Sociology

Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self

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Abstract
Why do people from privileged class backgrounds often misidentify their origins as working class? We address this question by drawing on 175 interviews with those working in professional and managerial occupations, 36 of whom are from middle-class backgrounds but identify as working class or long-range upwardly mobile. Our findings indicate that this misidentification is rooted in a self-understanding built on particular 'origin stories' which act to downplay interviewees' own, fairly privileged, upbringings and instead forge affinities to working-class extended family histories. Yet while this 'intergenerational self' partially reflects the lived experience of multigenerational upward mobility, it also acts – we argue – as a means of deflecting and obscuring class privilege. By positioning themselves as ascending from humble origins, we show how these interviewees are able to tell an upward story of career success 'against the odds' that simultaneously casts their progression as unusually meritocratically legitimate while erasing the structural privileges that have shaped key moments in their trajectory.

Keywords
class identity, class origin, intergenerational self, multigenerational social mobility, privilege

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Introduction

In a Hawaiian resort four well-groomed men puffing on expensive cigars and resplend-ent in white dinner jackets settle down to a nice glass of Chateau de Chassilier. Thus starts Monty Python's classic 1974 'Four Yorkshiremen' sketch about a group of men reflecting on their ascent into Britain's elite. But rather than an exercise in self-congrat-ulation, it is soon clear that this is an exchange of childhood reminiscences – and one in which the stakes revolve around proving one's purported proletarian origin rather than privileged destination. 'We used to live in a tiny, tumble-down 'ouse with great 'oles in t'roof', John Cleese tells us in a distinctly ropey Yorkshire accent. ''ouse!', exclaims Graham Chapman in marginally improved dialect. 'You were lucky to 'ave an 'ouse. We used to live in one room. All 26 of us.' From here a ludicrous race to the bottom ensues, with boasted familial dwellings stretching from corridors to lakes to shoe boxes.

The sketch may not be particularly funny (and indeed a forerunner for the now hack-neyed comedy trope of the 'Northerner') but its enduring appeal with the British public (it has been repeated verbatim by multiple[1] comedians since) lies in the fact that it con-tinues to carry a pertinent thread of social commentary. For over 50 years, survey research has consistently demonstrated that Britons tend to identify subjectively as working class, even when – like the Four Yorkshiremen – this often contradicts their 'objective' class position (Heath et al., 2013; Savage, 2007). For example, the latest available data – the 2016 British Social Attitudes Survey – shows that 47% of those in 'middle-class' profes-sional and managerial occupations identify as working class (Evans and Mellon, 2016).

For many this may be simply explained by the identity pull of working-class *origins* (Friedman, 2016; Ingram, 2011; Lawler, 1999). Yet, curiously, 24% of people in these occupations who come from professional and managerial backgrounds *still* identify as working class (Evans and Mellon, 2016). This is worth underlining; in the UK nearly one in four people in middle-class jobs from middle-class backgrounds – approximately 3.5 million people[2] – *see themselves as working class*.

So why do so many people from privileged class backgrounds misidentify their ori-gins in this way? In this article we probe this apparent contradiction by drawing on 175 interviews with those working in professional and managerial occupations, 36 of whom are from middle-class backgrounds but identify as working class or long-range upwardly mobile.[3] We find that the main source of such misidentification is elaborate 'origin sto-ries' that these interviewees tell when asked about their class backgrounds. These accounts tend to downplay important aspects of their own, privileged, upbringings and instead emphasise affinities to working-class extended family histories. Drawing from social psychology, we explain this as the expression of a distinctly 'intergenerational self' anchored as much by one's place in a familial history as their own personal past.

This intergenerational self partially reflects both 'real' relational differences in privi-lege and the experience of multigenerational upward mobility. However, our findings indicate that it also acts as a means to deflect class privilege. By positioning themselves as ascending from humble origins, we argue that these interviewees are able to tell an upward story of career success 'against the odds' that simultaneously casts their own achievements as unusually meritocratically legitimate while erasing the structural privi-leges that have shaped key moments in their trajectories.

Meritocracy, Class Identity and British Exceptionalism

There is strong evidence that, over the last 40 years, rises in income inequality across a number of western countries have been driven by the 'pulling away' of those in high-wage occupational classes (Williams, 2012; Wodtke, 2016). There is also a growing body of work demonstrating that within such high-status occupations, it is those from privileged class origins that appear to have a particular advantage in both getting *in* and getting *on* (Hällsten, 2013; Rivera, 2012). As Friedman and Laurison (2019) show, only 10% of those from working-class backgrounds make it into Britain's higher professional and managerial occupations and, even when they do, go on to earn 16% less than their colleagues from more privileged backgrounds.

