

Positionings of the black middle-classes: understanding identity construction beyond strategic assimilation

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Abstract

This paper explores the identities of Britain's black middle-classes. Drawing upon interviews with seventy-two participants, I theorize a 'triangle of identity'. This triangle emphasizes how black middle-class identities are constructed within the dynamics of three poles. Firstly, there is the class-minded pole whereby class comes to the fore as a conceptual scheme; secondly, there is the ethnoracial autonomous pole whereby 'race' is central to one's identity and whiteness is actively resisted; and lastly there is the strategic assimilation pole, where one continually moves between classed and racialized spheres of action. This tripartite approach to identity builds upon previous research by further exploring the social, cultural and phenomenological distinctions within Britain's black middle-classes.

Keywords

Black middle-class; race and racism; positioning theory; racial identity; intersectionality; whiteness

Introduction

The lives, experiences and identities of Britain's black middle-classes are emerging in sociological research. A recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project, carried out by Nicola Rollock, Carol Vincent, David Gillborn and Stephen Ball, focused on 'the educational strategies of the black middle classes'¹. Although this project's predominant aim was to explore the heterogeneous strategies that black middle-class parents used in parenting and interacting with educational institutions, it also provided a foundational study into the complex identities of the black middle-classes.

My research continues the ethic of exploring the complexity and heterogeneity of Britain's black middle-classes by analysing the dynamic relationships between race, class and self. This involves drawing upon positioning theory to understand how objective social structures, and personal storylines and social episodes affect black middle-class identity construction. This leads me to theorize a triangle of identity for understanding black middle-class identities, which emphasizes how Britain's black middle-classes position

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themselves relative to three modes of experience. The first mode is 'strategic assimilation', whereby individuals culturally assimilate with white middle-class norms in public spaces, while also signaling to racialized others that they maintain connections to their ethnoracial roots. The second mode represents a shift towards 'class-minded' phenomenology, whereby individuals construe their experiences and identities through the lens of class. Lastly, there is the 'ethnoracial autonomous' mode, whereby individuals maintain high levels of ethnoracial affinity, openly challenge the expectations to assimilate with white standards, and seek out cultural spaces which are from white influence. Whereas strategic assimilation has received significant attention in Britain as a black middle-class social reality (Rollock et al. 2011, 2015), the other two modes of experience have been alluded to but are yet to be incorporated into a general theory of identity. This paper seeks to outline such a general theory of black middle-class identities.

Strategic assimilation and boundary work

Strategic assimilation illustrates how both class and ethnoracial membership are drawn upon in identity construction. The notion of strategic assimilation was theorized by Lacy (2004) in her research on the black middle-classes in Washington. Drawing upon interviews with 30 black middle-class respondents, Lacy (2004) demonstrated how these participants would use 'boundary work' to emphasize similarities with the white middle-class while also displaying an affinity for their ethnoracial roots. In this context, boundary work denotes 'a type of cultural work where individuals associate selected aspects of their identity with a specific cultural repertoire' (Lacy 2004, 910). Such boundary work forms the basis for strategic assimilation, as Lacy (2004, 908) argued her respondents were involved in a form of 'segmented assimilation' whereby they privileged the 'black world' as a 'site of socializing' while assimilating with white standards in public spheres of action. This switching between classed and racialized spheres of action forms the basis for understanding the concept of strategic assimilation, further developed in British research.

Across the Atlantic, Rollock et al. (2011, 2015) synthesized Lacy's concept of strategic assimilation with the critical race notion of WhiteWorld. WhiteWorld can be understood as a racialized social structure involving 'the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of White identifications, norms and interests' (Rollock et al. 2015, 14). Extrapolating from interviews with 62 black middle-class respondents, the authors understand strategic assimilation as a mode of experience whereby individuals partially assimilate with WhiteWorld as a strategy to maintain respectability. Such assimilation with WhiteWorld is often performed through micro-acts of class distinction – for example, wearing particular clothes and speaking in a particular manner. Nevertheless, Rollock et al. (2011) also underscore how while partially assimilating with WhiteWorld, their participants also send out signals of racial 'authenticity' to display that they maintain an affinity towards their ethnoracial roots, for example speaking in patois towards racialized others. Strategic assimilation thus involves moving 'back and forth the class and race divides within different

social spheres populated by audiences and actors of varying race and class backgrounds' (Rollock et al. 2011, 1088).

