

# **Assessing Contradictions: Methodological Challenges when Mapping Symbolic Boundaries**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we address the methodological question of making sense of contradictions in sociological analysis. Focusing on the scholarly debate about generating and interpreting data on symbolic boundaries – the ways in which social actors evaluate, categorise and judge others – we argue in favour of the continued relevance of the qualitative interview. We discuss how we can move beyond merely mapping attitudinal stances and deal with inconsistencies and contradictions in interviewees' accounts when classifying others. Rather than seeing contradictions as reflecting a fundamentally unreliable and invalid method of studying people's feelings, thoughts and attitudes, we argue that they can be viewed as reflecting existing contradictions that people grapple with in everyday life. To illustrate our methodological points, we conduct a small-scale empirical analysis of bodily distinction and symbolic boundaries among a sample of physically active, upper-class men in Norway. Highlighting tensions between interviewees' honourable and visceral narratives, our analysis explores how such tensions can be teased out by using certain interviewing techniques. We argue that interviewees' contradictory accounts are connected to the level of abstraction in the phrasing of interview questions. We thus emphasise the importance of methodological reflexivity in studying symbolic boundaries.

## **Keywords**

Body, class, lifestyle, photo-elicitation, qualitative interviews, status, stratification symbolic boundaries

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## **Introduction**

According to a wide range of scholars, society is riven with contradictions: from the structures of the capitalist economy (Marx, 1976) and its cultural logic (Bell, 1976), to the social and material interests of those in middle positions in the class structure (Wright, 1985); from the conflicting demands working mothers face in terms of time, energy and ideas about how they should behave (Hays, 1998), to how people draw on different discursive toolkits to talk about love and marriage (Swidler, 2013). But how do we, as sociologists, tackle contradictions in our analyses of the social? Can our theoretical and methodological frameworks even detect contradictions, let alone make sense of them?

In this article, we will focus on a scholarly debate about the generation and interpretation of data on symbolic boundary drawing – the ways in which social actors discursively evaluate, categorise and judge others (Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

Methodologically, there has been some disagreement about using qualitative interviews to map symbolic boundaries (see e.g. Jerolmack and Khan, 2014; Lamont and Swidler, 2014; Martin, 2010; Pugh, 2013; Vaisey, 2009): Are qualitative interviews – the preferred method in this stream of research – a valid measure of boundary processes? Do accounts of boundary drawing stated in interviews reflect events in everyday-life encounters in the outside world? Can these accounts be trusted? How should we understand interviewees' tendency to give contradictory accounts of their attitudes, thoughts and actions?

We discuss in particular the interviewees' apparent tendency to present themselves in a socially desirable light when confronted with qualitative researchers' probing questions. This is typically cast as 'self-presentation' and 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) that, according to some critics, render the qualitative interview an unreliable and invalid research method incapable of shedding light on manifestations of symbolic boundaries in social life. Indeed, as argued by Jerolmack and Khan (2014), the tendency to ask interviewees attitudinal questions will inevitably lead to an 'attitudinal fallacy' while failing to acknowledge that interview data reflect how interviewees feel they *ought to* feel and act, and not, as many qualitative researchers seem to believe, how they *actually* feel and act in real-life social encounters outside the interview setting. Interviewees' expressions of ideals of tolerance and openness cannot be trusted as there is no way of knowing whether this reflects the actual absence of cultural judgement.

We will argue in favour of the continuing relevance of the qualitative interview. We discuss how we can move beyond merely mapping attitudinal stances and deal with inconsistencies and contradictions in interviewees' accounts of their classification and evaluation of others. Expanding on the recent work of Pugh (2013) that illustrates tensions between interviewees' 'honourable' and 'visceral' narratives, we discuss how such tensions can be teased out by phrasing interview questions differently. We also put forward a methodological case for the use of particular interviewing techniques, not only to tease out potentially visceral narratives, but also to investigate connections between symbolic and *social* boundaries, that is, objectified forms of social inequalities, manifested for instance in differential association and unequal access to resources, opportunities and privileges (Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

To illustrate our methodological points, we conduct a small-scale empirical analysis of bodily distinction and symbolic boundaries. We use qualitative interviews to explore symbolic boundary drawing among a sample of physically active, upper-class men from Norway. In mapping out these men's discursive classifications and evaluations of others' lifestyles, we focus on three interrelated aspects of lifestyle differentiation: physical exercise, food and body type.

### **Mapping Lifestyles and Symbolic Boundaries**

A key concern in contemporary cultural stratification research is whether and how lifestyles and tastes create and perpetuate boundaries between social classes. Debates have centred on Bourdieu's (1984) thesis that the class structure ('the social space') is reflected in systematic lifestyle differences. In recent decades, there has been a rapidly expanding body of empirical research assessing this model of class and lifestyle differentiation in other societal contexts. Although some have argued that Bourdieu's model is becoming increasingly outmoded (see e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe, 2010; Peterson and Kern, 1996), others have countered this, arguing that lifestyles remain highly classed, through the influx of new forms of distinction (see e.g. Friedman et al., 2015; Prieur and Savage, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu (1984), recent contributions to cultural class analysis have emphasised how certain cultural practices and aesthetic orientations function as resources or 'capitals' in social life (Savage et al., 2005). This has generated a great deal of research on lifestyle differentiation in terms of whether and how cultural preferences and tastes map onto society's class structure. There is thus some degree of knowledge about the social distribution of a range of lifestyle properties, for instance people's musical and literary

preferences and material consumption choices. The subjective aspect to the way people explicitly value, esteem and judge others' lifestyles has, however, not been explored to the same degree. Although several contemporary studies have employed the metaphor of capital to depict specific lifestyles (e.g. 'highbrow', 'emerging' and 'cosmopolitan' forms of cultural capital), it is often unclear whether and how practising such lifestyles produces advantages and privileges in social life, as the metaphor suggests. Inferring the symbolic 'market value' of specific practices from the mere fact that they are statistically associated with certain strata of the population is, arguably, quite imprecise and should be explored by other means.

