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How Children Negotiate and Make Sense of Social Class Boundaries

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How Children Negotiate and Make Sense of Social Class Boundaries

This article aims to understand how children in a superdiverse Western European city actively negotiate their social position. Based on in-depth interviews with children aged 11 to 13, we highlight how a diverse group of children give meaning to social inequality and assess how they position themselves towards different socio-economic groups. We argue that children not only show an acute awareness of social differences but also engage in symbolic boundary-making to secure a positive self-identity. We analyse how children describe the 'middle-class' according to their own position, to present themselves as neither rich nor poor but as 'normal' or 'ordinary'. However, as the children's narratives reveal very different life chances, they use different identity management strategies to construct their own 'ordinariness'.

Keywords: boundary work; childhood; meaning-making; social class; social identity

Introduction

Adar is an energetic eleven-year-old boy living with his two brothers, sister and parents in a two-bedroom apartment in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Antwerp, Belgium. His unemployed father, who has migrated from Kurdistan, was a taxi driver but had to quit his job because of health problems. His mother cares for the children and has never done paid work. When we ask Adar to position his family on a socio-economic ladder ranging from one (poor) to ten (rich), he chooses six.

Eleven-year-old Roos lives in a large, beautiful house in an upper-middle-class Antwerp neighbourhood. Her parents are highly educated, and she has a brother. Roos hints

that she is encouraged by her parents to fully develop her potential. In her spare time, you can find her, depending on the day's schedule, at scouts, drawing school, tennis school or at her ballet, jazz or modern dance classes. When we ask Roos to position her family on the socio-economic scale, she chooses six.

Ana is a hard-working eleven-year-old girl who aspires to become top of her class and who lives in a small apartment in Antwerp. Her aspirations are fuelled by an intrinsic motivation to achieve and she is also determined to make her parents proud, as they, she believes, came to Belgium to give her a better future. Although the Georgian family has been living in the country for seven years, they have not yet received a legal residence permit, and it is not even clear if they ever will. Because of their undocumented status, Ana's parents have to take on undeclared and thus precarious work. Her father works, as Ana describes, long hours '*in a large freezer where he has to put stickers on food, like bananas*', and her mother went back to working a few hours a week as a household help after her youngest son entered kindergarten. Ana believes that the middle of the spectrum, a five, best represents her family situation.

Indeed, although these children come from very different socio-economic backgrounds, they self-identify neither as rich nor poor but as somewhere around the middle. This finding corresponds with previous studies among both adults (Savage 2015; van Eijk 2012) and children (Kustatscher 2017; Mistry et al. 2015; Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017; Sutton 2009) which indicate that many people, regardless of background, identify this way as they aim to present themselves as 'normal', 'ordinary' or 'middle-class'. Yet, compared to race, ethnicity and gender, researchers have not examined the social construction and negotiation of class position among children in much detail, which calls for further exploration of their attitudes to and experiences of social class (Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Antwerp children aged 11 to 13, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of children's active negotiation of their social position in a superdiverse urban environment. In this context, which is characterized by high rates of ethnic diversity as well as poverty (see further), we aim to study how a diverse group of children give meaning to inequality and how they position themselves with regard to different socio-economic groups. The article is structured as follows. We highlight the state of the art and our contribution to the literature before explaining the research context and our methodology. Subsequently, we present our findings and conclude with some reflections on their broader implications and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical framework: a cultural sociological approach to children's meaning-making about social class

Decades of inquiry into class reproduction and unequal life trajectories have taught us that class position impacts not only how children are raised, but that it also affects children's well-being, peer group formation and educational outcomes (e.g. Lareau 2011; Iqbal, Neal, and Vincent 2017). For a long time, this impact of class on children has been investigated by socialisation approaches, which see children as largely 'shaped' by their environment. Yet, a growing number of researchers have criticized these approaches and shifted the focus to children's own experiences of their socio-economic status or class position (Kustatscher 2017; Sutton 2009). After all, class is both a category of practice and a category of social analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). As a category of practice, class is used by everyday actors to position themselves and others. In this paper, we focus on class as a, mostly implicit, category of practice among children. Although children seldomly use the term 'social class', an experience-distant category mostly used by social analysts, they clearly are aware of 'social class boundaries' and actively use ideas about class differences to make sense of their

own social position, of their activities, of what they share with and how they differ from other social groups.

Our article contributes to a growing literature studying children's views on social class. Most studies, however, have mainly approached children in pre-defined groups, such as 'poor children' or 'affluent children', to gauge their 'class-based experiences' (e.g. Hagerman 2018; Weinger 2000). Far less attention has been paid to how children themselves define and construct differential class positions. Yet, recently, a small but growing number of studies have aimed to tackle this empirical gap by having children themselves define which social class they believe they belong to (e.g. Feddes, Monteiro, and Justo 2014; Mistry et al. 2015; Goodman et al. 2000), and by showing how disadvantaged young people challenge dominant representations about their social class by constructing counternarratives (Reay 2004; Nayak and Kehily 2014). Children seem aware of social class hierarchies and are able to position themselves within these. Yet, research also reveals a strong middle-class bias. Mistry et al. (2015), for example, have shown that children generally refer to their own social position as 'middle-class', irrespective of their 'actual' position, and generally attribute positive characteristics to this social group (see also Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017). According to these authors, this bias may be motivated by two factors. First, children seem to describe 'the poor' and 'the rich' in such extreme terms (e.g. homeless people vs. Bill Gates) that they cannot identify with the two categories and thus choose to position themselves 'in the middle'. Second, the middle-class is generally seen as socially 'normal' or 'ordinary' and therefore probably as the most desired position to identify with.

