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*Human Relations* 2009; 62; 1011
DOI: 10.1177/0018726709335551

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/7/1011
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ABSTRACT
Advertising in Britain has traditionally been the preserve of a middle-class, public school and Oxbridge-educated workforce. Although this narrow recruitment base is recognized as problematic, the influence of social class on advertising careers remains largely unexplored. This article explores the career trajectories of British advertising creatives from different social class backgrounds and the forms of capital at their disposal. Drawing on life history interviews with creatives, we explore how they got started, got in and got on in advertising careers. In particular, we highlight how the ‘working-class’ creatives struggled to overcome the economic, social and cultural barriers they face in entering the industry. We suggest, however, that once ‘in’, the influence of their social class background was more subtle and less detrimental, due to the social capital they accumulated en route and the value of their distinctive brand of cultural capital.

KEYWORDS
advertising • collaborative working • creative careers • life histories • social class

Introduction
The difficulties of managing the ‘motley crew’ are a distinguishing characteristic of the creative industries (Caves, 2002). ‘Motley’ indicates miscellany, diversity and variety and Caves (2002) highlights the managerial challenges
raised by the diverse disciplines and skills that constitute creative production. Advertising certainly involves a motley crew. Distinctly and distinctively collaborative, it involves teams of art directors and copywriters, supervised by a creative director, and working with media, research and client liaison specialists. Advertising agencies also mediate between clients, media and consumers, and collaborate with many other organizations, including model and actor agencies, photographic, music and film studios, production companies, and research suppliers (Malefyt & Moeran, 2003).

‘Motley’ also refers to the contrasting or dissimilar, a dimension that has received relatively little attention in studies of the creative industries. Limited demographic diversity has been noted in American and British agencies (Broyles & Grow, 2008; Feldman, 2002; IPA, 2008). An advertising workforce that is ‘predominantly white, male and middle-class’ (Pringle, in Burnfield, 2008) raises concerns about social inclusion, lost talent, and suboptimal creative output. Although the advertising literature has paid some attention to the limited ethnic or gender diversity within the industry (Broyles & Grow, 2008; Feldman, 2002), issues of class have scarcely featured (Nixon, 2003). However, although class-related processes ‘have become more implicit and less visible . . . the effects of class are no less pervasive in people’s lives’ (Bottero, 2004: 991).

Advertising in Britain has traditionally been the preserve of a middle-class, public school and typically Oxbridge-educated workforce (Scorah, 1989). In this article, we explore the careers of British advertising creatives in relation to their class backgrounds. We examine how aspects of class are played out in career choice and progression and how background impacts on the creative nature of work. Our examination of these issues not only illustrates the various ways in which social class shapes career trajectories, but also offers insights into social processes and relationships within the advertising industry. Some rich ethnographic accounts of agency life and cultures have emerged in recent years (see Malefyt & Moeran, 2003; Moeran, 1996, 2005; Nixon, 2003, for examples), and several studies have explored issues such as the constitution of agencies’ social order and professional identity through talk (Alvesson, 1994; Hackley, 2000), and the different perspectives and agendas of creatives and other agency personnel (Hackley, 2003; Kelly et al., 2005, 2008; Kover & Goldberg, 1995). In general, however, agency processes and relationships have received little research attention to date within the advertising or management literature.

We begin by outlining why and how class is a pertinent issue and some contemporary approaches to understanding class. We then explain how the creative function is organized and managed within the advertising industry, and how class impinges on this. Next, we draw on life history interviews to
explore how class has shaped creatives’ talents, attraction to the advertising industry, career trajectories and relationships. The analysis of our findings is presented in terms of three key phases in advertising creative trajectories, which we label getting started, getting in, and getting on. We suggest that the lessons of the study are pertinent not only for other creative industries, but also, although different markers of class may operate, for other jurisdictions. We conclude by considering the implications of our study for theory and practice.

The elephant in the room?

The role of social class in shaping life chances and dispositions is well documented (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1989; Maccoby, 2007). However, as Lawlor (2005) notes, many academic and political commentators have seen a shift towards individualism, changes in industrial organization and property ownership as sounding the death-knell of class. In Britain during the 1980s, the Thatcherite view was that talented, enterprising, and hard-working individuals could create their own success (Bates & Riseborough, 1993). However, although class might have fallen out of academic and political fashion, its significance cannot be theorized out of existence (Skeggs, 1997). Indeed, Goldthorpe and Mills (2008) found no evidence of greater social mobility in Britain now than in the 1970s, and class inequalities in British higher education persist (Reay et al., 2001). Despite the establishment of new universities and a further education sector in the 1960s, and a unified higher education system in 1992, working-class students’ participation in higher education is still constrained by a range of factors, including poor information, general perplexity and confusion about the options (Archer et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2001). Furthermore, the discourses drawn upon by middle-class school-leavers are those of entitlement and self-realization, in contrast to those of guilt or shame found among their working-class counterparts (Reay, 2005). This suggests that class extends beyond disparities in accessing opportunity to psychic and emotional territory (Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 1997).

Scholars who draw attention to cultural aspects and lived experiences of class are indebted to Bourdieu (1986: 242), who argued that it is ‘impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one introduces capital in all its forms and not solely on the one form recognized by economic theory’. He offers a detailed analysis of the interplay between economic, social and cultural resources available to those in different social classes. Economic capital refers to wealth, income and
financial assets. Social capital refers to the benefits of social connections and membership of groups, with Putnam (2000) subdividing it into ‘bonding capital’ (links with people ‘like me’) and ‘bridging capital’ (links with those ‘unlike me’). Cultural capital takes three forms. In its embodied state it refers to long-lasting dispositions of mind and body. Its objectified state concerns the possession of tangible cultural goods. It is institutionalized through formal recognition (such as academic qualifications) conferred on particular knowledge and skills.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s framework, Cooper (2008: 1229) notes how early socialization ‘...supplies children and then adults with specific types of “habitus”, an internalized, pre-conscious set of cognitive and affective dispositions shaped by a person’s social location that provides them with a sense of what is normal, comfortable and natural’. Drawing on life history interviews, she explores how their social class backgrounds influence people’s level of exposure to risk and their ability to navigate through a risk society.

