'We're all ordinary people': perceptions of class and class differences in personal relationships

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Abstract

This paper examines people's perceptions of class and class differences—in general and with regard to personal relationships. Data from an original survey on personal networks (n=195) shows that most people think they are middle class, although many lower class respondents classify themselves as working class. In addition, according to respondents, most of their network members have a similar class position. Follow-up in-depth interviews with 27 respondents focus on respondents' criteria for classification and reveal that people perceive themselves as middle class not so much because their network is class-homogeneous (and people thus fail to recognize the class hierarchy) but rather because they contrast themselves with people of higher and lower class positions, finding themselves 'in the middle'—sometimes articulated as 'ordinary' or 'average'—and thus middle class. People further recognize class hierarchy and the complexity of class, pinpointing various aspects of class. Although people were quite willing and able to classify themselves and their network members, they seem less willing to recognize a class hierarchy, stressing that people are equal, 'downgrading' the upper class and 'upgrading' network members. Finally, I suggest that class-talk is 'classed' itself: those who saw class only in terms of income are mostly lower-educated while those who saw class also in terms of practices and taste are mostly higher-educated. The conclusion elaborates on what this might mean for the recognition of inequality and the engagement of urban middle class with urban residents of lower class positions.

1. Introduction

This paper examines perceptions of class and class differences, and the role of personal relationships and networks in assessing class and class differences. A new generation of class theorists who advocate 'culturalist class analysis', stress the 'classed nature of social and cultural practices' (Bottero, 2004: 988). According to Reay (2005: 924), 'class is deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity even when it is not acknowledged'. This approach to class identity sees class as an 'everyday process' which is 'powerfully internalised and continually played out in interaction with others across social fields' (Reay, 1997: 226). Bottero (2004: 994) asks: if class is embedded in everyday lives and relationships, why, then, are people not (more) aware of the class hierarchy? Her answer is that

> 'since hierarchy is embedded in the most intimate social relationships and "social location" and "culture" are united in the structured nature of everyday social practices, hierarchical practices emerge as 'second nature', unremarkable and ordinary' (…) The nature of hierarchy is such that simply by going about our daily lives social inequalities are mechanically reproduced' (ibid: 995).

Class is powerful, because it is implicit in social relations. 'The absence of direct reference to class in everyday discourse is taken as a sign of class in action, with class now encoded in implicit ways' (Bottero and Irwin, 2003: 470). Others have worried about how the invisibility of class differences, or the lack of recognizing class differences, is related to whether people are aware of class inequality (Evans et al., 1992; Pahl et al., 2007). Drawing on Bourdieu, Savage et al. (2001: 877-878) argue that 'it is precisely because of the power of class that it is difficult for class to be articulated by people'.

My interest in perceptions of class and class difference is grounded in two bodies of literature. The first is concerned with the recognition of classed practices—specifically 'the way in which cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination' (Devine and Savage, 2000: 195). In the Netherlands, a discourse on class is largely lacking. The Dutch society is considered to be egalitarian and the Dutch culture emphasizes equality: nobody should be excluded and nobody should fancy him/herself better than anyone else (van den Brink, 2004: 148). Talking about class and class differences is regarded a taboo. On the other hand, ethnicity and ethnic differences (in particular non-Western migrants and their descendents versus 'native' Dutch people, but

also about specific ethnicities such as Moroccans and Antilleans) are often at the foreground in political and public discourse. This was also apparent in the interviews I carried out: when people discussed relationships with people of a different ethnic origin they almost always referred to the 'different culture'. The fact that people, upon asking, had difficulty explaining what that 'different culture' maintained may point at the normalization of emphasizing cultural differences—which produces an almost automatic response. Very few people explicitly brought up class position and class differences, however.

Yet, class is invoked implicitly in a broad range of policies and political concerns. According to Lawler (2005: 798), concerns with education for young people from 'deprived areas' and encouraging parents to learn 'parenting skills' are class-based—these concerns are articulated in Dutch political discourse as well.[1] In this paper I want to examine how people's ideas about sameness and differences may be rooted in ideas about class-based practices and result in exclusion based on misrecognition (rejection) of certain practices—even when people themselves are not explicit about this or even fully aware. There are many ways to talk about class and class differences without ever using the c-word (Payne and Grew, 2005). Furthermore, talking about class or class-based practices may be 'classed' itself (Reay, 2005: 913-4; Kuipers, 2006). My interest is in exploring how the recognition of classed practices and the distinction between 'us' and 'them' based on these practices may be a mode of exclusion.

A second literature is concerned with the 'urban middle class' who would move to (class- and ethnically-mixed) urban neighbourhoods because they like and are open towards 'diversity'—as opposed to the (perceived) homogeneity of the suburbs (in Dutch often called Vinex-locations). The interest in the urban middle class is particularly vivid in debates about gentrification and 'social mix'. The idea that a like for diversity would translate into 'practising diversity' has been heavily criticized (e.g. May, 1996; Zukin, 1998; Butler and Robson, 2003; Peck, 2005; Lees, 2008; Blokland and van Eijk, 2009). Butler (2003: 2471) concludes that the practices of middle class gentrifiers 'indicates the formation of a metropolitan habitus in which values such as diversity, social inclusion and social integration form an important element of the narrative of settlement but which, in its practice, is one of social exclusivity'. Related to this is the interest in the 'creative

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[1] Consider further the concern with social mobility: see e.g. Vromraad-advice (2006) 'Stad en stijging' [City and mobility] which argues for facilitating 'getting ahead' in education, work, housing and leisure through urban renewal. The key point for the Dutch Labour Party [PvdA] is 'social elevation', see e.g. opinion-paper in NRC Handelsblad November 21, 2008 'Underclass is the problem' (an exception for here class *is* made explicit) and the 'Resolution Integration'.

class', an invention of Florida (2002), who would similarly be open towards 'diversity of all kinds' and who can be regarded as a segment of the urban middle class,.

