



Article

# The Racialised ‘Second Existence’ of Class: Class Identification and (De-/Re-) construction across the British South Asian Middle Classes

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cus](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cus)**Rima Saini**

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## Abstract

This article maps typologies of class identity for the UK-born South Asian middle classes. Using thematic analysis of interviews with 20 British South Asian professionals, it identifies culturally and socially situated forms of class (dis-)identification. It finds that ‘middle-class’ identity is not uncritically adopted or internalised by socially mobile British South Asians who, on the bases of objective socioeconomic markers, may be classified as such. Beyond existing research which has long established the dual material and symbolic nature of class, and the corresponding ‘fuzziness’ of class subjectivity, for the population of interest this can be attributed in large part to: (i) the rapid upward intergenerational social mobility of South Asian groups which is seen to defy British-specific forms of stratification and class reproduction and (ii) the racialisation of class where the symbolic power and subjective salience of middle-classness is mediated through Whiteness. In establishing this, this article argues for further theoretical and analytical reflection on the racialisation of class taking into account the ethnoracial specificities of culturally diverse ethnic minority populations.

## Keywords

British South Asian, class identity, middle class, racialisation, social class, Whiteness

## Introduction

This article attends to the racialised dimensions of class identity amongst British-born (second-generation) British Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi professionals. Race and class in the UK are historically co-constituted, with the formation of socio-economic

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stratification in the ‘modern world’ intimately bound up with racisms (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; Shilliam, 2020; Virdee, 2019). Class and ethnoracial identity formation amongst upwardly mobile ethnic minority groups is both an interesting and under-researched area in sociology (Platt, 2011). Sociological theorisation of the class-race ‘intersection’ has held a long but often marginal position in the discipline. When race and class emerged as a ‘field’ of analysis, the working classes were the primary focus, and when the ‘middle classes’ emerged in class theory as a distinct population of analytical and political interest, “‘race’ rarely came on the agenda as an influence of middle-class formation” (Phillips and Sarre, 1995: 76). Contemporary empirical studies of race and class have, to some extent, branched out from their focus on the ethnic minority working classes as a result of significant class transformation. In relation to ethnic minority socio-economic trajectories, Khattab et al. (2011), Platt (2005a, 2005b) and Modood (2004) have analysed the upward mobilities of British Black and Asian diasporic groups, destabilising class-determined theories of social mobility by highlighting the centrality of processes of racialisation. Rollock et al. (2013), Meghji (2016, 2017) and Wallace (2018) have, among others, sought to explore how these ethnic minority groups negotiate and internalise classed identities and mobilise racialised capitals. The interjection of race into contemporary analyses of cultural capital has led to sophisticated theorisations of how the Black middle classes challenge power differentials in White spaces, with scholars such as Wallace (2019) arguing for a sharper focus on Whiteness and racial politics in analyses of cultural capital. Much work has also been done on understanding class reproduction amongst the Black middle classes in relation to cultural socialisation in the family given the inherent Whiteness in theorisations of elite cultural consumption and ‘legitimate’ cultural capitals (Banks, 2012; Lareau, 2003). Nonetheless, there is a paucity of such research in non-Black middle-class ethnic minority contexts, particularly within the UK where there exists a sizeable South Asian diaspora. In this article, subjectivities of class will thus be explored through analysis of interviews with British Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi British-born professionals. The article will argue that the co-constitution of race and class in the UK gives rise to racially and ethnoculturally specific critiques of commonly understood class categories which further our understanding of the relation between the materiality/‘objectivity’ of class couched in socio-economic markers, its contested symbolic dimensions and its racialised ‘second existence’. It will also, as far as possible, consider the implications of this not just for class identity formation but for cultural citizenship, particularly in the context of the hyper-racialisation of South Asian Muslim groups. The following sections outline dominant theorisations of class formation and class identity which provide the necessary starting point for theorisations on the symbolic boundaries of class, and outlines relevant debates within the burgeoning literature on the racialisation of class.

### *The Racialisation of Class*

Bourdieu’s theorisations on class – namely whether classes ‘exist’ – provide a pivotal, although limited, point of departure for considerations of how race mediates class formation for socially mobile ethnic minority groups. As Bourdieu (1989) notes, classes are not ‘real groups’ but are determined through the organisation of social relations and