Although the authors of the ESRC project found strategic assimilation to be a salient feature of many of their participants' lives, they appreciated how their respondents had varying attitudes towards their own racialized identities. The authors thus placed their participants on a spectrum ranging from those who perceived their blackness as 'incidental' towards those who perceived their blackness as 'collective' (Rollock et al. 2015). Whereas incidental blackness is understood 'in terms of mere skin pigmentation', collective blackness is represented as being 'aligned to a political or conscious sense of collective worth and investment' (Rollock et al. 2015, 24). Importantly, the authors did not assert that their participants were *either* collectively *or* incidentally black, but used this continuum to display the range of attitudes and understandings that their participants had towards their own blackness.

My research builds upon this previous work by analysing how those who are positioned towards 'incidental' or 'collective' blackness have their own related hierarchies of social, cultural and symbolic capitals, as well as particular phenomenological viewpoints of the social world. This appreciation of the heterogeneity of black middle-class identities involves shifting the conceptual framework towards a positioning theory, which emphasizes the dynamics between objective group positions and individual social episodes.

Positioning theory and the black middle-classes

A key difference separates positioning theory from boundary work. Whereas boundary work focuses on how individuals and groups position themselves relative to others, positioning theory also incorporates how such individuals and groups are themselves positioned by others. As Baert (2012, 312) states 'positioning [...] involves on the one hand an "agent", *doing* the positioning, and on the other hand a "positioned party", being attributed certain features. The agent can be a sole individual but does not have to be; it might refer to several people or to a group. Likewise, the positioned party can be an individual or a larger social entity'.

A position is not just defined by individuals or a group sharing particular ascribed features, but can also 'be looked at as a loose set of rights and duties that limit the possibilities of action' therefore affecting 'the repertoire of *acts* one has access to' (Harré and Moghaddam 2003, 5). Positioning theory thus focuses around the formation of conventions and meanings embodied in social identities and action(s) – how certain social scripts come to be read and performed as normal, how they are challenged, and how they are developed or replaced through time. This is relevant when discussing the black middle-class, as they are often still positioned by others (stereotyped) as being lower class (Rollock et al. 2015) and consequently often challenge this positioning and fight for the legitimacy of what they perceive their actual position to be.

Despite recognizing the constraining effects of occupying a particular position, positioning theory highlights how individuals and groups are able to reflexively engage with their own positions. As Harré and Moghaddam (2003, 6) state:

[...] There is a kind of Platonic realm of positions, realized in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamic way.

The dynamic nature of positioning means that one can position oneself, be positioned by another (second-order positioning), and can resist being positioned (meta-positioning). With regards to black middle-class identities, this translates into a clear research agenda exploring how black middle-class individuals position themselves, their narratives of being positioned by others, and their performances of resistance against being positioned. Moreover, positions are not fixed but are 'ongoing achievement[s]' (Baert 2012, 316) which develop through particular encounters – termed 'social episodes'. Positioning theory thus allows the researcher to analyse how particular 'social episodes' have a continuing effect on the social action and identities of their participants. This efficacy of positioning theory is now further explored in the discussion of my methodology.

Methodology

My qualitative research design features seventy-two participants from two datasets. The first dataset contains participants I interviewed myself, whereas the second dataset is taken from the previous ESRC study, stored in a databank². Both datasets are mostly composed of first-generation middle-class individuals, who are second-generation immigrants, predominantly residing in London. At the time of interview, the majority of participants in both datasets were in their forties, the rest evenly spread between those in their thirties or fifties, and two in their late twenties. When quoted in this text, participants from the ESRC study have '*ESRC*' written in parentheses.

Sample selection is invariably connected to one's research findings, as it involves deciding who 'counts' as data. This translates into the problems of defining the middle-class, and defining who is racialized as 'black'. For ease of access, 'middle-class' was defined as incorporating those in executive, managerial, and professional occupations. However, the issue of racialization was more difficult to negotiate, as racial and ethnic classifications can be seen as mechanisms that socially construct difference, rather than markers of essential differences (Gunaratnam 2003). I overcame this issue by adopting a 'doubled research practice' within which researchers work 'both with and against racial and ethnic categories' (Gunaratnam 2003, 29). This research practice involves using 'official' ethnoracial classifications for an entry point, but exploring the varying heterogeneities within the relevant group.

