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Applying a Psychosocial Framework to Explore Class as Lived, Experienced, and Felt. Suggestions for an Updated Conceptualization of Class and Social Position

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Key words: psychosocial theory; qualitative methods; class; respectability; social inequality; post-welfare; middle class; class consciousness; health

Abstract: In this article, we discuss the relevance and implications of class in contemporary Western society, emphasizing the importance of incorporating a qualitative, cultural class perspective into psychosocial research. We present five key discussions on the concept of class, and we propose that a psychosocial framework could offer elaborate and nuanced understandings of how class is manifested in post-welfare societies. The five discussions are: a redefined concept of class consciousness; social mobility as class journeys; development of a middle-class sociology; class configurations concerning forms of subjectivity; and finally, healthism's scapegoating of disadvantaged people.

We argue that psychosocial research holds the potential to critically examine implications of class within capitalism as a governing system, such as how class is lived, experienced, and felt in a post-welfare context. However, one must acknowledge the challenges involved in applying concepts across different societal structures and cultures, and we therefore call for a methodological rethink to accommodate new forms of value and social divisions in contemporary society. Overall, we underscore the importance of class analysis in addressing social inequality and resisting the individualization of structural inequality.

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1. Introduction: Updating the Concept of Class in a Psychosocial Framework

In this article, we put forward five discussions that we consider relevant for psychosocial research to reengage with in order to develop the concept of class. We highlight some of the essential questions regarding class and social inequality that, in our view, could currently be raised within a psychosocial analytical framework. [1]

In 2020, TYLER described how a "welfare stigma machine" (p.5) permeates British society as a constant cycle of moral judgments; she argued that stigma is a political strategy to establish social differentiation (p.9) and legitimate welfare retrenchments. The relevance of the class concept in this post-welfare context is taking on greater significance as social inequality continues to increase in terms of finances (PIKETTY, 2014), health (MARMOT, ALLEN, BOYCE, GOLDBLATT & MORRISON, 2020) and access to welfare (AAMANN & DYBBROE, 2018). [2]

There is extensive sociological work on mentalities in different social positions, such as GEIGER's (1939) focus on social stratification and mentality and ELIAS' (2000 [1939]) work on the relationship between sociogenesis and psychogenesis, where he showed how social structures and historical developments influenced individual behavior and personality. However, neither GEIGER nor ELIAS used ethnographic, qualitative methods that involve talking to, observing, or collaborating with participants, which is our methodological foundation for writing this article. Furthermore, in this article, we have chosen to highlight five discussions which aim to explore the subjective, affective and emotional dimensions of class rather than, e.g., mentality or behavior. These are the reasons why we position the article within a psychosocial rather than a sociological framework. [3]

The five discussions presented draw on the work of a small group of researchers that has been labeled the English school of feminist post-structuralists (HEY, 2003, p.321). We unfold the potential insights that a qualitative, ethnographic and cultural perspective on class can offer and identify both the opportunities and challenges presented by this approach to class. As this perspective offers a dynamic conceptualization of class and is sensitive towards the emotional and affective dimensions of class, we argue that the perspectives could fruitfully be integrated within psychosocial understandings. [4]

On the one hand, classical sociologists often examined class "as a set of 'empty' signifiers (employment, housing, etc.) waiting to be filled by interchangeable social actors" (LAWLER, 2005, p.797). On the other hand, psychologists often individualized experiences of social inequality and injustice rooted in class (WALKERDINE, 2003, p.238). In early cultural studies, based on WILLIAMS' "structure of feeling" (1958, cited in DURING, 1999, p.2) it had been suggested to merge sociological structural insights with the psychological implications of class-based inequality. WILLIAMS argued that "it is at the level of the individual life that the cultural effects of social inequality are most apparent" (ibid). [5]

SKEGGS insisted that: "... class is so insinuated in the intimate making of self and culture that it is even more ubiquitous than previously articulated, if more difficult to pin down, leaking beyond the traditional measures of classification" (2005, p.968). She believed that class exists in a subtle and more diffuse configuration than previously thought. To explore these subtle forms of manifestation of class, we argue that a psychosocial analytical framework can be useful. [6]

As HOLLWAY and FROGGETT noted: "The goal of psychosocial research is to explore ways of understanding that do not reduce to either psychological or social explanations and do not uncritically locate these in 'the individual' or 'society', or in 'internal' and 'external' worlds" (2012, §1). HOLLWAY stated:

