Doing the heavy lifting: the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities

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CONTENTS

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This EdD thesis is dedicated to the 13 participants in this study. These often-unsung facilitators of UK higher education do so much 'heavy lifting' within each of their own contexts; providing emotional support to students they recognize as having had shared experiences, picking up heavy workloads without remuneration and being subject to cultural experiences within institutions which are alien, often leaving them feeling out of place and unappreciated. In the UK, professional services and administrative staff are absent from academic literature, in their own voices. This study is indebted to those who gave up their valuable time in 2022 to help me understand how they experienced work within Russell Group institutions.

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EdD cohort of 2019, we're going to get those floppy hats!

Abstract

In recent years, UK higher education has pursued more inclusive practices, adopting widening participation metrics, removing historically problematic statues, reviewing research culture environments, and renaming university buildings (Chigudu, 2021; Heath et al, 2013). Research has sought to understand how people from different 'non-traditional' backgrounds experience these institutions (Reay, 2017b). At present, studies of social class focus on the experiences of working-class academics and working-class students (Crew, 2020; Crozier et al., 2019). Academic research has not yet addressed the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff, who form a critical part of the political economy of knowledge production. This study used an interpretative approach, combining narrative inquiry and semi-structured interview questions to elucidate the narratives of thirteen working-class professional service staff working in Russell Group universities. This thesis makes contributions from conceptual, empirical, theoretical and practical perspectives. Conceptually, a working-class identity, for the participants in this study, is formed from a multitude of varying characteristics, rather than a traditional association with employment and labour. Participants refer to their working-class identity through family history, occupations, deprivation and taste. Empirically, participants felt supported by their immediate networks but often at the price of uncomfortable relationships with academics. Here, a lack of value was made visceral by toxic behaviour, substandard remuneration, poor career progression, isolation and not being listened to in meetings. Concerning theory, I find a ubiquity with the use of Bourdieu in working-class studies. Yet, there is a disparity between theory and participant identification and a dislocation between temporalities of space, time and experience that the theories of Bourdieu fail to account for. I find that there is a *lamination of field* which working-class participants carry through their lives. I question social mobility, a rhetoric accepted as the way disadvantaged people are accepted into elite institutions. This assimilation accepts that middle-class space is normative in juxtaposition with working-class attributes which are seen to be undesirable. Inclusion, not representation, should be the goal of all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) if they want to embed equity in their workforce. This study works at frontiers of research on social class, developing a space where the experiences of professional services staff might be fully integrated in the cultural fabric of universities. For too long these voices have been ignored and pushed to the margins, I hope this will be the first of many studies to address this injustice.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aims and objectives of this thesis

This study builds on the plethora of literature around working-class identities within academia (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2021a; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Johansson & Jones, 2019). This existing cache looks at two key areas, the perspective of students and the perspectives of academics with a working-class background. During the literature review it became apparent that the voices of people who work within professional services and administrative contexts are not heard and it is here that this thesis makes a substantial contribution. Universities arguably have three key stakeholders, the students who come to learn, the academics who teach and research, and the professional services or administration staff (e.g., Research administrators, finance officers) who facilitate research and support the structure of the institution.

Literature relating to administrative staff uses their functional role to demonstrate how the institution works on a day-to-day basis (Caldwell, 2022; Trowler, 2008; Whitchurch, 2010; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). They themselves are not recognised as having individual lived experiences which are integral to understanding their working environment (Caldwell, 2022). To understand how universities can evolve as organisations, it is important to understand how the culture within those institutions is lived by these key stakeholders. This thesis addresses a substantive gap in academic knowledge. Professional services and administrative staff are very rarely included in academic research in their own voices. Instead, literature which refers to these roles prioritises their roles and functionality rather than their identities and experiences (Trowler, 2008; Whitchurch, 2010). Research to date has considered how a working-class social identity interacts with the roles of academics and students but, in a UK context, has not yet considered the perspectives of working-class professional services and administrative staff (Caldwell, 2022; Crew, 2021b; Crozier et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2010). As Mosier-Puentes (2023:138) notes, 'the stories we tell about working-class people are often too narrow'. This thesis aims to be a first step in addressing this gap. Much like moving away from the deficit model of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practice, if institutions are to change and to make substantive movements towards the inclusion of working-class people, the structures and experiences within that institution need to be understood and held to account (Brook & Michell, 2012). We need, as Reay intimates, to produce change on a 'wider systemic level, one which transforms the culture and methods of higher education', to achieve better social class mix and a diverse university sector (Reay, 2021:61). This can only be achieved by understanding

the current culture of these institutions from the perspectives of all the relevant stakeholders in that institution (Reay, 2021:61; Brook & Michell, 2012).[1]

The Russell Group is a self-styled 'elite' subset of universities in terms of reputation and access. Spanning between 50 years at the youngest and 1000 years at the oldest, The Russell Group are 24 universities across the UK, established in 2007. This group of universities demands the highest grades for access and has notoriously attracted high achieving students yet struggled to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds (The Russell Group, 2015). The Russell Group is far from being a homogenous group, despite a sense of elitism which surrounds the group itself. The universities within this group are formed from different compositions, including some, like Durham, Oxford and Cambridge who operate collegiate systems, whilst the other 21 universities in the group do not. The way in which each university is managed is not ubiquitous, with some universities such as Bristol operating a more centralised version of administration, where others operate with a level of local jurisdiction which is more devolved. The student populations within each university are also not homogenous across the group. For example, HESA (2020/21) data depicts institutions such as Oxford as having a stable intake of undergraduate students from the UK state sector, at 68.7% in 2020/21 which compares to a state school intake at Russell Group institutions such as London School of Economics (similar, at 69.6%), but a far different composition from the University of Southampton (87%) or Cardiff (85.9%). The systems of governance and the structural arrangement of each of these universities is therefore unique and worth bearing in mind as to how this is a limitation in this study.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis focuses on two fundamental research questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of working-class professional services and administration staff in Russell Group universities?

RQ2. How is a working-class identity conceptualised by working-class professional services and administration staff in Russell Group universities?

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[1] Brook & Michell (2012:587) asserted this position with regards to working class academics, noting that the enrolment share of low socio-economic status students would be unlikely to improve if the accounts of working-class academics were not taken into consideration.

1.3 Overview of the thesis

This thesis is formed from eight chapters. Chapters ne and two build the foundations for this study. In chapter one, I scope the political, social and legislative environment which has brought the realm of widening participation into existence, and to the fore, over the last twenty years. This chapter looks at the broad area of widening participation, which encompasses the nine protected characteristics as indicated by the 2010 Equality Act, alongside the non-protected characteristic of socio-economic background (UK Government, 2010). This is important and critical to the study subject itself. Without the widening participation agenda and the increase in the pursuit of equality, diversity and inclusion over the last twenty years, the phenomenon of having more diverse people in institutions like Russell Group universities would not exist. Understanding this deeper historical framework allows us to acknowledge how tensions exist between traditional elitist university spaces and 'non-traditional' employees and students, setting the scene for a deeper exploration of these tensions in contemporary society. Here, I also look at the historic positioning of the working-class and how this group has often been referred to in disparaging terms. This helps contextualise this thesis by underlining the reasons why studies of working-class people are often less palatable within academia and often ignored by research, whilst also going some way to understand the persistent inequalities that working-class people face in such institutions.

Chapter two maps the current academic literature which has considered working-class social identities within universities in the UK. Here, the intention was to scope which populations have been studied, which methods and theories have been used in these studies and how the studies have been designed. This approach was taken because, from an initial scoping review, I failed to find literature on working-class professional services staff. I used a systematic approach to question this. I found no studies around working-class professional services staff, with all literature concerned with either students, academics, or on one occasion, parents. Subsequently, I analysed the methods, theories and approaches used by these studies to establish conventional approaches, in order to create my own methodology, conceptual framework and study design, for a population which had not yet been studied.

Chapters three and four discuss theory and method; notably the use of a Bourdieusian framework as well as semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry. Here, I discuss why I have chosen to form the interviews using narrative inquiry and semi-structured questions; using narrative inquiry allows for a thorough exploration of the participants' lived history and experiences, building rapport and connection with the researcher. This also compliments my chosen method of analysis (Reflective Thematic Analysis) as including the researcher as a

fundamental component of research data. The following semi-structured segment of the interviews allows for a greater exposition of current experience.

My findings chapters have been separated into three; one which looks at the definition of working-class, one which looks at experiences working in Russell Group universities, and one which looks at cross-cutting themes throughout the interviews. Here, I have chosen to merge traditional 'findings' with discussion points, relating each thematic area back to the broader literature. The reasons for this approach are outlined in chapter three. Chapter eight concludes the thesis and chapter nine makes recommendations for further research and improvements for practise. Here I make several suggestions as to how universities might start to address broader issues of social class inclusion and equity.

1.4 Thesis context

This chapter will outline the historical narrative, cultural changes and legislative progress which have formed the context of this study. A call to make UK society one that is fairer and more equitable to people from all demographics is one that has laid the foundations to understand how different groups of people, with different upbringings and personal narratives, experience some of the most historical institutions in the UK. This chapter sets the scene for the influx of research of this type which has been more present within academic research over the course of the last fifteen years. It tracks the changes to attitudes within the fabric of society which have made this kind of research possible, and more effective. It does, however, provide a degree of criticality to the way in which the conditions for this kind of research emerge, outlining the responsibility that academics have, to conduct research with people who have thus far remained silent, with the ambition of truly making the production of knowledge more openly accessible. Later in this chapter, I outline why research of this type is needed in trying to ascertain how universities in the UK, and the Russell Group in particular, can become more inclusive environments (Brook & Michell, 2012). By understanding the experiences of those who have thus far gone unheard, small pieces of the puzzle can be added to the web of information of what is already known (Dopson & McNay, 2000; Wong, 2018). The historic treatment of working-class people is important and critical to this study; it helps to situate and explain the microaggressions that working-class people still experience in universities whilst exploring why the experiences of these people have largely been ignored and not 'credited with the attention they deserve' (Brook & Michell, 2012:587).

Lastly, this chapter also explains and discusses my own personal journey and connection to the research subject matter and how it was that I came to be interested in this topic. As I will

outline, I am an advocate of Braun & Clarke's approach to thematic analysis and as such, my own impressions of the research, participants, and experiences therein are woven within the threads of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006;2021).

1.5 The historical and social context of class in the UK

1.5.1 Social class in the early 20th Century

The history of the UK economy over the period of the last 80 years has been directly influential in the manifestation of class. This section outlines how economic political rhetoric over this period has shaped attitudes towards the working-class population. It is worth being aware that social class is also gendered. Prior to women being involved in the labour market in full employment and full enfranchisement, sociological theories were developed with the employment of men, exclusively. As such, there is a key limitation in understanding social class purely as the expression of means of production and labour, particularly for women but also in times of social upheaval and national uncertainty. Not least, this highlights a critical limitation in the understanding of studies related to class; women are largely absent from the conceptualisation of the class system in political commentary prior to the 1980s (Abbott, 1987; Dale et al., 1985; Goldthorpe, 1983; Leiulfsrud & Woodward, 1987, 1988; Roth & Dashper, 2016).

1.5.2 The war on class and emergence of a meritocratic society?

Conservative party politics of the 1980s moved away from the post-war socialist values of protection; the welfare state, council housing and the NHS, towards a renewed focus on individual success, private ownership and deregulation (History Extra podcast, 2019; Miliband & Lloyd, 2021). Sandbrook (2019) and Davies (2013) argue that the proliferation of home ownership through the 'Right to Buy' scheme of 1980s Thatcherism drove a wedge between the 'up and coming' working-class council house dwellers and those that did not buy their council homes, who were subject to decreasing availability and standard of social housing (Disney & Luo, 2017; Field, 1997; History Extra podcast, 2019). In contrast to the wrap-around care of the post-war Welfare State, Thatcherism was characterised by the notion of Laissez-faire or 'leave well alone' (Jessop, 1997). A Laissez-faire approach enabled financial markets to determine interest and exchange rates and reflects the wider Thatcherite ambition towards deregulation in other sectors (Jessop, 1997, 2015). During this period social class came under attack, encapsulated by the idea that *Class is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles and sets them against one another* (Thatcher, *the Guardian* 1992; Skeggs 2002). This

political rhetoric remarked class to be a 'Zombie category' and completely redundant (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991).

Meritocracy has stepped in as an inadequate replacement over time, ushered in by Thatcherite neoliberalism, expanded and espoused by New Labour (Exley, 2019; McKenzie, 2017; Reay, 2017b; Skeggs, 2004). Meritocracy denotes that anyone can achieve anything, regardless of background with hard work and determination, centring the individual at the heart of success (Bloodworth, 2016; Boliver, 2017; Frank, 2016; Savage, 2007a; Tholen & Brown, 2017). Meritocracy enables institutions of power to absolve themselves of responsibility for the outcomes of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016; Hunt & Scott, 2017; Ingram & Bradley, 2012; Sandel, 2020; Tholen & Brown, 2017). Meritocracy has been seen as a way for politicians to excuse themselves from the inequalities which pervade British society, a system which no longer views class as central to social issues within the UK (Skeggs, 2015). Severe class inequalities persist, and the British class system is still 'particularly pernicious' (Akala, 2019:27).

The concept that anyone could who they wanted under New Labour 'where hard work and merit' marked a space to distinguish between the 'lazy and feckless' and the aspirational working-classes (Blair, 2005; Beckwith, 1998; Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2015, 2017; Working-Class Collective, 2022). Jones (2012) has explored how the vilification of working-class people since the 1970s has been spearheaded by the UK national media, creating a sense of moral uncertainty and to some degree, moral panic regarding the working-class population (BBC History extra, 2020; Sandbrook, 2019). This characterisation could be considered as an influential factor in determining why research with working class participants is less widespread, thorough, and well received.

1.5.3 The working classes in popular media and rhetoric

The problematic nature of the term 'working-class' is best evidenced by negative perceptions of working-class people, driven through popular media and discourse (Jones 2018). This distinctly negative framing can help us to understand why working-class people have often been left out of academic research. The UK has a long history of class derision, reaching back as far as the 18th and 19th centuries, a rhetoric which propagated a derogatory, criminalised vision of the working-class as feckless, reckless and subhuman.[2] Smile's *Self-help,* for example, placed responsibility of deprivation firmly at the feet of the working-class,

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[2] Lack of aspiration among the working-classes has since been countered through education research by Baker et al., (2014).

characterising them as lazy, and responsible for their own poverty (Smile, 1859). This vilification has gathered traction over the last 40 years and has often been framed through specific examples and narratives (Jones 2012; Exley, 2019). During the 21st Century this is articulated through headlines in *The Daily Express* such as *'4M scrounging families in Britain'* (*The Daily Express*, 1st September 2011), *'Mansions for scroungers'* (*The Daily Express*, 21st February 2010) and *The Daily Star* '*Benefit scrounger Mum's £10k Vegas trip'* (*The Daily Star*, 5th April 2015). These headlines are regularly followed by retractions, show how dissemination of antagonistic feelings has a purpose beyond accurate fact. This prejudice towards working-class people in serves a very real motive; the media was (and still is) dominated by individuals from the middle and upper classes (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; O'Neil & Wayne, 2017).

In establishing a derisive narrative against the working-classes, the media can perpetuate and maintain the established order (O'Neil & Wayne, 2017; Reeves et al., 2016). There is an inherently political dimension to this portrayal. As Jones (2012) notes, the position of newspapers like *The Sun* have been influential in the success of different political parties. It was *The Sun* itself which proclaimed in the 1992 general election '*It's The Sun wot won it'* (Reeves et al., 2016). Headlines such as '*A new Sun is rising today: We beat strike thugs'* (January 27th, 1986) and '*To think this is England: Fury in the Ghetto*' (January 1981) demonstrate the depiction of unionised workers striking. Reeves et al (2015) similarly found that *The Sun* had the ability to influence the outcome of political elections in the UK at the whim of Murdoch (Reeves et al., 2016). McKenzie (2017) explores how the working-class vote is associated with the Brexit outcome, vilifying these communities. For McKenzie (2017b:201), this class-based prejudice enables the working-classes to be seen as 'irrational' or 'xenophobic', betraying a 'lack of sociological understanding of the long-term progression of narratives'. The power of the media lies not only in the ability to maintain an established order through antagonism but uses this power and antagonism to influence political outcomes (O'Neil & Wayne, 2017; Reeves et al., 2016).

Understanding this narrative is critical to understanding why, in part, working-class identities in the university have been thus far largely ignored; revealing oneself to have a working-class identity has long been associated with degradation.[3] Later, I make links to how this perspective of the working-class as feckless and reckless has fuelled and exacerbated microaggressions which are still at work in contemporary British society. This thesis contributes to unpicking this narrative by giving space to the experiences working-class professional services have in UK

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[3] Tiffe (2014:7). explores how moving from a 'typical' working class background into academia reflected a movement within her life history: 'financially and culturally we were "white trash", but we were nuanced white trash'.

institutions, something which has not yet been studied, partly due to a lack of respect and understanding.

1.5.4 Proxies for understanding and measuring social class in the 21st century

New proxies have been proposed to describe lower socio-economic status without referring to people as working-class. In accordance with the Social Mobility Commission (2021) some of these constructs have revolved around social mobility, or first generation (to go to university), free school meal status or historic parental education and occupation (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). However, using any of the proxies for socio-economic status in place of the term 'working-class' fails fundamentally to understand the intricacies of how working-class identity is lived (Hunt & Scott, 2017; Scandone, 2017; Waller et al., 2015). Class status is not something synonymous solely with economic capital, it is 'not enough by itself to define class' (Goldthorpe, 1999; Savage & Mouncey, 2016:47). Class is intertwined over time with the experience of cultural capital, convention, and norms (Akala, 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; McKenzie, 2015; Savage & Mouncey, 2016).

Class status is the amalgamation of three capitals; social, cultural, and economic and cultural capital is an ease of moving between genres, confidence moving in institutions, being assertive and comfortable in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). Savage et al (2013) argued that the traditional 3-part class system is no longer relevant for modern Britain and were able to identify seven classes as part of the 'Great British Class Survey' (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Savage, 2007b; Savage et al., 2013; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). They sought to understand class as predicated by multiple factors, creating a questionnaire for mass participation which asked questions based on multiple modes of class categorisation. This questionnaire was based on ideas pertaining to a typical understanding of class, one akin to Marxist and Warnerian theory around professional occupation and labour (Savage et al., 2013; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). The questionnaire also sought to uncover the boundaries of class which are attributed to Bourdieusian theory, the predilection for tastes, dispositions and attitudes which Bourdieu sees as entwined with rungs on the social class hierarchy (Savage et al., 2013; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). These cultural pursuits add a further dimension to our understanding of class, enabling Savage et al (2016) to combine cultural class status and economic class status (Savage & Mouncey, 2016). This combination of cultural taste, professional status and economic status results in the creation of seven class categorisations for Savage et al (2016), with some results showing therefore that it is possible to ascend culturally (through attending the opera or museums) whilst concurrently having low levels of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; M. Warner et al., 1985). Yet, these seven classes, nearly a decade on from

their inception, are not part of the popular lexicon. This study demonstrates that the dispositions of taste in cultural indicators are still predominantly connected to economic status; yet deploying these kinds of categories to define class reproduces a reductionist notion of class, rather than a more complex cultural understanding. Friedman et al (2021) also found that British people have a strong affiliation to an historic sense of class and the traditional three social classes still dominate the collective understanding. This plethora of research suggests, far from some statements in popular rhetoric, that class remains an important, yet contested category of identification in contemporary British society. This supports the need to understand the experiences of class more broadly, something this thesis aims to do within the realms of professional services in UK higher education.

1.5.5 Reclaiming terminology

There is a strong theoretical rationale for using the terminology 'working-class' as an identifier for participant recruitment (Attridge, 2021; Crew, 2020b; 2021a). The political narrative that sought to declare class as obsolete has led to communities being ignored (Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2015). McKenzie's (2015) work on the rationale for working-class people in the Northeast to vote for Brexit demonstrated a lack of care and attention towards the working-class people of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. She found Brexit has had influence on working-class people dubbed 'the left behind,' a sentiment echoed by Exley 2017 where he defines 'Brexit was a wake-up call for metropolitan elite [to listen] but they did not' (Exley, 2019:206; McKenzie, 2017). Deviating from the late twentieth century narrative, McKenzie upholds that far from being obsolete, ignoring class has led to swathes of the population who feel disenfranchised (McKenzie, 2015; McKenzie, 2017; The Working-Class Collective, 2022). This disenfranchisement of working-class voices has led to them being described as people who often are 'shoehorned into narratives created by someone else' and 'served up one-dimensional narratives of identity' facilitated by middle-class observers (The Working-Class Collective, 2022:33). In order to understand the experiences of others, we urgently need to listen to their voices (Cohen et al., 2007; Newby, 2010; Barbour, 2008). Class matters. More than this, it matters that it is visible in the narrative of higher education. Fundamental to elucidating this narrative is giving working-class people the opportunity to describe their experiences without third party involvement or fear of reprisal, as is the critical aim of this thesis (Bathmaker et al., 2013a, 2013b; Ingram & Bradley, 2012).

In 2022 there has been a recent resurgence of the use of 'class' based framing in popular and national literature. The 2022 Sutton Trust Report, *Speaking up,* found that accent, a stereotypical marker of prejudice relating to class, is still used to discriminate and bully others in the workplace. The Guardian published *Revealed: Working-class people paid thousands*

less than middle-class peers despite doing same jobs, which depicted a clear 'class pay gap' in the projected and actual lifetime earnings of people from different class backgrounds (Tapper, 2022). Whilst these two instances alone do not prove that the narrative of class is dominant, they do suggest it is not yet extinct.