Within my 'doubled research practice', I asked for self-defining black participants, allowing for multiple ethnicities to be sampled, highlighting the ethnic fluidity under the racial label 'black'. Historically, British national statistics have homogenized African, Caribbean and South-Asian descended people as 'black', but this homogenization did not occur in my research - six of my respondents self-defined as Black-Caribbean, the other four as Black-African. Given that many of my respondents construed the notion of 'blackness' as cutting across ethnic differences, featuring both Black-Caribbean and Black-African people was not envisaged as problematic in my research. Furthermore, despite being defined as separate groups in 'official' classifications, research has highlighted how anti-black racialized barriers result in Black-Caribbeans and -Africans occupying a similar position in social structure with regards to spatial segregation (Wallace 2015), unemployment (Khattab and Johnston 2013), underemployment (Brynin and Longhi 2015), and access to elite higher education (Boliver 2016). The study's participants were recruited through contacting black professional networks, individuals on the annual list of 100 most influential black Britons (known as the 'Powerlist'), black politicians, and personal referrals. Semi-structured interviews took place in 2015, and conversation focused on racial and class identity – transcripts were anonymized for the presentation of the data.

The second dataset was the transcripts from the previous ESRC qualitative project on the black middle-classes, involving 62 Black-Caribbean participants in middle-class occupations. The choice to sample Black-Caribbeans was justified on the basis that the authors were primarily concerned with black middle-class interactions with educational institutions. In this context, at the time of the project Black-Caribbeans were one of the poorest academically achieving middle-class demographics, relatively more likely to face exclusion, and relatively less likely than other groups to achieve the national academic achievement benchmarks (Gillborn et al. 2012). Participants of this study were recruited via contact with black professional groups, as well as snowball sampling; the participants were interviewed between 2009-2011.

An issue I contemplated was whether the use of secondary data analysis would be a worthwhile method. Authors such as Savage (2005) have admonished secondary qualitative data analysis, arguing that it cannot further knowledge of the given area. Furthermore, how can secondary qualitative data analysis capture the interactive nature of interviews, given that the researcher was not present?

Although both of the above criticisms are pertinent, they do not symbolize a dead-end for secondary qualitative data analysts. Data are not independent phenomena ontologically 'out-there', but are produced by particular research questions and projects (Hammersley 2010). Thus, parts of the ESRC project's transcripts also served as 'different' data when connected to my project; although we both had an interest in racial identity, I produced and incorporated the data into a different theory (positioning theory), to achieve different findings (the triangle of identity). Furthermore, although I was not present in the interview, this is not necessarily a drawback. I was still able to access the lucid narratives which arose from the interview interaction, and the important bodily or visceral iterations

that appear in interviews – such as pauses, laughing, changing the tone of voice, and bodily gestures – were still recorded in the transcripts, allowing me to understand how the interaction unfolded.

My secondary qualitative analysis served two purposes. Firstly, it assisted me in the construction of my interview guides by providing me with insights into black middle-class experiences – this was particularly useful given the scarcity of literature on Britain's black middle-classes (Mauthner, Parry, and Backett-Milburn [1998] and Berg [2005] argue that dearth of previous literature is a central reason to use secondary qualitative data). This also allowed me to incorporate some of the ESRC project's questions into my own interview guides – for example, the ESRC project asked their participants whether class or race was a more salient factor in their parental strategies, I adapted this question to ask whether class or race was more salient in their 'social and cultural lives'³. Secondly, the ESRC transcripts were analyzed in conjunction with my own interviews, increasing my research design's internal generalizability, allowing me to discern between interesting idiosyncrasies, and recurring social episodes.

Throughout the research process I maintained a level of epistemic reflexivity given my ethnoracial membership as a British-Asian. Qualitative research labels this problem as 'interviewing across difference', although I do not wish to reify the notion of essential 'racial' difference. Using qualitative research's vocabulary of being an 'insider' or 'outsider', I was positioned in a space between the two. My participants assumed I had knowledge concerning how whiteness functions, for example, Toby (Solicitor) commented to me 'well, you know how white people can get when you point it [racism] out'. However, I was not positioned as a full 'insider'; many respondents were keen to emphasize how the intensities of racism affecting Asian and black people in Britain were different. My ethnoracial membership thus served as a springboard from which to discuss issues of racism in British society, the notion of racial hierarchies, and how whiteness is internalized differently by different ethnoracial groups.

