Experiences of Academics from a Working-Class Heritage

Experiences of Academics from a Working-Class Heritage:

Ghosts of Childhood Habitus

By

Carole Binns

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Experiences of Academics from a Working-Class Heritage:
Ghosts of Childhood Habitus

By Carole Binns

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3782-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3782-8

For Joseph

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part Two: Being an academic from a working-class heritage – what does this mean and what can it look like?

Part Three: Discussing the lived experiences of the interviewees

LIST OF TABLES

List of Appendices

FOREWORD

A personal reflection

I am an academic who is from a working-class heritage. Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden (1962), the authors of 'Education and the Working Class', revealed that their book (which was mostly based on interviews with working-class parents and their grown-up children on the grammar school experiences of a northern English town) was a difficult text to write. For me, and for one reason or another, it was a difficult book to read because it struck a number of personal chords.

Whilst involved in the initial phases of writing this book I was taken with a passage that Lovett and Lovett wrote in 2016 (p.146) about how someone's personality might not change despite their social circumstances altering:

> *"A person's individual identity is shaped by his/her ties with others and who an individual perceives their 'self' to be is both contemporary as well as chronological and always subject to change … While people might be classified socially and culturally by others it is how individuals personally identify themselves that is the most important aspect for those individuals in knowing who they are."*

As such, and for me personally (and despite the fact that I work in what is considered to be a middle-class profession) I remain an academic who sees herself as working-class.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the fourteen academics that came forward from the university in which they are employed, and who volunteered to be interviewed for the study. Without those interviews there would be no data, and as a consequence, no written work. I am grateful to you all.

I would also like to thank my home institution for granting me a short period of sabbatical leave so that I could write a number of book chapters. My appreciation is also directed to Professor Ivan Reid, Professor Peter Hartley and Mr Peter Hughes who reviewed my book proposal and offered useful feedback. My thanks go to Dr. Yunis Alam, with whom I talked about conceptual ideas for this book, and also to Professor Simon Duncan, who introduced me to a number of texts influenced by Pierre Bourdieu as I was previously unfamiliar with this work, not having studied sociology as a student.

My gratitude also goes to Professor Ian Burkitt who very helpfully read the first draft of this book, and also to Adam Rummens and Sophie Edminson at Cambridge Scholars who provided invaluable advice and typesetting assistance. Lastly, I would like to thank the small group of librarians who are employed at community libraries, and who saw me working at their computers for several hours a week. Thank you for making me an appreciated mug of tea every now and again.

PART ONE:

INFORMING THE READER

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

1.1 Setting the scene

This work is an exploration of the experiences of being a university academic, but from the perspective of being an academic who is from a working-class heritage. It will be of interest to a global audience, and it has been written with new or aspiring academics in mind - particularly those who come from a working-class background themselves. However, the interview material and findings drawn from it will also be of much interest to more established academics and also to students of sociology, education studies and those interested in social class and social mobility.

Elliot Major and Machin's (2018, p.19) work entitled 'Social Mobility and Its Enemies' makes the point that *"In Britain it has become increasingly the case that where you come from – who you are born to and where you are born – matters more than ever for where you are going to."* Their findings advocate that many people remain on the same point on the social ladder as their parents.

However, this book is about a small group of people who travelled, via the process of achieving social mobility, up the social ladder both in educational and career terms. It is also a book that reveals how this group of people managed to do this, and more importantly perhaps, it explores the lived experiences of their transition. In addition, it considers whether they feel that their heritage consciously or subconsciously seeps into their professional interactions with students, and particularly in respect to the sector-practice of widening participation of the undergraduate and postgraduate cohort.

These lived experiences were verbalized by the 14 tenured academics who were interviewed for this project and who were also employed in one UK university. Whilst the interview material and academic content is confined to the UK, the findings will appeal to international scholars also, and particularly those located in the USA and Australia where texts concerning

working-class academics have been published. As such, factual information explaining the context of the UK higher education sector has been written into sections of Chapter Two. However, UK academics, and especially those who are more professionally established, can choose not to engage with these sections if they wish.