In this article, we further analyse this 'middle-class bias' by focussing on children's ability to actively construct, negotiate and challenge perceived social class boundaries. Our research resonates with a rather diverse cultural sociological literature studying the role of meaning-making processes in class and status-group production and reproduction (Bourdieu

1984; Lamont 1992; Ollivier 2000). Although this literature is too diverse and voluminous to fully cover here (for an overview, see Lizardo 2010), we flag some important features. While most researchers in this field use a broad, Weberian idea of class – seen as an aggregate of individuals who share similar 'life chances' – cultural sociology as a perspective contrasts with sociological perspectives which focus on analysing class structures regardless of the meanings attached to them, and seldomly take into account the contingent processes of their formation and change. Rather than assuming a society-wide, fixed class hierarchy, cultural sociological research considers class position to be linked to the multi-layered and intersecting 'symbolic boundaries' of occupation, educational background, income, race, gender, and lifestyle that people draw between themselves and others in processes of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont 1992; 2000). Traditional indicators, such as occupational status or income are crucial but only one of numerous dimensions of class position and status inequality. Contemporary research attempting to study how social actors mark the boundaries between different classes mainly follows Weber and Bourdieu in keying in on culturally variable criteria for class membership (e.g. lifestyle, specific moral qualities, occupational status, cultural sophistication). Lamont (1992), for instance, famously argued that class boundaries based on moral qualities associated with socioeconomic pursuits (e.g. work ethic, strong success orientation) tend to be more salient among the American upper-middle class, while their French counterparts stress cultural boundaries. Instead of working with occupational prestige scales, Ollivier (2000) investigated how different social groups (university professors, electricians, students) each used specific criteria for evaluating occupations and drawing boundaries around occupationally based groups, in an effort to enhance their own social position and downgrade others. Social class boundaries are then not fixed but the product of continuous symbolic negotiations about which markers of class matter most (Savage 2015; Sayer 2005).

However, while much research exists on the cultural dimensions of class and differential social status among adults, little is known about how symbolic boundaries are drawn by children when talking about class differences. Yet, if we aim to conduct research with children as actors with agency, we must recognise and value their own categorization of the social world. Whereas research has shown that children define their class position primarily in terms of income and consumption possibilities (Mistry et al. 2015), there are some indications that children also draw boundaries based on symbolic markers such as morality or taste. Pugh (2009) has shown, for example, how upper-middle class children challenge the 'upper-class tastes and values' of their parents by desiring cheap, poor quality goods. By focusing on the details and nuances of children's meaning, this article aims to contribute to this literature by discussing the ways in which children strategically engage in boundary-making to secure their positive self-identity and to present themselves as 'normal'.

The Research

The data presented are drawn from two rounds of in-depth interviews with children in various Antwerp schools (see further). With more than 500,000 inhabitants, Antwerp is Belgium's second city and the largest city in the Flemish region. Although Flanders is among the EU-regions with the lowest child poverty rates, there is a strong ethnic gap: while 6% of Flemish children of EU-born parents are 'at risk of poverty', the at-risk-of-poverty rate among Flemish children of non-EU-descent is as much as 36% (Kind & Gezin 2018). The latter group is strongly represented in Antwerp, as 75% of the children under the age of ten have a migration background, many of them born in families of non-EU-descent (Stad Antwerpen 2020). Antwerp thus has a higher share of children born at risk of poverty (27%) than compared to the region of Flanders as a whole (12%) (Kind & Gezin 2018). Because of both the strong social diversity and inequality, the city is a highly interesting research context to study children's conception and negotiation of class and wealth differences. Furthermore, although

these topics have been primarily investigated within Anglo-Saxon settings (e.g. Mistry et al. 2015; Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017; Weinger 2000; Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley, and Davis 2003; Kustatscher 2017; Sutton 2009), far less is known about children's reasoning in a non-Anglo-Saxon context. It is important to address this major gap, as research indicates that people's perceptions of inequality and different social class groups are shaped by the welfare state regime, the socio-economic context and the public discourses or 'repertoires' that are available to discuss and evaluate social class (Arts and Gelissen 2001). Compared to other countries, Belgium has a social welfare system rather based on principles of 'equity' (Arts and Gelissen 2001). Others have shown how class divisions in small, Western European countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands are often minimized, misrecognized or denied. Especially adults tend to self-identify as 'middle-class', 'normal' or even as 'outside the class system' to downplay class hierarchy (Savage 2015; van Eijk 2012). All this raises the question to what extent children socialized in this specific context will use analogous schemata when discussing the differences between social classes.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

