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Knowing your place: social class & the interplay between work and non-work lives

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Background: What's the issue?

- Little focus on social class in organisational/HRM/management literature
- Theory of class work: the crossing of class boundaries at work illuminates the processes of class advantage/disadvantage (Gray & Kish-Gerphart, 2013) BUT as yet no empirical research
- Existing studies of social class have been criticised for their failure to acknowledge the impact of class origin on individuals' experiences of work with the overriding discourse being only of the beneficial outcomes of social mobility (Friedman, 2013, 2016)
- Yet individuals “tend to carry social class from relationship to relationship and situation to situation” (Coté, 2011: 49), including their social class imprint related to childhood experiences of social class (Kish-Gerpart and Campbell, 2015)

Our research project

How does social class influence individual experiences of work?

Survey (n=113) measuring the following:

- a) Social class (objective & subjective)
- b) Class travel & impact of class origin
- c) Experiences of work related to class

Follow up interviews (n=20) to find out the extent to which social class plays a role in employees' experiences & opportunities in the workplace using a combination of biographical methods, open-ended questions & critical incident technique.

How does social class influence the interplay between work and non-work lives?

- Our paper sets out to explore the dynamics of work-life interplay & subsequent outcomes (balance, conflict, enrichment) through the lens of social class using border theory
- We define balance as: “congruence between work and non-work where an individual has satisfaction and good functioning in both their work and non-work lives with a minimum of conflict or interference between the two.”
- In border theory work and non-work lives are viewed as separate domains with their own distinct sets of rules, emotions, thinking & behaviour patterns (Clark, 2000)
- The transition between the two domains can be a minor or extreme experience dependent on a combination of domain and individual factors
- Our study examines whether social class acts as a bridge between work and non-work domains in either facilitating an easy path **or** making it a more precarious crossing between domains

Interview Sample

1. **Class congruent:** “individuals who have retained their class origins in both their home and work lives”

2. **Class Transitioners:** “individuals who have moved away from their class origins in either their work and/or their home life”
 - a. **Class relocators:** “individuals who have moved away from their class origins in both their home and work lives”
 - b. **Class migrators:** “individuals who work in roles where their colleagues are usually of a higher class, but retain their class origins”

Domain characteristics

- Class transitioners were more likely to perceive social class as salient in their work and non-work domains; many were very conscious of the differences between their work and social class origins: “like different worlds” (Danielle, CR)

My work environment is all very white middle class (Robert, CR)

When I started at the grammar school, I noticed that my friends were more middle class than me. So, in my early teens I became more aware of class and, you know, I didn't pronounce my words correctly. When I got to university, people were a degree posher again where some people had been to boarding school (Kate, CR)

I come from a lower class than the majority of people I work with as it tends to be very middle class, upper class type people as opposed to having parents who are traditionally working-class backgrounds, so I'm aware of my social class at work (Simon, CR)

I think it's a difficult one, social class because personally I think it's more and more dying out. I don't think there's so much on social class now (Diana, CC)

Border crossers

I'm middle class now because of the job I do and the way I live. I was ambitious so I made sure I learned how to fit in more with that world of work. I just internalised the need to conform to the standard of the world I found myself in (Kate, CR)

I'm good at the job I do and I don't need to conceal my class because I have other attributes, rather than being well-spoken, which can get me progression. (Simon, CR)

I just want to keep that root thing going & I want to feel as though I've not changed much (Edward, CM)

I've got a middle-class job, I've got a middle-class wife and we live in a middle-class house with a middle-class lifestyle, but I don't see myself as being a middle-class person. I'm working class - I see myself as working-class (Richard, CM)

I've never felt uncomfortable about my background because I think middle class is generally what the population is and that's true in most roles and jobs (Diana, CC)

Other domain members

- Other domain members played a key role in our interviewees' ability to navigate between their work & non-work lives
- Both positive & negative experiences in their cross-class encounters

I get mocked (at work), it's not a regular thing, but I don't hide the fact I'm of that class. There's kind of a joke that I have progressed quite a lot from what my class suggests I should be. (Simon, CR)

He made a formal complaint about me saying that I was unprofessional and he actually used the words *how can she meet anyone speaking like that?* (Nora, CM)

I'm probably a little cocooned, aren't I? I'm surrounded by people of a similar ilk without realising. (Liz, CC)

It became very clear that the way I presented myself and the way I spoke and also my attitude was seen as being not suitable for a place like this. She made this comment about my origins, you know, from not this part of the world. I was so furious I broke my pen! (Richard, CM)

