

# Affective formations of class consciousness: Care consciousness

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**Abstract**

This article explores affective formations of class consciousness. Through autoethnography and conversations and discussion sessions with working class women, the article contributes to a sociology of social class that recognises how people come to know their class positioning in spaces outside of waged relations. The article argues that affective relations and affective inequalities inform women's experiences and consciousness of inequality generated by the class system. Their consciousness of the class system is narrated through their care relational identities, discontent with affective inequalities generated by the class system and their attitudes and actions for social change. This implies an affective formation of class consciousness referred to as care consciousness. Care consciousness takes seriously what is refused legitimacy at a sociological and political level yet articulated privately by the women as they discuss experiences of the class system.

**Keywords**

affective relations, care, consciousness, gender, inequality, social class

**Introduction**

The work of Stephanie Lawler (2008), Beverley Skeggs (1997, 2004), Valerie Walkerdine (1984, 2017) and Diane Reay (2005), building on the scholarship of working class women in previous generations, has done much to uncover the psycho-social and cultural forms of contemporary class relations. They offer a new sociology of class that legitimises people's classed experiences as sociologically and politically significant. The work of these theorists complements the activism and writings of other feminists in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1970s and 1980s who drew attention to

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spaces for organising outside of direct waged relations (Bruley, 2013; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Pollert, 1981). The use of unwaged spaces for reflecting and organising against oppression was core to how working class women engaged with the feminist movement in Ireland (O'Neill, 1992) and in Britain (Rowbotham, Segal, & Wainwright, 2013). Women looked to their own lives and learnt from their own experiences by studying topics like childhood, motherhood and jobs (Bruley, 2013, p. 719). Bruley (2016, p. 726) claims that 'consciousness-raising (CR) was a vitally important aspect of the movement'; it provided women with a means of understanding their class oppression as they lived it.

This explorative study, examining how working class women narrate living with inequality, builds on this activism and scholarship on social class that goes beyond its economic formations; it engages with affective relations of class consciousness and affirms the importance of spaces outside of purely waged relations for forming consciousness of class inequality. The study draws on feminist care theory to conceptualise affect as more than emotions, feelings and embodiment. Instead, the affective is presented as a set of social relations (Lynch, 1989, 2007), interconnected but different from other social relations. It is made up of care relations, institutions, norms and practices that can, and do, help form class consciousness alongside economic, cultural and symbolic formations.

As Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009, p. 13) observe, there is an acceptance in the social sciences that cultural and political systems operate, in several respects, relatively independently of the economy; yet there is a refusal to recognise the relative autonomy of affective relations that produce love and care. The latter are defined as derivatives, dependent for their 'sociological livelihood' on other social relations (Lynch et al., 2009, p. 13). In many ways the status of affective relations is analogous to the status of those who do most hands-on paid and unpaid care work, namely women. They are defined as dependent, only meriting analysis when tied to the powerful relations of the economy and polity in particular.

This study places affective relations as central to how class inequality is lived and how the class inequalities of the class system are experienced. The motivations for this are private and political as much as intellectual. Growing up in a family reliant on social welfare meant my life experiences were shaped by class inequality through the meagre resources we had and also the little cultural capital we held. But my life experiences were also shaped by the affective: how households mediate class, not only through cultural and economic relations, but also affective relations, practices, norms and goals. Knowing the class system through affective inequalities shaped my own class journey but also, as I discovered through my research, that of the women who took part in this study. Conversations and reflections on class inequality with working class women presented a private world of love and care, where they felt value and created value, but also where they experienced pain in trying to produce and maintain affective relations with unequal resources.

The data presented in this article map out how women's classed journeys are mediated through affective relations using findings from autoethnographic material as well as interviews and group discussions with working class women. Care consciousness is analysed through the author's and others' lived experiences of social class inequality. Using the framework devised by Wright (1985) and Gurin (1985) respectively in terms of class

and gender consciousness, it analyses the role of identification, discontent, withdrawal of legitimacy or support for action and collective orientation in framing care consciousness. Care consciousness, therefore, is defined by the presence of care relational identities, discontent with affective inequalities in a classed society and the desire for action or change to challenge these inequalities.