The qualitative semi-structured interviews were executed during the early spring of 2018, which was during a time when higher education had been (and still is) operating in an era of significant change, particularly when looking at changes that concern the profiles of undergraduates entering the sector. This first chapter introduces the aims and objectives of the book, and its main underpinnings, by engaging with some of the issues and discussion points around academia and 'working-classness' that are highlighted in some of the existing literature. It also distinguishes this study from previous work in the field. Towards the end of the chapter, I briefly describe the methods used to elicit and analyse the qualitative interviews that feature (as verbatim interview extracts) in the discussions set out in some of the subsequent chapters. As these extracts are formed by the spoken word, there may be some grammatical and language inconsistencies.

A brief general overview of the anonymous university that employed the interviewees (Chapter 1.4), and a general profile of academics (employed in the sector as a whole) is also included (Chapter 1.5), and much of this has been reproduced from *Binns, C (2017) Module Design in a Changing Era of Higher Education: academic identity, cognitive dissonance and institutional barriers,(2017), Palgrave Macmillan, published by Springer Nature*, and reproduced with permission from Palgrave MacMillan. Some of Chapter Two (located in parts of 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.41) and which concern the historical changes in higher education in the last few decades is also reproduced from that same book, and again with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

The interviewees who took part in the study spoke candidly about their childhoods, their school and college (or first job) experiences, their direction of travel into higher education, how they came to be academics, how they felt when they first entered the sector, what it is like to work in a predominantly middle-class profession, their relationship between home and work, their experiences of professional networking, and if they thought that their working-class heritage influenced their working relationships with students. Using the words of Jackson and Marsden (1973, p.15) this book is also *"... about working-class children turning*

into middle-class citizens."

Almost all of the interviewees engaged in a reflective and very considered narrative about their understanding of 'class', whether such a thing actually exists, and what the term 'working-class' means to them. They were aware that I too am from a working-class heritage, and as they spoke, interviewees consciously reflected on whether or not their experiences and journeys within the higher education sector were a consequence of them having this background, or if they were more to do with their personal circumstances that were not related to class. As such they discussed their upbringing, their work ethic, their individual personalities, their childhood traits, and occasionally their gender. Unpicking these thought processes from the concept of being 'from a working-class heritage' formed much of the interview content.

Lovett and Lovett (2016, p.147) identify that *"An understanding of class is best achieved when studied in conjunction with other social identities like race and gender"* and whilst this is something that I would agree with, it is not something that I have acted upon in this study, and particularly when analysing the data. For example, I have not made reference in the text if the verbatim interview extract was given by a man or a woman. Part of the reason for this was because I did not want to endanger the reassurances that I had given to interviewees that I would do everything that I could to ensure anonymity. Some of the interviewees voiced that they felt very sensitive about a perceived risk that they might be identified through the verbatim transcript data, and I have respected those concerns. As such, I have also taken the unusual approach of not using transcript / interviewee codes (e.g. transcript numbers) because the proportion of academics in the university of focus who are from a working-class heritage appeared to be small.

Following the first couple of interviews, I realised that the quantity of the interview data, the depth and richness of it, and the quality of the reflective interview responses was going to be far greater than my initial expectations. For example, and for some of the participants, their answers to the first question (which focused on the social background of the participants, their upbringings and their childhood experiences) underpinned so many of the responses to some of the subsequent questions.

I have researched academics, academic life and academic practices before, and have always found that such participants are easy to interview. I find

that generally, academics will simply tell you 'how it is'. The interviewees who took part in this research study were no exception. However, and for this study, the pace of the interviews was much slower, and the responses were very much more considered and insightful, in that the participants stepped out of the work arena and ventured into matters that concerned their personal histories. As such and as already alluded to, some of the respondents were concerned about issues of anonymity and confidentiality to an extent that I had not experienced before. In addition, a number of the interviewees shed tears during their time with me, but many of them also said that they found the experience a rewarding one, in that they felt that the topic that was being explored was very important. I am therefore indebted to the fourteen academics that came forward and entrusted me with their highly personal recollections and experiences.

