities. These identities were often articulated through accounts that construed gay and working-class identities as relationally 'Other'. Together with accounts of gay class transcendence, attachments to middle-class identities illuminate how combined cultural, social and economic (dis)incentives promote personal and social distancing from working-class forms of existence. In the concluding section, I highlight the implications of my analysis for theorizing and studying gay-class cultures and their links to the socio-economic.

Reincorporating and rethinking class

Material queer theorists acknowledge, as Noys (2008: 105) suggests, 'the capacities of flexible post-Fordist capitalism to absorb, or capitalize upon ''dissident'' sexualities', and are critical of how queer discursive approaches to the performativities and deconstruction of sexual identities inadequately account for 'the material conditions of ''sexual deregulation''' (Noys, 2008: 105, citing Morton, see also Hennessy, 1995, 2000; Merck, 2004; Shapiro, 2004). They argue, via Marxian theory, that such deregulation stems from the disintegrating effects of advanced capitalism and works in its interests. Central to this position, as Hennessy proposes, is the argument that the visibility of dissident sexualities is largely an issue of commodification: 'a process that invariably depends on the lives and labour of invisible others' (Hennessey, 1995: 142).

Hennessy (1995, 2000) deploys the notion of commodity fetishism to challenge Queer cultural understandings of dissident sexualities as radical politics (M Fraser, 1999: 116). Criticizing 'the reigning Foucauldian materialisms that reduces the social to culture or discourse' (Hennessy, 1995: 143), she argues that a Marxian understanding of commodity fetishism provides a more 'useful critical framework for understanding and combating the commodification of identities' (1995: 162). As Mariam Fraser (1999: 116) notes, this argument suggests that 'avant-garde' queer sexualities are part of 'the more general aestheticization of everyday life in consumer capitalism' and queer theory and politics 'the latest participants in

this trajectory'. For Hennessy, the emphasis on aestheticization in the construction, performance and theorizing of queer identities masks the unequal social relations that make them visible and underplays their availability only to the socio-economically privileged (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Despite the significance of material and social inequalities to queer lives, the proposal of a Marxian inspired frame for re-classing sexualities is problematic because it reduces late modern sexual formations to the economic relations of late capitalism. Hennessy (1995: 143) initially refutes that her approach is economically determinist, but later modifies this by saying that the 'return to historical materialism' (2000: 29) it is not 'simplistic reductionism' (2000: 17). Indeed, she clearly proposes complex economic reductionism or determinism, as is evident where she argues: 'the economy can't be privileged over culture in any simple way. But by the same token, this is *not* to propose a process of mutual determination' (2000, emphasis added). Thus, her analyses of how 'sexual identities are systematically organized' (1995: 177) and how '[c]ulture-ideology consists of different practices or . . . discourses that displace, compensate, mask, and contest the basic inequality of capitalism [of which] [s]exuality is one' (2000: 11) emphasizes social relations that ultimately stem from late capitalist economic relations of production, consumption and exchange.

Hennessy's frame is underpinned by Marx's conception of 'the economic relationship of owner and producer' as 'a determining logic', and E.P. Thompson's conception of this as 'the kernel of human relations' (Hennessy, 2000: 18). Despite proposing 'postmodern historical materialism' (1995: 143) she does not fully disavow the idea that sexual identities and cultures ultimately arise from 'these basic relations of production' (Hennessy, 2000: 18, citing Wood). Instead, this idea seems central to her understanding of how sexual identity is reconfigured 'in various postmodern forms under late capitalism' (2000: 34). Despite discussing postmodern sexual identities, Hennessy mistakenly reduces the postmodern to late capitalism. Thus, she cannot incorporate Foucauldian-inspired insights into how the material, social and cultural are *mutually* constituting or 'determining' (2000: 11, see also the debate between Butler, 1998 and N. Fraser, 1998). As Adkins (via M. Fraser) notes, the logic of Hennessy's argument 'understands the social as pertaining only to issue of class, and . . . the cultural as separate from the socio-economic and issues of class and as concerning issues of sexuality, gender and ''race''' (Adkins, 2002: 27). In summary, Hennessy's proposals for re-classing queer involve a turn away from the cultural and returning to a diminished kind of 'economic/class analysis' (2000: 15) that would ultimately reduce class *and* sexual identity to the economic.

In a more general critique of the postmodern (including Queer) emphasis on cultural discourses of identity and resistance, Nicholson and Seidman (1995: 8) agree that these neglect social institutions, class and economic processes. Unlike Hennessy, however, they fall short of claiming that cultural-discursive analytical frames are inherently problematic. They argue instead for 'broader, systemic and integrating perspectives' to combine the cultural, social and economic: 'to think

about the interrelations of social patterns without being essentializing or totalizing, and to create constructive as well as deconstructive analyses of the social' (1995: 9). It is a mistake therefore to try to link 'merely postmodern' sexualities to socio-economic class relations as Hennessy does (cf. Butler, 1998). Rather, the task is to explore how such sexualities and *postmodern* (or cultural) *class* interconnect in late modernity, whilst recognizing that the latter is irreducible to late capitalism (Heaphy, 2007).

