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# Doing class: a discursive and ethnomethodological approach

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# Doing class: a discursive and ethnomethodological approach

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Abstract: This article offers a discursive and ethnomethodological approach to analysing the interplay between class, discourse, and talk. Drawing on feminist and sociological work that foregrounds the cultural dimensions of class, this article moves beyond the cultural approach by using the insights of discursive psychology and ethnomethodology. Conceptualising class as a "doing", the article analyses empirical examples that emerged from a qualitative study on young women's relationship with feminism. Providing a novel theoretical framework, but also a close, empirically-grounded analysis, the article argues that a discursive and ethnomethodological approach can offer useful insights to the study of class in general, and the cultural approach in particular.

## Introduction

Walkerdine et al. (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001, p. 14) understand class as a 'discursively produced category and therefore a site of struggle and contestation'. Similarly, Skeggs (1997, p. 5) defines class as a 'discursive, historically specific construction, a product of middle–class political consolidation, which includes elements of fantasy and projection'. This article draws on feminist work around social class (Walkderine et al, 2001; Skeggs, 1997 a, b, 2004, 2005; Lawler 1999, 2005; Reay, 1997), but also on cultural approaches to class more broadly (Devine & Savage, 2005; Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst, 2001). By combining the insights of the cultural account with discursive psychology (Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 2003a, b) and ethnomethodology (West and Zimmerman, 1987; West and Fenstermaker, 1993, 1995a,b; 2002a,b), I provide a novel perspective on the interplay between class, discourse, and talk. Discursive psychology offers the practical tools to study language and talk in action, while ethnomethodology provides the theoretical framework to understand class as a routinized accomplishment.

The first section of the paper will introduce the theoretical frame of this study by briefly outlining the cultural approach to class as well as the underlying assumptions and usefulness of discursive psychology and ethnomethodology. Drawing on the ethnomethodological writings on class as a situated accomplishment, and West and Fenstermaker's (1995a,b; 2002a,b) work in

particular, I will conceptualise class as a *doing*. By presenting data gained in a qualitative study on feminist consciousness amongst a diverse group of young German and British women, the main section of this paper will demonstrate the different ways in which class figured as a doing in the interviews. Class was done by establishing respectability and responsibility, by making distinctions on the basis of class, but also by critiquing existing systems of classification and by using rhetorical devices that allowed for the construction of a moderate and reflexive self. In offering a close and empirically grounded analysis of the various ways in which class was done in talk by drawing on the tools of discursive psychology and ethnomethodology, this paper seeks to contribute to the theorisation of class in general, and the cultural approach in particular.

**A cultural approach to class: discursive psychology and ethnomethodology**

Difficulties in conceptualising social class categories have motivated feminist theorists and sociologists to regard class as culturally produced (Walkderine et al, 2001; Skeggs, 1997 a, b, 2004, 2005; Lawler 1999, 2005; Reay, 1997; Devine & Savage, 2005; Savage et al., 2001). In summarising various criticisms of the concept of class, Reay (1997, p. 225) claims that the 'categories "working" and "middle class" are viewed as increasingly simplistic and irrelevant to sociological thinking both within and without feminisms'. Social class categories ignore the multiplicity of women's positioning and theories of social class still operate with a 'dichotomy between "working" and "middle" class' (ibid.). Reay also points to the problems of regarding class as a location, rather than as a process (ibid.). Equally, Skeggs (1997b, p. 126) critiques "mere" descriptions of class by arguing that they constitute processes of re-categorisation that can be read as the 'truth' and do not account for the constant production of class and the way classifications might be challenged. In tandem with a 'recent revival in the cultural dimensions of class' (Devine & Savage, 2005, p. 4)[1], Reay and Skeggs have turned to the work of Bourdieu by arguing that his social theory offers a useful theoretical framework to conceptualize class (also see Lawler 1999; Devine and Savage, 2005; Savage et al, 2001). Understanding class as dynamic rather than static,

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[1] Devine's and Savage's text also contains an historical overview of sociological debates on class in the UK.