In analyzing the transcripts, I pursued an 'interactive' approach, emphasizing a back-and-forth between theory and data. My analysis started with reading and re-reading the transcripts before coding them – as repeated narratives of the three modes of experience became salient, I started coding according to these three modes. Participants' discussions of resistance to white norms were coded as ethnoracial autonomous, narratives where class was construed as the most salient factor underlying participants' dispositions were coded as class-minded, and narratives emphasizing the switching of identities between the public and private worlds were coded as strategic assimilation. Similarly, the narratives formed in the interviews provided robust support to the use of positioning theory as a theoretical framework; thus, I also coded according to meta-positioning (resisting being positioned) and second-order positioning (being refused a certain position) to see how these overlapped with the three modes of experience. This paper now turns towards outlining these modes of experience.

Introducing the triangle of identity

Strategic assimilation, ethnoracial autonomous, and class-minded are the three modes of experience that together form the triangle of identity. This triangle is not an attempt to rigidly fix identities to the study's participants, and it should be noted that many individuals dynamically exist in spaces within the triangle, rather than perfectly aligning themselves to a particular pole.

Those oscillating towards the class-minded pole tended to be 'class confident'. Such individuals internalized post-racial views, believing that becoming middle-class allows one to transcend the world of racism. A central feature of the class-minded mode of experience is therefore a phenomenological framework whereby the individual's experiences and choices are mediated through the lens of class. Those oscillating towards the class-minded pole are similar to what Moore (2008, 505) called 'middle-class minded' blacks in her research in Philadelphia, used to refer to the black middle-class group who adhere to an 'integrationist ideology', and attempt to symbolically and spatially separate themselves from lower-class blacks. The ESRC project makes reference to the class-minded mode of experience when discussing those who construe their blackness as 'incidental' – those who construe their blackness as merely a skin color (Rollock et al. 2015, 39). Furthermore, the ESRC project also makes reference to this mode of experience when discussing how particular parents are 'academic choosers' rather than 'social choosers'. These academic choosers prefer their children to go to academically high achieving schools and are willing to sacrifice racial diversity for [middle] class homogeneity (Ball et al. 2011). This preference for class homogeneity also symbolizes the desire of class-minded parents to symbolically and spatially separate their children from what they view as 'stereotypical' depictions of blackness as lower-class (Vincent, Rollock et al. 2013). My research further analyses how individuals positioned towards the class-minded pole have a preference for class-based (rather than ethnoracial-based) cultural and social practices.

The phenomenological viewpoint of the class-minded mode of experience is in contrast to the ethnoracial autonomous and the strategic assimilation modes, both of which give primacy to ethnoracial membership in identity construction. However, whereas those oscillating towards the ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience see both ethnoracial and class membership as central to their identities, those oscillating towards the strategic assimilation pole have more of an ambivalence towards their class, recognizing race or ethnicity would often 'trump' their class (especially with regards to being positioned by others). This ambivalence towards class, recognized at the strategic assimilation pole, is also noted by the ESRC project, as the authors define the majority of their respondents as 'middle-class ambivalent' (Rollock et al. 2012).

More generally, other fissures separate the ethnoracial autonomous and strategic assimilation modes of experience. Whereas individuals at both poles are aware of the presence of WhiteWorld, those siding towards strategic assimilation believe that switching their identities and assimilating with white standards in public spheres is a necessary and

viable strategy to get by. On the other hand, those siding towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole reflexively discussed their beliefs that assimilation was undesirable, and they actively resist the norms of WhiteWorld. Such resistance to the norms of WhiteWorld is referenced in the ESRC project when the authors discuss a particular group of parents in their research who embody a 'fighting' spirit when interacting with educational institutions (Vincent et al. 2012a). These parents are not afraid to vociferously confront the school when they think it is letting their child down, being very clear when they believe that racism is acting as a social barrier to their child.

My research furthers the theorizing of the 'collectively black', ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience by developing the notion of black cultural capital. This involves examining the social and cultural capitals which are ascribed higher value towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole, usually involving cultural and social spaces that are free from white influence – including black theatre plays and black art exhibitions. This is contrasted to the practices of those oscillating towards strategic assimilation, who are 'cultural omnivores' (Friedman 2012) – although they display affinity towards socialising with people from the same ethnoracial background as themselves, they also socialize in white middle-class milieus in order to establish a degree of cultural equity with whites.

