



# The classing gaze and its gendering effects: (dis)-respectability, emotional (in)-competency, and the counselling experiences of domestically violent Taiwanese men

*Bo-Wei Chen, Wen-Hui Anna Tang and Hong-Zen Wang*

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## Abstract

Research on domestically violent men typically takes an oppositional logic of gender. While the significance of class in researching domestically violent men is identified, class and gender are often treated as separate entities that do not complicate each other. Drawing upon group observations and in-depth interviews, this paper identifies how intersections of class and gender manifest in the counselling experiences of domestically violent Taiwanese men. From a Bourdieusian feminist analysis, the authors analyse (1) how class distinctions serve to (re)produce gendered hierarchy; (2) how contradictory experiences of gender reveal a relational understanding of class; and (3) how the gendered nature of domestically violent men is inscribed with a meaning of (working) class specificity for maintaining middle-class 'purity'. In analysing men's multiple and conflicting experiences, this paper contributes to research on domestically violent men by showing how class and gender are actively constructed and not produced in a monolithic/invariant way.

**Keywords:** Bourdieusian feminist analysis, emotional-control, domestically violent Taiwanese men, intersection of class and gender

## Introduction

Prolific research has contributed to understanding the gendered nature of domestic violence, and the diversities and conflicts inherent within the experiences of women who have been physically assaulted. Yet research on domestically violent men has adopted an oppositional logic of gender as its primary explanatory model (Anderson and Umberson, 2001; McCarry, 2009; Kimmel, 2002; Mullaney, 2007; Schrock and Padavic, 2007; Totten, 2003). By focusing on between-gender differences, these debates collapse distinctions *within* classed gender groups. The multiple and conflicting dimensions of domestically violent

men are inevitably compromised by making 'gender dependent on sex and sex dependent on male force' (Gardiner, 2005: 39). While research on domestically violent men has addressed the significance of other social conditionings such as class – class and gender are usually treated as separate entities that do not complicate each other. We learn little about how middle-class respectability could serve to (re)produce gendered hierarchy among domestically violent men (eg Schrock and Padavic, 2007), and classed gender is also treated as fixed rather than processual (eg Anderson and Umberson, 2001).

This article sets up to challenge the homogeneity of domestically violent men. We focus on within-gender differences that are likely to indicate conflict, competition and greater ambivalence. In analysing men's experiences in multiple and conflicting terms, our findings elaborate how the intersections of class and gender manifest in Taiwanese therapeutic intervention programmes for domestic violence. Specifically, we examine:

- (1) how *gender is classed*, and how class distinctions serve to (re)produce gendered hierarchy. This explains why certain domestically violent men 'know how' to perform middle-classness in order to gain respect, while simultaneously subordinating those who cannot;
- (2) how *contradictory experiences of gender reflect classed relations*, and how middle-class respectability helps define who can become a respectable man, in whose eyes, how and under what conditions. This explains why the same men could gain respect in certain social contexts but not in others – as cultural dispositions are attenuated by movements across fields;
- (3) how *the gendered nature of domestically violent men is inscribed with a meaning of class specificity*, and how if a 'middle-class' man is accused of domestic violence, he will be perceived as being as 'ignorant' as the working class. Specifically, in the eyes of the middle class, a domestically violent man cannot be middle class and thus must be working class.

We aim to make three contributions. First, by examining the tensions and competitions between the domestically violent men, we illustrate how domination and disempowerment are simultaneously realized in their lives – without collapsing gender in to sex. Second, by exploring the multiple and conflictual experiences of these men, we elaborate how classed gender is relationally lived out rather than simply received or fixed. Third, by identifying the intersections between class and gender, we demonstrate how class and gender are not constructed in a monolithic and invariant way. Our analysis of contrasting male experiences illustrates how class collides with gender in shaping the professionals' presumptions about domestically violent men and the gendered nature of the classing gaze.

We will address the above positions analytically from a Bourdieusian feminist perspective by looking at class distinction and gendered hierarchy, and then at classed gender as differentiating processes.

## Class distinction and gendered hierarchy

Although one may criticize him for a structural reductionist stance (Butler, 1999; Jenkins, 2002), Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of distinction remains useful for feminist scholars in terms of examining how cultural hierarchies translate into social divisions by celebrating particular forms of femininity and simultaneously marginalizing others (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004). Middle-class femininities are perceived as 'normal' and 'respectable', whereas working-class femininities are considered 'disgusting' (Lawler, 2005), 'wrong' (Walkerdine, 1998), or at least distasteful. Through the classing gaze, particular negative gendered values are *inscribed* upon the 'problematic' others (Skeggs, 2004). The pathologized *others* both mark the existence of a respectful self and help define it.

In response to their 'hidden injuries of shame' (Sennett and Cobb, 1977), 'passing' as respectably middle class becomes a desirable yet *uneasy* option for many working-class women. Desirable, in terms of the potential escape route it offers from their tainted identity, which causes feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Uneasy, since in becoming respectable, one needs to know what to do and how to do it *properly* – the embodiment of the cultural confidence that signifies middle-classness (Bourdieu, 1984).