My concern is not with examining the question of mixing as such but with connecting this debate to notions of class identity. Class analysts have argued that class identity is now about differentiation and distinction (Devine and Savage, 2000). It is possible that, through their practices, the 'creative class' and gentrifiers are actually people with the strongest sense of distinction in relation to others—despite their taste for 'diversity'. In a forthcoming paper, Blokland and I show that people who moved into a neighbourhood for its 'diversity' were not more likely to have interclass ties compared to those that did not move to that area for its diversity. The networks of the creative class are actually more class-homogeneous (van Eijk, forthcoming). Class analysts have argued that where and among whom one lives is increasingly becoming a marker of distinction and thus a class-marker (Savage et al., 2005; Butler and Watt, 2007). Florida (2002) also hints at this when he describes that the creative class seek places tolerant towards diversity and with certain lifestyle amenities (vibrant street life, outdoor recreation, cutting-edge music scene) but which are foremost 'a place where they can construct and validate their identities as creative people' (2002: 242). In this paper I want to explore how urban middle class people talk about class and class differences and whether their class-talk is characterized by openness towards otherness or rather by distinctiveness.

2. Methodology

The data for this paper come from a larger study on sociospatial segregation and personal networks (see van Eijk, forthcoming). One of my interests is in people's perceptions of similarity and difference (homophily versus heterophily)—what criteria do people employ when they assess their network members as 'people like us' or as 'others', and to what extent do these criteria reveal a classed nature of social and cultural practices?

With a team of undergraduate students I interviewed a total of 204 people in two neighbourhoods. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2007, were face-to-face and based on a structured and mostly close-ended questionnaire. Students were excluded from the dataset which leaves 195 respondents.

The population of Hillesluis is predominantly lower and low middle class, with a large proportion of people of ethnic minority background. Blijdorp is a predominantly middle class neighbourhood, where young singles and families are replacing an older

population. Located near the city centre, Blijdorp is attractive for young urban professionals, although the area itself lacks urban amenities. Nonetheless my impression is that of an urban middle class comparable to gentrifiers who would move into more mixed and vibrant areas. The two samples reflect the population of the two neighbourhoods for socioeconomic status and are therefore not representative for the Dutch population, although it can be said that it is roughly representative for the urban population as it includes the full range of socioeconomic categories. My aim is however not in the first place to generalize to the urban population but to examine the ways in which people talk about class differences.

The questionnaire covered a broad range of topics relating to people's daily lives and relationships, and included two questions about class.[2] First we asked: "Sometimes people describe society in classes, such as working, middle or high. If I would ask you to place yourself in such a scheme, how would you classify yourself?" People could answer: "working class", "middle class", higher class", "other" or "don't know". Second, through name generating questions we constructed a list of network members and for each network member we asked: "Do you think that this person belongs to the same class as you?" People could answer yes, no or don't know. In addition we asked people to describe their (former) job, on the basis of which I classified them as working, low middle or high middle class according to the Standard classification of occupations 1992 developed by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS).

Two years later (February-March 2009) I went back to 30 people (15 in each area) and interviewed them based on several open-ended questions about their network members. The people who participated in the follow-up interviews are mixed for educational level and job position (see Appendix). I selected these people for range (see Small, 2009: 13) to include both people of lower and higher socioeconomic status. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. In 27 of the 30 interviews I included the above-mentioned two questions about class but now asked people to reflect on their answer and explain to me their classifications. The analysis in this paper is based on the answers to these questions. These questions were preceded by questions differences and similarities between respondents and their network members—a totally open question— for which I probed about lifestyle, background, milieu, and growing up but without using the term class. Very few respondents used the term class spontaneously in answering this question. In the first couple of interviews I referred to people's self-classification during

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[2] The questionnaire including the two questions about class is based on and largely similar to a questionnaire designed by Talja Blokland.

the first interview, but I soon discovered that people had forgotten about this so in most interviews I just repeated the entire question without referring to the first interview. I felt that confronting them with their first answer left people with too little room to adjust and reflect on their views—I did not want people to focus on their answers of two years ago. This practice revealed that classification is not hundred percent consistent: several respondents classified themselves differently than they did in the interview. In the first interview, one of the answer categories was "working class"; in the follow-up interviews I offered only low, middle and high. For example, six people had classified themselves as working class but in the second interview said they were low class (2x), middle class (3x) or refused to self-classify (1x). This suggests that question wording matters; the term "working class" might not be a term that many people come up with themselves.

Evans and colleagues (1992) argue that the 'strong political elements in the terms "working class" and "middle class" is a grave disadvantage' in studying people's perception of class and class hierarchy. One the one hand, in the Netherlands reference to either working or middle class will likely not have a strong political connotation given that 'class' is hardly referred to in public and political debates. On the other hand, if class is indeed a taboo people may not like talking about class differences or class hierarchy. The interviews reveal that many indeed felt uncomfortable with talking about class, but given the ambivalence and defensiveness described in other papers (Payne and Grew, 2005; Savage et al., 2001; Reay, 2005) I believe that this is not specific for Dutch people. Furthermore, despite the discomfort some felt and the lack of class in public debates, people were able to talk about different aspects of class.

The objective of this study is not to generalize empirically but rather theoretically albeit in a modest way, that is, the patterns and tendencies might be found in other studies and might be similar but not necessarily identical (see for moderatum generalization Payne and Williams, 2005).

