

(Not) Bringing Your Whole Self to Work: The Gendered Experience of Upward Mobility in the UK Civil Service

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Abstract

Women from working-class backgrounds face a multiplicative earnings penalty in Britain's elite occupations. In this paper I explore one driver of this 'double disadvantage'; a strong gender divide in who discusses and displays a working-class identity in the workplace. Drawing on data from the 2019 UK Civil Service People Survey (n = 300,788) and 104 interviews with civil servants, I find that men from working-class backgrounds are more likely (than women) to identify as coming from a working-class background, to talk openly about their background, and feel comfortable displaying embodied markers of their origin. For some men such 'origin talk' can even confer advantage, allowing them to resist dominant behavioural codes or 'brand' themselves as senior leaders with a unique perspective. In contrast, women from working-class backgrounds overwhelmingly choose to conceal their backgrounds at work, presuming that such disclosures will only leave them vulnerable to negative judgment. Such suppression often leaves a significant emotional imprint, with many women reporting a lingering sense of shame and inferiority. It can also have implications for their careers; feeling unable to inhabit one's 'authentic self' at work often elicits a sense of withdrawal and self-elimination from the stakes of career progression.

Keywords: class ceiling, gender, working-class, upward mobility, embodied cultural capital

Introduction

Social scientists have long devoted attention to identifying the pay gaps, or 'glass ceiling', that women face in achieving the same rewards as men in the labour market – particularly in elite occupations (Gormon and Kmec, 2009; Yavorsky et al, 2019). A more recent stream of work has shown that, in the UK at least, there are strong intersections between this glass ceiling and what has been termed the 'class ceiling' – the finding that those from working-class backgrounds face a powerful class pay gap in elite occupations relative to more privileged colleagues (Author). More specifically, this work finds that women from working-class backgrounds face a 'double disadvantage' in earnings. This pay penalty is not just additive but multiplicative; it is significantly higher than simply adding the gender and class pay gap together.

In this paper, I explore one mechanism that may explain this double-disadvantage; the degree to which those working in elite occupations feel they can be their 'authentic selves' in the workplace. In doing so I draw on literature rarely examined in work on class or gender pay gaps – that which probes the gendered experience of upward social mobility (Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 1999; Reay et al, 2010). While this work has tended to foreground the emotional, embodied and experiential dimensions of mobility, and has typically focused on understanding the 'hidden injuries' of women's upward movement, I argue here that it can also help us to understand important inequalities of outcome – specifically, in this paper, within the UK Civil Service.

Drawing on data from the 2019 Civil Service People Survey (CSPS), I begin with the first ever analysis of the class and gender composition of the Civil Service. Here results indicate that although the class origins of male and female civil servants are largely similar, there is tentative evidence that women from working-class backgrounds are more under-represented in senior grades. Second, drawing on 104 interviews with top-grade civil servants, I find that there is a strong gender divide in terms of who feels able to discuss their background at work. Men are both more likely to identify as having a ‘low socio-economic background’ in the CSPS and, in interviews, more inclined to talk openly about, and display embodied markers of, a working-class background. Moreover, for many (although not all) white men, such displays are successfully deployed as a form of embodied cultural capital, allowing some to resist dominant behavioural codes and others to ‘brand’ themselves as senior leaders with a unique style and perspective. In contrast, women from working-class backgrounds overwhelmingly choose to conceal their backgrounds. These women feel instinctively that such a disclosure will only unlock a latent class snobbery among colleagues that will ultimately negatively impact their careers. However, suppressing this aspect of their identities often leaves a significant emotional imprint of inferiority and shame. Finally, I also demonstrate that this can also have significant implications for these women’s career development. For many, feeling unable to bring one’s ‘authentic self’ to work elicits a sense of alienation and withdrawal from the Civil Service, and a subsequent ‘self-elimination’ (Bourdieu, 1990) from the stakes of career progression.

Connecting the glass *and* the class ceiling

Scholars have long attended to the existence, scale, and causes or correlates of racial and gender pay gaps. Here the metaphor of glass, and particularly the glass *ceiling*, has been usefully deployed to highlight the invisible yet durable barriers that women and racialized groups face in achieving the same rewards as white men in the same positions – particularly in elite occupations (Woodson, 2015; Yavorsky et al, 2019; Gormon and Kmec, 2009). Scholars of class and mobility, in contrast, have traditionally been less concerned with how class origin shapes progression *within* the workplace. Instead researchers have tended to focus more on documenting generalised rates of intergenerational mobility between a person’s class of origin and their class of destination within a set of “big” occupational classes (Goldthorpe, 1980)

One of the problems of this dominant approach is that it proceeds with the presumption, at least implicitly, that once a class “destination” has been achieved - in the form of entry to a particular occupation - class origin ceases to matter. Yet recently a number of studies have demonstrated that even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering a range of elite occupations they go on to receive significantly lower incomes than their privileged colleagues (Hällsten, 2013).

This ‘class pay gap’ of course cannot be considered in isolation. After all, class, gender, race (and many other aspects of social division) do not operate as mutually exclusive axes of inequality. Indeed, adding an intersectional lens is key to understanding the UK class pay gap (Author). Women and certain racial-ethnic groups from working-class backgrounds face a distinct *double disadvantage* in terms of earnings (in elite occupations). Working-class women, for example, earn on average £7,500 a year less than women from professional/managerial backgrounds, who in turn earn £11,500 less than men from professional/managerial backgrounds. And strikingly this ‘double disadvantage’ pay gap is £2000 a year higher than simply adding the gender and class pay gap together. This suggests

that the ‘penalties’ associated with being from a working-class background *and* being a woman in Britain’s elite occupations is not just additive but multiplicative. In other words, these demographic characteristics *interact* to produce specific disadvantages, barriers or forms of discrimination.

The question this raises, and which I explore directly in this paper, is *why* – what distinguishes the lived experience of upwardly mobile women in the elite workplace and how might this help understand why these individuals face such profound intersectional inequalities?

Stigma and The Gendered Experience of Upward Mobility

There has long been a lively debate in sociology about the nature of the mobility experience – and particularly its impact on individual identity and wellbeing. This literature can largely be grouped into two competing strands. The first, which traversed both US and UK academia in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, argued that upward mobility had a largely ‘dissociative’ effect on the individual (Hopper, 1981; Sorokin, 1956). The theoretical reasoning that lay behind this claim was that in societies with relatively durable class cultures, such as Britain, moving through the class structure was likely to disrupt attachment to a particular class identity and generate a range of ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennett and Cobb, 1977; Lawler, 1999). For example, the upwardly mobile may experience a status anxiety about their acculturation into their class destination and simultaneously a sense of guilt or betrayal about abandoning their class origin.

