

Chapter 1

Class in Academia*

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Overview

Despite ongoing efforts to promote diversity within universities, they continue to reflect and perpetuate traditional patriarchal, colonial, and privileged hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and class (Phillips et al., 2022). For this reason, universities remain ‘oppressive academic institutions’ (Tran, 2020, p. 49). Social class, the central theme of this book, holds particular significance because class-privileged academics enjoy significant unearned advantages that facilitate their admission to, and navigation of elite institutions. Additionally, they can access prestigious mentorships, and enhanced employment opportunities. While the academy has historically demanded cultural assimilation from working-class individuals (Reay, 1998), forcing them to navigate ‘architectures of exclusion’ built on elite and middle-class values (Walkerline, 2021), a stark reality remains. As bell hooks (1994) poignantly observed, ‘nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings’ (p. 177). One significant silence that has motivated this body of research is the lack of recognition of the impact of an elite-dominated academic landscape. The overrepresentation of scholars from privileged backgrounds perpetuates classism and has potentially deterred talented working-class individuals from pursuing academic careers. Our lived experiences offer a crucial counterpoint to the dominant elite narratives, enriching teaching and research, while challenging academia’s power structures.

*All names of respondents used in this book are pseudonyms. This measure was implemented to safeguard the anonymity of respondents.

The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity: A Class Apart, 1–8



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2 *The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity*

Building on my previous work (Crew, 2020), this book advances the scholarship on working-class academics (WCAs) in four ways:

- It consolidates the systemic challenges encountered by WCAs within a framework of classism. This is a vital contribution to sociological literature as discussions on classism in higher education (HE) have predominantly centred around students. While existing scholarship is nuanced and insightful, outside of the field of WCA studies, the experiences of WCAs are frequently oversimplified, relegated to individual struggles and often entirely ignored. This book seeks to rectify this oversight, and in doing so, argues for its inclusion in conversations on equity and social justice within the broader field of education studies.
- The book includes an analysis of existing statistical data on WCAs derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). A prior statistical analysis by Friedman and Laurison (2019) of the classed background of people in various professions included academic respondents who also worked outside academia. This book provides statistical insights into those who exclusively work *within* academia.
- While the central premise of this book remains that class is the primary vector of disadvantage faced by WCAs (and other working-class people), academia is not only a classed space. It is ‘a white space’ (Reyes, 2022, p. 15), and one that is masculine and able bodied too. This book builds upon the intersectional findings established in Crew (2020) and introduces an intersectional analysis of ‘institution’ and ‘subject discipline’.
- Finally, a key objective of my original work was to present an informed alternative perspective to the prevailing deficit viewpoint that characterises research on working-class individuals in HE. In this book, I expand upon the discussion of the cultural wealth of WCAs, first introduced in Crew (2020).

Conducting the Research

Over the course of five years, this research has utilised a mixed methods approach, incorporating qualitative semi-structured interviews and survey data collected in three distinct research phases.¹ A fourth research phase analysed existing

¹Prior to interviews taking place, I ensured informed consent by sending the interviewees a copy of the information sheet and permission to record the interview form. I sent respondents the original ethics form (Ethics reference number: BLSS14) so they could have full details of the study. Before the interview, I introduced the study, and reminded respondents of their right to leave the study at any time (and that their data would be destroyed if they did so), then discussed other relevant ethical issues such as confidentiality and storage of data. With regards to the survey, the same details from the information sheet were recorded at the start of the survey. Respondents were then asked to tick yes or no regarding the following statement ‘I have read the information above and I am happy to participate’.

statistical data and is discussed in Chapter Two. This study collected data from 255 WCAs from across the UK.² Further elaboration will be provided in Chapters Four and Five, but spanning the three phases of data collection, approximately two-thirds of the respondents were female, 10% of respondents were from diverse, ethnic backgrounds, and 1 in 5 had a disability or long-term illness.³ My interview data revealed that 76% of respondents had parents who were in manual employment, compared with 80% of survey respondents.⁴ Both the interview and survey data demonstrated that few had educational advantages via their parents as only 10% of interview respondents and 8% of survey respondents said that their parents had a degree qualification. This is extremely low compared to other research, as in a study of 7,218 tenured faculty members, Morgan et al. (2022) found that over half had parents with a master's degree or higher. In all, 20% of those who completed the survey and 8% of interviewees were in professional employment, with the vast majority of respondents being in forms of manual employment.⁵ The data on the type of school attended were less detailed as this question was not included in the survey. Only n.5 interview respondents reported that they went to private school, and each mentioned having some form of a scholarship which enabled them to do so. Just under half of the survey respondents mentioned being a recipient of free school meals (FSM) alongside 70% of the interviewees. There were fewer respondents from either Oxford or Cambridge Universities (Oxbridge)⁶ with most either working at post-1992 or traditional institutions. Alongside this, respondents represented over 34 different subject areas, across a wide disciplinary spectrum. Health, Social Sciences, Geography, and Education comprised of the majority of respondents, with sparse representation in fields such as Physics, IT, and Mathematics. The rest of this chapter will introduce my research respondents, before examining the concept of class and what this means in terms of a WCA identity. The final section will outline the structure of the book.