spaces on interrelated axes of economic, cultural and social capital. Classes are neither wholly grounded in objective reality – even if researcher-led identity-based categories of class such as ‘working’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ are operationalised through ‘objective’ socioeconomic markers such as occupation, income or wealth (Goldthorpe et al., 1987; Wright, 1985) – nor are they pure theoretical constructs. The symbolic boundaries of class are contested, conceptual distinctions between peoples and groups, a medium through which they acquire status and resources (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). People who work in similar occupations and have similar lifestyles and dispositions, tend to live and socialise together in the ‘field’. These relations and dispositions – ‘habitus’ – form the basis of ‘bounded’ entities which are reproduced over time through the intergenerational transmission of institutionalised ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu, 1986). They thus take on both symbolic significance (Bourdieu, 1987: 4) and, importantly, economic and political power.<sup>1</sup> The groups comprising the British middle classes have been formed through the wielding of capitals (Ball, 2003; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Lockwood, 1995). Superior educational credentials and social closure in the professions, for example, are forms of cultural capital that have a strong role in the strategy of class competition as well as the formation of middle-class subjectivity (Crozier et al., 2008; Lareau, 2003; Weeden et al., 2007). Most research on class *identity*, however, has found that people tend to see themselves as members of a middling group of ‘ordinary’, ‘working’ citizens (Bottero 2005; Evans and Kelly 2004; Irwin 2016). Savage (2003) argues that it is important to expose practices which allow the middle classes to reproduce their privilege and monopolise advantage in society, including their innocuous self-presentation as ‘ordinary’, neither upper-class ‘snobs’ nor members of the working-class ‘masses’. Although class identities are diffuse and perhaps lacking resonance on an individual level, classed capitals – which they are linked to – are mobilisable. For this reason, a phenomenological understanding of class that goes beyond that of group-based identity or group ‘traits’ is important to disrupt the idea that we are all one class or, indeed, no class (Byrne, 2009: 427). As Bourdieu (1989) argues, jettisoning class nomenclature does not eschew the significance of class, just as much as denying the symbolic distance between oneself and others does not eradicate those distances or obviate the power they imbue.

Class formation and the wielding of class advantage, however, is contingent on race. This is where important yet still limited scholarship on class, capital and ethnoracial experience proves illuminating. Only in recent decades, have the ethnic minority middle classes emerged as a distinct contemporary phenomenon, their class privilege and identity mediated by their racial otherness and predominantly working-class and migrant histories. Negotiating the school and university system and gaining entry to professional routes (Ballard, 2003) have been key to the growth of the British South Asian middle classes specifically. Abbas (2007) and Ghuman (1997) discuss the perhaps culturally exceptional commitment South Asian parents have to education and professionalisation, often theorised in the literature as forms of ‘ethnic capital’ (Crozier et al., 2008; Modood, 2004). This is because middle-class practices, and the legitimisation of certain types of capital (Wallace, 2018) specific to White middle-class reproduction, have historically been tied to the maintenance and reproduction of classed *and* raced privilege for the White middle classes (Byrne, 2009; Reay et al., 2007). Theorisation of the racialisation

of class can thus help us understand, in part, class and its 'second existence' within and beyond 'WhiteWorld' (Meghji, 2016).

With the notable trend towards political conservatism amongst British Indian Hindus (Begum, 2020; Martin, 2019), an ethnoreligious group held up within neoliberal discourses as 'model minorities' (Gillborn, 2008) as a function of their rapid social mobility, one might argue that ethnic minority middle-class formation less so disturbs racialised social hierarchy or our understanding of middle-class privilege than underscores it. However, intra-ethnic and intra-class differentiation shape relative racial and class privilege in complex ways. Institutionalised Islamophobia plays a central role in how both class and race are 'read' (Garner, 2012) onto hyper-racialised British South Asian Muslim groups (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010; Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans, 2009). This not only mediates their social mobility trajectories and the 'credibility' of their capitals, but also their cultural citizenship, in other words their social and symbolic inclusion within the bounded notion of 'Britishness' (Beaman, 2017). For (most) immigrants and their descendants, however, cultural citizenship is rarely guaranteed on the basis of socio-economic success due to the racial composition of the modern nation state within which ideas around 'worthy' citizens are based on deep-seated cultural and racial assumptions (Anderson, 2013; Beaman, 2017). The prevalence of neo-liberal 'model minority' narratives of social mobility and integration centred on the South Asian Diaspora are thus predicated on a false, post-racial equivalence between middle classness and authentic 'Britishness'. This means that – ultimately – social mobility is not necessarily a determinant of not just 'authentic' middle classness but wider social inclusion and belonging for ethnoracial minorities. The stakes, therefore, of the racialisation of class extend beyond the social and economic, to contingent issues of political belonging.

### *The Ethnoracial Dimensions of Class Identity*

As per Bourdieusian class theory, the pre-defined social categories we use to think about social groups, including along the lines of race or ethnicity, are theoretical renderings of social relations. The relationship between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' in theories of self-categorisation is such that only a subjectively 'salient' or important social identity leads to a self-identification with that group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and the conceptualisation of that group and its interests as a reference group for one's own thoughts and behaviours (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). Fundamentally, however, identities are rarely stable. They are dynamic and relational (Lamont and Molnar, 2002), practical and political (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001) and situated both spatially and temporally (Devine, 1992). As class analysts we thus cannot presume where socially or politically meaningful boundaries lie at risk of reifying a fixed notion of class that is neither temporally, spatially nor culturally specific. Immigrants bring symbolic boundaries with them across cultural contexts and reproduce these inter-generationally which intersect with the racial boundaries they must negotiate and navigate in their self-making processes (Ong, 1996) within a new society. Within a British South Asian diasporic context<sup>2</sup> specifically, it is necessary to consider not only racialisation in the formation of class and class identity, but other historical forms of stratification with roots in the South Asian sub-continent, such as caste for Indian Punjabi Sikhs particularly, which continue to bear upon both

ethnic and class identity salience (Jodkha, 2002; Judge and Bal, 2008; Ram, 2012). Similarly, the embeddedness of Bangladeshi Muslim Sylheti migrants and their descendants in historically close-knit working-class ethnic minority East London communities (Carey and Shukur, 1985) has implications for the substantive meaning and enactment of both ethnic and class identity for these groups, within social spaces structured by differing classed and racialised norms.

