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Qualitative Upward Mobility, the Mass-Media and 'Posh' Masculinity in Contemporary North-East Britain: A Micro Sociological Case-Study.

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Qualitative upward mobility, the mass-media and ‘middleclass’ masculinity: a micro sociological case-study.

Abstract

The Changers are seven British men who have experienced upward mobility in their lives. A vast body of quantitative insights into upward mobility exist. Yet the qualitative, experiential dimensions of upward mobility are understudied; especially in relation to the lives of upwardly mobile males. This article presents an empirically rigours corrective that qualitatively outlines the Changers’ upwardly mobile existences and views. In particular, this article examines how sections of the mass-media have produced a didactic notion of ‘middleclass’ masculinity which the Changers feel compelled to replicate in their everyday lives, largely via the men consuming specific, expensive commodities. Attention is drawn to the anxieties which the Changers endure because of their social mobility and associated attempts to qualitatively appear ‘middleclass’.

Keywords: class; masculinity; mass-media; social mobility/alternative approach to mobility analysis; qualitative research.

Introduction

Historically sociology has predominantly analysed social mobility as a quantitative, macro phenomenon. More recently however sociologists (e.g. Miles et al, 2011: 419) have outlined a qualitative-based ‘new research agenda in mobility studies’ (Friedman, 2013: 1) which focuses on the subjective ways social mobility is experienced by social agents and which investigates how ‘people make sense of their social trajectories not just through ‘objective’ markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artefacts of class-inflected cultural identity’ (Friedman, 2013: 1). Thus, the analysis of social mobility is diversifying: statistical insights are being complimented by micro, empirically rooted investigations that consider how those who move between social classes understand their move and engage with class-infused cultural symbols and artefacts as part of their move.

In expansion of the emerging ‘new agenda’ in mobility studies this article qualitatively explores how a cohort of seven, closely-knit, white, heterosexual males aged in their early thirties (the Changers) who live in the North of England (UK) phenomenologically account for and understand their social mobility. In particular this article’s exploration is concerned with outlining the empirical relationship between the Changers’ upward mobility and the Changers’
exposure to and interpretation of a global, mass-media system. The Changers aim to qualitatively project what they collectively refer to as ‘middleclass’ masculine identity within their everyday lives and self-presentations. The Changers believe that visually appearing middleclass will help them, to borrow from Elias and Scotson (1994), become ‘established’ members of a new social class and disassociate themselves from the ‘poor’ class and community they derive from; in which the Changers are now ‘outsiders’. The central purpose of this article is to draw attention to the ways that the Changers rely upon the mass-media to provide them with a didactic insight into the sorts of commodities - or ‘artefacts and symbols’ - they must conspicuously consume, display and embody in order to aesthetically appear subjectively ‘middleclass’ within their upwardly mobile life-courses. It is illustrated that a particular version of embourgeoised masculinity exists in the media, and that the Changers replicate this version of masculinity in their own existences as part of their attempts to qualitatively appear as members of a new social class.

This article evolves over four sections. Firstly, theoretical background is given. Secondly, the research design that informs this article is explained and the Changers are introduced as a sociologically relevant cohort. Thirdly, findings on the relationship between the Changers’ upwardly mobile lives and the Changers’ interactions with the mass-media are presented. Finally, conclusions are presented.

Theorising and Contributing to Social Mobility

Upward mobility occurs when a person’s socio-economic circumstances improve to the extent that they move from one (potentially opaque) social class category into another, higher social class category (Breen, 2004). A vast number of quantitative insights into social mobility exist. These insights stem from Glass’s (1954) work which established the initial epistemological and methodological framework on which subsequent large-scale, statistical measurements of
social mobility have been based. Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford – after initially setting out to update the work of Glass one generation on – affirmed the predominantly quantitative approach to analysing social mobility within British sociology from the 1970s onwards. More recently, distinctively ‘non-Nuffield’ quantitative analysis into mobility has emerged; such as that produced through the Cambridge Stratification Seminars. Further, an abundance of quantitative insights into social mobility exist in the sociologies of other countries, most notably the USA.

Despite their undoubted macro merit, quantitative insights into social mobility fail to explore the micro, culturally nuanced, experiential aspects of upward mobility (see Miles et al, 2011: 418; Friedman, 2013 and Savage et al, 2013: 4 for an extension of this line of thought). In recognition of this anomaly, a small but convincing body of work that looks at social mobility from a qualitative, empirical perspective emerged in the late 1990s under the title of the ‘alternative approach’ (AA) to analysing social mobility (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Crompton, 2006).

Instead of defining class statistically and measuring the number of agents who move between social classes, AA deviates from its quantitative cousin by focusing upon how the theme of class is subjectively enacted, understood and engaged with by agents as they move between social classes. While quantitative mobility analysis ontologically assumes social mobility is a benevolent process - in line with Goldthorpe et al’s assertion that social mobility creates a happier experience than social immobility (1980: 247) – AA has consistently ventured evidence which suggests that the upwardly mobile experience ambivalence as they change class (e.g. Friedman, 2012, Lawler, 1999); especially when working class students experience social mobility through educational institutions (Ingram, 2011; Reay et al, 2009). The apparent ambivalence which the upwardly mobile may experience in contemporary society identified in
AA was also evident in the lives of the upwardly mobile existing in earlier epochs according to cultural insights such as Strauss’s (1971: 188) (which outlines the disappointment that the upwardly mobile feel when they arrived at a point in their lives only to find nothing ‘as it was supposed to be’); Bott’s (1957); Bell’s (1968), Hopper’s (1981), Sennett and Cobb’s (1972: 36-7) and Lenski’s (1954): all of which collectively lament the idea that upward mobility is a happy process. As part of its analysis this work draws into focus the anxiety which the Changers experience because of their social mobility and media-engagements, thus concurring with AA’s counterintuitive assertion that mobility is a negative experience.

