THE EXPERIENCES OF WORKING-CLASS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: TO WHAT EXTENT DOES SOCIAL CLASS STILL NEGATIVELY IMPACT ON STUDENTS EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Masters By Research

2021

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to gain an insight into the first-hand experiences of working-class

university students. Six current students or recent graduates participated in this research to

discover whether social class impacts upon working-class individuals' experiences of higher

education. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to collect data which were then

analysed via thematic analysis using conflict theory as a conceptual framework. These methods

allowed an intimate and raw insight into the experiences of the six participants. The research

found that for the individuals in this study, their experiences of university were negatively

impacted due to their social class backgrounds.

Context

This research aims to answer the question; to what extent does social class still negatively impact an individual's experience of higher education? I will explore the existing literature surrounding experiences of social class inequality in higher education to provide context for this research. While a wealth of existing research focuses on the inequalities of working-class university students in terms of academic achievement, access, or identity (Reay, 2001; Sullivan, 2001; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Stebleton & Soria, 2021; Lehmann, 2013; Jury et al, 2018), no research focuses on their overall first-hand experiences as they are currently living it. The research surrounding working-class experiences of university seems to be focused on their experiences coupled with other factors such as how experiences shape outcomes, working-class experiences with family achievement guilt, and working-class student experiences of phycological barriers in higher education (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jury et al, 2017; Walpole, 2003). This research extends on the existing field of social class inequalities in higher education and illuminates the continuation that education is indeed, far from a meritocratic institution. I have achieved this extension by focusing on the experiences of six working-class university students as a whole and answering the question 'To what extent does social class still negatively impact students' experience of higher education?'. I recognise the critical importance of the wealth of existing literature and research and aim to extend this by producing a rich, raw, and in-depth insight into working-class students' first-hand experiences during their time at university, with an in-depth look into the social aspects that contribute to an individual's experience of university also.

There is a wealth of research surrounding social class inequalities with a focus on specific barriers that working-class students may face in their access to and experience of universities, such as the research explored in the literature review. Research must continue to be produced and expand the existing field regarding these specific issues – or an individual's experiences in their entirety such as this research paper - as the deeper the insights we gain into these students' experiences, the greater the chances we have of inflicting change and eradicating the inequalities of this institution.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether social class impacts upon working-class student experiences. Three research questions guided this study: (1) How has coming from a working-class background effected their access to higher education? (2) If any, what barriers have been present in their education due to social class? (3) Has being from a working-class background effected their experiences with higher education services?

This research will also provide a particular insight, drawing on the intimate, rich and deep experiences of 6 working-class university students who shared their narratives. Significant to this research is also my position as a working-class university student. It would be naive of me to try to argue that I am entirely objective or an outsider within this study. I have multiple positions within this research. I am a writer, researcher, learner, student, and a working-class individual who myself, feels the oppression and inequality of the higher education system. So, I believe it appropriate here to explain my experiences to provide an insight into my positioning and reasoning for conducting this research.

I began my journey as a student five years ago now. I had no idea that where I came from would have any impact on my experience at university. It was a big deal for myself and my family for me to attend university as none of us had ever done it before. My mother was bursting with pride, and I was so beyond excitement for the life I was going to create for myself that I was blind to the discrimination that this middle-class institution would ultimately present to someone like me. I turned up to lectures and seminars like any other student, listened and learned. It wasn't until I began learning about the sociological aspects of education that I began to see how coming from a working-class background leaves you at a disadvantage in higher education. Words like inequality, disadvantage, and non-traditional would be used to describe students who had not come from middle- or upper-class homes. I never really liked this as it felt somewhat offensive to me. I truly did not see myself as "disadvantaged" or "non-traditional" but the more we delved into what this really meant and the impact it has on one's education, I saw that I was.

I did not come from a family that could provide me with financial stability as I completed my studies. There was a lot of love, a lot of support and a lot of pride. But not a lot of money. Where I come from if you need money you work for it. There isn't anybody around to provide a safety net if you can't pay your bills. Therefore, I worked multiple jobs throughout my time at university. I worked retail jobs, bar jobs, childcare jobs. Anything I could to ensure that I had money in my pockets and food on the table. This to me, was the norm. Working whilst studying meant that sometimes lectures were missed, time was taken away from studying and university events couldn't be attended. I hadn't even thought of this as a classed narrative or inequality issue until we began exploring what to me were normal aspects of everyday life as social class barriers to education during a sociology module in my undergraduate degree.

I discovered that aspects of my life that would seem perfectly normal were in fact a barrier to my education caused by disadvantage. For example, missing critical lectures due to working, not being able to attend educational trips because I cannot afford it, not understanding what my lecturers were speaking about as they would "speak too posh". This fuelled a fire in me, and I wanted to break down every barrier that presented itself to me in my pursuit of a higher education. I believe I did that to some degree by achieving well academically despite the barriers I faced because of where I come from. But I still felt unfulfilled. I wanted to change the way working-class students experience education and find a way to level the playing field for those starting their time at university.

This is how this present research has come to be: To begin to make a difference in bridging the gap in social class experiences of inequality in higher education, what first must be understood and acknowledged are the many everyday experiences of working-class university students themselves. To obtain and value first-hand accounts of the student experiences exposing the barriers faced compared to those from more affluent and 'traditional' higher education backgrounds. I felt it important to process my own experience in channelling my motivations into researching the experiences of others and discovering whether other students from similar backgrounds are aware of and facing the same obstacles. I believe that although this is a small-scale study, I provide a particular insight and passion to this research as I have experienced the many barriers from which this research has emerged and is centred. Maybe once the stories and experiences of the participants in this research are added to the existing literature surrounding

social class inequality in higher education more understanding and recognition will be given to the barriers these students face and methods to overcome these can begin to be developed.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are historically a predominantly middle-class system that valorises middle-class norms and values (Reay, 2006). In the past decade, the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending higher education has increased significantly and now stands at a record high (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). In 2019/2020 the number of students eligible for Free School Meals progressing to university by age 19 has increased to 26.6% (Department for Education, 2021). Widening participation efforts have led to higher numbers of admission of working-class individuals being accepted into universities across the UK, but are these students social class backgrounds negatively affecting their experiences of higher education?

This section will introduce key figures and principles surrounding social class inequality in education to provide a wider understanding into, arguably, why the participants in this study were subjected to the experiences they had. A wealth of previous literature has argued that social class inequality in education is a well-established area of disadvantage in the UK with a vast and complex history of ensuring working-class students remain outsiders fighting to succeed within (Reay, 2001; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Mijs, 2016; Jury, et al., 2017; Reay, 2018). The work of these academics can be seen in the literature review as they explore social class inequality in education in relation to; class hybridity, working-class underachievement, psychological barriers present for lower income students, and working-class identities at university (Reay, 2001; Dune & Gazeley, 2008; Jury et al, 2017; Reay, 2018). In the seminal work of esteemed academic Diane Reay, she has consistently argued that the education of the working class has always been inferior to that of the middle and upper class (See Reay, 2001).

For example, explaining how even as far back as the 18th Century politicians viewed the schooling of the working class as an opportunity for control and containment as opposed to liberation and an opportunity to enhance social mobility (Reay, 2006). Other scholars support Reay's arguments that England is the most illuminating example of education as a means to secure what Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci (1971) identified as a hegemonic domination over the subordinate classes (Green, 1990; Boronski & Hassan, 2020).

Gramsci's use of the term hegemony to identify domination on a macro level has been defined by Boronski and Hassan (2020) in relation to class and society as the occurrence of seemingly voluntary acceptance of the ideology of the dominant class by the subordinate classes. The dominant class successfully implement their ideology in society through the education system. Gramsci (1971) states that the educational institution is an important ideological apparatus as it assists in securing the consent of the oppressed whilst helping maintain the dominance of the ruling class in capitalist society (Gramsci, 1971). The belief that the education systems oppress the working classes through hegemony and capitalism stems from the theory of Marxism. The theory of Marxism states how systems of exploitation are achieved through the dominant classes imposed ruling class ideology (Boronski & Hassan, 2020). In a capitalist society, Karl Marx saw conflict between the proletariat (the working classes) and the bourgeoisie (the middle and upper classes) with the latter exploiting and controlling the former with the hopes and aims of profit. The dominant class convince the subordinate classes that society is fair and just.

It has been argued that one of the key ways the dominant class had achieved this throughout the history of our education systems and continues to do so today is through the notion of

meritocracy (Reay, 2006; Aronson, 2008; Steinmetz, 2008; Jury et al, 2017; Elkins and Hanke, 2018). Reay (2006) defines meritocracy as a powerful myth that helps maintain the social hierarchy. Meritocracy is the idea that individuals make progress through hard work and ability alone rather than other factors such as social class (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). The UK education system is supposedly a meritocratic institution with success earned through 'hard work' (Reay, 2006; Elkins & Hanke, 2018). Michael Young first coined the term in the hopes of a Britain which allocates positions based on merit (Young, 1958). A meritocratic society and the education system is argued to have its benefits as individuals are given what is a supposedly level playing field as they are judged based on their merits alone, and therefore, should give all members of society equal opportunities (Boronski & Hassan, 2020). However, as this theory was introduced evidence quickly showed it was unrealistic and class inequalities alongside disadvantages present in pre-war Britain were continuing to be reproduced under new systems (*ibid*). Reay has repeatedly argued that social class has a considerable impact on individual educational outcomes (Reay, 2001; 2006; 2018). Scholars are constantly labelling meritocracy within higher education as an unfulfillable and unrealistic promise (Jury, et al., 2017; Mijs, 2016), while the OECD (2010) identified that in Britain background influences one's success far greater than any other rich country (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2010).

Highlighting why meritocracy is an unfulfillable promise is central to Dunne and Gazeley's (2008) research into how secondary school teachers identified underachievement in their classrooms. They stated that teachers' judgements of pupils' achievement were informed in correlation with their social class (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). Teachers were more inclined to

accept and expect underachievement from working-class pupils which in turn contributed to differences in levels of attainment (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). The teachers also shifted the causes of this underachievement to the home settings and conceptualised this as out of their sphere of control (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). In contrast to this, when middle-class pupils were identified as underachieving, teachers were inclined to address the issue so as to not hinder their educational and occupational aspirations (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). These teachers are contributing to an already alarming gap in educational attainment based on social positioning (Ryan, 2000; Reay, 2001; Boronski & Hassan, 2020). This study supports the argument stated by Reay (2006) that meritocracy is a myth through highlighting how teachers views, and prejudices create obstacles for working-class pupils interfering with their ability to succeed based on hard work alone (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008).

To continue the 'meritocracy is a myth' argument made above by showing the disproportionate access to higher education - based undeniably on social class instead of 'hard work' - are some of the alarming statistics continuing to be seen over the last few years that demonstrate the inequalities experienced by working-class students throughout education. Focusing on higher education, the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils entering higher education by age 19 is the highest it's been since 2006/2007 with a gap of 18.8% (Department for Education, 2020). Only 19% of state school students progressed to higher education by age 19 compared to 56.5% of independent school students in 2018/2019 (Department for Education, 2020). As an illustration of the problem, and taking my own institution as an example, Canterbury Christ Church University published statistics showing that regardless of its outreach programmes and efforts to close the gap in participant progression, white male students from lower-

socioeconomic backgrounds are consistently less likely to progress to their higher education institution (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019). There was a 20% gap in working-class white male progression at CCCU in 2015/2016, up 8% from the previous year (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019). However, it should be noted that despite a gap still being present in the progression of these male students, CCCU has closed this gap with it lowering to 9% in 2019/2020 (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019). Improvements are being made but a large gap in accessibility still remains for these disadvantaged students (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). It is shown within the literature that despite many efforts, the working classes are underrepresented leading once again to unequal outcomes due to social class background (Wong, 2018).

Throughout history, education of the working classes has been positioned as inferior to that of the middle-classes and used as a tool to secure hegemony over those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gramsci, 1971; Reay, 2001). It can also be seen that the promise of success based on merit alone is an idea in which many scholars critique labelling it a 'myth' due to evidence demonstrating that social class vastly impacts an individual's education (Reay, 2006; Mijs, 2016; Jury, et al., 2017). The deep roots of social class and education to which all of these issues discussed above stem, originates from what is known as cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). These terms define the fundamental factors to which working-class individuals in education are ultimately at a disadvantage. The literature reviewed below explores these principal ideas.

Literature review

Having just explored some of the history and background of social class inequality in education - whilst also narrowing our view on higher education in particular - this section will review the literature regarding key aspects of disadvantage that working-class students may face in their pursuit of a higher education and the theories surrounding this inequality.

Bourdieu and The Form of Capital

Critical to the field of educational inequality is French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who outlines three forms of capital: social, economic and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986). His belief that the more capital one possesses determines the chances of success in education as well as in life - is widely supported by a vast array of scholars (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2001; Sullivan, 2001; Walpole, 2003; Aries & Maynard, 2005; Aronson, 2008; Byrom, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Jury, et al., 2017; Watson, 2018; Wong, 2018; Elkins & Hanke, 2018; Reay, 2018). Capital refers to the resources available to individuals that can generate social advantages; economic capital refers to financial resources, social capital refers to networks and contacts, and cultural capital refers to cultural knowledge, possessions, tastes and qualifications (Wong, 2018). The literature makes evident the concern that access to these capitals is advantaged towards the middle-class excluding the working-classes (Walpole, 2003; Jury, et al., 2017; Reay, 2018).

Bourdieu's literature consistently argues that education systems are the primary source of the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Education values the three forms of cultural capital; objective, embodied and institutionalised (Bourdieu; 1986). Objective capital is in the form of cultural goods, books and artwork, embodied capital in the form of language, mannerisms and preferences, and institutionalised capital is in the form of qualifications and educational credentials (Bourdieu, 1986). Education favours and rewards students that can demonstrate these forms of cultural capital which tends to be middle-class students who then, therefore, are at an advantage (Walpole, 2003).

Scholars have argued that not only do the middle classes run the system, the system also valorises middle-class capital rather than working-class capital in the first place (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2006). Jury et al (2017) go on to explain how the parents of low socioeconomic students lack the cultural capital of the dominant culture within the education system, and therefore, cannot transmit this capital to their children in the same way middle and upper-class parents would in order to benefit their children (Jury, et al., 2017). Literature has shown that working-class young people are unable to fully participate in the game of education as they do not have the resources or competence necessary for participation (Bourdieu, 1998; Walpole, 2003; Bathmaker et al, 2013; Elkins and Hanke, 2018).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction states that children from middle-class families are advantaged due to the transmission of cultural capital from their parents (Bourdieu, 1977).

Sullivan (2001) researched the effects cultural reproduction has on educational attainment and her findings show that cultural capital is reproduced within the home setting and does in fact have a substantial effect on educational performance (ibid). She also identifies how her findings support Bourdieu's view that cultural capital is unevenly distributed due to her research showing that parental cultural capital is directly associated with social class and parental qualification (ibid). Her findings also suggest that parental capital strongly influences the cultural activities of the pupil, as students from more affluent families engaged in activities with increased objective cultural capital which in turn positively affects educational attainment (ibid). This research was conducted by surveying year 11 students in England in 4 comprehensive schools, two of which were co-educational, all two single-sex in 1998 (ibid). This research is useful in highlighting the effects cultural capital reproduction has on educational attainment and the advantages it provides middle-class students whilst increasing the gap in inequality for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This research focused on a specific age group within four schools in England and therefore, the generalisability of this research could be questioned due to the specific age range and a small sample from which the data was collected. It should also be noted that this research was conducted over two decades ago and therefore the findings of this research today may not be as valid in the current context. A gap in the literature can be identified here also, as more research is needed using a variety of age groups, particularly ages 18 and above to explore if Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and cultural reproduction affect university achievement and experience.

