



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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Gender, Class and Race: 'Placing' the Experiences of Men in Manual Work

This developmental paper explores the work experiences of white working class men, born in the UK and employed in manual occupations, i.e. physical jobs requiring a minimum level of general education and/or on-the-job training. Specifically, as an advancement on accounts dominant in the field, it focusses on the significance of *place* for understanding the work history, geographical and occupational mobility and future aspirations of a classed, raced and gendered group that has been largely overlooked within public policy and the academy. In contrast to the spatial mobility of the middle class, members of the male, white working class have been devalued as 'unprogressive' (Skeggs, 2004; McDowell, 2003) – 'left behind' by global forces, the erosion of localised reference points (e.g. secure, low skilled work) and inward migration that has created greater competition for jobs. Little is known, however, about the role of place, as a constellation of opportunities, processes and relationships (Massey, 2005), in shaping 'lived experiences' of disadvantage. Here, Bourdieu's (1990) Theory of Practice provides an innovative frame, highlighting how wider contextual conditions (austerity policies, neoliberal agendas) combine with socio-economic setting to generate identity formations around aspirations, belonging and a sense of potential, prospectively reinforcing inequalities. The paper addresses the questions: What spatial and non-spatial factors have shaped the employment paths of white working class men in manual occupations? How is place, with its specific local and global relationalities, implicated in the meanings given to past and present work experiences, perceived opportunities and future aspirations?

Drawing on an ethnographic approach, based largely on photographic representation and semi-structured interviews, the paper presents the results of preliminary research undertaken in Hastings – a mid-sized coastal town in the UK. Coastal towns have been identified as the "least understood of Britain's 'problem areas'" (House of Commons and Local Government Committee, 2007: 46), recently singled out as experiencing particular inequality. The area has higher than average levels of

spatial deprivation in income levels, employment opportunities, education/training and the 'living environment' (ONS, 2013), making an analysis of how the social framework that is rooted in place 'grounds' existence and defines the white, male working class employment experience a critical inquiry. Identified by Government as within the top three most deprived coastal towns, Hastings has undergone long-term decline in income levels and employment opportunities with greater proportions of inhabitants experiencing above average levels of deprivation (ONS, 2013). Hastings therefore comprises a compelling case for a study of place in lived experience of disadvantage

Drawing on data from this research, the paper highlights particular ambiguities and ambivalences with regards to place. Low levels of geographical mobility largely related to strong family ties underpin a place-dependence and a generalised emotional attachment to the town. Pride is taken in Hastings' cultural and historical heritage, particularly in relation to the meanings created around harbour towns such as the hardships involved working with the sea. Though reduced in scale, fishing remains a thriving industry and offers a particular distinctiveness, sense of place and identity that is both contemporary and historic (Urquhart and Acott, 2013) and which contributes to place-attachment even for those who are not directly involved. Many respondents have neighbours or relatives who have worked at The Stade (home to the local fishing industry and with the largest beach-launched fleet in the UK) and this specific area holds place meanings for other male manual workers based largely on a (largely masculine) attachment to notions of adventure and the dangers of the sea.

At the same time, there is an awareness of the constraints that place has imposed in terms of limited work opportunities, with regret for lack of mobility a dominating factor. For younger workers, the desire for local, secure work in order to support families and to acquire permanent (e.g. non-rented) accommodation dominates future aspirations. Here the ability to draw on traditional class-based

and gendered narratives around breadwinner roles and a desire for a 'wider horizon' is compromised by insecure local labour markets dominated by flexible contracts and seasonal work - highlighting how wider neo-liberal agendas combine with place to produce particular disadvantages. A strong sense of economic and social decline and perceptions of encroachment through inward movement of middle classes from London, contributing towards perceived 'gentrification' of parts of the town and the exclusion of long-time residents, as well as the presence of migrant workers who are seen to undercut wages and create an unwelcome competition for jobs, add a further sense of dislocation and disadvantage.

These and related results are discussed in relations to Bourdieu's Theory of Practice in terms of how contextual conditions and socio-economic settings generate gendered, classed and raced identity formations around aspirations and a sense of potential. In particular, the paper shows how people maintain self-identity through the meanings they associate with places and how the dynamics have a strong gendered, classed and raced element. Thus, working men's clubs, where some of the interviews took place, offer a white, masculine (personal and often intimate) space for particular activities (drinking, socialising, watching sport) that contributes to both place attachment as well as a place dependence, further limiting aspirations for mobility. Gender, class, race and place accordingly intersect in that the meanings associated with place can be seen to be based on social relationships and processes that occur in a particular setting, contributing in turn to feelings of (often missed) opportunities and lack of possibility and potential.

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