Becoming Classy: In Search of Class Theory in Philosophy of Education

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INTRODUCTION

Many educational philosophers aim to contribute to better understanding how social differences are constructed and intersect with inequality and injustice. In a conference in social foundations or philosophy of education, a significant proportion of work is typically focused on these themes. Yet among categories that frame and relate to education, difference, and injustice, less work is generally focused on class than on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. In an analysis of the last 20 archived volumes of *Philosophy of Education,* I found few essays that primarily examined class or socioeconomic status and education. Many articles recognized class or socioeconomic status with a few sentences, or included such key terms within a "kitchen sink" approach to acknowledging difference through listing categories. The kitchen sink approach, however, does not primarily aim to substantively describe or discuss the social categories. For instance:

> [T]he fact that like it or not, each of us is raced, classed and gendered (with the attendant caveats that these particular categories are not the only salient ones and nor do they mean the same thing in different cultural contexts) draws attention to one of the more uncomfortable facets of contingency, namely, that the parameters of social identity do not simply precede us, they actually produce us as particular kinds of people.[1]

> In contrast to the agent provocateur, who makes trouble, the agent provocateuse facilitates trouble, removing the civil barriers that protect the privileged from having to think

about racism, homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, ethno-centrism, xenophobia, and class bias … [2]

In contrast, much more work in the archive has focused on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The terms and related concepts can also be found in the kitchen sink. However, they are often given more critical theoretical treatment, aimed at developing understanding of their impact on identity and relations in education and society. While few essays in twenty years focused on contributing to a theoretical understanding of class, in most years more than one essay aimed at further developing understanding of race, racism, or whiteness, for example.

Sometimes a lack of work on a topic can indicate lack of interest, which reflects inattentiveness to or possible misrecognition of the topic's significance: in this case, the impact of class on educational and other forms of injustice. Yet this is not the only possible explanation. Perhaps class is well understood in the field, through scholarship and experience. That class is frequently mentioned, if not deeply examined, in the archive suggests this could be the case. I explore these possibilities here. First, I consider how class can be conceptualized in the context of philosophy of education essays that focus on difference in the case of identity and race, gender, or sexuality—categories more commonly theorized in the archive. I reflect here on the extent to which insights about one category have implications for the others. Second, I reflect on my experience autobiographically to consider how scholarly understandings of identity, privilege, and authority intersect in paradoxical ways in relation to class. One point I make is that while class experiences are lived as racial and gendered experiences are, recognition in this case entails a different approach than that used to recognize and respond to other forms of oppression. This essay thus aims to build a foundation for critical and systematic work about class in educational theory in the future.

IS CLASS LIKE RACE OR GENDER?

As previously mentioned, class is often acknowledged via the kitchen

sink as a signifier of advantage and disadvantage in society. The kitchen sink operates (sometimes intentionally, but not necessarily) to group together in a basic way race, class, gender, and more. It would not be unreasonable for a reader to interpret that such language implies a kind of equivalency: if something is said about one form of disadvantage, something similar or related could be said about the other forms.

However, it is easy to find counterexamples where class is not akin to race or gender. Possibilities for and implications of passing and fluidity, in identity and social relations, provide a vivid example. By "passing" I mean here a slippage or transcendence of status that can take place, indicating fluidity in the category, in contradiction to commonplace assumptions that the category (class, race, gender, or others) is objective, permanent, and universally understood and assessable. *Class* passing, and class transformation (mobility), are usually regarded in privileged social and professional environments and academic discourse as unproblematic, if not good.[3] However, the social understandings of passing or transformation in relation to *race* and *gender* (or *sexual orientation*) are different.

When it comes to race, the contingency of passing is often observed as an instantiation of arbitrary racialized oppression. That one can change race, intentionally or unintentionally, in the context of racism has been explored by Awad Ibrahim. As he notes:

> I was not considered "Black" in Africa, though I had other adjectives that patched together my identity, such as "tall," "Sudanese," "academic," "basketball player," and so on. In other words, except in South Africa, race is not "the" defining social identity in Africa. However … in direct response to the historical representation of Blackness and the social processes of racialization and racism … these antecedent signifiers, adjectives become secondary to my Blackness, and I retranslate my being: I become Black.[4]