In the literature above, social class is argued to be reproduced and rooted within the family upbringing. An individual is socialised towards certain attitudes, preferences and dispositions

towards the social world (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Bourdieu defines this socialisation of preferences as Habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Other scholars, such as Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009), have explored Bourdieu's work and provided additional explanations of habitus as the embodiment of cultural capital, embedded habits and dispositions we have as a result of our lived experiences (Reay, et al., 2009). The literature shows that although habitus is strongly rooted within the family, schooling and friendships have a great effect on an individual's habitus (Walpole, 2003; Reay, et al., 2009; Byrom, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Wong, 2018)

It has been argued that, due to the lack of access to capital, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds possess a habitus that destines them to think and act in ways that recreate the conditions of their own habitus (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Individuals are born into a particular social-class group that has its own characteristics, and without a surplus of economic, social and cultural capital, research demonstrates how due to their habitus, the working classes are more likely to experience less academic success, develop negative attitudes towards schooling and achieve lower levels of attainment (Walpole, 2003; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Reay (2001) takes this argument further by stating that the working-classes have been viewed in the past and still often viewed today, as "unknowing, uncritical, tasteless mass from which the middle classes draw their distinction" (Reay, 2001 Pp.335) As previously discussed, education is an institution that favours a middle-class habitus, resulting in working-class pupils being put at a disadvantage. However, Bourdieu's theory of habitus has been criticised within the literature for being too deterministic as it seeks to explain an individual's motivations and behaviours in the

social realm with a somewhat invisible force - leaving one's conscious decisions and efforts

unaccounted for (Archer, 2010; Croce, 2015)

Contrary to the research discussed above and the potentially deterministic nature of Bourdieu's

habitus, scholars have also shown how working-class students can, in fact, draw on the habitus of

the education system itself to succeed (Reay, et al., 2009; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Edgerton

and Roberts state that working-class students who experience sufficient early academic success

could see schooling in a positive light (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Students may then alter their

attitude and performance in school which leads to an accumulation of cultural capital, therefore

furthering their positive attitude towards schooling as it is then seen as a source of social

mobility (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Evidence of working-class students' success due to

viewing education as a means of social mobility can be seen within the literature (Lehmann,

2013). Data from interviews collected from a four-year longitudinal qualitative study saw

students reporting enjoyment in embracing university life and sourcing motivation from the

knowledge that they are gaining cultural capital (Lehmann, 2013).

Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) support this through their research which found that

educational habitus has proven effective for low socioeconomic students within their sample

despite coming from working-class backgrounds with a lack of cultural capital (Reay, et al.,

2009). They went on to state how the students did not acquire a cultured habitus due to strong

support and guidance from teachers: but rather due to working on themselves for themselves as

individuals (Reay, et al., 2009). This positive orientation towards schooling is described as the

'educated habitus' in which individuals gain strong aspects of their habitus through schooling

with a desire to be educated and identify as an educated individual (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

This educated habitus positively affects working-class pupils through high-aspirations, increased

self-discipline, attentiveness, self-control, positive self-image, diligence, and positive outlooks

on education (Nash, 2001; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Educated habitus links with the works of Vygotsky as he states that cognitive development in

children takes place through the child's culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's term culture is

what Bourdieu would define as 'Habitus'. Therefore, by combining these two theories it could be

argued that cognitive development takes place in many successful low socioeconomic children

due to the 'educated habitus' they formed for themselves. Children who experience literate forms

of socialisation in their early years are able to portray, what Vygotsky would define as 'higher

mental function', as well as what Bernstein would define as 'elaborated semiotic code', therefore

allowing for better progress within education (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Working-class students' ability to succeed in education despite parental social status and lack of

access to capital, Bourdieu would argue, is due to the ability of the habitus to adapt and

transform (Bourdieu, 1990). He states that habitus changes in response to experiences and

context in addition to being flexible in environments (Bourdieu, 1990; Byrom, 2009). This

concept of habitus is widely supported throughout the literature with Mills arguing that although

habitus constitutes a default position, this can be altered as habitus shapes but does not

concretely decide one's choices, therefore, allowing habitus the opportunity to transform rather

than reproduce inequalities (Mills, 2008). Some researchers argued that this transformation of habitus is achieved somewhat through repeated practice and requires the recognition of others for working-class students to transform into their new selves (Sayer, 2005a; Lehmann, 2009). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) use the concept of an institutional habitus to explain how different academic spaces can influence a student's identity, with their research showing how working-class students describe university as a 'bubble' in which they are continuously reshaping their habitus (Reay, et al., 2009; 2010).

Interestingly, in their research, they found that the working-class students held onto aspects of their working-class habitus, whereas other literature argues against this (Reay, et al., 2009; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lehmann, 2013; Jury, et al., 2017). Scholars tend to argue that young people tend to have a 'break up' with their habitus as they start to succeed within education viewing it as something to leave behind as not to hinder them (Lehmann, 2013).

It could be indicated through the research surrounding habitus - and its ability to adapt and transform - that working-class students can enter the middle-class arena of educational institutions, however, at a cost of altering their identity and shedding the culture they grew up within. Regardless of this constant practice that habitus transformation may require to succeed and overcome inequality, researchers have found that although working-class students may be able to disguise themselves and 'pass' as middle-class, there will be a constant reminder that the habitus they have 'claimed' is not one which can ever be fully embodied (Lawler, 1999; Byrom, 2009). This is due to working-class pupils being in what Bourdieu would define as an unfamiliar 'field' (Bourdieu, 1984). When an individual is in an unfamiliar field a habitus can, indeed,

transform; but it can also produce feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and doubt in oneself (Reay, et al., 2009). With the focus on higher education, scholars have supported this argument by stating how working-class students at universities tend to feel like a 'fish out of water' (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). These feelings of not fitting can be distressing for students and further add to the inequalities experienced by working-class university students (ibid).

Class Identity and Transformation

Scholars suggest that working-class university students are disadvantaged in the world of higher education as university settings favour and reward the middle-classes due to their accumulation of capital which reflects the middle-class nature of universities (Sullivan, 2001; Byrom, 2009; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). However, in the marginal cases in which working-class students thrive in higher education and achieve academic success, Reay states that this is due to a desire for escapism (Reay, 2001). For these students, she describes their journey in higher education as one in which they wish to lose themselves, contrary to the middle-class journey of finding yourself during the time spent at university (Reay, 2001).

This desire to lose oneself in higher education can reflect a much more sinister issue of rejecting the working-class identity within the higher education system once away from the field of the home setting. Reay argues that this stems from the working classes historically being 'found out' in education as they are "discovered to be inferior, less cultured, less clever than the middle classes" (Reay, 2001 Pp. 343). This dismissal of working-class roots is supported throughout the

literature, with research showing how due to working-class students being a minority within higher education, individuals may develop negative emotions towards their social class (Orbe, 2004; Alon, 2009; Lehmann, 2009; Jury, et al., 2017). Due to their underrepresentation within higher education, they are constantly reminded that they are not part of the dominant class culture for which they have entered (Orbe, 2004; Jury, et al., 2017). In a Bourdieunian sense, their habitus is one that does not fit with the field of the institution (Bourdieu, 1990). This rejection of an individual's working-class identity has been criticised by scholars as it seems to be only working-class students who feel the need to shed part of their identity to fit in with the dominant culture of a middle-class institution (Reay, 2005; Borrego, 2008; Elkins & Hanke, 2018). Diane Reay adds to this critique to suggest that the idea of meritocracy has emphasised the need for working-class identities to be left behind within higher education and has become something to feel embarrassed about (Reay, 2005).

Steinmetz (2008) researched the experiences of working-class students at elite universities and discovered that these students chose to dress and act in ways that would hide their working-class background (Steinmetz, 2008). This is supported by academics who have found that minority groups actively try to alter their identities through increased efforts to speak 'correctly' and keep their social class backgrounds hidden (White & Ali-Khan, 2013; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014; Martin, 2015). Elkins and Hanke support this with what they call 'code-switching' (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). They define code-switching within university settings as the practice within which students alter their speech and non-verbal communications as well as performances of social class through appearance, material possessions and personal stories to navigate various fields (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). They explain how once again, due to issues of working-class identity

rejection, students alter their language as a strategy to manoeuvre through the tensions of their social-class background and the social-class identity they are portraying in higher education (*ibid*).

Code-switching relates to what Bourdieu deems as linguistic capital in which particular forms of speech are dominant in certain institutions and settings (Bourdieu, 1986). Linguistic capital is a form of embodied cultural capital outlined previously in this literature review. In his literature, we can see how possessing capital provides an advantage, especially when institutions favour the middle-classes capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). The literature on code-switching and linguist capital supports and explores the infamous 1962 paper from Basil Bernstein who connected linguistic codes to social class by stating that working-class individuals spoke in a restricted code, whilst middle-class individuals spoke in an elaborate code (Bernstein, 1962). The forms of capitals and the linguistic codes are vastly intertwined as if an individual speaks in an elaborated code, they are in possession of higher levels of embodied cultural capital to which in the eyes of society and education, they are advantaged (Bernstein, 1962; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1997).

Due to the advantages scholars have shown middle-class pupils receive due to their increased capital - such as their linguistic capital discussed above - it is no wonder studies have demonstrated that working-class students attempt to mask their true social class background at university (Steinmetz, 2008). Interestingly, it is not just the working-class students that mask their social class identities with Elkins and Hanke arguing that students tend to identify as middle-class despite their actual social class status, whether it be working, middle or upper

(Elkins & Hanke, 2018). They believe that this is due to their inherent level of class-based privilege and bias that runs through higher education settings, as well as reflecting the social mobility promised by higher education (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). They go on to explain how upper-class students may also falsely identify as middle-class in the hopes to disguise their increased level of privilege, benefits and capital (Elkins & Hanke, 2018).

Contrary to the literature discussed so far in this theme, is Finnegan and Merrill's (2017) research which found that working-class identities were not something to be ashamed of in higher education but were rather an identity that represented a strong sense of community, hard work, a caring nature, and honesty (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). They found that students had reported class transformations at university, but this was not necessarily a negative transformation, with students stating that university provided a safe space for them to rework their identities and escape the difficulties and deprivation of their home life (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017). This reworking of identity is what is defined within the literature as 'habitus transformation' (Lehmann, 2009). As we have seen in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, one's habitus can transform through the various environments and social contexts in which they find themselves (Bourdieu, 1990).

However, many other academics have argued that due to the working and middle-class habitus differing greatly as a result of the contrasting fields and capital the classes possess, students from working-class backgrounds tend to experience habitus dislocation rather than transformation during their time at university (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Lehmann, 2009). Baxter & Britton define

habitus dislocation as a painful dislocation between the individuals old and new forming habitus (Baxter & Britton, 2001). They explain that this process is painful due to the habitus and identities becoming ranked through the hierarchy in higher education whilst carrying overtones of inferiority or superiority (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Habitus dislocation has been reported in other studies with Aries and Seider (2005) researching the experiences of low-socioeconomic college students in the USA and finding that students developed new forms of cultural capital and struggled with their class identities as their habitus dislocated from who they were before higher education and who they are becoming now they are in higher education. They also reported that these issues were vastly heightened for students at more prestigious and elite colleges (Aries and Seider, 2005).

As students experience habitus dislocation, they are constructing new understandings of themselves and begin what much of the literature would call, indeed, a transformation (Aronson, 2008; Byrom, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010). Aronson states this transformation occurs when students develop a comprehension of their identities in relation to their education (Aronson, 2008). She goes on to argue that the working-class to middle-class identity transformation requires what she calls 'identity work' (Aronson, 2008). This 'identity work' is comprised of acceptance and playing the part of a middle-class student through the enactment of a middle-class habitus and adopting middle-class codes (Kaufman, 2003; Aronson, 2008). The idea of working-class students experiencing an identity transformation is supported by the work of Jensen (2004) who defines the process as a "crossover experience'' as it represents a journey from the old and a cross over to the new (Jensen, 2004). This concept is similar to that of habitus dislocation yet in

this literature the transformation or break up with the past self is seen as a positive, with Jensen explaining how the crossover may lead to new opportunities and knowledge (Jensen, 2004).

In a case study of 27 working-class students in higher education in the UK, Reay, Crozier and Clayton researched student identities in different academic contexts (Reay, et al., 2010). They used mixed methods across four different higher education institutions from elite, civic, post-1992 university and a college of further education (Reay, et al., 2010). Although the authors used interviews as part of their methodology, these interviews were conducted as a group rather than individual interviews and, therefore, may lack the richness and depth of that which could have been achieved via independent interviews as participants may not want to share certain experiences in a group setting. Independent interviews will be used within this present research in the hopes of achieving a high level of richness and avoiding participants potentially feeling uncomfortable in a group environment.

The authors state that class can be transformed through university experiences and that this transformation is vastly related to students developing what they call their 'learner identities' (Reay, et al., 2010). Their research found that these learner identities became the students strongest and main source of identity through a connection to institutional habitus, however, the extent of this connection varies depending on the institution and whether the students lived at home, in university accommodation or on campus (*ibid*). They also found that for students attending the elite university, the demanding environment coupled with the immersive experience of campus living and social life resulted in their learner identities becoming centred around being a university student (*ibid*). However, contrary to this, for the majority of working-

class students who chose the comfort of a college setting due to financial reasons, they found that these students experienced a continuation rather than a transformation like the students at the elite university (*ibid*). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) go on to highlight within their study how working-class students face barriers to their university experiences - which also, in turn, affect their learner identities and possible transformations - as they found that for students who live at home, their identity is very much rooted as a 'local working-class student' (*ibid*). These students reported how balancing paid work and family responsibilities takes precedence over habitus transformations and playing the role of a middle-class student (*ibid*).

Class identity and transformations often lead to feelings of conflict in working-class university students (Reay, 2001; Aries & Seider, 2005; Reay, et al., 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Lehmann, 2013). Parekh (2007) argues that although identities can overlap when a working-class habitus is coupled with a middle-class educational institution it is becoming increasingly common for the different dimensions of one's identity to be in conflict with each other (Parekh, 2007; Reay , et al., 2010). The idea of class conflict within the working-class self is supported throughout the literature with Thomas and Quinn (2007) also explaining how uncertainty and conflict in the self are generated when multiple narratives regarding what it means to be working-class and educated collide. We can see examples of this within the Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) research discussed above, as throughout an interview a working-class student attending the elite university spoke about her mother's negative reaction and disapproval to her gaining entry to the prestigious university as she believed this is not what her daughter should be doing (Reay, et al., 2010).

Many scholars in the past have argued that for working-class students to succeed in higher education and eliminate this internal class conflict they must break with their class practices and distance from their family and home environments (Ashdenden, et al., 1982; Desmarchelier, 1999; Kaufman, 2003). The arguments these scholars present provide a situation in which working-class students must let go of their backgrounds, identities and habitus to succeed in education. The literature insinuates this to be a difficult and potentially traumatic experience that, as previously demonstrated, middle-class students do not have to endure (Jetten, et al., 2008; Reay, et al., 2009).

Thus far, we can see that many authors have argued that in the face of class conflict working-class identities should be left behind in order to transform one's identity into the middle-class habitus of higher education (Ashdenden et al., 1982; Desmarchelier, 1999; Kaufman, 2003). Yet, once again with reference to Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010), their longitudinal research found that working-class students in all four of the universities in which they were researching maintained a strong connection to their home life (Reay, et al., 2010). Although maintaining strong relationships is positive, some issues arise from keeping connected to home communities whilst experiencing identity transformation (Aries and Seider, 2005). During their research, Aries and Seider discovered working-class students felt concerned about how they could be different from their loved ones without coming across as judgemental (Aries & Seider, 2005).