Various studies have explored the micro-processes through which families pass on social and cultural capital. Allatt (1993), for example, examined how middle-class families use their resources to enhance the life chances of their children, by accessing private education and instilling confidence, ambition, and detailed career planning. The cost of the education contributed to the bonds of reciprocity between parents and children; children were expected to provide a return on this investment through hard work and productive use of time. These parents not only used social networks to their children’s advantage, but also modelled the process of networking for their children and fostered in them the skills for creating their own social capital. Devine (2004) documents how privilege and power has been retained by the middle classes in Britain and America. She found that although individuals often encountered a broader set of influences over time, their families’ social class remained an important influence on the economic, social and cultural capital at their disposal.

**Organizing, managing and recruiting advertising creatives**

Within the advertising industry, creative professionals (commonly referred to as ‘creatives’) typically work in a ‘creative team’ of two – an art director and a copywriter. Supervised by a creative director, the creative team forms part of a wider ‘account team’ responsible for a particular client’s business. This larger team typically includes an account handler (who liaises directly with the client), an account planner (who incorporates research insights into the campaign), as well as media specialists. Creatives work to a creative brief
typically prepared by planners to explain the advertising objectives, target audience, and creative task (Hackley, 2005).

Strictly speaking, the art director is responsible for an ad’s design, layout and aesthetics and the copywriter is responsible for the verbal dimension (Young, 2000), although these boundaries tend to blur in practice (Gilmore, 2005). Copywriters draw from their own observations and experiences to engage in an imagined dialogue with an internalized other, the ‘implied reader’ of advertising texts (Kover, 1995). As well as conversing with imagined others, copywriters engage in dialogue with their real ‘other’, the art director. Generating creative ideas involves both partners in an intense dialogue as they seek to craft messages connecting products with members of a target market (Hackley & Kover, 2007).

Creatives usually begin their agency lives in a placement team, where they gain work experience for little more than expenses and hope to secure a permanent job as a ‘junior’ team. Although their subsequent career path lacks formal structure, it is well understood within the industry. Careers are advanced by the quality of work, measured by peer recognition and awards. Award-winning teams tend to progress by moving to agencies with a better creative reputation, which typically offer highly respected creative directors, interesting clients and environments conducive to creating more award-winning work (Fletcher, 1999). As a creative team builds its ‘book’ (a portfolio of work) and reputation, it acquires ‘middleweight’ or ‘heavyweight’ status. Some ‘heavyweight’ creatives move into creative management as Creative Directors, while others set up their own agency (Pratt, 2004).

Nixon (2003) suggests that creative recruitment patterns reflect changes in Britain’s formal education system and shifting relationships between education, social class and career opportunities. In 1950s Britain, commerce had unsavoury connotations. In an attempt to raise their profile and status, the large British advertising agencies displayed a preference for Oxford and Cambridge graduates, not least when hiring copywriters (Pearson & Turner, 1965). Such ‘institutionalized snobbery’ meant that those lacking an Oxbridge education and middle-class origins struggled to gain entry into the industry (Delaney, 2007). However, as further education developed, agencies could recruit from specialist courses teaching the craft skills of advertising. Although not universally accepted within the industry (Sutherland, 2005), specialist courses introduce students to the culture of advertising creativity and provide networking opportunities (Beale, 2006). Workshops for creatives trying to break into the industry are also organized by Design & Art Direction (D&AD), an educational charity.

Hackley (2000) noted that the leading London agency that he studied seemed to recruit a particular ‘type’, favouring polite, poised, socially
sensitive and somewhat diffident Oxbridge graduates. While that combination of qualities and qualifications were a good fit with that particular organization’s culture, new entrants to creative (as opposed to media) agencies in general are still drawn disproportionately from Oxbridge and older, research-led universities (Umarji, 2008). One explanation for this narrow focus is offered by Alvesson (1994), who notes in a Swedish context that given the ambiguity of advertising work, agency personnel need to draw on various symbolic resources to convince clients of their professionalism and authority. Similarly, Moeran (1996, 2005) describes how a Japanese agency orchestrated various resources to create a good impression with clients. Thus, degrees from elite universities – and the personal qualities associated with graduates of such institutions – might well have significant symbolic and persuasive value for agencies in negotiating with clients.

Creative departments appear slightly more open than others, in British agencies at least. In a survey of 102 British advertising practitioners, Nixon (2003) found that advertising creatives are more likely to have taken a degree or further education qualification in art or graphic design than any other subject, and those who had taken generalist university degrees typically took a postgraduate diploma in art direction and copywriting. Indeed, he argues that such courses have replaced Oxbridge as the primary source of new creative recruits. Regardless of their route into the industry, 18 per cent of creatives, compared to 14 per cent of account managers or planners, had ‘working-class’ backgrounds. The proportion of ‘lower middle class’ personnel was also slightly higher among creatives (45%) than among managers and planners (43%) (Nixon, 2003).

The current study

As Hackley and Kover (2007) note, few studies have focused on the subjective experiences of advertising creatives. While they explored the working lives of seven senior copywriters in New York agencies, this article examines the personal and professional trajectories of British copywriters and art directors, their understanding of the nature of creativity and their working lives. Life history interviews were conducted with 34 British advertising creatives between October 2004 and July 2005 (see Table 1).

A life history is a ‘written account of a person’s life based on spoken conversations and interviews’ (Titon, 1980: 283). It is particularly relevant to this study’s aims, since an advertising creative’s career connects psychological and social processes (Giddens, 1989). As Cooper (2008: 1238) notes, collecting life histories of workers enabled her to offer insights into ‘how
Table 1  Sample table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Class roots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Deputy Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Printing College</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Deputy Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University (English)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallace</td>
<td>International Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Oxbridge (Geography)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Oxbridge (Classics)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Len</td>
<td>Worldwide Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Oxbridge (Classics)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>Executive Creative Director</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Oxbridge (English)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jez</td>
<td>Network Board Member</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Oxbridge (English)</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>Worldwide Creative Director</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Upper</td>
</tr>
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<td>Lionel</td>
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<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald</td>
<td>Executive Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University (English)/Watford</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>University (Biochemistry)/Watford</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>Copywriter</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University (English)/Bucks</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Copywriter</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Art College/Bucks</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jacob</td>
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<td>30s</td>
<td>Art College/Bucks</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabir</td>
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<td>30s</td>
<td>University (Art)/Watford</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Damon</td>
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<td>30s</td>
<td>University (Film Studies)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
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<td>Indira</td>
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<td>20s</td>
<td>University (English)</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archie</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Local College</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
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<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
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<td>Copywriter</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Local College/Watford</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calum</td>
<td>Copywriter</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>University (History of Art)</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Printer Apprenticeship</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Art College/Bucks</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Local College</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mairi</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>University (Art)/Watford</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Local College</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

structural positions and cultural disposition interact over time’. In the context of this study, looking beyond individual creatives’ talent does not diminish their individual importance, but acknowledges the social and educational relationships shaping their story (Amabile, 1996). Thus, the life history ‘tellers’ in this study offer accounts of the families, teachers, friends,
creative partners, peers, mentors and others who helped shape their life and work.