### *Typologising Racialised Class Identity*

Even if, as established thus far, we cannot conceive of classes as fixed entities or solely objective groupings, ‘traditional’, commonly understood class groupings can prove an analytically useful reference point. The class typologies developed in this article do not necessarily speak to a ‘real’ transgression or fracturing of existing groupings of ‘working’, ‘middle’ or ‘upper’ class but demonstrate the dual practical and political role of such classifications which ‘are never totally coherent or logical’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 10). The enduring notion of class and common understandings of class difference amongst a specific racialised population are thus the starting point for analysis in this study, as they have been for preceding ones in the field.

In Archer’s (2011) qualitative study of class identity amongst upwardly mobile first-generation ethnic minorities in the UK, a ‘middle-class’ identity was deemed inauthentic, with the values accrued from a working-class background an important part of self-conception. Rollock et al. (2013) identify five groupings of class identity amongst the middle-class British Black Caribbean participants in their study on class status and identification – ‘comfortably middle-class’, ‘middle-class ambivalent’, ‘working-class with qualification’, ‘working-class’ and ‘interrogators’ – that cover a range of critical and hybrid modes of class identification. Moore (2008) differentiates between the ‘multi-class minded’ and the ‘middle-class minded’ (akin to the ‘class-minded’ or ‘class-confident’ identifiers in Meghji’s (2016) study of Black middle-class identity construction) in an attempt to capture the nuance of class identification across the African-American middle classes. The latter tend to come from ‘established’ middle-class families and exemplify the middle-class habitus. The former, by contrast, seek to maintain a connection to their working-class background. The racialised dimensions to these modes of identification across symbolic boundaries of class are starkly evident. For Archer’s participants, a discomfort with middle-classness ‘appeared to be heightened [. . .] perhaps, it might be assumed, due to their positions in relation to racialised inequalities’ (Archer, 2011: 142). Daye’s (1994) mixed-methods study of Black professionals in London, found that many hesitated to identify as ‘middle-class’ because their experiences of racism made them reluctant to define in terms of a category associated with privilege. Likewise, Maylor and Williams’ (2011) study of Black British middle-class women highlighted how many reject the ‘middle-class’ label to stand in anti-racist solidarity with Black lower-classes – a finding echoed in Wallace’s (2016) research of Black middle-class identities in a London school.

Meghji (2017) frames two modes of Black middle-class identity construction which give primacy to race instead of class – ‘ethnoracial autonomous’ and ‘strategic assimilation’ – characterised by an acute awareness of the Whiteness of classed spaces. The

exclusion that minority ethnic individuals report in these spaces, even when they embody or perform classic markers of middle-class ‘taste’ (Bourdieu, 1984) and often regardless of their class background (Collins, 1993), underscores their racialised location at the intersection of privilege and subordination (Archer, 2011). Although education and qualifications provide ‘formal’ access to predominantly White middle-class spaces like professional places of work, there are ‘tacit’ requirements (Bourdieu, 1986) to social acceptance for those who do not fit their racialised and classed norms (Puwar, 2004; Reay et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2010) and perhaps in some cases a greater urgency to strategically distance themselves from ‘undesirable’ signifiers of their working-class and/or ethnic minority-ness. Indeed, being ‘too’ ethnic or ‘too’ religious is often read as *de facto* working or lower class (Archer, 2011; Wallace, 2016).

Though these studies lend significant credence to the idea of a racialised ‘second existence’ of class, there is a lacuna of analogous research on the British South Asian diaspora similar to that carried out on the British Black middle classes. Such research is important to further our understanding of the ethnoracial specificities of class formation and, specifically, class identification within a culturally and socio-economically heterogeneous yet nonetheless heavily racialised population. The following section outlines the method for this study which seeks to broach this analytical gap.

## **Method**

On receipt of ethical approval from an independent ethics committee, 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out in 2015-2016 with legal and engineering professionals who self-defined as second-generation British Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. Participants were chosen to loosely fit one of two sub-major professional groups in the ISCO-08 (The International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008) structure – one being science and engineering, the other the legal profession. Professionals, high-grade technicians, administrators and managers (of large and small firms) are often used as proxies for occupational middle-classness (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993), and the fields of law and engineering can be construed as ‘established’ professions where an accredited higher academic qualification is necessary for entry, and which harbour distinct professional cultures, hierarchical structures of management and paths to progression (Greenwood, 1957). They are characterised by high levels of social closure (Weber, 1978), particularly along the lines of class background, gender, and race (SRA, 2017; RAE, 2017) and thus, although operating along their own distinctive status cultures, feed into larger social inequalities (Collins, 2005). Although law and engineering are distinct fields, the aim of this study was not explicitly to elicit comparison between the two but to impart some focus, via an occupational lens, on a definition of ‘middle class’ that makes sense within a British South Asian context. And acknowledging, as this article does, that social class cannot be linearly mapped onto occupations by virtue of its symbolic, situated and relational dimensions, occupation is nonetheless ‘generally a good and economical indicator of position in social space’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 4).

