**Class and Comparison: Subjective Social Location and Lay Experiences of Constraint and Mobility**

Abstract

Lay perceptions and experiences of social location have been commonly framed with reference to social class. However, complex responses to, and ambivalence over, class categories have raised interesting analytic questions relating to how sociological concepts are operationalised in empirical research. For example, prior researchers have argued that processes of class dis-identification signify moral unease with the nature of classed inequalities, yet dis-identification may also in part reflect a poor fit between 'social class' as a category and the ways in which people accord meaning to, and evaluate, their related experiences of socio-economic inequality. Differently framed questions about social comparison, aligned more closely with people's own terms of reference, offer an interesting alternative avenue for exploring subjective experiences of inequality. This paper explores some of these questions through an analysis of new empirical data, generated in the context of recession. In the analysis reported here, class identification was common. Nevertheless, whether or not people self identified in class terms, class relevant issues were perceived and described in highly diverse ways, and lay views on class revealed it to be a very aggregated as well as multifaceted construct. It is argued that it enables a particular, not general, perspective on social comparison. The paper therefore goes on to examine how study participants compared themselves with familiar others, identified by themselves. The evidence illuminates social positioning in terms of constraint, agency and (for some) movement, and offers insight into very diverse experiences of inequality, through the comparisons that people made. Their comparisons are situated, and pragmatic, accounts of the material contexts in which people live their lives. Linked evaluations are circumscribed and strongly tied to these proximate material contexts.The paper draws out implications for theorising lay perspectives on class, and subjective experiences of inequality.


Keywords: Social comparison; class; subjective social location; inequality; reference groups; dis-identification; recession

**Introduction**

In a highly unequal society how do people experience and perceive their circumstances? The question has informed research into social class, subjective inequalities and well being. The decline of overt class identities has been the focus of much research and commentary. Whilst class is less important as a basis of subjective identification or as an account of social hierarchy than (at times) in the past, it retains force as a sociological and analytic tool for describing current societal inequalities, and linked subjective experiences (Atkinson 2010; Savage 2005; Gillies 2006; Reay 2005a; Gewirtz 2001; Skeggs 1997). For many commentators an historical undermining of social collectivity and a rise in individualism, and neoliberal policy and rhetoric, have rendered classed processes more opaque and implicit in lived experience. In turn this has engendered highly complex, and ambivalent, lay attitudes to social class. Unravelling this complexity has been an important strand in recent analyses of subjective experiences of class and inequality (e.g. Savage, Silva and Warde 2010; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001; Savage 2005; Reay 2005a, b; Bottero 2014; van Eijk 2013). Some analysts have argued that we need to break more thoroughly with any theoretical expectation that class should be a lay scheme of interpretation, or a meaningful identity. For Bottero, class is a specific kind of account of the structuring of social inequality, embedded in particular historical, political and social contexts (Bottero 2004, 2005). 'Class' is not a routine framing of understandings of inequality, but rather a specific kind of claim about its nature (see also Cannadine 2000). As such it is potentially problematic as an empirical tool for indexing *subjective* social location. Social comparison and reference group theories offer overlapping conceptual frameworks but potentially more flexible tools for exploring people's experiences and perceptions of their positioning within society. The bases on which people compare their own experiences with others, the contexts in which they do so, and the meanings such

comparisons hold have been subject to analysis in research on subjective experiences of inequality (e.g. Bottero 2012; Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007; Rose 2006; Evans and Kelley 2004; Lam 2004; Suls and Wills 1991; Wood 1989). Such approaches reveal value in analysis of subjective social location in terms which are framed by participants' own reference points.

The analysis presented in this paper contributes to conceptualizing social actors' perceptions of social class, their modes of social comparison, and their experiences of inequality. Drawing on new qualitative data I explore a pattern in which class identification was common, contrary to the common lay ambivalence identified by Savage and colleagues (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001). Nevertheless, whether or not people self identified in class terms, class relevant issues were perceived and described in highly diverse ways (cf. Payne and Grew 2005; van Eijk 2013). The analysis contributes to discussion of the methodological complexities entailed in operationalising class, and the theoretical implications (Savage, Silva and Warde 2010; Savage 2005; Payne and Grew 2005). Other questions, about social comparison with familiar others, offered a rich source of data on people's perceptions of their situation, and positioning within the wider social milieu. Bottero has argued in this journal that social comparison is a practical activity, with diverse, context-specific relevancies (Bottero 2012). This emphasis on the embeddedness of lay normativity is also a theme developed by Sayer (2005a,b, 2011), who has argued that social science must do more to 'grasp not only the predominantly practical character of everyday life but [also] its normative character' (2005a: 949). For Sayer, people reflect on their actions in ways which are embedded in the contexts and practical engagements through which they live their lives (Sayer 2005a). There is much to be gained from extending research into subjective experiences of socio-economic inequality with reference to lay relevancies, of which social class may be a special, rather than a general case.

