

# Half a mile or a world apart? A systemic duoethnographic inquiry into our experience of social class in the UK

Julia Evans & Kevin Hall

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**Abstract**

These reflective auto-biographical /ethnographic pieces are based on experiences of social class during our childhoods. We go on to reflect upon these from our current perspectives within the UK public sector. Born in 1975, we grew up living half a mile apart from each other in Kings Norton, Birmingham. We met as teenagers and were reacquainted in our 40s. Our childhoods were worlds apart from the perspective of social class and social deprivation. We see these same class divides in our everyday encounters in our work contexts. This paper emerged from conversations regarding our contrasting experiences and explores how reflecting on social class may impact upon practice. The article uses a duoethnographic and systemic inquiry methodology and we use a method we have devised for the purpose called a “ripple effect” to reflect on each other’s writings. There is so much we would have liked to expand further upon in this paper. Through the writing we have recognised many further directions that the discussion could have moved in, leaving room for further debate.

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**Citation Link**

You will never understand  
How it feels to live your life  
With no meaning or control  
And with nowhere left to go  
You are amazed that they exist  
And they burn so bright  
Whilst you can only wonder why

(Common People – Pulp, 1995)

The UK Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency is being interviewed on the BBC (13.05.2022). He talks about “levelling up” and then comments on the Downing Street parties which contravened pandemic lockdown regulations at a time when no-one was allowed to socialise or be with loved ones who were ill or dying. “A non-story”, he says dismissively with a deadpan expression. He attempts to move the conversation swiftly on. He then says that 90,000 civil service job losses are being made.

Another Member of Parliament, during the same week, speaks about the British public needing to “begin making sacrifices.” We wonder what they think a large proportion of the British population have been doing for the past 10 years. The U.K. cost-of-living crisis is having a significant impact on household’s budgets and yet conversations about social class seem to have disappeared from the agenda. An individualist narrative speaks more loudly than ever. The complexity of the impact of poverty and social deprivation remains simplified and reductionist. The quality of air you breathe, the number of books in your home, your life expectancy, your weight, clothing, diet, educational achievement... the list goes on... all have an association and relationship with your social status. In a context where we are discussing the importance of decolonisation, challenging the UK class system is an appropriate subject for debate. As Orwell states in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, “the essential point about the English class-system is that it is not entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a money-stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts” (Orwell, 1937, p.67). Written in 1937, yet so much of this quote continues to resonate.