Interviews were based around a topic guide, which included questions about the creatives’ childhood, family, early interests and education, as well as their ‘discovery’ of advertising as a vocation and their working life. Participants were initially recruited through the first author’s industry contacts or identified by reading articles on creativity in Campaign, a trade publication. As fieldwork progressed an element of snowball sampling (Kumar et al., 1999) was introduced when participants suggested other contacts who would be interested in the issues discussed. This process continued until it was felt that theoretical saturation was reached (Ancliff et al., 2007). Thus, we did not set out to obtain a representative sample, but rather ‘a diverse range of viewpoints and subjective understandings’ (Cooper, 2008: 1239).

The initial selection criteria were that the sample would include art directors and copywriters at every career level, in agencies with varying reputations for creative work, across three cities: London, as one of the world’s leading advertising centres (Jowell, 2006); Edinburgh, which has a strong creative reputation; and Glasgow, associated with a more service-led approach (Grant et al., 2003). As the interviews progressed, social class emerged as an important dimension of the life histories, and so the selection criteria were adapted to obtain participants across the social spectrum.

The sample of 34 creatives included 12 creative teams, with partners interviewed together (four teams) or separately, depending on their preference. Only one creative team was non-British and their input was not included in the analysis for this article. In terms of the British creatives’ social class background, eight came from ‘upper’ or ‘wealthy middle-class’ backgrounds, 14 from ‘middle-class’ backgrounds, and 10 from ‘working-class’ backgrounds. Clearly, experiences of class are likely to vary with race and gender (Bottero, 2004; Skeggs, 1997). Reflecting the predominantly ‘white male’ composition of creative departments (IPA, 2008), only three participants in the study were female, and three were second-generation British Indian or Chinese.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was analysed using an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy (Thompson et al., 1989) whereby early readings of the text informed later readings and later readings offered a fresh lens on data analysed earlier. This part-to-whole analysis was undertaken in relation to each transcript, and to each social class grouping. The analysis presented below relates to three key phases in their personal and professional trajectories, with particular attention paid to the experiences of ‘working-class’ creatives. In order to protect
participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout, references to particular places are removed, and at the most senior level, titles are reported simply as ‘creative director’.

**Getting started**

While the circulation of ‘differential currencies of opportunity’ within families is linked to educational and occupational outcomes (Bates & Riseborough, 1993), Csikszentmihalyi (1996) found that despite their varied social backgrounds, successful creative people shared a drive to shape their own destiny. In this study, creatives’ accounts of their origins and path towards advertising reflected this fine balance between structure and agency (Giddens, 1989, 1991).

When the creatives discussed their families, most spontaneously classified their backgrounds as ‘middle class’, ‘working class’, or what one copywriter termed ‘wealthy middle class’. These characterizations reflected parents’ occupations, family finances, and the areas where they grew up. We describe creatives’ backgrounds in some detail to aid readers in relating these labels to their own awareness of class markers.

‘Working-class’ creatives grew up in environments ranging from council estates (public or social housing) to small country villages. Fathers had worked in jobs like painting and decorating, lorry driving or mining, and mothers tended to be housewives or worked part-time in offices or shops. Some grew up in single-parent families reliant on the mother’s earnings. Economic capital was in short supply:

Dad was from ___ and Mum was from ___ ... they are both very working class downtrodden areas ... they’ve never had material wealth ... (Calum, ‘working-class’ copywriter, 30s)

Cultural capital appeared to be limited. These were not ‘bookish’ households, and visits to theatres, museums, or art galleries did not feature in accounts of growing up. As Calum put it, his parents ‘like culture ... but they came from a kind of class and a world where they, you didn’t aspire to that’. Nonetheless, the family environment often encouraged the development of curiosity and interests, with mothers playing a particularly important role in nurturing their creative talents. Exposure to television, advertising, cinema and days out were important in introducing a range of creative possibilities and opening up the imagination. Unlike their
‘middle-class’ counterparts, there appeared to be little rationing of television viewing, and several recalled having been ‘obsessed’ with television:

I was the biggest TV kid . . . in fact I grew up in front of the television . . . I didn’t go out and play football with other kids or climb trees with other kids . . . I watched videos and taped MTV and put together collections of pop promos and stuff . . .

(Jonny, ‘working-class’ copywriter, 20s)

For Calum, it was the film *Star Wars* that gave him a sense of purpose and direction:

I know what made me want to get into advertising, it was seeing *Star Wars* when I was about five or six . . . it was a definitive moment . . . I saw that film and I knew what I wanted to do. It opened up a whole world of imagination, possibilities and ideas . . .

(Calum, ‘working-class’ copywriter, 30s)

All these creatives went to state school, and many talked about feeling how they did not ‘fit in’; some did not meet teachers’ expectations of ‘good’ academic students, some had little in common with their peers, and others had more immediate problems; Derek’s school, for example, was in ‘a very rough area’, so that ‘the day you didn’t get your head kicked in, that was a good day’. Although all described their gravitation towards the more expressive and creative subjects, their talents in this area were not always recognized by teachers. Most left school at 16 to go to a local art college. Geographically restricted options among ‘working-class’ school-leavers were also noted by Reay et al. (2001), who attributed these to financial pressures. Teachers provided ‘working-class’ creatives with little career guidance or encouragement; as Jonny notes, ‘there was never any talk of university or college’. Parents were ill-equipped to fill this gap, given their own limited educational experience:

They didn’t mind what I did as long as I was happy really . . . but they didn’t like push me into any area . . . I don’t think my mum or my dad were that well educated so they couldn’t really advise me on like what to do . . .

