

EMERALD STUDIES IN THE
SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION



Working-Class People in UK Higher Education

Precarities, Perspectives
and Progress

Edited by

JESS PILGRIM-BROWN, TERESA CREW
& ÉIREANN ATTRIDGE

Working-Class People in UK Higher Education

Emerald Studies in the Sociology of Education

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This series aims to provide a clear understanding of sociological approaches to the study of education, drawing on a range of scales and contexts around the key dilemmas of education, society and social change. Books in the series contribute to knowledge in differing national and historical contexts and explore 'big ideas' such as inequality, power, and identity and their application to contemporary educational issues and debates.

Working-Class People in UK Higher Education: Precarities, Perspectives and Progress

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Editors

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Sarah McLaughlin entered higher education as a mature student and later qualified as a sociology teacher. Her time spent teaching adults on an Access to Higher Education and foundation degree courses, and her personal journey as a working-class single mother successfully returning to education, motivated her doctorate in education research. Her doctoral thesis 'Educating the Ritas' is a narrative enquiry into the lived experience of mature working-class women returning to education via an Access course. Sarah is now a Lecturer and an MSc. She is a Co-Lead in health professions education at Bristol University. She is a working-class academic, and proud.

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Ed Penn recently completed his doctorate in Education at the University of Oxford's Department of Education, where he researched the norms and constructions of fairness and merit governing Oxford's undergraduate admissions

routes and the impact which innovative admissions reforms have upon them. He now teaches academic skills at two colleges in Oxford, alongside research on graduate admissions reform. His work employs Bourdieu's conceptual tools, particularly habitus and its institutional outgrowths. He is interested in the links between admissions practices and teaching at 'elite' universities and the narratives which inform them, in classed student transitions, and in socio-academic identities and their links to academic practice. Prior to becoming a researcher, he worked in widening participation as a practitioner.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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If you picture a university campus, what do you see? Neo-classical buildings and faux-renaissance architecture, high-tech classrooms, library shelves with rows of expensive books bound in leather; shiny polished hallways with notices emblazoned on their walls; cafeterias serving a myriad of flavoured iced lattes; well-manicured landscapes with well-ordered borders and uniform trees. Who do you encounter as you venture through those buildings? Who do you meet? Beyond the lecture halls and seminar rooms, countless individuals keep the institution running. The cleaner that arrives before dawn, navigating empty corridors they may never study in, leaving before the first academic arrives, through doors they'll never use. A research administrator, the first in her family to ever enter such university spaces; she manages a million-pound research project budget but still feels like an outsider, an alien in a chimeric, illusionary world. A porter whose local knowledge frequently goes unrecognised ensures the safety and smooth running of the university and is regularly on hand to protect those within the university walls. A mature student whose practical knowledge and experience often goes unrecognised as they navigate competing challenges between work, home and studying that his contemporaries cannot imagine. These are some of the working-class people and experiences in higher education (HE) narratives that remain largely untold, both hiding in plain sight and obscured by the entrenched cultures that perpetuate our industry.

This book addresses an unreported world, providing the first comprehensive exploration into the other working-class experiences in UK (HE) which have been largely isolated from research and left out of the dominant pathways of discourse and attention. Working-class people exist within institutions in a multifaceted kaleidoscope of ways; in research administration, in pre- and post-award finance, in cleaning roles, as receptionists, executive assistants, as porters, security guards, as mature students, in managerial roles, in HR, as academics, pracademics, and through many other indefinite parameters. This book is the first of its kind in the

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United Kingdom, which aims to bring all these people together, even in the most modest of exploratory ways, in one singular volume; tessellating the diverse mosaic of interactions and realities that working-class people have in isolating environments such as the academy.