Because I interviewed academics from only one UK university, it is possible that the issues discussed in this book are not unique to that institution. In addition, they might not be exclusive to academics from a working-class heritage as other people who were raised in different circumstances might experience at least some of them also. Therefore I have not made any claims to representation. What I have presented, however, are my observations of the data. Indeed is very possible that readers who are also from a working-class heritage, and who are not employed in academia, but who work in another predominantly middle-class profession, might come across material in this book that resonates with them too.

1.2 The aims of the book

One of the outcomes of the report produced by the Social Mobility Commission (26 January 2017) was that in a professional work environment, people from working-class backgrounds are less likely to access professional networks and work opportunities, achieve equal levels of success and keep up with the salaries of their colleagues. The Commission cited other works from MacMillan et al. (2015) and Friedman et al. (2015) that stated that in some instances, this is because these people don't even apply for such things in the first place, and may not apply for promotion because of anxieties about not being able to *"fit in"* (2017, p.20). In addition the report stated that many professions that have traditionally employed people with a middle-class background continue to be dominated by those from such upbringings and that *"even when comparing individuals with the same education, occupation and level of*

experience, those from working-class backgrounds are still paid £2,242 less than more privileged colleagues" (Social Mobility Commission 2017, p.1). There were also references to the concept that people from working-class backgrounds tend to experience conscious and unconscious discrimination in the workplace (Allen 2017).

The report focused on various professional career paths, including those associated with medicine, law, IT, engineering and journalism. But it also included academia – indeed it stated that 58% of academics included in the survey were from a middle-class background, compared to only 14% from a working-class background. The remainder of academics belonged to those groups whose parents were (or had been) employed in intermediate professions such as secretaries, police officers and clerical officers (Social Mobility Commission 2017, p.36). However, and on the 'other side of higher education', e.g. the admission of under-graduate students, the sector is welcoming applicants from more diverse educational, social, and economic backgrounds than ever before. Indeed despite the growth in the diversity of the student population (which includes a growing number of those from lower social groups) the higher education sector predominantly employs middle-class academics, and this suggests that there might be an increasingly widening gap between the staff profile and that of students. Conceptually therefore, there appears on at least these grounds alone, to be a cultural, class, and potentially widening mismatch within the sector, and this puts a different slant on the current discourse around the concept of 'widening participation' within higher education. As such, a book that embraces how academics from a working-class heritage see and locate themselves within the sector (which in turn explores and informs us of how they perceive their academic identity within it) and the effect that this might have on their practice, is in the era of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the newly formed Office for Students (OfS), a timely proposition. The focus of the TEF and the OfS is presented in Chapter Two, but one of the things that the TEF focuses on is the student experience of higher education and by holding higher education institutions to account, it is designed to help them to focus on what actually matters to students. This is an issue that is picked up later on in this book, when the interviewees reflect on their own experiences of being a student and how this has influenced their approach to teaching and their observations in the classroom and beyond.

In line with a number of other sector institutions, the student population at the university in which this study took place includes a wide cultural and social population of undergraduates and postgraduate scholars who have

come from a variety of educational establishments including mixed-gender comprehensive schools, academies, sixth-form colleges, and colleges of further education. As such, one of the questions that the participants were asked was if they felt that their engagement with students was influenced by their social class. The reason why this question was asked was because the university that was used in this study attracts a very large proportion of students who do not have a middle-class heritage. How the interviewees responded to this question forms part of Chapter Six.

1.3 The existing literature, prior authors, and the focus of their work

There are a number of texts that focus on working-class academics. Some of the more well-known books include 'Strangers in Paradise*: Academics From The Working Class'* (Ryan and Sackrey 1984), 'This Fine Place So Far From Home*: Voices of Academics from the Working Class"* (Barney Dews and Leste Law 1995) and 'Coming to Class*: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers*' (McMillan et al. 1998) All focus on the perceived struggles, and sometimes accomplishments, of this social group at that point in time.

In the book *'Strangers in Paradise': Academics From The Working Class',* Ryan and Sackrey (1984) discuss the auto-biographical upwardly mobile experiences of 24 USA college professors in respect to their experiences of adjusting from a working-class background to life in the academe. The book assembles their experiences into three main recurring themes, and the first concerns the phenomenon of living in 'two vastly different worlds'. This leads to the second theme, which is 'perceived class conflict'. Thirdly, the book offers personal accounts of how the professors coped in the workplace.

