

Class and the Family

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Introduction

‘Class’ is a complex concept, and this very complexity has proved to be fertile ground as far as academic debates within ‘class analysis’ are concerned. As Sayer (2005 72) has recently argued, ‘Conceptual dizziness is...an occupational hazard in the study of class, but noting the different referents and explanatory ambitions of different concepts of class can reduce it’. Particular approaches to ‘class’ may be very different from each other, but if they have a focus on different things, then they are not necessarily incompatible. Thus it has been argued (Crompton 1998 203) that the ‘...most fruitful way ahead in ‘class analysis’ within sociology lies in the recognition of plurality and difference (*ie, between different approaches to ‘class’*), rather than forcing a choice from amongst competing positions, or attempting to devise a completely new or revised theoretical approach’.¹ In this paper, a contribution to this ‘positive pluralism’ will be developed through an examination of the role of the family in class reproduction.

This paper, therefore, is not intended to make a contribution to ‘class theory’ as such. However, it does make a number of ‘theoretical’ assumptions that, in the spirit of Sayer’s prescriptions as described in the paragraph above, will be made explicit as the argument progresses. This paper also assumes that ‘class’ is still a relevant concept for the analysis of contemporary societies. The assertion that ‘class’ is no longer useful for the analysis of ‘late modern’ societies has been made so often as to be almost banal. One frequent argument is that in ‘reflexive modern’ societies, the individual has become the author of his or her own biography (eg Beck 1992, 2002). That is, rather than simply being able to

‘follow the rules’ as laid down by the established collectivities of class, status, and gender, the individual is now ‘forced to choose’. As Bauman (2002) puts it: ‘Modernity replaces the determination of social standing (*ie, of ‘class’*) with compulsive and obligatory self-determination.’ However, the position taken here is that although there has indeed been considerable and extensive social change, and individuals may indeed appear to have more ‘choices’ to make than in the recent historical past, the concept of class is by no means redundant, and the family plays a key role in the reproduction of social classes and class inequalities.

It will be argued, following Sayer, that it is necessary to make a distinction between abstract (highly selective and one-sided) and concrete (many-sided) conceptions of class. Abstract concepts of class cannot be expected to do the same work as concrete concepts. Abstract concepts ‘focus on a particular aspect of the social world, abstracting from others which may coexist with it’ (Sayer 2005 72). Thus: ‘Marx’s concepts of classes is capitalism, anchored in relations of production, is...highly abstract’ (ibid). Concrete concepts, such as, for example, are employed in Bourdieu’s (1973) account of the French class structure, ‘...attempt...to synthesise diverse forms of differentiation’ (Sayer 2005 73), that will include economic resources and social behaviours (and even other axes of differentiation such as gender and race).

Abstractly, capitalist industrialism requires the concentration of the means of production as private property and the availability of nominally free wage labour, as well as markets in which goods can be freely bought and sold. In the broadest terms, this organisation of

production and exchange relationships generates differentiated groupings that are described as ‘classes’. For example, in describing the accumulatory potential of economic capital, Savage et al draw on Marx’s $M - C - M^1$ (money-commodities-money¹) formula, in which money becomes capital only when it accumulates: ‘In the capital-labour relationship it is the routine, daily, exchange of labour power for wages, and the relentless accumulation of capital, that defines the nature of this particular relationship’ (Savage et al 2005 43). This is a highly *abstract* account of reproduction, from which actual persons are absent. ‘Capitalism’ needs persons to achieve this accumulation. It is not necessary to subscribe to the labour theory of value to recognise that the production and realisation of commodities (C) cannot take place without the activities of people ‘working’ (for want of a better word) in families, factories, shops, and offices, as well as in a myriad other locations.ⁱⁱ

In capitalist societies, the majority of the population relies, directly or indirectly, on paid employment of some kind. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the occupational order began to emerge as a useful axis of classification that gave a summary indication of standard of life as well as ‘life chances’ (Szereter 1984). The convention developed of describing the different occupational groupings created by the application of classificatory schemes as social ‘classes’. These classificatory schemes also appeared to offer a mechanism for the transition from abstract to concrete operationalisations of ‘class’, given the structuring of employment by the requirements of capitalist production and markets (Goldthorpe 2000 chap 10, Wright 1997). However, these ‘employment aggregates’ (Crompton 1998) are better regarded as useful proxies for the economic

dimension of class, rather than as encompassing the complex realities, material and cultural, of concrete classes. For example, and most obviously, employment aggregates do not include any indication of wealth holdings. In this paper, economic ‘class’ will be seen as a structured type of economic inequality resulting from the operation of capitalist production and market mechanisms (that sort people into occupations) together with the distribution of inherited wealth.