Having summarized the basic differences underlying the three modes of experience, a discussion of how these modes manifest themselves in the identities of the black middle-classes now takes place. Given that the ESRC project has already paid due attention towards strategic assimilation (Rollock et al. 2011, 2015), my analysis focuses around the class-minded and ethnoracial autonomous modes of experience.

Discussion

My study's participants talked of the need to have 'acceptable' and 'respectable' identities in WhiteWorld. The concepts of acceptability and respectability were understood as respondents' desires to be 'taken seriously in the mainstream' (Thomas, Charity CEO). The concepts of respectability and acceptability thus function as 'strategies of equalization' (Lamont and Fleming 2005, 36) – that is, ways to establish equal standing with those who are perceived to be superior. However, depending on which pole of the triangle the participants oscillated towards, their understandings of acceptability and respectability, and their social and cultural action, greatly differed.

Un-doing racial salience

The concepts of acceptability and respectability were often construed as being related to the issue of racial salience. Racial salience is understood as being visibly and culturally different to the norms of WhiteWorld (Rollock et al. 2011). Such salience, therefore, is connected to appearance and performance in public spaces.

In the class-minded mode of experience, the issue of racial salience is addressed by a process of de-racialization. This de-racialization involves a shift whereby 'class' comes to the fore as a conceptual scheme for understanding one's experiences. This shift was

patently visible in stories recollected by respondents where they would be the only black person at a social event. Whereas individuals siding towards the ethnoracial autonomous or strategic assimilation poles would often speak of discomfort in such instances, those siding towards the class-minded pole would either not notice they were the only black person present, or would feel out of place because of their working-class upbringing rather than their race. This is demonstrated in the following quotation:

I've never had sort of barriers to entry because of race, but definitely have with class. In some places I will feel out of place, not because of my colour, but definitely because of where I come from, in terms of having no shared background with certain people, but it's never to do with my race it's always to do with class and my ability to fit in. (Harrison, Journalist).

Harrison referred to the particular social episodes of attending networking events to illuminate his point. When he was at university, he perceived networking to be a middle-class activity with which, due to his working-class upbringing, he lacked the social knowledge of, and consequently believed he was made to feel unwelcome due to his working-class (rather than racialized) background.

This class-minded phenomenological shift, where class is given more prominence than race in understanding one's experiences, provides insights into contemporary post-racialism. The class-minded mode of experience creates a phenomenological context in which what others may interpret as racist or racialized social practices are transcended. This is seen in Thomas' comment that being middle-class provides a layer of 'protective insulation' against racism, and specifically now with his daughter:

If you're a middle-class black girl, living in a middle-class suburb, you're not really gonna get it [racism] – you get insulated, so therefore the world is your oyster. You don't see anything holding you back.

Thomas' narrative of 'the world is your oyster' echoes the recent emergence of post-racial ideology which, in its most controversial form, claims that society now 'transcend[s] the disabling racial divisions of the past' (Bobo 2011, 14). Furthermore, as Rollock et al. (2015, 23) comment, for those positioned towards incidental blackness (and therefore the class-minded mode of experience), because they believe 'race' has lost its conceptual significance, to 'even see or acknowledge race is problematic'. In this respect, the class-minded mode of experience encourages a conflation which presently allows racism to persist – the conflation between anti-racialism and anti-racism (Kapoor 2011). This endorsement of anti-racialism – denying the significance of race – separates the class-minded from the 'black bourgeoisie' previously described by Frazier (1957). Frazier (1957, 131), referring to the black bourgeoisie in Northern America, argued that they had an inferiority complex which led them to strive 'to make itself over in the image of a white man'. This inferiority complex was the result of still being the subject of racism despite

being educationally and occupationally superior to most other Americans. In my research, the individuals siding towards the class-minded pole are different to this 'black bourgeoisie' in many ways, most particularly in that they do not believe they are any longer the victims of racial inequality.

The anti-racialism endorsed by individuals oscillating towards the class-minded pole has effect and affect at the level of internal consciousness, as these individuals come to see themselves as 'middle-class' rather than 'black'. This becomes particularly apparent in the performative identities of the class-minded, where they adhere to the norms of WhiteWorld without interpreting their assimilation as problematic. These performative identities are characterized by 'not just being white, but being inconspicuous in a white environment' (Sarah, Journalist).

