

Cultural Sociology

<http://cus.sagepub.com/>

Situating Lesbian and Gay Cultures of Class Identification

Brian Heaphy

Cultural Sociology published online 24 September 2012

DOI: 10.1177/1749975512457140

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cus.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/09/03/1749975512457140>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[British Sociological Association](http://www.britishsociologicalassociation.org)

Additional services and information for *Cultural Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://cus.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://cus.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Sep 24, 2012

[What is This?](#)



Situating Lesbian and Gay Cultures of Class Identification

Cultural Sociology
1-17

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission: sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1749975512457140

cus.sagepub.com



Brian Heaphy

University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

How significant are class identities to lesbians and gay men? In the 1990s some theorists implied that lesbian and gay identities were classless or post-class ones. This paper challenges this idea by considering personal narratives of class (dis-)identification that were generated via interviews with lesbians and gay men in the 1990s. The salience of class was explicitly and implicitly articulated in narratives of 'accepting', 'rejecting', 'ambiguous' and 'disrupting' class identities. Interviewees' narratives suggested the relative strength of sexual identities over class ones and their accounts of class had much in common with apparently 'weak' mainstream class identities. However, viewed relationally and historically, their narratives troubled the idea that lesbian and gay identities override or transcend class ones. They undermine arguments about the insignificance of class to identities more generally, and complicate arguments about the individualization of class.

Keywords

class, class analysis, culture, gay, lesbian, identities, intersections, sexuality, sexualities

Introduction

In British sociology the situated study of class identities has been linked to the reinvigoration of class analysis (Devine et al., 2005; Crompton et al., 2000; Lawler, 2005; Savage, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). This paper adopts a relational and historical approach to situating lesbian and gay class identities. Specifically, it analyses lesbian and gay narratives of class (dis-)identification that were generated by interviews in the 1990s. Whilst some late 20th-century theories suggested that lesbian and gay identities were classless or 'post-class' ones, my own analysis challenges this (see Bech, 1997; Blasius, 1994; Dunne, 1997; Giddens, 1992; Weeks, 1995). Although interviewees' identity

Corresponding author:

Brian Heaphy, Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M139PL, UK

Email: brian.heaphy@manchester.ac.uk

narratives suggested the relative strength of their sexual identities over their class ones, they also indicated the salience of class.

The paper begins by outlining some of the ways in which class and identity have been discussed in recent sociological and broader debates, and argues the case for combining aspects of ‘modified class’ and ‘intersectional identity’ analysis. It highlights a dearth of empirical work on lesbian and gay class identities and considers how in a study of same sex relationships diverse class (dis-)identifications were articulated in response to direct questions about self-identification. Sexual identities seemed relatively strong compared to class ones and the latter had much in common with apparently ‘weak’ mainstream class identities. However, it would be mistaken to assume that this supports arguments about the insignificance of class to lesbian and gay identities and to individualized identities more generally. Such arguments are less than persuasive when class identities are relationally and historically situated.

Class and Identity

By the late 20th century the cultural turn, and especially the emphasis on the construction and deconstruction of identities, was linked to the demise of the central significance of class analysis to British sociology (e.g. Devine et al., 2005; Crompton et al., 2000, Savage, 2000). Munt (2000: 5) also argued that identitarianism had detracted from British Cultural Studies’ foundational concern with class, and Nicholson and Seidman (1995: 9) argued for a return to ‘the social’ to correct the sidelining of class in cultural analyses of identity. However, recent attempts to reinvigorate class analysis in British sociology have turned *to* culture and identity.

Commenting on the sociology of class, Savage et al. (2001) noted the dearth of contemporary empirical research on the salience of class identification when ‘compared to identities of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and locale’ (2001: 875). However, there is a renewed sociological interest in the situated study of class identities (e.g. Byrne, 2006; Devine et al., 2005; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 1998; Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Southerton, 2002; Taylor 2007). Unlike classic studies of class cultures, the ‘new’ sociology of class – or ‘modified class analysis’ (Savage, 2000) – does not assume class identities (subjective class) to simply reflect objective class position. It tends to view class (dis-)identifications as “‘claims for recognition” ... which are contested and fraught’ (Devine and Savage, 2005: 12). It explores the ambivalences and complexities of popular class identities as opposed to seeing them as evidence of dominant ideologies and situates class awareness in the context of people’s everyday lives (Devine and Savage, 2005: 12–13). It seeks to *engage* with ‘the individual’ as a new core concern of British sociology, as opposed to defensively ignoring or denigrating this (Savage, 2000: 7, cf. Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Savage’s (2000) approach is an exemplar of such engagement. With colleagues he used interviews to research class identities in the north-west of England in the 1990s and linked these to the late modern individualization of class (Savage et al., 2001). In later work (Savage, 2007) he situated class identities by comparing personal narratives of class generated via Mass Observation in 1949 and 1990 and observed a shift from collective to more individualized articulations of class.

Arguments for modified class analysis are rooted in – and tend to be addressed to – long-standing debates about class (dis-)identification in the sociological sub-discipline of class analysis. Because of this, they risk sidelining how class cultures and identities have been studied outside of the sub-discipline: for example, in sociology itself, cultural and media studies, feminist studies, psychology, geography and history (for overviews see Munt, 2000; Skeggs, 2004; McDermott, 2011). Many of these studies have highlighted the links between class and other identities. This raises an issue that is especially relevant to the specific class identities discussed in this paper: the intersectional nature of identities.