> "... where ever you encounter the social, you encounter it multiply mediated by the psychodynamic and vice versa: We are psycho-social because we are products of a unique biography of anxiety- and desire-provoking life events and the manner in which their meanings have been unconsciously transformed in internal reality. We are psycho-*social* because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses and also because the unconscious defenses that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others). We are psycho-social because the real events in the external, social world are desirously and defensively, as well as discursively, appropriated" (2004, n.p.). [7]

Psychosocial researchers focus upon intersubjective relations and the processes through which inner and social worlds are interconnected and combined (WOODWARD, 2015). With its psychoanalytical inspirations, psychosocial research attends to unconscious forces and psychodynamics, placing affect and emotion in the center of human relations and in the relation between inner and social worlds. In this way, psychosocial perspectives can contribute to the exploration of subjective, emotional, and cultural effects of social inequality by asking questions such as: What are the implications for the everyday lives, self-understanding, and agency of people in different class positions? How is inequality subjectively perceived, and which psychic forces and investments, defenses and desires, are activated in response to inequality? To gain these insights there is a need to update the concept of class in psychosocial theory to enable us to problematize the increased inequality. [8]

The structure of the article is as follows: Following this introduction, we explain the emergence of the concept of class in Section 2, and introduce the five discussions mentioned in the abstract. In Section 3, we elaborate on a concept of consciousness of class. In Section 4, we focus on the theme of social mobility; in Section 5, we argue for developing a sociology of the middle class and raise a range of methodological issues; and in Section 6, we reflect on class configurations and forms of subjectivation. In Section 7, we move on to explore how healthism relies on neoliberal scapegoating of disadvantaged people. In the final Section 8, we summarize and call for resistance to the individualization of structural social inequality. [9]

2. Class: A Critical and Contested Concept

FINCH (1993) demonstrated how "the working class" as a discursive formation emerged in the mid-19th century. In response to urbanization and extreme poverty, the "bourgeoisie" felt the need to regulate the threatening "masses," i.e., "In the 1840s social commentators began to voice an alarm, bordering on panic, that complete ignorance about the urban poor was leaving a potential threat to social order quietly simmering at the doorstep of polite, middle-class society" (p.16). [10]

Since that time, she wrote, the term "working class" has been extensively employed as a means to regulate individuals through processes of categorization and the "collection" of certain kinds of "knowledge" about them. Furthermore, WALKERDINE pointed out how psychology and sociology developed as "the twin disciplines through which class was produced as a truth through which the urban population of industrialized cities could be managed" (2003, p.238). The concept of class is therefore infested with an effort by a dominant group to control another group through classification and the collection of knowledge. [11]

MARX in fact used the concept of class critically, but as FINCH wrote:

> "Marx never tried to relocate the boundaries, nor present a different working class to that already being formulated by the social surveyors. In fact, ... Marx was not concerned with people at all. He was an analyst of structures who saw his task as investigating the economic system which was being created around him" (1993, p.10). [12]

When we insist on using the term class in this article, it is because social inequality continues to exist, regardless of what it is called. SKEGGS stated: "To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist anymore; only that some theorists do not value it ... Class inequality exists beyond its theoretical representation" (1997, p.6). Although the concept of class originates from the bourgeoisie's need for control, there is reason to reclaim it as a basis for critical analysis. [13]

Class has historically held a very central place in sociology; but over the past few decades, its importance has waned. Some have even argued for the irrelevance of the class concept, as evidenced by, e.g., books with telling titles like "The Death of Class" (PAKULSKI & WATERS, 1995). As PAKULSKI explained, "'[c]lassness' reached its peak in industrial society and has been declining while post-industrial and postmodern trends intensify. Contemporary advanced societies remain unequal, but in a classless way" (2005, p.152). [14]

The argument was that significant societal changes, such as the dismantling of industrial society with its clear social stratification, had contributed to the erosion of traditional class structures. Consequently, Western societies were transitioning into "status-oriented" societies where class distinctions were increasingly supplanted by new forms of inequality rooted in status, lifestyle choices, and

consumption patterns. This shift was thought to lead to social stratification being more influenced by individual lifestyle preferences and social status than by class structures. [15]

However, the shift from industrial to financial capitalism, often referred to as "neoliberalism" (TYLER, 2015, p.493), has not eliminated social inequality. Rather, several authors argued that this shift has merely eradicated class as an explanatory framework (McLAREN, 2005). These arguments not only fail to recognize that consumption patterns and lifestyle choices depend on access to economic resources, but they also rely on a narrow definition of class as something exclusively economic and structural, thereby neglecting the work of BOURDIEU. [16]