However, despite the criticisms that may be levelled at the employment aggregate approach, occupational class schemes *are* invaluable proxies for economic ‘classes’. In respect of the occupational structure, Sayer (2005 88) argues that capitalism as such is identity-indifferent. ‘Nobody is born a capitalist or worker...Other mechanisms not intrinsic to the basic structure of capitalism may contingently influence who becomes a capitalist or a worker...but from the point of view of what is necessary for capitalism to exist, anyone can find a place in its structures’.ⁱⁱⁱ Concretely, however, stratification analysts (including Bourdieu) have identified a range of different factors that seek to explain why *particular* people arrive at particular positions within these structures. Class and stratification analysts have long argued that the family has a major role in determining the location of individuals within the ‘class structure’. Family relationships do not in and of themselves *create* classes and class relationships, but they play the major role in reproducing them and the family is the major transmission belt of social advantage and disadvantage. As Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992 233) put it: ‘The family is...the unit of class ‘fate’...the economic decision-making in which family members engage...is

typically of a joint or interdependent kind. The family is, at the 'micro' level, a key unit of strategic action pursued within the class structure.'

In the West, 'the family' has been subject to recent, and considerable change. From the second half of the twentieth century, there have been dramatic changes in family formation and behaviour. Rates of marriage have declined, divorce rates have risen, and the numbers living in consensual unions have increased. The average age at marriage has risen – in England and Wales, the average age of first marriage was 28 for women and 31 for men in 2001, an increase of five years for both sexes as compared to 1961. These changes have been reflected in fertility rates, and in England and Wales, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen from 2.9 in 1964 to 1.7 in 2000. Births outside marriage have increased dramatically, from 7% in 1964 to 40% in 2000 in England and Wales (ONS data). These trends in fertility and family behaviour are taking place in all 'western' countries (for a cross-nationally comparative empirical summary of these developments, see Crouch 2000 chapters 2, 7). Some authors (eg Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) have argued that changes in gender roles and the family are a significant factor associated with increasing 'individualisation' in contemporary societies. However, in this paper it will be argued that despite the very real changes that have taken place in respect of family life, family arrangements and relationships remain central to the concrete reproduction of social classes and class inequalities. It will be argued that these arrangements and relationships are economic, as well as cultural or normative.

Thus two intertwined strands of the transmission of class advantage and disadvantage via the family may be identified, material and cultural. Most obviously, income differences between families mean that not only do some children grow up in more affluent circumstances, but they will also inherit economic capital. In addition, there are empirically established class differences in the way in which children are socialised (Lareau 2003), and the extent to and manner in which parents invest time and resources in their children's acquisition of social and educational skills. This generation of 'habitus' - 'things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable 'upcoming' future' (Bourdieu cited in Ball 2003 16) means that from a relatively early age, children acquire (or do not acquire) behaviours appropriate (or not appropriate) for educational and occupational success. Class differentials in educational and occupational attainment are thus also maintained via the unequal endowments of 'cultural capital' possessed by individuals in different classes, and largely acquired within the family.

As Devine (2004 182) has argued: '...any theory of class reproduction must acknowledge that social, cultural and economic resources are mutually constitutive of each other'. In a similar vein, Bottero and Irwin (2003 465) argue that: '...constructions of social difference shape both material inequalities and inequalities of recognition'. That is, in order to understand processes of reproduction and differentiation by class, social classes cannot be adequately conceptualised as economic or material categories alone, but are also characterised by cultural and normative practices that themselves serve to maintain differentiation from other classes and to reproduce class inequalities.

However, there is nevertheless a tension between ‘materialist’ and ‘culturalist’ accounts of class reproduction. In particular, an over-emphasis on the causal significance of ‘culture’ in the construction of social life (as evidenced in the ‘cultural turn’ within sociology, see Ray and Sayer 1999) may lead to what Fraser (2000) has described as ‘vulgar culturalism’, in which material factors are disregarded and inequalities are seen as being largely a consequence of misrecognised or devalued ‘identities’. Another, rather different, source of tension lies in the fact that if class reproduction is seen to be largely a consequence of a lack of aspirations, motivations etc. deriving from the absence of cultural capital then this may be seen as endorsing ‘culture of poverty’ arguments, that effectively ‘blame the victims’ for their low aspirations and stunted lives (Walker 1990). The most recent example of this *genre* emerged in debates around the supposed emergence of an ‘underclass’ (in Britain and the US), described as feckless, workshy, and only too willing to live on state benefits (Murray 1984). Critics of ‘underclass’ theorists have made two major arguments. First, that the circumstances of the very poor were in large part a consequence of major structural changes that had removed both opportunities for employment as well as the possibility of upward mobility (Wilson 1987). Second, a range of empirical evidence has demonstrated that, contrary to the arguments of the ‘underclass’ theorists, the poor and unemployed are not less committed to the idea of work as employment than other class groupings (eg Marshall et al 1996).