Whilst intersectional analysis encompasses a broad range of theoretical and empirical approaches, intersectional *identity* analyses are often concerned with how different identities (gender, class, ‘race’ and ethnicity, generation and so on) interrelate at the ‘cross-roads’ where they meet (Anthias, 2005; Nash, 2008; Taylor, 2011). Proponents of intersectional identity analyses argue that it enables nuanced understandings of how identities are mutually constituted in different contexts. Thus, they imply, ignoring the links between class and other identities leads to un-situated understandings of class itself. This points to an apparent weakness in Savage’s and his colleagues’ application of modified class analysis: the primary concern with the historical individualization of class identities pays little attention to how class and other identities interlink. My own approach and analysis suggests the value of combining aspects of Savage’s version of modified class analysis with some of the concerns of intersectional analysis, and I discuss this explicitly in the conclusion. I now consider how non-heterosexual and class identities have been linked in the literature.

Sexual Identities and Class

The study of the links between class relations and non-heterosexuality has a relatively long history. In the 1970s early versions of gay liberation theory made strong connections between homosexual oppression, class structures and capitalism (Altman, 1993 [1971]; Weeks, 1977). Some socio-historical analyses linked the formation of homosexual cultures with the development of capitalist societies, and others explicitly linked homosexual oppression to class (see Lofstrom, 1997). Connections were also made between lesbian oppression and capitalist class structures, although patriarchal structures were more often emphasized (see Hennessy, 2000). For several decades now, class and sexuality, as well as ‘race’, have featured highly in feminist debates about the differences ‘within’ the category of women (e.g. Fuss, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000), and some feminist intersectional analyses incorporated sexuality, along with gender, class and ‘race’ (see Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Richardson et al., 2006). Despite this, Taylor (2009, 2011) argues that intersectional analysis has failed to focus on the specific interconnections between class and *lesbian* sexualities. Plummer (2008: 18) also noted that in discussions about intersectional sexualities ‘we really do not hear much about class’. This connects to more specific criticisms of how class has been marginalized in empirical work in lesbian, gay and queer studies. Queer theory, especially, has been accused of prioritizing the cultural performativities of identities over their material, socio-economic and class dimensions (e.g. Jackson, 2001; Jeffries, 2002; Hennessy, 2000). In turn, Queer theory’s

critics have been accused of seeing sexual identities as ‘merely’ an ideological reflection of economic relations (see Butler, 1998; M. Fraser, 1999; N. Fraser, 1998).

In the 1990s a strand of social theory and sociology that sought to avoid economic *and* cultural reductionism implied the classless or post-class nature of lesbian and gay identities and lifestyles. Bech, for instance, combined Marxian, Foucauldian and phenomenological ideas in analysing homosexuality as a form of existence that was unavoidable ‘irrespective of one’s background ... in terms of race, class, etc.’ (1997: 157). He argued that the homosexual form of existence overrode the influences of ‘race’ and class in shaping gay male experience. Dunne (1997) developed radical materialist feminist ideas about economics and culture to suggest that via lesbian identity and relationships women could transcend heterosexually gendered material inequalities. By ignoring class, Dunne assumed it to be insignificant to lesbian lives. Blasius (1994), Giddens (1992) and Weeks (1995) generated neo-liberationist analyses of lesbian and gay identities. In doing so, they linked the ‘post-emancipatory’ (Giddens, 1992) historical ‘moment of lesbian and gay equality’ (Blasius, 1994) or ‘moment of citizenship’ (Weeks, 1995) with forms of agency that presumed lesbian and gay identities to be structurally liberated from class. Both Bech and Giddens extended their post-class arguments beyond lesbian and gay identities. Bech argued that the homosexual form of existence was now a mainstream one (where heterosexual ways of living had become like non-heterosexual ones). This implied that post-class identities were commonplace for homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. Giddens argued lesbian and gay identities to be exemplars of post-traditional reflexive identities. Thus, their post-class identities are indicative of the broader insignificance of class.

Despite noting a recent resurgent interest in class, McDermott (2011: 65) argues that this ‘has been less obvious in ... lesbian and gay studies and queer theory’ (see also Taylor, 2011: 4). Class is very rarely the *central* focus of empirical investigations of lesbian, gay and queer identities and lives, although there are exceptional studies that have challenged Queer, neo-liberationist and other versions of classless or post-class lesbian and gay sexualities (e.g. Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2007, 2011). In Britain, Taylor’s (2007) empirical work stands out for explicitly challenging the notion that class is insignificant to lesbian identities. Taylor’s study of working-class lesbian lifestyles recruited interviewees on the basis of their working-class identities. Thus, her study was framed by subjective class from the outset. This led her to take a cautious view of ‘the increasing theorisation of class ... in term of dis-identification’, which should ‘include a stronger sense of when working class and middle class women do and do not identify themselves as classed’ (2007: 8). This points to the relational nature of class identities: for example, how specific class identities are experienced as significant and articulated in relation to ‘other’ ones in specific interactional contexts.