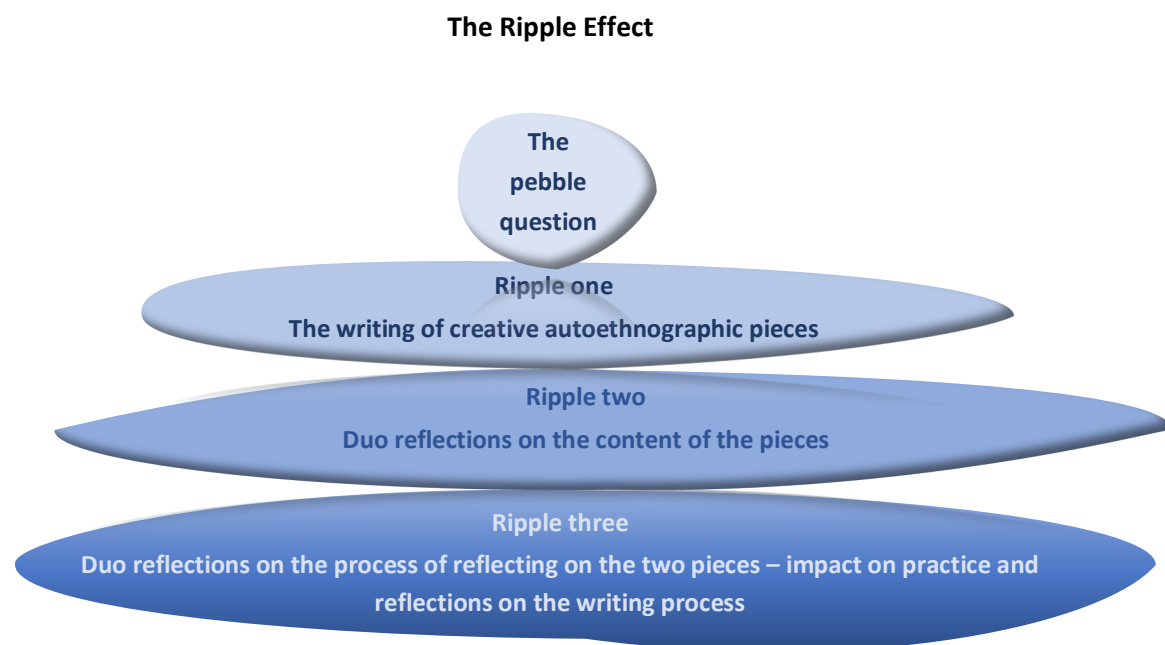
## Methodology

We have chosen to explore the relevance of social class in our current contexts, using duoethnography with systemic inquiry. Duoethnography describes a conversation “between people and their perceptions of cultural artifacts that generates new meaning” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.2). Like autoethnography, it differs from biography with its aim to address sociological phenomena, power differentials and inequalities. Duoethnography is polyvocal, dialogical, and attends to, and learns from the story of the other (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Bakhtin (1984) describes the multiple voices we speak from when in dialogue with another. Thus, a duoethnography carries many more voices from that of the two authors. We all contain multitudes (McNamee, 2003). We are reminded of Bateson’s thoughts on double description. He uses the metaphor of binocular vision with the two eyes having different perspectives constructing a three-dimensional view (Bateson, 1978, p.79-81). Possibly an insect’s compound eye would be another metaphor with its ability to detect motion. Duoethnography may enable us to hear stories across time and in relation to another, with multiple lenses. John Burnham refers to the kaleidoscope of “non-symmetrical, sometimes colliding vision of relations between socially produced differences” (Burnham, 2012, p. 144).

Systemic inquiry is the methodology underpinning this discussion. It’s responsiveness to feedback and news of difference (Bateson, 1978) lends itself well to a creative writing paper. Systemic inquiry recognises the inherent fluidity, flux, interconnectivity, and relationality of life. It doesn’t seek to generalise but recognises unique outcomes and multiple descriptions (White & Epston, 1990). Creative writing has the potential to pay attention to language, narrative, human relationship, and material description simultaneously. A relational reflexivity that extends beyond human systems can

be explored and moved between with ease in creative autoethnography. We notice our responses to the world around us, attune to them, use feedback to make choices about how we orientate ourselves in order to make ethical, social and cultural choices (Etherington, 2004, Burnham, 2005). We feel aligned with Gail Simon's comment that, "Much has been written about Self and Other but there appears, to my systemic eye, to be some space in the research field to explore the dynamic elements in relationships between researcher and research participants. Descriptions of this relationship are either minimal, or sound as if participants are separate static entities" (Simon, 2014, p.23).

To maintain a sense of dialogue, we are going to explore the theme with a methodology we have devised called "The Ripple Effect". We have used the analogy of a pebble being dropped into a pond, and the ripples that follow.



The "pebble question" for our inquiry is: *"What are your key memories relating to social class, and its relationship to social deprivation, in Birmingham when growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. How do you feel it has impacted your systemic practice?"*

**The first ripple** involves each author writing an autobiographical creative piece with this question in mind. Whilst being a monologue on the one hand, the two pieces are also binocular. In this instance they describe contrasting and complementing lives in the same geographical area and era. The telling of a story is embedded in culture, temporality, and identity. Being embedded in culture, narratives have ability to challenge and highlight systems of power. "Performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal" (Pelias, 2005, p. 240). We are particularly mindful of Cronen and Pearce's LUUUTT model (1990) where stories unheard and stories untold may be forgotten or fade into the background with other narratives privileged, remembered, and brought to the fore.

**The second ripple** is the dual reflection on the **content** of the two pieces of writing with the question reflecting on how reading the monologues impacts your systemic thinking. The ripple effect utilises the ideas of Andersen's reflecting team creating a meta-position (Andersen, 1987). This allows us to reflect upon the narrative and create an "ecology of ideas" (Bogdon, 1984) which "make life an ongoing changing process" (Andersen, 1987, p. 1). There could be many more ripples here creating reflections upon reflections creating further levels and depths of meaning.

**Finally, the third ripple** is a reflection on the **process** of reflecting upon the writing. Through this ripple we explore the possibilities and limitations of the methodology, alongside reflections of the binocular and dialogical nature of writing from a polyvocal perspective. The third ripple attempts to take a meta position on the content of the reflection, reflecting on the political and relational significance of this conversation. Through this we consider some of the possibilities for further exploration around class given that, "There is no neutral space from which we write or from which we read. As well as our past experiences we bring our present locations and the immanence of futures that are opaque and, that offer multiple possibilities" (Gannon, 2022 p. 42).

## Ripple 1

We have suggested a soundtrack to accompany the reading of this. A song signifying the backdrop to that memory played in our respective homes / contexts at that time.

### ***Kevin - (Song – West End Girls – Pet Shop Boys)***

The creamy beige of the middle class.