Additionally, through attempts at *passing*, working-class women are both anxious about being judged from above for not passing 'well enough' and fearful of accusations of pretentiousness from peers (Skeggs, 1997). This *relational comparison* is important for understanding a more dynamic and emotionally ambivalent pattern of class relations, where *resentment* and respect towards the dominant occur simultaneously (Reay *et al.*, 2009; also see Reay *et al.*, 2011 for ambivalent middle-class identities). Moreover, this desire to *pass* reproduces a gender hierarchy where the stigmatized try to 'mirror and clone the self-image of hegemonic [norms]' (Puwar, 2004: 128).

In sum, through the classing gaze, particular negative gendered values are attributed to 'the others' (Skeggs, 2004). Social distinctions are made by marking apparent social differences. This leads us to ask how the classing gaze functions, for what reasons, and for whose benefit? In addition, the sense of the self's place is always relational to the dis/respectable social positions of others. Through the classing gaze, it is middle-class values which are both automatically taken seriously and aspired to.

In analysing the classing gaze, this paper argues that the domestically violent men we observed are fixed in a marginalized position, where gendered values of middle-classness are dominant. Specifically, in the eyes of the (middle-class) professionals, these men were pathologized in terms of working-class stereotypes. In analysing the classing gaze, we seek to reveal how the values of the privileged are prioritized, and the stigmatized attributes of the others are misrecognized as 'natural'. Additionally, we examine how the classing gaze and its value indexes are upheld through these men's

interactions. We analyse why certain men know how to appropriate the ‘right’ emotional styles – that is, ‘self-mastery’ and ‘successful communication skills’ – that signify middle-class respectability (Illouz, 1997; Liu and Ding, 2005). By demonstrating (inner/outward) control of emotions in particular, certain domestically violent men can gain respect from others (including the professionals), while subordinating those who cannot.

Our analysis builds on existing research by exploring how the emotional habitus of middle-classness that helps certain people to demonstrate ‘right’ forms of emotional style is socially distributed and *not* accessible to all (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Illouz, 1997; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2004; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997, 2009). We examine specifically the counselling programme for Taiwanese domestically violent men where the middle-class’s invention of a therapeutic culture and its ‘reflexive’ emotional styles are endorsed and valued for marginalizing the others (Illouz, 1997; Pfister, 1997). Scholars have well documented how the working class are historically pathologized as both moral and psychological unfit, if not irrational, dangerous or violent (Bennett, 2003; Blackman, 1996; Rose, 1990). What are camouflaged by these stigmatized presumptions are the values of middle-classness that make ‘proper’ personhood an exclusive resource predicated on constitution by exclusion (Skeggs, 2009: 496). While the domestically violent men we observed are reprimanded by the counselling professionals for alleged faulty mentality, having some sort of ‘personality problem’, and lack of emotional control; we suggest that emotional competency has greater implications than for personality alone. Following Illouz (1997), our analysis demonstrates how the language of psychology in the counselling programme has naturalized and legitimated the emotional styles of middle-classness, making class inequalities an individual’s deficiency.<sup>1</sup>

Our findings extend existing literature by further demonstrating the actual processes through which classed distinctions serve to (re) produce a gendered hierarchy. This enables us to shed light on how class intersects with gender where domination and subordination *within* gender are simultaneously realized. Without collapsing domestically violent men into one coherent category, we examine gender in terms of hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources rather than in those of axiomatic opposition (Morgan, 2005).

## **Differentiation: classed gender as processual**

While distinction formulates Bourdieu’s mode of social organization, it is differentiation that provides a more relational and dynamic understanding of its processes. In describing this, Bourdieu outlines how individuals constitute their social identities by *differentiating* themselves from other groups in various fields. Through ‘relational comparisons’ made with meaningful others,

differentiation articulates the systematically organized *positions* and *dispositions* that inform both from where one sees and how one perceives their social world (Savage, 2000; Bourdieu, 1989).

Differentiations as social groupings are far from straightforward. The dominant seek a monopoly on legitimate naming, whereas the subordinate manoeuvre to protect their already limited resources. Battles and struggles are thus constantly involved in the formation of class culture. The process of differentiation can be further complicated by movements across different fields, where each field has its own logic and *asymmetrical* social forces that thus collide (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Despite his efforts to capture social relations in a more flexible conceptualization, Bourdieu's inclination to reveal the generative schemas for 'stylistic affinity' across different fields often leads him to the opposite position (Bennett *et al.*, 2010). His overly socialized dispositions describe causes of behaviour where 'actors are not allowed their reasons' (Jenkins, 2002: 97; Lovell, 2000).

For feminists inspired by Bourdieu's notion of differentiation, a key task is that of overcoming structural determinacy without falling into voluntarism. In response, Skeggs (1997) argues that emulation and the mirroring of consensual hierarchies of social classes are, for the subordinated, *not* the only outcomes of differentiation. Marginalized others can 'respect (and resent) the power of the middle classes but despise them for the power they effect' (Skeggs, 1997: 93). Ambivalence and potential resistance are registered in the indeterminacy of position-taking, where 'subjects never fully occupy or identify with norms' (Adkins, 2003: 206).