In contrast to Taylor, Skeggs (1997) studied heterosexual working-class women who largely dis-identified in class terms, but who Skeggs categorized as working class. Her ethnographic study was framed by objective class from the outset. As opposed to seeing her study participants’ class dis-identifications as evidence of post-class identity formations, Skeggs suggests that the enduring (historical) links between class and gendered identities *fixes* working-class heterosexual feminine identities as stigmatized ones which

works against 'working class' being embraced as an identity. This returns us to the relationally situated and emergent nature of class identities. The extent to which Skeggs's and Taylor's empirical work can address this is constrained by the ways in which the women they studied were fixed as working class by the research process: they were defined and fixed as such by Skeggs, and defined and fixed themselves as such in Taylor's study. Also, the focus on *working-class women* in both studies limited how diverse class identities (male and female working, middle and ambiguous class identities) could be explored together. While the nature of the study discussed below constrained my own analysis, it offers some broader scope for exploring how class identities were situated in diverse ways. It did not recruit on the basis of one particular class position or identity, but on the basis of same-sex relationship involvements. The participants were not fixed in class terms by the study and – as I argue – they articulated their class (dis-)identifications in a broad range of relationally situated ways.

Situating the Study¹

The personal narratives analysed in this paper were generated through interviews conducted with self-identified lesbians (n = 40) and gay men (n = 46) during 1995 and 1996 as part of a larger British study of same sex relationships.² Interviewees were recruited through strategies aimed at including as broad a range of geographic, economic, and socio-cultural experiences as possible.³ The interviews were semi-structured and took a conversational style. They were organized around the themes of identity; friendships; household; partners; children; caring; HIV and AIDS; legal issues; families; sexuality and other related issues.

Participants were initially asked if and how they identified in terms of sexuality and those with lesbian and gay identities mostly told very detailed stories about these. They were also explicitly asked if and how they identified with or saw themselves as belonging to any particular social class (Savage et al., 2001 adopted a similar approach). As we shall see, personal narratives of class identity seemed weak compared to sexual identities. Later on I will discuss how the historical contexts of their production may partly explain this. However, there are also methodological issues to be taken into account. Because this was a study of same-sex relationships, participants were more likely to have anticipated being asked about their sexual identities than their class ones. They may have also viewed the discussion of class identities as a diversion from the 'real' focus of the study. Also, while the sexual identities of the two interviewees were known (one lesbian and one gay), their class identities had not been disclosed. These factors may have encouraged an emphasis on sexual identities over class ones.

In analysing personal narratives of class (dis-)identification, I was influenced by approaches to modified class and intersectional analysis as discussed earlier, but also by Plummer's (1995) 'sociology of personal story telling' and his pragmatic view of the relationship between personal stories and actual lives. This allows identity narratives to be analysed as 'narrative truth' and explored for their significance in participants' lives, their relationships and to the socio-cultural order. This is an approach that is in many ways compatible with performative analyses of identity (cf. Butler, 1990), but is more influenced by symbolic interactionist ideas than poststructuralist ones. It is

better suited to exploring the work that personal stories do in people's lives than poststructuralist frames that tend to be abstracted from such concerns.

Narratives of Class (Dis-)Identification

Amongst the 86 lesbian and gay interviewees, class identification was not a straightforward matter. Some participants fairly immediately accepted or rejected a class identity. However, most were initially ambiguous, often beginning with comments like: 'That's a tricky one', 'Well, I suppose', 'Oh, I'm not sure'. Despite this, 21 participants (11 men and 10 women) eventually identified as working class and 45 (21 men and 24 women) as middle class. Ten men and three women did not identify, and in seven cases (four male and three female) the issue was unclear. However, these rough numbers oversimplify complex processes, shifting discussions and overlapping narratives of (dis-)identification that are worth exploring in more detail. In fact, approximately one third of the women and men who (finally) named a class were *highly* ambivalent about this. The remaining 'identifiers' often narrated somewhat ambivalent and ambiguous class identities.

At the outset, it is important to note that while class identifications were inflected with specific situating details in terms of gender, ethnicity and age, they were not *structured* by socio-cultural location in these respects. Put another way, irrespective of their ethnicity or age, women and men were as likely to narrate accepting, rejecting and ambiguous class identities. However, a greater proportion of gay men (roughly 20%) refused a class identity than women (less than 10%), and male participants more often linked their sexual identities to the disruption of class ones. I discuss this in more detail later on.

'Accepting' Narratives: Given Class and Individualized Identity

Accepting narratives of class identity ranged across a continuum from 'embracing acceptance' through 'straightforward definition' to 'ambivalent resignation'. They immediately challenge the notion that class is insignificant to lesbians' and gay men's identities. A small minority of interviewees embraced a class identity. Peter (32, public relations officer), for example, described himself as 'class conscious' and presented his politicized middle-class identity as central to his view of himself and his social and intimate interactions. John (37, part-time events organizer) also embraced class as an aspect of his identity and recounted: 'everything I am today is kind of evolving from that working class, gay, bi-racial kind of mix'. Jayne (31, volunteer organizer) more straightforwardly described herself as middle class: 'through and through ... very middle class upbringing', and Toni (32, unemployed) identified as working class in a matter-of-fact way: 'Irish working class ... my dad was a migrant worker'. Embracing and straightforward narratives of class identification posited class identity as 'given' by virtue of one's hierarchical class position as determined by family background, education and/or occupation. Narratives of middle-class identity were much more likely than working-class ones to refer to class advantage and privilege. In a few cases, such as Josephine's (38, social care trainer), such advantage and privilege underpinned 'ambivalent resigned'

narratives of middle-class identity: 'Much as I hate it, I think I am middle class and I feel I was forced into it ... its values ... I don't think I can throw it away. I can just try to be aware of it'.