This issue is further explored through the work of Lehmann (2013), who drawing on qualitative data from a four-year longitudinal study of successful working-class university students, found

that the achievements of those described as 'left behind' - such as early work experience, getting a mortgage or having a family – is sometimes seen as inferior to the success of becoming educated and more cultured (Lehmann, 2013). However, Lehmann does highlight the fact that those classed as left behind and inferior may have higher incomes, more material goods and lower levels of debt (Lehmann, 2013). During the interviews, the students in this study spoke of their parents or former peers 'narrow-mindedness' to which they are demonstrating how their new knowledge gained from university is of more importance, more value, and sets them apart from their less-educated family and friends (Lehmann, 2013).

Lehmann then goes onto explain how rather than graduating university with critical and empathetic understandings of their cultural conditions of their previous habitus and the habitus of their loved ones, these working-class students who now view themselves as superior to those individuals in their home communities have joined the middle-classes and the middle-class narrative that renders working-class knowledge and experiences as deficient (Lehmann, 2013). Sennet and Cobb (1972) also critique the behaviour demonstrated by these working-class students describing it as a powerful force that inflicts feelings of inadequacy (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). It is important to note, however, that other literature contradicts the findings produced by Lehmann. Scholars research has found that many working-class students experiences of middle-class universities lead to reaffirmations of their class-based values and sense of self, as in comparison to the highly affluent students they are surrounded with, they were able to witness the value of their independence, resilience and empathy developed from their working-class roots (Skeggs, 1997; Aries & Seider, 2005).

There is an alternative argument within the literature to the class transformations, habitus dislocation, or shedding of working-class identities discussed above, with many scholars arguing that students can possess class hybridity, in which they can move between the social classes and possess traits from either class and use this to their advantage in various contexts (Reay, 2001; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Bathmaker, et al., 2013; Elkins & Hanke, 2018). The students within the Reay, Crozier and Clayton study described their university life as a 'bubble' in which they come in and out of whilst constantly refashioning themselves (Reay, et al., 2009). Other scholars describe this class hybridity as 'border living' (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Elkins & Hanke, 2018). They state that working-class students linger on the border of working and middle-class values to navigate their way through their past life and new life (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). Gardner and Holley explain the strength that is to be gained from working-class students' boarder-living as they then possess the ability not only to make their families proud but pave a path for future generations (Gardner & Holley, 2011). These scholars support the arguments Reay makes from 20 years ago in which she states that the hybridity working-class students can possess through stopping outright transformation provides safety and comfort as they can combine educational achievement and authenticity in their sense of self (Reay, 2001).

Although the hybridity does not require outright transformation and allows students to navigate between their past and present, the literature exposes how it may also pose a risk of students being caught between the old and the new as they may no longer feel they entirely belong to the working-classes now, yet not entirely accepted by middle-classes either (Lehmann, 2013). It is explained how as these student's grow and progress through life they are likely to find themselves in environments and situations in which they are deemed as cultural outsiders

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(Lehmann, 2013). Jury et al (2018) explains these problematic situations in which working-class students find themselves no longer belonging in their old groups but not yet welcome in the new, as encountering 'double discrimination' (Jury, et al., 2018), a phenomenon which is supported by a vast amount of literature (Branscombe, et al., 1993; Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Warner, et al., 2007).

Barriers for The Working-Class Student

A wide array of literature surrounding class inequalities in higher education is centred around the barriers working-class students face in accessing and participating in higher education (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; Walpole, 2003; Quinn, 2004; Jury, et al., 2017; Jury, et al., 2018). There are three main barriers identified by academics Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) which we will explore through the examination of further literature. The three main barriers faced by working-class students are; economic, social and cultural, and educational (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). The barriers explored within this section are all interconnected with each other with the effects of one barrier potentially causing another barrier to develop. These barriers also heavily correlate with Bourdieu's work, as the working-class students lack of capital and innate habitus causes a disadvantage in the access and experience of higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). The disadvantage developed through the lack of capital and habitus is what causes the barriers which will be explored within this section.

It is argued within the literature that before working-class students even enter the university setting, they are facing social and cultural barriers and inequalities with many scholars

discovering that low-income students are more likely to delay enrolment due to daily survival and contributing to the household income taking priority over the 'luxury' of a gaining a degree (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; Aronson, 2008). This provides a barrier not only to their access to higher education but to the completion of their degree with Bozick & Deluca finding that even a single year delay in enrolment reduces the likelihood of seeing one's studies through to completion (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

These social and cultural barriers stem from differences that Walpole (2003) claims are a direct result of having low socioeconomic status and being young in age (Walpole, 2003). She states that differences such as parental input and expectations, school structures, experiences of education, and finances all accumulate to create a barrier to working-class access and experiences of university (Walpole, 2003). She goes on to add that students from working-class backgrounds also tend to enrol in lower positioned institutions that do not have equal reputations to elite universities that are known for their high achievement and high aspirations (*ibid*). Walpole's 2003 findings of the differences that aid in the building of cultural and social barriers for working-class students accessing university are supported by a vast amount of literature (Bernstein, 1977; Bernstein, 1982; Astin, 1984; Halle, 1984; Astin, 1985; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Gaskell, 1985; Kozol, 1991; Astin, 1993; Bowen & Bok, 1998). It could be argued that these differences resonate highly with Bourdieunian work as the characteristics defined as those which build barriers are in fact what Bourdieu defines as working-class capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). Combining both the differences Walpole outlines above with Bourdieus habitus we can see an example of what Edgerton & Roberts previously described as

the phenomena of working-class habitus perpetuating its own inequality (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

A critical social and cultural barrier - and described as one of the most pressing issues in the higher education sector - is the drop-out rates amongst working-class students at university (Quinn, 2004). Conducting qualitative research through interviews with 80 first-generation working-class students who had recently dropped out of university, Quinn (2004) argues that drop-out rates are undeniably a classed narrative. Through the interviews, she discovered that this narrative is one of a cultured nature in which working-class drop out becomes self-perpetuating, and therefore, the article argues that dropout should be seen as a socio-cultural issue rather than just an educational one (Quinn, 2004). Much research has shown that dropout rates are higher at post-1992 institutions which working-class students are ultimately more attracted to due to these institutions maintaining a much less elitist culture (Kenwright, 2002; Archer, et al., 2003). In her research, Quinn goes on to argue that there is an assumption that increased access to higher education coupled with higher levels of lower socioeconomic students enrolling in universities produces social justice and bridges the gap in educational inequality (Quinn, 2004). However, she concludes that this assumption is false as despite widening participation efforts it has been demonstrated that working-class students are more likely to be accepted in less prestigious institutions which have lower completion and higher drop-out rates than elite universities (Quinn, 2004).

Research supports Quinn's argument for the classed narrative of dropout in higher education with authors highlighting the disproportionate dropout rates amongst the least well off at university (Vignoles & Powdthavee, 2009; Crawford, et al., 2016; Wigmore, 2016; Reay, 2018). Reasons for dropout have been identified by the work of Yorke (1997) who stated that the five most significant reasons for non-completion were incompatibility, lack of preparation, lack of commitment, financial difficulties, and poor academic progress (Yorke, 1997). Yorke's work could be critiqued as these reasons for dropping out do not outright mention class dimensions. However, these factors are more heavily weighted towards working-class students due to their lack of both cultural and economic capital (Walpole, 2003; Jury, et al., 2017; Reay, 2018). Findings from Quinn's research directly reflect these reasons with one student interviewee explaining how they lived on a council estate and identified strongly with people from this community who believe that education is not important but finding immediate work is (Quinn, 2004). This student has many factors contributing to her decision to drop out of university. These factors were both cultural and financial in nature as her community placed little value on higher education, alongside her family living in poverty and therefore, the main priority for this household was financial survival (Quinn, 2004).

Again, there is much research to support these findings with literature stating that low socioeconomic parents have different expectations and definitions of success that view finishing school as the norm rather than valuing gaining a degree (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Willis, 1977; Halle, 1984). In addition to this, we can also see much literature that supports the evidence presented by Quinn that shows working-class families defining success and placing a higher value in securing a full-time job after finishing school (Hearn, 1984; Hearn, 1990; McDonough,

1997; McDonough, et al., 1997). It does have to be noted, however, that the literature cited in support here is very much dated and it could be argued that the expectations and norms in working-class communities have progressed as increased numbers of non-traditional students now enter university.

The next barrier highlighted within the literature links with the previous literature reviewed above. As discussed previously, working-class students experience a class identity conflict and habitus dislocation when they enter the field of higher education (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Lehmann, 2009). Although we have seen some of the issues this presents such as painful feelings of inferiority, it can also present as another barrier to working-class students at university, a psychological barrier. Scholars have argued that the lack of compatibility low socioeconomic students experience with their university negatively impacts their psychological wellbeing (Jetten, et al., 2008). In 2017, Jury et al produced an extensive review of the literature surrounding the psychological barriers low socioeconomic students face in higher education (Jury, et al., 2017). They argue that from their in-depth analysis of the literature that even if low socioeconomic students are able to overcome the economic barriers they may face, they are likely to still experience increased psychological threat, increased mental health problems, increased negative emotions and lower levels of motivation than middle and upper-class students (Jury, et al., 2017).

The authors state their definition of psychological barriers in their analysis as "students emotional experiences (e.g., emotional distress, well-being), identity management (e.g., sense of

belonging), self-perception (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived threat), and motivation (e.g., achievement goals, fear of failure)" (Jury, et al., 2017, pp.25). They also found within the literature they reviewed that working-class students experience negative psychological effects in each of these areas defined above as a result of their university experiences (*ibid*). The authors state that these psychological barriers are 'self-debilitating' as they directly and negatively affect the behaviours, motivations and attainment of working-class students which can lead to the reproduction and maintenance of the inequalities in higher education faced by the working-class students themselves (*ibid*).

The findings of Jury et al (2017) are supported by Reay (2006) as she has also found that class has worked its way into the realm of psychological barriers and therefore works as a tool for the reproduction of inequality as working-class students internalise their failures and lack of success as pathological. Adding that working-class psychology in higher education is defined by fear, anxiety and obsession with failure in which success seems delusional (Reay, 2006). Jury et al (2017) argue that psychological interventions and increased support services are needed within higher education institutions to help working-class students overcome these barriers. Quinn (2004) and Wong (2018) argued, however, that contrary to the findings that working-class identity leads to a pathological sense of failure, that some students can find pride in their backgrounds and use their class heritage as a source of motivation for success.

The work of Walpole (2003) has already been seen to support the idea of Bourdieu's cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). However, Walpole's work also produced

evidence of what she calls purely educational barriers for working-class students. She states that students from working-class backgrounds have lower educational aspirations, lower performance, as well as lower educational achievements throughout the entirety of education including further and higher education (Walpole, 2003). She is supported by much dated literature from over three and four decades ago that also found working-class students to be seen as inferior to their higher socioeconomic peers in these areas (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; MacLeod, 1987; Tinto, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993; Lareau, 1993).

Continuing with educational barriers present for working-class students is the work of Jury et al (Jury, et al., 2018). In a separate paper than the one discussed previously, the authors research what is known as performance avoidance goals which is found to be a pressing educational barrier to working-class university students (Jury, et al., 2018). Their research takes an alternative stance to much of the literature surrounding low-socioeconomic students as they argue that this barrier is created through first-generational (working-class/low socioeconomic) students achieving upward mobility rather than their apparent unavoidable lack of success (Jury, et al., 2018). Their research found that the higher these students achieved, the more they employed performance-avoidance goals compared to continuing generation students who tend to be from more affluent families (Jury, et al., 2018). The theory of achievement goals was developed in the early 1980s with two main types of achievement goals that students can pursue being outlined: mastery goals in which the purpose is competence and mastery, and performance goals in which the purpose is to demonstrate competence relative to others (Jury, et al., 2018). The performance goals are then split into performance-approach and performance avoidance

goals with performance approach focusing on gaining positive outcomes and demonstrating

superiority, and performance-avoidance focusing on avoiding demonstrating inferiority or

incompetence (*ibid*).

Performance-avoidance goals are tied with negative outcomes for university students throughout

the literature. They are associated with low motivation, procrastination, viewing tasks as

threatening, un-organisation, surface learning, not seeking any feedback, lower grade outcomes,

as well as increased negative emotions such as anxiety, hopelessness, and shame (Elliot &

Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pekrun, et al., 2006; Payne, et al., 2007; Elliot &

Murayama, 2008; Darnon, et al., 2009a; Durik, et al., 2009). Regardless of negative outcomes

associated with performance-avoidance goals, scholars have found that some students adopt

these goals anyways (Van Yperen, 2006; Smith, et al., 2007; Van Yperen, et al., 2011). Jury et al

(2018) argue that the adoption of performance-avoidance goals is in fact a classed issue as

research highlights the fact that perceived competence is one of the strongest predicators of

performance-avoidance goals among university students. The argument that working-class

students are more likely to adopt performance-avoidance goals is strengthened by the findings in

other research that low socioeconomic students suffer from not only low self-esteem in their own

competencies, but negative stereotypes surrounding their academic competence from others also

(Elliot & Church, 1997; Jury, et al., 2018).

The last barrier to be assessed here is student employment which narrows down directly to a

financial barrier, but encompasses social, cultural psychological and educational barriers also.

Research has found that students take up employment alongside their studies due to financial

factors, their values and habitus (Callender, 2008). The literature shows us that employment is taken up as loans do not cover the essentials - with no access to family financial support for working-class students - making employment, therefore, unavoidable (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Callender, 2008). Scholars have argued that typical full-time degree courses in the UK are not designed to work alongside employment, yet the government does not recognise this as they view students as individuals who work to fund their 'excessive lifestyles' instead of recognising that many working-class students are forced to work to make up for the lack of financial support they receive from home (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Research has found that working during university negatively impacts university results and overall degree marks (Callender, 2008). This is supported by a wealth of literature which shows students reporting the negative effects of student employment which includes missed lectures and seminars, less studying, less time spent on assignments, less use of university facilities, and increased stress and fatigue (Smith & Taylor, 1999; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Metcalf, 2003; Van Dyke, et al., 2005; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). These negative effects created through term-time employment directly impact attainment with Lindsay and Paton-Saltzberg finding that working students failed on average 3X as many modules as students who are not in employment, received significantly lower grades and had lower degree marks overall (Lindsay & Paton-Saltzberg, 1994). Although these problems are present for any student that engages in term-time work, these barriers disproportionally affect working-class students as scholars show they are more likely to be employed whilst studying (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Callender, 2008; Aronson, 2008).

Moreau and Leathwood's study of student employment found the experiences of low-socioeconomic students were directly affected by term-time employment (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The authors found that due to working-class students lack of financial support from home they are forced to take up employment (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). They go on to demonstrate how this results in these students being less likely to take up opportunities for voluntary work in their chosen field than middle-class students which leads to them having no experience in their chosen sector which again only perpetuates the disadvantage these students face (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). They go on to explain that their study found students reporting high levels of stress, little time for studying and getting involved in university life (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The authors argue that term-time work highlights an equality issue for working-class students as they face barriers due to their social class that hinders every aspect of university life (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The work of Moreau and Leathwood is supported by Callender (2008) who argues that it is working-class students who are the most negatively impacted by the need for term-time employment which is fundamental for these students but ultimately reproduces the disadvantage these students face. Callender goes on to explain how the disadvantage is perpetuated as these students become isolated due to their fatigue and stress and miss out on opportunities they may have otherwise been given, as well as their lower degree results harming their future careers (Callender, 2008).

Methodology

This chapter will outline the methodology for this research. It will provide insight into the use of conflict theory as a conceptual framework for this study due to its recognition of working-class disadvantage in education, the specific qualitative methods and interviewing techniques used to conduct the research at hand, and a detailed plan and reasoning for the use of thematic analysis.