Bourdieu's work is said to account for the ways in which class is lived, formed and challenged, encompassing processes of inclusion and exclusion. His 'sociology of practice' (1977) and the concepts of field and habitus regard inequalities as the outcome of the interplay between embodied practices and institutional processes (Devine & Savage, 2005, p. 13).

While I share the cultural view of class, I move beyond Bourdieuvian accounts in this article and present a new approach that focuses more explicitly on language, talk, and interaction. A perspective that combines discursive psychology and ethnomethodology will allow me to theorise class in cultural terms by regarding it as a dynamic process, but will also enable me to shed new light on the complex interplay between discourse, talk, and class. Discursive psychology provides useful insights to the study of class and discourse because it offers the practical tools to analyse language in action. Based on ethnomethodology, conversation analysis (CA) and Wittgenstein's later philosophy (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 119), discursive psychology is concerned with 'language in use as the accomplishments of acts or as attempts at their accomplishments' (Harre & Gillet, 1994, p. 32). Discursive psychologists seek to demonstrate how social order is produced through discursive interaction (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 119) and do not regard language as a neutral means of communication which simply mirrors the social world, but as actively constructing reality (Gill, 1996, p. 141). To be sure, 'discursive psychology is a broad church' (Wetherell, 2003b, p. 11) and 'a divide has emerged between the poststructuralist inspired work of Wetherell, Edley and others, and the recent work of more CA-aligned discursive psychologists, such as Potter, Edwards, Hepburn and Speer' (McIlvenny, 2002, p. 18). Currently, there is also a debate between discursive psychology and psychoanalysis (Wetherell, 2003a). I however do not seek to outline the various versions of discursive psychology here, but aim to provide an overview of its underpinning assumptions to demonstrate its usefulness for exploring how class is produced in talk and interaction.

Discursive psychologists stress the dilemmatic nature of ideology (and thinking) and do not posit unified systems of beliefs (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton & Radley, 1988).

Rather than problematising contradictions and inconsistencies in talk, they regard variability as a clue for analysis (Edwards, 2003, p. 33). Individuals' accounts can differ, depending on the function they seek to fulfill. One of the key concepts of discursive psychology, the 'interpretative repertoire' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 138) provides an analytic tool to study and theorize the flexible deployment of language (Edley, 2001). 'An interpretative repertoire is a recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations' (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 443). In contrast to the broader Foucauldian notion of discourse, interpretative repertoires can be viewed as more fragmented, less monolithic entities that offer speakers a whole range of opportunities (Edley, 2001, p. 202). In addition, notions such as 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig et al., 1988, see below) allow discursive psychologists to account for variability and complexity in talk which is why I chose it as an interpretative frame. Recalling the arguments about class as a dynamic process, but also attending to documented ambivalences in class identity (notably Skeggs, 1997), I argue that discursive psychology's emphasis on complexity and its perspective on talk as functional provide constructive insights to investigate the class-inflected nature of talk.

While discursive psychology offers me the practical tools to study language in action, I also draw on ethnomethodology because it provides a theoretical frame to conceptualise seemingly objective properties of social life – such as class -  as achieved through the course of social interaction (Kessler & McKenna, 1987, p. vii). According to West and Fenstermaker (1993, p. 152), '[t]he aim of ethnomethodological inquiry is to analyse the situated conduct of societal members in order to see how "objective" properties of social life are achieved'. West and Fenstermaker's ethnomethodological approach is grounded in the work of Garfinkel (1967), Kessler and McKenna (1978), and West and Zimmerman (1987) who initially explored how gender, and indeed sex, are accomplished in social interaction. In their famous article *Doing Gender*, West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) present a 'distinctively sociological' approach to gender and sex which they regard as produced through processes of differentiation. Similar to the  cultural approach to class where

culture is seen as a 'material force' (Skeggs, 2005, p. 63),  ethnomethodology does not posit

'natural, essential, or biological' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137) differences. Indeed, the

ethnomethodological approach to gender has been extended to race, and class (West &

Fenstermaker, 1995a; 2002a). It is this perspective on '"difference" as an ongoing interactional

accomplishment' (West & Fenstermaker, 1995a, p. 9) that I find useful in analysing how class

simultaneously figures as a structuring principle in talk, but also as a practice, as something that is

accomplished in interaction.

