'It's like saying "coloured"': understanding and analysing the urban working classes

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<u>**Abstract**</u>

This paper draws on data from a qualitative project exploring the engagement of working class families in London with childcare. It is a first attempt to throw some light on our usage of the term 'working class', and consider what forms 'working class-ness' takes in relation to our respondent families. We discuss some recent sociological literature on the working class(es) in order to understand the emphasises and focuses of other research. We emphasise the heterogeneity of the working class(es), the differences in attitude and experiences based on place, gender, occupational status, education, age and family membership. Then we consider our respondents in relation to their strategies and exercise of agency, their engagement with the labour market, and their embedded-ness in social networks. We conclude that one way of understanding the lives of urban working class families is to consider the extent to which they *'manage or struggle to cope'*, a focus which emphasises process, activity and the differential degrees of agency which the respondents are able to exercise.

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Introduction

This paper draws on data from an on-going project (ESRC award number RES 230770) exploring the engagement of working class parents, mostly mothers, with childcare provision. The research project as a whole examines a number of issues which affect choice of childcare and the balance individual families seek between paid work, childrearing and other domestic responsibilities. ==However, this paper is not about childcare *per se*, but focuses on a more general issue pertinent to the project. It is a first attempt to throw some light on our usage of the term 'working class', and consider what forms 'working class-ness' takes in relation to our respondent families[i].==

In order to do this we first discuss some recent sociological literature on the working class(es) in order to understand the emphasises and focuses of other research. Then we turn our attention to the respondents in our research, focusing, amongst other variables, on their capacity for agency, their engagement with the labour market, and their embedded-ness in social networks in order to begin to analyse points of difference and similarity amongst them.

'Worlds of Pain'?

We have witnessed in recent years both an academic and political retreat from class, (Savage 2000). For some scholarly commentators, 'the rise in individualization is regarded as having made social class obsolete in social explanation' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards & Gilles 2003 p.132). Certainly traditional working class occupations, dependent on a manufacturing base, and identified with particular communal lifestyles, values and expectations no longer exist in many localities. Furthermore, the expansion of routine white collar work and service employment is clear. Some commentators, most notably Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), have argued that a 'disembedding' has occured, a 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and

commitments' (such as strong class collectivities) (Beck 1992, p.128, cited in Savage 2000 p.103) leading to a situation in which individuals can 'reflexively construct their biographies and identities' (Skeggs 2004 p.52). However, many commentators approach such general positions with caution, and highlight instead the continued power of class in shaping economic inequality (Savage 2000, Ball 2003, Evans 2006). Yet, Savage (2000) argues that people are often hesitant about displaying class consciousness, suggesting that 'there is precious little evidence which indicates the existence of strong collective and articulated class cultures in contemporary Britain' (p.34)[ii]. Some of this ambivalence and hesitancy is apparent in our title quotation. These are the words of a friend, a London Sure Start worker. On reviewing a draft leaflet which offered information about our research to other Sure Start professionals, he suggested that the use of the term 'working class' was comparable to the use of the term 'coloured'. This suggests that 'working class' is an old-fashioned and, worse, a disrespectful, disreputable phrase, that those who do use it are out-of touch at best, and at worst, ignorant and prejudiced. His words draw attention to the silence and discomfort that the term 'working class' can prompt - at least amongst those who are not now or were not ever capable of claiming the label for themselves. Munt (2000 p.3) quotes a broadsheet journalist as saying 'the very phrase 'working class' tends to stick in the throat like a large chunk of stale Hovis' (Anthony 1998 p.2). Recent empirical research (Savage 2000, Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst 2005) suggests that people tend to claim for themselves the term (either middle class or working class) which indicates to them 'normality' and 'ordinariness'.

Nontheless, perceptions of class are deeper, broader and more intensely felt than might be suggested by the use of a technical mechanism to consign individuals to particular categories based on occupation (Crompton 2006, Ball 2003, Skeggs 1997, 2004, Savage 2000). 'Class is not just an objective entity, but also (and mostly?) a question of identifications, perceptions , feelings' (Medhurst 2000 p.20). 'We think and are thought by class….it is enacted rather than something that just is' (Ball 2003 pp.6-7). Therefore, our understandings have also to include the 'practices of everyday living –

practices that are both engaged in, by, and simultaneously encircle men, women and children on a daily basis' (Weis 2004 p4). As Charlesworth notes,

> The important point is that class is a phenomenon of the flesh, of coming to inhabit the world in a certain way through powerfully internalising senses based on an objective hierarchy of relations within which individual sensibilities take shape. It concerns processes of desire and aversion through which individuals come to be located within certain social fields (2000, p.65).