Within AA the qualitative experiences of upwardly mobile women have been made explicit (see Payne and Abbott, 1990; and Lawler’s 1999 close-scale analysis of the ways seven upwardly mobile women narrate their existentially difficult move from ‘working class’ to ‘middleclass’ status). Similarly, in sociology more broadly, empirical attention has been given to how class thematically relates to women’s lives (e.g. Taylor’s 2011 analysis of the class-struggles women living in the post-industrial north-east of England face). However, as articulated by Morgan (2005: 172), within AA and sociological analysis of class more generally: ‘masculinity remains a relatively underexplored aspect in the examination of class practices’ … ‘only in relatively recent times have any discussions of gender and class have come to focus on the practices of men rather than on those of women (Ibid: 176). Accordingly, while qualitative insights into the intersection of class, social mobility and womanhood exist, the qualitative relationship between class, social mobility and manhood is under-explored (see Miles et al, 2011, for a rare reversal of this trend; and Ingram’s 2011 work on upwardly mobile schoolboys). Sociologists can thus legitimately ask AA: ‘what about the qualitative experiences of upwardly mobile men’?
Experiencing and entering a new, unfamiliar social class requires one to rethink if not modify their identity, as illustrated through Reay et al’s (2009) description of students from working class backgrounds adjusting their identities to find acceptance in the middleclass habitus of an elite university. Similarly upwardly mobile men like the Changers must adjust their identities if they are to successfully move into middleclass social categories and institutions, and be accepted among a new class of peers. Yet, paradigmatically, we know little about how upwardly mobile males attempt to find acceptance, belonging and legitimacy within a new social class, or the impact that such attempts have on the well-being of men. Thus, there is clear scope for the emergence of thorough, empirically rooted insights into how men experience social mobility and accordingly interact with the theme of class within AA. By considering the Changers this article provides such an insight that specifically focuses on the central part that the mass-media qualitatively plays in the lives and identities of a cohort of upwardly mobile men living in late-modernity.

Other current AA projects explore how class is a barrier to social mobility occurring (e.g. the Bristol Paired Peers Project). In contrast, this work focuses on the less-explored question of how those (men) who are socially mobile - despite their class of origin – qualitatively frame and negotiate their entrance into a new social class. By focusing on how social mobility is lived by agents at the micro, everyday level AA polemically neglects the impact that macro influences have on the micro lives of the socially mobile. By drawing the unique relationship between the Changers’ social mobility and the wider mass-media that exists around the men into focus, this article highlights that the Changers dramaturgically ‘perform’ and define their mobility not autonomously of but in accordance with a central aspect of the wider social structure that exists around them. By so doing, this article complements and extends the ontology of AA and related projects.
Research Design and Research Participants

The Changers were researched during two phases of fieldwork. Gym D is a public gymnasium in the pseudonymous, post-industrial town of Dramen. Dramen is located in the north of England (UK) and is situated fifteen miles from a major northern city. Dramen is associated with high levels of crime, unemployment, deprivation and suicide. As part of a wider study into masculinity and gym-use in post-industrial Britain a poster was displayed on a notice board in Gym D in January 2007 which asked male users of Gym D who live in Dramen to be ‘questioned on life’. 42 male respondents contacted the author after seeing the poster. These 42 men functioned as a pool of consenting research participants. An individual, semi-structured qualitative interview was conducted with each participant. Interviews occurred between February 2007 and December 2007 (phase one of fieldwork). Phase one interviews lasted around one hour and took place in a quiet corner of a Dramen coffee shop.

The coffee shop functioned as a space that was methodologically conducive to empirically truthful data being elicited from participants. Not all spaces are conducive to truthful data being elicited. If interviews had been conducted in Gym D – as well as interviews being interrupted by the gym’s users and loud music – participants would have potentially felt inclined to ‘perform’ masculinity in a certain way given Gym D’s machismo culture, and thereby responded to interview questions in a potentially untruthful way. By conducting interviews in the coffee shop participants were questioned in a space where they could ‘be themselves’ and respond to questions naturally, without having to keep up a masculine pretence that would have potentially polluted the objectivity of the data the author elicited.

Each qualitative interview in phase one was structured around 30 leading, open-ended questions which probed the phenomenological meaning that participants ascribe to aspects of
their existences such as their labour lives, futures and identities. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The author used visual aids in interviews to elicit meaningful data from participants in congruence with the trend for social scientists to employ aesthetically led data induction methods (see Banks, 2001). Serendipitously, the author took some magazines on bodybuilding and men’s fashion along to his first day of interviews to read between participants arriving. In his first interview the author often referred to visuals in the magazines to discuss subjective notions like ideal body types (thereby showing participants different sorts of male bodies – some heavily muscular, some less so – in interviews and asking which bodies participants prefer) and fashion preferences (thus showing different masculine styles depicted in the magazine’s adverts and asking participants which style looks best and why). The magazines became permanent visual aids employed in all subsequent interviews due to the author seeing their usefulness as data inductive devices.