Acknowledging that oppression exists simultaneously along the lines of gender, race, and

class, West and Fenstermaker (1995a, 2002a) apply the insights of conceptualising gender as a

doing to the study of "difference" more generally. They (1995a, p. 25) stress the diverse *outcomes*

of inequalities, but nevertheless emphasise that the *mechanisms* which underlie the production of

social differences are the same. In making this claim, West and Fenstermaker (1995b, p. 507) draw

on the notion of accountability as 'the ubiquitous *possibility* of persons being held accountable – of

having their actions, their circumstances, and even their descriptions characterised in serious and

consequential ways'(emphasis in original). Gender, race, and class are regarded as doings that

consist of the 'local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate

attitudes and activities' (West & Fenstermaker, 2002a, p. 541). In view of the ever-present

possibility of evaluation, individuals align their behaviour and beliefs with an eye to their

accountability so that gender, race, and class represent ongoing, situated accomplishments.

West and Fenstermaker (1995a, p. 30) stress that the accomplishment of class renders

unequal institutional arrangements normal and natural, depicting class differences as enduring

dispositions. Consequently, interactional and institutional processes are viewed as closely

intertwined. West and Fenstermaker  (1995b, 508) are critical of distinctions between 'face-to-face

interaction "versus" structural discrimination' , arguing that the impact of social structure and

history is realised in variously situated social relationships as the sites for doing difference. While

West and Fenstermaker's ethnomethodological approach to difference has been challenged for

obfuscating power relations and neglecting the influence of macro-social structures (Collins, 1995, p. 494; Weber 1995, p. 500), their view of the interactional and structural levels as closely intertwined means that interaction is 'integral' (West & Fenstermaker, 1995b, p. 508) to the production of class divisions. The focus on social inequality as situated and dynamic does not erase the existence of broader unequal power-structures, but offers insights into how they are produced.

Conceptualising class divisions as dynamic and processual implies that the ethnomethodological perspective can account for agency. In response to the charge of failing to explain social change (Winant, 1995, p. 505), West and Fenstermaker stress that there is both activity (including resistance) and agency in the notion of 'doing' (West & Fenstermaker, 1995b, p. 510). Situated conduct is not tantamount to determined conduct (2002b, p. 211) with social processes being 'the source of both change and the inevitability of it' (2002b, p. 212). Similar to the cultural approach, the ethnomethodological perspective conceptualises class as a dynamic process, but its focus on interaction lends itself more readily to an analysis of how class is accomplished in talk and conversation. In conjunction with discursive psychology that offers the practical tools to analyse language, an approach that uses both ethnomethodology and discursive psychology provides constructive insights into the various ways class figures in talk.

**The study**

The research reported here forms part of a qualitative research project exploring young women's relationship with feminism in Germany and the UK. In view of the widely documented phenomenon of young women's (dis-)identification with feminism (e.g. Jowett, 2004; McRobbie, 2004), the study investigates how young women think, talk, and feel about feminism[2]. It is based on 40 semi-structured interviews that were conducted between April 2006 and September 2007, and lasted between one to one and a half hours. Topics that were addressed explicitly ranged from the

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[2] Taking into account that feminism is a highly contested term and that there is no one feminist movement with a unified set of goals, my research regards feminism and the women's movement as discursive categories to signify the multiple, individual, and cultural understandings of the concepts. Seeking to avoid a pre-defined and potentially exclusionary definition of the terms (Butler, 1992), I invited research participants to talk about their personal understandings of feminism and the women's movement.

research participants' views on gender (in)equality, their understandings of and associations with feminism and the women's movement, to their opinion about feminism. While the focus of the interviews was on young women's relationship with feminism, the length and in-depth character of the conversations meant that a range of themes was discussed. The research reported in this article emerged from various stages of the interviews where issues of class were made relevant.