Yet despite the significant advantages enjoyed by those from middle-class backgrounds, there is strong evidence that such individuals tend to downplay (Sherman, 2017), misrecognise (Khan, 2011) or elide (Brook et al., 2019) such privilege. Indeed, it is these individuals who tend to believe most strongly that 'hard work' is the key determinant of career success (Mijs, 2019) and are least likely to acknowledge the role of coming from a privileged background (Hecht et al., 2020: 16–19). And although a growing number of 'woke' white men from privileged backgrounds may acknowledge structural inequality at an abstract societal level, such individuals still largely fail to concede its impact on their own career trajectories (Brooke et al., 2019).

One potential explanation for this is that many simply do not *see themselves* as privileged. Here it is useful to turn to the literature on class identity. Sociologists have long argued that the key way that people understand their social position, and attendant privileges and disadvantages, is through their subjective class identity. We conceptualise class identity as a relational form of 'position taking' where one not only claims membership in a particular symbolic community (e.g. the middle class) but also draws a boundary between their own location and other social groupings (e.g. the working class) (Irwin, 2015; Reeves, 2019). Further, we understand such identities as not only material and economic in nature but also constituted by the affective, cultural, emotional and psychosocial dimensions of class (Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2005). Indeed, class identities remain widespread (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Reeves, 2019). As Savage (2007) notes, only 10% of Britons refuse to assign themselves a class identity.[4]

When it comes to *where* people place themselves, it is well known that most (in Western Europe and the USA at least) tend to identify as middle class, even though this often contradicts their 'objective' occupational class position (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Hout, 2008). The dominant explanation for this inability to identify one's 'correct' class position comes from 'reference group theory', which contends that people form perceptions of their social position by comparing themselves to others in their immediate social environment or 'structural neighbourhood' (Levy, 1991: 65; see also Irwin, 2015). This leads to a widespread 'middling' of subjective social positions, whereby people see themselves relationally as normal, average and therefore middle class.

Yet Britain represents an intriguing outlier. People in the UK are more likely to 'misidentify' as working class rather than middle class. Drawing on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), Evans and Mellon (2016) show that 60% of people in Britain identity as working class – a figure that has not changed since 1983, despite

working-class jobs declining sharply and now making up only 32% of the workforce. And among those in 'middle-class' professional and managerial occupations, just under half (47%) say they are working class.[5]

This is partly explained, of course, by the relationship between class origins and destinations, and the complex way such life-course trajectories affect identity. For example, a voluminous sociological literature has explored the enduring emotional pull of class origins in shaping people's sense of self, particularly among those who experience upward social mobility from working-class backgrounds (Friedman, 2016; Ingram, 2011; Lawler, 1999). This is reflected in the BSA data; 61% of those in professional and managerial jobs whose parents did routine and semi-routine work identify as working class.

But upward mobility does not entirely explain the popularity of working-class identities in the UK. Significantly, 24% of those in professional and managerial occupations whose parents did professional and managerial work also identify as working class.

How might we make sense of this widespread misidentification of class identity? Sociological literature points in three possible directions. First, it may be that this is rooted in a desire to resist moral assumptions associated with certain class *destinations* (Sayer, 2004). For example, in Britain, identifying as 'middle class' can be perceived as a signal of pretension, or an indication that one is symbolically placing oneself above others and therefore contravening norms of openness and tolerance (Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 1997). In this way, claiming working-classness can be read as an assertion of 'ordinariness' that wards off possible suspicions of snobbishness, smugness and elitism. Indeed, such charged interactive dynamics may play out particularly in the kind of research encounters where questions of class identity are traditionally broached. As Savage (2007: 3) notes, 'relationships between researcher and researched are themselves class relationships that may give rise to telling kinds of class identification'. In this way, apparent misidentifications of class identity may actually reflect the desire of interviewees to resist sociological stereotypes about middle-class superiority that they feel are being imposed upon them, and instead assert their own unique and peculiar biographical story (Mellor et al., 2014; Savage and Flemmen, 2019).

Second, misidentifications may be more to do with class *origin* than class destination. In particular, they may reflect a 'meritocratic turn' in professional and managerial occupations that increasingly compels those from privileged backgrounds to downplay, deflect or distance themselves from any evidence of 'unfair' privilege (Sherman, 2017). Here the increasing incorporation of class origin – or 'social mobility' – into corporate 'diversity' agendas is key. This discourse constructs an ideal 'figurative practitioner' unfettered by ascribed advantage and, in so doing, arguably demands that all others find a way to articulate a similarly 'worthy' and 'deserving' story of career success. Claiming an upward trajectory from 'humble origins', then, may increasingly function as a way of telling a meritocratically legitimate story, of agentic achievement against the odds.

Third, and related to this, it may be that misidentifications of working-class identity reflect the role of *extended family* histories in shaping people's class identities. Most lay people, and indeed sociologists of class, tend to assume that people's self-understanding is strongly shaped by *personally* experienced events, especially during their upbringing (Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe, 1980). They also assume that the dispositions inculcated

via primary socialisation are dependent on the economic, cultural and social resources (or capitals) that flow from parents' class destination. This 'two-generation view of the world' dominates work on class identity and indeed the wider field of social stratification (Mare, 2011).