Volunteers to participate in the study were found within notable corporate law and engineering firms in London, Birmingham, Leicester and Manchester (cities that are super-diverse (Pemberton, 2017) and notable for their significant South Asian

populations (ONS, 2020)) with recruitment then branching out to smaller firms and professional networks on social media. The age group was capped at 60 with the youngest respondent at 25 years of age (all working but at different stages of their career) with the final group weighted towards men (8 women and 12 men). All participants emigrated to the UK as infants or were born here, the majority (17) with working-class parents. Ethnically, nine participants self-defined as Indian, seven Bangladeshi and four Pakistani. All the Bangladeshi and Pakistani participants were of Muslim background and/or described themselves as practising Muslims. Seven Indian participants identified as Hindu and two as Sikh, to varying levels of religiosity.

### *The Interviews*

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours each in total. Thematic patterns were drawn from the data but not for robust comparison. The aim of the analysis was not to draw generalisable empirical conclusions, treating each individual as representative of their group, rather to engage with the complexity of individuals who are racially and culturally situated in certain ways (Archer, 2012). Small (2009: 15) discusses how the relationship between small, qualitative empirical cases and the larger populations they are expected to represent remain unclear. In order to appease a wider desire or need for generalisability in empirical studies, the answer has often been to emulate the practices of quantitative researchers. The result has been a form of imitation with terms such as ‘bias’ or ‘representativeness’ incorrectly applied, and a statistically informed notion of validity and reliability held up erroneously as a standard. We can, however, discuss accuracy and authenticity within qualitative research by drawing on the vernacular of ‘validity’, not in relation to ensuring generalisability beyond study but in ensuring that meaning-making is grounded in the language and concepts used, and in the discursive movements<sup>3</sup> made, by the participants themselves (Maxwell, 1992). In the analysis section of this article, when references are made to numbers or proportions of participants who, for example, exemplified a certain theme or (loosely) adhered to a particular typology of class identifier, this is not a quantitative or statistical assessment but a broad marker of similarity or difference across participants.

In the interviews, participants were asked to define social class, whether they think of themselves in terms of class, and then prompted on their understanding of and their relationship – if any – to the middle classes and/or ‘middle-classness’. It was clear early on that these lines of questioning generated ambivalence, with depth and nuance in responses emerging when participants reflected more broadly on their own biographies (Irwin, 2016). A grounded theory approach to analysis was thus adopted in this study, whereby transcripts were produced for each interview and on completion inductively and abductively (Charmaz, 2008) coded via qualitative analysis software (NVivo). Coding was emergent and iterative, with themes developing over many weeks grounded in substantive concepts such as mobility, inequality, power, deprivation, and in relation to race, class, gender, religion and other axes of identity. Through a number of readings and rounds of initial descriptive coding and theoretical categorisation across and between the transcripts, discernible typologies of class (de-/re-construction) and class identification eventually emerged.

Although not the sole intention, the interviews emerged as a space for participants to engage in reflexive critique of commonly used or understood class categories, largely 'middle' and 'working'. In the analysis process, there was evidence of both 'strong' and 'weak' identification with concepts such as 'working' and 'middle' class, and emergent hybrid or sub-types of class categories as well as 'transgressions' outside of these schemas. These formed the basis of the first sets of codes from the initial readings of the transcripts which informed the broad and fluid typologies presented in the next section of this article. Only through rounds of coding of the full corpus were the broader theoretical arguments with regard to the racialisation of class explicitly able to come to the fore, with an understanding on a phenomenological level of the contingency of class identities and experiences of race.

Individuals often have difficulty in facing the complex realities of class inequality, in interpreting or expressing complex notions of 'difference', or reconciling the real-world complexities of class within aggregated, broad and imperfect class categories (Irwin, 2016; Surridge, 2007). We might further ask whether questions on class identity elicit 'true' experiences or reflections on the subject matter given the role of the interview and researcher-participant relationship in constructing social realities (Back, 2012; Denzin, 2012; Skeggs et al., 2008) and the performativity of the research interview. This data, therefore, must be taken as a snapshot of discursive rationalisations and cross-sectional narratives around class identity across a differentiated but non-representative sample of British South Asian professionals. The interviews in this study represent the situated, personal narratives of the relative significance and meaning of class in the lives of the participants.<sup>4</sup>

## **Class (De-/Re-)construction and Identification**

This section will outline the broad typologies of class identified in this research: working-class/hybridised (working- and middle-class) identity; middle-class ambivalence; no class/rejection of classification. In line with the theoretical premises fleshed out earlier of class as a constructed notion, there is a great degree of fluidity to the classifications derived here, the boundaries of which must be considered weak but nonetheless illuminating. Class was defined in multiple and interrelated ways tapping both its material and symbolic dimensions – as socio-economic groupings demarcated by income, wealth, occupation; as the basis of social and political identification; as symbolic markers of judgement and difference; as both defining and productive of social and cultural 'difference', and – importantly and most comprehensively – as a racialised set of classifications that speak primarily to the experiences and histories of White British society.