Late modern individualization theorists are critical of economically reductive frames and postmodern cultural ones, and their integrating perspective on socio-cultural processes has focused on sexual identities (see Giddens, 1991, 1992; for an overview Heaphy, 2007). In contrast to the social postmodernist position, however, they argue that class is becoming less significant to contemporary individualized identities. Turning Foucauldian ideas about sexuality, discourse and governance on their head, Giddens (1991, 1992) argues lesbian and gay identities to be exemplars of individualized identities that are reflexively self-fashioned via the incorporation of cultural resources. While collective class provided the basis for embedded self and social identity in modernity proper, in late modernity institutionalized individualization disembeds people from traditional axes of identity including class. This position suggests that self and social identities are now far less fixed by collective class and less constrained by socio-economic positioning than they were previously. Hence, late modern sexual identities and lifestyles are seen as relatively 'classless'.

Such propositions are problematized by situated analyses of contemporary sexualities (Adkins, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Johnson and Lawler, 2007; Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2007). These tend to be critical of economically and/or culturally reductive views of class and sexuality, and advocate integrative frames to comprehend temporally and spatially located interactions of sexuality, class, gender, 'race', generation and so on (Adkins, 2002; Binnie, 2004; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Casey, 2004; Heaphy, 2009; M. Fraser, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Via Bourdieu, some situated analyses of sexualities argue that interlinked economic, social and cultural capitals enable and constrain sexual identities and lifestyles. Some empirical studies have highlighted the disjuncture between late modern theoretical understandings of class and sexuality and the operation of classed sexualities in women's everyday lives (Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2007). Skeggs (2004) argues that late modern individualization theory undermines the resources required for self-fashioning and thus fails to see this as a classed issue. Echoing Hennessy's criticisms of Queer theory, she suggests that theories of reflexive (sexual) identities both mask and reinscribe classed selves. In her own empirical study Skeggs (1997) argues that class is centrally important to shaping heterosexual femininities. Rather than conceiving women's working-class dis-identifications as evidence of individualization, she sees these are resulting from the stigma and shame that working class implies as an identity for women. Taylor's (2007) research similarly suggests that class is important to lesbian experiences and identities. In contrast to the women that Skeggs studied, however, Taylor's interviewees often strongly identified as working class (Taylor, 2007: 5–6).

There are three points to note about these situated studies of classed sexualities that are relevant to the ensuing analysis of gay men's class identities. First, existing studies focus on women's classed sexualities. While studies of gay male cultures and scenes discuss these *as* classed (see Binnie, 2004; Johnson, 2008), the situated study of gay men's classed identities has barely begun. Second, while Johnson and Lawler (2005) discuss heterosexual middle-class sexualities as well as working-class ones, existing studies tend to focus on working-class sexualities. As Lawler (2005: 802) suggests, it is important to explore middle-class identities as well as working-class ones. I agree. Class is fundamentally relational, and because middle-class identities often represent the 'given' norms against which working-class identities are judged as lacking it is important to explore the former *as* constructed and to investigate how they are legitimized.

The third point relates to the limitations of situated analyses of classed sexualities. One limitation of some of the studies discussed so far is their reluctance to fully explore the precarious relationship between class identities and 'objective' class. This is evident where Skeggs (1997: 94) insists on seeing 'class as structural' and her participants' 'dissimulations' from class as 'produced through it'. It is also evident in Taylor's objection to cultural analyses of class identities that fail to relate 'material inequalities to identity formation' (Taylor, 2007: 7). Thus, the insights generated by cultural class approaches that I build on in my own analysis are refuted: that classed identities are being reconfigured *in* individualized terms in late modernity (see, for example, Bottero, 2005; Devine et al., 2005; Savage, 2000). Late modern class identities do not therefore stem *from* collective class cultures, and neither do they straightforwardly map onto modern models or measures of objective class.

Outlining their position on this, Savage et al. (2000) argue that 'While old models of collective class cultures are indeed dead and buried, we should not leap to . . . positing thoroughly individualized beings who fly completely free from class identities' (2000: 102). Drawing on Bourdieu's arguments about class, they argue that class, like identity itself, is relational, the implication being that 'class cultures can be usefully viewed as modes of differentiation, rather than as types of collectivity' (2000: 102). Individualized identities can therefore be analysed *as* class identities, and not as their antithesis. However, class identities are not simple reflections of 'objective' class. As I will illustrate, this does not mean that they bear no relationship to social and economic inequalities. Rather, social and economic inequalities are not reducible to class. Before illustrating this, I clarify the limitations of my own analysis by discussing the study that generated the personal narratives that I analyse.