Sarah's comment – made in reference to being one of a few racialized individuals in a workplace – represents how many of those oscillating towards the class-minded pole view their racial salience as an elephant in the room, and address this salience through 'whitening' practices in order to become 'inconspicuous'. A pertinent example of this is women's beauty practices, specifically the wearing of certain hairstyles and make-up. Traditional middle-class conceptions of beauty frame whiteness as iconic while equating blackness with ugliness, perpetuated through the view that 'lighter skin' and 'straighter hair' are superior but are features which natural blackness struggles to attain (Tate 2013, 223). Racialized beauty standards particularly affect black middle-class women, as 'natural' black characteristics – which are positioned as ugly – act as barriers to respectable identities that are expected among the middle- and upper-classes. This further supports Rollock et al.'s (2015, 128) suggestion that the black middle-class have to protect themselves (and, if applicable, their children) from 'ingesting a notion of beauty perpetuated by White society, the criteria of which tend to be internalized by the Black community even though they involve disregarding and devaluing Blackness'.

Racial salience as a resistance to WhiteWorld

The finding that many within the black community internalize white beauty standards (Rollock et al. 2015) provides insights into the complexity and dynamism of identities within the black middle-class. For example, many respondents recorded a changing attitude towards racialized beauty standards – a changing of position – as discussed in the following excerpts:

I had a thing of wearing weaves [...] I realized part of it was that I was a bit embarrassed about how my hair looked, and so I think there was definitely a thing about challenging it. And also this worry I had, I was applying for jobs at the time and reading about, you know, where if you're in a corporate or any working environment certain hairstyles are looked upon unfavorably or deemed to be inappropriate – so there was definitely a thing of acceptance [...] and having natural hair is about challenging white supremacist ideas (Sarah).

I was trying to be somebody I wasn't. I wanted to be accepted for having long hair [...] You know, heavy makeup, I just wasn't myself and then one day I thought, 'You know something? I have just got to take this weave off' and when I took the weave off, it was as if I was liberated (Anne, Teacher, *ESRC*).

Both Sarah and Anne display the dynamic nature of positioning theory and black middle-class identity construction. This dynamism involves moving away from the class-minded pole, where assimilating with white standards is the norm, towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole, where open resistance to white standards is commonplace. In their cases, this resistance is realized through the counter-discourse of 'browning' (Tate 2013, 224). 'As a practice rather than a phenotype, browning gives us an aesthetic parsing of Black beauty as part of a "distinctive counter culture"' (Tate 2013, 224). Browning, therefore, is an example of 'metapositioning' – resistance to being positioned by others.

Metapositioning is idealized in the ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience. Sarah forms a narrative of 'challenging White supremacist ideas', and Anne of being 'liberated'. This is indicative of how those oscillating towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole are aware of the pressures to assimilate with WhiteWorld, yet unapologetically resist against such pressures. Instead of attempting to subvert their racial salience, the individuals siding towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole celebrate it. Femi (Further education lecturer, *ESRC*) lucidly formed this 'resistance-to-assimilation' narrative, emphasizing the political nature of appearance. She states how her appearance, including the wearing of dreadlocks:

Says my politics before I even walk in the room [...] if I have my hair in locks people know that I think natural is best and that I disagree with trying to assimilate in white society.

Femi uses her appearance, therefore, for a political stake invested in a particular racial identity. She develops this narrative by referring to the specific social episode(s) of when she was learning to become a teacher, and encountered many people who had degrading attitudes towards black people:

Particularly when I was studying to be a teacher, some of the racist attitudes and 'poor darling' attitudes when they would all come in with their suits I would deliberately wear African print cloth because it is like you are not going to patronize these people. I got so sick of hearing how the people I work with were sort of simple, it was like 'hello' they have survived twenty years without being able to read and write in this country you try that, that is not a stupid person.

The meta-positioning idealized in the ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience, visible in the narratives and social episodes of Femi, Sarah and Anne⁴, means that they disparage those who both fully assimilate with WhiteWorld (seen at the class-minded pole), and those

who switch in-and-out of it (seen at the strategic assimilation pole). This negative view towards even strategic assimilation is well explained by Toby, when I probed him on whether black people are expected to publically behave and appear in particular ways. Although he said he can understand why particular individuals do switch identities, he commented that:

As soon as you start presenting yourself as others kinda want to see you, then in my opinion – and it's just my opinion – then you're not really yourself. And I won't, couldn't be that kinda person and be proud of that.