As indicated, our data have been collected with children in various Antwerp schools. Based on government statistics[i], we carefully selected six primary schools because of their social mix and location in a more or less disadvantaged neighbourhood. After the six schools had agreed to participate, we gave all sixth-grade pupils information letters and consent forms. We made accessible copies for the children and copies for the parents. Letters were translated into English, French, Arabic and Turkish for non-Dutch-speaking parents. The project was also verbally presented to all pupils and we stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in two rounds. The first round, in which we interviewed 47 children, took place when the children were enrolled in the sixth grade of primary school, and the second round, in which we interviewed a selection of 24 children, after the children's transition to secondary education, approximately eight months later. Yet, the impact of this transition is not the focus of this article and will be discussed elsewhere. The 24 children were selected for the follow-up study based on their and their parents' willingness to further participate, their social position (as interpreted by the researchers), aspirations and we also aimed for a mix regarding ethno-religious background and gender. In the second round, the school context was less central to the current analysis as the research had now become child rather than school centred.

In the first round, the children were generally 11-year-old, a few were 12-year-old (usually pupils with one-year grade retention), and one child, who has not been in the country for long, was 13-year-old. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the participants' migration backgrounds. Based on the information children provided about, among other things, their home and living conditions, parents' occupation and stories about, for example, unpaid bills, we made an estimation of the class they might belong to, making a distinction between 'middle-class' and 'lower-class' children to analyse our results. The fact that we did not know beforehand what the 'objective' social background of the pupils was, forced us to thoroughly reflect and to ask 'all the right questions', and to also use child-friendly questions to gauge feelings of deprivation. We especially focussed on indicators which are proven to be relevant for children, such as their participation in leisure activities, whether they attend school trips, if they can have friends come over, and so on (see Guio et al. 2018). The researchers' 'ignorance' gave children an open opportunity to narrate and to dramatically 'present' their social identity as they wanted to (see also Kustatscher 2017), which led to rich empirical data.

The conversations lasted between 23 and 75 minutes in the first round and between 35 and 100 minutes in the second round. Most of the presented data are drawn from the first round, in which we questioned children's perception of their own social standing and their views on different social groups. Following previous studies on children's conceptions of social class (e.g. Mistry et al. 2015; Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017; Kustatscher 2017), we focused predominantly on financial resources as children define their class position primarily in terms of income and consumption possibilities (Mistry et al. 2015). As a starting point, children were asked to position themselves on a social ladder ranging from one (poor) to ten (rich) (e.g. Goodman et al. 2000). In the first round, this 'ladder' was presented as a horizontal line ranging from poor (left) to rich (right), so that children did not had to position their families within a hierarchy. In the second round, however, the children were literally presented with a ladder ranging from poor (bottom) to rich (top). Both tools led to the same results, indicating that children's self-positioning is not necessarily distorted by the way the ladder is presented. Especially important was the meaning that children attached to their self-positioning. They were therefore asked to explain their choice, to share their views on people in poverty, rich people and people in 'the middle'. We also asked children where they would position their classmates on the ladder. In the second round, we delved deeper into these results and aimed to clarify ambiguities. Although we, for the sake of readability, use terms such as 'middle-class' in this article, sociological classifications were not used in the interviews.

Since the children could define different social groups themselves, we aimed to prevent certain existing status stereotypes from being reproduced. While this can also yield interesting findings, we have not worked with, for example, photos (e.g. of big and small houses) that need to be linked with 'poor' children, 'rich' children or children of certain ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, although the researcher showed appreciation for and

interest in children's descriptions of different social classes, she deliberately did not answer in the affirmative, telling them that their answer is 'correct' or 'accurate'. To put them at ease, children were told that they do not have to mention names of classmates they rank below or above themselves on the social ladder, unless they wanted to. Overall, children seemed to experience few problems speaking about their own or others' 'lower' position on the social ladder, as there are few negative perspectives about these social groups (see results). In addition to this, the study was also approved by the university's ethics committee.

The interviews were conducted by an Antwerp-born social upwardly minority ethnic researcher who grew up in a lower-class family herself. We believe that her sensitivity to many of the lower-class children's home situation allowed the children to freely present their own situation as 'ordinary', as the researcher was seldomly visibly 'surprised' by children's answers. Her familiarity with some forms of vulnerability allowed her to respond rather naturally to the children's answers and to gauge deeper into their perceptions. The minority ethnic children, moreover, seemed to believe in a 'shared minority background', which made them feel comfortable (see Kostet, Verschraegen, and Clycq 2021).