Yet this dissociative thesis has also been extensively critiqued. In particular a host of quantitative scholars, exploring the relationship between upward mobility and life satisfaction and mental health, find no relationship between mobility and disassociation (Präg and Richards, 2019). These studies conclude instead that the upwardly mobile, on average, successfully ‘acculturate’ into their class of destination (Chan, 2018)

While this debate is marked by a strong methodological divide - quantitative work tends to support the acculturation thesis while qualitative work overwhelmingly upholds the dissociative thesis - a small number of qualitative studies also finds that the upwardly mobile largely acculturate (Author; Miles et al, 2014)). Yet tellingly the focus in these studies is *men*. In Goldthorpe’s classic work (1980) for example - where he concludes that the upwardly mobile are rarely plagued by any cultural disequilibrium – his qualitative sample are entirely male.

Homing in on gender more specifically and comparatively, Loveday (2014, 2016) looks at the experiences of upwardly mobile students and staff working in UK higher education (HE). While the men in her study are acutely aware of how contemporary markers of working-class identity are pathologized in HE settings, they often successfully resist assimilation to middle-class behavioural norms. In particular, they draw on a working-class identity rooted in stories and symbols from a fairly distant past, from a historical moment when a ‘heroic’, ‘noble’ and ‘authentic’ male working-classness was accorded greater recognition and worth. In contrast, she finds that such a ‘retroactive strategy’ is largely not available to women, who are not able to draw upon such romanticised discourses of working-class identity. Instead, the women in her study tended to ‘disidentify’ with their class background as a strategy to avoid the shame and judgment they presume will be generated if they are ‘revealed’ as working-class.

But why is a working-class background so much more likely to engender shame among women? Skeggs (1997; 2005) locates this historically, arguing that the line between the 'rough' and 'respectable' working-class has long been drawn on, or presented through, the female rather than the male body, and its behaviour. Indeed, Skeggs notes that the very category 'working-class' came into being in the 19th century as the middle class aimed to consolidate their identity and power by drawing moral boundaries between themselves and definable 'others'.

Working-class women have thus long been configured as what Skeggs (2005) calls 'the constitutive limit to propriety'; their sexuality, femininity, behaviour and bodies subject to increased scrutiny and a 'moralising, disgust-producing register'. In recent decades such pathologizing depictions have only intensified, particularly as reality television and social media have ushered in a new era of celebrity culture. As a range of scholars have argued, such mediums inscribe a particular 'visualisation' of working-class women as the exemplar of physical, moral and sexual 'excess' and therefore deserving subjects of societal contempt (Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2020; Skeggs and Wood, 2011).

What is particularly important about such representations is that, as a number of feminist scholars have documented, they tend to leave powerful traces on how working-class women, particularly those who experience upward mobility, understand themselves and others (Reed-Danahay, 2004; Reay et al, 2010). Such women face a 'double jeopardy'; they must both guard against suspicions of being disrespectable while at the same time risk being mocked for *too clearly aspiring to be respectable* (Skeggs, 1997). As Lawler (1999: 12) notes 'women's desires for, and envy of, respectability and material wealth' have long been portrayed as markers of 'pretense and triviality'. She notes, for example, that no female equivalent exists of the heroic tale of 'the working-class boy made good'. Instead, among her upwardly mobile respondents, she finds a widespread pain attached to mobility that stems from an anxiety that accent, pronunciation, taste and other embodied actions will forever mark them as 'other' in middle class spaces.

Central to much of this work on the distinctiveness of women's upward mobility is a Bourdieusian theoretical lens. In many ways this is surprising, as Bourdieu was repeatedly critiqued for failing to fully develop the role of gender in his work. However, many of the thinkers above appropriate his concepts to provide an explicitly feminist analysis. Reading across these works, one common theme that emerges is the centrality of gender in understanding how Bourdieusian capitals are converted in social life, particularly forms of embodied cultural capital. Fundamental to the concept of embodied cultural capital is the idea that there are class-specific and durable modes of *comportment* that are imprinted during early socialisation (Bourdieu, 1986). This process of transmission leaves physical traces *in* and *on* the body – in accent, inflection, gesture and posture, as well as styles of dress, etiquette, manners and aesthetic orientation. Moreover, Bourdieu argued that embodied cultural capital carried the greatest 'weight' in terms of class reproduction, because, it is the 'best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital', inculcated and transmitted by upper-middle class parents and thereafter 'misrecognised as [a] legitimate competence' in social life (Ibid: 17-18). In this way, it operates as a 'symbolic capital' that can be 'cashed in' in multiple settings, including as 'field-specific capital' in the labour market. However, as Skeggs (2005) suggests, embodied cultural capital is not always the preserve of the middle classes and is also strongly gendered. Specifically, markers of *male working-class* identity can sometimes also have exchange-value (which does not extend to women) that allows such

men the ontological luxury of being able to achieve upward mobility without shedding the cultural markers of class origin.

Following this, the question I take up in this article is how gendered notions of embodied cultural capital play a specific role in the elite *workplace*; how they are (or are not) converted into what Bourdieu calls ‘field-specific capital’ and how, in turn, this may have important implications for the career trajectories of women (versus men) from working-class backgrounds in the UK Civil Service.

The Case of the UK Civil Service

While a range of studies underline the specific challenges faced by upwardly mobile women, research that considers the implications of this experiential specificity for inequalities in the workplace are much more limited. Work in this area has tended to focus on women from *privileged* class backgrounds. For example, the classic work of Kanter (1977), and more recently Snee and Goswami (2020), finds that the women who succeed in professional jobs, even when beset with disadvantages relative to male colleagues, tend to be from higher-class backgrounds.

In this paper I shift this focus to examine the experiences and outcomes of women in high-status jobs who are from *working-class backgrounds*. My case study is the UK Civil Service – which comprises government departments, agencies, and non-departmental government bodies, and employs approximately 447,000 people.

The Civil Service represents a particularly rich site from which to understand the gendered experience of upward mobility. Historically, the top of the Civil Service was dominated by white men (Puwar, 2004; Watson, 1994). In recent decades, however, diversity and inclusion initiatives within the Civil Service have focused on making the top grades of the organisation more representative (Walker and Boyne, 2006). In terms of gender and ethnicity, these initiatives have been somewhat successful. The percentage of Senior Civil Servants who are women, for example, has grown steadily from 17% in 1996 to 46% in 2020, and the representation of Black and minority ethnic SCS has grown from 4% to 9% from 2006 to 2020 (Civil Service Statistics, 2020). Yet despite this qualitative research has continued to emphasise concerns about the culture of the UK civil service (Wyatt and Sylvester, 2015) and particularly its normalisation of what Puwar (2001) calls the ‘somatic norm’ of the ‘white, male, upper/middle class body’ (2001: 652). Puwar argues that this somatic norm is so naturalised in the bodies of middle-aged, middle-class, white men, and so closely intertwined with the idealised conception of what it is to be a neutral, rational, objective civil servant, that it acts to deny any conception of this subject as classed, gendered and – particularly – raced.