In this article, we draw on BOURDIEU's conceptual framework (1990 [1980], 2010 [1979]; see also BOURDIEU et al. (1999 [1993]). BOURDIEU (2010 [1979]) emphasized that cultural practices should not be seen as mere reflections of an individual's economic, occupational, and educational class position. Instead, cultural practices are integral to shaping class relations. He also explored the inertia of social structures, using the concept of habitus to understand how class structures become ingrained in individuals' bodies, influencing their preferences, inclinations, and tastes. Lastly, he argued that class analysis should consider other forms of capital beyond the monetary, shedding light on what constitutes class relations and how class-based inequalities are perpetuated. With BOURDIEU's thinking, it thus becomes possible to understand class as something far more comprehensive than merely economic structures, as class also plays a central role in "choices" of lifestyle and the resulting consumption patterns. [17]

BOURDIEU's conceptual framework is therefore well-suited for exploring the emotional and subjective experiences of class-based inequality. An example of how these perspectives have been used in the context of psychosocial studies was presented by LAYTON (2004). LAYTON explored how emotions, here "the heebie-jeebies," played an important role in sustaining the tastes that keep class hierarchies in place. While BOURDIEU (2010 [1979]) primarily considered the tastes of the different class fractions as they appeared to the conscious mind of his informants, LAYTON (2004) argued that the significance for psychoanalysis of BOURDIEU’s theory of distinction lies in the fact that the core sociological concepts he identified operated largely on an unconscious level. Through an analysis of friends' and colleagues' emotional experiences when shopping in high-end versus low-end stores, LAYTON pointed to everyday issues that sustain class conflict, in particular the connections between emotions and the unconscious, conflictual internalizations of class relations that underpin well-defended identities (p.40). [18]

In the following pages, we introduce five recent discussions, both theoretical and empirical, based on qualitative, ethnographic methods and taking place within feminist gender studies, cultural studies and cultural sociology in the UK, and partly in the USA:

- A redefined concept of class consciousness;
- social mobility as class journeys;
- development of a middle-class sociology;
- class configurations concerning forms of subjectivity;
- healthism's scapegoating of disadvantaged people. [19]

3. A Redefined Concept of Class Consciousness

In traditional class sociology, "class consciousness" was used to denote the political mobilization of the working class, typically manifested in the white male industrial worker. However, this androcentric and economistic understanding of class had been criticized from a feminist perspective (e.g., FRASER, 2013). BETTIE (2003, p.199) pointed out that women from the working class have never been portrayed as the idealized figure of romantic revolution in the same way as working-class men. This is because a narrow quantitative definition of class based on occupation typically placed women according to their husband's or father's profession, effectively rendering women invisible as classed subjects (for a Danish example, see SKJØTT-LARSEN, 2011, p.66). [20]

The British anthology "Class Matters: 'Working-Class' Women's Perspectives on Class" (MAHONY & ZMROCZEK, 1997) was an attempt to address this issue. The authors combined feminist post-structuralist reasoning with BOURDIEU's conceptual framework. The common thread among the contributions in the anthology was that they were authored by academic "class travelers," women who have moved upward between class positions, and the authors explicitly or implicitly drew on their subjective experiences of how class operates. Their experiences shed light on how class serves as a driving force for social change and as a source of deeper insights into how inequality is lived. WALSH stated in her contribution: "As 'strangers' within, women from working-class backgrounds have both a special place and a crucial role to play in changing academic practices and purposes, and their relation to social change" (1997, p.153). [21]

Consequently, albeit unarticulated, a new meaning of class consciousness was being brought to the fore and explored in this work. Under the heading "Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class," REAY (2005) argued for this new ascription of the concept as she proposed a different approach to class consciousness—one that, although often overlooked, influenced both internal experiences and outward actions. She argued that class was experienced on both conscious and unconscious levels. Her point was that beyond socio-economic classifications and class behaviors, there existed a psychological dimension of class that had largely gone unnoticed in academic discussions and everyday understanding (p.912). [22]

REAY suggested that it is fruitful to view class consciousness as a kind of intuitive sense to enhance our understanding of how class operates and feels. What is intriguing in the context of psychosocial research is that class consciousness seems to take on different meanings depending on gender identity. For example, as mentioned earlier, BETTIE (2003) indicated that working-class men are often portrayed as romantic revolutionary heroes. Similarly, LAMONT (2000) in her empirical studies showed that the concept of "working class" has been a source of positive self-identification for (American and French, both white and black) men. [23]