The interviews were fully transcribed and coded inductively. After a first analysis of the attached codes, we developed a coding scheme bringing together various relevant concepts. Children's perceptions were analysed and refined thoroughly through a repeated coding process. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, after which we translated relevant quotations into English. When additional information had been necessary to clarify quotations, information was added in square brackets. We have provided the quotes with background information on the narrator, and we clearly mention the speakers' social background according to the researchers' classification (RC) and children's self-positioning (SP), ranging from one to ten. We also include the child's age at the moment of the interview, which varies depending on the research round. As in Table 1, we clearly mention the

percentage of children in the schools receiving a study allowance (SA) and the percentage of mothers without a secondary education qualification (QM). All names are fictional.

Results

How can we understand children's tendency to position themselves around the centre of the social spectrum? In this section, we first look at the markers that inform children's self-positioning. Subsequently, we analyse children's perceptions of rich people, poor people and people 'in the middle' to analyse how they challenge class boundaries. Our analysis shows that although children from different backgrounds identify with the middle of the spectrum, they construct this position in different ways. Class differences also seem to occur in children's descriptions of 'the poor', although no major differences arise when commenting on 'the rich'. Finally, we examine how children construct, navigate and evaluate these perceived differences in their own school environment.

Positioning oneself on the social ladder

Although the narratives of our interviewed children reveal very different life chances, the vast majority self-identify as neither rich nor poor; more than four fifths of the children position themselves near the middle (range 5-7) and less than a fifth of the children position themselves nearer to the top (range 8-9). No child ascribes themselves to the richest (10) or lowest (<5) groups. Generally, children's self-positioning is informed by various markers: (1) money, purchasing power and consumption patterns, (2) source of money, (3) type of housing, (4) comments made by others and (5) social references (see also Mistry et al. 2015).

Money, purchasing power and consumption patterns are the most common markers children refer to when asked to explain their positioning. Most of our child-respondents refer to how much their families are able to afford and how long they would have to wait or save to be able to buy something. Children strongly emphasize material possessions (e.g. expensive

smartphones, branded clothes) to describe their position in the social hierarchy. A few children also associate wealth with access to opportunities, for example by pointing out that they cannot afford to engage in leisure activities, such as sports, like their classmates do. Children likewise refer to how often they can go on vacation or eat in a nice restaurant.

Because of the focus on material possessions, children who perceive that their family spend a lot of money on consumption goods, believe that they are more affluent than others, and the other way around. The children who position themselves nearer the top, believe they are 'richer than people in the middle' because of their families' consumption patterns. Hanane, for example, lives in a single-income family of seven and positions herself near the top of the social ladder:

> Researcher: 'If you look at your family, which number represents your place?'
>
> Hanane: 'Eight or nine, maybe between those two.'
>
> Researcher: 'Eight or nine, so you're richer than most people but not the richest?'
>
> Hanane: (nods)
>
> Researcher: 'Are you the richest girl in your classroom?'
>
> Hanane: (nods)
>
> Researcher: 'How do you know?'
>
> Hanane: 'My sister works, my mum works, and my brother is going to work. My [other] sister, she's almost sixteen and she'll also work. And my [oldest] sister always buys very expensive shoes if she gets money from her work. (…) She always comes home with new clothes while she already has a lot of clothes she never wears, but she keeps buying new and new and new.'
>
> (R1, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 8 or 9, SA: 68% QM: 71,5%)

As we saw, none of the children position themselves in the lower half of the social ladder. Amadou is the only child in the study who explicitly reports feelings of deprivation, although he also positions himself around the middle:

> Researcher: 'Do you feel different from the other kids [in your classroom]?'
>
> Amadou: 'Yes'.
>
> Researcher: 'In which way do you feel differently?'
>
> Amadou: 'Uhm, because… Yeah, because they have more, much more stuff than I do. [They] get to choose more than I do from their parents.'
>
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

As Hanane shows above, children also refer to work as a source of money, although to a lesser extent. A few children seem to be aware of the relative status of their parents' occupation and know their parents might earn more or less money than others do. When placing himself on the social ladder, Alexander comments:

> Alexander: 'My parents are doctors and they, yeah, they do earn a lot and… yeah, that's all I can say.'
>
> (R2, 12yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 14%)

While most children solely refer to work as a source of money, Olivia also refers to her family's assets. She states that although her single mother does not earn a lot of money, she does have enough savings which secures them a stable financial position. Olivia also refers to the capital of her, according to her, affluent grandparents. Children generally also, when placing themselves on the social ladder, mention the fact that they live in a house, which is preferred over living in an apartment. Yet, they draw no distinction between families' capacity to buy or to rent a home.

Interestingly, a few children's self-positioning is also influenced by what they hear from others, whether at home or in the peer group:

Researcher: 'Why six?'

Roos: 'Because we do have a large house, but my mum and dad also talk a lot about… I mean, about uhm… money and stuff, which I'm not supposed to hear, but I hear them.'

(R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16,6%)

Researcher: Why seven?

Olivia: 'Well that's not to be mean but uhm, it's like, many children said a few times, I don't remember exactly how it happened, but one day someone said "wooow, you're probably very rich?" I was like "no". That's because they were at my place, they were very shocked like "wow".

Researcher: How would you say your place looks like?