**Social class and social comparison processes**

Recent decades have seen social class analysis move from its central focus on economic processes, relationships to production and questions about solidaristic class belonging to a concern with class as part of a set of cultural processes in which inequalities, rather than providing a basis of identity and conciousness, are often implicit, embedded in social relationships and interactions, values and practices and social psychological dispositions (Bottero 2014, 2005). Class properly remains central within sociologists' accounts of social inequalities in material well being, health and life chances generally, yet in popular thinking such inequalities are often not apprehended in class terms as social class has become less meaningful as an identity category and has receded as a public account of social inequalities (e.g. Reay 2005b; Sayer 2005a, b; Lawler 2005; Skeggs 1997; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001). An influential strand of research has explored the affective social psychological impacts of class (Reay 2005b; Sayer 2005a,b). Some have argued that people actively distance themselves from classed identities, finding in 'class' a set of negative associations which themselves speak of the moral degradation of class inequalities in modern society (Skeggs 1997; Sayer 2005a). Class operates through people but, a motif of modern individualism, people tend not to see or evaluate their own experience explicitly in class terms, even where they see themselves as living in a class society (Savage 2000). In Savage and colleagues' (2001) qualitative analysis it appeared that a majority of their respondents were ambivalent about belonging to a particular social class, and were partly defensive, as the idea of class stands to undermine faith in individual agency:

[B]ecause people are threatened by thinking of themselves in terms of class, they seek strategies to displace class, which they do by seeing it as something outside themselves. (Savage et al 2001: 853-4).

The more privileged respondents, and some male working-class respondents, more clearly articulated a class identity, but the majority expressed ambivalence, commonly referring to themselves as ordinary and as normal. However, ambivalence about class itself had a classed dimension, as people distanced themselves from a lack of virtue they associated with both upper and lower classes, a finding echoed in Savage's (2005) secondary analytic work on qualitative data from the 1960s Affluent Worker study.

The argument of commonplace ambivalence and defensiveness has been challenged. In a partial replication of Savage and colleagues' study, Payne and Grew (2005) found a similar pattern in people's responses regarding class but offered a very different interpretation. Within Savage and colleagues' interviews, an abstract question about general social arrangements was followed with a question about people's own class identity. Payne and Grew observe that ambivalence and defensiveness (indexed by Savage and colleagues through rhetorical qualifications to class belonging, such as 'I suppose') might be artefacts of the line of questioning rather than an 'objective' description of people's intellectual or emotional feelings about class belonging (Payne and Grew 2005). Expressions of ambivalence may have reflected respondents trying to 'manage' the sequencing of a particular line of questioning, as interviewees were 'being asked to handle a genuinely multi-faceted concept at short notice' (Payne and Grew 2005: 903). The authors explored the multifaceted nature of class within lay accounts, questioned general statements of the salience, or otherwise, of class and argued in favour of more precise specification 'of the components of class' (2005: 909).

Returning more recently to the question of class dis-identification, Savage and his colleagues argue that there is mileage to be gained in a 'focus on the mechanisms by which even ambivalent and hesitant identities are manufactured and defined' [Savage, Silva and Warde 2010: 73]. They see this as part of an agenda for research into the politics of classification. The avenue I propose is somewhat different, targeted on researching subjective perceptions and experiences of social inequality through participant defined relevancies. Social comparison approaches offer potentially helpful analytic purchase. Here researchers draw on a tradition of social psychological research which posits that social comparisons are both routine and meaningful, impacting on subjective social location, well being and wider social attitudes (Wood 1989; Suls and Wills 1991; Walker and Smith 2002; see also Bottero 2012). Analysts have sought to understand the ways and extent to which people perceive and evaluate their own position with reference to socially near others (e.g Bottero 2012; Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007; Rose 2006; Dolan 2007; Runciman 1966).

Research has foregrounded the importance of socially proximate comparisons in shaping subjective experiences of inequality:

> most people have a relatively restricted range of reference groups with which they compare themselves [and].. tend to make comparisons with others like themselves. (Rose 2006: p.1).

Runciman argued that people had relatively narrow, and bounded, reference groups, tied to occupational and work situation, explaining acquiesence in the face of extensive inequalities (Runciman 1966). Pahl, Rose and Spencer (2007) sought to update Runciman's analysis of

subjective inequalities, adapting the conceptual approach to reflect and capture late twentieth century social structural changes. They argued that people are now more likely to compare themselves with others on the basis of consumer lifestyle rather than on occupation and income. By the turn of the twenty first century there was a relatively narrow range of income amongst a 'middle mass' forming the middle 3 quintiles of the household income distribution. The authors argued that, in respect of comparisons most people see themselves 'in the middle', that there was a rough accuracy to this, and that people hold a "*reasonably accurate view that the material lifestyle of households geographically and socially close to them is simply not that different*" (Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007: 18). Kelley and Evans have argued influentially that comparison processes also encourage a middling tendency in subjective social location (Kelley and Evans 1995; Evans and Kelley 2004). Drawing on reference group theory and comparative analysis of large data sets they argued that people's perceptions reflect material realities but, additionally, their tendency to compare with social similars within their family and friendship groups pull perceptions towards a more middling position. Subjective social location partly reflects material realities but 'these abstract visions are heavily coloured by the vivid hues of immediate experience' (Evans and Kelley 2004: 7). There is, however, relatively limited qualitative empirical evidence on how such 'vivid hues' of immediate experience and proximate comparisons themselves shape subjective social location. Further, some have argued that comparison processes may be overstated (in different contexts, for example, Stewart and Blackburn 1975; Wegener 1991; Dolan 2007), so we need also be alert to risks of overstating comparison as a meaningful undertaking for people.