This section has briefly traced the history of social class and the understanding of social class over the last 150 years. In doing so, this section has shown the changing understanding of social class, discussing the intersection between class and political narrative. This has been important in elucidating why studies of working-class people have largely been left out of mainstream academia. Reclaiming the terminology of 'working-class' as it is a manifestation of multiple intersecting cultural elements rather than a simple reflection of economics is integral to this study on working-class professional services staff. It enables this study to investigate the temporalities in time and space which interact and contribute to a classed understanding of experience, this is evident in chapters five and six.

1.6 University landscapes

Since the advent of New Labour in 1994 and subsequent success in winning the UK General Election in 1997, there has been an increased focus on widening participation and inclusion within universities (Heath et al., 2013). The 2010 Equality Act guided this movement towards focusing on protected characteristics (sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, race, religion, age, disability status, pregnancy and maternity and marital status), which does not include social class or socio-economic background (GOV UK, 2010). Despite these changes in political appetite, universities nevertheless continue to be elite and elitist institutions (Reay, 2009). These institutions continue to carry this elitist trope by failing to make adequate space for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; not providing studentships which meet the cost of living, maintenance loans which barely cover rent, and failing to prepare students for the graduate job market, meaning students often have to rely on personal networks (as I find in chapter seven, for those from working-class backgrounds, these networks are not 'facilitating') (Exley, 2019; Reay, 2017b, 2021a). Yet, the effect of class and socio-economic background on equity in universities and graduate outcomes is fairly pronounced (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Work by the Paired Peers Project from 2010-2013 mapped the journeys of students through The University of Bristol and University of the West of England, ultimately finding that career prospects on completion were less reliant on grade outcomes and degree classifications and more reliant on class status, parental wealth and networks (Bathmaker, 2016, 2021a; Bathmaker et al., 2013).

In particular spheres students in recent years have become more vocal in addressing issues of inequality. Prompted in part by the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd in 2020, student activists have focused their efforts on cultural iconography and symbolism in order to create cultural change within these institutions (Walker et al., 2021). The 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign which was both an Oxford and global phenomenon, and the campaign to remove the statue of Colston in Bristol heightened an emphasis on inclusion, historical narrative and the subsequent effect on modern culture that these narratives may influence (Ballantyne, 2021; BBC News, 2021; Chigudu, 2021; Newsinger, 2016). These concurrent issues relate directly to conversations around class. Culture runs far deeper than iconography and symbolic gestures, and although changing symbolic elements of an organisation can identify a shift in popular understanding and opinion more widely, they still fail to address the wider issues of systemic institutional culture and true inclusion of difference (Ballantyne, 2021).

Russell Group universities have been continually failing to improve the access for disadvantaged students to their institutions over the course of the last 30 years (McCall, 2018). Whilst policy has focussed on increasing representation and widening access, little impact has been made for the most socio-economically disadvantaged in society. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2016) indicated that the most disadvantaged young people are seven times less likely than the most advantaged to attend the most selective higher education institutions, something Thiele et al (2017) demonstrated has barely shifted since the early 1990s. The student population in state schools represents 93% of the total number of pupils in the UK, yet only around 79% of those attend Russell Group higher education institutions, and this is differentiated in different institutions (Oxford, for example admits just over 68%) (Boliver, 2018; Woodward, 2019). To understand how culture is lived and experienced within an institution, the actors within that institution and the primary stakeholders need to be given space to reflect and contribute (Dopson & McNay, 2000; Harris, 1998). As yet, these experiences have centred on student and academic experience, fundamentally leaving any other stakeholders, such as professional services staff, in the shadows (McKay & Robson 2023; Caldwell, 2022). The purpose of this thesis is to start to add to the wider field of working-class research by addressing this vast void.

1.7 Context: Self reflection

The approach of Braun & Clarke (2021) to embed the research in the process of reflexive thematic analysis foregrounds researcher positionality. My personal narrative has led me to think about the ways in which elite universities curate cultural environments, maintaining them

through performative actions, symbols, icons, convention, structures, and behaviours. I grew up in a single parent household with constant economic struggle. As I have gone through University, I have been distinctly aware of cultural inconsistencies between my experiences and those of others. I studied History at the University of Manchester and was immediately thrown into a distinctly middle-class environment where skiing holidays and private schools were normative. What I experienced as an 18-year-old were indicators of class cultural capital; things that were unfamiliar to me but natural for others. It is not a cliché to state that I was often asked what school I'd gone to. The question was confusing and acted as an entry point to a mysterious club. For the best part of a decade, I attempted to assimilate, using a strange natural aptitude for rowing and a broadly southern accent as currency. Accent as a feature of working-class identities is something which I will continually return to in this study. Research around accents has shown that individuals use accents to 'code switch' between social settings (Donnelly et al., 2022). For me, having an accent which is a normative part of the dominant social culture has enabled me to code switch into and out of middle-class settings (Cuddy, 2022).

On several occasions working in professional services at one Russell Group institution, I experienced being 'found out'. On one occasion I was volunteered to conduct an orchestra of students in a team building exercise, students who were well versed in classical music. I felt a visceral transfer of 'perceived power' and absolute humiliation. I have felt over time that there is a need for elite institutions to continue to make strides to be more inclusive. In contacting and speaking with professionals working in Russell Group institutions I hoped to better understand how people from working-class backgrounds experience elite universities. If there are areas of tension or difficulty as a result of class background, I wanted to explore these, with the ambition to highlight experiences and contribute to better practice in the future. Whilst a small-scale study of this kind cannot hope to be representative of the whole body of working-class professional services staff or make sweeping recommendations, it will highlight areas which are not presently illuminated. I come to this study with a set of preconceived notions about Russell Group universities, with a set of negative experiences. The awareness of this was important to me in collaborating with my research participants. I later discuss my choice to work with reflexive thematic analysis and the model of Braun & Clarke which does not see bias as an inherently bad thing, they don't believe in bias, rather unique sets of researcher-participant collaborations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ultimately, my awareness has been mindfully incorporated into my research questions and, using narrative inquiry, I have been conscious to make space for the voices of my participants as of primary importance, something Reay refers to as 'passionate partiality' (Reay, 2017:2).

1.8 The field of research

This study was conducted with people who are currently employed on administration-only or professional services contracts at Russell Group institutions. The Russell Group was selected to build upon existing literature which looks at working-class experiences of 'elite' institutions, where it is the assumption that clashes between cultural norms between the individual and these universities may be the most significant. These 'elite' Universities are cited as having particularly hidden processes of exclusion and exclusivity which permeate their culture (Reay, 2021). As such, it was felt necessary to restrict the pool to Russell Group universities. 'Professional services', for the purpose of this study is taken to mean roles which:

> *…are engaged in the provision of professional and administrative support services to college staff and students and sometimes to the wider public. The work might involve administrative support, developing and implementing policy, specialist services or project management* (Imperial College London, 2023).

The participants in this study were strictly employed on non-academic contracts and not inclusive of those who hold dual academic roles with administrative responsibilities.

1.9 Significance of the study and purpose statement

This study has strong purpose with real-world application. Whilst widening participation has been a central tenant for higher education over the last three decades, reports from organisations like the OECD and the Social Mobility Commission find increasing wealth inequality stratifications in post-industrialised countries which have significant implications for universities (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Despite the various pathways of life, privilege from birth still replicates as a privilege at all stages of life, regardless of changing circumstances (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). In instances where studies have conducted large-scale surveys of institutional culture there is still the indication that those from non-traditional backgrounds continue to experience a lack of acceptance, difficulty progressing and inequalities within universities (Belluigi et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2023). This research intends to address a significant gap, the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff, subsequently making recommendations for policy and practice.

Understanding the perspectives of working-class administrators and professional support staff may help administrative teams to foster environments which are more inclusive; in turn developing psychological safety, critical to high performing teams (Edmondson, 1999). This

study provides an original contribution to the understanding of class identity and how class identity impacts the lived experience of professional services employees within elite universities. The identity of administrators and professional services staff is largely absent from any literature, therefore my literature review focuses on student and staff groups. This study has the potential to create a space for reflection and to find room to discuss deeper the cultural norms, values and behaviours within Russell Group universities. There are also wider implications about the conceptualisation of what it means to be working-class which are made visible by this research. Further recommendations and implications for policy, research and practice are highlighted in chapter nine.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter summary

This chapter reviews the current literature which studies working-class people in higher education. It does this in two ways; the literature review was systematic in its approach to mapping working-class experiences across higher education literature. I wanted to ascertain which groups of working-class people in Higher Education had been the subject of research and what the existing literature on working-class experiences had found. This stage included a broad definition of working-class and was inclusive of all institutions. This part of the literature review took a thematic approach, mapping the demographic groups, theories and methods in existing studies. This is vital to establishing a unique contribution to knowledge; none of the studies in this sample included working-class professional services staff and therefore their experiences are undocumented. By understanding the themes, approaches and methods used in other studies of working-class people in higher education, this thesis was able to build a robust methodology based on convention in the field which was then applied (in chapters three and four) to the study of working-class professional services and administrative staff. This literature review establishes a vacant niche in the literature whilst also directly informing the study design.

The literature review begins with a broad theme of class, via the systematic and narrative review process it then focuses on demographic context, theory and methodology, making it clear that a substantial gap still exists in terms of research into the social class identities and experiences of professional services and administrative staff. This literature review has exposed substantial literature on social class in UK higher education and a separate body of literature around the functionality and role of professional services in UK higher education, with very little, if any, intersection between the two. Professional services employees are recognised only by their role (their human capital), which is a substantially classed discourse. As has been demonstrated here, systematic reviews are not, in themselves, as wholly objective as we might be led to believe. Relying on the subjective input of phrases, words or terms in select databases could lead to the regeneration of a certain type of knowledge, one in which some classed actors remain silenced in the literature.

2.2 Scope

Understanding the identity of actors (academic staff, non-academic staff and students) within higher education has gained increasing traction over the last 20 years. The term 'identity' as used here references the relationship between the professional capacity and formal role of

individuals within the University as it is connected to experiences, beliefs and histories of the individuals who inhabit that role. This understanding of identity is not as simple as the understanding we gather from Sfard & Prusak (2005); one which is curated by the community. Rather, identity has a temporal nature, one which is biographically rich and links past histories with present and future reckonings of social identity (Binns, 2019). These reckonings are intersected by various axes among which class is profoundly important (Skeggs, 2004). This identity is understood in the context of this thesis as the multiple intersections which occur in the life histories of working-class professional services careers. I take a sociological interpretation of identity as socially constituted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Carter, 2020). This also includes following an understanding of identity through the realms of individualisation and the assertion that identity is personally construed, with no two people sharing the same socialisation, experiences, or formations of self-identity (Goffman, 1963; Giddens, 1991). The creation of identity is formed both from the individual personal experiences a person has, but also the interplay between a reflexion of self in relation to the exterior social environment (Goffman, 1963). This interpretation of identity contributes to participant self-identification for this study and later, reflections in chapters five and six on self-perception, something often missing from framings of class identity.

New Labour policy emphasis on widening participation in higher education in the 1990s and 2000s enabled the movement of a higher number of 'non-traditional' academics into academia (Heath et al., 2013; Reay, 2017a). The experiences of these 'non-traditional' academics, those from marginalised or minoritized backgrounds as well as those from the traditional working-classes has been of increased interest in the last 10 years, which is best demonstrated by this body of the literature spanning from 2010-2022, and a vast proportion being published in 2021 (17.54%). The recent (2021) BERA scoping review of the Education discipline for example, demonstrated a need to understand the precarity and experiences of non-traditional academics, in order to make substantial culture change and provision for the future (Boyle et al., 2021; Stentiford et al., 2021). The literature around non-traditional academics has begun to grow and expand over time. New studies are now displaying a depth of qualitative data and are being conducted by working-class academics themselves (Bentley, 2020; Crew, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Reay et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2021a).

Before embarking on this full literature review, I conducted a brief scoping review where I failed to find any research on working-class professional services staff in UK higher education. This scoping review involved applying a few key search terms, such as 'working class professional services' to both the ERIC and SCOPUS databases and reviewing the first four pages of results. During this phase, I also reached out to academics in the field of working-class studies

both on social media (Twitter) and through established working-class academic networks (the Alliance of Working-Class Academics) to gather whether anyone in the field was aware of literature in this area. Aside from being recommended one book on the US context (Martinez et al., 20219), no literature around working-class (or social class in general) professional services and administration staff was uncovered in a UK context. This literature review therefore intended to systematically sift through the available literature across UK higher education to see whether this was an accurate reflection. It shows that there is currently a large gap in the understanding of the experiences of working-class professional services staff. As a result, it then analyses the themes relating to the studies, key findings and participants' understandings of being working-class in universities. The analysis of these themes, methods, approaches and designs are critical. The conventional approaches in studies with working-class students and academics subsequently helped to inform the design of the research and methodology.

2.3 Approach

2.3.1 Systematic review

Systematic reviews in educational and qualitative research are not yet conventional (Chalmers et al 2023). Systematic reviews have a strong tradition in the medical sciences, originally intended to quantify the results from randomised control trials to reduce research waste and the ethical implications therein. The meta-analysis as a form of systematic review was first used by Glass (1976) with systematic review used in educational research towards the end of the 20th century (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

When composing a thesis or any other publishable piece of research it is important to establish a niche and contribute to the landscape of knowledge (Webster & Watson, 2002). The only way to consider the entirety of a body of research is to ascertain the composition of all the research in that area, compiling it systematically (Chalmers et al., 2023; Booth, 2012). The best evidence for many decisions comes from a systematic review of all the evidence (Mulrow, 1994). A systematic review is defined by a specific and reproducible methodology and governed by a protocol, often registered publicly. This feature contributes to the necessity for a systematic review by helping to eliminate research bias in the selection of sources and by keeping the process accountable (Booth, 2012). PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) and PICO/PICOSS (population, intervention, comparison, outcomes) formats help to guide systematic review methodology (Page et al., 2021a). However, PICO/PICOSS centre around an intervention element which is not necessary for this review. As such, PRISMA protocol will guide this review (Page et al., 2021).

PRISMA protocol is the widely recognised 'gold standard' for guidance on reviews of this kind (Chalmers et al, 2023). There is a concern that systematic reviews in qualitative research are in danger of over-generalising and oversimplifying findings and failing to take into consideration the individual participants in rich detailed research (Boland et al., 2017). They are also limited by the information that is inputted into the search string and the filters and restrictions applied therein. Subsequently, Dickson, Cherry and Boland (2017) suggest that keeping the wider thematic questions is more appropriate for education research of qualitative nature due to the difficulty with generalising primary qualitative research as might be appropriate in a scientific review.

As such, this literature review aims to analyse the entire field of literature by theme. The focus is therefore to look at the places, spaces, people and contexts where working-class experience in Higher Education has currently been reported on and analysed in academic literature. This is appropriate for the thesis because it aims to corroborate or negate the hypothesis developed after carrying out the scoping search. This scoping search found no literature around working-class experience or identity within the networks of professional support or administrative staff. Corroborating or negating this hypothesis will allow a thematic niche to be established as a starting point for empirical research (Hammersley, 2020). This will allow meaningful research in a new and innovative thematic area to develop, contributing to knowledge and reducing the potential for 'research waste' (Glasziou & Chalmers, 2018). There is a substantive point to be made about assessing the quality of the research in this review. However, the theoretical approach of the literature review as a systematic scoping review, and the intention to map the thematic landscape do not lead this review to need to analyse the quality of the research within the search findings.

2.4 Review objectives

The objectives for the systematic review, as demonstrated by the introduction to this chapter, were to establish a broad understanding of how a working-class social identity has been made evident in the academic literature. The objectives for this thesis compliment the central research questions of the thesis by formally understanding the scope of scholarship around people from working class backgrounds in UK higher education. They also guide the central research questions by understanding what prevalent theories and methods have previously been used, for me to construct the approach that will answer the key thesis research questions. The objectives for this review were as follows:

1. What literature exists around working-class experiences in higher education?

2. What literature exists around working-class professional service and administrative employees in higher education?

3. What themes are prevalent within the literature?

4. What are the experiences of working-class people within higher education?

2.5 Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies

Publications were included if they mentioned Higher Education alongside the term 'working-class. This was explicit and publications were removed if this terminology was not used (e.g., proxies like *socio-economic status, lower socio-economic background*). These were excluded on the basis that the terms 'socio-economic status' and 'lower socio-economic background' fail to address the experiences of 'working-class' communities. Class has been explored by multiple scholars, such as Crew (2020, 2021), Skeggs (2004) and Savage et al (2016) as being a manifestation of various factors in combination, rather than a pure focus on economic status. Far from being an objective measure of economic status, class encompasses multiple competing subjective interpretations, realities and shared histories, as demonstrated in chapter three (Bentley, 2020; Crozier et al., 2008; Evans & Mellon, 2015; Johansson & Jones, 2019; Manstead, 2018; Reay, 2018b; Savage et al., 2013; Skeggs, 2004). It is the multiple facets of class which are of particular interest and therefore it is class which forms the focus of the literature search rather than solely the experience of socio-economic status and financial income. Reports which take a reductionist approach to framing class include the data produced by HESA each year. Here, HESA covers several 'socio-economic' proxies of disadvantage, namely, parental occupation, parental education, neighbourhood participation in higher education, indices of deprivation and school type. The weakness of this approach is that although it covers multiple aspects, it cannot be used to represent class, due to the composition of class identity being a manifestation of experience, social and cultural capital, culture and historical resonance (HESA 2022). Publications from 2010-2022 were included to reflect changing research since the advent of the Equality Act 2010. All topic areas were included in the protocol and not limited to Russell Group universities or issues of identity or belonging, as the review intended to ascertain the full range of studies. At this stage the country was not considered, although 'UK' contexts only were extracted after the initial search.

2.5.1 Information sources

The information sources used included Elsevier (Scopus) and ERIC. These sources were selected as two of the most comprehensive databases in education and sociology.

2.5.2 Types of studies

Studies were included if they were featured in a peer reviewed publication. This excluded all types of non-peer reviewed publication such as newspaper articles, magazine articles, thesis studies, dissertations and commentaries.

2.5.3 Types of population

Populations included in the sample are all those connected with higher education institutions, from paid employees to students and the reflections of close family members of these populations. One of the aims of this review was to understand which groups had been accounted for in terms of working-class experiences and as such this inclusion/exclusion criteria was broad and inclusive. This literature review was approached in this way to map and understand the instances where working-class professional services staff were included in UK academic research. As the initial scoping of the literature had suggested that there were no relevant papers in this area, all populations were included within this literature review in order to understand methods, themes, theory and precedent which could then inform the design of research with this new population (professional services and administrative staff).

2.5.4 Setting/context

Publications were included in this sample if they both included working-class experiences and UK Higher Education Institutions. They were included regardless of type of institution attended (e.g., Russell Group, Post-92).

2.6 Search

Details of the search strings applied can be found in the Appendix.

2.6.1 Data extraction

Of the 519 articles found through the search strategy, 386 were unique. Applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 24 were removed as excluded types of publication, six for not being in English. 135 were removed for being in the wrong context i.e., not based in UK institutions. Studies were removed from different geographical contexts (e.g., the United States). Lastly, 191 publications were excluded for the wrong topic area, e.g., not featuring working-class experiences. 30 publications were suitable for analysis.

2.6.2 PRISMA Flow Diagram

Below shows the search process and screening process for refining the sample for review. The flow diagram is produced according to PRISMA protocol (Page et al., 2021b).

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified from databases
N=519

Records removed before screening
Records removed as duplicates
n=133

Screening

Records screened
n=386

Records excluded
Type of publication n=24
Not in English n=6

Included

Records assessed for eligibility
N=356

Records excluded
Wrong context (non-UK HEI, non-UK context, not higher education) (n=135)
Wrong theme/subject (not working-class experiences) (n=191)

Studies included in review
N=30

2.7 Characteristics of the data set

2.7.1 Literature search results by year of publication

Papers in this sample dated from 2010 to 2021, with the majority (17.54%) being published in 2021. Over 50% of the sample date from after 2017. 2010 was used as a marker point due to the ratification of the Equality Act 2010, a key marker in time for issues related to equalities, personal backgrounds and equity in organisations.

Table 1: Distribution of papers by year from 2010-present

Year	% of Year
2010	7.48%
2011	9.98%
2012	4.99%
2013	7.49%
2014	9.99%
2015	7.50%
2016	2.50%
2017	10.00%
2018	7.51%
2019	7.51%
2020	7.51%
2021	17.54%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

2.7.2 Authors

Some authors are highly represented in this sample. Reay features in four different papers, Crozier in three and Bathmaker, Clayton, Waller and Ingram in two papers. This marks a limitation in the sample and a reporting bias towards those who frequently use similar keywords to describe working-class experiences in higher education. This demonstrates how, in the UK context, it is possible for a small group of academics to have a definitive impact on a study, such as informing the literature review for this study. The way in which some academics can dominate some fields and substantive research areas tells us about the politics of the production of knowledge, who produces knowledge and who is visible in research which is disseminated. This 'publication bias' refers to the concern that small networks of academics decide what knowledge is made visible and published (Joober et al., 2012; Nair, 2019).

