

## **The bubble of privilege. Young, privately educated women talk about social class.**

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### **Abstract**

Conceptualisations of the self in relation to others are examined among a group of young women attending a fee-paying school in England. As part of a larger study exploring intimacy and agency among young women from relatively privileged class backgrounds, fifty-four young women participated in focus group discussions and interviews. Findings reveal that young women strongly positioned themselves in relation to 'others' – both those they saw as 'chavs' and young people attending state schools. Yet, just as often, these young women sought to distinguish themselves from other private school peers. Within the privileged bubble the young women inhabited - locations within the wider private school network, type and extent of parental wealth, and fame, were all markers used to differentiate the self from others.

Keywords: middle class, private education, girls, femininities

## Introduction

Giddens' (1991) 'reflexive project of the self' and Beck's (1992) 'individualization' thesis have shown considerable cultural, academic and political purchase (Lawler 2005a; Reay 2006), with some authors arguing that social class may no longer have the same structuring influence on social, cultural and economic life in twenty-first century society (Atkinson, 2007). A number of researchers and theorists, however, have presented compelling data challenging the notion of there being a transition towards a classless society (Reay 1998; Lawler 2005a), in which the individual follows their reflexive project of self identity without impediment of class, gender or race (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001; Skeggs 2004; Hey 2005). Within the sociology of education, the vast majority of recent contributions continue to make a strong case for the centrality of social class (as well as gender and race) in understanding discourses of achievement (Youdell 2003; Renold and Allan 2006; Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007), the ways in which students position themselves and others (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2001; Reay 2001; Youdell 2005), and school choice (Ball 1997; Power et al. 2003; Reay 2007), among other topics.

While the narratives and the experiences of the 'middle classes' within education have formed the focus of much recent work (Ball 2003; Power et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2007), existing studies largely concentrate on parents' situations and experiences rather than young people's perceptions. Writing on middle-class young people's positionings of the self and others tends to have been developed out of research conducted in mixed social class school and college environments (Aggleton 1987; Hey 1997; Reay 2001; Youdell 2005). A focus on young men and women's understandings of class within privileged, private education settings is less common and here the existing data tends to be somewhat dated. Delamont (1989), Connell et al. (1981), Frazer (1993) and Proweller (1998) studied young women attending private single-sex schools in Scotland, Australia, England and the USA respectively. More recently, there has been some focus on young masculinities in private education in Australia (Poynting and Donaldson 2005; Saltmarsh 2007), and a small number of researchers have focused attention on young women in private education (Charles 2007; Allan 2009; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010).

This paper reviews the literature that examines how middle class young people define themselves in relation to others in terms of class background. Against the background of this work, the paper then explores how the young, privately educated women in the current study talked about themselves in relation to others – both those outside their social network and those within their own peer group. The goal of the paper is to contribute to a broad concern within the sociology of education – understandings of class among young women – but also to problematise further our understandings of these by bringing back to the fore the perspectives of a relatively neglected group of young people, in a relatively under-studied context - private education.

## Looking down: middle class perspectives

In the existing literature, there are arguably four key themes which inform understandings of how social class is understood by those occupying more affluent and culturally privileged positions: social class may be understood relationally; the working class are pathologised; fractions within the middle classes exist; and even if social class is not directly used to position oneself – clear markers exist to support processes of identification and differentiation on the grounds of socio-economic status.

Building on the earlier work of Bernstein (1977) who saw fractions of the new middle class as agents of symbolic control intimately linked to processes of social reproduction, Skeggs (2004) has argued that middle class fractions utilise the culture of others, as a resource in their own self-making (177). Reay (2007) has suggested that working class students are 'positioned within middle-class imaginaries as 'the other' to a middle-class norm' (1192). This is not a value-free process of 'othering', but as Lawler (2005b) has argued, is accomplished through expressions of distaste and disgust at white working-class existence (429). Kehily and Pattman (2006) in their study of sixth formers in one English city also found that middle class students tended to pathologise their working-class peers.

