

Contributions, conjunctures and care: Revisiting *Formations of Class and Gender*

The Sociological Review

2025, Vol. 73(2) 344–361

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00380261241310011

journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Helen Wood** 

Aston University, UK

Jo Littler 

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Abstract

Since its publication in 1997, *Formations of Class and Gender* has become a touchstone for research in sociology and feminist media and cultural studies due to the precise, evocative and generative way it pinpoints and theorises class and gender. Skeggs' careful ethnographic work – listening to 83 women training to be carers in the north of England over 12 years – provides tangible evidence of classed 'feelings' at the intersection of culture and economy and uses a multifaceted cultural studies approach to understand how this relates to their socially and historically specific context, or conjuncture. *Formations* gave many people a language with which to extend their analysis of the cultural violence enacted through the terms of 'respectability', alongside the undervalued nature of classed and gendered labours of care. These insights have had remarkable analytical reach for sociology and media and cultural studies, helping us understand how inequalities are both formed and felt. This article analyses the book's contribution in three parts. The first opens by highlighting key features of the text and sharing our reflections on the book when re-reading it in the present. The second part charts the impact and contributions of the text in and around feminist media and cultural studies. The third part discusses the book's continued relevance for understanding the current conjunctural moment of widening social inequality and a crisis in care, when sexism, racism and class divides adopt new incarnations, and suggests how its lessons might be repurposed today.

Keywords

Beverley Skeggs, care, class, conjuncture, gender

Corresponding author:

Helen Wood, School of Law and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham B4 7ET, UK.

Email: h.wood3@aston.ac.uk

Introduction

Beverley Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender* has become a touchstone for research in a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences ever since its publication in 1997. Challenging existing academic templates and developing innovative understandings of how the dynamics of gender and class could be understood, its impact has been significant, extensive and certainly *formative*. Since 1997 it has actually taken on more intellectual currency, not least because at the time of its publication the 'postfeminist' neoliberal media landscape was at the zenith of espousing an 'equal playing field' organised around the logics of meritocratic and entrepreneurial potential and disavowing class. The book has since become a key resource for understanding the relationship between the ideological terrain of neoliberalism and lived experience.

This article analyses the book's contribution through three sections. We open by highlighting the key features of the work that are striking to us when re-reading it in the present, and by considering its contexts, both in terms of discipline and the wider cultural social formation. The second section charts the impact of the text in feminist media and cultural studies, an academic area either adjacent to, intertwined with, or a constituent part of sociology, depending on your perspective. This part shows how the text was adopted not only by studies of representation and audience research, but also by theorisations of affect and analysis of lived experience. The third section suggests how the lessons of the book might be repurposed today to understand the current conjunctural moment of widening social inequality, when sexism, racism and class divides adopt new forms. In the process, we draw attention to the urgency of analysing the economy and the reproduction of care as we witness further attacks to the social contract.

Returning to *Formations*

It is an education to return to and re-read *Formations of Class and Gender* today on multiple levels. For a start, it is an education in rhetoric. The book wears its deep learning lightly and conveys it with cutting clarity, its sentences pithy and quotable from the outset. 'Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class', Skeggs opens with, before caustically skewering both the longstanding historical and rude contemporary snobberies that have forced her to look at the issue:

Respectability would not be of concern here, if the working classes (Black and White) had not consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect. (p. 1)

But they were classified in such a way, and such forms of classification set the parameters for ways of life. So it is a concern, an injury, an outrage. And so she takes on the project, rigorously working it through to give us such clear frames in which formations of class and gender might be better understood in order to argue and to fight against these modes of social damage and injustice.

Formations emerged with the specific agenda to re-insert class into both feminism and cultural theory, from which 'class as a concept and working-class women as a group

have almost disappeared' (p. 2). This was the 1990s, the zenith of postmodernism, at the 'end of history' and the beginning of third way politics when neoliberal culture told us we had largely solved inequalities of class, race and gender – and that, if you worked hard, as the singer Yazz put it, 'the only way is up'. In too many accounts class was viewed as a historical remnant from a bygone era: as embarrassing, indeed, even in some theoretical circles, apparently reactionary even to mention. Yet *Formations* drew on a longer tradition of British Cultural Studies in which it was both possible and important to take class into account: to centre its role in the social fabric, to be both necessarily generous and capaciously understanding of the cultures it created, that it uses to negotiate, create, survive and protest. It examines how class is 'central to us all, even if we do not feel impeded by it or choose not to recognise it' (p. 7). But unlike some of the work on class which had focused on men and boys, like Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977), *Formations* looked at the lived experience of material inequality by examining how working-class women 'negotiate and understand themselves'.

The book is based on a study of women enrolled on caring courses at a local college in the north-west of England. The study followed these 83 white women over a 12-year period – including three years full-time – tracing 'their trajectories through labour market, education and the family' (p. 1). Some of this research was conducted as part of Skeggs' PhD at Keele University. By contemporary standards, when academics today are impelled to constantly flit between research programmes in search of publications and funding, the length of this kind of single-person longitudinal ethnographic study appears very much like a document from another age, now astounding in its range and rarity as well as compelling in its rich detail. What also becomes clear is the extent to which the ethnography provides such an extensive theorisation of how gender operates as an expression of class, and class as an expression of gender, by analysing the women's perspectives in their multiple contexts in such fine depth. In the process, it both provided a challenge to the more reductive strand of post-structuralist theoretical fashion which eschewed social categories and became a formative resource with which to develop new work.