On class background, however, the contemporary representativeness of the UK Civil Service has, until now, remained unknown. While reaching top grades was historically strongly tied to socio-economic background (Kelsall, 1974; Guttsman, 1974; Boyd, 1973; Heath, 1980), a series of reforms introduced after World War 2 explicitly aimed to open up the route to the top. These reforms were partially successful; in 1929 only 7% of senior civil servants came from working-class backgrounds, this rose to 19% by 1967 (Halsey and Crewe, 1967). Yet we know little about whether this trend has continued to the present day. While the Civil Service has retained a strong rhetorical commitment to increasing social mobility (Hancock, 2016), no data has been collected on the class origins of Civil Servants since 1967.

Methods

The research I draw on in this article explicitly plugs this gap. First, I was given privileged access to the 2019 CSPA, which included for the first time questions on class origin. This new data, which includes 300,988 respondents, allowed me to quantitatively analyse for the first time the class composition of the entire UK Civil Service, and how this intersects with gender, ethnicity, region, department, and grade.

To measure class origin, I draw on two measures; parental occupation and self-assessed socio-economic background. To measure parental occupation, I refer to the CSPA question asking the occupation of the respondent's main income-earning parent when they were 14¹. Based on answers to this question I then grouped civil servants' parental occupation into the simplified three-class schema of the ONS National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC); those whose parents did 'professional or managerial', 'intermediate', and working-class 'routine, semi-routine, lower supervisory and technical' occupations.

Second, 104 in-depth interviews were conducted² online between May and September 2020 with civil servants in the top seven grades³ in four departments – HM Treasury (HMT), HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC), Cabinet Office (CO) and Department for Transport (DfT). Departments were chosen to reflect variations in the socio-economic shape, grade makeup and occupational specialisation across the Civil Service. Notably, HMT is the most socio-economically exclusive department, HMRC is one of the most diverse departments, and DfT and CO sit near the Civil Service average (Author, 2020).

Civil Service occupational grades can be categorised into five categories of seniority; Administrative officer / administrative assistant (AO /AA); Executive officer (EO); Senior executive officer / higher executive officer (SEO / HEO); Grades 6 and 7; and the Senior Civil Service (SCS). Within the SCS, there are five further levels of seniority; Deputy Director (DD); Director; Director General; Permanent Secretary and Cabinet Secretary. I chose to concentrate interviews on Grade 7 and above to keep a focus on progression into and within the Senior Civil Service, and to keep the scope of the study manageable.

To recruit interviewees, articles asking for volunteers were placed on each department's intranet page. 659 civil servants volunteered to be interviewed and from this a sample was constructed that was broadly representative of each department in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and region. As the focus of the study was social mobility, I oversampled the upwardly mobile and my analysis here focuses on 52 interviewees (28 women, 24 men) from working-class backgrounds.

Interviews were conducted across three sections. I began with a set of in-depth questions probing interviewees' class background. Second, I asked interviewees to describe their career trajectories to date, allowing them to narrate the key moments and crucial junctures in their own words. Third, I asked a number of more specific questions about their career, the culture of the CS, and whether they feel their career has been held back in any way.

¹ According to LFS data in over 80% of cases this is the occupation of the father

² 81 were conducted by the author and 23 by a team of four social researchers from HRMC.

³ These are in order of seniority; Grade 7, Grade 6, and then within the SCS; Deputy Director (DD), Director, Director-General, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Secretary

The unusual level of access I was granted was brokered by The Social Mobility Commission, an advisory non-departmental public body, who commissioned the research. In this way, the research was conducted independently of The Civil Service but at the same time with their institutional support. For example, the project was sponsored by Bernadette Kelly, Civil Service Social Mobility Champion and Permanent Secretary in the Department for Transport, and her team helped negotiate access to the four case study departments.

It is important to acknowledge that, while this article looks at gendered experiences of upward mobility, I am a (cis) male researcher from a privileged class background. This distance in positionality likely impacted the data I generated, particularly as the preference in work on class and gender tends to be for ‘class-matching’ between interviewer and interviewee (Mellor et al, 2013). As Savage (2007) notes, ‘relationships between the researcher and the researched are themselves class relationships’ and I am mindful that some interviewees may have been keen to resist stereotypes of working-class identity they may have presumed I hold. Equally, my position as a gendered and classed ‘outsider’ may have impinged on, or even closed down, certain interactions or affected how comfortable interviewees felt in sharing certain intimate or difficult experiences. At other times, however, my outsider status may have lubricated interactions, allowing interviewees to discuss aspects of their lives they may otherwise consider obvious. Indeed, as Mellor et al (2013: 148) note, it may be useful to ‘relinquish the attachment to class-matching in favour of a broader view’ that foregrounds interviewers capacities for, and active attention to ‘reflexivity, empathy, communication and curiosity...as resources for rapport-building’.

Results

Objective and Subjective Class Origin in The Civil Service

I begin my analysis by examining the class composition of male and female civil servants in the Civil Service. Figure 1 shows that while civil servants from advantaged professional/managerial backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the Civil Service (54% versus 37% in the UK workforce as a whole) there is very little difference in the class composition of male and female civil servants.

Figure 1 here

However, this overall composition hides small but potentially telling gender differences by grade. As Figure 2 demonstrates, while the number of civil servants from non-professional/managerial backgrounds falls sharply for both men and women as they ascend the grades⁴, this drop-off is slightly steeper for women than men. For example, the percentage of non-professional men falls from 54% to 29% between AA/AO and SCS (a difference of 25%) while for women it falls from 56% to 27% (a difference of 29%). These are modest differences but nonetheless suggest tentative evidence that women from low socio-economic backgrounds may indeed face a double disadvantage in progressing their career within the Civil Service⁵

⁴ Significantly, this progression gap by socio-economic background is also clear when analysing other socio-economic background measures in the CSPS, such as school type of parental education. For example, while only 4% of AA/AO staff were privately educated, the figure among SCS is 25%. Similarly, while 56% of AA/AO staff have parents educated below degree level, this falls to only 33% among the SCS

⁵ It is worth acknowledging that these differences may be attributed to differential non-response and, at the SCS grade, relatively small absolute numbers. The problem of small numbers is less of an issue at the Grade 6 and Grade 7 level, however, and to put these differences in perspective, I calculate for illustrative purposes that

Figure 2 here

Yet 'objective' measures of class origin do not necessarily align with people's own self-assessment of their background. Figure 3 therefore shows how people's subjective assessment of their class origin differs by gender. Here we see an intriguing difference. Male civil servants are more likely to subjectively identify as being from a 'low socio-economic background', despite there being negligible gender differences in objective class origin (Figure 1).

Figure 3 here

How do we make sense of this difference between objective and subjective class identity and how might it be connected to notions of double disadvantage? One way, I suggest in this article, is to turn to interview data showing the different ways men and women think, feel and talk about their working-class background *at work*. A key question I asked in interviews was whether participants were happy talking about their class background within the Civil Service. Although many interviewees maintained that such topics rarely come up in conversation, those from privileged backgrounds explained that when it did they were happy to share their story.

