Chapter 5

The Impact of Place

Keywords: Institution; elite universities; Russell Group institutions; post-1992; subject; Social Sciences; Geography; Education; STEM; Classical Studies; Physics

Overview

Within the academic sphere, scholars' identities are often profoundly influenced by their institutional affiliation and the academic discipline in which they are engaged in teaching or research. Institutional contexts may influence an academic identity by bestowing status and networks (Bourdieu, 1990). Simultaneously, the academic subject can play a pivotal role in shaping one's intellectual and professional identity. The specific discipline may not only define the scope of knowledge an individual acquires but can again influence the networks an individual builds and the ways in which they contribute to the broader academic discourse. Both institution and subject discipline exhibit hierarchical structures with positions of dominance and subordination, determined by individual and institutional forms of capital (Naidoo, 2004). Chapter Five explores the intricate interplay between these settings, examining how they shape the nuanced dynamics of identity inclusion/exclusion for WCAs.

Institution

Understanding the intersection of institutions is crucial in unravelling the experiences of WCAs. Drawing on McDonough's (1997) concept of 'organisational habitus', Reay et al. (2001) introduced the idea of 'institutional habitus'. This concept highlighted that social class may be both a structuring force and a

structured entity within an organisation. Each type of institution will have distinct characteristics (Ball et al., 1995). An institutional habitus is useful in examining how a university can shape the trajectory of academics as it might influence teaching methodologies, guide the scope of the research conducted and contribute to the overall academic culture within the institution. An institutional habitus plays a role in shaping individuals' perception of belonging. Using the example of students at a post-1992 institution, Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) found that one key feature that this type of institution offers them was the comfort blanket of home (p. 129). My interview with Luke, a Professor in Social History at a traditional institution, explores this as he discussed the time he interviewed at an elite institution. '*One of the questions they asked me was, given the background you've come from, you know, how do you think you'd would fit in at [name of elite institution]?*' (Crew, 2020, p. 83). At the heart of this question lies the assumption that Luke's background would not align with the institution's culture, casting doubt on his ability to adapt to its established norms and practices. The inquiry itself highlighted a broader issue of class-based assumptions and expectations within academia, where, as we know, individuals from working-class backgrounds may often be viewed as outsiders.

The institutional habitus of elite universities such as Oxbridge,[1] derive their status from being ancient institutions, with both being founded more than 800 years ago (Cambridge University, 2023; Oxford University, 2008). There is a strong emphasis on upholding historical prestige and traditions. A prominent illustration of this is college dining, a tradition that involves 'performances that reinforce the idea of social stratification through the repeated re-enactment of roles and boundaries' (Dacin et al., 2010, p. 1394). These institutions have a longstanding reputation for prestige which lead to opportunities for career advancement. Oxbridge can exacerbate feelings of exclusion for those who have not assimilated into the elite culture. Both institutions address the potential for 'not fitting in' this on their websites.[2] Although the cynics among us might say that a more immediate strategy to address this issue might be to increase representation from working-class students. Research by Leeb (2004) considered the experiences of working-class women in elite academia (at one of New York City's elite private academic institutions). Her study highlighted that these female WCAs often concealed their origins and experiences, perpetuating a self-surveillance cycle to conform to elite norms. Leeb proposed that openly embracing WCA identities in academia could disrupt this dynamic, though, as noted by Reay (2006), this suggestion fails to acknowledge the complexity and challenges involved.

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[1]Oxbridge is a portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge, the two oldest, wealthiest, and most famous universities in the United Kingdom (Worswick, 1957).
[2]https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/article/imposter-syndrome and https://www.ice.cam.ac.uk/course/imposter-syndrome

Red brick[3] institutions are also renowned for their research excellence. They were the original widening participation institutions as they opened up universities to women and people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Whyte, 2015). Alongside this are Russell Group institutions,[4] an association of 24 research intensive universities, established in 1994 in the UK. The group represents its members' interests to the government (The Russell Group, n.d.). Redbrick universities were originally from industrial cities and were known for engineering. These universities are now part of the Russell Group (Times Higher Education, 2023). WCAs at Russell Group may struggle if they mainly encounter students and faculty from advantaged backgrounds. While these institutions acknowledge the need for diversification,[5] their efforts often prioritise student-level initiatives.[6] Davis (2021) co-produced knowledge with eight respondents that he described as 'Academics with Working Class Heritage (AWCH)', at Russell Group institutions. He found that AWCHs viewed their in-between class status as beneficial, allowing them to perceive social spaces uniquely compared to those academics from typically advantaged backgrounds. Although he acknowledged that there were also occasional moments of emotional dissonance which served as reminders of their outsider status.

In 1992, the binary classification that once separated universities and polytechnics in the UK was abolished, creating a unified HE system. However, an examination of publicly available data on research activity, teaching quality and the socioeconomic composition of students, revealed that binary distinctions continue to persist (Ratcliffe, 2017). Traditional (pre-1992) universities are marked by higher levels of research activity, greater financial resources, and an economically privileged student body. Boliver (2015) found that teaching quality levels remain similar across traditional and new (post-1992). While teaching-focused institutions are still typically seen as being less prestigious, the first results from the teaching excellence framework (TEF) placed many post-1992 universities in the highest 'Gold' category (Times Higher Education, 2017). Post-1992 institutions tend to prioritise student diversity, which can create an inclusive environment for WCAs. While research by Binns (2019) did not focus on academics from post-1992 institutions, I include it here as her study investigated the social mobility experiences of 14 WCA from a single university that was not either an elite or Russell Group institution. Of interest was her finding that there was a hesitancy

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[3]The term was coined by Bruce Truscot (Edgar Allison Peers) in *Red Brick University*, which states: 'It is primarily with eight of the twelve English universities that this book is concerned: Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Reading and Sheffield' (p. 25) and, with respect to Durham, that 'its Newcastle college, perhaps, can properly find a place in this survey' (1951, p. 24).

[4]The Russell Group is one of the four 'mission groups'.

[5]See the following strategy 'How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality' from the Russell Group https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5858/pathways-for-potential-full-report-may-2020.pdf.

[6]Although I accept that they could also be promoting diversity for academics, I just haven't observed evidence of this on their website (an example of their public approach to widening participation).

among participants to leave their current institution and pursue positions at more prestigious establishments. Binns clarified that while a few interviewees anticipated such a shift in the future, the majority prioritised personal comfort and wellbeing over career advancement.

Table 5 outlines the details of WCAs taking part in this study, classified by how they described their type of institution.

Table 5.   Respondents and Their Institutions According to Each Research Phase.

Institution	Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three	
Elite	7	4	4	
Red brick	14	3	0	0
Russell Group	20	21	19	17
Traditional	24	34	22	
Post 1992	22	10	30	34
FE/HE institute	0	0	2	2
Various	2	1	4	4
Distance learning	0	0	0	2
Independent	0	0	5	0
Outside UK	0	0	2	5
Did not indicate	3	1	1	1
"Small Specialist"	0		1	1
Federal University		0 0	1	
Research Centre	0		1	
	92	75		
		73		

In Phase One, the majority of participants were from 'Red brick' universities, with a significant number from 'Traditional' institutions and 'Oxbridge'. In Phase Two, respondents were mainly from traditional institutions. In Phases Two and Three, the number of participants from 'Red brick' institutions significantly decreased, while those from 'Russell Group' remained relatively stable. Notably, there were respondents in institutions from 'outside of the UK' in Phase Two. The following sections will present findings from four types of institutions: elite institutions, Russell Group universities, post-1992 institutions, and universities abroad, as these were the institutions that respondents referred to in terms of class and its intersections.