Olivia: It's like, for me it's just normal, it's just cosy, uhm but we maybe do have a few expensive things, like a piano and a djembe, that's a drum, an African drum. And uhm, a beautiful kitchen, like marble, marble or something like that but then it's, it's fake (laughs) but it still looks very chic and yeah just really many things, little things, I think, that show that… Iittala, that's uhm, a brand, like very expensive vases, I don't know. My mum loves it. And also, my grandpa, he works at, I don't know, I can't pronounce it, X (name of leading company) or something like that? And he really has lots of money. I mean, I don't want to say all this, but my mum said they've a lot of money, so if something would happen, they could

[help] us.'

(R2, 12yo, RQ: middle-class, SP: 7, SA: 20%, QM: 15%)

We also found that, when placing themselves on the social ladder, some children spontaneously make social references, positioning themselves against a significant reference group. Generally, these children mention that they place themselves in the middle because 'they're not poor' but 'also not rich'. Yet, some other children compare themselves more explicitly with other children when the researcher asks them to explain their place on the ladder:

> Victor: 'Because you really can see that some children wear shoes which… that those soles are completely worn out, while we, we'd go to a shoemaker if our soles were worn out and we'd let them fix those soles, while others aren't able to.'
> (R2, 12y, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 36%, QM: 22%)

While some children compare themselves with other families or peers, some minority ethnic children also seem to refer to their relative status in their parents' countries of birth. These children spontaneously say how their families were or still are considered wealthier in those countries. These arguments are used by both foreign-born (e.g. Hala) and Belgian-born (e.g. Ibrahim) children of immigrants:

> Hala: 'We haven't got the money to buy everything so we're not very rich (…) and it's also not like we can't buy anything so we're not poor either. I've chosen six because we're a little richer than the middle.'
> Researcher: 'I see…'
> Hala: 'But, but in Iraq, back then in Iraq, if we were in Iraq, I think I'd choose eight.'

Researcher: 'You were richer in Iraq?'

Hala: 'Yes (…). In Iraq, my father and my mother had much better work and we were living in a very large house and we could do whatever we wanted to do.'

(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Researcher: 'Do you know any rich people by person?'

Ibrahim: 'We have a villa in Morocco.'

Researcher: 'You have a villa in Morocco, so you'd say you're rich in Morocco? What about Belgium?'

Ibrahim: 'In Belgium we have an ordinary house.'

Researcher: 'Where would you place your family [on the ladder]?'

Ibrahim: (circles eight)

Researcher: 'That's in Belgium, right?'

Ibrahim: 'In Morocco.'

Researcher: 'What would you choose in Belgium?'

Ibrahim: (circles six)

(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 68%, QM: 71%)

Through this identity management strategy, some minority ethnic children express a double frame of reference, on which they draw to place themselves at a higher, and probably more desired, position. Although this double frame of reference is not the focus of this study, further research should explore how children use these arguments to manage their self-presentation and to protect a positive self-identity.

The grateful, the greedy and the ordinary: images of the poor, the rich and the 'in-betweens'

When we gauge the meanings children create in relation to different social class groups, it becomes very clear that descriptions of 'people in the middle' vary with their own class position. Indeed, although the vast majority of children identify with the 'middle', they have contrasting understandings of what it entails to belong to this category. Ana, for example, refers to her own family when describing people in the middle:

> Researcher: 'How would you describe a family in the middle, so rich nor poor?'
>
> Ana: 'Uhm, that's hard, I think… Uhm yeah who… Who actually can do stuff but uhm, I mean, it's like us actually, uhm, yeah sometimes, uhm… If you're in the grocery store, then… If you have money, you fill your shopping cart. If you have less money, then [only] what you need (laughs). So, every time… My dad receives his money at the end of the month so uhm, … If that money is on his debit card, then, then you fill your shopping cart entirely, but uhm… If it's still the middle of the month, then only the things that are yet needed. So, no extra soft drinks and that stuff.'
>
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

How she describes this middle position clearly differs, however, from the description provided by middle-class children, such as that of Roos:

> Roos: 'I think just a mediocre house, not really too big and not really too small, and also quite pretty decorated but not that that kind of modern which costs a lot of money. And those children also [have] more toys than poor ones.'
>
> (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

Hence, when children from different backgrounds position themselves around the middle, they do not necessarily imagine the same pre-defined middle category. Children from lower classes, for example, do not present themselves as 'in-between' by performing a marked out middle-class 'position' or 'lifestyle', nor do they necessarily use an 'information control' strategy (Goffman 1963) to conceal any financial hardships experienced. On the contrary, they generally define this middle category according to their own financial position and lifestyle, which suggests that children, in the context of our study, are predominantly concerned by normalizing their own position, rather than aiming to pretend to be someone they are not. As the 'rich' and the 'poor' are generally seen as extreme examples and thus as 'non-ordinary' (Mistry et al. 2015), identifying as 'middle-class' is the most available identity management strategy to present oneself as 'ordinary'. Children are still aware of socio-economic differences within their classroom, although they classify their middle-class peers as rather rich, so that they can maintain their position 'in the middle' (see further).