### **Psycho-social and cultural formations of class consciousness**

In her 2005 article 'Beyond consciousness', Reay situates her work within a new sociology of social class that allows for the analysis of the affective dimensions of class consciousness. Reay's work on the psychic economy of class describes the emotional life of class, which, 'while often unrecognized, still pervades our inner worlds and outer practices' (2005, p. 912). Reay's work is complemented by Skeggs' study (1997) on respectability and the classed lives of working class women. It shows how shame and judgement operate in forming class subjectivities when cultural relations mediate class positioning. Her analysis also develops our understanding of how the hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) are more than just symptoms of structural class inequality in forming and structuring social classes. Stephanie Lawler's work on identity (2008) extends this understanding by recognising the role of relationships in maintaining identity. In particular, she emphasises the continuing significance of kinship (that is of those recognised as kin (p. 50) in the context of the social changes required for new classed identity formation. But like Skeggs, Lawler contextualises affective relations as cultural relations; they are defined as correlates of the cultural sphere.

McKenzie's (2012) work is different as she has focused on how affective relations of love and care provide respect and value for West Indian women as this work is valued in their community. This is significant because it highlights a dimension in the women's lived experiences of race and class that they can draw upon to undermine the 'othering' that comes from misrecognition and pathologising of their class and gender and their way of caring. If, as Skeggs suggests, we 'should not abandon the study of experience' (1997, p. 167), then class analysis needs to take these affective references in the women's lived experiences of class more seriously.

The way class is mediated by intimate love and care relations is not given an equal analytical status in sociological accounts when affective relations are defined solely as components of the psycho-social or cultural system. This type of analysis fails to recognise a space within households or within intimate love and care relations that allows for value and goals connected to love and care work that are affectively as well as culturally defined. A mother striving to ensure her son or daughter succeeds in life, beyond narrow expectations and limitations, is not only culturally and materially mediating class but also affectively managing class through her affective relations and practices in rearing her child. This affective formation of class interfaces with the cultural and this is where her parental care is often pathologised, once it enters that symbolic realm of power relations that Skeggs illustrates so vividly in her work. Yet, the affective also occupies a discrete space between mother and son or mother and daughter in which they perform affective roles and relations intrinsically linked to their desire to exist, belong and feel love and care (even though the opposite, namely abuse or neglect, can also arise).

## **Moving to affective formations of class consciousness**

Extending the psychic economy of class consciousness to the operation of affective relations requires moving beyond not only economic but also psycho-social and cultural frames for understanding how social class is lived. The care and love practices, norms and goals that define the relational lives of people within families/households have played a central place in feminist analysis. They are commonly identified as key concerns in research addressing gender inequality (Fahs & Swank, 2016) as well as in the analysis of the intersection of class, race and gender (Duffy, 2005; Herd & Harrington Meyer, 2012). In addition, there is a body of literature within class analysis that shows how parenting and mothering is a classed activity with a specific focus on how mothers and children produce and reproduce class through their relations (Crompton, 2006; Lawler, 2000; Steedman, 1986; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Yet very few of these writers definitively posit love or care relations as a discrete set of social relations. Crompton (2006), for example, writes about the need to combine economic and cultural approaches to the role of the family in reproducing class inequalities. The productive practices of care work within the family are classed in capitalist societies but they can also be lived and experienced as relatively autonomous relations, forms of affective practice alongside cultural and economic production.

It is Lynch (1989, 2007) in particular, building on the work of care theorists such as Kittay (1999), Ruddick (1989), Gilligan (1982) and Tronto (1993), who defines emotional labour and the wider nurturing that produces love and care as constituting a discrete system of affective relations. While Duffy (2005) warns against the conceptualisation of care within a nurturing framework, as it can downplay the gender and racial inequalities illustrated by a care work or reproductive labour approach, Lynch et al. (2009) do not frame love and care exclusively in terms of nurturance. Her work recognises the deep-rooted interrelationship between redistribution, recognition, representation and relational (affective) forms of inequality (Lynch, 2014), and the material productivity of love labour (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017). What matters sociologically is that affective relations are not social derivatives, subordinate to economic, political or cultural relations in framing social justice.

### *The operation of affective relations*

Within political theory in particular, there is a large body of feminist scholarship that recognises the discreteness of affective relations and their role in creating a more egalitarian society (Held, 2006; Jonasdottir & Ferguson, 2014; Kittay, 1999, 2002; Tronto, 1993, 2013). Bryson (2014) in particular highlights the ways in which the affective and economic systems intersect to generate injustice. What these feminist writers and earlier care theorists have in common is a tendency to discuss the emotional and other dimensions of caring as important sites of affective practice.