Being particularly interested in how socio-economic positioning, ethnic and racial background as well as sexual orientation mediate feminist (dis-) identification, I interviewed a diverse group of 40 German and British women (aged 18-35). The identity characteristics of the respondents varied across multiple axes of differentiation and intersected with each other in numerous ways. It is therefore problematic to adopt a "tick-box approach" by categorising the research participants as being members of a specific group. However, I will provide a brief summary of my sample in order to give the reader an overview of the research participants and a feel for the data. In Germany, I interviewed thirteen middle-class women and seven women from lower socio-economic backgrounds; four women who identified as gay, 14 as heterosexual and two bisexual women; as well as four black, one Korean-German and 15 white research participants. Three respondents identified as Turkish-German and one participant had been raised in Ivory Coast and had worked in Germany for five years. All respondents lived in Berlin at the time of research and 12 were born in former West Germany. Eight  research participants had been partly raised in the GDR (mostly in East-Berlin) which some of them regarded as constitutive to their up-bringing. In the UK, I conducted 15 interviews in London and five in Birmingham.  In these interviews I met five working-class women and 15 middle-class women. Three respondents described themselves as lesbian, 14 as heterosexual and three as bisexual. Two research participants identified as black, three as mixed-race, three as Asian and 12 as white. Most research participants had been raised in the UK with four research participants having multi-national backgrounds including France, South Africa, and Zambia. Given the intersectional design of the study, class was discussed in various ways − be it explicitly or implicitly as my approach to class as a doing will demonstrate.

**Doing class**

*The currency of (dis-)identification*

Across the data, there were few instances of talk that explicitly expressed a class identity (such as 'I am middle/upper/working-class'). This is partly related to the fact that it was not always appropriate to ask research participants direct questions about their class background. The respondents had agreed to take part in a study on gender-related issues and were not readily prepared to talk about their socio–economic status. Class was perceived as a very personal subject whose discussion provoked unease, particularly in relation to the participants' own sense of identity (Savage et al., 2001, p. 880). The few instances where class identity was made explicit occurred in interviews with women who described themselves as middle or upper class. Vicky[3] portrayed her socio-economic background as 'very middle-class' and Ella, who had lived in the UK and in Zambia, stated: 'You know, for England I would be upper-class, I guess I am, for you know, upper-class, but I mix with everybody'. These instances of explicit talk on class location witness a degree of self-certainty and entitlement in relation to one's socio-economic positioning (see Reay 1997). The observation also resonates with Savage's et al. (2001, p. 885) argument that people with higher cultural capital had the confidence to 'play around reflexively with ideas of class'. Furthermore, the finding that working-classness was not named resonates with the well–known phenomenon that working–class women have an investment in not being recognised as such (Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

According to Walkerdine et al. (2001, p. 40) working-class women's talk is 'infused with a desire to distance themselves from the painful position of being "one of them". "They" were the "scruffs", the rough working class, the "underclass", the poor, the homeless or the hopeless'. Janina, who was 22 years old and currently unemployed, stated: 'and I never wanted to belong to those people who always depend on state benefits. In a way, I myself, I always wanted to stand on my

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[3] All names have been changed.

own two feet, have work, pay the rent with everything being fancy. But that hasn't really worked out. To the contrary – as one can see now. I am now a 'Hartz IV[4]' recipient […]'.

*Establishing respectability*

Janina's statement does not only illustrate the painful, felt need to distance herself from 'those people who always depend on state benefits', but is also indicative of an attempt to become respectable. In her study on gender and class, Skeggs (1997, p. 1) argues that '[r]espectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class'. Mainly being a concern of the working– classes who are seen as unrespectable due to a history of being represented as dangerous, polluting and pathological (ibid.), the attempt to establish respectability featured strongly in interviews with research participants who came from less privileged socio–economic backgrounds. Janina portrayed herself as a 'clean' person 'even though' she was in debt. Similarly, I conducted an interview with Susanne who was talking about the difficulties in raising a child on her own without a secured income. She was at pains to emphasise that she did not owe any money: 'and I am not in debt. This is important to me, that I am not in debt. Officially, I am not in debt, because I did not want that, I did not want that my child has such a role model'.