(Archie, ‘working-class’ art director, 30s)

Similarly, Bates (1993: 77) notes that the working- and lower-middle-class parents of students on a further education fashion course, were ‘culturally naïve and not overly concerned about the value and status of different types
of qualifications and different forms of education and training’. In the absence of useful career guidance, then, several creatives ended up taking ‘all the back roads’ towards a career in advertising. Nonetheless, parental encouragement still mattered:

Mam was . . . very good at drawing . . . I was good at being artistic . . . she taught me to draw, perspective and stuff . . . she said to us that I could make a living out of this . . . you don’t have to go down the mine . . . I went to art college straight out of school, thanks to me Mam pushing us . . .

(Derek, ‘working-class’ art director, 40s)

Several creatives talked about how they respected their parents’ hard work and desire for their children to do ‘better than they had done in life’. The determination to shape their own lives noted by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) was also evident. As Calum recalled,

I’ve always known what I wanted to do from a child, I either wanted to be in advertising or in film, even from when I was about five . . . I always wanted to be in something creative . . .

Many spoke of wanting more out of life than their ‘working-class’ roots offered. Thus Mairi lamented her father’s expectation that she would simply ‘settle down and have babies’, and Donald ‘didn’t want to live that dull life for the rest of my life . . . to live on a dull estate in ____ and do nothing’. They used their talents to escape the world in which they had grown up, and also felt the need to escape in order to do justice to their talents. For the ‘working-class’ creatives, starting college, or in some cases university, was a turning point in their lives. Even if their courses were not undertaken in prestigious universities or did not lead to degrees, they thrived in less restrictive and more stimulating environments, where they were encouraged and motivated by their tutors. Art and graphic design courses predominated, and it was on these that they were first exposed to the real prospect of careers in advertising. Many described how tutors recognized their aptitude and pointed them towards specialist advertising courses.

‘Middle-class’ creatives typically grew up in suburban areas, described by one as ‘very respectable, very quiet . . . very claustrophobic . . . bloody boring’. All ‘middle-class’ fathers had professional training and occupations. So too did many of the mothers, although they tended to stay at home after having children. Several fathers were architects, and aspects of their work fascinated their children:
I used to love going to his office . . . seeing all those technical drawings of buildings and houses . . . My dad used to bring work home at night, and he’d have all the plans, and like tracing paper, set squares and compasses and I just watched, I loved watching him . . .

(Paul, ‘middle-class’ creative director, 40s)

Parents, particularly mothers, were quite vigilant about friends, school, and television viewing. Consistent with Allatt’s (1993) account of ‘middle-class’ parents’ attempts to transmit cultural capital to children, considerable emphasis was placed on educational achievement. These creatives talked about going to ‘good schools’, and productive use of time was also an issue. As Crispin remarked, his parents ‘were strict, they kind of tried to instil discipline in me’. Here, as with the families researched by Allatt (1993) and Devine (2004), education was seen as a family project, and as with the privileged participants in Cooper’s (2008: 1250) study, it was ‘pre-conscious, obvious and normal’ to plan one’s future and enter higher education. Thus, there were various references to jettisoned career plans (‘I thought I might be a vet’, or ‘I started off wanting to be a lawyer’). ‘Middle-class’ creatives were also encouraged to become ‘rounded’, cultured individuals, particularly through extra-curricular school activities:

Our parents made us learn the piano, we all played for around ten years before we were allowed to give it up . . . and we all went on an orchestra course . . . anything the school did we’d be told to get involved . . .

(Lewis, ‘middle-class’ art director, 20s)

Although artistic and imaginative talent was encouraged, this was not generally seen as a career option. In general, these households emphasized stability, status and security in relation to careers, and parents encouraged their children to enter professions such as law or medicine. Teachers also expected them to go to university and follow a professional career. Again, consistent with Allatt’s study, creatives in this group generally reported quite ‘stressful’ childhoods, struggling to pursue their creative ambitions against their parents’ high educational expectations.

‘Middle-class’ copywriters generally had less of a struggle at school than art directors because they found it easier to fulfil academic expectations. Many made ‘sensible’ subject choices and generally pursued one of these subjects (often arts based) at university. None went to Oxbridge, and some art directors went against the grain by leaving school before completing
national qualifications to go to art college. For those who stayed on at school, an enlightened English or Art teacher often broadened their horizons. Several ‘middle-class’ accounts of starting out, then, communicated a strong sense of drive and struggle against expectations.

I dropped biology . . . it got in the way of art . . . I wanted to be an artist, . . . much to my folks’ horror . . . I suppose they want their kids to be in a career that they’ll make a good living out of . . . so they can say to their peers ‘oh my son’s doing this or he is this’ . . . I mean they couldn’t say ‘oh he’s an artist’ . . . they’d rather I was a doctor or a pharmacist . . .

(Rabir, ‘middle-class’ art director, 30s)

The values of the ‘wealthy middle-class’ parents were in some respects closer to their ‘working-class’ rather than ‘middle-class’ counterparts, since they encouraged their children’s creative ambitions and were open to different experiences. They had been brought up in town houses or large country houses. Such creatives came from old monied backgrounds with a tradition of private and then typically Oxbridge education. Some of the fathers were in professions such as law and property, although a few had departed from family tradition to follow more idiosyncratic pursuits. Some of the mothers used their professional or artistic skills, while others chose not to work. As one creative put it, ‘It was a rarefied . . . posh . . . background . . . a wealthy middle class family with an intellectual outlook on life’. Parents also nurtured their children’s creative talents, creating stimulating households for their children through books, the creative arts, family discussions and debates. Other relatives and family friends were a source of further cultural capital. Lynn, for example, spent a lot of time with her aunt ‘who was a bit of an intellectual and an art collector’. Her uncle was also influential:

He’d got a big art collection and literally thousands of books, so I’d sit in his library reading his books about art . . . he was always telling me things about painting or drawing . . .

(Lynn, ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director, 40s)

Children were encouraged to express themselves creatively through activities such as writing and performing plays and inventing ‘sort of fantasy worlds’. Although these creatives generally reported happy home lives, most, following family tradition, were sent away to private boarding schools, and this did not always suit them:
I've... grown up in this tradition of semi-professional class style thinking and educated privately... I went through what that generation with that kind of background and income did... which was to be sent away to school at the age of 7... and tipped out into the world again when I was 23... sixth generation to have rocked up there... I didn't hugely enjoy it if I'm honest...