Affective relations represent a discrete site of practice for a number of reasons. Most significant are the nurturing (nurtured) identities that people have as carers and cared-for persons. People define themselves in terms of how and if they are loved and cared for, and in terms of who they love and care for (Lynch et al., 2009, pp. 54–77). Career and

life priorities are influenced by love, care and solidarity values in complex ways that are gendered and classed, but also impacted by a variety of other statuses (Lynch et al., 2009, pp. 78–113). Given the complex character of human relationality, affective relations are intersectionally linked to economic, power and cultural relations but also operate according to discrete norms and values, given the sociological reality of dependency and interdependency.

Relational identities frame primary (love) care relations in unique ways. The primary level of care in the affective system, that of love labour (the work that we do to create our intimate relations with others), is inalienable; you cannot pay someone to love another person on your behalf as the paid-for relationship is not your own; it is a different relationship (Lynch, 1989, 2007). While there are many care tasks that can be and are commodified, there are a ‘variety of moral, political, and economic reasons why the work required for human reproduction cannot be completely commodified and marketised’ (Oksala, 2016, p. 299). Love in particular is defined through specific personal relationships that, by definition, are non-transferable and non-substitutable (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017): love is given in the contexts of pre-established relationships with a unique history and assumed but indefinite future that involves continuity and attachment (Barnes, 2005, pp. 8–9). It is this mutuality, commitment, trust and responsibility at the heart of love labouring that makes it distinct from general care work (Lynch, 2007). The goal of this labour is the production of people in their humanity (Oksala, 2016) and this makes it a discrete field of study in its own right.

The forces of interdependence and other-centredness that inform affective relations also make caring and loving unique (Ferguson & Folbre, 1981; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999). For Kittay, the moral underpinning and other-centredness of high dependency care work distinguish it from other forms of work as it cannot be left undone without significant harm coming to the person in need of care at a specific time. The other-centredness of love and care labour can be understood in terms of the difference between food production, which we need for self-interest, and food provision required by someone dependent on us. In this way, affective relations are distinguished by the vulnerability of the human condition, which, as Fineman observes (2008, p. 8), is universal and inevitable. Vulnerability is connected with human embodiment and dependency (Fineman, 2008, p. 9) that no person can avoid. In sum, the affective relations that produce human beings in their relationality (see Cantillon & Lynch, 2017) have unique sociological features that distinguish them from other cultural and economic systems of relations. They cannot be reduced to culture, politics or economy.

### *Conceptualising care consciousness*

Material inequalities operate intersectionally (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993), but material conditions are not the generative site of all lived experiences of oppression; sometimes they are derivatives or ancillary to oppressions such as those arising from race, disability or gender. Thus, how people come to know the paradoxes of the class system, how they develop consciousness of class inequality, may not always be through the economic relations that generate their class position. The unique operational forces within affective relations play a role in generating injustices and framing

consciousness in the same way that economic and cultural forces frame consciousness in their respective spheres.

Research by Henderson and Tickamyer (2008) and Seccombe (2007) demonstrated how poor mothers' actions were driven by the immediacy of care needs when faced with economic constraints. Green's research with low-income families (2013), Dodson's work with low-income women (1999, 2007, 2009), Luttrell's work with children in low-income families (2012, 2013), Scott, Edin, London, and Mazelis's work on welfare-reliant women (2001) and Manoogian, Jurich, Sano, and Ko's work with Appalachian low-income mothers (2015) all demonstrate how the urgency and imminence of love work drives human behaviour. In each of these studies the women were found to prioritise their children's needs in the face of injustices. Care concerns dictated action on injustice beyond economic security for themselves or status or power considerations.

Sayer (2005, p. 948) writes about the moral dimensions of how class is lived and the 'importance of lay normative responses to class, particularly as regards how people value themselves and others'. The research with poor women, detailed above, draws attention to lay normative responses to class that are interconnected with care relations and love and care work. Class matters to the women because of the impact on their children. But, taking Sayer's lead, this concern is not just functional in terms of providing resources for survival but ethical and moral in knowing what is right and wrong about class inequality and carelessness. There is a moral and lay normativity to these actions as primary carers that is not captured in traditional accounts of how class inequality is lived. The feelings and experiences that inform how the women act for their children, against poverty, is tied to material and emotional responses to class inequality and carelessness. The women, although also living with the consequences of class inequality, do not prioritise their own selves in their concerns but rather prioritise the lives of their children; they act as moral agents according to their own lay normative values (Stets & McCaffree, 2014).