In parts, *Formations* becomes a meta-commentary on Skeggs' own PhD, work and process. She wryly comments here and there on both the potential contributions, and painful inadequacies, of academic work in relation to addressing inequality. Like the women she writes about, she does not miss an opportunity to be irreverent (p. 37). We are made fully aware of her own subjectivity in this research; of how, especially in writing the chapter on '(Dis)identifications of class', her own location is vital to the way which she feels the experiences of the women in her study. In the process, we are constantly reminded of Raymond Williams' (1961) work and the way that 'class is lived as a structure of feeling' (pp. 94–95), for instance when she acknowledges her own experiences of class-passing and denial at university. In the process, Skeggs was joining a number of working-class women writers around a similar time whose voices added their own experiences of working-class life into an otherwise masculinised image of the 'organic intellectual'. For instance, Steedman's (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Walkerdine's (1991) *Schoolgirl Fictions* similarly use their own purchase on their subject with painful and yet generative outcomes. Skeggs draws on Steedman's anecdote:

I read a woman's book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I would have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't. (Steedman, 1986, p. 2)

These personal and deeply felt accounts are central to the analysis and are perhaps what drives the development of a version of class which moved beyond existing sociological frameworks. Whilst Skeggs uses the explanatory models of capital given to us by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, she also reflects on its absences, gendered and otherwise; of how its large-scale structural model can be coldly mechanical and miss key features; whilst this book, powered by cultural studies, allows a way into the pleasure, pain and affect of just 'how class operates at an intimate and emotional level' (p. 13).

Formations therefore draws on its interviews and ethnography to consider how, for instance, the women Skeggs talks to did not recognise themselves as 'the subject . . . of most feminist discourse' (p. 139). This allows her to explore how the category of feminism publicised in mainstream media is primarily a white middle-class one, and to note that 'the cultural capital of the middle-class woman predisposed them towards feminism'. The opposite is the case for the working-class women of her study (p. 152): Skeggs notes that the feminisms she lives with on a daily basis are 'practically unrecognisable to the women of the research'. This account of how the women were 'refusing recognition' of many middle-class forms of feminism is also the chapter of the book which paints the most vivid picture of the wider social and cultural context of the time. She shows how the images of feminism that circulate emanated from a range of diverse sources and were influenced by key events: particularly the feminist peace activists at Greenham Common; the rise of Margaret Thatcher and the development of 'corporate feminism'; the circulation of 'popular feminisms', for instance by Madonna; and working-class women's resistance as part of the miners' strike. These social contexts and threads enable her to unravel what feminism means to the women she is talking to: what cultural representations are available to them, and how these different discursive positions were 'occupied, negotiated and resisted' (p. 139).

The book also spotlights the liberatory possibilities of working-class femininity in breaking the stifling and self-centred codes of middle-class morality and bourgeois behaviour. For instance, Skeggs writes of how the sensibilities of the women she interviews run counter to that of possessive individualism, that long Western tradition congruent with modern capitalism which treats the self as a bounded entity and disavows interdependencies. Because 'a great deal of their time is spent surviving or openly enjoying life rather than introspection', the women 'have a different take on subjectivity': they are less invested in the mantras of possessive individualism than many of their bourgeois counterparts. This mode of being means that they live 'at the surface, in public', as here 'to live visibly is to construct oneself through relations with others rather than to spend time on oneself' (p. 163). (It is interesting to read this text today at a time when living visibly and 'in public' has taken on a very different resonance and shape in the age of social media and micro-celebrity.) Noting that the working classes have historically been situated as part of 'the mass against which individualism was constructed' (p. 164), she analyses how in her study, 'the women did not assume that their bodies were valuable, that they had entitlements or that they were even interesting. The women's ontological

security was found precisely in not being an “individual” but in “fitting-in” (p. 163). So whilst duty, obligation and care were more important (p. 164) than individualism – whilst interdependencies were valued – it was, at the same time, also the case that the women devalued themselves. These entangled dynamics of class, gender and individualism are therefore teased out in all their complexity.

It is also striking, reading it again, to see just how much this book works at the seams of sociology and cultural studies, moving between both. Its sophisticated reading of the different takes on ‘feminism’, for instance, as mentioned above, shows both how these gendered discourses are rooted in the wider social/political context and how these narratives are adopted, rejected and adapted by specific groups of people to shape their perspectives and power. In the process it shows the benefits of fusing sociology with media and cultural studies, with holding onto wider economic models of inequality and infusing them with sentient details from the ground. How much the mode of writing borrows from the *modus operandi* of cultural studies is evident in its excavation of the complex relationship between structural and local conditions. Skeggs was deeply influenced by the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham and the way it used ethnography, not to produce ‘the other’, but rather to make links between theory and practice, structure and culture, and to make accountability and reflexivity central to the research frame. She sees a cultural studies approach as involving ‘a methodology which combines theoretical positions and political intent; it informs how the different methods are combined and the way the researcher approaches issues of power, responsibility and ethics’ (p. 23).

When the book arrived on the intellectual scene, on this cusp of sociology and cultural studies, it quickly occupied a place as a founding text on gender and class. British cultural studies, as a transdisciplinary experimental approach to understanding the power dynamics of the moment, or ‘the conjuncture’, drew on the Marxist tradition as refracted by Gramsci to explain the workings of hegemony through the structure of class antagonism (Connell & Hilton, 2016; Gilbert, 2019; Hall, 1981; Littler, 2016). This approach underpins the multi-authored CCCS text *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978), Willis’s (1977) school ethnography *Learning to Labour*, and also generated some of the founding texts for media studies, most notably Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model and Morley’s (1980) follow-on audience research in *The Nationwide Audience*. Notoriously though, ‘feminism crapped on the table of cultural studies’ (Hall, 1997) as feminist scholars at Birmingham and beyond challenged the masculinist presumptions of this association with class which had written women’s experiences out of the picture. As McRobbie (1980) pointed out, highlighting the significance of social reproduction and the necessity of a feminist emancipatory politics, it was as though the men of those ethnographies and spectacular subcultures had no homes to go to. A flurry of feminist work investigated women’s experiences with popular culture, including McRobbie’s (1991) work on adolescent girls, their media and ‘bedroom culture’, Janice Winship’s (1987) work on women’s magazines, Chris Griffin’s writing (1985) on young women’s transitions from school, Hobson’s (1980) work on the housewife and soaps, and Gray’s (1992) work on the consumption of the video. Whilst Gray (1992) and Andrea Press (1991) (in the US) started to discuss the importance that class has in our understanding of women’s culture, it was *Formations* which for many people sealed the understanding that class is

gendered, and gender is classed, and made the field of feminist media and cultural studies sit up and take note. It remains a touchstone for the key texts about media, gender and identity with which we teach our students (Blackman, 2020; Gauntlett, 2008; Gill, 2007b; Thornham, 2007).