Elite Institutions

In all, 7% (n. 18) of respondents were from elite institutions. Among these respondents, there was an even gender mix, but there were fewer ethnic minority

respondents and only one respondent reported having a disability. While not universal, respondents tended to exhibit more of an abandoned habitus, i.e. they typically tried to assimilate into the elite culture. An example of this is from Bryan, a Research Fellow in History who said '*I've learned to adapt my behaviour and speech and I've toned down my accent, and I've become more cautious about what I say in front of colleagues*'. Bryan's self-censorship and restraint suggested a conscious effort to modify his identity so that he could adopt the values, beliefs, and practices of the elite institution.

Respondents reported having both the traditional and non-traditional pathway:

> *I had a traditional route, I went to school, went to sixth form, was good in a couple of things, physics in particular. Applied to university, to [elite institution] got in, one of 1500 in that sixth form. I'm from Middlesborough…Only one person got into Oxford or Cambridge that year, which was me. So, I went to [elite institution] and studied natural sciences. I always thought I would want to aim for academia. Even from a child, quite young. My mum was a schoolteacher and she taught chemistry. My mum had been to university…so, that means I'm not first generation in that sense, but my dad hadn't and no one else in my family had, as far as I know*. [Eric, Post-doctoral Research Assistant – Psychics, at an elite institution]

> *My girlfriend in sixth form came from a very middle class family, and she said she was going to do this [her degree], so I'm going to do it. So, I did it without any real plan for what I was going to do and then had a bit of a panic. I ended up working as a teaching assistant for a year and then did my undergrad at Cambridge, which was a weird experience. I mean, we can talk about that as we go on, but lots of cultural dissonance, lots of feelings of displacement and to have habitus and alienation from both through both my cultural origin and from [elite institution] itself, and not really fitting in was a dislocation*. [Fred, a PhD Student in Education at an elite institution]

The two narratives offer insights into the academic journeys of WCAs at elite institutions. Eric's academic trajectory is, in comparison to many of my WCAs, more linear and conventional. Eric's mother's profession as a schoolteacher is likely to have played a role in shaping his aspirations for academia as research demonstrates that educated mothers often pass their cognitive ability and financial resources on to their children (Vegard et al., 2021), but also an educational know-how which can help bolster their children's educational status. Eric's mention of being the only one from his area to get into an elite institution emphasised his exceptional achievement and possibly the challenges he faced in his community. Whereas Fred's narrative shows a more complex and non-traditional path to academia. For instance, he refers to there being a sense of 'displacement', which is more typical for WCAs. Fred's experience was also marked by his struggles to 'fit' with the culture of the university, and challenges in navigating the elite institution.

There was one theme found in the data regarding WCAs at elite institutions.

Class Pride

Analysis of my data revealed WCA respondents at elite institutions had a profound sense of pride in their class heritage. This persisted even though some respondents opted to conceal their working-class background, aligning with studies such as Lehmann (2014) and Kallschmidt and Eaton (2019).

> *Working in an elite educational institution is a testament to the incredible journey I've undertaken, it fills me with an overwhelming sense of pride coming from a working class background to this prestigious setting. I carry with me the resilience, determination, and unique perspectives that my background has instilled. In these halls, I feel like I represent social mobility at its purest, this makes me committed to breaking down barriers and to inspire others from similar backgrounds to pursue their own dreams.* [Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an Elite institution]

Alan's quotation indicated that respondents like him had a strong emotional connection to their heritage as their journeys involved overcoming barriers, further amplifying the sense of pride, fuelling his resolve to dismantle obstacles that may hinder access and advancement for other WCAs. Incidentally, Alan also referenced how his background has shaped his character and worldview, something he considered to be valuable assets. These, more positive reflections from WCAs like Alan, will be expanded upon in Chapter Six.

Russell Group Institutions

In all, 20% (n. 50) of respondents were from Russell Group institutions. There were slightly more female respondents and a minor increase in ethnic minority respondents and WCAs with disabilities compared to respondents at elite institutions. Most respondents at Russell Group institutions, such as Layla, a PhD Student in Sociology, experienced a cleft habitus, described in Chapter Two, in various ways by Friedman (2016), Cruz (2021), and Lubrano (2005):

> *Me going into academia doesn't change the fact that my family still (try to) live on Universal Credit, and that I don't have access to the kinds of material and cultural support that many (most, even) of my peers do. It's a difficult question because when I think about whether I am working class in an academic context, I feel no hesitation – I absolutely am! But when I'm home with my family, I feel different – I have access to cultural and material opportunities that they don't, like travelling abroad for conference paid for by my funders. So I don't not feel working class there, I just feel differently about it. But in academic contexts, there is no hesitation: absolutely!*

Layla's quotation highlights a dual identity, akin to what Lubrano (2005) described as feeling torn between their working-class roots and their academic roles within universities. She, like other respondents at Russell Group universities, recognised that her academic achievements had created a degree of separation from her family's circumstances. At times these were emotional interviews as respondents reflected upon the social distance from their families, prompting them to question whether academia was a worthwhile pursuit amidst the 'loss' of family ties.

The data from respondents at Russell Group institutions highlighted two themes.

Mentorship Gaps

An integral component of the academic world, mentorship involves experienced academics guiding and nurturing the intellectual and professional journey of students and colleagues (Marino, 2021). As Chapter Two discussed, WCAs may have limited access to social capital and as such may benefit from mentors who can relate to their specific challenges. Respondents at Russell Group institutions were more likely to report a lack of mentors. This mentorship gap can hinder their professional development and career advancement. Ethan emphasised a specific challenge reported by WCAs in accessing effective mentorship at Russell Group institutions:

> *The issue of mentorship…I know that some people are very proactive in terms of asking for collaboration. I just don't see myself doing that. It should come from the supervisor, he's very busy doing lots of work, lots of work that relates to the kind of work I'm doing. He knows that I'm here…So, it would feel like I'm begging which I guess it's probably classed to some extent. I also think that given that I already don't feel that I belong, if I were to ask, I anticipate that I'll be rejected to put it quite bluntly and that would hurt me too much. So, I'm not willing to take the risk at that point.* [Ethan, Graduate Student in Sociology at a Russell Group institution]

While mentoring relationships often develop informally, through intentional or coincidental networking (Ward et al., 2020), Ethan suggested that as he was hesitant to approach a busy supervisor, mentorship initiatives should ideally originate from supervisors. This view, which was reiterated by most respondents, was likely to be influenced by a fear of rejection and the hierarchical nature of academia. Narratives such as Ethan's highlighted the decision to prioritise emotional wellbeing over potential academic benefits.

Kerry's account offers a poignant illustration of a further challenge that WCAs can encounter in the context of mentorship and support.