3. Self-classification and network homogeneity

Of the 195 people, the majority (52 percent) of people classified themselves as 'middle class' (Table 1), which supports the finding of other studies that most people tend to classify as middle class (Evans et al., 1992; Pahl et al., 2007). However, a quite large minority of 23 percent classified themselves as 'working class', 13 percent self-classified as 'higher class', another 8 percent offered another class category and 5 percent did not self-

classify (some of whom refused to).[3] Table 1 further distinguishes for respondents' class position based on their (former) job (see methodology section for classification) so we have an idea of how well people classified themselves (accepting that class is related to job status). Most people are pretty accurate in classifying themselves: of those who self-classified as working class (n=43), 74 percent belong to the lower class based on their (former) job; of those who self-classified as middle class (99), 72 percent belong to the low middle and high middle class; and 60 percent of those who self-classified as higher class (n=25) belong to the high middle class based on their (former) job status.

Table 1: Self-classification of respondents (percentages), total and by class category based on (former) job

Self-classification:	Total	Class category based on (former) job:			
		Never worked	Lower class	Low middle class	High middle class
Working class	23	21	51	13	2
Middle class	52	43	33	63	64
Upper class	13	7	5	11	26
Other	8	14	6	7	9
No class	5	14	5	7	0
	100	100	100	100	100
n	191	14	63	56	58
missing	4	0	1	1	2

[For distinction by class category based on (former) job: Cramer's V=.319; p=.000]

Of those who never worked, 2 refused to self-classify and 2 said something else: "just a citizen" and "unemployed". Of the lower-class respondents, 3 refused, and the other responses were: "normal" (2x), "lower class" (1x) and "don't know" (1x). Of the low-middle-class respondents, 4 refused and 4 said something else: "cultural class", "higher than low class", "don't know" and "between middle and high". Of the high-middle-class respondents, finally, nobody refused to self-classify, and other responses were: "creative class", "higher-educated with responsibilities", "higher middle class", "highly educated but low income" and "intellectual class". People who refused to self-classify said such things as "we're all equal", "I don't recognize [acknowledge?] that division" or "I don't think in categories" (in Dutch: *Ik denk niet in hokjes*, which could also be translated as "I'm not narrow-minded").

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[3] The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) in 2006 asked respondents to classify themselves; of the 404 respondents living in urban areas 23 percent classified as 'working class', 32 percent as 'lower middle class', 36 percent as 'higher middle class' and 5 percent as 'higher class'; 6 percent said 'don't know' (source: Culturele Veranderingen in Nederland 2006). The rather large percentage of people who classified as higher class in my sample might have been smaller if the category 'higher middle class' was included.

Table 2: Network homogeneity for class, by self-classified class category

Self-classification:	Average homogeneity	Standard deviation	95% interval: lower bound	95% interval: upper bound	N
Working class	,7117	,36859	,5982	,8251	43
Middle class	,8042	,29858	,7444	,8641	98
Upper class	,7220	,24472	,6210	,8230	25
Other	,6385	,36717	,4052	,8718	12
All	,7595	,31603	,7134	,8056	183

[Differences not significant (Tamhane's T2)]

Table 2 shows the homogeneity of people's networks according to people's own classification of their network members as belong to the same class. People who self-classified as middle class have most homogeneous networks (80 percent). Those who self-classified as working or higher class had less homogeneous networks—they likely see more people respectively 'above' or 'below' them. People who offered an 'other' class-category have least homogeneous networks (64 percent). Table 3 presents the same variable for network-homogeneity but now categorized according to people's class position based on their (former) job. This shows a slightly different picture, with increasing homogeneity as socioeconomic status increases.

Table 3: Network homogeneity for class, by class category based on (former) job

Class cat. based on (former) job:	Average homogeneity	Standard deviation	95% interval: lower bound	95% interval: upper bound	N
Never worked	,7038	,43611	,4403	,9674	13
Lower class	,7048	,37581	,6069	,8028	59
Low middle class	,7576	,28363	,6802	,8350	54
High middle class	,8249	,23101	,7642	,8857	58

[Differences not significant (Tamhane's T2)]

Although most people were able to classify themselves, the follow-up interviews showed that people's ideas about what class is and where they, their network members and people in general 'belong' is not at all straightforward (cf. Devine, 1992). Savage and colleagues (2001) observed 'ambivalence' in people's ideas about society and identity— talking about a classed society while refusing to identify in class terms, for example—, while Payne and Grew (2005) interpret this as reflecting the complexity of this task for people. The interviews support both these views.

First, people did not seem hesitant to classify themselves but found it particularly difficult to talk about class hierarchy and to classify others as belonging to a lower or higher class. Nonetheless, many people perceived a class of people 'above' and 'below' them, which is perhaps also why so many see themselves as middle class and why

'middle' is sometimes translated into 'average'. Second, many people recognized that class includes various aspects—class depends not just on someone's level of income and education but also education, general interests, one's role in society and behaviour matter. Sometimes people referred to the complexity of class in an attempt to nullify this strict hierarchy. Third, which criteria where applied seems to be 'classed' itself: people of lower socioeconomic status tended to talk mainly about income, while people of higher socioeconomic status tended to include specific practices that for them signified class position.

4. Class hierarchy and ordinariness

Several scholars are concerned with whether people recognize class inequality because so many people, regardless of their socioeconomic position, classify themselves as middle class. One explanation is based on reference group theory: people's classifications are based on what they see around them and particularly the people in the network (see Evans et al., 1992; Pahl et al., 2007). Because they socialize predominantly with people who are much like them, people think they are 'normal and unexceptional' and therefore see their hierarchical position as 'average' or 'middling' (Bottero, 2004: 998). However, while people's networks are indeed rather homogeneous (interclass ties are mostly inter-generational family members), the interviews show that people did recognize that society is more varied, sometimes classified network members as lower or higher class, and were able to describe people in the lower or higher class in general.