In contrast, MAHONY and ZMROCZEK in their "Class Matters" anthology (1997) and SKEGGS (1997) in her longitudinal fieldwork among young white working-class women demonstrated that class consciousness for women is more intertwined with experiences of moral devaluation. SKEGGS explored this morally judgmental perspective through the concept of respectability as a particularly feminized class practice. Respectability, historically associated with the creation of a distinct middle-class identity centered on the virtuous housewife figure and set apart from the aristocracy and the proletariat, encompasses an institutionalized and internalized evaluative gaze directed both outward and inward. Consequently, class is lived, felt, and produced on a deeply intimate level based on these judgments. Drawing on these insights, SKEGGS suggested that class should be understood as a dialogical relationship between those who judge, with judgments authorized by culture, and those who are being judged. [24]

As an example of this class consciousness based on class as a judge-judged relationship, we would like to highlight the historian STEEDMAN's autobiographical work "Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives" (1986). In this book, STEEDMAN described her own and her mother's working-class upbringing in 1950s London. The book begins with the following passage:

> "Upstairs, a long time ago, she had cried, standing on the bare floorboards in the front bedroom just after we moved to this house in Streatham Hill in 1951, my baby sister in her carry cot. We both watched the dumpy retreating figure of the health visitor through the curtainless windows. The woman had said: 'This house isn't fit for a baby.' And then she stopped crying, my mother, got by, the phrase that picks up after all difficulty (it says: 'it's like this; it shouldn't be like this; it's unfair; I'll manage'): 'Hard line, eh, Kay?' ... And I? we will do everything and anything until the end of my days to stop anyone ever talking to me like that woman talked to my mother. It is in this place, this bare, curtainless bedroom that lies my secret and shameful defiance" (p.2). [25]

Here STEEDMAN pointed out how class takes shape as a morally judgmental, institutionalized gaze. She also showed how this gaze is ambivalently internalized: Class consciousness manifests itself as a fear of moral devaluation, being judged as not respectable. Additionally, she illustrated how the health visitor's judgment of her mother became a significant driving force for the class consciousness she described as a secret, shameful defiance. STEEDMAN's focus on childhood, emotions, intimate spaces, and encounters with the state's

representative, the health visitor, illustrates how class takes on a much more intimate significance (see also REAY, 1998; WALKERDINE & LUCEY, 1989) than the traditional concept of class consciousness, which is often associated with (masculine) political mobilization. [26]

STEEDMAN further demonstrated how intuitive class consciousness functions as both a catalyst for class mobility/escape and as indignation that she carried with her in encounters with more privileged individuals. In her autobiographical work she continued:

> "I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago, I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't" (1986, p.2). [27]

These discussions about respectability as a feminized class consciousness can be particularly interesting for the field of critical psychosocial studies focusing on motherhood and family life. It can be argued that class and moral judgments are closely linked to motherhood and health practices (AAMANN, 2017a) and that respectability is reinforced by dominant ideas about how parents should take responsibility to prevent specific health risks (e.g., obesity), thereby reinstating class as a central marker among parents and when health professionals screen for vulnerable families (see also AAMANN & DYBBROE, 2018; AAMANN & ERLIK, 2023). [28]

However, it is essential to be cautious about adopting perspectives from the 1980s and 1990s for a post-welfare context in 2024. While social and health authorities in contemporary post-welfare societies play a pivotal role in catalyzing moral judgments about parenting practices, one may question whether "defiance" and "indignation" are widespread responses to these class judgments in an era where individualization and neoliberal forms of subjectivation legitimate welfare retrenchments and function as markers of the middle class. [29]

4. Social Mobility as Class Journeys

It is primarily the journey from the working class to academia that is illuminated and problematized as coming at a cost by qualitative class researchers. REAY addressed this issue in an article titled "Surviving in Dangerous Places: Working-Class Women, Women's Studies and Higher Education" (1998). She wrote that higher education subtly, yet widely, works to undermine and diminish working-class identities (p.12). Efforts to get young people from what is generally referred to as "education-remote families" to complete higher education are, therefore, simultaneously a class-converting endeavor. [30]

However, as REAY pointed out when she, as an "educated working-class woman" (p.17)—a term developed in response to the assumption that when you are an academic, you are a privileged middle-class person—drew on her own experiences, it was not without costs. In addition to university life being filled with

academic and personal setbacks, a sense of "homelessness" was also experienced. This was addressed by HEY:

> "... 'becoming' an (academic) somebody [...] is no easy job. On the contrary, 'joining the club' is lived as grief—a gain that is constantly spun from the recognition and experience of a loss of a previous home without the pleasure of feeling safe in the new location" (2003, p.325). [31]