The study[1]

The personal narratives analysed in this article were generated through interviews conducted with 48 men (who identified as gay in one way or another) in mainland Britain during 1995 and 1996 as part of a larger study of women's and men's same-sex relationships (see Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). The men

were recruited through strategies aimed at including as broad a range of economic, social and cultural experiences as possible (for details of the methodology see Heaphy et al., 1998). Interviews were undertaken with individuals and couples, were semi-structured and took a conversational style. They were organized around the following themes: personal life and identity; friendships; household; partners; children; caring; HIV and AIDS; legal issues; families; sexuality and other related issues.

The study generated strong identity narratives as relationship and identity stories were enmeshed. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the study, participants mostly framed their narratives of identity in terms of sexuality. Participants were explicitly asked if they saw themselves as belonging to or identifying with any particular social class (Savage et al., 2000 adopted a similar approach). Responses to these questions varied enormously: some men gave brief negative or affirmative statements, others gave detailed accounts of the rationale for their class identification or otherwise. As McDermott (2004: 177) suggests, 'classed' talking practices may restrict and enable the telling of particular kinds of narratives in interviews, and I return to this point in the analysis. In comparison to their narratives of sexual identities, however, the men's narratives of class ones were *generally* 'weaker': they were less obviously rehearsed through previous telling and participants mostly perceived them to be less important to 'who they were'. Hence, spontaneous responses to questions about class identification tended to be simply affirmative or rejecting of a classification (less than half the cases), or hesitant and vague about its personal significance. Roughly, 11 men were willing to be 'pinned down' to identifying as working class and 25 as middle class. Ten men refused to be pinned down at all, and in two cases the response was unclear. However, these rough numbers oversimplify what were, as we shall see, quite complex processes and discussions. In fact, nine of the 36 men who (finally) named a class were highly ambivalent about doing this. Inevitably, because simple affirmative and rejecting class identifications were restricted to statements like 'working class', 'middle class' and 'I don't see myself in that way', the bulk of my analysis focuses on the cases where more detailed stories were told.

As discussed earlier and is evident in the following analysis, the relationships between explicitly claiming or denying a class identity, 'objective' class and socio-economic location are not simple ones. The approach that I adopt does not seek to impose a straightforward or automatic relationship. As well as being influenced by the cultural, integrative and situated analyses discussed earlier, my analytical strategy was also influenced by Plummer's (1995) 'sociology of personal story telling'. Personal narratives, Plummer (1995: 172) argues, can be analysed less for their objective truths or aesthetic qualities and more for the roles they play in personal and social life: as narrative truth. This pragmatic view of the relationship between personal stories and actual lives allowed me to explore gay men's class narratives for their significance in the men's lives, their relationships with others and the socio-cultural order. In other words, it is an approach that generated insights in the performativities of personal narratives of class. This approach is in many ways

compatible with Butler's (1990, 1991) ideas about performativity but is more influenced by symbolic interactionist ideas than poststucturalist ones. As such, it is more useful for exploring the work that personal stories do in interactions in embedded social contexts than poststructuralist frames that tend to be abstracted from these (the interview itself is an example of an embedded social context).

As the interviews were conducted almost a decade and a half ago, the insights they could generate into *current* experience is limited, especially in the light of socio-cultural and legal developments that have taken place in Britain since then. However, general processes associated with classed sexual identification are unlikely to have changed drastically in the intervening period, and interviewees' stories of classed identification are likely to be still relevant to *them*. Nevertheless, the narratives analysed here are temporally situated in specific ways. Most notably they were told before 'the moment of sexual citizenship' (Weeks, 1995) and the 'moment of lesbian and gay equality' (Blasius, 1994; see Weeks et al., 2001 for a detailed account of their situatedness). In the light of the dearth of empirically informed analyses of gay male classed identities in recent decades, it seems worthwhile to present the data and analysis here so as to inform current debates about classed sexualities. My analysis is also specifically situated and 'un-situated' in other ways. Most notably, it focuses only on gay male classed identities, and does not explicitly attend to how 'race' and ethnicity are implicated in these. Given that formations of classed sexualities are complexly gendered and 'raced' (M Fraser, 1999), my analysis is therefore limited in important ways. This is the result of pragmatic decisions I took relating to the comparative merits of depth and scale of analysis. An initial overview of the men's and women's class narratives indicated similarities and differences that warranted separate in-depth analysis prior to their comparison. Similarly, a rigorous analysis of the interactions of class, gender, and 'race' required more time and space than was available. Future papers will explore the women's narratives, and a greater range of interactions. I begin by analysing the gay men's narratives simply because I am most familiar with these having undertaken the interviews myself. I now turn to this analysis.

