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Feeling working class: affective class identification and its implications for overcoming inequality

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ABSTRACT

This article is a provocation, discussing the ways class measurement is complicated in efforts to understand participation and barriers to access for working class people. I explore class as a structure of feeling, emerging as a not-yet-worked through aspect of the theatre experience. I ask what would need to happen in theatre institutions if we took seriously people's self identification, rather than relying primarily on external measures, and suggest ways that doing so might offer strategies for overcoming inequality.

KEYWORDS

class; class measurement; structure of feeling; self-identification; inequality; hospitality

According to a 2016 survey, sixty percent of the United Kingdom's population identify as working-class (Evans and Mellon 2016). Given that just twenty-five percent of the population work in manual labouring occupations, and that forty-seven percent of those in professional and managerial jobs, which would usually be considered middle-class professions, describe themselves as working-class, it is apparent that there is a disjuncture between the measurements social scientists use to determine class position (commonly including those based on occupation, wealth, home postcode and education – see O'Brien 2018 for a discussion of measurement methods), and the 'felt' experiences of those 'identifying' as working-class. Clearly, taking seriously people's self-identification for the purposes of understanding structural class inequality is fraught with problems. Most obviously, it risks erasing and therefore denying coherent aspects of class difference (such as the impacts of poverty on health, for example), concealing how economic and social privilege shape future economic and social advantage. In other words, allowing people to 'identify' as working-class effaces distinctions such as poverty and affluence, which are vital to recognise in order to identify those most in need of support and restorative action.

How best to measure class for the purposes of addressing the structural nature of injustice is an on-going and necessary debate across the social sciences, and is increasingly significant in scholarship seeking to explore class inequalities in the arts and cultural industries.¹ Certainly, creating criteria through which we can assess the operation of class enables us to see how class difference operates to produce and distribute unequal value to individuals and groups. In other words, if class is something we can measure, the injustices it produces become more tangible. As Mike Savage's work has shown, however, care and nuance in our methods for understanding class and labelling class inequality is important. Class as a categorisation, more so than other diversity

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categories such as race and sex, is not fixed but fluid – with class boundaries changing across relatively short periods of time, and economic inequality exacerbated by gaps in wealth, taste and social networks in the changing social and political context of the twenty-first century (Savage 2015, 1–10). So too, class inequality is inherently intersectional, always entangled with injustices related to race, gender, sexuality and disability, to the extent that it is difficult to understand the lived experiences and stigmas produced by distinct identity positions as separate from class (see, e.g. Reay 2005, 919; Snoussi and Mompelat 2019; Tyler 2020).

In contemporary discourses of class, the issues of wealth, taste and so on are often expressed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'capitals' (Skeggs 2012) – 'economic, social, cultural and symbolic' – enabling us to grasp the ways that class operates across fields of practice and beyond purely social and economic measures (Bourdieu 1986). In theatre studies and cultural policy scholarship dealing with arts institutions, finding methods to measure class has been an important means of making visible how inequalities relating to the distribution of capitals intersect with protected characteristics such as race and sex to create barriers to participation for cultural workers and audiences (O'Brien 2018). Existing research, including that presented in the *Panic! It's an Arts Emergency* Report (Brook, O'Brien, Taylor 2018), evidences that those from working-class backgrounds (as defined by measurements related to 'class origin' (see O'Brien 2018)) are overwhelmingly under-represented in cultural industries occupations, and other elite professions (Friedman and Laurison 2019). As a result of evidence gathered from these kinds of studies, there have been calls for class to be recognised as a protected characteristic in equality law (along with the already recognised characteristics of race, sex, disability, age, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, marriage or civil partnership, religious belief and pregnancy and maternity) to address under-representation and to make unnecessary or disproportionate discrimination on the basis of class illegal (Evans 2019). In December 2019, Arts Council England (ACE) announced that, from 2020, they would include a question on the 'socio-economic background' of staff at funded arts organisations as an addition to an existing equality and diversity monitoring process (Snow 2019, 1). Rather than allowing people to 'self-identify' into a socio-economic category, ACE's questionnaire instead asks employees to report on their class origins, with a question about the occupation of their highest income parent at age fourteen – adopting a common social science technique for class measurement.