In this light, changing class is not problem-free. Or rather, can one belong to multiple classes simultaneously? SELJESTAD wrote how his own class journey involved both homelessness and a sense of dislocation, but it also provided him with valuable insights (2010, p.38). He argued that his class journey provided a foundation for challenging the status quo and questioning what seemed obvious, self-evident, and commonly accepted. [32]

LAYTON (2004), herself a class traveler, found in her inquiry into emotions connected to taste striking responses in relation to the journey from lower to higher classes. She noticed that wives of men whose social trajectory took them from white working class to highly paid professionals reported that their husbands *never* went into discount stores. This also appeared to be true for those born into the upper-middle class. But as she stated:

> "... there are interesting emotional differences behind the similar behavior of these two groups. In the store, both groups might feel the heebie jeebies, but it seems that the emotional reactions of those who rose from lower class origins center on the fact that it all feels painfully familiar, while those from upper class origins find such stores simply alien. For both groups, entering the stores might reactivate all that they have split off to attain what they have, and both groups' emotional responses suggest a fear of contagion by contact with the lower classes. But whereas the heebie jeebies among those born into the upper class seems to be something akin to revulsion, for the group whose class status has risen these stores also evoke shame, even humiliation" (p.41). [33]

LAYTON showed that what on the surface seemed to be similar reactions, upon closer examination turned out to contain different feelings and to originate from different class positions. The emotional "homelessness" resulting from being a class traveler, and the potential advantages and disadvantages, call for more in-depth psychosocial exploration and more precise theoretical consideration. [34]

5. Middle-Class Hegemony and Its Methodological Implications

If class is institutionalized in the distribution of moral judgments by (social and health) authorities and acquires early significance for those who are devalued as a sense of shame, a fear of exposure, and potential indignation, researchers must also ask: What significance does class have for those who are middle-class? How does it feel when class constitutes an advantage rather than a disadvantage, and what forms of class consciousness emerge? With BOURDIEU's (2010 [1979]) concept of class, we think of the middle class as covering a range of social positions, placed in the middle on the parameters of economic and symbolic capital. [35]

As with the categories of "race" and "ethnicity," class is not only something "others" have. Class also shapes subjectivity for the middle class, which has attained the status of an unmarked norm, even though it may appear as a "non-feeling." Therefore, there is a great need to develop "majority problematizing" perspectives similar to more established queer, crip, and whiteness theories. As WALKERDINE asked: "Do the endlessly repeated stories about The Working Class tell us more about bourgeois fantasies of the Other than they do anything about working-class subjectivity?" (1996, p.357) [36]

The middle classes in the West hold cultural hegemony. EHRENREICH (1989) explained that the American professional middle class is uniquely influential in defining what is considered important and shaping self-perceptions. This pervasive influence complicates the task of writing about it and analyzing it as a distinct class. The very omnipresence of the professional middle class makes it challenging to discuss it as a separate entity, as its ideas and assumptions are embedded in our everyday thinking. [37]

Important questions also arise about who the privileged middle class is and what exactly constitutes their privileges. In Denmark, research into elites has been a trend in the last decade (BACH, 2011; HOUMANN ELLERSGAARD, 2015). These are relevant contributions to understanding Western class societies, but as the elite's way of living and their cultural norms are not always in accordance with middle-class hegemony, we believe that we need nuanced understandings of the middle class and its configurations and psychosocial implications. [38]

However, this might be challenging. The strong middle-class consciousness aligns perfectly with neoliberalism's individualization. If the national self-understanding in the West rests on an idea of equality but is instead shaped as middle-class hegemonies, there will be significant challenges in insisting on the relevance of the class concept when deploying it in qualitative ethnographic methodologies. [39]

During the fieldwork in AAMANN's PhD project, she encountered numerous ethical dilemmas stemming from the fact that she insisted on studying differences (2017a, pp.143-147); class was produced in the research encounters as entitlement, embarrassment, and confusion, creating a series of awkward

situations. The solution to the issue was to consider these ethical dilemmas as part of the research project's problem, namely the questions that class inevitably raises about moral worth, and to analyze them as part of the empirical data. In this way, exploring the subjective and emotional dimensions of class requires a methodological rethink. For instance, disharmony or even resistance in the research encounters, which have traditionally been considered technical difficulties to overcome, can instead be included as a fundamental condition of knowledge production and thus incorporated as part of the empirical data (AAMANN 2017b). This approach can create new insights into how middle-class consciousness, hyper-individualism, and equality ideologies intertwine. [40]