The research reported in this paper was conducted in the depths of economic recession, raising interesting additional issues regarding subjective social location in contexts of increased insecurities and constraint for many. How recession shapes social comparison processes is

unclear. Evans and Kelley (2004) point to evidence that high unemployment might exert a downward force on subjective social location: that people generally feel worse about their position given the wider context of employment insecurity, rather than relatively well off due to comparing their situation favourably with people worse off than themselves. Ragnarsdottir and colleagues (Ragnarsdottir, Bernburg and Olafsdottir 2013) also suggest that quite generalising comparison processes matter but that, in the Icelandic recessionary context, subjective experiences of distress are cushioned, as people feel themselves 'to be in the same boat'. Oddsson (2010, also in the Icelandic context) argues that recession, and widening inequalities, may raise class awareness. The context of the research reported below appeared set to heighten rather than suppress the salience of comparison processes in people's lived experiences. Pahl and colleagues (Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007), writing on the eve of recession, identified a broad pattern of relative contentment amongst their sample, but in the depths of recession the sample discussed below manifested different sentiments about their lives, with wide reference to increasing costs of living and employment insecurity, experiences of constraint, and risk, and hardship for the least advantaged (cf. Atkinson 2013).

In the analysis to follow I examine perceptions of social class and then if, and how, people compare their own situation with that of (socially proximate) others. Their accounts provided very rich data on their experiences and perceptions of their social circumstances and positioning relative to others. Such comparisons revealed the contextually embedded ways in which people engage with, and evaluate, their social positioning. Consequently the analysis illuminates the incompleteness of class as a prompt for exploring subjective social location, and the potential value of analyses which follow the relevancies and metier of everyday living.

**Researching subjective inequalities**

**Methods**

The analysis draws on data from a project designed to research parents' values and ideas, their experiences and perceptions of parenting, and their expectations for their children's education and future work. In 2008 I ran a self-completion questionnaire survey of parents with children involved in organized activities across diverse socio-economic circumstances.[1] Interviews were subsequently run with a sub-sample of 34 individuals, identified strategically from the survey sample with reference to their socio-economic circumstances and to some of the attitudinal data collected in the survey, relating to education and ideas about whether its importance has changed through time. One of the objectives here was to access intra-, as well as inter-class diversity, an important dimension of the research (Irwin and Elley 2011, 2013). Additionally parents whose child at the activity (at wave 1 interviews) was of upper primary school age or lower secondary school age were targeted, so that talk about future education and subsequently employment related expectations could be explored in meaningful ways. There was a high rate of agreement to participate, and we interviewed 22 women and 12 men. Most were white British. There was a fairly even spread of interviewees across middle, intermediate and working-class backgrounds, as measured by occupation, residential neighbourhood and other contextual indices. The sample did not include people at either end of the socioeconomic spectrum, neither the super-rich nor those in extreme poverty. However it did cover very diverse circumstances, ranging from the affluent middle class to people who were unemployed or on low incomes and living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The relatively modest number of partipants was due to time and resource constraints. The study was undertaken in West Yorkshire.

A second wave of interviews was undertaken in the summer of 2011, with 30 of the original participants.  In the second wave interview a range of areas were explored, both following up wave one and developing new lines of questioning. Participants were asked how they saw themselves to be doing in life, compared to their own families of origin, and compared to other people they know now, and whether or not they saw themselves as belonging to a social class (see Appendix 1 for the relevant section of the interview schedule). The framing of questions about social class is a very important part of the context in which we need understand people's expressions of class belonging (cf. Payne and Grew 2005). Because the interview questions about class followed on from discussion of participants' own circumstances and lives, and how these compared to familiar potential points of reference, the questions were contextualized differently from the study of Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2001). The more personal line of questioning may have encouraged more positive (class self identifying) responses. Within the sample, occupations included many service sector jobs and also a quite high proportion of families with (skilled, semi-skilled and some self employed) manual workers, for example a bricklayer, a plasterer, an upholsterer, a window fitter, a driver, and a mechanic. It is plausible that this profile increased the chances that people would identify as working class compared to the sample of Savage and colleagues. Certainly when asked directly about class membership many answered, unequivocally, in the affirmative ('Working class. Definitely'; 'I'm a working- class man'; 'I'm really middle class'). However, I will argue that the question of whether or not people self identify in class terms is less revealing than the diversity and complexity of their reflections which, in turn, suggests a need for a more nuanced empirical grammar for people to articulate the comparisons they make.


**From class dis-/identification to perceptions of class as a multifaceted concept**

Approximately one third of the sample identified each as working class and as middle class and around one third did not identify in a straightforward way. As we will see, class was perceived in ways which were complex and multifaceted, and even for class identifiers 'class' was made of very diverse components.  In this there are echoes of the arguments of Payne and Grew (2005) and Atkinson (2010) regarding the diverse criteria people use in discussions about 'class', whilst not necessarily invoking a class terminology. For Payne and Grew  '[t]his is not so much a rejection of class as an attempt to make better sense of how it works' (2005: 902). We will see in the following the differing registers of class, and the diverse reference points in accounts of class belonging. Where participants saw themselves as members of a social class they associated it with a range of diverse bases, including family background, income, work circumstances (occupation, and boss/worker relationships), educational qualifications and moral integrity. Some illustrative quotes follow.

> I come from a, definitely a very middle class background.  ..both of my parents were, like my mum's dad was a consultant and there are lawyers on both sides of the family and all that kind of stuff.
>
> (Lucy, Solicitor; higher level qualifications)[2]

> ..my background is middle class and that's where I am but for[my husband] it has been a change and it's education that's done that. I mean all three [husband and his brothers] went to university, and they're all professional.
>
> (Anne, Occupational therapist, higher level qualification as mature student)

> Working class hero, that's all I am love. Go to work, pay me bills and try to give the kids what you can. I am not middle class, I a'nt got no money behind me.

(Mike, Window fitter, no formal qualifications)

Identifying as working class, Jack referred to the labour relationship:

..there's a guy who works and there's a guy that tells you to work.