In this climate, in which the injustices of class inequality are made visible with methods that rely on instrumental measures, there is often scepticism towards so-called 'self-identification'. That is, those people who claim working-class identity, despite not fitting into instrumental measurements that would categorise them as formally working-class (such as having an unemployed or manually labouring parent, or living in social rented accommodation, or earning a particular salary), are often perceived as dishonest, as 'claiming' an identity position they have not experienced and have no right to. As O'Brien points out, and as I suggest above, there are genuine problems with class-measurement and self-identification, as self i.d. methods often lead people to 'misidentify their class position and often their class privileges' (2018). Allowing anyone to 'identify as' working-class risks collapsing vastly different economic and cultural experiences into a homogenous melting pot of 'working-class' narratives, where already privileged voices are privileged again, producing further barriers to access for the less privileged among the

extended community of working-class people. Nonetheless, to ignore self-identification also risks overlooking important aspects of working-class disadvantage, namely the ‘affective’ or *feeling* dimensions that underpin structural violence (Skeggs 2012), and that continue to resonate despite so-called class mobility.

Despite the problems with self-identification then, I want to use the remainder of this provocation to take seriously *felt* class identity. Drawing on my research into working-class artists and artworks, I position *class feeling* as an important dimension of understanding how barriers to access and participation operate in theatre contexts, and propose how we might see class as a structure of feeling through which theatres operate – one that exists beyond socio-economic measures. Indeed, the term ‘socio-economic’ conveniently effaces the sticky and complicated word ‘class’; this avoidance of explicitly naming class injustice as such, as Imogen Tyler points out, is one way in which the neoliberal project has succeeded in increasing class inequality while denying its existence (2013, 156–159). Importantly, this often happens through methods of understanding class position as separate from, rather than always intersecting with race, disability, gender and sex positions – thus, class discourse about the UK context often becomes conflated with conceptions of the white working-class and dismissed on the basis of this – particularly as ‘white working-class’ becomes reductively conflated with racist and far-right ideologies. Such dismissals of class discourse demonstrate the worst possibilities for so-called identity politics, where solidarity through class identification is made impossible through divisions that pit the working-class against one another. In what follows then, my definition of class recognises the many intersections of that term, in all their nuances and specificities. I offer some suggestions as to why those who may not be working-class by instrumental measures might nonetheless identify as such. Taking seriously class *feelings*, or what Diane Reay calls ‘the psychic landscape of social class’ (2005, 911), is essential if institutions are genuinely committed to increasing the diversity of their workforces, and engaging those who currently do not participate in institutionalised and publicly funded cultural activities.

Identifying as

In an emotionally resonant account of her experiences in the academy, film scholar Deirdre O’Neill makes a case for the affective dimensions of class identification (2019). Class, according to O’Neill, is not only bound to one’s current socio-economic position, but is a deeply embodied, intensely felt identity, in which the ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennet and Cobb 1972) that characterise the working-class experience do not disappear with social mobility, but continue to be enacted and felt long after instrumental measures would position one as ‘middle-class’. Although class origin measurements take this into account, given that the injuries of class leave a legacy – and that the impacts of poverty in terms of health, education, attainment and wealth acquisition are lasting (Child Poverty Action Group ND) – it is not unreasonable to suppose that at least some of the effects of class injustice are felt inter-generationally. The lower life expectancy of a parent raised in poverty, for example, is likely to manifest as an enduring affect upon the child who loses the parent, regardless of the class position that child occupies. Similarly, cultural capital can also operate inter-generationally – those raised by working-class origin parents in supposedly middle-class professions may have spent their childhoods in working-class

environments, surrounded by working-class family and associates. The term ‘middle-class’ also does not necessarily accurately define the affective and material register of childhood experience, or indicate the level of social and cultural capital of someone from a working-class family in which a parent moves into an elite profession towards the beginning of the child’s teens. Meanwhile, symbolic markers of class include aspects of experience and self-presentation such as the location, size and decor of a family home, accent, race, schooling (whether comprehensive, grammar or private), body language and clothing – as I have written elsewhere, the way you perceive your own class position does not necessarily equate to the way your class position is read by others (Beswick 2019, 76). There may then be a multitude of reasons why individuals feel themselves, legitimately or otherwise, to be members of the working-class, regardless of where they are positioned by instrumental measurements.

