CHAPTER 7

# Looking Back and Moving Forward

**Fig. 7.1** 'Staff'

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## Looking Back

This book draws upon the experiences of 89 UK academics from working class backgrounds. Due to the current HE fees regime in UK, this is a cohort that, Luke, one of my respondents, suggests "*may be more difficult to locate in ten years' time*". This book acknowledges the complications with the term 'working-class academic', but to 'remove' a preferred class identifier once someone gains professional employment diminishes their agency and obscures any difficulties they may have experienced in comparison to someone with advantaged forms of capital. This first section reports the main findings in relation to the three research questions.

### *What Makes an Academic 'Working Class'?*

Almost all respondents embraced the descriptor 'working-class academic' as "it describes people like us, on the margins of academia" [Sal, a Lecturer in Social Studies at a traditional institution]. Chapter Two identified and described the four elements that comprise a working-class academic identity:

*Family Background*
This was not a uniform experience. Some had the typical markers of a working class upbringing e.g. free school meals, council housing (60 per cent of interviewees), and poverty (65 per cent of interviewees). The remaining respondents had a childhood that was more financially stable, but all lacked the large social networks useful for employment opportunities. Their cultural capital was varied and had been largely influenced by their family's financial resources.

*An Uneven Access to Capital*
Compared to their advantaged colleagues, working class academics were always playing 'catch up' with their cultural capital. Any financial advantages were delayed due to large debts accrued as students or patchy economic capital as almost half (41%) were on precarious contracts, with no savings or family support. While their cultural capital increased this had mainly been developed during their time in academia. Cultural biases meant their social networks remained small.

*A Lack of a Safety Net to 'Manage' Academic Precarity*
Over half of respondents earned more than £35k per annum, yet 90 per cent of respondents did not have financial support from their family. One third of interviewees said they were in debt and 20 per cent did not own their own home. Just under half that were on precarious contracts did not have the economic capital to take time out to write the articles/funding applications needed for permanency.

*A 'Habitus War' (Bentley 2020: 27)*
There was not one dominant form of habitus among the respondents, but all were conflicted in some manner. One third noted that the reconciliation process between their class heritage and the preferred middle-class habitus had been painful. This had led to difficult relationships with their family and friends. A further third were able to 'pass' as being an elite or middle-class academic but wondered if it was worth it. The final third had a chameleon like habitus—'one person for work, another for home'. Whatever their experience, being "one of only a few was very isolating" (Svoboda 2012).

### *Broad Experiences of the Academy*

One of two overarching themes were found in most interviews:

*Precarity*
Just under half of respondents were on fixed term contracts. Twenty per cent of these had visited foodbanks within the last 12 months, and 15 per cent had struggled to pay their mortgage/rent, to the point that they had been on the verge of homelessness. Precarity had a classed impact:

- Income insecurity was especially difficult as 20 per cent of my respondents provided financial support to their parents or siblings. Other were only able to sustain their employment as their partner earned a high income.
- Work-life balance—male respondents were open about the fact that the stress they experienced from these precarious contracts was negatively affecting their relationships.
- Ill health—Three quarters of those on fixed-term contracts reported poor mental and physical health. Mainly female academics reported these health issues.

Respondents with disabilities were able to draw upon their familial/ social capital from their families and friends e.g. parents would read research papers out loud, and wait for them to drive them home if they were unwell. Online communities were sources of moral support.

*Hostility*

There were feelings of inadequacy among my interviewees, with many reporting that they did not 'fit in' due to the following:

- Acenteeism—a particular issue for those with regional accents and from Russell group institutions. An accent can be welcoming for students from similar backgrounds
- Humour—respondents saw their sense of humour as a marker of class distinction. Some, feeling cautious, 'toned down' their sense of humour in order to fit in with their surroundings, others used it as part of their pedagogy
- Clothing—female respondents worried about the 'rules of the game' regarding academic attire. Male respondents faced direct comments from colleagues about their clothes, for example, being critiqued if they did not wear a suit
- Food—respondents, mainly from elite institutions, were concerned about their food literacy and their lack of ease at formals
- Tattoos—10 per cent of respondents had tattoos. While potentially problematic for their image as an academic, some saw them as a way of resisting middle-class femininity.

Microaggressions were a key feature of academia. Class-based hostility included lazy stereotypes about disadvantaged communities, for example 'chavs'. Male respondents appeared to experience fewer, but more direct examples, while female, and BME respondents, received less direct, but more frequent examples of microagressions. Racial microaggressions were reported frequently. Anecdotal data suggested that BME respondents experienced more racially motivated microaggressions because the assumption was that they were middle class. Anecdotal data suggests that the longer someone is in the academy, the less microaggressions they experienced.

*The Qualities Working Class Academics Bring to Academia*

Two key themes were found: student support, and a working-class pedagogy.

*Student Support*
Respondents supported students in higher education by:

- Providing advice and guidance regarding HE in informal community settings.
- Being a visible presence of class differences at open days, especially for those considering STEM subjects.

