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# The moral dimension of class and gender identity-making: poverty and aggression in a secondary school in the city of Buenos Aires

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This paper presents some results of a qualitative study carried out in a secondary school in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina). It examines how two students from poor families responded to, and viewed, aggression by peers at their school. This paper argues that the examination of students' narratives about aggression (based on classism and sexism) illustrates the analytical usefulness of the moral dimension of social life to unpack crucial aspects of the micro politics of class and gender and processes of identity-making. Following Sayer, this article maps students' responses to immoral sentiments and misrecognition: the search for respect and respectability, and moral boundary drawing. It demonstrates that these reactions are entangled in students' class and gender identity-making. It also shows how 'victims' are able to regain respect. However, the individualized nature of these processes and the spirals of aggression they instigate demonstrate the fragile and temporary nature of this achievement.

**Keywords:** social class; gender; identities; morality; emotions

## Introduction

In Argentina, since the 1970s, numerous studies have examined the nature of the educational participation and attainment of children and young people from different social groups mainly living in urban areas. Only a minority of researchers have looked at class identities, and how these are formed (and informed) by schooling experiences. On the other hand, during the past decade, several studies have begun to examine schools as productive and generative cultural sites of gender and sexual identities. However, these two strands of research have been like 'two ships passing in the night'. This article argues that the examination of the moral dimension of inequalities and

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students' class and gender identity-making can promote a fruitful dialogue between these research traditions.

This paper contributes to British traditions of sociology of education by focusing on the moral dimension of class and gender identity-making in secondary schooling. Many studies have examined the ways in which social class interplays with gender (for example, Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007; Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Reay 1997). They have also explored how these social differences shape young people's identities and how these are related to different educational engagements, achievements, and aspirations. However, only a few studies have looked at morality, recognition, and class and gender identity-making (see Willis 1981). The present article illustrates the usefulness of such an approach.

The paper presents an analysis of the narratives of two poor students (a boy and a girl) regarding their understanding of and response to aggression enacted by peers at their secondary school in Argentina. Aggression in the school ranged from aggressive staring ('*mirar mal*'), insults, mockery and threats of violence, to actual physical harm. They caused distress, humiliation, and feelings of contempt. This paper argues that the examination of students' narratives about aggression (based on classism and sexism) illustrates the analytical usefulness of the moral dimension of social life to unpack crucial aspects of the micro politics of class and gender and of processes of identity-making. Following Sayer (2005), this article maps students' responses to immoral sentiments and misrecognition, the search for respect and respectability, and moral boundary drawing. Moreover, it demonstrates – drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of social practice and recent class analysis – that these reactions are entangled in students' class and gender identity-making. Samira (a girl) and Yutiel (a boy) claimed recognition of their moral worth and in so doing performed specific types of femininity and masculinity that condemned the traditional aggressive heterosexist masculinity performed by their aggressors.

The co-existence of multiple moral communities (e.g. those of women and so-called 'decent people') helps Samira and Yutiel (the targets of aggression) to succeed, at least temporarily, in their attempts to define valuable class and gender identities for themselves. However, the individualized nature of these processes, and the spirals of violence (either verbal or physical) they instigate, demonstrate the fragile and temporary nature of this achievement. Unless teachers and school authorities engage with students' moral frameworks and sense of 'right and wrong', classism and homophobia will continue to go unchallenged.

The next section briefly unfolds the theoretical tools used to examine social class and gender identities and their links to morality. The following section describes key features of the education system of the city of Buenos Aires, the school, and the methods used. Then I examine how two poor students narrate incidents of aggression, in which their poverty (and, in the

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case of the boy, his sexuality, too) were targeted. I argue that the students' strategies for dealing with abuses were central parts of their class and gender identity-making. Finally, I relate my analysis to research on educational inequalities in Argentina.

## Recognition, emotions, inequalities and identities

Class inequalities have been of paramount interest to sociologists and sociologists of education in different latitudes. However, the majority of sociological studies tend to ignore lay normativity (Sayer 2005). Sayer (2005) convincingly argues that the micro-politics of class encompasses not only struggles over access to valued goods but also the definition of what is good. In this view, social struggles are also about self-worth and recognition. Hence, paying attention to the moral dimension of social life is crucial to achieving a better understanding of people's 'feeling for the game' (in Bourdieusian terms), their investments and commitments, and what matters to them.

Following Sayer (2005), recognition and misrecognition are central aspects of the micro-politics of class and gender and of people's subjective experiences and well-being. Recognition is always claimed from others and involves the acknowledgement of one's right to self-determinacy and of the worth of one's behaviours, moral virtues and labour. Recognition entails reciprocity. There are two types of recognition: the unconditional and the conditional. The former is granted on the basis of people's humanity; the latter is given on the basis on people's ability to adopt valued ways of living, practices and moral virtues.