> *I signed up for their mentoring programme when I first joined. I got paired with somebody. Don't get me wrong she was great, but she was in a different department. I remember we had a meeting, and I*

was excited, [thinking] hopefully she's going to give me some good pointers, because I have no idea what this career trajectory looks like. Academia is precarious, so all my contracts are six months long, you're constantly contract hopping. Maybe, she can give me good pointers about how I can get more security. I do think that's a strong feature of having a working class mentality. I always panic about where's my next job is, I can't afford to take two months off. I had this meeting with her, I was very enthusiastic about it. You write a little blurb about yourself, and you send them your CV and they give you helpful pointers. She looked at my CV and said, so, you're doing a doctorate at a [post 1992 institution]? She said you need to start being realistic about your pathway in academia. I guess I didn't think that was a thing anymore, that kind of post-92 snobbery. She said you might need to really consider that you might not become an academic because of where you've done your doctorate. I just didn't know what to say. [Kerry, a Research Associate in Modern Languages and Linguistics at a Russell Group institution]

Kerry's proactive approach in seeking mentorship in academia is something that is, unfairly, not always linked with WCAs. Her initial enthusiasm about the mentoring program is evident. Although her encounter with her assigned mentor was difficult, Kerry's reference to her '*working class mentality*' is a harsh self-critique, accentuating the anxieties often ingrained in a WCA habitus about the need for a stable income. Her mentor's suggestion that Kerry's academic pathway might be limited due to her institution highlighted the prevailing biases against post-1992 institutions, which are typically perceived to be inferior when compared to elite or Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2013).[7] This interaction had a profound effect on Kerry's confidence and sense of belonging in academia. Potential mentors should consider that these experiences can be demoralising and deterring individuals from pursuing academic careers reads as a harsh suggestion from a mentor.

Inequities in Career Advancement

Respondents at Russell Group institutions also referred to there being restrictions in career advancement opportunities, regardless of their qualifications and achievements. A survey by the UCU (2022) demonstrated that most WCAs feel their class has affected their career progression, and nearly half believed it had affected their initial recruitment into the profession. Whereas research by the Social Mobility Foundation (2023) reported that professional workers from working-class

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[7]Although as I discuss later in this chapter, my own respondents did refer to the lack of resources in post-1992 institutions.

backgrounds (not just from academia) are paid an average of £6,291 – or 12% – less per year than those from professional managerial backgrounds. My respondents went further and discussed perceived biases in promotion and hiring processes that benefit scholars from privileged backgrounds. As Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care, at a Russell Group institution explained:

> *I've published more than some of my colleagues from elite families. I have brought in more funding, yet I'm passed over for leadership and promotion.*

Despite feeling that they outpaced advantaged colleagues in terms of productivity, some WCAs described there being an invisible barrier to progression, a classed ceiling as described by Friedman and Laurison (2019). Discriminatory assumptions about their abilities appeared to hinder their upward mobility. Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution echoed this sentiment, saying:

> *In meetings, I'll make a research suggestion and it gets shut down by the professors from Oxbridge backgrounds. But then ten minutes later, one of them will propose the exact same idea I said earlier, and suddenly it's praised as highly innovative.*

These slights accumulate, signalling to WCAs that decision makers underestimate their insights and potential, reflecting underlying classist biases. Without access to the same privileged social networks as their colleagues to advocate for their advancement, WCAs can find it hard to advance. Ellie, a Reader in Health Sciences at a Russell Group institution summed it up as: '*You reach a certain level and then it's like hitting a brick wall. The path to full professorship seems closed off no matter how strong your profile is*'. Together, the quotations highlight how classist assumptions about lacking the 'right' dispositions, connections, or background continue to obstruct WCAs at Russell Group institutions from accessing senior positions.

Post-1992 Institutions

In all, 16% of respondents (n. 40) were from post-1992 institutions. Respondents from these institutions demonstrated the greatest diversity in respondents in terms of representation of ethnicity and disability. Although my data did not fully support Binns (2019) finding that WCAs hesitated to leave their current institution and pursue positions at more prestigious establishments, it is relevant that my WCAs at post-1992 institutions were more likely to exhibit a chameleon habitus. This implies they shifted seamlessly, i.e. where they shifted between their working class and academic identities, embracing both without feeling the need to 'assimilate'. While acknowledging that I lacked comprehensive details about their day-to-day lives, it seemed that respondents at these institutions were

the most content among those surveyed. For instance, their chameleon habitus meant that they valued academia but were also able to stay 'true' to their authentic selves.

> *I've never pretended to be someone else. My working class heritage is obvious, but so is how much I enjoy the job. I'm very grateful to have my academic pursuits, but also, I'm still 'me'. You mentioned the typical academic before. Well, that's not me, but I'm still a great academic.* [Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution]

This finding, regarding the habitus of WCAs at post-1992 institutions, may be attributed to these universities typically having a more diverse student body (Waller et al., 2015). Such diversity means that post-1992 universities might have less rigid academic traditions, leading to a more flexible environment where WCAs may not feel they have to conform to a particular academic ideal. Exemplified by Dominic's embrace of both his heritage and academic identity, respondents from these institutions demonstrated a heightened awareness of the challenges faced by first-generation students, compared to those from other university types.

The data from respondents at post-1992 institutions highlighted one key theme.

Lack of Resources

Almost 20% (n. 9) of my respondents from post-1992 institutions referred to perceptions of there being fewer professional development opportunities, in comparison to those afforded to their academic peers at older universities. Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution refers to how this '*hinders our academic progress*'. Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a post-1992 institution, referred to there being limited opportunities (in terms of both time and resources) to establish professional networks. Respondents also mentioned that securing research funding was particularly challenging due to the competitive environment. Looking at example data from Research England on existing funding arrangements across institutions, they allocated almost £2 billion in funding based on research excellence in 2021–2022. The University of Oxford was awarded the largest share of funding of all English institutions, with the University College London in second place and the University of Cambridge in third place. The top 10 included universities at Bristol, Nottingham, and Birmingham (McIntyre, 2022). Strike (2014) argued that it was unlikely that any of the post-1992 universities received more than 10% of their income (including fees) through research funding. This had a knock-on effect as in terms of effectively participating in and competing for research funding, respondents specifically highlighted needing further guidance on proposal writing and developing networking connections in academia.

Universities Abroad

While I did not intentionally seek out respondents working abroad, these WCAs academics provided compelling insights into navigating classed experiences within international academic institutions. I felt that their inclusion may inspire other researchers to conduct research in this arena. Sang and Calvard's (2019) qualitative research conducted with 30 academics at various stages of their careers in both Australia and New Zealand found that academic migration tends to reflect the privileges of white, Anglo-Saxon male academics and to perpetuate gendered and racialised hierarchies. Although this literature doesn't explicitly addresses WCAs, it highlights the common experience of precarious academics who are frequently compelled to transition from one short-term contract to another – a challenge that WCAs might find particularly difficult. In all, 2% (n. 5) of my respondents talked of working in universities outside of the UK. Among the WCAs working abroad, there were slightly more females, a good mix of different ethnicities and representation of disabilities. This extract from Reuben, an Assistant Professor[8] at an elite university in Asia[9] interview, discussed some of the difficulties he encountered:

> *My situation is somewhat complex. Because I am employed in [country in the continent of Asia], I feel that many of the markers of class evaporated in the face of ethnicity – i.e., I am seen as white and foreign, which seems to erase my class. However, whenever I interact with academics from other institutions (e.g., by email or Zoom), I become conscious of my working-class background. For example, many of the middle-class academics I talk to appear to have an inherent confidence and are able to phrase things in ways that I just cannot and, to be honest, would not, as it just comes off as artificial and contrived. However, I often come away from conversations feeling second rate, despite the fact that I have published a lot of research. I feel this tension between wanting to be authentic (i.e., say things how I want to say them) and wanting to be recognised as a "real" academic. This translates into me writing in a way that is alien to me. Really, writing academically is like speaking another language! I am currently on a 3-year contract, so precarity always lurks in the background.*

Reuban's narrative revealed significant tensions. While working abroad, his identity as a (privileged) white foreigner typically took precedence over his

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[8]While the respondent provided his full title, I have not given it here as it might identify him.