One promising means to this end is the framework developed by Lamont (1992, 2000; Lamont and Molnar, 2002) and more recent work in its wake (see e.g. Friedman and Kuipers, 2013; Michael, 2017; Skjøtt-Larsen, 2012). This stream of research has focused on the notion of symbolic boundaries, referring to the way people demarcate 'us' from 'them' in discursively evaluating, classifying and judging others' way of life. Insofar as such boundaries crystallise into widely recognised status hierarchies and/or the formation of real or imagined symbolic communities, they can take the form of *social* boundaries, that is to say objectified forms of social inequality, manifested for instance in differential association, group formation and unequal access to resources, opportunities and privileges. Mapping symbolic boundaries, then, can be seen as a way of empirically assessing whether and how classed lifestyle differences are in fact linked to processes of social exclusion and inclusion. As symbolic boundaries are seen as discursive in nature (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168), the preferred and most productive method for studying them empirically has been qualitative interviews, aiming to map how people demarcate themselves from others. In Lamont's (1992, 2000) influential framework, the analytical strategy involves mapping how people draw on various 'repertoires of evaluation' to demarcate themselves from others. Such repertoires, she argues, vary across contexts, such as between countries, classes and rural and urban areas. Although Lamont's overarching theoretical views of class and inequality have developed since her pioneering work of the early 1990s (see e.g. Lamont, 2012; Lamont et al., 2014), the analytical approach to mapping symbolic boundaries has remained largely unchanged (see e.g. Lamont and Duvoux, 2014).

There are, however, several problems with the Lamontian approach to studying symbolic boundaries, calling for methodological development. Three points are essential to our aim here. First, there is an unfortunate reductionism inherent in regarding symbolic boundaries as manifested solely in social actors' actively expressed speech acts, explicitly separating 'us' from 'them'. As highlighted by Giddens' (1984) notion of practical

consciousness and Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus, there are other aspects to subjective perceptions of symbolic hierarchies – and the sense of one's own or others' place within them – than explicit, verbal expressions. Indeed, Bourdieu's (1984, 1991) analyses of relations of symbolic power and symbolic violence demonstrate how status hierarchies and distinctions often rest upon 'doxa', that is, the taken-for-granted linked to the 'universe of the undisputed'.

Although status hierarchies and symbolic boundaries may of course result from people's conscious, intended and explicitly expressed demarcations, arguably this is not a *necessary* precondition for the existence of status hierarchies and symbolic boundaries between social groups. A Bourdieusian case in point is the role of the state in imbuing certain lifestyles with an aura of legitimacy, thereby drawing a symbolic divide between those who have mastered these lifestyles and those who have not. Accordingly, data generated by qualitative interviews – social actors' own explicit accounts of their thoughts and actions, however 'thick' and 'rich' – cannot be seen as *exhaustive* in terms of whether and how symbolic boundaries exist between groups. Nonetheless, by defining explicitly expressed symbolic boundaries as one of several forms that symbolic boundaries can take, we may appreciate that using qualitative interviews can function as a suitable method for assessing whether and how symbolic boundaries take overt forms and how this may vary across contexts.

Second, there are some potential pitfalls linked to generating and interpreting interview data about symbolic boundaries. As argued elsewhere (Jarness and Friedman, 2017), expressing symbolic boundaries in interview settings is fundamentally bound up with the different levels of information elicited by interviews about people's beliefs, feelings and practices. Drawing on Pugh's (2013) conceptual distinctions, we can identify contradictions flowing from interviews, particularly the tension between scripted 'honourable' narratives, where interviewees frame their answers to present themselves in a socially desirable light, and more spontaneous, 'visceral' narratives that capture people's 'emotional landscape of desire, morality and expectation' and 'feelings such as disgust, passion or inchoate notions of right and wrong' (Pugh, 2013: 50–51). One of Pugh's crucial points is that researchers should acknowledge and mine analytically interviewees' contradictory accounts, as well as the 'meta-feelings' that typically accompany them. As we will demonstrate later, tensions between these levels became visible when we phrased questions differently, for instance by probing the response immediately or by returning to a topic at a later stage. In particular, we experimented with different levels of abstraction, sometimes asking about

imagined others in general, sometimes probing into specific people or milieux the interviewees mentioned.

This technique contrasts with the one in Lamont's framework. Lamont (2000: 255) notes that she did not ask interviewees to 'define themselves in relation to, or describe their feelings toward a specific group'. Instead, judgements about and boundary drawing towards various categories of people 'emerged spontaneously during the course of the interview' as the interviewees answered her more general questions. However, in our interviews, this way of teasing out symbolic boundaries tended to elicit mostly honourable accounts. However, when asked to define themselves in relation to specific others, the interviewees gave more visceral accounts. Although it would be interesting to compare how honourable accounts vary across contexts – for example, assessing whether and how some types of judgements are more legitimate, justifiable and morally acceptable than others – it should be kept in mind that this particular type of analysis brackets away crucial information at other levels.

Third, a related potential pitfall is the widespread assumption that what people *say* in interviews directly reflects what they *do* outside them in everyday-life encounters (see e.g. the critique in Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Lamont (1992: 18) argues that 'because symbolic boundaries are primarily enacted at the discursive level', attitudinal data gathered in interviews 'can be interpreted as behavioural data'. Although speech acts are a form of social practice, actions do not always accord with people's sentiments. Moreover, what people say at one point in an interview may differ from what they say at another. It is thus important to pay analytical attention not just to contradictions between what people say and do, but also to contradictions between what they say and what they say.