This is important for the themes of this special issue because research indicates that class discourses, which manifest in class feelings, have some relationship to participation in cultural activity. At the level of cultural workers, the Labour Party’s *Acting Up* report suggests that snobbery plays a role in acting as a barrier to access to performing arts careers for those from working-class backgrounds (Brabin, De Piero, and Coombes 2017, 12). While snobbery is not a concept that maps straightforwardly onto class measurements, it is an affectively experienced phenomenon that does have a relationship to class discourses. In a landscape in which class is systematically leveraged to position the working-class as a morally lacking, inferior ‘other’ (Skeggs 1997, 2012; Tyler 2013; McKenzie 2015), the classed weight of the judgements passed by snobbery is intensified, David Morgan argues, because ‘of numerous other slights [experienced] in the past and anticipated in the future’ (2019, 96). Shame, Morgan proposes, is a powerful and common response to snobbery and, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, shame is intimately bound up with notions of identity. Indeed, shame is the very ‘place where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally’ (2003, 37). That is, shame is a feeling site in which we constitute our own identities in the wake of how we are seen by those who are not us.

Class discourses also circulate through arts policy research into engagement and participation, even where class is not directly named. This is particularly visible in the 2011 and 2017 Arts Council England Reports into audience engagement, which draw on a ‘segmentation’ method used by the Audience Agency to characterise ‘engaged’ and ‘non engaged’ groups. The ‘segments’ of the population mapped out by the Audience Agency might also be understood as ‘moral euphemisms’ (Skeggs 2005, 965) that produce stereotypes which circulate in the wider culture, and through which class prejudice and snobbery are enacted and felt (see also Beswick 2019, 73–76). For example, the people characterised by the segment ‘A Quiet Pint With the Match’ (2011) are described as:

[...] fairly conservative in their outlook, have little interest in other cultures and are not environmentally minded. As the majority struggle for money they place most value on material gains as a sign of success. In their spare time they want to be entertained, not to keep up with the news or current affairs. (ACE 2011)

Although the tone here is presented as factual and ostensibly neutral, the description can also be understood in moralistic terms. It can be read in a tone that feeds into wider class discourses that produce snobbery: ‘non-engaged’ people are perceived in ways often

stereotypically associated with the working-classes – as uncultured, uneducated, reactionary, materialistic and inward-looking. That the shame of being seen and positioned in this way by arts institutions might contribute to why people in this group are ‘non-engaged’ is not part of the conversation that plays out in the ACE reports.

Class as a structure of feeling

What plays out in discussions with artists, and what resonates in personal writing, scholarship and artworks about class experience in the theatre too, are the ways that class is experienced as a *structure of feeling*. That is, drawing on Raymond Williams’ (Williams and Orrom 1954) phrase, class emerges within theatre institutions and is experienced as a not-yet fully worked through phenomenon, which ‘appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts’ (Buchanan 2010). The means by which people come to know themselves as working-class are often vague and emergent. How this knowledge manifests in theatre buildings and other arts institutions is indirect and intersectional, and includes policy, representation in plays and other artworks, and in the interactions and relationships that institutions and members of authority create with individuals.

The affective dimensions of the class experience occur again and again in the discussions I have had with working-class artists in my research, both formally, in interviews and discussion forums,² and informally in conversations about class experience that inevitably play out in the social contexts, including social media, surrounding formal arts events. In narratives of their experience of the arts, working-class artists often pinpoint the ways affective misunderstandings contribute to the stalling or curtailment of their careers (see also Friedman and Laurison 2019). As Skeggs points out, working-class people are cognisant of how they are seen and judged by ‘middle-class institutions and authority’ and, ‘are fully aware of how cultural distinction and classification work in the interests of the powerful – legitimating inequalities so that privilege cannot be contested’ (2012, 283).