The interviews suggest two alternative reasons why many people tend to classify themselves as middle class and why many say their network members are of similar class position. First, people saw, in general and within their network, that some people were 'doing better' and others were doing not so well compared to them—consequently they found themselves literally 'in the middle' (cf. Savage et al., 2001). People are thus not blind for the range in positions in society (although they might under- or overestimate this range (Evans et al., 1992; Pahl et al., 2007)—that question lies beyond the scope of this paper). This would reject the thesis that self-classification as 'middle class' has to do with a homogeneous network. Rather, I would argue, people recognize they are in the middle. This was sometimes evident when people replaced the term 'middle class' by 'in the middle', 'normal' or 'average class'.

Average I think, yes. And yes… well, I think a bit higher than average. Not for, but for living status, living standard, I'm doing quite okay […] I mean, we have a car and two cars even. We absolutely don't have to worry about jobs or mortgage or whatever. So quite, not well-to-do but very okay.
(Els, 39, social worker, higher vocational training)

Being a social worker, Els later compared herself to her clients and concluded that she sees herself 'higher than my average client so to say'. She thus contrasts here position with the people around her who are of higher and lower socioeconomic status and locates herself in a quite average position. Sometimes stressing one's 'average' position was linked to stressing equality:

I see myself, well, average person, in the first place, maybe I'm not an average Dutch person [she migrated from Poland], I don't see myself as such, but just an average person, not too notable. I'm not someone who says, I see myself not that high and not that low, for, "oh I'm so important". I see myself as a normal person.
(Ruth, 61, retired (former: teacher, childcare), higher vocational training)

I: what distinguishes you from the lower class?
Yes what is it… The classification is quickly made for salary, minimum income, normal income, top. But it's not that I feel elevated above others or something like that, that's nonsense. But I think I'm just average. No peaks or whatever. […]
I: and how would you classify [friend]?
Is a lawyer. Also just normal, yes just normal middle-class people. They have to work to live, can't live off their investments. […] Birds of a feather flock together, everybody's the same, in the middle class.
(Dominique, 38, contract settler, higher vocational training)

Nonetheless the range of diversity differed according to one's socioeconomic position—the network indeed offered a frame of reference. Maureen, for example, is low-educated and unemployed and she also saw herself as middle class:

My level is not really high but not low. […] I went to school in Cape Verdi, not here because I had children early, but even so I would not be in the low, also not in the high but also not in the low.

I: what kind of people are in the lower class?

People like [acquaintance] because he can't read. But he does his work, he has pay. He takes care of his family, so I don't say that he's low because he's stupid but you know [with regard to] school he is [lower class].

I: you had more schooling than he did?

Yes, because [in Cape Verdi] I had fourth grade. So I don't have a good school, good education, but when I get a letter than I can read it myself.

(Maureen, 37, unemployed (former: cleaning), primary education)

In other words, people perceived themselves as middle class not so much because their network is class-homogeneous (and people thus fail to recognize class differences) but rather because they contrast themselves with people of higher and lower class positions, finding themselves 'in the middle'—sometimes translated as average or ordinary—and thus middle class.

A second explanation for why people regarded themselves and most of their network members as middle class is that people felt uncomfortable with talking about class hierarchy—rather than talking about class as such. For some, classifying others was perceived as judging others and judging is not done. Jannie for example had great difficulty with talking about class:

[Heavy sigh] … I find that so difficult.

I: why is that?

Well… what do you think about the one and what do you think about the other, that's what you're asking.

(Jannie, 58, unable to work (former: dry cleaning), lower vocational training)

But feeling uncomfortable about class did not necessarily mean that people would refuse or were not able to classify. Jannie, albeit hesitantly, classified herself as middle class because 'I can go along with both [lower and higher classes]'. Further, as we will see later, Jannie talked about class differences in speech and clothing. Riet refused to classify although she, unwillingly, acknowledged a class hierarchy:

Well my father was a market gardener, used to have his own business, so I do know what class difference is, so, but no, I say, you have to accept someone as he his, and you shouldn't say like, well he went to study or whatever, why should I

care that he went to study, everybody is allowed an own opinion, and should be honest about his opinion, I think that's important, and whether you're the Queen or you're a country bumpkin that doesn't matter, you have to accept someone as he is.

(Riet, 62, retired (former: shop assistant), secondary education)

This example is telling because Riet denies that class matters for one's 'worth' but makes her point by referring to two extremes of class hierarchy—the Queen and a country bumpkin—thereby acknowledging that this hierarchy exists.

According to Daniel, class is about 'financial position' and 'cultivation' (by which he means speech, manners, literature, art, view of society), but after classifying himself (middle class for financial position, higher class for cultivation) and several of his network members along these lines Daniel breaks in on the conversation:

I feel it's rotten to classify them all.
I: why do you feel that's rotten?
Well, I have great difficulty doing it, I don't like to, you can, in my view you declass someone, you don't classify. I don't like that, I'd rather not do that with friends, no.

After explaining why I am asking these questions, and that I am interested in perceptions of differences, I ask him whether he thinks there are class differences at all and he replies:

Oh yes, on various domains. I think that a lot of people who watch SBS6 [commercial channel] every evening behave differently and have a different pattern of spending, book a different kind of holiday than people who in the evenings read a book, who have a broad social life.
(Daniel, 43, ICT manager, higher vocational training)

This is an example of the ambivalence that Savage and colleagues found (2001) except that Daniel is not reluctant to (self-)classify but feels uncomfortable with doing so. There were other examples. Someone apologized for sounding 'pedantic' when saying she thought of herself as 'intellectual'. One respondent, also after classifying herself and family members (as middle and higher class), replied to my next question as follows:

I: do you know people who you would classify as lower class?