This requires a break with the common assumption in ethnographic fieldwork that research participants are "telling it like it is" (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2013, p.2). Psychosocial research works with a concept of the subject as "defended," directing awareness to the intra- and intersubjective defenses, which will always be in play in the research encounter. The understanding of the subject as defended stems from the work of KLEIN, who was regarded as the founder of object relations theory. Through observation and psychoanalysis of children, KLEIN (1932, 1984) emphasized the early experiences of interplay with the primary caregiver and how these form later interactions and emotional development of the individual. She referred to two distinct positions, the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, as the fundamental ways of handling emotions, such as anxiety, frustration, and anger, which threaten the ego. She believed that infants were not able to see the world as a coherent whole in the early phase, but perceived things as fragmented and could not recognize the primary caregiver as a source of both positive and negative emotions. Because of the infant's lack of understanding of time, it could not anticipate the satisfaction of food when it felt frustrated by hunger. The infant polarized the emotions: "negative" when hungry and sad, and "positive" when fed and comforted. In its imagination, the infant singled out and projected negative aspects of its experience, to isolate them from positive aspects. Thus, splitting and projection become dominant defense mechanisms to avoid anxiety and pain. This split between good and evil was characterized by KLEIN as the paranoid-schizoid position (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2013, p.18). [41]

Gradually, and if its needs were fulfilled, the infant is able to recognize the caregiver as a holistic object which could both satisfy and frustrate. KLEIN (1932) believed that this development laid the foundation for the child to experience the world in a more balanced and integrated way. She called this integration phase the depressive position (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON 2013, p.18). This position can arouse painful feelings of guilt, worry, and sadness and give rise to a desire to make up for and repair damage caused by previous hatred and aggression. But it is a crucial position as it is a prerequisite for further growth. [42]

Although KLEIN's theory had its origins in observations of children, it was believed to be relevant throughout life. When adults were faced with situations that trigger significant frustration, the earliest defense mechanisms can be activated again. Adults can react by a paranoid-schizoid position and split the

"good" from the "evil," then ending in an either-or way of thinking. In other cases, grown-ups may be able to respond from the depressive position, where complexity and conflicting emotions are recognized and it is realized that the "good" and the "evil" can co-exist in the same person or group (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2013, p.18). [43]

Based on object relation theory, disharmony and resistance in the research encounter will be interpreted as signs of the emotional content activated by the research topics and questions. Importantly, both the researcher and the research subjects are seen as defended, meaning that the emotional reaction of the researcher is an important source of knowledge. As HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON stated, emotional content can be traced both in actions and in speech, which implies that a key aspect is the interpretation of reactions to the research encounters, ways of talking, and investment in discourses (p.17). [44]

Seeing the researcher as a defended subject means that interpretation of ethnographic data must not be done solely by the researcher but benefits from group interpretation. Different alternative and experimental methods departing from the idea of the defended subject have been developed in the tradition of psychosocial studies, both to generate qualitative data and for interpretation. The visual matrix has proved relevant in research dealing with content that is emotionally challenging or difficult to talk about in a cognitive-rational way (LIVENG et al., 2017). The visual matrix is a psychoanalytically informed group-based method, aiming at creating nuanced, complex, and elaborated images of aspects of modern life which are usually suppressed, tabued, invisible, or abjected in cultural representations (FROGGETT, MANLEY & ROY, 2015). Following an introductory stimulus, participants visualize, imagine, and make associations with the theme in focus. A collectively created "collage" is generated, formed by the individual contributions and reflecting the emotions, fantasies, and reflections of the participants. Facilitators, usually the researchers, address unease in the group through their own contributions. Experiences of the visual matrix are reflected on and interpreted, first with the group of participants, and later, when transcribed, by a group of researchers. [45]

Further, the biographical narrative interpretive method (WENGRAF, 2001) can be relevant in relation to research into class. This is a psychosocial method containing an interview technique aiming to elicit the participants' uninterrupted stories, thus capturing their way of giving meaning to their personal and social worlds. The method has been used in studies of emotionally difficult topics, such as the experiences of health care staff taking care of older people who later die (ÅDLAND, GRIPSRUD, LAVIK & RAMVI, 2022). [46]