(Wallace, ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director, 40s)

These parents did not educate their children in the expectation that they would enter a particular profession. Indeed, the bohemian outlook of some parents was sometimes at odds with those of the schools their children attended. Most creatives from this background had followed their family tradition of going to Oxbridge, where they typically studied Classics or English. Their parents’ financial resources and attitudes enabled them to accumulate a range of experiences, including time abroad.

Getting in

For the ‘wealthy middle-class’ creatives in this study, getting into advertising was a matter of choice, typically arrived at after graduation. Those from private school are ‘the elite’s elite’ (Roker, 1993: 136) and an Oxbridge degree confirmed and amplified this. As one ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director put it, ‘Being honest, you felt a bit of a dork leaving [Oxbridge] and going to London in [the 1980s] if you didn’t go to something reasonably well paid.’ For those graduating around then, it was obvious that this was ‘quite a flash time’ for advertising, with famous campaigns for Benson & Hedges (cigarettes) and the Conservative party raising the industry’s profile, and:

I don’t think you can overestimate the effect that that had on people looking for careers... suddenly it was big and sexy and it was powerful and they were moving with the mixers and shakers.

(Fred, ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director, 40s)

Rather than a longstanding aspiration, advertising was seen as a lucrative career option that would enable them to use their creative talents. Indeed, one creative director referred to ‘having a chat’ with the managing director of an advertising agency who ‘sort of persuaded me to go and do a placement there for three months’. Others, now in their 40s, 50s or 60s simply applied for jobs in the industry, not necessarily in creative departments, and one had been recruited directly from a successful art degree show. Only one
of this group (the youngest, now in his 30s) had had to be proactive in networking and seeking placements, but even here there was a strong sense that he was in command of his future; describing his trajectory, he simply stated that he ‘went to Oxford and did Classics and then decided to be an advertising creative’. The sense that this career was theirs for the taking resonates with Reay’s (2005) discussion of the psychic landscape of class.

In contrast to the ‘wealthy middle-class’ interviews, the difficulty of breaking into the advertising industry was a constant refrain among the ‘middle class’, and to an even greater extent, the ‘working-class’ creatives. Most had gravitated towards London at the outset, seeing it as an exciting place in its own right and because it was home to the top agencies. They hoped that a placement would lead to a permanent job, but it generally took several placements, and periods of unemployment, before this happened.

There was a clear consensus that the best way in to the industry was via the specialist undergraduate creative advertising course at Buckinghamshire New University (‘Bucks’) and the postgraduate creative advertising course at West Herts College (‘Watford’), both of which were strongly vocational and significantly oversubscribed. These courses provided students with both cultural and social capital. On the Bucks course,

By the time you leave you’ve got a portfolio, you know what agencies are what, you know who to go and see and then it’s just a matter of getting a job in the industry . . .

(Wilf, ‘working-class’ art director, 20s)

Similarly, Watford was described as ‘basically like advertising bootcamp. You go in knowing nothing and you come out with a portfolio and a partner.’ Since creatives advance their careers through peer recognition and award-winning work, finding the right partner was crucial, and these courses helped by requiring students to work with many different partners. This also exposed them to peers from a variety of backgrounds. Mairi, for example, talked about an earlier college partner whose ‘family was minted’, and mentioned her unease on finding that:

There was quite a lot of people who were kind of middle class . . . public school backgrounds . . . and it felt a bit easier because Suzy was from very working class parents . . . we had more in common in that respect as well . . .

(Mairi, ‘working-class’ art director, 20s)

Of the 10 ‘working-class’ creatives in this study, four had attended either Bucks or Watford, following recommendations from college tutors. Although
this sometimes did lead directly to a placement and permanent job, others who had done well on these courses still struggled a great deal, enduring considerable periods of financial hardship between placements and unemployment. Jonny described a year and a half of struggle, when he and his partner ‘worked on our portfolio, phoned up for crits,¹ went round London, saw people, ‘em cried a lot [laughs], ate beans, was very poor’. The emotional politics of class (Skeggs, 1997) were highlighted as he talked about his drive to succeed and fear of failing. Having worked in a low-paid service sector job,

It was all or nothing . . . I couldn’t walk away at that point . . . it was that fear of having to go back to that life that I didn’t want . . . I didn’t get any financial support from my mum, you know, they didn’t earn a lot of money . . . I just had to wait until I didn’t have any choice in the matter or someone literally threw my suitcases in the street and told me to get out because I hadn’t been paying my rent . . . that was the point I was going to get to [before giving up] . . .

Mairi also talked about ‘just trying to keep going’ during a period of 18 months when they were ‘on the dole’ between placements, and ‘sat at home watching daytime TV, trying to write some ads and like getting really depressed about it all’. As Bottero (2004) notes, relatively little is known about the lived experience of class in gendered and raced ways. Although the creatives from ethnic minority backgrounds did not discuss how or whether this shaped their careers, it was clear from Mairi’s account that her entry to advertising was shaped by her gender as well as her class. Thus, one placement did not work out because ‘it was very laddy you know . . . a boys’ club sort of thing . . . we just didn’t feel like we fitted in’. There were also issues about how success in securing a placement would be interpreted by others:

I think it’s hard for girl teams in the beginning . . . at the start to be taken sort of seriously . . . cause people just think . . . when you get given a placement or anything people just go . . . particularly all the boy teams as well . . . you’re only here because it’s something to look at or creative director just wants to shag ’em . . .

Alvesson (1994) noted that looks were an important consideration in the recruitment of Swedish female agency employees, and like the working-class women in Skeggs’s (1997) study, Mairi saw her body as a form of cultural capital that served her well on the placement trail:
The smartest thing is just learn to play on it ... just go yes we might just be here to look at ... we’re actually in the agency now and so we’re going to put this to good use and get some work done and get some work out of it ... you can get into places that a lot of the boy teams can’t sometimes and you have to turn it to your advantage ... 

For the ‘working-class’ creatives who had not gone to Bucks or Watford, entering the industry was particularly difficult. Most lacked not only the economic capital to ease the hardship of placements, but also the guidance of tutors who knew the industry, its working practices and key contacts. Calum talked in detail about the enormous effort involved in getting an advertising job. Graduating with an art-related degree, ‘I don’t remember somebody saying how to do it and what you should do’. The psychic landscape of class was also evident:

I remember my dad saying to me, ‘well, it’s [advertising] a closed world and you’ll never get into it’ and all this sort of stuff. I don’t think he was trying to be negative, it’s just that he’s come from a world where it was much more class-driven and I think he thought that it just wouldn’t happen ...