### *Developing consciousness*

Researchers on consciousness claim it has a number of core components, including identifying with a position; verbalising discontent or paradox between your position and wider structures; providing support for action in the interests of your position; and developing a vision of an alternative egalitarian structure (Wright, 1985; Zingraff & Schulman, 1984). In feminist literature, these components of consciousness have been referred to as identification, discontent, withdrawal of legitimacy and collective orientation (Gurin, 1985). Thus, the process of developing consciousness has implications for how people collectively challenge oppression and the presence of the core components has been used to signify the existence of consciousness.

Jones (2001) drew on the aspects of consciousness identified by Wright to analyse how care workers in both paid and unpaid circumstances expressed class consciousness. She examined how their identities, actions and ideas on social change were premised on the presence of class consciousness. This article employs the measures used by Jones to appraise class consciousness, and Gurin to identify gender consciousness, to conceptualise care consciousness. It explores the extent to which women knew and narrated life experiences through their relational identities, particularly as mothers/grandmothers; the

extent to which they articulated discontent with injustices in love and care (discontent); whether they knew what action needed to be taken to survive care-threatening injustices (action), and if they believed in the need for social change to challenge these injustices (collective orientation). This framework provides a useful conceptual frame for analysing the dynamics of care consciousness.

## Setting the methodological context

In presenting the concept of care consciousness, it is necessary to locate my own consciousness-raising connected to affective relations, which was the genesis for this study. For me, the realisation emerged as I explored my experiences of childhood poverty and related inequalities on a personal level. Having mobilised out of poverty through educational attainment, I needed to deal with the severe anxiety that held me back in my adult life that I had always credited to the hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). As part of this personal journey, the hidden injustices of class, for me, went beyond cultural inequalities connected to resources and status. Coinciding with this personal journey was an academic one in which I was undertaking a doctoral study of inequality and social change. I was interested in how people live with and challenge class inequality. My retrospective stories of childhood became part of an autoethnographic account of inequality that formed the basis of a case study for this wider research on class inequality.

## Methods

Having a rich autoethnographic case study based on personal reflections and diaries compiled over four years documenting classed experiences, I wanted to cross-reference this experiential data with other women's experience of living with inequality by conducting interviews with 10 working class women, five of whom also identified as community activists. The interviews had no structured questions and were conducted as conversations about living with inequality (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Gray, 2009). The interviews were informal and questions were generated spontaneously during the interview. I used the interviews to share ideas, more so than just stories, with other women who lived in poverty. This led to the development of two learning circles as a third method for data collection. These circles were about engaging the women in theory building by discussing the ideas and findings from the autoethnographic material and the interviews. The circles were about shared learning between the researcher and the participants. They represented an attempt to avoid colonising research, which is often a feature of research on class inequality (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994). Two circles were organised, each involving three women who were recruited through the community centres in their area (three of whom also participated in the interviews). The circles met on three separate occasions so there were six learning circle meetings in total. Each circle lasted from one to two hours where ideas generated from my autoethnography (rather than their personal experiences) were discussed. In total, 13 women were involved in the study.

The research was guided by an emancipatory approach to research design and employed the feminist-inspired research methodologies advocated by Dodson (2007,

2009) and the communicative methodological approach to research progressed by Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha (2010) and Flecha and Soler (2014). The use of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004, 2009), interviews and learning circles gave the research a robust methodological frame and the benefits of cross-verification from a triangulated approach (Olsen, 2004).

### *Participants*

Because I was self-disclosing as part of the research process, ethically it was important to ensure that there was a level of trust between me, as researcher, and the participants. This dictated how the sample was selected and the size of the sample. The women were recruited using snowball sampling through contacts with community centres that I was familiar with from my community work. The centres were provided with information about the research and women were invited to volunteer for a conversation with the researcher if they were interested in talking about inequality based on their own experiences and opinions. Having a working class background was an important selection criterion given that I was interested in sharing and exploring experiences of class inequality. In addition, given the gendered structure of care relations and my interest in how class and care intersect, the gender and relational identity of participants was also important. For this reason, all participants were women, and all identified as mothers or grandmothers. Five of the women also self-identified as community activists and they were purposely selected to participate, again recruited through contacts in the community development sector. Having activists was significant for understanding not only how women live with but also how they challenge inequality.