Class and gender, as different sources of inequalities, involve divergent types of recognition and are important to understanding subjectivities and identities (Reay 1991; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997). On the one hand, class inequalities always imply unequal degrees of recognition of people's worth, due to variable access to valued goods (such as resources and practices).[1] Class inequalities are based on disparate levels and combinations of economic, social and cultural capital, and comprise different degrees of movements across the social space (Skeggs 1997).[2] According to British cultural analyses of class (inspired by Bourdieu's theory of social praxis), class identities are the result of conscious and unconscious strategies of differentiation and distinction from other social groups or classes (Lawler 2005; Savage 2000). However, class identities – how people define themselves against others classes – cannot automatically be deduced from people's social positions (Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997). Social actors' reflexivity and ability to deploy moral judgements play a central part in processes of class identity-making (Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997). In this sense, identities should be interpreted as being fluid, contested, contextual, processual and produced through discourse.

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Gender, on the other hand, as a cultural construction, is produced through identity-sensitive mechanisms. The subjective experience and associated identities are necessarily productive of gender, because this type of difference is ascriptive in character (Sayer 2005, 92). In this analysis, the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, masculinities and femininities contribute to an understanding of gender identities and processes of gender identification (Connell 2002). Gender identities, like class identities, are never crystallized; rather, they are produced through continual construction, contestation, negotiation and assertion. A person produces and asserts his or her identity in different manners, across various settings, and times. The concept of hegemonic masculinity points to the co-existence of 'competing masculinities' and makes visible the dominant forms of masculinity that successfully claim the highest status and the greatest authority in a particular context and time (Francis and Skelton 2001). Other less powerful forms of masculinity are marginalized and subordinated (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). Femininities, on the other hand, are always constructed in relation to masculinities (Archer and Francis 2007; Francis and Skelton 2001). Both femininities and masculinities are performed and practiced within a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990), within which heterosexuality is constituted as the sexual norm. Homophobia is both a productive and regulatory discourse of sexual practices and desires.

Sayer (2005) argues that moral sentiments and emotions are useful to an examination of experiences of inequalities and symbolic domination. They are spontaneous evaluative judgements about how people are treated, and should be treated, by others. They can emerge in a wide range of social settings, and may not do so exclusively within, and as reactions to, relations of domination (class-based or otherwise). Actors use moral sentiments to establish differences between themselves and others but also to differentiate among behaviours within and across social class and other divisions. Actors rarely fail to acknowledge that they can be badly or well treated by members of any group. Sayer argues that lay normativity features in social life and experience, and that actors' evaluative judgements of inequalities matter because they impinge on their own actions towards them.

Sayer examines different moral sentiments and emotions (such as sympathy, benevolence, shame and humiliation) and immoral ones (such as class contempt, sexism, ageism and homophobia), and asks how they operate as commentaries on class inequalities. In this paper, I examine how peers' class contempt triggers Samira's and Yutiel's humiliation and their responses to the misrecognition of their moral worth.

Class contempt is a particular type of 'othering', which assumes a wide range of forms, ranging from disgust, revulsion and subtle aversion to uneasiness or discomfort in the company of others (Sayer 2005). It is 'contempt for people and their behaviour by virtue of their class position, not their behaviour, or alternatively contempt for their behaviour because it is

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associated with a particular class' (Sayer 2005, 165). Class contempt is characterized by 'illegitimate slides from aesthetic to performative and moral disapproval' (Sayer 2005, 164), involving appreciation of the self, and those of the same class, and projection of all that is immoral and bad onto the other (Skeggs 2004).

Humiliation, on the other hand, is a moral sentiment that arises as an evaluative response to others' negative aesthetic, performative and/or moral judgements. Humiliation is provoked not only by the attribution of deficit to a group or a person but by public declaration of this inadequacy (Sayer 2005). In other words, humiliation involves misrecognizing a person's worth. Both Samira and Yutiel are humiliated by their classmates (because of their poverty and also, in Yutiel's case, his perceived homosexuality). This article shows how the students respond to their inferiorization by searching for recognition (respect and respectability) and by drawing moral boundaries, all of which affects their understanding of themselves and others (both in class and gender terms).