Theories of cultural reproduction, therefore, may be criticised as being over-determinist and as failing to give an account of change, depicting the poor as condemned to endlessly reproduce their conditions of existence. For these kinds of reasons, one influential strand

within sociology has systematically sought to reject such arguments. In the sociology of education, Halsey et al (1980) argued that the type of school children attended, rather than cultural capital, had the more significant impact on educational attainment. In a similar vein, Goldthorpe (2000 167ff) has argued that the difference between middle and working class strategies in respect of their children's education may be explained by rational action theory (RAT) rather than cultural class differences. Parental investment in children's education will be a relatively greater cost for poorer families, who will therefore have both more to lose, as well as having less certainty as to a successful outcome as far as investing in their children is concerned.

Nevertheless, although 'materialists' and 'culturalists' may give different accounts of the causal processes of class reproduction, it is important to remember that both of these contrasting 'schools' locate the site of these processes within the family. It may also be suggested that the underlying commonalities between these two approaches go further than this. Savage et al (2005 38, see also Devine 2004) have recently criticised RAT as being 'merely descriptive', as simply describing '...in more detail the mechanisms linking well attested correlations or relationships which still require theoretical legitimation'. A development of Bourdieu's approach is seen as preferable, as 'not being caught in economic determinism' and achieving '...an account which recognises *both* relational *and* distributional effects' (Savage et al 2005 43). However, it may nevertheless be suggested that Savage et al have not demonstrated conclusively the methodological distinctiveness of the different kinds of arguments in respect of social reproduction. Goldthorpe's materialist account is criticised as being descriptive and tautological,

advantages are generated through being in a position of advantage, and the advantaged middle classes always win. However, the same point may be made in respect of Bourdieu's arguments.^{iv} Cultural capital is acquired through contestation within a field, and there is a homology between the economic and the cultural fields (for Bourdieu (1973 101), objective classes are described as 'the set of agents who are placed in the homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogenous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices'). Thus Bourdieu's account is similarly descriptive and tautological, as practices generate similar practices and the middle classes always win. Similar criticisms, therefore, might be made of both culturalist and materialist accounts of social reproduction, in that they have a tendency towards circularity and thus difficulty in identifying potential sources of change.

We will return to the implications of these arguments in the closing section of this paper, in which it will be argued that this 'circularity' does not in fact present a problem for either 'economically' or 'culturally' biased arguments. For the moment, however, we will demonstrate the persisting significance of both economic and normative/cultural aspects of family arrangements in relation to two issues: teenage pregnancy and the increase in women's paid employment.

Class and ‘family values’

As noted above, demographic changes in ‘the family’ have been linked to the thesis of growing ‘individualisation’, which itself is associated with arguments that ‘class’ is now a redundant concept. As Beck (2002) has put it, social class is a ‘zombie category’, which is ‘dead but still alive’. The past bases of collective identities, he argues, are no longer relevant, and society has been ‘individualised’. Beck (2002 202) states that:

‘Individualisation is a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society...freeing people from historically inscribed roles...Individualisation liberates people from traditional roles and constraints...individuals are removed from status-based classes...Social classes have been detraditionalised’. In a similar vein, Silva and Smart (1999 p 7) argue that: ‘Personal scripts are written in the context of the different social and economic locations of families, as well as individuals, within wider social structures. But there is now more than one normative guideline to provide the context for these choices. Moreover, social class, gender, sexuality age and ethnicity no longer operate as inevitable or one-dimensional pre-determining aspects of these normative guidelines’.

Indeed, such theorists have argued that processes of individualisation within the family are a major factor driving the individualisation of society more generally. In respect of the family, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002 86) argue that what was once a ‘community of need’ is becoming, increasingly, an ‘elective relationship’ (see also Giddens 1991). Traditional family arrangements, it is argued, were constituted in inequalities between

men and women, as well as the ‘feudal’ division of labour that allocated domestic work to women and market work to men. Women’s claims to equality have radically destabilised this traditional structure, as is reflected in the demographic changes summarised above. Women have themselves become individualised and increasingly able to exercise their choices. As a consequence, family relationships are in flux and ‘...there is no given set of obligations and opportunities, no way of organising everyday work, the relationship between men and women, parents and children, which can just be copied’ (Beck 2002 203).

These kinds of arguments – and indeed, ‘individualisation’ arguments more generally – seriously under-estimate the continuing significance of within-family patterns of reciprocities and obligation (Finch and Mason 1993), as well as class-differentiated patterns of behaviour that, as we have already seen in the Introduction to this paper, serve to reproduce class inequalities. In the next sections, we will further examine class-differentiated family behaviours in respect of teenage parenthood, and mother’s employment. First, we will briefly examine some recent evidence describing class variations in attitudes to family life, which are summarised in Table 1 (see over).