Among civil servants from working-class backgrounds, however, this was a much more difficult subject. And responses were strikingly divided according to gender. While most (20 of 24) men said they openly talked about their origins, 23 (of 28) women I interviewed said they deliberately chose not to talk about their background. To understand this identity suppression, it is first important to place it in the wider context of Civil Service culture, and particularly the dominant behavioural codes that prevail in senior grades.

Studied Neutrality and The Ideal Civil Servant

Clearly, the Civil Service is too vast to talk of one uniform culture. In fact, interviewees regularly talked of multiple different 'cultures' – whether at the regional, departmental or professional level. Nonetheless, most agreed that there is also a cross-cutting and unwritten behavioural code that underpins notions of 'merit' in prestigious departments like Treasury, prestigious professions like policy, and within the SCS more generally.

The central principle underpinning this dominant behavioural code is the idea of neutrality. This of course has a clear and legitimate function. Civil servants answer to the government of the day rather than any one political party and therefore political neutrality is clearly critical to upholding the principle of impartial public service. However, I repeatedly heard that behavioural expectations around neutrality extend beyond simply political impartiality. Neutrality, instead, is valued more as an overarching disposition, a studied way of being,

approximately 950 more women from non-professional backgrounds would be employed at the Grades 6/7 level if the socio-economic progression gap was the same for women as it is for men. According to the Civil Service Statistics Bulletin 2019, there are approximately 23,600 women employed at G6/7, of which 10,400 are from non-professional backgrounds (44%). However, if the proportion of women from non-professional backgrounds were 48% (which is what the proportion of nonprofessional women would be if there was a decline of 18% rather than 22%) then there would be approximately 11,350 women from non-professional backgrounds at Grades 6/7 (11,350 - 10,400 = 950 more women from working-class backgrounds).

encompassing particular styles of speech, self-presentation, communication, even lifestyle and recreations.

Studied neutrality has three key dimensions. First, it involves a certain package of expectations around accent and style of speech. Central here is the idea that Received Pronunciation (RP), synonymous with an advantaged background, is routinely read as a signal of ‘neutrality’:

There is a definite style of speaking...that kind of neutral-ish RP accent, like trying to place yourself as from nowhere...so I think most people in the SCS end up having an accent that is quite similar, at least the ones who are in the central teams, and replicate the style, the rhythms...there is a kind of go-to neutrality, same voice, same accent. And it is very like - 'I'm objective, my analysis is objective (*Isaac, DD, prof/man*)

What is striking here, as with many other similar comments, is how Isaac draws a connection between accent (as well as attendant aspects of speech such as speed, tone, timbre) and a wider conception of neutrality; of being able to carry out more ‘objective analysis’, particularly in the context of the SCS and policy work in central departments. Others went further, connecting the idea of neutrality to other self-presentational behaviours; to being softly-spoken, calm, unflappable, emotionally detached, restrained, understated:

I think there's a general suspicion of people who are too passionate, a sense of “we've seen it all before” and a pretence of being, you know, nicely detached from it all in a sort of cynical jaded way. (*Rob, Director, Intermediate*)

I don't see anyone getting emotional. Maybe that's because it's sort of filtered out before [SCS]. But I think if someone did get very concerned, that would probably be frowned upon. Self-control is really prized (*Oyinda, DD, Prof/man*)

Finally, studied neutrality also extends to the expression of taste and lifestyle in the workplace. This is not necessarily about possessing the same exact tastes, but rather sharing certain cultural touchpoints – being able to make, or respond to, casual conversation about theatre, art galleries and foreign holidays, for example, or understanding the use of Latin and cricketing metaphors in work meetings. Also key is *how* people express these tastes, with a particular premium placed on the ability to employ a ‘disinterested aesthetic disposition’ (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, the most popular topic of non-work conversation among civil servants is politics. Yet knowledge of, and interest in, politics must be articulated in a particular way. This is partly and understandably about maintaining political impartiality. But beyond party-political neutrality, many explained that what is particularly prized is a particular disinterested orientation to politics, where in-depth knowledge and analysis – a ‘sort of political nerdery’ (Nigel, Director, prof/man) - is self-consciously displayed in informal work settings:

When I get feedback one of the things [staff from working-class origins] raise is that the conversation is all about politics and, you know, people on Twitter that everyone's following or certain blogs or certain podcasts and I'm not sure a lot of that is strictly necessary to do our job. That stuff is not going to answer whether we should put more money into housing benefit, and the majority of the country are not reading these Effing tweets. Probably the entire audience for that tweet is in this room [laughs] (*Alistair, DD, prof/man*)

Studied neutrality, then, cannot be easily reduced to one particular aspect of occupational culture. Instead it is a package of behaviours, tastes, and an embodied way of being, that signals that you are the 'right type' of civil servant, that you 'fit'.

Significantly, it is possible to trace the dispositions that make up studied neutrality – relating to particular forms of language, accent, self-presentation and a disinterested appreciation of culture and politics – running through the history of the Civil Service. Here, it has particular antecedents in the understated, cultured figure of the 'gentleman' Senior Civil Servant. Indeed historical accounts of the SCS, particularly up until the 1980s, stress not only the dominance of men from very privileged class backgrounds (including the top public schools and Oxbridge) but also a particular workplace culture where generalism was privileged over expertise, discretion and decorum keenly observed, and a wider intellectual orientation highly prized (Guttsman, 1963; Scott, 1982; Annan, 1990). In this way, it is possible to see studied neutrality as representing, at least in part, the historical legacy of an overwhelmingly privileged (White, male) majority - what Puwar (2004) calls the 'somatic norm' - who, over time, have been able to embed their own ideas about the 'right' way to behave in the upper echelons of the Civil Service workplace.

Resignation, resistance and brand building: men's experiences of upward mobility

Men from working-class backgrounds were acutely aware of the power of studied neutrality. Indeed, many explained that they had shed markers of their background precisely in order to 'fit in', or had actively learnt to mimic and adopt the behaviours detailed above. Central, in particular, were modulations of accent and style of speech. Many explained how regional accents were routinely read as impinging on neutrality, as a signal of being too aggressive, loud or passionate:

I think if you're from a working class background and you have like quite a deep, maybe gruff voice...I don't know how well you're going fare. It's like a raised eyebrow, like, 'Oh, tone it down.'...I probably spent the better part of a year feeling I didn't want to stay in the Treasury... used to put on a bit of an accent, or try to enunciate a little bit better. Ridiculous and...humiliating [laughs] when I look back on it (David, DD, working-class)

Yet while some men described assimilatory struggles, many others registered more defiant responses. These men, who were all white, had consciously resisted studied neutrality and instead proudly retained embodied markers of their working-class background such as accent, humour and taste. Tom, now a Grade 6, had joined the Civil Service straight from school. He was initially refused a job as a county court clerk 'because of the way I spoke' and told to 'get elocution lessons'. But he explained that he had always defied such behavioural codes - 'I parade the chip on my shoulder', he joked. Tom eventually rose to become the Court Manager at 'the biggest family court in the country':

And the first thing I did... and I knew it would upset people but I thought, 'fuck it, I'm here because I want to represent change'...I was given an office, and it was lined with old books, law reports, which no-one had read. So, day two, I got in contact with a local charity and said, 'are these books any good?'. And what I put in their place was a board with references that were important to me; pictures of Benjamin Zephaniah; the Clash, the Beatles, do you know what I mean? That created a shit show. I was pulled up by the Senior Judge, 'why are you doing this, this is not what

we expect our Court Manager to be?'. And I said, 'this is my room'. And it was! A reference for me, to anchor myself in my culture. And my past. So, there was a bit of just reclaiming a bit of space.