Skeggs' account of the production of gendered working-class respectability relies heavily on an understanding of its relationship with colonialism. She draws on the intertwined histories of capitalism and empire which 'others' Black and White bodies in order to distance them from middle-class bodies. Using the work of McClintock (1995), she explores the production of 'degenerate classes' through which power is maintained which cuts across class and 'race'. Whilst Skeggs, (2004b) writes of her regret in not building an analysis of 'race' into the PhD research design from the beginning, in the book an analysis of racialisation is central to her conceptualisation of respectability itself. The similarities between the pathologisation of young Black and White working-class women are made apparent, as we could also see in Mirza's (1992) study of young Black women in the education system where teacher–pupil interactions drew on similarly-coded forms of distinction. Later, Puwar's (2004) powerful analysis of racial minorities in positions of power in public organisations drew, amongst a range of work, on Skeggs' exploration of bodies that seem 'out of place'. Using Skeggs' discussion of feelings of not belonging in academia as 'virtuoso', Puwar powerfully explores Bourdieu's discussion of having to 'strive for distinction' as a structure of feeling which resonates with those 'out of place' bodies of her study (2004, p. 130).

Formations therefore has a central role in the development of the field of feminist media and cultural studies, not least for further diversifying the category of woman, for bringing experience to bear upon distinctions, and for reminding us of just how structural forces are subject to cultural negotiation and translation. It has had extensive reach across the different sites of media and cultural studies, from close textual work with film and TV and even social media, to more ethnographically and sociologically informed work with youth, audiences and subcultures.

The impact of *Formations*: Tracing a field from representation to affect

This is why representations are a key site in this class struggle; they are where symbolic violence occurs. (p. 95)

Respectability matters because it is at the centre of struggles over the classification of the working class as existing outside of its norms. As Skeggs so eruditely educates us, respectability has been painstakingly historically produced as a colonising and civilising mission, one which enabled the White bourgeois subject to come into being by defining itself against the Black and White working class. In this process the working class emerge as dangerous and polluting objects that must be monitored, measured and regulated. Taking her cue from Foucault, these are operational schema which circulate at the level of discourse but also work through institutions of social control onto bodies and into lived experiences.

Skeggs' work in understanding the lived violence of this articulation of the working class has been vital to interpreting its persistent machinations in the years since 1997. Whilst Skeggs was writing against a political denial of class in mainstream politics, that echoed for many a turning away from a collective class-consciousness, class itself was being publicly reproduced in the neoliberal agenda to support consent for undermining social welfare, a process which was to become increasingly dramatic and savage as the years rolled on. Where we hear the women in Skeggs' study (dis)identifying themselves against an idea of a working class characterised by a lack of cleanliness, by laziness and by ideas of overt and out-of-control sexuality, they are precisely reproducing the terms through which they know themselves to be judged.

In the UK, in the years after 1997 and at the turn of the century, with increased unemployment, welfare-dependency was blamed on a feckless atavistic underclass, whereby this pathologising and increasingly abject vision of the working class seemed to only intensify (Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2012). Many of these ideas circulated in popular culture and were condensed onto women figures, as Imogen Tyler (2008) analysed, drawing on Skeggs' work to discuss the gendered representation of the figure of the 'chav' mum. In the UK the emergence of the figure of the 'chav' (the origin of which was much debated as potential shorthand for 'council house and violent') represented a class conjured as problematic and dangerous, and who were getting all the codes of 'respectability' wrong in their tasteless and conspicuous consumption. As Tyler demonstrated in her analysis of the 'chav mum', the media construction of both the celebrity mother from a working-class background (Kerry Katona) and the comedy figure from *Little Britain*, Vicky Pollard, the gendering of these ideas helped to support the public vilification of young White working-class mothers. These figures embodied historically primed yet contemporary anxieties about 'female sexuality, reproduction, fertility, and "racial mixing"' (Tyler, 2008, p. 17).

Such formations of a classed identity that were construed as backward-looking and lacking in ambition were noticeable across the media landscape of the new century, during a period in which Cameron's discourse of 'Broken Britain' enabled greater policing powers and an agenda which continued Thatcher's legacy of the disruption of the post-war social contract. For feminist media studies, especially in the UK, but also in the US, the discourses which supported such a framework were accompanied by the language of self-responsibility and self-work, through which a neoliberal agenda pressed the responsibilities of the individual, against any sense of the collective. For feminist media studies, representations which pushed this agenda seemed to abound in a media landscape which proffered the value of self-transformation and self-work – especially via the 'makeover', as part of the restyling of primetime TV, in which lifestyle programmes told us how to live successfully (Moseley, 2000).

McRobbie (2008) showed how on programmes like *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2001–2007) Skeggs' analysis could help us see how the new lifestyle experts were re-coding working-class femininity away from respectability towards an individualised glamour. McRobbie sees how this process is part of a re-energising of distinctions between women: as one of the outcomes of the double entanglement of feminism where the language of empowerment has suited a commercial, individualised neoliberal agenda which only reaffirms class antagonism. Rather than social collectivity, '[f]emale individualism is a

process bringing into being new social divisions through the denigration of the poor and disadvantaged women by means of symbolic violence' (p. 117). Television of the late 1990s and 2000s was quite literally animating and enacting the kind of symbolic violence that Skeggs had identified operating on the surface of bodies, and experienced daily in the lives of the women in her study.