Conceptual framework

The literature review has identified barriers that lead to class-based inequalities throughout all stages of education which in turn proves problematic for working class students as they attempt to break down the barriers they face and gain entry into higher education. The conceptual framework of conflict theory in the realm of education continues the arguments made throughout the literature reviewed above and postulates that meritocracy is in fact a myth, that educational settings do reproduce inequalities, as well as provide an environment for perpetuating class conflicts (Chernoff, 2013). I will therefore be using Conflict Theory as a conceptual framework throughout this research as it recognises the inequalities faced by the working classes in education and the cycle of oppression this reproduces.

Conflict theory as a perspective focuses on the social, political, and economic inequalities and draws attention to the power differences between the social classes in society. This theory derives its conceptual roots from Marx and Weber (Dworkin, et al., 2013; Mishra, 2013). The

two major conflict theory traditions - Neo-Marxist and Neo-Weberian – both share the same fundamental beliefs that makeup conflict theory, particularly within the realm of social class and education (Jacob, 1981). Both traditions believe that education is an institution that promotes struggle and is an environment that encourages the domination of lower social classes (Brown & Lauder, 2010).

Karl Marx as we have already seen within the literature review is a key figure in the field of social class inequality and it is, therefore, no surprise that Marxism laid down the foundations for conflict theory (Dworkin, et al., 2013). Marx argued that human history is littered with conflict borne from the ruling class exploiting the working classes (Mishra, 2013). Marxism states that the bourgeoisie gain power from the oppression of the proletariat and control of the forces of production which result in a conflict between the two groups (Mishra, 2013). The Neo-Marxist tradition of conflict theory focuses on the capitalist class as a source of continued oppression and conflict, along with the ideological role of the state in education as a means of reproducing class inequalities (Jacob, 1981; Dworkin, et al., 2013).

We can see an infamous example of the oppression of capitalism on education in the seminal work of Marxist sociologists Bowles and Gintis (1976). The work in 'Schooling in Capitalist America' has heavily influenced conflict theory as their fundamental argument is that the main function of education in capitalist society is to produce compliant workers for the labour market (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). They argue that education socialises individuals into work according to their social standing in life and therefore is a key player in the reproduction of inequality (*ibid*).

The education system is in the hands of the ruling class who own the means of production and it is therefore in their best interest, as well as the best interests of capitalist society to produce a hardworking workforce that does not resist authority and the unjust system (*ibid*). The Correspondence Principle is a theory from 'Schooling in Capitalist America' which states that the values and behaviours pupils learn through the explicit and hidden curriculum in schools correspond with the values and behaviours needed to aid in their future exploitation in the capitalist workplace (*ibid*). This oppression caused by education inevitably causes conflict and aids in the division of classes in their access to quality education. This occurs through their socialisation into the workplace as those socialised into lower-paid jobs cannot afford the same resources to provide an education for their children equal to that of the middle and upper classes (Mishra, 2013).

Also credited as the other major influence towards the foundations of conflict theory is the work of Max Weber (Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010). Weber saw society through an economic lens in which all classes are developed within market economies as individuals compete for economic gain (Mishra, 2013). He states that there are three sources from which status groups may develop; differences based on lifestyle from economic differences, differences in life situation based on power position, and differences in life situation deriving directly from cultural conditions or institutions (Collins, 1971). He defines class as a group of individuals who are in a similar economic position and, therefore, share similar opportunities in life as they hold an equal chance of obtaining the things deemed desirable within society (Mishra, 2013). His influence on conflict theory comes from his argument that social inequality stems from status and political

influences as well as money and economics (Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010; Mishra, 2013). As society contains all these factors as a source of inequality, conflict becomes inevitable (Mishra, 2013). As the market economy, status and power massively influence social class groups and the groups which hold the most power in a society, Neo-Weberian conflict theorists focus on the competition between social groups for social dominance (Jacob, 1981). Neo-Weberian conflict theorists view education as a marketplace in which there is a consistent struggle for educational credentials (Brown & Lauder, 2010). Due to certain social groups possessing more power and money, they can ease the struggle in the competition for the qualifications and credentials required to further succeed in life (Brown & Lauder, 2010). The dominant classes in society can utilise a range of tactics either consciously or unconsciously to rig the game in their favour in the pursuit of gaining a higher education (Brown & Lauder, 2010). He states that just like inflation in the market economy, the need for educational credentials will inflate also creating a bigger gap in access to higher educational qualifications (Hurn, 2002).

This macro-level approach to understanding the inequalities experienced in society – macro due to its nature on analysing the larger structures of society as a whole - focuses on the conflicts that arise through the struggle for advantage and resources (Collins, 1971; Mishra, 2013). Conflict theorists argue that tensions and conflicts develop in society when resources, status and power are unevenly distributed between the various groups in society (Chernoff, 2013; Mishra, 2013). In Randall Collins' seminal work he explains that different groups in a society form 'Associational Groups' (groups which share status equality through their participation in common cultures) in which individuals form fundamental aspects of their identity (Collins,

1971). He goes on to theorise that members of associational groups share language, dress codes, opinions and values and the identity formed around these common cultures tends to be particularly contrasting from that of individuals who are part of different associational groups (Collins, 1971). As conflict theorists state that every individual in society competes for resources, wealth and power, Collins concludes that although individuals may compete with each other - as individual identity is largely formed from participation in an associational group, and that cohesion of the said group is key to maintaining a groups strength - the primary conflict in the competition of resources is between social groups rather than between single individuals in society (*ibid*). The work of Collins strongly resonates with the work of Bourdieu previously discussed with Collins 'Associational Groups' and common cultures somewhat reflecting Bourdieu's notion of Cultural Capital and Habitus a particular social class group possesses (Bourdieu, 1986; 1990). Both theorise that individuals from common cultures or social class backgrounds share a learned set of behaviours and dispositions that are rooted in their social standing (Collins, 1971; Edgerton and Roberts 2014). These theories are useful to the framework as the participants from this study are all from working-class backgrounds and should, in theory, share a similar Habitus or Associational Group. This has been kept in mind and formed part of the framework in which this research was undertaken to analyse whether the participants have shared experiences of higher education as a student from a lower-income background.

The framework posits that every society contains groups competing for the limited resources, power, esteem, and honour, with the particular group that gains control holding the power within that society and the institutions within it (Hurn, 2002). Conflict theorists see social institutions as

a reflection of this competition for resources and power and aid in the maintenance of wider unequal social structures (Hurn, 2002). The conflicts seen within society not only allow for analysis and greater understanding of the inequalities different groups face, but also allow for potential change as conflicts can be resolved and potentially provide stability (Hurn, 2002; Mishra, 2013).

Although the foundations of conflict theory and the views it provides on social inequality, in general, are views that can be somewhat reflected throughout this research, it is within the perspectives of conflict theory on education specifically that provoked me to use this theory as a conceptual framework through which my research will be undertaken. The overarching belief of conflict theorists regarding education is that its main purpose is to reproduce social inequality and maintain the power of the dominant classes (Collins, 1971; Jacob, 1981; Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010; Chernoff, 2013; Dworkin, et al., 2013; Mishra, 2013). Educational institutions are seen within conflict theory as the major vessel within which the largest reproduction of inequality takes place, with the only competitor being the family (Hurn, 2002). This is because these institutions serve the interests of the dominant classes through systematically reinforcing unequal and unjust ideologies (Hurn, 2002; Mishra, 2013). Conflict theory sees these ideologies reinforced through socialisation and the hidden curriculum which works to develop skills, values and attitudes within the working classes to accept their lower positions within society and the injustices they face in the hopes of creating an unresisting workforce for capitalism (Mishra, 2013).

Aspects from both Marxist and Weberian traditions of conflict theory will be used to form the conceptual framework for this research. Specifically, the Weberian idea that the middle and upper classes are able to utilise tactics in order to rig the game in accessing higher education, the Marxist idea that education is a powerful institution that reproduces inequalities and maintains social structures, as well as the argument held by conflict theorists as a whole that education does not favour intelligence, but rather favours cultural knowledge possessed only by the middle and upper classes (Brown & Lauder, 2010; Mishra, 2013). Therefore, for the reasons stated above I felt it appropriate to use conflict theory as a lens to explore the experiences of working-class university students. So, it is with this understanding and with this framework in mind that I have conducted my research and analysed the data that my research has produced.

This framework has been used to guide this research as it sharpens the focus on the issue at hand. Conflict theory is used throughout this research to discover and explain the experiences of working-class university students and guided this research towards answering whether social class negatively impacts on experiences. The data are presented below, with this conceptual framework then used to describe and explain the findings in a wider context that links the research questions to a larger theoretical perspective. Conflict theory allowed for this small-scale qualitative research to hold significance and contribute to a much larger theory of knowledge that highlights the inequalities of the working classes in education.

Methods

This research aims to understand and gain insight into the experiences of working-class university students. To achieve this, three research questions guided this study: (1) How has coming from a working-class background effected their access to higher education? (2) If any, what barriers have been present in their education due to social class? (3) Has being from a working-class background effected their experiences with higher education services? Six current students or recent graduates were interviewed from universities in England in a small-scale study using semi-structured interviews to allow flexibility and the opportunity to probe and explore the participant's responses whilst ensuring topics are kept within the parameters of the research aims (Berg, 2007; Alshenqeeti, 2014). There were three male and three female participants in this study ranging from mid-twenties to mid-forties (Please see Appendix 1.A for a Pen Portrait of each participant). The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (See Data Analysis Plan chapter below). A thorough ethics application was submitted and approved prior to any data collection beginning along with all participants receiving a participant information document via email and giving their consent to participate in this research. The names of participants were changed in this research to ensure confidentiality.

As reflected in much research that aims to broaden knowledge and understanding, my research aims to gain a first-hand insight into human lived experiences. As with all research that involves humans, I have an ethical responsibility as a researcher regarding the integrity of the research I produce as well as a responsibility to the participants. Many ethical considerations arise from methodologies that surround individual narratives, including possible power relations and

insider/outsider positioning. This will be explored below, along with broader, more general ethical considerations detailed by The British Educational Research Association (2011).

To ensure that my research was conducted responsibly and ethically, I reviewed the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2011). The BERA (2011) states that individuals participating in research should "be treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and with an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference". I followed this guideline consistently throughout my research.

BERA (2011) guidelines for educational research state responsibility regarding Voluntary Informed Consent, Openness and Disclosure, Right to Withdraw, Incentives, Detriment Arising from Participation in Research, Privacy and Disclosure. Again, to ensure that these ethical guidelines were met and upheld, the BERA (2011) guidance was read extensively and applied throughout the entirety of this research project by keeping the guidelines at hand throughout the research process and referring to them regularly to ensure ethical standards were adhered to.

There were two main ethical considerations for this research project regarding the individual narratives collected from my participants and my own position in this research also. These considerations were possible power relations and insider positioning. I felt that the possibility of power relationships can be influenced by insider positioning, and I will therefore explore these considerations in unison.

A researcher's insider position has been defined by Gair (2012) as the extent to which a researcher is a part of a group they are researching. Generally speaking, insiders tend to have more intimate knowledge of the groups they are part of whereas outsiders do not (Griffith, 1998). Due to the fact that I am a working-class university student, researching the experiences of working-class university students, my position is located as an insider. It could be argued that this positioning is a positive factor in this research as it has increased my chances of gaining access to the knowledge and narratives necessary to conduct this research (Merton,1972; Xu, 2017). The level of understanding a researcher has of the groups of people being researched is enhanced when the researcher is a part of said group (Buckle and Dwyer, 2009). It also states in the literature that those who are outsiders to a particular group are structurally incapable to comprehend the inner workings and complexities of groups of which they are not a part regardless of their efforts (Meton, 1972). Insider research tends to be able to gain access to a group more easily and the participants tend to be more comfortable with them which leads to them being more open in their responses (Buckle and Dwyer, 2009).

Due to my insider position within this group, I believe that this has allowed me to somewhat level the playing field regarding possible power relationships. Research states that in addressing and helping to overcome power relationships in interviews, researchers should reveal some aspect of their identity so the interview process feels more reciprocal (Brinkmann, 2007). My participants were aware of my working-class identity and my insider position arguably balanced any possible power relations. It was important that I created a welcoming, non-threatening

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environment in which my participants felt comfortable in sharing their experiences not only for the benefit of the data collection but also for the ethical considerations and experiences of the participants themselves. This welcoming, nonthreatening environment that I endeavoured to create has been linked to an atmosphere of power equality (Karnieli-Miller, Stier and Pessach, 2009).

However, despite the deeper level of understanding and access to knowledge which could arguably not have been discovered, the insider positioning has been criticised. It is argued that insider positioning clouds a researcher's judgement as their closeness to the group in question leads them to form a bias which could prevent them from accessing authentic knowledge and data (Buckle and Dwyer, 2009; Innes, 2009). Regarding research methods, the literature criticising insiders states that their position may result in them failing to approach their research in the critical manner necessary for good practice as they become too familiar with participants (Chavez, 2008). It is also argued that when the group is shared between participant and researcher, the participants may assume that the researcher understands certain issues and will fail to explain their experiences fully which can impede the data collection (Buckle and Dwyer, 2009).

To overcome the issues that insider positioning may pose for this research, I maintained thorough research notes throughout the entirety of the research process and constantly reflected on my own position as a researcher to take every step to remain objective. However, I also resonate with arguments made by various scholars which argue that to label a researcher as inside/outsider is restrictive and binary (Aoki, 1996; Mullings, 1999; Buckle and Dwyer, 2009).

Being a member of one group does not shackle you to that group and that group only, nor does it automatically give you unrestricted access to all members of that group. Qualitative research allows for the recognition of an individual's multidimensional experiences in which fluidity helps provide depth and richness (Buckle and Dwyer, 2009). So, with this argument in mind, I believe that I am an insider and an outsider in this research as this group is fluid yet rigid. My participants are all low-income working-class students, but each is different and in different circumstances. I cannot understand or completely reflect on many of the experiences shared by the participants, yet I share so many of them also.

As a recent working-class graduate, I felt apprehensive about how I would define what it means to be 'working-class' within my research and especially during my recruitment of participants. I felt it was too insensitive and invasive to ask about income explicitly, postcodes and parental jobs as a factor in defining social class. To help solve what I perceived personally to be a rather uncomfortable issue, I took to the literature I had previously reviewed on working-class students to see how more experienced researchers had defined working-class students in their work. A common indicator throughout the literature of having come from a working-class background was attending a state comprehensive school (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Wong, 2018; Elkin and Hanke, 2018). This was then used as a requirement in my recruitment for participants along with having either received free school meals and/or received low-income bursary or grants at university.

I chose to include free school meals as a requirement as it is a well-known class signifier in the realm of social class and education as well as research finding that it is a good indicator of social

class (Taylor, 2018). I used low-income bursaries and grants at university as an additional or alternative requirement as not all individuals from low income and working-class backgrounds received free school meals despite being entitled to them but may have received low-income bursaries or grants whilst at university. The government and UCAS define these grants and bursaries as a source of extra help for those from low-income families in the hopes of bridging the gap in access to higher education (GOV.UK, 2021; UCAS, 2021). I used both of these indicators to help ensure that the people I recruited were indeed from a working-class background but also to not exclude anyone that may want to participate if they only met a single requirement.

The participants were recruited using an advert placed on various community and student social media groups (See Appendix 1.B). The advert outlined the purpose of the research, what the research will entail and the requirements to participate. As my research focused on the experiences of working-class students, I had to include requirements within my advert to ensure the individuals reaching out met my specifications. As explained above, I ensured the participants recruited were indeed from working-class backgrounds with my recruitment criteria being grounded within the literature. My advertisement stated that participants must; have attended a state school and either received free-school meals and/or received low-income bursary or grants at university.