2.7.3 Study participants

The papers within this sample look at different experiences of working-class people within higher education. Where studies took an empirical approach, these included populations of working-class people who were either students or academics. Seventeen papers in this sample (56.7%) were studies with working-class students (54.7%) or specifically mature students (2%). This finding demonstrates a key contribution to the field that this thesis is making; most of the literature which is appropriate is either about students or academics, neither of which deal with the experiences of professional services staff. In striving to

understand the experience of working-class professional services staff in UK higher education, I found that no such studies currently exist.

The approach taken with these studies differs from publication to publication. Bathmaker (2021b) observes and monitors the graduate career pathway from education to employment for graduates who had taken part in the Paired Peers Project between UWE and the University of Bristol. A longitudinal study which aimed to map the graduate outcomes of working-class and middle-class students at different institutions, the study found that class and social capital was the mitigating factor in the development and access to different graduate careers on leaving university. Social class as a key mitigating factor in life chances is an area explored by Field et al (2013) with participants in Scotland. Other nuances are visible in the student participants within this sample. Wong et al (2019) look only at final year working-class students at a post-92 university and earlier (2018) at final year working-class students who were deemed to be 'high achieving'. Preece (2015) works with a cohort of working-class students at a post-92 university who are enrolled in an academic writing course (Preece, 2015). Crozier et al (2019b) specify their study concerns BAME and white students. Some studies made a distinction based on subject-orientation of different student cohorts; Devas et al (2011) focus only on media students; Gaston et al (2020) only on social science students and English (2012) only on male software design students. The final distinctions between student cohorts were made by Reay et al (2010) who looked only at four anonymised universities and Finnegan et al (2017) who completed a comparative study between working-class student experiences in England and Ireland specifically. All other studies observed working-class students who were not specifically considered to be mature students, without additional inclusion criteria. With regards to mature working-class students, studies were conducted with learners over-50 in Scotland (McAllister, 2010) and mature working-class students at post-92 institutions (Burnell, 2015). There is a high degree of nuance among the populations of academics and students, which is represented in this literature review. Yet again, this demonstrates how working-class professional services staff have not thus far been considered by academic literature, creating and further establishing the niche within which this thesis sits. Far fewer studies were conducted with working-class academics; four papers worked with academics to look at their experiences and of these four papers they all conducted research with women. These papers did not include the experiences of working-class male academics. These looked specifically at the experiences of white working-class female academics (Hoskins, 2010) working-class female academics in their 40s (Rogers, 2017) working-class female lecturers (Rickett & Morris, 2021) and working-class female academics in general (Wilson et al., 2021). Lastly, one paper looked at the experiences of working-class parents in relation to their children's experiences of Higher Education, which appears to be a unique

approach (Khambhaita, 2014). Specifically, this paper sought to understand the perspectives of Indian mothers in the UK (Khambhaita, 2014). This demonstrates the nature of the current academic literature of working-class experience in the UK as being predominantly concerned with students, it is less concerned with the social class identity of staff in higher education; although academics have begun to be included in research, professional services staff are completely absent.

The studies in this sample use a range of theories, approaches and methods in order to understand the experiences of working-class students and academics in higher education. Qualitative approaches, using interviews and focus groups formed the predominant method used within this research sample, with 24 (80%) of the sample using interviews in some way. This is interesting when connected with the wider body of education research in the UK. The BERA (2023) 'State of the discipline' report outlined that 86.2% of researchers in education typically used interviewing as a method (Morris et al., 2023). Four papers are 'theoretical or conceptual', one uses existing study data, and one mentions 'qualitative methods' without a degree of specificity. In terms of methodology, some papers in this selection used a solely qualitative approach, selecting interview participants through convenience or snowball sampling and only conducting interviews. Those that used interviews as the sole method included Bathmaker (2021), Crozier et al (2011), Thiele et al (2017), Finnegan et al (2017), Field et al (2013), Reay et al (2018), Wong et al (2019), Khambhaita et al (2014), McAllister (2010), Rickett et al (2021), Burnell (2015), Rogers (2017), Hoskins (2010).

Other approaches included mixed method designs where participants were surveyed during a questionnaire and then later, some interviews also took place (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2010) Reay (2021) combines the survey and interview also with focus groups, Preece (2015) uses observations in conjunction with interviews and English (2012) uses interviews, discussion and feedback as a methodological framework. Other papers in this sample used no empirical methods, opting instead for a theoretical contribution. This is important for the broader thesis as it suggests that there is a methodological convention to approaching working-class studies which should form an approach to researching the experiences of working-class professional services staff.

There is some interesting difference between how interviews are named in these papers. In some instances, a qualitative research interview is labelled as being 'unstructured' whilst some other practices involve 'in-depth interviews' (Hoskins, 2010; Reay, 2018; Wong, 2018), 'biographical interviews' (Merrill 2020; Finnegan et al., 2017), 'deep biographical interviews' (Bathmaker, 2021b), 'group interviews' (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013), 'unstructured interviews'

(Rogers, 2017) and 'semi-structured' interviews (Bathmaker, 2021; Khambhaita, 2014; McAllister, 2010; Wong & Chiu, 2019). Few methodological approaches include tools like narrative inquiry, which might seem a fitting approach for allowing working-class participants to contextualise their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). There is an opportunity therefore to fill the void of understanding with regards to professional services staff by employing experience-elucidating methods such as narrative inquiry with the understudied professional services staff in universities, as this thesis successfully does.

This literature review has found no studies concerned with the experiences of working-class professional services and administration staff in UK HE. This review has established and demonstrated a critical niche which it is vital to address. The subsequent methodological approach is informed by the methods and approaches which have been used in parallel studies with working-class students and academics, as demonstrated here. A further expansion on these methods and the theoretical approach is available in chapters three and four.

2.7.4 Theoretical approaches

A high proportion of the studies in this sample name Bourdieu and specifically Bourdieu's concept of habitus and field as critical theories. In 16 of the studies there are references to Bourdieu, habitus, field and the theory of practice. In some cases, Bourdieusian theory is discussed alongside other theoretical approaches. Finnegan et al (2017) reference both Bourdieu and Alheit & Dausien on 'biographicity' to situate the experiences of the individuals in their study in the broader context of their deeper historical past and the simultaneous effect this had had on their interpretation of their own experiences as working-class students. Similarly, the dramaturgical theory of Goffman is used in conjunction with Bourdieu's Theory of Practice by Gaston et al (2020) exploration of student experiences around the Cambridge University supervision system. Foucauldian post-structuralism is the central thesis of Preece's (2015) observations of student interaction with language, dialect and linguistic patterns. Other theories utilised by studies in this sample include Bernstein's Pedagogic Device (Crozier & Reay, 2011), Phenomenology (Thiele et al., 2017) Social Constructivism and Constructivist theories of learning (Findsen et al., 2011; Wong & Chiu, 2019) and Critical Education Gerontology (McAllister, 2010).

The use of Bourdieu as a theoretical underpinning for work on class is widespread beyond the results of this systematic search and habitus, field and 'belonging' are features within other literature. Crew (2020;2021) focuses on Bourdieusian theory in her understanding of experiences with working-class academics, as the central theoretical underpinning of her

approach and subsequent focus on 'examining impostor syndrome, alienation and microaggressions: all common to the working-class experience of academia' (Crew, 2020, 2021). Similarly, Bentley (2020) employs a Bourdieusian theoretical framework in her analysis of working-class women in academia and sees the role of cultural capital as central to the movement between and among academics within universities. The seeming precedent for Bourdieusian theory in this field of study is not surprising given the nature of Bourdieusian theory as closely connected to hierarchies, class structures, characteristics of class and a sense of belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Thatcher et al., 2015). However, the preference for Bourdieusian theory as demonstrated within this literature sample leads to some potential limitations in the way that stories and narratives are collected and analysed. Using a Bourdieusian theoretical framework to identify class-based narratives focuses on ideas of belonging, cultural capital, economic capital and social capital whilst potentially ignoring the conceptualisation of theories like social capital from other perspectives. 'Capital' has been interpreted differently by different theorists, with Putnam looking at a model which is based on clubs, groups memberships and socialisation rather than hierarchies predominated by economic status (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Garrett, 2020). Slightly ironically, this suggests there is a doxa around using Bourdieu to understand class to the exclusion of other theoretical positions, due to the dominance of Bourdieusian theory. There is a concomitant desire to develop research from a particular sphere of theoretical capital in order to navigate this space in educational research. In turn, creating various taxonomies of class in academic work, reproducing the categories of difference for participants which are supposed to be the centre of academic critique. I will return to Bourdieu in chapter four, looking at the various facets of Bourdieusian theory and how they are relevant within this thesis.

2.8 Defining working-class participants for research purposes

A key finding of this systematic review is the diverse way in which working-class participants have been identified for the purposes of research. Understanding class and defining class is a difficult task which often features class being synonymised alongside 'socio-economic status' and 'social mobility'. These terms rely on reporting of economic capital held, the term 'working-class' determines an experiential identity extending beyond economic status (Skeggs, 2004). This connected to Bourdieu's theorisation of disposition; understanding class status is to understand also that class is the manifestation of different threads, woven together (Bourdieu, 1984). These include dispositions of taste, preferences towards certain cultural pursuits (e.g., hobbies like skiing in the UK), preferences towards music and the shared understanding of personal narrative (Bourdieu, 1984). As such, an individual may consider themselves working-class in origin and essence yet be classified literally based on economic

capital as being connected to a different class status. The theme of class identification is prevalent within political literature; organisations aiming to identify those with the least privileged in society have often asked different questions in order to ascertain who belongs to this group. The Social Mobility Commission recommends four questions; asking about parental occupation, asking about state school attendance, asking whether students received free school meals or asking whether parents had gone to University (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). There are inherent issues with these kinds of questions; the best performing state schools often drive up the housing market in the immediate vicinity which in turn prioritises access for parents with mobile economic capital. The question about free school meals is not widely applicable outside of the UK, as internationally this does not serve as a marker for deprivation in other contexts (*The Guardian*, 2005). Increasing access to university places over the last 20 years will mean that over the course of the passage of time, this question will decrease in relevance as the pool of university alumni grows (Thane, 2010).

In terms of contextualised admissions for university entry, the National Office for Students currently advocates the use of POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) and TUNDRA (Tracking Under Representation by Area). POLAR is the classification of groups by geographical location in the UK. It uses data to examine how likely students in that area are to attend University, classifying local areas into five groups. POLAR4 uses 'Middle Layer Super Output Areas' to assess how likely students are in local areas to go to university, dividing the number of young people who attend higher educational institutions by the young population of the area (Office for Students, 2022). POLAR tracks cohorts of students rather than individuals, not accounting for school attended. TUNDRA assesses data from cohorts of pupils who undertook their GCSEs from 2012-2016, linking these cohorts to data on admissions to higher education records from 2014/2015-2019/2020. TUNDRA differs from POLAR in one fundamental way. Instead of homogenising the student population by school type, TUNDRA assesses the participation rate based on cohorts of state-funded mainstream school pupils. This participation number is then divided by the number of Key Stage Four pupils in the area (Office for Students, 2022). This type of identification may therefore not be useful in discerning working-class adults for participation in this study.

Both measures assess socio-economic deprivation for use within admissions processes. These approaches have been criticised heavily by Boliver et al (2022) who demonstrate that both TUNDRA and POLAR yield a high rate of false positives in practice; identifying students for the contextual admissions process who were not from a lower socio-economic background (Gorard et al., 2019). Boliver et al (2022) advocate instead for the development of new kinds of metrics in assessing socio-economic status such as 'verified individual-level measures of

socioeconomic disadvantage' if the ambition to equalise access to higher education within a generation is to be achieved. These kinds of markers can't and shouldn't apply to professional services staff in the same way; often, professional services staff have had life experiences which further distort the relationship between habitus and the field of the university, due to the individual interactions with other fields in the time between being a child and being a working professional. This might be one explanation as to why studies with working-class professional services staff currently do not exist; a working-class identity in this context, has no tangible measurement.

Yet, markers of 'class' in recruitment and admissions look fundamentally at socio-economic class as connected to socio-economic status and economic capital, rather than addressing the additional complexities of class identity. This broader inconsistency with the way social class is monitored, assessed and used in admissions processes reflected in the findings of this literature review. The studies in this review identified participants from working-class backgrounds in different and divergent ways. Self-identification is used with 12 working-class female academics by Rickett et al (2021) with the specific intention of capturing the essence of the experience of working-class identity. They argue that social class must be disentangled from standard measures like socioeconomic status, as social class 'represents a complex interplay of a person's life experiences, family backgrounds, the social networks they are a part of, their language and speech style, lifestyle, mode of appearance and so on' (Rickett et al., 2021:92).

Further, Rubin et al (2014) describe the contemporary measurement of class as fundamentally missing the concept of self-identification. Whilst this paper is a theoretical and conceptual contribution, there is a distinct emphasis on developing a framework in sociological research which enables participants to self-identify. The subjective self-definition of class status, in conjunction with SES measurements is identified to clarify and refine the embodiment of class by potential participants. Self-identification is used differently by Field et al (2013); although they use self-identification the study included participants from a range of social class backgrounds. As such, whilst there was no objective measure of socio-economic status used to define participants' class identities, the participants were asked to describe their class background to the interviewer during the period of data collection.

This approach is different from the approaches where participants are asked to self-define as a selection criterion. Self-definition as a selection criterion assumes that there is a certain level of shared understanding about class position and experience, without clarifying or measuring what is understood by class among different participants. As Beckwith (2003) and Evans et al

(2015) note, class identity is not only experienced by individuals but is also formed from a collective understanding, a group identity. Field et al (2013), instead ask participants to describe their class status. Participants in this study describe their class position in relation to family background and family history, the jobs their parents did, qualifications their parents attained, work ethic, aspiration, language and speech, and their class position in relation to those around them (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013). One student describes their own class position in opposition to someone they see as being of a middle-class identity due to their ability to 'go on holiday to Italy' with an apparent ease (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013). Parental and familial background are indicators of class in publications that are outside of the results of this systematic search. In 2021, Friedman et al found that participants who objectively occupied a middle-class economic position frequently described their origins as working-class, in alignment with what they saw as their family history and wider narrative. In this paper, they assert that individuals occupy a false sense of belonging to a working-class identity as a result of their parents or grandparents' level of deprivation, education of social standing. This, they assert, is a false representation of identity among their participants. Friedman et al (2021) find that this reliance on historical narrative can enable individuals to occupy a space which is inaccurate, potentially leading to the misrepresentation of the working-class and working-class experiences. They advise that care is taken in studies that require participants to self-identify and recommend the use of objective indicators. This warning has substantially informed the eventual selection of participants for the empirical part of this thesis and some attempt has been made to mitigate inconsistencies through asking participants to address their self-identification using a narrative approach at the start of each interview.

As discussed, the nature of a working-class professional services identity falls outside of the remit of much of the indicators that are used to identify student participants for parallel studies. As shown in chapter four, self-identification is the method by which participants in this thesis were selected. This further resonates with the findings on class identity in chapter seven; class identity is far from clear cut and includes the manifestation of historical realities, cultural norms. It does not exist with the polarity of habitus, doxa and field which is sometimes proliferated by the studies in this literature review, and more broadly by Bourdieusian theory.

Some of the studies in this literature review use one, or more indicators of deprivation and social class as recommended by the Social Mobility Commission (2021). As previously referenced, these include: the participants receipt of free school meals, attendance at a state school, parental occupation and parental qualifications (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). In the sample for this review, the concept of being 'first generation' has been used to identify participants for several studies. The concept of 'first generation' students refer to the student

being the first in their family to attend University. Byrom et al (2013) used this as the sole inclusion criteria for working-class participants, however other studies used it in combination with other factors. Bathmaker et al (2021) use parental education status alongside parental occupation, type of school; area of low or high HE participation; receipt of financial grant support; self-identification to determine working-class status.

Parental occupation is a determining factor of working-class status in Reay et al (2021b) parental occupation is combined with 'social and cultural capital'. Further, one study picks up the SMC's identification processes by determining working-class status through receipt of Free School Meals alongside receipt of Pupil Premium payments (Thiele et al., 2017). Other financial indicators were also used to determine class status. A National Statistics classification NS-SEC 4-7 determined working-class students for Crozier et al (2011) with the same classification protocol used, but for categories 7-14 by Reay et al (2010). Wong et al (2019) determined 'low-income household' as an inclusion criterion for working-class participants, whilst English (2012) used receipt of EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance) and Findsen et al (2011) used the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Income is also assessed in the case of Indian mothers in a subjective process by the researcher (Khambhaita, 2014). In several instances multiple indicators were used alongside one another. Bathmaker (2021a; 2021b) and Reay (2021) both use multiple factors connected to parents (occupation, economic capital, education, cultural capital) where Devas et al (2011:817) uses an extensive set of criteria of:

> *Parental ownership or rental of home, parental occupations, parents' newspaper reading habits, students' previous qualifications, student's term time working patterns, information supplied by the student at interview, personal knowledge of the students.*

Hoskins et al (2010) worked with multiple participants from different backgrounds, allowing them to self-define. During this process she noted similarities and differences in the way that working-class and middle-class students presented their class status:

> *They all reported somewhat differing family values, forms of education provision, employment opportunities and class cultural norms, of what it means and has meant to them to be working-class. They all reported different degrees of parental involvement in their education progression; some parents were encouraging and knowledgeable, others relied on the school and the teachers. Yet there were similarities in their constructions of being working-class, most notably, their*

experiences of social mobility as they all were the first in their families to participate in, HE.

Other studies did not specifically outline the method by which class was determined during their study. This is a limitation which we will return to later in the chapter.

An understanding of class which is not ubiquitous among all studies is an interesting finding for several reasons. Whilst class is undoubtedly a difficult concept to measure, as an amalgamation of experiences, cultural norms, economic status, conventions, beliefs and dispositions, there is currently no precedent within the literature to suggest that there is one preferential way in which to measure class for studies with working-class participants. Where some studies which focus on economic indicators like free school meals, pupil premium payments, parental occupations and family economic capital, these studies adhere to a model of class interpretation which is focused fundamentally on economic situation. Other measurements of participant class backgrounds weave into this narrative a sense of other class attributes; self-identification largely captures 'feeling, tradition and convention' yet, as we have discovered, comes with multiple caveats and inconsistencies. Understanding cultural capital and cultural markers in Bourdieu's notion of dispositions of taste is referenced in inclusion criteria which look specifically at cultural capital, family education history, self-education history and references to extra-curricular activities (Bourdieu, 1984).

This systematic review has found that there is no ubiquitous approach to identifying participants from working-class backgrounds, although some preference for self-identification has evolved more recently (Crew, 2020b; Friedman et al., 2021; Rickett & Morris, 2021) it is difficult to know how to evaluate studies around working-class experiences, when the measure of being working-class is so divergent and open to interpretation. This has implications for this thesis and has informed the methodological approach; participants are asked to self-identify in order to explore the nuances that prescribed definitions might be likely to miss. It also asks a deeper, epistemic question over how class is conceptualised between and among people. Where participants were asked to identify themselves or were identified, different markers of class were used. As such, the understanding of what constitutes class not only differs between studies but differs between people, leaving a large amount open to interpretation and query. Understanding the relationship between class and self poses this epistemic question relating to identity, lived reality and performativity which are addressed in the findings in chapter seven. It is also questionable to what degree the method itself has classed implications and is classed in itself. Missing so many of the studies which I point out later in this chapter might imply that

there inherently classed connotations to the use of systematic review as a literature review method.

This section has looked at how studies within the systematic sample evaluate working-class status with their participants. It has found not only that studies require different criteria for participation but that there are differences between the way participants refer to themselves. In both scenarios, different key indicators and markers are used to determine class in different contexts. This disparity between the measurement of class has significant implications for the thesis research in this study and informs the method of participant selection. Self-identification was therefore chosen, as is explored in chapter four, to explore the potential nuances which exist between understandings of social class, and to fully understand the facets of being working-class as a perceived identity. This eventually resonated with the central thesis findings, as can be observed in chapter seven. Here, the various markers of a working-class identity are explored, finding that there is variation of assimilation between habitus and field which is dependent on environment and context (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In the next section, the main themes cross cutting the studies in this review will be discussed. I identify those with close resonance to my own data, which are taken forward into the analysis.

2.9 Themes

2.9.1 Belonging and feeling like 'a fish out of water'.

Throughout the body of literature around working-class experiences in higher education, the concept of belonging is a central and noticeable theme. 'Belonging' is a phenomenon that is attributed to Bourdieu, and the dislocation between habitus and field that he referred to as 'being a fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). 'Being a fish out of water' understands that different spaces occupy different sets of social and cultural 'rules' which either align closely, or do not, with the internal set of social and cultural 'rules and expectations that individuals themselves have, as a manifestation of their primary origin and subsequent experiences (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Warner et al., 1985). There are distinct markers that individuals identify as being culturally symbolic of their habitus (Donnelly, 2015).

First, accent and language are a critical consideration in the space of Higher Education for both working-class academics and working-class students. Universities as institutions occupy traditionally middle-upper class habits, which often is higher, or lower, up the hierarchy of taste depending on university tier. As such, there are specific accents and ways of constructing language which are typical within these spaces. Received pronunciation is often identified as

the dominant style of speech in universities (Kaufman, 2003). Explicit 'othering' is associated with accent, working-class students experience others 'mocking' their accents, and a need to adopt a 'middle-class accent' which can help them to move more seamlessly through university (Crozier et al., 2019a).