In one forum I attended, a young apprentice on a high-profile programme run by an English theatre, described feelings of shame and anger that played out in a meeting during which a superior failed to understand why he could not commit to working flexible, ad-hoc hours (he needed a job to afford the apprenticeship, and had to be clear with the employer who was paying his wages about when he could and could not work). The fear of being seen as unwilling to compromise, uncommitted and ‘unprofessional’ underpinned the shame affect that played out in this meeting, and led this apprentice to question the practicality of a creative career for someone like him.³

The affective shame of having one’s means of communication perceived as ‘aggressive’, ‘confrontational’ or ‘rude’ by middle-class standards that are structured and reproduced in elite cultural professions, including the theatre, occurs frequently in conversations with working-class artists. This sense of communication misrecognition is often compounded by differences produced through intersecting identity positions – for example, the working-class artists Scottee and Kelly Green both include disclaimers about dyslexia at the foot of their email addresses, apologising for short, abrupt or misspelled communications that might be misinterpreted by readers. Given that both have made works about the ways they are caricatured and stereotyped in classed ways

(Scottee's *Class* 2019 and Green's *CHAV* 2017/18 and *SLAG* 2019), these email signatures signal an affective class, as well as disability-based, anxiety about miscommunication.⁴ As Reay points out, and as Scottee and Green both reflect upon in their performance works, conceptions of intelligence and cleverness produced and sustained by the middle-classes operate as signifiers designed to position the working-class as inevitably less intelligent (Reay 2005), leaving working-class people especially insecure about being misread as stupid. Indeed, Green's *CHAV* specifically addresses the tensions of navigating life in the arts industry and higher education as a working-class person who is regularly misunderstood and condescended to.

Feeling welcome

In a public Twitter thread posted in April 2019, a writer and critic who is also a black, working-class woman, described asking for a refund at the box office of a prestigious London theatre after being questioned about sitting in the café space while she was waiting to see a play, following a tannoy announcement asking those who had not paid for tickets to leave.⁵ A member of staff presumed she had not booked a ticket or purchased food, and suggested she was taking up space a paying customer might occupy. As the writer pointed out, her blackness made her hyper-visible in the theatre: the assumption that she had not booked a ticket (she had), drew on stereotypes about 'non-traditional' theatre audiences which are classed as well as raced. In Sabrina Mahfouz's anthology of reflections written by working-class artists (2019), the feeling of being unwelcome in institutionalised cultural spaces resonates through many of the accounts offered by artists. The difficulty of disentangling racism from classism in such situations of hostility is revealed by the writer and performer Michaela Coel, who describes how racism she experienced at drama school was compounded by her class position – where her relative lack of cultural, economic and social capital intersected with her race to make feel uncomfortably visible and out-of-place. Coel expresses how this operates on an affective, embodied level:

I was the first black girl they'd accepted in five years, an admission coined by the head of the school as 'the elephant in the room'. This was my third attempt at university. I'd still never been into a pub, to a festival, I just hadn't. I'd never watched *Fawlty Towers* or *Red Dwarf* or heard of the festival in Edinburgh, I just hadn't. I struggled to converse on things I didn't know about with the other students. I was watching a lot of TV at the time: *Seinfeld*, *Moesha*, *Golden Girls*, *Buffy* – shows no one really spoke about. I spent most of my time in the corridor, perched, like a falcon, and retreated into my hood. (2019, 75)