Alternatively, Lois McNay (1999) examines the extent to which habitus and its effects may be attenuated by individuals' movements across different fields. For example, women's entry into the workforce after childrearing may not demonstrably free women from emotional responsibilities. Rather, their domestic dispositions may sit *uneasily* with workplace requirements, where different power relations are likely to 'collide' with each other. These increasingly conflictual gender roles are inherently ambivalent because of the constant processes of negotiation demanded. Gender identity, therefore, should not be thought of in terms of 'implacable opposition but in terms of multiple disjuncture overlap and conflict' (McNay, 1999: 113).

Although Skeggs's culturalist analysis and McNay's sociological approach represent different Bourdieusian interpretations, they are connected in two ways. First, gender is understood as processual rather than fixed. This can be seen in both Skeggs's 'classed gender as dis-identification' and McNay's focus on the 'ambivalence' and 'dissonance' emerging from conflictual field relations. Second, the gendering process is further explored by examining how gender *simultaneously* intersects with other social conditionings such as class or place and enables us to rework and redefine its contours (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004). This requires an understanding of the internal differentiations within gender, where femininities are reproduced in neither an invariant nor dualistic way.

Our research posits classed gender as processual by focusing on the *contradictory gendered experiences* that the same men simultaneously encounter. For example, respectability was gained in terms of showing the 'right' emotional style in group therapy where such cultural capital was a sign of a higher class. However, in the courtroom this same 'respectability' failed to gain respect and could indeed be turned into stigma. Such contradiction illustrates two themes. First, how classed gender is lived out through relational comparisons, where the gendered values of middle-classness help define who can become a respectable man, in whose eyes, and under what conditions. Second, and more importantly, how class collides with gender. To be a domestically violent man is to be assumed to be working class. The concept of a 'middle-class' domestically violent man, therefore, indicates a troubling process of differentiation that does not obscure, yet perpetually secures existing social boundaries. In other words, to resolve the crisis of identity is to re-read the ambiguity according to a pre-existing regime of identity cards: 'if [she is] not Aboriginal, then [her skin must] be sun tanned, then [she must be] white' (Ahmed, 1999: 96). The impossibility of addressing the subject through a singular name explains how different social conditionings intersect with each other.

Adding to this, we want to argue that the collision of gender and class is especially apparent when there is no problem of calling the subject a certain name. This involves *inscribing* domestically violent men with a meaning of classed specificity, a specificity that fixes the object of the classing gaze into a logic of inclusion (you are middle class like us) or exclusion (you are working class like them). When a middle-class man is accused of domestic violence, the integrity and authenticity of his middle-classness will be immediately questioned, if not totally denied. Through the erasing of his middle-classness, the privileged maintain their class 'purity'. The men in our research, therefore, are not seen just as domestically violent men but as a *certain* class of men – rendering class and gender inseparable.

We have situated analytically and empirically how class and gender intersect via distinction and differentiation. We focus *not* upon overlooking the contradictions and tensions experienced by domestically violent men, but upon working *with* and *through* these. We will now further contextualize class (analysis) in Taiwanese society and examine why a Bourdieusian framework is useful for exploring its class relations.

### **Situating class (analysis) in Taiwan**

Researching class in Taiwan is complicated by its local history and economic development. Before the lifting of martial law in 1987, the authoritarian Kuomintang ruling party allowed little space for labour movements and the formations of working-class identity (Ho, 2011). Potential class conflicts were further camouflaged by the state's aggressive developmentalism of the 1970s and 1980s and the post-industrial phase of the 1990s (Lin, 2009).

Although Taiwanese scholars began their mostly quantitative discussions on middle-class identities at the beginning of the 1990s (Hsiao, 1999), class positions were treated as static attachments to indicators such as housing or employment. The dynamic and internally differentiated nature of class was overlooked, and little attention was paid to the (re)production of social inequalities through economic and cultural processes in everyday practices.

A Bourdieusian class analysis is therefore useful in exploring contemporary class relations in Taiwan as it attempts to decipher how certain cultural 'preferences' are bound up with the (re)production of hierarchy and exclusion. It also offers a conceptual flexibility in understanding how class is lived out by individuals differentiating themselves from members of various social categories in which class relations are 'modes of differentiation, rather than as types of collectivity' (Savage, 2000: 102).

Despite different trajectories of class formation, we note some similar classed values within domestic violence prevention programmes across different cultural contexts. In common with American programmes (eg Schrock and Padavic, 2007), the value of 'emotional control' was also constantly emphasized in the programme that was observed for this study. However, through the lens of psychology, emotional-control is simply *read off* by the Taiwanese therapists as 'class-neutral' indicators of mental fitness rather than as ideal cultural dispositions that signify a higher status in class and gender (Liu and Ding, 2005: 40; Illouz, 1997). Consequently, domestically violent men are *naturalized* as 'psychologically unfit', 'vulgar' and having a 'short-fuse' during therapeutic interventions. What remains silent is how middle-classness maintains its privilege in these sessions.