Working-class academics have indicated how a certain accent can identify them as being from a different background to others in Higher Education (Crew, 2021a; Wilson et al., 2021b). Accents are often associated with different geographical communities within the UK, with some accents being typically marked as 'working-class. Academics with these kinds of accents often describe how they deal with common misconceptions about their abilities, title and responsibilities within Universities as a result of having these kinds of accents. One participant in Rogers (2017) study of female academics talks about 'confound[ing] people's expectations of me'. Accent is a feature of working-class experience and culture beyond academia. Recently, the Sutton Trust (2022) published their report 'Speaking Up' which focussed on the existence and experience of people with different accents in professional occupations. The report found that 30% of university students, 29% of university applicants and 25% of professionals reported being mocked for their accent, criticised or singled out in educational settings (Sutton Trust, 2022:4). This report emphasised a north-south divide in the UK, finding that 29% of university applicants from the North were concerned about how their accent would impede their ability to succeed compared to 10% of those from the South (excluding London) (Sutton Trust, 2022). For those already at university, worries connecting accent to success was over 41% for those from the North, compared again to far few (19%) from the South (Sutton Trust, 2022:23).

Accents from traditionally working-class towns and cities like Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool tend to rank the lowest in terms of perception around prestige (Sutton Trust, 2022). This notable accent bias is connected to restrictions around social mobility, progress, employment and success both within university settings but also within wider professional networks (Sutton Trust, 2022). Whilst none of these studies deal with professional services experiences, these themes are important to the focus of this thesis more broadly because they reflect the treatment of working-class people in parallel areas. Due to the area being completely under researched, the findings of this literature review are used, as is demonstrated in chapter four and later in the appendix, to help form the interview schedule for the data collection phase.

Within academia, dispositions of taste also prioritise particular 'ways of knowing' (Kaufman, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984). This is manifested through the ways in which it is deemed appropriate

to articulate ideals through verbal and written communication and academic language. Differences in language are made stark in instances where individuals come into academia with different styles of communication and use of language, which are related to their previous environment or habitus. The adoption and utilisation of academic language in academic writing has been described as a difficult process where the dislocation between communication styles is most pronounced. Preece et al (2015) use observational research and ethnography to analyse the learning journeys of students taking part in an academic language course. Specifically, these students come from environments in London where they are used to communicating in a particular way. For them, the use of slang and what is termed 'London English' is synonymous with their local communities before attending university (Preece, 2015). The research makes clear that there are difficulties between students trying to 'sound posh' through academic writing whilst still maintaining strong communication with their peers and community networks (Preece, 2015). Language and communication are inherently connected with social hierarchies, dispositions of taste and relationships between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984). The understanding of language rules and communication as being classed is something which is an important consideration for the participants in this thesis. As is shown in chapter seven, some participants explained their inability to communicate with others in their institutions due to the convoluted language, deferential patterns of language and references used (such as references to classical mythology).

There is a disparity between students fitting in socially and fitting in academically (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020). Often, students who felt like they had the right academic qualifications and approaches to learning to be in 'elite' universities also felt the disjuncture between this academic prowess and a failure to fit in socially (Mellor et al., 2014). This factor is more pronounced in the top tiers of Higher Education in the UK, and particularly in instances where students have a higher proportion of contact time with lecturers and other students on their course. Oxbridge has additional supervision sessions for small groups of students (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020). In these instances, Gaston et al (2020) described how students feel the need and ability to show their academic flair and ability to communicate with their peers using the intelligence that helped them to gain entry to the institution. However, there are sometimes subtle cultural markers which show how this intellectual prowess is fractured by a sense of not fitting in socially. Middle-class students and academics understand the 'rules of the game' when it comes to higher education (Donnelly, 2015; Exley, 2019; Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020; Kaufman, 2003; Mellor et al., 2014). From the perspective of working-class students and academics this often looks like an effortless, seamless process where they understand how to access a university education, how to speak with confidence and how to relay ideas in group settings (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020; Tholen & Brown, 2017). Later, in chapters six and seven

I find that these 'soft skills' are things which working-class professional services staff in this study do not feel that they possess but understand to be important in promotion and progression criteria.

Accessing education, the process of applying and entering a university is understood as being easy for middle-class students, particularly in scenarios where others in their family have also attended university (Devas, 2011). In the case of the students' studied by Gaston et al (2019), some participants remarked how they were often criticised in reports for not being able to articulate themselves appropriately, directly emphasising the dislocation between their knowledge and their understanding of modes of communication in this new habitus. The communication of knowledge, therefore, is not only dependent in this study on the content of what is being said, but the way in which that content is relayed (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020). In some instances, this inability to contribute in the 'correct' style of communication for the environment led to participants being unable to contribute completely, withdrawing from further interaction. This withdrawal from participation complemented a compounded sense of not belonging in the space, despite the understanding that the students had met the entry requirements and intellectual challenges to access it (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020). This review has spoken about identities and facets of identity at length thus far. The concept of a fractured identity regarding learning is something which manifests itself particularly in spaces where students from working-class backgrounds attend Russell Group universities (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020). Reay (2020) refers to this as fractured learner identities. This is a symbolic representation of how those who perceive their own ability to be high through access in admissions processes, entrance exams and an aptitude towards studying are met with a cultural blockade which prevents this aptitude from being able to flourish whilst at university. This cultural blockade, the style, mannerisms, language, speech patterns and 'ways of knowing' acts the vehicle through which intellectual aptitude can be realised, particularly in 'elite' institutions (Bourdieu, 1984). Interestingly, I find parallels between the concept of fractured identities and the findings in this thesis. Often, participants explained the need to be seen as being intelligent through indicating their level of qualification in their email signatures. This was an active response used by participants in this thesis, to try to mitigate against the biases they believed would be construed about them due to their use of language, accent, presentation or their preferences (Bourdieu, 1984).

The idea of a dissonance between ability and perception reinforces the Bourdeisuain idea that dispositions of taste and cultural preferences are inherently tied into the hierarchical nature of social structures, rendering the content (knowledge) unusable as it could not be unlocked through the vehicle of appropriate discourse (Atkinson, 2011; Bourdieu, 1985). This cultural

barrier challenges the rhetoric of meritocracy, 'pulling yourself up by the bootstraps' and 'hard work' (Exley, 2019). Earlier in this thesis, the concept of meritocracy was considered at length. Meritocracy is a political tool which is particularly visible in right-leaning political narratives (and a feature of New Labour c.1994). The concept that anyone could achieve anything, be what they wanted to be and have the career and success they desired no matter where they have come from was a particularly pertinent narrative of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016). In 2012 (then Prime Minister) Cameron's reference to being the leader of an 'aspiration nation' showed that meritocracy was still a very prominent feature of conservative party politics and attitude towards the working-classes (Exley, 2019; Jones, 2012; Wintour, 2012).

The studies in this literature review have challenged the concept of meritocracy in its application to university admissions and working-class students. Students working to attend Cambridge University in Gaston et al (2020) are met with the challenge of communication, norms and values and preferences cultural behaviours (Kaufman, 2003; Mellor et al., 2014). Bathmaker et al (2021) also demonstrate through the Paired Peers Project that graduate outcomes for university students from poorer, working-class backgrounds were typically far less prestigious and profitable than their middle- and upper-class counterparts, even where students from working-class background out-performed their colleagues in degree classification and the status of the university they attended (Bathmaker, 2021a; Bathmaker et al., 2013a; Tholen & Brown, 2017; Waller, n.d.). Regarding the professional services staff who feature in their own words in chapter seven, this materialises through promotion and progression practices within institutions. Here, they described the feeling of the unknown when it came to how to get promoted and the need to have 'soft' management skills, the kind of which are taught at fee-paying schools.

The concept of belonging manifests itself in different ways between groups of staff and groups of students. Dispositions of taste and cultural pursuits are evident in the narratives that working-class students in particular experience on arriving at university. Often, students mention things like holidays, being able to afford to go on holiday and the type of holidays that are experienced (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Ingram & Bradley, 2012). Experiences in social settings where 'everyone is talking about skiing and going to Asia' mark out a dislocation between habitus and field (English, 2012:326). Skiing is referenced as a cultural marker of class, an exotic hobby (Bathmaker, 2021a). This is arguably unique to the UK, as skiing is reserved largely for those that can holiday abroad and can spend a significant amount of money on lessons and equipment. The concept of holidaying abroad is something that marks out individuals from more affluent families, heightening a sense of loneliness and 'othering'

(English, 2012). Physical items and material goods have been identified as being markers of social class and identification of belonging to the dominant class within student groups (Bathmaker et al., 2013b; Thiele et al., 2017). Not having the right 'things' like 'phones, clothes and TV channels' are highly symbolic as physical indicators of belonging to students in university environments (Thiele et al., 2017:56). Concealing things that make them stand out to others in a social setting is a recurrent theme in the literature around working-class students, with instances of hiding the need for payment support, working outside of classes and details about their personal background (Thiele et al., 2017). Material possessions can signify class and create boundaries to membership which working-class people are unable to overcome. This, I explore at length in chapter seven where material goods and access to technology feature as having been critical in participants' understanding of their social class status from childhood.

Whilst working-class academics highlight the concerns and importance of accent in belonging, studies involving working-class academics have highlighted other, arguably more subtle indications of class and feeling 'outside'. Feeling a sense of belonging has been illustrated by social connections and social ties within the academy (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020b; Johansson & Jones, 2019). Often, academics cite the kinds of social groups they feel at ease connecting with whilst at work (Crew, 2020b). In some instances, this revolves around finding other working-class academics and befriending them, although this seems to be a longer process inhibited by the 'code switching' that working-class academics operate in order to fit in. working-class academics seek each other out, forming valuable relationships (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013).

In many cases, academics cite feeling more at ease communicating with support staff rather than other academics, due to a sense of personal shared narrative and understanding (Crew, 2021b; Rickett & Morris, 2021). Reay et al (2010) discuss the idea of being like a 'fish out of water' differently than in other papers in the sample. Instead, they look at the mismatch between institutional habitus and class whilst they also address learners' identities (Reay et al., 2010b). There is less emphasis in this paper on the markers indicated in previous sections and the study focuses far less on elements of cultural capital like holidays, hobbies and extracurricular activities. In this context, learner's identities refer to the way in which student learners present themselves and narrate their own experiences throughout higher education. These learner identities are affected directly by interactions between working-class students and students from different social classes, encouraging working-class students to doubt their abilities, tenacity and deference for speaking on academic issues in group settings (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Reay, 2018b, 2021b). These different factors are compounded even further by

professional services staff who often must contend with the power dynamics of their position in higher education in comparison to their academic counterparts. Such power dynamics are made evident in chapter seven, where I explore how participants have been spoken to, often disparagingly, by their colleagues in UK institutions. This power imbalance and the manifestation of these power dynamics often leads to similar issues; doubting ability, being unable to speak in group settings and feeling undervalued and underappreciated.

2.9.2 Feeling 'in between'

In the previous section, areas which act as markers of dislocation between working-class and middle-class culture helped us to emphasise the concept of belonging and how students and academics from working-class backgrounds often struggle to belong in university settings. In some cases, assimilation or the adoption of cultural taste proves enabling for working-class people to move more effortlessly through university spaces. In the opening section, this was discussed with regards to class; that in adopting a more middle-class accent that individuals were able to assimilate. However, these indicators of class are surface level, performative elements. Alongside this performativity and 'code-switching', working-class individuals in middle-class spaces explain the continual dislocation between their present environment and their environment of origin. The theme of feeling 'in between' is found within studies which were generated by the systematic search, but also in other sources. Clancy described this as being features of the 'muddle class', those that grew up enjoying cultural indicators of working-class experience but who are now in middle-class spaces (Alliance of Working-Class Academics, 2022). This is often characterised in the literature as a sense of existing in a space somewhere in between origin and present circumstance.

For working-class students, feeling 'in between' can have a direct impact on their learning, learning outcomes and desire to stay at university. Crozier, Reay and Clayton (2010) have extensively studied the effect of belonging and feeling 'in between' for students from working-class backgrounds. working-class students are more likely to go to universities which are closer to their home, in order to save money on things like rent and moving out of the family home (Reay et al., 2009). Reay et al (2010c) found that keeping this tie to their parental home proved to be difficult in terms of integrating into the student's new environments. Bonds between students were observed as being formed from the excitement of moving away, partying and living together, and it was identified that some of the working-class students in their study found it more difficult to form deeper relationships with their new peers as a result of commuting into University (Reay et al., 2010c). Similarly, this review has already identified that styles of language, formation of speech and ways of knowing are integral to how students feel they are able to fit into their new environment. These themes are relevant to the findings

of the data collection phase in this thesis; often professional services staff also mention the way that they speak, the language that they use and the references they employ as being different from the dominant language and references that are used by other people from different social class backgrounds.

Alongside relationships with the new habitus of the university, the sense of being 'in between' also manifests in relationships with family, personal background and friends (Reay et al., 2009, 2010c). One of the pervasive themes among research with working-class participants is how the feeling of 'being in between' is displayed through relationships with those who remain in the field the participant previously belonged to (Crew, 2020b; Hoskins, 2010; Johansson & Jones, 2019). Here, several elements are signalled out as being problematic. Studies such as the 2022 Sutton Trust report 'Speaking Up' and Reay et al (2013) have indicated that whilst accent can be used as a form of currency with which to broker new relationships, changes to accent as a result of moving away from home can also serve as clear indicators that the participant no longer 'fits' into their previous environment. Further, mannerisms and style of dress have similarly been identified as cultural currency, showing a strong dislocation between origin and a new destination (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay, 2017b; Reay et al., 2010c). Moreover, knowledge, attitudes towards knowledge and impressions of a university education also are themes which are revealed by participants in the studies in this review. working-class students have referred to their friends and family thinking they had 'gotten above themselves', thought they were 'too good' for their home environment and were now outsiders to their hometown and local spaces (Reay et al., 2001; 2009; 2010a). There is the sense within other academic literature that class position is dynamic and changing (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013; Reay et al., 2010c). This is in response to Bourdieu's own claim that class is entrenched within societal structures and therefore not open to fluidity (Bourdieu, 1984; Warner et al., 1985). The changing nature of position is related to habitus and field, and performance within the field over time. Whilst this is not something which is stark within this literature sample, it is worth bearing in mind that the response to the challenge of 'being in-between' is the suggestion that class boundaries and experiences change during a lifetime, if the process of social mobility is enabled and able to come to fruition.

The feeling of being 'in between' spaces is disconcerting as uncomfortable for many working-class participants, represented throughout the studies in this literature review. Participants in various studies navigate an epistemological battle around identity, trying to understand how and where they belong, what their learner identity and whether what they know to be true about the world they inhabit is verified by those around them (Crozier et al., 2019b). This challenge of identity is deeper than the representation of clothing, accent or cultural belonging

to certain musical tastes or hobbies. It is a challenge of between-ness and a struggle to find relationality to the challenges working-class academics and working-class students face as 'fish out of water'. The concept of being in-between is something which I return to as a central theme in chapter seven, where the findings indicate that a middle space also exists for professional services staff who are neither able to exist in their home environment or within their new professional setting.

The phenomenon of being 'in-between' is fostered by organisational cultures which do not institute psychological safety to create environments which are inclusive to people from different, marginalised class backgrounds. Psychological safety is a term used to describe circumstances at work that enable an employee to be themselves, to ask questions about their work and experiences, and to make a valuable contribution (Edmondson, 1999). An organisation or team can be psychologically safe if it enables an employee to feel like they have a valued and worthwhile perspective, giving them the opportunity to fail and to constructively learn from these failures (Edmondson, 1999). The psychologically safe environment is an interconnected and interdependent set of cultural norms, values and circumstances enabling employees to be their 'full selves' (Edmondson, 1999; Nurmi & Koroma, 2020). Understanding the rules of engagement is important in developing well and highly functioning teams (Edmondson, 1999; Graen et al., 2020; Lechner & Tobias Mortlock, 2021; Siad & Rabi, 2021).

2.9.3 Narratives of hard work and luck

In the introduction to this thesis, the concepts of 'hard work' and 'luck' and how they intersect with meritocracy were discussed. The idea of hard work and luck is something which is also central to the themes that run through the literature in this review. There is dominance of the narratives of 'hard work' and 'luck' within literature around working-class experiences in higher education. On multiple occasions, the literature in this sample refers to students feeling 'lucky' 'working hard' and being grateful to be in their institution or studying within their university. At times, students in particular note that they deserve to be where they are due to their work ethic but there is also an underlying sentiment that many feel they have been lucky to achieve the successes that they hold. This narrative is emulated in sources outside of this systematic search. In *The Myth of Meritocracy*, Frank discusses how the narratives of hard work and luck feed into a wider framework of meritocracy (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016). Rather than understanding society as realms of inequalities and circles of deprivation or privilege, the *Myth of Meritocracy* can be useful as a political tool to explain why some people are more disadvantaged or impoverished than others (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016). The conversation around hard work and luck in the University sector determines that positions

within universities are occupied by the hardest working and that those from deprived backgrounds need only to combine talent with hard work in order to succeed. However, as Bathmaker et al (2013; 2016) found, students with the best outcomes were not those who had worked particularly hard to achieve first class degrees from well-regarded Universities (Bristol) but those who had come from socially and economically advantageous backgrounds by comparison (Friedman et al, 2016). This thesis expands on this, applying a critical analysis of the discourse between 'hard work' and 'luck' in this new, under-researched context.

2.10 Limitations to this review

2.10.1 Precedence for using Bourdieusian theory

As previously outlined, 50% of studies in this sample explicitly used Bourdieusian theory as part of their theoretical framework. This presents a key limitation. Bourdieusian theory, particularly habitus, field and feeling like a 'fish out of water' rely on a central tenant and understanding of society as constructed and formed through the precedence and maintenance of economic capital, and how this economic capital inhibits or promotes a hierarchical system. In its origins, the theoretical nature of this work looks at French society rather than the integrated and often uniquely different conceptualisation of class in the United Kingdom. It is important to be aware of how these approaches may inform how working-class experiences are conceptualised, bringing some elements to the foreground, while inhibiting other issues (Biesta, 2020). I return to this critique later in chapter three.

2.10.2 Lack of uniformity in the approach to selecting working-class participants

One of the key findings for this systematic review was the methods employed by researchers to identify and recruit working-class participants for studies in and around HE. It was found that studies varied considerably in their approaches, with some recruiting via self-identification, others selecting participants based on economic factors like free school meals and pupil premium payments and further studies focussing on education, parental professions and personal previous career experiences. Self-identification is a critical juncture here, there is some significant debate in academia that there can be 'no such thing' as working-class academics as the pay band, institutional culture and profession itself is a middle-class pursuit and inhabits middle-class experiences. Studies such as Rickett et al (2021) which focus on academics typically use self-identification as the participant selection criteria due to this transient experience between working-class origins and history, and contemporary professional experience. As such, the findings between and among studies may differ and be siloed by participant type, working-class academics from working-class students for example.

Second, sampling methodology in some studies was again different and open to interpretation with some studies using self-reporting mechanisms like 'Were you in receipt of free school meals?' whilst others took an objective approach to participant sampling practices like applying to the National Office for Statistics Social and Economic Classifications. Reay et al (2010) sought participants measuring L7-L14 on this scale where Crozier et al (2011) sought participants identifying on the scale as L4-L7. An interpretivist position would suggest that self-identification is a suitable method for participant recruitment. However, the disjuncture between selection approaches for different studies in this sample makes it difficult to compare the findings within it. Similarly, each study involves different groups of working-class participants, some are undergraduates from social sciences degrees, whilst others are groups of female academics. The sample of participants is therefore highly specific and requires more contextual information.

2.10.3 Represented communities

There is an absence of male working-class academics across the piece as well as an absence of intersections between working-class participants and other protected characteristics as outlined by the 2010 Equality Act (GOV UK, 2010). The experiences of working-class women are very present and at the forefront of the literature in this review. This is a limitation to the review; it inhibits an understanding of how class intersects with other experiences which are often marginalised and minoritized within university spaces (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Yerbury & Yerbury, 2021). Some work with disabled academics is forthcoming but, little literature is available around these various intersections (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Crew, 2020).

2.10.4 Systematic Reviews as a method

Systematic reviews are highly dependent on the type and nature of the search strategy employed and therefore can often be accused of attempting to be all encompassing but leaving out many 'missing fragments' (Salvador-Olivan, 2019). Whilst Chalmers et al (2023) argue that systematic reviews posit the best opportunity for reducing duplications of effort, the process and strategies employed in systematic reviews often lack planning, approach and conceptualisation. The development of Boolean string searches is highly dependent on the search terms evoked and the strategy of database selection and category refinement whilst in the database itself. As such, the quality of search threads is often the biggest key impact on the eventual results. It was apparent whilst analysing the results of the systematic review that the entire body of literature around working-class experiences in higher education in the UK had not been uncovered by the search process. This implies that the method has a political component because it is limited by the theoretical ambiguities around how class is defined,

reproducing class inequalities. Critical work such as Crew (2021) did not emerge in the results. As such, the decision to accompany the systematic search process with a brief narrative review was taken.

2.11 An absence of voice

After some extensive searching through SCOPUS, ERIC and the British Library as well as snowballing the question of working-class administrators and professional services staff out to colleagues in the field, I became aware of *Straddling class in the academy (*Martinez et al., 2019). *Stradling class in the academy* uses narrative methods to observe the experiences of working-class people within universities from the perspectives of administrators, academics and students (Martinez et al., 2019). However, whilst this approach is from multiple perspectives it is a US-context book and therefore has overlaps with experiences of class between the UK and USA, but these do not completely cross over.

