

URBAN GEOGRAPHY SPECIAL ISSUE: Making and Mapping Britain's 'New Ordinary Elite'

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ABSTRACT

There has been a sharp intensification in public and academic interest in differing conceptions of an urban 'elite' in recent times. However, the concept of social class in the construction and reproduction of urban elites has remained either an implied or unexplored concern. The purpose of this paper is to explore the empirical manifestations and methodological issues surrounding the definition of an elite which arose from the BBC's *Great British Class Survey* experiment leading to Savage et al.'s (2013) 'New model of social class' and Cunningham and Savage's (2015) identification of the *Elite* as a profoundly urban phenomenon with distinctive patterns of spatial concentration. However, this paper builds on our commonplace understanding of an elite as economically distinct by focussing on their social resources and patterns of cultural consumption, based upon a Bourdieusian (1984) 'capitals' approach to social class, and highlighting dimensions of this cadre which have hitherto received scant attention in recent public and academic debate.

KEYWORDS

Elites, spatial analysis, capitals, Bourdieu, Great British Class Survey, inequality

INTRODUCTION

In the first years of the twenty-first century there has been both growing interest and disquiet over the increasing inequalities which characterise so many global and national economies. This has led to a burgeoning of research in the area and the effects of the concentration of wealth as an inherent characteristic of capitalism (Piketty, 2014) or on the negative social consequences of such inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). What has been revealing about much of this work has been the absence or elision of social class as a means for interpreting and understanding the manifestation, reproduction and intensification of these processes of social, economic and spatial inequality. This paper acts as part of the ongoing process of reinstating and spatializing social class as essential to our understanding of contemporary patterns of inequality (Parker et al., 2007). For Parker and his colleagues, as for others (Savage et al., 2005; Butler with Robson, 2003; Butler & Lees, 2006; Slater, 2009), we must make residential structures of social class a core component of our analyses. They are not simply subsidiary to or merely reflective of class position, they are also generative in the construction of classed identities. Furthermore, for Parker et al. (2007) the need to spatialize class gains urgency from the challenges and opportunities posed by geodemographics and the rise of what

they term 'commercial sociology' being conducted in the private sector but having an increasing impact upon the academic analysis of urban inequality (Webber, 2007; Atkinson, 2015; Webber & Burrows, 2015; Atkinson et al., 2017). Due in part to reasons of academic hubris and self interest, such developments have not, argue Savage and Burrows (2007) been awarded the serious attention they deserve, posing a challenge of existential proportions to the social sciences and the discipline of sociology in particular. It is against this intellectual backdrop which the BBC's *Great British Class Survey* (GBCS) experiment and its particular conception of the *Elite* can be seen to have emerged. However, it is very important to avoid the sort of 'presentist' mentality which critics such as Robert Dodgshon (2008) have argued has infected contemporary geographical discourse. The notion of the 'spatialisation of class' can clearly be traced back to the 1960s and the pioneering work of scholars such as Ray Pahl, Rex & Moore (1967) at the class/race interface and a specific concern with the role of housing type in the residualisation or reinforcement of class position at the bottom of the social spectrum, something that has remained a concern of social scientists working across disciplinary boundaries (Forrest & Murie, 1983; Power & Tunstall, 1995; Burrows, 1999; Brown & Cunningham, 2016; Savage 2010).

The specific purpose of this paper is to explore some of the methodological issues and implications of an attempt to reassert the centrality of social class in our understanding of social inequality through the development of a new social class schema and the articulation of a new and rather more extensive conceptualisation of an 'elite' than is generally recognised amongst geographers, sociologists and the public at large. According to the GBCS 'new class model' developed by Savage et al. (2013), the *Elite* comprise seven percent of the population and is therefore a significant component of society rather than a tiny cadre of super-rich individuals who have provided the focus for other researcher in the field of urban elites (Atkinson, 2015; Beaverstock et al., 2004; Butler & Lees, 2006; Webber & Burrows, 2015). Indeed, it has been defined by Savage et al. (2015) as a 'new, ordinary' *Elite*. The empirical data for the construction of this new *Elite* came from the BBC's GBCS experiment, a project which has opened up a new debate on the contemporary meaning of social class and its relationship to inequality which has extended well beyond the usual academic discourse (Savage et al, 2013; 2015). The theoretical basis for the construction of this project was heavily informed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and specifically his concept of social class as based upon one's stocks of social, economic and cultural capital (1984). Thus, this configuration shifts the focus solely from economic or occupational position as the basis for social class position and it is the focus on cultural capital, which builds upon a established and growing school of 'cultural class analysis' (Atkinson, 2010) which has been perhaps the most contentious element. Thus, this re-imagining of social class has been strongly contested on both methodological and substantive lines (Dorling, 2013; Mills, 2014; 2015; Savage et al, 2014; Skeggs, 2015), criticisms which this paper will engage with. However, another purpose of this paper is to focus on the spatial and temporal rhythms of participation in the survey as an instrument for socio-spatial research and the light this may shed on a particular conception of an urban elite as a stratified and highly self-propagating entity. Contrary to the recent work of Atkinson (2015) on an albeit more exclusive definition of an urban elite, this more accessible vision sees this group as egregiously revealing of their social status and habits. However, whilst displaying distinctive patterns of engagement and spatial settlement, this *Elite* is far from amorphous, displaying differential stocks of economic, cultural and social capital across space. The paper will also address this *Elite* class in relation terms by drawing attention to their economic

resources in contrast to the wider populations of Britain's largest urban centres drawing on representative data.

Context: Inequality, the 'Death' of Social Class and the Genesis of the *Elite*

It might be supposed that the concept of social class would be central to an understanding of inequality, the broader issue within which any consideration or conceptualisation of elites must be framed. However, since the 1980s social class had fallen out of favour with academics, politicians and the public at large. The reasons for this are complex. From the early 1980s, the 'cultural turn' within the social sciences was leading academics away from over-arching structuralist explanations for inequality towards a firmer consideration of the place of the individual and the way in the experience of class was mediated through different constituent identities such as race, gender and sexuality. Ray and Sayer (1999, pp.13-14) summarise this intellectual shift neatly as the transition 'from economy to culture' which accrued from the 'realization that most non-class social divisions could not be explained on the model of class'. In this way, Ray and Sayer were articulating part of a broader ontological concern on the part of social scientists about the difference between ascriptive and subjective social and cultural differences. These were intellectual developments not solely limited to the British context; Jan Pakulski (1993), along with Malcolm Waters (1996) pointed to transnational processes of de-industrialisation, the fragmentation of identities and appropriated Benedict Anderson's (1991) theorisation of nationalism for a critique of the cultural turn in the emergence of new 'imagined communities'. In the US, David Grusky and Kim Weeden's empirical analyses (2005) led them to argue that the 'big classes' employed by sociologists had little meaning in the real world, and argued instead for an analysis of 'micro-classes', effectively much smaller occupational groups, which they argued constituted much stronger and more realistic components of a class structure. So whilst still utilising occupation as the basis of understanding social structure, the evidence Weeden and Grusky (2012) present suggests that these micro-classes are more powerful than the big classes of established sociology in predicting a range of social, cultural and attitudinal outcomes.

In the UK, the discipline of sociology was riven by increasing acrimonious internal disagreement over the role and relevance of social class, with Ray Pahl arguing in 1989 (p.710) that 'class as a concept was ceasing to do any useful work for sociology'. Such a claim came against an economic setting of industrial decline, rapid financialisation of the economy and a breakdown in traditional class identities. The rampant inequalities now firmly associated with the UK and many other developed economies can be directly associated with the de-regulation of the financial services sector in the 1980s (Tanndal & Waldenström, 2016). In the UK context we can add to that mix the poisonous politics of class warfare evident in the Thatcher government's handling of the Miners' Strike of 1984-85 and the aggressive counterexpropriation of public sector housing through the 'right to buy' scheme and we can start to see the political mechanisms by which social class had become politically neutered by the 1990s. So politically moribund was social class as a concept that consecutive opposing Conservative and Labour Prime Ministers could agree that it was either dead or dying. For the Conservative John Major such a claim was presented merely in aspirational terms, striving in 1990, as he put it, for 'a classless society' (Turner, 2013, pp.1-2) His Labour successor Tony Blair was somewhat more robust, proclaiming just seven years later that 'the class war is over' (BBC, 1999). At the start of the new millennium and against the rise of the internet and consumer culture, the eclipse if not the

actual death of class, appeared confirmed. However, it is interesting to note that even in the thinking of Ulrich Beck (2002, p.203) this death was incomplete as he argued that class had become a 'zombie category', 'dead but still alive'. So class was still there, latent, but had been buried alive by a pervasive culture of individualism and consumption. These two themes remain remarkably prescient as we turn to what might be considered the resurrection of social class.