Indeed, feelings about class can be raw, visceral, painful, and the ambivalence that Savage and colleagues identify perhaps points indirectly to a recognition that class engenders and embodies strong emotions in individuals, fractures and divisions in society. Much academic writing in this area focuses on exposing the way in which working class lives are seen as deficient, portrayed as limited and limiting. To be labelled and/or identify oneself as working class can be a source of both deep shame and pride. Skeggs (2004 p.173) argues that there is a denial of working class experiences, based on the false assumption that the viewpoints and perceptions of the middle classes are universal , and Medhurst cites Skeggs's earlier work, 'Who would want to be seen as working class? (perhaps only academics are left)' (1997 p.95).

Skeggs is one of a small number of contemporary writers who write with passion and intimacy about negative, indeed deficit and damning perceptions of the working classes, especially, but not only, the white working class, as 'redundant individuals' (2004 p.94) (Further examples from the field of education include Reay 2002, Steedman 1986, Walkerdine, Lucey, and colleagues 1989, 2001).

> The working classes have been represented as 'excess, as waste, as authenticating, as entertainment, as lacking in taste, as unmodern, as escapist, as dangerous, as unruly and without shame (Skeggs 2004, p.99, also Reay et al 2006).

Skeggs writes of the 'hidden' – and not so hidden - injuries of class' (Sennett & Cobb 1973) in the representation of different groups within the working classes, again, particularly but not exclusively the white working classes, as tasteless, feckless, vulgar, and the subject of middle class derision. Terms include 'Essex girls', and more recently 'chavs', and the more general term 'white trash' (in the US, 'trailer trash') (Nayak 2006, **Preston ref**). As Weis notes, 'class is worn on our bodies as it seeps through our minds' (2004 p.13). Some research also conveys a negative portrayal of the working classes. Rubin's (1976) classic *Worlds of Pain* study identifies her American white working class respondents as victims, detailing what Bourdieu refers to as 'miserabilism' (1999, p.374)*.* She portrays them as living grim lives filled with pain: limited social relationships, restricting unfulfilling jobs and battles with poverty. Gorman's (2000) study of working class parents sets out to 'reconsider *Worlds of Pain'* . He argues that the working classes are more heterogeneous than Rubin suggests, and suggests that living more 'settled' lives is associated with having one adult in the family who has some higher education or is in or comes from a skilled blue collar occupation (p.715).
In the use of the term 'settled' Gorman is picking up the descriptors used in another classic American study, *Hard Living on Clay Street* (Howell 1972) which posited a continuum of working class life experiences from 'hard-living' to 'settled-living' (terms echoed by Lois Weis in her 2004 study of the white working classes in a de-industrializing US city). Gorman argues that both Howell and Rubin focused more analytical attention on those families that could be considered 'hard-living', hence their negative portrayals.

Here we see examples of the persistence of the traditional division of the working classes into rough/respectable, with those 'hard-living' US respondents being akin to the rough, the lumpen proletariat', or the underclass, whilst the 'settled', the respectable are aspirational, hard working, and law abiding. Lawler (2005) goes as far as to argue that the working classes have either been absorbed into the middle classes (the 'respectable' ones) or 'consigned to a workless and work-shy underclass' (the 'rough') (2005.p.434)

Indeed, members of the 'underclass' are portrayed as 'outsiders' to
mainstream society (Morris 1994 p.81, Smith 2005), the un-reachables, the
alienated, the disaffected, living morally adrift lives. 'This underclass
generally feels excluded from society, rejects commonly accepted values,
suffers from behavioural as well as income deficiencies' (Auletta 1982 p.xiii,
cited in Bauman 2005 p.74). The grouping comprises a flexible variety of poor
'others', often understood as the 'passive poor' (Auletta 1982) (long term
welfare recipients, one of the most notorious category of which is lone
mothers), petty criminals, addicts, and those engaged in an underground
economy. Bauman argues that to be consigned to this group is to be defined
by images of waste, of redundancy.