Table 1 demonstrates that, across a range of attitudinal statements relating to family life, as compared to professional and managerial employees, routine and manual respondents would appear to be relatively more ‘traditional’ in their attitudes to gender roles, and to place a relatively greater emphasis on the importance of family life.^v Whilst it is not being suggested that family affection and commitment is any less prevalent amongst

managers and professionals, it is not particularly difficult to construct a ‘causal narrative’ as to why people in routine and manual occupations might place a greater degree of emphasis on their family lives and obligations.

Table 1: Attitudes to gender roles, women’s paid work and the family, by social class (BSA/ISSP 2002) ^{vi}, percentage ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’

	Professional and managerial	Routine and manual	Total (including Intermediate) <small>vii</small>
a) ‘a man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’	10	27**	18
b) ‘it is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work’	11	20**	14
c) ‘a job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children’	16	35**	24
d) ‘watching children grow up is life’s greatest joy’	76	86**	81
e) ‘if a person cannot manage their family responsibilities, they should stop trying to hold down a paid job’	25	42**	33
Base (1)	692	759	1844

**p<.01.

1. indicative figures, actual base numbers vary by response rates to different questions.

Professional and managerial jobs are more rewarding than routine and manual jobs, not only in a material sense, but also in respect of social recognition and self-esteem. A wide range of quantitative and qualitative evidence has documented class differences in attitudes to and experiences of employment. For example, the Working in Britain survey (Taylor 2000) found that whereas only 21% of higher professional and managerial employees thought of their job as ‘just a means to earn a living’, this was true of 58% of

skilled manual, and 54% of semi and unskilled manual employees (Taylor 2000 14). Classic texts such as Sennett and Cobb (*The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 1973) describe how manual workers suffering from ‘injured dignity’ turn to their families as a way of recovering lost pride. It should be emphasised that this pattern is not peculiar to manual employees, as middle class men who feel unsuccessful in their careers may also seek solace in their family lives (Crompton 2001). It is not being argued here that a tendency to place a greater emphasis on the family is necessarily class-specific, but rather, that the characteristics of working class jobs are more likely, in aggregate, to result in people in such jobs putting a greater emphasis on their families than people in more rewarding jobs. Class-differentiated attitudes to the family are reflected in family-associated behaviours. Here we will discuss two aspects of these behaviours: first, teenage parenthood, and second, the patterning of mother’s employment, particularly mothers of small children.

Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. Recent empirical research has demonstrated the overwhelming influence of class and family on young women’s decision-making on becoming pregnant (Lee et al 2004). Social deprivation (or class) has a strong influence on teenage conception rates, as well as their outcomes (ie whether the pregnancy is continued or terminated). Lee et al demonstrate a clear, and statistically significant, relationship between abortion proportions and a number of social deprivation measures. That is, termination of teenage pregnancy was much *less* likely to occur in areas of greater social deprivation (as measured by proportions of dependants of family credit claimants and national geographical indexes of deprivation):^{viii}

Areas that rate highly in regard to social deprivation also have higher conception rates, meaning that many young women from such areas will comprise a significant proportion of the total *number* of under-18 abortions. However, the research...clearly shows that they are *relatively less likely* to have an abortion than young women from areas that are not as socially deprived (Lee et al 2004 15, emphasis in original).

Qualitative interviews conducted as part of the same research revealed that young women's decisions depended on the economic and social context of their lives, rather than abstract moral views. Young women who saw themselves as having a secure and positive future opted for termination:

There was no question of me keeping it because I knew I was going to go to university...I didn't want a baby...I'd had a good education and I had a career path to go down, it was all laid out for me (Lee et al 2004 18).

However, young women from insecure backgrounds, with poor employment prospects, saw pregnancy and motherhood as '...an escape route from a future characterised by lack of achievement and lack of direction' (ibid). In these cases, family influences (and family supports) were crucial. One young mother reported that her mother had said that 'whatever you decide I'll stick by you' but that 'she don't agree with them (abortions)' (Lee et al 2004 44). Young women who continued with pregnancies often lived in communities in which abortion was generally disapproved of (as well as being socially deprived areas), and young motherhood was commonplace (Lee et al 2004 46). In short, despite arguments and claims, such as those of Beck, as to increasing 'individualisation'

in family decision-making, class and community would appear to be of considerable significance in the shaping of young women's family decisions.

Class and mother's employment

In Britain, women's labour force participation rates have been rising since the 1950s and stood at 66 per cent in 1984. The rate then increased markedly during the 1980s, reaching 72 per cent by 2001, and the participation rates of mothers with young children changed rapidly in the last decade of the millennium. In 1990, the economic activity rate amongst mothers with a child under 5 was 48 per cent, but by 2001 this had risen to 57 per cent. In contrast, men's participation rates have been falling, from 88 per cent in the 1980s to 84 per cent by 2001 (Dench et al., 2002). Much of the increase in women's employment in Britain has been in part-time work (which stood at 44% in 2001).