The methods used for this research follow an interpretivist paradigm using qualitative methods to accommodate for individual experiences and depth within the data collected which help to build

an intimate and detailed picture when exploring the research questions. As this research focuses on the personal experiences of working-class university students in higher education, each experience is subjective and therefore leaving the interpretivist paradigm an obvious choice for myself as a researcher as the paradigm allows for ambiguities and contradictions from the data which reflect the realities of the society in which we live (Denscombe, 2014). Using these qualitative methods provided a richness that otherwise would have been overlooked if quantitative methods had been implemented (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivism and qualitative methods go hand in hand whilst embracing human emotions and individual experiences which contribute to the richness and depth of this type of research (Denscombe, 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that although qualitative methods provide an insight into individual experiences with depth and richness, it could be argued that the data collected through such methods lack authority through its subjectivity compared to quantitative methods based on scientific experimentation and its production of statistically significant data (Rolfe, 2004; Atieno, 2009; Noble & Smith, 2015). As a result of the subjectivity and lack of authority, the findings derived from qualitative research proves problematic to generalise as the data has not been tested in a scientifically controlled setting for the discovery of statistical significance (Atieno, 2009). Although the reliability and validity of qualitative methods are significantly different to assess compared to quantitative methods, research has suggested that the reliability and validity of qualitative methods can be increased by the accuracy and efficacy of data collection and analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015). Regardless of the limitations outlined above, I have taken the steps to ensure that the data has been collected and analysed thoroughly and accurately to produce data

that although holds no statistical significance, does provide a deep and rich insight into the experiences of working-class university students. I also believe that the richness and depth that is found through the qualitative methods used in this research outweigh the limitations it poses as we gain an insight that allows us to really step into the worlds of the individuals within this study. An insight that is not possible if quantitative methods had been used.

Another motive for my choice as a researcher to work within the interpretivist paradigm and use qualitative methods is in response to Biesta's understanding of what he defines as an *Efficacy Deficit* (Biesta, 2010). This *Efficacy Deficit* posits that typically quantitative research methods using scientific-experimental strategies are flawed in a social realm such as education as it is an environment in which all variables are unable to be controlled (Biesta, 2010). He explains how quantitative research adopting experimental and scientific methods requires a controlled environment in which hypotheses can be tested to establish cause and effect (*ibid*). These environments are what he calls closed systems which are vastly different from the social domain of education which he calls 'open recursive semiotic systems' (*ibid*). Education is 'open' due to its level of interaction with its environment, it is 'recursive' as its behaviour is a combination of external factors and internal dynamics, as well as being 'semiotic' as it operates through the exchange of meaning as opposed to physical force (*ibid*). Therefore, education is not a domain in which a positivist paradigm using quantitative methods for experimental or scientific research is effective as its social elements do not allow for closed or controlled environments (*ibid*). Qualitative research allows for anomalies to occur which best fits the variable and dynamic environment of education which is made up of multiple individuals (Denscombe, 2014). This argument presented by Biesta influenced my approach greatly as my research aims to

encapsulate the raw experiences of students that solely quantitative methods would have overlooked.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data within this research. Open-ended questions (See Appendix 1.C) were prepared for the participants to answer, however, the questions allowed for natural conversation to occur surrounding the topic and for the participants to speak freely to allow data to form naturally (Newby, 2010). The prepared questions remained the same and were asked to each participant, however, if the participants began to speak freely about a topic that was useful to the research but not adequately covered with the prepared questions, then the topics were allowed to guide the interview rather than the prepared questions. After the conversation had concluded on said topic, the prepared interview questions were continued.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for the participants to tell their stories in their own way whilst having a foundation to ensure the data collected was relevant to the research question (Spradley, 1979; Cohen, et al., 2007; Newby, 2010; Morse, 2014). Participants were given the platform to share their experiences with minimal interruption and therefore provide an increased level of validity as their responses lacked interference (Morse, 2014). Semi-structured interviews have been labelled by scholars as an excellent way to gain insight into societal issues through the exploration of individual experiences (Cohen, et al., 2007; Seidman, 2012; Alsaawi, 2014). The freedom semi-structured interviews provide for participants to share their stories whilst also remaining on the topic provides rich data that brings meaningful information from personal

experiences to real-world issues and allows an intimate exploration of the research questions at hand (Denzin, 2001).

Qualitative methods such as these hold their strength in the richness and depth of the data findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin, 2001; Denscombe, 2014). It has been argued that interviewing is a more than worthy method of research when seeking out individual experiences as it produces information and insights that would not likely be accessible using strategies primarily focused on statistics (Blaxter, et al., 2006; Alshenqeeti, 2014). The seminal work of Cohen, Manion and Morrison on research methods in education states that interviews are powerful tools for researchers to use flexibly to discover individual interpretations of the world in which we live (Cohen, et al., 2007). The accuracy and trustworthiness of the data are arguably increased when collected through semi-structured interviewing as there is room for explanation of misunderstood questions and answers (Dörnyei, 2007). With freedom given for questions to be simplified or rephrased, this ensures complete understanding of questions asked, and, therefore, allows the participants to provide accurate and appropriate answers (Cohen, et al., 2007; Dörnyei, 2007).

The limitations of qualitative research methods can be extended to the process of interviewing as it is a predominantly qualitative process. However, interviewing has been criticised as an independent data collection method as the researcher is relying entirely on the participant to provide them with strong data, with participants only providing information they feel comfortable with sharing (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Researchers will not know what information is being withheld, falsely given or exaggerated and therefore the reliability of the research cannot

be guaranteed (Alsaawi, 2014; Alshenqeeti, 2014). It is also argued that dependant on the date and time in which the interview occurs, a participants responses, recollections and perceptions of experiences may alter which therefore brings into question the reliability and trustworthiness of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin, 2001; Alshenqeeti, 2014). As this research was not able to provide each participant multiple interviews to cross examine the data collect to ensure its trustworthiness, I aimed to overcome this issue by allowing participants to choose the time and date of their interviews. I hoped this would make the participants feel comfortable as they could choose a time and day when they have no other commitments and have adequate time to tell their stories.

A practical issue discussed within the literature is the lengthy nature of interviewing and the responsibility of transcription (Alsaawi, 2014). Due to the time it takes to recruit participants, conduct interviews, transcribe interviews and analyse data, there is a risk of information being missed due to the volume of data or responses being misunderstood (Robson, 2011). This limitation was overcome as I recorded each interview which ensured that if any doubt or misunderstanding occurred, I could refer back to the interview and listen to the response being given in real-time. Verbatim transcription was used to once again aid in eliminating any risk of misunderstanding responses and provide as accurate data as possible. A checklist in aiding researchers to increase the validity and reliability of their research was followed which included; avoiding asking leading questions, low levels of interference in interviews, taking notes alongside recording interviews, conducting a pilot interview, and providing an opportunity for participants to sum up and clarify their response's (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

It is highly recommended within the literature that a pilot interview be conducted before data collection begins (Dörnyei, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Alsaawi, 2014; Alshenqeeti, 2014). To increase the quality of my research and follow the advice of these scholars, I conducted a pilot interview to help refine my interview questions and iron out any issues that may occur before the official data collection began. The pilot interview was conducted with an acquaintance of mine that met the participant requirements as two out of six of my official participants who responded to the advert for the interview are also individuals I have personal relationships with (this is discussed further below). Therefore, I took this opportunity to not only use to pilot to test the questions I planned on asking, but also assess the dynamic of interviewing somebody I know personally and see whether it would affect the quality of the data collected.

The pilot took place in the same conditions in which the official interviews were conducted. It was conducted via video call and consent was given for the pilot to be audio recorded. Once the pilot interview had concluded, I let the individual speak freely in order to gain feedback and insight into their opinion of the questions asked and the researcher/participant dynamic. Feedback given stated that the questions were not leading at all and provoked deep thought into the topic at hand throughout the interview process. The questions did not make the individual feel that I, as a researcher, was looking for specific answers to my question and the individual felt that they had a platform to speak freely on their experiences. One critique regarding the questions was that they were almost too open in that from the first few questions many topics were explored and therefore, some of the latter questions felt repetitive. From this feedback, I

then prepared some prompts and alternatively phrased questions to prepare for the possibility in which answers have already been given to questions not yet asked (See Appendix 1.D).

Feedback was also given on the dynamic of the researcher/participant relationship whilst already having some form of personal relationship outside the world of academics. The pilot interview allowed this to be explored and it was found that although some caution does have to be taken in allowing personal relationships to affect the research, the participant did not believe that our relationship affected the way questions were answered at all. It was also stated by the participant that as this research involves current or recent university-educated students that they believe the individuals involved are capable of setting barriers between the personal and professional in order to remain objective. It should be noted that although it could be argued there may be some level of bias to this research due to personal relationship involvement, the participant for the pilot interview believed that our personal relationship made them more likely to share personal experiences and provide honest answers as they are comfortable with me and trust me with their personal information.

From my pilot study I noticed that there is a strength to using a sample of current students or recent graduates whilst being a recent graduate myself as there is an increased level of comfortability the participants have with me as a researcher. Research shows that it is crucial for interview participants to feel comfortable and have a positive relationship with the researcher in which trust is an important factor as this not only provides a safe space for participants to share their experiences but also increases the chances of them conveying their true and accurate responses to questions (Berg, 2007; Atieno, 2009; Seidman, 2012; Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Data Analysis Plan

This chapter will outline in detail the approaches taken to analyse the data found within this research and aim to explain and give evidence as to why this approach was taken. Firstly, I will give an explanation as to why an inductive approach to Thematic Analysis was chosen to analyse the data produced from the semi-structured interviews. I will then outline in detail the process in which Thematic Analysis was used to produce the themes that are presented in the findings section below.

Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the data collected within this research due to its theoretically flexible nature that allows for it to be used as a useful tool that provides rich, organised and detailed insight into the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexibility seen within thematic analysis allows it to be a process that is not static and rigid, but one that is recursive and free flowing allowing the researcher to move back and forth as needed through the different phases of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of analysis is thorough requiring full immersion within the data collected and therefore providing a comprehensive account of the data set (Allen, 2017). The immersion that occurs in the data analysis process results in themes being developed that provide an accurate, rich and comprehensive account of the issue a hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As this research used semi-structured interviews the entirety of the data were interactions transcribed into written texts. This form of analysis allowed me to manage this written data accurately without losing its depth as I immersed myself within it whilst coding, organising and

discovering themes (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Themes developed in research using thematic analysis are produced inductively here as they capture something of importance within the data that relates to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

However, another reason as to why this form of analysis has been chosen is that although themes are frequently developed through recurring observation and repeated patterns within the data set; this method has the freedom to allow the researcher to develop a theme based on a singular occurrence if they believe it captures significant importance (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010; Allen, 2017; Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2018). Therefore, themes generated using thematic analysis are not only developed based on quantifiable measures but rather on any instance that captures the richness, depth and importance of the data regardless of the number of instances it has occurred (Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2018).

The process of data analysis in this research was that of an inductive nature as the themes were built purely from the data set as opposed to themes built from a preconceived theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Allen, 2017). Although a conceptual framework grounded in conflict theory was used as a lens throughout this research, this guided my process of analysis through seeking connections in themes that emerged inductively and organically to the wider theoretical principals of conflict theory for later discussion, rather than using said principals as a checklist to force my data to fit.

The coding process occurred organically through a process of immersion focused entirely within the data itself. Inductive approaches avoid the risks of rigid and closed off methods that attempt

to squeeze data into a pre-existing theoretical framework or typology (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). This inductive, rather than a deductive approach to coding goes hand in hand with thematic analysis and compliments the raw, honest and rich data this research aims to produce to highlight the experiences of working-class university students.

The first step of thematic analysis for this specific research was that of familiarisation. This step consisted of the complete immersion within the data that has previously been discussed within this chapter. This required the data to be read through multiple times to ensure that I, as a researcher, understood the depth and breadth of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data had been collected and transcribed first-hand which was a benefit to this stage of analysis as I had already achieved a level of immersion with the data set before this stage had even begun. During the repeated reading, any initial ideas for coding, potential patterns or meanings were noted and later returned to when the later steps of analysis began.

The second step of analysis consisted of generating initial codes. Whilst repeatedly reading the transcripts, codes were given to certain aspects that appeared interesting or held significance in regard to the research questions. During this step, 20 initial codes were produced (See Appendix 2.A). These codes were specific and sometimes overlapping but for this initial phase, there were given different colour codes and separated until further analysis occurred. Once all the data had been coded it was organised and collated into its own document so all data regarding a certain area was in its own separate place.

The third step of the analysis involved the development of initial themes. This involved reading through the relevant coded data and identifying any areas that relate strongly to each other or overlap to begin organising the data into themes. Whilst analysing my codes, some stood out clearly as to how they would combine to produce overarching themes. For instance, the codes 'Identity Switch' and 'Identity Transformation' overlapped in some way yet still held individual significance and therefore clearly combined to produce an entire theme on Identity. This process required me to repeatedly read the coded data to find links and relationships between the codes that would produce themes that clearly demonstrate the first-hand experiences of working-class university students. Once the codes had been combined, I had six candidate themes (See Appendix 2.B).

The fourth step of my analysis was that of refinement. The data in each candidate theme was then organised into their own document that left me with 6 documents all containing the data related to its own specific theme. Reading through the data in these potential themes, reworking and reorganising to place during this phase. It was evident through repeated reading that some of the data belonged to other themes, and it was therefore moved into a theme to which it belonged. For example, data regarding an individual's working-class roots related to a few different potential themes and this phase allowed flexibility for its true home to be discovered. This stage allowed me to take a step back and look at the potential themes and rework them until the themes I was left with accurately reflected the issue at hand. The reworking in this phase included renaming my candidate themes, moving data into other themes, and dismissing and creating new themes. At the end of this phase, I had refined my data into four themes (See Appendix 2.C).

The last phase of the analysis consisted of defining my themes. I had, by this point, become entirely immersed in my data, coded, organised, reworked and refined my potential themes. I then organised the data within each theme into a subtheme and an order that when written, tells the story of these working-class university students. This phase of theme organisation allowed me to capture the individuality and importance of each theme and ensure it is relevant in creating a picture that answers the research questions. By the end of this process, I felt I had developed four themes that are reliable, accurate and valid as they had emerged through inductive approaches whilst having also been carefully analysed and created to produce a rich and detailed account of the participant's experiences of higher education.

Synthesis of Findings

I believe in the light of transparency that I be honest and state that writing this synthesis of findings was both extremely easy and extremely difficult. It proved difficult as the stories of these individuals brought to light the issues that I have personally faced being a working-class university student myself, yet have spent years trying to conceal as I wanted to keep up appearances and not admit I have often found the barriers I have faced overwhelming. When the participants spoke of their struggles navigating university life, I kept an objective and professional manner as not to taint the reliability of my data. Yet when it came to writing this down on paper for the analysis, I found myself overcome with sadness. I always knew that these participants were individuals with their own lives and stories, but it is easy when conducting research for them to become 'participants' and 'subjects' from which data is collected. But they are not, they are people. People who have faced injustice ad inequality at the hands of the education system as they try to better their lives. I resonate with these people, I empathise with the people, I am these people. For these reasons, I found the writing of this section difficult as I had to separate my emotions from the process of writing. I would channel my focus and write this with the academic professionalism I know I possess, but later would phone friends and family and rant about how unjust our universities are. I felt nervous before I wrote this as I so desperately wanted to do my interviewees justice. I didn't know whether I was capable of telling their stories well. But again, as a working-class university student myself, I couldn't be sure whether this was justified anxiety or my own imposter syndrome peeking its pesky little head.

On the flip side, I found this easy to write as for all the emotions, empathy and injustice I felt towards the stories told by the people I had interviewed, I felt honoured and motivated to tell their story and tell it well. So, when it came to physically write this chapter the words flew out of me as I wrote this with an increased sense of purpose. I know this research is small-scale and cannot make a large generalisation, and I know this research will not single-handedly change the face of education around the world forever. But I do hope this research tells the story of the six people who participated in it and touches the hearts of those who read it. I hope anybody who reads this research takes with them these stories and attempts to make the world a better place for those less fortunate in society.