(Sign fitter, GCSEs)

Along with aspects relating to material circumstances there were references to the moral dimensions of class (unusually in this example the interviewee's husband was present and participated in the interview):

| | |
|---|---|
| *Sarah*: | Would you think of yourselves as belonging to a particular social class? |
| *Leslie*: | Working class. |
| *Rob*: | Well working class we, we belong to but I can talk with anybody. |
| *Leslie*: | Oh yeah I don't, no we don't feel that we're below anybody…We are working class that's what we are, that's the financial level we're at. |
| *Rob*: | Well we're lower working class then according to that. |
| | (Leslie: teaching assistant, 'O' levels; Rob: unemployed upholsterer; job based apprenticeship) |

Interestingly, reflexivity is strongly in evidence when there is a sense of a possible discrepancy between perceptions, or where diverse components do not line up straightforwardly. For example, Maggie was employed in a professional role, described a working class background, was married to a self employed tradesman and had a quite affluent lifestyle. She described herself as working class although she distinguished between how she saw herself and how others might (and do) see her:

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So funny. We had a conversation about this at me mum's about two weeks ago. And I said that me and [my husband] are working class. And me brother said that we're not. "How can you call yourself working class? Out canoeing on a weekend and horseriding?" ….. I'd still say we're working class. I suppose its background really. I look at me mum and dad. But like I said, from an outsider's point of view we're quite well off.

(Chartered accountant; BTEC and professional qualifications whilst working).

In sum, a significant proportion of participants identified in class terms, yet in talking through its meanings they described class in very different registers, and accorded weight to diverse social criteria. In addition they might see such criteria as not neatly lining up.

Diverse criteria relating to dimensions of inequality were also present in the accounts of others who did not identify with a social class. A significant minority manifest ambivalence and /or distaste for the terminology of class, and its perceived implications. Some saw class as irrelevant, and some saw it as morally objectionable (cf. Sayer 2005b, van Eijk 2013). In conjunction, such moral questioning overlapped with a sense of intellectual doubt, where people were critical of the way in which 'classing' people stereotypes them. A summary index is seen as inadequate to the task of capturing complexity. Di was an example of someone who felt class to be irrelevant:

No it doesn't, it doesn't bother me. You know I, erm, as long as I have enough money to pay the bills and, and enough money to feed and keep a nice home that's all that matters

(Sales assistant, O levels).

Echoing Payne and Grew's evidence that people talk about class issues in nuanced ways even if they eschew class terminology, Di explained:

> My dad worked really hard .. he worked on the coalface .. .it was very difficult watching my dad because I mean he died when he was fifty four.  Erm, and he'd worked so hard and I just, now I just think that you look at the people who have what I think are good jobs in life, professional jobs

Others were critical of the idea of class as something which pigeonholes people and misrecognises them. Some stressed as a moral imperative seeing people as individuals and not as members of groups:

> It don't matter what you are, it's who you are that's important (Colin, postman, 'A' levels)

> I just treat people, ..as I want them to treat me so really I don't, I don't look at it that way at all I don't think  (Kev, plasterer, apprenticeship, Advanced City and Guilds)

There was a partial overlap between this concern about 'pigeonholing' people and a sense that a class categorization fails to fit one's own experience. For example,  Steph herself volunteered the idea she would be perceived as working class and yet at the same time did not like such a classification on the grounds it inadequately captured her circumstances:

> *Steph*:  Erm, I don't like the idea that I'm working class. I really don't like that because I think that…compared to a lot of families in working class, I'm at the top of it. I think, I don't like that whole middle class, upper class, lower.  No I don't like it.  That's like something from the .. past where, you know, there was all them classes
>
> Sarah:  Could you say a bit more about why you don't like it?
>
> Steph:  …I think just, it's judging in't it? It's judging somebody..
>
> (Family support worker, 'O' levels and NVQ 2)

For Ben:

> ..as far as classes are concerned, there'll always be classes…  But to me the whole point of classes is to, you know, I'm in top class, you're in middle class..  So I don't see myself in any class on that. .. I'd probably, where would you put me?  I still always believe I'm working class.  And I think, I'd be proud if, not proud, God but, 'cause I don't wanna put myeself in a little stereotype.
>
> (Employment advisor, O levels; apprenticeship in engineering, HNC in computing)

In these accounts concern about classifying people is partly about a moral unease, but we also see evidence of intellectual doubt: a reluctance for complexity to be squeezed into a unitary category. That is, where people did express doubts about class, it is unclear that their accounts should be seen as reflecting defensiveness or ambiguity. They were not evasive as if this were an embarrassing and taboo subject, but rather they questioned its terms.

Across all responses was a pattern in which class was deemed to index diverse dimensions of economic, social and moral positioning. In this there are strong echoes of the argument of Payne and Grew (2005), as evidence suggests that class is construed in terms of

multiple components. Thus whilst a fascinating focus for exploring perceptions of social diversity, class does not always tap into people's sense of their circumstances and, where it does, it has diverse relevancies. We must take seriously the possibility that lay ambivalence over, or desistance towards, class as a category reveals its difficulty in encapsulating everyday experiences and perceptions. I turn, then, to evidence on social comparison in which people were asked to describe how they saw themselves relative to people they knew. The aim was to generate a 'grounded' account of subjective inequalities, framed more in participants' own terms.