Positioning My Own Experiences

This study is influenced by my working-class heritage, which contributes a lived experience that compliments the existing literature on WCAs. My parents are

²Details of the research design are provided in Appendix One. The experiences of respondents from research phase one were included in Crew (2020). Where appropriate, this will be referred to throughout this book.

³Statistics were generally similar in each phase except there were greater levels of men recruited in phase two and lower levels of academics from ethnic minorities.

⁴The slight difference between research methods is because some respondents cited their parents' self-employment, all of whom referred to their parents having a small business.

⁵All names of respondents used in this book are pseudonyms. This measure was implemented to safeguard the anonymity of respondents.

⁶Details such as institution, subject area, and country will be discussed in Chapter Five.

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from large working-class cities, Nottingham, and Liverpool. Despite facing intermittent unemployment and relying on welfare benefits, they nurtured aspirations for a better future. This has provided me with a personal understanding of economic and social disadvantage, ambition, and hard work. I was born in 1972, and lived in social housing across various locations, including Runcorn, Nottingham, Liverpool, and eventually in North Wales since my teenage years. My academic promise may have been evident, but due to my class background, no one was going to say: 'you're bright, go to university' (O'Neill, 2019). My limited economic, social, and cultural capital curtailed any career aspirations. I left school at 16 and found employment in routine service jobs, such as waitressing and retail, before becoming a young mother at the age of 21. Despite being far removed from academia, in my spare time I read academic books and nurtured an aspiration to attend university.

Vague aspirations for university lingered within me until 2003 whereby a chance conversation with a friend, discussing her course, gave me that push to start my own academic journey. Similar to existing research indicating that disadvantaged students are often underrepresented at prestigious universities (McGrath & Rogers, 2021), I chose to pursue my education at a local university near my home, prioritising the convenience of being close to my children's school over the consideration of institutional reputation. Despite struggling with low self-confidence, again common for working-class people (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984), my aspirational capital⁷ (Yosso, 2005) drove me forward, even during the most challenging of times. I had numerous financial, social, and cultural obstacles but I persevered, achieving a first-class honours degree, and subsequently completed my master's and PhD degrees. I took on sessional teaching at the university and then secured a permanent lecturing position (Crew, 2020). While this may seem like a smooth and straightforward transition, these years were challenging, characterised by self-doubt and financial struggles. Additionally, I experienced disruptive episodes of ill health. Adopting an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), it's significant that I've (unwisely) worked without reasonable adjustments, wanting to keep up a 'façade of sameness' (Lourens, 2021, p. 1212). In retrospect, I've been wary about adding a disability to my classed identity as being 'impaired' and 'competent' are typically deemed to be incompatible (Gil Gomez, 2017).

Since entering academia I've encountered numerous people who have made remarks about my social class without fully grasping the bumpy road I've travelled and still traverse. Without the 'Class Matters' collection by Mahony and Zmroczek (1997) I might never have understood that there were 'others like me' who positioned themselves as being 'working class' (Hey, 2003). I recognise that my established position at a reputable university, along with my publications and academic accolades, may initially mask my status as an 'outsider within'

⁷I will discuss Yosso's forms of capital later in this chapter, with a specific focus on it in Chapter Six.

(Hill Collins, 1986). I'm privileged enough to have a dream job that pays me to read and then talk about what I have read. However, without the financial support of a school bursary for my master's degree or securing a prestigious Economic and Social Research Council funding for my PhD, or having had the opportunity to teach undergraduate seminars, or being employed as a lecturer on precarious contracts for four years, it is highly likely that my academic journey would have concluded with my undergraduate degree. These fortunate circumstances have played an equally, if not more, significant role in my academic success than any personal skills I possess.