In recent years, a (derogatory) term for the working class has emerged in popular discourse in the United Kingdom: the 'chav' (Nayak 2006). The term may originate from the Romany term 'chavi', meaning child, but it is unclear how the term has worked its way into common parlance over the last decade in the UK. There are websites where people can post reviews of the 'chaviest' town, or where they can complete a test to find out how 'chav' they are. McCulloch, Stewart, and Lovegreen (2006) found that young people in two large UK cities used this term as an 'othering' label (547), and while some of their research participants appropriated labels such as 'skater' or 'goth' as self descriptions, none were willing to claim the identity 'chav'.

Such processes of 'othering' and pathologisation have also been found in research with young, middle class women. In Allan's (2009) ethnography of girls aged ten and eleven years attending a private school in southern Britain, young women took great pains to distinguish themselves from those from the 'lower class' or 'townies'. The girls also made clear links between these categories, dressing 'tarty' and being 'too sexy' (154). Thomson (2000) studied young people's views of gender, teenage pregnancy and sexual activity in two very different socio-economic communities – the first socially deprived, the other affluent. The students living in the middle-class area frequently set themselves apart from 'pikies' (slang for Irish Travellers and non-Roma Gypsies, but a term which can also include the broader working class). The young women also made efforts to differentiate themselves from hyper-feminine 'girly girls', which, Thomson argued, could be 'seen as a strategy for distancing themselves from an embodied form of working class femininity' (416).

From the descriptions of these two terms – pikies and girly girls – given by the young people in Thomson's study it would appear that they both have working class connotations, but do describe different behaviours. Pikies were said to live in dilapidated environments, rife with drugs and crime, while girly girls were seen as young women whose main concern was to be attractive to young men and keep their hair and make-up immaculate. Both of these

descriptors were used disdainfully to talk about young people outside of their own social class by the middle class respondents.

Delineating the boundaries between social classes appears to have a homogenising effect, especially for the way in which those labelled as working class are viewed by those who position themselves outside of this category. Yet, research with middle class young people and parents has identified a range of 'fractions' (see Ball et al. 2004) within the middle social class. The existence of such fractions does not, however, mean that views of working class other are necessarily different. Such fractions become apparent as respondents actively work to distinguish themselves from others who they also see as being middle class. The 14 and 15 year old young women in Delamont's (1989) ethnography of a private girls' school appeared to separate themselves into six distinct groups – two of the largest groups being the 'debs and dollies' and the 'the clever ones' or 'swots and weeds'. Young women in these two groups came from different family or class sub-cultures, the former from entrepreneurial/managerial fathers with financial wealth and the latter usually from dual career families, where both mothers and fathers had been educated to a high level and were involved in intellectual or cultural professions (Delamont 1989: 57).

Frazer's (1993) later research with young women attending private schools in England also found that intra-class differences were highlighted during discussions about school and femininity. Young women understood the middle class to have fine gradations, and drew clear distinctions between 'old' and 'new' money (142). The formation of distinctive friendship cliques based on indicators of intra-class distinction (such as common interests, types of clothes worn, the way leisure time was spent) has also been noted by Proweller (1998) and Power et al. (2003) in their research on young women in selective and private schools (75).

Recent studies by Ball et al. (2004) and Reay et al. (2007) on middle class parents' choices of nursery and school provision have found that many parents position themselves as 'other' to what they perceive to be normative white middle-class attitudes and behaviour. Yet despite these differentiations, the negative connotations placed on working class aspirations and practices remain intact.

A final strand within the research literature suggests that even when individuals appear reluctant to draw directly on notions of class when discussing their own position or explaining wider societal issues, social class is still a strong organising structure within people's narratives (Reay 1998; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001). Payne & Grew (2005), for example, in their research which aimed to explore whether they could replicate Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst's (2001) findings in a rural location outside northwest England found that their middle and working class participants used fourteen indicators to differentiate the social classes.

## The study

The data in this paper came from a recent study exploring young middle class women's reflexivity, narratives and embodied practices of agency in their sexual and intimate relationships. We have developed an understanding of agency which has its origins in young women's conceptualisations of power within relationships, and the various ways in which they actively position themselves as taking power back or being powerful (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010).

