**Title: Home-made to Couture: An Autoethnographic Insight into Class Travel**

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**Purpose**

Acker (2012, p.221) laments “almost no one talks about class” in organisation studies. Hanappi-Egger and Ortlieb (2015, p.464) explain this through a diversity lens as a research divide. They note how much diversity research favours pre-set social identity categories deemed relevant to particular organisation contexts (eg gender, age and/or ethnicity), treating social groupings as internally homogeneous. Conversely, scholars interested in class differences do place emphasis on social inequality but frequently ignore social identity. To bridge this research divide the purpose of this developmental paper is deliberately broad, the intent being to frame a future research project. Three interconnected themes will be explored:

* Firstly, how class intersects with other categories of difference to produce lines of (dis)advantage, movements and mobility’s drawing on Hughes (2004) notion of class travel;
* Secondly, the implications of neo-liberal discourses for understanding lived, class-based experiences;
* Finally, the implications of the middle-class lens as part of a normative class culture through which difference (gender and age, career choices) is given meaning.

**Method**

To do so I use an autoethnographic lens as a way to incorporate observations of the ‘everyday’ into multi-level analyses (Syed and Ozbiligin, 2009). Autoethnography is one of the few research methods that give us a precious scholarly space in which to connect with such introspective conversations, so that we might raise our self-consciousness and engage in a reflexive process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This method enables the researcher to meld personal experience with a critique or comments on social structures and/or cultural practices and the knowledge building process (Holman Jones et al., 2013).

In the next section I briefly outline some of the background story that has reignited my interest in class, mobility and inclusion, the feminisation of poverty. This is not a comfortable space yet it is a space I once understood well. Today I have all the hallmarks of a privileged, white woman. The following conversation attests to the concrete conditions that underpin a widening class divide in New Zealand.

**The ‘back’ story: A conversation with Sue[[1]](#footnote-1) about the ‘everyday’**

*I stand and look at the newly rented ‘old’ caravan perched on a hill at a close relatives rented property. A neat little garden, a newly constructed wooden porch [made by a relative], a ‘million dollar’ view, no toilet but, otherwise, Sue exclaims, ‘a place I can afford’. We chatter as I mask my unease. Proud, part of a close family, she has, by my standards, led a frugal existence. Still, Sue has found it difficult to ‘put a little money aside’. One unexpected event and her circumstances have changed. So here she is, her ‘so-called’ choice, constrained by exorbitant market rents, is to live for now, in a rented caravan. As I leave, I wonder how Sue would react to being labelled the ‘new’ invisible working poor: single, female, ‘older’ and employed. Her ‘choice’ of employment, a female dominated, low wage, private sector industry, again a situation of ‘little choice’. Here, Sue holds the status of ‘Manager’, the role has numerous responsibilities, the tasks demanding but with insecure tenure. She is a hard worker. Her unpaid roles include mother, grand-mother and eldercare. Sue’s struggles replicate those of many women and groups of men working for a so-called living, but earning only what the market is prepared to pay or value as worthy[[2]](#footnote-2).*

**Setting the scene**

This recent incident described above shook me. It was personal, a stark reminder of the everyday ‘lived reality’ of social inequality, the precariousness of privilege and how easy it has become to rationalise entitlement. I had ‘lost touch’ with what it actually meant to live week-to-week on a low income and, the cumulative effect as you age. Adhering to a culturally pervasive reticence to name inequality in class terms I implicitly find comfort in notions of “ordinariness” and “people like us” (Anthias, 2012, p. 123). Indeed through NZ’s history, the dominant political discourse has framed equality in terms of a “fair go”, which hints at being given an opportunity and then left to “get on with it” (Rashbrooke, 2013, p. 33). Aspiration, self-advancement it seems, offer little respect to those involved in less skilled work (Slutskaya et al, 2016, p.166) with wage rates justified by social and institutional attitudes and norms (Pringle et al., 2017; Ravenswood and Harris, 2016). Women are told they are simply in the ‘wrong’ jobs (Ministry for Women, 2017). Sue’s situation is symptomatic of how poorly New Zealand is doing in addressing the structural basis of pay equity (Davies et al., 2017). A recent study found 80% of the gender pay gap[[3]](#footnote-3) is driven by hard to measure factors such as unconscious and conscious bias (Ministry for Women, 2017). The National Council of Women, a long-standing voice for women, has referred to gender equality in policy terms as a “wicked” systemic problem (NCWNZ, 2015, p.3).