I've never 'relaxed' in the academy. While some academics have had a lifetime of reassurances that they are 'worthy' of a position in academia, that has not been my narrative. Despite entering academia in my late thirties with a rich tapestry of lived experiences and a professional background, I have consistently struggled to find a sense of belonging. In fact, I feel more acutely aware of my working-class identity within the academic sphere. It's been 10 years since I gained my lectureship and I still wait for that email that will say in that unfailingly polite middle-class way, *'there seems to have been a terrible mistake, you were never meant to have this esteemed academic position'*. It's not imposter syndrome that makes me feel like this, rather I'm just aware, as were many of my respondents, that universities were not originally 'designed' with someone like me in mind.

Nevertheless, I've always recognised that my lived experiences as a first-generation student and subsequently as a WCA are valuable assets in the academic realm. Deeply ingrained within me is a profound sense of justice and empathy, especially when it comes to my students. My working-class heritage, which positions me as a 'queer subject' (Hey, 2003, p. 319) in this academic space, empowers me to forge authentic connections with my students, particularly those who share my working-class heritage. I have deliberately refrained from trying to 'pass' as a typical academic, developing instead a chameleon-like habitus (Keane, 2023) (more of this in Chapter Two) that has enabled me to navigate academic environments with classed authenticity. I live in the same type of social housing I always have and socialise with the same working-class people I always did. My interests align with aspects of lowbrow culture, such as watching football and reality TV, although I do appreciate highbrow culture, such as the theatre and museums. Even my relaxed form of speech, which is casual and sprinkled with the occasional profanity, sets me apart in academia (Crew, 2020). These elements of my identity are my past and my present and serve as a bridge between my students and academia. I've not changed since becoming an academic, I've just read more books.

Defining Class

Despite social democratic parties dropping the rhetoric of class (Nineham, 2023) or reporting that the 'class war is dead' (Blair, 1999), the UK government's 2021 Social Mobility Barometer, found that almost half of the general public (48%) identified themselves as being working class (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

Class has earned the moniker ‘the British disease’ (Halsey, 1995), alluding to its persistent presence and the challenges associated with ignoring it.⁸ Karl Marx’s classic definition, which organises class based on our relationship to the means of production, provides a valuable foundational perspective (Marx, 1867/1990). While not the first to discuss class, Marx understood ‘the significance of class for understanding society and for changing it’ (Nineham, 2023, p. 17). In contrast, a Weberian view of class, positions it as multidimensional, capturing the intricate interactions among wealth, prestige, and power (Wright, 2002). The contrast between Marx and Weber emphasises the complexity inherent in defining social class. At its most fundamental, class is characterised by factors including income (the amount of money one earns); occupation (the type of job one holds); education (the level of educational attainment); and wealth (the accumulation or inheritance of assets) (Hurst & Nenga, 2016).

Our social class has traditionally been defined through employment-based classifications, such as the Registrar General’s Social Class (RGSC), which ranked occupations hierarchically based on skill and manual/nonmanual work. This approach became less meaningful in the 21st century due to changes in work and occupations. Goldthorpe (2007) then categorised individuals into three groups: employers, self-employed workers, and employees. Goldthorpe’s classification, while influential in European sociology, differed from the RGSC by including the self-employed. One critique of such classifications is that they assign people to a social class based on their job titles, which may or may not accurately reflect the nature of their work. Since 2001, the National Statistics Socio Economic Classification (NS-SEC) has been widely used in official statistics and surveys. It comprises eight categories, but a simplified three class version is often employed, categorising individuals into higher, intermediate, and lower occupations. This classification presents challenges when categorising service workers and categorise unpaid work.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist and public intellectual, has come to dominate British Sociology over the last 40 years. Bourdieu, born into a working-class family in southern France, attended an ordinary secondary school before transferring to a more prestigious school in Paris (Britannica, 2024). It is interesting that many obituaries do not explicitly refer to his class heritage, despite him writing a book, ‘Sketch for a Self Analysis’, that applied his own theories to his working-class background and intellectual trajectory. For Bourdieu, social stratification is based on taste, typically linked to our salary, savings, and possessions (economic capital), our networks (social capital) and what we do in our spare time (cultural capital) (Hill, 2018). In *Distinction* (1984), his classic text, he demonstrated how ‘social order is inscribed in people’s minds through cultural products, including education, language, values and everyday activities’ (1986, p. 471). Bourdieu asserted that the struggles faced by working class students in

⁸In the aforementioned UK government’s 2021 Social Mobility Barometer, 84% of respondents were prepared to identify themselves with a particular social class background, which suggests that these broad ‘class divisions’ matter to people.

