The Lives of Working Class Academics

This compelling anthology of stories from academics who identify as having a working-class background offers new insights into our understanding of the relationship between academia and class.

Offering a substantial contribution to the body of research that uses autoethnography, the volume opens a platform for academic authors to reflect on their own lived experience through critical study of oneself and one's own socio-cultural context. The book is a useful resource for autoethnographic research and readers who want to understand the lived experiences of becoming a higher education professional; they will see farther and more clearly through the authors' lenses.

Although a working-class heritage underpins the autoethnography of each of the writers, the intersections of social class with race and gender are also explored, providing in-depth knowledge about personal journeys into academic life.

While the legacy of elitism remains in higher education, and with very little history or class culture in the field of higher education to identify with, the volume can give voice to and authenticate the authors' experiences, and more importantly, challenge the dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate elitism and exclusion within higher education.

'The collection provides a solid foundation for students and academics, of important questions being asked about transitioning into academic life.'
Professor Giorgia Doná, Co-director of the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging, University of East London

This book fully explores the developmental journey and experiences of working-class academics, using an affective approach which brings together class, race, ethnicity, gender and the intersection between them.

Class issues that have long been sidelined are finally foregrounded and examined through a critical conversation focusing on the lives of academics whose backgrounds diverge from the middle-class norm.

The book provides a platform for the authors to discuss who they are as academics, their family backgrounds and what it means to be a professional in the academy.

Burnell Reilly invites working-class academics to write about their careers in higher education. This use of autoethnography is important as it generates a profound understanding of the lived experiences of individuals.

The work is compelling and makes a significant contribution to our insights into the predicament of working-class academics. The book, therefore, has the potential to improve efforts to encourage more inclusive approaches to supporting the recruitment and advancement of those from less traditional backgrounds.

Dr Victoria Showunmi, Associate Professor, Institute of Education, University College London

This inspirational book critically analyses and reflects upon the journeys of colleagues from a working-class background into the perceived higher echelons of academia, using autoethnography as its methodology. The stories are honest and impactful as they describe the often not straight-forward routes into higher education. Instead, the routes meander through education, seizing opportunities as they arise. Many academics recognise the imposter syndrome and feelings of not belonging in a certain arena, with notions of class, race, gender, sexuality and identity firmly ingrained into the culture. However, the contributors to this book have demonstrated a tenacity and attitude towards learning that has led them to where they are now, warriors and champions of widening participation.

This book will be useful to academics to reflect upon their own journeys but mainly to all who think that higher education and the world of academia is 'not for them', based upon their views and experiences of class, etc. Being the first in one's family to attend higher education and then pursue a career in it may feel challenging and daunting and could be accompanied by a sense of loss (of identity) and betrayal (of background). This book acknowledges those feelings through its reflexive and often cathartic accounts while also demonstrating what can be achieved.

Dr Jodi Roffey-Barentsen, School of Education, University of Brighton

As a postgraduate student, I have found this collection of autoethnographic studies to be an enlightening experience when considering my approach to my studies. The format of these autoethnographic findings has shown that there is another way possible, a way that allows a deeper examination of a subject that

is so close to me and that allows me the scope to delve into it intensely. This collection has shown me the importance of personal power when discussing issues relevant to the self and how utilisation of that power can be cathartic while creating a deeper understanding from the perspective of the writer.

This interesting compilation has been invaluable to me as I take my next steps along my educational path, giving a powerful insight into how others have used an autoethnographical approach to critically examine a variety of subjects. The book has been able to show the scope of this method and its possible uses within my work and I am sure it will be a helpful starting point for other students who are considering the possible structure of their studies.