Roger, also a Grade 6, had been similarly defiant. He explained that he had joined the Civil Service with a group of male friends from similar working-class backgrounds, and they had all collectively decided to resist what he called 'playing the game':

I'm intelligent enough to understand that there is a game to be played, yeah? I understand the way to dress, the conversations you need to be having, the polish you need to get to that SCS level. But this group of friends who joined together, we didn't play that game...we felt it was important to be true to who we were...to say, 'we want a seat at the table, which is a different seat, a different voice'. And that means you've got to be prepared to say things, clumsily or otherwise. Because, I'm not the most articulate man in the world, I don't have a university education, but I believe that I bring my lived experience with me, and through my career I haven't shied away from challenging conversations

Others went even further, explaining that they had not only proudly defied dominant behavioural codes but that doing so, overtly displaying their working-class identity, had actually lubricated their career progression. In particular, these men explained how they had deployed their 'upward mobility story' to build a particular 'brand' – as senior leaders who are 'different', who can offer a 'fresh perspective' (Frank, Director) or offer a 'different skillset' (Martin, DD). John, for example, had risen swiftly to one of the highest grades of the SCS⁶. He was from a working-class family, spoke with a broad Merseyside accent, and told me he had always been "quite relaxed" about talking about his background:

People were always taking the mickey out of my accent...Tony [Blair] always used to do his Harry Enfield impression when I came in the room...y'know 'calm down our Barry, calm down' [a reoccurring quote from *The Scousers* - a comedy sketch featuring stereotyped Liverpudlians in *Harry Enfield's Television Programme*]...some people might feel knocked by that, I guess, but I always found it quite funny... because, you know, it means he remembers you.

In fact, since joining the SCS, John had increasingly begun to use his working-class background as 'the centrepiece of [his] pitch' for various senior jobs; 'I've got a story to tell, unlike most of the pale stale brigade [laughs]...so at the moment it's a net positive'. James, a Director, described a similar process of what he called 'owning' his background within the SCS. For James this was both about presenting his authentic 'self' but also, like John, seeing that his class difference could be beneficial, even 'fashionable':

I find you can get so far without talking about your background, if your background is like mine. And you can try and assimilate to the best of your ability, you can fit in. And then at some point you realise, one, you don't want to do that because you're not true to yourself. And two, you start to realise that there is a bit of strength in diversity in terms of being a bit different, having a story. Shaking things up a bit. Especially if those things then suddenly become fashionable...

⁶ Some details about John have been changed to protect his anonymity

Humour was a key theme in these discussions. Like John and James, many mocked the ‘stiff’ and ‘uptight’ culture of the Senior Civil Service. Yet rather than ape this seriousness, as with other areas of studied neutrality, these men confidently challenged this norm. In particular, many spoke of gently teasing, ribbing or mocking their colleagues to, as Roger put it, ‘help people let go and have fun a bit’. Most acknowledged that deploying such mockery contained an element of risk, and of course any success is hard to fully gauge without interactional data (c.f. Persson, 2021). Yet nonetheless I was struck by how many described their humour as central to their identity at work – especially in pursuit of ‘shaking things up’, as James describes above.

White men from working-class backgrounds, then, were certainly aware of the ways in which dominant behavioural codes within the Civil Service tilt towards those from privileged backgrounds. However, while some experienced this as an assimilatory pressure, others successfully resisted. They mobilised the chip on their shoulders, as Tom put it, and wore their origins (or others’ caricatured readings of their origins) as a badge of honour. And significantly, with social mobility emerging as key area of the CS diversity agenda, these men were often even able to exploit their working-class background as a resource, ‘a net positive’ as John puts it; a form of embodied cultural capital that has exchange-value even in a ‘sub-field’ that normally only (mis)recognises the value of bodily schemas inculcated via privileged class backgrounds. In contrast, and as I go on to explain now, women were markedly unable to position their working-class background in this way.

(Not) bringing your whole self to work: women’s experiences of upward mobility

Unlike male colleagues, almost every woman I interviewed from a working-class background (23/28) said they actively chose not to talk about their background at work. Notably, it wasn’t that these women necessarily ‘disidentified’ with their working-class background; most talked fondly about its enduring impact on their identity. Yet nonetheless each felt compelled to conceal their origins in the workplace:

So I’ve never shared my background at work, just being in a social mobility network is a step for me...why wouldn’t I? I think it’s partly a sense of shame, judgement
(Nicola, Grade 7, working-class)

It’s one of those things where I don’t think I am my true self at work because I don’t...I don’t tell people my background, that’s a thing I hide. I guess I think people might look down, or look at me in a more negative light. And, you know, if I did say what my dad did, I would always say, “Oh, he’s an HGV driver”, because that’s a bit, you know, better than that he drives a lorry and moves furniture. There’s always a bit of trying to posh it up a bit. (Steph, DD, working-class)

I just don’t know how it would be perceived. And people talk about their own backgrounds and you never get like that parallel so I kind of know I’d stick out. You know, you get to know where people live/what holidays they go on/what their parents do and you kind of go, well, that doesn’t really fit with the background I have. So, you don’t really want to share because, again, you know it’s just going to make people think less of you (Louise, Grade 6, working-class)

In each of these accounts what is striking is the way decisions to hide class origin are mediated by the imagined gaze of more privileged colleagues – both male and female. This gaze elicits strong feelings of shame and embarrassment and each of these women presume that their background – if revealed – would leave them vulnerable to negative judgment (Skeggs, 1997). In response, many labour to hide markers of their origins or alter aspects of their origin story to ‘posh it up’, as Steph notes.

For these women, then, concealing one’s background is a calculated, logical, rational decision; a strategy of stigma management (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). Unlike male civil servants who often successfully mobilise ‘origin talk’, these women have an instinctive sense that such declarations will only work against them; will unlock a strong latent class snobbery among colleagues that will ultimately negatively impact upon their careers. As Tracey (Director, working-class) quickly retorts when I ask why she doesn’t share her background, ‘What would it gain me to say that? It would just mark me out as even more different’.