Janina and Susanne orient to discourses on the "working-classes" as dirty and as financially irresponsible. In presenting themselves as 'clean' and 'not in debt' respectively, Janina and Susanne implicitly refer to stigmatising discourses and design their talk with an eye to their accountability. From an ethnomethodological perspective these statements represent a way of doing class: Janina's and Susanne's unsolicited comments about their financial situation demonstrate that they render themselves accountable to culturally approved standards of being financially responsible. The ethnomethodological and discursive perspective does not only see respectability as a 'signifier of class' (Skeggs, 1997, p.1), but sheds a different light on it by regarding claims for respectability as

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[4] Translation by the author. 'Hartz IV refers to a German labour market reform law which came into existence in January 2005. Since then, the 'Hartz IV' recipient became a commonly used rhetorical figure to designate social welfare recipients, often in derogatory ways. For more information on the law in English:  Heiner Dribbusch, **eiro**nline, european industrial relations observatory on-line, at:
http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2004/09/inbrief/de0409204n.htm (accessed July 2008).

ways of doing class. This approach allows us to regard instances of talk as classed where class is made relevant, but not explicitly voiced.

### *Being responsible*

Frequently, utterances that sought to establish respectability were tied to statements about being a responsible person. Skeggs (1997, p. 56) regards 'responsibility as one of the key signifiers of respectability'. The attempt to achieve respectability through a construction of oneself as responsible was prominent in interviews with single, working-class mothers who had to negotiate hurtful stereotypes of 'welfare scrounging single mothers' (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 189). In her critical article on the representation of the figure of the "chav" in the British media, Tyler (2008, p. 26) claims: '[w]hilst young unwed working-class mothers have always been a target of social stigma, hatred, and anxiety, the fetishisation of the chav mum within popular culture has a contemporary specificity and marks a new outpouring of sexist class disgust'. Susanne was orienting to stigmatizing discourses on working–class single motherhood by presenting herself as a responsible mother. Without prompting her to talk about the way she was raising her daughter, she emphasised that she did not hit her, had stopped using drugs when she found out she was pregnant and that she would always put her daughter's needs first.

In her talk about how she raises her daughter, Susanne negotiates culturally pervasive stereotypes about single working-class mothers. She orients to being positioned as working-class in her talk but seeks to escape her classed positioning by portraying herself as a responsible mother. Susanne's orientation to and negotiation of the discursive formations under which she becomes positioned as a classed subject figures as an accomplishment and interactive process, as a way of doing class. In my personal notes about the interview I wrote that Susanne talked to me as if I was a social service representative. Skeggs (2004, p. 22) draws on Steedman to argue that the working – class self came into existence by 'narrating itself in the ways established by the state legal system of poor relief'. Steedman (2000, p. 30) shows that '[t]he eighteenth-century philanthropic organisation

often demanded a story in exchange for its dole'. While Susanne does not use any class-related terms in her talk, the ethnomethodological and discursive approach illuminates the subtle and implicit ways in which class is oriented to, negotiated, and taken up in and through language.

The attempt to establish respectability through a self-presentation as responsible also became apparent in the interview with Roxana who was from a working-class background. During the first few minutes of the interview, Roxana spoke about her children. When I asked her how old they were, she answered my question and subsequently stated: 'I had them when I was young. But that's how I planned it, that's how I wanted it so I've done it my way'. Roxana emphasises her planned motherhood which fulfils the function of undoing stereotypes of the "irresponsible teenage mother". Moreover, the use of individualist rhetoric – 'I have done it my way' – allows her to present herself as a self-made individual: she wanted children at a young age, planned on having them and did it her way. Using the tools of discursive psychology and ethnomethodology, Roxana's statement provides us with yet another insight into how class is done in talk. Her emphasis on planned motherhood and her use of individualist rhetoric present her as a responsible, and therefore respectable person. Roxana engages in practices of accountability by claiming she had children at a young age, but had *planned* on doing so. Class is done by orienting to, accounting for, and negotiating her positioning as working-class.