**Identifying Mobility**

During phase one, seven closely-knit, heterosexual white men were identified as being significant within the research pool on account of them existing as a cohort of upwardly mobile males in a pool of otherwise socially immobile men. These men were labelled as Changers in the second-order sociological tradition. The Changers are referred to via the pseudonyms Richard, Adam, Tom, Luke, Phil, Gary and Chris. The Changers were brought up in households that adhere to the definition of ‘traditional working class’ ventured by Savage et al (2013). The Changers describe their upbringings as ‘poor’, ‘surrounded by ignorance’ and ‘polluted by people with no hope and ambition’. In contrast to their upbringings the Changers worked as contemporary knowledge workers during phase one, in the following roles: a barrister’s clerk (and training to become a barrister); a data analyst for the NHS; a computer programmer for a
multi-national accountancy firm, a mortgage adviser for a bank, an IT salesman for a multi-national software company, a ‘marketing executive’ for a local firm and a recruitment agent for a national firm. The Changers’ migrated from Dramen to a northern city on a daily basis as part of their labour lives.

Although this article is primarily concerned with the Changers’ experiences of social mobility at a qualitative level some attention needs to be given to the question: on what basis are the Changers objectively upwardly mobile in line with extant sociological measures? Following Bourdieu, recent work has shown that an agent’s social class can be measured in relation to the economic, social and cultural capital a social agent has (Savage et al, 2013). If an agent acquires higher levels of Bourdieusian capital over time – especially in comparison with their parents – social mobility has occurred: that agent has entered a higher social class to the one they derive from on the basis of their heightened capital. When this capital-defined measure is applied to the Changers in mind of the Changers’ working lives and educational attainments (both of which are seen as key indicators of social mobility in AA and quantitative mobility analysis) it is clear that a level of objective social mobility has occurred in the Changers’ lives.

Those Changers who know their fathers (5/7) describe their father’s jobs as ‘manual’, ‘low paid’ ones which were often supplemented by ‘periods on the dole’ (welfare allowances). The Changers’ mothers worked as either fulltime housewives (4/7) or (3/7) housewives with low-paying ‘part time jobs on the side’ (as a ‘cleaner’, ‘waitress’ and ‘dinner lady’). The Changers’ parents worked in jobs categories as L12 (semi-routine occupations) in NS-Sec classification terms and received little capital via their work. In contrast, the Changers all work in fulltime, white-collar office jobs which are defined by information technology based labour processes and which are salaried and cemented through legally binding contracts and pension schemes. The Changers gain levels of pecuniary stability and disposable income (economic capital);
occupational prestige (cultural capital) and work with ‘professional networks’ (social capital) through their jobs, which are categorised as L4 (lower professional and higher technical occupations) in NS-Sec classification terms. The Changers’ average salary is, purportedly, £29,000 per annum which is high for men of their age living in their region. In terms of education, the Changers’ parents all ‘left school’ at the age of 16 with few qualifications. In juxtaposition, all of the Changers attended their local sixth form until the age of eighteen as A-level students having gained at least 5 GCSEs at A – C grades, and all but one of the Changers attended a post-1992 university. The Changers’ educational attainments represents further capital in their existences

Thus, through their working lives and educational attainments the Changers have acquired levels of capital which mean the men belong to a different social class to the class they were brought up. The Changers’ salaries and educations act as dependent and independent variables relating to their mobility respectively. The Changers have transcended their working class roots to become members of the ‘New Affluent Workers’ social category identified by Savage et al (2013); i.e. the men’s lives have become defined by ‘moderately good economic capital, moderately poor mean score of social contacts, though high range, moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital’ (Savage et al, 2013: 12).

The Changers, aware of their social mobility, describe their current selves as ‘educated, posh ‘middleclass yuppies’. The Changers ventured radically different answers to the question ‘how shall I live?’ (Giddens, 1991: 4) in phase one interviews to other participants. While other, socially immobile participants merely aimed to ‘get by in life by just keeping head down and not expecting ower (over) much’, the Changers suggested articulate and though-provoking statements like:
Phil: ‘A proper posh lad in (northern city) ... always drinking in a top bar at the weekend with loads of money in my pocket and women with nice accents all around me while wearing my Armani suit ... like the guys in the TV show Entourage’.

Adam: ‘Having a good office job, a degree and a BMW and an eye for the good life ... leaving the past and the riff raff I knew behind me ... living in a nice area with a garden and talking about politics rather than football’.

As a cohort, the Changers have experienced almost identical life-courses. The Changers grew up in the same area of Dramen in ‘respectable’ not ‘rough’ working class homes (see Nayak, 2006, who shows how ‘respectable’ working class men from ‘traditional skilled households’ have different public identities and leisure lives to ‘rough’ working class males). The Changers attended the same low-performing state schools before embarking on white collar careers, typically after shared experiences of attending the same ‘new’ university where the men studied vocational degrees in Business and IT faculties.