They also supported students through higher education by:

- Helping them to construct a professional identity by fostering a sense of belonging in the academy (especially useful for students from disadvantaged backgrounds)
- Bringing in professional, working-class role models from outside the academy. Little was discussed about supporting students after higher education apart from attempts to hold graduate events.

The sheer exhaustion of providing this care work should not be underestimated. A paper by Wilson et al. (2020) in part talks of the "guilty burden of pastoral care" (p. 5), where mainly female academics are "overworked…pressurised and over-burdened by the volume of pastoral cases" (ibid.). While this book has found that working-class men are very supportive to students, students will often opt for female academics as they are deemed to be approachable (Heijstra et al. 2017).

*A Working-Class Academic Pedagogy*
Interview data also identified a 'working-class academic pedagogy'. A teaching approach with social justice at its heart, it engaged with students from a strength's perspective, embraced shared experiences and encouraged students as co-creators of knowledge.

*Forms of Working-Class Academic Capital*
Respondents had various forms of capital according to the framework by Yosso (2005).

**Aspirational Capital**
Aspirational capital referred to the ability to aspire and dream despite challenges. For instance:

- Respondents persisted with their aim of working in academia despite challenging times
- Being role models in academia meant that they provided the critical encouragement for students so that they, in turn, would persist despite the barriers they may face.

**Familial/social Capital**
Familial/social capital is focused on community well-being that can manifest as caring and nurturing. For instance:

- Respondents with disabilities on fixed term contracts received practical and emotional support from their families and friends and online communities (that focused on disability)
- BME academics were able to draw upon this capital to help them cope with racially motivated microagressions
- Being a visible presence of class differences at open days and for those considering entry into STEM subjects
- Demonstrating a commitment to community well-being by bringing in professional, working-class role models from outside the academy

**Linguistic Capital**
This type of capital relates to the ability for students to develop communication skills through various experiences. While accent was a site of various microaggressions, one's style of speaking was also referred to being a very visible example of the diversity needed in academia.

**Navigational Capital**
This form of capital related to the various strategies used in navigating social institutions. These strategies were used to support students. For instance:

- By providing IAG in informal community settings
- Sharing personal experiences that provide insight into their own strategies for navigating academia

**Resistance Capital**
This means to challenge inequity and subordination.

There are a number of examples given, some of which had clear practical impact.

- Recognising their 'working-classness' as an asset
- Overhauling the reimbursement culture in their institution
- Rejecting a middle-class, academic femininity by dressing in ways where they would 'stand out', and displaying 'rebellious' markers such as tattoos, nose rings and buzz cut hair styles.

## Moving Forward

We have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education than ever before.[1] The working-class academic has an especially important role to play in this era. "Like never before, there is a need to show the public that intellectual enquiry is not the sole preserve of the middle and upper classes …" (Stiles 2017 cited in Binns 2019: 115). Based on my findings, I have the following recommendations for working-class academics to take into their pedagogy and research.

### *Recognise Class Inequalities*

This book has outlined many class based inequalities, but as Ardoin and martinez (2019) highlight, there are more:

- *As individuals*—assumptions about intelligence and professionalism, expectations regarding attire, language and communication style, mentoring and discussions about housing, dinner and vacations (p. 182). *For instance, don't presume that all students from disadvantaged back-grounds will have rusty study skills.*
- *In departments*—recruitment and hiring practices, membership of professional organisations, reimbursements (ibid.). *For instance, consider how the reimbursement culture stops people on fixed term contracts from being able to access opportunities such as going to their first conference or to be a key note speaker.*
- *On campus*—deposits for registrations and housing, welcome week, family weekends, internships, student engagement (ibid.). *For instance some working-class academics may be ideal for student engagement and retention.*

Recognising class inequalities is vital as it "creates moments for learning, allows us to consider ways to be inclusive and encourages action". A form of action could be a co-created research project (with students) to

examine class inequalities in their institution. But this is an area that ultimately institutions need to address in their policies. While not a protected characteristic, the Equality Act includes the 'Socioeconomic Duty', which requires government and all public bodies to have due regard for 'reducing the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage'. Currently only the Welsh government has enacted the Socioeconomic Duty. As mentioned by Friedman and Laurison (2019), I would ask readers to put pressure on the UK Government to support this by writing to their MP and asking them to support the Early Day Motion. #1forequality, a campaign led by Just Fair and The Equality Trust (https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk) has a link to a template letter that you can use.

### *Challenge Stereotypes about Working Class Communities*

Too often, "working class" is an offensive caricature e.g. a racist hooligan, an alcoholic thug; sexually available (for females), or brainless, feckless scroungers (Ginsburgh 2012). I have listed other stereotypes in earlier chapters of this book which are just as derogatory. There are rarely ever positive representations of working-class communities in the media (remember Benefits Street?). As an applied sociologist, I see the curriculum as being the ideal place to root out damaging stereotypes. Reflect on your own teaching and consider:

- Does class diversity feature in your module material?
- Do you challenge the ways students think about class, or;
- Do you (unintentionally) perpetuate the myth that there are no class distinctions?