Other sociological studies have addressed similar concerns. As Sayer (2005) reminds us, in the sociology of education Paul Willis examined how the routine rejection of school authority and the celebration of working-class masculinities by the 'lads' was entangled with struggles they were engaged in for recognition of their worth and their right to be respected. Another example is the work of Skeggs (1997), who examined how working-class women claim respectability by performing heterosexual caring femininities and by distinguishing themselves from the working classes. In Willis and Skeggs' analysis, social class and gender identities intersect and are enmeshed in struggles for forms of recognition through moral judgements. Sayer asserts that 'respectability is sought somewhat submissively; respect is claimed or demanded more assertively' (2005, 176), arguing that women tend to search for respectability and men for respect; this paper, however, offers evidence that this needs to be established rather than presupposed.

Having presented my conceptual tools, the next section depicts the city, the school and the research methods used in this study.

## The city, the school and the methods

The city of Buenos Aires has historically been one of the richest jurisdictions in Argentina, and has the lowest level of poverty (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos 2001) in the country. Despite this generally favourable situation, the city has high levels of social inequality and polarization that are reflected in its socio-spatial organization. Between the 1991 and 2001 population censuses, for instance, *villas miserias* (shanty towns) grew considerably.

These socio-economic inequalities are reflected in the state education system. For instance, while the average rate of repetition of students enrolled at

state secondary schools[3] was 15.6% in 2004, this indicator reached a maximum of 22.5% in one of the poorest school districts of the City and a minimum of 5% in one of districts with the lowest levels of structural poverty (Secretaría de Educatión del Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires 2005). Although there is little quantitative data available on the socio-economic composition of schools (Cervini 2005), statistics offer enough information to assert the existence of a local system with circuits of schools with unequal educational performance. Qualitative studies have pointed out the existence of 'fragments' or 'segments' (i.e. groups of institutions) with differential socio-economic intakes, institutional profiles and aspirations (Kessler 2002; Tiramonti 2004).

Successive local administrations have tried to counterbalance growing levels of social and educational inequality by the implementation of policies aimed at promoting social and educational inclusion. One of the key initiatives undertaken has been the raising of the compulsory school leaving age to 18 years, which took place in 2000. This policy resulted in an increase in the number of students from poor families who were enrolled in secondary schooling but failed to alter high levels of educational failure (repetition and drop out).

I carried out my fieldwork in the state secondary school 'Low Hill'.[4] The school was located in a middle-class neighbourhood in the northeast of the City, but its intake came from a wider geographical area, one that encompassed quite diverse neighbourhoods, in terms of their social composition (they ranged from middle-class enclaves to deprived areas). Despite the fact that the population of its school district decreased over the same period, Low Hill's intake increased almost 33% during the seven years prior to my research. This increase could be interpreted as being the result of an improvement in the school's building and recruitment policy, as well as local policies aimed at involving more young people from poor families in secondary education.

Low Hill students were very diverse, in terms of their age groups, educational trajectories, and social background. For instance, in the third school year, more than 30% of students had repeated at least one school year (Low Hill 2004).[5] Three out of 10 students were new students, who came from other schools. As for the school's socio-economic composition, according to the head teacher, teachers and pastoral assistants, Low Hill's population came from lower classes and poor or marginal families.[6] According to my interviews and survey, the third school year also included a number of lower-middle-class students who had repeated in other schools just before enrolling in Low Hill.

Unlike students attending elite state secondary schools, Low Hill's students did not have to pass an examination to enrol. At the beginning of 2004 the school had 810 students, of whom 60% were girls. According to teachers, from the mid-1990s onwards Low Hill accepted a high proportion

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of students with previous experience of educational failure and serious behavioural problems. Rosalía, a female geography teacher at Low Hill, illustrates this change of population and the perceived distance between the school and its 'new' students:

> The educational level of the students in this school has always been a bit lower than that of other schools in the area [...] At that time, we didn't have so many students with *sobre-edad* and fewer students were completely uninterested, like now. I don't mind having a student of 20 years old if they come to study, but if the student of 20 years old commits the same mistakes they committed last year and the year before [...] this type of *chico* comes here and thinks that this is a social club [...]. (Interview)

My fieldwork was focused on the third-school-year students. It was carried out over the course of nine months, from mid-March 2004 to mid December 2004. It consisted of participant observation, various types of interview, surveys and the examination of a range of documents. This paper is mainly based on the analysis of semi-structured and spontaneous interviews with Samira and Yutiel, and interviews with their teachers, pastoral assistant and peers.