This methodological problem has been particularly evident in debates about the enactment of symbolic boundaries in Norwegian society, where particularly strong egalitarian sentiments prevail. A crucial question has been how to interpret the significance of honourable accounts, for instance where interviewees present themselves as 'non-judgemental', 'open' and 'accommodating' to others. Skarpenes and Saksli (2010) have demonstrated that members of the upper-middle classes explicitly *refrain* from passing judgement on others' cultural tastes and frequently depict themselves in opposition to what they regard as morally dubious cultural snobbery. They follow Lamont in arguing that such accounts also reflect the absence of symbolic boundaries between social classes; this is seen as perpetuating egalitarian sentiments deeply ingrained in Norwegian culture. Others have argued that tensions between honourable and visceral aspects of people's selves manifested in contradictory accounts in interview settings also manifest themselves in everyday life;

although people may display accommodating attitudes towards others by *downplaying* differences in social encounters, they still harbour private biases that are connected to informal social boundaries in terms of group formation and social exclusion (Gullestad, 1992; Jarness and Friedman, 2017; Ljunggren, 2017; Vassenden and Jonvik, 2018).

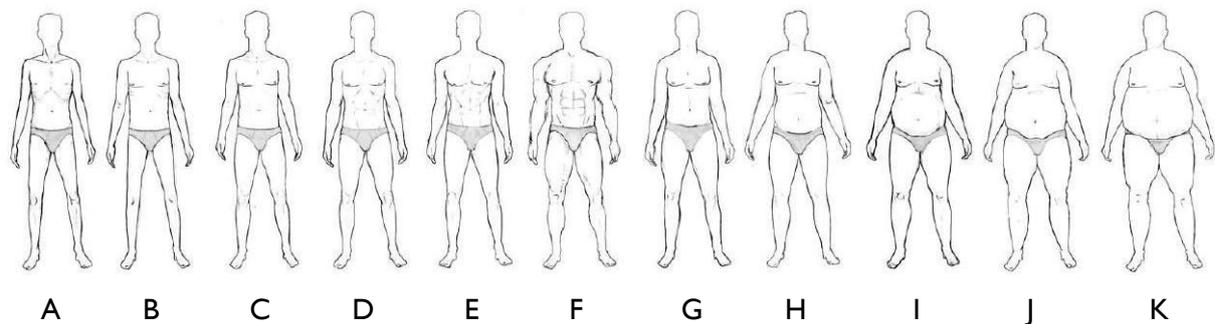
In our analysis, we investigate the tension between honourable and visceral aspects by assessing how interviewees respond to invitations to give accounts of real-life encounters outside of the interview setting, particularly those related to their assessments of job applicants at their places of work. Although data generated by this technique cannot be interpreted as reflecting actual actions outside the interview setting – they are still speech acts during the interview – it is crucial that this technique often, but not always, elicited more visceral accounts that may not have been expressed without such probing questions.

This technique can arguably help us move from merely mapping attitudinal stances – questions that mainly tap into interviewees’ normative attitudes to how they ought to think and feel – to mapping how interviewees grapple with contradictions between their actual feelings and how they feel they ought to feel. As discussed earlier, however, our methodological position recognises that the mundane drawing of symbolic boundaries may be more practical than discursive in nature; our interviews can thus be read as prompting interviewees to give discursive form to their practical sense of others. Linking this to assessments of applicants for employment – an experience familiar to all the interviewees and a specific situation that in a sense forces these people to assess and judge others to find ‘the best person for the job’ – is one way of connecting the practical and the discursive.

### **Putting the Approach to Work**

In our empirical analysis, we focus on the body and the way it is connected with positive or negative evaluations of social esteem. We map how our interviewees classify, evaluate and judge others’ bodily attributes and appearance. Although the physical aspect of distinction was central in Bourdieu’s (1984) pivotal work, most assessments of the class/lifestyle nexus have been geared towards the intellectual aspect of cultural consumption (e.g. tastes in literature, art and music). There are, however, some exceptions that address the embodied dimension of class and lifestyle, demonstrating for instance that physical activity, nutrition, health, body mass, ideals of beauty and the prevalence of eating disorders are indeed classed (see e.g. Charlesworth, 2000; Cockerham, 2007; Crossley, 2001; Darmon, 2009; Flemmen et al., 2018a; Kuipers, 2015; Shilling, 2012; Skeggs and Wood, 2012; Vandebroek, 2017).

In our analysis, we address the significance of bodily distinctions in explicit and verbal status judgements by mapping how social actors classify, evaluate and judge others' bodily attributes and appearance. We have used an interview schedule constructed to tap into three themes relating to the body: physical exercise, food and body shape. We elicit information at different levels (Pugh, 2013). In particular, we shifted between general, open-ended questions at a high level of abstraction (e.g. 'What kinds of people are you averse to?' and 'What kinds of qualities do you dislike in others?') and more specific, concrete questions, typically follow-up questions. These more specific questions also varied in their level of abstraction, ranging from probing into specific others (e.g. named colleagues or friends) to semi-specific others (e.g. the clientele at named restaurants). At the end of the interviews, we introduced a variant of a photo-elicitation exercise (Harper, 2002) by showing drawings of 11 male body types and shapes (see Figure 1). The interviewees were thus invited to discuss and evaluate them. The figures were borrowed from Vandebroec's (2017) survey-based study of social class and bodily distinctions in Belgium where he demonstrates marked differences along both dimensions of social space in terms of one's reported, current body shape and one's desired body shape.



**Figure 1.** Figures of body shapes used in interviews.

Reproduced with kind permission from Dieter Vandebroec.