Joanne McLeod, Post Graduate Research Student,
MA Education: Culture, Language and Identity,
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The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

In honour of my grandmothers:
Anna Teresa Byrd[1]*, née Reilly*
and
May Beatrice Bridgman, née Loynds

[1]'Byrd', formerly 'Bird', is a pseudo-translation of the Irish surname 'MacEneaney' (MacLysaght, E., *More Irish Families,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: UK, 1996). Although many variations of the spelling exist, MacEneaney is an anglicised form of an original Irish Gaeilge name (according to my great-aunt), recorded as 'Mac an Éanaigh' (Woulfe, P., *Irish Names and Surnames,* published by M.H Gill and Son, Dublin: Ireland, 1922) in Ulster.

Anglicisation of Irish names was commonplace in Ireland and intensified during the seventeenth century, a period known as the 'Penal Laws' (Cusack, M., http://www.libraryireland.com/historyIreland/penal-laws.php), in a bid to reduce Irish identity and enhance British control of the country. This was Britain's attempt to oppress Ireland, the culture and the language. The Gaelic Revival movement of the nineteenth century caused many people to reclaim their indigenous names (Smyth, W.J., http://publish.ucc.ie/doi/atlas). The 1737 penal law, banning the use of Irish in the courts, was recently repealed following a community-led campaign for an Irish Language Act in the north of Ireland (www.irishlegal.com/articles/centuries-long-ban-on-irish-language-in-northern-ireland-courts-to-be-scrapped).

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Dr Carli Rowell is a Lecturer at the University of Sussex, as well as a sociologist, feminist and ethnographer and much of her work grapples with issues pertaining to contemporary social, spatial and geopolitical (im)mobilities particularly in relation to educational (in)equalities. She has conducted funded research on working-class students' experiences at an elite UK university (ESRC) and working-class early career researchers' experiences of moving through doctoral study into/and out of the academic workforce (SRHE). She tweets at: @carliriarowell.

Dr Peter Shukie is programme leader for Education Studies and Action Research lead in College Based Higher Education in East Lancashire. His PhD focussed on community engagement in technology through Community Open Online Courses, where everyone can teach and learn, for free. Dr Shukie imagined, then made real, the collective that led to the Working Class Academics Conference and

continues to advocate for working-class voices in the ways we create a new academy.

Dr Hannah Walters is at King's College, London. Hannah is a feminist sociologist of youth with particular interest in girlhood and the intersections of class and gender. Her work uses participatory and creative methods underpinned by the principles of feminist research. She tweets at: @hanwalt.

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Professor Marcia A. Wilson works at the Open University as the Dean for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). She is responsible for embedding the EDI agenda across the institution. Her work includes equality projects with Universities UK, and she has an interest in racial trauma in sport. She is a multiple award winner and uses her platform to raise awareness about inequalities to generate institutional and sector-wide change.

Dr Steve Wong is a Senior Lecturer of Education Studies at the University of East London and Lecturer of Applied Linguistics at UCL Institute of Education in London. His research interests relate to the broad areas of language and social interaction, and cultures of hybridity arising from the intersection of language(s), race and ethnicities. His work is informed by cross-disciplinary understandings of sociology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, anthropology and education studies. His research takes the linguistic ethnographic approach.

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Foreword

> Academia has rarely developed complex understandings of working-class people.
>
> (Reay, 1997, p. 18)

This book is a collection of autoethnographically inflected accounts of what it is like to be working class and what it is to be a working class academic. Perhaps the most transformative aspect of this collection lies in its approach towards writing working-classness – through auto-ethnographies produced by working class academics. For some time, there have been problems in the way that class is applied in education research – there has been a tendency towards understandings that have ignored some of the significant and meaningful ways in which class is lived and class is done. There have been some major oversights such as the primacy often given to white male experiences and 'the possibility of a complex trajectory for people who remain working-class is often denied' (Reay, 1997, p. 19). In addition, there have been problems with the ways in which class has been theorised and analysed. Some time ago, Rosemary Crompton (1998, p. 114) warned that 'it is not possible to construct a single measure which could successfully capture all the elements going to make up social class – or even structured social inequality'. Nevertheless, work on class and education can sometimes seem inert and stuck, relying on proxies such as the receipt of free school meals rather than more powerful and complex approaches. The chapters in this collection include diverse and situated accounts from a set of academics who all identify as working class (in different ways) and whose various narratives challenge the sorts of shortcomings I have described here.