Formations has therefore played a pivotal role in the critical analysis of the neoliberal postfeminist media landscape, deciphering the classed ideological language of individual 'success'. The neutralising of working-class taste and the promotion of middle-class forms of bodily composure writ-large across the mainstream media were tuned to the contemporary postfeminist discourses of the 'future' girl of women's magazines and popular culture who knew what she wanted and knew how to get it (Gill, 2007a; Negra, 2008; Winch, 2013). Skeggs' work told us exactly how working-class women were always positioned beyond a postfeminist sensibility and reminded us that we could not speak of gender formations and their intersection with class and 'race' without reiterating what they defined themselves against. Skeggs' work was put in dialogue with analysis of 'other' bodies marginalised by postfeminist discourses, such as Scharff's (2011) and Siraj's (2012) analyses of Muslim women and more recently Dosekun's (2020) investigation of the lives of Nigerian women, opening up more ways to see the interaction between classed and raced distinctions.

In *Formations* the women constantly spoke of self-improvement but were constantly defeated; 'attempts to escape class identifications through discourses of improvement and strategies of passing rarely succeed because of their lack of power to convert cultural capital into symbolic capital' (p. 75). The 'postfeminist sensibility' was, then, ultimately a white bourgeois one, historically predicated on the lines of respectability that Skeggs historicises. It belongs to young women who have access to exactly the right forms of capital, and can even appropriate working-class tropes, but importantly can put capital to work in the right way and in alignment with those other capitals of empowerment and choice. In her later work in *Class, Self, Culture*, Skeggs (2004a) looks to media representations, discussing how in a landmark TV show like *Sex and The City* (HBO 1998–2004) the women's overt sexuality is made respectable by their access to other forms of legitimated cultural consumption and educational capital. This kind of mobilising of sexual confidence is still not something that working-class women can do to enhance their femininity, for fear of judgement and retribution.

If *Formations* showed that classed and gendered representations were working at the level of symbolic violence, it also enabled us to see just how it was working through the operationalisation of forms of capital, and in the production of hierarchies of value in everyday life. As Skeggs notes, 'Class operated in a dialogic manner: in every judgement of themselves a measurement was made against others' (p. 74). Respectability operates through the judgement of others and through the affects of shame and disgust which serve to make those classifications felt and understood. Wood and Skeggs (2008) extended this line of analysis, showing how the televising of often feminised accounts of self-work, self-transformation and self-comparison (through bodies, homes, parenting, finances, sex lives, etc.) dominating our TV screens uses the 'ordinary' person as part of a discourse through which to realign the signs of a classed history on the body, as narratives of individualised and personalised failure. In this way, precisely just as the political

scene and significant strands of contemporary sociology were pronouncing the 'end' of class, so the working class became much more visible and more 'spectacular' across contemporary television. They called this the 'spectacularisation of the working class' (of overeaters, smokers, tasteless homes, garish bodies and over-sexed out-of-control individuals) that was so valuable to the visual economy of this ever-expanding reality television and so revealing of the way in which class was being remade in contemporary politics. Politically, class formations were being denied as structural realities and instead were being assigned as symptoms of personalised failure, a diagnosis which fitted seamlessly into the narrative drive of many lifestyle and reality television formats.

How were audiences being positioned in relation to these ideas? How are these ideas part of a conjuncture in which a further demonisation of the working class became so fundamental to British culture? Lyle (2008) directly adopted Skeggs' terms to analyse how a programme like *Wife Swap* adopts a 'middle-class gaze' – a scopic position textually designed through 'normative' codes and frames of judgement. Skeggs and Wood (2012) described 'the judgement shot' where edited 'still frames' of dirt, full ashtrays, debris, unmade beds, bloated stomachs and so on became the visual grammar of reality television to represent failing subjects. Skeggs' work was the entry point for a host of feminist media analyses which exposed the symbolic violence of a middle-class media system which produced, particularly women, as bad mothers, over-sexed young women, lazy wives and so forth – those 'others' beyond the terms of respectability.

In the UK, after the financial crash of 2008 and during the harsh period of austerity, these traits from lifestyle television further double-down on classed failure, precisely as welfare resources were being removed. Jensen (2014) points to a glut of programmes like *Benefits Street* (Channel 4 2014–2015) which began to be categorised as 'poverty porn' and which persisted later into the decade in a category of what scholars identified as 'factual welfare television', where precarious production conditions further exacerbated negative scopic framings (de Benedictis et al., 2017; Raisborough et al., 2022). This was a genre which fuelled class antagonism and which saw residents who recognised themselves as the object of this media gaze pushing back with a set of protests around 'poverty is not entertainment' (Tyler, 2014). During this period of austerity the UK sustained a popular and mainstream talk show, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, from 2005 until the suicide scandal in 2019, whereby the culture of demonising the working-class seemed to make sense to the British media system. The show regularly presented working-class people as untrustworthy (with its lie detector tests) and as overly fecund (with its paternity tests) (Hill, 2015) and featured a host which regularly bullied and made fun of the guests.

Bev Skeggs' work considerably helped feminist media studies to make sense of the political work that these representations were doing, not only in using the historical precedents of classificatory systems, but in renewing them within a conjunctural moment which was hell-bent on undoing the social contract at the centre of the welfare state (see McRobbie, 2023 for a recent account of 'anti-welfarism'). Across film and television studies Skeggs' work is fundamental to critiques of transgressive bodies (Richardson, 2016) and to explorations of class in realist drama (Forrest & Johnson, 2017). As increasing attention has been drawn to the role of media production Skeggs' analysis has also contributed to the increasing number of studies which address the

systemic inequalities in the cultural industries that help to perpetuate uneven classed formations (Brook et al., 2020; Bull, 2019; Bulut, 2020; McRobbie, 2018). In an evolving media landscape representations are reproduced and circulate in new forms and *Formations* is also central to contemporary analyses of digital circulation across new platforms and social media, showing the endurance and mutability of mediated classificatory systems (Bishop, 2018; Brown & Gregg, 2012; Hakim, 2019; Lehto, 2020; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018; Wood, 2018).