Exceptional and ordinary: Embracing and rejecting class identities

In this section I consider the relatively exceptional cases where gay men embraced class identities and the more common cases where the personal significance of class was initially rejected. Embracing and rejecting narratives were performative of hierarchically and laterally differentiated gay classed identities. Lateral class differentiations, as Bottero (2005) argues via Bourdieu, highlight that class is not simply about economic capital and the cultural capital that *arises* from this. Rather, there is a complex interplay between the forms of capital, which influences a range of diverse social locations and class positions. For Bourdieu, Bottero notes, lateral differentiations point to how groups within classes claim distinction. Here I consider hierarchical and lateral gay class differentiations in the context of

individualized distinction, and how these are tied to claims of 'individuality' and 'ordinariness' (cf. Savage, 2000).

Exceptional embracing

Peter identified unequivocally as middle class, and John as working class. Both told 'exceptional' stories about their gay lives and relationships that contained unprompted discussions of class. Peter's narrative of his gay life was, for example, interwoven with an account of his class identity. For example, in discussing his relationship he recounted:

> [My partner and I] have talked about class, because he's working class and I'm middle class and we talked about that quite early on. Although interestingly our life experience is fairly similar in spite of our class background being different. Our educational background's incredibly similar. In fact . . . he's got a PhD and in academic terms he's more qualified than I am. So we talked about class and that was important for me to sort of suss that out really, to see whether he had any class consciousness. And he's very clear about being working class, so that made it easier really . . . because I'm class conscious. (Peter, aged 32, 'middle class', public relations officer)

Peter discusses class in terms of education, qualifications and 'background'. Despite his partner being 'more qualified' than him, Peter defines him as working class by virtue of his background. Class is a personal-political issue for Peter. It is important to defining the *kind* of gay man that he is, as well as the *kind* of relationship he has: he is a class-conscious gay man in a class-conscious gay relationship. When asked to describe his social class, John immediately replied: 'working class, definitely'. When prompted to 'tell me a little about yourself' as background to the interview he responded:

> Born and raised and stayed in this area . . . from a working-class family, from a working-class background . . . apart from being influenced by my class, I'm also influenced by members of my family . . . one of whom is a black woman. So my kind of identity if you like has evolved from my working-class bi-racial upbringing . . . everything I am today is kind of evolving from that working-class, gay bi-racial kind of mix. (John, aged 37, 'working-class', part-time events organizer)

John's narrative, like Peter's, presents class as a personal-political issue. This is evident where he discusses his personal associations and community affiliations:

> Where I live is a predominantly working-class environment. Council estate . . . I live in a predominantly working-class community. So that's the community I live in . . . I've never found this mythical gay community . . . if gay community means like Stonewall, ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] people then I wouldn't want to belong to it.

For John, working-class identification and being gay were not of the same order. The former was about a sense of belonging and community, the latter about 'being more interested in sex'. In describing being gay in this way he denies gay identity as such, and in the foregoing quotation dissociates from the kind of people who would identify with gay community: 'Stonewall' or 'ICA' people (the political and cultural urban gay middle class).

Peter's and John's classed identities appear to be very different ones. Relationally, Peter's middle-class sexual identity is articulated in couple terms, and his narrative of the latter paints a picture of a dialogically reflexive relationship (cf. Giddens, 1991, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). John's working-class identity is relationally articulated in community terms and in terms of the incompatibilities of working-class identification and middle-class gay cultures. On closer inspection, however, the men's narratives are similar in how they incorporate and mobilize publicly available class and sexuality discourse and 'theory'. Peter displays a 'sociological' awareness that class matters: as an influence on the person one is; as an aspect of power in intimate relationships; and as something that *should* be made conscious. His narrative of his identity and relationships clearly indicates elements of the reflexivity that Giddens (1992) argues is characteristic of late modern sexualities, but that Skeggs (2004) argues is available only to middle-class selves. John's narrative also displays a high degree of reflexivity. This is especially evident in how it combines an account of class identity and his classed-based 'choices' about community associations (as discussed earlier) with a 'sociological' awareness of the cultural politics of identity:

> I think . . . lesbian and gay culture is middle class . . . white middle class . . . [and] I've never connected with queer culture at all, I've never felt comfortable with . . . you know . . . the succession of books published . . . on queer culture . . . [it's] predominantly white middle-class lesbian and gay culture.

Both Peter and John narrate highly reflexive stories about their classed sexualities, that are in keeping with Savage's (2000) proposal about class identities being (re)configured as a matter of distinction. These narratives are performative of specifically situated classed sexualities: of identities and lifestyles that are classed in hierarchical terms (as middle and working class), but that are also laterally differentiated. Peter's narrative, for example, explicitly situates him hierarchically as a middle-class gay man, but also laterally as a *specific* kind of middle-class gay man: one who possesses a certain kind of political knowing which distinguishes him within (what are often assumed to be apolitical) middle-class gay cultures. Similarly, John's narrative of being a working-class gay man distinguishes him as occupying a *certain kind* of (reflexive knowing) working-class sexuality that distinguishes him from the gay middle classes, but also within (what are often assumed to be heterosexual) working-class cultures. In the light of the heightened reflexivity that John's narrative displays, and Skeggs' (2004) association of reflexive selves with middle-class subjectivity, it could be mistakenly concluded that he is

'really' middle class. Rather, John is claiming a distinctive gay working-class identity, and on the basis of this a highly 'individual' identity. His and Peter's narratives suggest, therefore, that class and sexuality can be interlinked modes of differentiation through which claims to *individuality* are articulated.