Context and Significance

This comprehensive edited collection of working-class experiences across a number of university roles comes at a crucial moment. The urgency of examining these diverse experiences in HE has never been greater. Rising inequalities, the cost-of-living crisis and questions of authentic, versus tokenistic, inclusion make this examination crucial. With recent industrial action undertaken across universities by many staff, alongside growing precarity and widening socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, understanding the university experience across all roles has become vital for institutional reform. The increasing marginalisation of HE and debates around who it is that universities truly serve make this edited collection particularly timely. By bringing together previously unheard voices, we challenge traditional narratives about who belongs in academia and also some of the dominant ideas about working-class people in UK society. People from working-class backgrounds, and with working-class heritage, exist in university spaces in a myriad of different ways, and with a plethora of intersecting roles, identities and experiences. The preparation for writing the proposal for this book was established when, on doing a thorough scope of the field of literature in this field, it appeared that working-class experiences tended, in the United Kingdom at least, to focus predominantly on the accounts of academics, and what might be considered more ‘traditional’ students; students who had transitioned from school to university as 18 or 19 year olds, and had gone on to study standard subjects, usually at elite universities (Pilgrim-Brown, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

While the scope of literature in working-class studies has been expanding with regards to UK HE over the course of the last 5 to 10 years, the canon of work in this space still continues to revolve around these critical two demographics. As Crew has identified in her work with working-class academics (2020, 2021, 2022, 2024a, 2024b), and Attridge continues to do throughout her latest avenues of research (2021), the various ways in which working-class identities intersect with other demographic characteristics, inequalities and experiences, such as race and disability, have been largely omitted from this body of work. Further, Pilgrim-Brown (2023, 2024a, 2024b) has also explored how the expanse of working-class stakeholders operating in non-academic roles has also been left largely unaccounted for; despite growing research in the field of working-class studies in HE, large swathes of this population remain unaccounted for in our research praxis. And yet, for those who work and exist within our institutions, the double-deficit of multiple intersecting identities has a significant impact on their

existence within the space of UK HE, and their ability to transit and progress within, and through it.

This collection expands on several key theoretical foundations. Many contributing authors from within and beyond the field of sociology draw upon Pierre Bourdieu and his theories of cultural and social capital, to understand how working-class people navigate academic spaces designed for, and by the middle and upper classes. This theoretical lens helps explain the exclusionary practices and invisible barriers that persist in HE. Further, recognising there is no one working-class experience, we draw upon intersectionality, a theory developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), to understand how class intersects with other forms of identity in academic spaces. Bringing a diverse range of contributors together, throughout this book, you will see a range of theories employed from Goffman to Freire. Considering many of the contributing authors are from working-class backgrounds, their contributions hold importance beyond research alone. Thus, many of the chapters here offer more practical emphasis, providing recommendations for policy, pedagogic practice and more general tips for survival within the academy.

Aims of this Book

This book sets out to accomplish several interconnected aims that build upon one another. At its foundation, we seek to create a comprehensive record of historically excluded voices. This naturally leads us to highlight the intersectional challenges and opportunities these individuals face. Through these authentic accounts, we demonstrate how working-class perspectives enhance academic practice, offering unique insights that can transform institutional approaches. Building on these insights, we propose concrete ways to make academia more inclusive, translating lived experiences into actionable change. Ultimately, we position the integration of working-class voices as fundamental to academia's revival and survival, arguing that true institutional excellence can only be achieved through genuine diversity of perspective and experience.

Methodological Approach

Our innovative methodological approach reflects our commitment to authentic representation and collaborative knowledge production. The editors and our contributors represent diverse roles, career pathways, experiences, institutions and subject areas across the UK. Above all, we are a collective partnership of 27 authors, living and working beyond the praxis of traditional academic expectations. We employed a novel methodology in the book's construction and design, dedicated to ensuring that each author's voice is represented accurately and that the collection reflects each contributor as fully as possible. We believe strongly in our value as a collective body of academics, and this belief shaped our entire process. Consequently, during the book's construction we had 'section meetings' for contributors in each area. Prior to these meetings, contributors received copies