The focus of the research was a fee-paying co-educational senior school (henceforth called St Luther's School) for young people aged 13 to 18 years. A private school setting was chosen because the aim of the study was to examine the potential for agentic practice in a context in which a clear majority of respondents were middle-class. Previous studies exploring agency among young women have identified being middle class as a facilitator for agency – but in mixed social class contexts (Hey 1997; Youdell 2005).

At St. Luther's school, the majority of students board, and day pupils are required to stay at school for the entire day – to attend classes, participate in extra-curricular activities and do their homework. All students (boarders and day pupils) are assigned to a boarding house – where they have a room to sleep, change their clothes and study in, as well as eat their breakfast, watch television or spend time relaxing with their friends. Most of the students come to this senior school from a Prep(aratory) school at 13 years of age.

All young women in the sixth form were invited to participate in the study. Almost half of the female members of the sixth form agreed to participate – through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. All the participants were white, with a small number having grown up abroad but with UK family connections. Additionally, eleven members of staff were interviewed, to explore the broader context of the school and its demography. The vast majority of the data drawn on for this paper comes from the young women, all of whom were interviewed by the first author.

Social class was not initially an explicit focus of the research, but emerged as such in the course of the investigation. Young women were not therefore directly asked about their views of class or how they would position themselves. At the commencement of the focus groups or interviews, the young women were asked to indicate what their parents did occupationally but this open question rarely led to any further comments about social position or class. However, subsequent questions such as whether the young women had enjoyed their time at the school tended to generate quite a lot of discussion which either directly or indirectly made reference to socio-economic status and social class differences. Subsequent questions went on to explore young women's experiences of sexual and intimate relationships (the main focus of the study and reported on elsewhere – see Maxwell and Aggleton 2010).

During the initial reading of interview and focus group discussion transcripts, the authors filed any sections of narrative which was either class-related or alluded to social difference, in a separate document. It is these data which have been drawn on here. Following the framework for analysis developed from the literature overview, data were examined more

closely for examples of how young women 'othered' members of the working class in order to position themselves. The way these 'others' were represented was also explored. Next, possible fractions within this group of young women were searched for and identified.

### **Positioning the self in relation to others – chavs and state schools**

In a number of instances, young women clearly demarcated themselves from others using terms such as *chavs* (Ellie), *chaffs* (Regina) or describing 'others' as *lower class people* (Amy). Although Amy was primarily talking about how *judgemental* and *gossipy* the people at her school were (particularly about sex), she drew a direct link between the working class, sex and even sex work.

*Even like lower class people ... I mean you do get you know the girls who you know give blow jobs on the side of street corners and stuff but ... I think here [at the school] it's so much more judgemental, because it's all about gossip, and everyone knows everyone's business* (Amy)

During a focus group discussion, Honey drew an association between the term *chav* and *girls just sleeping around*, as well as notions of tact and restraint.

*[It is] what I call like a chav thing to do. Something where girls just sleep around, it's just something to do with their guy 'cos they're going to impress them...I'm not tacky, I'm classy. I'm retained, reserved...if I walk past a car and I stick my bum out, but [I] don't do anything about it okay, some girls put their bum out and they do something about it. They would have slept with about twenty guys* (Honey)

Here, Honey was not suggesting she was not sexually active herself, or that she was not aware and confident about her own sexuality (and the way men responded to it), but she drew a distinction between herself and others. In contrast to *chavs*, she does not necessarily respond to, or act on the attentions received from members of the opposite sex.

Ellie's use of the term *chav* also has negative undertones. She explained:

Ellie *...[when] I came I was a bit of a chav to be honest.*

Claire *Really?*

Ellie *I was like a bit of like, I don't know, wearing white and pink trackies [track suit / jogging outfit] and had little pink streaks in my hair.*

...