**Proximate social comparisons and subjective social location**

Comparisons, relating to people's direct experiences and interactions, appear to offer a productive avenue for researching subjective experiences and perceptions of positioning within an unequal social structure (Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007; Dolan 2007; Bottero 2012). In the analysis which follows I explore this avenue, but ask also if people do make such comparisons, in what contexts they are meaningful, and what people adduce from such comparisons. Interestingly Pahl and colleagues (2007) found it challenging to elicit detailed responses about comparison from participants in their qualitative pilot study. People talked in quite general terms ('keeping up with the Joneses') but were not keen to make specific comparisons, indeed often they 'resisted the idea that they actively compared themselves to people they knew' (2007: 7). In my own interviews people were quite forthcoming in making comparisons when asked to do so. This may be because the discussion came near the end of an interview which had focused on their lives and experiences and the question could be interpreted in immediately meaningful terms. They were asked how they saw themselves as doing compared to their experiences growing up, and compared to other people they know now. If social comparison

is meaningful to people in a routine way, then it is liable to be so with reference to those closest to them, not to abstract distant others (Bottero 2012). Accordingly the framing of the questions was suited to assessing the analytic purchase of social comparison. Participants were then also asked if they *do* make such comparisons, and explicitly invited to reflect on whether the question was meaningful to them (see Appendix). Of course there is a necessary imposition of meaning here, an implication that people are likely to compare with others, and a requirement that they identify somebody socially close, although there was also the specific invitation to contest the question. Whilst data are always shaped by the questions through which they are generated, they provide a revealing window on highly diverse experiences and perspectives. Most interviewees were articulate in responding to the request to compare themselves with others. In doing so, they talked of their experience of opportunities, of constraint, and for some of movement through the structure of inequality, and they offered evaluations of their circumstances relative to others. I explore this in the next section. Firstly it is helpful to briefly consider some different dimensions of comparison as reflected in the data.

Participants were asked about how well they felt they and their current family were doing compared to family when they were growing up. Temporal comparisons were easy to make and familiar. Many people felt they were better off now than their families had been when they were growing up, although some felt themselves to be in a similar position. These different accounts were manifest in both middle and working class contexts. Many were struggling with costs of living, notably rising food, energy and fuel prices, and some with unemployment. Nevertheless, the less advantaged participants in this study typically felt better off than their parents. For example, for Leslie:

When, when we were kids if my Mum says she wor short o' money. ..she wor short o' money. She'd 'ave a few coppers in 'er purse and she had to manage till Friday till me Dad got paid. So for us to say we're short..is nothing compared to what it was when we were kids.  So I think the standard of livin' is higher, a lot higher than what it used to be. Not that we're not finding things tough.  (Teaching assistant, 'O' levels)

The comparison was not necessarily straightforward for all, since a number of participants commented on having had selfish parents. They felt they lived better now, but that was in part to do with childhood experiences in which their parents did not share resources around the family in an even handed way.

Sideways comparisons, like class, entailed diverse reference criteria. The questions about how well they were doing compared to others was prefaced by reference made to 'how well off you feel, whether you can afford to have things, or afford to do things' (see Appendix). Even so, some people chose to foreground non-economic dimensions on which they compared their well being. The evidence is an important caution that people's priorities often lie with health and relationships ahead of socio-economic issues. In addition, some participants said visible comparisons could be misleading (cf. Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007) because of different family sizes and working patterns, or the use of credit. Generally, however, participants offered comparisons of their own material well being and that of others when asked to do so. Interestingly, they often revealed awareness of their situatedness in respect of the wider social context, whilst then providing a more detailed account of their proximate circumstances and immediate concerns. For example, middle class Andrew (who had been made redundant and was starting a new business venture) said: 'How well off do I feel? Not particularly well off. But I suppose by most people's standards we would be extremely well off'. I argue that, when

asked to do so, people made nuanced comparisons, which in turn illuminated the diverse material contexts in which they live their lives. We will see that making socially close comparison is meaningful to people. They rarely offered spontanous comparisons with distant 'others' beyond asserting their lesser relevance. People's comparisons and the linked evaluations they made of their own well being were closely related to their immediate circumstances and experiences. Such comparisons, and related evaluations, tell us a great deal about how people themselves index, and orient to, their position within the broader social milieu.


Writers have argued that how people perceive their position in a social hierarchy reflects a blend of reality and proximate social comparisons so that people over-state the middling nature of their social positioning, and under-estimate the extent of inequality (Evans and Kelley 2004; Bottero 2005). If people compare with social similars, do they view their lot with relative equanimity, even in contexts of extensive disadvantage (cf Shildrick and MacDonald 2013)? The data reported in my study suggests that people are aware  they are situated in an unequal and hierarchical society. They are also very capable of providing nuanced accounts of how their circumstances compare with proximate others. Such comparisons may attenuate, or exacerbate, people's feeling about their relative well being, but perceptions appear to be strongly framed with reference to material circumstances. When participants evaluated their circumstances, this was very conservatively bounded, and closely followed the contours of people's lives (if I had not become unemployed; if my husband had not become unwell; if I had not been so determined to get ahead). This suggests that, in our inquiry into the nature and implications of social comparisons, and linked evaluations, we need to theorize the contexts in which people compare. Comparisons and the relevance of comparison groups have a complex relationship with the perceived im/mutability of social

arrangements. In day to day experiences and perceptions, people tend to take the social world in which they move, and the configuration of opportunity and constraint, as effectively given. For my participants, comparisons appear to be most relevant in referencing very immediate alternative possibilities and, as such, the resulting data shone light on how people perceived their circumstances and positioning on society, rendered in terms of well being, constraint and agency.