I can remember the smell of the carpet: a non-descript clean of the Shake and Vac adverts. It wasn't a smell that was masking an unpleasant odour. It was just cleanliness: a kind of cleanliness that hung gently in the air and characterised every room. Even the carpeted bathroom smelled the same. This immaculate deep pile was the creamy beige of the middle class, preserved by invisible rules that they all intrinsically knew. For example, you had to take your shoes off when you went into the house. My socks were dirty, so I didn't want to take my shoes off.

I would have been in year 7 so I would have been 11. When I went into secondary school, I was in all top sets: groups made up of what you would class as "nicer kids" generally. This was how Stephen and I met. At that time, I lived on a council estate in Northfield. It was the sort of place that people spoke about. People who didn't live there would recoil at the name it.

When me, my mom and my sister Gemma became homeless, we went to stay with my aunty who lived on the estate. The three of us shared a room there. It was my Mom's sister, so she put us up. It was really fucking grotty; the house was a first-floor maisonette with three bedrooms. I remember vividly the first night we stayed there; mom told me to go out and see if I could find someone to "play" with. I went out and found a couple of lads. Of course, we didn't play, but we were chatting. It was the sort of aimless interaction boys that age have. Climbing walls, wandering the estate, getting the measure of each other. One told me to turn around, and his mate pissed all over me. It felt like smack in the face. Welcome to this estate.

In fact, piss was somewhat of a feature of that time in my life.

Soon after we moved in, my aunty and her two children got a rental in Weoley Castle a few miles away. The landlord of the pub that she worked at owned a house and they started renting it. So, my mom used money from the sale of our house on the new place. She spent some of it carpeting the rooms in cheap, brown nylon and some of it on Charlie, a ginger neutered tom cat who was a dopey, kind cuddlable comfort. He was part of the family: a warm thing to have around in a really cold environment. Mom was never that fond of him but Gemma, me and my cousins were. There wasn't much that brought us together as a family, but Charlie wove a connection between us all, enabled us to think not about ourselves but something separate from us that we all cared about and liked. Families disagree and argue but the cat was separate from that, sacred. So much so, that when I buried him in the garden years later, I wrapped him in a thick, black rubble sack so his body is still there. Somebody ran him over.

The door that opened into the maisonette took a sharp right turn and there were really quite steep stairs to the next floor. There was a routine that regularly played out at the top of those stairs. When mom and I argued, I'd run off to the bottom of the stairs; I knew she wouldn't be able to follow me because she knew that if she came down those stairs I'd run out of the door, and she wouldn't be able to catch me. It was not so much a game as a battle strategy but because of my age I was delaying an inevitable conclusion.

She'd say, "get back up here!"

I'd say, "you're not going to hurt me, are you?"

She'd fix a smile that showed her teeth and glare at me, anger emanating, fooling nobody.

"You're not going to hit me, mom?"

"No."

It was reassurance, but I already knew that the only way back in was with a slap. She used to grab my hair. That was her tactic and it worked. By grabbing a handful of the hair of somebody much smaller than you, any attempts to escape just hurt the victim even more. I learned to adjust my mindset in response to physical pain. In the end, I knew that it wouldn't last long, and within half an hour it would be forgotten about.

If you turned left, there was a small redundant space. This section at the bottom of the stairs became Charlie's litter tray; he used it as a toilet. The first few times he did it, it was cleaned by me or Gemma but then after a while the cat's bowel movements became so engrained in the cheap fabric, no amount of scrubbing and cleaning would get rid of it. Once cats designate an area for their toilet, they don't tend to cease. Eventually we just stopped scrubbing. Sometimes the cat graduated to the bath. This was easier to clean; if it wasn't too firm you could hose it down the plughole with the showerhead. It was never pleasant being greeted by a turd in the facility designed to make you cleaner, not dirtier. It didn't dawn on me until years later that, living in a first-floor maisonette, you might need a cat flap.

At Stephen's I felt like a farm animal entering a civilised household. Following the angst-ridden reveal of my grubby socks, his mother would offer me a choice of beverage from an extensive list of cordial options that then arrived in the bedroom five minutes later accompanied by after-school snacks and placed on the bedside table, nestled between a reading lamp and a bed made up with matching covers. In my house, if there happened to be anything other than water or alcohol to drink you would

simply swig it from the bottle. The fact that these cupboards were well stocked reliably, day after day after day, couldn't compare with my life back home. It was the life of a family well in order: they already knew what they were having for tea next week.

There was an orderly gentleness to Stephen that was different from the friends I'd made on my estate, even the ones that didn't piss on you. The boundaries in his life were tight and comforting. When we went up to his bedroom, he had enumerable games carefully stacked, tidily packed away, and the time we had to play them fitted neatly into his daily routine. The smell of cooking tea would politely and unobtrusively enter the room to join us as we played, and I would feel sad because I wouldn't be there to eat it.