However, the sample is limited in that all women were white and of Irish nationality. This was in part dictated by the women that came forward for the research and the fact that I recruited through the community centres in local authority housing estates, which are traditionally home to the white working class in Ireland. For this reason, the intersection of ethnicity with class and gender is missing from this study and merits further research.

### *Analysis*

For analytical purposes, using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2008), I analysed the autoethnographic account, the interviews and learning circle discussions according to key codes. The codes informing the concept of care consciousness were first generated by the autoethnographic account as the affective relations, practices and institutions in my life started to feature regularly in how I narrated my experiences of class inequality. The codes that triggered the concept of care consciousness as a substantive code also featured in the interview and learning circles discussions in accounts of how inequality was lived in public, yet experienced privately through the affective relations of love and care. The interviews and learning circles shared common codes with the autoethnographic analysis. As these codes interacted, a more substantive code of care consciousness became evident.



## Findings: When care is classed

When care is done in classed societies, working class women's lives are framed by relational identities, discontent about love and care inequalities and social change. These map onto the aspects of consciousness identified by Gurin (1985) and Jones (2001), which are also evident in the findings presented in this article.

### *Identity and discontent*

Two components of group consciousness that figure prominently in research include identification with a group and discontent about the social position of the group (Gurin, 1985). Both identification and discontent were evident in the data in the way the women narrated experiences of inequality relationally: they showed care relational identities (Lynch et al., 2009) by talking about their experiences of inequality through constant reference to significant others in their lives for whom they do love and care work:

I think the impact on children is the hardest. That's what I think about. (Nancy, mother, age 60+)

And:

I have nothing for the grandchildren. His pension is gone. It's for your family, you see, not yourself. (Lorna, grandparent, age 60+)

They expressed discontent about their position when they talked about the damage to themselves, to family and to wider communities from doing love and care work with few resources. The focus on emotions, and the stories that they told, captured the discrete ways in which inequality had impacted on them based on their other-centred work of love and care:

I mean I look after the kids but I wouldn't even take a minute to think about myself. I don't think like that. Maybe that's why many of us look wrecked. You just can't do everything and it does bring you down so that is a part of it too. If I am honest, I am really down behind it all. (June, lone parent, age 30–40)

The emotions of shame, guilt and judgement were raised in the context of the research participants' relationship with themselves as a result of the deprivations they experienced in trying to do love and care in a class divided society. They were expressed in the shame of being a lone parent or the guilt of not being able to do more for one's children. Shame was named as a relational and affectively driven feeling intersecting with status rather than a purely status-related emotion. This is evidenced in the autoethnographic material, which showed how the shame and hurt felt by my father from his classed and affective position were carried into self-deprecation, depression and poor mental health when he felt he could do no better for his children. His experiences of inequality, through the parent-child relationship, were passed onto me and lived out in my emotional and material experiences of living with inequality:

But the fear of where we were going to live, would we lose this house too, who would care for us if our parents were taken away, [these] were all very real worries for a seven year old. As an adult, having done a lot of work on myself, I now know his self-loathing and poor mental health that came from being reliant on others (notably the social welfare and local authority) for his income and housing played a role in not only my own lack of content with being working class but also the anxiety that I still carry through my life even after I have reconciled my feelings about class identity. (Autoethnographic account)

Conversations also included talk about trying to do love and care with scarce material resources. Resource inequalities, such as housing and income, across the conversations, were discussed through stories of affective love and care issues in the women's lives:

To have to go home and lie in bed at night and think about what you are going to do for dinner ... you're afraid of the school asking for money, you're afraid of the kids coming back looking to go to the pictures, 'cause you know you don't have it, you know in your heart and soul you don't have it. You don't want to leave them without so you are going to get it from somewhere. (Jennifer, mother, community activist, age 40–50)

The class-related inequalities in most conversations were contextualised, therefore, in the love and care injustices experienced and felt by participants, usually hidden from public view. Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage (2016, p. 8) have identified similar narratives when people have to manage the burden of debt with the needs or desires for care within the household. Their evidence reveals how debt interferes with and disrupts the intimacies of life (p. 10). They reach similar conclusions about the hidden injustices of economic inequalities. The emotional and relational costs are not classified or categorised, so they are overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant (p. 13).