Claire *And that wasn't the look [required at this school]?*

Ellie *No! And I was quite immature for my age ...*

Although Ellie suggests she herself was *a bit of a chav* because she had poor fashion sense and was physically, socially and emotionally immature, she carried on to almost immediately move herself outside this categorisation by explaining how she had now grown up, *adjusting into the environment* and that she had become *really posher*.

Bella was the only young woman to challenge the association between social class and sexuality.

*I really don't like the way that people with not so much privilege are seen like, slutty and you know and I don't think there is much difference...I think maybe sometimes they [the less privileged] won't have the same ability to buy protection...maybe that's why they get pregnant more...or they can't get abortions as much because they don't have the money – so many public school girls have had abortions...they [less privileged] get seen [as sluts] for it because of the difference of money....(Bella)*

Yet, during a focus group discussion Bella had previously participated in, she had commented,

*We're in a public school and we do probably start later [having sex] than other people in the country (Bella)*

Bella's comment introduces a second, more frequently drawn on distinction made by the young women in this study – organised around the division between state and private education. Liz's remark again makes the link between pregnancy and sex and those young people who use the state education system.

*Obviously at state school a lot of girls get pregnant at like thirteen, it's really bad (Liz)*

This comment was a little surprising given that Liz herself had attended a state school until the sixth form. Juno also seemed to draw an association between attending a state primary, and for at least a short while a state secondary school, and being exposed to sex earlier than her privately-educated peers.

*I went to X [local primary school] and then a term at X [local secondary school] and then I came here so they're [the schools] completely different. So I grew up, I think, in many ways a lot quicker...I was a lot more like sexually aware than people here (Juno)*

Other young women described how private schools were *superior* to state schools and how a private education was able to offer more opportunities than *normal* (Ellie) schools.

*I think you just get more of the good teachers at private school, more of the sort of wanting to teach you...(Summer)*

*Even though it [the school] was really expensive, they [my parents] thought this would probably give me the best opportunities to do everything that I wanted to do....and also I think they [my parents] both were boarding as well so I think they obviously wanted me to have a boarding thing, because it's quite you know ... it gives you independence and teaches you to get on with people...(Geraldine)*

A small number of the young women involved in the research were in relationships with young men who they described as having *very different friends* and *different backgrounds* (Maggie). Ellie explained,

*He's really nice; I just love him 'cos he's not like the boys at this school. He's an X [tradesman], he's just not like public school user sort of thing. And he went to an all boys grammar school... We're the most different, compleeeetly different backgrounds and stuff but we just get on* (Ellie)

Beyond comments about *chavs* and distinctions made between themselves and young people attending state schools, or those with *different backgrounds*, young women also positioned themselves within interviews and focus group discussions in relation to peers within their school, most usually in relation to relative privilege and money. It is within the process of marking out points of distinction within the school peer group that a more detailed analysis of privately educated young women's conceptualisations of social class becomes possible.

### **Friction and fractures within the middle-classes**

Young women in the study differentiated themselves from their peers by highlighting various social markers: type of schools previously attended; how much money their families had, and whether their parents had had to work for this wealth; and drawing on terms such as *posh* and *traditional* to situate themselves within their own social class.

Chantelle had grown up abroad and described how it had been quite difficult for her to settle into St. Luther's School when so many of her peers had been to the same Prep school and were therefore friends before they started their senior school. Juno invoked the very common refrain of *difference* when she suggested that her pathway through the state education system until she came to this private school for her final five years of schooling was what marked her out as *different*.

*I've always been like different from a lot of people at this school [because] I went to [a state school]* (Juno)

Similarly, Ellie, who said she had come from a *normal* school (i.e. a state primary school), felt she did not necessarily fit in because she did not know anyone else before starting at the school and because she was not *posh*.

Claire *When you say you weren't like the other girls, what were they like that you weren't like?*

Ellie *They were all quite, they were already quite posh, and quite a lot of them knew each other.*

Being *posh* (Ellie) and *rich* (Plum) was associated with popularity and being part of *the cool crew* (Ellie). In one of the focus group discussions, notions of popularity and being cool were fiercely debated.