The Great British Class Survey: A Bourdieusian Approach to Elites

It was against this backdrop that in 2010 the BBC proposed a major new survey seeking to shed light on contemporary understandings of the role and relevance of social class in the UK in the early twenty-first century. The pitch to the public neatly summarised the significance of this:

It's said that the British are obsessed with class, but does the traditional hierarchy of 'working', 'middle' and 'upper' class really exist anymore? And does social class even matter in 21st century Britain? (BBC, 2016).

The BBC Science division had approached the sociologists Mike Savage and Fiona Devine to devise a web survey aimed at addressing these questions, based upon the view of social class propounded by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu argued that social class was more than a matter of economic circumstances or status but rather was the aggregate effect of our differential holdings of various 'capitals', of which the economic was just one dimension, to be considered alongside our stocks of 'cultural' and 'social' capital. Cultural capital is defined as our activities, preferences and interests and Bourdieu argued that rather than being subsidiary to our understanding of how social class works, it should in fact be central to it. He argued that our engagement with particular forms of 'legitimate culture' such as going to museums or the theatre not only enhance our social standing, they also have direct benefits in terms of facilitating a successful middle class negotiation of the school system because of the ways in which such established forms of culture are deeply embedded in educational curricula, ways in which more popular forms of cultural engagement simply are not (Savage et al., 2015, p.95). In *Distinction* Bourdieu's research found that the French elite of the 1960s were set apart from the population not simply by their economic status but by their ability to appreciate at an abstract level, these forms of culture, and by extension to set themselves apart from the forms of culture enjoyed by the masses, as popular and vulgar (Savage et al., 2015, p.96). For these reasons, the survey dedicated a considerable amount of space to the identification of cultural capital resources; of roughly 250 direct variables available to the research team in the original dataset, 88 of these related to issues of cultural taste and participation. Respondents were asked about their pastimes, tastes in food and music, as well as about the sorts of holidays that they took. In addition to their preferences for each of these various types of activity, they were asked to identify the frequency with which they undertook them, providing considerable data granularity.

From an intellectual standpoint, it is also clear why such a focus was central to an understanding of formation and reproduction of a contemporary elite. A growing evidence base is beginning to emerge around the power of cultural capital in internally-stratifying the elite. Recent research using the *GBCS* has identified a 'class ceiling' in operation in the UK's elite occupations in which cultural capital is pivotal (Friedman, Laurison & Miles, 2015), whilst work by Laurison &

Friedman (2016) on the representative Labour Force Survey has found that over 50% of the class pay gap in higher occupations lie unexplained by the available indicators contained therein and that future research needs to focus on the role of the intergenerational transmission of wealth alongside the analysis of social networks and cultural capital. This has been echoed by the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission (CPSMC, 2014; 2015a). Their 2014 report found that a small number of prestigious universities dominated access to the most elite roles in British politics, the media and legal sectors, while more recently (SMCPC, 2015b) they have identified that a 'glass floor' operates to exclude bright working class applicants based on attributes which map precisely onto Bourdieusian notions of social and cultural capital.

Turning then to social capital this also received extensive attention in the survey mechanism for the light it could shed upon the UK's class divides and the upper strata of British society in particular. This was analysed by asking respondents to the survey to identify from a list of 37 different occupational groups ranging from chief executives to call centre workers, those whom they knew socially from amongst their friends, family and acquaintances. Each of these occupations was then given a score based upon the Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification Scale (CAMSIS), which ranked them according to the level of social interactions between different occupations and the social structures which underpinned these. This approach to the quantitative analysis of social capital is commonly known in the social sciences as a 'Lin position generator' following the highly-influential work of Nan Lin (2001) in this field. The resulting data from the *GBCS* position generator could be used and interpreted in different ways to analyse the breadth, size or status of an individual's social networks. For the purposes of analysing the social dynamics behind class structure and the elite in particular, the aggregate status of each respondent's social networks has been the most useful variable derived this area of the dataset. Again, this has solid theoretical underpinnings in terms of sociological theory, drawing upon Mark Granovetter's (1973) seminal work in a Boston suburb on the 'strength of weak ties' between individuals in learning of job opportunities and leveraging economic advantage more generally. In a contemporary and more specifically elite context, such findings still clearly echo in our contemporary concerns around the power of elites to sustain and consolidate their social positions through access to professional networks and specifically, unpaid internships for their offspring. Thus, the SMCPC report,

Despite increasing recognition that internships should be advertised openly and fairly paid, many are still secured through informal connections and remain unpaid...We are a long way from access to internships being based on what, not who, you know (2015b, pp.105 & 107).

In contrast to the abundance of data available through the survey to address cultural and social capital, the questions addressing the final component, economic capital, were far more constricted. Three questions were asked here: on household income, savings and property value. Clearly, despite the Bourdieusian focus on social and cultural capitals a measure of economic resources forms a key component in our understanding of inequalities and how classes, and elites in particular, are constituted. It is economic inequalities and specifically the inter-generational transfer of wealth and the higher long-run returns on capital which Piketty (2014) identifies has led to the increasing residualisation over time of economic resources within a progressively smaller proportion of the population. Nonetheless, we must also recognise that it is not merely economic resources alone which are heritable and therefore whilst it is important to recognise the significance of the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage, we also need to be clear that a Bourdieusian

approach allows for us also to recognise how 'soft' assets in the forms of social and cultural capital are also passed between generations, and hence inform the *GBCS* approach to social class. Bourdieu was very clear on this: in his essay on 'The Forms of Capital' (1986) he refers repeatedly to the inherited character of social capital, whilst in his work on education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) he again made intergenerational transmission central to his argument. More generally, the reproduction and inheritance of such soft assets is central to his key concept of *habitus* (1977) in which individuals develop and embody particular worldviews, tendencies and dispositions through everyday practices and interactions. The *GBCS Elite* is therefore a much more theoretically complex formulation.

The primacy of space and specifically, property, is becoming ever more prominent in analyses of elites. In part this could be seen as a sort of superficial manifestation of our popular obsessions with bling and celebrity lives, but at a deeper, more conceptual level, we can view this as a very precise case of 'the spatialisation of class'. For Burrows (2013) this is both an empirical observation and a methodological exhortation; the accumulation of property by the super-rich in particular parts of London is an exercise in both economic and cultural capital accumulation, it is also a development upon which we need to focus intellectual energy.

For the middle reaches of the class structure, the need to place space much more centrally in our understanding of class identities receives expression in the notion of 'elective belonging', elaborated by Savage et al. (2005: p.29):

Belonging is not to a fixed community, with the notion of closed boundaries, but it is more fluid, seeing places as sites for performing identities. Individuals attach their own biography to their 'chosen' residential locations so that they tell stories that indicate how their arrival and subsequent settlement is appropriate to their sense of themselves.

Whilst at the other end of the class spectrum the idea of choice is absent from the class-space relationship due to the lack of economic capital that these individuals hold. In this context we have increasingly seen class stigma being expressed within spatial terms of reference and notably in the demonization of social housing estates and those that inhabit them. The increasing iniquity and unsustainability of our housing market have driven this spatialisation of social class, with Jones (2011, p.35) arguing that;

over two thirds of those living in social housing belong to the poorest two-fifths of the population, Nearly half of social housing is located in the poorest fifth of neighbourhoods. things have certainly changed compared to thirty years ago, when a staggering 20 percent of the richest tenth of the population lived in social housing.