Ordinary rejecting

In contrast to Peter's and John's embracing narratives of class, it was more usual for interviewees to confirm more simply a class identity, initially reject the personal significance of class, or state they were unsure about their class identities. As the first two quotations following indicate, confirmations of working-class identity could be interpreted *either* as reflexive (knowing) or 'unreflexive' (habituated) statements, as was the case for confirmations of middle-class identity The third and fourth quotations following indicate a kind of reflexive class dis-identification (not believing or not choosing to identify) and the remainder suggest a kind 'unreflexive' dis-identification (never having thought about the issue or not being able to answer). These quotations problematize Skeggs' (2004) association of reflexivity with objective middle-class location, and suggest that class (dis-)identification is a more complex issue for gay men than it is for the heterosexual women she studied (Taylor, 2007 argues this is also the case for working-class lesbians):

> Working class. (Scott, aged 31, 'working class', receptionist)
> What I usually say about myself [if asked] is working class. (Ed, aged 29, 'working class', machine operator)
> I don't believe in the class system. (Thomas, aged 29, 'working class', office administrator)
> I don't want to define myself being in any of these class things. (Alain, aged 27, 'no class', waiter)
> I've never thought of myself as living in a social class. (Luke, 30, 'middle class', health worker)
> I don't think of myself as a class. I couldn't answer that question. (Mark, aged 22, 'unsure class', care worker)

Having stated that they were working class, Scott and Ed seemed to have little else to say on the matter, as was the case with several middle-class identified gay men. Viewed in isolation, Scott and Ed's cases could support McDermott's (2004) suggestion that interviews themselves are not conducive to generating working-class talk. However, this does not explain the minimal stories of middle-class identification. It is more likely to be the case that limited stories about working and middle-class identities are indicative of the limited value these have for some gay men. I will return to this issue later on when discussing distancing from working-class identities and the idea of class transcendence. In terms of class dis-identifications, Skeggs (1997) and Savage (2000) note that the refusal of class identity does not necessarily imply the refusal of classed experience. Indeed, in fleshing out their

initial dis-identifications, gay men often told more complex class stories. Luke, who initially stated that he had never thought about himself as 'living in a social class' followed this up by saying:

> if it comes to money . . . I respect the money that I've got because I came from a place where I didn't have any and that allows me into middle-class type company . . . [on that basis] I'd identify myself as middle class. (Luke, aged 30, 'middle class', health worker)

The middle-class type company that Luke referred to included his partner (a dentist) and a network of mostly gay male professionals with whom they socialized. Later on in the interview he discussed homophobia and recounted:

> We're lucky we live in the area that we live in. They're very tolerant. They're middle class. I say middle class because the last place we lived in was more – they were very intolerant. Perhaps because they expressed their intolerance. It is . . . less polite to do that in a middle-class area.

These quotations suggest that class *does* matter to Luke, even if he did not initially identify in these terms, and indicate that he views the reality of class as involving economic resources, distinct values, places and modes of behaviour. He also associated middle-class spaces and cultures with the opportunity for living 'free' from the kind of explicit homophobic intolerance he associates with working-class ones (see also Moran, 2000; for criticisms of such associations see Taylor, 2007: 26, 119). Luke's notion of being 'allowed' into middle-class company assumes that association across classes requires access to economic resources (money) and cultural resources (polite social manners). This resonates with arguments about how access to gay community and cosmopolitanism is not open to all (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Hennessy, 2000; Taylor, 2007). Finally, Luke recounts that he respects money *because* it allows him to participate in middle-class gay forms of association. This and the suggestion that he is 'lucky' to live in a middle-class area, indicates the high value he attaches to a middle-class form of existence.

Other class dis-identifications like Frank's: 'I wouldn't say anything at all' (aged 47, 'no class', unemployed) and Darryl's: 'I just see me as me' (44, 'middle class', psychotherapist) were linked to claims to ordinariness. Commenting on their own research on class identification in Britain, Savage et al. (2000) and Savage (2007) note that claims to ordinariness were common ones. They argue that this is an area where there is 'a lack of clear difference between middle-class and working-class self-identities' (2000: 115). On the one hand, ordinariness could be a middle-class claim: 'you are neither exclusive . . . or part of the working class' (2000: 166). On the other hand, it could be a working-class claim: you are not part of the underclass at the bottom of the hierarchy or the privileged higher up (2000: 116). For Savage et al., ordinariness is a class claim in that it invokes hierarchically classed forms of differentiation of being above, below and in the middle. At the same time, it is not

a claim associated with a specific objective class and is a fairly unreflexive claim for the individuality of the person: 'I just see me as me'.