He found his way in by taking badly paid, depressing jobs, and working at night on his portfolio. He also ‘somehow managed to get to see’ some creative teams, and,

They both taught me the first lesson, that you have to have a partner. I mean I didn’t know that that was how the industry worked because I had come at it completely coldly.

He was similarly enterprising in finding a partner; discovering where would-be creatives on an industry course tended to meet, he introduced himself to them. This was not without its own emotional cost, however,

It all sounded horribly vague, and quite intimidating and scary, you know, walking into a pub where they might be. And I remember telling my dad ... and to his credit he said you have to go ...

Among the ‘middle-class’ creatives, eight of the 14 took the Bucks or Watford route into advertising. In some cases this was due to careers advice at school, although others heard about these courses at art college. A few took different advertising courses, or studied subjects such as English, business or
science at university. This left them without the social capital provided by the Bucks/Watford courses:

They were churning out loads and loads of people who had access to the agencies because they had been taught by the people working in the agencies . . . we had a placement . . . but we never converted it into a job . . . there were all these other graduates and they kept getting all these places because they had contacts . . .

(Michael, ‘middle-class’ copywriter, 40s)

Faced with the challenges of breaking into the industry, ‘middle-class’ creatives had economic, cultural and social capital to draw on. Some referred to financial support during the placement phase of their careers, for example, and others to helpful career guidance at school or using ‘a couple of books on how to get started’. The personal skills and confidence associated with a good middle-class education (Devine, 2004; Reay, 2005) were also evident:

I started exploring different fields to work in . . . just finding out my options and calling people in the industry, getting advice and stuff you know . . . I was quite proactive in finding out [about the industry]. I’d talk to people and get names, I’d call people up and just find out a bit about what the job was like, what it involved and how to get into the field . . .

(Rabir, ‘middle-class’ art director, 30s)

Similarly, Crispin described how he and his friend made contact with a local creative team, and ‘just went and annoyed them every second day, and took them like cakes and cookies’ to show appreciation for their advice. Such accounts reflect Allatt’s (1993: 143) observation that middle-class children not only benefit from their parents’ social capital, but learn the skills to create their own through ‘sociability and understanding of the mechanisms of social networking’.

**Getting on**

For the creatives in this study, ‘getting on’ related to both good relationships with their partner, and moving up the ranks within the industry. Social class was a quiet, but still important, presence in their accounts of working life.
The creative partnership: ‘Showing your knickers’

The importance of finding the right partner to work with was a theme that reverberated across all the transcripts. Most creatives had changed their partner at least once, but there was a strong sense of the creative team as a strong unit without clear boundaries between their disciplines:

On paper I’m the writer . . . Scott is the art director . . . I wouldn’t defer to Scott on art direction and vice versa he wouldn’t defer to me necessarily . . . we try to make it more integrated between the two of us, it’s not delineated . . .

(Calum, ‘working-class’ copywriter, 30s)

The closeness of creative partnerships was underscored by Archie, who recalled being told by his mentor to ‘stop saying “I” and say “we” instead because it’s all about teamwork’. This was essential, given the inherent riskiness of idea generation and development. The only person they were prepared to share and sift through their ‘bad ideas’ with was a trusted partner:

Because when you start working with somebody you’re basically showing them your knickers . . . you’re showing them your inner workings of your mind . . . you’ve got to be very comfortable with someone to try something which may sound a bit stupid or might sound crap . . . it’s the little like golden nuggets that you have to work out between you . . .

(Derek, ‘working-class’ art director, 40s)

Similarly, the copywriters interviewed by Hackley and Kover (2007) described the ‘us against the world’ mindset of creative teams, and the importance of a good partnership. Among the British creatives in this study, good partnerships counterbalanced the frustration and risk involved in creative production through a shared sense of humour, trust, respect and compatibility.

Despite the appeal of homophily (Ibarra, 1992) in such contexts, the creatives echoed Amabile (1996) in recognizing how different perspectives could liberate their thinking. Homogenous teams may reach solutions more quickly and harmoniously, but as one creative director noted ‘the conformity of the input increases the conformity of the output’. Of the 11 British teams participating in this study, one combined ‘working-class’ and ‘wealthy middle-class’ backgrounds, and the rest paired a ‘working-class’ with a
‘middle-class’ creative. Difference was a valuable part of effective working relationships:

        You have to maybe be able to appreciate each others’ ideas even though it might not be the kind of idea that you would come up with yourself . . . I think what you need . . . is to complement each other but be opposite to each other . . .

        (Donald, ‘working-class’ creative director, 40s)

Immersed in a creative brief, partners drew on their different personal experiences, attitudes, and tastes. This generated a creative tension, new ways of thinking, and ideas that neither could have created alone (Pollitt, 1979). It is here that the diversity of class backgrounds is potentially at its most productive, since ‘class is produced in a complex dynamic between classes with each class being the other’s “Other”’ (Reay, 2005: 923). The importance of class differences was made explicit in some interviews. One creative director, for example, described the impact his first ‘working-class’ creative colleague had on him:

        I was very proud of myself that I had got myself to Oxford . . . Billy was really anti–university . . . Billy is very, very working class and there was a school of advertising copywriters like Tony Abbott and David Brignell that wrote elegant body copy and if they hadn’t gone to Oxford wished they’d gone to Oxford . . . and if I’d learnt from them I think I would have got stuck in one way of doing it . . . Billy hated that . . . he said the best body copy is no body copy at all . . . he was very visual . . . fantastically liberating in terms of thinking . . .

        (Malcolm, ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director, 50s)

Class diversity within creative teams did not appear to have been engineered by agency management. Rather, it seemed that partners with different social backgrounds gravitated towards each other, perhaps as a way of providing complementary knowledge, skills and perspectives to ‘feed the cultural brain’ (Kelly et al., 2005: 515) of the creative team. Indeed, it could be argued that social diversity was especially important given the blending of craft skills between partners, which reduced other potential sources of creative tension within the creative team.

**Career trajectories**

One of the most striking aspects of the interviews was the degree of movement and insecurity involved in advertising creatives’ careers. Cooper (2008) argues
that workers’ social class backgrounds influence both their exposure to risk and their ability to navigate through it. Clearly, the placement system offers a precarious, penurious apprenticeship, likely to constitute a barrier to entry for ‘working-class’ creatives in particular. Past that hurdle, there was still a great deal of movement; indeed, one creative referred to the industry as a ‘merry-go-round’. Some of this was positive, with good ‘books’ or ‘breakthrough campaigns’ allowing teams to move to better paid jobs in agencies with a stronger creative reputation. Not all their moves were voluntary, however; most creatives had been fired or made redundant at least once.