Well I think, I don't like to categorize people, I think in any case everyone should live like he pleases to and of course I know people who live on welfare and that is indeed counting every penny, of course, so I think yes compared [to them] I'm doing fine, so yes, but therefore they are not a lesser person of course.

(Anita, 58, management assistant, secondary education)

Anita did not feel uncomfortable until she had to talk about people of lower class position, suddenly concerned with not wanting to judge people or looking down on them. When people felt uncomfortable about class and classifying, it was mostly about not wanting to judge others—not declassing others, stressing that everybody should be treated as he or she is, that everybody is of equal worth.

A second explanation for the tendency to classify people in one's network as similar to oneself (often as middle class because people often self-classify as middle class) thus may be that people claim 'ordinariness' in an attempt to repudiate the class hierarchy (Savage et al., 2001). This claim is linked to what Savage et al. term the 'omnivoric refrain': people should be treated the same regardless of their position (2001: 887).[4] This 'refrain' may also be used to say that it is incorrect to judge others, for example by placing them in a higher class or, particularly, lower class. By saying that others have a lower status, people may feel that they are judging and feel superior over others, while by saying that others have a higher status they have to 'admit' that they are inferior and thus may feel the need to say that these others have no right to look down upon them. The above-mentioned excerpts support that people feel ill at ease when talking about class. People's classification of themselves and their network as middle class may be a strategy to avoid this discomfort. The interviews demonstrate that people are aware of differences and their feelings of discomfort can be read as acknowledging—even if deemed undesirable—of class hierarchy. When people said their network members were of a lower class position they often felt they need to apologize or to somehow nullify the class hierarchy, as we will see.

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[4] I'm not sure that this term covers what people may intend to say—the term 'omnivoric refrain' is grounded in the idea of cultural elites appreciating not just highbrow activities but also middlebrow and lowbrow; appreciating a range of activities is however not necessarily the same as saying that everybody should be treated equally.

5. The complexity of class

People applied a variety of criteria and talked about different aspects of class (cf. Payne and Grew, 2005; Devine, 1992). Almost everybody mentioned income or an income-related aspect (job position, being on welfare, being able to buy a dwelling, being self-sufficient) as a class-signifier. The recognition that various aspects played a role in one's class position made that people sometimes struggled with defining the boundaries of class categories, or find it hard to classify people. Kristel, for example, classified mainly according to income (she classified herself as lower class because she has debts) but when I asked her about what kind of people are in the higher class she points at the 'complexity' (her phrase) of the question:

> High class you can of course formulate in two ways. In the first place I think about posh and swell, and, well those who have a real office job and that sort of thing, well I totally don't fit in with them. Middle [class] I feel is a more normal kind of person and lower [class] I think than you have a bit more difficulty getting by, well that's why you also become more forward, a bit more asocial, because you have to in order to get your stuff.
> (Kristel, 31, homecare worker, secondary education)

She thus applies two criteria: income-related and behaviour (posh, swell as opposed to forward, asocial). Other dimensions of class that were weighed against income were for example education or intelligence, experience of life and position in society. I already mentioned Daniel, who mentioned aspects of financial position and cultivation. Willem (45, academic education) self-classified as middle class in socioeconomic terms but as higher class in terms of his position (minister of a church) and his 'leading role in society'. Dominique (see above) pondered about whether the high class is characterized by wealth or intelligence, 'because the wealthiest people don't at all have to be intelligent'. This ambiguity about class is on the one hand a consequence of the complexity that people perceive (cf. Payne and Grew, 2005), recognizing that not everything can be neatly classified: there are always exceptions.

On the other hand, complementary variables (complementary to income and education) were used to 'upgrade' or 'downgrade' people to higher or lower classes. Sometimes low-educated or unemployed network members were 'lifted' to middle class status based on other criteria, like self-development and life experience. Hafida for

example classifies herself as middle class based on her education and her involvement in 'family and work and society'.

> I: And [how would you classify] your sister-in-law?
> Half low, half middle, but not really low and not really middle. Because often she is not aware of certain things. And not really consciously involved with certain things.
> I: what kind of things for example?
> Parenting for example, I think that is very important. Parenting, health, certain things that happen in society. […]
> I: and your mother?
> My mother has never been to school, not in Morocco and not here. She does understand a bit of Dutch. […] Well, so she didn't go to school, so I wouldn't assess her highly. But it's also not like she doesn't know what she's talking about, we definitely learn a lot from her. I would also assess her middle [class].
> I: okay, and that is because she knows a lot.
> Yes, she knows a lot, she has lots of experience.
> (Hafida, 35, nurse, higher vocational training)

Hafida's sister-in-law is of lower class position, but her mother, who has no education at all, is middle class. Another example:

> I: do you know people of lower classes? And what kind of people are they?
> For example [friend], did not study much, she did not have much opportunities, but she is a person that developed herself, is open towards things, learns things, reads, and knows of things, and is interested.
> I: is she then not lower class?
> … no I wouldn't say so despite that she is has little with respect to finances
> I: so for education and finances she is lower class but for how she is, or how she…
> Performs, then I can't say she is lower class. And also not [for] behaviour.
> (Ruth, b. 1947, retired (former: teacher, childcare), higher vocational training)

> I: [A neighbour-friend] tends to simply follow the herds when it comes to politics and… but psychologically and because of his work experience or his life experience, then I estimate him similar to me, yes middle class, if you have to

make that classification. […] So you have people who are all very social but for the way in which they socialize are in the lower class, a bit simpler and unpretentious, and [those who] psychologically through life experience nevertheless have risen actually, that they have more insight through experience. (Wibbe, 48, self-employed building inspector, lower vocational training)

The complexity of class was sometimes invoked in order to 'downgrade' higher class people (based on income or status) to a lower class. Recall Riet, who talked about the Queen and a country bumpkin:

I: so the Queen is not necessarily higher class?
No! Who knows maybe she is very asocial, that's also possible, you can never know can you?