## Confronting misrecognition and class and gender identity-making: the cases of Samira and Yutiel

Many boys and girls, from different social groups, mentioned episodes where they had witnessed or experienced situations of verbal abuse amongst students. Teachers, pastoral assistants and students also mentioned several episodes where female and male students were caught up in fights in classrooms. They also mentioned fights outside the school (whether at the entrance door or in a park nearby). On a few occasions, I witnessed such events myself. In line with British and Argentinean research (Connell 2002; DiLeo 2009; Mac an Ghail 1994; Willis 1981), conflicts and abuse amongst students in Low Hill were, in many instances, linked to challenges to heterosexuality, racism, and classism and to conflicting views about school matters and teaching styles.

The Argentinean education system does not enforce specific regulations and procedures designed to tackle abuse involving heterosexism, racism and classism. Human rights legislation (such as the Convención de los Derechos del Niño y del Adolescente) enacted in Argentina establishes that any person should be free of 'discrimination' (based on gender, sexuality, 'race', religious condition, etc.). However, at the time of the fieldwork, the national and local education systems[7] had not yet put in place institutional mechanisms to respond (either at school or classroom level) to cases of abuse based on social inequalities and/or cultural differences.[8] Adults in the schools did not have any institutional spaces to discuss these issues, or any

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specific training to address such routine abuse. Teachers spontaneously talked about the 'discrimination' experienced by certain students who were verbally abused by their peers. In many cases, teachers found these situations very difficult to manage. According to students, school authorities, teachers and pastoral assistants tended to intervene 'too little and too late'. Indeed, the great majority of students asserted that the school 'did not care' and 'turned a blind eye' to everyday conflicts and abuse. A few students argued that adults' inability to deal with abusers could be explained by their fear of retaliation.

In the following sub-sections I examine the narratives of two poor students (Samira and Yutiel) concerning peer group aggression and disrespect based on class contempt. The analysis will be split into two sub-sections. First, I will introduce Samira and Yutiel. Then I will examine each of their narratives, in turn.

### *Poverty and schooling*

Despite both belonging to families with very low economic capital and inappropriate cultural capital, Samira (a girl of 16 years) and Yutiel (a boy of 17 years)[9] were located in different objective social positions, determined by the volume, composition and trajectory of their cultural, economic, and social capitals (Bourdieu 1985; Sayer 2005). Samira lived in a *villa miseria* with her mother, father, brother and sister. Her family struggle to survive. Her father had had an accident few years earlier and had not been able to work since then. He was in a wheelchair and sometimes begged for money, in train or bus stations. Her older sister had a serious disease that did not allow her to work. She was studying textile design at a state university. Her younger brother went to the secondary school. They lived on benefits and the re-sale of cans, cardboard and newspapers. Samira, her mother and her brother occasionally collected items from the garbage (a practice known as *cartonear*).

Yutiel, on the other hand, had moved to the city of Buenos Aires six months before the beginning of the school year. He wanted to 'be somebody'. His father was a rural worker and his mother was a housewife. Neither his parents nor his older siblings had completed secondary schooling. Yutiel was the first one in his family to attend secondary school. His economic and emotional situation was more difficult than Samira's. During the school year, he lived with one his brothers in a room in a *pension* (cheap hotel) for a few months, and then went on to live there alone. Before the school term, he worked long hours doing a menial job in a supermarket. He received intermittent economic support from his family and from other people he knew in Buenos Aires.

Despite their relative different social positions, Samira and Yutiel shared some features that make the comparison of their narratives meaningful. First,

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they both valued secondary education as a key for unlocking their futures, their identity-making and their sense of self-respect. Secondly, they considered their school a 'bad school', where adults did not deal well with everyday aggression and conflicts between students. Thirdly, most of the school's teachers regarded them as being 'nice' and 'well behaved', as well as being 'good people'. In this sense, they recognized the legitimacy of teachers' authority and of schooling.[10] Finally, they were classmates[11] and had to endure aggression and disrespect from the same group of students.

### *Class and gender identity-making: between the search for recognition and othering*

Samira was particularly angry with a small group of boys and girls who taunted her because of her poverty. At the beginning of the school year, she put up with their comments in silence. By the end of the first term, however, she had developed a strong sense of injustice. She started to answer back. She once hit a girl in her classroom and she fantasized with hitting one of her abusers. In her words:

> One day I was angry because … I didn't have a tooth. 'Well' I said, 'don't look at it. It's easy. If you don't like that I don't have a tooth, well, don't look at it, or pay me for a new one. He said: 'Yeah, you collect cans [from the garbage]'. 'Well, that's my problem', I said. 'I do collect cans for a living; you don't. Yes, I work doing that; you don't'. I told him that. He was the one who showed off that he had money. I have this problem with him since last year. He started to put that entire group against me, and that girl was laughing, ha, ha, ha. He stared at me, she mocked me, I don't know … It's not like I like to fight (*agarrarme a las piñas*). But the anger was there. I really wanted to hit her. I don't know why but that day I wanted to kill her' … 'I hit her' 'everybody asked me why I hit her; I said 'well, because I wanted to' […] 'I had my reasons to hit somebody. It's not like I enjoy hitting people'. (Group interview).