Formations therefore helps give us a language through which to render visible the symbolic violence at work even in a fast-changing media system and remains central to any media analysis of class formation. But its work also pushed past the discursive framing of class and alerted us to its affective relations. Here Skeggs was amongst the vanguard of those announcing an 'affective turn' in the social sciences and in cultural studies (Clough & Halley, 2007). If the affective turn was in part concerned with putting bodies back into the picture – after the prominence of the textual turn of post-structuralism and discourse analysis – then for Skeggs the body was always at the centre of the analysis, as 'the body and bodily dispositions carry the marks of social class' (p. 82). Skeggs' development of Bourdieu has reminded us to put the feelings felt by, and inscribed onto, bodies into our understanding of the operation of different forms of capital, alerting us to the way in which 'affect may enable us to explore how use-values are experienced, expressed and known' (2004b, p. 89). The women in her study were regularly shamed and felt shame in their interactions with others. As they occupied spaces that made them feel uncomfortable (such as the department store or the classroom) we hear how the social realities of classifications took on physical and bodily affects through which classificatory violence is lived.

Here, then, *Formations* can be located as part of a canon of literature, in particular from feminist scholars in the cultural studies tradition, through which greater attention is paid to the social dynamics of affective relations. For instance, Probyn (2005) in her work on shame analyses how shame works through social proximities and draws on Skeggs to show its importance to the academic analyses of the schism between habitus and field. Probyn writes that *Formations* 'richly evokes the constant feeling that a hard-won respectability will suddenly be torn by the body's capacities to feel ashamed and to shame' (p. 62). Munt (2017) discusses the associations with queer shame, whilst Sara Ahmed (2014) called these relations 'affective economies', further drawing out the social hierarchies of 'race', class, gender and sexuality.

But feelings are perhaps not quite as predictable as ideologies (as complex and shape-shifting as ideologies always are) since feelings are part of complex physical bodily forces which are coded into emotions in the discursive realm. Importantly, feelings alert us also to the pulls of alternative sentient expressions and to the very dynamic life of cultural scripts through which people live. These are the 'structures of feeling' to which Williams first alerted us and to which Skeggs' work adds such fine gendered detail. In a faithful attempt to not further pathologise the women who so generously gave of their lives and their time, we hear the liveliness and vibrance of the women in the study dealing with classificatory struggles on the ground. The women continually disidentify, push back, and reclaim value in the spaces through which they can. Their femininity, sometimes sexuality, their training and dispositions towards care, are some of those sites

through which they find value and importantly articulate themselves 'having' value. As Allen et al. (2014) point out, even in programme like *Benefits Street* the person-character of 'White Dee', a matriarch at the centre of the street who provided care and support to many of the residents, becomes a figure through which we can, even within the castigatory frame of the show, 'see' and feel her value and explore the work of social reproduction in challenging conditions. Working-class care and gender here offer a counterpoint to the otherwise negative framing of 'poverty porn'.

Skeggs and Woods' (2012) work on media audiences in social contexts in *Reacting to Reality Television* drew together observations about reality television as a stage for judgement and explication of the genre's 'hidden injuries of class' (Couldry, 2011) with an analysis of how audiences were being positioned by such representations and calls to judgement. Reality TV texts themselves were opening out a range of frameworks through which individuals were often deemed to be failing as they get tested in so many scenarios and situations as discussed above. Watching programmes with different groups of women demonstrated how specific judgements were made in encounters with television depending upon the audience's ability to draw on alternative forms of capital. More middle-class viewers, for instance, drew upon 'legitimate' cultural and educational resources; Asian viewers drew upon cultural differences around questions of morality; and working-class women largely drew upon their resources as good mothers. This was a finding which was predicted in *Formations* as Skeggs' study shows how women were able to invert class divisions to 'claim moral superiority to the middle-class women, who by "farming out" their children, are behaving in a way that is uncaring, unnatural and irresponsible' (p. 71).

It is perhaps not surprising that motherhood is one of the key vestiges of value for women, given how it has been historically positioned at the centre of concerns for the meaning of womanhood and the way in which the mother is given responsibility for the nation. Jensen's (2018) work *Parenting the Crisis* tracked the rise of 'parent blame' across a plethora of media and policy initiatives which espoused an individualised neoliberal rhetoric to accompany the withdrawal of social support. Littler's (2013) analysis of the 'yummy mummy' draws out the conservative pressures of a consumer-driven 'perfect' middle-class mother in popular culture, positioned in opposition to the figure of the 'Chav Mum' as analysed by Imogen Tyler, both of which were being beamed across a media landscape depicting mothers falling apart as failures. No wonder that the women in Skeggs and Wood's (2012) audience study were quick to draw on motherhood as a source of authorising themselves, especially given the way in which, according to Skeggs, working-class women are historically and emotionally tied to the production of a caring self. But as the White Dee example illustrates, the ideological structures of judgement that were meted out in these shows were not always met with the kind of derision and schadenfreude that they may have intended. *Reacting to Reality Television* showed that also, and often within the same programme, many of the women across all groups reached through the framing to find a point of connection and to demonstrate care for the television participants in a range of situations. What is heartening therefore is that the pursuit of care has potential to challenge and push back against the workings of symbolic violence. These are tensions that Skeggs' work opens up for us, helping prepare the ground for a cultural studies of hope.