Yet a strand of work in social psychology pioneered by Robyn Fivush (Fivush et al., 2008; Merrill and Fivush, 2016) challenges this idea that self-understanding is tied to autobiographical memory. This work emphasises a more 'temporally extended self' that is still guided by parents but is informed by stories of their lives before they had children, of their own childhoods and those of their extended families. These kinds of family stories provide a historical context for children, informing them of how they fit into a 'larger life framework' and family identity constructed across historical time. In fact, such family reminiscing leads to what they call an 'intergenerational self' anchored 'as much by one's place in a familial history as a personal past' (Fivush et al., 2008: 131). In this way, supposed misidentifications of class may in fact reflect perfectly accurate readings of one's class history, just premised on multigenerational family histories.

In this article we consider how each of these explanations tallies with in-depth qualitative interviews with 175 people working in professional and managerial occupations. Significantly, almost all of these individuals identified 'correctly' as being in middle-class or upper-middle-class destinations (see Online Appendix Table 1). However, the matching of subjective and objective class *origins* was much less consistent. Reflecting this, we focus most of the analysis that follows on 36 interviews with participants from middle-class backgrounds that identify as coming from working-class origins or as long-range upwardly mobile.

Methods

We draw here on data from a mixed method study exploring how class origin shapes career trajectories in professional and managerial occupations (i.e. NS-SEC Classes 1 and 2). The project consisted, first, of secondary analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) and, second, 175 semi-structured interviews (lasting between one and one-and-a-half hours) carried out across four in-depth occupational case studies; a national television broadcaster, 6TV;[6] a large multi-national accountancy firm, Turner Clarke; an architecture practice, Coopers; and with self-employed actors. These were primarily chosen to capture variation in the class composition of different professions in the UK (see Friedman and Laurison, 2019 for more on rationale of case selection). In each organisational case study, a survey was first distributed to all staff and then an interview sample drawn that reflected the demographic makeup of the firm. Actors were recruited via an advert placed on social media and shared with a range of acting websites, news outlets and unions.

Online Appendix Table 1 provides information on the number of interviews carried out in each occupation (30–50 per case study) as well as demographic information about the gender, ethnicity, age, career stage and trajectory, department, interview location, schooling, parental occupation (father and mother) and subjective class identity (origin and destination) of each interviewee.

In terms of class origin, 90 interviewees were from 'middle-class' backgrounds where the main breadwinner during their childhood was doing professional and managerial work (NS-SEC 1 and 2), 36 were from 'intermediate' backgrounds (NS-SEC 3–5) and 49 were from 'working-class' routine and semi-routine backgrounds, or were from families where the main breadwinner was long-term unemployed (NS-SEC 6–8).

In this article we largely focus our analysis on 36 of the 90 interviewees (marked in red in Online Appendix Table 1) whose 'objective' class backgrounds, based on parental occupation, were 'middle class' (professional and managerial) but who subjectively identified as coming from working-class backgrounds (24/36), or as being 'long-range upwardly mobile' (12/36). We categorised identifications of 'long-range' upward mobility based on the *amount of times* interviewees mentioned being or feeling 'socially mobile' (in relation to their parents), the *range of movement* implied in their narratives (e.g. expressing a sense of 'being caught between two worlds') and the types of *adjectives* they used to describe their background (e.g. 'poor', 'humble', 'hard-up', 'piss-poor', having 'no money', etc.).

Interviewees were marginally more likely to be men[7] (16 were women and 20 were men) and there was no clear skew in terms of ethnicity (29 white-British, 7 Black and minority ethnic). However, interviewees were disproportionately drawn from the two *cultural* occupational case studies (15 actors; 10 6TV; 7 Turner Clarke; 4 Coopers) – a finding we return to in the discussion.

Interviews were structured across three sections. First, we asked a set of questions that probed interviewees' class background. This included questions about both parents' occupation, their schooling and whether they think of themselves as coming from a particular class background. Second, we asked about career trajectory, allowing interviewees to narrate key moments and critical junctures, and asking whether they feel their career had been held back in any way. Third, we asked whether they feel they belong to a particular social class now (see Friedman and Laurison, 2019 for more on methodology).

It is important to reflect on how our own positionality – as three white male professionals – may have shaped the stories our interviewees felt able to tell. Indeed, as mentioned, misidentifications of working-class origin may have reflected interviewees' desire to resist stereotypes of middle-class superiority they felt we wanted to impose (Mellor et al., 2014; Summers, 2020). Equally, the perceived class origins of ourselves, as interviewers, may have also impacted interviews. In this regard, however, it is worth noting that all three interviewers generated broadly similar findings, despite coming from different class backgrounds.