In this way, we therefore need to understand the crucial role that property plays in our understanding of the elite not simply in terms of a cadre perpetually pulling away from the rest of the population, true as this may be. Rather, we need to understand the literal and metaphorical place of the elite as part of a wider process of polarisation in housing, which is acting to radically distend and aggravate class distinctions in the UK and beyond.

The Great British Class Survey *Elite*: Space and Capitals

Due in no small part to an extensive publicity campaign, the *GBCS* elicited an enormous and quite remarkable level of response from the general public, with 177,383 responses over the period between the survey's launch in January 2011 and the publication of the research paper in *Sociology* announcing the initial findings from the data (Savage et al., 2013). Of those responses, nearly 103,000 or 58% occurred in the week immediately following the survey's launch on primetime television and 147,000 or 83% occurred in the month following. The survey remained open until June 2013, during which period the overall sample approximately doubled with a further 160,000 in the 2nd wave, bring the overall sample up to around 320,000.

The 1st wave data were then analysed and a 'new model of social class' was proposed based upon variables extracted from the data and designed to operationalise the Bourdieusian capitals discussed above. The new model, derived from latent class analysis, identified a new class structure in the UK in which this *GBCS Elite* constituted approximately seven percent of the population. Both the methodology and the model are discussed in detail in the 2013 research paper (Savage et al., 2013) and indeed have been extensively discussed elsewhere within and beyond academia. The focus in this paper is on the methodological lessons and implications of this extraordinary experiment.

[Figure 1: The spatial distribution of the GBCS Elite](#)

Uniquely, for a survey of this scope, the categorical granularity is matched by considerable spatial detail. The remarkable response rate meant that it was possible to map this new Bourdieusian *Elite* at a high spatial resolution. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the *GBCS Elite* at local authority level for Great Britain and at the level of the county and Belfast Metropolitan Area for Northern Ireland using an 'observed versus expected' methodology. This works by highlighting the difference from a baseline of completely even distribution across every spatial unit, relative to the participation level of each unit in the survey itself. Figure 1 shows that the *Elite* are disproportionately concentrated within London and the 'home counties' of South East England, with, in general terms, a clear trend towards decline in numbers as distance from the capital increases. At face value these reflect long-established and historic patterns of class settlement in the UK (Dorling, 2004; Howell, 2004) but this geography also clearly resonates with contemporary political debates around the growing spatial and sectoral divides in the UK economy, with a growing concentration of wealth in and around London based primarily on the financial services sector, set against a progressive decline in the old manufacturing heartlands of the north. Indeed, such is the recognition of the seriousness of these profound imbalances in the UK's social and economic structure that even the Conservative government have acknowledged they must be addressed through their 'Northern Powerhouse' initiative (Osbourne, 2014). It is also important to note that the maps do also shed light on some of the regional nuances which reflect the UK's class and economic landscape. For example, the Isle of Thanet in north-eastern Kent, and the Thames Estuary region more generally, which lies immediately to the east of London, clearly show up as areas of under-representation for the *Elite*, despite their close proximity to the capital. The remarkable disparities in the social, economic and physical environments of the districts lying immediately to the east and west of the capital are well described in Iain Sinclair's (2002) psychogeographical circuit of the M25 ring motorway, *London Orbital*. Whilst in the north of England, we see concentrations of the *Elite* in some districts of North Yorkshire and in North Cheshire. Both areas lie in close and commutable proximity to major cities – Leeds and Manchester respectively, and

both have come to be known as ‘golden triangles’ for the concentrations of wealthy individuals that lie within the vertices of these (Savage et al., 2015, p.279).

Yet, despite the detail available from all of these data, it is important to make clear that the *GBCS* was not a representative sample and is heavily skewed towards a more educationally and financially advantaged section of the population. Nor has it captured equally across this population; the main *GBCS* dataset and the spatial distribution of the *Elite* we witness will be, in part, an artefact of the willingness of individual respondents to engage with a survey on social class, and in term, whatever hidden determinants that decision to participate is conditional on. This issue has been clearly acknowledged from the outset (Savage et al., 2013). This skew was also evident in the differential patterns of participation by location. The table in Figure 2 shows the top and bottom twenty districts by participation in the survey relative to their underlying population bases. Nonetheless and skew notwithstanding, there are clear and sensible patterns to be discerned here. The areas witnessing the lowest levels of participation are predominantly in the ex-industrial regions of Wales, Northern England and Scotland’s Central Belt, with all of Northern Ireland’s six counties appearing also. The last of these can be explained by the interaction of issues of ethnicity and class in Northern Ireland, where the questionnaire’s moniker of ‘Great *British* Class Survey’ almost certainly acted to suppress nationalist involvement in a polity where issues of national identity have historically triumphed over those of class (Cunningham & Gregory, 2014; Gregory et al., 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, seventeen of the twenty most over-represented areas are all in the South East of England, with eleven being London boroughs.

[Figure 2: Areas of highest and lowest response to the GBCS across the UK](#)

Despite these imbalances, as Savage (2015) notes, in the case of studying elite groups, the particular nature of the sample skew presents a distinct advantage. Moreover, and in a specifically geographical context, Cunningham and Savage (2015) have found that the *GBCS Elite* closely resembles established and validated notions of a social elite in the form of the National Statistic’s Socio-economic Classification’s (NS-SeC) Class I, comprised of higher managers and professionals, representing about 12% of the UK population at the last census. This is also notwithstanding the fact that these alternate conceptions of an elite have been based on radically different conceptual and methodological approaches. What the skew clearly shows is that there was a particularly strong appetite for the survey in more affluent areas, and specifically in those parts of the UK where the *Elite* could be found in the greatest numbers. This is further borne out in Figure 3, which is a scatterplot showing the relationship between participation in the survey and the proportion of the sample within each area that were classified as belonging to the *Elite*. The outliers of extreme levels of both participation in the survey and *Elite* composition here are the City of London, Oxford, Cambridge, York and Islington. With these *Elite* geographies we need to consider what is captured by the *GBCS* mechanism. It is not simply a geography of occupation, affluence or accumulation which we might usually associate with a social elite, but something altogether more complex, nuanced and revealing: a multi-dimensional geography of cultural tastes, social ties allied to economic power. The very strength of this survey lies in precisely the fact that it *is* self-selecting. We are excavating here the geographies of active identification and ‘elective belonging’ (Savage et al., 2005). The sample size means that we can attend to these geographies in remarkable detail. Figure 4 demonstrates this with reference to some of the UK’s major cities. Figure 4(a) shows the spatial distribution of the *Elite* in London. The areas that show the greatest concentrations are in places such as Hampstead, Crouch

End, Islington, Hackney, extending into the central London neighbourhoods of Bloomsbury and Regent's Park, with pockets in the Docklands and Shoreditch. In South London, areas such as Brixton and Clapham come to the fore. Yet areas of long-held affluence are relatively under-represented in this picture: places such as Chelsea and Mayfair. Turning to Manchester (Figure 4(b)), the areas which emerge are the city centre and key middle-class neighbourhoods to the south of it – Chorlton-Cum-Hardy, Withington and Didsbury.

[Figure 3: Correlation between Elite composition and participation in the GBCS by spatial unit](#)

[Figure 4: Geographies of the a\) London and b\) Manchester Elite](#)

There is a clear pattern in these geographies which points firmly towards the power of particular high-end urban 'villages'. In London, these villages take prominence over some a few better-known and perhaps more obvious areas of affluence. They reflect a geography of gentrification, or more accurately, 'super-gentrification' in urban space (Butler & Lees, 2006). We might then read that as a shortcoming of the utility and accuracy of this *Elite* as a grouping, but this is to neglect the particular way in which it is formulated. The *GBCS Elite* is not simply a financial cadre but represents the aggregate of a complex and complementary stock of social, cultural and economic resources. The sorts of neighbourhoods which the class survey data point to are those where these three forms of capital have most accumulated. They are spaces where very high economic capital are to be found within networks of culturally engaged and highly self-aware, self-confident, high status social networks. In contrast, those areas of London which we might traditionally conceive of as 'elite' such as Mayfair and Holland Park, are increasingly characterised, yes, by extreme – indeed stratospheric levels of wealth, but as Atkinson (2015) identifies, also by a lack of social interaction and cultural engagement. The turning of these areas into arenas of absentee super-rich property speculation is leading to new and fascinating forms of social desertification and unrest between the relentless waves of global mineral wealth and the beleaguered 'old' money populations (Webber & Burrows, 2015). It is important to note then, that those locales of 'new' and 'old' money elites do not appear with the levels of intensity which we might otherwise expect. Perhaps these are groups to whom seemingly parochial and arcane debates on social class appear either irrelevant, or following Evelyn Waugh's chastisement of Nancy Mitford over the 'u'/'non-u' controversy of the 1950s, still crass and distasteful (Savage et al, 2015).