Formations showed how working-class women invoke a ‘caring self’ that is partly pressed upon them as centuries of rhetoric have encouraged taking pleasure in monitoring oneself through servitude and through the care of others. The technologies and measurement of these caring practices generate considerable anxiety, doubt and guilt through which the women must continue to invest in the performance of care. But the women also demonstrate considerable capacity. Whilst many of the institutionalised academic accounts of care from their courses are overturned as pointless (the hilarious jokes over being shown how to bathe a doll!) the women do take something of value from their care placements where they can recognise themselves as ‘real carers’ and where they generate some amount of self-worth. It is this complex relationship between the binds of respectability and attachment to care that Skeggs’ work forces us to continue to pay attention to in the current conjuncture. She says, ‘The desire to be valued and to demonstrate respectability and responsibility predisposes the women to voluntary and unpaid caring’ (p. 72). It is this relationship which provides the conditions of their continued structural exploitation. The cultural work of gendered respectability underpins their economic oppression.

Care, gender and class in the contemporary conjuncture

The economy is at the heart of politics. Responsibility for it cannot be delegated, any more than democracy itself can. (p. 13)

What is the analytic purchase of *Formations* in the present? How does it help us understand key facets of the contemporary conjuncture? We know that the current economic climate is characterised by a growing chasm between rich and poor. Capitalism, once commonly heralded as improving lives for most, and often treated as neutral or inevitable like the weather, is becoming more widely (if not consistently or hegemonically) viewed as having failed as any kind of socially progressive project (Fraser, 2022). The latest annual Oxfam report on inequality shows that over the past decade the richest 1% have pocketed half of all new wealth, rising to two-thirds since the Covid-19 pandemic, and that to varying degrees top rates of tax on the most wealthy have collapsed all over the world (Oxfam, 2023). The UK is a prime example of such a tendency towards ballooning economic inequality, given that one in four children now live in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023) whilst the number of its billionaires has increased by over 1000% since 1990 (Equality Trust, 2022). Wealth extraction is being felt most by those with the least as ‘advanced’ capitalist nations shrink and privatise their welfare states. Since bailing out the banks during the financial crisis, social support has been depleted, national resources like the NHS plundered and marketised, whilst dirty energy companies, the financial services industry and asset managers make extortionate profits, hurtling us towards climate crisis whilst we witness the continual and exponential rise and rise of the super-rich.

Ongoing cultural analysis helps us to see just how economic neoliberalism relies on a powerful and pervasive ideological agenda which pushes ideas of individual achievement and social aspiration whilst shrouding startling inequality with a kind of

'inevitability'. We can see the work of feminist media scholars calling out the problematic narratives of social mobility in the celebrity discourses of those that made it from 'rags to riches' as myths of mobility (Biressi & Nunn, 2013; Deery & Press, 2017). This builds on the politics of the classificatory struggles described by Skeggs, where class gets denied and described as something from which one can escape, if only one has the tenacity and 'get up and go' to do something about it. As Littler (2018) has discussed, the overwhelming ideological weight of ideas around 'meritocracy' across political and media cultures and embedded in existing education systems blindside us to the continued structural conditions of inequality, as everywhere we turn even the super-rich can hide their private jets behind individualised narratives of personal struggle. McRobbie's (2020) recent work points to how feminism's resurgent language of empowerment has dovetailed with the neoliberal agenda of 'resilience' which only serves to double-down on working-class women's failure. Imogen Tyler's work (2012) has shown how the continued abjection and 'othering' of the poor and migrants has been a central part of this battlefield. This is a battle which is difficult to challenge when faced with the power of what she calls 'stigma machines' working at the heart of political, social and media structures (Tyler, 2020). The resounding emphasis upon the successful neoliberal subject does all it can to disavow the structural conditions of privilege or poverty in a media culture which valorises spectacular individualised narratives and personal journeys to success.

What are the antidotes to this pervasive and damaging neoliberal individualism? What should we as feminist media and cultural studies and sociology scholars do about this? Everywhere we turn we see the intensifications of these narratives as postfeminism calls us towards a deeper psychic 'mindset' for success (Gill, 2017) and as women we should dial up our 'confidence' in response to precarious employment, rising living costs and diminishing child, health and welfare support (Gill & Orgad, 2022). It is of course important to continue to show the physical damage that all of this hegemonic work is doing, and the new shapes and forms it takes. However, at the same time we also need to recognise, highlight and spotlight any forms of push-back and the claiming of alternative subjectivities as routes towards potential political action (Wood, 2017). Just as Skeggs' women did not always take the judgements of them from others on board and used tactics to wrestle with their sense of self, so should we look for the moments, the movements, the alternative structures of feeling in which egalitarian forms of change are manifest and can be supported and built upon.

The women in Skeggs' study knew that their caring responsibilities provided value to themselves and others. We know that the economy fundamentally rests on the unpaid and underpaid work of mostly women, and migrant women, carers around the world. Oxfam (2020) reports that the monetary value of the unpaid care of women workers over the age of 15 around the world is in the region of \$10.8 trillion, three times the value of the world's tech industries. It is not surprising then that Bev Skeggs' more recent work has turned to the inequalities generated through the financialisation of care, and the injustice of care as the most necessary and yet the most devalued sector in society (Skeggs, 2019a). The value of care became so visible during the pandemic and was met with an outpouring of emotion in the UK's 'clap for carers' sentiment, leading Wood and Skeggs (2020) to call for 'care justice' to match this

‘care gratitude’. The histories of the classificatory boundaries of ‘race’ and class are entwined (Shilliam, 2018; Skeggs, 2019b) and the legacies of these racialised politics of inequality were apparent during the pandemic, separating out bodies that ‘deserved’ open space and those workers and virus spreaders that did not (Kay & Wood, 2022). The pandemic saw a fight for survival from below and a surge of mutual aid initiatives around the world (see Sitrin & Sembar, 2020). Yet of course the UK government has not met this with any commitment to resources as nurses use foodbanks and join the ranks of striking workers in 2023. These strikes are signs of a fightback because we know that despite the forces of individualism and competitiveness, people show us time and again that they *do* care.