> People get cast in the underclass because they are seen as totally
> useless – something the rest of us could do nicely without. They
> are indeed, blots on an otherwise pretty landscape, ugly yet greedy
> weeds, which add nothing to the harmonious beauty of the garden
> but suck out a lot of plant feed (Bauman 2005 p.72)

The 'underclass' are seen as morally culpable, choosing, either passively or
actively to behave in ways that promote poverty and disorder, of having a
deficit culture which does not emphasise self-reliance, the work ethic, or
responsibility to either self or society. Definitions of policy 'problems' alter over
time, however, at least in presentation, and under New Labour the
'underclass' have been re-cast in less harsh terms as the 'socially excluded',
a label suggesting the potential for redemption (Hayeltt 2001, cited in Skeggs
2004, p.90), in part, at least, through work.

> The teachings of the work ethic are available to anyone who will
> listen and opportunities to work wait to be seized – the rest is up to
> the poor themselves (Bauman 2005 p.77)

What tends to be omitted from both versions (underclass / socially excluded)
is the processes by which demonised behaviours are produced within a set of

damaging, destablising and destructive social, economic and material conditions of living.

Our point here is that the working classes are heterogeneous and are reported as such, at least implicitly, by policy makers (the underclass being one category within, although sometimes beyond, the working classes). The rough/respectable distinction in both policy and research appears tenacious and difficult to escape as we shall see below. However, Smith, from his study of residents of a Greater London housing estate, argues that the simple 'rough/respectable' binary may be being re-aligned, at least by some of those to whom it is applied. Residents' different situations – such as being on benefits, or working illegally in the cash economy - led to contradictions, as both groups saw themselves as 'respectable' (for not cheating the system, and for being economically active respectively) and the other group as 'rough'.

Place, 'placing' and social class

Watts (2006) identifies a more straightforward application of rough and respectable in his study of council tenants in inner London, arguing that social distinctions take on a spatial form as people feel comfortable with others like themselves (Butler with Robson 2005, Vincent & Ball 2006). Some of our respondents also drew on a rough/respectable division to distance themselves from low status 'others' of whom they disapproved, but with whom they shared the same space. This proximity serves to render the distinction fragile (Watts 2006 p.794).

The location for our research - inner London - also differentiates, in some respects, these populations from the working classes of other places (see for example Charlesworth's 2000 study of Rotherham in the North of England, and Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst's 2005 study of Cheadle in Manchester). For example, Charlesworth's portrayal of mid-1990s Rotherham, very much a 'worlds of pain' one, shows a depressed and isolated working class forced to live within a stagnant local economy (as traditional industries decline). Written with passionate anger, he argues that poverty, alienation, and boredom encourage depression and a sense of individual helplessness and

powerlessness in the face of declining conditions within civil society (2000 p.207), resulting in a diminished, impoverished 'inner life, with this landscape of the heart framed by necessity' (p.289).

The respondents in our study do not talk about their lives with the sense of hopelessness that Charlesworth's respondents do. There are a number of reasons for this. We conducted the research at a time when the national and local economies were strong. Most of our respondents were relatively securely employed, albeit in low paid jobs, whereas unemployment was rife in Rotherham at the time of Charlesworth's research. Most (two thirds) of Charlesworth's respondents were men, largely it seems young men[iii]. Most of our respondents were women, all, clearly, were parents. Children are mentioned positively but fleetingly by one or two respondents in Rotherham (it is impossible from the presentation of the data to be sure). Children were at the heart of the interviews we conducted. Weis's (2004) study of the white working class in a de-industralising, US city points up very strongly the difference in drive, determination and desire to achieve a 'settled' life between the women and (some of) the men in her research. 'Women keep moving forward as many of their men collapse around them. Fuelled by a deeply rooted sense of possibility…. a sense of possibility born of the struggles of the women's movement as well as the opening up of the economic sector to women,' (Weis 2004 p.171).