[Figure 5: Standard scores for mean household income, mean social capital score and mean high cultural capital score by 2.5 kilometre bandwidth radiating from the Bank of England](#)

Yet, if we think in a little more depth about how urban space cleaves so effectively our differing conceptions of elites, it is also possible to use the data to reflect on how our own *GBCS Elite* is also very effectively stratified across the city. Figure 5 demonstrates this powerfully using some key indicators. The analysis has broken Greater London down into 2.5 kilometre wide bands radiating out from the Bank of England located right in the heart of London's financial district. The mean standard scores for three key indicators of each of the three forms of capital has then been generated for all of the *Elite* residents within each bandwidth. This shows some striking patterns. For the *Elite* in London there is a clear and consistent spatial hierarchy across all forms of capital. In terms of all three indicators, there is a clear distance decay effect for members of the *Elite* as proximity to the inner city declines. Higher incomes, higher status social networks higher cultural capital are clearly associated with central London. The analysis underlines the ways in which very different capitals are reinforced

and reflected by one other across space, representing an evident geography of 'elite distinction' (Daloz, 2009).

[Figure 6: Ratio of GBCS annual household income to ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings \(ASHE\) 80th percentile annual income for UK's eleven most populous urban areas](#)

So whilst it is clear that there exists pronounced spatial stratification within the *Elite* how does the *Elite* relate to the wider population across urban space? The uniqueness of the *GBCS* means that there are no comparable datasets for the measures of social and cultural capital available from the BBC survey material. However, we can draw on representative data sources for the economic indicators. Figure 6 uses official statistics on annual wages derived Office for National Statistics' (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Income (ASHE) for the ten most populous unitary authorities in Great Britain. London has been divided between the inner and outer boroughs using the ONS' official definition due to the substantial disparities in income between the inner and outer sections, a distinction also evident in the *GBCS* data. Figure 6 presents the ratio of annual household income for the *Elite* in the *GBCS* data to individual annual income for those in the 80th percentile of household income from the representative ASHE data. It is thus a means of gauging the economic relationship between the *GBCS Elite* and their wider, representative urban contexts.

Across Great Britain as a whole the ratio of *GBCS Elite* income to ASHE earnings is 2.98:1, but in Manchester the ratio is higher at 3.86:1. The Edinburgh *Elite* displays the lowest level of economic disparity from the wider population at 2.85:1 due to relatively high median wage levels in the city. However, the key point to make about this graph is that there is simply no clear spatial pattern to the unequal relationship between the various urban *Elites* and their particular metropolitan contexts that neatly fits into pre-existing debates on Britain's north-south divide (Martin, 2004) or the economic dominance of London (Cunningham & Savage, 2015). The city *Elite* stand apart but their economic distance from the wider urban populace is nuanced and non-linear.

Responses: The 'Recursive' *Elite*

As noted, the publication of the 'new model' has elicited much interest and critical comment in the intervening years. Those criticisms have ranged across issues of methodology and sample bias (Mills, 2013: 2015), through to issues of whether the model should more accurately be described as one of 'stratification' rather than 'class' (Bradley, 2015; Skeggs, 2015) due to the weight given to issues of social and cultural capital (Crompton, 2008, pp.8-9). Or indeed whether such a mechanism is actually helpful at all at a meta-level in terms of understanding of social inequalities or instead does more damage by shifting the focus towards the reification of classed identities rather than the struggle against them (Tyler, 2015) and the enacting of further 'symbolic violence' against the weakest in society (Bourdieu, 1984). It was certainly true that in the maelstrom of debate, fuelled by the online character of the survey and the popularity of social media, attention in the immediate aftermath of the 'new model' (Savage et al., 2013) focussed heavily on the classifications as little more than a sort of sociological credit score tool. The massively-accessed BBC 'class calculator', with seven million unique visitors in the following week, acted as a plaything – a sort of social class 'selfie' in which any notions of relationality or implied exploitation between these classes was seemingly lost in a fog of

egotistical navel-gazing and self-aggrandising tweets by wealthy, young urbanites in the main, frequently displayed in terms of faux-shock or disapproval (Savage et al., 2015, p.315).

The sociologist Colin Mills (2013; 2015) has raised fundamental methodological concerns focusing on the latent class typology which generated the *Elite* as part of the 7-part new model and also on the unrepresentative nature of the *GBCS* dataset which he has argued severely undermines the survey's worth as a tool for social research. It has always been acknowledged that the *GBCS* is heavily skewed in its composition towards those at the upper end of the social spectrum. Savage et al. (2015) make a pragmatic response to these criticisms by showing how it is possible to use these skews effectively to look at those in elite positions for which there are often not enough respondents in national sample surveys to draw any kind of meaningful inferences. It has also been shown how initial work using *GBCS* data has been largely replicated using large scale national sample surveys such as the Labour Force Survey (Laurison & Friedman 2016), thus showing how patterns derived from the *GBCS* can be robust. Furthermore the *GBCS Elite* is not that different to notions of an expansive 'elite' in the NS-SeC. Figure 7 shows that almost 60% of the *GBCS Elite* fall within NS-SeC I (senior managers & traditional professional occupations), with a further 35% coming under NS-SeC II (modern professional occupations & middle and junior managers). Given the statistical and spatial (Cunningham & Savage, 2015) overlaps between the *GBCS Elite* and nationally-representative and validated measures of class, for pragmatic purposes, the *GBCS elite* does offer a way of operationalising elites multi-dimensionally, even though we should always recognise the limitation imposed by the self-selecting nature of the *GBCS* dataset.

[Figure 7: Distribution of GBCS Elite within NS-SeC classes I & II](#)

The overtly geodemographic nature of the latent class model and the archetypes widely circulated and caricatured in April 2013 jarred with traditional academic approaches to class analysis and gave rise to accusations that the *GBCS* experiment was purely an exercise in 'data dredging' (Mills, 2013). However, the variables used to construct the MCA were carefully and conceptually specified to measure cultural and social capital. In the case of the *GBCS*, if any theoretical criticism is to be made it might be that the experiment was perhaps too hidebound to an *a priori* conceptual framing rather than too little in terms of a Bourdieusian approach to class structure over established conceptual approaches. Notwithstanding the clear limitations of a class structure based only on occupation and employment relations, to have dispensed entirely with such measures in favour of a solely Bourdieusian economic, social and cultural capitals approach might be regarded by some as an unnecessarily radical departure given the primacy and value of occupational based approaches over such a long period. However had some form of composite measure been put forward which included both occupational and Bourdieusian approaches it is likely that this too would have led to accusations of conceptual incoherence.

Another of our critics, the geographer Danny Dorling, whose work on inequality has focussed on a more exclusive definition of an 'elite' in his '1%' (2014), made the point that while our classification of an elite was too broad, the concept more generally was problematic as it is inherently 'recursive' (Dorling, 2013). As a self-evident truth, there is no real response to the notion of recursivity, so the main contention then lies in how one conceives of an 'elite'. The explicit conception with the *GBCS Elite* is of a new 'ordinary' cadre who share economic, social and cultural privileges beyond the

reach of the vast majority of the population (Savage et al, 2015, 303-329). Part of the rationale behind this is in the clear knowledge that wealth has increasingly become concentrated in the hands of an ever smaller proportion of the population; it has been a long term trend, even if the evidence is now that it appears to be accelerating after some decades of relative egalitarianism in the post-War period (Piketty, 2014). Further, despite the fact that such extremes of wealth have long been apparent, it does not appear to have acted as a particularly powerful call for remedial action. The purpose of this experiment was to understand processes of inequality and the mechanisms by which people end up in their given class location and therefore to move beyond the empirical descriptions of economic inequalities alone which have dominated debate up to this point, valid and necessary as those are. In this intellectual context then, the idea of a wider conception of an 'elite' in which we can see the ways in which inequalities are replicated and reinforced beyond the economic sphere, appears like a radical departure and one which would seem to resonate with new research which draws attention to the interactive effect of Bourdieusian capitals and the economic power of cultural and social capital resources (CPSMC, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Friedman, Laurison & Miles, 2015).