There are multiple potential progressive projects to pursue and ways to act. One route, at this juncture of widening social inequality, is for media and cultural studies to join anti-racist feminist struggles over the terms of care amidst and against this picture of widening social inequality. As the Care Collective (2020) argue in their manifesto it is time to make care a structuring principle through which we organise society, putting care at the centre of the economy and elevating a collective infrastructure of joy over and above individual desire. In academia it involves a double move: not just calling out the ways in which mainstream media and cultural forms have been overtly complicit in pedalling individualism, shaping neoliberal narrative terms of ‘success’ and nurturing our egos, but also pushing against it by showing examples of alternatives, including alternative structures of feeling ‘on-the-ground’, and by helping generate forms and languages of interdependency and collective hope for all.

Practically, this includes doing more of the kind of work that Bev Skeggs undertook in *Formations*, which puts bodies into the research and attempts the kind of cultural analysis that wants to ignite social change to share the wealth – otherwise, as Stuart Hall would tell us, what is the point? We need cultural analysis that takes into account the experiences of those we want to address, just as Skeggs has done, because failing to do this is simply ‘to produce irresponsible knowledge’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 169). Angela McRobbie has recently argued, we need to forge ‘better links between cultural studies and the fields of social policy and criminology. This arises out of the sheer power now attributed to all things media and screen-related and to the dominating effect that popular culture has on our everyday lives.’ In making this case, she turns back to ‘Bev Skeggs’ wonderful work’, arguing that ‘I think it’s important to create more active dialogues with social policy for the reason that the welfare society (and its demise) is at its core’ (McRobbie, 2023, p. 188).

As McRobbie notes, this is the kind of intellectual work that those of us at the boundaries of cultural studies, sociology and feminist media studies try to do. Many of us have been called to the project by painful subjectivities through which work like *Formations* made sense of our experiences, as ‘organic intellectuals’ who had skin in the game, or as ‘affective intellectuals’ driven by the power of feeling from the ground. Here, we have tried to do justice to some, if not all, of the related avenues and work opened up by Bev Skeggs’ important text. It is also the kind of interdisciplinary work that finds fertile soil in *The Sociological Review*, which follows Skeggs’ understanding of the complex conjunctural ground upon which politics, economy, society and, importantly, culture, intersect.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Helen Wood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9269-9944>

Jo Littler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8496-6192>

References

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Allen, K., Tyler, I., & de Benedictis, S. (2014). Thinking with 'White Dee': The gender politics of 'austerity porn'. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3), 1–7.
- Bioresi, A., & Nunn, H. (2013). *Class and contemporary British culture*. Palgrave.
- Bishop, S. (2018). Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm. *Convergence*, 24(1), 69–84.
- Blackman, L. (2020). *The body: The key concepts*. Routledge.
- Brook, O., O'Brien, D., & Taylor, M. (2020). *Culture is bad for you*. Manchester University Press.
- Brown, R., & Gregg, M. (2012). The pedagogy of regret: Facebook, binge drinking and young women. *Continuum*, 26(3), 357–369.
- Bull, A. (2019). *Class, control, and classical music*. Oxford University Press.
- Bulut, E. (2020). *A precarious game: The illusion of dream jobs in the video game industry*. Cornell University Press.
- Care Collective. (2020). *The care manifesto: The politics of interdependence*. Verso.
- Clough, P., & Halley, J. (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press.
- Connell, K., & Hilton, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Cultural studies 50 years on*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Couldry, N. (2011). Class and contemporary forms of 'reality' production, or hidden injuries of class. In H. Wood & B. Skeggs (Eds.), *Reality television and class* (pp. 33–44). BFI.
- de Benedictis, S., Allen, K., & Jensen, T. (2017). Portraying poverty: The economics and ethics of factual welfare television. *Cultural Sociology*, 11(3), 337–358.
- Deery, J., & Press, A. (2017). *Media and class*. Routledge.
- Dosekun, S. (2020). *Fashioning postfeminism: Spectacular femininity and transnational culture*. University of Illinois Press.
- Equality Trust. (2022). *Inequality from the top down: Billionaire Britain*. https://equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/BillionaireBritain2022_hires.pdf
- Forrest, D., & Johnson, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Social class and television drama in contemporary Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fraser, N. (2022). *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care and the planet*. Verso.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, gender and identity: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Gilbert, J. (2019). This conjuncture: For Stuart Hall. *New Formations*, 96–97, 5–37.
- Gill, R. (2007a). Postfeminist media culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166.
- Gill, R. (2007b). *Gender and the media*. Polity.
- Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 606–626.
- Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2022). *Confidence culture*. Duke University Press.
- Gray, A. (1992). *Video playtime: The gendering of a leisure technology*. Routledge.