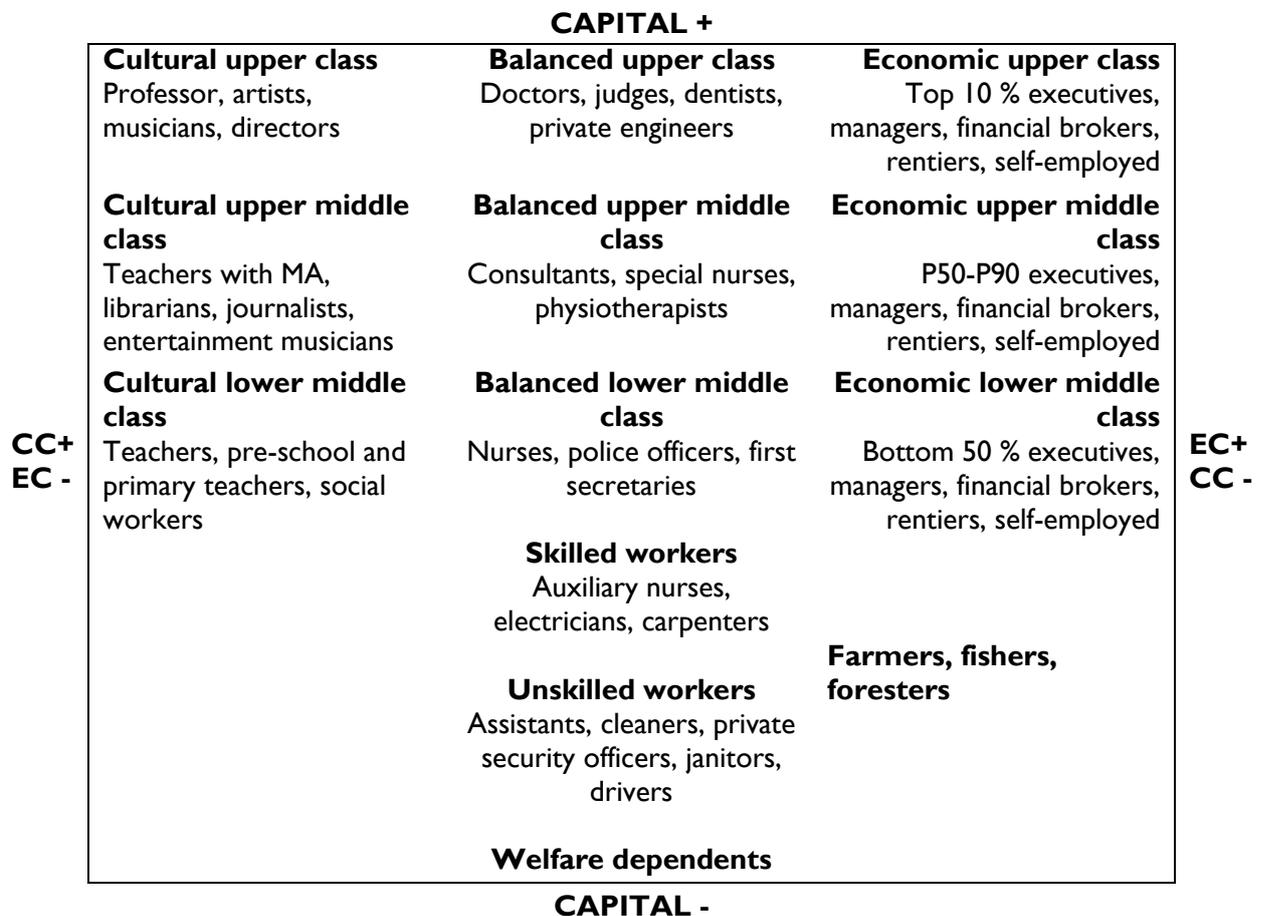
To tap into the enactment of symbolic boundaries outside of the interview setting, we asked about assessment processes during job interviews. In particular, we probed for detail about the role of topics such as health, fitness and bodily attributes. Previous research has suggested that bias due to body weight is pervasive: those regarded as overweight are negatively stereotyped and discriminated against during most parts of the employment cycle such as hiring, firing, promotion, pay and so forth (see e.g. Carr and Friedman, 2005; Roehling, 1999;

Roehling et al., 2007). Drawing inspiration from the work of Rivera (2012), we assessed whether and how lifestyle judgements are involved in upper-class men's evaluations of candidates in job interviews. Expanding on the use of drawings of body shapes, we asked the interviewees whether and how they regarded people characterised by these body shapes as (un)suitable for their places of work.

The analysis is based on 10 qualitative interviews with Norwegian upper-class men (see Table 1 for a list of interviewees). The strategic sampling procedure was based on the Oslo Register Data Class scheme (ORDC – Hansen et al., 2009), depicted in Figure 2. This class scheme draws on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the social space and differentiates between classes and class fractions along two dimensions. The first hierarchical dimension differentiates the highest from the lowest classes. In this hierarchy, class positions reflect the total volume of cultural and economic capital. A second horizontal dimension crosscuts the first one and places each class into three fractions according to the principle of capital composition: a cultural fraction (those whose capital portfolios consist primarily of cultural capital), an economic fraction (primarily economic capital) and a balanced fraction (roughly similar amounts of cultural and economic capital).

**Table 1.** Interviewees.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Age</b>
<i>Economic fraction</i>		
Andreas	Lawyer, partner	40s
Bjørnar	CEO	40s
Erik	CEO	50s
Fredrik	CEO	50s
Jonas	CEO	50s
<i>Cultural fraction</i>		
Gaute	Head of cultural organization	50s
Henrik	Professor, humanities	40s
Kristian	Professor, humanities	50s
Stig	Head of cultural organization	50s
William	Professional musician	40s



**Figure 2.** The ORDC class scheme.

We strategically recruited interviewees from the upper class (those with the highest volumes of capital in Norwegian society). To assess possible differences along the dimension of capital composition – internal differences within the upper class – we recruited interviewees from each end of the spectrum of the horizontal dimension of the class scheme. The sample consists of 10 interviewees, five from the cultural and five from the economic fraction of the upper class. To reduce complexities stemming from other background variables, we employed several additional sampling criteria: sex (men only), age (early 40s to late 50s) and geography (residing and working in Bergen, Norway). Focusing on physically active men, we recruited interviewees who adhere to the American College of Sports Medicine’s (ACSM) exercise recommendation of at least 150 minutes of moderately intense exercise per week (either 30–60 minutes of moderately intense exercise five days per week or 20–60 minutes of vigorously

intense exercise three days per week (Haskell et al., 2007). Although the sample is small, our main aim here is to discuss and demonstrate the fruitfulness of a particular methodological approach and not empirical generalisation.