### *Working-Class/Hybridised Class Identity*

A number of the participants expressed a sense of working-class or hybridised working- and middle-class identity. All of these particular participants claimed working-class 'roots'. Although acknowledging their professional occupational status and 'comfortable' incomes, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyers Farhan, Nadya and Bisma attributed their affinity with a working-class identity to the 'working classness' of their families and



backgrounds, and the embeddedness of their work and family lives in traditionally working-class parts of East London. Physical as well as symbolic proximity, therefore, to working classness problematised the association that might be drawn between the material bases of their class positioning – such as higher education qualifications, a professional occupation, and above-average income – and symbolic identification with ‘middle-classness’. Experiences of rapid intergenerational mobility (Modood, 2004) see ethnic minorities straddling or moving between the material boundaries of what might be commonly accepted as ‘working’ and ‘middle’ class, to the extent that we might question how or if, analytically, we can objectively classify diasporic communities in this way. Farhan stated that on the basis of his ‘council estate background’ and his embeddedness within what he defines as a working-class area in East London – Whitechapel – he sees himself as ‘thoroughly working-class’. The classed and racialised distinctions of place bear strongly on the working-class dimensions of his identity, with Whitechapel historically home to a significant Bangladeshi Muslim population (Carey and Shukur, 1985). Drawing on economic and cultural capitals, however, Farhan described himself as middle-class, being ‘very well informed of society having studied, Law, Politics, Economics, History’, as well as having a ‘middle-class income’. There is a clear sense of hybridity in his class identification which falls short of either a strong working- or strong middle-class affiliation, predicated on a conceptualisation of class boundaries as permeable – ‘I certainly wouldn’t box myself as strictly a middle-class person, nor would I say I am only a working-class [person]’ – but nonetheless something more than purely conceptual.

Nadya, a criminal lawyer working and living in London but with roots in the north of England, similarly draws on her working-class background when discussing class identity, again referring to a symbolic rootedness in a distinctly working-class Bangladeshi Muslim area which she states is, given the cultural pull of family and community rather than financial necessity, ‘very difficult to kind of extricate yourself away from’. Here, we see a stronger affiliation with ethnic minority working classness than Farhan, that problematises any affiliation to (White) middle-classness. This is not dissimilar to one of Rollock et al.’s Black middle-class participants who self-identified as ‘middle-class by profession, working-class by birth and attitude and African Caribbean by culture, history and social experience’ (2013: 260), but the co-constitution of working classness and ‘Bangladeshi-ness’ is more apparent here.

Bisma, a Bangladeshi Muslim legal aid lawyer living and working in East London, described herself almost unequivocally and enthusiastically as working class, not purely in relation to class background but through deliberate and socially transgressive practices of consumption such as shopping for clothes and material in local markets:

[. . .] there was this really pretty dress, and I know the first thing my sister-in-law would ask is ‘where did you get it from?’ It wasn’t about the cheapness or nothing of it, it could be the same price in H&M or Next or whatever, had I said I got it from Next in the sale, isn’t that great, but it was that ‘oh we don’t shop in markets anymore’. (Bisma, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from London)

Unlike her sister-in-law, outwardly striving to exhibit middle-class traits as a racial minority at risk of further stigmatisation as ‘visibly’ working-class (Archer, 2011;

Wallace, 2016), Bisma takes ‘pride’ (Rollock et al., 2013) in her self-representation as not only authentically working-class but specifically Muslim working-class:

I take good pride in saying yeah, my sister made it [Islamic dress], pound a yard, and it’s like, I don’t have this thing of where, maybe it’s a working-class thing where you actually, you know, you actually boast about how cheap something is [laughs].

The ease with which she reconciles this ‘in-betweenness’, in contrast to Farhan’s self-proclaimed ‘identity crisis’, can be construed as a form of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979). She is able to assert a sense of ethnic minority working classness allied with positive connotations of hard work and integrity (Rollock et al., 2013) that disrupt the equivalence between White middle-class culture and ‘desirable’ cultural capital (Wallace, 2019), while ostensibly still benefiting from the relative economic privileges of her professional occupation. The latter, however, is mediated by racial and gender marginalisation, particularly within White, elite middle-class social spaces. Later on in the interview, she candidly describes how in the courts of law where she often works, neither her working-class nor ethnoracial cultural markers – such as her hijab – confer symbolic privilege or power.

### *Ambivalent Middle-Class Identity*

A middle-class ‘identity’ was expressed in some form by approximately half of all participants, and all the Indian Hindus. As with the working-class identifiers, class background (private school or mixed private/state-school educations in these cases), their professional occupations, and in most cases their stable and sizeable incomes (Rollock et al., 2013) were generally cited as clear and unproblematic indicators of their (objective) middle classness:

I think we’re upper middle class in the sense that I come from a very good educational background, I’m in a good stable occupation, I have a profession and I have financial stability. So in that sense I would class myself as middle class. (Rakhi, Indian Hindu lawyer from London).

Research has borne out the socio-economic ‘successes’ of the British Indian Hindu community, and within this (albeit small and statistically unrepresentative) sample, only the Indian Hindu participants described themselves, in part, as hailing from middle-class backgrounds. Nonetheless, the often hesitant and critical ways the middle-class participants discussed this positioning contrasted markedly with the affective dimensions that Nadya and Bisma, particularly, brought into their identification with (ethnic minority) working classness. The middle-class identifiers seemed to constitute the ‘middle-class ambivalent’ more so than the ‘middle-class minded’ or the ‘comfortably middle class’ (Moore, 2008; Rollock et al., 2013) despite their relatively high levels of economic capital (Meghji, 2017). This can partially be attributed to the firm equivalence drawn between Whiteness and middle classness.