> Samira: This boy, when he is with the rest, he is wow! He is the leader […] but when he is alone, it's just him and us; we are a group of girls. I think that if we confront him, he will just run away. What does he think? Just because we are women, does he think we will not hit him? I think that if we hit him, he won't be able to do anything. If he [Yutiel] fights him, well, maybe his parents could report him to the police. […]
>
> Yutiel: I don't hit anybody
>
> Samira: I think that a woman has more right to hit a man, I mean. If I hit this guy, he cannot report me to the police […] I don't know how to say it … you should respect a woman. If the man does not respect a woman, the woman needs to make him to respect her. Maybe fighting but she needs to gain respect. […] Once I told the girls 'we need to hit Carlos' […] then we didn't do it. But sometimes you really want to hit him. It really disgusts me, it's disgusting, I want to grab him

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> from his neck [...] hit his face. He is disgusting. What he does is disgusting. He doesn't seem a person. He has lots of money and he only laughs at us, maybe he buys drugs to his friends. Who knows what he does! It really bothers me that he laughs, not just at me, but at everybody. (Group interview)

The first extract illustrates how humiliating and painful her classmates' remarks and laughter were for Samira. Humiliation is a moral sentiment provoked by peers' class contempt (Sayer 2005). In addition to the pain and suffering that her living conditions inflicted on her and her family, the first extract shows how Samira had to endure public disdain for her way of life and physical appearance, which questioned her moral worth (Charlesworth 2000). She was put down and disrespected for not being able to have a new tooth and for collecting cans from the garbage for a living.[12] The former act relates to the dominant aesthetic and the latter to dominant discourses about the respectability of certain types of job. These are class injuries that 'affect the kind of individuals people become' (Sayer 2005, 7). Moreover, Samira rejected her peers' valuation of her by asserting that *cartonear* was something she had to do for living. She did not choose it. In other interviews, Samira stated that c*artonear* was nothing to be ashamed of and that it was something she and her family had to do to cope with the dramatic economic situation that had been triggered by her father and sister's serious illnesses and by losing their house and belongings in a fire. For her, these were events that were completely outside their control and for which they bore no responsibility. Their predicament was, therefore, indicative not of personal or family deficiency but of injustice (Sayer 2005). In this way, Samira decoupled her poverty from the accusation of 'lack of moral worth' implicit in her classmate's aesthetic and performative judgements, and claimed respect and recognition for her ability to endure hardship and poverty that had been forced upon her and her family.

This extract also refers to the event where she rebutted her classmate's remarks and hit the girl who laughed at her. Despite class injuries, Samira answered and fought back. Anger, hate and violence followed disrespect and humiliation, not silence and shame. When this happened, students were alone in their classroom and Samira's classmate did not retaliate.

In the second extract, Samira expresses her profound disgust at the conduct of a better-off male classmate. She also encourages her girlfriends to hit him. Narratives of disgust and fantasies of physical violence helped Samira (albeit in problematic ways) to resist her inferiorization on the basis of class inequalities. In particular, disgust operated as 'judgements of culture' put into effect (Skeggs 1997, 118). Disgust is at the very core of subjectivity making (Lawler 2005). Lawler asserts that, amongst those who are disgusted, 'their very selves are produced in opposition to "the low" and the low cannot do anything but repulse them' (2005, 430). However, unlike the

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disgust of the middle classes, in Samira's case 'the low' are those 'morally low' (Sayer 2005), who 'don't seem a person' and 'sell drugs', and do not deserve respect due their lack of moral virtues and imagined criminal lives. In this way, Samira positively reworked her class identity ('being poor') by drawing moral boundaries and presenting *cartonear* as a legal and honest job, and, therefore, a respectable way for living, unlike selling drugs.