Two recent studies of working class communities in inner and outer London (Bermondsey, Evans 2006 ; Morden, Smith 2005) would appear to have more points of convergence with our study, and indeed there is much in the data that is familiar. However, they focus mainly on white working class populations living within tightly defined localities. Within this small canvas, space and place remain key. The local economies are obviously a major factor here, but beyond the economic sphere the characteristics, demographics and history of a place also influence the 'moral geographies' (Duncan 2005), how 'things' – from social relationships and networks to attitudes to the law – 'are done here'. These are not necessarily uniform across a locality as Smith makes clear in his discussion of those who work in

the cash economy and those (few) who do not. Our sample is multi-racial, and includes migrant families; the localities from which they are drawn are less well-defined than in Smith or Evans study. Thus we found heterogeneous attitudes and values, with the influence of close friends and family being clear. Thus views on childcare (the subject of our interviews) differed concerning for instance, mothers of young children working or staying at home on benefits, although there were also points of convergence (a distrust of 'unknown' childminders for example).

What we can conclude from the above is that place, gender, occupational status, age, and whether one has a partner and children all differently orientate members of 'the working class'. Ethnicity is also a key and highly pertinent variable. However, we cannot in the limitations of this one paper focused on analysing and defining 'working class' experiences, adequately discuss the complex interactions of ethnicity and class. This will be the subject of later work. It is possible however to note that it is extremely hard to predict what areas of commonality and difference will exist between a white working class, unemployed young man in Rotherham, a white, middle-aged, skilled worker in Cheadle (Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst 2005) and a black, working class mother with a clerical job, in inner London.

Parenting in the 'inner city'

Our respondents were all living either in the Stoke Newington area of Hackney in North London or Battersea in South London. The starting-point of our research was one specific aspect of their lives – childcare. We also asked questions about the related areas of employment and running a home, and collected data from our respondents on their occupations, their education and their housing. These data give us glimpses into some of the social and material limitations with which the respondents have to work (Vincent, Braun and Ball 2006). However, our emphasis here is on their agency and the different forms and volumes of resources that they are able to deploy in 'coping' with these limitations, although particular forms of agency can change the limitations of circumstance – for better or worse. These are not fixed entities, but rather dynamic personal and social variables. All social beings

are able to exercise agency, but to different extents depending on circumstances and relevant resources.

Update tables There are 61 families are included in our study to date, 29 in Battersea and 32 families in Stoke Newington. 55 of the interviews were with mothers, two were with heterosexual couples, and four with fathers. Just over half of the families were in live-in partnerships (34), 20 described themselves as single mothers and seven reported live-out partners. In terms of ethnic background, 25 of the 61 mothers came from white UK or white other backgrounds and 26 came from African / Caribbean backgrounds (see table 1)

- Table 1 about here -

32 of the 61 families lived in social housing, and table 2 gives details.

- Table 2 about here -

Whilst safety in Battersea and Stoke Newington was a key theme, ('there's been, in the lift area, there's been blood, big pools of blood [….] And I don't go out at night, I won't go out at night. Andrea, white, single mother, at home, B.), over half the sample (34 out of 61) had grown up in the immediate locality, and had clear attachments to the areas, to local family members and friends, networks which generated a feeing of belonging and which survived the fears and dangers.

We also collected data on respondents' education

- Table 3 about here -

When we asked respondents about their education, they were often vague about exact qualifications and dates, which is perhaps indicative of the

marginal significance in their lives of compulsory education. This contrasts with our middle class sample (Vincent & Ball 2006) who had no trouble in offering detailed recitals of their educational histories at school and beyond. A utilitarian practical view of education prevailed, its importance for getting a job was recognised, and , as can be seen from table 3, eight of the mothers had degrees, returning to study in later life, and reaching higher education institutions. One, Lauren, a black single mother, currently nearing the end of a BA in social policy, was typical of these adult returners, in that her route to a degree had been long and tortuous, involving a slow accumulation of qualifications over more than 10 years. This stands in stark contrast to the seamless way many middle class students move from school to university.