A third of the participants – across ethnic backgrounds – stated that the first image they would have of a middle-class person is of a White person, or associated middle

classness with racialised images of (White) Britishness or Englishness, despite acknowledging the notable growth of the UK South Asian middle classes. Anita (an Indian Hindu lawyer from London) for example, stated: 'In my head they're White. But only because that's my instinctive reaction, I can think of Asians that are in that world'. Anita and Dinesh chalked their middle classness down to material – rather than social, cultural or political – factors like children's schooling, frequency of holidays, and where they live ('a nice part of London' and 'a very sort of expensive area of Leicester') not so much affirming their middle classness as denying their non-middle classness – 'I can't say I'm not' (Anita). In her study of ethnic minority middle-class identities, Archer (2011) similarly found evidence of 'real' or authentic middle-class identities constructed as predominantly White, facilitating both a dis-identification with middle classness for ethnoracial minorities and reinforcing the ethnoracial class determinism (Wallace, 2018) through which whiteness and middle classness coalesce.

### *No Class Identity or Rejection of Classification*

A number of the participants who, albeit functionally, described themselves as middle class also stated that they had never thought about class, had never been prompted for an evaluation of their class identity up until this point, or felt ill-equipped to advance a definition of class. Deepak stated that he had never 'attached any value' to the question of class. However, as the discussion progressed into dimensions of race and ethnicity he went on to differentiate between his social status and his caste standing, stating that even though he was born in the UK, he – as part of a larger diasporic, ethnic minority collective – is 'relatively new' to the historically embedded class system, specific to the UK and ostensibly 'native' White British society:

From a caste system I'm higher up, from a landed point of view I'm pretty high up, we had land decades ago but you know what I mean, we're in that field of society, er, whereas in the UK I'm relatively new to the society, I don't really fit in immediately. (Deepak, Indian Hindu lawyer from London)

Approximately a third of participants across ethnicity, gender and profession explicitly stated that the concept of class bears little relevance to their life histories and experiences (cf. Meghji and Saini's (2017) accounts of the non-experience of racism amongst the British Black and South Asian middle classes and the subsequent reproduction of post-racial ideology). Some, therefore, not only queried but reconstructed commonly understood class boundaries through the dual lenses of race and culture in an attempt to further destabilise the idea of social class as a whole. Within such deconstruction, they advanced their own, bespoke understandings of class hierarchy – usually predicated on an occupational and/or categorical definition of class – that acted as the necessary basis for their critique of class-based social stratification. For example, Hussain generalised from his perceived ability to mix in a professional context with those in different socio-economic strata (perhaps this ability itself a form of cultural capital) to argue that 'the [class] lines have disappeared'. His point is that if class is socially as well as economically divisive, with class boundaries defined both in material and symbolic terms relationally (Lamont

and Molnar, 2002), his professional interactions with those in ‘different’ class groups such as ‘company directors’ (ostensibly middle-class) and ‘shoplifters’ (ostensibly lower-class) suggest otherwise. The very fact that he has a preconceived idea of classification, however, implies recognition of some form of socio-economic hierarchy:

One day I could be representing a company director on a, you know, big multi-million pound case, another I could be representing someone who’s shoplifting [. . .] See what I mean, I straddle between, the reason I, for me, er, the lines have disappeared because there’s no class I think, that’s my view. (Hussain, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from Birmingham)

Karim similarly bases a scepticism towards the existence of class within the fluidity of social boundaries, but couches his critique in the lack of homogeneity within common categories of ‘working’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’. He does so in relation to not only tangible behaviours like regular holidaying but social ‘values’ and ‘political views’, undermining class both as an objective marker of social difference and as a basis of group identity, and fundamentally questioning the Bourdieusian notion of middle-class habitus:

What does middle-class mean any more today I don’t know what it means, does it mean that you go on holiday once or twice a year [. . .] what does it mean in terms of values, my political views might be very, very different from [. . .] a lot of my friends who might be considered middle-class as well. (Karim, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from London)

These types of sentiments were expressed most acutely – although not exclusively – by the Muslim participants who tended to articulate the salience of their hyper-racialised ethno-religious minority identity to their own sense of self and the ways they experience, navigate and in some cases transcend the symbolic boundaries which structure classed and racialised social spaces. This is a positioning partly but not wholly aligned with what Meghji (2016) frames as an ‘ethnoracial autonomous’ mode of experience. Nabeela (Pakistani Muslim lawyer from Manchester) suggested ‘working’, ‘middle’ and ‘upper’ class categories do not reflect ‘elements’ specific to an upbringing in an Asian community. Although there are aspects of the (British) middle classes ‘Asian’ people can relate to, there are elements of another (immigrant/ethnic minority) ‘world’ that problematise a comfortable self-definition of middle class, regardless of how clearly one may be able to define the attributes of this ‘group’. Here, we see allusions to the racialised ‘second existence’ of class predicated on a level of mutual exclusivity between the ethnoracial minority experience and middle classness. This is somewhat different to the ‘straddling’ of class boundaries expressed earlier by the hybrid working/middle-class identifiers, as here the distinct, racialised lifeworlds where stratification operates and sometimes interacts is more clearly explicated:

When you’re Asian [. . .] you’re almost like [inhabiting] two different worlds. So there’s elements of the middle class you can relate to, but there’s other [things] that you can relate to, there’s other elements, your upbringing in an Asian community that you can relate to. (Nabeela)