There are two interrelated points worth noting about gay men's claims to individuality via the reflexive embracing of class and unreflexive claims to ordinariness. The first relates to how similar these are to those made by interviewees in mainstream studies of class identification (involving samples assumed to be mostly heterosexual) who commonly claimed individuality and ordinariness (Savage et al., 2000; Savage, 2007). This suggests that when it comes to class identification, gay men's identities are being (re)configured along fairly mainstream lines. Developing this, the second point relates to how, when viewed in this way, gay men's personal narratives seem to contradict theoretical claims about the exceptional nature of gay identities and their especially heightened reflexivity (Blasius, 1994; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Weeks, 1995; for an overview see Heaphy, 2008). Rather, gay (classed) identities appear to be unexceptional in being articulated via discourses of 'individuality' and 'ordinariness'. However, the differential value that gay men attached to working- and middle-class identities suggests there are specific dynamics at work with respect to their cultures of identification that are related to the interplay of class, gender and sexuality. I discuss these in the following section in considering gay men's mobile relationships to class and their ambiguous and ambivalent narratives of class identification.

Class mobility: Ambiguous and ambivalent identities?

In Britain, when fathers' and sons' occupations are compared there is a notable flow in male mobility (Bottero, 2005). Unsurprisingly, therefore, many interviewees recounted narratives of class mobility. As we shall see, while many men related this to the acquisition of cultural, economic and social capitals, others related this to being gay. Others still displayed a mobile relationship to class in viewing it as something they might opt to identify with or otherwise.

Uncertain class?

While ambiguity and ambivalence are common features of contemporary narratives of class (Bottero, 2005; Savage, 2000; Taylor, 2007), gay men's narratives of class ambiguity and ambivalence were often performative of fixed middle-class sexual identities that were realized through accounts of class mobility and the articulation of gay and working-class identities and cultures as relationally 'other'. Consider Simon's and Paul's narratives:

> By default I am middle class now, because of my education and [my] job. But I think there's a sort of residue of things which I've grown up with which are definitely working class and so I can't thoroughly identify with what a middle-class person might be conceived to be. I don't know how, really, to identify myself. (Simon, aged 35, 'unsure class', chemist)

> I come from what I'd call a solid black working-class family. By virtue of education and opportunities and pretensions, I now have middle-class habits and mannerisms, but I'm much less certain where that places me. I know what my lifestyle is . . . how it appears, but where I actually see myself is a much more vague issue. (Paul, aged 36, 'unsure class', dancer)

Simon's and Paul's narratives of class mobility clearly highlight a sense of uncertainty with respect to class identity. Both relate their mobility to moving from working-class backgrounds into their current middle-class occupations and lifestyles via the acquisition of cultural (education, qualifications, mannerisms, tastes) and economic capitals. These are not, however, weak narratives of class itself. First, in both cases there is a strong sense of class differences as tangible and real – based on the differential access to interrelated capitals. Second, Paul's reference to his 'pretensions' simultaneously indicates self-knowing criticism and the strong appeal of middle-class lifestyle. Third, in both cases middle-class status is fixed via the performative statements 'I know what my lifestyle is' and 'by default I am middle class'. Relationally, the 'objective' reality of Simon's class was underscored by his account of how his siblings 'do lead completely different lives to me':

> My relationship with [my siblings] is . . . not very close . . . we don't see each other very often . . . they do lead completely different lives to me . . . it's very difficult on just an ordinary social basis to keep interest up. They don't do similar work to me, they have different jobs. They never went to university, they don't have that 'middle-class identity' that I developed. (Simon, aged 32, 'unsure class', chemist)

Simon casts his and his sibling's ways of being as irreconcilably different, and views class mobility as erasing any substantial basis for association. In doing so he casts middle- and working-class forms of existence as more or less wholly incompatible. Thus, his narrative is performative of a middle-class identity that is more or less dichotomously opposed to the working-class identity he attributes to his siblings. Other interviewees, as we shall see, assumed class mobility and distance from the institution of the family to be common features of gay life.