Results

Class Origin and the Intergenerational Self

As explained above, we opened interviews by asking interviewees two simple linked questions: 'What did your parents do for a living when you were growing up? And do you think of yourself as coming from a particular social class?' Most answers to these

questions were direct and to the point. Most interviewees briefly described their parents' occupations (and any relevant changes during their childhood) before identifying a subjective class background that 'correctly' matched their 'objective' class background:

> So, my dad is a carpenter. When I was a young kid he worked in maintenance for big industrial places that needed carpentry doing. And my mum was a punch card operator till she got married and then after that had a retail job in the Co-op. So I'm from a very working-class background, basically. (Ben, 60s, Tax partner, Turner Clarke)

> My Dad has a PhD in biology and was a Malaria researcher; he lived in Africa, then Haiti for a long time. Then he dropped that. Research wasn't really paying and mum doesn't work so he started to work as an engineer for a train company. I would say it was like middle class, maybe higher. (Elena, 30s, Architectural assistant, Coopers)

The brevity of these accounts contrasted sharply with the 36 interviewees who 'incorrectly' identified as coming from working-class backgrounds or being long-range upwardly mobile. Here answers differed in two key respects. First, these interviewees typically sidestepped, or only briefly addressed, the question about parental occupation. Instead, they placed their background within the context of a much longer family history, incorporating grandparents and sometimes even great-grandparents. They narrated their sense of self, then, as shaped less by what analysts conventionally think of as *own* class origin and more by *parental* or even *grandparental* class origin. Second, and connected to this, their answers were markedly more elaborate. Contrast the two answers above to Ella, a successful actor in her mid-30s:

Ella:	Okay, well I consider my background to be a working-class one even though I don't sound like that really. My parents, their parents were all very much like cleaners, taxi drivers, painters and decorators and then in my parents' generation my mum is a hairdresser but then she was of the Thatcher world and was encouraged by her parents to own her own salon. And then my dad was good at engineering so he did an apprenticeship as a draughtsman. So I consider them like quite aspirational from the working class, which was quite typical of that generation. . .
Interviewer:	Yeah. . .
Ella:	. . .And an incredibly hard working family. The whole family are really like massively. . . because my grandparents they owned a hotel. They did everything themselves. They had no staff. They did all the cleaning, all the cooking, all the entertaining, and all the decorating and did really well.
Interviewer:	Okay.
Ella:	So that is them and I am from that. Then we lived in, it wasn't quite a rough area, but it was an ordinary area of Portsmouth but it was, the schools weren't very nice so my mum was worried how I'd speak, and so I was sent to like a very small independent girls school. But you know, I don't know if you know much about private education, but you have got the really small ones which are quite cheap.

There are two striking aspects of Ella's account here. First, it is clear she sees her background as defined by events that extend far beyond her own personal experience; 'that is

them and I am from that', she says, locating herself within an extensive multigenerational history. In this way, Ella articulates a distinctly *intergenerational self*, anchored by her place in a strongly working-class familial history.

Second, what is also notable is the slight awkwardness of Ella's intergenerational self. She is conscious from the start that her claim to a working-class identity may be undermined by her middle-class accent and is keen to play down the privilege attached to her private schooling. Expressions of intergenerational self often felt uncomfortable in this way, as if respondents felt unsure about how we, as interviewers, would evaluate their identity claim. Mike, a senior partner at Coopers, gave a long family history when asked about his background, focusing less on his father's career as an architect and more on his grandmother who had worked in a mill as a child. Later in the interview, when we discussed class privilege in architecture, he became defensive, emphasising that his mother had worked as a cleaner and downplaying his father's success as an architect: '[my father] was a technician made good really'. This discomfort was also illustrated in an interview with Matthew, a partner at accountancy firm Turner Clarke.

Matthew:	Yes, so what else, so I am 51. Background, yes parents were, well my dad worked for the MOD [Ministry of Defence], he's sort of like a telecoms engineer chap. My mum had a shop.
Interviewer:	How would you. . .
Matthew:	. . .But before that, before that my grandfather was actually born in a workhouse so the generation. . .
Interviewer:	. . .Oh right, yes
Matthew:	. . .was very much. . . upwards in a sense.

In this passage we see clearly how Matthew wrestles, like both Ella and Mike, to transpose a question about parental occupation into a much wider multigenerational context. In many ways, this is entirely logical. As Mare (2011) notes, the preoccupation with measuring class solely in terms of the relationship between parents and children is an entirely sociological construct, and one which elides the very real influence of social, cultural and economic resources passed on across more than two generations. Indeed, it is worth noting that nearly all 175 interviewees mentioned extended family at some point in their narratives.