The Changers provide each other with ‘relations of sociability’ within their micro existences. Marshall and Firth (1999: 33) conclude after their comparison of social mobility in ten different countries that ‘the upwardly mobile are sufficiently numerous so as to be able to provide each other with ample opportunities for relations of sociability’. In a region and space where social mobility is rare – especially among working class men – the Changers co-dependently rely on each other for solidarity.

In phase one of research the Changers were in the process of abandoning their working class roots: the men all aspired to migrate from Dramen to a ‘posher area’ and had little connection with people in Dramen other than each other. ‘Other lads’ the Changers knew from their pasts who were socially immobile were, sneeringly, rejected by the Changers. In general the
Changers looked down on their family members; despite several Changers living with their families in phase one of research.

Unlike the upwardly mobile men analysed by Miles et al (2011) who humbly describe their mobility through ‘modest stories’ the Changers are boastful of their mobility. The men do not see their mobility as a product of luck but something that they have manufactured through skill and hard-work. Other, immobile men that the Changers know apparently lack such traits:

Richard: ‘I was bullied at school by a load of scum. Now I drive a top car. Why am I here while that lot are on the dole or in prison? Because I worked hard and have the talent … they’re lazy and useless’.

Immobile people are shown in Sennett and Cobb’s work (1973:112-113) to feel inadequate when in the presence of upwardly mobile people from similar social backgrounds. However, feelings of inadequacy were not experienced by non-mobile men I researched when they’re in the presence of the Changers. Rather, immobile men implied that the Changers are ‘snooty’ and pretentious. This is explained by a ‘down to earth’ participant who has observed the Changers in social contexts:

‘(the Changers) are looking at each other to see who looks the best, like which clothes are the best and the most expensive, who has the best haircut, which lad has the best girl on his arm or the most money in his account … It is not just banter with them, they are really trying to prove they’re better than the others, like their egos are massive … it is not like that with the other lads (non-mobile men in Gym D)’.

The Changers are thus an ‘other’ in the working class community they are from because of the impact upward mobility has had upon their selves and lifestyles.
The Changers were the only men in the research pool to consider themselves to be upwardly mobile, and certainly the only men in the research pool to qualitatively change their identities from a ‘hard’, ‘rough’ masculine identity into an embourgeoisé masculine identity as a result of their engagement with the mass-media. Non-Changer participants researched in phase one belong in three broad categories of masculine identity, being either 1) unemployed males from non-respectable, rough families defined by intergenerational unemployment; 2) precariously employed blue-collar workers who work sporadically; 3) securely employed blue collar workers. The latter group, which consisted of five participants, are the one group of men in the research pool other than the Changers who may be upwardly mobile due to their income levels. However, members of this group appeared embarrassed by the suggestion they were socially mobile and passionately suggested they ‘will always be working class … no matter what’. This is demonstrated in the following extract given by an affluent participant who, after training as a builder, has ‘made plenty of money developing and selling property’:

‘you are born working class and you stay working class, you can’t be born posh and end up working class, or be born working class and end up posh … Money does not change who you are … I have a six bedroom house with a billiards room. I have about five bank accounts with fifty grand in each so I know about this but I’m still the same cause who you are is in here (beats his heart) … money doesn’t change your class … You might end up marrying some posh bastard and being loaded if you’re a lass (women) from here, but you’ll still have the values and experiences that you got from growing up working class, like me … I’d be embarrassed to go on like them (the Changers) cause they went to college (university) and work in (northern city) they think it’s ok to act like they do and come into Gym D dressed like a fucking wanker!’
Phase Two

The author contacted the Changers in the summer of 2012 to re-interview the men over a further four month period (phase two). The Changers were aged in their early thirties in phase two of fieldwork and had all moved away from Dramen to live in the ‘trendy’ suburbs of a northern city. The Changers no longer used Gym D following their move and instead ‘worked out’ their bodies in expensive city health clubs. The Changers had little connection with Dramen in phase two interviews generally, although three Changers regularly kept in touch with family members via phone calls and occasionally, reluctantly, returned to Dramen to visit family members on ‘special occasions like Birthdays and Christmas’. The Changers remained in the same jobs during phases one and two of research. As in phase one, no Changer was married or was a father during phase two interviews, and no Changer was in a committed, monogamous relationship. As single men with no family financial commitments, the Changers have large levels of disposable incomes to draw on within their upwardly mobile existences.

Phase two interviews were designed to allow the author to probe how the Changers see their social mobility further, and explore the special relationship between the Changers’ upward mobility and the mass-media which was apparent though not fully developed in data elicited during phase one. Phase two interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed so as to induce empirically informed findings and arguments. Data elicited in phase two interviews was complemented by ethnographic observations of the Changers which the author conducted in various, public leisure spaces where the Changers frequent (e.g. bars, restaurants and shopping centres) so as to understand the Changers’ views further.