Although this is small-scale research, many of the findings were coherent across all participants which could present an argument that these individual experiences form a wider issue present within the institutions themselves. This research presents the experiences of recent and current university students who have navigated their way through university in the last 5 years with university fees, rent and general living costs higher than ever (Reay, 2018). This research sheds light on the experiences of recent non-traditional students as they journey through higher education. From the analysis conducted, three themes emerged which highlighted the shared experiences of the working-class students within this research. These themes included 1) Barriers, 2) The Big Divide, and 3) Identity. Each theme is comprised of different sub-themes to better understand the depth and complex nature of these experiences. Although these themes were developed using an inductive approach to thematic analysis detailed above, they have a strong correlation to the themes presented in the literature review. I believe that it is interesting

that these themes are related as although this is a small-scale study, the data produced somewhat

replicates wider more generalisable research into the inequality experienced by working-class

students. It could also be argued that this forms evidence that this research has contributed to and

expanded on existing research in the field, as the findings presented here replicate wider

literature whilst also presenting a fresh insight into these students' current experiences alongside

recognising the importance of the social side of university. In this research, I state the importance

of the social side of university, as this makes up a vast part of these students' experiences. Much

research focuses on the inequality of outcomes and attainment, but I argue that focus on

academics needs to be considered alongside a focus on social experiences to gain an insight into

student's real experiences in their entirety.

In this section, I share the first-hand accounts of working-class university students to note how

these individuals experienced higher education in a country that is arguably still suffering at the

hands of social class inequality and disadvantage.

Barriers

Much literature demonstrates that many students from working-class backgrounds face multiple

barriers in their pursuit of gaining a higher education (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Callender,

2008; Jury et al, 2017). This is a well-documented issue of educational inequality that continues

throughout higher education. This research contributes to existing literature with this chapter

showing how the participants in this study faced barriers during their time at university. They

overcame and navigated financial obstacles that left them with no option but to find employment during their studies whilst their more affluent peers were studying and enjoying university life, they missed out on the social side of university due to their lack of disposable income, as well as their lack of social and cultural capital hindering their chances at securing critical internships and work experience. This theme discusses the barriers presented above in greater detail and links these findings to existing literature to demonstrate how these individual experiences contribute to the existing works on social class inequality in higher education.

Student Employment -

It can already be seen within the literature the potential negative effects term-time employment has on university life, well-being, and academic achievement for many students (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Aronson, 2008; Callender, 2008; Jury et al., 2017). Yet for students from low-income backgrounds, it is a necessity to take up employment whilst enrolled in full-time degrees. This can be seen within this research with the majority of participants explaining how they had to work during their studies regardless of the stress it caused them and the barrier it created towards their university experience.

Speaking on the barrier's student employment created for him, *Rob* explained how:

> *"It was compulsory for me to get a job otherwise I just couldn't live…you see it reflected in your [university] work…I was not doing as well as I should be doing"*

Rob had taken up manual work throughout his studies which left him physically exhausted most days of the week yet still having to complete assignments, revise for exams and attend lectures. He spoke of the obstacles this created and the frustration he felt towards having no choice but to juggle employment and university:

> *"You want to go to bed, but you've got to come home and study, exams the week after next… im doing actual manual labour and then you come home and you do your essays and stuff and you get a 2:1. And then you're sort of kicking yourself again for getting a 2:1 because you know that bastard at Oxford is going to get a 1st cause he's got so much time to think about it…"*

Robs experience is reflected within the literature with other research finding that working can cause struggles balancing employment and study which can have negative consequences such as lower grades and lower engagement (Choy, 2001; Aronson, 2008).

This frustration was shared by *Emily*, who even though gained a high 1st overall in her studies, still experienced student employment as a barrier to her university experience. Emily had to work before, during and after her time at university as she still lived at home and helped her family with money. She described this experience as challenging and proved to be an obstacle when it came to socialising with her university peers and getting involved with university life.

> *" I didn't join any [societies] whilst at uni and I didn't move out into student accommodation which I'm gutted by. I wish I experienced that and couldn't do like*

societies, couldn't do freshers because I was working … and I feel like there was also a

judgment if you're not going out"

Emily spoke of how different her experience of socialising at university was compared to her more affluent peers in her cohort. She stated that her peers would have the freedom and funding from their parents to go on nights out whenever they pleased, and due to not working, their attention was focused entirely on creating a positive university experience in which they joined clubs and societies, attended every lecture and seminar, and go to events and socialise. Emily explained how *"I could not relate"*. She did not have the means to live the kind of student life her peers were living due to work commitments and her financial situation.

Emily's experience is unfortunately not a unique one with research supporting the data found here with many students in employment reporting feelings of increased stress and loneliness due to their work commitments which lead to them missing out on many aspects of university life (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

Missing out –

Due to employment commitments, family commitments and their financial situations, students from working-class backgrounds miss out on many aspects of university life outside their direct involvement with academics (Walpole, 2003; Aronson, 2008; Redmond, 2010; Bathmaker et al,

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2013). Students within this study - as we have just seen with Emily - reported feelings of isolation due to their lack of involvement in societies, clubs and sports teams, university trips, and socialising with their university peers. This sub-theme leads on from the findings above as although there is a slight overlap, this section focuses on students inability to partake in socialising due to factors aside from employment alone.

Speaking of her inability to partake in social events due to her lack of disposable income during her time at university, Lily stated that she frequently had to decline invitations to social events which caused friction between herself and her housemates.

> "*I was so broke and yeah, I didn't go out very much and that did cause a friction between me and my housemates, cause they always wanted an explanation as to why you weren't partaking in stuff, or you know distancing yourself at a time when you're trying to make friends*"

Lily went on to explain how this caused feelings of embarrassment for her as she felt she had to explain that she could not afford to join in on these events and social nights. She expressed her desire and suggestions for there to be more accessible events for low-income students to attend:

> "*I would love there to be some kind of low cost or no cost alternatives that weren't promoted as such but were just promoted alongside cause it can be really embarrassing. I felt really embarrassed all the time, but no one had ever drawn attention to my lack of*

wealth until people always started asking me why I wasn't doing stuff, and then I sort of self-realised it was cause I was really fucking poor. And so yeah, maybe just a couple of options for fresher's week"

Lily's experience here illuminates a side to university that often gets overlooked within the literature in regard to social class inequalities in higher education, yet for many students, the social side of university makes up a vast part of their experiences. Social events and societies allow for the building of friendships, stress release, and networking which all make for a richer and well-rounded university experience. Although critical, the academic side of university only makes up a fraction of the experience for students coming to university and the social side is a large part of what draws many students to these institutions in the first place. Therefore, for these working-class students to miss out on this element of university life creates an entirely new complex layer to their disadvantage.

Emily explained that for her, the social side of university was an 'advantage' she did not possess. Due to her living at home throughout her studies, any disposable income was given to her family to help support them. She explained:

"Because if it's between like paying for my night out and putting food on the table, my mum is going to put food on the table for my brothers and sisters"

Previously, the non-academic experiences of low-income university students have been described as "non-existent" within the literature (Redmond, 2010). This has been identified as a source of regret from the participants within this study and the work of other researchers (Bathmaker et al, 2013). Simon stated that he would have loved to have gone on his 3rd year trip to Barcelona with his friends but due to his financial situation, he could not. He went on to explain that for him personally, the main barriers he faced as a non-traditional student was entirely centred around socialising.

Rob also experienced missing out on university trips due to a lack of funds and shared his frustration with university societies claiming to be "inclusive" yet organising expensive trips that only more wealthy students can afford to go on. He stated that this may be:

"Intentional or unintentional, but you are somewhat culturally ostracised from it".

The existing research that has focused on this area of social class inequality in higher education has argued that we need to bridge the gap between not only access to university but the quality of university experiences for different social class groups. Widening participation strategies have focused on enrolling non-traditional students into university which is a step in the right direction. However, once these students begin their journey in university they are often isolated with a non-existent social life (Redmond, 2010; Bathmarker, 2013). Waller, Ingram and Ward (2018) question this often overlook issue also by stating that we as researchers must come to understand how people's experiences of being at university contribute to ongoing social inequalities.

Those working-class roots –

The working-class roots the students in this research possess is better defined, as we have already explored, as their Habitus. This is, in Bourdieunian terms, their learned preferences, attitudes and dispositions embedded in the family home and upbringing which greatly shape a person (Bourdieu, 1973; Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Research has shown that the habitus of those from working-class or low-socioeconomic backgrounds predisposes them to perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage and inequality (Aronson, 2008; Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Even for the students in this research who are breaking the barriers in front of them in an attempt to break this cycle of disadvantage, face obstacles towards their higher education and access to it in terms of their habitus and the family home it was created in.

A working-class habitus is often directly coupled with a lack of capital such as not possessing any insider knowledge from family members or first-hand experience of the processes of higher education. This was the case for Emily who spoke about how she had to navigate all aspects of university life on her own. Emily explained:

> _"I think being first in my family to attend uni I had to figure it out all myself. So if I was stuck, I didn't have anyone to talk to or reach out to and try and like work things out. Whereas there's people on the course who had mums, dads, brothers, sisters who have gone to uni and they can ask about the silly things…my family don't get it, they don't understand any of it, so it's kind of like I'm proud, but I don't know how to celebrate it"_

Here Emily is describing an issue many working-class students and graduates face; a working-class habitus deprived of the cultural capital most middle-class students face in order to navigate the processes, norms and values of higher education. Jury et al (2018) found that students face many psychological changes as they begin their journey at university and, therefore, family support through the transmission of insider knowledge can help support students in this journey (Jury et al, 2018). Unfortunately, this support is a privilege not available to many working-class students as they are more often than not, first-generation students (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015). That is not to say that working-class families do not offer support as all of the participants in this study spoke highly of their families in terms of emotional support and encouragement. However, for first-generation students, direct issues surrounding university problems have to be solved independently.

Emily also went on to comment on a tension that has arisen between her and her family now she is a graduate. She stated:

> *"They don't quite understand it, but they think that I've gone to university so I'm stuck up now. And im not on the same sort of level with them, but I think well surely you want that for me because you don't want me to struggle the way that we've struggled in the past? I know now when to switch on and off my working class identity, especially at home because I don't wanna make anyone feel dumb"*

As these students work to climb the social mobility ladder and break the cycle of disadvantage, they run the risk of leaving those from their backgrounds behind. Previous research has shown that many of these first-generation working-class students suffer from what the literature calls 'family achievement guilt' a feeling of guiltiness of the opportunities now available to them compared to the opportunities available to their friends and family back home who had chosen alternative paths (Covarruibias and Fryberg, 2015). Their new identities and experiences lead to a transformation that can potentially better their lives but leaves them anxious regarding how to act at home with their newfound knowledge without appearing judgemental (Aries and Seider, 2005).

Society is neutering the working-class –

It has been argued the cultural and social capital the middle and upper classes possess allows them to draw upon this capital through their networks and connections to provide them with opportunities that will enhance their employability and experience in the professional world (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990). The participants within this study did not possess the capital to draw on connections or 'call in favours' to further their employability or secure graduate jobs regardless of all gaining high grades at university. The participants spoke of the inequality and injustice they felt as they believed that their efforts and achievements would always be inferior compared to somebody that knew how to 'play the game' of higher education (Tomlinson, 2008).

Speaking about internships and work experience, Rob felt that the system unfairly penalised those from disadvantaged backgrounds. He explicitly stated that coming from a working-class background would "*neuter*" your chances of securing internships. He said:

> *"The fact that you come from a poor background, which is going to neuter you when you're applying for internships ect is something that needs to be mitigated because you're fighting tooth and nail just to sit at the same table…If you got the connections, you're going to be better equipped. There's no getting away from that… because there will be people that are going off and they're doing three weeks at a law firm because they dad's a partner".*

Having both used the terms "it's not what you know, it's who you know", Emily goes on to support Rob by sharing her experiences of middle-class students in her cohort receiving graduate jobs with a lesser degree classification than herself due to their parent's connections in the professional world:

> *"They'll be getting 2:1s which don't get me wrong, is really good, and like 2:2s but will still manage to get a better job than me in the end… I think even though I've done well and I've got a 1st compared to some students from middle-class backgrounds and they've achieved a 2:1 or even a 2:2 I still know that my 1st is not good enough to get a graduate job you know."*

These working-class individuals can work extremely hard and achieve exceptional academic achievement, but it is still arguably far more challenging for them to access the same social, financial and cultural capital as their middle- and upper-class peers. This data supports the research from Bathmaker et al (2013) who show that middle-class students were far more likely to secure critical internships than working-class students due to their social capital born from their parental networks (Bathmaker et al, 2013). They also found that the middle-class students within their study were well aware of how to 'pull strings' and had every intention of doing so (Bathmaker et al, 2013).

Focusing more on the financial capital as a barrier to securing internships and work experience rather than the social, *Lily* explained how during her time at a Russell Group University she was encouraged to apply for summer internships. As she was looking into doing this, she realised this would never be an option for her due to her financial situation and most internship positions are unpaid. Lily then also realised the impact not securing internships would have on her future career. Lily stated:

> *"There is no way I could do these. There is no way in hell I will ever be able to partake in a summer internship. Firstly, they're in London. There is no way I could get a train to London every day. Alternatively, there's no way I could stay in London for six weeks. It would never happen. I would never be able to afford it. Also, these places are requiring you to wear office wear, I don't have any and I can't buy any. Also, I've got three jobs to go back to that I need to earn money for next terms rent".*

Lily spoke about the fear this situation created for her as she felt she had completed a degree but without the internship experience her more affluent peers had secured, she would enter the professional world without anything appealing for employers. Lily's experience is one shared by many from lower-income backgrounds as other research has also found that graduates from working-class backgrounds feel their lack of professional experience has a significant impact on their employability (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

As she did not come from a world in which she receives financial freedom to take up unpaid internships, Lily stated that:

> *"I'll probably never do what I always wanted to do because I couldn't get the right work experience when it counted".*

The findings presented in this theme demonstrate the barriers the participants within this study faced as a direct result of coming from a low-income working-class background. The lack of capital they possess hinders them in accessing the social elements of university life, accessing crucial internships and work experience they need to progress in their careers, and being left with no choice but to find employment during term-time to become financially stable. In Rob's experience, term-time employment had a negative effect on his grades which is an issue also reflected within the literature (Choy, 2001; Aronson, 2008). To some, student employment may not seem an issue that pressing, however, when the majority of students taking up employment are from lower-income backgrounds whilst their more affluent peers are free to study and socialise as they please, the issue becomes that of social class disadvantage and inequality. This,

coupled with the knock-on effect employment and lack of funds has on students joining

university societies and socialising sees working-class students isolated missing out on a huge

element of typical student life. In the seminal work *Higher Education and Social Inequalities,*

University Admissions, Experiences and Outcomes, we can see throughout the collection of

research papers the importance of the social side of university and how, in fact, many students

perceive university to be an 'experience' rather than an academic institution with this mindset

often guiding their choice of establishment (Coulson, et al., 2018).

In addition to this, we have seen how the participants were at a disadvantage also when it came

to accessing internships due to their lack of financial support and social capital. It could therefore

be argued that with the findings presented in this theme, that the students in this research faced

barriers constructed entirely out of their social class backgrounds which middle- and upper-class

students would potentially not have to face. The university experiences had by these participants

were littered with obstacles for only non-traditional students to overcome which breaks down the

perception that university is the 'great equalizer' and see's everybody begin their educational

journey in an equal position (Elkins and Hanke, 2018).

The Big Divide

University has been labelled as a middle-class institution due to its favouring of middle-class

cultures and the capital the middle-classes possess (Reay, 2006). Due to higher education

favouring and embodying middle-class culture, working-class students are left as outsiders without the cultural or insider knowledge to fully access university life (Aries and Seider, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). This theme demonstrates how the students in this study felt they were outsiders who did not fit in due to their social class and often faced negative stereotypes and judgements as a result of coming from non-traditional backgrounds. The divide in traditional and non-traditional students is heightened with many working-class students struggling with how to speak, how to dress, and how to act in professional settings such as university as they have not had many experiences in such environments before (Aries and Seider, 2005). The divides felt by the working-class students and how they navigated the gaps they experienced are explored in detail below.