- Plum *Popularity at this school, is just basically if you're fit or if you're rich...*
- Mercedes *You know what, I compleeeetely disagree...[there is] a group of people that like going out clubbing at night, there's a group of people that like going to a pub for drinks. There is a group of people that like going to Cornwall to go surfing, there are a group of people who like to go to play music or like sport, or a group of people that like working. You can't say okay the people who go clubbing, that means that they're cool.*
- ...
- Plum *The popular group is the people that people talk about the most.*
- Meredith *But I could think of at least several people...in our year that [are] like... 'Oh yeah I really wish I could [be like them]'*
- Apple *I think we're like calling them a popular group. But if you just like forget that word a second, I think there's different groups of just similar personalities. And then there's the really loud groups and we'll call them the laddish groups, you know, they're the really loud ones...*
- Meredith *I think people do look up to them and they say, 'I wish I could be in that group'.*
- Mercedes *...like fit people will be approached more, people will like want to be with them.*

Plum and Meredith appeared to strongly disagree with Mercedes about whether a high status group existed at the school. Although Apple and Mercedes worked hard to move away notions of popularity and invoked differences between students based on *personalities* (Apple) and leisure interests, they described how being *fit* (i.e. physically attractive) (Mercedes) or young men acting *loud* and *laddish* (Apple) were in fact markers of 'popularity' (the latter behaviour by young men was strongly associated with public school boy arrogance by two members of staff). From observations and discussions at the school, Mercedes clearly came from a very wealthy family, and was one of the most noticed and popular girls in the school. In interview, Mercedes gave some indication of her lifestyle,

*[I] went to X [a popular holiday destination in the Middle East]...then I started going out with guy from X [famous elite private school in England]...then I really fancied this guy called X who was a model (Mercedes)*

Mercedes dominated discussions when she was in a room, was viewed as being physically attractive by other students, was friends with all the 'cool' boys, and appeared to be what might be called a 'queen bee'. With this understanding of Mercedes, the markers of popularity she articulated together with Apple during the focus group intimate that status in this sense anyway is likely to be associated with family wealth as well.

While Plum and Meredith appeared a little envious of students they described as popular, other young women actively juxtaposed being posh and arrogant with being *down to earth* (Ellie and Regina) and being *a lot more balanced* (Regina). Regina and Ellie explained that it was their friends back at home who *grounded* (Regina) them because *they come from virtually nothing and their parents have to scrape for everything* (Regina).

Just as status and popularity were closely associated with notions of wealth and fame, so too were notions of *privilege* (Regina and Bella) and being *posh* (Ellie).

Claire *So when you say there are schools that are posher. What do you mean by that?*

Natalia *Like loads of rich people, famous people's children go [to my old school], not that my parents are famous or rich. But you know like X [famous 80s and 90s pop band], [the lead singer's] children were there, X, X and now X, their youngest one. And who else...X [famous UK actress] went there...*

*I don't like to sort of like name drop and things but he [her boyfriend] was...the son of X who owns X [famous brand] so they were extreeeeemely well off (Carmel)*

Although Natalie and Carmel appeared slightly seduced by the celebrity or wealth of some of their peers, other young women emphasized that the difference between them and others lay not necessarily in the amount of money an individual's parents had, but how the family had come to have so much money.

*Sure, we've got a nice house and we get to go on nice holidays but that's because my dad's worked hard and my mum's worked hard, whereas these people [at the school] it just comes [easy], they don't think well they've worked for it kind of thing (Regina)*

The way in which family wealth had been acquired appeared important in differentiating between people at the school, but what also appeared central was whether respondents would be able to rely on this wealth after their education or whether parents expected their children to become economically independent. Chardonay explained,

*Like some people's parents at this school are very rich and like erm....especially a number of my friends like they don't work hard, 'cos they don't need to work hard because their parents don't push them because you know they have that comfort of all their money falling back on them. But my parents like really really want me to work hard, for myself (Chardonay)*

Natalia alluded to a similar division between students attending private schools – those who need or want an education in order to make the transition to economic independence, and those who do not need to – because of their family wealth or because they expect to be financially supported by a husband.