Baljit stated that he feels as if the White British class system doesn’t apply to him as an Indian Punjabi Sikh, a community with its own, culturally specific system of stratification that confers symbolic power within social spaces where White classed capitals are not

privileged (Wallace, 2018). By virtue of belonging to a higher ethnic caste, he states that any relative privilege a middle-class positioning may afford him or those in his community is thus unimportant: ‘I think being Punjabi we don’t have that class system, we don’t, middle class, higher class, upper class, because in a sense we’re brought up as Jats being of a higher-class anyway’. ‘Jat Sikhs are seen as one of the most economically powerful, politically influential and occupationally privileged caste groups (Jodkha, 2002), akin to Brahmins in the Hindu caste system. Although Deepak stated that his caste background does not afford him sufficient cachet to elevate his social positioning in the UK or indeed resonate with him on a personal level, Baljit suggests it renders his positioning within, or any identification with, a UK-specific class system obsolete. It is unsurprising that he recognises and strongly identifies with a naturalised social hierarchy in which he would be placed at the top, and one that also reflects and informs his strong sense of ethno-religious belonging. Baljit, unlike Deepak, is embedded within a strong Indian (specifically Sikh Punjabi) community in Birmingham, both professionally and socially, which may account for the high level of caste salience he expresses, and its effect on his conceptualisation of class and stratification as a whole. Importantly, in latter parts of the discussion he described his identification with ‘British society’ and sense of belonging with his White British middle-class neighbours as weak, as a function of his poor upbringing and racialised ‘otherness’, underscoring his sense of both symbolic as well as material exclusion from dominant, racialised notions of White British middle classness (Archer, 2011).

Mohan, like Deepak, believes that in any western social hierarchy, ethnic minorities are at the ‘bottom’. Mohan’s interview was punctuated by discussions of his inter-generational journey from extreme poverty to wealth. He believes dominant ideas around social class and social mobility, specifically, are inapplicable to the British South Asian experience, a group whose social mobility trajectories have been predicated on the accumulation of wealth, financial security and, by proxy, social status. Talking – like Baljit – as an ethnoracial collective ‘we’, Mohan stated that the focus for immigrants and ethnic minorities has been on the accumulation of money and education to achieve a ‘better house, a better car, move to the outskirts [. . .] a better life’ – in short to become socially mobile. Socio-economic deprivation is construed as an intrinsic part of the ethnic minority experience, and thus not necessarily reflective of the White middle-class experience of capital accumulation and class reproduction:

as an Asian, we don’t think of it as a social class, we don’t think of any class, er, I think what we tend to say is okay, we need to make money for a start because we’re all very poor, we know how important money is. (Mohan, Indian Sikh engineer from Warwickshire)

I can’t possibly be in the top class, I’m certainly not a Monarch or a royal [laughs], definitely not an aristocrat, nowhere near any kind of title, erm, and so I think inevitably if you’re an ethnic minority you start off at number one. (Deepak)

### *Class, Race and Cultural Citizenship*

In contrast to Deepak, Mohan and Baljit, Farhan sought to draw an equivalence between British middle classness and Muslimness, specifically. A number of the Muslim participants

spoke directly to negative hyper-racialised representations of Muslim communities and Muslim identity (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010) not only in relation to class but to nationalist discourses. He stated that British middle-class values are framed as, but are not, mutually exclusive with Muslim identity, with the latter often ostensibly framed, and pejoratively (rather than proudly as per Bisma) so, as working class. He felt it necessary to clarify that Islam is not the domain of the uneducated, parochial working classes, naming particular stigmatised working-class behaviours such as drinking and promiscuity. In seeking to reconcile middle-class values and ‘Islamic’ values he engaged in a pseudo-strategic assimilationist (Meghji, 2016) mode of rationalisation that allowed him to both critique the racialised boundaries of Britishness whilst also reframing ‘Islamic’ capitals as inherently (White, British) middle-class, and thus legitimate and valuable (Wallace, 2018):

if you're a Muslim it doesn't mean you cannot be a professional, you cannot be educated, you cannot be intelligent, you cannot be middle class in terms of your values as indeed a lot of the values I share, erm, in origin may have been Islamic (Farhan, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from London).

Zain, another Muslim-identifying lawyer, similarly sought to deconstruct a perceived distinction between White middle classness and ethnic minority or immigrant ‘culture’ with respect to cultural or ‘ethnic’ capitals related to hard work, education and aspirationalism (Crozier et al., 2008). Whereas Farhan and Zain sought to draw similarities between ‘Muslimness’ on the one hand and British middle classness on the other, Hasan believes the tenets of Islam, grounded in equality and fairness, allow him – much like Baljit – to operate above and beyond culturally specific social divisions. Rather than trying to draw an equivalence between Islamic culture and British middle-class culture, he places himself – by virtue of his ethnocultural belief system – above the moral murkiness of social stratification:

For me, for a Muslim everyone is equal [. . .] so you don't treat people differently because of the fact that they have colours or speak different languages etc. etc., so that cuts right the way through that class distinction. (Hasan, Bangladeshi Muslim lawyer from London)

These discursive movements across class, racial, religious and national identity underscore the ethnocultural specificity as well as the salience of processes of racialisation to conceptualisations of, and identification with, middle classness. Critiques of stratification allow participants to transcend, undermine or reframe the synonymy of Whiteness and ‘authentic’ middle classness and, importantly, its bearing on the normative requirements for cultural citizenship (Beaman, 2017). The racialised ‘second existence’ of class thus has classed, racialised and political dimensions expressed in similar but culturally distinct ways depending, in part, on the intersectional positionings and social identity frameworks of the individual in question.