We will now further situate the domestic violence prevention programme we studied and discuss why therapeutic intervention is preferred by justice and rehabilitative services for 'treating' domestic violence in Taiwan.

## Setting and method

The programme studied was housed in a psychiatric hospital of a metropolitan south-western city. This location indicates how domestically violent men are legally and professionally perceived in Taiwan. Following the implementation of the Taiwanese Domestic Violence Prevention Law (DVPL) in 1998, programmes were put in place to provide 'educational and psychological consultation, mental therapy, drug/alcohol addiction rehabilitation ...' for perpetrators (Article 2, DVPL). Thus, the discourse of pathology is widely deployed for both identifying and treating male perpetrators (Lin *et al.*, 2007).

Counselling programmes are preferred by the legal system over gaol sentences for 'treating' men's domestically violent behaviours. Although all programmes' participants we observed were mandated by the court and expected to complete 12 sessions for a duration of three months, one of the men studied had actually been on this 3-month programme for more than 2 years. Due to



his personal circumstances and his wish to complete the course, the evaluator decided this counselling programme was more 'effective' for him to learn how to avoid family confrontations than simply putting him behind bars. This was not an uncommon situation, according to the programme facilitators.

Paradoxically, it was precisely the perception of counselling programmes as 'treatment' rather than punishment that informed the legal professionals' seemingly cursory decisions (Wang *et al.*, 2010). Participants often complained how they were unfairly treated by the courts. In response, the programme leader explained the rationale behind the legal judgments:

... domestic violence is usually not considered as a 'serious' crime. So the judge will let you join the counselling programme, to learn how to change yourself, avoid confrontations, and hopefully solve the problems in your family ...

Consequently, the professionals did not see a domestic violent man as he saw himself but as they believed he should be. Their decisions on whether a man committed domestic violence were often determined by class-based presumptions, and scant attention paid to actual lived experiences.

### *Research process*

We attended the programme's weekly 2-hour evening sessions between December 2010 and June 2011. The same therapists facilitated each session, yet participants varied depending on who had newly entered or completed the programme. The group comprised, on average, 8 to 10 men and two therapists. All participants were first-time offenders, convicted of both verbal and physical assaults towards their female partners. Amongst the 18 men we observed, 3 of them had previous criminal records (one for defamation and 2 for physical assaults). Less than a quarter of them were divorced, and two were barred from entering the victim's residence.

Direct quotations in this paper are from in-depth interviews with 12 participants and 6 participants who were observed in group discussions. Although we were not permitted to use tape-recording in the group observations, lengthy fieldwork notes were documented for each session to recall the actions and interactions that occurred. In group observations, we often witnessed tensions and competition between the men, illustrating gender in terms of internal differentiations as opposed to a homogenous category. In-depth interviews provided a more complex and often contradictory biographical picture of these men, showing their social-economic positions as not fixed, but processual. In terms of occupation, only one of our participants was unemployed. Another was on disability welfare. The others had stable yet varied jobs. The diversity of our sample enabled us to examine how classed gender is lived out in terms of hierarchies of differential access to resources.



The names of the participants used in this article are pseudonyms and all of them were informed about the aims of our research prior to their involvement. During the interviews, we explained the necessity of tape-recording for accuracy of transcripts and translations (from Mandarin/Taiwanese to English undertaken by the first author). We also informed the research participants that they could terminate the interview or stop the tape-recording at any time if they wished. None of them objected to being recorded in full. We also interviewed Helen and Adam, therapists who had co-managed the programme for 2 years. Programme leader Helen, an experienced family therapist, had a PhD in counselling psychology. Facilitator Adam was doing his PhD in counselling with a particular focus on adult career development. It was Helen who was mainly responsible for teaching and maintaining class order – and the interactions between Helen and the participants are quoted more frequently in this article.

Although our academic researcher status provided us with some professional authority, we treated this with caution to avoid becoming complicit in (re)producing ‘pathologized’ others (following Skeggs, 2002). Nevertheless, we are accountable for our analytical constructions and our use of terminology. As a qualitative study, our research does not seek inductive validity by suggesting that the participants represent broader counselling experiences of Taiwanese domestically violent men (Dooley, 1990). Nor are our participants the bearers of certain designated variables systematically selected from specific categories of attitudes and responses. Alongside Crouch and McKenzie (2006: 491, 493), we perceive our respondents as ‘meaningful experience-structure links’ who reveal ‘dynamic patterns’ of interplay between individuals and their social world. In observing the counselling experiences of domestically violent men, we found certain values, patterns and mechanisms used by the classing gaze for making and maintaining the hidden privilege of middle-classness. We created labels to capture both the practices and meanings of these processes: (1) ‘merely’ looking, (2) maintaining emotional-control, (3) becoming (dis)respectable, and (4) resisting/reinforcing stigmas.

### **‘Merely’ looking: the classing gaze and its gendered inscriptions**

Through the classing gaze and its pre-conceptions, counselling/legal professionals can identify the ‘causes’ of domestic violence by *merely looking*. Domestically violent men can be easily marked as lacking appropriate tastes and demeanours. During his last session, Helen reminded A-Kuo (a 36-year-old builder) of the importance of self-control in order to avoid relationship confrontations. Appearance, according to Helen, can be an effective first step to achieving self-control:

*Helen:* You look tidier today . . . not so ‘dirty’ . . .