Significantly, though, it was only interviewees from *privileged backgrounds* who articulated this intergenerational notion of self when talking specifically about class origin. To unpick this, it is worth revisiting the stilted nature of these interactions. Returning to Matthew, it is notable that while he begins by matter-of-factly describing his parents' occupations, he then deliberately shifts to disrupt this by turning to his working-class grandparents. This move allows Matthew to direct the discussion away from his own, middle-class, upbringing and instead narrate an identity premised on multigenerational upward social mobility. Indeed, it is this desire to 'tell an upward story' that constituted the central theme among expressions of an intergenerational self. And here the emphasis was not necessarily on occupational mobility but more the telling of a particular familial narrative of success; of hard work, of unusual talent; of meritocratic struggle 'against the odds'. Martha, a commissioner at 6TV, had been brought up in what appeared to be a solidly middle-class family – her father was a headteacher[8] and her mother a social

worker. Yet her origin story, an elaborate account of rising from humble origins, could not have been more different:

> So I'm really just this slightly gobby scouse girl (laughs) and actually there's a few of us in commissioning who are kind of working-class, humble roots. . . I mean when I was born my mother was a school dinner lady and my dad was a bus driver. Yes so my mum and dad were, I believe the actual term is, piss poor. My grandparents were farmers and school dinner ladies and factory workers, and they grew up in just normal council houses in Liverpool but all worked. And my mum and dad are very unusual which is why I think my sister and I are. They were very young, my mum got pregnant when she was 18 and my dad was 19. And he was a bus driver and she was a school dinner lady. But my dad was like the cleverest bus driver in the world so he went to night school and trained to be a teacher. And my mum had three jobs, she was working in a bar all night then she came home and looked after me then worked in a care home. They were very politicised so my mother then started training to be a social worker. And my dad just went through, got his teacher training, was an excellent teacher then became a headmaster, then became an Ofsted inspector.

We do not mean to imply that these accounts are somehow disingenuous, or cynically strategic. Such multigenerational stories clearly represent very real instances of upward social mobility that were keenly felt. Further, they also underline how perceptions of class origin are often strongly *relational* (Irwin, 2015). Like Martha, many of these interviewees worked in elite occupational environments and were surrounded by colleagues from extremely privileged backgrounds. This reference group, in turn, strongly shaped how they located themselves. Jane, for example, a successful actor whose parents had both done 'white collar' work, explained that she only began to see herself as a 'working-class person' when she moved from her small Lancashire town to the 'Establishment world' of the West End. It was only here, she explained, that she started to 'see' and 'feel' her class difference, to 'just hold on to it and know that it is not an issue of shame but an issue of pride'.

In this way, it is not straightforward to position these as misidentifications of class origin – they often represent accurate perceptions of relational differences (in privilege and advantage) between those from successive generations of privilege and those, like Martha and Jane, whose grandparents and other extended family did working-class jobs (Chan and Boliver, 2013).

Having said this, it is also clear that such multigenerational upward stories often act – whether intentionally or not – to deflect from the substantial privileges associated with these interviewees' *own* middle-class upbringings. Here, in particular, claiming mobility acts as a signal, a way of indicating that one has made their own 'way'; that he or she is an autonomous individual with their own story to tell. In this way, we read the (often awkward) articulation of an intergenerational self as functioning – at least in part – as a means of disavowing, downplaying or justifying one's class privilege, especially in the face of questions that, if answered directly, would reveal such advantaged origins in fairly unambiguous terms. Thus, transposing a question about one's own upbringing into a narrative about extended family not only allows interviewees like Martha to construct their own subjectivity as constituted via, and through, a romantic upward story, but also

to narrate their subsequent life outcomes – as we go on to explain now – as marked by particular meritocratic legitimacy.

Meritocratic Hubris: The Legitimacy of an Upward Story

Claiming multigenerational upward mobility not only functions as a means of telling a humble 'origin story'. This intergenerational self was also present in interviewees' narration of their own life course, and particularly how they made sense of career trajectories. Here these individuals often presented themselves as classed outsiders, who had overcome significant barriers within their elite occupational environments. Returning to Martha, it was notable that although she had risen swiftly to become one of the most senior commissioners at 6TV, she repeatedly spoke of her career as a 'struggle'.

Martha:	I know what it is like to be out of favour and not to be able to get your foot through the door because your face doesn't fit or your accent doesn't fit or you're not cool enough or not part of that club. And I know what that's like, I really do.
Interviewer:	That's interesting.
Martha:	So within the organisation I think, possibly, I'm not selfish enough. And I wonder if that's because of my background and I've been around people who've got no money and I've been around people who have hopes and dreams and aspirations that don't just come true.

Like Martha, many focused their discussion of barriers on occupational culture and a sense of imposter syndrome. This was expressed through a lingering sense that they were somehow 'not good enough' (Amin, Coopers) or a 'fraud' (Colin, Turner Clarke). What is striking about these narratives is that, in many ways, they echo the kind of cultural barriers expressed by interviewees from working-class backgrounds (see Friedman and Laurison, 2019 for a detailed discussion). Both groups reported an inability to master dominant behavioural codes, especially in terms of unwritten expectations around humour, language and self-presentation. One particular area of crossover was regional identity and particularly accent. Notably, 26 of our 36 participants mentioned regional accent during their interview and, like those from working-class backgrounds in the main sample, emphasised how this had marked them out as an outsider, as lacking the kind of 'polish' or 'gravitas' that their employer associated with 'neutral' RP (received pronunciation).[9]