You were never allowed in the houses of friends on the estate. I guess everyone was too ashamed of their homes. I never wanted my mom to come and collect me for a similar reason: I was really embarrassed and ashamed of her. I didn't know or understand the feeling at the time, but I felt really angry. Stephen's mom had opened a door and I realised what I was missing out on. I can see now that I was jealous and wanted to be part of a life that was closed to me, beyond the odd glimpse on a weekday afternoon.

### ***Julia - (Dexys Midnight Runners - Come on Eileen).***

When I tell people I grew up in Birmingham, it tends to be met with a "sing songy" Peaky Blinders-esque mimic "Burm-ing-um." In 47 years, no one has ever said to me "Oh, that must have been a lovely place to grow up." Yet, for my sisters and I, it was. My memories of Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s feel like they are in sepia. However, I think it truly was very brown. Most of my memories of the city centre are of tired legs shopping at dusk. My sisters, Vickie one year older and Sarah, two years younger and myself milling closely around my mum. I can still feel the wool of my grey duffle coat and the soft fur lined hood that I would always wear and tired feet in start rite shoes. As the sun dropped, Birmingham, in those days, had spectacular murmurations of starlings. We took them for granted. Maybe even more, we perceived them to be vermin. Yet at dusk they swirled and danced in their thousands over the Birmingham buildings. The ramp which led from New Street to the station heaved with crowds of people. It would have been easy to get lost. The ramp, as it was known, was where I had my first McDonalds, where worn buskers lined the tightly packed path and where, as teens, we met friends before shopping. There was a smell of chestnuts which were sold roasted. It was a treat to have a white paper bag of chestnuts before heading back on the train home. They caused our thumb nails to be sore as we prized them open, and the chestnut shells filled my duffle pockets.

I lived with my parents and two sisters in a town in the conurbation of Birmingham called Kings Norton. We lived at the top of a cul de sac, off a cul de sac, in a four-bedroom architect designed house. 45 years later, my parents still live there. Kings Norton was a town of significant class differences. By Kings Norton standards our family were, considered to be middle class. A timid small child, my memories of home are by far the happiest. Our home was safe, warm, welcoming, and fun. It was a place of order, routine, and care. I didn't notice the order at the time. However, as a mother of three children myself, I am in awe of the order my parents created. Our table laid neatly with the table mats always facing in the correct direction and cutlery placed neatly. Milk or cream in a jug. Grace at the start of the meal, and "please may I leave the table" at the end. Busy conversations where we all spoke over each other.

Sometimes giggles, sometimes arguments, it was, what I considered to be an entirely “average and standard” family life.

The nursery I attended was on an estate called “the Hawksley estate.” It was not far from our home, but it felt like it was miles away. The first memory that gives me an awareness of social class was being lifted onto a swing at nursery by one of the childcare staff. I was about 3 years of age. As she lifted me, in a warm friendly voice, she said “Come on Bab.” I distinctly remember being slightly put out and thinking I’m not a “Bab”. No one had called me that before and at 3 years of age I didn’t consider myself to be a baby anymore. I was “Jules”, a poppet or a darling; but not a “Bab”. At home by three years of age I was spoken to as a person with my own views and opinions and wasn’t babied. In fact, I considered myself quite grown up. I recall the nursery Christmas play with its Christmas trees and costumes and whilst the performance was going on, someone broke in and stole the nursery hamster. I was shocked. Why would someone break into our nursery, let alone steal the hamster? And on that day, I looked forward to being safely back home away from a world where people stole hamsters to my safe world where I was loved and where life was predictable.

Most of my recollections, at that time, centre around our home or the homes of family friends. Our road was small, with detached homes and a network of friendly neighbours. Our next-door neighbour was the Danish consulate. The Danish flag flapping in the wind was visible from my bedroom. I was impressed when I visited, and they told me that I was on Danish soil and that I wouldn’t be able to be arrested at their house. Not that I can imagine what would have caused me to be arrested! We knew everyone in the road and every car. We rode our bikes, scooted, roller skated and pushed our dolls prams around the roundabout. We kept off the grass which was neatly tended by one of the neighbours and we called for friends who lived in the cul de sac off ours. The family living over the road were antiques dealers. They drove a yellow MG and the mother’s platinum blond hair flowed elegantly. It was in their home that we danced to Come on Eileen by Dexys Midnight Runners on the record player and where pretty antiques caught my eye. I started to recognise the different shades of Middle Class. We weren’t a homogenous group and there were homes that I felt more at home in than others. Most at ease in the sprawling semis in Birmingham or Penarth, South Wales (where we also had friends). Homes with musical instruments, books, family furniture from grandparent’s homes and conversations about meaningful topics. These were places where I felt a fit and felt that I was amongst like-minded people. Familiar, safe, and able to be myself without judgment. I was learning about life, politics, tit bits of gossip, education, friendship, and care. My sisters were my best friends and with them I was learning about where we fitted into the world.