Ibrahim goes on to describe being stopped by police in Toronto search-
ing for "a dark man with a dark bag."[5] Ibrahim's story of racialization
highlights the boundary of becoming, and how racialization as a process
negatively impacts people based on arbitrary judgments in racist society.
James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* tells
Johnson's story of first identifying as white, until he is recognized by
his teacher and principal one day as black ("colored").[6] Like Ibrahim,
Johnson confronts a contrast between his own sense of self versus rac-
ist social expectations. For people who are seen as white and stay in
contexts where white is seen as normal, such questioning of oneself
in relation to others is not likely to occur in this way. Such phenomena
of race fluidity in the context of oppressive racialization has prompted
reflection on how white people can know, see, and problematize their
racial identity as arbitrary yet personally beneficial, an emergent theme
of educational theory.[7]

    Stories of race passing and fluidity help deconstruct oppres-
sive processes in a society that is unjust with regard to race. While they
demonstrate the arbitrariness of race as a construction, social justice
educators see "color-blindness" as a denial of the ongoing harms of
racism, which remain inescapable for many people without structural
change.[8] Ignoring race and racialization is not regarded as a solution,
but as part of the problem, as people of color are blamed and treated as
deficient within racist society, lacking recognition of racism. The notion
of deliberate passing from white to black also remains taboo in this
context. The recent negative public treatment both of Rachel Dolezal, a
white woman who seemed to become black (or trick people into think-
ing she was black), and Rebecca Tuvel, a scholar whose *Hypatia* article
rationalized Dolezal's transformation in part, signal societal discomfort
with racial fluidity.[9] Although an ideal world would enable people to
create their own identities rather than have race ascribed externally to
them, in the real world many are presumed unable to change their race;
in this context, Dolezal seemed to exploit personal possibilities for ra-

cial fluidity for personal gain.

With gender and sexual orientation, the situation is different. Like racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia are harmful and operate in oppressive ways. Yet in this case, gender and orientation passing are more broadly regarded as possible, while both are also increasingly held as fluid and open.[10] In relation, while the outing and shaming of Dolezal is normalized and regarded largely as unproblematic, given rejection of her case as ethical or legitimate passing, the undesired outing of an LGBTQ person or the dead-naming of a trans person is regarded as ethically harmful, depriving people of respect and dignity. In contrast with Dolezal's case, that people should not be "outed" against their desires, but respected in relation to how they wish to be identified, is regarded here as appropriate recognition in unjust gendered, sexist, transphobic, and homophobic circumstances.[11]

In contrast to these cases, (upward) class passing is rarely seen as "passing," but is held as normal, acceptable, good transformation, as class mobility. One can transform herself, according to meritocratic discourse, through education, hard work, networks, etc., from lower-class or working-class to middle-class. It is not seen as deceptive to become middle-class; there is no discourse that one should be "out" to be authentic, or that strict borders should distinguish class identities today. Although one can imagine morally problematic class-based "outing," recognizing a person's past lower-class status (or actual upper-class status) is not widely seen as harmful today, because upward mobility is viewed as good. Thus, politicians and elites often emphasize how they "pulled themselves up by the bootstraps," in contrast with "being born with a silver spoon."

In much writing on race, gender, and sexuality, philosophers of education describe their experiences, of being white or black, man or woman, straight or LGBTQ. In a sense, their essays are testimonies that seek to acknowledge complex positionality and intergroup relations against the backdrop of harmful ideological systems. Many also describe

themselves as "working-class," "middle-class," or similar. The use of autobiographical discourse in the field reflects in part a sense of moral obligation to write from a personal rather than universal position in relation to systems of oppression. Susan Laird wrote of this phenomenon as program chair of the Philosophy of Education Society conference in 1997. As she noted, "Obviously most philosophers of education are academic women and men and therefore either working class or middle class, yet few write consciously from their gendered location and even fewer from their economic locations past or present."[12] Going on, she observed an increasing academic trend to not "ignore any social location that establishes my relationship to oppressed groups: I am morally obligated here to inform you that I am a white, working-class, heterosexual, middle-aged, tenured, academic woman, of Anglo ethnicity, post Christian, now able-bodied … and so on."[13]

Laird articulates an attitude found in much scholarship today in social justice education. Positive recognition in education and in theorizing diversity often invokes awareness of insider/outsider status, and reflects that people should have the capacity to meaningfully author themselves, to name themselves to others, rather than be possibly misrecognized.[14] In this genre, people are granted more authority to identify and describe themselves than to identify and describe others. Women know more about being women than men; black people know more about being black than white people.[15] At the same time, as discussed in relation to Ibrahim and Johnson, members of marginalized groups face multiple versions of identity and double consciousness that gives them (need for) a better understanding of privileged others' perceptions than is typically observed in privileged others.[16] And ignorance about racism and whiteness among white people has been the focus of much work which queries it as willful, desirable, a moral performance or shortcut, etc.[17]