Group-based in-depth hermeneutic interpretation (GRIPSRUD, MELLON & RAMVI, 2018; HOLLWAY & VOLMERG, 2010) goes beyond the idea of the tell-it-like-it-is subject. The method has its origins in the cultural psychoanalytic approach of the sociologist and psychoanalyst LORENZER (1986). Partly by employing the concept of scenes, the method provides a framework for psychosocial text analysis and emphasizes the inclusion of multiple perspectives

through group analysis (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2013). The approach contains three intertwined steps, first a descriptive analysis (what is being said), secondly a stylistic analysis (how it is being said), and finally an interpretation of meaning (why it is expressed in that particular way). [47]

The methodologies described here are examples of approaches which potentially can "break through" middle-class hegemonies and open insights into complexities, privilegies, and emotional challenges inherent in middle-class ways of living, as well as experiencing, feeling, and understanding life in neoliberal Western societies. However, the biographical narrative interpretive method must be reflected on regarding its potential class bias as a method depending on the ability of the participant to engage in verbal representation. This might call for the development of methods based on other ways of assessing subjectivity, such as photo-voice (ZURBA, TENNENT & WOODGATE, 2017). [48]

6. Class Configurations and Forms of Subjectivation

Across Western societies and social spheres, there is pervasive pressure on the individual to exhibit a kind of "extraordinary subjectivity" (SKEGGS, 2005, p.973). This "psychologization" and "governmentalization" of human existence (ROSE, 1990; WALKERDINE, 2003) can be seen as a consequence of what is often characterized as neoliberalism, defined here as follows: "Neo-liberalism is not confined to what is traditionally understood as the political sphere, but it is a new societal logic suffusing our bodies and minds" (DAHL, 2012, p.284). Under neoliberalism, a "logic of capital" (SKEGGS, 2014) is established, creating a subject of value (TÜRKEN, NAFSTAD, BLAKAR & ROEN, 2015, p.34) that is constantly preoccupied with "self-realization" through measures like "personal development" to enhance their symbolic value. [49]

The problem lies in the fact that not everyone can assume this value-accumulating subject position, as societal divisions based on class, race, gender, or sexuality create both limitations and potential advantages, as noted by SKEGGS (2004, p.75). In other words, not everyone has the opportunity to transform his/her culture into self-realization through personal development. For instance, white working-class women are often compelled to perform their gender and class in a naturalized manner, which fixes them in a particular time and place without the possibility of accumulating value:

> "... they cannot utilize their culture in self-making in the same way, one that can be converted into other forms of capital ... the working classes cannot capitalize on their culture because it has already been devalued as that which is not optimizable" (p.78). [50]

The key point here is that this appears to be fundamental as to how the middle class defines itself: A self that performs, particularly through body stylization, where appearance, presentation, and impression management are crucial for belonging and shaping the identity of the middle classes (p.47). In other words, not everyone has access to "self-realization" and the ability to present

himself/herself as valuable subjects. Access to the cultural and capital forms necessary to "create" oneself as having value has become central to how privileged middle classes are constituted (see also AAMANN, 2015). [51]

These new forms of class distinctions regarding subjectivity, and the inequity arising from them, are sparsely discussed and explored in social research, with even less attention given to their psychosocial implications (although see AAMANN, 2020). For the middle class, we lack insights into what new forms of pretentiousness this self-optimization regime produces and how the fear of not being able to perform or of losing status is experienced and managed in everyday life. For the lower classes, we lack insights into how class is lived when one is excluded from symbolic struggles because one's culture and subjectivity are de facto assigned lesser value. [52]

7. Healthism's Scapegoating of Disadvantaged People

Several scholars contend that health has evolved into an ideology (CRAWFORD, 1980; LUPTON, 1995). CRAWFORD (1980, p.368) defined this health ideology as a preoccupation with personal health as *the* central focus for the achievement of well-being. From this perspective, individualized responsibility for health served as a model and a prototype for a neoliberal restructuring of Western societies (CRAWFORD, 2006). [53]

Neoliberalism emphasizes the individual's freedom to choose. It is, however, well argued that governmentality also operates precisely through the notion of "freedom" (ROSE, 1999). BROWN (2005, p.44) aptly noted that neoliberal subjects are managed *through* this freedom, as neoliberalism moralizes its consequences. Therefore, morality becomes the focal point, while displaying responsibility (FINCH, 2007) is central to achieving moral value. Neoliberalism, therefore, functions not only through self-monitoring and evaluation but also through the imperative to display oneself and, simultaneously, face moral assessment. Consistent with this view is a growing expectation for individuals to publicly validate themselves as good and deserving subjects (SKEGGS, 2011, p.496). In this perspective, neoliberalism reinforces appraisals of moral value (see also LAMONT, 2012) and imperatives to display it—discursively and habitually. [54]