Yet there was also a subtle difference between the narrations of imposter syndrome we elicited from interviewees from different class backgrounds. For those from disadvantaged backgrounds, imposter syndrome was a fairly chronic condition. These individuals routinely experienced paralytic feelings of insecurity and inferiority in the workplace and expressed a strong sense of resignation in interviews about their ability to challenge dominant behavioural codes (see Friedman and O'Brien, 2017). In contrast, there was a strong theme of resistance in discussions with more privileged interviewees. The stories of two partners at Turner Clarke from *different* class backgrounds were telling here. Paul, whose parents were a sales assistant and a housewife, explained that when he was 'brought through' to partner, his lack of 'corporate polish' had been 'noted'. In an

attempt to remedy the situation, he explained, the partner group decided he should have an external 'presence coach':

> I am sure it was phenomenally expensive. And I used to joke that I felt a bit like Crocodile Dundee, used to go 'I bet [the coach] checks I haven't nicked anything after I've gone!' You know I am a partner in one of the largest accountancy firms in the world but you still wonder. . . now is that just me having a laugh or is there something deeper. . .?

Compare Paul to Graham. Both Graham's parents were successful actors and although he had made partner fairly early in his career, he explained that 'there is still a little voice at the back of the head that occasionally says, you're going to get found out, any day now'. He recalls the first meeting of a prestigious international committee:

> The great and the good are there and I'm just sitting there thinking, I'm Graham Martin, my Mum's an actress, she's been in some rubbish (laughs), my Dad's a song and dance man, he left school at 15. What on earth am I doing here? But. . . people have self-limiting beliefs and if I allowed the Graham Martin at the back of my head that says you're Graham Martin from 'Leyton' (accentuates an East London accent) you have nothing positive to contribute, I would probably sit on my hands a lot more. . . I mean there are times when I say things where I think maybe that wasn't the best way of phrasing that. Or I say things which are clearly jokes, clearly intended to get a laugh, and I don't think everyone in the senior leadership is entirely comfortable. But if you can't bring yourself to work I think you should probably be looking for a different job.

Imposter syndrome is of course about more than class difference, and it is worth noting that such sentiments were disproportionately expressed by female and ethnic minority interviewees (Breeze, 2018). Yet here the experiences of two men, at the same level, in the same organisation, talking about the same behavioural codes, is instructive. On the one hand, Graham confidently names imposter syndrome before going on to explain that despite senior management not being 'entirely comfortable' with his humour, he has persevered nonetheless, discounting any 'self-limiting' thoughts and resolving to 'bring his whole self to work'. In contrast, for Paul, imposter syndrome did not have to be named; the humiliating imposition of a presence coach had inculcated the feeling so deeply it had crippled him with an enduring insecurity and paranoia. Thus, while interviewees like Graham often presented their career trajectories as held back by class-cultural barriers, putting their narratives in comparative context often revealed these obstacles to be fairly fleeting and successfully overcome.

Discussion of class-based barriers also provided a means for these interviewees to position their own career trajectory in relation to colleagues they perceived as *more* privileged. Here in particular many emphasised the importance of their state schooling (compared with the private education of colleagues). Karen, for example, was a successful advisory partner at Turner Clarke. She was from an affluent middle-class family and her dad was a university professor. Yet throughout her interview she narrated her career as one characterised by 'overcoming adversity' both in the context of a working-class extended family and her own experience of attending a 'tough' comprehensive in the north of England. 'Battling' these forces, she argued, had acted as 'a huge driver' of her

success, unlike many around her from 'posh' backgrounds who have not fulfilled their potential because 'they've had an easy ride the whole way through'. Others, like Katie and Nigel, went even further, positioning their career success as more deserving due to their negotiation of class-based barriers:

> I'm Welsh, female, working class, what have I got? And you sort of, you know, you go through all of this, and you are definitely aware that things are stacked against you. . . and I think it's definitely manifested in me working longer and harder than other people. (Katie, Assistant director, 6TV)

> Well when you are very broad northern speaking, you're a normal bloke, there's no airs and graces, it does mean that there are career challenges along the way, undoubtedly. Like when I do an audit I do a presentation at the end. And if I am presenting to say an audit committee chair from a FTSE 100 business, I fully expect him to be surprised when he meets me because I will not be what he's expecting. He will be expecting someone posher, and that will be the starting point. So I know that when I walk in I am starting from an inferior position to the guy that's been in before me. What I say has to be that bit better. (Nigel, Audit partner, Turner Clarke)

In these accounts we see clearly how narrations of upward mobility allow interviewees to position themselves as uniquely meritocratically legitimate. By 'starting from an inferior position' or 'having the odds stacked against' them, these interviewees assert that they have had to 'work harder', 'work longer', 'be better' and therefore, by implication, are *more* deserving of their success.

Blinded by (Economic) Privilege

Deploying an intergenerational upwardly mobile self not only skewed perceptions of the legitimacy of one's achievements. It often also simultaneously blinded interviewees to the privileges that had flowed from their own upbringings. A central theme here was parental financial support, particularly among interviewees working in acting and television. As with all interviewees from middle-class backgrounds we spoke to in these professions, this kind of safety-net had acted as a pivotal early-career lubricant, allowing interviewees to negotiate internships, manoeuvre into more insecure but lucrative career tracks, invest time and resources into developing valuable networks, resist exploitative employment and take risky opportunities – all of which had increased their chances of long-term success.