In discussing her 'objective' class, Josephine displayed considerable reflexivity about middle-class privilege and advantage. She discussed her middle-class identity in a way that resonates with Bourdieu's notion of habitus: it was something that could be acknowledged but not simply be undone. At the same time, Josephine's narrative, like Peter's that was quoted earlier, was a claim about class self-consciousnesses as much as it was a story of middle-class identity itself. Through claims about class consciousness participants often differentiated themselves from their middle-class peers, as *knowing individuals* who were aware of the personal-political workings of class. Differentiated class identities were also articulated in other ways. Consider the following quotation from Niamh (42, therapist): 'I'm middle class and there's no way past that ... it's always upper middle-class people who say "Class really doesn't matter" ... because [they're] in a position to say so'.

By accepting that she was middle class, Niamh displayed a consciousness about her privileged class location, but simultaneously downplayed this by accusing 'other' more privileged middle classes of class denial. Thus she distinguished her middle-class identity in hierarchical *and* lateral terms. For Bourdieu, Bottero notes (2005), lateral differentiations point to how groups within classes claim distinction. While the above quotation from Niamh illustrates this, Peter's and Josephine's narratives also suggest that hierarchical and individualized class differentiations could be bound up with claims to lateral class distinction: claims to being *self-reflexively* aware of hierarchical class position could involve claims about self-aware *groups* within a class. This was underscored by Mollie's narrative (51, unemployed), which implied a distinction between middle class lesbians and gay men: 'I'm more aware of class problems with gay men ... very little awareness ... a lack of political awareness'.

Overall, accepting narratives of class identity trouble arguments about lesbians' and gay men's classless identities. They suggest that theories about 'traditional class' and 'reflexive individualized' post-class identities (Giddens, 1991) centre on (and construct) false dichotomies that are not necessarily a feature of identities themselves. They also illuminate how class identities are relationally articulated via hierarchical, individualized and lateral distinctions. This suggests that we should be cautious about overemphasizing shifts towards individualized class identities in the late 20th century (cf. Savage, 2000, 2007; Savage et al., 2001). Although accepting narratives of class identity could configure class in individualized ways, these were not discrete modes of configuration but intrinsically related to hierarchical and lateral modes.

'Rejecting' Narratives: Individuality, Ordinarity and the Power of Class

Perhaps surprisingly, narratives of class dis-identification also challenge assumptions about the insignificance of class to lesbian and gay identities. Class dis-identification was articulated in outright and tentative terms. Thomas (29, administrator)

rejected class as the basis for identity by saying: 'I don't believe in the class system'. Aubrey (72, retired artist) self-defensively rejected a class identity on the basis that 'I don't have a class problem'. Carol's (26, administration officer) response also suggested an element of defensiveness when she said: 'I am who I am. I don't belong to any particular structure or group, I'm just who I am'. Savage et al. (2001) suggest that defensiveness is a common feature of contemporary class dis-identifications. Skeggs (1997, 2004), Munt (2000) and others have linked this to shame that attributed working-class identities can imply in cultures that pathologize and denigrate working-class people; and where there are few or no traditions, representations or political endeavours through which working class can be (re-)claimed as a positive identity. Also, in an era of neo-liberal governance, where individuality and personal authenticity are conflated, the idea of being subject to working- and middle-class forms of existence can be ontologically undermining (Savage, 2000). In other words, class can be powerful in how it 'spoils' identity and/or undermines a sense of individual agency. Unlike the participants discussed so far, Ebony and Mo more tentatively rejected class identity:

I could say I was working class and I work very hard for my money, but I could say I was black middle class ... my parents aren't really rich, but they're not poor ... But I don't really tend to identify myself in terms of class. (Ebony, 34, development worker)

I don't think I am [working class] really ... I'm certainly not the ruling class ... I think I [could be seen] as middle class in terms of who my parents are, what kind of profession I am likely to hold, but that doesn't [fit] either. (Mo, 22, student)

Both Ebony's and Mo's narratives point to what Savage et al. (2001) identify as another characteristic of late modern class dis-identifications: the claim to ordinariness. By situating themselves as neither rich nor poor, and neither working class nor ruling class, both participants located themselves as 'in the middle'. They deployed the relational logics of class in denying class identity. For Savage et al., ordinariness itself *is* a class claim (even if it is not associated with a specific objective class) because it invokes hierarchically classed forms of differentiation of being above, below and in the middle. This returns us to the issue of class defensiveness, and raises the following question: Why did some participants refuse the language of class when they continued to deploy the logics of class in making sense of their identities? Some participants' responses suggested that the answer to this question might lie in an awareness of the self-negating power of attributed class. In refusing a class identity, for example, Lilly stated: 'I hate using labels like that ... Because they can be a putdown' (Lilly, 67, retired). Alain (27, waiter) also stated: 'I don't *want* to define myself being in any of these class things'. He rationalized this on the basis of the links that existed between class and a hierarchy of worth where 'as a waiter I'm going to be in the worst [position]'. Class identities were therefore often rejected because they were associated with self-undermining attributed identities. Class dis-identifications did not therefore indicate the insignificance of class for identity. They were a mode through which the relational logics of class hierarchies and their personal salience could be affirmed.

Situating Narratives: 'Ambiguous' Class Identities

It depends who I'm talking to ... Don't take me the wrong way, because I strongly identify [with] a working class background. (Katrina, 29, volunteer co-ordinator)

Class ambiguity could be interpreted as evidence of the insignificance of class to late modern identities. However, personal narratives like Katrina's above suggested that it might more accurately be viewed as evidence of something else: of an acute awareness of the interactional and emergent nature of class identities (Taylor, 2007). Ambiguous narratives of identification, like Katrina's, pointed to how class identities were relationally situated in the way that one's sense of class identity depended on who you were interacting with and in what context. Dee (41, unemployed) explicitly situated her ambiguous class identity relationally: 'We've had many discussions about this. If you're working class and you change your lifestyle and you don't associate with the people you were brought up with ... it's difficult to explain and define'.