*[This school] is actually way more academic than my old school...because it's not like...[the] blonde bimbos at my old school... like one of my friend's aspirations is to just get married and have kids, so pretty much...be like her mum and meet her husband at university (Natalia)*

The link Natalia made between type of wealth and what could be argued to be quite *traditional* (Geraldine) views on gender, was further developed by a number of the young women.

*I come from really quite a traditional family where my mum cooks every meal and my dad goes out to work. So...if I'm older and I've had children and then my husband's earning a comfortable salary, I think I'd feel that's normal. Definitely (Geraldine)*

Many of the young women described having stay-at-home mothers who had been responsible for bringing up the children while their fathers worked long-hours and travelled internationally for their work. Yet there was no clear association between extent and nature of wealth and traditional views of gender. In fact, two of the young women who described having very affluent lifestyles were also the most vocal about how they felt themselves to be strong, independent women who were usually in control of their relationships with young men. Iona introduced herself as a member of one of the oldest families in the former British colony where she had grown up and talked about her extensive travel plans during her gap year. Iona's attitude to young men was mirrored in Mercedes' stance,

*It's all the arrogant guys that really like me because I think...I don't like take any shit and...I'm quite forceful (Mercedes)*

According to Anne, monetary wealth was not necessarily directly associated with being *traditional* or *posh*. Anne described herself as *different* not because she had been to state school or because her family did not have as much money as some of her peers, but because she came from a different *background* and had been brought up by her parents with a *different outlook to life*. Anne was the only young women in the study who alluded so clearly to historical ideas of social class, aristocracy and the landed gentry.

Anne *I mean they're [the other girls in her boarding house] very different to me, we regard each other with slight suspicion*

...

Claire *So when you say they're different to you - what do you mean?*

Anne *Different....outlooks to life, different fashion sense, different morals. Brought up differently, even the sort of the amount of allowance they get...*

...

Anne *... different classes or the way they've been brought up. And just who you associate with and that sort of thing, [it's] quite difficult not to sound sort of totally classist or anything like that...*

Claire *So when you say class what do you mean by that?*

Anne *Erm, don't know (laugh). Er....sort of what your parents do, how you've been brought up.*

...

Anne *[I've been brought up] sort of semi religious, erm...speak certain words, dress you know...talk you know the right way, behave in a sort of way, erm...I mean I've been brought up not to eat walking down the street. And when I came here, everybody went to X [deli shop] and they started eating their baguettes down the street and I was like are you allowed to do that?*

...

Anne ...I'm quite shameful of what my parents think sometimes, they're very middle class, they were brought up with, sort of staff and large estates and that sort of thing and they do have certain outlooks on life which shock you, especially in these modern times.

Claire So in terms of men and women's positions?

Anne Yeah, and we were brought up quite traditionalist...I mean it's really sad but it's sort of race and whether you're gay or not...

Differences within this relatively privileged and wealthy group of young women were therefore articulated in relation to experience of the state education system, extent and type of wealth, norms around gender, and the legacy of the landed gentry.

### Discussion and conclusions

Although this was not a study which set out explicitly or actively to explore issues of class difference and status among a group of privately-educated young women, most of the participants invoked notions of difference when reflecting on their experiences of the school (an opening question during the interviews). The young women appeared to position themselves in relation to the 'other' outside their social class using quite negative, sexualised markers of difference, but also focused on the differences between themselves and their school peers.

Especially within one-to-one interviews, a number of the young women identified feeling *different*. Anne mentioned that she was regarded with suspicion by her peers because of her *traditional* up-bringing, while Natalia said two young men in the year above her at the school had recently taken *the piss out of my voice* as she had a London accent and most of the students at the school came from *the country*. Regina who also came from London felt that despite her parent's money and having attended private Prep schools, the urban environment she had grown up in meant she had *seen both sides of life*. Although Anne, Natalia and Regina came from relatively well-off families, they felt different for a number of reasons (their traditional up-bringing, or being from London); as did some of the other young women quoted in the paper who came from less prosperous backgrounds (Liz and Ellie for example). It appears as if it was those young women who were both wealthy and, or possibly because of this, popular, who did not, or rarely invoked the refrain of *difference* between themselves and their peers.