From the perspective of the ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience, therefore, what is at stake is the notion of 'black authenticity'. This is echoed in Rachel's (Commercial Lawyer, *ESRC*) thought that: 'there [are] black people in this country who are only black on the outside'. It is this issue of authenticity that my discussion now turns to, examining issues of black identity and authenticity in cultural and social practices.

Hierarchies of capital: towards 'black' cultural capital

Cultural and social practices may be understood through the lens of capital – referring to cultural tastes and social networks and ties (Bourdieu 1986). One's position influences one's cultural and social practices. Consequently, the de-racialization characteristic of class-minded positioning translates into a preference for socialising with those from a similar class, with an ambivalence towards ethnoracial cultural and social practices. William (Investment consultant) illustrates this point when I asked him whether he tends to socialize with people like himself, followed by a prompt on how he defines people 'like himself'. William's comment is insightful as he construes 'middle-class' and 'black' as disparate positions, showing his preference for the former in understanding and constructing his identity:

I think it's natural to socialize with people like yourself [...] people who like what I like, do what I wanna do, enjoy the activities I enjoy and all that [...] [such as going to music] concerts, galleries, upmarket restaurants. And, I dunno, it could be because I tend to socialize with my peers, who are white, but I think lots of black people are often put off going to these places because it's seen as [pause] it's assumed to be very middle-class.

However, from the position of the ethnoracial autonomous pole, individuals at the class-minded pole are seen to be valuing the wrong forms of capital – they should be investing in 'black cultural capital'. Black cultural capital refers to the 'knowledge, experiences, and practices that produce cultural power relevant to black people, their experiences, and to their social location' (Grams 2010, 73). This form of capital thus refers to those symbolic resources that are ascribed high value by particular black communities (Wallace 2015). Rather than homogenizing black cultural capital, Wallace (2015) has argued how black

cultural capital takes on different meanings and values in different black communities, depending on locale, age, gender, ethnicity and class. The black cultural capital at the ethnoracial autonomous pole involves 'traditional' middle-class cultural and social activities – such as dining out, visiting art exhibitions and theatre productions – mediated through a way that promotes ethnoracial affinity. Elsa's (Senior HR Manager, *ESRC*) criticism of her brother illustrates this point:

I don't want you to go to the Ritz for tea you know, I mean what's that about you know? Just cause you like scones you can have scones in, you know?! 'We are going to the Ritz', that to me is just pretentious nonsense. If [brother] wants to go for tea, go to some black restaurant and eat and support your own people!

Elsa's comment demonstrates a fissure that polarizes the class-minded and ethnoracial autonomous modes of experience. Although individuals towards both poles enjoy middle-class activities, individuals positioned towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole prioritize ethnoracial socializing, whereas those positioned towards the class-minded pole prefer moving within white social and cultural spheres. This point is important for developing the sociology of culture, as even within the academy 'black culture' has regularly been used only to refer to a myopic set of cultural forms: jazz, rap, reggae or hip-hop music (see Hebdige 1987; Gilroy 1993; Rose 1994). Such reductive accounts of black culture overlook how different black individuals and groups ascribe different values to particular forms of capital (Wallace 2015).

The appreciation of how the black middle-classes prioritize particular forms of black cultural capital has been the subject of several interesting studies in the United States, the central theory of which can be applied in the British context. In Chicago, Grams (2010, 72-73) found networks of black art that created a space which allowed for [middle-class] black people to 'judge artworks and to legitimate these judgements', and more broadly created a 'cultural context through which the work of black artists could [...] be judged fairly and critically by other black people'. Similarly, in New York and Georgia, Banks (2010, 2012) showed how black middle-class individuals would consume black art to create positive depictions of black identity by creating an association between high culture and blackness. These research findings are echoed in the British context, where those positioned towards the ethnoracial autonomous pole see black art as a prime medium for expressing alternate black identities than the stereotypical depictions seen in popular media.

Nevertheless, in Britain, the reach of WhiteWorld into black cultural and social spaces complicates the hierarchy of cultural and social capitals constructed at the ethnoracial autonomous pole. Many participants discussed social episodes where they have gone to a specific 'black' art exhibition, or concert, only for there to be more white than black people present. Within these social episodes, the cultural competency and social knowledge of whites would be critiqued – thus de-legitimizing the presence of the white consumers in these spaces. Felicia (Solicitor, *ESRC*) recalls such a social episode:

I remember recently a friend and I went to see a Chris Ofili exhibition and I recall that her and I, we really enjoyed it [...] And we were sitting down having a conversation about it, laughing, because the white people were walking around looking very serious whatever, and we were laughing saying that we thought they didn't understand it. And a black woman was there on her own and she overheard the conversation and she joined in, because she said she thought the same as well and we were just discussing the various things, lots of things we were picking out, whereas we thought they were actually passing through quite quickly.