### *Action on discontent*

Gurin (1985) also identified withdrawal of legitimacy, support for action and collective orientation as core components of group consciousness. In this study, women were aware of the need for action to address discontents in love and care; yet they were also aware of the unavoidability and immediacy of that work regardless of action for change. Research participants spoke of just getting on with life as a way of dealing with providing and receiving love and care in unequal class and gender conditions, even if they found that injustice intolerable and wrong:

I think you have to keep going. No one is going to pick you up. They [my children] are looking at you and thinking 'come on mam, I need this or I need that'. You have to try keep it all together for them. (Sarah, lone parent, community activist, age 40–50)

In most societies, thinking and action around love and care is a moral imperative for women (Lynch & Lyons, 2008; O'Brien, 2007). In addition to the gendering of love and care work (Worthen, 2015), it is raced and classed (Duffy, 2005). In economically unequal societies, when loving and caring is done in unequal class and gender conditions, it is mainly poor women that learn to love and care within class-related inequalities. They

learn to do this work even if the conditions in which they do so impact adversely on the goals of that labour:

My mother was a great manager. It was part of who she was. She managed poverty. You didn't moan about it. She didn't share the struggles that she had so maybe that's why I thought things were fine. She was the eldest herself of 14 and grew up in terrible poverty and swore she would never be poor again and her children would not be poor. So she was a great manager. I felt I was bad compared to her. (Janice, mother, community activist, age 60+)

The inescapable aspects of love and care labour, and the inalienability of love labour, meant that the conversations were not narratives of resistance or opposition. The women could not just stop doing this work in protest; instead, they remarked on how love and care work could not be left undone:

None of this matters [giving out about life] because I still have to get up tomorrow and do it all over again. No one else is going to care about my children for me and certainly no one would make the sacrifices I make. (Jennifer, mother, community activist, age 40–50)

Yet for some of the women, beyond dictating everyday demands and actions, care played a motivational role for engaging in activism. The conversations with the community activists show their reasons for getting involved in an active challenge to inequality were in part driven by their relational identities:

Women hold poorer communities together. You look at this centre, there are no men working in this [resource] centre. It's all women. It has always been women that take an interest in communities. (Jennifer, mother, community activist, age 40–50)

Other activists also refer to how being a lone parent motivated them to get involved in activism:

All of my adult life I have been involved in activism. I suppose as a lone parent in my twenties ... when I ended up a single parent living in a one bedroom flat in Ballymun, I suddenly saw a side of the world I had never seen and I wasn't happy and I had to fight back ... (Janice, mother, community activist, age 60+)

The active resistance from lone parents and other female community activists shows how the demand to do love and care corresponded with a need to create a society that supported them to do this love and care.

### *The personal contradicting collective orientation*

The presence of collective orientation poses a problem when talking about love and care inequalities. When given the space to reflect conceptually on lived experiences of inequality in the learning circles, participants, including the community activists, stated that people might not necessarily want to be political about what matters most to them on the level of love and care. Affective relations and affective inequalities did not translate

easily into something that they could talk about politically. This was linked to a lack of trust and fear that their personal (love and care) troubles could be construed as personal failures; they could be pathologised:

The first thing the system will do is get the media to pick holes in you and now with Facebook they can discredit you in any way. If you are talking about caring then that is a great one for them especially if they can get something on you to show you don't care about others or yourself. (Pauline, grandmother, community activist, age 60+)

Well they [the media and the state] are interested in the family but only to blame you ... (Clara, mother, age 20–30)

We had all the love and care we needed. I'd be worried that drawing attention to how we care for children in poverty would be skewed by the media into 'poor me stories' and the bigger thing you are talking about would be missed. (Laura, lone parent, age 30–40)

The women in the learning circles were clear that when talking about love and care in their lives, one must not lose sight of the bigger picture, which for them included the wider economic, cultural and political injustices that they experienced:

I remember the priest of the parish coming down and when he walked into the kitchen his mouth dropped open at how little we had. His reaction made me conscious. We were so used to it that we didn't see it. I was always politically active. I'd like to make sure the focus is still on that because what we didn't have was the hardest part of being poor. (Pauline, grandmother, community activist, age 60+)