*A-Kuo:* Miss, the place I usually work is nearby, and I usually come to the session straight after work . . .

*Helen:* . . . if the way you dress for the class is the best effort you can make . . . I can't imagine what you would be like at home . . . *us psychologists know that the way you talk can be reflected in the way you dress.* If you dress tidily and pay attention to your appearance, you will also pay attention to the way you talk . . . if you are so unkempt, the way you talk will be just as rude and rough . . .

For Helen, A-Kuo's 'scruffy' appearance is seemingly *symptomatic* of his tendency to domestic violence. However, she overlooks the economic and cultural resources required to 'dress well' (in her eyes). Forms of power that secure the values of the hidden privileged are camouflaged by *arbitrary* cultural tastes, while simultaneously excluding individuals who cannot demonstrate them (Bourdieu, 1984).

Related to this, a common experience bemoaned by male participants was being unfairly treated by the courts. Judges' decisions seem often to be based on two questions: 'Are you employed?' and 'Do you have alcohol problems?' A similar set of 'judgments' to those of Helen appear to operate here – rather than what domestically violent people actually do, it is the judgments of the professionals that are taken seriously (Lawler, 2005).

The classing gaze is also apparent in the men's censoring of each other. This process was not discouraged but often reinforced by the professionals as in a group discussion when Helen raised the drinking issue of A-Shu (a 42-year-old ex-civil servant): 'I don't know if you realized that your drinking causes you to walk unsteadily . . . perhaps you can't tell . . . but you can understand yourself better from others' observations of you'. Helen then invited the other participants to give A-Shu some suggestions regarding his drinking:

*A-Liang:* Except [manual] workers, no one drinks 'rice wine' [which A-Shu drank] . . . in the old time, only the indigenous people in Taiwan drank it . . .

*A-Chien:* Drinking is bad, so I hardly drink. If I do drink, I only drink 'XO' or at least 'Centaur' [Remy Martin]

*A-Hsin:* Rice wine is 'cheap', if you want to get drunk, and you don't have too much money to spend, rice wine is the best option . . . Drinking rice wine can be very damaging to your brain, and people, who drink rice wine, often have their brains damaged already. My brother-in-law is a good example. *Because of drinking rice wine, he has stayed in the bed so long that his muscles have wasted away . . . his legs are too weak to walk.* Often he can't even go to the toilet in middle of the night, either too drunk or too weak to walk. *He simply pees in his bed . . .* [emphasis added]

Interestingly, alongside the domestic violence prevention programme, A-Hsin (a 42-year-old technician) was also attending an alcohol recovery programme.

However, for A-Hsin, drinking itself is not the problem; what makes drinking problematic is drinking the 'wrong' kind of alcohol: 'Although I drink, I don't drink rice wine. *Drinking rice wine makes you look cheap and desperate*'. Thus, 'good' or 'bad' taste in alcohol is not based on personal choice alone. The (il)legitimate way of drinking is also a means of differentiating the respectable self from the shameful others even if the specific behaviours are virtually identical.

Through the classing gaze and its value-indexes, the 'problematic' others are singled out with few hesitations. The references to 'alcoholism', 'scruffy looks' or 'unemployment' reinforce what a domestically violent man 'should be' for the professionals: a 'rude and rough' working-class man. Additionally, the very existence of middle-classness relies on producing and inscribing the 'apparent' social differences onto the marginalized others. The process of inscription is so efficient that the stigmatized attributes, such as 'brain-damaged' or 'muscle-wasting', were transferred onto A-Shu's bodily behaviours and simply *read off* as 'natural'. Through the classing gaze, the fixing of domestically violent men in marginalized positions simultaneously renders the values of middle-classness dominant and respectable (Skeggs, 2004).

### **Maintaining emotional-control: the middle-class respectability**

The key goal of the programme we observed was to persuade the participants of the importance of emotional control. As the facilitators constantly remarked, the self-mastery of emotion helped avoid confrontations in intimate relationships and could be achieved through personal choices alone:

*Helen:* . . . . You need to ask yourself why many people experienced similar difficulties as you have, but few of them react the way you did. How come they have managed their anger but you did not? . . . To manage your anger successfully, you have to first of all value emotional control greatly. It should not be something imposed upon you. Such value is part of who you are, what you believe in and how you want people to perceive you.

*Tom:* When you feel angry, you have to believe that you can control your anger rather than let it control you. You have to remember that *how you choose to react will reveal what sort of person you are* . . . [emphasis added]

Hence, 'choice theory' was deployed within programme curriculums to explain why personal choices can lead to necessary self-transformations. Illustrative comparisons were often made with cars by the programme therapists to elaborate how rational thoughts and actions (as front wheels) can govern feelings and physiology (the back wheels).