[9]I have refrained from specifying the country in which this particular WCA (and others) work. This decision is motivated by the concern that revealing this information might inadvertently identify them.

working-class background. However, when engaging with Western academics abroad, his class consciousness would then remerge. These academics often perceived these challenges as their personal shortcomings (Mallman, 2017, p. 235), failing to recognise the systemic disadvantages they faced. Reuben, for instance, revealed how precarity exacerbated these tensions as with his livelihood being uncertain, he felt the need to suppress his working-class identity and adhere to more typical academic norms.

Violet, a Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology at a private European university (which she described as being quite prestigious), echoed the sentiments of many WCAs in the UK. She expressed common experiences of not fitting in, having imposter syndrome, and the fear of being exposed as someone who doesn't truly belong in academia.

> *I feel that I don't fit…I feel an impostor and have this kind of fear that eventually someone will notice it and my academic life will end.*

Despite her negative experiences in academia, Violet's interview exuded an inspiring spirit of defiance. Her account of working with marginalised young people revealed a newfound sense of rebellion against the challenges she had faced:

> *I have felt so comfortable working with these young people that it reminded me why I do research. They don't see themselves as being disaffected, they are confident in their abilities. It made me think about my own identity. I do not want to pretend to be someone else. I'm rebelling by being me. We need to change…and focus on our assets.*

This transition from an outsider status to championing her classed heritage as an asset was a powerful testament to the resilience and potential of WCAs, demonstrating the wealth that WCAs contribute to the academic community. This will be expanded on in more detail in Chapter Six where I discuss the cultural wealth that my respondents possessed. Overall, the experiences of WCAs working in universities abroad were shaped by a combination of personal factors, the specific host country's culture and policies, and the dynamics of the academic institution. Building a strong support system and embracing the opportunities of an international academic career could potentially help WCAs navigate and thrive in this context.

Subject

The inclusion of subject as a classed intersection is important as the Becher–Biglan typology (to be discussed later in this section) proposed that academics have a strong association with their respective fields, typically serving as custodians for their academic disciplines. Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework highlights how these academic disciplines, like institutions, are fields with their own distinct rules for success, shaped by various forms of individual capital (Naidoo, 2004) – essentially, the 'rules of the game' – that confer advantages

within that field. This understanding includes the activation of relevant cultural capital by demonstrating mastery of dispositions highly valued in specific educational fields.

The psychologist Anthony Biglan developed a widely used classification system for academic disciplines based on the cultural beliefs and norms held by their members The Biglan (1973) classification characterised academic disciplines along three dimensions: (1) pure/applied (e.g. Mathematics/Engineering), (2) hard/soft (e.g. Natural Sciences and Humanities/Social Sciences), and (3) life/nonlife (e.g. Biology/History). Overall, the 'hard' natural sciences tend to garner more respect, with the 'soft' sciences typically receive less esteem (Doberneck & Schweitzer, 2017). He also distinguished disciplines in terms of their reputation, norms, and scholarship.

Building upon Biglan's (1973) classification, Becher's seminal work, *Academic Tribes and Territories* (1989, with a second edition in 2001 co-authored with Paul Trowler), provided a standardised approach to categorising the content of diverse curricula. Neumann et al. (2002) then clustered academic disciplines into four main groupings: Hard Pure, Soft Pure, Hard Applied, and Soft Applied – each with their own epistemological characteristics. They refer to this structure as the Becher–Biglan typology (Table 6). This classification, while not always straightforward as different facets of a discipline may be emphasised by individual researchers and university departments (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 39), provides a useful framework for understanding the diverse academic landscape.

Table 6.   The Becher–Biglan Typology.

Discipline Type	Disciplines
Hard Pure	Maths (including Statistics), Science (including Chemistry and Analytical Sciences, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Life Sciences, Physics and Astronomy)
Soft Pure	Social Sciences (including Economics, Geography, Politics and International Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology), Arts (including Art History, Classical Studies, English, History, Music, Philosophy and Religious Studies)
Hard Applied	Technology (including Computing, Design, Environment, Engineering)
Soft Applied	Education, Modern Languages, Health and Social Care (including Nursing, Social Work and Youth Justice), Business School (including Law)

Source: Table adapted from Coughlan and Perryman (2011, p. 14).

Broader structures of power and privilege often mean that some subjects have greater prestige than others (Bourdieu, 1990). Despite their comprehensive nature, the labels 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines can have pejorative connotations,

implying a lower level of rigour in certain academic fields (Berliner, 2002). Those fields that are closely aligned with elite interests, for instance, Medicine, Business, and Law, tend to have an elevated status. In contrast, academic disciplines associated with marginalised groups, i.e. more applied subjects tend to have a lower status. These hierarchies tend to mirror wider social inequities, and as such, disadvantaged students are less likely to study STEM subjects (Ro et al., 2021). A key reason, proposed by Brooks (2014) is that working-class people lack "science capital" - science-related cultural/social capital through knowledge, behaviors, and networks (Archer et al., 2015). This framing risks a deficit view of working class groups, overlooking diversity of experiences within.

Academics may research and/or teach in a specific subject discipline for a myriad of reasons. Their choice often stems from personal interest, expertise, skills, and educational background, including subjects studied from school to university. Factors such as research funding, academic networks, and career aspirations can influence the selection of their field. Some academics may prioritise research opportunities, while others often focus on teaching or community engagement. Academic disciplines often have distinct cultures shaping assumptions of who 'fits' within that field (Hudson, 2017). According to Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework, subject disciplines, similar to institutions, function as fields with distinct rules for success (pp. 80–97). To thrive in academic settings, individuals must comprehend and operate within the specific norms, behaviours, and knowledge – the 'rules of the game' – that confer an advantage in that context. Bourdieu (1977) argues that leveraging field-specific cultural capital is crucial for successfully navigating the academic landscape. However, possession of valued capital alone is not sufficient. The distinct cultures within academic disciplines may inadvertently marginalise scholars without a habitus ingrained in the established norms and practices of those specific fields.

Across the three research phases, I interviewed WCAs from 34 different subject areas, representing a wide disciplinary spectrum (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2.   List of Subject Disciplines of Respondents.