In our analysis of the transcripts, we noted that respondents frequently voiced a sense of differentiation, of 'me' (the 'respectable') and 'them' (the 'rough') , a sense of 'others' not like me, not with my values, a lawless and undependable 'other'. This comes out clearly in discussion of their localities where respondents 'keep to themselves' (Reay and Lucey 2000 p.418) and the fear of violent crime is pervasive, and in education where low standards and poor behaviour are thought to dominate. Reay and Lucey (2000) argue from their observations of life on large council estates in North London that this disassociation from neighbours is connected to individuals' desires and strategies for class mobility, a generational process of transformation which must be achieved and sustained not only on a structural level, through physical distance (moving off the estate) but also via the kind of physic distancing and differentiation effected by the production and organisation of such defence mechanisms as 'keeping to yourself' and 'not getting involved' (p.419). Natasha (black single mother, at home), in our study, is an interesting example here. She lives on a large estate in Battersea with a poor reputation, about which she is ambivalent. The 'me' and 'them' binary is not so clear cut here. She talks with some wry humour of the stereotyped image of 'single mum, estate, block of flats' and comments on the number of friends she has on the estate in a similar position: 'we all got put here' [when transferred from temporary accommodation]. Note the enforced passivity of 'put'. She talks about the close-knit nature of networks between the people she knows on the

estate. She simultaneously participates in these social contacts, whilst also seeking to distance herself and her children from their exclusivity and (to her) their ultimately limited character. Within the limits of the opportunities available to her, Natasha is trying to position her children for what she sees as a better life, 'and hopefully [they'll] go to a good school'. Her use of 'hopefully' here suggests her sense that the quality of education her children receive is outside of her control. Nevertheless she has a clear strategy of sending her daughter to a primary school which is not the 'estate school' to give her access to a 'different [and it is implied, 'better'] social circle'.

Respondents seemed largely ready to accept New Labour's individualist discourse of family life stressing responsibility and self-sufficiency (Fairclough 2000, cited in Skeggs 2004), and this is apparent in discussions around paid work (for details see Braun et al 2006), where those active in the labour market sought to distance themselves from disreputable 'others', those on benefits who made no effort to find work. Work is in itself virtuous. To give just one example,

> There's a woman that comes in, a customer, I mean she must be in her forties….she's dressed with the latest gear, her nails are always done, every week she tells me she gets her nails done. And she's on benefits, (Diana, black mother, separated, part-time post office clerk, SN)

This enthusiasm for participation in the labour market amongst working class women is documented in other recent research (Morris 1994, Rubin 1994, Weis 2004, Power 2005).

<u>Class fractions</u>

One emerging theme here is the heterogeneity of the working classes, and this perhaps points to the need for some kind of conceptualisation of working class fractions. As we noted above, the influence of the rough/respectable binary is pervasive and difficult to escape. We are far from sure that we have succeeded in doing so. The problem is that the binary

 simply gives crude labels to apparent differences which are complex and multi-faceted. However, one conceptualisation we found useful was that employed by McCrone (1994) in his study of Kirkcaldy: a distinction between those who 'get by', who are completely caught up in coping with daily life in the short term, on a daily or weekly basis, and those who are 'making out', taking a longer term perspective, having plans and strategies for the future 'which give some forward projection' to their lives (p.69) (although, importantly, these plans may not all be realised). McCrone's (1994) sample included middle and working class families, and he comments 'what is not at all in evidence is the stereotypical pattern of middle class long-term forward planning and working class short-termism' (p.80). Indeed, we found plenty of families amongst our respondents who appeared to be 'making out' (see below for one example). An attraction of McCrone's distinction is that it stresses process, activity, and the differential degrees of agency people are able to exercise over their lives. Like McCrone's respondents, ours were seeking to cope with a variety of possibilities, necessities and contingencies However we have adopted different terminology to McCrone to reflect different emphases, including respondents' degree of embedded-ness in social networks of friends and/or family. We use the terms '*managing to cope*' and '*struggling to cope'*, as they seem to us to be indicative of our range of concerns. Most of our respondents were 'managing to cope'*.* They are 'centred', relatively secure, and exercise agency strategically in their lives, engaging purposefully with structural constraints, if not always able to move beyond them. Those 'struggling to cope' are using all their agency in dealing with the demands of daily life.