The most highly ambiguous narratives of class were told by those who identified their backgrounds as working class and their current occupations and lifestyles as middle class. These participants linked their experiences of class mobility to unsure class identities. Simon (35, chemist), for example, stated: 'By default I'm middle class now, because of my education and [my] job. I don't know how, really, to identify myself'. Mollie (51, unemployed) also recounted: 'I'm in a muddle ... I don't think somebody with a university education can really be working class and yet ... sometimes I feel completely working class'.

As the above quotations indicate, ambiguous narratives of class identity did not deny objective class. Rather, the experience of class mobility was often linked to an acutely relational sense of class identity. This signals the limits of interpretative frames that emphasize shame and/or self-negation for understanding non-straightforward articulations of class identity. While such frames generate insights into defensive dis-identifications from class, they can encourage a less grounded view of how ambiguous class identities are rooted in dynamic life circumstances. However, ambiguous class identities also trouble classless or post-class analyses of lesbian and gay identities where the potential fragility of class identities is associated with the 'fact' of class transcendence. On the one hand, class-mobile participants' identities could seem fragile because they were not fixed. On the other hand, they were strong in that they were not wholly transcended by objective class mobility. As we shall see in the next section, however, some participants seemed to believe that by virtue of being gay they had transcended their class.

Class 'Disruption'

... my decision to be gay entirely changed my perspective on a lot of things. [Otherwise] I probably would be very much the same as my sister. Very middle class, *very*, because I'd never have had to stop and think ... everything would just be as I was told it was going to be. Because of one decision everything was altered. (Mo, 22, student)

In the above quotation Mo links her gay identity to the disruption of middle-class identity. Her comments echo sociological narratives about the implications of coming out for lesbian and gay 'experiments in living', heightened self-reflexivity and increased personal agency. These narratives propose that coming out implies *coming into* distinctive lesbian and gay forms of existence or lifestyles that disrupt 'traditional' bases of identity such as class (Blasius, 1994; Dunne, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Weeks, 1995).

More male than female participants believed that non-heterosexual identities undermined class ones, and possible explanations for this are considered in the next section. In the meantime, Andrew, Roy and Richard explicitly linked being gay to the undermining of class identities. Andrew was from a working-class background, and Roy and Richard were from middle-class ones. All suggested that gay ways of living disrupted class identities in some way or other, and linked this to the disruption of heterosexual patterns of living. Andrew believed that being gay involved opting out of parenthood which, in turn, implied more disposable income. He commented: 'I suppose being gay destroys the whole thing of class in some ways, because generally you don't have children ... I earn quite a good wage' (Andrew, 28, social worker). Roy (57, civil servant) believed his gay sexuality enabled him to develop intimate associations that transcended class boundaries. He recounted: 'I grew up in a middle-class family ... the main grey area here is around sexuality. I have a lot of experience of other[s] because [of] the ... lives I'm involved in.' Richard (36, teacher) claimed that gay ways of living subverted middle-class lifestyles. He stated:

Once you've been to university ... when you're gay you subvert all that and you don't become a part of it any more ... to be middle class is two children and a semi-detached house and an estate car ... gay people [don't] actually fall into that

These personal accounts of how gay identities and lifestyles 'destroy', 'disrupt' or 'subvert' class indicate how in narrating the implications that their sexual identities had for their class identities some gay men drew on popular discourses about gay mixed-class associations and cosmopolitan queer lifestyles that have been in circulation since the 1990s (for critical discussions see Binnie, 2004; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Seidman, 2011). Analysed as claims for recognition, however, narratives of disruption illuminate how class dis-identification could be deployed to articulate sexual distinctions, but also how class identities could be simultaneously confirmed.

In these personal narratives, class was deployed to distinguish non-heterosexual and heterosexual identities and lifestyles. The quotations above from Mo, Andrew, Roy and Richard all implied enduringly classed heterosexualities. Their narratives claimed that while non-heterosexuality undermined class, heterosexual family and relating practices reproduced it. Thus, class was deployed as a basis through which the distinctiveness of gay identities and lifestyles could be claimed and recognized. At the same time, however, claims about sexual distinctions were framed by 'peer class' comparisons: participants discussed their distinctive sexualities in relation to their 'very middle-class' kin (Mo); middle-class forms of association (Roy); educated middle-class lifestyles (Richard); and to class peers with children (Andrew). Framed as they were by comparisons to class peers, their narratives involved *lateral* claims to class distinction that were performative

of 'gay class' identities. In summary, disrupting narratives illuminated how class dis-identifications could be articulated *through* sexual identity, but also how such dis-identifications did not fully 'escape' class.

Historically- and Relationally-Located Identities

What insights do lesbian and gay (dis-)identifications generate into class identities in the 1990s? Clearly, they suggest that the links between sexual and class identities are more complex than theoretical arguments and assumptions about classless or post-class lesbian and gay identities suggest. To more fully draw out their implications I now historically locate them with respect to developments relevant to lesbian and gay identities and mainstream class identities in the 1990s.