Yet it was not that interviewees did not recognise this 'bank of mum and dad'. Instead, what was striking was the way they deployed stories about the *source* of family money as a way of deflecting presumptions about ascribed privilege. Particularly important here were careful expressions of *how* family wealth (that they had subsequently benefited from) had been accumulated. Many highlighted a particular family 'ethos' that had flanked wealth-building, including of course hard work but also a certain shrewdness, frugality or self-sacrifice. Patricia, an Executive at 6TV, had been privately educated. Her mother was a teacher, her father the managing director of a manufacturing company. Throughout her interview, however, Patricia continually described her own upbringing in terms of her parents' origins, reaching back to explain their upward trajectories from

poor working-class families in Wales. Tellingly, though, she also weaved in this family history when explaining key moments in her life that had been facilitated by familial economic capital – going to private school (based on 'careful saving' by grandparents), a deposit to buy a flat (based on an 'advance' of a 'modest' parental inheritance) and help getting 'set up in TV' (based on parents 'giving up' several holidays).

Others differentiated their economic inheritance by steering conversations towards colleagues who had received *greater* financial help. David, a junior commissioner at 6TV, was the son of two teachers – although described himself 'as very much socially mobile in TV terms'. His parents had given him extensive financial help for two years when he first entered TV as a runner. But David was keen to stress the financial pressure that this had put his parents under, who 'really stretched their savings to help me'. He told us:

> I hate the idea that people might look at you and go well you're quite privileged, from a middle-class background, and 'oh, of course, haven't you done well?'. And I have, to a certain extent, because my parents did help me out at the start with rent and stuff. But. . . but they sort of killed themselves to do that. . . and I've got loads of mates in TV who always knew their parents would pay the entire deposit for a house or who still get their phone bill paid by their parents! So I'm there going hold on I'm not, this is all, I've worked really fucking hard.

In short, interviewees often appeared to imply that the modest, unlikely and virtuous roots of their inherited economic capital *mattered*, that such transfers were underpinned with a unique meritocratic ethos and that this set them apart from those whose ascribed privilege meant their inheritance was ensured – who 'always knew', as David puts it.

Conclusion

In this article we have imported the concept of the 'intergenerational self' from social psychology to help explore a long-standing sociological puzzle; why do people from privileged backgrounds so often misidentify their origins as working class? This concept, we have shown, helps us understand that many Britons understand their class origins, and sense of self, as constituted in ways that elide the conventional conceptual lens of sociologists. Rather than locating their class background as rooted in the socio-economic conditions of their own upbringing, the interviewees we analyse here instead reach back further into their extended family histories. Here they find stories of the past – of working-class struggle, of upward social mobility, of meritocratic striving – that provide powerful frames for understanding their own experiences and sense of self.

This of course begs the question of whether these should be considered 'misidentifications' at all? After all, in the vast majority of cases these interviewees 'correctly' identify the socio-economic conditions of their working-class ancestors and simply argue it is the legacy of *this* history that scaffolds their origins. Indeed, such claims have some 'objective' basis; the class position of grandparents does, on average, have an effect on children's class destinations (Chan and Boliver, 2013). Similarly, interviewees often articulate a sense of difference rooted in regional class identity or non-selective schooling that also maps onto non-trivial inequalities in life outcomes (Hecht et al., 2020;

Reeves et al., 2017). In this way, expressions of intergenerational working-class origins are not necessarily incorrect but instead reflect the 'real' lived experience of *multigenerational* upward mobility or 'real' *relational* inequalities with colleagues from more elite origins.

Yet we should not overstate this. The 'grandparent effect' on life outcomes is small in comparison to that of parents (Engzell et al., 2020). And we should not forget that the vast majority of our 175 interviewees identify their class origins, like most sociologists, as rooted in the class destinations of their parents. We would therefore argue that these intergenerational understandings of class origin should also be read as having a *performative* dimension; as deflecting attention away from the structural privilege these individuals enjoy, both in their own eyes but also among those they communicate their 'origin story' to in everyday life. At the same time, by framing their life as an upward struggle 'against the odds', these interviewees misrepresent their subsequent life outcomes as more worthy, more deserving and more meritorious.

It is also important to note that such misidentification is notably higher in two of our occupational case studies – acting and television (24 of 36 interviews). This is not coincidental; there is arguably a particular symbolic market for downplaying class privilege in these professions. Not only are these arenas disproportionately dominated by the privileged and class inequality an increasingly fiercely debated topic, but the uncertain and precarious nature of the work itself – often freelance, short-term, poorly paid, extremely competitive and reliant on informal networks – tilts career progression particularly in favour of those insulated by the 'bank of mum and dad' (Brook et al., 2020; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Either way, in such unequal and class-conscious occupations, there is arguably heightened scrutiny on the meritocratic legitimacy of career trajectories, and therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that people feel a particular pressure to tell a humble origin story and ward off suspicions of hereditary privilege.