This pattern of working highlights the need for trust and respect between partners who tended to be ‘hired and fired together’. It also points to the importance of the team’s ‘book’ and their social networks. A book containing award-winning and interesting campaigns is essential for impressing potential employers, but access to those potential employers is also required. Just like the freelance television production workers researched by Ancliff et al. (2007), creatives relied heavily on social networks; the industry was described as ‘incestuous’ and ‘a small community’. The specialist advertising courses and the placement system meant that new and aspiring entrants networked from the outset. Thus, while the ‘middle-class’ and ‘wealthy middle-class’ creatives may have started out with greater skills and support in this area, the ‘working-class’ creatives in this study also built and benefited from extensive social networks. The ‘hired together and fired together’ ethos meant that these resources were shared within the team, with benefits moving in both directions across the boundaries of social class backgrounds. Stories were common throughout the interviews, regardless of social class, of friends who alerted teams to opportunities, gave them jobs or offered freelance work to tide them over periods of unemployment. Among creative directors who had started their own agency, networks were also crucial:

One of the guys here . . . an old friend of mine, we used to live together and so when he was looking for people to start the agency with, he called three people and I was one of them . . .

(Donald, ‘working-class’ creative director, 40s)

Within the literature on class, tastes and interests are seen as hierarchically differentiated. Tastes associated with ‘upper’ and ‘middle-class’ backgrounds traditionally have more status; indeed, Alvesson (1994: 546) noted how ‘good taste’ was an important symbolic resource for agency personnel in positioning themselves favourably vis-à-vis clients and competitors. Within the British advertising industry at least, however, the cultural capital amassed by ‘working-class’ creatives could also be used to advantage within the team. As Scorah (1989: 7–8) notes,
Most advertising is planned and created in relatively plush offices in major city centres, by people who are paid well above the average wage . . . They are unlikely to watch the most popular TV programmes of the day, or read the popular newspapers . . . Despite the fact that these people are in no way representative of, or even in touch with, the majority of the population they are expected to be able to communicate in a meaningful and motivating way with all those not lucky enough to be among the chosen few destined to work in an advertising agency.

Creative choices are becoming increasingly intertwined with media choices, posing a challenge to the traditional advertising creative mindset that revolves around 30-second television commercials. Increasing emphasis is placed on brand ideas communicated consistently across different media, with a particular emphasis on digital technology (Saunders, 2005). According to Delaney (2006: 32), the new and more diverse generation of creatives has an ‘instinctive grasp of media’. In this study, while all creatives acknowledged the importance of embracing new media, the ‘working-class’ and to some extent the ‘middle-class’ copywriters cited different, more visually-based influences than their ‘bookish’ (and typically older) ‘wealthy middle-class’ counterparts. Jonny, for example, talked about how, in contrast to his university-educated partner, videos and MTV pop promos were his biggest interest growing up, and how ‘you’ll get more inspiration from a pop video . . . or a painting by Banksy [a popular graffiti artist] than you would reading industry papers or books . . .’. He would relish challenges such as ‘trying to invent a video game for a product’, and suggested that ‘people who go “right, I’m only going to do TV ads” are going to become dinosaurs’.

Thus, ‘working-class’ creatives may serve in a sense as intermediaries, spanning the cultural divide between social classes, and converting their origins, cultural and experiential reference points into cultural capital within the advertising industry. There were some indications that female creatives may function in a similar way. Mairi, for example, is explicit about this, referring to herself and her female partner as ‘a really valuable commodity’ within the industry, especially since even now ‘there’s still not that many women in advertising’.

I know that I’m never going to be out of work now . . . you know I can do advertising, I’m good at what I do and I’m a girl . . . there’s hardly any good girls out there and there’s just . . . because there’s so many women, female consumers and female products I’m always going to have work if I want it . . .

(Mairi, ‘working-class’ art director, 20s)
Although the ‘working-class’ creatives in this study had clearly amassed and used social and cultural capital, as Skeggs (1997) has discussed, class is also embodied and ‘deeply etched into our psyches’ (Reay, 2005: 911). In this study, traces of this could be read from some ‘working-class’ accounts of dealing with others in the industry. In marked contrast to the social competence and confidence of the Oxbridge agency personnel described by Hackley (2000), Jonny found some agency meetings stressful because he tended to go ‘ridiculously red as soon as I open my mouth in front of people I don’t know’. The ‘hidden injuries of class’ (Sennett & Cobb, 1977) were particularly explicit in his account:

I left school at 16, at the back of my mind . . . I think I must have psychologically at the back of my mind that I’m not . . . I shouldn’t be here, everyone’s going to find out I’m stupid mentality . . .

(Jonny, ‘working-class’ copywriter, 20s)

Although he suspected that all creatives share that insecurity at some level, he noted that his colleagues joked about how he ‘thinks he’s going to get fired every two seconds’. Similarly, Wilf explained that he tried to ‘just keep my nose clean and be polite you know and just stay out of trouble’. Such a strategy is the very antithesis of the entitlement associated with middle-class discourse (Allatt, 1993).

Conclusions

What I like about this business . . . is that you can come into this business and be successful regardless of your background . . . I mean Oxbridge people, and there are people who left school at 16 and they’ve all made a lot of money . . . it’s, I wouldn’t say meritocratic but it’s at least random . . . healthily random . . .

(Len, ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative director, 40s)

This ‘new embourgeoisement thesis’ (Bates & Riseborough, 1993: 4) was not only advanced by the more privileged creatives; Calum (‘working-class’ copywriter) also suggested that ‘as long as you can generate ideas and that you’ve got the right aptitude for it I don’t think it matters how you got there’. Certainly, within the advertising industry, creative departments appear to be something of an oasis (or perhaps a ghetto) for those from ‘subaltern backgrounds’ (Nixon, 2003: 61). Once in, the ‘working-class’ creatives in this study were also very proficient in capitalizing on and developing their social networks. Their early cultural milieu and interests also emerged as something
to capitalize on, because it could produce a creative tension when working with partners from more privileged backgrounds, and also perhaps because it helped them to communicate more empathetically with target audiences who shared their background. This suggests another sense in which ‘working-class’ creatives could be considered ‘new cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 310–11). Perhaps it is not only social capital that has bridging and bonding forms (Putnam, 2000), since at least some of the value attached to these creatives’ cultural capital lay in its ability to bridge the gap between the privileged habitus of agency life and the cultural landscape of those occupying a different social position.