The author was born in Dramen. The author is of a similar age to the Changers and grew up in a similar household to the Changers. Rapport between the author and the Changers was therefore especially easy to establish. The Changers saw the author as ‘one of us – another local
lad on the up’. Perhaps due to their comfort with the author, the Changers provided an abundance of verbal data about their upwardly mobile lives and the impact the mass-media has had upon their lifestyles and self-presentations. Most of the Changers were keen to compare their experiences of social mobility with those the author had experienced as a male academic. This comparison led to further, relevant, personal data being elicited in the field. Had the Changers and the author not had so much in common it is unlikely that as much natural data would have emerged in the research process.

**Middle class?**

During interviews, the Changers constantly referred to themselves, their lifestyles and each other as ‘middleclass’. Further, the men frequently used the term middleclass to refer to an array of items ranging from manufactures of clothing to holiday destinations and bars. Middleclass is a notoriously problematic term for those analysing social mobility qualitatively (see Lawler, 1999). Though it is a less problematic term for the Changers, who use the term as a generic, convenient way of referring to a habitus, way of life and conceptualisation of masculinity. This work goes on to examine what middleclass masculinity means to the Changers and how the men engage with the term because of their interpretation of the mass-media. For now it is enough to note that when this article explores the relationship between the Changers and ‘middleclass’ existence it does so predominantly in mind of the Changers’ subjective use of the term.

**Further Issues**

This article does not aim to imply that all men from working class backgrounds who are exposed to the media attempt to enact a media-purveyed notion of middleclass masculinity in their lives. Of all the interviewed participants, only the Changers mimic a media-purveyed notion of middleclass masculinity and engage with the media in a unique way. In
substantiation of this, I draw attention to five unemployed men from ‘non-respectable’ families and households who were researched in phase one and labelled as Drifters by the author. The Drifters represent adult versions of the ‘Charver kids’ discussed by Nayak (2003). The Drifters are exposed to the same mass-media that the Changers are. Yet the Drifters perceive and react to the mass-media in a fundamentally different way, as shown by the contrasting comments made by a Changer and a Drifter when they were shown an advert for a film during an interview, and asked ‘how the advert makes them feel’. (The advert depicts the film’s American actors in stylised poses, wearing expensive suits). The Changer commented:

Chris: ‘I see that advert and feel inspired. I think … I’d like to look like that’

In contrast, the Drifter said:

‘If you walked around dressed like that, you’d get the shite kicked oot of ya (beaten up) ... They look like a load of queers (gay men) to me to be honest. Like a bunch of pretty boys … all that is is something to watch when you get back from a hard night out, pissed and stoned, ya put it in to chill out (relax) - if ya start taking that seriously, you’re a fucking Muppet’.

Mere exposure to society’s mass media is not enough to ensure that ideals relating to middleclass masculinity are acted upon. Instead, individuals will ‘receive’ (Hall, 1973) the media in accordance with their relative situations: while the media serves to encourage social mobility and a qualitative self-invention via consumption among the Changers it functions to affirm the Drifters’ cultural apathy.

Further, elicited data did not imply that the Changers blindly follow all depictions of masculinity that the media project. Instead, the Changers reflexively distinguish between
relative portrays of masculinity they see. The men reject working class depictions of masculinity, though emulate middleclass depictions of masculinity. This is made clear by considering how the Changers interpret the scripted British ‘reality TV’ shows Geordie Shore (which depicts working class existence in the North-East of England) and Made in Chelsea (which glamorises the lives of privileged existence in one of London’s most affluent spatial areas):

Author: ‘They talk about the north south Divide and that is class things, isn’t it?’

Luke: ‘Oh completely, it’s a different world in the south … like the TV shows, like Geordie Shore, what an embarrassment, it’s all working class Geordies pissing themselves and getting drunk and fighting, like typical scumbags, they’re cheap lads (men) that are typical of low-lives in society but that other one in London, (Made in Chelsea), well those lads … it’s a different life and the show shows that, like they’re in lovely restaurants, speaking about art and wine, wearing lovely clothes with posh tarts (women) all over them, and that is because it’s a class thing, they are proper posh and middleclass, like that is how the better half live … I am more Made in Chelsea than Geordie shore, I am more about how the better half live’.

Author: ‘So you can watch a show like that and learn from it, like learn how to be the better half?’

Luke: Totally, I get ideas from it, like let’s wear a top like that, or let’s try that drink that those lads had, it sounds stupid but it’s true’.

The Changers often try to emphasise the extent of their upward mobility and prove ‘how well we are doing’. This is made evident in the way that the Changers buy each other expensive bottles of Champaign when socialising in bars and often present Champaign with statements
like ‘well I can afford this now’. Because the Changers are so keen to prove their affiliation with a new social class it is possible that some of the data they passed on to me in both phases of research is a product of machismo bravado in places. The Changers’ interview responses may represent the Changers’ social reality as the Changers want such to be, rather than how it is. Despite these reflexive concerns, the data which the Changers ventured is highly significant as it amounts to a rare collection of honest insights into social mobility from a collective of working class men moving into a middleclass social category: an understudied demographic who are the group in British society least likely to experience social mobility statistically.

In line with BSA guidelines, no harm or danger came to participants as a result of fieldwork. All participants remain anonymous. Any sensitive data gathered – such as incriminating comments – have been left out of this article.

**Findings and Analysis**

I now present four central findings on the relationship between the Changers’ qualitative social mobility and interaction with the mass-media.