There have been some notable developments in class theory that have enlarged our critical horizons. Here I am thinking about the ways in which we recognise that there are 'very many different ways of being working-class' (Reay, 2017, p. 5). First, there are fractions of class, and these are fluid, shifting according to economic changes and individual experiences of turmoil and distress, where families edge out of being part of the 'respectable' working class and teeter haphazardly on the border of being 'rough'. There are emotional ambivalences, and sometimes high costs, attached to this shifting between being, and not being, respectable. Social class is also powerfully shaped by place – by attention and commitment to 'home' and where we come from, as well as where we may have settled in our journeys from our working-class origins to our jobs in the academy. Any work on class and education may be limited if it does not speak of space and place; from the recognition of access to privilege and limits to social goods,

perhaps because of poor transport and high travel costs for example, space and place are strongly implicated in social reproduction and the ways in which class inscribes itself in the lives of us all. There are also other differences too – differences of accent and how we speak – differences in the language we use to speak and write of ourselves and others.

And then there is diversity and intersectionality. Social identities and our classed identities are sculpted out of the structural and material resources that are available to us. These resources that speak powerfully to us, about who we are and may be and desire to be, are amalgams of discourses from our gendered selves, our ethnicity, our embodied selves, our sexualities. They are also constructed out of our age, the times we live in, as well as the places where we live and the faith communities that we may belong to or come from. If this were not complex and complicated enough, aspects of our identities, and for academics of working-class backgrounds, our classed selves are interpellated by educational moments that may provide (sometimes) advantages, by luck and chance as well as by serendipity. So social identities are contingent, fluid and always in a process of emergence, matters that are addressed in this set of autoethnographies.

This book, *The Lives of Working Class Academics*, works as an important corrective to the common-sense notion of the academic being middle class. Here this notion is troubled – troubled by a set of arguments that recognises that working as an academic is generally regarded as a middle-class occupation, although things are changing. A report by the Social Mobility Commission (2017) found that while 58% of academics in the survey reported coming from a middle-class family, 14% were from a working-class background. In this diffuse, rich and emotionally authentic set of chapters, the voices of a range of academics speak to their experiences of this voyage from one class into another as well as into a very powerful motor of reproduction – the university. Yet, what of the university? Given its hierarchical and oppressive nature, and the importance of place/space, what role does the type of university, perhaps the subject discipline, as well as the academic positionality of the authors of these beautifully crafted pieces play in being working class in the academy? As Iona Burnell Reilly asks of these working-class academics in the preface to this collection, how have they become who they are in an industry steeped in elitism? How have they navigated their way, and what has the journey been like? Do they continue to identify as working class or have their social positioning and/or identities shifted?

Forewords are necessarily short in length and so they are limited in what they can express. What I can say from having read these chapters is that in their range they go a long way towards capturing the diversity of working-class academics' accounts and are all here in one place – something that has not been addressed for a long time. Some of these narratives privilege gender; others incorporate race/gender into their stories. There are accounts that speak of micro-aggressions and introjected values that attempt to situate being working-class as a negative and demeaning identity, and there are others where being working-class is something shared and valued – an asset to be drawn on for solidarity and comradeship. In much of what passes for work 'on' the working classes, their voices are situated in the margins, their lives written out as if being working-class were somehow a

homogenous experience to be retold by others. This powerful collection gives a lie to this violent act; it also works as a corrective to how we construct the subjectivity of 'the academic' from the written words and lives of working-class academics.