Such a strategy of class dissimulation was not available to all women, however. As Skeggs (2013: 1) notes, ‘Whiteness’ (unlike class) cannot be performed and for five black African/Caribbean women I interviewed, even though they too refrained from discussing their backgrounds, each were nonetheless routinely read through the stigmatising lens of particular racialised class stereotypes of blackness. These often revolved around caricatured notions of urban marginality that bore no resemblance to their lived experience:

So yeah, you do get a lot of misconceptions, people look at you and before speaking to you, judge you and just assume, ‘Oh, you live in London, you must come from the ghetto,’ and it’s like, no I don’t live in a slum, We’re not all in debt! (*Martina, Grade 7, working-class*)

I was having a meeting about policing on council estates and my manager started talking about, ‘Oh, you know, like black-on-black crime,’ and like nodding to me as if I would know everything about this. And I was just like, ‘What on earth is going on? Like why would that ever be something that you think you should say?’ (*Joy, Director, working-class*)

But why does disclosing a working-class background appear to carry such different connotations for men and women? Significantly, many women addressed this in spontaneous comparisons they drew with male colleagues. Becca, for example, explained that whilst ‘even after 20 years’ in the Civil Service there wasn’t ‘a single women’ she would ‘identify as having a working-class background’, she is ‘surrounded by men of a working-class nature’. This is partly about what is valued in her area of DfT – a certain ‘macho hands-on knowledge of working on the railways’ – but also more generally about the ability of working-class men to ‘trade’ on a certain ‘salt-of-the-earth authenticity’ that ‘everyone seems to respond well to’. Some male managers from privileged backgrounds, she joked, even try and emulate this, putting on ‘mockney accents’ to appear more ordinary and down to earth. Others like Jackie similarly grappled with this relational sense that men are able to derive greater value from displaying a working-class identity:

There’s something I think about being a bit laddish working class that is almost quite a nice thing for middle class men to be, like a lads-will-be-lads bantery way of dealing with people. Whereas women, that doesn’t seem to happen...I mean there is no benefit to being a working class girl, like a bit of a rogue, is there? You get on by

looking good, by behaving in the right way, and as much as we'd all like to think that's all moved on, in lots of ways it hasn't...I mean there are no traits that I can display as a positive demonstration...like there isn't a working class woman's banter, is there, that I could kind of bond with other women with

There are strong echoes here with the work of feminist scholars such as Skeggs (1997), Reay et al (2010), Loveday (2016) and Lawler (2005). For women like Jackie, 'displaying' one's working-class background has no exchange-value, generates no 'benefit' in the workplace, and (unlike men) forges no solidarity with privileged-origin women. On the contrary, 'you get on' by pursuing a respectability that involves explicitly distancing oneself from embodied markers of working-class womanhood (i.e. 'by looking good, by behaving the right way'). Such accounts demonstrate how the boundaries of studied neutrality are markedly stricter for women⁷, compliance more tightly policed, and the threat of class stigma ever-present.

Double Disadvantage: Connecting Emotional Costs to Women's Career Progression

So far my analysis has demonstrated that female civil servants from working-class backgrounds are much more likely than their male colleagues to conceal their backgrounds at work. But why does this type of identity dissimulation matter sociologically? In this final section I show how interviews point toward two important implications. First, it was clear that such suppression, or what Hooks (1993) calls 'class surrender', had often left a significant emotional imprint; 'it is one of those things in my self-conscious that still makes me feel a bit inferior', Tracey explained. For Sarah (Director, working-class), such inferiority was even felt as a physical sensation:

I don't think anyone has asked me what my parents do. But I think if they did I'd probably feel quite stressed. Like it's something that I do actually have a physical response to.

For others this imprint was expressed more in terms of the emotional labour required to corral presentations of self into an appropriate behavioural form, or through an underlying anxiety about making 'mistakes' in one's execution of dominant behavioural codes. In particular, many noted the irony of the Civil Service's stated encouragement to 'bring your whole self to work' in the context of their own experience of managing or concealing difference:

I probably never actively talk about my childhood and maybe I am kind of suppressing it to fit in...because I suppose [pause] I assume that my background is so different to theirs that maybe I would feel a kind of sense of shame. I guess on a like fundamental level everyone wants to just fit in, wants to be liked. So, yeah, I just don't want to like give them a reason to think that I'm not one of them, maybe (Alice, Grade 7, working-class).

This emotional or psychological burden is important to register in its own right. It both speaks to a longstanding literature on the 'hidden injuries' of upward mobility, as well as underlining the way in which these costs are often strongly gendered, particularly in terms of

⁷ It is also worth reiterating here that studied neutrality is itself gendered and, although not the focus of this article, even women from privileged backgrounds often reported struggling to be recognised as sufficiently 'neutral', particularly in terms of in terms of their execution of certain self-presentational behaviours such as emotional detachment and understatement

their capacity to generate feelings of shame and embarrassment (Lawler, 1999; Reay et al, 2010).

Yet interviews also indicate that such suppression, and the emotional turmoil it precipitates, often has implications for the career *outcomes* of these women. For example, many described how classed feelings of imposter syndrome had significantly affected their willingness to push for progression:

I guess that disconnect has become more apparent as I've become more senior, between how I present myself and my confidence...and a kind of shared tone I don't feel I have... a sense of...I don't really fit, my background doesn't fit...and it just feels like a slightly alien world to me still...it's not necessarily intended to exclude, but I think part of the fact I haven't got further is because I just don't get it." (*Lara, Grade 6, working-class*)

Like Lara, many explained how such crippling struggles to fit and assimilate had had knock-on effects on motivation, concentration and ambition. For Victoria, this had led to a gradual sense of 'withdrawal' from the workplace:

Victoria: So, there's this thing about 'bringing your whole self to work'. But I think most people don't actually do that. Because, I would have thought if people are actually bringing their whole selves to work, there would be less consensus [laughs].

INT: So you don't necessarily bring your whole self to work?

Victoria: Yeah. I think there's something about how I talk that isn't right here. There's just a style of presentation people like here. And, you've got to be able to approximate that. But being myself and just talking naturally just feels so uncomfortable. So I just kind of withdraw. (*Victoria, Grade 7, working-class*)

Struggling to adapt to dominant behavioural codes, then, had led the women I interviewed toward varying degrees of what Victoria helpfully describes here as withdrawal. Some saw this as 'just another barrier' while others described a feeling closer to resignation. This sense of 'self-elimination' (Bourdieu, 1990) is important because, in turn, it likely affects how such individuals are read by senior gatekeepers and how highly valued attributes like 'visibility' or 'confidence' are assessed. Victoria, for example, told us elsewhere in her interview that she is often told by managers that she needs to be 'more confident'. Like many I spoke to, however, she explained that there are many areas in her life – with her friends and family, or in her local community, for example – where she feels perfectly confident and is seen as such by those around her. In other words, it is not that she lacks confidence per se, but that certain work environments, especially when they are infused with powerful behavioural codes, act to embolden some and inhibit others.