of all rough first drafts in their section and during these gatherings the group provided feedback on one another's work. Throughout the editing process, we implemented multiple rounds of changes, edits and suggestions until both editors and contributing authors were satisfied with each chapter and how well it represented each voice in the final piece. This required vulnerability on all parts and a dismantling of traditional power structures. We as editors were also challenged on our feedback and suggestions and the collection is a better piece as a result. It was vital to us that this book provided contributors with networks of like-minded collaborators who they would be able to work with on other projects subsequent to this book. Indeed, several collaborative projects have already emerged from these connections. The hidden mythology inherent with academic career pathways is a dangerous and restrictive feature of the occupation; demythologising this rather foggy landscape and encouraging solidarity was fundamental to the methodological approach of this collection. Many working-class academics (as is evidenced throughout this book) are often at the receiving end of negative, demeaning and directly harmful feedback and criticism as part of their challenge in navigating traditional academic outputs (e.g. academic journals). To counter this, an ethos of kind, friendly, constructive feedback was also part of the fundamental nature within the process of amalgamating this book, in all its technicolour, and multidimensional beauty.

While the individual chapters reflect contributions from across career stages, pathways and experiences they also reflect the diverse and often novel methodological terrain that working-class writers and academics use within their work. This book features work that draws upon autoethnography, co-production, interviews, reflections from literature, focus groups, surveys and others; thus, creating a rich tapestry of working-class voices and illuminating their realities. Just as there is no single working-class experience within academia, there is no single way of best researching or representing these experiences.

Overview of this Book

This book is organised into five sections.

The first section explores working-class academic identity through language, disability and regional representation, demonstrating their vital role in academia. It shows why working-class academics are essential for culturally competent research and representation amid current socio-economic challenges.

The second section examines the student journey and how working-class students navigate personal identity and authenticity in academia through the intersecting experiences of disability, age and language. These accounts reveal the complex navigation of elite spaces, class-based barriers and assumptions about merit.

The third section outlines how working-class pedagogical approaches and knowledge production through examining teaching methods, researcher positionality and community engagement in academia. The chapters collectively demonstrate how working-class perspectives can enrich academic practice.

The fourth section examines power hierarchies through non-academic staff experiences, including professional services, librarians and ancillary workers. It reveals class inequalities while highlighting these often-overlooked contributors to HE.

The final section examines lasting impacts of class identity in academia through imposter syndrome, reflections on identity. It concludes with transformative recommendations for making HE more inclusive for working-class people.

Conclusion

This collection represents a significant intervention in terms of how we understand class in HE. While readers may recognise their own stories here, or discover new ways of experiencing academia, this book's importance extends beyond individual narratives. By bringing together these previously unexamined accounts – from the cleaning staff arriving before dawn to the mature student juggling multiple responsibilities, from the administrator navigating complex power dynamics to the academic challenging traditional knowledge hierarchies – we reveal both the challenges and the vital contributions of working-class people across university spaces.

These stories collectively demonstrate that working-class experiences are not merely stories to be documented but sources of knowledge that can transform HE. For practitioners and policymakers, this collection provides concrete recommendations for creating more inclusive institutions. For scholars, it creates new theoretical perspectives on how class operates across university spaces. For working-class people, it offers recognition, solidarity and opportunities for change. Ultimately, this book is not just about who belongs in the ivory tower; it's about reimagining what the tower could look like when all voices are truly heard.

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Chapter 2

Academic Terminology

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“Welcome to Michaelmas Term”
I don’t feel very welcome
On the back foot
before I’ve even set foot
on campus.

Words as gate-keepers
middle-class markers
signposts for prestige.
Better get used to it
my codes need switching.

“By the end of Lent Term. . .”
I’ll understand it’s *their* language from *their* schools.
A continuation. Tradition.
The tradition of exclusion
as if there was any doubt.

Different terms for different terms
Hilary. Trinity. Epiphany.
Here’s my epiphany –
I don’t belong
because I was never meant to.

Autumn
Spring
Summer
The accessibility of the seasons.
“These events are free and open to all.”

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