We searched for potential interviewees using Google and online tax records using various occupational titles defined as the economic and cultural upper class in the ORDC scheme as search criteria. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted on average 90 minutes. They were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian. The interview quotes used in the analysis have been translated to English by the authors.

## **Findings**

### *Honourable Accounts*

We began the interviews with a series of general, open-ended questions (e.g. ‘Can you please tell us about the physical exercise you do?’ and ‘What kinds of food do you prefer?’). These questions elicited a wide variety of responses, as interviewees focused on different themes and responded with varying levels of detail. Some common features were found across the data: these questions tended to elicit a type of self-presentation that emphasised virtues of openness, tolerance and non-judgement.

A particular feature of their accounts was the notion of being ‘ordinary’ and ‘normal’, emphasising their ordinariness across all three subthemes. As regards nutrition and diet, Andreas, a runner and a lawyer, said of his family’s diet, ‘We are really quite ordinary [...] We have tacos on Fridays like everybody else, and yeah, we’re no different’. On a similar note, discussing his physical activities, Bjørnar, a triathlete and a CEO, told us that the triathlon has had a somewhat negative reputation for being an ‘extreme’ sport but he nonetheless stressed its ‘popular appeal’: ‘Everybody can swim half a mile [...] bike 12 miles [...] and run 3 miles [...] It’s a sport where you can be in different shape [...] and I think that’s great’. Regarding bodily appearance, Fredrik, a golfer and CEO, told us: ‘People should accept the body they are given [...] Everybody has a different body, and each person has their own reasons for looking the way they do. I never give it any thought.’

Some interviewees even explicitly shunned being perceived as ‘different’ or ‘snobbish’. When asked about the places he preferred eating out and the clientele there, Gaute, a martial arts practitioner and head of a cultural organisation, told us: ‘They are totally ordinary people. I don’t choose the best restaurants [...] I like that Thai restaurant at Høyden.<sup>1</sup> [...] So it’s not like I’m snobbish and only go to places like Colonialen.’<sup>2</sup> Others emphasised that they seldom gave others’ way of life much thought. As Kristian, a runner and

professor of humanities, told us: ‘Well, I don’t know if I think that much about it, or about them. Only when there’s a health problem I think there is... [...] That’s not something I’ve thought about, really.’

Responding to open-ended questions about their own and others’ lifestyles, the interviewees consistently presented a tolerant front and appeared quite open-minded and nonjudgemental. They were clearly seeking to adhere to virtues of moral correctness and presented themselves in a favourable light as holding high moral principles – they thus exhibited what Pugh (2013) has dubbed ‘honourable information’, in other words, what interviewees regard as ‘noble’ at a normative level.

On some occasions, however, we glimpsed more visceral judgemental accounts but these were quickly accompanied with reflexive statements about such judgements breaching moral standards of tolerance. For instance, in our interview with the cyclist and professor of humanities, Henrik, we probed his use of the term ‘bad diet’:

Interviewer: What would you characterise as a ‘bad diet’?

Henrik: That’s almost bound to be judgemental... And moralising [...] How should I put it? [...] Well, convenience food [...] And I try to avoid that myself [...] The taste itself is unpleasant. But I understand that it’s practical and okay for some people [...] But people should be able to eat whatever they like. I don’t have any problem with what people eat.

This is a clear example of what Pugh (2013) dubs meta-feelings – how people ‘feel about the way they feel’. According to Pugh, such meta-feelings indicate a felt distance between how interviewees *actually* feel and how they feel they *ought* to feel. In our interviews, such meta-feelings typically manifested themselves in reflexive and somewhat selfreproaching statements about being judgemental. In the foregoing example, Henrik described his understanding of a ‘bad diet’. Simultaneously, however, he pointed out that he does not judge people eating such diets. He thus acknowledged that his utterance may have sounded judgemental while trying to avoid being seen this way by highlighting his toleration of people indulging in such ‘bad’ diets.

A quotation from our interview with the lawyer and runner, Andreas, represents a more explicit example of self-distancing from being judgemental. Describing his own diet, he told us that his goal is to ‘balance calories consumed versus calories burned’. When probed on

this, an interesting response emerged; Andreas downplayed the possibly ‘condescending attitude’ of his statement, seeking instead to reinstate a tolerant front:

Interviewer: What do you think of those who don’t balance their calorie intake?

Andreas: Well, it’s... I must try not to be condescending at all [...]

Interviewer: Why are you reluctant to be perceived as condescending?

Andreas: Well, it’s not a good thing to be. So I don’t want to look down on others or their lives. It’s simply because it’s not a good attitude.

All of these instances of honourable, reflexive accounts are consistent with studies highlighting the role of strongly egalitarian sentiments in Norwegian society (Gullestad, 1992; Ljunggren, 2017; Skarpenes and Sakslind, 2010). But does this mean that the interviewees do not harbour judgemental attitudes of others’ diets, health and physical activities or do they reflect normative *ideals*?

### *Visceral Accounts*

The second set of questions was constructed to invite the interviewees to reflect on imagined others linked to a specific place or group but they were asked in a putatively neutral manner. Instead of asking somewhat abstract questions about *general others*, these questions invited interviewees to talk more concretely about specific individuals or groups, body types, clientele at named restaurants and so forth. These were typically follow-up questions about places, groups, situations, values and actions mentioned earlier. Such questions included: ‘What types of people do you reckon go to [specific places, like restaurants or gyms]?’ and ‘What are your thoughts about people going there?’ Unlike the open-ended questions, the responses to the specific questions were much more judgemental, although such judgements were often accompanied by meta-feelings and attempts to restore a tolerant front. Such questions thus elicited what Pugh (2013: 50–51) has dubbed visceral information, reflecting feelings of ‘disgust, passion or inchoate notions of right and wrong’.