Barney Dews and Leste Law's (1995) work (*'This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class')* also includes autobiographical and self-analytical essays written by USA professors and graduate students (from a working-class background) telling their own stories. These contributors spoke of their frustrations within the academe and especially in the way that the academic environment operates.

The work by Shepard et al. (1998, *'Coming to class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers')* is again set in the USA, and includes 21 reflective essays which embrace the effect of class on teaching practice and the working relationships between teacher and student.

These texts were written over twenty years ago, although they can be bought quite easily from online book stores. All were influential in the drafting of the interview schedule used in the interviews for this study, in that the questions drew on the concepts of living in two social worlds, understanding the hierarchical processes of the academe, and how being from a working-class background affects (or not as the case might be) professional relationships with students.

There is some more recent work however. For example Michell, Wilson and Archer (2015) edited an Australian collection of accounts as told by academics from a working-class background. Some of these stories refer to being female, or a migrant. Reay wrote a book chapter on 'The Double-Bind of the Working Class Feminist Academic' (first published in 1997), and Wakeling (2010), in a University of York database publication, asks 'Is there such thing as a working-class academic?' The latter provides a discussion of class in academia (although much of the reviewed literature was published between 1994 - 1997).

Like other books on this subject, Reay's (1997) chapter draws on autobiographical data. Writing partially from a feminist perspective, she alludes to 'imposter syndrome', and asserts that *"... the female academic from a working class background is unlikely ever to feel at home in academia."* (1997, p.22). By writing a lot about the perceived problems with upward social mobility and the need to belong, Reay asserts that *"if you have grown up working-class you know that the solution to class inequalities does not lie in making the working classes middle class but in working at dismantling and sharing out the economic, social and cultural capital which go with middle class status ..."* (p.25). These observations were something that I wanted to explore in this study, and so one of the interview questions was designed to encourage people to talk about this.

Hurst and Nenga (2016) and Muzatti (2005) provide two recent texts which focus on working-class academics reconciling their position in higher education, but again the first book was written in the USA, and in the case of Muzatti, Canada. Like many of the texts mentioned above, Muzatti employs a collection of multi-disciplinary narrative style essays in which the writer reveals how class has affected their working and home life. Two areas of the book concentrate on how the cultural capital that is held by the middle-classes impinges on both fairly new and more established academics who are from a working-class background, and particularly with respect to working-class students.

One other text that is based in the USA was written by Welsch (2004), '*Those Winter Sundays: Female Academics and Their Working-Class Parents'*. The book partly examines how the relationship between daughters and working-class parents influences their academic work. The collection of personal memoirs is categorized into some broad themes: bringing what was learned at home into the academe; the influence of one's parents; how they became an academic and balancing the two worlds of home and work.

All of these works overwhelmingly focus on personal narrative essays. However, the study conducted for this book relies on semi-structured interviews. This approach to data collection does not claim to be any better than the methods used in the studies above, but it is a different approach. As such, I was able to tailor the interview questions to focus on particular aspects of being an academic who is from a working-class background, and this has been alluded to at the beginning of this chapter.

In addition to the books mentioned in the previous pages, there are a number of relevant journal articles, newspapers and online blogs concerning the experiences of what the authors describe as 'working-class academics', and these are discussed alongside the interview data in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Some, such as the one written by Foiles Sifuentes (2017 and set in the USA) relay the accounts of working-class female academic staff.

Writing in the 'Times Higher Education' publication, McKenzie's (2015) UK piece reflects on the title question of 'who would be a working-class woman in academia', which raises challenges in her own ethnographic research in deprived communities. Like Tingle's (2005) conference paper, her writing describes her observations of how working-class academics are viewed by the middle-class, and in this instance when they use plain language, wear big earrings or laugh loudly (McKenzie 2015). Other papers, such as the paper by Lovett and Lovett (2016), Tingle (2005) and Greene (2002) focus on the personal reflective education experiences of working-class male academics. Warnock's (2016) paper is set in the USA, and focuses on a small collection of autobiographical essays which were written by working-class academics during a period of over thirty years. The essays were themed, and this resulted in a wide-ranging analysis of the lived experiences of those authors.