For those outside of arts and humanities subjects, how culturally diverse are your classes? Research into this area may find that like Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003), a student's social class is a factor in entering the elite fields of medicine and law (see p. 169). Are your subject areas the same? We need to know more about this so I encourage research in these areas. The next step is to consider what can be done to address any underlying issues.

### *Show Solidarity to Others on the Margins of Academia*

My book has shown examples of solidarity between working class academics for instance, their attempts to reverse the reimbursement culture, and support via the HE strikes over the last few years. We need to be allies for our colleagues employed on exploitative contracts as acts of resistance are easier to do if in a settled position. But we can go further. Like Freidman and Laurison (2019) I recommend that academics use an intersectional analysis when researching working class identities (and any subject for that matter). DiAngelo noted in Chap. 1, that while she faced classism and sexism her white privilege insulated her from the racism faced by BME women from working class backgrounds. Examples of racial microagressions in this book are too numerous to ignore. Our solidarity needs to extend to BME academics from *any* background as they remain under-represented and are far more likely to occupy entry level and junior roles in universities (Bhopal and Jackson 2013; Equality Challenge Unit, 2014 cited in Miller 2016) for what can only be discrimination. A 2019 UCU analysis found that while one in nine white academic staff (11 per cent) are professors, compared to one in 15 (7 per cent) of Asian academic staff are professors, and just one in 33 (3 per cent) black academic staff. Alongside this, 93 per cent of professors are white, as are 91 percent of academic-related managers. There is also an ethnicity pay gap of 9 per cent between white and BME staff. Although black academic staff are paid 14 per cent less than white academic staff. Academics with disabilities also need our support as they work in a field where capacity is conflated with quality (Walsh 2017). In Brown and Leigh's (2018) article on ableism in academia, they talk of how a support group for female academics with disability had more than 60 members within 24 hours. Inckle (2018) reports there being a battle to get the reasonable adjustments which are a requirement under the Equality Act (2010)—something mentioned by two of my own respondents. This is "additional unpaid labour which has significant mental health and career impacts as well as violating principles of equality" (Inckle 2018: 1372).

### *Reach out to Likeminded Academics*

I urge you to reach out to other working class academics. They might not be doing as well as you are. This could be done by raising the issue of class (although be careful, a small group of my respondents received a negative reaction when they did this). You might want to 'reach out' by reading texts

by like-minded academics. I recommend the work of Diane Reay, Beverley Skeggs, Lisa McKenzie, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison, and a collection by Thatcher et al. (2018). *Bourdieu: The Next Generation. The Development of Bourdieu's Intellectual Heritage in Contemporary UK Sociology.*

There are also societies and associations relating to working class academics:

- Working-Class Academics (WCA) advocates for students and faculty of poverty and working-class origins, strives to implement reforms designed to assure greater class equity within colleges and universities (For more details: https://wcstudiesassociation.wordpress.com/working-class-academics-section/). I was fortunate to attend and speak at their inaugural conference. The excitement of being able to speak without fear of critique of one's regional accent, or supposed lack of cultural capital, was palpable.
- *Association of Working Class Academics*—an international collection of academics who have formed the association in order to support the working class in academia. Their aims are: to helping academic colleagues overcome the barriers throughout their careers, amassing data on the challenges facing working class academics, provide advice; support the sector in recognising and removing the barriers and collecting good practice. (For more details https://workingclassacademics.com)

### *Remember the Capital You Bring to Academia*

Throughout this book I have drawn upon the excellent work by Professor Tara Yosso to discuss the various forms of capital working-class academics bring to the academy. At times it is too easy for scholars from the margins to focus on where they are supposedly in deficit, what they lack. So, consider the following:

- What is your cultural wealth?
- What do you bring to academia?
- What are your funds of knowledge?

### *Concluding Remarks*

Throughout this book I have never forgotten my readers. Whether they be a working-class academic who has questions, perhaps unsure of why they do not feel as if they 'fit in', or a student who has recently entered

higher education and is maybe feeling bewildered. I hope that this book defies any notion that the working class have inferior norms, values, skills and knowledge. As Shukie (2020) so beautifully reminds us, "Working Class is not an accent to be lost … a savagery to be civilised … a roughness to be polished … [or] a background to be assimilated" (para. 24).

Instead we sparkle with pedagogical gifts, represent a bridge between "'educated' middle-class life to the 'real' world" (Greenwald and Grant 1999: 28) and are armed with an immense cultural wealth that challenges academia. To paraphrase Shukie (2020), working class is achievement. Working class is a space of philosophy, art, science. Working class are active creators of knowledge not the passive subject of other people's. Working Class as Academics (para. 24).

## Note

1. Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) was developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in HE. Each of these groups represents around 20 per cent of young people and are ranked from quintile 1 (Q1) (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (Q5) (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged). Pupils in the most advantaged quintile are more than twice as likely to progress to HE as those from the most disadvantaged quintile at 57.9% compared to 26.4% in 2017/18. There has been some narrowing of the gap over time with the progression rate for the most advantaged increasing by 6.6 percentage points since 2009/10 compared to 8.4 percentage points for the most disadvantaged.

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