Turning to class, wealthy people are less authoritative about experiencing poverty than poorer people, while poorer people may

be more accustomed to the perspectives of the more well-to-do than vice versa.[18] If a person transcends class, moving from one position to another, they possess knowledge of both, and authority that comes from experience of both. However, the views of those with passing and transcending experiences are not necessarily generalizable. Those who transcend (for example, gender or sexual orientation identity) may have a greater awareness in relation to their experience than others.

Gaining academic authority normally comes with upward mobility, if there is a change in class position. This creates a bind for an academic who would want to communicate from experience of being poor. Their case is not generalizable to all poor people. It is not clear in this case if an academic can speak or write effectively of being poor, if they have a tenure-track position, for example, at the time of articulation. On the other hand, because upward mobility is not terribly unusual in academia, scholars often approach the topic as one about which all have roughly similar experience and authority. (In other words, upward-mobile experiences are not generalizable about being poor, but are treated as generalizable about being an academic.) In this context, it can be difficult to access epistemic authority while identifying as poor in higher education, particularly in critiquing the myth of meritocracy. For example, if I say, "the poor kids can't make it, and I would know," a response might be, "well, didn't you make it?"—if one believes I am an insider, and an academic authority. If my authority is accepted while my insider status is dismissed I might get a response like, "how would you know?" which questions how I could be, at the moment (or ever), an insider. To employ insider status to discuss class and injustice is unpersuasive, when class transcendence is regarded as normal.

That mobility discourse frames class transcendence as good—in line with meritocratic ideology—leads to another issue that can discourage academics from identifying as poor. Poor people in the United States today are often stigmatized as essentially, possibly willfully, uneducated. Particularly if one parses class from race, the image is of

ignorant, racist, Trump-supporting whites. Such discourse has been quite extreme since the Trump election, when mainstream reports often depicted Trump supporters as mentally and psychologically deficient.[19] One risks being identified with this group, as morally unenlightened, for pointing class out as significant. He risks being read quickly as sympathizing with racism, as meritocratic ideology remains implicitly accepted by many academics when it comes to class.

In relation, much writing about education for social justice focuses on middle-class/privileged white students, to the exclusion of serious analyses of poor white experiences. Such writing in effect obscures class as a significant factor, although it is kept in the kitchen sink.[20] Since not all white students are well-off, I wonder whether authors of such articles really know the backgrounds of their students. On the other hand, given the normalcy of class transcendence, perhaps simply attending a good university takes away one's identity as lower-class. My experiences inform my views here.

BECOMING CLASSY

I grew up poor. "Working-class" would not be accurate, although I use it to feel polite around friends and colleagues. Until I was a teenager, our toilet was outside. There was plumbing in the kitchen, but the water was not and has never been drinkable. We filled up plastic milk jugs with water from a stream by the highway every week. I went to Head Start before kindergarten, for children living below the federal poverty level. When I was a teenager, my mother moved us in with my grandmother, as she had no other option and could no longer afford housing. Because of my experience, I always wonder whether there are poor yet functional families in the United States. I never saw one. In my neighborhood, some kids lived with foster parents who did not seem particularly caring, while many of my other friends' parents were permanently impaired by long-term serious drug use.

Growing up white in a rural community where the vast majority of

people were white, and where some were working-class or middle-class while others were miserably poor, race did not significantly figure into my worldview. The few black and Asian kids in town were not among the sizeable impoverished population of which I was part, and among my friends were many Hispanic/Latino youth, whose class positions were generally better than those of my white friends. I was one of those color-blind whites, poor and uneducated.

I spent eighteen years waiting to get out of, and working to get out of, poverty that was material as well as emotional, psychological, of my spirit. Then I went as far as I could go with some aid and scholarships, to start living. At university, I plunged into interesting conversations with more worldly people and I learned, which was my aim. In particular, I was taught—by more sophisticated students and by some of my nicest, most caring professors—that it is held in polite, educated society as morally deficient for white people to see themselves as not racist or as color-blind, and that it is morally good to accept racial complicity as a white person in a racist society. Such lessons were hardly intuitive to me. They resembled nothing I experienced, or could deeply know, although I was starting to learn more in social sciences classes about these things. The knowledge was abstract to me, but university was for bettering myself, and leaving behind the past. I had no academic counterpoint. I accepted the lessons.