People thus not only claimed ordinariness of themselves but also of others: they may be extraordinary with regard to one aspect (e.g. wealth) but with regard to other aspects (e.g. intelligence, behaviour). When I asked Cees about the higher class, he talked about the nouveau riche and famous:

In the past you had of course something like noblesse oblige so you were supposed to contribute to society. That's something that lacks completely, it's all for themselves, everyone pretends to be their own Sun King and show palace and stuff, all showing off, no content, no contribution. […]
I: and they are not necessarily higher class?
They have too little to show for, they're on to a certain trick through which they can earn an absurd amount of money […] So when I see Wibi Soe… what's his name[5] play the piano I think, well, he has very elastic fingers, but further he contributes nothing. What does he develop, what does he do, except play the piano, like a football player who does tricks and smiles.
(Cees, 61, self-employed in trade and pension funds, academic education)

The higher class, according to Cees, is not just those who have a lot of money but also those who contribute to society. After classifying the rich and famous as higher class, Cees

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[5] Wibi Soerjadi, a famous Dutch pianist.

nullified their higher position by claiming that 'they have nothing to show for'—they are nothing more than people who are not that rich and famous. This could be understood as an attempt to 'flatten' the class hierarchy.

6. 'Classed' class-talk

In this last section I examine how talking about class and class differences may itself be 'classed' (Reay, 2005: 913-4; Kuipers, 2006). Savage and colleagues (2001) find that people with 'cultural capital' were more reflexive about the idea of class, while those lacking cultural capital 'felt threatened by the idea of class and lacked the cultural confidence' to either self-classify or reject the class-label. I would argue that lower-educated people are not necessarily more threatened by class-talk but indeed lacked the knowledge and the confidence to talk about class and class differences. In a comparison of Mass-Observation respondents in 1948 and 1990, predominantly higher-educated middle-class people, Savage (2007: 5.6) observes that people 'use class talk reflexively to show their sophistication' (whereas respondents in 1948 saw talking about class as vulgar). Kuipers (2006) finds that higher-educated people not only knew of a greater number of comedy shows on Dutch television, they also were more confident in rejecting 'lowbrow' shows— even when their knowledge about these shows was largely lacking or out-dated. Rejecting, distinguishing and looking down upon other ways of life and practices require that people know—or at least think they know—about other ways of life and practices (Kuipers, 2006). In other words it requires 'cultural confidence' which in turn is made possible by cultural capital (Devine and Savage, 2000: 196).

Three patterns can be distinguished. Firstly, some people understood class mostly in terms of income and income-related aspects (whether someone can buy a house, spending pattern, whether one has a car or expensive stuff) and grounded class-differences largely in differences in income. These were mostly lower-educated respondents (secondary school, lower vocational training). Secondly, some people grounded class differences in socioeconomic variables (income, job position, education) but included also several additional markers of class, such as life experience, speech and clothes. Thirdly, some grounded class differences in socioeconomic variables (income, job position, education) and included practices such as cultural and 'broad' interests, whether one reads a book or watches TV, interest in music and art, and what kind of holiday one likes—all markers of whether one is 'educated' (developed, informed) or of 'lifestyle' rather than mere socioeconomic position. The third response-pattern was exclusive for

higher-educated respondents (higher vocational training and academic education). However, not all higher-educated respondents fitted into this category, suggesting that it is a segment of the middle class that perceives class differences based on classed practices.

Here are two examples of people who categorized solely on income and income-related aspects:

I: can you explain why you see yourself as middle class?

Because we both [respondents and her husband] have a job and we make reasonable money, so I think we're doing okay […]

[about her neighbour:] well he always looks proper, so I think, and it's a owner-occupant house so I assume he can pay for it, so he will be middle class I think, yes […]

I: do you know people who are in a higher class?

Yes

I: what kind of people are they?

Well, they are more… well, for example my sister en friends of hers, […] they are a bit, a director and that kind of thing so yes that is the higher class

(Anita, 58, management assistant, secondary education)

I: [introduction question], how would you classify yourself?

I wouldn't know, middle class I guess?

I: what do you think class is about?

I really wouldn't know, think just whether you live in a private or rental house, drive an expensive or cheap car, that kind of thing, I don't know

I: so it has to do with what kind of stuff you have, where you live?

I think so, with what you can and can't pay for.

(Jeffrey, 33, refuse collection, secondary education)

Riet, who refused to self-classify, talked about how she 'knows' class differences because her father used to have his own business (see above), when I asked her for clarification she talked about how people 'labelled' her father as 'affluent' because he would have had a higher income, while they had no car, whereas others in the same business owned a 'fat Mercedes'—'boasting'—and her sister, who also owner her own business had 'two cars, speedboats'. Here class differences are experienced and described in terms of property—the 'have nots' versus the 'have lots'.

Some people added a few more aspects to class (second pattern)—such as Wibbe, talking about life experience, Hafida, talking about taking an interest in parenting, health and schooling, and Willem, seeing class position as on the one hand income and on the other one's role in society. Another example is Jannie's classification—who I described earlier as someone who had difficulty classifying because she felt she was judging others. Nonetheless she talked about how she saw class differences among the customers of the dry cleaner's where she had worked most of her life:

> I: did these people [posh] come into the dry cleaner's?
> Yes all sorts of people.
> I: and could you see or hear that someone was [posh], how did you see that?
> Sometimes you could, sometimes not. How they are dressed, how they talk. Usually the clothes, or what they brought in. […] It's usually also their attitude. And well, just, it's getting less and less, you used to have fur coats and that sort of thing, you don't have that anymore. […] Different use of language usually. Yes… the shoes will show also, but that's again another factor.