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Preface

The Importance of Autoethnography as a Research Method

Byrne describes autoethnography within his own context as a 'tool with which to understand individual and shared experiences of class in higher education' (2019, p. 133). My intention for this book was to collect stories from academics who identify as having a working class background. These stories would be an account of their lives, their experiences and their journeys into becoming a higher education professional, including an in-depth look at their educative experiences along the lifespan. Rather than writing about working-class academics, I have asked working-class academics to write about themselves. McKenzie, writing about her own background, and experiences of the social class structure, comments that 'Narratives, and storytelling, are important in working-class lives. It is how we explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context' (Mckenzie, 2017, p. 6).

One of the requirements of contributing authors for this book was to position themselves as being from a working-class heritage. Reay points out that 'To own an identity as "working class" is, among many other things, to accept one's social inferiority' (1997, p. 228). Crew explains this point further:

> What working class means to everyone looking in at the working class, and sometimes how working-class people see themselves, is that working class means failure, working class means at the bottom of everything. Working class means not being educated, not well read. It always has these really negative connotations. Everything that is about being at the bottom, not good enough.
>
> (Crew, 2020, p. 24)

Initially, my concern was that, for some, writing about one's social class may be a difficult, even painful, experience. Another concern was that people might feel uncomfortable about revealing themselves and their background. Crew recounts some of the challenges she faced while producing her book, including some uncomfortable conversations: 'Perhaps claiming a working-class identity, from the supposed advantaged financial and educational perspective of an academic, could be seen as pretentious. Or, as someone said to me during the writing up of this research, "wanting the best of both worlds"' (2020, p. 25). Geraldine

Van Bueren, chair of the Alliance of Working Class Academics, poses a different kind of concern[1]: 'In academia, people don't feel able to talk about their backgrounds freely because they think it will negatively affect their career' (cited in Wilby, 2019). Byrne presents a different view when he states 'Working-class people are, by definition, relatively uneducated, which exposes the link between class and academia, and the inherent dissonance in thinking about oneself as a working-class [person]… the academy is not just classist, it is the *source* of classism, and of the very concept of the working-class' (2019, p. 136).

These problematic factors are what make the lives of working-class academics all the more interesting, rich and powerful. How have they become who they are in an industry steeped in elitism? How have they navigated their way, and what has the journey been like? Do they continue to identify as working-class or have their social positioning and/or identities shifted? These questions and more will be addressed and answered through each author's fascinating account of their journey. Ryan and Sackrey comment on what instigated their journey into publication: 'we began to wonder if other upwardly mobile academics had experienced similar feelings of displacement or dissatisfaction, and perhaps more importantly, internalised conflict' (1984, p. 6). Thirty-eight years on and, having undergone my own journey, this very question is now on my lips.

Autoethnography is a fascinating method of research that allows the author to reflect on their own lived reality and explore their personal, professional and cultural experiences (in this case, their journey and experience of becoming an academic). 'Autoethnography in its most simplified definition is the study of the self' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). However, unlike autobiography and autofiction, autoethnography is a critical study of oneself, and how we understand our relationships to socio-cultural contexts. Hughes and Pennington comment on autoethnography as 'critical reflexive narrative enquiry, critical reflexive self study, or critical reflexive action research in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self' (2017, p. 11). Simply put, the researcher is the subject of the study, critically reflecting and interpreting their own life, social background and personal experiences. Autoethnography, as all research methods, is driven by theory; different theoretical and conceptual frameworks can be used to frame and/or underpin the autoethnographer's story. Hughes and Pennington provide guidelines to writing an autoethnography and, among others, state that theories are the basis of the account (2017); they also remind us that using a theoretical framework can serve to 'protect the autoethnographer from accusations of narcissistic navel-gazing' (2017, p. 51).