However, in Britain, the broad patterning of occupational segregation (and the gender wage gap) has remained rather stable despite the very real changes in the law, women's educational levels, and the rate of women's employment. Men outnumber women amongst senior managers, skilled trade occupations, and press, plant and machine operators. Women outnumber men in administrative and secretarial occupations (by far the largest occupational category for women), personal service occupations, sales, and professions and associate professions (including teaching and nursing. See Dench et al 2002 p 51). A comparison of occupational data for 1991 and 2000 (Dench et al 2002 53) shows that despite the changes in the occupational structure over this period, together

with the increase in the employment of women, there has in fact been little change in women's share of employment across occupations.

Debates about women's continuing lack of equality in the employment sphere, despite the widespread acceptance and implementation of equality legislation, have tended to be dominated by the issue of 'choice'. In particular, Hakim (2004) has developed what she describes as 'preference theory', in which she argues that, in aggregate, women's employment patterns are in large part an outcome of the existence of different 'types' of women. Only a minority of women, she argues, are 'work-centred', and will give priority to their employment careers. The majority either give lifetime priority to their families, or shift priorities over the employment-family life cycle. Thus the majority of women will voluntarily either take breaks in employment, or shift to part-time work, when their children are young, and it is this kind of behaviour that explains women's relative lack of success in the employment sphere. An emphasis on the contemporary and overwhelming significance of women's 'choices' meshes well with theses of increasing 'individualisation', and indeed, Hakim has drawn on these arguments in the development of her work. Hakim's theories have generated an often acrimonious debate (see Ginn et al 1996) that will not be explored here. However, perhaps the tenor of these debates might explain why an important trend seems to have gone relatively unremarked – that is, the class differentiation of women's employment 'choices'.

As Rake et al (2000, Chapter 3, see also OECD 2001, Table 4.1) have demonstrated, low and mid-skilled mothers are more likely to reduce their employment than mothers with

higher skills, thus the cost of motherhood (in foregone earnings) is greater amongst these women. These differences in women's employment patterns are reflected in household employment strategies. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) for 2001 demonstrates a clear class gradient in couple employment arrangements. Categorising couple households by the occupational class of the main earner, in 52% of professional and managerial households, both adults work full-time, as compared to only 23% of joint full-time working amongst unskilled manual households. Similarly, in 26% of professional and managerial households, the man worked full-time and the woman worked part-time, as compared to 43% of unskilled manual couple households (Crompton forthcoming). With the increase in women's employment, these class-associated patterns of women's employment will, obviously, serve to reproduce and even deepen material inequalities between households.

These patterns are also found in the BSA/ISSP data. In the 2002 survey, amongst mothers with a child under 5, 44% of routine and manual mothers were 'looking after the home' as compared to 28% of professional and managerial mothers, and whereas 41% of managerial and professional mothers were in full-time employment, only 15% of routine and manual mothers were working full-time. Table 2 summarises, for the BSA/ISSP sample, the reported employment behaviour of all mothers, by occupational class.

Table 2: Employment of mothers when a child was under school age, by occupational class; attitudes to women’s employment (AWE) score by occupational class. Women who have had children only. BSA/ISSP 2002.

	Managerial and professional	Intermediate	Routine and manual	Total
% reporting in employment ¹	62**	50	40	50
% reporting staying at home ²	38	50	60**	50
N	255	173	319	747
Mean AWE score ³	11.55	13.28	13.93	
N ⁴	254	164	297	715

**p<.01

¹ managerial and professionals significantly more likely to be in employment than routine/manuals.

² routine/manuals significantly more likely to stay at home than managerial and professionals.

³ higher score = greater level of traditionalism in attitudes to women’s employment. Scheffe’s post-hoc test showed significant differences in mean scores between managerial and professional, as compared to intermediate and routine and manual respondents.

⁴ base numbers will vary because of variations in numbers of respondents answering questions.

It can be seen that there are significant differences in the proportions of managerial and professional, as compared to routine and manual, mothers reporting ‘being in employment’ as compared to ‘staying at home’ when their youngest child was under school age. Table 2 also reports significant class differences in attitudes to mother’s employment, using the ‘attitudes to women’s employment’ (AWE) scale.^{ix} Managerial and professional mothers have significantly less traditional attitudes to mother’s employment than either intermediate or routine and manual mothers.

The data summarised in Table 2, together with a range of other empirical evidence, indicates not only that mothers of young children in the lower occupational categories are less likely to be in employment, particularly full-time employment, but also that their attitudes to gender roles and family life are rather more traditional than those of

professional and managerial women. Explanations of women's employment behaviour, therefore, might be seen as reflecting different class 'cultures of family'. However, as we have already seen in our discussion of class-differentiated variations in educational aspirations, 'culturalist' interpretations of women's employment behaviour run a serious risk of simply justifying the unequal *status quo*. Perhaps we should not be surprised to find a greater emphasis on the value of family life amongst men and women in lower-level occupational classes, but the factors that influence decisions about women's and mother's employment are complex.