Here the words Fraser (1995 cited in Hanappi-Egger and Ortlieb, 2015, p.456) resonate. She talks of the “redistribution – recognition dilemma. People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition [voice and visibility] and redistribution [eg income]”. Recognition and redistribution challenges the capitalist logic where pay for ‘ordinary’ staff such as Sue, is kept low, so that a greater percentage of the business income can go to senior management and shareholders. The words of one CEO come to mind: ‘keep pay as low as you can get away with’. The scenario of recognition and redistribution appeals to my sense of “ordinariness”. It is reminiscent of a local landscape that struggles to exist. It has been supplanted by our early and wholesale adoption of neoliberalism including neoliberalism’s patriarchal foundations (Davis et al., 2017; Kelsey, 2015; Rashbrooke, 2013). This is not to say New Zealanders had an untroubled existence before the 1980s’ reforms (Rashbrooke, 2013). Rashbrooke (2013) points out, there was an alternative path towards a modern economy where the benefits of growth are shared evenly, but, this proposition was ignored.

Country interpretations of neoliberalism differ, dependent on their material and institutional starting points (Kelsey, 2015). New Zealand, from the early 1980’s, rapidly transformed to be one of the most neoliberal countries in the OECD. For example, income imbalance widened faster in the 1980’s and 1990’s than in any other developed nation (Kelsey, 2015). Economist, Jane Kelsey terms what has emerged as the FIRE economy (finance, insurance and real estate). She argues the reforms have been a widespread failure evidenced by glaring inequalities. In a locale that took pride in an egalitarian ideal, the stark rich-poor divide illustrated in the following commentary outlines the “lines of a new class system”, the “affordable housing crisis” experienced by Sue, is but one “lived reality”.

Based on the very latest net worth figures from the Government it looks as if middle New Zealand is a fairly equitable place to be - 40 per cent of the population own 37.2 per cent of the wealth. The real class divide is happening at the top and the bottom. "There's an awful lot of people who have no meaningful wealth at all." Rashbrooke says the poorest 50 per cent own a measly 3.8 per cent of wealth. With those at the very bottom entrenched in debt - negative wealth. On the flip side you have the top 10 per cent who own 59 per cent of wealth. "Upper professional classes, senior lawyers, doctors, accountants," explains Rashbrooke. Perched above them are the one percenters who hold 18 per cent of the country's net worth.

(Herald on Sunday, 2016)

Sue is towards the bottom in terms of economic inequality: she has “no meaningful wealth at all”. She is one of the many peripheral employees who have few options or attractive conditions of employment. Her life had not always been like this. The snapshot of Sue could just as easily have been me! ‘Class travel’ unfolds over a life lived and it is this that I will reflect on using a multi-level lens (Syed and Ozbilgin, 2009). As Rita Mae Brown (cited in bell hooks, 2009) wrote in the early 1970’s:

Class is much more than Marx’s definition. Class involves your behaviour, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of the future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel and act.

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1. A pseudonym [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acker uses the concept of provisioning (Nelson, 1993 cited in Acker 2006) as a way to connect class analyses into unpaid work. Provisioning includes the ability to provide for oneself and one’s dependents (job designation, societal class position, distribution of wages, resources and benefits) and the varied activities that link paid work to the home and the rest of life (arranging care for dependants, childcare, cleaning and cooking).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2016, the gender pay gap was 12 percent. The gender pay gap has reduced since 1998 (16.3 percent), but has stalled in the last decade. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)