Studies about administrators and professional services staff (regardless of class background) tend to focus on the functions and mechanisms of professional services roles and responsibilities within the University, they represent a literal notion of 'human capital'. Professional services and administrative service is much less researched on the whole than other populations within the University (McKay & Robson, 2023). There are significant academics who work on the roles of professional services staff and administrative staff in universities. Whitchurch (2010) has looked extensively at the experiences of academics, early career researchers and managerial professionals in research spanning many decades. Her contribution to the understanding of university holistically has been vital. Whitchurch's work focuses predominantly on line managers. She does not focus as much on mid-level or lower-level administrators, and her tendency is often to lean towards discussing academic career pathways in relation to professional services staff and how their function can support academic work (Whitchurch, 2010a, 2010b; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2017). Understanding professional services staff in comparison to others within higher education often places a value on professional services as being subservient in value to their academic counterparts. This forms a reductionist approach; those who are seen to have less value and are subservient are therefore left understudied and invisible (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Collinson, 2007).

Literature focusing on professional services and administrative staff looks at the operation of the university as an entity and how non-academic stakeholders contribute to functionality. Professional services staff make a key contribution to policy, process and governance (Trowler, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010, 2017) Professional services staff are often

viewed as the driving force for implementing cultural change, policies and procedures (Trowler, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010, 2017). With the growing marketisation and neo-liberalisation of education, work on professional service roles and functionality has focussed on the administrators and decision makers who implement policies designed to improve economic efficiency (Brown, 2013; Trowler, 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2017). The interrelationship between administrative and professional services staff and academics is seen as fundamental to the operation, strategy and progression of institutions. As McKay and Robson (2023:633) note, professional services staff represent a 'minoritized voice in HE policy discourse and research' and this has been represented by Akerman (2020) as an 'invisibility', that professional services staff exist outside of the dominant discourse in UK HE. Whilst McKay and Robson (2023) build on an understanding of the role of professional services staff as third space actors in higher education, their individual identities and experiences are still fundamentally left out of this piece of research. This literature deviates from work with students and academics. Identity as it is lived and performed is central to the understanding of the lives of academics. McKay and Robson (2023) similarly intimate that professional services staff have been largely left out of academic research, despite the fact they form such a large part of the UK Higher education workforce. The lived experiences and identities of people occupying professional services and administrative roles has largely gone undocumented in the UK to date, this thesis will begin to address this void.

2.12 Conclusion

The literature in this review has demonstrated that scholarship on working-class experiences predominantly features the lived experiences of working-class academics, working-class students, and on one occasion, working-class mothers. Literature in this sample, is marked methodologically by qualitative research methods, interviews and focus groups. Occasionally, this is also accompanied by questionnaire or survey data. Largely, papers in this sample used a Bourdieusian conceptualisation of social capital, habitus, doxa and field to describe and explain the systems of higher education and ways of knowing within the field. There are several dominant themes which relate to a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. These themes centred around concepts of the self, location of the self within the field, personal habitus and the relationship between habitus and field and a sense of belonging, or of being a 'fish out of water'. This was expanded to explore learner and professional identities and cultural indicators which determine how far an individual belongs in an environment. These focus on class, sensibilities, taste, ways of presenting oneself, patterns of speech, hobbies, material possessions and holidays. This literature review identified key limitations to studies in this sample. Often, the participant recruitment criteria for belonging to the 'working-class' differed

from study to study, with some studies observing economic criteria like free school meals and pupil premium payments as allowing inclusion into the study. Other studies enable the self-definition of participants as working-class, where some also use multiple variables and others look at postcodes or the indices of multiple deprivation.

In terms of representation and intersectionalities, studies predominantly feature working-class participants, sometimes with a focus on gender or, less often, race and ethnicity. working-class women appear to be represented more frequently in this sample than working-class men. The experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff do not feature in this sample. Where studies of professional services and administrative staff (of any class background) feature in academic literature these concern role and functionality rather than identity and experience. This literature review has demonstrated that these two areas very rarely, if ever, overlap in the UK and other contexts.[4] Professional services employees are considered only by their role (human capital) which, can be viewed as a classed discourse. This review has identified the niche and the contribution to knowledge that the thesis study will address.

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[4] See Martinez et al (2019). *Straddling class in the academy.*

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Chapter summary

This thesis is a study of the working-class experiences of professional services and administrative staff in UK higher education. For context, is necessary to understand critical theories of social class. This chapter reviews theories of class from the perspective of Marx, and Engels as well as social and cultural capital theory from the perspectives of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam. It ultimately addresses the reasons behind taking a Bourdieusian approach (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

3.2 Theorisations of class

3.2.1 Class and its origins: Marx, Engels and early social class theory

When Marx and Engels noted in *The Communist Manifesto* that the 'history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle', a (then) novel perspective on the ordering of society as one of social connections and classes emerged (Marx & Engels, 1848:35). The Marxist conceptualisation of class as hierarchical is split in two ways: those that control the means of production and those that provide labour (Marx & Engels, 2002). As such, three substantive class categories emerged: the upper class, the middle-class (or Bourgeoisie/Intelligentsia) and the lower classes (or Proletariat) (Marx & Engels, 1848). Marxist social theory depicts capitalism as a system of cyclical power, a system which is only partially reciprocal (Marx & Engels, 1848). I describe this as only partially reciprocal as, in Marxist theory, although those that own the means of production are heavily reliant on the labour output of the workers, the workers are not proportionally compensated for their work, with the profits of manufacture going directly to those that own the means of production (Marx & Engels, 1848). A Marxist understanding of class is based on output, with class status differentiated through necessary or surplus output. This partial reciprocity is at the heart of how capitalism works, which suggests that it is a fundamentally violent economic system. Class antagonism is based heavily on a struggle for the means of production and what the control over means of production implicates the control of class more broadly (Marx & Engels, 1848). This struggle delineates class boundaries, relating economics and employment to the manifestation of cultural class-based capital. Higher education essentially is an important institution therefore for the reproduction of the ideology of capitalism, replicating the structures and boundaries that are reflected in the original notion of the theory.

Marxist theory emerges from the end of the period of industrialisation and explains the social hierarchies which exist in capitalist systems. Marxist theory develops predominantly as a response to the expansion and history of capitalism which had been in development for 400 years by the time *The Communist Manifesto* was published. There is considerable debate among historians of capitalism as to whether the emergent merchant capitalism of the 1300-1700s is truly 'capitalist' (Meiksins-Wood, 2002). Yet, mercantilism signifies a shift in middle age society and perspective; from insular communities of feudalism and guild-crafts to the flourishing of early industrialisation (Butlin, 1986; Hopkins, 2000). Marxism arrives at the later part of this period, towards the end of industrialisation where, with the intervention of new technologies like steam power and accumulation of wealth through manufacture became possible (Brown, 2002; Feinstein, 1998; Hopkins, 2000). The flourishing of empire and industrialisation encouraged the development of new types of economic relations (Brown, 2002).

Marxist theory is dependent on class as linked to conflict, with class being the key determining factor in disruption (due to the struggle for means of production). Other conceptualisations of class hierarchies have focussed on the division of class into a broader taxonomy. Through a consensus functionalist sociological lens, Durkheim presented an understanding of class in larger societies as relationships of interdependence which enabled them to function effectively (Durkheim, 1858, cited in Lukes, 2013). Social order and stability created by a clear order formed part of Durkheim's theory 'anomie' and the concept that systems work in society as mechanisms with which to create security and balance (Lukes, 2013). Rather than being conceptualised in response to conflict, functionalist sociologists describe class as a way to categorise society, making it more coherent. Conflict and consensus functionalised models of society (i.e., conservative in the case of Durkheim and conflict-oriented in the case of Marx) represent a tautology in so much as they will only ever frame social institutions in relation to functions. These are static models which give little attention to the agency and actions of individuals. This agency and intersection are a critical point of diversion for this thesis, and I argue that the individual narratives as intersected by gender, race, locality, history, generation and experience are critical to the formation of social class identity (Skeggs, 2004).

3.2.2 Social class theory and constructivism

The lived experiences of administrators within Russell Group institutions involves understanding the rich tapestry of systems and hierarchies within society. In order to explore the representation and theories that relate to these systems it is important that appropriate social theories are considered. Broad strokes of social theory have been used to explore questions of class from a functionalist to a structuralist, to a feminist, post-colonial and post-

structuralist position. These movements draw upon different intellectual paradigms. It is possible to forge a theoretical framework that uses different social theories. Critical feminism for example, illuminates a concept of 'studying up'. Nader (1972) uses this concept to understand society as hierarchical rather than linear (Guerrina, 2015). This perspective leads a study of institutions to consider the 'voice of the subaltern', to understand how classed representations are 'produced, sustained and resisted' (Holmes et al., 2019; Spivak, 1988). Whilst a critical feminist perspective enables us to study the voices of those who have not been heard in the current body of rhetoric, it does not go far enough to provide a basis for the understanding of societal patterns, movements and reproductions which are necessary in this study of working-class professional service staff. To 'uncover the workings of society' requires a deeper understanding of the models which underpin power, relationship and responsibility (Grenfell, 2012). Rather, this study aligns closely with the concept of constructivism. Constructivism considers the world as based on narratives, with the researcher at the heart of new information creation (Denicolo et al., 2016). The way that individuals experience the world and relay those experiences is heavily formed from social interactions, perceptions and exposure to different social phenomena (Denicolo et al., 2016). This can guide participants to give an account of prior knowledge, leading to the creation of new information (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Central to the theory of constructivism is the exploration and representation of the self both individually and in response to a collective experience. Phenomena in themselves can be explored from multiple perspectives and it is the combination of these perspectives in responses to other peoples' perspectives in social groups and situations which contribute to a fluid understanding of reality. The fluidity of reality as something which changes in accordance with personal narrative and social interaction forms the basis of the guiding ontological perspective of this thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.3 Bourdieu

3.3.1 The antecedents of Bourdieu

It is important to the history of sociological thought and ideas to situate Bourdieu in context. Bourdieu expressed the Marxist theoretical notion of capital, recognising societal order as the manifestation of social power, structures and societal norms. The extent to which Bourdieu adheres to a Marxist framework has been contested (Desan, 2013). Famous for his ambiguity, this dislocation has resulted in some placing Bourdieu as a firm Marxist, where others have exemplified how distant Bourdieu was from the framing of Marxism (Frank, 1980; Rasmusson, 1981; Desan 2013; Wacquant, 1993). For those who understand Marxist capital theory as solely concerned with economic status and capital, Bourdieu dissents from an understanding

of capital which is purely economic, thus building on this understanding, through 'extension', to the social realm (Desan, 2013). However, as Desan (2013) argues, the extent to which Bourdieu truly is an 'extension' of Marxism can be called into question. Where there are strong associations, through the concept of 'capital' as its own entity, Desan (2013) cites a movement in Bourdieusian rhetoric which diverged heavily from Marxism in his later writing, pointing to text in which he actively distanced himself from the 'fashionable' Marxism of Althusser in post-war France (Desan, 2013). As Palotta (2015:135) notes, Bourdieu considered the Althussian tradition with a 'silent animosity' rarely citing the philosopher himself but focussing on the critique of his followers. In terms of discipline, this split related to Bourdieu's own split from the tradition of philosophy towards sociology, a tradition Althusser continued to maintain and aggrandize. Rather than arguing for a transcendence from Marxism, Desan (2013) calls for a recognition of the pluralities between Marxist sociology and Bourdieusian theory which continue to exist throughout his work.

There are inherent commonalities between the early structuralists and Bourdieusian theory. The idea that structures reproduce themselves within society is formed from a broader structuralist tradition, borrowing concepts and theoretical frames from Durkheim and Levi-Strauss. Wacquant (2000:105) described the relationship between Durkheim and Bourdieu as having both 'common plinths and cracks'; being inherently connected yet moving beyond functionalism and towards emphasising a social agent which does not compliment the understanding of functionalist logic. This approach is particularly important for this study given the selection of self-identification rather than a reliance on structural forces alone. The historical tradition of Bourdieu is important in situating the theoretical frame in relation to this thesis; understanding that Bourdieu both exists within the realms of Marxism and structuralism yet also diverges from both traditions enables us to understand the possible links between theory and practise through the guise of differing forms of capitals as well as the structural models which are at stake within the university environment.

3.3.2 Bourdieu: Cultural capital

Bourdieu relates cultural capital to two other types of capital: economic capital and symbolic capital. Cultural capital relates to the relationship between individuals, groups, disposition and a hierarchy of tastes where economic capital concerns financial assets and assets which can be counted (Bourdieu, 1984a; Warner et al., 1985). Cultural capital understands socio-economic inequalities which pervade the class hierarchy as formulated from the tastes and cultural preferences on different rungs of the social ladder (Bourdieu, 1984a; Warner et al., 1985). Whilst these relate predominantly to classes and groups within French society, cultural capital has also been used to describe the cultural pursuits of different classes within the UK

(Evans & Mellon, 2015; Skeggs, 2004). Preferences that individuals have for activities, art, music and hobbies are governed by class conditions, which in turn is directed by economic capital. Cultural capital also can determine mannerisms, conventions (such as place settings at a dinner table or style of speech) and 'ways of being' (Bourdieu, 1984a; Warner et al., 1985). Certain pursuits are synonymous with upper class behaviour and transactions and are restrictive to the lower classes due to their associated costs (Skeggs, 2004). Participation in these pursuits acts to symbolise class belonging.

There are associated examples which demonstrate this in contemporary society. In the realm of private schooling, the notion of the teaching of classics has been described by Kenway as being pursued purely because it restricts access to the majority, preserving it as a cultural emblem of belonging to a wealthier class (Adkins et al., 2016; Kenway, 1990; Kenway & Lazarus, 2017). Bourdieusian cultural capital then is determined by socio-economic background and used through social spheres to ascend the hierarchy, accumulate wealth and acquire new positions. In *Language and symbolic power* (1992), Bourdieu demonstrates how tastes, pursuits, education, activities, language and linguistic codes demarcate the experience of well-conditioned class positions, ascendance of the hierarchy is predetermined by an inherited economic capital which inculcates cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1992). This hierarchy of tastes and concealment of types of culture as the sphere of only some classes reflects in this thesis study and we see later in chapter five how the inaccessibility of types of culture leaves working-class professional services staff outside of the normative experiences of others within their institutions. Whilst this study is fundamentally interested in cultural capital theory as a theory of social order and power, economic capital is also intrinsic to Bourdieu's conceptualisation. This was critical to the findings in the literature review (chapter two) which highlighted the prevalence of Bourdieu in the theoretical frames of existing literature. In order to ground this study in one socially oriented capital theory, it is also necessary to understand some other interpretations of different types of capital from leading theorists.

Bourdieu (1990) explains the curious case of different classes using the education system to ascend the social hierarchy:

> *The more unified the market on which the value of the products of the different PAs is determined, the more the groups or classes which have undergone a PA inculcating a dominated cultural arbitrary are likely to have the valuelessness of their cultural attainment brought home to them both by the anonymous sanctions of the labour market and by the symbolic sanctions of the cultural market (e.g. the matrimonial market), not to mention academic verdicts, which are always*

charged with economic and symbolic implications. These calls to order tend to produce in them, if not explicit recognition of the dominant culture as the legitimate culture, then at least an insidious awareness of the cultural unworthiness of their own acquirements (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990:28)

One interpretation of this passage is that using educational attainment to ascend the social hierarchy is, to some extent, useless with the resulting position and experience always being at the mercy of cultural, economic and symbolic implications which will outweigh the eventual educational achievement. Therefore, should someone from a lower class aim to ascend this social hierarchy using educational attainment as their medium of transition, they will always find their path stunted due to the inequity of their cultural capital. However, as Bourdieu later asserts, he believes the receipt of habitus through education transforms cultural capital in a way which is reflective of genetic capital accumulation:

Education, considered as the process through which a cultural arbitrary is historically reproduced through the medium of the production of the habitus productive of practices conforming with that cultural arbitrary (i.e., by the transmission of a training [formation] capable of durably patterning and 'informing' the receivers), is the equivalent, in the cultural order, of the transmission of genetic capital in the biological order. If the habitus is the analogue of genetic capital, then the inculcation which defines the performance of PA is the analogue of generation, in that it transmits information generative of analogous information. (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990:32).

On the surface, it appears that these two passages are the antithesis to one another, one suggesting that educational attainment can never equal the symbolic and cultural capital held by those within the higher social order and the second, from the same chapter, suggesting that education may be used in the transferral of habitus, enabling an individual from a lower social order to equate their accumulated capital to the genetic capital inherited by those in the higher social order, using education as the vehicle for this transition. One interpretation of Bourdieu is that this is highly dependent on the successful transferral of this kind of habitus through the process of education, which may be optimised were, for example, the person from the lower social order to achieve a scholarship to a private school in the UK. This habitus, according to this interpretation of Bourdieu, would be difficult to accumulate through any given mode of education received in any other type of institution. This interpretation has been questioned by academics working in the field for many years and where some such as Edgerton and Roberts (2014) believe habitus is far from static, the degree to which this is the case is under question. As I find in the conclusion to this thesis, education for those from

working-class backgrounds in this study does not appear to have facilitated this kind of capital accumulation nor a complete or absolute evolution of personal habitus.

3.3.3 Other theories of capital: Putnam and Coleman

Where Bourdieu perceives cultural capital as a network of hierarchical relationships driven by economic condition, Putnam understands social capital as relationships across a linear perspective (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Garrett, 2020). Putnam concentrates on how societies function through human relationships and the ability for people to work together in order to be well ordered, effective and progressive (Dodd et al., 2015; Putnam, 2000). This reciprocity of trust is formed through either 'bonding' (between groups) or 'bridging' (across groups) ties. Putnam delineates between two types of trust: 'Thin' and 'Thick' trust (Putnam, 2000). 'Thin' trust alludes to a general understanding between people who are strangers to one another where 'Thick' trust describes a deep level of security existing between family members or generational friendships (Putnam, 2000). Membership of groups is important for extending connection and this collective environment is transformative for democratic action and electoral participation.

Coleman's (1988) social capital forms three stands; obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. This combines economic theory with social organisation (Coleman, 1988). Focusing on relationships between social actors, Coleman understands that social capital is closely related to building of human capital. Obligations and expectations are a form of social capital which demonstrate inter-reliance on two actors within a social sphere (Coleman, 1988). This relies on trustworthiness and the extent of the obligation itself. A concentration of obligations constitutes a concentration of social capital which makes action on behalf of the public good more likely (Coleman, 1988:S103).

Bourdieu, Putnam and Coleman differ in their theorisation. Putnam and Coleman imagine capital as manifested within communities through the formation of ties, trust and groups (Coleman, 1988; Dodd et al., 2015; Putnam, 2000). Bourdieu understands the theory of capital differently, inextricably linked to the origins of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1992). This informs cultural taste, distinction, which acts as a class marker (Bourdieu, 1984a; Warner et al., 1985). It is this microscopic conceptualisation of the individual central actor which is the antithesis to Coleman and Putnam's macroscopic depiction of society through groups and memberships (Bourdieu, 1984a; Coleman, 1988; Warner et al., 1985). Bourdieu's interpretation of cultural capital will be taken forward due to the wider applicability, reference in existing literature, and appropriateness. To grasp Bourdieu's interpretation of 'practice' we must also understand habitus, field and doxa, and how they relate to this study specifically.

3.3.4 Bourdieu: Habitus, doxa and field

The understanding of social space is critically intertwined with the understanding of how cultural capital interacts with habitus and field in Bourdieusian theory. To fully understand the permutations of class, the lifestyle characteristics of a class or a 'unity hidden under diversity' it is necessary to understand how distinctions are made between agents of class, lived class experiences and the manifestation of class in the social space (Adkins et al., 2016; Bourdieu, 1984a; Thatcher et al., 2015; Warner et al., 1985). Class habitus is class conditioning, a set of homogeneous systems which generate similar practice, relying on the construction of a discernible set of common properties. Bourdieu understands these discernible properties as being intrinsically linked to the interaction between means of production and how these means influence class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu emphasises that class and class habitus is not only governed by the means of production (type of work) yet also governed by the distribution of geographical properties and subsidiary characteristics (Bourdieu, 1984a). As such, economic and social conditions which govern class habitus are tied into the inheritance of cultural capital at birth and the manifestation of this as social capital in the sphere of social hierarchy. These inter-relationships are understood as structural features within society and social spaces, individuals interact with these structures as agents, but the social reproduction of structures informs the replication of dominant cultures (Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Studying the experience of agents (individuals) within these structures enables us to understand how social reproduction is facilitated through the perspective of these agents (Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Warner et al., 1985).

The concept of field is the last part of Bourdieu's equation for social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 2017b; Reay et al., 2001; Warner et al., 1985). Where habitus encompassed shared understandings, beliefs, practices and concepts, the theory of field is connected to location, networks and connections. Field is a 'system of social positions' and is used to describe the pattern of relationships that exist within a structure, a structure that sits within the wider concept of society. Field is, like habitus, constantly in flux but where habitus is about behaviours, field is about specific models (Bourdieu, 1984a, 1992; Thatcher et al., 2015; Warner et al., 1985). Field can therefore be understood as the function of certain professions, organisations, institutions and modes of work. For example, within this study, the field of the University as an institution includes networks of power which are different from one another yet also similar to each other on multiple levels (Bourdieu, 1984b). Academic pathways have different appropriations of power according to their status; Professors have greater degrees of academic power and prowess than Early Career Researchers, yet these

operate within a structure which predominantly has a double strand of career pathways, one in administration and professional services and one in academia.