The felt need to present one's life as being under control in interviews with working-class participants was in stark contrast to Kelly's statement. Kelly, who identified herself as middle-class, was in her thirties, expecting a baby, just finished her PhD, and felt that 'things are up in the air'. Throughout the interview, she stated that she had 'never really planned her life' and never envisaged it as stable in terms of having a mortgage, etc. The self-confidence with which she presents herself as unplanned differs – and I argue class is a crucial factor here– from Susanne and Roxana who are at pains to emphasise that they made planned decisions. Kate's positioning as middle-class means she does not have to negotiate an interpellation as an irresponsible person who needs to exert more control over her life. She confidently portrays herself as somebody who goes

with the flow while Susanne and Roxana do a lot of discursive work to present themselves as responsible. In contrast to her working-class peers, Kate's confident self-portrayal as unplanned implies that she does not have to contest the terms under which she becomes a classed subject. The very absence of the need to negotiate her class position might be indicative of Kate's privileged and normative identity as middle-class. If middle–classness is normalised (Lawler, 2005), the terms by which one is made into a middle–class subject might be equally normalised and invisible. Kelly does not seem to feel the need to negotiate the terms of her making – they are "just there".

*Making distinctions*

Class was not only done in the interviews by orienting to and negotiating quests for respectability and responsibility, but also operated through processes of differentiation. In conjunction with socially pervasive discourses (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 189), Vicky and Sabrina regarded working–class parents as insufficiently suited for parenting. Vicky, whose self-description as middle-class I cited above, argued that the population was declining in the UK and said: 'And the type of people who are having more babies aren't necessarily the most well-prepared to have babies'. Vicky is doing middle-classness by distancing herself from 'the type of people'; her statement represents a distancing move through which she accomplishes and reasserts her class position. As Lawler (2005, p. 429) argues, to distinguish oneself from the working–class is crucial to middle–class identity. Similarly, Sabrina discussed 'kids who hang around and things and it seems like their parents er, don't mind them hanging around ….and it seems like um, their parents – you can imagine like a mum being at home and cooking their dinner for them and they – and their dad being at the pub, something like that'.

Resonating with Vicky's statement on 'the type of people who are having more babies', Sabrina considers certain persons less suited for parenting. She speaks from a middle-class position by making distinctions based on class where socio-economic differences nevertheless remain unvoiced. Class is at issue but Vicky and Sabrina do not make it explicit. They are doing middle-

classness by tacitly making distinctions and constructing their experiences and views as ordinary. Sabrina for example spoke about her neighbourhood in Surrey, stating that it is 'normal' there for boys and girls to go to school and then to university. She describes specific experiences - that are predominantly middle-class - as common, which reflects the status of middle-classness as normative as well as normalised (Lawler, 2005, p. 429). Her statement accomplishes the representation of middle-classness as the norm. Furthermore, the absence of attempts to escape one's socio-economic status and/or to negotiate it inadvertently sheds light on how normative class positions are done in talk. They are "simply" taken up, rather than re-negotiated, as Vicky's and Sabrina's statements on parenting show. Reiterating my arguments about the usefulness of a discursive and ethnomethodological approach, this perspective on the interplay between talk, discourse, and class offers insights into the various ways both normative and non-normative class positions figure in talk. Given Savage's et al. (2001, p. 888) argument that 'class identities are generally weak', I hold that the discursive and ethnomethodological approach provides useful perspectives on how class comes to matter in talk and interaction.

Miranda was also doing middle-classness through a distancing move. She had come to London from South Africa spending her first year doing 'the worst jobs ever'. Working in catering 'where you have to literally clean people's plates for a whole day', Miranda stressed that 'all these bad jobs, that was just not for me'. She was then offered a position in a money broking firm, stating that 'working in the city felt like me again….I felt good about myself, and you dress nicely, and, you work normal hours, and you hang out with smart people, and have adult conversations about the world'. In her study on class mobility, Lawler (1999, p. 17) claims that class was 'integral' to the research participants' sense of self, emphasising that it was experienced as a part of the self, rather than as an 'external marker'. Class works at the level of subjectivity (Skeggs, 2005, p. 64) so that the construction of the "real self" in Miranda's statement figures as an interactional accomplishment of class. Miranda emphasises that her city job made her feel "like me again". She

is doing class in this statement by distancing herself from her former jobs and by establishing her "true" self in relation to different occupations and life-styles.