**Finding 1: Consuming Class**

It has long been accepted following Veblen’s (1899) *Theory of the Leisure Class* that agents in a capitalist culture conspicuously consume commodities to both denote what social class they belong to and distinguish themselves from less affluent members in society. In line with Veblen’s thesis, the Changers all expressed that social class is ‘obviously’ qualitatively denoted through the commodities and artefacts an agent consumes and symbolically displays within their existence:

‘obviously if you’re driving a Ferrari and wearing a Rolex and using a top phone and have a good haircut people will see you differently to if you’re waiting for a bus with a
black eye and a skinhead and a tracksuit on .. one you’re upper class cause of what you own the other you’re lower class and scummy, basically one you have money the other you don’t and you’re showing the money’ (Phil).

As a result of their association between consumption and class, the Changers ritually consume what they define as ‘middleclass’ commodities. They do so in the belief that by owning and displaying middleclass commodities their identities become aligned with a middleclass identity and status semiotically. The significant thing about the Changers’ attempts to ‘buy’ and align themselves with a middleclass identity by virtue of what they own is the manner in which the media functions as a seminal reference point in the Changers’ lives. In a period of unprecedented consumption choice, the media makes the commodities which the Changers ‘need to own’ to appear subjectively middleclass explicit:

‘I see the adverts for Ralph Lauren and it’s an image thing, it’s like you’re rich and posh and middleclass if you wear that stuff … then all the celebrities wear that stuff and it enforces it … you see the image you should be in the media and you make sure you go after it and look like it, I call them my need to own things’ (Tom).

‘It’s the details that count … being a graduate and having a BMW is one thing and it impresses people, but people in the know will even check out your underwear! That’s what class is about to answer your question: is he wearing Calvin Klein underwear? Oh, he’s the real deal: he’s in the know like if he is! … I’m basically tuned into men’s fashion and the only way to know about that is watching the media like a hawk to know what underwear to have, it’s that detailed’ (Gary).

One Changer even suggested that the media functions as something of a surrogate father in his life, due to the media’s ability to help him navigate into and assimilate middleclass identity:
‘When you teach at the university those lads will have had fathers who are doctors and stuff and their dads say wear this, do that. Like a proper father. They know things because of their background. But my Dad is ignorant. He has lived in Dramen all his life and can’t see past it. If I ask him for advice on what to wear or how to act I’d be laughed at and embarrassed …. The media though, it’s kind of like a mirror into a world I want to belong in, it’s like showing us the way to be’ (Chris).

Taking on a middleclass identity when one derives from a working class background is, for Lawler, 1999, marked by two risks: 1) the risk of ‘getting it wrong’ socially in a middleclass cultural habitus by committing social faux pas, 2) the risk of being rejected among one’s original class. While the Changers don’t seem bothered about being rejected by their class of origin – indeed the Changers see their rejection in Dramen as a source of pride - the men are anxious about ‘getting it wrong’ among middleclass peers. Due to the Changers’ upbringings, the men have not had the sort of exposure to the middleclass habitus and ‘class rules’ that affluent males apparently take for granted. As a result, the media is the seminal reference point which the Changers - as men from deprived backgrounds - can consult to help them negotiate their move between classes at a qualitative, visual level. By mimicking a specific style of media-purveyed middleclass masculinity the Changers reduce their chances of ‘getting it wrong’ in middleclass spaces.

**Finding 2: American Hegemony**

The Frankfurt school of thought argues that the media functions to ideologically seduce the ‘one-dimensional’ (Marcuse, 1964) minds of proletarians in a capitalist society, thus manipulating proletarians to exist as subservient consumers. It appears that the Changers exist as contemporary versions of the one-dimensional citizens described by Frankfurt scholars: the men rely upon the media to didactically dictate what symbolic commodities they must consume
and engage with in order to qualitative appear middleclass within their upwardly mobile life-courses. Significantly, the notion of media-purveyed middleclass masculinity which the Changers mimic has typically been constructed in the American mass-media, especially via Hollywood films and American television corporations. Further, the ‘middleclass’ commodities the Changers wish to consume tend to be derivatives of American brands:

Richard: ‘I’m watching the best American shows and I’m seeing how the top boys in New York and California are dressing and how they’re getting their hair cut and how they’re going on, like what patter (conversations) they’re having and of course I’m thinking yeah, that’s how I want to be … your Abercrombie and Fitch adverts and your American aftershave adverts, there’s like a code and message in them’.

According to the Changers’ comments a media system manufactured in America but purveyed in micro locales globally is able to promote a homogenous notion of middleclass masculinity – a ‘Mac-masculinity’ to borrow from Ritzer – for men like the Changers to mimic and align themselves with via consumption. Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, which expands Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, asserts that a particular version of masculinity becomes to be seen and thought of as culturally dominant, subjectively, by a given group of men in a given locale at a specific time. A central question in masculine studies today is why some forms of masculinity are seen as hegemonic by men while others are not (see Beasley, 2012). In the context of the Changers’ lives, it seems that the American media system functions as a powerful ideological tool that defines what hegemonic masculinity constitutes.