Adding further complexity, Bourdieu describes how the interaction of habitus and field work in different scenarios with different people through the term 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1992; Crozier et al., 2019a; Reay et al., 2001, 2010a). Doxa asserts how far an individual fits with the habitus of the field. Simply, doxa represents how far an individual's norms, behaviours and understandings assimilate with the preferential norms, behaviours and understandings within the habitus, or institutional environment, in our case. Doxa might be described as water to the fish, taken for granted contexts that seem beyond critique until they are present in a context or field where the doxa are strange or exclusive. These things are fluid. An individual agent may align with the habitus of one field at an institution of the same profession in one instance yet find themselves out of line with the habitus of a field in another (Reay et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2021).

> *The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a hierarchy of intersecting fields). On the other hand, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaning-full world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127)

Using Bourdieu as a theoretical framework is essential to understanding lived experiences of administrative and professional services staff for several reasons. Precedent in literature has observed working-class experiences for academic members of staff in elite universities, finding many instances of dislocation, feeling like a 'fish out of water' and imposter syndrome through different studies such as Reay et al (2009, 2010, 2021). This body of literature is explored in more detail in the literature review (chapter four). The habitus of the field of universities is different from the habitus of the field of working-class families in these examples, because the social reproduction of norms within elite institutions is historically and socially different from the social norms in many working-class families. Whilst this has been studied in many different contexts and in many ways, it has never been explored through the eyes of different agents within the field. As such, whilst this study aims to make no hypotheses about findings, and cannot claim to be representative, it is interested in understanding the nature of doxa from the perspectives of administrators and professional services staff to understand whether this dislocation is pervasive throughout the institution or whether it is a particular phenomenon associated with academics or students. The understanding of doxa is particularly interesting

in this context as it will enable us to explore how the institution is experienced by different groups of people with different backgrounds, norms and behaviours (habitus) and experiences in different fields. Field is often construed as spatial and social but here I also focus on the temporal nature of space – the way that personal narratives of class experience suggest that temporal fields are overlapping and individuals bring their classed biographies with them, even when entering a field with a different class dynamic.

3.3.5 Bourdieu: Misrecognition and symbolic violence

For social class order to be maintained within society, Bourdieu explains that a non-physical power, symbolic violence, is implemented in the everyday (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Symbolic violence reproduces social class, social norms and social hierarchies, connecting cultural phenomena to the structural features within society, showing how the culture produced works in turn to maintain it (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). One reading of Bourdieu suggests that symbolic violence exists as the antithesis to the concept of symbolic power, maintaining existing structures through using the dominant cultural production evidenced within the higher strata of society against the dominant cultural narratives of the lower strata of society. Symbolic violence appears to be an expression which maintains a certain aloofness we see in Bourdieusian text. However, the manifestation of symbolic violence is much easier to understand when considering the actions and types of appropriation which are levied between social classes within contemporary society. Symbolic violence appears to have manifestations in two critical ways; oppressive symbolic violence which is actively levied against those from the lower social order by those within the higher social order and through the impression those from lower social orders have regarding people or institutions and the impression they receive as to how they might fit with the institutional or personal habitus which is outwardly displayed. This 'passive' symbolic violence (misrecognition) is described in studies which use a Bourdieusian lens to rationalise why, for example, highly intelligent, capable students choose to select institutions which appear to better match their life experiences than those which score highest in university league tables (Scandone, 2018:125). Bourdieu himself does not speak about symbolic violence using the language of microaggression, viewing symbolic violence as a non-deliberative act rather, an imposition of the norms of the group which occupy the most social power within any given context, which also manifests as a misrecognition of reality on behalf of those from outside of the habitus. As envisaged by Bourdieu, symbolic violence is the promotion of dominant social norms whereas misrecognition is the self-imposed boundary an individual places upon themselves based on the impression of how far they will belong to the environment which espouses those norms (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). An additional active manifestation of symbolic violence and the notion of a microaggression have been connected by Crew (2020; 2021) and others to explain how symbolic violence outwardly

manifests through active microaggressions towards working-class people in elite institutions. Such examples include ridicule of styles of dress, accent, behaviours or language used by working-class people by others who more easily fit into these types of habitus.

3.4 Critical analysis of the approach

Whilst the concept of narrative inquiry and the understanding of habitus, field and cultural capital appear to form an interrelationship, there are limitations to this approach. The conflict between individual experiences and the collective experience of class as defined by Bourdieu and the social system of reproduced hierarchies can be explained as being largely at odds. The individual perspective and biographical nature of individualised reporting is, for Bourdieu, a reflection of collective histories and experiences from groups within the social hierarchy. Thus, the personal and the individual are symbiotically intertwined with the experiences of the collective, and the experiences of those bound within a certain social class. This is best demonstrated through an explanation of personal experience and the realities of social class:

> *Since the history of the individual never reproduces anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, structural variants of the group or class habitus can be seen in the systems of individual dispositions, which are systematically organised precisely in the differences that separate them and in which the differences in careers and positions within and outside the class are expressed: the 'personal' style, this special characteristic that all products of one and the same habitus, all actions and works, are never more than a self-regulated and sometimes even codified deviation from the style peculiar to an epoch or a class* (Bourdieu 1979:187).

It is arguable that uncovering personal histories using narrative inquiry as a tool will prove to be at odds with the understanding of working-class experiences within Higher Education. This argument is based on the idea that Bourdieu espouses, that understanding personal biographicity would be obsolete as personal narratives would all reflect the same ideas, oppressions and experiences. However, whilst the experiences of conflict between habitus and field can be linked as synonymous with people from specific social class backgrounds, the nuance of experience between people within social class boundaries differs enormously. As previously discussed, the specificity of Bourdieusian theory is bound within an understanding of French society in the 20th Century. The understanding of social class in the UK in the 21st century and the understanding of how being working-class is experienced, or performed during this post-industrial period may be different entirely. There are also significant

temporal gaps in applying Bourdieusian theory to this space which will be explored in chapter eight. Most notably, I point to a lamination of field, with participants aware of the imposition of their previous histories and current life outside of work, leaving them often balanced between the existence of varying habitus, fields and doxas. As I demonstrate in chapters five, six, and seven, people exist across multiple temporal frames simultaneously, bringing their classed past and futures with them into their present. This temporal dimension is arguably omitted by Bourdieusian theory and will be discussed at length in chapter eight.

3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed several key social theories in relation to class. It explains the rationale behind using concepts of Bourdieusian theory in this thesis with particular emphasis on capital theory, habitus, field and doxa.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4. Introduction

This chapter will explain and explore the methodology behind this thesis. In this chapter, the background for the chosen methods is explored by documenting the paradigm, approach and theoretical framework that underpins the fabric of this study. These sections seek to understand my own position as a researcher and the ontological and epistemological considerations which help to form this position. This chapter further investigates how the background and approach to research, in conjunction with the theoretical framework, have helped to inform and influence the methods utilised in this thesis.

This study has the primary ambition of giving a voice to those working within higher education in administrative or professional services roles who self-identify as working-class. As the literature review found, these voices have been often ignored or considered through their functionality. In very isolated circumstances, professional services and admin staff are consulted by universities to understand things like research culture and environments (Collinson, 2007; McKay & Robson, 2023). The University of Bristol ran an initiative to look at the research culture of the university through conducting a series of focus groups with 'Research Culture Officers' (Manafo, 2022). Yet, these kinds of initiatives usually happen concurrently with consultations with other groups, such as academics, postgraduate students, lab technicians and academic-related staff, meaning that those working in professional services and administration rarely, if ever, get the opportunity to express their opinions and experiences specifically. We know that the literature (see chapter two) around working-class students, and more recently, academics is particularly vast, but it cannot be assumed that professional services and administrative staff from working-class backgrounds encounter the same issues, tensions, responsibilities and feelings.

From the literature review it became clear that these experiences focussed on issues that relate to Bourdieu's concept of habitus and explanation of cultural capital within social hierarchies. Much of this literature is grounded by concerns like not fitting in, a lack of belonging, feeling like an imposter or an outsider, and not being clear about the 'rules of the game', or being able to engage in conversations that centred around cultural pursuits or activities. This study wanted to understand if these experiences, which have in many ways been similar amongst both academics and students, also resonate with administrative staff and those that work in professional services. The reason this is critical is that by understanding the perspectives of the third key stakeholder in higher education we can begin to understand

the cultures that dominate the environment of university life. The culture of institutions is crucial in capitulating a sense of inclusivity and eventually enabling widening participation. By understanding the experiences of this third key group within universities, the missing piece of the puzzle may be placed.

4.2 Paradigm and approach

This thesis is underpinned by a view of the world as it is constructed from multiple narratives, perspectives and multi-faceted webs of communication and stories. The 'truth' of an experience is the one which is told with the best intention, but it is not one which is subjected to external triangulation or confirmation from other sources (Egbert, 2013; Egbert & Sanden, 2019). The truths individuals hold to themselves and tell others are the truths that they see are valid and relevant to their own personal narrative and experiences (Putnam & Banghart, 2017; Ryan, 2018). It is these truths which are open to exploration and interpretation by researchers who are interested in the expressed narratives of people (Egbert & Sanden, 2019). It is not the intention of this research to cross-check or triangulate the narratives presented, nor to present a representative reflection, but to explore the richness and depth which is inherent within the navigation of lived experience and memory (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This leads the study to collect narratives and accounts from individual lived experience as a priority above any other form of data collection. In the context of this study, this is a useful approach when studying the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff. Whilst there is current precedent for taking the approach of constructivism in relation to working-class students and academics; we see the use of narrative and experiences in the work of academics like Crew (2020; 2021) and Reay et al (2017; 2018; 2021), it is also important to understand how these people, who are crucial to the success of the university on a day-to-day basis see and experience the relationships, structures, ideas and formalities within them (Reay, 2017a; 2018; 2021b).

Critical to understanding perspective and approach is personal narrative and I am mindful to include this here (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The position of the researcher themselves within the research being undertaken is critical to the project (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This idea is central to the understanding of reflexive thematic analysis and will be discussed in relation to Braun and Clarke's model later in this chapter. Braun and Clarke understand the position of the researcher as integral to the research produced; the findings are unique to each project because the perspective of the researcher and the participant are brought together in a certain time, with certain life experiences, in a unique context and at a unique moment (Braun &

Clarke, 2021). As researchers, we all bring our own experiences and subjective understandings of the world to each study and to be mindful and reflective around this enables us to understand our own situation which comes with various lenses and frameworks (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, Egbert 2013). Researcher reflexivity enables us to understand the unique circumstances in which the piece of research unfurled, allowing us to identify the formal rules within it (Holmes, 2019).

The concept of the 'insider' is one that has been explored in depth by many researchers within education. Braun and Clarke (2021) explain an insider perspective as closely related with the experiences of the researcher, the researcher is embedded within the topic or area of study. This study is intertwined with my own personal narrative within multiple facets. These facets span both the organisational context of administrative staff within higher education and the social context of growing up within a working-class context and experiencing many of the elements explored in literature around students such as lack of belonging or uncertainty around identity. Whilst I currently work in a research context at a Russell Group university, I was previously employed at a different Russell Group University in a research project management and research administration capacity. I could clearly see anecdotal instances of insecurity, uncertainty of identity and disparity around themes of promotion and progression within the institution.

I am mindful that my positionality as a former professional services worker allows me to be relative 'inside' to the research, the experience created the rationale to elucidate these narratives. Similarly, growing up in a fundamentally working-class home has given me a desire to unpick how others have experienced class and the construction of identity within higher education as a response to their own experiences and, in many cases, deprivation. My position has changed over time and objectively my social class position has been flexible over the last decade. According to Savage et al (2013), my class position as an emergent service worker is still one defined by precarity and a lack of economic assets (Savage et al., 2013; Savage & Mouncey, 2016). The deep understanding, I have of economic precarity and social exclusion, coupled with my experience working within administration at an elite university has prompted me to want to make these voices more visible in academic research.

Understanding the world as a myriad of narratives, stories and perspectives and a reality which is fluid and ever-changing ensure that this study follows an interpretive paradigm. This is an approach which aptly reflects an understanding that the world around us is subjective and open to interpretation and will be further explored through utilising narrative enquiry. This exploration will form the basis of my methods section in the subsequent paragraphs. I discuss

later some of the ethical and personal challenges of using narrative inquiry and the interplay between this method and an 'insider approach'. In the conclusion to this thesis in chapter nine, I discuss at length how care for the researcher has often been omitted from university ethics procedures (Brown & Wild, 2022). This omission often leaves researchers without the adequate support from their institution when conducting 'insider' research which includes traumatic experiences which may reflect instances in their own lives.

4.4 Research method

4.4.1 Instrument and design

This study uses both narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews as research methods within a single instance of a participant interview conducted via MS Teams. The interview method was clearly divided into the narrative inquiry and more traditional semi-structured interview segments (see appendix). The use of interviews here is informed by three areas: precedent, approach and appropriateness to the research subject.

First, there is precedent in studies of working-class experience to conduct semi-structured interviews which forms the basis of emerging studies over the past 10 years (Burnell Reilly, 2022; Crew, 2020). The literature review in chapter two outlines that 80% of the studies within the sample set used interview techniques, although various interview methods were used within this sample. Deep-biographical interviews have been used alongside semi-structured interview schedules in previous studies around working-class experiences in Higher Education and beyond (Bathmaker, 2021; Preece, 2020). Bathmaker (2021) demonstrates how in-depth biographical interviews can be used with a semi-structured interview schedule in order to enable participants to speak freely about their contemporary experiences, yet also to set these experiences in context by allowing them the space and freedom to talk about their historical narrative and understanding of growing up in a working-class environment. Semi-structured interviews are so called because they dictate the pattern of the interview; semi-structured interviews focus on the 'capacity of the interviews to elicit data on perspectives of salience to respondents rather than the researcher dictating the direction of the encounter' (Barbour 2008:119). Ruslin et al (2022) have argued that a key benefit of semi-structured interviews is their ability to acquire new information, which they discern as being a 'powerful' element of using the method. Semi-structured interviews also enable the researcher to gain a better insight from the perspective of the participant, enabling a degree of structure and predetermined design alongside allowing the researcher to follow up on pertinent elements that arise within the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde et al, 2022). It is also worth bearing in mind that semi-structured interviews are also highly dependent on the skill of the researcher in

navigating the responses of the participant and on how well and intuitively the question schedule has been amalgamated (Barbour, 2008; Egbert & Sanden, 2019). Semi-structured interviews often require a significant experience and expertise on the behalf of the researcher which can often be lacking in early career researchers (Barbour 2008). Semi-structured interviews can be used alongside different sampling methods (either through purposeful or convenience-based sampling) to be more, or less, generalisable, although it is often not the chosen method for large-scale, generalisable or representative research designs due to its individual and reflexive nature (Barbour, 2008).

Focusing on a world which holds different meaning to different people, one that is constructed in accordance with personal memory, experience and phenomenon enables greater emphasis to be placed on the elaboration of an individual's personal history and circumstances. As such, using a mixture of narrative inquiry and semi-structured interview aligned with the theoretical approach of this study. This approach is highly relevant. As I have explored in the literature review, the instances of interviewing professional services and administrative staff are very few and far apart in academia, and the instances of interviewing working-class professional services and administrative staff are absent from the research agenda. Adding these personal perspectives, viewpoints and interpretations offers an original contribution to the field of educational research. Arguably the appropriate way to explore these perspectives is to pursue an interview scheme which enables personal history, reflection and biographicity (what is past) alongside events, relationships and interpretations of current realities (what is present). Understanding these events, relationships and interpretations is vital to understanding how professional services staff experience working in Russell Group universities.

The method used included embedding narrative inquiry alongside semi-structured interviews. Whilst participants were only involved in one interview each, the interview itself was designed to include a descriptive section around past experiences growing up and family background. Whilst this methodological approach is not necessarily representative, it allows for a much deeper exploration of personal narrative. In chapter two, I identified a conceptual disagreement in existing literature around the definition of being working-class and how it is defined in 2023. As such, the interview schedule for this research built in questions which asked participants to define the parameters of 'working-class' according to their own experiences and relationships with society. Using a narrative inquiry approach this gave participants space to reflect on what being working-class meant to them and allowed them time to talk in depth, if they felt comfortable, about the life experiences that they had had prior to undertaking a role within a Russell Group university. It is important to note here that the

method selection and approach leads to the illumination of genuine findings. Yet, as a result of the methodological approach it is hard to ascertain how typical these findings may be.

4.4.2 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a complex concept which has been used in various fields and types of research. As an approach, it has been prevalent within healthcare research, being used to investigate the experiences of patients as well as their understanding and sense of identity following major episodes of ill health. Understanding the biographicity of family history, personal history and sense of self is integral to the promotion of ethical practice and better healthcare research in the medical sphere (Whiffin et al., 2021).

Narrative Inquiry is underpinned by the concept and understanding of story and how the stories we tell ourselves and each other differ over time (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). It is used to research the way in which people create meaning in their life through their own woven narratives, it assumes that stories are formed from experiences which are fluid, changing and temporal in nature (Trahar, 2013). These stories are 'stitched into the way of seeing, knowing and being' and influence our construction of reality and meaning (Grady et al., 2018:153). This way of knowing is directly related to how individuals know themselves, something which is developed by knowing one's own story; story telling goes beyond articulating facts, sequencing meaning in the re-telling of events (McAdams, 1997). The retelling of these narratives presents the opportunity to use stories as a medium to learn, and to acquire new knowledge and therefore this is felt to be an appropriate tool to understand the experiences of working-class professional services staff in this thesis. Narratives are at the heart of how histories have been told and imagined over time, reflected and repeated by those who shape them. Meta-narratives can dominate the production of knowledge yet the use of narrative inquiry, particularly in the case of marginalised groups, can illuminate forgotten and silenced knowledge (Grady et al., 2018).

Narrative inquiry is a research approach which cuts across disciplines yet has no definitive or formalised structure and process. Waletzky & Labov (1967) describe a narrative approach in linguistics using a 6-point framework to assess how language is spoken and delivered (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Labov (2006) further emphasises the connectedness of narrative as the continuation of a chain leading to an event which is deemed worthy enough to be reportable (Labov, 1997, 2006). The construction of this chain of narrative is a particular way of reporting past events 'in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted in the order of the events it refers to' (Labov, 2006). Narrative structure therefore follows events in time but is reconstructed to work back from an event of significance. As such, an event of

significance (for example, the undertaking of professional employment in a university) has a series of events, stories and narratives which are critical in how the event is eventually formed or experienced (Labov, 1997, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 1997). The dislocation between personal identity and environment allows the opportunity for narrative inquiry to be useful; exposing the story which exists at the point of discomfort between familiarity and difference (habitus and field). It can therefore be used in this study to understand the story which exists between class background and working environment.

In the field of education, Clandinin and Connelly (2004) have used narrative inquiry to add additional levels of complexity and meaning to research of experiences. This work relies on several aspects which define the method of inquiry. It is impossible to remove subjectivity from the research gathered within a narrative inquiry as the subjective element of researcher perspective, influence and interpretation is critical to the creation of new ways of knowing with any given research participant at any given time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). The study of experience is studied narratively because 'narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing', narrative is both the phenomenon and the method in social science. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004:17). Narrative Inquiry is a particular way of understanding experience, working within three clear dimensions: temporality, personal-social space and within place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). There is an importance in going back and forward between the present, past and interpretations of the past and how this movement in thought affects or contributes to the telling and retelling of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). As inquirers we meet ourselves through memory, through the construction of past, present and anticipated futures, the process is imaginative and the stories we bring are set within institutions and social narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Labov, 2006; Trahar, 2013). As background and personal history are important to understanding how professional service staff experience their working environment, enabling participants to meet themselves through narrative inquiry offers the opportunity for a deeper, more meaningful reflection on class and higher education.

4.4.3 Why Narrative Inquiry?

Narrative inquiry is often heavily critiqued by journal editors and other social scientists, particularly for the inclusion of subjectivity as being critical to the production of research (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Ethically, concerns are raised around the determination of fact and fiction and the construction of potentially alternative or volatile narratives through the retelling of stories and imagination of the past (Boje, 2001). The use of narrative inquiry in small-scale studies such as this has the potential to distort 'truth' as reflections are constructed and not generalisable. Narrative inquiry demands the construction of relationships between the

participant and the inquirers and therefore there is the chance that ethically, participants may not be willing or open to inquiry if these relationships are not nurtured or fostered in a way which is supportive and productive (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). However, narrative inquiry has fundamental merits which are not present in other qualitative methods. narrative inquiry is different from simple interviewing methods as it seeks a depth of experience that goes beyond the surface and beyond a simplistic retelling of events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Trahar, 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015). Other approaches such as ethnography and observation require the researcher to be lost within the process, without a visible contribution to the storytelling process between themselves and the participant (Cohen et al, 2007:181). In narrative inquiry, the researcher is integral to the co-creation of the narrative, a 'narrative interplay' with the eventual story created reflecting the questions asked, the responses given but also of the level of rapport, ease of conversation and readiness to divulge episodes of personal history (Cohen et al, 2007: 198; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Wang & Geale, 2015).

For this study, the relationship between social and familial background is key to understanding identity, identity formation and the situatedness of participants to a particular class identity. The deeper background of participants and the experiences that have led them to self-identify as working-class are as critical to the understanding of how they experience elite institutions as the examples of being within these institutions themselves. As Shelton (2019) notes, there is no one way to 'do' narrative inquiry, and as such Clandinin and Connelly's approach has been tailored for this study to make it more relevant and applicable (Shelton, 2019).