These findings have a number of implications for scholars of class and mobility. First, they show the importance of differentiating research on class identity between class origin and class destination. Most research in this area tends to elide this temporal dimension and simply ask whether, generally, people feel they belong to a particular social class. However, as these findings illustrate, people often feel their class identity has changed over time – even when they have not been 'objectively' socially mobile. And significantly, although the vast majority of people 'correctly' recognise their class destination, it is the more thorny issue of class origin – our findings suggest – that leads to much of the class misidentification demonstrated in survey research.

Second, and relatedly, our findings contribute to debates about the contemporary value afforded to different class identities. Most sociological literature argues that working-class identities are increasingly stigmatised and devalued, particularly in the UK (Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2013). At first glance the proud working-class identifications expressed in our data appear to challenge this. Here again, however, our emphasis on the temporal dimension of class identities, and particularly the subjective importance of class *origin*, is key. As both Lawler (2014) and Loveday (2014) have argued, there is often an important distinction between the value afforded to working-class identities of the past and present – with the 'heroic workers' of previous generations nostalgically counterposed to the 'demonised' working-class identities of today. Our findings echo this

distinction. Indeed, it is telling that our respondents' affiliations to working-class identity are largely rooted in stories and symbols located in a fairly distant past, a 'family folk-lore' – as Loveday (2014) calls it – of times and places when (particularly male) working-classness was accorded greater recognition and worth.

Finally, our results contribute to a burgeoning critical literature on meritocracy (Littler, 2018; Mijs and Savage, 2020). Central here, of course, is the idea that all progressive movement is upwards on a ladder, with the most meritorious ascending the greatest number of rungs from origin to destination. As others have observed, this variously contributes to the stigmatisation of working-class destinations (Tyler, 2013), the cultivation of 'meritocratic hubris' among the successful (Sandel, 2020) and a misplaced belief among all that resulting inequalities of outcome are fair (Mijs, 2019).

What is less understood, we would argue, is how this meritocratic hubris also shapes how the successful, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, narrate their *origins*. Mindful of on one hand Britain's tarnished historical legacy of ascription and, on the other, a policy agenda that holds up the upwardly mobile as the 'winners' of meritocracy, the individuals we analyse here instinctively reach back to extended family histories in order to tell an upward story. Whether this is intentional or not is of course hard to adjudicate, and we must be careful not to veer into smuggling analysis 'behind the backs' of our respondents. Such claims to mobility could also be a methodological artifact; interviewees may be aware of their privilege yet feel uncomfortable talking about it – especially to an interrogative sociologist of class inequality! But whether this is a matter of how people make sense of their origins *or* how they choose to narrate it in public, either way it indicates a deepening internalisation of meritocratic norms (Littler, 2018).

The meritocratic ideal thus not only acts as the yardstick by which we routinely evaluate life outcomes, but as Monty Python's Four Yorkshiremen playfully suggest, it may also mediate how we judge the legitimacy of our own and others' starting points. Of course, returning to Monty Python also brings us back to the question of how peculiarly British these findings are. Certainly, the popularity of specifically *working-class* identities may well reflect the particularities of British class-cultural history. However, the wider question of how people subjectively narrate their class origins, and how this informs their understanding of inequality, remains under-explored in a number of national contexts. We would suggest this represents a fertile avenue for future research, particularly in settings like Western Europe or the USA, where meritocratic ideals are arguably equally entrenched and upward mobility equally fetishised.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Most notably the sketch was revived in 2001 by Harry Enfield, Alan Rickman, Eddie Izzard and Vic Reeves and in 2015 by Davina McCall, John Bishop, David Walliams and Eddie Izzard.
2. In 2019 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated there were 32.9 million employed individuals, 45% of whom were employed in professional and managerial occupations.
3. We define expressions of 'long-range mobility' in the Methods section.
4. However, it should be noted that many people only define themselves in terms of class when pressed to choose a class identity (see Savage, 2007).
5. We draw here on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), where Classes 1 and 2 denote professional and managerial occupations and Classes 6 and 7 working-class occupations.
6. All organisations and interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms and certain details modified to ensure anonymity.
7. This may reflect the fact that historically women's working-class identities have been intensely stigmatised as the exemplar of physical, moral and sexual 'excess' (Skeggs, 1997; 2005).
8. A disproportionate number of those misidentifying as working class have teachers as parents. This may reflect ambiguity in the lay class status of teachers, and therefore the privilege associated with these origins. However, Friedman and Laurison (2019) find that the children of teachers achieve on average higher class destinations than other professions.
9. This chimes with long-standing evidence that gatekeepers exhibit a negative bias towards most regional accents in the UK, regardless of class origin (Coupland and Bishop, 2007), and that there are often intricate nuances in accent style between people from similar and different class backgrounds in many parts of the UK (Donnelly et al., 2019).

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