Unfortunately, I am unable to offer a thorough breakdown of respondents across each subject area due to a considerable number of incomplete or missing responses in the survey data. Nevertheless, it was evident that certain fields such as Health, Social Sciences, Geography, and Education had a more substantial representation in the dataset compared to others. In contrast, there were lower numbers of respondents in some STEM subjects, which remained low across all phases, with sparse representation in fields like Physics, IT, and Mathematics. I was unable to ascertain whether WCAs were/are less likely to pursue STEM-related academic careers. Furthermore, more detailed research is warranted to comprehensively map WCA representation across subject disciplines and to gather a qualitative understanding of subject choice. The subsequent sections of this chapter will delve into the disciplines explicitly referred to by respondents in their interviews and survey narratives. It's important to note that discussing these specific disciplines does not imply their overarching significance for WCAs; rather, it signifies their relevance as indicated by the respondents in influencing their experiences.

Social Sciences

According to the Becher–Biglan typology, the Social Sciences are included in the 'soft pure' disciplinary group. Coughlan and Perryman (2011) describe the Social Sciences as a discipline that considers the 'whole' or entirety of a subject matter. The Becher–Biglan typology suggests that there is an inclination towards qualitative research methods in this discipline, emphasising the quality and nature of phenomena rather than quantitative aspects. In terms of UK Sociology, a 2010 *International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology* asserted that 'British Sociology remains weak in quantitative methods' (Byrne, 2012, p. 13). This has inspired a number of initiatives aimed at improving the inclusion of quantitative data within the discipline, of which the Q-step programme is the most recent (Hampton, 2018). However, Williams et al. (2019) argued that despite possessing world-class large-scale datasets and being at the forefront of methodological development, UK sociology has never been a quantitative discipline. With the exception of Psychology and Economics, UK Social Science disciplines have historically been marked by humanist approaches rather than quantitative ones from their inception (p. 337). The Becher–Biglan typology states that scholarly inquiry in the Social Sciences is often carried out independently, without extensive collaboration. This is likely to have developed since the typology was produced as researchers in all disciplines are being pushed to collaborate. However, Lewis (2017) suggested that Social Scientists may not embrace collaboration in greater numbers because of the value they place on their autonomy or freedom to pursue their own ideas.

Within the academic discipline of Social Sciences, scholars share a set of dispositions, values, and attitudes that shape the diverse field. Encompassing subjects such as Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Economics, and Political Science. The Social Sciences prioritise empirical research to investigate social phenomena, emphasising evidence-based approaches, rigorous data analysis and practical application of research findings to bridge theory and practice

(Bryman, 2016). Interdisciplinary collaboration is a hallmark of the Social Sciences, reflecting their deep interest in understanding and exploring the complexities of society (Serpa et al., 2017). The habitus of the Social Sciences may be characterised by a commitment to addressing inequality, discrimination, and disparities through research and advocacy, something which can potentially attract WCAs who may be passionate about understanding and addressing these societal disparities (Gamoran, 2021; Staines et al., 2023). As scholars in this field have to navigate hierarchical power structures, this too can shape their interpretations and contributions to research and teaching. While varying by subject, this multifaceted habitus defines the dynamic and evolving nature of Social Sciences.

Almost one in five (n. 46) of respondents reported that they were within the Social Sciences. Of all the subject areas, respondents in the Social Sciences exhibited the strongest sense of belonging within their subject discipline. Echoing the sentiments of respondents in Grimes and Morris (1997), who described 'feeling at home in Sociology' (p. 144), my WCA respondents expressed positive views about the subject due to its alignment with their values and interests.

> *Sociology stands for positive social change within communities.* [Matt, a Lecturer in Sociology at a Russell Group institution]

> *Sociology represents values such as social justice.* [Amelia, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution]

However, respondents did note that navigating the complex landscape of the Social Sciences could be difficult. As Kayden, an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at a traditional institution noted, interdisciplinary collaborations presented difficulties for WCAs such as himself due to his limited access to academic networks, crucial for forming collaborations. Developing effective communication skills, another integral component, could also be challenging for my respondents because at times they had not had the same opportunities (as their advantaged peers) for public speaking or academic writing, and, as such, may feel less prepared (Grimes & Morris, 1997, p. 143) for an academic career. These challenges show the need for tailored mentoring and workshops to help WCAs overcome barriers. Such targeted support initiatives also signal universities are invested in WCA success and dismantling obstacles to them accessing and thriving in academia.

Education

According to the Becher–Biglan typology, Education is included in the 'soft applied' disciplinary group. This is described by Coughlan and Perryman (2011) as follows:

> 'Dependent on Soft Pure knowledge, being concerned with the enhancement of professional practice and aiming to yield protocols and procedures'. In common with Hard Applied disciplines, Soft Applied disciplines also feature 'multiple influences and interactions on both their teaching and research activity'. (p. 406)

The academic discipline of Education has been characterised by epistemological weaknesses, often attributed to a deficiency in 'the consensus and coherence observed in some of the more established disciplines' (Furlong, 2013, p. 2). This critique, while offering valuable insights, fails to acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of education. Education draws upon the theoretical foundations of soft pure disciplines like Social Sciences and Arts, while also incorporating the practical applications of hard applied disciplines like Technology. This duality is evident in the emergence of digital classrooms (Haleem et al., 2022). Academics in the applied disciplines were more likely to engage in publicly engaged research and creative activities, teaching and learning initiatives, and service-oriented practices (Doberneck & Schweitzer, 2017).

Education, as a subject discipline, aims to establish practical and applicable guidelines, which resonate with the practical and applied orientation often attributed to the WCA habitus. However, before embracing these notions of a WCA habitus without empirical evidence, a comprehensive mapping of WCAs and their academic affiliations is vital.

The field of Education encompasses a shared set of values and attitudes among scholars and practitioners. It is diverse and interdisciplinary, spanning subdisciplines like Childhood Studies, Higher Education as well as career and vocational education.

The discipline consists of typical quantitative and qualitative methodologies, alongside objective analyses and action research. The field encompasses perspectives from teachers, researchers, administrators, and/or policymakers. This diversity is further enriched by the individual backgrounds and values within the educational domain. The field exhibits a tendency to shift its focus intermittently, turning to Psychology on some occasions, and exploring Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural Studies at other times (Yates, 2004). While there may be variations within each subfield, professionals tend to adopt student-centred approaches and value diverse learning styles (General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, 2019). Academics in the field of Education engage in research and scholarship to advance knowledge in areas such as educational theory, policy, and practice and may value evidence-based decision-making. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to the field, as are attempts to address educational disparities (Machost & Stains, 2023), which means it's an attractive discipline for WCAs who may have faced difficulties in their education.

In all, 10% (n. 26) of respondents were in the field of Education. Similar to Ardoin and martinez (2019), my respondents were more likely to cite a desire to '*foster inclusivity in education*' [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution] as their primary motivation for entering this academic field. In this spirit, five respondents emphasised the unique perspective they brought to the Education field, a lived experience that empowered them to provide a '*reality check to self proclaimed experts*' [Natalie, a PhD Student in Education at a post-1992 institution]. Respondents implied that 'experts' may not have a true understanding of the challenges faced by people who had experienced disadvantage, suggesting that these 'expert' opinions might stem from assumptions or stereotypes rather than real world experiences. Financial barriers in pursuing

professional development courses and certifications were also cited by other respondents (n. 3). Additionally, Ellis, a Senior Lecturer in Post-compulsory Education at a post-1992 institution, and two others highlighted the difficulties they experienced in accessing research funding for educational research, a finding that extended beyond those specifically teaching or researching in the field of Education. Mirroring a report by Gladstone et al. (2022), my research revealed WCAs facing funding gaps, citing a lack of networks and biases against less prestigious institutions and WCAs. Targeted interventions to build networks, skills, and address biases could enable WCAs to attain research funding parity.