'Strong' Sexual Identities

Compared to their sexual identities, lesbians' and gay men's class identities seemed to be relatively weak ones. Participants almost universally presented their sexuality as central to their self and social identities, and *embraced* their sexual identities. Narratives of lesbian and gay sexual identity mostly followed an 'institutionalized' pattern and were well rehearsed: they were mostly structured as a journey that involved 'coming out' of heterosexuality; coming into contact with lesbian and/or gay cultures; and developing new ways of relating and living (cf. Plummer, 1995). They were mostly told spontaneously and with ease. Put another way, they seemed to have been rehearsed within a 'community of sexual story tellers' (Plummer, 1995). In contrast, while some participants did tell 'embracing' or straightforward narratives of class, class identities were more often narrated in hesitant, 'ambiguous' and 'rejecting' ways. They were less obviously institutionalized and often less easily told, and provided little evidence of a community of class story tellers. Compared in this way, participants' identity narratives resonated with sociological accounts of marginalized sexualities as the basis for identities and ways of living that override or radically disrupt 'traditional' class-based ones (Bech, 1997; Blasius, 1994; Dunne, 1997; Weeks, 1995). However, the issue is more complex than this.

Sociological arguments about distinctive lesbian and gay experience have *some* merit when applied to late 20th-century experience. They suggest that lesbian and gay sexual identities are especially valued because they are forged through personal-political struggles for legitimacy. All of the participants had grown up in heteronormative contexts and coming out was mostly experienced as a critical life event. It is unsurprising therefore that participants' viewed their sexual identities and lifestyles as highly prized *personal* achievements. This raises the ways in which their identity narratives were historically located. The personal narratives analysed here were generated at the cusp of the moment of lesbian and gay 'equality' (Blasius, 1994) or 'citizenship' (Weeks, 1995). First, they were told at a time when lesbian and gay identities and lifestyles were still relatively marginalized, and when personal-political responses to AIDS, New Right 'anti-gay' agendas and the political denigration of same-sex relationships as 'pretended families' in the UK demanded a strategic alliance across lesbian *and* gay (and other queer) identities (cf. Herman and Stychin, 1995; Gatter, 1999; Weeks, 1995). Second, these narratives

were generated at a time when lesbian and gay equality and citizenship was being claimed on the basis of the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, parenting, 'chosen families' and a range of other legal protections and 'rights' (Donovan et al., 1999). Participants' commitments to articulating strong sexual identities could therefore also be viewed as historically situated *personal-political* claims for recognition in the face of sexual inequalities and marginalization.

'Weak' Class Identities

Class is also, of course, linked to inequality and marginalization. However, a number of factors worked against class being prized as an identity. Participants were narrating their class identities in the context of successive political projects, associated with Thatcherism and Blairism, that sought to assert Britain as a classless society (Munt, 2000: 2). This went hand-in-hand with the pathologization and denigration of working-class ways of living in political and cultural discourse (Skeggs, 1997; Munt, 2000). Discussing the late 20th-century cultural politics of representations, Munt (2000: 8) argued that: 'Whereas there has been public debate for the last twenty years on positive images of women, people of colour, and gay and lesbians, there has been no such equivalent clamour for working-class representation.'

The broad ways in which identity narratives were historically located with respect to the cultural politics of sexuality and of class may partly explain the relative strength of personal narratives of sexual identities over class ones. Amongst the participants there were very few examples of working-class pride. As was discussed earlier, working-class identified participants rarely mentioned class (dis)advantage. It was also noted earlier that a greater proportion of gay men refused a class identity than women, and male participants more often linked their sexual identities to the disruption of class ones. As the study was not based on a statistically representative sample, the extent to which gender differences are significant can only be discussed in a speculative way. I have discussed elsewhere how 'working class' is a devalued identity amongst many gay men (Heaphy, 2009). While it is a valued identity in some masculine cultures, access to the positive content of working-class identities is premised on being heterosexually male. This, combined with shame and stigma associated with being at the bottom of classed hierarchies, could generate especially strong incentives for gay male distancing from working-class identification.

In contrast to the lesbian participants in Taylor's (2007) study who did often value their working-class identities, many female participants in this study were more ambivalent about them. This suggests that shame and stigma could also be relevant to lesbian working-class dis-identifications. This difference between Taylor's and our own findings may be related to the fact that she recruited women on the basis of their working-class identities. Taylor's study was conducted a decade after ours. Her findings might signify the re-emergence of class as significant after the socio-legal recognitions afforded lesbians and gay men in the 2000s (see Harding, 2011). This is an issue that warrants further investigation. In the meantime, while middle-class-identified female and male participants could acknowledge class (dis-)advantage, it was rare for 'middle class' to be explicitly valued as an identity. Like Savage et al.'s (2001) participants, lesbians and gay

men were generally in favour of equality, and prizing middle-class identity might be interpreted as taking pride in being better off than others.

Situated as they were, participants seemed to value their sexual identities over their class ones, and seemed more concerned about sexual inequalities and marginalization than class ones. In broad terms, sexual identities seemed to be especially valued because they were viewed as a marker of individuality in a way that 'given' or attributed class identities were not. As Mark (22, care worker) put it: '[I had] to invent myself [as gay] because there was nothing there'.

Distinctive (Dis-)Identifications?