Finally, a third pattern of class-talk was characterized by referring both to socioeconomic variables and markers of 'taste' or lifestyle. Daniel, for example, made a distinction between spending your evenings watching a commercial channel or reading a book and having a broad social life (see above). Watching TV came up several times, and reading:

> I: what does higher class mean for you, you think you might belong to the higher class?
> Yes, I get the feeling that that is about, when you tick the boxes [of a survey], HBO[6], academic study, above-average income, but also things like, maybe the neighbourhood where you live, or, well a bit the cliché images really […] Maybe just a bit more educated, like…
> I: like what?
> Well educated in things like, questions like: do you read a book once in a while, do you read the newspaper, do you watch the news, are you aware of what is happening in the world?
> (Madu, 30, creative therapist, higher vocational training)

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[6] Higher vocational training

[About a neighbour-friend] Well, she will read other types of books than I do. She reads for example 'an angel on your shoulder' or something like that. More like esoteric books or self-help books or something like that. A profound novel of a Japanese writer, you wouldn't please her with that.

I: and it would please you?

Yes, I would, I welcome a bit of challenge.

(Liesbeth, 35, coach communication skills, academic training)

Madu refers to survey-questions and seems to say that it is not her categorization, but it actually she interprets these practices (reading, watching the news) as class-related. Liesbeth perceives reading self-help books as not such a 'challenge' (intellectually) compared to what she would read (while we might also say that reading self-help books are challenging because the aim is to gain insight into yourself..).

Note furthermore that people are not necessarily accurate in describing practices of people or lower class position. Sometimes the differences between cultural practices were described in a rather stereotypical way, for example contrasting a concert of Frans Bauer (a famous Dutch folk singer) with the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. This supports the idea that higher-educated people are more 'culturally confident' in rejecting certain practices—practices about which they not necessarily know a lot (Kuipers, 2006). These descriptions of what other people like or don't like (in the perception of respondents) further show that the culturally confident apparently felt the need to distinguish themselves from these practices—stressing perhaps a better 'taste'.

Finally, sometimes it was experienced as puzzling that people had in one respect the 'right' taste while in other respects the 'wrong' taste. Carlo describes the people in his neighbourhood:

Most people, young people who come to live here are fairly successful, also with work, children, can have a chat with each other. [...] Maybe also like art and that kind of thing, there are more of these types in this street, go to dance performances or are into art, culture. Everybody has something interesting or something like that, in stead of just working and watching TV. [...]

I: Your neighbours, the ones we talked about [with whom Carlo socializes], do they fit into that picture, successful, higher educated and maybe like art?

Well not all, I'm not sure about [a neighbouring couple], although they are very much into books […] I don't think they are much of a theatre visitors, while I would expect that of the others [neighbours]. Now I know that they are more common, for background, they clearly have that working class background.

I: what do they like to do, for example? What is 'common' like?

Well I sometimes wonder! [laughs] They watch a lot of TV. They are very much into books, absolutely, they both work in a book shop. But sometimes I wonder, what else do they do except for watching TV and visiting grandpa and grandma?

(Carlo, 37, information manager, higher vocational training)

The neighbours watch TV and spend time visiting their family, which is regarded as 'common', but they do like books, which fits in more with his image of the other neighbours. Here's another example:

A girlfriend of mine, she never reads a book. And yet she is a doctor! Then I think, how is that possible? In that sense it doesn't really match with the image [of higher-educated people], but that's also because I think that's important [to read books] and there are simply people who don't think that's important and that's also okay.

(Liesbeth, 35, coach communication skills, academic training)

Liesbeth finds the fact that her doctor-friend does not read books puzzling, but then seems to realize that, first, the idea of the higher-educated as necessarily literate is a stereotypical image and second, that she is imposing her standards upon others. This is another example of not wanting to judge. A final example shows how Vivien distinguishes herself from a (in her perception) lower-class colleague by pointing at the way she dresses, but then seems to correct herself and says that it's a difference in taste:

I: how do you differ from the lower class? Do you know people in of lower classes?

Yes many. You can't have deep conversations with them. [Friend] and I for example we never put on make-up, people from the lower class have make-up.

I: are there people of the lower class who are your friend?

No, but the assistant of the church [where respondent volunteers] always has make-up, I really have a good bond with her but she's not of the same… […] And

she is more, I don't know, different clothes also, really different way of, I would never want to wear her clothes.

I: what kind of clothes?

More chic clothes, more open here [gestures towards her bosom] and a bit, not really sporty, you know, a skirt, always elegant […]

I: she also dresses elegant, you said?

Yes but too much, a bit too much. Actually it's not my taste, I'm more sporty, practical, I do everything by bike, can't wear a skirt, I'm more attached to practical than to pretty.

(Vivien, 50, GP/doctor, academic education)

7.   Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was twofold. First, I wanted to examine how people's ideas about sameness and difference may be rooted in ideas about class-based practices. The second aim was to explore whether the class talk of the urban middle class reveals openness towards otherness. My interest is not so much in whether class-talk 'proves' that class, class differences and class hierarchy exist, but rather in the ways in which people talk about what they believe are class characteristics and classed practices. The interviews show that for some class is about income differences, whereas for others class is about different practices—what kind of books people read, whether one watches TV, or what kind of clothes one wears. Although it does not necessarily mean that people actively categorize people on the basis of class position in everyday life, it does support the view that perceived differences in practices (sometimes based on very little and superficial information) play a role in how people assess others—as 'people like us' or as 'others'— and consequently perhaps in structuring interactions. People were willing to talk about these perceived differences under the heading of 'class', but perhaps if I had labelled it differently these narratives would have come up too. Hence I am not suggesting that class as such is an important aspect of people's identity. Rather, people recognize differences in daily practices and they seem to agree that these practices are attached to a certain category of people (whether we call it a class or something else).