As far as the professionals are concerned, emotional control is inextricably linked to having a 'healthy' personality. Successful emotional control implies

mental fitness and capability; and those who lack control are considered psychologically ‘problematic’. As A-Wang (divorced, a 27-year-old businessman) comments, ‘[the therapists] always look at you with a jaundiced eye and want to “cure” you. If we say nothing, they think we have some sort of mental problem. If we say something, they always said that we spoke with hatred.’

However, the mastery of one’s inner self and the exercise of outward emotional energy via good communication skills are about more than just personality (Illouz, 1997; Liu and Ding, 2005). While the ‘right’ emotional styles can be converted into respectability and even leadership potential, the appropriate emotional repertoire is socially distributed and *not* equally available. In other words, to control emotions *properly* is ‘the prerogative of those who have already available a range of emotional options, [and] who are not overwhelmed by emotional necessity and intensity’ (Illouz, 1997: 56).

The very existence of class inequalities relies not only on unfairly classed inscriptions but also cultural exclusions in which the values of middle-classness are centred (Lawler, 2008). If one understands domestic violence as some sort of ‘personality problem’, one can overlook an examination of how the *arbitrary* preferences of the privileged class are transformed into the only *legitimate* way of practising (Bourdieu, 1984). We will now examine how classed exclusions are camouflaged as ‘proper’ cultural preferences. A particular focus is given to understanding the performances of these ‘right’ emotional styles as cultural capital that enable only certain men to be taken seriously.

### **Becoming (dis)respectable: domestically violent men and the intersections of class and gender**

The domestically violent men we observed do not constitute a homogenized gender category. Disagreements and tensions between them often took place during the counselling processes. The following analysis will focus on three participants, who actively and frequently contributed to group discussions. We explore the competitions and tensions between these men, where middle-class respectability serves to reproduce gendered hierarchy. We also focus on why the same men can gain respect in some contexts but not others, and how classed gender is dynamically lived out with necessary contradictions and tension, rather than fixed or passively received.

#### *The disrespectful working class other*

A-Jen (divorced, 45 years old, unemployed), had attended this programme for more than two years. He liked to share experiences and wanted to lead group discussions. He would say things such as, ‘misery likes company and misery has brought us together . . . Miss I understand their miseries very well and they understand what I am saying’. Hence, A-Jen often jokily suggested to the programme leader that ‘Miss, you should hire me as your teaching assistant.’

Other group members had different ideas though. Two weeks before he completed his course, A-Jen had been drinking and began to brag about past achievements. After A-Jen had been bragging for a while, A-Wang interrupted:

*A-Wang:* Hey buddy; I find you a bit emotional and extreme . . . I have also failed, but when I am in a bad mood, I like to raise my spirits by reading some self-help books. . . . for example, I like to read *Thick Black Theory* [a contemporary Chinese Machiavelian manipulation] . . .

*A-Jen:* I have read *Thick Black Theory*, in fact I read it three times when I was in prison.

The conversation between them ended because A-Jen said he needed to ‘leave early’. Previously, he had left the class early because he felt ignored by the therapist and was so angry that he forgot to take his jacket. Thus, A-Jen was considered by other participants as ‘grumpy’, and was often challenged by other group members. He intended to speak out, yet was *not* heard or taken seriously – in contrast to peers who communicated *properly* and were thus entitled to respectability as we will now explore.

### *The ‘respectable’ middle-class self*

Rather than being the stereotypically ‘scruffy’ domestically violent man, A-Tsai (a 49-year-old senior manager in the automotive industry) was ‘respectable’ in appearance. Every time he came to the session, he always dressed in a neat and tidy way. He also had a master’s degree from America, about which he remarked, ‘for someone from my generation, to be able to study abroad, you have to be not only diligent, but also have financial support from your family.’

The first time A-Tsai attended the programme, he gave us an impression of being a confident and decisive person. Unlike other members, who were usually unclear in their self-introduction, A-Tsai went into detail about what had happened to him, and how his criminal record of domestic violence had affected him so badly that he almost could not find a job. A-Tsai was not concerned about people seeing him as a ‘loser’ as his successes in the past prevented him from such embarrassment:

. . . the impression that I give to others is that I have the characteristics of being a manager . . . diligent and very disciplined . . . I have been a senior manager for many years . . . in the Philippines and never needed to clock in upon my arrival at work . . .

A-Tsai communicated eloquently. Unlike A-Jen, who always complained about the DVPL being ‘unfair and vicious’, A-Tsai tended to be neutral in his criticism, by sophisticatedly providing (counter) arguments. Additionally, A-Tsai spoke rhetorically in order to win people’s agreement. For example, if

he took up too much time or became too emotional, he would reflexively apologize – ‘sorry, I have been talking too much’, ‘I am over-reacting here’. In doing so, he succeeded in getting the group to allow him to speak at length. This was in stark contrast to A-Jen, who appeared wholly preoccupied with his own misfortunes.

A-Tsai managed his emotions well and was able to share his stories in a more ‘appropriate’ way. This helped him win the approval of the therapists and respect from other participants:

*Helen:* A-Tsai has a good education so whenever he talks, he is very articulate and balanced so that people can accept his opinions easily. He communicates well . . .