Enemy Territory -

As can be seen within the literature, social class contributes greatly to one's sense of self and their identity (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017). Therefore, it is unsurprising that in the middle-class world of higher education, it leads to working-class students feeling that they do not 'fit in' (Aries and Seider, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). The findings presented below from this research confirm that of other scholars as working-class students repeatedly report judgements, stereotypes, social divides and feelings of isolation (Stebleton and Soria, 2012; Jury et al, 2017).

Speaking on the stereotypes she had faced coming to a Russell Group university as a working-class student, *Lily* reported:

> *"There's a real misconception that is you're working-class that you are unintelligent, uneducated, stupid, inarticulate and that isn't me. I am bright and articulate. I came to the seminars and the lectures with ideas, and you know, theories having done all the reading and really knew my stuff and I completely flourished in that environment, and I did really well".*

The misconceptions and stereotypes that Lily outlines here are not only false but damaging as a multitude of research has found that negative stereotypes have implications on students psychological functioning, particularly for low-income students who ultimately develop lower levels of self-confidence in their abilities, intelligence and worthiness (Hellman and Harbeck, 1997; Stebleton and Soria, 2012; Jury et al, 2017).

Jess, a working-class mature student and also a single parent, shared a difficult moment she had experienced during a seminar at university in which she felt judged by false stereotypes about working-class single mothers. *Jess* was enrolled in a sociology module during her course and the class engaged in conversation about single parents. She explained how the entire class began making these sweeping generalisations about single mothers and made comments such as:

"They just take off the system, they have a tendency towards drugs and alcohol, they just

try to get money out of dads, and they just have babies to get on benefits".

Jess explained that being in this scenario was extremely upsetting as she has been in this situation herself, yet all of the people making these comments were young child-free students who themselves have no concept of what it is to be in this scenario yet were making judgements that directly reflected *Jess* herself. These negative stereotypes are harmful as previously discussed and are a prime example of the findings from Jury et al who stated that negative stereotypes can lead to a detrimental effect on self-confidence (Jury et al, 2017).

Every participant shared some sort of experience in which they had been judged, felt out of place or alienated due to their social class. Speaking on his experience of going to a Russell Group university also, *Rob* stated that he felt he was in 'enemy territory' as he was alienated by both classes. He felt that the gap between himself and the middle and upper classes was "phenomenal", yet when he found other people that shared the same background as he did it felt like they were competing to be "more working class" than each other.

This feeling of a social divide was shared by *Simon* who felt he too did not fit in with his more well-off peers at university and stated he had to turn a "blind eye" to certain conversations and statements his middle and upper-class friends made. He also spoke about the lack of shared interests they held which caused a barrier to socialising with these people during his student years.

Through the findings discussed in the previous themes above we can see that these working-class students feel isolated, out of place and unable to fit in due to their difference in intersectional habitus, culture and identities. In addition to these findings, this research has shown that from this difference, students from working-class backgrounds also have different priorities during their time in higher education than their more affluent peers. These different priorities can drastically alter the experiences students from lower-income backgrounds have.

One participant in this research, Emily, spoke about how her priorities were entirely centred around the academic side of university and achieving good grades. In contrast to this, she noticed that for some students in her cohort who did not have to worry about money, the social side of university was their main focus. She explained:

> *"For me, it seemed like my priority was actually the uni work itself, and their priority and the whole reason for going to uni is for the social side of things. So, like, going out and getting pissed up and that's it...with middle-class peers, you know, I was friends with. I feel like uni wasn't as important to them, you know, it was all about getting drunk, joining societies and then actual uni came second."*

Emily goes on to share that she feels she has no safety net, and that for her, this is her only chance. Therefore, her focus cannot be deterred away from academic success as she does not

have family members or friends to fall back on for a good career if things did not go well at university. Emily's feelings here are greatly connected to the feelings shared by the other participants in the Barriers theme of this chapter. They are also connected to the feelings and experiences of working-class students in general as other researchers have found that working-class students prioritise their academic studies over the social side to university due to similar worries (Bathmaker et al, 2013; Wong, 2018).

The difference of priorities here for the working and middle classes in higher education leads to different experiences potentially being had for the two groups. Whilst, like Emily said the low-income students focus heavily on academics and good grades, the middle and upper classes in her experience, are able to enjoy the social life university has to offer. Rob found this to be the case also, yet in addition to this, he found that those enjoying the social side of university from more privileged backgrounds to be elitist and entitled with them making jokes about people in lower-paid jobs. He stated:

> *"Some of the stuff that was going on was atrocious. Like, I went for a drink in Durham and when I came out there was some boys smashing glasses on the ground and someone asked them why they were doing that, and they said it gives the street cleaners something to do... it alienates you, it makes you feel like shit basically."*

Robs experience led to him feeling shocked as he witnessed and found himself in a social situation in which he was outside of his social norms and cultural values. Or, as Emily phrased it

when she shared her experience, *"it's a completely different world. It's a completely different upbringing".*

The different priorities and the way they manifest here through Rob and Emily's experience as a difference in attitudes, norms and values for the working and middle classes can be seen in the literature as what low-income students experience as the 'shock of the elite' (Reay, crozier and Clayton, 2009). That is, not fitting in or finding and common ground with the perceived 'posh' and 'rich' students (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009).

'When I talk, I sound common' –

The education system, particularly that of higher education rewards middle-class students who possess the capital to thrive in these middle-class settings (Sullivan, 2001; Reay 2006; Gardner and Holley, 2011). These students can access the language used, the networks available, and the resources they need to fly through university without the barriers that face working-class students who do not possess cultural, social or financial capital (Aries and Seider, 2005; Reay, 2006).

Emily spoke heavily on this matter through her own experiences, particularly in terms of the way she speaks and the language she uses. She explained that she struggled with 'sounding common' and the professionalism that was needed when speaking to professors and lecturers. She explained:

> *"You know, you have to be professional… I wouldn't approach my mum and dad in the same tone I'd approach my lecturers and the people around me, which is obviously a given so even like having to approach a lecturer, I did not know how to have that sort of professional professionalism. Is that the right word?… just think people must think I'm thick because I sound common when I'm talking"*

This is a reoccurring issue that can be seen throughout the literature, with working-class students making their way into universities but facing barriers due to their lack of capital that middle-class students would not have to worry about. Aries and Seider found that low-income students at elite universities struggled with what that called "immaterial knowledge" such as linguistic skills, proper dress, how to behave in formal settings and utilising networks (Aries and Seider, 2005). These skills are not taught at university yet prove crucial to the university experience and preparation for life as a graduate.

Emily continued to explain that her perceived lack of professionalism created a barrier for her when it came to approaching her lecturers for help or guidance as she believed this would make her look unintelligent compared to her middle-class peers in her cohort. She stated how she did not want to:

"... approach my lecturers or even like people in the past. How to write an essay and in my head, I was… I don't know whether I should because it looks like im thick. I don't know what I'm doing… so id just suffer in silence in a way, but it sort of paid off cause I didn't rely on anyone and just got it done myself... I always find it, you know, embarrassing to approach lecturers and I always felt judged because of the way I talk, and that I don't understand something".

Emily's anxiety regarding approaching her lecturers for help and the fact that she 'suffered in silence' supports another barrier researchers have found in which working-class university students are not forming the critical relationships they need for support through their academic journeys (Moschetti and Hudley, 2015). Researchers discovered that low-income students believed that it was their individual responsibility to succeed in higher education and did not want to approach anybody else or attempt to broaden their social capital to help them thrive (Moschetti and Hudley, 2015). This desire to rely on oneself can be seen vividly within my research through Emily.

Although this theme focuses on the effects a lack of cultural capital and what can be labelled as insider knowledge has on working-class students, Emily's narrative of struggling with feelings of embarrassment surrounding her speech led to another barrier forming in her access to higher education. This can also be said for the students that faced negative stereotypes due to their social class because as we have seen, such stereotypes negatively impact an individual's

confidence and sense of self (Jury et al, 2017). These students have enrolled in university to pursue their desired careers and further their education just like any other student, yet they are facing judgements and backlash that more traditional students will not have to face which arguably creates a social and education divide among the two groups (Gardner and Holley, 2011).

Identity

A working-class identity in higher education is one that is continuously recognised within the literature as one which does not fit in or have a place to be authentic in universities (Reay, 2001; Sullivan, 2001; Byrom, 2009). As many non-traditional students hold onto hope that their gaining a degree will help them climb the social mobility ladder, research has shown that as working-class students enter university they mask their true identities in an attempt to leave their social class backgrounds behind them and begin the journey into the middle-class (Lehmann, 2009; Elkins and Hanke, 2018). This journey, as we have already discussed within the literature, is a struggle as many working-class students experience a painful habitus dislocation and battle with the class they have come from and the one they are trying to portray and enter (Baxter and Brittion, 2001; Lehmann, 2009). Many of the students in this research experienced a struggle with balancing their working-class identities in the middle-class institution of higher education. Below they speak of how their identities felt inferior, were masked or transformed altogether.

The working-class habitus in the university system often leads to a phenomenon that academics have labelled the 'imposter syndrome' (Jensen, 2004; Gardner and Holley, 2011). Imposter syndrome as we have previously discussed is a state in which low-income students feel incompatible and out of place within higher education and have feelings of being an 'imposter' that will be discovered to not belong (Aronson, 2008; Jetten et al, 2008; Jury et al, 2018).

Two participants, in particular, spoke of feeling like an imposter at university at great length and described how they felt uneasy and unsure of themselves as they believed they did not belong. *Jack*, a working-class mature student spoke vastly on how throughout his entire degree he tried to keep his head down and not cause any fuss as he was worried that somebody would discover he was not worthy of his place. He went on to explain that even now he has recently graduated and has received a hard copy of his degree certificate he cannot believe that he has 'not been discovered' Jack's stated:

> *"But I think the main problem for me was still not.... just feeling a bit jumpy, being a bit scared to ask for advice. You don't want to cause a fuss; you don't want to make a noise... I still kind of look at the certificate and think 'I'll be dammed' kind of thing cause I still don't entirely understand how it happened, but it did. I don't know... the fact that when you think you're in someone else world that you shouldn't be in. And you're hanging around there and you're wating till they discover that you're an imposter."*

Gardner and Holley conducted research in which they found that working-class university students have strong feelings of feeling out of place and have fooled anyone that believes they have earned the right to be there (Gardner and Holley, 2011). They explain that this phenomenon demonstrates how the inequalities in the higher education system create barriers for underrepresented groups even when their places have been earned (Gardner and Holley, 2011). The findings from this paper support wider research regarding this issue as these participants had worked hard to secure their places at university and were achieving good grades yet still felt that they had no right to be there and lost faith in their abilities which only perpetuated the cycle of disadvantage.

Emily shared the phenomenon of imposter syndrome that Jack had experienced but also suffered from what has been called "intellectual phoniness" (Clance & Imes, 1978). Similar to imposter syndrome, intellectual phoniness is a feeling of failure and lack of success despite achieving well academically. Emily consistently achieved exceptionally high grades throughout her undergraduate degree and is successfully perusing a Master's Degree yet feels inferior and has increased anxiety over fear of failure despite proving time and time again that she has outstanding academic abilities. Emily explained:

> *"I'm like, kind of like an imposter. I think even now I feel inferior. There's, uh, I'm always second guessing myself. So, like, I don't belong at university or even on this master's course, or I'm not good enough."*

The literature surrounding intellectual phoniness and imposter syndrome shows that the feelings that Emily is experiencing can potentially have a negative impact on not only her future achievement but her wellbeing (Gardner and Holley, 2011; Stebleton and Soria, 2012; Finnegan and Mirrell, 2017; Jury et al, 2018). Research has shown that working-class students like Emily go through university in a dissociative state and feel disconnected from their university experience whilst experiencing negative emotions regarding their sense of self which impacts their mental state and their potential social mobility (Stebleton and Soria, 2012; Jury et al, 2018). Emily's fear of failure can be represented within other research which states that the desire to hide one's perceived 'stupidity' and blend in results in failure avoidance tactics rather than genuine academic learning (Gardner and Holley, 2011; Jury et al, 2018).

Identity Switch -

As we have seen, higher education is a predominantly middle-class institution in which it could be argued that the working-classes are outsiders within (Reay, 2006). Therefore, it is no surprise that much research has shown that working-class students frequently attempt to mask their true social class identity by taking the steps to appear middle-class whilst at university (Byrom, 2009; Elkins and Hanke, 2018). The research presented here supports these findings as participants spoke of a 'switch' that they flipped whilst in higher education as they felt that they could not be themselves.

Emily stated that she was a different person entirely whilst at university compared to when she was at home. She explained:

> *"It's that switch. I'm a totally different person at university 100%. It's just like you can switch on and off cant you. As soon as you walk into the classroom, like lecture room you're middle-class, you know you should be here. You know how to act, you know what sort of things to say, how to present yourself, how to hold yourself. But then as soon as I get home I'm the poster child for the working-class child".*

Diane Reay has stated that the reason that these students feel the need to mask their true identity in university is that, historically the working classes have been 'found out' in education and discovered to be inferior, less intelligent and deemed as uncultured (Reay, 2001). As previously discussed, these false and negative stereotypes can have a detrimental impact on the achievement and wellbeing of working-class students, and therefore it is seen as easier to appear as middle-class for the sake of fitting in than to be seen as working-class and suffer the negative consequences.

Emily went on to explain how a big part of her identity switch at university was disguising the way she spoke. She stated:

> *"So, it's easy to switch between the two and you know when to fit in and when not to. You know what to say and what not to say...you just change the way you talk and you change the way you think. It just happens like that"*

The way Emily describes her change in speech in order to fit in with the dominant classes of the higher education institution reflect what Elkins and Hanke found in their 2018 research of code-switching (Elkins and Hanke, 2018). They found that students from lower-class backgrounds use code-switching as a means of navigating their original social class and their perceived social class in higher education (Elkins and Hanke, 2018). They defined code-switching as a shift in verbal and non-verbal communication along with other performances such as appearance to portray themselves as belonging to a different social class group (Elkins and Hanke, 2018).

Rob also shares Emily's experience of flipping the switch on one's social class identity in order to fit in as he found it difficult during his time at university to find a group in which he could be himself. He found this particularly difficult as he studied for a Law degree at a Russell Group University in which conversations surrounding politics were prominent. He stated:

> *"Yeah, it's rare that you find a group of people where you can just be normal around, or be yourself and invariably the tensions between the group changes as soon as politics is brought up. Yeah, it's difficult. You do have to change face depending on people's politics. There's no place where you can identify as a working-class person...".*

Robs feelings of having no place to identify as a working-class person at university highlight the issue and source of why these students feel like they must mask their identities in order to succeed in higher education. It could be argued from these findings that the performance of

middle-class attributes for these students in this study serves as a constant reminder that their true working-class identities are not good enough for the university setting. Academics have previously argued that although working-class students may be able to disguise themselves as middle class, the process of having to disguise themselves in the first place is a continual reminder that the habitus in which they are claiming is one that can ever be fully inhabited (Lawler, 1999; Byrom, 2009).

Identity transformation –

Thus far we have seen from the findings in this research that regarding working-class identities in higher education, students from lower-income backgrounds are often left feeling like imposters who are not worthy of their spaces in university, or that their working-class identities have no place in these middle-class institutions and therefore portray themselves as middle-class in order to fit in. However, it can be seen from the literature and reflected within this research that some working-class students go through an identity transformation in which their time and success at university lead them to begin a journey in which their working-class identities are reworked and remodelled in line with where their habitus is currently situated (Aronson, 2008; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Bathmaker et al, 2013).