Questions about specific restaurants and bars the interviewees regarded as ‘shabby’ seemed to elicit particular aversion. For instance, the triathlete and CEO, Bjørnar, had presented a tolerant front earlier in the interview, emphasising the ‘ordinariness’ of himself and his peers. He had also said that although some of his friends did not exercise regularly, they were ‘just as good people’ as those who – like him – kept their bodies in shape. However, when asked more specific questions later in the interview about others’ food and

drink preferences, he admitted that he harboured ‘a certain prejudice’ towards ‘people who eat a lot of junk food’ and that he associated people who went to ‘shabby’ bars with an ‘unhealthy’ type of person who ‘probably doesn’t exercise’ and who is ‘not very enlightened’. The practice of eating at such places was thus associated with a range of characteristics deemed rather negative, such as particular body shapes, health conditions and a lack of intelligence.

Similarly, at several points during the interview with William, a yoga practitioner and musician, he had reflexively problematised judging others’ preferences and habits, deeming it morally wrong: ‘You’re not supposed to be elitist nowadays,’ he said. However, when our conversation turned to his views of more specific others, such as people going to named restaurants, explicit symbolic boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ began to emerge:

Interviewer: How would you describe the clientele of the places you just mentioned, nsuch as Burger King, McDonald’s ?

William: Well, here come all the prejudices [laughs]. I think they’re not that culturally aware [...] and that they’re not very reflective [...] They look unhealthy. And their kids are often shockingly overweight, they drink too many fizzy drinks and eat lots of fat [...] And I find that sad. And I think their parents are incredibly mean to let it go that far [...] I’ll admit I look down on them.

Interviewer: How about the opposite, the places [...] that you like. How would you describe those people?

William: [...] They’re what I would call ‘normal people’ [laughs] [...] An okay body shape, normal clothes, and they look like they’re enjoying themselves and are talking about something interesting [laughs]. [They] are a bit more conscious of what they eat and do in their lives.

William’s definition of ‘normal people’ is interesting. Clearly, people regarded as ‘unhealthy’ are symbolically excluded from this category. This suggests that the selfperceived ‘ordinariness’ discussed earlier is not necessarily synonymous with the absence of symbolic boundaries, as what is regarded as ‘normal’ seems to be defined by the characteristics of the interviewees’ social circles. Compared to the open-ended questions that elicited almost only honourable accounts, the visceral accounts typically appeared further into the interview when the interviewees were asked to elaborate on the types of places they avoided. Although the

clientele frequenting McDonald's may in reality be a rather diverse group of people, their characteristics and what they symbolise can be quite specific in the eyes of the interviewees.

The types of boundary drawing depicted thus far are arguably directed 'downwards' in subjectively perceived status hierarchies. Indeed, as William's quotation shows, he even states that he looks 'down' on people who go to a certain type of restaurant. However, questions about specific others also elicited *horizontal* boundary drawing; other people, though seen as 'healthy' and 'fit', were perceived as deplorable in their quest for corporal distinction. Some interviewees, especially those from the cultural fraction, repeatedly drew boundaries against the tendency of 'the business community' to 'push it to extremes'. For instance, Stig, a racquet-sports player and head of a cultural organisation, had, like the other interviewees, previously emphasised his 'non-judgemental' attitude. However, when our conversation turned to the theme of competitors in specific bike races, he expressed disdain for a type of 'hysteria' linked to a 'self-centred' type of businessperson:

Interviewer: Do you have any thoughts about whether there are differences between the cultural field and the business community when it comes to types of activities and their meanings?

Stig: Yeah, definitely. I know this Birken disease quite well.<sup>3</sup> And we don't have that kind of hysteria in the cultural sector [...] We don't push it to extremes [...] Some snort cocaine, others exercise too much [...] If people are so loaded that they can buy a 150,000 kroner bike they use three times a year... I mean, that's their business. But if they push it so far it exceeds their own physical capabilities, it shows a lack of intelligence. You know, if you have children, a family, and you are so self-centred that you devote yourself to something that is actually quite insignificant... Well, be my guest.

Our probing during the photo-elicitation exercise (see Figure 1) teased out similar demarcations. A number of interviewees expressed aversion to the most 'muscular' body shape (F in Figure 1). Henrik, the humanities professor and cyclist, had previously expressed his toleration of others, saying that he did not have 'any problem' with what people ate or their bodily appearance. When probed, however, he expressed scepticism of a particular type of person he perceived as 'too concerned with their body and body shape':

You become moralising the moment you say someone should be more concerned with spiritual or intellectual pursuits instead of looks and the body. But I have to admit, that's what I think.

Similarly, in our interview with the martial-arts practitioner and head of a cultural organisation, Gaute, the photo-elicitation exercise led him to talk about a specific person he knew of who had an 'overly muscular' body shape. When probed about his views of this person's body, he said:

It looks absolutely ridiculous [...] He almost looks like a cartoon character. He's way too big, and he wears [jeans] that are far too tight [...] He lifts weights. Not to become healthier [...] but to create a certain body shape. I find that weird.

This contradicted statements by Gaute earlier in the interview: he had repeatedly emphasised his 'non-snobbish' lifestyle and attitude. This contradiction seems to be linked to the level of specificity of the questions we asked: general questions elicited a tolerant attitude, whereas explicit judgements emerged when we probed for detail about a particular person and a particular body shape. Gaute's foregoing statement also illustrates how the photo-elicitation exercise functioned as a dual mechanism of concretisation (ultimately evoking a visceral account): it connected the interview to specific body shapes and encouraged the interviewees to associate the different body types with specific others.

### *The Body at Work*

All the interviewees reported having taken part in hiring processes. We wanted to explore whether and how bodily distinctions and evaluations of lifestyles were involved in assessing jobseekers. To this end, we continued our use of the photo-elicitation exercise. The interviewees regarded the figures to the left in Figure 1 as generally positive and linked them to a wide range of admirable qualities such as 'ambitious', 'goal-oriented' and 'industrious'. Body shape was thus considered to represent visible symbols or indications of jobseekers' personal qualities. When we asked specifically whether level of physical fitness and results from competitive sports influenced his appraisal of job applicants, the runner and lawyer, Andreas, who had previously described himself as 'ordinary' and 'tolerant', said:

If you're a salesperson of some sort, it's important that you look competitive [...] For instance, if you're overweight... The subconscious would sometimes suggest that 'this guy doesn't have his life in order'. Indirectly, being fit offers a certain advantage.