### *Criticising existing systems of classification*

Frequently, class was done in the interviews in ways that reinstated existing class structures, but it is crucial to emphasise that there were several instances where respondents critically commented on classifying discourses and practices. Being aware of the scrounger discourse (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 189), Yvonne talked about the stereotypes associated with single working-class mothering.

> Oh, but it's one of those oh, like arguments when people say oh, you – you're neglecting your kids emotionally and de-de-de (Yeah.) because you're not working um (Yeah.) because you're working and – and you know, you're impinging on their time (inaudible) spent with them or and especially that they haven't got their dad at home as well erm, but at the same time if you stay at home and claim benefits then people like well, you know, oh, single parents, partly under [inaudible] (Yeah.) you're just having kids and (Yeah.) you want to sponge off the state and you know, you just – you can't win.

Yvonne is critical of prevailing discourses on working-class single motherhood. She does not seek to negotiate her positioning by presenting herself as responsible and respectable. By arguing 'you can't win', she challenges the discursive formations under which the acts of single, working-class mothers are subject to criticism no matter what they do.

Middle–class lifestyle or attitudes were also questioned in some interviews which resonates with Skeggs' (2004: 114) claim that accusations of middle–class pretentiousness represent one significant challenge to degrading systems of classification. In critically discussing today's 'emphasis on beauty', Carry stated: 'It's women that produce these magazines, produce these TV-shows, it is all women, and I think that is a very middle-class thing. Middle-class aspiring to be upper-class, but, you know, I think you should just be happy with what you are'. Furthermore, several working-class research participants were critical of socio-economic inequalities and dismissive of rich people 'who are having more and more, and who are doing really well, while poor people are having less and are doing worse' (Helena). Following the discursive and ethnomethodological approach to class and talk, these statements also figure as ways of doing class.

Carry and Helena speak about 'middle-class women' or 'rich people' as though they were not part of them, taking up a differently classed position as not middle-class, or not rich. Carry and Helena are doing class but simultaneously offer a critical perspective. Resonating with the finding that class identities are ambivalent and complex, these instances point to the need to conceptualise the doing of class as a dynamic process and to acknowledge that it can be done variably, reinstating or critiquing existing systems of classification.

### *Using rhetorical devices to construct a reflexive self*

Class operated variously at the level of talk and interaction, but also figured in the interviews through the unequally distributed use of rhetorical devices, such as the disclaimer. A disclaimer is a 'common face-saving device' used to ward off potential critique (van den Berg, 2003, p. 125). It often takes the form of: '"I am not a racist/sexist, BUT I endorse x (x being a statement that could be interpreted as racist/sexist"' (ibid.).The use of disclaimers differed  across the data and was much more prominent in the talk of middle-class women. Christine, who had described herself as middle–class during the interview, used a lot of disclaimers when I asked her how she felt about feminism:

> Feminism – oh, erm, well obviously, my reaction to it is based upon what my understanding of it is, and my understanding of it is *probably very stereotypical. I think anything that supports the advancement, you know, recognising, helping women to be seen as equal is, should have a role, but*, er, I suppose, one stereotype I think, I don't like, I don't, I get the impression that sometimes feminists try to play down the qualities that women have […].

Christine begins by saying that her reaction to feminism is mediated by her understanding of it thereby qualifying her following remarks. Her understanding is probably very stereotypical which again works as a statement to ward off potential critique. She thinks positively of the advancement of women, '*but*' feminists sometimes play down the qualities that women have. Signalling awareness of potential criticisms as not having a proper understanding of feminism, or as not being in favour of women's emancipation, Christine's use of disclaimers enables her to present herself as an individual that is critical of feminism and 'yet' has progressive views. Arguably, Christine has to

negotiate the 'ideological dilemma' (Billig et al., 1988) of wanting to portray herself as being a supporter of gender equality while being critical of feminism.