These extracts also show how, during this struggle for recognition, Samira's narratives portrayed her as an active, assertive, disobedient, strong, and outspoken person, embodying 'not nice' femininity (Sayer 2005; Paechter 2006). Demanding respect and respectability was part and parcel of the production of an oppositional femininity, outside dominant conceptions (Paechter 2006). On the one hand, Samira condemned her male classmate's abuses by invoking universal moral values ('respecting women') and tried to mobilize a local moral community (her girlfriends) to claim respect through the use of violence. Again, violence was imagined as the only way to regain respect and as merited punishment for the perpetrators of abuse and everyday mistreatment. On the other hand, unlike many of her female friends and classmates (who were shy and silent during lessons and breaks, and when witnessing abuse), she directly and indirectly confronted male students who performed heterosexual and macho-type masculinities through abuse of different kinds, including homophobic jokes and banter (Mac an Ghail 1994). Femininities and masculinities are defined in localized and relational ways (Connell 2002). Samira's struggle for recognition was intertwined with her identification with strong and rational femininities capable of using physical violence to regain respect. By hitting her female classmate and by asking 'What does he think? Just because we are women, does he think we will not hit him?', Samira was challenging biological and essentialist conceptions of womanhood as passive, weak, and emotional. However, Samira was not a 'ladette'. She valued education, had good educational results at Low Hill, and was seen by teachers as being 'bright', 'intelligent', 'participative', and 'a very able student' (Jackson 2006). Despite previous experience of educational failure, she wanted to complete secondary school, for the sake of herself and her family. Moreover, she 'knew' that completing secondary schooling and continuing higher education studies would be very important in getting a respectable job, as a nurse or policewoman, and also help her family.

On the other hand, Yutiel was both the target of class contempt and homophobic bulling by a small group of boys and a girl in his class. In different interviews, he mentioned several occasions on which his peers had mistreated him. Class contempt and homophobic abuse had assumed different forms (ranging from subtle forms of moral evaluation (e.g. glances, looks, and remarks) to open abuse, including name-calling, jokes, and the appearance of insulting graffiti in his classroom. Yutiel's response changed over time: from silence and shame to jokes and anger. The following inter-

view extract illustrates how Yutiel interpreted the glances and looks directed at him by one classmate (a girl called Samantha) as a form of mistreatment, based on his perceived poverty:

Yutiel: Have you met Samantha? Because she has two surnames[13] [. . .] she is arrogant (*viene con unos aires*), she thinks she is posh (*chetita*), she thinks that she is better than us, and she stares at us . . . To hurt her I call her *Injusticia*, *Injusticia* is a name of a character in a TV program [for teenagers]. I've called her that and she gets angry [. . .] The person who is *Injusticia* in the program is fat. Samantha is also fat and she watches the TV program, well, she mocks me and I mock her. I cannot stand [that] from a woman. I would grab her from her arm and ask her: 'what's your problem?' It really annoys me. That is why I call her *Injusticia*.

Interviewer: What does she say?

Yutiel: She looks at me like I were a *villero*, who lives in a *villa* [*miseria*][14] (shanty town). [. . .]

Samira: She looks at you with contempt [. . .]

Yutiel: I tell her things to hurt her. If she were really posh, she wouldn't come to this state school. If you are from the high society, you wouldn't go to a state school who is for people from the low society. (Group interview)

This extract shows how routine, and painful, class contempt and disrespect were (Sayer 2005). As in the case of Samira, poverty and peer disdain are twin class injuries for Yutiel, undermining his well-being and his sense of self-respect. Yutiel's narrative and gestures attempt to capture the subtle and embodied nature of the aesthetic, performative and moral judgements that form part of his daily interactions. His narrative also highlights how much they matter to young people's sense of self. Yutiel asserted that Samantha looked at him as if he were a '*villero*, who lives in a *villa* [*miseria*]'. For Yutiel, this was an insult, a way to publicly indicate his deficit or inferiority, a way to express that she 'was better than us'. In Argentinean lay discourse and the media, and at Low Hill, *villerito* or *villerita* – terms identifying someone as a man, or woman, who lives in a shanty town or *villa miseria* – are used to label individuals as poor, marginal, violent, and amoral. The words indicate low social standing or position, consequent inability to sustain a valued way of life, and lack of moral worth (Sayer 2005). As further discussed below, Yuitel also associated *villeritos* with a lack of moral worth (even though some of his classmates, including Samira, actually lived in a *villa miseria*), thereby endorsing dominant values, which he himself found very difficult to embody.

Only when Yutiel started to build alliances with others in their classroom – during the second term – did he begin to fight back against Samantha's undermining of his self-worth. By calling her *Injusticia*, he mocked

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Samantha's physical appearance in order to 'hurt' her, to 'save face' and to regain the respect of his peers (and, indeed, himself) (Goffman 1967). Another strategy for dealing with Samantha was to question her supposed social superiority and to define her as being no better than the other students who attended Low Hill. So far as Yutiel and his allies were concerned, posh people did not attend the school. By asserting this, he denied the social distance between him and Samantha and attempted to invalidate her negative remarks, attitudes and glances.