**Embedded in social milieu: comparison as a lens on advantage and constraint**

It has been observed that people in relatively disadvantaged positions commonly compare downwards, butressing feelings of self worth (Shildrick and MacDonald 2013; Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007; Dolan 2007; Wood 1989). For Savage and colleagues (2001), people distance themselves from those at either end of the social spectrum, both seen as 'undeserving'. However, these assertions of distancing and positioning as 'ordinary' (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001) or 'in the muddle in the middle' (Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007) reflect a sense of social position with reference to a somewhat abstract and distant generalised 'other'. In contrast, my study interviewees were asked to compare their circumstances with people they knew (such as friends, siblings or neighbours). This reflected a desire to ensure relevance, and built on an expectation that people will draw more meaningful comparisons with those who are socially close (Bottero 2005).

Proximate points of comparison for those in relatively advantaged and secure positions sharpened a sense of the possibililty of things being otherwise, and recession led issues including economic insecurity were discussed in several accounts. Many middle-class participants recounted their position of being relatively protected from recession, but with

reference to close others who had been impacted by it. For example, for Alex, a medical professional,

> my elder brother was made redundant and subsequently found another, but much lower paid, job...  I'm very aware ..how protected and insulated we are in medicine.

Anne, an occupational therapist, noted

> we've had friends who've been made redundant ..he worked for (named bank), and it was awful..He got another job straight away but it absolutely threw up everything about family life and what that would mean if they had to sell the house …It made us think, how secure are our jobs?

Andrew had been made redundant from a senior director level role in the private sector, but was embarking on a business venture in partnership with his wife: 'so I've made a decision that I wouldn't disappoint myself again and we'd, we'd give this a go'.  This level of freedom was not typical amongst the diverse middle class within the sample, some of whom were in  quite constrained economic circumstances. Nevertheless, their experiences shone a light on contexts very different to those experienced by participants in less advantaged circumstances, where comparisons highlighted particular experiences of constraint, sharpened by recession.  For example, Leslie was a part time teaching assistant and her husband was unemployed. They both commented on the relative pay of jobs:

> *Rob*: The ordinary jobs are getting lower and lower paid, they're actually..
>
> *Leslie*: going down in value. You're actually worse off now than you were….
>
> *Rob*: ...when I wor workin' I wor gettin' less than I wor twenty five years ago.

*Leslie*: we had a better standard of livin' ten years ago though than we, than we have now.

*Rob*:  Yeah we did. We're just plodding now at the moment. Treading water.

When asked about how they feel they are doing compared with other families they know, Leslie articulated disappointment:

I don't think we're doin' as well are we compared to.. no, cos other people, .. a lot of them have had holidays and, and....I think we're strugglin' we haven't had an 'oliday for how long?.. It's about three years now in't it?

When asked if she actually does make comparisons with other people, there was some discussion between the couple about Leslie's recent expression of jealousy that her brother holidays abroad quite often. The comparison seemed to be a focus for her feeling of constraint rather than a cause of it. Throughout the discussion, the greater relevancy of comparison appeared to lie with the contrast between how they felt they were doing now and how they might reasonably expect to be doing had Rob not become unemployed. For Leslie: 'Moneywise its been a significant impact.. I think we are struggling more than we were two years ago'.

Rising living costs also undermine the relative value of wages. For Ben:

*my wage isn't the same as it was two years ago.. you've got the same money but its going round less and less.. We scrape through each month*.

Mike, a window fitter, was worse off than he felt he might reasonably expect, having experienced redundancy. Although working now, he was on a wage he described as the same as he earned at eighteen. He had been working a few months after being unemployed but 'we're not back on us feet yet. Obviously no family holiday this year'. When asked about how well off he felt compared to people he knew, he said:

I don't feel poor.  But the only down side is we an't got a car now.. I just can't afford a car.. That's the only poor side I see about us. I see families worse off than us that have got cars.

There was no particular pattern to whether those in less advantaged contexts compared 'upwards' or downwards'. Either way it provided a window on how people experienced constraint. Jack was a sign fitter, married with six young children. He had seen a reduction in his wages during the recession, despite working more hours. Asked how he was doing compared to other people he knew, he talked of his sister and her misfortune. The comparison was framed by compassion for her tough circumstances, and guilt that he did not have more time to think about, or help, her. In this regard a 'logic' of downward comparison did not bolster Jack's sense of relative well-being, indeed it came over as part of a wider experience of constraint:

Oh ma sister,  ma sister's not doing very well at all. …She's got a council 'ouse and she's separated from her husband and father of her children. So she's not doing well at all…and .. you've got more than she has, put it that way. And you know when you speak to her she's catching her pockets to try and make ends meet.  … I feel sorry for

'er. And I try to help out as much as I can but it's hard when you've got your own bills to pay.

When I asked '*do* you tend to think about how other people are doing?' rather than compare his and her circumstances he switched the register of the question to one of if, and how, he might help his sister, although the practical aspects of his life made it hard to do so:

> But everything's  so busy and we're on the go in this house…  we don't have much time for each other, never mind thinking about other, other people.  … Until they make that phone call, I an't thinking about them if you know what I mean.

In short, his 'downwards comparison' reflected compassion and concern, and appeared to have a negative bearing on his sense of well being, if it had any at all.