On a similar note, the CEO and a triathlete, Bjørnar, told us that he Googles top jobseekers to see 'what kinds of people they are':

I would regard it as positive if I saw a physically active person [...] I think they share my values [...] Someone who works towards his or her goals [...] [Doing] exercise [...] will always be a positive characteristic to me. If I read a person's résumé and it says 'I like to hike and do ski mountaineering' and stuff like that, it would be a positive thing to me. If it said, 'I do triathlons', it would be even more positive, since I do them myself.

Bjørnar thus regarded physical activity as reflecting people's values: clearly, he saw physically active people as good at achieving their goals; this contradicted his earlier statements about his 'tolerance' of others' body shapes and eating habits. Conversely, the discussion of body shapes and health conditions associated with the other end of the spectrum elicited negative judgements. The CEO and golfer, Fredrik, who had previously claimed not to give other people's bodies 'any thought', seemed particularly concerned with people's physical health during hiring when he was asked more specific questions about this process:

Interviewer: [As regards hiring processes at your company,] do you think that others' level of physical fitness or their results from competitive sports can function as a type of resource?

Fredrik: It's not a disadvantage. It's positive if you're physically active. And it's obviously negative if for instance you smoke or don't take care of your body, in the sense that I can see that you are indifferent about it [...] And I actually ask people whether they smoke. I don't know if that's allowed. But I ask anyway [...] I ask what they do in their spare time. And I ask whether they're into sports and whether they exercise [...] We work a lot with sales, and a lot of us work with different customers, we're part of a network. And I mean, you have to instil confidence. There's a confidence aspect to it. If you don't take care of yourself, what kind of confidence do

you instil? [...] And that is why we try to get a sense of a candidate's trustworthiness, integrity, inner strength... The types of things you can never read from a diploma.

In contrast to earlier in the interview, Fredrik now seems to place great emphasis on the body, once again illustrating potentially different outcomes when talking about a topic in general as opposed to talking about it in a specific social context. Erik, a CEO and runner, expressed a similar view. When presented with the illustrations of different body shapes, he told us which types would and would not be a good match at his workplace:

Well, I'm not concerned about those on the left-hand side [of the figure] [...] If they were on the right-hand side, I would see that as a sign that they don't take care of their health. They seem less ambitious. If this was to be my first impression, I would be most comfortable with those in the middle.

Interestingly, the emphasis on jobseekers' bodies was much more prominent among the economic than the cultural fraction. Although the contradiction between visceral and honourable accounts was evident in all the interviews, the visceral judgement of bodies seemed less important in the cultural fraction's appraisal of jobseekers. For instance, the racquet-sports player and head of a cultural organisation, Stig, told us that his recent recruits had all been people who exercised and who were 'quite fit', but he also highlighted that this had not been 'decisive' in his appraisal of them:

I don't think it was decisive. But of course, if a candidate obviously didn't care about his or her physical shape, I might have been unsure whether there were other things the candidate lacked as well. For example, work ethics, morals in the workplace, discipline and so forth [...] I would ask myself those questions but I don't think it would be decisive.

Despite drawing a connection between (a lack of) physical fitness and (a lack of) moral character, Stig insisted that other aspects had been decisive in his assessments. In a similar account, the humanities professor and runner, Kristian, claimed that although people's bodies would not determine hiring outcomes, certain body shapes 'would raise some questions'. When presented with the figures, he told us: 'For example, an extremely thin person [points to body shape A], is there something wrong here? [...] Is this person in a healthy balance?'

Nonetheless, he emphasised that formal qualifications and professional skills should be decisive, not whether candidates were physically fit; accordingly, he did not ask jobseekers about their health or physical activities.

### **Concluding Discussion**

This analysis has shown that mapping symbolic boundaries is no simple task, nor is ‘tapping into’ them by turning on a recording device and asking people what kinds of people and practices they do not like and why. We thus highlight the importance of methodological reflexivity in the study of symbolic boundaries in terms of sampling strategies, the construction of interview schedules and the interpretation and analysis of interview data. Our analysis highlights people’s tendency to give contradictory accounts in interviews. However, rather than seeing this as reflecting a fundamentally unreliable and invalid measure of people’s feelings, thoughts and attitudes, and thus as a cue to abandon this method (see e.g. Jerolmack and Khan, 2014; Martin, 2010; Vaisey, 2009), we argue that such contradictions are not necessarily artefacts of the method but can instead be interpreted as reflecting existing contradictions that people grapple with in everyday life. Our analysis thus joins those of a rather diverse group of authors emphasising the contradictory nature of social life (e.g. Bell, 1976; Giddens, 1984; Hays, 1998; Swidler, 2013; Wright, 1985).

Methodologically, we argue that contradictory accounts given in interviews represent different levels of information that this method elicits about interviewees and, crucially, that there is in fact a logic behind such contradictions. Expanding on the points put forward by Pugh (2013), our analysis suggests that tensions between honourable and visceral narratives are linked to the phrasing of questions in interviews. General and open questions at a high level of abstraction elicited almost exclusively honourable accounts of openness and tolerance. More specific and concrete questions – particularly those related to the photo-elicitation exercise, asking the interviewees to discuss and evaluate specific body shapes – tended to elicit more, although not only, visceral accounts of judgement of and aversion to others.

However, our argument is not that the stimulus from the first types of questions always elicits certain responses which are qualitatively different from the responses to stimulus from the second type; rather, we would suggest that shedding light on contradictions between how people feel and how they feel they ought to feel is rendered possible by introducing questions with different levels of abstraction and specificity. We thus argue that asking questions only at a high level of abstraction – for instance, by avoiding asking

interviewees to define themselves in relation to specific others (cf. Lamont, 2000: 255) – substantially limits such possibilities in unfortunate ways. Our approach to eliciting tensions between what people feel and how they feel they ought to feel is, we believe, particularly fruitful when endeavouring to understand the complex and often subtle ways symbolic boundary processes manifest themselves in social life.