Narrative inquiry allows the free flowing of information and storytelling from the participant with limited amounts of involvement from the researcher (Shelton, 2019; Cohen et al, 2007:198). This process can be guided and encouraged by the researcher in order to create a sense of comfort in sharing personal experiences in this setting (Cohen et al, 2007:198). Whilst Narrative Inquiry grounds this study in the understanding of lived experience and personal narrative, it forms only the basis of part of the data collection. Framing interview questions through the tool of narrative inquiry enables a degree of biographicity, through open response questions which allows for flexibility and storytelling for participants. Storytelling of this type has been explored by Tugell (2022:36) in relation to working-class people explicitly, noting how 'we tell stories in order to live' within the academy; the process of facilitating these stories therefore has a direct notable application in this context as a form of pseudo-emancipation. This piece of research seeks to understand the experiences of working-class professional services staff in Russell Group universities. As such, the elicitation of personal narrative and the construct of self-story is critical in establishing meaning.

This study combines the use of a narrative approach and specific guidance in narrative inquiry in the opening section of the interview. This part of the interview seeks to understand the narrative of the individuals background, their story growing up as a younger person and how they have navigated their career pathway to date. During this section, the participant is guided by loose, unstructured opening questions from the researcher. The second part of the interview is interested in understanding the specific experiences of working within Russell Group universities. As such, this part of the data collection interview focuses on a typical semi-structured interview approach where the participant is guided to talk about particular themes through open-ended questions. These questions will then often be followed up and do not necessarily form a certain programme or order but are used as a prompt to guide the conversation (Cohen et al., 2007). Using narrative in this way is important to this study. The understanding of personal experience and background is critical to the formation of identity, and specifically working-class identity. It is critical to the understanding of contemporary experiences in the workplace to understand in detail how a lived, personal and historical narrative creates a lens through which recent experiences are perceived.

Before each recording began, time for explanation and context was written into the interview plan. Here, I explained briefly my approach, the reason for the study and a very small explanation of my own upbringing. The rationale behind this design was guided by the work of Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Allowing participants to frame the narrative with their own short personal history to date is a key part of following a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 1997). It also is a useful tool in contextualising the interview and enabling participants to feel at ease and comfortable with the interview setting and the space to talk about their experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Wang & Geale, 2015). There is the risk with using narrative inquiry that it encourages a particular framing of class and a certain version of storying. This framing and understanding also enables discourses of class to shape the means of data collection, particularly where participants are familiar with typical tropes of classed personal narratives such as the themes of success, failure and resilience. As such, there was a need to remain critical when listening to these stories and analysing them, and this is something that I return to later in chapter eight, and again in chapter nine where I discuss the limitations of this study.

4.4.4 Sample

The participant target number was 10-15 participants in order to be able to give space for meaningful interaction whilst collecting experiences from across different Russell Group

universities. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling from social media sites used by professional services staff (Twitter/LinkedIn) (Cohen et al., 2007; Egbert & Sanden, 2019). Convenience sampling is defined by Cohen et al (2007) as '[involving] choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing the process until the required m, size has been obtained or those that happen to be available and accessible at the time' (Cohen et al., 2007:114). This method of sampling does not represent the wider group or population as the process is driven by the researcher, the researchers' networks and their immediately accessible networks. There is the limitation that the participants might be familiar to the researcher, that the pool might have limited scope, and that the research will not be generalisable. As an interpretivist study, there was no desire to produce generalisable research. The study and approach are also interested in the lives of experiences of individuals, acknowledging that each contribution is unique and valued; convenience sampling is therefore an appropriate method of sampling in this context.

Participants were recruited from multiple career stages, working in different departments and sometimes colleges. There were no inclusion criteria set around demographics or seniority. Participants were recruited via social media channels. Initially research recruitment posters were distributed through Twitter and LinkedIn, encouraging connections to share with their networks. This poster outlines the inclusion criteria for the research as well as following the British Education Research Association guidelines for conducting Educational Research which state the importance of offering anonymity (BERA, 2018). The associations of participants to institutions and their identities themselves were not useful to this research and therefore this assurance could be given from the outset. These social media channels were selected for distribution as there is a strong academic and higher education presence on Twitter but also a strong presence of professional services and administrative staff on LinkedIn. LinkedIn often has groups which are created for administrative support at different Universities. The reaction to my social media outreach was sizable and within one week I had recruited 10 participants. The original tweet was retweeted over 90 times yet there was an even distribution of participants stating they had come to my email address via either channel. It is worth noting here that research was conducted in 2022 following upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This may have limited my potential sample due to changing patterns in work (with more University staff working from home or in hybrid model) or due to 'survey fatigue' as a result of remote working and an expansion of studies conducted during the pandemic from 2020-2022 (Vyas, 2022; Patel et al., 2021). Participants came from eight different Russell Group universities. Some participants were recruited via word of mouth from an academic who had seen my post on Twitter. I did not collect formal data on legal sex or any other personal demographics as I did not feel these were relevant to the thesis subject

area and therefore these are not reported here; in accordance with GDPR this data should only be collected if relevant to the research questions.

4.4.5 Self-definition

Participants were asked to self-identify as working-class as part of the outreach process for this study. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, although studies looking at students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have used determinants there is a growing precedent in academic literature for the self-identification of working-class participants. Crew, and later, Burnell (2020;2021; 2022) outline the need for participants to define themselves as working-class for ethical reasons, Burnell-Reilly suggested it was not 'her place' to determine her participants' social class backgrounds on their behalf (Burnell, 2015; Burnell-Reilly, 2022). Self-identification reflects the dual determination of both individual resources and perceived rank within the social hierarchy (Kraus et al., 2009). This aligns with Bourdieu's theorisation that the embodiment of objective habitus enables subjective identities that embody class, through access to social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital (Rubin et al., 2014; Bourdieu 1985;1987). There are several limitations to self-identification which include misrepresentation of one's own status within society (O'Brien et al, 2021). Understandings of social class may also differ with context or experience and therefore may not mean the same to each person. There is also a pertinent concern that those choosing to take part in a study where they are asked to self-define are those who have a full understanding of their class position. This may alienate potential participants who may embody working-class experiences but are unable to express themselves using this terminology (Rubin et al., 2014). Rubin et al (2014:199) suggest that self-definition can act as a way of obtaining different information about participants and their experiences in the world. They state self-identification reaps the following benefits;

- Provides more direct assessments that relate to students' self-definition rather than the characteristics of students' parents.
- Can be interpreted without reference to objective standards that are constrained to particular contexts and time periods.
- Result in less missing data.
- Are more sensitive to changes in social class and SES (Socio-economic status). Assess the identity component of social class and SES.
- Have proven convergent validity with objective measures.
- Are stronger predictors of some outcome variables.
- Afford greater potential for comparisons between different situations and contexts; and
- Enable a conceptualization of social class as an intersectional construct.

As outlined in the literature review chapter, there are many shortcomings in using methods of participant selection which do not use self-definition. As I found, the sample within the literature review demonstrated that there is no single, agreed determination method for defining social class within research studies. As such, it is arguable that all the methods used in other research such as POLAR, Social Mobility Commission recommended guidance and attendance of state school each have multiple flaws. Self-definition follows the theoretical framework of a constructivist interpretation of the world; definition is a self-selecting identity which is arrived at through the consideration of personal history and experiences. Further, as I found a tension between preferred methods of self-definition in the literature review, participants are asked during interviews what the term 'working-class' means to them, asking them for the parameters by which working-class is defined. As such, this thesis can go further than previous studies in determining some insights around a contemporary definition of 'working-class' in the 21st Century.

In total, 16 participants were recruited but three could not take part in the study due to annual leave and working commitments. The total pool of participants came from seven of the different 24 Russell Group institutions in the UK. They come from a range of geographical backgrounds, although all were born and grew up in different parts of England and Scotland. These regions included Teesside and the North-East, the Midlands, the outskirts of London, Glasgow, the North-West, the South-West and the South-East. In terms of their roles, many were working in outreach or areas connected to widening participation, but individuals were also working in undergraduate management and support, marketing and more general student administration. Participants were from seven different Russell Group institutions, with two being from collegiate-style Russell Group universities. Participants were disproportionately female (with a sample of nine women to four men), all of white ethnic background and two people in the study outwardly discussed that they were of different sexual orientations to heterosexual. As such, the intersectional potential of this study is limited and not reflective of either the wide UK population, or the wider population of staff working in higher education in the UK Participants in this study all had varying levels of educational attainment. Two participants had not gained a university degree, whereas several were either in pursuit of doctoral funding or had already achieved their doctorate. This will be further considered in the limitations section of this thesis, to understand how typical or atypical this might be in relation to the population of working-class administrators in higher education across the UK. Further detail can be found about the participants in the appendix.

4.4.6 Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethics procedures at Oxford Brookes University, which included applying to the ethics committee outlining the steps, methods and purpose of this piece of research (see appendix). It also closely followed the BERA ethical guidelines for research in education, which highlight the critical principles of ensuring that 'all educational research is conducted with an ethic of respect for; the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of education research and academic freedom' (BERA, 2011:4). There was the possibility that participants would be known to me due to the sampling method used and the fact that the research call was disseminated via my own social media channels (Twitter and LinkedIn). Participants may then have been inclined to make certain statements about their position and experience. One member of the participant pool was known to me before the interview was conducted although they are neither directly influential in my current work nor influenced by my position. This study complied with GDPR regulations by firstly anonymising data samples, de-identifying the samples (by removing any identifiers such as University name, participant name, age or other personal details) and all participants were given pseudonyms. All data was kept in a secure location with password protection on the device and further on the storage facility.

4.4.7 Process

After participants contacted my Oxford Brookes email address, they were sent the participant information sheet, asked to review it, and to check they were happy with the study and the process outlined. Following this, they were sent the consent form and asked again to review and fill it in, sign and return it if they were happy with the items outlined. Participants were given a minimum period to review the consent form of 48 hours before interviews were booked in order that they were able to give informed consent and to drop out of the process, they were made aware this would have no detrimental effect.

I actively built rapport with the participants prior to the recording, to give some context about the study and the purpose of the study whilst also introducing myself and my own lived experiences in a limited, informative way. I wanted to do this in order to emphasise the interview as a place of safety, enabling the participant to speak freely and without fear of repercussion. It is also vital in this that the participant is made fully aware of the function and nature of the study from the outset. From a point of psychological safety, I wanted to emphasise that all reflections were welcomed and encouraged (Edmondson, 1999; Lechner & Tobias Mortlock, 2021). I was actively looking for participants to reflect on their life histories and how these interacted with their narratives about working in professional services roles in

Russell Group universities. Creating an environment of safety and respect was key and in doing this, I hoped to create an environment for candid and open reflections.

4.4.8 Analysis methods - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis as an approach has been in use for the past 100 years. The most readily cited paper around thematic analysis is Braun and Clarke (2006), and this is often credited as the seminal paper on the use of thematic analysis in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis has often been misinterpreted by researchers who have allocated it as being a method rather than the representation of an ontological research perspective, sitting between method and methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Over time, Braun and Clarke have addressed regular misconceptions of their original methodological contribution, with adaptations to their 2006 paper being made in their 2021 book (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Particularly, the idea that themes 'emerge' from the accounts of participants has been addressed in this later work. Often, researchers talk about finding these emerging themes from data as if they are objective 'Fact' that will exist regardless of interpretation or the context the researcher analysing the data is coming from. Rather, Braun and Clarke (2021) contend that the process of reflexive thematic analysis is heavily reliant on the novel and different interpretations different researchers bring to their work. This approach dispels the need to produce generalisable qualitative research. Interestingly, Braun and Clarke (2021) also contend that theses using reflexive thematic analysis need to outline why they have not chosen other methods of interpretation of data, and therefore this chapter will focus on the reasons for selecting reflexive thematic analysis, rather than also including the reasons why other forms of analysis have not been chosen (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexive thematic analysis fits securely within an interpretative and constructivist paradigmatic perspective as it understands the piece of research as involving the researcher, the researcher is part of the construction of the research generated. Further, reflexive thematic analysis relies on inductive analysis of the text rather than a pre-formation of deductive coding structures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The essence of this way of conducting analysis focuses on what the researcher sees and interprets from the account of the participant, rather than looking for emerging themes or what the data says explicitly, as conforming to a certain set of positivist markers. Reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges that the researcher brings with them certain lenses from which they view the research. This proposition of thematic analysis moves away from 'bias' alleviating tools like dual coding, destigmatising the concept of researcher 'bias' as being essential to the piece of research rather than detrimental to a preconceived idea of what the content of the research should look like. Dual coding is outside of the scope of reflexive thematic analysis, however, can be used for the original researcher

to double check they have interpreted things in a consistent manner (Braun & Clarke 2021). This approach is contested; whilst it epitomises the purest form of interpretivist qualitative research, there is an academic schism here between this kind of analysis and the ability of research to be replicable, and therefore seen as rigorous among academic communities.

4.4.9 Reflexive thematic analysis and narrative inquiry

Reflexive thematic analysis fits within the ontological perspective of using narrative inquiry as a method for data collection. Reflexive thematic analysis finds parallels with narrative inquiry around subjectivity, 'bias' and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Where I discussed the subjectivity of narrative inquiry being integral to the collection of new knowledge and the formation of new understanding, reflexive thematic analysis suggests the creation of knowledge is specific to time, place and the lens that the researcher brings to the collection of data and its analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis stresses that themes and experiences cannot be 'drawn out' or 'emerging' from the interview script as this suggests that there is a Truth to be uncovered which is universal. Rather, reflexive thematic analysis demonstrates that experiences are identified through the process of analysis as a result of the subjectivity the individual researcher brings with them to the research process and stress that this is a unique formation of knowledge as a result (Braun & Clarke 2006; 2022).

4.4.10 The process of reflexive thematic analysis

Braun & Clarke heavily advocate for the interpretation of qualitative research in an empathetic, malleable, fluid way. Despite this, they have been heavily credited in qualitative academic research for their "6 steps" approach to conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87). These are as follows:

(1) familiarising oneself with the data,
(2) generating codes
(3) constructing themes
(4) reviewing potential themes
(5) defining and naming themes, and
(6) producing the report

In subsequent work (2022; 2023) they have also advocated for the power of qualitative research to lie outside of formal structures and processes, underlining the necessity for researchers to be extremely well acquainted with their qualitative responses and to move reflexively through the data, rather than necessarily following a rigorous set of steps in a pre-

designated order (Braun & Clarke, 2022; 2023). To discern the unique creation of knowledge between participant and researchers as is promoted by Braun & Clarke, NVivo was used as the analytical tool of choice. Whilst Braun & Clarke often advocate for the use of pen and sticky notes, NVivo enables the coding of central themes in a seamless and interpretive way, allowing the researcher to collate central ideas before organising or reorganising into central themes and top-level codes. The process of reflexive thematic analysis is intended to move between steps repeatedly and the movement of codes is critical to how the text is analysed and understood. This is more easily achieved in NVivo.

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter outlined how the theoretical framework determined method selection. The theoretical framework guided the study towards using narrative inquiry alongside semi-structured interviewing techniques to combine the telling of personal historical narratives with the interpretation of current work and daily interactions. It has outlined the rationale behind the choice of method as being derived from what is currently known about the literature in this field. It demonstrated that this is the most appropriate way to conduct this research given the theoretical approach, scope and ambition of the study, and the relevance of the method to the relatively understudied experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff (McKay & Robson, 2023).

Chapters 5, 6, and 7: Analysis

5.0.1 Introduction to the analysis chapters

The story of the working-class professional services and administrative staff who feature in this study is multifaceted, intriguing, endearing, concerning and in some parts, it is the narrative of a social class of people who are often left behind, left out of contemporary policy decisions, and disregarded in modern Britain (McKenzie, 2015, 2017; McKenzie, 2017). Yet, their stories are far from ubiquitous or generalisable (Egbert & Sanden, 2019). Drawing from experiences in multiple Russell Group institutions and across the spectrum of administrative occupations, the participants in this study shared their historical narrative and working experiences in a way that reflects a small part of working in Higher Education today (UCU, 2022). The individuals in this study were all highly competent, highly engaged, highly qualified people. There is an often-peddled depiction of administrative and professional services staff as being responsible for mundane, 'easy' or straightforward tasks and this is a particular narrative I hope to counter within this study (Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016).

The findings and discussion from this study are presented as three analysis chapters. These have been laid out in this way, to integrate analysis with literature and discussion for a very specific reason. As Braun and Clarke (2023) note, the traditional method of separating an 'objective' findings section from an analysis section and subsequently a discussion section, comes from a positivist framing (Braun & Clarke, 2023). They argue that integrating analyses with a discussion of the literature and relevance to the wider world is integral to reflexive thematic analysis because:

> …Interpretation is inherent to the analytic process. You can't really separate out the results and the interpretation because they are kind of one and the same…We do think there is a strong argument for integration…the literature can really help you to engage with your data
>
> (Braun & Clarke 2023, 1:06:30).

In the opening analysis chapter, *Conceptualisations of class and a working-class identity*, I look at definitions of 'working-class' participants asserted through the proxies of hobbies, leisure, occupation, financial security, attitudes and behaviour. This section was designed to address the multiple ways of categorising working-class people in the literature review, looking at how the interpretation of those who identify as working-class may be changing, adapting or responding to the rescission of traditional 'working-class occupations' in the UK. These definitions were formed from the narrative inquiry portion of the interviews. This chapter

addresses working-class categorisation using other proxies like leisure, poverty, cultural capital and social exposure. This section also explores the multiple facets and realities of having a working-class identity; from belonging, to being 'in between', to exclusion, poverty and assumptions.

The second analysis chapter focuses on issues related to working as professional services and administrative roles in Russell Group universities. Here, I look at the relationships those participants in this study experienced with students, other professional services staff and the often fractious and detrimental relationships with academics. This chapter looks at the potential, career pathways, ambitions, training opportunities and support that are on offer for professional services and administration staff in Russell Group universities. These were areas which were apparent in the semi-structured section of the interviews. This chapter hopes to understand to what extent working-class professional services staff are fully included in the cultural fabric of the university by understanding how their needs and ambitions are taken into consideration.

In the third analysis chapter I turn to themes which were pervasive throughout the narrative inquiry and semi-structured elements of my interviews. This chapter looks at the following central themes; narratives of hard work and luck, the presence or absence of networks, guilt and financial anxiety and feeling underappreciated. These were themes which were neither connected to the participant's expression of why they felt they were working-class or directly connected to their contemporary experience of working in Russell Group universities. Rather, these themes were embedded throughout the interviews with the people in this study,

5.0.2 Self-reflection on the analysis process

To begin this chapter on the analysis of my interview transcripts, I will reflect on the experiences of conducting the interviews in this study. As Braun & Clarke (2022; 2023) note, being 'within' the research is part of the co-creation process between researcher and participant and their approach to reflexive thematic analysis draws significantly on the reflection of the researcher during the process of them also taking part (Braun & Clarke, 2022; 2023). The themes that each researcher identifies are completely unique to them in the moment; they are informed by their own personal narrative and epistemological beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun & Clarke (2022) also advocate for keeping records of thoughts, feelings, and perspectives throughout the process of conducting interviews in order to better understand the eventual evaluation and to be able to reflect fully on the piece of research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022; 2023).

I made notes during the period of data collection which are useful to reflect on here. The period over which the interviews took place was relatively short, due to the overwhelming response from the call for participants. The research took place during July and early August 2022 to enable professional services staff to take part. The summer period is often a busy time for administrative but direct contact with students and academics is reduced, and therefore it was felt this was the best period for conducting research with these participants. Of course, this time frame may have limited my potential sample, with university staff taking summer leave during late July and August. While discussion of interview methods might normally be found in solely in the methodology chapter of a thesis, it is important to return to the process of data collection here because it exemplifies the reflective nature of this study.

In some cases, multiple interviews took place on the same day, although were designed with substantial gaps in between them in order to reflect and prepare appropriately. I am mindful that due to the in-depth nature of these interviews, this may have reduced my reflexivity. During the narrative phase of the interviews, participants were open and candid with me about their experiences and I heard in depth about instances of neglect, bullying, harassment, and references to incidents of trauma and a difficult childhood. Due to the closeness of my own experiences to some of the participants, I found myself reflecting on the interviews on multiple occasions, long after the interview had been completed. I found that I was more drawn to the stories of the participants here which reflected my own narrative and as such I found it easier to ask follow-up questions. From reviewing my notes, I struggled to build rapport with the men in this study at the outset of the interview and it took longer for me to open their narratives and experiences.

In some instances, my own experiences had been very closely aligned with the experiences of my participants, particularly in the retelling of stories around childhood. I found these interviews interesting and collaborative, but at the same time troubling and reminiscent of experiences I had tried to leave in the past. I had not anticipated that these strong emotional reactions I had during the interview process itself would recur when I embarked on the analysis. In fact, I found that I needed to take much longer than expected to transcribe and analyse the transcripts. This period stretched out before me as I often found I had revisited not only the content of the transcript itself but also the feelings and thoughts I had had during the initial interview. I had also, of course, forgotten some of the content of the earlier interviews once I had completed the thirteenth and found returning to some of the personal historical narratives in the analysis quite upsetting. I will return to ethical practice in research in chapter eight.