*Ping:* . . . A-Tsai . . . is more sincere and objective, not too extreme, unlike A-Jen who is very defensive and always talks about himself and his own feelings . . .

We also observed that neither therapists nor other participants interrupted or challenged A-Tsai when he talked. Unlike A-Jen (who thought of himself as a potential teaching assistant for the class despite no one really listening to him), A-Tsai was the *de facto* assistant. Indeed, whenever group members were talking too much time, A-Tsai would say, ‘alright, you should let others have the chance to talk’. Since A-Tsai was familiar with middle-class values, he knew how to speak in ways that gained respect as easily as ‘a fish in the water [that] does not feel the weight of the water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

#### *‘Passing’ as the respectable middle class*

Although middle-class cultural dispositions are not equally accessible, some individuals can learn them in order to gain respect. Take A-Wang, another ‘participant-leader’ of the group, as an example. If A-Tsai was ‘book smart’, then A-Wang was ‘street smart’. A-Wang only ceased education at high school, yet he had learned how to do business with people from a very early stage of his life by watching how his father (a business-person) handled their family business and had set up a successful ornamental tree business.

A-Wang was much liked by other group members for his sense of humour and capacity of making difficult concepts easy to understand. For example, when we were wondering how Oriental cherry trees could survive in Taiwan’s climate, he figuratively explained to us:

. . . if your son is five years old and you take him to the North Pole, he can easily adapt to the environment. Yet, if you take him there when he is 30 or 50 years old, things would be very different . . .

This example revealed A-Wang’s inter-personal skills and, his ability to contribute positively to the group (and hold its attention). Indeed, it was commented by a fellow participant that ‘A-Wang’s sense of humour lights up the dull and boring atmosphere of the group’.

In group discussions (and in interview), A-Wang often used allusions and quotations to convince and engage. For example, when Helen commented on A-Kuo's scruffy look, A-Wang complained that Helen seemed to rush to a conclusion without much consideration:

Miss, I have read Han Feizi's [Chinese philosopher] books for a year. He wrote that people don't communicate by appearance but through sincerity . . . you don't really know us, so please don't judge us based on your impressions.

This was not an isolated example – the conversation between A-Wang and A-Jen about *Thick Black Theory* also showed the former's conversational competency. Although A-Wang was not highly educated, he knew how to appropriate cultural resources that would make his voice heard and taken more seriously.

### *The erasing of middle-class respectability*

A Wang and A-Tsai faced (for us) significant limitations in their attempts to gain respect through demonstrating middle-class respectability. Unlike book-smart A-Tsai, A-Wang was awkward and uneasy when he tried to appropriate academic knowledge. For example, when he attempted to vindicate his argument by quoting Han Feizi, he also asked group members: 'you guys know Han Feizi, right? The student of Confucius . . .', A-Tsai immediately challenged him: 'Was Han Feizi Confucius's student?' (which he was *not*). Also, when A-Wang tried to draw an analogy between a successful business and a successful artist, he asked if we knew 'the famous artist "Fan-te" [the Chinese pronunciation for a BMW dealership in Taiwan] from a country that is famous for tulips', although he had intended to refer to 'Fan-Gu' (Vincent van Gogh). In attempting to appropriate middle-classness in an unfamiliar cultural field, A-Wang seemed to constantly run the risk that his failure in *passing* would be somehow exposed through the classing gaze (Skeggs, 1997).

As for A-Tsai, although his middle-class respectability was acknowledged within the counselling group, the validity of his cultural capital extended only so far as was permitted by the gendered values of middle-classness – and certainly not into the domain of the courtroom:

I tried to explain to the investigator that I did not intend to violate the Domestic Violence Prevention Order (by not getting within more than 100 metres of my wife). But my son was living with her and I needed to pick him up for cram school. I also needed to go to her apartment for paying the maintenance . . . The investigator simply ignored what I said and snapped with sarcasm: *are you so educated that you can't even read what was written on the order?* [emphasis added]



The issue here is not simply the professionals' tendency to look down upon domestically violent men. Rather, the investigator's remark serves to classify domestically violent men through a lens of class specificity. Specifically, when A-Tsai – as a 'middle-class' man – was accused of domestic violence, his cultural capital was immediately questioned, if not denied completely, to the extent that he was considered as 'illiterate' (as the working-class). Instead of gaining him status, his respectable middle-classness was paradoxically evoked as a 'failure' in the eyes of the investigator. Because of the classing gaze, *a domestically violent man cannot be middle class and thus must be (as ignorant as) the working class*. The erasing of A-Tsai's middle-classness helps illustrate how the privileged maintain their status.

Thus far we have explored how classed gender is lived out relationally through necessarily negotiations and tensions. We have also suggested that the collision between class and gender specifically takes place when there is no problem of placing the domestically violent men into a single identity category. The relative differences in the men's actual class backgrounds are glossed over in order to reinforce middle-class respectability. Thus, the men in our research were not seen as just domestically violent men but a 'certain' class of man and constantly classified and read through middle-class gendered values – rendering class and gender inseparable.