Yutiel was also the target of continuous homophobic banter. One of Yutiel's initial strategies for dealing with this was to pretend that he neither listened or cared. However, during the second part of the school year, he started to answer back and to tease the two boys who had previously abused him. Benefiting from his 'discovery' of the gay scene in Buenos Aires and having established good relations with certain teachers, he was able to confront his abusers and 'come out of the closet'. The process was not an easy one, however, for instances of abuse and mistreatment still occurred, as the following interview extracts makes plain:

> Some of my classmates laugh at me (*se burlan de mi*). I try to shut them up. For instance, the other day a teacher asked if I was going to Cordoba. 'Yes' I said. 'I am going to attend a birthday party of a friend and visit my boyfriend'. Well, this guy was mute. He didn't say a word. [...] Before, I didn't say anything, but now, no, I answer them back. (Interview)

> I don't care what they say. Anyway, they have calmed down. They don't insult me as much. Well, it's like I didn't listen [*entraba por un lado y me salía por el otro*]. They realised I didn't care about what they said ... they got bored and they rarely bother me. [...] Well, I am calmer now, I don't know, [...] but I am a nervous person, I could become crazy, I could fight. I don't want to because [...] I have my ethic, I mean, I am not going to fight because I am not a *negrito* (dark skin boy) or a *villerito* (a boy from a shanty town) who fights. I am not an ignorant. That's why I have my ethic.' (Group interview)

The first of these two extracts illustrates how humiliating and hurtful the laughter of some of Yutiel's classmates actually was. Teasing and mocking his mates and publicly talking about his life as a gay person were strategies designed to confront and challenge homophobia. The second extract illustrates how he had to contain his feelings of pain, rage and hate. These emotions defy the kind of structural mistreatment, which presents heterosexuality as the norm and regulates people's sexual desires and practices. It also shows how responses to abuse and his search for respect were part and parcel of his gender and sexual identity-making. Moreover, Yutiel draws a moral boundary here between himself and those who are violent and fight: those who are *negrito* and *villerito*. These are derogatory terms. *Villerito* was discussed above, while *negrito* is used to refer to a man who has darker

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skin. Following Margulis and Urresti's (1999) analysis of Argentinean society, having darker skin operated, historically, as negative physical capital, often linked to low volume of economic capital, inappropriate kinds of cultural and social capital and marginal objective positions within the social space.[15] Despite being poor and having darker skin, Yutiel attempted to gain respect and respectability by distinguishing himself from the *villeros* and the *negritos*, who are associated with lack of moral worth and with a violent masculinity. He condemned their ways of life and behaviours and claimed the respectability of adhering to universal moral virtues and values (having an 'ethic'). By so doing, he staked a claim to be seen as part of a wider moral community (one that condemns physical violence). In this way, he attempted to distance himself from the negative categorizations that (real or imaginary) others persistently attempt to impose on people like him – people who occupy social locations that make them highly vulnerable to processes of social exclusion (Crovara 2004; Giménez and Ginobili 2003).

Like Samira, Yutiel wanted to disconnect the collective associations between poverty and lack of moral values. However, unlike Samira, he rejected violence because he was not 'an ignorant'. 'Ignorant' is a negative label that is usually applied to those socially excluded like Yutiel. Yutiel believed that secondary schooling was a crucial site for 'not being ignorant' and for claiming his membership of – once again – a wider moral community (i.e. those who value education and schooling). In his words:

> If you study and study, some day we are going to be something because if you don't study you are nothing – well, in inverted commas – because you can be, but if you don't study, you can't be someone, because if one day someone asks you, for instance, talking with your friends, they ask you 'What do you know about the May revolution?' and well, you won't know and you will feel bad, uncomfortable, like *sapo de otro pozo* (a frog from a different pond). (Interview)

In this interview extract, Yutiel asserted that schooling was crucial to his attempt to 'be somebody', to be socially and cultural included and distinguish himself from the *negritos* and *villeritos* (Wexler 1991). Being at a school, like moving to the capital city, was part and parcel of his attempts to claim respect and recognition.

## Concluding remarks

This analysis shows how two secondary school students dealt with verbal abuse, and illustrates the complex workings of class and gender in an analysis of the moral dimension of social inequalities. It shows how Samira and Yutiel dealt with class contempt and sexism, and it demonstrates how moral sentiments and the search for recognition were entangled with processes of class and gender identity-making. Moreover, it illustrates how class and gen-

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der inequalities interplayed in the students' experiences and narratives and how they attempted to produce their identities while searching for recognition of their moral worth. This paper also demonstrates how the search for respect and respectability was part of a painful day-to-day struggle, within which Samira and Yutiel were trapped.