The different ways in which children of diverse social class backgrounds picture social groups becomes even more pronounced when discussing poverty. Many children from a lower-class background give a rather stereotypical and more 'extreme' definition of poverty. In contrast, middle-class children generally describe people in poverty in more nuanced ways. This contradicts earlier findings that middle-class children have a less realistic picture of what poverty means (Goodman et al. 2000) and that children seem to define differences between the rich and the poor in extreme terms (Mistry et al. 2015; Sutton 2009). Yet, our results seem consistent with studies showing that children of more highly educated parents have a more complex understanding of poverty and inequality (Flanagan et al. 2014). Except for a few respondents, middle-class interviewees, generally from highly educated parents, hardly refer to severe deprivation, such as homelessness, but tend to focus on families' weaker purchasing power:

Researcher: ‘A poor family, how would you describe such a family?’

Hanne: ‘Ow, uhm… I’m not sure, uhm… I’m not sure how to… yeah, I’m not sure what to imagine, just that they have to be more economical with their money and stuff, and that they can’t buy everything and don’t get to eat nicely in a restaurant and that stuff, yeah, that they have to pay attention…’

(R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

Jordy: ‘A poor family, for me, they live in an apartment, they don’t have such a uhm large room. And they mostly have a job where you don’t earn a lot of money, like garbage collector or so, or… I don’t know, tram driver or so, they don’t earn as much as my mum and dad. That’s it actually… But they can, they have enough food and they often have to take public transport and the… mostly they have to go by tram and bus because they can’t afford a car’.

(R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 9, SA: 57%; QM: 49%)

Although not intentionally, these middle-class pupils accurately describe the situation of their less affluent classmates who live in an apartment, whose parents have no car, who hardly go out to nice restaurants and so on. However, because the lower-class children in our study also aim to present themselves as ‘normal’ or ‘middle-class’, they have to describe ‘the poor’ in more severe terms and thus generally construct a category of people that are far more disadvantaged than they are:

Researcher: ‘How would you describe a poor family?’

Enes: ‘Uhmm, homeless, uhm… little [tap] water. If there’s water, the water is

> dirty. And uhm, no GSM, no internet. Yes, that kind of stuff.'
>
> (R1, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 7, SA: 78%; QM: 84%)

> Hala: 'According to me, a poor family… Wait, uhm… They don't have food; they don't have clothes and they just sit on the ground. They, they sleep on the ground, they don't have a bed and so.'
>
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Children's perceptions of the rich, however, do not necessarily seem to vary along class lines. All children focus on the same dimensions when describing the rich, such as their supposed ability to buy whatever their hearts desire. Interestingly, and in contrast to existing literature on children's perceptions of the poor and rich (e.g. Mistry et al. 2015), some children hold rather negative views of rich people (see also Burkholder, Elenbaas, and Killen 2019). When describing the rich, these children spontaneously refer to features such as being 'greedy', 'spoiled', 'pretentious' and 'anti-social'. Even though a few children mention positive aspects of rich people, such as their willingness to support vulnerable groups, these are exceptional, and children often mention that these are 'the good ones', clearly differentiating this group from 'average' rich people. These findings indicate that children draw moral boundaries against 'the rich' to challenge class hierarchies, suggesting that even though the rich belong to the top of the social ladder, they are not superior or more worthy than others (see also van Eijk 2012). Manal for example, states that: '*sometimes there are good [rich] people who do want to help others a lot, but very many rich people only think about themselves and they keep their money to themselves'* (R1, 13yo, RQ: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%), and in a similar vein Louise argues: '*sometimes they're like "I'm rich and you're not". Showing off, that's not that nice'* (R1, 11yo, RC: middle-class, SP: 6, SA: 30%, QM: 16%).

Negative features, on the other hand, are hardly attributed to people in poverty, who generally are considered to be modest, friendly and grateful. Children do associate being poor with emotional states such as being ‘sad’ or ‘unhappy’, but in doing so, they generally express feelings of empathy. Our child-respondents condemn poverty and hardly mention individual factors as causes of poverty. Poverty is predominantly seen as the result of unemployment or ‘having bad jobs’, and, to a lesser extent, as the result of circumstances such as war. These results contradict many findings, which reveal that children frequently describe rich people in positive and the poor in rather negative terms (Mistry et al. 2015; Rauscher, Friedline, and Benerjee 2017) and that middle-class children tend to express little empathy towards the poor (Goodman et al. 2000). One of the main explaining factors, could be the influence of the broader welfare state system (see discussion).

Constructing peers above and below

To gain more in-depth insight into children’s self-positioning, we also gauged how children position their own classmates on the social ladder and how they evaluate others’ social standing. Children’s tendency to identify with the middle of the social spectrum does not imply that they are unaware of social class differences in their classrooms. While securing the boundaries that ensure their own self-presentation as ‘middle-class’, most children show awareness of more or less affluent classmates.