Qualitative research has demonstrated that ideas about what constitutes 'good' mothering cut across social class boundaries. In a study of lone mothers, Duncan and Edwards (1999) identify 'gendered moral rationalities' that are the major determinants of mothers' employment behaviour. They argue that individuals with caring responsibilities (such as lone parents) take decisions relating to care and employment '...with reference to moral and socially negotiated (not individual) views about what behaviour is right and proper' (Duncan et al 2003: 310), rather than with a view to individual (self) maximisation. Thus some female lone parents identify themselves as 'primarily' mothers, and will not respond to economic incentives or pressures, seeing their primary responsibility as that of caring for their child(ren). Similar findings were reported in further interviews (Duncan et al 2003) with partnered mothers. Thus although government policies may be developed on the premise of an 'adult worker' model (ie the assumption that all adults, including mothers, will benefit from paid work), these policies commit a 'rationality mistake' in that women who define themselves as 'primarily mothers' will not take up employment

even if it is in their (economic) interest to do so (Barlow et al 2002). Women defining themselves as 'primarily mothers' were found in all social groupings.

However, better-educated mothers were less likely to be clustered at the 'primarily mother' end of the continuum.^x Similarly, a further qualitative study (including interviews with a mixed class sample of ninety-six women with young children) found that those women who were most consistently 'pro' direct maternal care for young children were white, working class, and relatively constrained in respect of their employment opportunities (Irwin 2003, see also Duncan and Irwin 2004). They believed that mothers' exclusive care and commitment should extend throughout children's primary school years. Here there was a contrast with the more highly qualified and advantaged middle class women who were interviewed. Even if these women considered maternal care to be best for young children, they nevertheless held (realistic) aspirations for themselves as workers and careerists. In contrast, as Irwin argues, '...a more limited scope for strategic employment decisions (amongst poorly-qualified working-class women) is consistent with holding moral commitments which lie for much longer with the exclusive care of children' (Irwin 2003 17). In short, these women's perceptions of 'good mothering' were closely related to their social location.

McRae's (2003) evaluation of Hakim's 'preference theory' arrives at parallel conclusions. McRae draws on longitudinal survey research with a sample of women who became mothers in 1988, and who were interviewed within one year of the birth, when the child was five years old, and again six years later. On the basis of her evidence,

McRae (2003 334) argues that ‘...neither the development nor the enactment of particular lifestyle preferences is random. Women with different earning capacities demonstrate strongly differing beliefs about mothers and mothering. The ability to overcome constraints is patterned by social structure/class whether manifested through differing qualifications, social networks, or income’. In short, there is a wide range of macro and micro evidence available that suggests that in aggregate, class-differentiated attitudes and behaviour in respect of mother’s employment may be interpreted as being in substantial part a response to class-differentiated constraints and opportunities available.

In the last two sections of this paper, we have briefly examined how ‘family values’ might impact on teenager’s decisions relating to pregnancy, as well as mother’s employment decisions. The empirical evidence suggests that decisions are taken with reference to social and moral frameworks that are themselves shaped by the particularities of class and locality, as well as the opportunities that are seen to be available. Taken together, these findings do not provide much support for the ‘individualisation’ thesis, although they do fully reflect the very real changes that have taken place in families and domestic life. It has been noted that the net effect of the class patterning of decision-taking in both of these areas will be to perpetuate, and even increase, class inequalities. This brings us back to the issues raised in the Introduction to this paper.

Discussion and conclusions

In the Introduction to this paper, it was noted that despite the apparent differences between ‘economically’ and ‘culturally’ biased accounts of class reproduction, they nevertheless share two important features. First, the family is seen as playing a major role in the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage, and second, both sets of arguments are circular. Indeed, this circularity is inevitable given that the reproduction of both economic and cultural capitals takes place over the life cycle of the family. Thus accounts of this reproduction are bound to be descriptive. In the empirical sections of this paper, we have seen how, despite major changes in the demographics of the family, as well as in structures of employment, class-differentiated economic and normative/cultural practices can still be identified that serve to reproduce both material inequalities and mis-recognised identities. Accurate descriptions of these processes and practices are required in order that we may understand them – there is nothing shameful about ‘description’ as such. Such descriptions may be circular, but this kind of evidence can generate causal questions that may be systematically investigated via further research, both quantitative and qualitative.