Whilst this still does not wholly escape the rough/respectable binary, we hope it is an advance as it is not overtly judgemental, and focuses on the ways in which individuals are able to exercise agency, or at least the forms of agency which are regarded as legitimate or appropriate in terms of parenting, social relationships and the labour market. However, we are aware that our formulation of 'struggling to cope' does not wholly escape a pervasive discourse of social and/or moral deficiencies.

Clearly, 'managing' is constructed in line with dominant political discourses and norms, its hallmarks are conventionality and responsibility, although there may be other forms of managing which are thoroughly unconventional (see Smith 2005). Thus, we would emphasise the respondents' conformity to discourses around being a 'good' citizen and a 'good' parent. The majority of our respondents talked in fairly conservative terms about the behaviour they wanted their children to adopt – or most particularly – to avoid, and their desire for their children to learn and develop[iv]. Their response can be understood as an effort to 'get on', to 'better' themselves in conventional terms, but with limited resources. The enthusiasm for paid work is crucial to this. As Power concludes from her study of single mothers 'it is through [paid] work and consumption that members of contemporary western industrialised societies – including women – reach full citizenship' (2005 p.656). The working class families who were 'managing to cope' displayed a considerable concern with the future, 'futurity' (Prout 2000) calls it, and this is evident in, amongst other areas, their plans for their children's compulsory education. They may not however all have the relevant economic or cultural resources with which to affect these plans (for example, several parents spoke of their hopes of attaining places at private or faith schools which were based on misunderstandings about the entry procedures). Overall, our respondents who were 'managing to cope', displayed an acceptance of individual responsibility, self improvement, achieving 'full citizenship' and belonging through paid employment, and a desire for market agency. Their agency can be recognised as socially and morally appropriate, given the structures and political discourses of contemporary UK society.

Daisy is an example of a 'managing to cope', embedded parent. She is a mixed race, single mother with one son (2yrs) who split up with her partner when she was pregnant. She is close to her family and has received a lot of support from them. Daisy left school at 17 with an NVQ in Business Studies . She works part time in Hackney for a small local company as a sales assistant and office administrator. Her son has a full time place at a local authority nursery with which she is very happy, feeling that attending nursery has aided her son in his development. Being in employment is important to

Daisy ('I enjoy working , I really do. I couldn't imagine not working…from sixteen I've always worked'). As she works part time she has some time on her own to do the 'housework and shopping and bits and pieces', and then spends weekends with her son. She is *lucky,* she says to have a boss who is supportive, being fairly flexible with her working hours and understanding when her child is sick[v]. As well as being close to her family, she has friends in the area, many now with small children of their own. Her council flat is on a 'nice, small estate' with a garden area where children can play. Nevertheless, Daisy is still subject to restrictions that would not apply to more affluent families. She is currently in a one bedroom council flat with her son, on the waiting list for a two bedroom one. Her finances are heavily dependent on benefits and working tax credit.

In contrast, Bernie and Caroline, a white couple, are in a much more 'peripheral' position, compared to Daisy; they are 'struggling to cope'. They are subject to considerable management and intervention by the state. Bernie does not officially live with Caroline and the children, but visits regularly. They had recently been involved in a serious dispute with neighbours. Their two children (2 and 6) were on the 'at risk' register for a while and the couple were dispatched by social services to attend a course at a family resource centre. A worker there found a part time nursery place for the youngest child, although the nursery is at some considerable distance from Caroline's home, and her first impressions of it are not favourable. Bernie appears in the transcript as the dominant partner, correcting Caroline frequently. Caroline was felt by social services to be isolated, and although the transcript reveals she has made some friends with other mothers, they appear as fairly casual relationships. Caroline has no family in the UK and Bernie's family, who live outside London, appear unsympathetic.

> My mum had four children, and [she] coped with us all by herself without any help….My mum had us seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. But Caroline finds this hard work to do, yeah….As [child's] grandma says, 'I had to deal with Bernie and I had twice as many kids as you had, so shut up.