I attended Cambridge University for my master's degree, and there I learned to be middle-class. I learned through socialization what to say and what not to say about politics, my family, my history, and my opinions; how to eat at a table; and how to do small talk. When I started my doctoral studies, some other students treated me like I was elite. I was called "Cambridge Liz" by some when I was not present. Then I found myself at a PES conference, discussing race, class, knowledge, and privilege. I quickly felt like no one really wanted to know what I thought. As a doctoral student, I was quite inept with jargon and argumentation. I worked to assimilate, while continuing to struggle to discuss race and class without feeling like (I was being taken for) one of the willfully racist white students criticized in some PES papers. Discussing my experiences as evidence seemed impolite, if not immoral.[21] I seemed obliged

to identify as white and privileged. Now with tenure and very good job conditions, my problems authoritatively discussing class have compounded. I have language and authority to speak, but lost along the way, having deliberately shed, my intimate knowledge of impoverishment.

Though I have not heard this story told before at PES, I am not necessarily unique. Some of my experiences likely resonate with others. Another challenge to understanding class is that it is very fuzzy. Many people did not have good indoor plumbing, depending on their age and geographical background; this does not always indicate poverty.[22] On the other hand, well-off people often desire to "middle" themselves and not be conspicuously well-off, and appear to come from humble origins.[23] In this case, if I identify as "working-class," well, "weren't we all"? Relativizing is natural, often intended as politeness, and class *is* fluid, and people *do* transcend. However, the conceptual fuzziness and category fluidity of class, in the context of common race-class conflation and neglect of class analysis, exacerbate the situation wherein the class passer loses her ability to speak of class as she gains authority to speak. Without deep recognition that material inequality creates harm, no white person can talk about class disadvantage with authority, unless from a superior angle, such as in condescending journalistic work pathologizing poor whites.[24]

Philosophers of education normally place "white" alongside "privileged" in text, and discuss "white middle-class students," but many whites who impact society are not middle-class or wealthy. Such work also seems to assume the class identities of students without giving proof—for instance, from student self-identification, or from university statistics.[25] Perhaps educational theorists considering ignorant, complicit, denying whites discuss wealthy whites incidentally. Yet Cambridge Liz, with deliberate affectation, may be the poorest student in the seminar. Despite much strong work about social justice in education, philosophers of education face challenges to understand class disadvantage amidst conceptual fuzziness, category fluidity and normalized passing, and the tendency to conflate race and class such that to be white and poor is a black box, given other more vivid harms in society.

REVEALING CLASS

There is a lot in the kitchen sink. How it all goes together is not obvious, and there are different kitchen sinks, which change over time. Sometimes the content is clear, and sometimes it is not. My story is not given here to sympathize with poor whites to the exclusion of other marginalized groups. Rather, it is done to emphasize the value of better conceptualizing class in relation to diverse identities. In this context, it problematizes the kitchen sink for possibly conflating categories, and encourages more precise analyses, to not blend distinctions incidentally. The kitchen sink highlights difference, but its impact can be paradoxical, if students experience their identities and becomings being essentialized, due to its tendency to simplify, rather than concretize complexity and fluidity.

Although this does not tend to be reflected on in discussions of class in educational theory (probably because these are more often conducted at the macro level), class is *deeply felt,* like other social categories of advantage and disadvantage: as deficiency and lacking, as boundedness to scripts—in this case, of meritocracy, of fitting in within groups and being recognizable across groups.[26] From the top-down, it may appear as if class disadvantage is just a lack of tools, but being recognizable across and within class places different demands on people that go beneath skin, to affective and emotional experience. It is not a lever or a switch, but a matter of recognition and relation, of desire for belonging and for acceptance as morally good. Yet, as Andrew Sayer notes, though class is a kind of cultural difference which is embodied and lived, poor people are hardly "clamouring for poverty to be legitimized and valued."[27] The desire for recognition in this case is directly related to material injustice and distribution, such that the poor often face criticisms of being not politically correct or moral in expression, while their attempts at a different sort of recognition are rarely read as effective social justice work.[28] Recognition of class thus entails, most basically, observing the extent to which "what you have determines what you get"—as well as how you feel, and who you are. In relation, it is recognition of how "economic inequalities … are forms of oppression and exploitation."[29]