## **Ripple 2 – initial reflection on the reading of the 2 monologues – What is your response to reading the other’s monologue?**

**Kevin** - It is apparent to me that Julia’s monologue focuses on a sense of belonging and feeling secure. Feelings of discomfort or feeling unsettled are an exception and I notice most of her narrative portrays a positive life and mostly positive feelings. I recognise her description of shopping at dusk in the city centre and I remember the starlings, but my own overriding memories of that time were largely feeling hungry or bored or both. The description of the chestnuts being shelled points to a subtle but significant difference in the way we lived. Firstly, the fact that someone would consider that you might be hungry in the first place would mean you would have someone thinking about your wellbeing.

Secondly, I never ate roasted chestnuts as a child as this would have been completely outside the cultural experience of my mom and she would not have had the confidence to try something new at that point in her life. Thirdly, the eating of the chestnuts sounds as if it became customary within her family and this points to a level of consistency, certainty and joined up thinking that simply was not present in my childhood. Harlene Anderson talks about local knowledge. Julia and I lived a half a mile apart. Our cultural knowledge existed in almost entirely different frames. "Importantly, local knowledge is always context bound and developed and influenced by the background of dominant discourses and narratives in which it is embedded" (Anderson 2012, p.11). Our worlds were constructed according to different power and privilege differentials.

Her family sat at the table to eat dinner every evening and we did not have a table and rarely, if ever, ate together. We certainly would not have spoken about our day and any attempt to have done so would have felt contrived. Eating was very functional and would take no longer than necessary and the less I could talk to my mom and sister the better. In reality, we ate when food was available, and it would have been only Christmas or special occasions where we shared a meal together.

It was interesting to read Julia's reference to "mum" whereas I use the spelling "mom" and it was only relatively recently that I was made aware that people use a different spelling. The people I grew up with use the same spelling as I do, but I believe it may also be American spelling. Mum is apparently considered the correct English spelling. While I was a senior school leader, a member of the team highlighted that my spelling, "mom", was different from the usual spelling in a child's permanent exclusion letter. A relatively minor point in a 15-page chronology of tragic events spanning three years. It had taken tens of hours to write, and the only feedback was that I had spelt mum incorrectly. The feedback was given in front of a large team of mostly middle-class leaders who chortled and scoffed at the mistake. "Kevin the Brummy" was the retort, said in an over exaggerated Birmingham accent. "You sound like the character Timothy Spall played in *Auf Weidersehen Pet*" (A 1980s comedy drama about construction workers). When you are working class, you get used to making adjustments. I identify with bell hooks when she says, "To avoid feelings of estrangement, students from working-class backgrounds could assimilate into the mainstream, change speech patterns, points of reference, drop any habit that might reveal them to be from a nonmaterially privileged background" (hooks, 1994, p. 181).

One of the most apparent differences between the two lives outlined in the narratives is the lack of order in my life at that time. However, it is worth noting that this is not always a feature of working-class families that I experienced then or have experienced since. Rather it is a feature of social deprivation and I happened to be from a working-class family. My family was chaotic, disorganised, unpredictable, and poorly managed. Whilst we were not well off by anyone's standards, we certainly had enough money to be fed, but we often went hungry, and to be sufficiently clothed but we experienced the shame of having holes in our shoes and feeling the cold in winter because we didn't have warm clothes.

When I read about Julia's childhood story it reminds me of my friend Stephen's life. Interestingly, she knew his family and it is only years later that a link was made. The link here being the Christian church and she knew him from a Christian youth club they both attended, and his mom knew Julia's mom as they were both social workers. Whilst my life was a world away from their lives, I was attracted to the orderliness of it and at a deep level yearned to live such a life. I instinctively knew that this was a better way to live and far from feeling homesick when I was away from home, I felt it when I went home,



yearning for another way to live. I was aware of what was happening to me, and I knew there was something better.

**Julia** - I feel immediately struck by Kevin's language. It is harsh and poignant. Thinking of a 12-year-old in such an adult world strikes me immediately. Burying a pet cat aged 12, thinking of how best to wrap it and cleaning cat faeces from the bath. In contrast, my world was very protected. I was able to be a child.