Although much of the broader findings from this analysis in relation to the co-constitution of race and class and its impact on class identification heavily underscore much of the findings in the existing literature, tentative differences by ethnic and ethnoreligious group were identified as salient. The Indian Hindu participants were more willing to

identify as middle class, but in a largely ambivalent way, and those who expressed working classness or rejected the notion of classification tended to identify with close-knit Muslim or Sikh communities. The potential role of class background, ethnoreligious identity, and processes of hyper-racialisation in differing modes of class identification and (de-/re-)construction can only be further theorised by engaging in a larger study with a group that better reflects the demographic and occupational diversity of the evolving British-born South Asian population. Nonetheless, through a grounded and situated analysis (Small, 2009) which takes into account contradictions, discursive movements and the reflexive ways in which individuals talk on and around class and its symbolic boundaries, this study has highlighted how small-scale interview research can make a meaningful theoretical contribution to the sociological literature on class and race.

## Conclusion

The study which forms the basis of this article, in contrast to others which have similarly analysed minority ethnic middle-class identification in relation to Whiteness (such as Meghji, 2016, 2017; Moore, 2008; Rollock et al., 2013) was conducted across a diverse sample of British South Asian second-generation professionals. Analysis of semi-structured interviews identified fluid and intersecting typologies of class identity across this 'objectively' middle-class sample. These were, broadly, (1) working-/middle-class hybridised identity, (2) ambivalent middle-class identity, and (3) no class identity/a rejection of class. The critiques of class and rejections of middle-class identity expressed in these interviews do not diminish participants' relative symbolic advantages afforded by their access to varying levels of economic and cultural capital. Indeed, some level of symbolic power exists in the ability to defy the material and cultural logics of classification (Bourdieu, 1989). However, the racialised limits of adopting an 'authentic' middle-class identity are clear (aligning particularly with existing work on ethnic minority middle classness by Archer, 2011 and Rollock et al., 2013) and give credence to the idea of a racialised 'second existence' of class.

The analysis threw up a lack of clarity around not only the symbolic but material boundaries of class as a whole. Although participants did often apply objective measures of socio-economic status (occupation, education, income) to their own evaluations of class positioning, both the conversations *on* and the discussions *around* class suggested more diversity in the way participants conceptualised social stratification. Whereas the individuals in this study were largely dismissive of class when the notion was attached to pre-existing categories of 'working', 'middle' and 'upper', they still drew on markers of distinction and difference, invariably linked to their own relative sense of power, deprivation and mediated inclusion within a hyper-racialised society.

Many participants engaged in reflexive interrogation of the UK class system, using their own personal biographies and life experiences as ethnoracial minorities to critique traditional class distinctions and their flawed or classification schemes (evidential – potentially – of forms of ostensibly middle-class cultural capital, but not explicitly recognised as such by them). The ethnoracial specificity of class, reflected in immigrant working-class histories, the salience of culturally specific forms of stratification, and explicit mention of the inherent Whiteness of class indicates the racialised 'second

existence' of class. It underscores arguments made by Meghji (2016, 2017) and Wallace (2016, 2018) about the Whiteness of dominant theorisations of class cultural capital, the latter a concept central to Bourdieusian ideas around class difference and mechanisms of class reproduction, but which has been under-theorised in relation to processes of racialisation and the rapid social mobility of ethnic minority groups. Further research which can draw sharper equivalences and differences between the British Black and British South Asian middle-class experience would be desirable to further our understanding of the racialisation of class.

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### Notes

1. According to Casey (2005) 'political capital' is the most authoritative form of capital because of its collective nature and its explicit association with power. It is exercised through the wielding of other types of capital for political purposes such as funding or lobbying for a particular political project, party or agenda.
2. The ethnic groups which comprise the British South Asian diaspora are differentiated by migration history and settlement trajectory, cultural and regional heritage, class background and capital accumulation. Indians have, economically, fared 'better' than predominantly Muslim Pakistani and particularly Bangladeshi groups (Brynin and Güveli, 2012; Jivraj and Khan, 2013; Maxwell, 2012). Although the latter are increasingly gaining traction in education and the labour market, barriers and exclusions still remain due to institutional racisms, cultural stereotyping, lack of support within further and higher education and lack of access to the professions (Casey, 2016; Ghaffar and Stevenson, 2018).
3. What might be chalked down to 'invalidities' of the methods are potentially useful in small-scale interview research. For example, the direction of conversation, the openness interviewees exhibit, the contradictions that arise within their narratives as well as the ways they self-position and resist positioning in relation to class (Meghji, 2016) might reflect relative levels of symbolic capital that they harness, discursive movements they make, and contradictions that they grapple with in everyday life (Sølvberg and Jarness, 2019).
4. See Heaphy's (2013) analysis of the accounts of class identification amongst lesbian and gay men interviewed in the 1990s.

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