[Figure 8: The class composition of the GBCS in a\) Wave 1 \(January 2011 – February 2011\) and b\) Wave 2 \(March 2011 – June 2013\)](#)

[Figure 9: Observed versus expected participation in the GBCS by the Elite by hour on 3 April 2013](#)

However, the criticism levelled by Dorling (2013) and Tyler (2015) that in creating this new *Elite* the focus became more about the taxonomy rather than the underlying structures and relationships, is a significant one. This is underlined powerfully in spatial and temporal analysis of the *GBCS* response patterns. Figure 8 shows the composition of the two waves of response in terms of the 2013 'new model' classifications (Savage et al., 2013) and is both a telling and depressing comment on the limits of mass and new medias to speak to the population as a whole. As we know, the data were already heavily skewed towards the most privileged in society, with the *Elite* comprising 21.4% in wave 1 (as opposed to seven percent in the nationally-representative sample). However, in wave 2, the *Elite* proportion leapt even further, now comprising 27% of all respondents in the second collection period. That statistic provides powerful evidence of two mutually reinforcing dynamics: the highly-competitive desire for affirmation on the part of society's 'winners' at one end (Daloz, 2009) and the 'conditions of governmentality' (Hannah, 2001; Legg, 2005) which act to shape how society's 'losers' interact with the mechanisms which maintain their place at the bottom. This becomes even more apparent when we look in detail at the relative participation rates for the *Elite* on the results launch day of 3 April 2013. Figure 9 shows the observed rate of participation for the *GBCS Elite* against the expected rate, were the *Elite* to respond at the same rate as the *GBCS* sample as a whole. Here we see that the *Elite* was heavily over-represented earlier in the day, in the period up to 1pm in the afternoon, with the only exception being the hour between 8am and 9am when most would have been commuting to places of work or on school drop offs, etc. It seems that this *Elite* were clearly anxious to acquire and affirm their status early on.

And again these patterns are reflected when we look to the spatial distribution of patterns of response. As we already noted from Figure 3, the more elite an area was, the more likely its denizens were to participate in the survey. Figure 10(a & b) maps the response rate for the two separate waves. Figure 10(a) shows that the areas of disproportionately higher response were also the most affluent parts of the country: west and south-west London and the Home Counties surrounding the capital.

Far lower levels of response that expected were registered in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and many parts of northern England. We can see from Figure 10(b) that this pattern was replicated in wave 2, where there no great corrective from previously under-represented parts of the country. The lack of change between the two waves underlines the skewed spatial enthusiasm and apathy with which the *GBCS* was greeted, and is stark testament to the distinctly classed and spatialized nature of the metropolitan discussion and critique which accompanied the genesis of the *GBCS Elite* and its other class categories. It also appears to speak directly to the work of Jean-Pascal Daloz (2009, p.28) who has argued that intra-group competition has always been a central, yet neglected aspect of the way in which elites reify their status. Such competition might traditionally have been manifest more in material displays of wealth and ostentation or in social and cultural affectations (Daloz, 2009, 69, pp.103-110), but in the digital world it appears that the online survey mechanism has provided a powerful means of the kind of conscious self-affirmation which he identifies.

[Fig. 10: Spatial distribution of participation in the GBCS by unitary authority* in: a\) Wave 1 \(January 2011 – February 2011 and; b\) Wave 2 \(March 2011 – June 2013\)](#)

CONCLUSION

This contribution has shed light on one specific and contentious incarnation of an elite. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need to understand the elite as a specific class formation, which comprises distinct resources of social and cultural, as well as economic capital, which set them apart from the population at large. The *GBCS* was a unique and powerful tool for identifying the new *Elite* and the complex relationships between these capital resources, and unlike previous historical conceptions of a British elite, this is a distinctly urban grouping, for whom London acts as a fulcrum. However, there exist pronounced intra-stratal distinctions within the London *Elite*, distinctions which are reinforced across all forms of capital and which are thrown into sharp relief through geographic analysis. These data point to the existence of nested urban villages, operating almost as class cultural ecosystems, in which groups of people with similar levels of economic capital congregate. However, what makes this *Elite* distinctive is the light it sheds beyond those material resources, turning our attention to these privileged spaces of repositories of social and cultural capital as well. Notwithstanding the limitations of the data which have been discussed here and elsewhere in some detail, it is in this regard that the *GBCS* reveals its research potential. Turning beyond London it is evident that simplistic north-south binaries break down when we consider both this *Elite's* spatial distribution and their economic relationship to their wider urban contexts. Yes, the *Elite* are a profoundly southern formation, but they also exist in significant numbers in areas of long established wealth in the north of England and beyond. Furthermore, the economic disparities between the provincial *Elite* in Manchester and the surrounding host district are more pronounced than those in Inner London. More generally there appears to be no clear spatial pattern to the extent of those disparities across the country as a whole.

In addition to its substantive empirical data in terms of the three Bourdieusian capitals, the *GBCS* is also highly revealing at a methodological and ontological level as displayed in the pronounced spatial, temporal and socio-economic patterns of engagement which the tool engendered. These patterns of engagement have clearly pointed to the power of the *GBCS* as a tool for the metropolitan *Elite* to affirm their sense of self and to allay their insecurities, whilst for those at the other end of the

class spectrum, it has been largely ignored. So whilst the spatial trend in London and elsewhere may be for elites to increasingly shield (Atkinson, 2015) and segregate themselves through the construction of 'poor doors' (Osborne, 2014) and subterranean worlds (Webber & Burrows, 2015, pp.11-12), such secrecy does not extend to the digital sphere, at least not for our 'new 'ordinary' *Elite*' (Savage et al, 2015).