However, as interviews will arguably always constitute ‘frontstage’ settings, we would not argue that our approach allows direct access to ‘backstage’ performances of people’s selves (Goffman, 1959). Nonetheless, we do think that our interviewing techniques encouraged our interviewees to share ‘face-threatening’ accounts of visceral judgement that would not have emerged if only general, open questions at a high level of abstraction had been asked. Nor would we argue that the visceral accounts necessarily represent a ‘truer’ or more ‘honest’ version of the interviewees. Rather, we highlight the possibility that people may bear several different selves, so to speak, and that these may be more or less prominent across different interactional contexts.

Indeed, a reflexive capacity to switch between different modes of self-presentation may in itself be a valuable asset in legitimizing and justifying one’s position atop social hierarchies. As argued by Jackman (1994), dominant groups have much to lose by distancing themselves too clearly from dominated groups, as the legitimacy of the power relation depends partly on the latter having a positive impression of the former. In other words, they need to include the dominated in a relationship that allows for their own status to be recognized bottom-up. People located atop social hierarchies – particularly those who are public figures and under the critical scrutiny of the public eye – are arguably much more prone to experiencing the risk of being seen as ‘snobbish’ and ‘elitist’. A more careful and strategic kind of impression management is thus required. In our case, openly using bodily features as criteria for evaluating job applicants – in effect thus excluding those regarded as ‘overweight’ and ‘unhealthy’ – is clearly seen as morally dubious. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees admitted, within the context of an anonymous interview, that such criteria are part of the process. However, to keep the process of hiring legitimate and justifiable to outsiders, they must find a way to keep such judgements hidden.

Honourable accounts stated in interviews are thus not necessarily just a morally correct facade masking ‘truer’ information at the visceral level. Arguably, such accounts are in themselves valuable to tap into normativities connected to how people navigate social life, in particular encounters with others perceived as different from themselves and the real or imagined group to which they belong. Thus, we emphasise the importance of research designs

that render possible assessments of contradictory accounts and the ways in which these accounts may be connected in intelligible ways. Instead of constituting a ‘problem’ inherent to the method, contradictions revealed in qualitative interviews can be seen as a point of entry to mine analytically existing contradictions that people grapple with.

Our analysis also brings up several crucial empirical questions that, while beyond the limits of our small-scale study, point to fruitful avenues for future research. First, is the capacity to switch reflexively between different modes of self-presentation distributed unequally in the class structure? In line with Jackman’s thesis discussed earlier, we have demonstrated in previous work that this may be the case (Jarness and Flemmen, 2017; Jarness and Friedman, 2017): contradictions between visceral and honourable narratives, followed by self-reflexive accounts, are much more salient among interviewees located in the upper regions of the class structure than in the lower ones. Conversely, judgements of the lifestyles of those ‘lower down’ the class structure are more blatant and unambiguous among interviewees from the lower regions. Thus, class might be involved in the structuring of the way in which judgements are explicitly expressed or reflexively withheld.

Second, is talking about certain aspects of lifestyle more likely to result in contradictory accounts of symbolic boundary drawing than other aspects? As matters related to the body are arguably seen as more ‘private’ and ‘intimate’ than many other aspects of people’s lifestyles, there is reason to suspect that our chosen theme is particularly likely to elicit honourable accounts of respect and tolerance, as well as self-reflexive comments, whenever judgements bubble forth. Conversely, insofar as there exists a perceived link between moral character (or a lack of it) and certain body shapes, judgements of others’ bodily attributes may also contribute to loading these judgements with *more* affect than, say, people’s tastes for literature and theatre. In other words, both the honourable and the visceral sides of the contradiction may be particularly strong in classifying bodies. How this plays out differently across various domains of lifestyle remains an open question worthy of exploration.

Finally, does the symbolic ‘market value’ of various body shapes differ between social fields? Our analysis suggests that this question may be worth pursuing. Although the interviewees from the cultural and economic fractions are quite similar in some respects (e.g. in their judgement of ‘unhealthy’ body shapes), it seems such judgements are considerably more consequential among the latter during hiring processes. Indeed, as the requirements for qualifications linked to positions in certain cultural fields are arguably more formalised (academia being a case in point), this leaves less space for judgements of personal

characteristics ‘that one cannot read from a diploma’, as one of our interviewees from the economic fraction put it. Insofar as this difference reflects a broader pattern beyond our sample – and more systematic assessments of this are clearly called for – this underscores a crucial point with regard to the function of the body within different sectors of the labour market, particularly between those engaged in fields of economic or cultural production. It also resonates well with previous research highlighting the significance of the capital-composition dimension of the social space in the structuring of lifestyles (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Flemmen et al., 2018b; Prieur et al., 2008). In particular, it lends credence to Vandebroeck’s (2017: 186ff.) analysis of two different definitions of the legitimate body within the upper class: the askesis of the cultural fraction and the aesthesis of the economic fraction. Whereas the former implies a cultivated celebration of a ‘natural’ orientation to the body and a wider ethic of sobriety and elective austerity, the latter refers to a refined indulgence, or an orientation to the body that includes treating it as ‘a precious object with specific needs that deserve (and demand) constant care and attention’ and investing in the ‘perceptible qualities [...] making the body into the visible bearer of material value’ (Vandebroeck, 2017: 189).

This also underscores a crucial methodological point in using qualitative interviews to map symbolic boundaries: in order to assess properly possible differences between fields and the opposition between economic and cultural capital, a careful and systematic sampling strategy must be employed. Using Bourdieu’s model of the social space seems a powerful means to this end.

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### **Notes**

1. A geographical area in Bergen.
2. A high-end restaurant in Bergen.
3. Birken is a long-distance mountain-bike race held annually in Norway.

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