French HE were not rooted in intellectual deficiencies but rather stemmed from the failure of universities to recognise and value their working-class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1989/1996). He also explored the ways in which forms of capital are cultural signifiers that demonstrate one's place in the social hierarchy. Economic capital affords the elite access to the most prestigious universities, while their accumulated cultural capital means they thrive within these institutions. Their social capital or elite networks will then ensure them professional employment (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), in a specific field (hierarchical social space) of their choice. Although the rules and hierarchies within these fields are not permanently fixed and are subject to ongoing struggles between classes (Bourdieu, 1985).

Inspired by Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and a perception that the conventional ways of thinking about class, characterised by distinct 'upper', 'middle', and 'working' divisions, are somewhat outdated, the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) was developed in 2011 by Professor Mike Savage and Professor Fiona Devine. The GBCS, the largest survey of social class ever conducted in the UK, was also a unique collaboration with the BBC. The online survey attracted 161,400 web respondents, as well as a nationally representative sample survey (Savage et al., 2013) which included questions about social, cultural, and economic capital. Its most significant finding was that the British class system is more complex than had previously been thought. It emphasised the significance of various factors, including education, age, and location, in shaping class dynamics. The GBCS proposed categories (see below) that show there is still an elite, a middle, and a working class, alongside an acknowledgment that people have varied levels of economic, social, and cultural capital:

- *Elite*: Very high economic resources, savings, and investments; extensive social connections; deep engagement with highbrow cultural activities.
- *Established Middle Class*: High economic capital, high-status social networks, strong participation in highbrow and emerging creative culture.
- *Technical Middle Class*: High economic capital, smaller but high-status social circles, moderate cultural capital.
- *New Affluent Workers*: Moderate economic resources; limited social contacts but high range; moderate highbrow, good emerging cultural capital.
- *Traditional Working Class*: Moderate economic hardship, few social contacts, limited participation in high or emerging culture.
- *Emergent Service Workers*: Moderate economic hardship but reasonable income, some social contacts, engagement in emerging culture.
- *Precariat*: Severe economic deprivation, lowest social connections and cultural capital (Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2013).

There have been criticisms of the GBCS with Mills (2015) noting that the 'elite' category was not well defined by the procedures used to identify it, and as such, the GBCS 'elite' is too large. Mills suggests that the 'elite' groups should have been defined according to reliable external data sources (pp. 395 and 397). Bradley et al. (2014) identified shortcomings with the GBCS where the selective markers of cultural capital skewed the empirical findings and fostered a negative

view of working class culture. She also remarked that there was a lack of coherence with some groupings (p. 429).

The work of Tara Yosso (2005) provided a much needed, alternative lens to position socially marginalised groups. Inspired by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which challenged conventional ideas about race, racism, and inequality. Yosso contested Bourdieu's view on the value of 'elite' and middle-class 'knowledge' since this framed anyone outside these social classes as being somehow 'deficient'. Yosso (2005) identified community cultural wealth (CCW), as in the knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by marginalised groups such as linguistic, social/familial: aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital (pp. 77–80). This model has been used by Flynn et al. (2023) to demonstrate how library workers can recognise working-class cultural wealth within the context of critical information literacy. O'Shea (2016) applied CCW to demonstrate how mature students drew upon lived experiences during their transition to university. Yosso's research will be utilised in Chapter Six to illuminate the forms of 'capital' that WCAs bring to academia.

Overview of the Book

Following this introduction, the rest of this book is structured as follows:

Chapter Two: The Complex Question of Definition examines the literature on WCAs before exploring the commentary on defining a WCA. This includes reference to cultural background and financial struggles, as well as habitus and capital.

Chapter Three: Classism explores the harmful stereotypes, derogatory comments, microaggressions, and minimisation that marginalise WCAs. These experiences inflict an emotional toll through imposterism, isolation, deteriorating mental health, and a pressure to assimilate.

Chapter Four: Intersectional Perspectives examines how gender, ethnicity, and disability status compounds class barriers. Understanding these complex dynamics provides a comprehensive picture of WCAs experience of the academy.

Chapter Five: The Impact of Place discusses how institutions confer status, based on history and prestige, while academic disciplines carry distinct norms that affect cultural fit. These intersections profoundly impact a scholars' identity.

Chapter Six: Working-Class Academic Cultural Wealth presents a discussion of the cultural resources WCAs possess to navigate through academia.

Chapter Seven: 'It doesn't have to be like this', the concluding chapter, provides a summary of the research findings before outlining the recommendations provided by respondents on how academia needs to change.