Geography

Like the Social Sciences, under the Becher–Biglan typology, Geography is included in the 'soft pure' disciplinary group. Coughlan and Perryman (2011) describe this as having a holistic approach, a nuanced and detailed exploration of subject matter, with what is often seen as a qualitative bias. Unlike the hard pure fields, there is a continuous relevance and application of knowledge. Scholars in these disciplines often work independently with distinct areas of focus. Geography is a multifaceted discipline that explores the spatial dimensions of our world. Geographers study the Earth's physical environment, including landforms, climate, and ecosystems, while human geography delves into the social, cultural, and economic aspects of our planet (Gough, 2023). Geography, as a discipline that captures the richness of our diverse world, should be one that inherently embraces diversity by cultivating a nuanced understanding of the world and its role within it (Milner et al., 2021). Geography is also highly interdisciplinary, drawing insights from areas like Environmental Science, Sociology, and Economics (Hill et al., 2018). Moreover, Geography's emphasis on spatial relationships and its commitment to training professionals aligns with the ethos of inclusivity, allowing individuals from various backgrounds, including WCAs, to engage in meaningful research and contribute to decision-making processes. Geographers often work in academia, government agencies, urban planning, environmental consulting, and other sectors where spatial analysis and problem-solving skills are highly valued.

This dynamic field continues to evolve, reflecting the ever-changing global landscape and the pressing need to address complex geographical issues in our interconnected world (Career Explorer, n.d.). In his chapter in the *Geographical Association (GA) Handbook of Secondary Geography*, Professor Alastair Bonnett describes geography's aim to study the world, both near and far, as being the most far-reaching and ambitious of any discipline. Geography as an academic discipline has faced dual challenges of fragmentation and visibility. The breadth of knowledge demands specialisation, creating sub-communities within departments. Geography struggles for visibility and credibility in academic life despite strengths in teaching and international research reputation. The discipline contends with outdated perceptions, impacting its representation in broader academic contexts (Johnston, 2003). For WCAs navigating this discipline, these challenges may be particularly pronounced, the struggle for visibility and credibility may

intersect with issues of representation, as WCAs may find it challenging to over-
come entrenched biases and stereotypes within the discipline. Despite these
challenges, WCAs in Geography bring a unique perspective, informed by lived
experiences, to address the discipline's evolving landscape.

In all, 7% (n. 18) respondents reported that they were employed at a univer-
sity within the discipline of Geography. The discipline's interdisciplinary nature
attracted some respondents (n.4) as they had the perception that this broad sub-
ject area could potentially open doors to diverse career opportunities. Respond-
ents encountered financial challenges within this field. Connor, a Professor of
Engineering Geology at a Russell Group institution, highlighted the significant
financial investments required to gain entry to his primary field of Geology and
the broader domain of Physical Geography.

> *[You] need to have wet weather gear…geological hammers…and*
> *boots and so on. [W]e certainly help with financial aid, by providing*
> *students some key equipment…its part of the fees, a welcome pack.*

Connor observed that Geology and related fields often require other specialised
equipment which can be costly. These expenses can create a barrier for students
and academics without economic capital. For instance, WCAs may encounter
several challenges such as the need for resources such as GIS and remote sensing,
specialised equipment and databases. Since many Geography programmes entail
fieldwork, this necessitates expenses related to travel and accommodation. As pre-
viously discussed in Chapters Three and Four, these costs are typically borne by
the academics themselves and reimbursed at a later stage. However, WCAs may
struggle to fund these activities, limiting their ability to conduct comprehensive
research. Like many subjects, Geography relies on collaboration and network-
ing to access research funding and job opportunities. Without access to these
research funding or grants, WCAs may find it difficult to conduct research and
publish their work. Notably, my respondents within the field of Geography were
more inclined than those in other subject areas to report that mentorship pro-
grams were within their institutions. However, it's important to acknowledge
that these programmes were relatively new, and as such, there is limited academic
evidence regarding their effectiveness.

Classical Studies

Classical Studies, one of academia's oldest disciplines, is the study of ancient
Greeks and Roman cultures, spanning language, literature, history, and artifacts.
Classics is also included in the 'soft pure' disciplinary group. Classicists are typi-
cally required to demonstrate proficiency in ancient Greek and Latin languages as
there is a strong emphasis on the reading and interpretation of original texts and
other primary materials, such as classical literature, epic poetry, drama, philoso-
phy, and prose. Additionally, the study of classical archaeology within Classical
Studies involves excavations, artifact analysis, and the examination of material
culture, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach that may require resources not

equally accessible to working-class individuals. Classicists often draw inspiration from other disciplines like History, Philosophy, Art History, and Linguistics, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the classical world. However, access to such interdisciplinary knowledge can be influenced by social class, as individuals from privileged backgrounds may have greater exposure to diverse educational resources. Furthermore, engaging with the philosophical ideas of ancient luminaries like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics constitutes a significant aspect of the Classics habitus, potentially creating disparities in familiarity and interpretation based on educational backgrounds and access to philosophical traditions.

The intersection of Classical Studies with social class is further manifested in the role of Classicists as educators. Many individuals in this field actively participate in teaching classical languages, literature, and culture across diverse educational levels (Whitmarsh, 2021). However, the accessibility of classical education can be influenced by social class, as individuals from more affluent backgrounds may have greater access to classical language instruction and related resources. This educational dimension introduces a socioeconomic element to the dissemination of classical knowledge, potentially contributing to disparities in exposure and engagement with the field based on varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Classics scholars are part of a global network of scholars who share a common interest in the ancient world. They participate in international conferences, collaborate on research projects, and maintain ongoing intellectual exchanges with colleagues from around the world. Again, these activities are made more difficult when an academic has varied access to economic, social, and cultural capital.

My respondents talked at length about the challenges they faced within the Classics field. Clare (2022), in his personal narrative of his trajectory from undergraduate to post-PhD researcher, found that while those without elite stores of economic, social, and cultural capital can face classism in any discipline, the inherent elitism within the classics and ancient history field adds an extra layer of difficulty for the working classes to succeed (p. 31). Classics is an elite subject, because, as observed by Simpson (2021), classical civilisation is scarcely taught in schools, let alone Latin and Greek. For the past three centuries, the Classical curriculum, traditionally associated with prestigious private schools, has granted privileged access to Oxbridge for the select few enrolled in these schools (Hall & Stead, 2020, p. 10; 24 cited in Perale, 2023, p. 26). Proficiency in Ancient Greek and Latin is crucial in the Classics, which poses difficulties for WCAs as some may not have had the opportunity, or feel they have the ability to study the subject (Perale, 2023). WCAs can also feel disempowered to either teach or conduct research in this field due to high levels of imposter syndrome (compared with other subject areas) and a lack of economic and cultural capital (Perale, 2023). The critical examination of primary materials, including ancient manuscripts and inscriptions, can be challenging for WCA who may have had limited access to these resources. Engaging in classical Archaeology, which often involves excavations and artifact analysis, can also require financial resources.