Jess speaks of her experience extensively regarding her identity transformation and the internal struggles and conflict this has led to. *Jess* has a great level of insight into this subject personally as well as academically as her interests at university lie within the world of the social sciences

and therefore, she explained her efforts to look at her social class objectively as well as subjectively. She stated:

> *"I literally have lived that struggle, and the oppression of the system and not having the privilege. You know, there's this pressure to kind of climb the social ladder and be socially mobile and all those sorts of things. And there's a real tension within myself, between wanting to do that and also just actually being okay with how I am because I don't want to buy into that system as well... You get a status by going through higher education... I know that getting this education I have actually pulled myself out and officially I'm not working-class anymore. I'm actually probably more middle-class because I'm educated. However, I'll always be working class and I kind of have got these like strong roots and so there's a bit of tension".*

Jess's experience is not a singularity as the literature shows that working-class students often construct a new sense of their identities in relation to their education which can lead to what is referred to as habitus dislocation (Aronson, 2008; Lehmann, 2009). Bourdieu's habitus is environmentally dependent allowing it to vary depending on time and place (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, Jess's identity transformed to reflect that of a middle-class identity as she spent years in a middle-class institution educating herself. Jess did, however, explain that she felt a tension within herself which refers back to the dislocation of said habitus as this sometimes-painful break-up of the old and new identities threaten the sense of self (Reay, 2018).

Although Jess's experience is one shared with other findings in past research, it is not one that is

shared with *Lily*. Lily experienced an identity transformation, but it is one that she fully

embraced with her habitus evolving and experiencing no feelings of dislocation or identity

conflict. Lily stated that during her time at university:

> *"I have never felt l belonged somewhere so much, around people who were, you know,*
>
> *pretty much on the same wavelength as me...I don't really have my class that I grew up*
>
> *in as part of my identity, so I don't ever think of myself as a working-class graduate. I*
>
> *just think of myself as a graduate".*

Lily has embraced her new forms of capital and transformation. Yet scholars warn that although

university promises a chance to climb the social ladder, there is still a great chance that these

working-class students will still be perceived as cultural outsiders (Lehmann, 2013). Research

demonstrates that students who shed their working-class identities in order to pursue social

mobility may find themselves in situations where they are the target of double discrimination

(Jury et al, 2018). They are no longer accepted by the working classes they have left behind but

not yet accepted by the middle-classes they are trying to join (Lehmann, 2013).

This theme has demonstrated that a working-class identity in higher education is something that

is a continuous struggle for working-class students. The students in this study felt a multitude of

emotions regarding the working-class identity with some feeling that it was something to hide

and mask in an attempt to portray themselves as more middle-class. As the working-class are

often looked at as inferior in higher education, it is no wonder these students would rather seek to

avoid the negative connotation associated with being a non-traditional student (Reay, 2001). Yet this is a sad reality as these students have a right to navigate educational spaces as their authentic selves. In addition to this, these students should also be able to feel pride in their academic success and not feel there are imposters in these middle-class institutions in which they find themselves.

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of working-class university students and discovered if their social class still negatively impacts their experience of higher education. The touching and raw stories shared by the participants in this study adds to the narrative of social class inequality in higher education. Taken as a whole, their experiences demonstrate some of the many barriers and obstacles working-class students have to navigate in their pursuit of a university degree. Below, I examine the findings of this research in relation to the conceptual framework of conflict theory.

Regarding the first research question concerning any effects a working-class background has on access to higher education, I first turn to the work of conflict theorists and their argument of a 'false consciousness' in education (Hurn, 2002). Conflict theory and wider literature (Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010; Mishra, 2013) recognize that meritocracy within education is a myth. For the participants in this study, their direct access to education was not hindered which could arguably be down to increased widening participation efforts (Byrom, 2009; Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). Yet much literature, as well as the students within this study call for students from working-class backgrounds to have access to the same quality of experience of higher education as their more affluent peers (Bamber and Tett, 2000; Stebleton and Soria, 2021; Reay, 2018). This is where the experiences of the participants in this study expose the myth of meritocracy, as their access to quality experiences such as those of their more affluent peers is affected due to their social class background and disposable income. For example, for the participants in this study, due to their lack of cultural capital they had to navigate their journey into university life entirely independently as they were often first-generation students. Therefore,

if they encountered any problems, they had to overcome this obstacle themselves through trial and error. However, for more affluent students who are more likely to have family members who have attended university themselves (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015), they have direct support and advice to help them through any difficulties they may face. Therefore, they can accurately tackle any obstacles correctly making them more likely to succeed as a result of their family's insider knowledge (cultural capital) of the university systems rather than based on merit alone (Gardner and Holley, 2011).

First-generation students such as the participants in this study also experienced an effect on their access to quality university experiences through negative judgments from middle- or upper-class students who did not understand the complexities of their backgrounds. Often leading to a lack of confidence, self-worth, or faith in one's abilities which can result in these students isolating themselves and having lower levels of integration in student life (Jury et al, 2017). I argued that the negative impacts of judgements and stereotyping potentially contributes to the lack of confidence that leads to the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. Which, for the participants in this research was experienced as feelings of not belonging, fear, phoniness and self-doubt even in the face of success. Resonating with the arguments of both traditions of conflict theory, it could be argued that imposter syndrome within the working-class participants in this study is the oppressive institution of education working as it should in an unjust society to ensure that even academically successful working-class students feel that their place in life is in accordance with their social standing (Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010; Mishra, 2013)

Barriers present in education due to social class, which was the focus of the second research question, resulted in many stories shared by the participants of this study. The data collected in this research surrounding any barriers the participants may have faced when taken as a whole show an educational journey littered with struggle due to a lack of privilege. Conflict theorists argue that education reproduces inequalities and is a site of struggle for the lower classes (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Jacob, 1981; Hurn, 2002). For the participants in this study, the struggles they have faced directly impacted upon their academic study, their need for employment, their ability to socialize, and their ability to gain the necessary work experience for employment. These barriers the students struggled with were all linked to social class backgrounds. It can be seen throughout the literature and has been reiterated throughout this research that higher education is an institution that favours the middle-class habitus (Aries and Seider, 2005; Reay, 2006). Therefore, those who do not possess a middle-class habitus will not experience university the same way as a middle-class individual. The working-class habitus is one that is not privy to the benefits of a disposable income, favorable family connections, or middle-class cultural capital (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). As a result of this, the working-class students in this study have faced barriers that their more affluent peers would not have to face.

Neo-Weberian conflict theorists argue that the elites in society have rigged the game for academic success in their favour (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Brown & Lauder, 2010). By doing this, they can continue to socialize the working classes into their social station in life and reproduce inequality in order to maintain, what Marx would argue, domination over the lower classes in society (Brown & Lauder, 2010). We can see examples of the rigged game of higher education through the experiences of the participants in this study. Rob spoke of the work

experience and internships which were critical to his future employment whilst at university, explaining how students from middle- or upper-class backgrounds easily secured jobs at very prestigious companies due to family connections alone rather than merit. These work placements and the experiences gained are highly important in the pursuit of graduate employment with Rob explicitly stating that his working-class background during this time left him "neutered".

The third research question related to any effects a working-class background has regarding experiences with higher education services. Conflict theory states that education favors the elites and works to continue the cycle of inequality (Jacob, 1981; Hurn, 2002; Brown & Lauder, 2010; Mishra, 2013). As university is a middle-class institution favoring the middle-class habitus, working-class students often feel uneasy reaching out and seeking support from tutors or support services (Aries and Seider, 2005; Moschetti and Hudley, 2015). This can lead to these students tackling the struggles they are facing alone and without support (Moschetti and Hudley, 2015). Specifically, within this study, we can see examples of the participants experiencing feelings of embarrassment and anxiety due to their perceived lack of professionalism and becoming unsure on how to approach lectures or staff with support on issues such as essay writing. We saw further depth with this issue with Emily pinpointing her embarrassment in approaching staff on perceiving her speech as 'too common'. This led to her feeling as if she had to tackle issues on her own without support rather than face the judgements of being from a 'common' background.

Taken as a whole, these stories shared regarding the third research question point to a more sinister issue presented within wider literature also of working-class identities being worthless in higher education (Reay, 2001; Aronson, 2008; Lehmann, 2013). They are seen as inferior and to

be discarded if one is to be successful in the academic world. I saw a reflection of what is, arguably, a devastating and problematic identity issue faced by the participants in this study as they struggled, modified, transformed and battled with their working-class identities in order to fit in with the middle-class culture of university. As the conflict theory of education posits that it is a powerful means of maintaining the power of the dominant classes through oppression and inequality, it is no surprise that many of the participants within this study felt they had to alter their working-class identifies in order to attempt to escape the struggle and domination this middle-class institution serves (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Brown & Lauder, 2010).

Taken in its entirety, the findings from this study provide support to the arguments of conflict theory surrounding the inequalities faced by the lower classes in education from the barriers present to the working-class students who participated in this research. The negative impact their social class background had on their experience of higher education worked as a mechanism, as stated by conflict theorists, to reproduce the inequalities within capitalist society to ensure the success of the dominant classes (Brown & Lauder, 2010). However, despite the barriers they faced, the participants I interviewed showed motivation, strength and determination in the face of the systems of oppression that sought to create obstacles for them.

Conclusion

This research focused on discovering the experiences of working-class university students and the impact an individual's social class background has on their higher education. This research - taken as a whole - points towards working-class students' social class backgrounds negatively impacting upon their experiences of university life regarding their academic and social experiences through the barriers their backgrounds create. These barriers present themselves as a result of higher education favoring the cultures middle-class individuals possess leaving lower-class individuals at a disadvantage from the start.

Limitations

This research exists very much as an exploration of six subjective experiences of working-class university students. The research is a small-scale study that does not possess generalizability. I believe that future studies should widen this research by gaining greater numbers of participants as well as balancing the sample with equal numbers of students from elite and post-1992 universities in order to gain insight into whether the negative impact of social class the students in this study felt are more generalizable and felt across prestigious and non-prestigious institutions. It is important to note that my own social class background has provided a somewhat unavoidable bias to this research which has contributed to the limitations of this study. The motivations for this research have been made clear in the context section, yet my desire to carry out this research as a response to my own experiences with higher education and to attempt to better the experiences of working-class students in the future carriers with it a preconceived idea – regardless of the supporting literature – that those from low-income backgrounds are disadvantaged in higher education. I believe it appropriate to address here also that my own social class background and habitus has lead to some obstacles in my relationship with academics. When it comes to academic writing, I feel that my habitus and lack of cultural capital leads me to either write to informally or attempt to overcompensate and write in a manner that leaves my work sometimes feeling inauthentic as I attempt to mask as something I am not.

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Appendix

1.A

Rob

Rob currently attends a redbrick university and is studying for a law degree. He initially moved away for university but moved back home and changed course. He was then unable to claim a low-income bursary as he has already been enrolled. He is working alongside a full-time degree. Rob is working 3-5 days a week in a physical role. Attended a grammar school. Currently living with parents. 20-25 years old

Emily

Emily is currently enrolled in a master's at a post-1992 university and studying for a master's degree in education. She is working just under on average 30 hours a week. She received a low-income bursary at university. Emily achieved a 1st class honours in her undergraduate degree and was the first in her family to attend university. She s living at home to contribute to the household income. She attended a comprehensive school. She is 20-25 years old.

Lily

Lily recently graduated from a Russell Group university with a degree in Performing Arts. She worked three jobs throughout her degree to support herself and moved to a different city to attend university. She is the first in her family to attend university. Lily achieved an Upper Second Class Degree at university and went on to work in a secondary school. She attended a comprehensive school. She is 20-25 years old.

Jack

Jack currently attends a post-1992 university. He is studying for a music degree. Jack is living with his partner and children. He attended a comprehensive school. He is not a first-generation student and has various family members that have attended university. Jack is a mature student.

Simon

Simon attended a post-1992 university. He studied architecture and achieved well in his degree which has landed him a good job in his field. Simon is the first in his family to attend university and attended a comprehensive school. He moved to another city to attend university. He is 20-25 years old.

Jess

Jess attended a post-1992 university and studied for an education degree. She is currently in the process of applying for a master's in education also. Jess achieved a First Class Honours Degree. She is a single mother who worked various jobs throughout her time at university to support herself and her child. She currently works in outreach to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Jess was not a first-generation student and had family members who attended university previously. Jess is a mature student.

1.B

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS PLEASE HELP!
I AM LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS FOR MASTERS RESEARCH
I am a Masters by Research student at CCCU and I am looking for current or recent students to participate in my study.
My research is about the experiences of working-class students in university and I am looking for current or recent students to interview
This is an opportunity to share your experiences of university as a working-class student and contribute to research in the field of educational inequality and social class
All personal an identifiable information will be kept confidential and held in line with the Data Protection Act 2018
Participant Requirements:
- Current or recent student at University
- From a working-class background
- Attended state school and either: received free school meals and / or received low income bursary or grants at university
- Happy to share your experiences of university life
Please get in touch for more information!
Email: r.clark510@canterbury.ac.uk
Thank you

1.C

1. Has coming from a working-class background affected your access to university in any way? If so, how?

2. Has coming from a working-class background affected your experience of university? If so, how?

3. Has coming from a working-class background created any barriers or advantages to your time at university? If so, what are these?

4. Has coming from a working-class background effected your experiences with university services? If so, how?

5. Do you think your experience of university has differed from students of different social class groups? If so, how?

6. Has your time as a working-class university student taught you anything?

7. Is there anything you would like to see change for working-class students at university?

1.D

Prompt Questions

- Have you noticed any differences in identity at university regarding your social class?

- How has having a working-class identity at university made you feel?

- When did you become aware of you working-class identity

- How did you feel about your class identity before/during/after university

- Have you noticed any cultural differences at your time at university

- Have you had any stand out moments or experiences that can be due to social class at university?

- Has your social class identity changed in any way at university?

- How do you feel about being/becoming a graduate from a working-class background

- Is there anything regarding social class and higher education from your experiences previous to, during or after university that you would like to share

2.A

20 initial codes generated through phase one of thematic analysis –

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

INTERNSHIPS

MISSING OUT

FAMILY

SOCIAL DIVIDE

LANGUAGE

JUDGEMENT

FAMILY HABITUS

CULTURE SHOCK

PRIORITIES

TALKING TO LECTURERS

CAPITAL

PRIVILEGE

EXPERIENCES

IMPOSSTER SYNDROME

WORKING CLASS VALUES

WORKING CLASS PRIDE

IDENTITY SWITCH

IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

MORE LOAN

MORE LIFE EXPERIENCE

ADVANTAGES NEEDED

2.B

Candidate themes after phase three of thematic analysis –

- Barriers

- Culture and gaps

- Imposter syndrome

- Working class pride/values

- Identity in higher education

- Advantages/advantages needed

2.C

Notes from phase 4 of thematic analysis –

- Theme organisation:

- Habitus - environment, socialisation, learned set of preferences, family, primary socialisation

- Identity – working class pride and values imposter syndrome

- Student employment - missing out, internships

- Culture Shock - social divide, priorities, judgement

- Capital - family barriers is a lack of cultural capital, middle-class privilege, language, not knowing how to talk to lecturers, advantages

This then go reworked and altered into four themes with subthemes of –

- Barriers: Student Employment, Internships, Missing out

- Identity: Imposter Syndrome, Identity Switch, Identity Transformation

- The Big Divide: Enemy Territory, Language

- Culture Shock: Priorities, Working-Class Habitus

The final refinement of themes in this phase left me with –

- Barriers: Student Employment, Missing Out, Working-Class Habitus, Internships

- The Big Divide: Enemy Territory, Priorities, Language

- Identity: Imposter Syndrome, Identity Switch, Identity Transformation