Warnock suggests that the institutional recruitment of working-class academic staff could help in the retention and progress of lower-income

and first-generation students as *"working-class academics are dedicated to serving this student population"* (2016, p.38) and her paper is revisited in Chapter Seven of this book. Likewise, Lee and Maynard's paper (2017 and also set in the USA) focuses on the role that Low-Socio-Economic Status (SES) academics play in their support of SES students and includes a detailed discussion of shared experiences drawn through recollections of US college experiences. It also provides a discussion of how their respondents supported these students academically, both in the classroom and pastorally, including talking about their own backgrounds and how they came to study for a degree.

From a theoretical perspective, the three texts that were influential in the writing for this book were 'Social Class in the 21st Century' (Savage et al. 2015), 'Mis-education: inequality, education and the working classes' (Reay 2017) and 'Bourdieu: *the next generation: The Development of Bourdieu's Intellectual Heritage in Contemporary UK Sociology'*, by Thatcher et al. (2015). The first book was one of the outputs from the 'Great British Class Survey' which, within a few weeks, attracted over 161,000 responses to the study, and it thus became the *"largest survey of social class ever conducted in Britain"* (Savage 2015, p.5). This work includes discussions of class boundaries and the accumulation of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Some chapters also embrace the concept and phenomenon of social mobility. The book occasionally draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to illustrate the points that it makes, and as such this work will be referred to at various points in this book. The second text, by Diane Reay, discusses the emotional and day-to-day aspects (particularly in the classroom) of being educated as a working-class pupil, and the subsequent outcomes of this. Reay's work is referred to in Chapter Four, when the interviewees that participated in the study for *this* book recall their experiences as children and teenagers. The third theoretically influential book, written by Thatcher et al. was for me, the text that contained various passages that personally resonated in the context of my own work. As an edited book, it contained ten chapters that gave insight into the work of *"a new generation of Bourdieusian researchers"* (Thatcher et al. 2015) and how these researchers have applied Bourdieusian theory when reflecting on their own research findings. There are references to 'habitus' (in the sociological sense and discussed in sections of Chapters Three and Four of this book), social mobility, and the pain and difficulties that can be caused by the latter. In addition, it considers educational choices, and the role of the family. There is also a chapter entitled *'The limit of capital gains: using Bourdieu to understand social mobility into elite occupations',* and as a result there are

a number of references to this section when analysing the interview data from this project.

1.4 The UK university that employed the interviewees

The institution that employs the staff who were surveyed and interviewed for this project was granted university status several decades ago (Binns 2017, p.19). In 2017, the student population comprised of just under 10,000 undergraduate, postgraduate or research students. The university is largely multi-cultural, embraces diversity, and attracts students and staff from a wide-ranging number of countries. There is a large culture of academic research, but it is a more teaching intensive university.

At the time that the interview data was collected (2018), the university was divided into a number of subject-specific academic Faculties (or Schools) which each embraced a broad range of specialist subjects, vocational courses and professionally validated programmes (Binns 2017, p.19). The university also offers some foundation year programmes and thus it welcomes applications from prospective students who are unable to meet the criteria for direct entry into some undergraduate courses.

There have since been a number of changes to the structure of the university. The institution is responsive to employers' needs, requirements and recruiting cycles, and as such is ranked very highly in both the local and national league tables for graduate employment.

As such, and like other higher education institutions across the UK, the university has introduced various student recruitment and retention initiatives in more recent years. These were specifically designed to help ease the application process for new students, and to provide extra academic, pastoral and employability guidance and support at all programme stages (regardless of academic level and social background). As a result, the institution has encouraged one-to-one and small group mentoring programmes, and has introduced all students to the career services at each and every level - in other words from initial entry to graduation and for a specified period of time beyond leaving the institution. It has also encouraged student engagement and feedback from their attendance on various committees, panels and boards. There has also been an institutional review of academic / administrative policies and professional services (including the library). Lastly, there have been efforts to simplify and improve programme curricula across the board.