Class transcendence and incompatibility

While Simon's narrative was one of class mobility creating an intimate distance between family members, other participants associated being gay with class mobility itself and linked this to gay dissociation from the social institution of the (heterosexual) family (see Dunne, 1997; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Andrew, for example, stated:

> I come from a working-class background. I suppose being gay destroys the whole thing of class is some ways, because generally you don't have children . . . I earn quite

> a good wage [and if you don't have children you spend it on other things]. (Andrew, aged 28, 'no class', social worker)

Andrew's comments reflect a popular conception that class is insignificant to gay identity and lifestyle that is based on the assumption that the latter implies the lack of parenting and family responsibilities and therefore implies greater disposable income. While Andrew's narrative of gay class mobility is one of coming from a working-class background, some men from middle-class backgrounds also understood being gay to imply class transcendence on the basis that the social institutions associated with class and heterosexuality were intimately intertwined. As Richard remarked:

> . . . particularly when you're gay you subvert all that and you don't become a part of it any more. Because to be middle class is two children and a semi-detached house and an estate car, and a Gite in France (ballet lessons for the little girl and all that sort of stuff). So I don't think gay people actually fall into that activity . . . those gradations. (Richard, aged 36, 'middle class', teacher)

Both Andrew's and Richard's narratives reflexively invoked theories of the relationship between heterosexuality and family life in mobilizing their accounts of gay class transcendence. In doing so, they echo academic accounts of how gay men (and lesbians) transform hegemonic patterns of (heterosexual) intimacy and in doing so transform gendered material relationships (see Blasius, 1994; Dunne, 1997). Assumptions about gay men's 'freedoms' from family responsibilities and access to economic resources have been challenged by a number of studies that suggest that in reality such freedoms and access are available only to the privileged (Binnie, 2004; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Taylor, 2007). Nevertheless, such assumptions clearly circulate amongst gay men themselves like Greg who is a full-time parent and unemployed: 'I suppose gay tastes tend . . . not to be working class, let's face it. It's the power of the pink pound' (Greg, aged 38, 'middle class', unemployed), and David, who is also unemployed: 'I think my gay class is different from my class in general' (David, aged 24, 'working class'). This raises the issue of the value that gay men attach to class and its transcendence.

The value of class

> I don't *want* to define myself being in any of these class things. Because as a waiter I'm going to be in the worst one (laughs). I say no. Maybe if I had a great job I say yeah, of course. Now no. (Laughs). (Alain, aged 27, 'no class', waiter)

Alain perceived his relationship to class identity to be mobile in that he 'opted out' on the basis of the discredited identity that his current occupation would imply. He jokingly associated class distinctions with what Skeggs (1997) and Reay (1998)

term the 'spoiled identities' at the bottom of class hierarchy. This points to how class identities and distinctions are not neutral descriptions. Indeed, these were highly charged issues for many men as they were bound up with perceptions of self-worth (see also Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2007). James touched on this when explained why he would 'opt' for a specific class identity. He stated:

> the monied and the Yuppie classes piss me off – but I know it sounds terrible, I also find a lot of working-class heterosexual society pisses me of . . . so if I wanted to categorize myself it would be Professional Middle Class. (James, aged 31, 'middle class', business consultant)

James opted for an employment model of class to articulate an 'objective' class. In doing so he distinguished himself latterly from the Yuppie middle-classes on the basis of their (vulgar) tastes and (individualistic) values and from 'a lot of' the heterosexual working classes on the basis of their (homophobic) intolerance. His choice of a 'factual' class identity is not value neutral: rather, it is based on a range of moral, relational, aesthetic differentiations and mobilizes a distinctive claim to self-worth on the basis of his own good taste, morality *and* worthiness of respect as a gay man. As the foregoing quotation indicates, dissociating from a working-class identity, and being critical of the working-class culture one grew up in may seem 'terrible'. But like Luke's narrative of explicit homophobia that was discussed earlier, James suggests a tension between gay and working-class identification that stems from the overt homophobia he associates with working-class cultures. Dissociating from working-class identity and culture can be bound up with a claim to gay self-worth. The emotional charge of class identification and differentiation was also evident in the following exchange between Rob (aged 30, 'middle class', mature student) and Scott (aged 31, 'working class', receptionist):

> Scott: I've forgotten from my studies [how to classify].
> Rob: Yes, because it's a load of old shit, isn't it?
> Scott: Working class.
> Rob: No, we're not working class Duck, but . . .
> Scott: . . . we both work. Or used to. And we haven't got much cash.
> [. . .]
> Rob: [But] you would say . . . that you're not like people who shop at [Discount Store] . . . [Where] people are going because of necessity . . . And you get the women there with tattoos all over themselves . . . there's women in the aisles saying [to their children] 'Come over here you little fucking bastard' . . . And it's quite frightening . . . and we come out of there thinking 'We're reduced to this'. So that's got to say something about where we see ourselves.
> [. . .]
> Rob: I don't see us as working class. I don't see ourselves as working class . . .'but I couldn't define it.

In this exchange Rob initially rejects class as 'load of old shit', but concludes by self-defining in relation to the class that he is *not*: poor, heterosexual, female, tasteless, frightening and Other. While Scott concluded his contribution to the conversation by saying 'I always think back to my family life and I always define myself as working class', Rob concluded by differentiating himself *and* Scott from those 'others' they encountered because of their economic circumstances. Not only was working class rejected as a spoiled identity by Rob, he also refused to acknowledge his partner's own identification as working class. Stigma, as Goffman suggested, spreads out in waves.