Concluding Discussion

In this article I have explored how the experience of upward mobility in the UK Civil Service is strongly gendered. While men and women from working-class backgrounds are equally (under)represented within the Civil Service, men are modestly more likely to reach top grades. My findings suggest that this double disadvantage may be connected to the gendered way in which civil servants express their class identity in the workplace. Not only are men more likely to identify as coming from a working-class background, but they are also more comfortable talking about their background and displaying embodied markers of a working-class identity. Moreover, for many (although not all) men, such origin display is successfully

deployed as a form of embodied cultural capital, allowing some to resist dominant behavioural codes and others to ‘brand’ themselves as senior leaders with a unique perspective. In contrast, women from working-class backgrounds overwhelmingly choose to conceal their backgrounds at work, presuming that such disclosures only leave them vulnerable to negative judgment. Such identity dissimulation, interviews suggest, often leave a significant emotional imprint, with many women reporting a lingering sense of inferiority and shame. This can have implications for career progression. For many, feeling unable to bring one’s ‘authentic self’ to work elicits a sense of alienation and withdrawal from the Civil Service, and a ‘self-elimination’ from the stakes of career progression.

These findings have implications for scholars working on the glass ceiling, those interested in issues of identity and authenticity at work, and Bourdieuisan scholars of class. Most obviously they underline the value of connecting literatures on glass *and* class ceilings. At present I know of no work directly interrogating the double disadvantages faced by working-class women in elite occupations. Yet here, in pointing to the strongly gendered divide in the disclosure and display of working-class identities, my results suggest a mechanism that may help explain why women from working-class backgrounds in a range of occupational settings often face such profound multiplicative inequalities. Further work would be helpful in unpicking the degree to which this may or may not apply in other professional settings and national contexts.

Second, these findings add to a recent stream of literature probing the increased importance of authenticity at work (Fleming, 2009 De Keere, 2014). In recent decades, management guidance in many professions has shifted from a utilitarian emphasis on rationality and self-control and instead championed the importance of self-expression, ‘personal qualities’ and authenticity (De keere, 2014). As Fleming (2009) explains, employees nowadays face a ‘just-be-yourself’ management policy in which ‘permitting employees to be themselves is presumed to result in higher motivation and productivity levels’. This is certainly the case at the Civil Service, where the instructive to ‘bring your whole self to work’ has become an omnipresent piece of organisational sloganeering. Yet our findings offer a useful corrective to such ‘common-sense’ mantras. They demonstrate, in particular, that in a setting like the Civil Service some expressions of authentic identity are more readily rewarded than others, and that some social groups – particularly women from working-class backgrounds – do not feel they are permitted to bring their ‘real’ selves to work.

Finally, these findings also have theoretical implications for those interested in the Bourdieusian concept of embodied cultural capital. Scholars interested in this idea have tended to confine their enquiries to how such capital shapes the expression of cultural distinction. However, my analysis indicates the need for this literature to engage further with how embodied cultural capital confers tangible forms of advantage in the labour market. Certainly, this process of capital conversion is clear within the Civil Service - particularly in terms of the alignment between modes of privileged embodiment and the unwritten but dominant behavioural code of studied neutrality.

Yet our findings also nuance this by suggesting that expressions of *white male working-class* identity can also sometimes operate as embodied cultural capital, and be converted into field-specific capital. Of course precisely how this is achieved, interactionally, is beyond the scope of this article and demands further ethnographic enquiry (c.f. Persson, 2021)). Yet my interview data suggests it may take place in two ways within the Civil Service. First, men sometimes appear able to position their backgrounds, and the accompanying bodily ‘hexis’,

as an acceptable form of difference, a kind of identity ‘brand’ that sets them apart and underlines their distinctive contribution to the SCS. Second, and connected, a key part of this ‘brand’ often revolves around being willing to, and rewarded for, ‘shaking up’ the restrained, boring, and pretentious – or ‘pale, male and stale’, as John puts it - culture of the Civil Service. This extends recent work exploring the valorisation of ‘traditional working-class masculinity’ in ‘dirty’ manual work (Sluskaya et al, 2016; Thiel, 2007) to show that such displays of working-class masculinity can also confer value, albeit limited, in some high-status occupational settings.

Indeed it is here, in thinking through the gendered way in which working-class origins are read *specifically* in the workplace, that my analysis both echoes and partially extends the work of Skeggs (1997) and others. First, it points to the kind of cultural adaptations and exceptions elite employers are willing to sanction in a climate where they are under increasing pressure to shed monocultural reputations and embrace ‘diversity’. Here, it is notable that it is expressions of white male working-classness, particularly humorous critiques of middle-class pretentiousness, uptightness and gentility, that are considered more acceptable forms of ‘talking back’ (Skeggs, 2005).

This connects to literature in organisational studies emphasising the ‘management strategies’ available to certain stigmatised groups, who often enact ‘micro-practices of resistance’ to challenge or ‘dodge’ stigma (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). However, my data suggests that access to such subversive and agentic stigma management strategies are strongly gendered (Tyler, 2020). For the working-class women in this study, stigma (both real and imagined) is experienced as fairly inescapable and corporeally inscribed (Skeggs, 1997). In this context, the only management strategy available to these women, they feel, is to dissolve or dissimulate difference and attempt class ‘passing’.

Second, and connected to this, my analysis points to the gendered implications of the creeping incorporation of class into organisational ‘diversity’ agendas. This ‘social mobility’ discourse arguably constructs an ideal practitioner unfettered by ascribed class privilege, and in so doing, arguably demands that employees find a way to articulate a meritocratically ‘worthy’ or ‘deserving’ story of career success. This may be further contributing to a partial revaluation of markers of working-class identity, especially those that signal humble origins or agentic achievement against the odds. Here again, though, our findings echo the work of Loveday (2014, 2016) in stressing that it is largely symbols, markers, and expressions of white male working-classness that appear to effectively signal this romantic ascension from humble origins. To restate Lawler’s (2005) telling observation, there remains no female equivalent of the ‘working-class boy done good’.