It is about love but money dictates a lot and I just think they don't care about us so why would they care even if we show them how we really hurt. They'd just get to know more about you. It doesn't mean they would care. (June, lone parent, age 30–40)

Their concerns are echoed by Pedwell (2014, p. 165), who warns that a focus on intimacy directs attention towards individuals and away from structural relations. My own life journey affirmed the women's concerns as shame, pride and a fear of being categorised as a dysfunctional family had led to my internalisation of a lot of our childhood traumas as personal memories not to be shared with those that could judge my parents or me as bad, immoral people. I could share stories of bad housing or poverty but not of familial conflict or developmental neglect because there was no way to do so that did not pathologise my childhood. There was no political economy discourse to articulate the materiality of affective relations and related inequalities. These embodied experiences of affective inequalities contradict the desire for collective orientation or at least complicate its realisation.

## **Conclusion**

In the conversations about inequality, the women's main reference point was their care and love relationships with others: their care relational identities. Their focus on inequalities in doing love and care work and their thoughts on the need for social change to

address these injustices highlight the ways in which care consciousness operates similarly to class and gender consciousness in terms of identity, discontent and action and collective orientation. The identification of these four components in the data illustrate the presence of care consciousness in how the women experience inequalities generated by the class system.

But their relational identities and their actions and attitudes to addressing love and care inequalities also illustrate what makes care consciousness unique. The women saw contradictions<sup>1</sup> in the class system when trying to do love and care with scarce resources but they were reluctant to expose and act collectively on love and care injustices in the public sphere, preferring to articulate them as resource issues. This is significant as it illuminates a site of consciousness that complements class and gender consciousness that is silenced in political discourse. The misrecognition of the affective inequalities of class leads to a sociological denial of its sociological and political salience.

If, as Arndt (1992) claims, the everydayness of a practice is so embedded and common that it is neglected in analysis and remains hidden from view, then this may partly explain why intimate love and care practices, and the everyday work of producing, maintaining and repairing human beings, is omitted from conceptualisations of class consciousness. Care consciousness lacks a public and political face as there is no safe space to politicise the care and love-based injustices, especially for poor working class women. Trying to sustain love and care work in a classed society means people who love and care in unequal conditions are often strained, tired, living hand-to-mouth on basic incomes, living with debt, living with a lack of choice and possibly living with no hope of change. They are also spatially located generally in isolated family units where politicisation of their concerns is not facilitated in time and space. The impact of some of these intersecting injustices are hidden from public view because the impact is relational, affecting relationships with oneself and with significant others; keeping the impact private, out of public knowledge leads to a state of living with contradictions where what is known and what matters cannot be made public legitimately. Walkerdine refers to this in her affective history of the community when she talks about how people keep specific meanings 'inside the safety of a known space, of doing things their own way and thus keeping control, [it] stops the possibility of a public confrontation, which we know historically, is usually the object of pathologization' (2016, p. 711). People feel safe in keeping relational injustices private but in so doing they ensure the affective relations of love and care are removed from public and political discourses and maintained at the level of personal discourse.

The reluctance of the women to name and claim their experience of injustice in doing loving and caring publicly was palpable. Like the women in Skeggs' study (1997, p. 167), the only authorising narrative the women had to explain their identities was pathology. The women in this explorative study were well aware of this and articulated this in their refusal to be public about their relational lives. They feared that naming the love and care privations in public would not lead to political actions for change but would rather lead to a re-naming and shaming of them as inadequate working class parents or mothers. The moral significance of class (Sayer, 2005) comes into play as they fear politicising care consciousness. However, without a political discourse that legitimated the role that love and care relations played in their lives, the women had no 'language' or political space for their most urgent concerns.

The affective reframing of consciousness proposed in this article contributes to a wider feminist move to give affective relations a legitimate status, discourse and public framing in political and sociological theory. It also contributes to a new sociology of social class (Reay, 2005). This study has shown that class relations are mediated through the prism of affective relations. This implies an urgent need for sociology to give affective relations more academic legitimacy and move care consciousness from the personal and private sphere to the public sphere where the emancipatory potential of care consciousness can be operationalised politically.

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## Note

1. The use of the term contradiction is linked to the way in which Georg Lukacs (1923/1967) discusses the role of contradictions in his work on class consciousness whereby he shows that contradictions are part of how people come to see the totality of the class system when they experience these contradictions.

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