Exercising agency, or planning ahead is difficult for them both, they have limited economic and social resources. They are both unemployed and on benefits - Bernie used to do building work and Caroline waitressing – and frequently 'run out' of money each week. Whist Daisy talks of her son being a 'joy', Bernie and Caroline seem more ambivalent. Although Bernie comments that the children are 'no problem' and Caroline that their son 'is not difficult at all', Bernie also describes the little boy as a 'wild cat', a 'little terror', and 'really strong headed' and Caroline says he is 'going all over the place'. This may be indicative of no more than the usual challenging behaviour of two year olds, but Bernie and Caroline are already parenting from the periphery (in social and economic terms) and as such have fewer resources with which to deal with such behaviour.

The 'managing/struggling to cope' model is not a binary, but rather two positionings that allow for movement between them as respondents' circumstances change. It is a device, a heurism, which links agency to circumstance, and one which seeks to avoid moral labelling. As we noted above, the majority of our respondents were located towards the 'managing to cope' end of the continuum. Indeed, there were only two couples (no single mothers) who appeared at the time of the interview to be clearly 'struggling to cope', currently unable to exercise much in the way of agency. However, there were also respondents who had been struggling in the recent past. Sheila is an example here. She is a white, single mother with three young children. She had suffered from post-natal depression and agoraphobia, and her two older children experience learning and developmental difficulties. She talks about her recent involvement in the local Sure Start and its activities as a 'lifeline', providing her with friends, advice, support, childcare and opportunities to 'learn…to make myself a better person' (note the emphasis on self-improvement). All of this, plus a college course, has allowed her 'to f[ind] myself again, because I lost her for a while but now she's back'. Sheila's transcript attests to the positive role of some forms of state support for parents who have become isolated. But it is important to note that she was not passive, prior to her involvement with Sure Start. She had changed her

son's school, for instance, after she felt the headteacher was not taking enough steps to prevent bullying, and had tried to refer herself to social services.

We have other respondents who we classified as 'managing to cope' overall, but had precarious elements to their lives, which constrained their ability to exercise agency. These included individuals who suffered from depression, were socially isolated, or had marked financial difficulties. 'Managing to cope' to a great extent rests upon the continuation of things as they are – crises, unexpected events or other disruptions can destabilise what are often fragile balances of financial, social and emotional resources.

'Managing to cope' manifests itself in slightly different ways in different ethnic and religious groupings. For a small group of female respondents from orthodox Jewish and Muslim communities, 'managing to cope' was a valued identity, but one that marginalised female involvement in paid work, and placed caring and home-making responsibilities as central. The Ultra Orthodox Jewish female respondents in Hackney had all been involved in paid work at some time (usually within the community), but given the tradition of very large families (over six children is not uncommon), it was usually only possible to work after the first one, or when the children were sufficiently mature. Although informal, but organised childcare (such as childminders) is common amongst the community, being present as a mother and fulfilling your domestic responsibilities was seen as paramount (also Blumen 2002). For the young traditional Muslim[vi] women to whom we spoke, paid work was less common – although not unusual – as their domestic responsibilities in multi-generational family households were again central[vii]. As Zeenat says, 'If I was to work then nothing would be done, the cooking and all that (Zeenat, Asian mother, with partner, at home, SN). In effect, 'managing' is here defined within traditional household gender roles.

Conclusions

We are suggesting that one way of understanding the lives of urban working class families is to consider the extent to which they *'manage or struggle to*

cope'. This offers one way of thinking about the heterogeneity of the working class(es), alongside the differences in attitude and experiences based on place, gender, occupational status, education, age and family membership. The heterogeneity is also underpinned by individual possession and activation of diverse capitals (see also McCrone 1994). The working class respondents who are 'managing to cope' had plentiful and useful social capital in the form of supportive family and networks of friends; they had developed transferable cultural capital in the form of educational credentials gained as adults and/or experience in the work place, and they had some economic resources gained through a combination (although often unstable) of employment and benefits. They were 'making out'. They either had a strong engagement with the labour market, or if they are mothers at home caring for young children, they had either a partner in that position, and/or were planning their re-entry into the labour market. They had plans and strategies for the future, both for themselves and their children, what one of us has described as a 'project of betterment' (Ball 2006, internal project paper). They had 'imagined futures' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2006) – plans for training, study, work and their children's education, but these were often marked by vagueness and uncertainty as to what was realisable and possible.