Why were differences between peers felt so keenly and so often remarked upon? A possible answer may lie in the worlds these young women lived in. Young women's narratives gave the impression that they studied, holidayed and partied in a relatively insular and exclusive environment. If the young women's parents or the families of their close friends' were not famous or well-known entrepreneurs, then they were friends with young men who attended elite private schools such as Eton and Harrow. When they were not attending one of the regular house parties or eighteenth birthday parties organised by someone within their social network, they were holidaying in the Alps or the Mediterranean at one of their friend's family homes. Liz described it as *the whole public school scene*.

*I like this guy...like whenever I go to London we kiss ... but basically he's really arrogant 'cos his dad owns the X [a large hotel chain] (Mercedes)*

*[My friend] invited me to their [school] parties and so I made friends with people there and just kept in touch with them. And now she's gone to X [another private school] and I went to their like ball the other night and so made a load of friends there...(Juno)*

*We went skiing. I know loads of people out there and then... three of my friends from X [the school] came; actually my three boy best friends came, and....X [one of her male friends] had his family friends out and stuff and he [her new boyfriend] was one of them, and he goes to like X [famous private school]. And there was a massive group of us, like it was really fun (Barbara)*

The insularity of this social network was described by a large number of the young women as being a *bubble* (Emma, Regina, Chantelle, Natalia). Most of the young women in the study had been schooled in the private education sector their whole lives, so their contact with the community beyond this very small proportion of society appeared extremely limited. As suggested by Natalia's comment:

*We [only] had one girl who came from a state school, when I was 11 [at my previous school] and no one else like, 'cos...this is really bad to admit. But we hadn't like encountered people from state schools erm...and so it was kind of like...woah. We didn't realise at the time because it's such a like bubble. But it was really bad, but like we were all friends so [we] just got over it (Natalia)*

Natalia had attended an arguably more exclusive boarding school before coming to St. Luther's, where the majority of the students came from very wealthy and famous families. The nature of the frictions and fractions within Natalia's previous school, or Anne's sister's school might be different, as suggested here:

*I know certainly here [at St. Luther's] I'm probably in a minority [i.e. coming from a traditional, aristocratic family background]. Whereas at my sister's school, probably a majority [do]. I mean from what her friends are like...(Anne)*

Work identifying the existence of fractions within the middle classes is not new (Bernstein, 1977; Delamont 1989; Frazer 1993; Ball et al 2004; Reay et al 2007). Young women in this study referred indirectly to differences in familial intellectual and cultural capital (Delamont 1989) and notions of old and new money (Frazer 1993) by differentiating between families whose wealth meant they did not expect their children to necessarily become economically independent or families who were historically privileged due to land ownership, rather than self-made entrepreneurs.

Comparing the conceptualisations of social class offered by the young women here with those of young women in private education more than two decades ago, the findings reveal something of the embeddness of social class in England. Unlike the urban settings where those in the middle and working classes live alongside each other, and where sometimes the

former choose to attend the same educational provision as 'the other' in Ball et al.'s (2004) and Reay et al.'s (2007) research, the young women in the present study had little contact with this wider world. Yet paradoxically they understood their world as 'ordinary' (Payne and Grew 2005) and those who felt marginalised in some way positioned themselves as 'different'. Perhaps most interestingly, considering their class privilege, these young women appeared both envious but also disdainful of their more wealthy peers.

Young women's narratives in this study suggest that social class, and different markers used to differentiate people within and across social classes were actively used by our participants to position themselves within their local environment. The research supports the claims made by theorists such as Skeggs (2004) and Hey (2005) that rather than moving towards a classless society, social class (as well as gender) continue to be drawn on as fundamental organising principles for understanding conceptualisations of self and others.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was funded by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council: RES-000-22-2398. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. Sections of this paper were presented at the Gender and Education Association's 7th International Conference, held at the Institute of Education, University of London on 27 March 2009.

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