The reference to 'hood' works in two senses here. First, conjuring an image that sees Coel dressed in a 'hoodie' or hooded sweatshirt, an item of clothing associated with negative depictions of the black working-classes (Bell 2013) – but 'hood' also means neighbourhood, and seems to refer to the working-class location in which Coel was raised and eventually retreats to find safety and creative inspiration. That Coel's breakout play, *Chewing Gum Dreams* (2013) and the television adaptation *Chewing Gum* (2015–2017) work to make lives lived in multicultural working-class neighbourhoods visible, points to the ways her position as a black working-class woman must be understood as intersectional – Coel's account shows how classism and racism operate in tandem and reinforce

one another. Several other accounts in Mahfouz's collection also discuss the intersections between race and class (Ahmed, Blackman, Dennis-Edwards), and between class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability (Alabanza, Luxx) – pointing to the complex ways that class snobbery operates at the intersections of inequality, and how those who are disadvantaged because of their race, disability or sexuality are also often working-class, or experience exacerbated disadvantages caused by unjust economic policy and attendant stigmas (Snoussi and Mompelate 2019).

Incidents of direct, passive aggressive and patronising snobbery then are intersectional (in that they intersect at axes of disadvantage [Crenshaw 1989, see also Lau 2018]), and feed into classed structures of feeling produced by elite cultural institutions that lead to segments of the population feeling unwelcome in theatre buildings and in cultural industries professions where they do not understand themselves to easily 'fit'. There is evidence that the sense of being unwelcome in theatre institutions has wider structural implications for working-class people within the theatre industry. For example, in their discussions with working-class theatre professionals, the organisation COMMON has found that instances of 'imposter syndrome' are especially high amongst working-class artists. As notes from a session with working-class producers, published on COMMON's website explains, the feeling register described as imposter syndrome

can be summarised as the psychological belief of working and under-class creatives that they do not belong or are not welcomed within the theatre industry, and that their working or under-class identity feels 'othered' or unusual to the 'normal' backgrounds of those who work in theatre.

Working and under-class creatives often feel that they need to legitimise, mainly to themselves, why they have the **right** to work in theatre.

It almost feels like working and under-class artists have been let in through the 'back door' of the industry; and therefore carry with them a feeling that they aren't allowed to or aren't encouraged to have an opinion.

(COMMON 2019)

I want to suggest, then, that addressing the feeling affects produced by class discourse, and reproduced by class relations in theatre and other institutions, is more significant in terms of facilitating access for so-called 'non-engaged' segments of the population than refining class measurements. At the 2019 Theatre and Performance Research Association's annual conference, notions of hospitality circulated through many of the papers, including Margerita Laera's keynote speech, in which she proposed the notion of 'reciprocal hospitality', 'as a powerful reminder that we are always already made of the stories of others' (Laera 2019). Creating spaces of hospitality, which also give way to the potential of ownership and leadership for working-class people, is essential if we are to overcome the underrepresentation of the working-class in funded arts spaces. 'How do people *feel welcome* here?' is the central question that institutions seeking to address working-class disadvantage must ask and answer as they make decisions towards inclusion in cultural production. Measuring the socio-economic origins of employees is not an action that will bring about change without consideration of affect. This means organisations must commit to thinking through how communication, design and diversity initiatives might open or close possibilities for those from working-class backgrounds to receive and offer hospitality. It means listening to

working-class people (self-identified or otherwise) on their own terms, and acknowledging the ways that cultural norms of communication, practice and social relations can serve to produce feelings of shame that create barriers which cannot be easily overcome.

Notes

1. There is also an ongoing debate on class-naming, which is beyond the scope of this article. How to categorise those living with specific kinds of social and economic disadvantage ('working-class', 'under-class', 'benefit-class') is important, but I contend that taking seriously the feeling aspects of these positions is more urgent than finding the 'right' terminology.
2. including those run by the organisation COMMON, which advocates for greater socio-economic diversity, and for which I am a trustee, those I've run myself, such as the 'what can art do for housing activism?' roundtable at Resist Festival of Ideas, held at the London School of Economics, and those held by artists themselves, such as Scottee's *Working Class Dinner Party* (Camden People's Theatre 2018).
3. Some details have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.
4. I have asked both artists' permission to include details about their email signatures in this article discussing class.
5. I have concealed this writer's identity as a matter of ethical discretion, despite the twitter thread being public.

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Notes on contributor

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