When pressed on what, specifically, the media-defined masculine ideal which the Changers aim to emulate represents the men consistently articulated a white, heterosexual, ‘yuppie’ masculine agent who is sexually active (‘able to pull loads of hot women and take no shit from them’) and employed in a powerful, well-paying white-collar job. The idealised middleclass
male which the Changers identified was also described as ‘well spoken’, ‘educated but not nerdy’, ‘muscular but not too muscular’ and - quintessentially - involved in the conspicuous consumption of certain, branded, typically American commodities. The character ‘Patrick Bateman in the film American Psycho’, based on the novel by Bret Easton Ellis, was identified by six Changers as epitomising their notion of ideal, hegemonic masculinity.

The version of masculinity which the Changers describe as hegemonic is in congruence with the model of masculinity that Connell (2005), after updating her earlier notion of hegemonic masculinity, refers to as a ‘transnational business masculinity’ (See Besley, 2012). Although transnational business masculinity is normally associated with ‘the ‘trading rooms of investment banks, the board rooms of multinational corporations and the business class lounges of international airports (Kimmel, 2005), it has – through the mass-media - become seen as an idealised version of masculinity by the Changers; who enact this style of masculinity as far as they can as service workers living in contemporary northern England.

**Finding 3: Embodying Class**

All interviewed non-Changer users of Gym D use anabolic steroids outside of Gym D and body-build (by lifting heavy weights) inside Gym D; meaning they inhabit large, imposing physiques that are often (in 95% of cases) tattooed. In contrast, the Changers performed ‘toning’ exercises (by lifting light weights) and cardio-vascular activities in Gym D, and participated in low fat, high protein diets outside of the gym. The Changers continue to utilise gyms in this way, having joined expensive leisure clubs in a northern city since migrating from Dramen. Consequently the Changers embody ‘defined’, ‘athletic’ physiques which have anatomically visible veins and clearly separated muscle groups. No Changer has a tattoo. No Changer uses or has ever used anabolic steroids to modify their anatomy. The Changers’
‘athletic’ bodies are unambiguously different from the steroid-enhanced, menacing bodies that men in Gym D – and other working class locales - display.

The mass-media has mediated a physiological ideal to the Changers about how their bodies ‘should look’ if they are to be ‘respectable’ and ‘middleclass’, as opposed to ‘hard’ and ‘thug like’:

Adam: ‘Big, steroid bodies just look stupid. Nobody wants that now… if you look at all the male models and film stars they are … cut and clean … six packs and low body-fat … That is what is cool and respectable. Big people just look stupid … like steroid scrappers (people who like to fight) …that’s why me and my mates (other Changers) train like we do and go for cut like an athlete … people notice it and are not intimidated … you couldn’t go to our bars or our places of work if you looked like them (immobile males in Gym D) – shaved heads, tattooed up and on the gear (steroids)’.

Class and embodiment are directly connected in the Changers’ lives: the media has, through its ‘male models and film stars’, prescribed a physiological ideal that is linked with social class which the Changers in turn have purposely modified their bodies to be in line with. This finding affirms wider thought on how physical bodies project social identity today (Crossley, 2001).

The Changers see their physical bodies as being central part of their ‘middleclass’, transnational business self-presentations:

Chris: ‘(desires to be) an office worker who wears cool clothes, has a fast car and a good haircut and who is ripped in his physique, like someone who knows about the world … not a steroid person with a shitty job (like other Gym D users) … this sounds arrogant but I’ll tell you for your work … the other night I was speaking to this girl … I wanted to impress her so I told her where I work, and that I am a graduate and I showed her my car … I told her about how I want a wife and to get on the property ladder and
to be as good as I can be ... then I took my jacket off and she saw my arms, and I had just (used a gym) and so my veins were really visible, and then I knew she thought he ticks all the boxes ... she knew that I was a corporate man. But if my body had been shit, then I would have lacked something, like a key physical part of who I want to be’.

**Finding 4: Corroding class**

In line with the experiences of other upwardly mobile participants analysed in AA the Changers consistently suggested that they experience a level of unhappiness in their existences because of their social mobility. This unhappiness is especially evident in terms of the Changers’ experiences of social exclusion and consumption.

There are certain spaces in and around the northern city where the Changers live which are popular with affluent students and local professionals. The Changers visit these spaces most weekend evenings when they wish to be ‘recognised’ and ‘respected’ by certain social groups; i.e. ‘people who went to boarding schools and who are now studying at university’ and local ‘lawyers, accountants – those professional sorts’. Recognition from such groups would denote that the Changers have become ‘established’ (Elias and Scotson, 1994) members of a new social class.

Despite the Changers’ forced ‘posh’ accents; displays of designer clothes, ‘trendy haircuts’ and ‘cut bodies’ - all of which act as superficial middleclass ‘badges’ (Sennett and Cobb, 1972: 153) in the men’s lives - the Changers are not seen as being sufficiently middleclass by many who constitute the social networks in the spaces that the Changers wish to belong. Thus, when in embourgeoised public leisure spaces the Changers exist as encroachers: inauthentic mimics seen as inferior and lacking. Embarrassingly the Changers (and I) were mistaken for football hooligans in a ‘trendy bar’ one night during the ethnographic components of phase two, such is their incompatibility with true middleclass culture. The Changers have become disembedded
from Dramen, though they have failed to become re-embedded in the upmarket spaces and affluent communities which their mobile life-courses have introduced them to (see Bauman, 2001: 41 – 36; 2000: 32-37 for further insights into social disembeddedness in contemporary culture). This rejection causes the Changer to feel inadequate, as they fail to exist as their ‘ideal selves’ (Giddens, 1991: 185):

Phil: ‘The truth is that no matter how much money I spend on clothes or how good I look, there is always a level that I can get to but not past ... basically the right background and breading ... There’s only so far you can go when you’re from where we are (Dramen), no matter how hard you try like when it comes to competing with that lot – best schools and all the silver spoons from a young age, the lucky bastards!’