Kevin speaks about the order of Stephen's home. That same order was familiar to me and safe. The chaos of Kevin's home was unfamiliar. I find myself reflecting on the distinctions and overlaps between class, poverty, and social deprivation. I am struck by the differences in both mothers. Kevin's mother, homeless, struggling to make a home, to make decisions and to parent with care and love. I feel both compassion and anger towards her, but also a confusion. Why did she buy a cat when she couldn't care for her children? This feels alien in a world where considered decisions were, and continue to be, my norm. She wasn't feeding her children. They never had clean bed sheets. She wasn't there at bedtime. I realise that my "logic" is unconnected from her situation and her history. I am talking from a different operating system. I remember a session with a family about 15 years ago where the mum was struggling to get her child to settle at night. As the conversation continued, she explained that the child's room was filled with clutter. She was paralysed at the prospect of clearing the rubbish, didn't have a bedtime herself and slept on the downstairs sofa. The child's bedtime routine was a distant possibility. It was a reminder that we are always talking across a cultural divide and the dialogical importance of curiosity. Every encounter "is cross-cultural in some way, even if the people we are seeing share all of our cultures and backgrounds and look the same as us" (Flaskas, 2005). I feel Cecchin's (1987) voice speaking up here and reminding us of the importance of curiosity and our awareness of our prejudices. Cushman (1991) states that "Culture infuses individuals, fundamentally shaping and forming them and how they conceive of themselves and the world, how they see others, how they engage in structures of mutual obligation and how they make choices in the everyday world." The subtle nuances of cultural class differences in the therapy room and beyond need to be attended to and challenged.

There is a theme of both of us learning to blend into our environments. We went to the same type of comprehensive school and shared an almost uncanny number of coincidental friends. We both learnt to say the right thing and to merge into our environments. We both acknowledge how useful this has been to us in adulthood. But we also both reflect on times when it meant that we didn't feel a "fit". I wonder whether this is a ubiquitous experience for children.

### **(Ripple 3) – How does the process of reflection influence your systemic practice?**

#### **Julia**

The language we have both used in the monologues and reflections has been a source of discussion between us. Maintaining cohesion whilst allowing for different language and writing styles has been a goal. There are class differences in our use of vocabulary. We spent some time discussing the appropriateness of saying "piss" in a journal article, and the importance of writing in the manner that we speak. Kevin laughs when I write "juxtapose" and "incongruent". And goes on to say it makes him prickle. To him it feels pretentious, but it is the way I speak. Another cultural divide. I am always aware

of my language and accent in the therapy room and of creating an environment where clients, both children and adults, feel able to speak authentically. Reflecting on the process of writing, I find myself worrying about the reader's impression of me. The concern of appearing that I believe being middle class is in some way superior and am conscious of hiding my roots. The desire to "fit in" emerges again, both in the process of writing and reflecting. I am struck by the "prolier-than-thou" and feel a distain about the inauthenticity of this. To deny the experiences we have had feels disingenuous and serves to devalue the experiences of others. Fox comments "Prolier-than-thou pretension is insidious....it simply reaffirms class prejudice" (Fox, 2016, p. 50). In the therapy room I am aware of being approachable and non-threatening. I am reminded of John Burnham's social GRRRAACCEEESSS in exploring the visible / invisible, voiced / unvoiced culturally determined power differentials that are present in the therapy room and in all aspects of our wider lived experiences (Burnham, 2013). Yoko Totuska discusses the "non-grabbing" aspects of the social graces as the aspects that tend to be less explored and says they "seemed to relate not only to lack of personal experiences but also to distancing due to negative experience or out of fear" (Totuska, 2014, p. 94). I wonder whether social class has at times for me been "non-grabbing", partly out of a fear of criticism, but also out of ignorance of the privileges I have benefitted from. What do I overlook, choose not to look at or consciously forget? What achievements do I claim as my personal success rather than my privilege? Writing this paper, for me, is a small step in acknowledging my part in, reflecting on, and challenging social inequality. As bell hooks stated, "I began to understand that power was not itself negative. It depended on what one did with it" (hooks, 1994, p. 187). I re-read Kevin's paragraphs. Mine was the home with the orderly boardgames, cordial and home cooked dinners. When Kevin tells me he didn't have a cutlery drawer, and they didn't own tea towels, I gain a greater insight into the chaos. Another layer begins to dawn on me. When I fitted in easily into the British education system and met my educational milestones, I received praise and positive feedback from wider systems. However, any achievement was largely related to me having the headspace, support, manners, preparation, books, uniform, pencil case, grammar, transport to school, morning routine, and more. All of these enabled me to be acceptable within the education system. Other children, who we individually pathogise more pejoratively have often not had the same supports.