- Griffin, C. (1985). *Typical girls? Young women from school to the job market*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hakim, J. (2019). *Work that body: Male bodies in digital culture*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1981). Notes on deconstructing the popular. In D. Morley (Ed.), *Essential essays: Vol 1: Foundations of cultural studies* (pp. 347–361). Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 277–294). Routledge.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis*. Macmillan.
- Haylett, C. (2001). Illegitimate subjects? Abject whites, neoliberal modernisation, and middle-class multiculturalism. *Society & Space*, 19(3), 351–370.
- Hill, D. W. (2015). Class, trust and confessional media in austerity Britain. *Media, Culture & Society*, 37(4), 566–580.
- Hobson, D. (1980). Housewives and the mass media. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 105–117). Hutchinson.
- Jensen, T. (2014). Welfare commonsense, poverty porn and doxosophy. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3), 1–7.
- Jensen, T. (2018). *Parenting the crisis: The cultural politics of parent-blame*. Policy Press.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2023). *UK poverty report*. https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/uk_poverty_2023_-_the_essential_guide_to_understanding_poverty_in_the_uk_0_0.pdf
- Kay, J., & Wood, H. (2022). ‘The race for space’: Capitalism, the country and the city in Britain under COVID-19. *Continuum*, 36(2), 274–288.
- Lawler, S. (2012). White like them: Whiteness and anachronistic space in representations of the English white working class. *Ethnicities*, 12(4), 409–426.
- Lehto, M. (2020). Bad is the new good: Negotiating bad motherhood in Finnish mommy blogs. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(5), 657–671.
- Littler, J. (2013). The rise of the ‘yummy mummy’: Popular conservatism and the neoliberal maternal in contemporary British culture. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6(2), 227–243.
- Littler, J. (2016). Consumer culture and cultural studies. In D. Shaw, M. Carrington, & A. Chatzidakis (Eds.), *Ethics and morality in consumption: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 233–247). Routledge.
- Littler, J. (2018). *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. Routledge.
- Lyle, S. (2008). (Mis)recognition and the middle-class/bourgeois gaze: A case study of *Wife Swap*. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 5(4), 319–330.
- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial context*. Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (1980). Settling the accounts with subcultures. *Screen Education*, 33.
- McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and youth culture* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- McRobbie, A. (2008). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage.
- McRobbie, A. (2018). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. John Wiley & Sons.
- McRobbie, A. (2020). *Feminism and the politics of resilience: Essays on gender, media and the end of welfare*. Polity Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2023). Beyond anti-welfarism and feminist social media mud-slinging. In J. Littler (ed.), *Left feminisms: Conversations on the personal and the political* (pp. 181–191). Lawrence Wishart.
- Mirza, H. (1992). *Young, female and black*. Routledge.
- Morley, D. (1980). *The nationwide audience*. BFI.

- Moseley, R. (2000). Makeover takeover on British television. *Screen*, 41(3), 299–314.
- Munt, S. R. (2017). *Queer attachments: The cultural politics of shame*. Routledge.
- Negra, D. (2008). *What a girl wants? Fantasizing the reclamation of self in postfeminism* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Oxfam. (2020). *Time to care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/time-to-care-unpaid-and-underpaid-care-work-and-the-global-inequality-crisis-620928/>
- Oxfam. (2023). *Survival of the richest: How we must tax the super-rich now to fight inequality*. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621477/bp-survival-of-the-richest-160123-en.pdf>
- Press, A. (1991). *Women watching television: Gender, class, and generation in the American television experience*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Probyn, E. (2005). *Blush: Faces of shame*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Puwar, N. (2004). *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Berg.
- Raisborough, J., Taylor, L., Harrison, K., & Dulson, S. (2022). The cutaway to the toilet: Towards a visual grammar of spatial stigma in factual welfare television. *Sociological Research Online*, 28(2), 558–576.
- Richardson, N. (2016). *Transgressive bodies: Representations in film and popular culture*. Routledge.
- Scharff, C. (2011). Disarticulating feminism: Individualization, neoliberalism and the othering of ‘Muslim women’. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 18(2), 119–134.
- Shilliam, R. (2018). *Race and the underserving poor*. Agenda Publishing.
- Siraj, A. (2012). Smoothing down ruffled feathers: The construction of Muslim women’s feminine identities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 185–199.
- Sitrin, M., & Sembar, C. (Eds.). (2020). *Pandemic solidarity: Mutual aid during the Covid-19 crisis*. Pluto Press.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. Sage.
- Skeggs, B. (2004a). *Class, self, culture*. Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (2004b). Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and ‘the self’. *The Sociological Review*, 52(2), 75–95.
- Skeggs, B. (2019a). *A crisis in humanity: What everyone with parents is likely to face in the future*. <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/a-crisis-in-humanity-what-everyone-with-parents-is-likely-to-face-in-the-future/>
- Skeggs, B. (2019b). The forces that shape us: The entangled vine of gender, race and class. *The Sociological Review*, 67(1), 28–35.
- Skeggs, B., & Wood, H. (2012). *Reacting to reality television: Audience, performance and value*. Routledge.
- Steedman, C. (1986). *Landscape for a good woman*. Virago.
- Sundén, J., & Paasonen, S. (2018). Shameless hags and tolerance whores: Feminist resistance and the affective circuits of online hate. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 643–656.
- Thornham, S. (2007). *Women, feminism and media*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Tyler, I. (2008). Chav mum chav scum. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8(1), 17–34.
- Tyler, I. (2012). *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. Zed Books.
- Tyler, I. (2014). *Being poor is not entertainment: Class struggles against poverty porn*. <https://socialabjection.wordpress.com/2014/10/30/being-poor-is-not-entertainment-class-struggles-against-poverty-porn-by-imogen-tyler/>
- Tyler, I. (2020). *Stigma: The machinery of inequality*. Bloomsbury.
- Walkerdine, V. (1991). *Schoolgirl fictions*. Verso.

- Williams, R. (1961). *The long revolution*. Chatto and Windus.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working-class jobs*. Saxon House.
- Winch, A. (2013). *Girlfriends and postfeminist sisterhood*. Springer.
- Winship, J. (1987). *Inside women's magazines*. Pandora Press.
- Wood, H. (2017). The politics of hyperbole on *Geordie Shore*: Class, gender, youth and excess. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(1), 39–55.
- Wood, H. (2018). The Magaluf girl: A public sex scandal and the digital class relations of social contagion. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 626–642.
- Wood, H., & Skeggs, B. (2008). Spectacular morality: Reality television, individualisation and the re-making of the working class. In D. Hesmondhalgh & J. Toynbee (Eds.), *The media and social theory* (pp. 177–193). Routledge.
- Wood, H., & Skeggs, B. (2020). Clap for carers? From care gratitude to care justice. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 641–647.