The Changers therefore represent a modern, British equivalent to the French petite bourgeoisie classes discussed by Bourdieu (1984: 336): aspiring but failing to be accepted by more affluent members of society.

It has been made clear that the Changers ritually consume branded, often American commodities in the belief that they can qualitatively project middleclass identity through their conspicuous consumption. Yet the Changers’ approach to consumption was found to be unhealthy for two reasons. Firstly, the Changers suggested that they rely on buying and owning things to create joy within their existences. Yet buying is unfulfilling, contrary to the ‘false needs’ (Marcuse, 1964) propagated by advertising:

Chris: ‘By the time the weekend comes, I feel empty, like I’ve been raped at work. But I wake up on a Saturday and spend … I go shopping with the lads (Changers) then go out … probably wearing my new clothes’.
Author: ‘But does shopping make you happy, does owning these things help you feel good?’

Chris: ‘No, not at all’.

Secondly, high levels of debt have been incurred by the Changers, particularly due to their use of credit cards:

Phil: ‘we’ve all (the Changers) got huge debts. Fucking thousands; spending a couple of hundred here, a grand there – a holiday here, some clothes there. Lots of nights out … and when you have to pay it back … is scary. The credit card company gave me a card when I was eighteen and said, have a good time ... And I have to meet my minimum payments I can’t sleep thinking about it sometimes … they make me pay back the money at 33% APR!’.

Through their attempts to buy middleclass identity through consumption and find acceptance among more affluent social groups the Changers have created experiences of anxiety which immobile men in the research pool avoid. The Changers’ can’t afford to buy middleclass status through consumption in the ways they attempt, despite the high levels of disposable income they currently enjoy as a product of their single lifestyles.

Finding relating to the Changers’ consumption lives help to expand the recent class-based work of Savage et al (2013: 9) who assert that two types of cultural capital exist for society’s members to engage with: ‘highbrow’ cultural capital (such as ‘engagement with classical music’ and ‘attending stately homes’) and ‘emerging’ cultural capital (including ‘engagement with video games’ and ‘social network sites’). Savage et al use people’s relative engagement with highbrow and emerging capital as part of their stratification of society’s members into classes. In expansion of Savage et al, it appears that somewhere between the spectrums of
highbrow and emerging capital exists the so far unidentified act of consuming (and displaying) specific, branded commodities. This act functions to allow people from working class backgrounds moving between classes to visually anchor their identities; even if it may also lead to debt inurement. Further, Savage et al identify ‘going to the gym’ as an example of emerging cultural capital. Data give by the Changers suggest that ‘going to the gym to modify one’s body in a specific way’ functions as a more accurate way of stratifying society’s members in accordance with their gym-use, in mind of the class-connotations that people’s physiological bodies and gym-use carries today according to the Changers.

**Conclusion**

This article has articulated the relationship between the Changers’ qualitative upward mobility and the mass-media that exists around the men. By so doing, this work has made a valuable contribution to AA. In conclusion, I make three points.

Humans living in late-modernity experiment with an array of identities (Bauman, 2001: 50). Consequently, contemporary identity is not, typically, a fixed entity but a series of temporal phases - reflexively open to change (Giddens, 1991: 81) - that agents take on and withdraw somewhat capriciously. In contrast, elicited interview data suggests that the Changers’ quest to project a media-defined ‘middleclass’ identity is unlikely to be abandoned. The men have been interacting with the media for over a decade as part of their attempts to qualitatively appear as members of a higher social class. However, I do not want to overstate the case of the Changers: the Changers are men at a particular career and life stage. Whether the men’s expenditure patterns, concern for new status and media engagement is a temporary transitional feature in their lives or not requires longitudinal analysis that considers how life-events – such as marriage and having a family – may relate to the experiences of the Changers’ outlined here.
Secondly, it must be emphasised that the Changers are a small subset of gym users. The men provide interesting, indicative data. Though their experiences should not be generalised as being necessarily empirically relevant to other men. The extent to which the Changers’ experiences are consistent among upwardly mobile agents in other locales remains to be seen; though amounts to an interesting future research question.

Thirdly, like other agents identified in AA, the Changers experience a level of unhappiness because of their social mobility. Despite the questionable benefits of social mobility to those who experience it as identified in AA, social mobility remains a fashionable and seductive buzzword which political parties rhetorically use to impress voters, especially in times of austerity (see Payne, 2012). Perhaps policy makers should be less keen to promote social mobility among citizens, in mind of the unhappiness that the socially mobile experience; which in the case of the Changers’ lives manifest in the men’s sense of exclusion and incurrence of debt.

References


**Web Citations**

Bristol Paired Peers Project:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/spais/research/paired-peers/