Risk prevention assumes a critical role, given the moralizing nature of risk-related issues (HUNT, 2003) and their normalizing function, as labeling something as a risk necessitates specific actions, compelling individuals into self-regulation aligned with expectations of making "the right choices" (MONTELIUS & NYGREN, 2014, p.434). In this perspective, practices related to health promotion, such as optimizing health and preventing risks, can be viewed as a performance of morals embedded in ideology and regulation (p.435; see also AAMANN & LIVENG, 2016). [55]

We argue that this "regime" of judgments in relation to risk-minimizing practices appears to reinforce moral class differentiations. SKEGGS and LOVEDAY (2012,

p.473) further noted an increased emphasis on the intensification and legitimization of class distinctions through their forms of expression and maintenance. There is a pressing need for a more comprehensive understanding of this field; our contention is that this "arena of judgments" (RICH & EVANS, 2009, p.163) around health and risk operates and is reinvigorated through class-based moral judgments. Viewed in this way, neoliberal governmentality operates through a form of stigma that is based on moral judgments closely related to class: By scapegoating the "irresponsible" lower-class individuals, processes of othering create a distinction that reinforces the position of the responsible, respectable, and morally valued middle classes. [56]

In AAMANN's prior research, she explored how this affects mothers differently, giving rise to emotions such as a sense of superiority, entitlement, and a natural inclination to make moral distinctions in middle-class mothers. Conversely, mothers with less symbolic and economic capital more commonly experienced emotions like resentment, distress, shame, and anxiety (AAMANN, 2020). Research into equity in health could gain from a more thorough investigation into the psychosocial implications of the ideological convergence between class and healthism, not only in terms of motherhood but also how it affects for instance children, young adults, men, or elderly people. [57]

8. Discussion and Conclusion: Resisting the Individualization of Structural Social Inequality

FRASER (2013, p.211) pointed out that the critiques in second-wave feminism have involved the three areas of economic, cultural, and political injustice. Her concern was that these critiques have become separated and detached from the critique of capitalism. As a result, she raised the question of whether feminist criticism had become integrated into the broader transformation of capitalism, which has exploited feminist criticism. [58]

In view of this argument, we believe that the concept of class holds a potential for emphasizing psychosocial research as a critical perspective that also directs its attention toward capitalism as a governing system and the lived, experienced, and felt consequences of the class societies that are a consequence of capitalism. However, there are several challenges associated with adopting concepts developed in different countries with different societal structures. Cultural variations, economic disparities and wealth distribution, and value politics differ across countries. Some societies may not view themselves as class-based, which inevitably affects the conceptualization of class in those contexts. This raises questions about the relevance and applicability of class-related terminology, such as who should be included within class categories, the boundaries between classes, and whether it is more accurate to discuss the concept of a single middle class or several middle classes. Addressing these questions poses methodological and ethical challenges (AAMANN, 2017b). Importantly, these challenges are of an analytical nature. A qualitative psychosocial class analysis should, instead of relying on pre-established classifications, examine the class relations present in the given material. [59]

The focal point of a qualitative, ethnographic psychosocial class analysis is to demonstrate how class is lived, experienced, felt, and produced, and acquires different meanings for different people in interaction with other categories, such as gender and ethnicity. Class theory should be able to accommodate how new forms of value establish themselves and affect social divisions within a society in interaction with other social categories. A central goal for the further development of a critical psychosocial class perspective should be to explore and cultivate revised methodological approaches and theoretical understandings of class that capture the novel, more nuanced ways in which class configures itself today compared to the past. In this regard, we have proposed five discussions that we believe would be fruitful within the context of critical psychosocial research: A redefined concept of class consciousness; social mobility as class journeys; development of a middle-class sociology; class configurations concerning forms of subjectivity; and healthism's scapegoating of disadvantaged people. [60]

The problem is that it can be exceedingly difficult to grasp the concept of class. Nevertheless, we believe this is a challenge we as researchers must embrace. Discarding the concept does not eliminate the social inequality generated in neoliberal societies, which is currently accelerating. On the contrary, it has the consequence that we lose an essential platform for critical and potentially emancipatory analyses of society and contemporary issues. The concern is that without a critical framework to address social inequality, it may continue to be individualized and appear as a result of the "personality" of specific individuals and their failure to make the "right" choices. From there, it is not a quantum leap for increased social inequality to become a legitimate and perhaps even a "just" development in society. If we want to stop the "stigma machine" as described by TYLER (2020), a psychosocial class analysis is a fruitful starting point. [61]

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