Most families will continue to do their very best to assure the position of their children within the limits of the resources they have available, thus the class structure has strong self-maintaining properties. However, it is also important to remember that class reproduction is not an inevitable process. Not all individuals from disadvantaged

backgrounds remain disadvantaged as adults, and not every child from a middle-class home becomes a manager or professional. Although *relative* rates of social mobility have proved to be remarkably stable, this does not mean that *aggregate* mobility has not been substantial. Nevertheless, given the self-maintaining nature of family reproduction, it is likely that social change, that is, in the direction of more or less class inequality, is likely to originate externally to the processes of family reproduction. Thus the nature and extent of class reproduction is overwhelmingly shaped by the *context* within which it takes place.

‘Capitalism’ is not all of a piece, and its impact on individuals and families may be substantially modified, particularly via state policies. For example, as Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992 165) have observed: ‘...the Swedish class structure may be regarded as showing a relatively high degree of openness, in that most barriers to mobility and likewise propensities for immobility tend to be weak...in Sweden the explicitly egalitarian policies adopted by Social Democratic governments...have met with some significant degree of success...’. Similarly, it has been demonstrated that teenage pregnancy rates are higher in countries characterised by ‘neo-liberal’ welfare regimes, and highest of all in the US (see Gornick and Meyers 2003 80). If we return to the question of mother’s employment, then good quality, affordable and available childcare is likely to have an impact on mother’s employment decisions. Controls on hours of work would make it easier for both parents to be employed if they wished, to say nothing of the impact on lone parents (as is well known, the British Government has actively resisted EU attempts to control working hours). As cross-national research has demonstrated,

comprehensive dual-earner family supports have their most substantial impact on less well-off families (Crompton forthcoming).

However, states may also operate in a manner that serves to enhance the potential for class reproduction. For example, it may persuasively be argued that recent policies in respect of education in Britain (increasing *de facto* selection, publishing ‘league tables’, etc) have created a scenario in which middle class families have increased opportunities and enhanced strategies to achieve returns on their cultural and material capital investments. Indeed, in general, the implementation of neo-liberal economic and social policies, that seek to increase competition by changing or removing the institutions of market regulation (or, in the case of education in Britain, attempting to create a quasi-market), is likely to increase the extent to which families are ‘forced’ to rely on their own resources. In extreme circumstances, this may lead to societal breakdown, as in the case of ‘Mafia’ style family organisations. For example, in developing the concept of ‘amoral familism’, Banfield (1958) argued that in Southern Italy, the nuclear family was organised so as to corrupt whatever institutions (law, city organisation, economic development projects) got in the way of the short-run maximisation of nuclear family interests (Stinchcombe 1997).

This paper has not sought to develop a ‘revived’ or ‘new’ theory of class, but nevertheless, we may conclude with a brief reflection on the theoretical implications of the argument and evidence presented here. The family is a key operator in processes of class reproduction. Families play a significant part in equipping people to be capitalists,

or workers, (or doctors or other professionals or plumbers), but to repeat our earlier arguments, they do not create the locations in question. Savage et al (2005) have recently argued for a revived class analysis via a capitals, assets, and resources (CARs) approach. They suggest that: ‘Rather than focusing on the abstract, cross-sectional, nature of the exchange between social parties, we are better off looking at the over-time accumulatory potential of specific kinds of CARs. It is not the fact that some people may exploit others that is fundamental; it is the potential of certain CARs to accumulate, store and retain advantages that allow us to distinguish the most important causes of stratification’ (Savage et al 2005 43). The major task, as they see it ‘...is to find a way of defining CARs that is neither economically reductive...nor descriptive’ (ibid).

However, this paper has argued that abstractly, ‘class’ is primarily an economic concept, and class *locations* are largely (although not entirely) generated by economic processes (see Fraser 2000, Sayer 2005, Scott 1996).^{xi} At this most abstract level, accounts of the reproduction of the ‘class structure’ *are* economically reductive. Although, in the most general sense, both economic and cultural capital may be said to be ‘inherited’, the *processes* via which economic and cultural capital is accumulated and transferred are not identical to each other. It is true that ‘...cultural capital developed in the parental home can be translated into the educational field so that children can do well in gaining educational qualifications, and thence these qualifications can be translated into advantaged jobs within the division of labour’ (Savage et al 2005 44). Here Savage et al have a similar focus as this paper, i.e. on the reproduction of class inequalities, and their transmission via the family. However, the kind of ‘cultural capital’ to which Savage et al

refer rests with the individual concerned, and cannot be stored or passed on in any direct sense (educational qualifications cannot be inherited). Its transmission is dependent upon the successful transmission of identity (or *habitus*). Objectively, winning the lottery might transform an individual (and their family) into *rentier* capitalists, but there are no tickets available for lotteries in cultural capital. In short, it is being argued that economic (eg Marx's) and cultural (eg Bourdieu's) class concepts cannot be seamlessly combined in a single theoretical 'approach' (such as CARs). However, as they are not mutually exclusive, they may be used in combination with each other (Sayer 2005 72).