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FIGURES

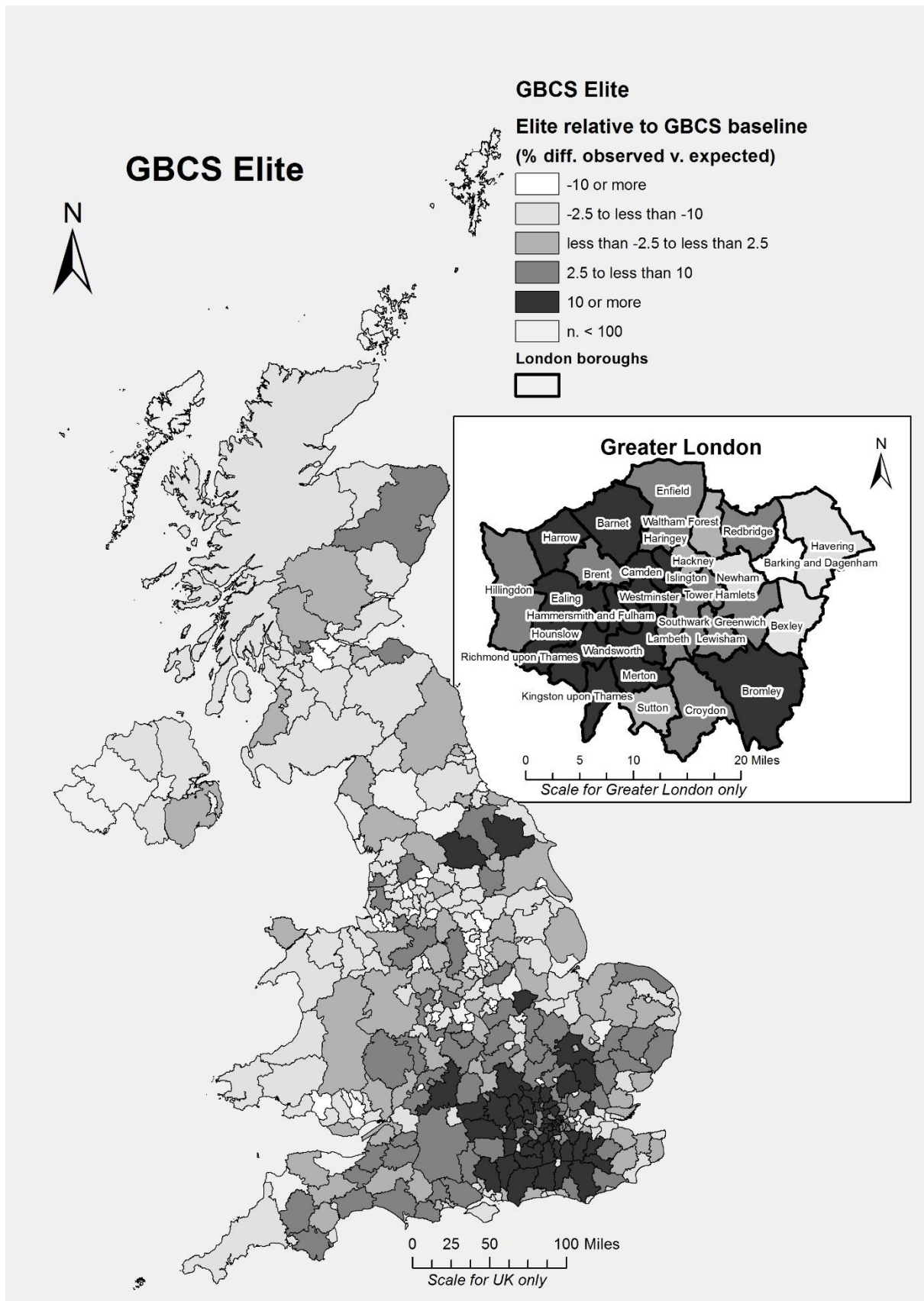
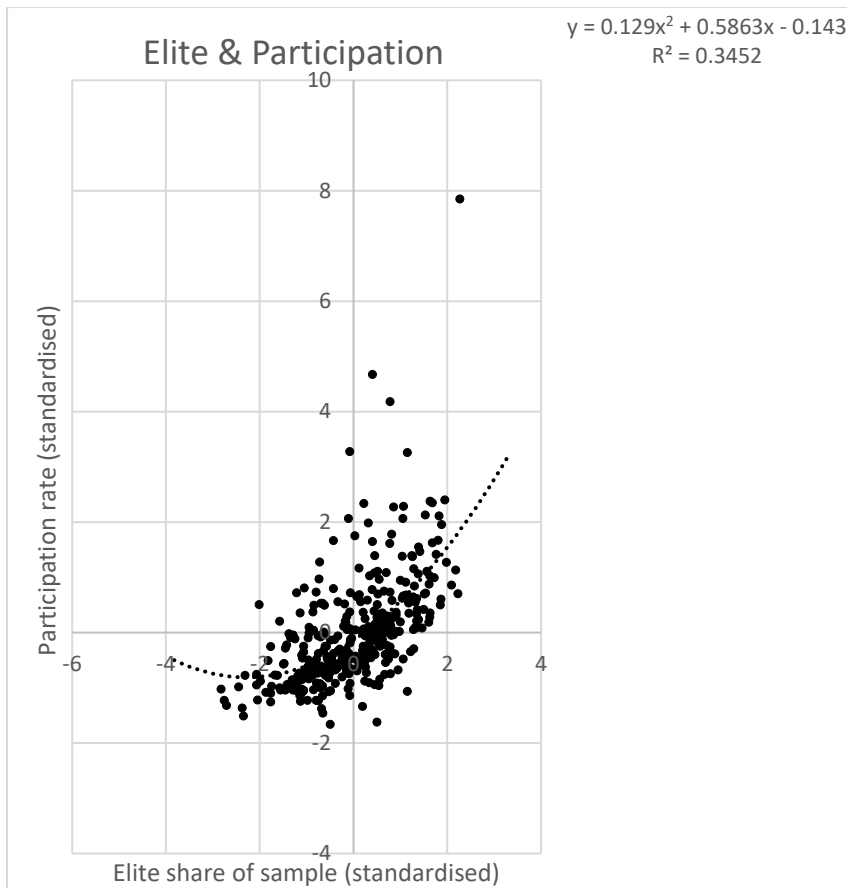


Figure 1: The spatial distribution of the GBCS Elite (Source: GBCS)

Rank	Lowest response	Highest response
1	Tyrone	City of London
2	Fermanagh	Cambridge
3	Armagh	Oxford
4	Blaenau Gwent	Islington
5	Barking and Dagenham	York
6	Bolsover	Hammersmith and Fulham
7	Londonderry	Camden
8	Harlow	Lambeth
9	Stoke-on-Trent	Richmond upon Thames
10	Antrim	Edinburgh, City of
11	Knowsley	Wandsworth
12	Down	South Cambridgeshire
13	Copeland	Southwark
14	Walsall	Bristol, City of
15	Blackpool	St Albans
16	Wolverhampton	Westminster
17	Castle Point	Reading
18	North Lanarkshire	Tower Hamlets
19	Barnsley	Hackney
20	Sandwell	Brighton and Hove

Figure 2: Areas of highest and lowest response to the GBCS across the UK (Source: GBCS)

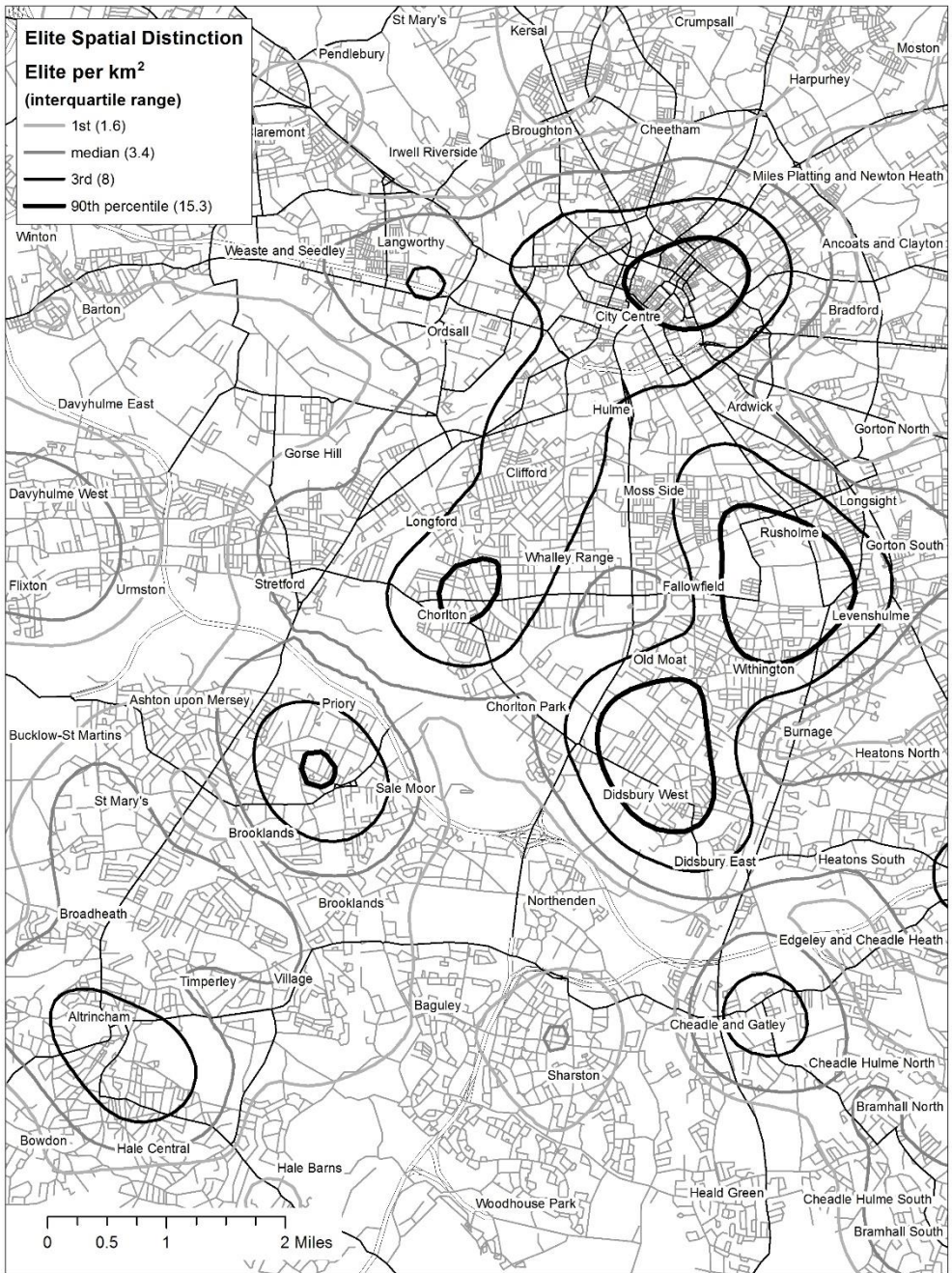


[Figure 3: Correlation between Elite composition and participation in the GBCS by spatial unit](#) (Source: GBCS)