Irrespective of their self-positioning in the middle, however, none of the middle-class children indicated in the first round that there are richer pupils in their class. This suggests that their position is seen by most of the middle-class children as the highest social position in their classroom. Unlike many lower-class children who place themselves ‘in-between’ a group of children ‘above’ and ‘below’, most middle-class children position themselves in the middle without identifying a particular group ‘above’ themselves. This could mean that these children, despite their privileged position, feel uncomfortable ranking themselves above the

middle. Some of the middle-class children also mention that they ‘do not really pay attention’ to others’ social position or that they have no idea of how other children’s families are getting by. This seems to reflect a certain uneasiness or even ‘taboo’ among these children to talk about class differences (van Eijk 2012). Even though less pronounced, class differences also appear when talking about classmates who have less money or are poor. Both lower- and middle-class children believe that some children have less money than they do or state that they are not sure. However, only some lower-class children report that no one has less than they do, suggesting that there are no poor children in their classroom. Children who believe they have classmates who possess less money than they do, usually mention a lack of material possessions or different consumption patterns.

The vast majority of lower-class children, however, and especially those in mixed schools, explicitly refer to pupils who are more affluent than they are. In doing so, they generally focus on the same determinants they refer to in their self-positioning (material possessions, consumption patterns, opportunities, etc.):

> Researcher: ‘Are there children in your classroom who’re richer…’
>
> Sam: (interrupts) ‘Yes! Yes! Definitely!’
>
> Researcher: ‘You’re sure of that one, aren’t you? Why is that?’
>
> Sam: ‘That’s because they… We’ve an apartment but they’ve a large house. They’ve a lot of toys and then… I [have] less because I don’t like to play and we’ve a PlayStation. And, to give an example, someone in my class also has a [PlayStation] controller but one of 100 euros instead of 50 euros. And also, a large TV, they have, and also with some other… There’s someone who has a house with two floors and that’s better than an apartment, I think.’
>
> (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Researcher: 'Are there children with more money?'

Ana: 'Yes! (laughs)'

Researcher: 'How do you know?'

Ana: 'Uhm, because they... they've really a lot of hobbies; tennis, football, dance like modern, jazz, ballet, piano, many things, and I only have one dance lesson. And they also really travel a lot, some of them go skiing, others go to… I mean, Roos for example, she really travels a lot, and then I'm like (pretends to be yearning).'

(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 30%, QM: 16%)

Although children believe in others' higher social class position, most claim that they are nevertheless happy with their own position. Moreover, some children express a value judgment when speaking about more affluent children. It seems that these children subtly draw boundaries by emphasizing that others' consumption patterns are not necessarily to be looked up to. Assia, for example, says about a friend whom she perceives as more affluent: '*I often see her literally buying things. Just buying and spending money but I wouldn't buy all those things myself because I wouldn't waste my money on it'* (R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 5, SA: 78%, QM: 84%).

Hence, some of the lower-class children use a 'comparative strategy of the self' (Sherman 2005) based on morality to deal with their 'underprivileged' position in the social class hierarchy. The moral boundaries children draw towards the rich also seem to emerge when some children indicate that their classmates' higher social position does not necessarily imply that they are morally superior:

Yassine: ‘Like those chic [rich] kids, they’re like ‘look at me’. If they only would think about poverty, then they’d become completely different. If they’d think like ‘look at how they [the poor] live, they take food from the trash’, I mean, if they’d think about those things, they would potentially change.’

Researcher: ‘Become a better person, you mean?’

Yassine: ‘Yes.’

(R1, 11yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 57%, QM: 49%)

Some minority ethnic children spontaneously refer to their classmates of Belgian descent when asked about the most affluent pupils - not surprisingly, as in one of the participating classes (school 3) only majority ethnic children are from a middle-class family. Although most minority ethnic children do not necessarily problematize the relation between class and ethnic background, a few explicitly relate higher social standing with being ‘Belgian’:

Sahar: ‘Especially Belgians are rich in this school. I mean, their homes alone, they’ve very large houses and so. And non-Belgian children, they’ve like apartments and so (…).’

(…)

Researcher: ‘Why are they richer?’

Sahar: ‘Maybe because they… like… Like their grandpa has died or something, and he was maybe rich, so all the money went to them.’

(R2, 12yo, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 43%, QM: 32%)

Sam: ‘We’re not poor but we’re also not rich (…). And at the top [of the social ladder] are Belgians, they’ve, if they have to make something, they’ve everything.

They've… Let's say we've to make a school project; they make theirs very extensive because they've everything they want.'

(…)

Researcher: 'Why do you think Belgians are richer?'

Sam: 'Because they study better or something like that.'