Across these examples people compare up as well as down. The comparisons they make are situated, reflections of their social circumstances. They entail evaluations of such circumstances, and the less advantaged participants drew on proximate points of reference (others close to them, or their own past experience) in recounting experiences of constraint (not being able to afford a car, or a holiday, the declining relative worth of wages, and unemployment; or in Jack's case, to avoid repeating his father's experience, of seeing his young family slip from a vulnerable position into a circumstance of misfortune). These reflect broad norms about what is needed to have a decent level of living and to participate in society. However, people drew relevancies from their immediate circumstances. Comparisons and linked evaluations were articulated within a perceived-as-realistic, quite conservative account of how things might be otherwise, and strongly linked to current material circumstances. So

too this was the case for some participants who had experienced upward social mobility, and whose accounts are the focus of the next section.

**Traversing social milieux: comparison as a lens on social mobility**

The practise of comparing with others engendered a quite detailed account of social stratification for some who had been upwardly mobile. Comparisons became the focus through which these interviewees narrated their circumstances and, for some, their agency. For example, Julia was black-British, in a professional job and living in a middle class neighbourhood (although she referred to herself as working class).[3] The way in which she compared how she was getting on was closely tied to her narrative of her background and identity. The experience of authoring a trajectory which was not seen as 'normal' by her peers when she was young engendered an overt comparison through being marked out as different by those in the neighbourhood where she grew up.

> *Sarah*: And <u>do</u> you ever think about how other people are doing in thinking about your own life or that of your children?
>
> *Julia*: I do because…when I was growing up .. there was a lot of jealousy in terms of where I was going.. I went to secretarial college after school and so I was seen as the snobby one.
>
> (Social worker, higher level qualification)

Julia talked extensively about people she knew in similar and very dissimilar positions to herself and these comparisons served to present a clear picture of social mobility and her determination and agency in driving this. Two other participants discussed next also described

their experiences of upward mobility in comparing themselves with others. Agency was an important motif in these accounts. For example, for Kev, a self employed plasterer, comparison provided a way of narrating his experience of mobility:

> Well to be honest we've advanced more than me friends and things .. they've never actually changed their lifestyle if you know what I mean, .. they 'aven't really gone anywhere, .. it's just a lot of them have probably followed their mum and dads.. Whereas I, obviously I've come away, bought an 'ouse, paid for it, go on holidays and stuff and I don't drink. .. I always wanted to, you can call it snobby or whatever but it's not, it's just I wanted to better meself a little bit (Plasterer, advanced City and Guilds)

There is an echo in the account of Maggie, a chartered accountant, introduced earlier. She too narrates both mobility, and her agency in authoring this (articulated partly with reference to her siblings making poor choices). Maggie had moved from a working-class background to a professional position, and felt significantly better off than her parents. She drew a stark contrast between her own experience and that of two of her three siblings, one of whom she described as an alcoholic, and the other as an unemployed single mum. Maggie distanced herself from them, and felt they had not made what they should of their lives. She added 'I had the opportunities. We all did… we all had the same life'.

Accounts of mobility and agency then, like accounts of constraint, are drawn in close detail with reference to very direct experience and points of comparison. People offer detailed descriptions with reference to their biographical and everyday experiences, and to proximate ideas of if, and how, things could be otherwise. We cannot draw the conclusion that comparison is necessarily deemed to be very relevant within people's everyday experience, although it is

possible that assertions of its irrelevance, by Kev and Maggie, relate to their sense they are doing relatively well:

> *Kev*: "I think about me, me family only really. I've never been envious or nowt but I've never really erm, thought about how he's doin' better than me ..., what he's done never interests me. As long as I look after me own like...No it dun't bother me at all

> *Maggie*: I think about it [how other people are doing] when I see me brother and me sister and things. Erm, there's no way that I could live 'ow they live. Erm, but as for friends, like I said we're all, all our friends are very similar. I don't, don't suppose I do compare, don't try and compare. It's, erm, yeah just get on with it [laughs].

Amongst the interviewees who had experienced upward mobility through their lifetime, social comparisons with those in differing circumstances were sharply drawn. The salience people drew from such comparisons varied, although participants' agency in authoring their trajectories was an important motif within these accounts, itself narrated through comparison with others with whom they had 'started out'. The immediacy of diversity in people's lived experiences is likely to engender reflexivity and possibly sharpen the salience of comparison in people's sense of their social positioning.[4]

In summary, questions about comparison with familiar others prompted rich accounts of social circumstance and experience, and appeared very meaningful to people at least as a way of indexing their social position, with reference to the opportunities, setbacks and constraints it has afforded them. The practice of comparing itself appeared to have diverse relevancies. Some participants engaged with the exercise of comparing as a kind of 'looking

outwards' from their more day to day thoughts and practices, asserting practical priorities ('look after me own', 'we don't have time for each other, never mind thinking about other people', 'its just, get on with it'). Across the interviews generally, whether people compared with others, how they compared, the meanings accorded to such comparisons, and linked evaluations of their social circumstance and position, were closely linked to the immediate material contexts in they live their lives. Lay experience of routine inequalities occur within these contexts of everyday practical relevance. Within the study reported here, comparison was a fascinating touchstone for participants' narratives of agency and constraint in managing their own, and their families' well being. The accounts illustrated real and significant diversity in the material circumstances in which people were living their lives, as well as a largely 'taken as given' framing of personal and familial circumstances. It was typically very immediately relevant counterfactuals against which people adjudged their circumstances. For example, the least advantaged adjudged their circumstances against personal or family experiences of unemployment, employment insecurity and a decline in relative value of wages. Those who had been upwardly mobile adjudged their circumstances relative to familiar others who had not made the choices they had themselves made. The evidence offers rich insight into subjective social location, wherein people necessarily position themselves as agents of their own lives, yet do so within radically different contexts of constraint and opportunity.