As can be seen in Felicia's story, by critiquing the white consumers, their (whites') competence in artistic appreciation is delegitimized – for instance there were things that 'they didn't understand', and things they overlooked while 'passing through quite quickly'. Similarly, Curtis (Accountant) joked to me about white people consuming black art that they shared no connection with, apart from the possibility that either themselves or their ancestors created or endorsed the inequality which is often artistically explored. Both Curtis and Felicia thus made a patent link between art, culture and identity, showing how black art symbolizes a resource 'used to celebrate an authentic "Black identity"' (Wallace 2015, 41). Those oscillating towards the class-minded pole are criticized for not investing in such black cultural capital because, as a consequence, they are not investing in authentic black identities. Recognition of such experiences is crucial for decentering traditional understandings of capital. Whereas research has argued that the cultural and social capitals that black individuals have is inherently devalued in virtue of their ethnoracial membership (for example, Yosso 2005; Rollock 2012, 2014), such instances described by Felicia and Curtis show the existence of alternate spaces in which black individuals' cultural capital is actually deemed superior to whites'.

Towards a clearer mosaic

This paper's primary aim was to continue the recent project of providing a clearer picture of the black middle-class in a way that puts them on the map of sociological research. Research can be seen as coming together to form a 'mosaic' whereby 'each piece added [...] adds a little to our understanding of the total picture' (Becker 2002, 80-81). This paper attempted to present a clearer mosaic by drawing upon positioning theory to understand black middle-class identity construction in a tripartite manner. My analysis hypothesized a triangle of identity, involving the strategic assimilation, class-minded and ethnoracial autonomous modes of experience. This triangle of identity helped build upon current understandings of black middle-class identities by further elaborating upon the social, cultural and phenomenological distinctions that emerge across the spectrum ranging from the 'incidentally' to 'collectively' black.

It would be interesting to see how this tripartite analysis of identity has efficacy in different national contexts. For example, the black middle-class in the United States is considerably larger than in Britain (Rollock et al. 2015). This could mean that the

ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience is more popular in the United States, as there is potentially a greater presence of social and cultural spaces free from white influence. Similarly, South Africa's collective black middle-class emerged at a similar time to Britain's (Burger et al. 2015). However, South-Africa is a black-majority country in comparison to white-majority Britain, so it could be that the class-minded mode of experience is more dominant in South Africa where there are greater attempts to symbolically separate the black middle- and lower-classes.

Nevertheless, despite the potential for future comparative research, it is worth noting that black middle-class studies in Britain are still in an embryonic stage. Phillips & Sarre (1995, 91) commented that 'if social science has any claims to be an emancipatory activity, it should challenge middle-class Whiteness as a principle just as it refutes it as empirically outdated'. Further studies of Britain's black middle-classes offer the opportunity to do this, as such studies will find that there are not only alternative discourses and performances of blackness, but also of *black middle-classness*.

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Notes

¹ This ESRC project resulted in the publication of journal articles (Ball et al. 2013; Gillborn 2015; Gillborn et al. 2012; Rollock et al. 2011, 2012; Vincent et al. 2012a, 2012b; Vincent, Ball et al. 2013; Vincent, Rollock et al 2013) a report (Vincent et al. 2011) and a book (Rollock et al. 2015). I use the term 'the ESRC project' to refer to these texts as a whole.

² Retrievable from

<http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=6832&type=Data%20catalogue>

³ Both in my research, and in the ESRC project, this dichotomy between race and class was used as an entry point for discussion rather than a claim that class and race are disparate modes of being. In both projects there was a focus on the "mutual constitution" of race and class' (Vincent et al. 2012b, 261), examining how 'race and class differently intersect for the respondents in different situations' (Vincent et al. 2012b, 263).

⁴ It could be that the ethnoracial autonomous mode of experience is more common among women, due to the increased expectations for them to assimilate with racialized beauty standards, which offers an obvious target for resistance. On the other hand, the class-minded experience may be affected by possessing high amounts of economic capital. Future research could explore these associations.

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