This paper shows how emotions, the search for recognition and moral boundary drawing are all central to the construction of gender and class identities. Rage, hate, contempt and humiliation operate as fertile ground for the deployment of diverse strategies to deal with abuse based on social class inequalities and sexual difference. Rather than remain silent and accept their inferiorization, Samira and Yutiel learned to 'fight back'. By doing so they produced certain types of femininity and masculinity. Both students challenged traditional masculinities and femininities and performed alternative gender identities. This analysis unpacks how these students temporarily succeeded in their attempts to claim valued class and gender identities for themselves. By decoupling poverty from a lack of moral worth, disassociating themselves from the aggressive traditional masculinity of their aggressors and drawing moral boundaries based on localized or universal moral communities, Samira and Yutiel defined themselves as moral beings. In different ways, they both searched for respect and respectability. Moreover, these cases illustrate how moral boundary drawing is particularly 'strong in groups that are anxious about their position in terms of both how they are regarded from above and the risk of falling into the groups they despise and fear bellow them' (Sayer 2005, 953). Finally, this analysis offers evidence of how social class and gender identities mutually shape and inform each other, and argues that they cannot be inferred from individuals' locations in the social space.

The rage, hate, contempt and humiliation previously referred to helped Samira and Yutiel to develop their own identities. In order to resist the mistreatment to which they were both subjected, they drew upon actual or imagined violence (in the case of Samira) or jokes and mockery (in the case of Yutiel). Lack of respect and misrecognition were their responses to class contempt and homophobia. Students' reactions helped them to succeed, at least temporarily, in their attempts to define valuable class and gender identities for themselves. However, the individualized nature of these processes, together with a spiral of violence – whether verbal, physical or imagined – trapped both their aggressors and Samira and Yutiel. The school's institutional blindness to abuse, and its inability to open up dialogue around 'what is right or wrong' in how students treat each other, served to normalize classism and homophobia.

In Argentinean educational research, there have been two different strands of studies relating to social class and gender inequalities. Since the 1970s, various schools of research have examined the connections between social stratification and secondary schooling (Meo 2008). In the past 15

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years, some researchers have looked at gender and sexuality in schools (Morgade and Alonso 2009). However, Argentinean studies of social stratification and gender have been like 'two ships passing in the night'. This paper offers a detailed analysis that aims to promote a dialogue between these two research strands. Regarding the British sociology of education, this examination serves to highlight the centrality of the moral dimension of social life and the concomitant need to address it when studying social class inequalities and the way in which the educational system either reproduces or challenges them.

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## Notes

1. Sociologists have tended to overlook the link between recognition and distribution (Sayer 2005).
2. However, they are reproduced through identity non-sensitive mechanisms, although they affect people's identities and subjectivity (Sayer 2005).
3. These statistics only relate to schools that are under the control of the Department of the Middle and Technical Education in the City.
4. Names of institutions and people are pseudonyms.
5. Low Hill's general level of repetition was around double the city average of 12.9%.(Low Hill 2004).
6. Neither the schools nor the local government produced information about the socio-economic status of students and their families.
7. In 2010, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology launched the National Action Plan 'The Rights of Girls, Boys And Teenagers: The Right to Have Rights' (*Plan Nacional de Acción por los derechos de niños, niñas y adolescentes: 'Derecho a tus derechos'*) to achieve the objectives of children's and teenagers' rights.
8. There are institutional procedures to deal with 'misbehaviour' in general.
9. According to teachers, this class was highly problematic, both in behavioural and educational terms. One student from it was internally expelled, and six out of a total of 33 students dropped out during the school year.
10. In Argentina, the legitimacy of the 'game of schooling' in schools like Low Hill is constantly challenged by the presence of 'new students' (in general, poor and first-generation of secondary school students, like Samira and Yutiel),

changes in the power relationships between generations, and alterations of the goals and meaning of secondary schooling (see Tenti Fanfani 2003).

11. At the beginning of the school year, they were not part of the same group of friends. Over time, however, they developed spontaneous and strategic alliances as a response to aggression and abuse.
12. Collecting cans from the garbage is what '*cartoneros*' do for living. They are informal collectors of recyclable materials who are associated in the media and lay discourse with social exclusion and extreme poverty (Schamber 2008).
13. In Argentina, having two surnames is interpreted as proxy indicator of high social class.
14. The literal translation of *villa miseria* is 'misery town'.
15. Having darker skin has made people the target of racism since the inception of the Argentinean nation-state and had been crucial factors of the production of the 'other', the illegitimate (Margulis and Urresti 1999).

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