### **Resisting/reinforcing stigmas: the reversed gaze of the subordinated**

Formations of class and gender involve consonant battles and struggles, where (marginalized) individuals are concerned with the improvement of their positions in the fields. The domestically violent men observed actively resist (and sometimes directly challenge) being stigmatized during the counselling processes. For example, many participants challenged Helen when she axiomatically associated A-Kuo's scruffy appearance with a propensity to domestic violence. In response, they mocked middle-class hypocrisy:

*A-Tsai:* . . . A-Kuo next time when you go to work, don't forget to wear your shirt and tie so that you won't be reported (for domestic violence) again.

*A-Tung:* . . . We should read *Three Hundred Tang Poems* so that we know how to 'beautify' our swearing, to swear without 'actually' swearing . . .

*A-Shun:* . . . we don't study (academically) a lot, but we have already got many degrees from 'the university of real life'. *We have met many educated people, who have one hand on Buddhist scriptures and the other hand on prostitutes' asses*. Hypocrites! We really look down upon them [emphasis added].

These men are not fooled by or accepting of class prejudices. These mockeries typify their judgments against, and resentment towards the injustices of, middle-classness.

Although many of them lack middle-class resources, 'real-life experiences' helped the participants provide a counter-narrative to unfair criticisms. This is exemplified by A-Tung's (a 58-year-old grocery-shop owner) confrontations with Adam:

... Mister, don't assume that because we attend the programme our families are abnormal ... you ask so-called 'sophisticated questions' and force us to give you the answers you want to hear ... *You aren't married, don't have many experiences and so you don't understand what we are saying* [emphasis added] ...

Challenges like this did not pass unnoticed. When we asked Adam how he interpreted such class tension, a sense of disempowerment was suggested:

... although I am professional in what I am doing, they make me feel that I am too young to understand them, I don't know what's really going on in their lives. What I have taught is unrealistic, like castles in the air ...

Here, we can see how the Adam's advice is downplayed by the group as unfeasible – his lack of social experiences and unmarried status position him as a *naïve child* who does not understand what 'real men' are talking about.

It is uncertain, though, if such challenges can undermine the dominant values of middle-classness (Willis, 1977). When newcomers to the group were angry and resentful at their treatment by the DVPL, senior members of the group would advise them to calm down (particularly if they were due back in court):

You shouldn't be distressed ... rattling on about how unfairly you were treated by the law ... otherwise the judges will really think that you have a tendency for domestic violence ... like the guy who was expecting 12 weeks but got 24 due to his lack of emotional control [in court] ...

Although these men felt unfairly treated, their attempts to explain false accusations served to reinforce the professionals' stereotyping of domestically violent men as short-tempered and lacking in self-control. Consequently, more criticisms or even punishments are served up for their 'unreasonable' or uncooperative behaviours.

## Conclusion

This article problematizes the monolithic gendered construction of domestically violent men. It is suggested that the men in this study are subject to the classing gaze that differentially interprets abusive men, judging those with the

fewest middle-class resources as the most likely to be stigmatized and violent. While literature on domestically violent men typically takes an oppositional logic of gender, we have approached gender in terms of hierarchies of differential access to a variety of resources rather than in those of axiomatic opposition. This paper thus contributes to research on examining how men themselves are the subject of both domination and disempowerment.

In rejecting an over-determinist approach of gender, we have identified how gender intersects with class and how their interaction changes these categories (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Walby *et al.*, 2012). This can be exemplified by how men in this study use middle-class respectability to transcend working-class stigmatization in the counselling space, while simultaneously being penalized by the 'same' respectability in others (e.g. the court). The success of their efforts to transcend the stigmatized image is limited, as they cannot successfully unseat the narrow *class-bias* of 'the' domestically violent man that labels their gendered identity in the first place. While the intersection of class and gender can disrupt dichotomous class boundaries (ie middle-class respectability as *both* status *and* stigma for domestically violent men), the contradictory classed gender relations reveal precisely how the privileged class maintains its 'purity' and legitimacy.

Importantly, we do not wish to suggest that these men are either 'innocent' or 'victims'. Rather, we argue that the seemingly 'class-neutral' therapeutic interventions are actually significantly class and gender biased. Thus, this paper illustrates how domestically violent men are too easily portrayed as one-dimensional by the classing gaze, and reveals how the hidden privileged is camouflaged through this gaze. While researching abusive men, we intend to bring men's diverse and contradictory lived experiences into focus, without overlooking the power of the dominant. Future research on men and domestic violence will benefit from more systematic attention to the intersections of class and gender.

*Nanhua University, Taiwan*

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## **Note**

1 In her analysis of service industries and business corporations in post-war America, Eva Illouz (1997) points out how the language of psychology was deployed to identify the dispositions and

personality traits of successful leaders in workplaces where emotional control is of key significance. By emotional control, Illouz refers to both the mastery of one's inner self and the exercise of positive emotional energy through communication. For Illouz, what is underlined by the inner/outward performance of emotions is a reflexive selfhood that can be converted into leadership potential. Yet, what is camouflaged by corporate meritocracy and its ascribed dispositions is a form of domination – a new middle-classness that individualizes class inequalities in terms of personal qualities and (un)employability.

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