While in these respects it might not matter ‘how you got there’, actually ‘getting there’ was particularly difficult – in economic, social, cultural and emotional terms – for the ‘working-class’ creatives in this study, even for some who had performed well on the specialist advertising courses. In addition to the challenges of finding out ‘how the industry worked’, and gaining access to established teams for ‘book crits’, many ‘working-class’ creatives described lengthy periods of unemployment at the outset, and the precarious nature of their jobs. While they were by no means the only ones to find this draining, the strain they felt was compounded by economic pressure, particularly in the early stages of their careers. In contrast, a ‘wealthy middle-class’ creative acknowledged that whatever financial pressures he may have faced ‘there was always some relative who could have bailed you out with a thousand quid, so I don’t know what it’s like not to know how to pay the gas bill’. As Mutch (2002) notes, those who break through occupational class barriers may well perform better than others in their chosen domain because of the challenges they have had to overcome to gain entry and acceptance. Thus, for every ‘working-class’ creative who ‘got in’, there are likely to be many more who struggled to no avail.

Once inducted into the industry’s working practices, creatives from different backgrounds encountered and indeed gravitated towards each other; different social backgrounds appeared to contribute some of the productive tension required for the team to create effective advertising. With the boundaries increasingly blurred between copywriting and art directing roles, diversity in social background may become increasingly important in maintaining this productive tension. Certainly, some of the more creatively lauded agencies have begun to engineer greater diversity within creative departments, and this issue appears to be rising up the recruitment agenda within the British industry. The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, for example, has recently collaborated with the British Government’s Culture Secretary to launch a ‘diagonal thinking’ initiative, intended to increase diversity within the industry. This study suggests that such drives not only...
further a social inclusion agenda but also serve the industry’s commercial interests. A broader base for recruitment has also been facilitated by the emergence of specialist advertising colleges, which have trained a new generation of ‘working-class’ and ‘middle-class’ copywriters with more visually-based influences and ‘languages of thought’ (John-Steiner, 1985: 8) than the traditional Oxbridge recruits. This may be even more urgent if, as Benvenuto (2007) suggests, creative teams need to graft on expertise in digital interactive technology. The influx of new craft skills into the agency would not only represent a seismic shift in the organization and dynamics of advertising creativity, but could also offer further opportunities for broadening the composition of advertising’s workforce beyond the traditional Oxbridge intake. The life histories of the ‘working-class’ creatives participating in this study, however, support Umarji’s (2008) contention that school-level interventions are also needed to encourage a more diverse group to consider and pursue advertising careers.

By exploring how the social class backgrounds of 32 British advertising creatives have shaped their experiences of getting started, getting in and getting on in advertising, this article has shed light on a dimension of the ‘motley crew’ that has largely been overlooked within the creative management and advertising literature. Indeed, the practices and relationships involved in advertising production have received remarkably little attention in the management and advertising literature.

In addition to exploring how advertising creatives’ social class background influenced their career trajectories, this study offers insights into the lived experiences of their career trajectories, from their family home and education to the various agencies in which they have practised their craft. It has highlighted the challenges of navigating the placement system, the social networks and the insecurity of creative work in the advertising industry. It has also indicated the intimacy of creative partnerships, the importance of trust and ‘creative tension’ within them, and the potential for technological changes to alter dramatically the composition and work of creative teams.

Clearly these findings relate to a particular group of British advertising creatives, at a particular point in time, and other studies are needed to explore whether similar patterns may be discerned in the career trajectories of other creatives, and in other cultures. The ubiquity of social inequities and class divisions, however, indicates that it is likely to feature in most.

There are several fruitful avenues for further research in this area. The creative relationship itself merits more detailed research attention than could be afforded here. Lived experiences of agency personnel – creatives and others – beyond the white, male, middle-class norm merit more attention, as our brief insights, limited by our sample, into class and gender indicate. The
career trajectories and challenges of planning, media and account management roles, and the demands they place on economic, social and cultural capital may be very different from those discussed here. Finally, diversity – or the lack of it – within advertising agencies is likely to affect agency–client relationships and agency–consumer communications, but such issues have yet to be explored.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number: PTA-026–27–1580). The authors would like to thank Gail Fairhurst, Associate Editor and the reviewers for insightful and constructive feedback that has helped the authors develop this article.

Notes

1 A critique of a team’s portfolio (‘book’) by a more established creative team. The ‘book’ is the team’s calling card, and book crits provide feedback on their work as well as introducing them to potential employers or mentors within the industry.

2 [http://www.ipa.co.uk/Content/Culture-Secretary-launches-Diagonal-Thinking].

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Charlotte McLeod completed her PhD at University of Edinburgh and her ESRC post-doctorate at St Andrews University’s Management School. Her PhD explored the life histories of advertising creatives. Her current research interests include the career trajectories of advertising creatives and the role of clients in creative production. She has previously published in the Journal of Marketing Management and Marketing Intelligence and Planning. Prior to pursuing an academic career, Charlotte was an advertising account manager.

[E-mail: cgilmore114@aol.com]

Stephanie O’Donohoe is a Reader in Marketing, University of Edinburgh Business School. An interpretive consumer researcher, much of her work has focused on advertising consumption and production practices. Beyond advertising, her research interests include the role of consumption in the transition to motherhood, and bereaved consumers’ interactions with the marketplace. Her work has been published in journals, including Human Relations, European Journal of Marketing and International Journal of Advertising.

[E-mail: stephanie.o'donohoe@ed.ac.uk]

Barbara Townley is Chair of Management at St Andrews and Director of the Institute for Capitalising on Creativity (www.capitalisingoncreativity.ac.uk). She has worked at the universities of Lancaster, Warwick and Edinburgh and spent 10 years at the University of Alberta, Canada. She has published in Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal, Organization Studies, Organization, Journal of Management Studies and Human Relations, and is the author of three books, the most recent of which, Reason’s neglect: Rationality and organizing, was published by Oxford University Press in 2008.

[E-mail: bt11@st-andrews.ac.uk]