Crossing the bridge: work

- Class transitioners engaged in a range of activities both at home and work to cross the bridge between work and non-work domains
- Class transitioners paid a higher toll by hiding their social class at work & downplaying their social mobility at home

In my old job there were a lot of dominant middle class women working there which I found quite intimidating...and I felt a little bit inferior.....so I'd dress up well for it...to make a certain impression as I felt they were judging people(Danielle, CR)

During meetings I just didn't speak a lot because I thought I'm going to make a fool of myself sounding like this (Nora, CM)

Being a male we've got sport which is the level that cuts across all classes (Robert, CR)

If I was in a situation where someone was, who I deemed, to be of a higher social class or standing then I'd probably be more careful with how I spoke and try not to have such an accent (Edward, CM)

I've learnt that being funny is a good compensation (Nigel, CM)

Crossing the bridge: home

If I'm with families I grew up with then I do notice that I will limit my vocabulary – I won't use longer words or things they might not understand whereas if I'm with someone that I think is of a higher class then I would use longer words or more complex language (Danielle, CR)

If I'm home then I'm speaking differently and I do it because I've got a lot of friends who probably didn't get the break and I want to melt back in with them (Edward, CM)

When I go back home, I can just talk in my proper accent rather than this modified voice which I use when I'm at work (Richard, CM)

I don't conceal my background or social class as I think I can just speak how I am.' (Diana, CC)

Crossing the bridge vs Knowing Your Place

I think I could have done a lot more with my career with the right education and background...I think I could have done way, way more (Kate, CR)

The system has been rigged for so many years and you don't realise this until you get older that it's all been rigged and it does come back to life chances....it's been rigged for the middle classes, for particular the upper middle classes (Edward, CM)

As a whole, the idea that we're all actually colleagues, is something that is essentially given lip service to and really you should shut up and know your place (Nigel, CM)

I look at those on a higher grade to me and I think I could do that, but I would never dream of applying for that job – I know my place (Nora, CM)

Work-life outcomes

You feel insecure and a little bit at sea. I just thought I'm inadequate. It's tarring because you're aware of it and looking out for it and you're never utterly secure in any situation, including the one you left (Kate, CR)

So you're acting all the time....it's having to bite your tongue. So you're finding that you're a chameleon half the time and sometimes it would just be great to just be yourself....but you can't (Edward, CM)

I've got less in common with my family now so I just don't go and see them that often, or as much as I did (Simon, CR)

I didn't feel as if I fitted in at all. I felt completely uncomfortable there as they were a different type of people totally. They were all luvvies who very much looked down on me. I felt very lonely and just couldn't face working there any longer so I resigned (Michelle, CC)

Work-life outcomes: summary

?	Group	Sub-grouping	Central domain	Domain segregation/integration	Domain members	Work-life outcome
1	CT	Relocators	Work	Segregate	Varied	Work-life conflict
2	CT	Relocators	Varied	Integrate	Varied	Work-life balance
3	CT	Migrators	Varied	Integrate	Varied	Work-life balance
4	CT	Migrators	Varied	Varied	Varied	Work-life conflict
5	CC	Congruent	Varied	Varied	Varied	Work-life balance

Conclusions

- Social class acts as a bridge between work and non-work domains:
 - *Tolls* – the ‘payment’ required to traverse domains. Those individuals who created psychological borders to hide their social class (at either work or home) paid a higher toll
 - *Open Roads vs Draw Bridges* – class congruent individuals had an open road between domains whereas transitioners more likely to conceal social class & draw up the proverbial drawbridge making border crossing more onerous
 - *Trusses and Suspension* - support and acknowledgement of the relative domains by other domain members stabilised travel across social class bridges leading to improved work-life balance. More likely to happen for class congruent individuals.

Conclusions

- We present social class as a bridge (with potential tolls, supports & drawbridges) between work and non-work lives
- Individuals from a working class background can pay a heavy toll to cross the bridge
- Those achieving greater balance had:
 1. confidence in their social class origins to be authentic in their work and non-work domains;
 2. an integrated approach to their work and non-work lives;
 3. support from other domain members

A working class background makes work-life balance more complex & challenging, particularly for the socially mobile. Harder for individuals to gain a sense of belonging at either home or work:

“You end up in some sort of no-man’s land” (Kate, CR)

THANK YOU!

ANY QUESTIONS?

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