Reflexivity is central to the process of rigorous autoethnography. Researchers are not free from assumptions and biases, and we all have different ways of interpreting the world. By describing, analysing and understanding their background, the autoethnographic process connects the writer's personal and self-narratives to a wider social, cultural and political context. Each of the authors

[1]The Alliance of Working Class academics is a UK-based organisation that supports faculty and students from diverse working-class backgrounds.

within this book has self-defined as being from a working-class heritage. The writer's social class may not be the only aspect of their lives that they reflect on and analyse; they might also draw on race, ethnicity, gender, religion and the intersections between them, in order to fully explore their experience, journey and development into becoming an academic in higher education (HE). Reflexivity, Hughes and Pennington remind us, is 'a central criterion of autoethnography [and] provides researchers with a forum for expressing their awareness of their integral connection to the research context and thereby their influence on that context' (2017, p. 93).

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'. Although a working-class heritage will underpin the autoethnography of each of the writers, the interlocking sections between class, race and gender may also be relevant, possibly for some authors more than others, and this is because, Avis argues, 'analytically we cannot separate relations of class from those of gender and race, in practice they are intertwined. We are all positioned in relation to our class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on' (2009, p. 14). One of the advantages of using autoethnography as the method of research is to reveal and authenticate the power relations, the oppressions, the subjugation and the privilege within and between the stories of people's lives.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is used to describe the ways in which one oppressive trait is interconnected with another; it is the cross-over between two or more distinct discriminations. When bell hooks (1982) referred to herself as a working-class black woman, she may well have been influenced by Claudia Jones, the American civil rights activist, who used the phrase 'triple oppression' to describe disadvantaged black women (cited in Lynn, 2014). Jones believed that black women's triple oppression, based on race, class and gender, preceded all other forms of oppression. hooks, entering HE in the 1960s, writes about her experiences of triple oppression – racism, sexism and class bias – in the academy. In her book *Ain't I a Woman* (1982), hooks challenges the view that race and gender are two separate phenomena, asserting that the struggle to end racism and sexism are inextricably interlinked. This early form of what we now call 'intersectionality' broadens the lens, identifying multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage, as well as race, class and gender; other factors may include caste, sexuality, religion, disability and physical appearance.

Why, we may ask, is any of this important? Hughes and Pennington (2017) have written about autoethnography as 'critical social research'. They cite Jupp (1993) as defining this as encompassing 'a broad range of social science studies that purposefully challenge existing understandings and foundations of knowledge' (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 17). It is usual for social researchers to pursue topics that are close to their experiences of the social world, and this is certainly true for me. Critical research is the paradigm whereby researchers start with a criticism of the social world, that there is something wrong and needs to be fixed. The criticisms usually involve social inequalities and injustices; 'Critical researchers see the world as being divided and in constant tension, dominated by

the powerful, who oppress the people and use the state and its institutions as tools to achieve their purpose' (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 51).

The critical research paradigm is a step further from interpretivism; not content at interpreting the social world, the critical social researcher aims to change it. Gray asserts that 'The assumptions that lie beneath critical inquiry are that: Ideas are mediated by power relations in society. Certain groups in society are privileged over others and exert an oppressive force on subordinate groups' (2020, p. 30). My objective was to give voice to working-class academics, a space to share their stories, and to situate their lived realities, in order that they can be acknowledged and understood. I do feel that not enough is known and understood about the lives and experiences of working-class academics, many of whom undergo unique and profound experiences. We all live in and experience the social world differently; having an understanding of each other's unique lived realities is not only very interesting but is necessary for the good of humanity, and for a progressive and inclusive society. Byrne notes that 'Autoethnography, writing ourselves into our work, is a way to give voice to marginalized groups and contribute to democratizing academic culture and writing' (2019, p. 146).

The legacy of elitism remains in HE, inequality and prestige have persisted, and with very little history or class culture in the field of HE to identify with, this can, for some working-class academics, make their experiences fraught and difficult. My aim for this book is to share those fraught and difficult experiences, give voice to and authenticate them, and more importantly, challenge the dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate elitism and exclusion within HE.

Iona Burnell Reilly

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