Noticing the frequent use of disclaimers in talk of middle-class research participants raises the question of whether their rather excessive employment is classed. The transcripts of the interviews with working-class women, and particularly the interviews with lower-class participants in Germany who were comparatively uneducated, show that they used disclaimers much less than their peers. Indeed, it was hard to identify disclaimers in these transcripts. Middle–class research participants frequently began their statements with disclaimers such as 'I don't know a lot about feminism but…' or 'You could argue I am stereotypical but'. In addition, they also drew on 'scientific evidence' to bolster their claims as Elspeth's statement shows. She was talking about boys performing worse at school than girls and was trying to explain why: 'I don't know, it is just, I don't have enough data, or information to process it, but…'.

The use of disclaimers and 'scientific evidence' fulfils the function of producing a moderate and reflexive individual, representing a rhetorical means through which middle–class women produce a rational self. Consequently, the use of disclaimers, and scientific evidence, should be understood as a classed process and as yet another way of doing class in talk. Skeggs (2004) shows that the reflexive self is a classed production and brings into effect particular forms of personhood. 'For the middle–class it was the "rational", constrained moral individual with reflexivity' (2004, p. 39). According to Skeggs, the self is a not a neutral category because the techniques for self-telling are not available to all. The ability to be reflexive is a privilege and indicative of a position of power.

Having used the insights of discursive psychology, but also of a cultural approach to class by drawing on Skeggs' work, allows us to see that the employment of rhetorical devices is not neutral, but class-inflected. Discursive psychology's view of language as functional illustrates that disclaimers achieve the construction of a moderate, rational individual. Combining these insights with the ethnomethodological perspective enables us to understand that the frequent use of

disclaimers in the talk of middle-class women represents a way of doing class: they orient to particular forms of personhood by employing rhetorical means through which they construct themselves as reflexive. From an ethnomethodological perspective, reflexivity -  as it features in these instances - is an accomplishment that enables individuals to produce classed selves in talk.

**Conclusion and implications**

The employment of analytical tools borrowed from discursive psychology and ethnomethodology contributes to a cultural approach to class by illuminating the various ways in which it operates at the level of talk and interaction. The attempts to establish respectability and responsibility as well as the making of distinctions and criticisms of existing class structures were reconceptualised as doings of class. While there were not many explicit references to class in the data, the discursive and ethnomethodological approach allowed us to understand how class operates in and through talk, tacitly or explicitly. The close reading of talk also enabled us to see how class features at the level of rhetorical constructions. Moreover, the empirically grounded approach can be used to assess large-scale social theories. In relation to the observation on the making of reflexive subjects in talk, insights gained from this study can be interpreted in light of the reflexive modernisation thesis as 'one of the most influential (and controversial) sets of ideas in contemporary sociology' (Adkins, 2002a, p. 13).

Most readily associated with the work of Beck (e.g. 1992) and Giddens (e.g. 1991), the reflexive modernisation thesis argues that capacities towards both structural and self-reflexivity have intensified. Giddens (1991, p. 3) claims that '[i]n the settings of what I call "high" or "late" modernity – our present-day world, the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made'. As reflexivity increases, the relationship between social structure and agents changes so that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 7)  posit 'individuals freed of traditional constraints'. As my close, empirically grounded analysis of class and talk however demonstrated, reflexivity is not equally distributed in regard to class; indeed, the use of disclaimers in the

production of a moderate and reflexive self is indicative and reproductive of a position of power. Echoing various theorists who have challenged the arguments about reflexive self-identities as being a characteristic features of later modernity (Savage et al, 2001; Adkins 2002b, p. 346 for a brief overview), the discursive and ethnomethodological perspective shows that reflexivity may be an important constituent of class *inequalities*. The insights gained from my approach are not only useful because they explore the doing of class in talk, but also produce empirically grounded accounts that can offer a critical perspective on large–scale social theories.

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