The Classics involve a deep appreciation for Literature and Philosophy. While there is no inherent reason why WCAs cannot embrace these disciplines, their educational backgrounds may initially make them feel out of place within the Classics habitus. The Classics Survey exposed stark WCA underrepresentation with a 'leaky pipeline' through to the senior ranks. Recommendations included collect class and intersectional data; boost Classics in state schools; sustained outreach; remove cultural, financial barriers across careers (Canevaro et al., 2024).

In all, 2% (n. 6) respondents were in the field of Classics. The following quotes offer poignant insights into the challenges faced by WCAs striving to establish themselves in this elite discipline:

> *I think ultimately, because I do Philosophy and Eastern religions, I am forever learning Latin, Greek and Sanskrit terms and it can be difficult… So, what I tend to do then is I'll go on Bugle put in how you say or how do you pronounce put in the word and I listen to it multiple times, so I can say it, and then it won't look as bad in the lecture*. [Kane, Lecturer in Eastern Religions at a traditional institution]

> *So I'm in Classics and ancient History…The problem with that is that they tell you, you can get along as an ancient Historian. You can't. What you need is to learn the languages. You need Greek and Latin. The problem with that is that Greek and Latin are taught to very posh kids at very posh schools. I worked on an outreach project for two years here in Liverpool. And it was all about delivering Greek and Latin GCSEs. And it was only the posh schools that could afford it. I tried to change that around. But then I got a job taken off me and given back to a senior member of class as a member of staff, which is why I'm grubbing around for teaching work now. There's a history of elitism in Classics and ancient History*. [Samuel, Teacher in Classics & Ancient History at a Russell Group institution]

> *I don't have a private education (obviously) so as an early modernist it's easy to feel inadequate; people assume that everyone has Latin and probably a bit of Greek! I often see discussions on Twitter of how you can't be a proper early modernist without those Classical languages*. [Ruby, independent scholar[10]]

These quotes highlight the intersection of educational privilege, access to resources, and the impact of these factors on academic opportunities. In Kane's

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[10]Respondent didn't provide name of the subject area in which she teaches/conducts research.

narrative, the challenges of learning Latin and Greek were further exacerbated by his dyslexia – something that can impact on your experience no matter your social class. Patterson (2020) aptly observed that Latin is not a subject readily adaptable for those with learning disabilities. The second quote by Samuel addressed the issue of elitism in Classics and Ancient History. He expressed frustration with the inaccessibility of Greek and Latin education, particularly its concentration in independent schools. The lack of access to the Classics can be seen in the statistics for A-levels, where 76% of Latin and 92% of Greek candidates came from independent schools. In terms of university admissions, fewer than a quarter of Oxford classicists in 2019 came from state schools (Cunliffe, 2022). The reference to an outreach project highlighted that Samuel had attempted to address this imbalance. However, outreach and engagement programmes tend to be only available at universities that teach Classics-related subjects, so widening participation into the Classics from outside the institutions can be difficult. Ruby's quotation highlighted how classical language proficiency is deeply embedded in the traditions and norms of this academic discipline, making it difficult for WCAs to break through these barriers. Collectively, these quotations illuminate the difficulties that WCAs without access to classical language education may face in academia.

Physics

The academic subject discipline of Physics is included in the hard pure disciplinary group. In the context of physics, Coughlan and Perryman (2011) describe a cumulative, atomistic structure that signifies the gradual accumulation of knowledge over time, emphasising fundamental components and addressing universal principles within the field. While the Social Sciences typically have qualitative approaches, Physics utilises quantitative reasoning by applying mathematical concepts to depict the world (White Brahmia, 2019). Academic communities in Physics are competitive yet sociable dynamic and multiple authorship are commonplace (Coughlan & Perryman, 2011). Within Physics there is a set of shared values, orientations, and attitudes, although individual variations exist. Physicists have an appreciation for empirical evidence and scientific rigour: Physicists value empirical evidence and scientific rigour. They are trained to design and conduct experiments, collect data, and interpret results in a systematic and objective manner (Rosen, 2009).

Like most academic disciplines, Physicists are trained to think critically and to approach problems with creativity and ingenuity. They are skilled at evaluating evidence, constructing arguments, and developing innovative solutions to scientific challenges. However, scepticism is instilled in the discipline as Physicists are trained to question assumptions, challenge existing theories, and rigorously test hypotheses (Rosen, 2009). Problem-solving is a central focus, with Physicists dissecting complex problems and devising systematic approaches for resolution. Given the long-term nature of Physics research, patience and persistence often become part of their habitus (Rosen, 2009). Elements of what eventually

evolved into physics were primarily derived from the fields of astronomy, optics, and mechanics, methodologically unified through the study of geometry (Kisak, 2015). Physics may be challenging for WCAs as science capital is unevenly distributed across social groups, with a strong concentration among more privileged individuals (Archer et al., 2015).

In all, 2% (n. 4) respondents referred to being in the field of Physics. Elaine, a Teaching Associate in Science at a Russell Group institution, illuminates several important themes related to class, gender, networking, and mentorship in the academic field of physics:

> *It's mainly…blokes…So, you'd go away to a lab somewhere. You must stay there, but then you'll be going out at night and things for meals, they'll be talking to each other about activities that you wouldn't consider doing. So, then you can't really join in in the conversation. You feel a bit left out because you haven't got similar experiences to them. They build up these networks, and they… choose people who they get along with, similar sort of people to them. So, it's hard and so when you're looking to move on, they've already got their eye on someone who they're going to employ. It's hard to get someone to support you. To help you move on in Physics, you've got to have some sort of mentor to take you under their wing. Seems like it's always somebody you already know who's going to get the job. They're already lined up sort of thing… So, it's basically if you're not like them, they don't take you on. That's how it feels*.

Elaine highlighted the gender disparities within physics, particularly in male-dominated subfields like Nuclear Physics. Physics has one of the largest gender gaps in STEM according to an analysis of more than 36 million authors of academic papers over the last two decades (Holman et al., 2018). Written evidence to the UK Parliament by the Institute of Physics (IOP) (2022), on representation in the Physics sector, reported it also has a significant underrepresentation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, disabled people, those who identify as LGBT+, and minority ethnic groups. Despite socioeconomic background not being a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, the IOP collects data on its membership every four years in its anonymous member diversity survey. The IOP used the highest parental qualification as a proxy for the socioeconomic background of respondents. In 2015, 11% of respondents reported that their parents held no qualifications, this had dropped to 7% in 2019 (IOP, 2022, 2020). At present, the representation of women in the nuclear science workforce within member countries of the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) is at 20% (The National Nuclear Laboratory, 2023). There is no comparable data available on class diversity in nuclear science.