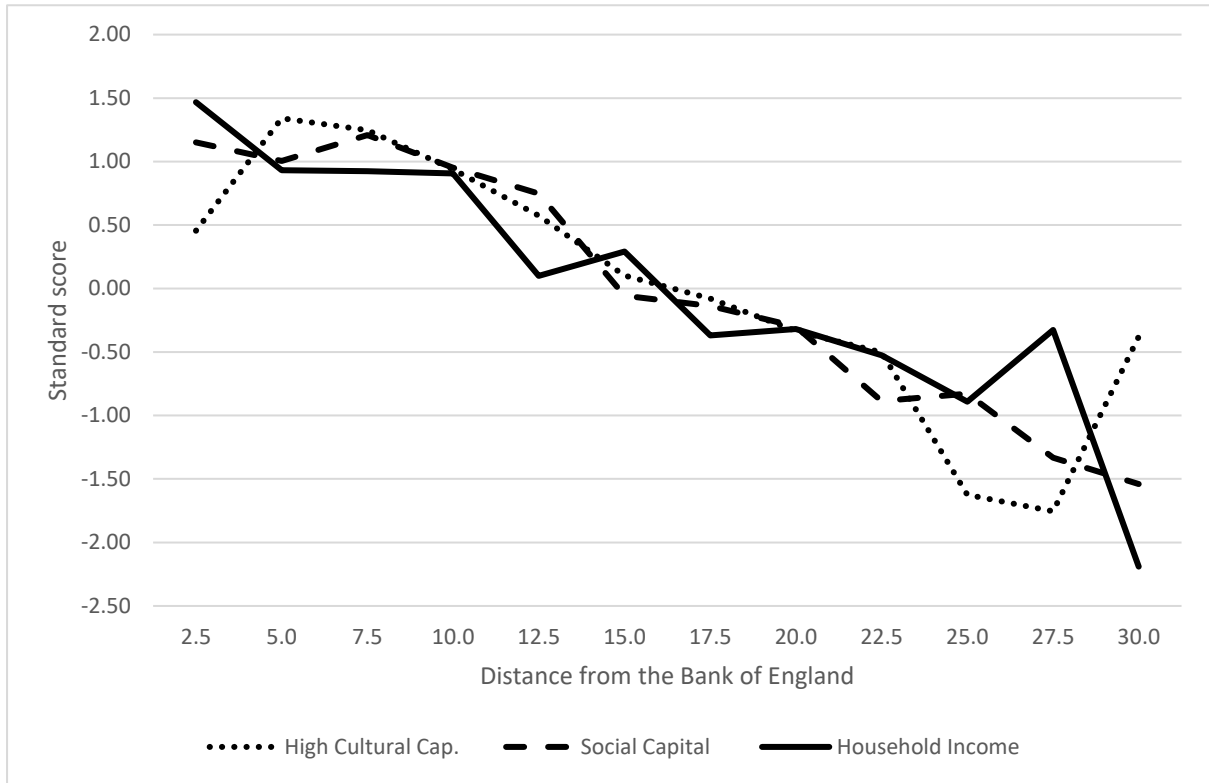
a)

The Manchester Elite

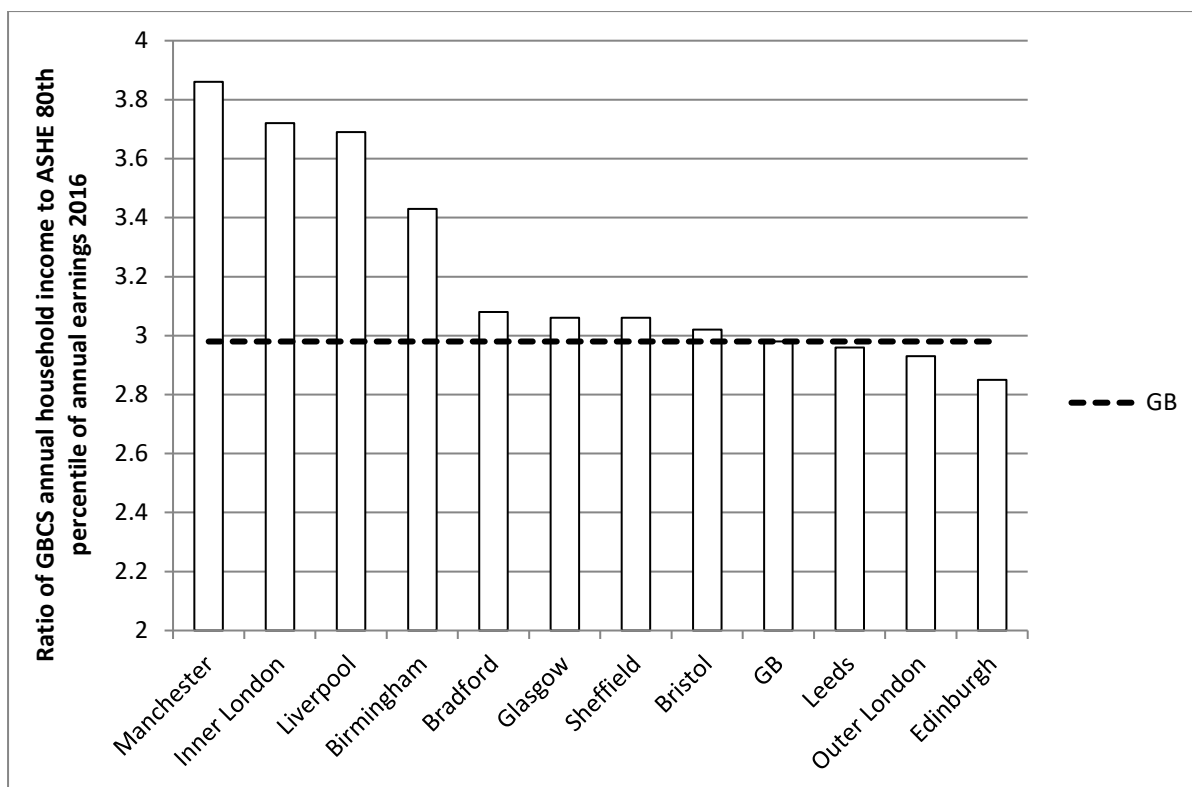


b)

Figure 4: Geographies of the a) London and b) Manchester Elite (Source: GBCS)



[Figure 5: Standard scores for mean household income, mean social capital score and mean high cultural capital score by 2.5 kilometre bandwidth radiating from the Bank of England](#) (Source: GBCS)



[Figure 6: Ratio of GBCS annual household income to ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings \(ASHE\) 80th percentile of annual income for UK's eleven most populous urban areas](#) (Source: GBCS; ONS ASHE data 2016 (Table 8.7a – Annual Gross Pay – Home Geography))

	GBCS Elite (%)	n
NS-SEC I	58.1	38,153
NS-SEC II	35.0	23,004
Other	6.9	4,566
Total	100.0	42,719