As class identity is complex in relation to education, it is thus also worth exploring class in educational and societal relations with students as lived experience. As theorists and educators, reflecting more expansively on class fluidity, dynamism, and transcendence in one's own life and in those of students need not distract from witnessing other harmful and oppressive ideological processes. Ideally, an analysis that does not unwittingly preclude class-based recognition and class transcendence issues can bolster understanding of social and educational transcendence and empowerment in the complex realities of lived experience. Philosophers of education can "stay classy" by taking class seriously, as a sharp instrument that should not be kept at the bottom of a slippery, opaque kitchen sink. Likewise, social justice educators can attend to rather than take for granted the impacts of class, in building inclusive spaces that avoid essentialism and various forms of misrecognition.

1 Natasha Levinson, "Unsettling Identities: Conceptualizing Contingency," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 62.

2 Audrey Thompson, "Response: Agent Provacateuse," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 89.

3 See for example: Kenneth Howe, "On Equality versus Adequacy: Principles and Normative Frameworks," in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013); Lynda Stone, "Dewey's Contribution to an American Hubris: Philosophy of Democracy, Education, and War," in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002); and Peter Giampietro, "(Un)Disciplining Virtue: Autonomy as Attunement and Relation," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006).

4 Awad Ibrahim, "One is Not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 35, (2007): 80.

5 Ibrahim, "One is Not Born Black," 82.

6 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912).

7 For example see Barbara Applebaum and Erin Stoik, "On the Meaning and Necessity of a White, Anti-Racist Identity," in *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000); George Yancy, "How Can You Teach Me if You Don't Know Me? Embedded Racism and White Opacity,"

in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia W. Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012).

8 See for instance, Barbara Applebaum, "On 'Glass Snakes,' White Moral Responsibility, and Agency Under Complicity," *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).

9 See Jesse Singal, "This is What a Modern-Day Witch Hunt Looks Like," *New York Magazine*, May 2, 2017, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/transracial-ism-article-controversy.html.

10[1] See for instance, The Gender Issue, *National Geographic,* January 2017.

11 Tuvel was also charged with harmfully dead-naming Caitlyn Jenner, although Jenner still uses her old name. See Singal, "This is What a Modern-Day Witch Hunt Looks Like."

12 Susan Laird, "Introduction," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Laird.

13 Laird, "Introduction."

14 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

15 Uma Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist," in *The Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004).

16 That minority youth should therefore be helped to understand multiple perspectives in a way that is empowering to them is advocated in Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

17 See for instance Cris Mayo, "Vertigo at the Heart of Whiteness," in *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Stone; John Warren and Kathy Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat," *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004).

18 See for instance Donna Selman-Killingbeck, "Can a Working-Class Girl Have Roots and Wings? White Trash in the Ivory Tower," in *Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Class, Identity, and the Working-Class Experience in Academe,* eds. C. Vincent Samarco and Stephen L. Muzatti (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

19 For example see Stephanie McCrummen, "Finally, Someone Who Thinks Like Me," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/finally-someone-who-thinks-like-me/2016/10/01/c9b6f334-7f68-11e6-9070-5c4905bf40dc_story.html?utm_term=.6ae47b5c6b85.

20 Many related points are made by Lawrence Blum in "Reservations About White Privilege Analysis," in *Philosophy of Education 2008,* ed. Barbara Stengel (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).

21 Simon Charlesworth discusses the academic "euphemization that the working class feel, intuitively," in *A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141.

22 Liz Jackson, "Comparing Race, Class and Gender," in *Comparative Educational Research: Approaches and Methods*, eds. Mark Bray, Bob Adamson and Mark Mason (Hong Kong: Springer/Comparative Education Research Centre, 2014).

23 See Rachel Sherman, "What the Rich Won't Tell You," *New York Times*, September 8, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/opinion/sunday/what-the-rich-wont-tell-you.html, on wealthy people hiding their privilege.

24 McCrummen, "Finally, Someone Who Thinks Like Me."

25 In relation, in "Reservations About White Privilege Analysis," Blum quotes Margaret Andersen's "Whitewashing Race: A Critical Perspective on Whiteness," in *White Out*, eds. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), noting that the absence of social scientific analysis in whiteness studies leaves it "without much grounding in the material reality of racial stratification" (21).

26 Charlesworth, *Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience*; Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

27 Sayer, *Moral Significance of Class*, 52.

28 Charlesworth, *Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience*.

29 Erik Olin Wright, "Conclusion," in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, ed. Erik Olin Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).