Going back to Elaine's experience about being excluded from conversations about networking events, this is indicative of the challenges women often face

in male-dominated STEM disciplines. She also highlighted the significance of networking in academic progress. The exclusionary nature of these groups, which often favour individuals with similar experiences, further perpetuated inequalities in the field. Elaine suggested that mentorship plays a crucial role in advancing one's career in physics. However, she implied that these opportunities may be biased towards individuals who are already known to those in influential positions. This is similar to the findings by Friedman and Laurison (2019) who found that one of the key drivers of the class ceiling is sponsorship, i.e. where those further up the ladder coach newer entrants (p. 217). This too can disadvantage WCAs. When asked about the intersection of class and gender, Elaine implied that women in high positions in Physics may predominantly come from advantaged backgrounds, hinting at the interconnectedness of class and gender disparities in the field. While Elaine indicated that financial resources may not be a direct barrier, she acknowledged the competitive nature of securing funding in Physics, which can be challenging for WCAs. Her statement also emphasised how the lack of representation can profoundly impact an individual's sense of belonging and career progression.

Practicality Versus Theory

Hasenjürgen (1986), somewhat patronisingly, constructed WCAs as being 'theory distant' (cited in Dressel & Langreiter, 2003). This observation should come as no surprise to the reader so far because as I've established, descriptions of the skillset of WCAs tend to only emphasise their perceived deficiencies. *If* indeed there is a perceived reluctance among WCAs to engage with theory, this may stem from the pervasive pathologisation of the working class in theoretical discourses. Leeb (2004) suggests, this could be viewed as another attempt to elevate the status of elite/middle-class scholars at the expense of WCAs. Working-class individuals may prioritise the acquisition of practical skills for two key reasons: firstly, they may lack the financial resources that would allow them the leisure to engage extensively in theoretical contemplation, and secondly, they recognise the importance of maximising their employability. Interestingly, only one of my respondents mentioned theory in a critical manner, but not in the way one might expect. Terri, a PhD student in History at a traditional institution observed '*I've been looking at Social Theory recently because I don't like Theoretical History as it tends to collapse on contact with reality*'. While Terri has a certain scepticism with Theoretical History, she expressed a preference for engaging with social theory, suggesting an interest in exploring abstract concepts, models, and frameworks for understanding societal phenomena. Another respondent revealed that he was writing a book on musical theory [Richard, a Professor of Culture at a traditional institution]. This variation underscored the need to avoid generalisations when discussing WCAs and their interactions with theory. While some may approach theory with scepticism, others embrace it enthusiastically, reflecting the rich tapestry of academic perspectives within the WCA community.

Directly opposing Hasenjürgen's (1986) view of WCA being 'theory lite' was Talia, a Research Assistant in Nursing at a traditional institution:

> *When I was doing my undergrad… it was to become a community and youth worker. I wanted to help my community. So, it was very practical based. Obviously, we had the theories behind the practice. And I found myself when I was maybe my third year, I was like, oh, God, I kind of prefer the theory more than the actual practical side. So, when I was in my fourth year, I thought, Okay, I want to do a master's afterwards. But I didn't want to do a master's in community youth work, because again, it was the practice, and I loved it, but I wasn't as interested in it. So, I applied to do a master's in sociology. And so I went, and I did my master's in sociology. And then after finishing that I was thinking, oh, God, I'd really like to do a PhD next. And so, I worked for a year as a research assistant to make sure it's what I really wanted to do. And now I'm beginning my PhD in September.*

Talia's quotation is interesting as she acknowledged that she initially pursued her undergraduate studies with a practical orientation in mind. WCAs, like Talia, might prefer applied degrees as they may hold perceptions about the relevance of theoretical and applied degrees in their communities. They may choose degrees that they believe will have a more practical and immediate impact in her community. However, in her exposure to theory, she recognised a preference for the theoretical aspects of their discipline. The cost of education can also be a significant factor for working-class people, thus WCAs may initially have chosen degrees that lead to more immediate and stable job opportunities, typically associated with applied degrees such as healthcare, engineering, or technology. Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care at a Russell Group institution, mentioned that she gravitated towards applied degrees because she had limited access to classic theoretical books. This transformation in Talia's academic interests may also indicate a simultaneous growth in her cultural capital. As she delved into new areas of study and diverse intellectual perspectives, she suggested she not only broadened her knowledge base but also enriched her understanding of different cultural contexts, narratives, and theories.

My interview with Ellis, a Senior Lecturer in Post-compulsory Education was especially revealing on the subject of theory. Ellis recounted the time when he was teaching FE in Media and IT Production. He had previously worked at the BBC before transitioning to the FE college. As an aside, he observed that there were seven people on the interview panel, and '*not one of them had a Liverpool accent*'. Ellis didn't get the job, and talked about the feedback he received:

> *They said that I was fantastic, but we didn't feel you had a good grasp of educational theory. I've been teaching educational theory for four years. All I've done is speak about different approaches to pedagogy, and then how that links with technology. I thought it wasn't a*

> *fair assessment. They said I was great on the technology stuff, and experience in media, and I was thinking that is bollocks, because we rarely get in-depth descriptions, just discussions and approaches around communities of practical critical pedagogy. I spoke about all those things.*

Ellis's statement underscored the challenges that WCAs may face in academia, where their qualifications and expertise may not always be recognised or valued in the same way as those from more privileged backgrounds. It also potentially underscores that Hasenjürgen's view of WCAs as 'theory distant' or lacking in certain areas may inadvertently contribute to a bias against them. This highlighted the importance of challenging stereotypes and ensuring that assessments of academic candidates are fair, thorough, and unbiased.

Bernard, a Senior Lecturer in Networking at a traditional institution, presented a nuanced perspective on the role of theory and practical skills in academia, particularly in the field of technology. He emphasised the significance of practical skills in certain industries:

> *We [some universities] have a snobbery about skills. In my industry, you need to have people who can configure routers, and switches, otherwise airplanes don't stay in the sky. It is as crucial as that. So having all this lovely academic theory is good, but if our students can't go and actually do this dangerous thing [keep airplanes in the sky], theories are useless.*

Bernard shared his journey into academia, highlighting that while he did not hold a doctorate or a postgraduate qualification, he did possess valuable industry experience. He stressed the importance of bridging the gap between academic values and practical skills, drawing attention to the necessity of advanced technical abilities in fields where the application of theory directly impacts real-world outcomes.

> *A colleague and I developed a programme and basically off that I was headhunted to carry on developing postgraduate programmes. I have no doctorate, no postgraduate qualification of my own, but I have the industry experience. I came in, very techie with industry experience and an understanding of academia from my FE perspective. We started off and developed that programme.*

Bernard's viewpoint challenged the dichotomy of theory versus practicality, advocating for a more balanced approach that integrates academic theory with practical skills. He highlighted the importance of reflecting on the culture of pre-1992 Polytechnics, where advanced technical expertise was crucial, especially in technology-driven industries where lapses could lead to severe consequences such as technological failures and security breaches.

> *You know, in university, there are certain academic values, which could be perceived as snobbery. I sit sort of very much on the side of, we've got to have these skills, these technical abilities, we've got to reflect upon the pre-92 Polytechnic culture where individuals must be very advanced at what they do, and very clever, otherwise you're going to be hacked and your bank is not going to be able to trade. There's going to be all sorts of technological problems. I'm teaching those kinds of individuals.*

Bernard's perspective illuminated the complex interplay between academic qualifications, practical skills, and industry experience within the academic context, emphasising the need for an adaptable approach, particularly in fields where the convergence of theory and practice is crucial for success.