Acknowledgments

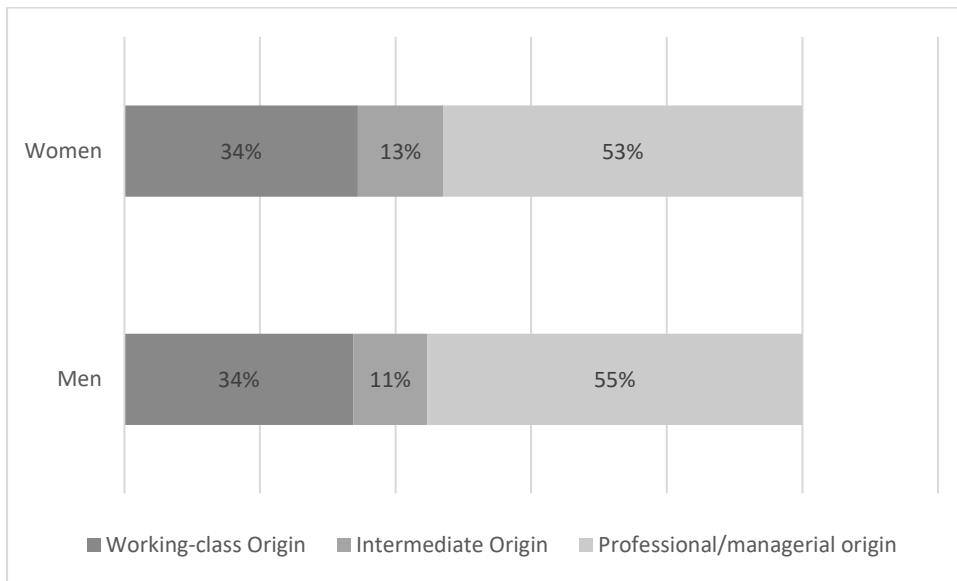
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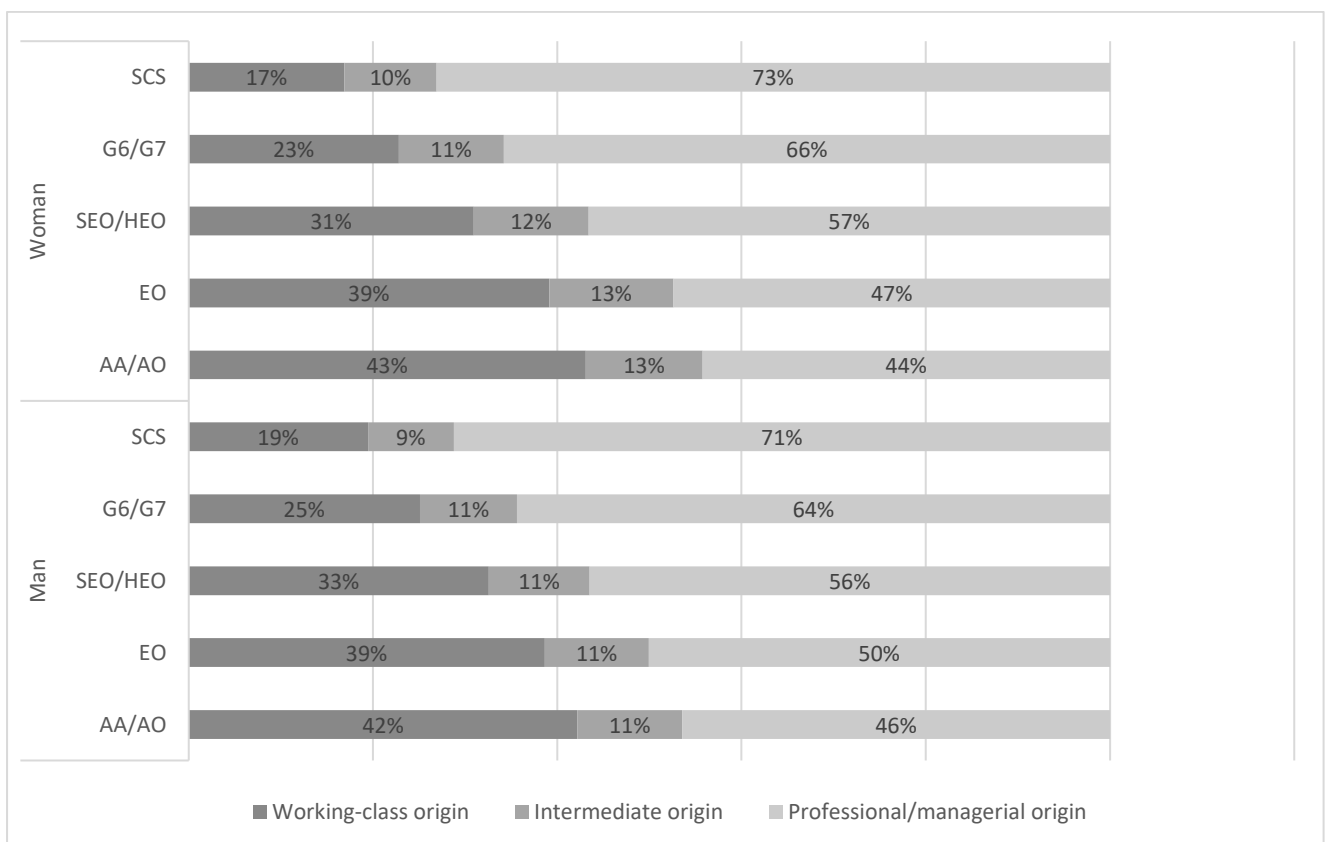
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Figure 1: The class origins of UK Civil Servants by gender



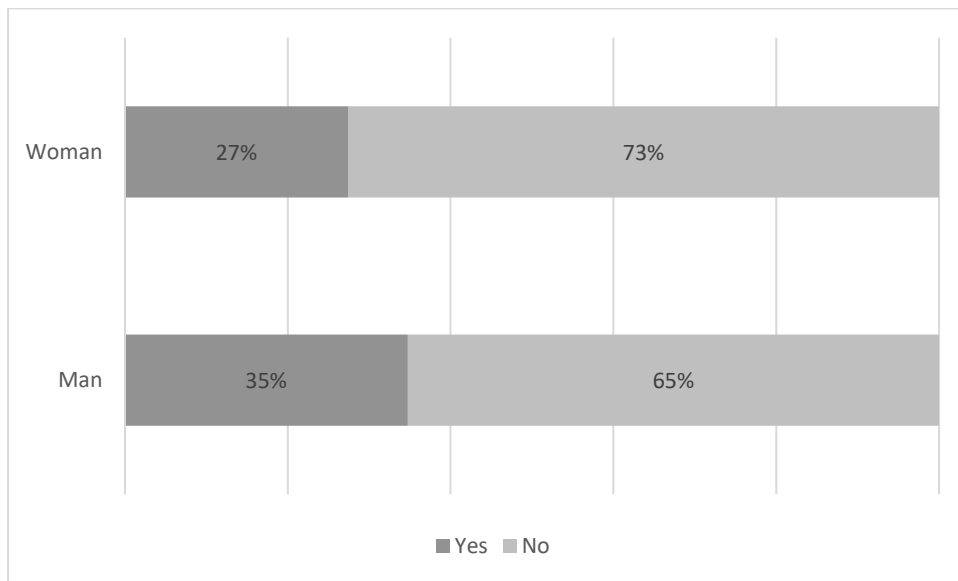
Note: Civil Service by parental occupation (NS-SEC) for those identifying as men or women in 2019 Civil Service People Survey

Figure 2: Civil service seniority grade by class origin and gender



Note: Civil Service grade by parental occupation (NS-SEC) for women and men in 2019 Civil Service People Survey

Figure 3: Self-assessment of low socio-economic background by gender among UK civil servants



Note: Civil servants who self-assess as coming from a low socio-economic background by gender identity in the 2019 Civil Service People Survey