It would be unjustified to leap from observing the relative 'weakness' of lesbian and gay class identities in the 1990s to claiming that non-heterosexual identities erased or radically disrupted class ones. While 'accepting' class identities could be hesitant, the fact that 66 of 86 participants eventually identified in class terms troubles the notion that class was insignificant to lesbians and gay men in the 1990s. Also, while 13 participants 'rejected' a class identity, their claims to ordinariness were often made via the logics of class and indicated a heightened cognisance of the power of class. Further, while many participants narrated 'ambiguous' class identities, these narratives often displayed an awareness of the interactional and emergent nature of class identities that was grounded in experiences of class mobility. Narratives of class ambiguity illuminated class identities as situationally emergent but strong. Finally, even narratives of gay class 'disruption' did not erase class distinctions but were performative of lateral 'gay class' identities. Lesbian and gay identities were not therefore 'post-class' ones, even if class identities seemed weaker than sexual ones.

While participants' narratives illuminate how class identities were configured amongst lesbians and gay men specifically, they were also indicative of more general configurations of class identities in Britain in the late 20th century. When compared to mainstream narratives of class (dis-)identification, and explored for their general qualities, they were unexceptional in their apparent weakness. In this respect they support the findings of modified class analyses of more mainstream class dis-identifications that have focused on how class identities are narrated in implicit ways. As noted earlier, Savage et al.'s (2001) study of class identities in the north-west of England in the 1990s found them to be articulated in ambivalent and defensive terms, often via claims to ordinariness. Savage et al. view ordinariness as a strategy to avoid social fixing and a defensive response to how class potentially undermines individuality. Their participants acknowledged the objective 'facts' of class, but were reluctant to translate this into subjective class. They simultaneously rejected *and* articulated class identities on the basis of their ordinariness. In these respects, the similarities between lesbian and gay narratives of class and mainstream ones are striking. Compared to contemporaneous mainstream findings about class identities, lesbian and gay class identities in the 1990s seem unexceptional. Despite the very specific ways in which lesbian and gay class identities might be situated as discussed earlier, they were also clearly configured along fairly mainstream lines. Viewed in this way, lesbian and gay class (dis-)identification did not evidence exceptionally

classless or post-class identities, but very ordinary configurations of class at a particular historical time. Overall, while lesbian and gay class identities could be 'distinctive' in some ways, they were also intrinsically mainstream. Personal narratives of class identities – be they lesbian, gay or mainstream – appear to be 'weak' when they are explored for straightforward class identifications. However, the important point is that class can be enduringly salient to identities even in the absence of straightforward identifications.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper has challenged arguments and assumptions about the classless or post-class nature of lesbian and gay identities. It has also illuminated some of the diverse ways in which class identities were being articulated in the late 20th century. These included explicit and implicit articulations of hierarchical, lateral and individualized class identities. Personal narratives of class (dis-)identification complicate the idea of a shift towards individualized *post-class* identities, of which lesbian and gay identities are sometimes thought to be an exemplar. They also complicate the idea of a relatively straightforward shift towards *individualized class* identities. There is a danger that overemphasizing the individualization of class identities obscures the continuities in how class identities are articulated. Hierarchical, lateral and individualized formulations of class identity are not discrete modes of articulation, but often intrinsically *related* ones. This raises the other ways in which this paper has underscored the relational nature of class identities: how they emerge in specific interactional contexts, and how they are linked to 'other' identities. While it is important to historically situate class identities and to consider how specific class identities are articulated in relation to each other, it is also important to focus on the other ways in which they are relational. In this respect the historically situating approach would benefit from incorporating the situating concerns of intersectional analysis, so as to explore shifts and continuities in how class and other identities are mutually articulated and constituted in specific historical and interactional contexts.

However, the intersectional identities frames also have their limits, especially where they focus primarily on the 'crossroads' where identities meet. Lesbian and gay narratives of class (dis-)identification illuminate these crossroad meetings but also have much more to say. In the analysis presented here, focusing only on the crossroads have over-emphasized would have lesbian and gay disrupting narratives of class: the primary meeting place of class *and* sexual identities in the narratives considered here. This would have undermined the broader insights that lesbian and gay men's narratives generate into class identities as forms of socio-cultural positioning; the intrinsically related nature of hierarchical, lateral and individualized articulations of class identities; and the enduring and shifting ways in which class is powerful. The point is that no one frame – be it an intersectional or an individualization one – is 'the answer' to the question about how class identities should be situated. My own analysis suggests that both frames can be incorporated into a broader approach that focuses on the diverse ways in which class identities are historically and relationally situated to illuminate the links between

'distinctive' and 'mainstream' cultures of class (dis-)identifications and the straightforward and subtle ways in which class identities can be articulated.

Notes

1. The interview data were generated via interviews for a research project funded by the ESRC entitled 'Families of Choice: The Structure and Meaning of Non-Heterosexual Relationships' (ref. L315253030). The study was reported in the book *Same Sex Intimacies* (2001) by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan. In this paper the information in brackets after interview quotations indicates the participant's chosen pseudonym, their age and occupation.
2. The larger study included interviews with 96 women and men who identified in a range of ways with respect to sexual identity (e.g. lesbian, gay, queer or bisexual). This paper focuses solely on 40 women who used 'lesbian' to describe themselves, sometimes combined with 'dyke' (n = 5), 'gay' (n = 2) or 'homosexual' (n = 1), and the 46 gay men who used 'gay' sometimes in combination with 'queer' (n = 4) and 'homosexual' (n = 2). Ten interviewees who did not identify as lesbian or gay (e.g. exclusively as bisexual or queer) were not included in the analysis. In this paper I use 'participants' to refer to the 86 self-identified lesbians and gay interviewees.
3. Participants mostly lived in urban locations across the mainland UK. Roughly 21 participants lived in the north of England, 12 in the Midlands, 8 in Wales, 4 in Scotland and the remainder in the south of England. Their ages ranged from 22 to 72, with the majority aged between their 30s and 50s. The majority of participants described themselves as 'white'. Three women and two men described themselves as black, one woman as Asian and one as black-Asian. One man described himself as bi-racial and one as Chinese.