When thinking about where this takes us, I've been recently wondering what systemic practice means. I sometimes think that it is thought to be practice that is "paid" or when we are operating as our professional selves. However, to be truly systemic in our practice, this relational thinking extends beyond the walls of our professional environments and is intertwined in our wider ethics. The GRRRAACCEEESSS needs thoughtful consideration outside of the therapy room. Particularly pertinent are Gail Simon's word on systemic inquiry: "We can frame the practice of systemic inquiry as caring, as involvement in the lives and communities of others, as an openness to be changed by the words and feelings of others, as a preparedness to be moved to action in and beyond the consulting room or classroom" (Simon, 2014, p. 13). We both feel strongly that this needs to be an ongoing, meaningful conversation in everyday life. Through much of the writing of this I have found myself recognising the importance of not only reflecting upon but **acting** upon social class differences. Thinking more consciously about the choices we make, the systems that we challenge and how and the comforts that we may benefit from might be at the expense of others, and thus perpetuate inequalities. How do we "own" the levelling up agenda in our own lives?

Writing together Kevin and I have worked to remain dialogical. I have wrestled with the question as to whether the contrast of two narratives speaks for itself in a duoethnography? Does contrast alone

invite the reader into a reflective process or is there something to be gained in “showing our working out”? Carolyn Ellis’ book *Final Negotiations* describes the process of writing her pioneering autoethnographic book about love, loss and chronic illness. She expresses eloquently the dilemmas of how many readers will “want more of sociology’s authorial voice, and just as many, less” (Ellis, 1995, p. 322). To what extent do we make the connections for readers, and to what degree do we allow them to build their own. Writing to “open up rather than close down conversation” (Ellis, 1995, p. 319) is key. Through the ripples does the reader gain a greater sense of the process of reflexivity? I feel that systemic inquiry allows us to see the working out: The wording and the re-wording, the toing and froing, the struggle, and the dilemma. The contrasting conversations have sparked further question, frustration, and debate for us both. We’ve debated whether we sharing too much of ourselves, or too little? Are we being too political? Our conversations have drifted to other relevant themes, and for a short paper this has been a challenge. We leave the writing with more unanswered questions than when we started.

### **Kevin**

The single most important aspect of teaching for me is the relationship developed with children in the classroom. When I think back to the best teachers I had, whilst the passion they displayed for their specialist subject was important, it is not what I normally remember about them. Rather, it is the questions they asked, how they asked them and the care they showed that enabled me to learn. In a typical “comprehensive” school it is normal to have thirty or more children varying hugely in terms of social class and other varying social factors. bell hooks talks about confronting the class system in the classroom. She states, “Significantly, class differences are particularly ignored in classrooms. From grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space - a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal” (hooks, 1994, p. 177). It is important to have an awareness of how these factors effect children. Something an effective teacher often does intuitively. However, in contexts where the bias lies in privileging middle class ways of being this permeates the classroom at every level. “There is little or no discussion of the way in which the attitudes and values of those from materially privileged classes are imposed upon everyone via biased pedagogical strategies. (hooks, 1994, p. 177). Although this was written in 1994, I would argue little has moved on around addressing social class and I feel a strong affinity with hook’s writing.

Being brought up in what I would consider to be a working-class household in Birmingham has had distinct advantages and disadvantages for me in terms of my teaching career. Early in my career I became aware, as one might expect, that there are a greater proportion of teachers from middle class backgrounds. Children are very astute and identify very quickly that I am from the same area as them or from a similar social class. Whilst I have never explicitly had a conversation regarding this with them it is evident in what they say. For example, children have consistently said things like, “You are sound sir, we understand the way you teach us” or “I like it when you teach us, you make it seem simple” or “I don’t understand what Mr. X says, he uses words I don’t understand”. Quite simply, my use of cultural references and general language does not intimidate them. I speak a language and adopt a humour with which many of them are familiar. Ken Gergen talks about the social construction of knowledge within discourse. Knowledge that is created in a middle-class world holds even less meaning for a working-class group of students. He states, “what traditional education largely provides is an array of abstractions stripped of their context of usage. They have no truth value save that

existing within those communities committed to a given paradigm. Their utility outside these contexts of usage is moot” (Gergen, 2015, p. 5). This moot utility can result in working class students being further disengaged by the lack of relevance and resonance in the texts they read and the classroom conversations.

When I was training to teach, I was criticised on one occasion by a particular teacher for use of poor grammar and this was a direct result of my social background. Coming from a generation that wasn't taught English grammar I spoke in sentences that “sounded” correct to me and was never corrected because everyone used the same language. One example was my use of the word “them”. The community I grew up in never used the word “those”. So, I we might have said “Can I have one of them” instead of “can I have one of those”. The shame of being corrected has always stayed with me and I am often overly conscious when speaking in formal situations. bell hooks also talks about distinctions between middle-class and working-class ways of being in the world and the privileging of middle-class behaviours. “Students who enter the academy unwilling to accept without question the assumptions and values held by privileged classes tend to be silenced, deemed troublemakers” (hooks, 1994, p. 179). This has really connected with my experiences in U.K classrooms.