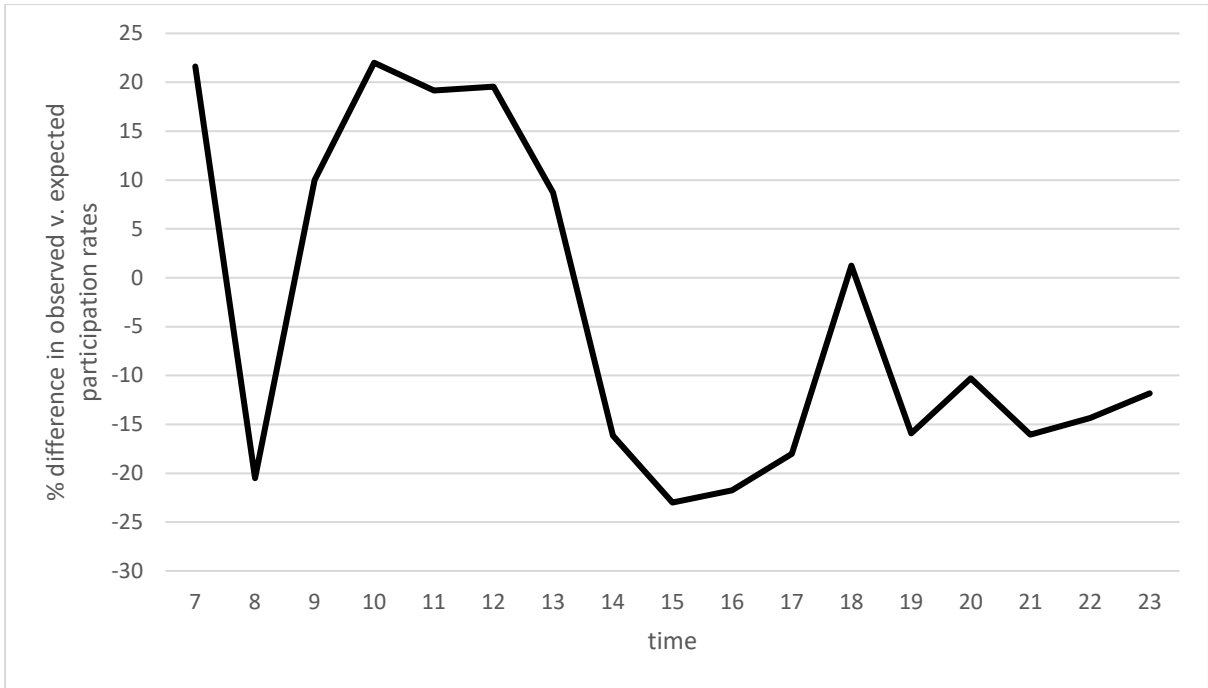
(Source: GBCS)

[Figure 7: Distribution of GBCS Elite within NS-SeC classes I & II](#)

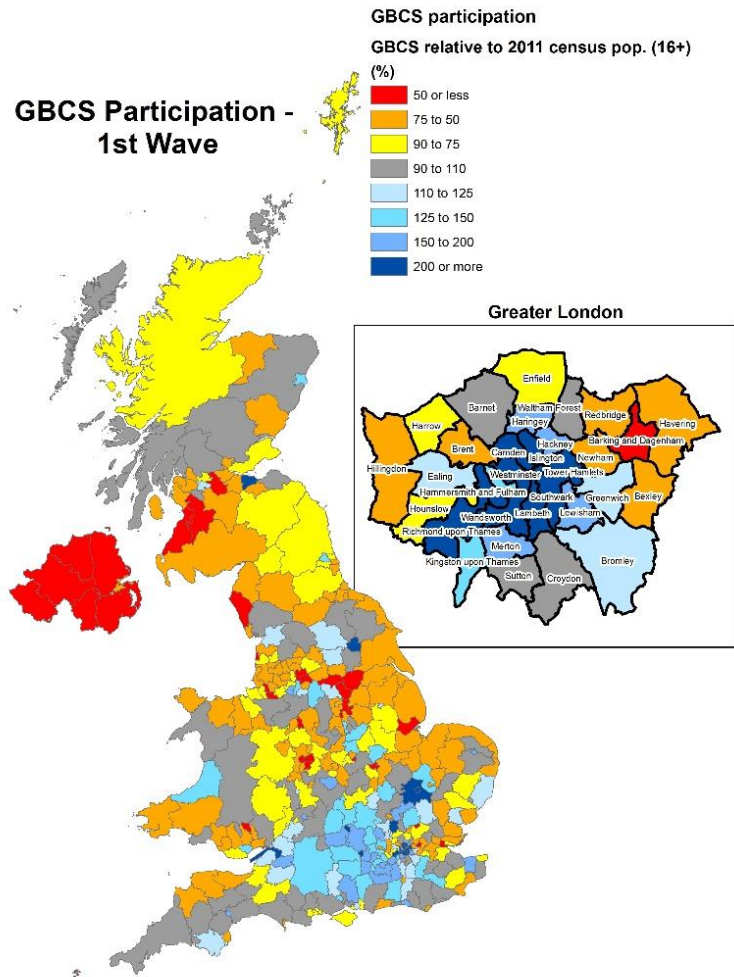
New Class	Wave 1 (%)	Wave 2 (%)
Elite	21.4	27.0
EMC	42.9	39.8
NAW	6.1	5.4
TMC	9.1	8.9
TWC	1.7	1.4
ESW	18.1	16.7
PRE	.8	.8

(Source: GBCS)

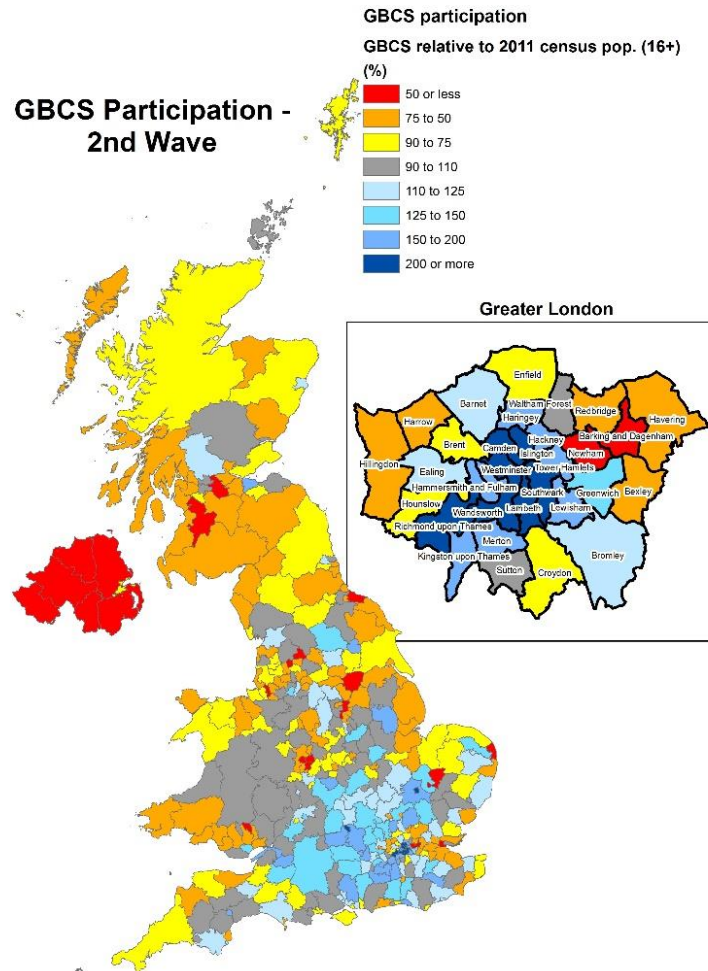
[Figure 8: The class composition of the GBCS in Wave 1 \(January 2011 – February 2011\) and Wave 2 \(March 2011 – June 2013\)](#)



[Figure 9: Observed versus expected participation in the GBCS by the Elite by hour on 3 April 2013](#)
(Source: GBCS)



a)



b)

Fig. 10: Spatial distribution of participation in the GBCS by unitary authority in: a) Wave 1 (January 2011 – February 2011) and b) Wave 2 (March 2011 – June 2013) (Source: GBCS)*

- Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area and counties for Northern Ireland