From a Marxian perspective, like that proposed by Hennessy (1995, 2000), Rob's narrative of his personal distance from working-class identity could be viewed as indicative of false consciousness and of the social distance that objective class relations and class ideologies promote. On the other hand, we could ask what other dynamics in combination with class inform his narrative and the emotional charge it expresses. Answering this entails linking Rob's narrative of dis-identification to those considered earlier that indicated strong attachments to relatively fixed middle-class identities and to the idea of gay class transcendence. It also entails attending to the interactions of class, sexuality and gender. Links can be made here to arguments about women's reluctance to identify as working class because it is without positive content for them. As Skeggs (1997: 74) argues 'Whereas working-class men can use class as a positive source of identity, a way of including themselves in a positively valorized social category (Willis, 1977), this does not apply for working-class women'. Rather, working class is a stigmatized identity for women, which is refuted on the basis of shame (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998).

A number of studies have shown how homosexuality is construed as other and regulated (explicitly and fairly consistently) in working-class heterosexual masculine schooling, training, employment and leisure cultures (see Haywood and Mac An Ghaill, 1997, 2003; Mac An Ghaill, 1996). Access to the positive content of working-class identities is premised on being *heterosexually* male. This exclusion of gay men from positive working-class identities goes some way to explaining some men's reluctance to embrace these, as well as the minimal nature of many gay men's affirmations of working-class identity. There are few scripts available (if any) for positive homosexual working-class identity, and the unavailability of these to my interviewees was reflected in many 'mobile' men's narratives of working class and gay identities as counterposed. Indeed, Johnson's (2008) work suggests that working-class subjectivities are currently represented in some aspects of gay culture as eroticized Others. The eroticization of Others often goes hand in hand with repulsion and fear.

Exclusion from the positive content of working-class identities and the linking of working-class cultures with overt forms of homophobic intolerance are dynamics that encourage gay working-class dis-identification. Combined with the stigma, shame and fear associated with being at the bottom of (classed, gendered and sexual) socio-cultural hierarchies such exclusions and links generate strong incentives for gay distancing for working-class identities and cultures. They provide

strong incentives to invest in middle-class cultures and identities and in the idea of transcendent ones as a way of repositioning oneself within socio-cultural hierarchies. This, in turn, can promote an investment in the economic resources required to make this possible. As Rob's narrative indicates such incentives can be powerful ones. As Scott's narrative indicates they are not universally so. Thus, while gay identities are clearly classed, they are not tied in any simple or straightforward way to 'objective' socio-economic class. This is not to argue, however, that they bear no relationship to the economic. Rather, as my analysis has illuminated, socio-economic processes are implicated in these cultural constructions that, in turn, have socio-economic implications. They are not however reducible to the economic.

Conclusion: Class attachments

Material queer analyses alert us to socio-economic inequalities in queer life, and to the dangers of declassing queer. In doing so, however, analyses like Hennessy's display an attachment to discredited and reductive historical materialist understandings of (socio-economic) class relations as determining class and sexual cultures. Rather than turning away from the cultural to explore classed sexualities under late capitalism, as Hennessy advocates, I argue we can turn *to* the cultural to explore how classed sexualities are (re)configured in late modernity. By adopting this approach, my analysis has elucidated how the cultural, social and economic interact to imbue some gay class identities with value and devalue others. In doing so it has clearly demonstrated that, contrary to some theoretical and popular conceptions, late modern gay identities are not classless.

This raises the problem of those analyses that are explicitly invested in and attached to the idea that late modern sexualities are classless, and of those analyses where the significance of class is implicitly denied via the positing of gay lives as involving undifferentiated modes of self-fashioned identities, relationships, lifestyles and forms of existence (for examples see Heaphy, 2008). 'Undifferentiated' accounts of gay life tend to narrate relatively well-resourced and privileged experience *as* gay experience, and normatively promote this as a script for how gay life should be conceived and lived. It is crucial therefore, that as well as refuting theoretical arguments about late modern classless sexualities we engage in the situated analysis of classed sexualities. The challenge is not however, as postmodern historical materialism proposes, to view (re)configurations of sexuality as the products of socio-economic class relations under late capitalism but to explore the more complex interplay between late modern reconfigurations of sexualities *and* of class.

Note

1. The interview data analysed in this article were generated via interviews for a research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council entitled 'Families of Choice: The Structure and Meaning of Non-heterosexual Relationships' (ref. L315253030). The study was undertaken by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, and was reported in the book *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of*

Choice and Other Life Experiments (Routledge, 2001). In this article the information in brackets after interview quotations indicates the participant's pseudonym, age, the class that they (eventually) opted for and their occupation.

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