(R2, 12y, RC: lower-class, SP: 6, SA: 43%, QM: 32%)

Sahar and Sam both link wealth with a certain social position, in particular that of being of Belgian descent, although their explanations differ strongly: Sahar emphasizes certain life chances while Sam stresses personal responsibility. A few other children in mixed schools, both of minority and majority ethnic background, also claim that minority ethnic families may be poorer because some of them had to flee war and had to start all over again. Yet, the majority of our child-respondents did not refer to ethnicity or migration while explaining their views on social class differences. In addition to this, we have showed in a previous article on the same group of respondents (Kostet, Clycq, and Verschraegen 2020) how most pupils, including Sahar and Sam, do not believe that children have less chances in life because of a minority ethnic background. This does not necessarily mean that children are not aware of the intersection of class and ethnicity. Yet, as this article is part of a larger research on symbolic boundary-making among children, we did not gauge deeper, for both methodological and ethical reasons, how children perceive the class position of different ethnic groups if they did not bring it up spontaneously. On the one hand, we did not want to influence children's answers when discussing ethnic or religious diversity. On the other hand, as we discussed in a previous article (Kostet, Verschraegen, and Clycq 2021) most pupils hardly draw boundaries based on ethnicity and we obviously did not want to encourage such boundary-making. Nevertheless, these scarce results do raise important questions for further investigation into

children's own conceptions of the intersection of class and ethnicity and how ethnicity affects perception.

Concluding reflections

This article contributes to the literature on boundary work and social class by providing a more complex analysis of children's tendency to identify as 'middle-class'. We showed that children strategically negotiate class boundaries to present themselves as 'normal', but that they are simultaneously aware of class differences and the fact that other children are more or less well-off. Yet, this does not mean they explicitly problematize their own social position. Rather they place other groups outside the boundaries of 'ordinariness', for example by classifying their more affluent peers as 'rich'. Indeed, children generally secure their own position as 'normal' by defining 'the middle' of the social spectrum according to their own social location and constructing other social groups around it. While most children identify as middle-class, they do not describe this social category in similar ways, nor do they draw the same boundaries against groups below and above themselves. To present themselves as 'normal', some lower-class children construct a more severe image of 'the poor', and some middle-class children in socio-economically mixed schools show discomfort when talking about class hierarchy, claiming that they do not pay attention to other children's social standing (see also van Eijk 2012).

Our research contradicts previous studies about children's evaluations of the 'poor' and the 'rich' (e.g. Mistry et al. 2015). We have shown that our child-respondents acknowledge structural factors causing inequality and tend to express sympathy towards the poor. Negative features, however, are attributed to rich people, who are generally considered to be greedy, selfish and lacking morality. We argue that both the negative perceptions of the rich and the uneasiness among some children to discuss class hierarchy, can partly be understood within the welfare state context in which these children grow up. As previous

studies (Arts and Gelissen 2001; Lamont 2000) have shown, individuals do not solely draw boundaries out of personal interest; their perceptions are also shaped by structural factors and by the public repertoires available to them within a specific welfare state regime. Whilst most research on children's perceptions of social class is conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries with a liberal welfare regime which assumes available equal opportunities and holds people responsible for their own social position, the Belgian welfare state regime is traditionally much more based on principles of equity (Arts and Gelissen 2001; Kluegel and Smith 1986), which can possibly explain the uneasiness, also among some of our child-respondents, to talk about class hierarchy (van Eijk 2012).

Another important finding is that minority ethnic children use their double frame of reference to strengthen their social position. A few also appear to believe that mainly children of Belgian descent are 'rich', which is not surprising as child poverty in Antwerp strongly intersects with a minority ethnic background. Albeit this is a relevant finding, the intersection of class and ethnicity was not a dominant topic in our interviews. Furthermore, because of the larger research context this article is part of, we did not strongly elaborate on how children conceptualize the intersection of class and ethnicity themselves. We acknowledge that this is both a limitation of the study and a large gap in the broader literature. While there is a reasonable number of studies on how younger children, youth and adults experience the intersection of class and ethnicity or race, research with the age group between 11 and 13 is scarce (Ghavami and Mistry 2019). The limited evidence, however, shows that pre-adolescent children's perceptions of social class are strongly racialized and that they are more likely than younger children to link poverty with structural factors such as racism (Ghavami and Mistry 2019; Seider et al. 2019), which, indeed, calls for further investigation.

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[i] Data were generated from https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/?var=natcube (demographic data) and https://www.agodi.be/cijfermateriaal-leerlingenkenmerken (school composition data).

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Table 1. School selection and pupil characteristics

#	N = 47	% children born 'at-risk-of-poverty' in school's neighbourhood	% pupils receiving study allowance[ii]	% pupils' mothers without secondary education	% pupils with non-Dutch home language	Origins	Selected for second round N = 24
1	12	11,4%	20%	15,3%	23%	Belgium, Portugal, The Netherlands, Morocco, Turkey, Ghana, Congo, Lebanon, Sweden, Sierra Leone, Poland	7
2	7	5,7%	16%	13,6%	8%	Belgium, Morocco, France, Brazil, Nigeria	3
3	11	40%	57%	49,4%	49%	Belgium, Afghanistan, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Ireland, Kurdistan, Tunisia	7
4	8	10,2%	30%	16,6%	27%	Belgium, Guinea, Georgia, Morocco	4
5	4	28,1%	78%	84,7%	78%	Turkey, Morocco, Algeria	1
6	5	39,6%	68%	71,5%	66%	Morocco	2