Those currently located in a more peripheral positioning were '*struggling to cope'* . They lacked credit in terms of one or more sets of social, cultural and/or economic resources, and had a tenuous or absent engagement with the labour market. They were 'getting by', a process which in itself requires 'careful and complex coping devices' (McCrone 1994 p.70), likely to command all of their energies.

Finally, we note that for all the parents in our sample, agency is relative, highly limited in comparison to that of the middle class professional families whom we previously studied (Vincent & Ball 2006). Precariousness and fragility defines even those 'managing to cope'. In contrast, the middle class families had financial security, credentials and qualifications, insurance policies and home ownership. The working class parents, were, should they wish to move, mostly subject to housing association and council property

availability and regulations. They were a less well credentialed group so had fewer assets with which to negotiate the labour market, were particularly vulnerable to downturns in the economy, and were not able to insulate themselves from the unsafe aspects of their localities, as effectively as the middle class sample. (Although the latter lived in close proximity to the working class respondents, crime and personal safety were much less frequently mentioned when their opinions on their locality were solicited, Vincent & Ball 2006). The complex financial calculations which allowed the working class families to work and pay for childcare were often facilitated by, if not entirely dependent on, tax credits, a confusing and occasionally inefficient system (see Braun et al 2006). Thus, we wish to balance in our analysis a recognition of both structural limitation and individual agency, to recognise and describe the heterogeneity *within* the working classes, whilst also being cognisant of the much more marked divide *between* the middle and working classes.

==Comment somewhere that ironically the peceptions we haven't included here are of the respondents themselves. We did ask a smaller section of the sample whom we re-interviewd about class and their understandings of their wn class psotion, but this material is being analysed. Didn't include in initial interviews because limit to what a schedule on childcare arrangements can bear.==

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Table 1

Ethnic background*	Mothers (n = 61)	Fathers (n = 61)
White UK**	19	18
White other	6	4
African / Caribbean	26	11
Mixed race	1	1
Asian subcontinent	6	6
East Asian	2	1
Middle Eastern	1	1
No information	0	19

* categories assigned by research team

** includes three ultraorthodox Jewish mothers and fathers

Table 2

Housing	Families (n = 61)
Council or Housing Association	32
Privately rented	6
Living with family	10
Owner-occupied	6
Renting from family	2
Accommodation with employment	2
Other	2
No information	1

Table 3

Education – highest qualification obtained	Mothers (n = 61)	Fathers (n = 61)
None	4	2
GCSE / O-level	12	9
FE (vocational)	14	10
A-level / access course	7	0
Degree	8	14
Non-UK	12	7
Other	4	3**
No information	0	16

* orthodox Jewish education (3), still in compulsory education (1)

** orthodox Jewish study (3)

[i] This particular paper is concerned with academic discussions of class, rather than with our respondents' understandings. During a later stage of the research, we re-interviewed 20 parents. Our schedule included questions about how they understood their own class position and whether that terminology had any relevance for them. This data is currently being analysed.

[ii] However MacKenzie et al 2006 argue that such collective identities do remain amongst some traditional occupational communities (such as steelworkers) even despite the demise of the industries.

[iii] The representation of class is typically gendered and raced, but often unacknowledged as so. Paul Willis' seminal '*Learning to Labour*' was also criticised for this omission by several feminist writers, eg Arnot (2006) and Griffin (2005).

[iv] They differed from the middle class mothers in our earlier research in that they did not necessarily accept 'total' responsibility for their children's development, nor necessarily develop clear strategies for ensuring stimulation, and social, intellectual, creative and physical development.

[v] Having an understanding and flexible employer was commonly seen as luck rather than what should be a right.

[vi] People who identify as 'Muslim' in the UK are a much larger and more heterogeneous category than those who identify as Ultra-orthodox Jews (which is not to deny distinctions within the Ultra-orthodox communities in Hackney). The Muslim women we spoke to were contacted through a mother and toddler group, advertised as for Muslim women. The majority of our respondents had their family origins in India.

[vii] This is not to say that gendered divisions of labour were not being challenged, certainly with respect to childcare. Muslim and Ultra-orthodox Jewish women spoke of the importance of men being involved in caring for their children, and gave instances of their husbands carrying out such labour (despite in some cases the reaction of the older generation).