I began teaching with the belief, somewhat naively, that education was the answer to beginning to eradicate the disadvantages present due to social class and social deprivation. Twenty years on I have been privileged enough to have the opportunity on many occasions to offer “make a difference” to the children I have taught and almost nothing is more rewarding. Whilst education is crucial in bringing about change, it is only one part of a jigsaw puzzle that would bring about change for the British working classes. It is with some optimism then that I recently read the Social Mobility Commission's report, *The Long Shadow of Deprivation*. In the report it states, “In the areas of greatest inequality, educational investment alone is not enough to remove in life outcomes between areas”. (*The long shadow of deprivation*, 2020, p. 39) This is something most teachers have always known. Your social class and the postcode in which you were born have huge implications for your outcomes in terms of life opportunities (*Levelling Up the United Kingdom*, 2022). Whilst personally I have been able to emerge from the long shadow of deprivation, it has been a battle.

A dilemma, particularly for me in the writing of this article, was the recent death of my mother and the ethics of writing about her. I describe being beaten, wearing dirty socks, and living in squalid conditions, which characterises a childhood of abuse and neglect. Whilst it is my story to tell, I have worked hard to tell “just enough” detail to ensure there is resonance with the story, place, and the characters. During the reflection I was at pains to remove some of the more intimate details that I felt were more shameful to my mother and family whilst still ensuring the narrative was authentic. Whilst it is unlikely to be read by anyone who is mentioned, it is possible, and once published it is available to read forever. Our memories are subjective, context bound and could be written from numerous perspectives. Considering how others may be implicated through the writing has been important. We've changed names and, where possible, have shown the writing to family members. We've considered whether those included would be comfortable with the presentation of them, whether they are living or dead (Ellis, 1995). With the recent death of my mother, and then writing this narrative, it has caused me to think more about the idea of people being victims of victims. It is almost certainly true that my mother will have had harrowing story to tell from her own childhood. She often referred to her own mother, once the dust had settled after a particular beating, telling me that her mother would have been more brutal. This was not much consolation to the 12-year-old me seething

in anger but helps me begin to understand that such patterns can play out over many generations. The physical assault pattern ceased with me and was not passed on to children in my care. In the writing of the narrative, I have worked to present the context of poverty, so that her parenting is seen in the context of her own challenges at the time and to enable people to view her in a more rounded way.

### Concluding thoughts

As we come to conclude this piece of writing together, the UK levelling up minister, Michael Gove is sacked, and Boris Johnson, the prime minister, resigns. What impact will this have on a fledgling levelling up programme? Where are the louder public voices in this discussion? Who cares enough about social class to challenge this system, and who does it serve for the conversation to remain quiet? Through the writing of this, the sharing of stories, and the reflections that have ensued, it has become increasingly notable to both of us the importance of meaningful, public, and passionate conversations about social class, inequality, and social deprivation. About how some children can walk whilst others must sprint to succeed in life. About the complexity of the class system in the U.K which extends far beyond the household budget, whilst not reducing the importance of this as a factor. About the importance of conversations that extend beyond binaries of “good” or “bad”? The need to explore the unique regional politics that enable class differences to persist. Exploring how our early experiences of class are carried into adulthood and every encounter. And the importance of recognising we all have unique cultural references, language, and experience. The British class system has been one of oppression with a long shadow and its effects are still being felt today (The long shadow of deprivation, 2020). This is a dialogue that has moved on little since the publications by Orwell, hooks and others. More than ever it requires public dialogue and un-defensive listening and witnessing by those with more class privilege. We finish this conversation with Wanda Pillow’s words in mind as she states, “We continue to need witnesses. We need methodological stories; records of lives lived, thought, and retold; data that compels and confuses; witnessings that confront ontological gaps and epistemological arrogances and are told with decolonial attitude and reparative love along scored, lenticular edges of responsibility” (Pillow, 2019, p. 129).

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## Author

**Julia Evans** is a systemic psychotherapist with experience of working within the NHS, local authority and third sector.

E-mail: [evans.julia@virgin.net](mailto:evans.julia@virgin.net)

**Kevin Hall** has worked as a senior and middle leader, and teacher in comprehensive schools serving, largely, deprived communities in the West Midlands. Kevin has undertaken the first year of a systemic counselling course.

E-mail: [kevinshall@hotmail.com](mailto:kevinshall@hotmail.com)

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