'Concrete' conceptions of class (or stratification), it has been argued, are many-sided, and accounts of this complexity will incorporate both material and cultural processes.^{xii} The processes of material and cultural reproduction are inter-twined, but analytically, they may be treated as distinct.^{xiii} Concretely, much of the reproduction of social classes takes place with the family. Accounts of these processes, both economic and cultural, are bound to be circular and often 'merely descriptive'. What I want to suggest, however, is that these kinds of criticisms are not fatal. However, they do leave us with an account of stratification that is rather messy – even if dignified with the label of 'positive pluralism'.

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Footnotes

ⁱ A parallel, although by no means identical, argument has been developed by Crompton and Scott 2005. Savage (2000 ix) might seem to be taking up a similar position when he argues that ‘The ultimate test for the future of class analysis is to see whether it can renew itself, not by defensive action from entrenched positions, but by being able to go out and speak to diverse currents of social enquiry’. However, as we shall see, Savage argues that re-forged *theoretical* tools are also required, whereas this author is rather more sceptical in this regard.

ⁱⁱ For an account that rests upon the labour theory of value, see Crompton and Gubbay 1984. Savage (2000) has argued that the weaknesses of the labour theory of value serve to undermine fatally ‘Marxist’ class theory. This *is* a problem if the aim is to cling to a Marxist class theory at all costs. However, it should be clear that this is not the aim of this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, some successful capitalists have been concerned to promote ‘identity indifference’. For example, Andrew Carnegie argued that inheritance was ‘most injudicious’ and absolutely the worst strategy for the disposal of wealth ‘Beyond providing for the wife and daughters moderate sources of income, and very moderate allowances indeed, if any, for the sons’.

^{iv} Savage et al (2005 42) also note these parallels.

^v The response rates in Table 1 are also shaped by sex and age. Older people are in general more ‘conservative’ than younger people on all topics. Only 31% of professional and managerial respondents are aged over 55, as compared to 50% of routine and manual respondents (however, class differences are still significant when controls for age are introduced). Women’s attitudes to gender roles are less conservative than those of men. For example 15% of women agreed with question (a), 12% with question (b), and 22% with question (c). However, women were more likely than men to agree with questions (d) and (e) (83% question (d), 39% question (e)).

^{vi} These data are derived from the Family 2002 module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) that was carried out as part of the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Extra questions were included in the module as part of an ESRC project : R000239727: ‘Employment and the Family’, and ESRC support is gratefully acknowledged. A more extensive range of questions were fielded in Britain, and in this paper, data is given for Britain only. However, in a range of other countries (Finland, Norway, France, and Portugal), a similar association between class location and traditionalism in family and gender attitudes was demonstrated. See Crompton Forthcoming. For a description of the ISSP programme, see Davis and Jowell 1989, also Jowell, Brook and Dowds 1993, also Jowell 1998.

^{vii} There are a number of social class schemes currently available. In this table, the three-category version of the NS-SEC classification (see *The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification User Manual*, Office for National Statistics, April 2002, also Rose and Pevalin 2002) is employed. This table does not give separate figures for the ‘Intermediate’ category. This is because the NS-SEC classification places the majority of self-employed men in the ‘Intermediate’ group. As the ESRC/ISSP questions were asked of employees only, women are considerably over-represented in the ‘Intermediate’ group in the BSA sample (in any case, women are over-represented in the ‘Intermediate’ grouping as it includes lower-level clerical workers, the largest single occupational category for women).

^{viii} The ONS (Office of National Statistics) area classification, that groups together local authorities that have similar socio-economic and demographic profiles.

^{ix} **The scale included the following items.**

A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.

A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.

All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job.

Do you think that women should work outside the home full-time, part-time, or not at all when there is a child under school age.

Do you think that women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all after the youngest child starts school.

Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with a maximum of 25 (most traditional). Factor analysis showed 1 factor with an Eigen value of 2.632, explaining 53% of the variance. A reliability analysis recorded a Cronbach’s alpha of .77.

^x As a qualitative study, Duncan et al's findings are not statistically representative. A further complication is the inclusion in the interview sample of a number of black mothers, who were more likely, whatever their class location, to identify themselves as 'primarily worker' or 'mother-worker integral'. That is, ideas about 'good mothering' are cross-cut by race, as well as class.

^{xi} For example, ceremonial positions associated with Courts (royal and legal) and Government are not 'economically' generated.

^{xii} It should be clear that it is not the intention to reject the arguments of Savage et al out of hand. Rather, it is to suggest that CARs based approaches do not offer 'a clear theoretical foundation for a revived class analysis', a negative possibility that they also consider. See Savage et al 2005 43.

^{xiii} Fraser (2000) describes this as 'analytical dualism'. See the discussion in Crompton and Scott 2005.