References

- Anthias F (2005) Social stratification and social inequality: Models of intersectionality and identity. In: Devine F, Savage M, Scott J and Crompton R (eds) *Rethinking Class: Culture, Identity, Lifestyle*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Altman D (1993 [1971]) *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bech H (1997) *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: SAGE.
- Binnie J (2004) *The Globalization of Sexuality*. London: SAGE.
- Binnie J and Skeggs B (2004) Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualized space: Manchester's gay village. *The Sociological Review* 52: 39–61.
- Blasius M (1994) *Gay and Lesbian Politics: Sexuality and the Emergence of a New Ethic*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia University Press.
- Bottero W (2005) *Stratification*. London: Routledge.
- Brah A and Phoenix A (2004) 'Ain't I a Woman?' Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5(3): 75–86.
- Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler J (1998) Merely cultural. *New Left Review* I/227.
- Byrne B (2006) *White Lives: The Interplay of 'Race', Class and Gender in Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

- Crompton R, Devine F, Savage M and Scott J (eds) (2000) *Renewing Class Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Devine F, Savage M, Scott J and Crompton R (eds) (2005) *Rethinking Class: Cultures, Identities and Lifestyles*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.
- Donovan C, Heaphy B and Weeks J (1999) Citizenship and same sex relationships. *Journal of Social Policy* 28(4): 689–709.
- Dunne GA (1997) *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality*. London: Macmillan.
- Fraser M (1999) Classing queer: Politics in competition. *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2): 107–131.
- Fraser N (1998) Heterosexism, misrecognition and capitalism: A response to Judith Butler. *New Left Review* 1/228.
- Fuss D (1991) (ed.) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories / Gay Theories*. London: Routledge.
- Gatter P (1999) *Identity and Sexuality: AIDS in Britain in the 1990s*. London: Cassell.
- Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens A (1992) *Transformation of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gluckman A and Reed B (eds) (1997) *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*. London: Routledge.
- Harding R (2011) *Regulating Sexuality: Legal Consciousness in Lesbian and Gay Life*. London: Routledge.
- Heaphy B (2009) Gay identities and the culture of class. *Sexualities* 14(1): 42–62.
- Hennessy R (2000) *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Herman D and Stychin C (eds) (1995) *Legal Inversions, Gay Men and the Politics of Law*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hill-Collins P (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson S (2001) Why a materialist feminism is (still) possible – and necessary. *Women's Studies International Forum* 24(3/4): 283–293.
- Jeffries S (2002) *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lawler S (2005) Introduction: Class, culture and identity. *Sociology* 39(5): 797–806.
- Lofstrom J (1997) The birth of the queen/the modern homosexual: Historical explanations revisited. *Sociological Review* 45: 24–41.
- McDermott E (2011) The world some have won: Sexuality, class and inequality. *Sexualities* 14(1): 63–78.
- Munt M (2000) *Cultural Studies and the Working-Class: Subject to Change*. London: Cassell.
- Munt S (2007) *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nash JC (2008) Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review* 89: 1–15.
- Nicholson L and Seidman S (eds) (1995) *Social Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plummer K (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories*. London: Routledge.
- Plummer K (2008) Studying sexualities for a better world? Ten years of *Sexualities*. *Sexualities* 11(1–2): 7–22.
- Reay D (1998) *Class Work*. London: UCL Press.
- Richardson D, Casey M and McLaughlin J (eds) (2006) *Feminist and Queer Intersections: Sexualities, Cultures and Identities*. London: Palgrave
- Savage M (2000) *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Savage M (2007) Changing social class identities in post-war Britain: Perspectives from mass-observation. *Sociological Research Online* 12(3): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/6.html>.
- Savage M, Bagnall G and Longhurst B (2001) Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: Class identities in the north-west of England. *Sociology* 35(4): 875–892.

- Seidman S (2011) Class matters ... but how much? Class, nation, and queer life. *Sexualities* 14(1): 36–41.
- Skeggs B (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: SAGE.
- Skeggs B (2004) *Class, Self and Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Southerton D (2002) Boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’: Class, mobility and identification in a new town. *Sociology* 36(1): 171–193.
- Taylor Y (2007) *Working Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taylor Y (2009) Complexities and complications: Intersections of class and sexuality. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13(2): 189–203.
- Taylor Y (2011) Introduction: Sexualities and class. *Sexualities* 14(1): 3–11.
- Weeks J (1977) *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. London: Quartet.
- Weeks J (1995) *Invented Morality: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Cambridge: Polity.
- Weeks J, Heaphy B and Donovan C (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies*. London: Routledge.

Brian Heaphy is Professor and Head of Sociology at the University of Manchester. He has researched and written about the implications of socio-cultural change for relationships, sexualities and personal life, ageing, living with HIV and qualitative methodologies. His publications include *Late Modernity and Social Change: Reconstructing Social and Personal Life* (Routledge), *Same Sex Intimacies* (with Jeffrey Weeks and Catherine Donovan, Routledge) and *Same Sex Marriage* (forthcoming with Carol Smart and Anna Einarsdottir, Palgrave Macmillan).