I have furthermore suggested that these different readings of class may be 'classed' themselves—the people who talked about different practices (as opposed to income differences) are all higher educated. I am not sure whether this means that they

are more exclusionary in their social identification with others. Perhaps they are just more articulate or more knowledgeable about what class as a scholarly term means (but then we perhaps would also expect a bit more reflexivity on the implications of class differences). On the other hand, and this links to the second aim of this paper, the fact that they bring it up may point to a need to show that one can be articulate about it (see Savage, 2007), that one rejects these practices (see Kuipers, 2006), or that one is different from other people. All can be sees as strategies of distinction. Distinction is however not to be read as intolerance, and I am certainly not suggesting that those who talked about classed practices are less tolerant than those who talked about class differences merely in terms of income. I am suggesting that an emphasis on distinctive practices supports the idea that a certain segment of the urban middle class—what would perhaps include the creative class—are seeking to live in 'a place where they can construct and validate their identities as creative people' (Florida, 2002: 242). Their openness to difference and like for diversity may be more a distinctive characteristic in itself than something that is actually practiced in daily life.

Although many people are willing to self-identify in class-terms and talk about class differences, even categorize their network members—and that in a society where the word 'class' is notably absent in public and political discourse—, the interviews show that people are aware of the complexity of class and feel uncomfortable with recognizing class hierarchy. I reject the idea that people see themselves as middle class because they are not aware of a class hierarchy or inequality; rather, I argue that people self-classify as middle class because they perceive that they are 'in the middle' with people doing better in a higher class and people who are doing worse in a lower class.

A second reason for placing oneself (and network members) in the middle class might be that people feel uncomfortable with placing themselves and others in a hierarchical order. Not surprising considering the 'affective aspects' of class:

> … resentment, defensiveness, guilt and shame characterize different class positions […] However, there are other emotions—envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment and pity that also contribute to the affective lexicon of class […] feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversion and the markings of taste (Reay, 2005: 913).

The interviews demonstrated several strategies for 'flattening' the class hierarchy: claiming that everybody is equal and thus the same; referring to the complexity of class

(multiple characteristics on the basis of which one is 'assigned' to a class) to upgrade and downgrade people to a higher or lower class; and seeing different practices as a matter of different taste. Although people seem to want to deny the class hierarchy, these strategies at the same time confirm their recognition of the hierarchy. Those who were more 'culturally confident' were not necessarily more confident about acknowledging a class hierarchy.

The idea of 'high' is often associated with 'better' and 'desirable', 'greater freedom', and 'strength' (Goudsblom, 1986). Goudsblom further argues that 'with the help of words, people try to define their relationships with one another'. On the one hand, recognizing differences in 'higher' and 'lower' points to ways to identify and disidentify; refuting the hierarchy, on the other hand, may point to an awareness of the 'pecking order'. Some scholars are worried that 'a failure of recognition—misrecognition—of certain groups' would have negative consequences for the distribution of material and cultural resources (Lawler, 2005: 799). This makes an investigation into class-talk relevant, although we cannot be sure how words relate to deeds. Nevertheless, in this light, the findings of this paper are both worrying and reassuring. Reassuring, because people are (to a certain extent and in some way) aware of a class hierarchy; worrying because it is at the same time denied or, even more worrisome, accepted as depending on 'taste'. Lawler (2005: 803) describes how class is cast 'as a problem of working-class people's behaviour and identities' (…) The poor are vilified here, not explicitly for being poor, but for having the wrong kind of life (too much TV?) and the wrong kind of identity (ignorant, desperate and inept)'. Further research could shed more light on how the recognition of classed practices relates to more political viewpoints of redistribution.

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Appendix

Respondent	Age	Educational level	Occupation (WW=unemployed)
Anita	58	Secondary education	Management assistant
Bernadette	51	Higher vocational training	Middle management
Carlo	37	Higher vocational training	Information management
Cees	61	Academic education	Trade and pension fund (self employed)
Daniel	43	Higher vocational training	ICT manager
Dominique	38	Higher vocational training	Contract settler
Els	39	Higher vocational training	Social worker
Hafida	35	Higher vocational training	Nurse
Hendrik	59	Academic education	WW (teacher, doorkeeper, factory, valuer)
Jannie	58	Lower vocational training	WW (dry cleaning)
Jeffrey	33	Secondary education	Refuse collection
Kareem	38	Secondary education	Environment inspector
Kristel	31	Secondary education	Homecare worker
Liesbeth	35	Academic education	Coach communication skills (self employed)
Maarten	31	Academic education	Policy advisor
Madu	30	Higher vocational training	Creative therapist
Maureen	37	Primary education	WW (cleaning)
Mirjam	34	Secondary education	Housewife
Petra	31	Academic education	Legal council
Riet	62	Secondary education	Retired (shop assistant)
Rosita	49	Lower vocational training	WW (administrative)
Ruth	61	Higher vocational training	Retired (teacher, childcare)
Stefan	40	Academic education	Consultant
Umaima	39	Lower vocational training	WW (administrative)
Vivien	50	Academic education	GP/doctor
Wibbe	48	Lower vocational training	Building inspector (self employed)
Willem	45	Academic education	Minister church