**Conclusion**

Researchers of social inequalities have engaged extensively with subjective experiences and perceptions of such inequalities, and sought to tackle different explanatory puzzles, including the ways people commonly disavow class. In the analysis reported here, whilst many participants did identify as members of a class, class issues were perceived in very diverse

ways across the entire sample. In this the analysis echoes the argument of Payne and Grew (2005) that class is a multifaceted construct. We must take seriously the possibility that lay ambivalence over, or desistance towards, 'class' partly reflects its unitary and over-generalising quality, and consequently its problematic purchase on everyday experience and perception. A social comparison perspective, running more with the grain of everyday experience and perception, was elaborated as a potentially productive analytic route into lay perspectives on, and experiences of, inequality. Questions about social comparison with familiar others enabled people people to articulate their own positioning and experience. Interviewees offered detailed and rich comparisons with family, friends and acquaintances. Those in advantaged circumstances compared up and down, felt relatively well off and secure, and held concerns about the implications and insecurities of economic recession. Those in disadvantaged circumstances articulated experiences of constraint and hardship through their comparisons. Those who had been upwardly mobile drew downward comparisons, narrating their movement across social strata, and agency in directing this. It is through their very diverse accounts that we see the highly differentiated and unequal social structure.

It has been asserted elsewhere that class might be construed as a particular kind of analysis, and claim, about the nature of social hierarchy, which has functioned as a cultural framing device through which experiences are interpreted and evaluated (Bottero 2005; Cannadine 2000). In the current era we see a much more individualised register in which people contemplate their social positioning (Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007; Bottero 2005). This individualized register is very strongly at work in the accounts reported in this paper. This does not mean that people do not relate their experiences to wider structural and economic processes (exemplified by comments on the declining value of wages made by several of the interviewees discussed here, as well as wide concerns about unemployment), but the individualist and

agentic ethos infuses people's accounts of how they manage, and seek to make changes in, their lives. In so far as comparisons engendered evaluations, these showed people to reflect on their social position within quite conservative and proximally relevant understandings of how things might be otherwise. However this is not to say that the participants belonged to a 'deemed as similar' muddle in the middle, or manifest relative contentment (after Pahl, Rose and Spencer 2007), but points towards the perceived-as-given structure of social arrangements. Evaluation of their position reflected circumscribed, proximally relevant and realistic ideas of how things might be improved. Often evaluation itself appeared to be a relatively abstract exercise next to the pragmatic, and agentic, orientation to their circumstance, whether in terms of getting on, or coping with daily exigencies, which people reflected in their accounts. In this the analysis echoes Bottero's (2012) argument that social comparison is itself a situated activity, relevant in specific contexts.

Social comparisons may be most consequential when they are made within tightly boundaried contexts, perhaps where the bases of comparison are extremely clear or well defined. Indeed, a clear cut assertion of injustice occurred amongst a handful of interviewees who recounted their anger and disappointment that, as children, their parents had treated them less well than their siblings. In such contexts, where there was a tightly defined and clear comparison, and an unassailable yet unmet claim to equal treatment, a resulting sense of injustice still burned and was shaping these parents' own ethics. However, in the more general contexts in which people assessed their own material well being and circumstances as compared to others, types of comparison were more diffuse, and the ways in which they were experienced as salient varied. This paper has sought to offer some insights into the contexts in which comparisons matter and, through exploring participants' comparisons and accounts of

constraint and opportunity, to show the close articulation of subjective experiences and structural inequalities.

(Date accepted: September 2014)

**Appendix**

The following questions formed the final part of the wave 2 interview schedule. The bulleted questions are the ones on which this article reports.

I would like to ask you some questions about how you feel you and your family are doing now (you, your partner and children), compared to your family when you were growing up – that is, thinking about how well off you feel, whether you can afford to have things, or afford to do things?

- Thinking about your current family, how are you doing compared to your family when you were a child?

*(follow up by asking how their life compares in terms of how well they live)*

- Again, thinking about how well off you feel, how would you say you and your children are doing, compared to other families you know – perhaps those of friends, or siblings or neighbours?

- <u>Do</u> you ever think of how other people are doing, in thinking about your own life or that of your children?

How would you describe the opportunities your children have to do well in life compared to you, when you were their age?

What do you mean by doing well in life?

Do you think your background has influenced what you want for your children? (*Could be their own family background, or their own biography for example. Explore*)

Do you think your background  has influenced the kind of jobs you want them to have?

- Some people talk about being working class, or middle class, or perhaps between, say, in an intermediate class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to a particular social class?

Do you reflect on changes in your family here, across the generations?

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[1] I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Elley who worked as a temporary research assistant on the project in 2008, helping the author administer the survey, and sharing the wave 1 qualitative interviews.  In the second wave Sharon undertook some follow up interviews, whilst the author undertook most of them.

[2] Interviewees' current occupation is shown along with the highest formal qualification they hold. 'O' (Ordinary) levels until 1987, and GCSEs from 1988 denote qualifications taken at the end of

compulsory schooling amongst 15 and 16 year olds (the school leaving age has been subsequently raised); A (Advanced) level is the upper level post-compulsory secondary education leaving qualification, higher qualifications is used to denote a university level qualification at diploma, degree or masters level.

[3] For an interesting discussion of ethnicity and class identification see Rollock et al 2012

[4] Such comparisons *may* link to class related cultural dislocation, a feature of some experiences of upward mobility (Friedman 2013).

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