5.1 Findings and analysis: Conceptualisations of class and working-class identity

In conducting the literature review (chapter two) it became increasingly clear that researchers have used variable methods for defining working-class participants for the purposes of sociological research, with the concept of class being inherently 'difficult to quantify' (Perale, 2022: 27). The literature review found that class was defined around several factors; indices of deprivation, postcodes, self-identification, the allocation of free school meals, parental occupation and family history, state school attendance, parental education and a combination of some of these (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Boliver, 2017; Burnell, 2015; Friedman et al., 2021a; Gorard et al., 2019). When asked 'What does the term 'working-class' mean for you?', participants responded in three ways; issues related to money, economic standing and poverty; issues related to employment, profession, education and occupation; and in terms which can be considered 'cultural'; owning a car, going on holiday, hobbies, taste, and housing. Some participants also additionally understood working-class to be a mentality, a way of seeing the world, a set of behaviours or approaches to life which might itself be considered as a form of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

I talked with my participants at length about why they believed that they came from a working-class background and still held an identity as working-class. Many participants expressed how difficult it was to define what they meant by 'working-class', some, due to their changing economic circumstances but also many who recognised that it meant slightly different things to different people. For several participants, the traditional conceptualisation of class was taken into consideration, and they expressed their feelings of being working-class in relation to the explicit occupations of their parents or grandparents. Molly* described her grandparents as being 'from down the pits', another defined his working-class identity partly in relation to the profession of his father (a bricklayer). Other professions which were mentioned by participants to wholly or partly explain their working-class background included a bus conductor, steel worker, dock worker, cleaner, electrician, decorator, shop worker, factory worker, and being unemployed.

This historic family lineage is an interesting reflection given our previous discussion around Friedman and O'Brien's paper, *Deflecting privilege* who found some of their interviewees relied on their historic class status to assert themselves as working-class (Friedman et al., 2021b; Friedman, O'Brien, et al., 2017). Later in this section I look further into feelings of 'in-betweenness' that the participants felt, and a tension between historical family professions and experiences in their upbringing and their position now working within an ostensibly middle-class environment on relatively 'good' wages, with a certain degree of financial income and

security. In a few cases participants in this sample had previously worked themselves in more traditional 'working-class' roles, as electricians, bar staff, as cleaners or on low wages in one example, working as a kitchen porter. David* explained his working-class background in relation to his career journey before starting work in a university:

> *I was sort of 15 when I left school, which was typically a couple of years before you normally would. I had a brief period of working in kitchens as a kitchen porter, a few other jobs, doing leafleting and things and then went to college. Basically, no qualifications.*

David* was a rare example in the context of my other participants where he related his class background in part to his own career background (among other factors). More commonly, where professions are mentioned by participants in relation to their class background, they are referring to members of their immediate family (usually a parent). Friedman and O'Brien (2021) assert that participants in their study wrongly describe themselves as being working-class due to their *current* income and positionality and here, a similar argument could be applied (Friedman, 2014; Friedman et al., 2021a).

I counter, though, that the experiences emulated by those in this study are reflective of their *cumulative* life histories, their struggles, disadvantages and marginalisation prior to working in the middle-class environment of a Russell Group university. This argument is made on the grounds of the experiences which are emulated within this study; in all interviews participants reflected on their experiences throughout their lives which had created an oscillation between habitus and field which was being consistently interjected by their life histories. I show this through the narratives explored in this chapter, and in chapter seven where some of the cross-cutting themes are elucidated by personal history. And yet, there are also experiences of marginalisation which persist throughout their working lives which they believe are strongly linked to their social class identities. These experiences, far from being distinctly economic, take the shape of a type of cultural baggage that participants continue to carry with them through life (Binns, 2019; Crew, 2021a; Skeggs, 2004). This kind of cultural baggage is best evidenced in chapter seven where participants consistently refer to instances of fear around poverty and money. Even though many were economically secure, several participants mentioned holding an irrational fear of poverty when it came to the cost-of-living crisis, and it was clear that this continued to form a key anxiety. In many cases within this study, whilst their employment is (relatively) secure, a number who are working in one of their first professional roles are on incredibly low and insufficient wages to subsist, despite their position within a 'middle-class' institution. In dismissing their experiences as being 'middle-class' due to their

new roles and positionalities, this study would be doing an enormous disservice to those who have come from across the breadth of society and who have objectively flourished despite the circumstances typically surrounding their childhood and young adulthood.

5.2 Being working-class in the UK today

The nature of what it means to be working-class in the UK today seemed to be in dispute among the participants in this study. Two participants explicitly explained that they thought the nature of defining as working-class had been changing and was different now to the definition that might have been applied to the term 30, 40 or 50 years ago. For one middle-aged woman working in the midlands, Rebecca*, she explained it in the following way:

> *I think about this quite a lot, because I think there's just been such a shift in, you know, [in] the last 40 years…it's becoming less and less easy to define what we mean by working-class.*

Being able to reflect on the movement of class boundaries through her own lifetime, Rebecca* indicated to me that she had been able to see the changes before her within a period of forty years. Her geographic location had been static, she felt a strong connection to her local area and a sense of wanting to be close to family communities. Growing up in a big community in a northern city had a defining impact on her identity and she felt strongly rooted to her local area as a result of the cohesion she felt by being part of this community. There appeared, it seemed, to be a certain 'way of being' as a working-class person living in a former centre of industrialisation, steeped with cultural ties to things like football and a background of Irish heritage. There was a similar connection to community for others in this study, too. Annie* speaks about how she felt a sense of working-class community talking about the council estate she grew up on when it was used as a point of ridicule for people from other backgrounds:

> *There was one incident in particular where I challenged someone who was talking about going through a council estate [and said it] was like watching Jerry Springer. [They were] talking about how people have furniture on the front gardens and all the men were wearing vests and… I mean I might joke about this with my brothers, but that's okay because we can. Because that's our space you know, that's kind of [different] when someone is doing that in a…mean spirited way, like snobbery.*

I will return regularly to the point of spatial temporalities and the importance of space to class throughout this study, but this example serves as an instance where space and the construct of that space is inherently tied to class, who belongs to that environment and who is able to make judgement on the constructs of that space. Whilst some of the participants in this study had been geographically mobile, moving to take on new jobs or studies, both Rebecca* and Annie* were able to see the movement in class boundaries, attitudes and behaviours as they had changed in one place over time. These behaviours and attitudes were demonstrated both intrinsically, within communities, but also extrinsically, as Annie* notes, towards communities using old tropes of classist rhetoric.

The distinction between different occupations has become more blurred in the last decade due to the increasing nature of work in the knowledge economy. Professional occupations are now assisted through technology to be sedentary roles which require less physical labour (Dolby et al., 2004; Rolfe, 2017). As ONS (2019) data suggests, manufacturing employment decreased drastically from 1960-2018 with services sector employment increasing dramatically in the same period (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The movement to close the centres of traditional working-class employment such as the mining industry in the North of England and Wales from the late 1970s and into the 1980s is partly responsible for this shift in attitudes. Gildea (2021) describes the significance of the 1984-5 miners' strike as the 'unmaking' of the working-class, the 'last great battle of the organised industrial class, of which the miners were the heroic vanguard', that social class in relation to occupation was henceforth never the same again. Annie* had recognised that this change had occurred, from her understanding it was a movement away from manual labour which made defining working-class more difficult:

> *I think it used to be more on my parents' certain kind of job. For me, it's around that kind of, limited income, free school meals…I grew up in a council house, or social housing, as we say now, because we don't say council house anymore.*

Annie* framed her living conditions as being closely tied to growing up in a working-class environment. There are two particularly interesting points that she raises within this excerpt. Primarily, we see the exploration of class as in flux, and as it is connected to the concept of social or council housing. At the end of the second world war many people were living in social housing, with the concept of social housing being quite normative for many families at the time. As Sandbrook (2017) notes, living in social housing was not unusual, it was where most of the population lived. Until right to buy was introduced by Thatcher's government in 1980, the concept of home ownership was not necessarily the norm (Sandbrook, 2017). The second

interesting thing about the way in which Annie* describes her living arrangements is the way in which she changes her framing of council housing during the piece, to call it 'social housing' because; *we don't say council house anymore*. Indicating a movement in semantics from council to social housing reflects the way in which council housing, over time, has been subject to intense scrutiny and ridicule by national press and social commentators in the UK (Jones 2012). Earlier in this chapter I showed how class operates outside of the boundaries of time; being connected to personal history and experience. At this point I would also suggest that class here is able to operate outside of the remit of space, that it is embedded in thoughts and experiences which permeate environment, structure and spatial mobilities (Valentine, 2014). Class does not just exist in inhabited spaces but also in spaces of the past, spaces located in temporality (Binns, 2019).

Some participants regarded their class background through socio-economic factors in alignment with social mobility discourse. Some said their parents had not completed a university education (or had done later in life) and they had received free school meals as a child. In instances where the participants stated they were from a traditional 'northern working-class' town, more emphasis was placed on parental occupations and historic family obligations such as in mining or labouring, which continue to have a sense of quasi-romantic resonance in these regions. I found that participants who explained that they were from southern counties in England placed heavier emphasis on growing up in economic disadvantage and poverty rather than necessarily associating their class status with what might be considered important regional working-class occupations. This geographical divide is possibly a result of the lack of traditional association to heavy industry, mining, steelwork and dock work regardless of the different types of traditional working-class labour that tend to be more typically associated with southern counties such as farm labouring and agriculture. There is also a popular narrative which is still present in the UK national media which associates northern counties and towns in the UK with working-class origins.[5]

This kind of national rhetoric may well play into the conceptualisations of class that are held in the popular imagination, informing how participants then describe and refer to their social class status. We know that some of the most economically deprived areas in the UK are situated in 'the south', places such as Jaywick and Hastings (Goodier et al., 2019; Ministry of Housing, 2019). Whilst there are more areas of deprivation in the 'north' of the UK, deprivation in the south exists (Ministry of Housing, 2019). This makes the associations between industry

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[5] (The Mirror, 2015) states 'the 10 most working-class towns in the UK', include Stoke, Kingston Upon Hull, Wakefield, Sunderland, Wolverhampton, Carlisle, County Durham, Leicester, Lincoln and Peterborough.

and employment, region and social class as demonstrated by some participants particularly interesting, and the way they describe their social class to be something worth further research, because there is greater nuance to be discovered here. Returning to the participant testimonies here, participants from 'the south' told me how they'd felt the need to caveat their accent or presentation by describing their social class background as they did not want to be perceived as something that they felt they were not (i.e., middle-class).

> It's not even questioned that you would come from a similar background. And at points, I've challenged it a few times…normally what I'll do is I'll negate the conversation by letting people know that I'm not who they think I am…there's a lot of classism, I think, and I don't know about you, but I find sometimes with my accent people take it that I'm middle-class.

This asks an interesting question of class and social mobility and the idea that a working-class identity should be shed somehow in order to progress. These participants wanted to keep hold of their working-class background, it wasn't seen as something that needed to be discarded. This presents a central criticism of the social mobility narrative, something which I return to later in the conclusion to this thesis.

Other economic factors were associated with a definition of working-class by participants. These factors related to explicit mentions of poverty and economic hardship, and difficulty in accessing resources. The most difficult parts of conducting this study were in instances where individuals reflected on their economic hardship growing up, often experiencing their parents making difficult decisions about housing, heating, food and extra provision for their children. Oftentimes, these trade-offs between choosing between heating and eating formed the basis of tensions in the family which were daily battles of survival. This was the part of the interview I found particularly difficult as it resonated with some of my own experiences, it often reflected on a sense of deprivation which was desperate, despite the actions of the families in these stories working harder and harder to provide against a tide of economic strife and poverty. This resonates with some of the reports of precarity and insecurity that Crew (2020;2021) explores with working-class academics (Crew, 2020, 2021). These academics often feel a real visceral sense of precarity and an anxiety around money due to the desperation to avoid being in economic hardship, to an extent which they had previously felt as a child and a young adult (Crew, 2021). For some in these studies, economic hardship was still very much a concern. There is a dichotomy with my own study; apart from two participants, many of the individuals here are now economically secure, yet there is still a tangible fear of poverty across all the interviews. Within the participant testimonials, Lizzie*, whose parents had experienced

hardship, including losing their home after the 2008 financial crisis, explained how this visceral reaction to economic anxiety had manifested from past experiences:

You know it wasn't an environment where education was fostered because both my parents were extremely stressed, because we'd lost everything you know. Where were meals going to come from? Like that was what was more concerning [for them]

She went on to link this experience she had remembered from being a child, to the feelings of insecurity through her early adulthood, and how this had been a limiting factor in her development as a late teenager:

I don't know…as long as I can remember, it's something you can't forget about. It's just always in the back of your mind that I can't afford this, or I can't do that. Or you know, I've got to be really careful this month.

On occasion, when we talk about poverty in the national press, the media or where the term is used politically, depth of emotion, feeling and impact on individuals tackling these struggles is lost. The participants in this study were clear about the memories they had about economic hardship and how it had framed their relationship with insecurity going forwards into their adult lives. I explore this in greater length in chapter eight, where we see how economic hardships participants had permeate their present feelings towards being financially secure, but it is important to note how strongly economic deprivation featured as participants' descriptions of being working-class. For many, economic deprivation was a constant threat, as Annie* notes, it permeated and punctuated much of her childhood:

I just remember being very aware of money and being very aware of the kind of impact of that on the house. You know…we were not doing things that other people did in a really casual way.

Penny*, a young female professional services worker in the South-west described how growing up in economic hardship had enabled her to be better at her job and had shaped her responses to other people around her:

…growing up like that has made me a lot more empathetic and a lot more compassionate. Once you've experienced something like that, you don't ever want someone else to feel that way… I think some people who have never

experienced that, like that isolating feeling, almost like shame as well. Yeah, they just don't quite understand it in the same way.

Penny* described in more detail how she had experienced neglect and poverty growing up, how her family were consistently having to make choices. This illuminated how important financial insecurity had been to her understanding of childhood:

…either afford heating or food, it was very much that sort of dynamic.

She was constantly aware as a child that she could not afford basic necessities. One example she gave was a memory that she held that as a child, her family could not afford to buy her new shoes even though hers had holes in, as she explained:

… I was always acutely aware that other people had more in terms of everything really, you know, they constantly had more new things. And there's me with my school shoes that have holes in, you know?

Whilst she doesn't linger in the interview on describing this in any more detail, the imagery related to being unable to afford footwear sparks a feeling of being cold, damp and uncomfortable. This was something she was often struggling to reveal to others around her at work in the present for fear of judgement. This vulnerability was something she saw as a trade-off between her authentic self and being portrayed as someone who was professional:

Yeah, I think it's a vulnerability to an extent. I particularly kind of present myself as someone who's very capable, and you know, good at her job. And talking about the fact I was almost neglected as a child is…I don't know, it tends to make people uncomfortable…the response doesn't always tend to be positive…it tends to be…almost awkward.

She was adamant that instead of revealing too much about her childhood that she built relationships with those around her based on 'neutral' shared interests, like reading, rather than seeking to share formative experiences. She was actively distancing herself in her professional capacity from her former life experiences. This is an example where Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus and field is relevant because her understanding is that the fields she has experienced operate as separate entities, that she is able to transition from one to the other. This example compliments the social mobility narrative that cultural capital might be exchanged in certain environments for acceptance, and to a certain extent this is an example

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where Penny* is leaving her personal histories behind her. Here, Penny* is opting to adopt her new middle-class surroundings through the medium of her reading, books and literature. She is enacting the discourse of social mobility as a zero-sum concept, having to shed the visible traits of the former in order to successfully pass into the field of the latter.

As I will explore later in chapter eight, the experience of financial deprivation is a traumatic memory which tends to resonate with the people in this study throughout their adult lives, even at points where they were able to become financially stable. For Penny*, working-class meant economic deprivation and is something which has lasted with her throughout her educational and professional career. It is something which she continued to worry about in relation to her professional services salary and soaring costs of living she was currently experiencing. This expounds the idea that class is inherently connected to space, time and context and takes Bourdieu's concepts a little further. The spatio-temporal dimensions of classed identity transcend the present in a way that radically challenges the linear, rational choice model of social mobility outlined above. Rather than a social mobility narrative offering a pathway towards an aspirational middle-class, where working-class identity is left in the rear-view mirror, Penny* demonstrates that features of her working-class background continue to affect her. It is impossible for these participants to remove themselves from their classed pasts, with space, time and environment providing intersections with classed histories which continually affect them in the present (Binns, 2019).

Three participants spoke extensively about factors relating to housing: one being repossession due to the 2008 financial crisis and another being around her experiences growing up in council housing. This point again refers to the spatial dimension of classed narratives. Despite being now removed from this environment, it is still a pertinent part of their reflection on their current understanding of life. The effect of past interactions with space (council housing) reflects how Annie* views her current circumstance, reflecting on a past life. Annie* described the experiences of living in council housing during her childhood:

> *I remember when I was a kid, we had a TV that you put 50 pence's in, and the person would come to collect the money and we would hide. So, it's just, I think it's those experiences of kind of being aware of money, being aware of financial limitations, being aware of the fact that the household income can change*.

Michael* was one of the few participants who related his definition of being working-class to situations and financial relationships he had had as an adolescent and adult. I found predominantly that participants related their working-class identities to experiences and phenomena which had either happened prior to their birth (parental occupation) or

experiences growing up as a child or teenager. Whilst Michael* did point to occupation and deprivation as being key actors in his assertion of a working-class identity, he also focused on the homelessness he had experienced in his twenties. He spoke about how this stretch of homelessness had only been mitigated by relying on the generosity of other people around him, that a sense of community around him had enabled him to find somewhere to live in better accommodation. Michael's* life experience was interesting to me, as I knew him personally, I found that his narrative and life experiences challenged the preconceived notion I had of his character.

Despite this connection I found it harder to respond to instances where he reflected on deeply personal and traumatic events in his life, such as being made homeless. As someone who had grown up in relative poverty, in uncertain circumstances and a difficult, rocky family situation, he had ascended the professional hierarchies working first in the financial district in the city and later going on to move rapidly within the hierarchy of professional services. However, in speaking about his professional journey he had had troubling experiences whilst working in the city, in roles which are traditionally dominated by privately educated and middle-class graduates. He described how he had struggled to fit in into these scenarios, despite adopting the dress, connections and insights of those around him.

Often, participants framed their economic deprivation growing up in relation to things that they could not afford, like certain technologies, new clothes, holidays abroad, hobbies and transport. This economic deprivation was framed in a similar way to many of the papers in the literature review in chapter two: in *fitting in or standing out* Reay et al (2010) explore how the necessity for working-class students to undertake paid work was important in being able to access necessities. For David* and Penny*, the sense of not having the same access to resources, technologies and material goods left them feeling a sense of disadvantage that they did not belong with the other children in their immediate social circles. This wasn't the case for all the participants in this study and David* and Penny* speak specifically about how this lack of material goods left them unable to be part of their immediate communities, very much belonging to a group which was operating at a deficit level in comparison to their local area. Penny* had a very distinct image of what the housing situation of others around her was like and she spoke about:

> *Seeing almost like these grand design houses, there's glass everywhere, and everything's very minimalist. And it just kind of it just really blew me away that people kind of live like that, and don't recognize what they have.*

Here, we return to the concept of time and the spatial dimension of class. The reflection of the 'grand design' houses makes a reference towards the kind of housing this participant had experienced in her own childhood and growing up in a working-class household. She explains that the people with these huge houses don't recognize what they have, suggesting that she has an understanding of an 'other' which goes hand in hand with her class-based experiences. The ability to oscillate between remembering her own home environment and the houses she sees before her allow her to compare and contrast the classed reality she possesses, but others don't. Being able to make these reflections to some extent contextualises the experiences of people she has in the present; being able to place their privilege alongside her own experiences of under-privilege, she reflects on how this influences their opinions and attitudes, and in this occasion, their ignorance of the world around them. There is also the suggestion in this passage that the ability to compare and contrast enables her to be ignorant about the world and how it operates, again feeding into her ability to contend the notion that working-class administrative staff are in some way intellectually deficient.

David*, a slightly older man working in the North described the lack of access to goods as much more tangible, framing it within the kinds of objects which would have been new and emerging technologies as he was growing up in the 1990s.

> *If you're at school with middle-class people, they would always have videotapes before, you know, your family had them or DVDs or computers or the internet. You're always a bit behind and you're left at a bit of a disadvantage.*

David* used the availability of technologies to explain how he perceived the experiences of working-class people in comparison to other people in their communities. He understood accessing things like videotapes as a metaphor for the working-class experience more broadly; that things did not come easily and that you had to 'work your way up' rather than being able to take these sorts of material goods and experiences for granted.[6] David* had grown up in a household with his grandparents after his parents, who had had a 'complicated relationship' had broken up and he had been kidnapped by his mum and taken to a different country. He noted that his dad had been absent in his childhood, being not 'really capable' of raising a child. His care was therefore provided for by his grandparents, one of whom had been incredibly unwell during his childhood. Whilst he described being 'very lucky' and his grandparents 'very caring', financial resources were few and far between. Coupled with this,

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[6] Other examples where participants mentioned being unable to access material goods and services that other people, they knew had growing up can be seen in Appendix.

the small village he grew up in had started to become a destination for people moving out of the nearest city, looking for places from where they could commute to work. He became aware over time that those who had moved from the city out to his village had different access to materials, opportunities and networks.

Being aware of how different people around them were experiencing life was central to how many participants then defined their own tastes with the tastes and cultural pursuits of those around them. Relating to the concept of Bourdieu's hierarchies of taste and presence of different kinds of cultural capital, many participants defined their situation in relation to the tastes and dispositions of those middle-class peers that they had around them growing up (Bourdieu, 1984):

> *People had horse riding lessons and all these extra-curricular things.*

In these references, participants would usually use the example of the hobby as a metric to then compare and contrast their own experiences. This also extended to the types of holidays (if any) that were experienced by those in this study. Relating their own experience of holidaying in the UK to the holidays of the richer middle-class children around them, David* explained:

> *We would go to Butlins that was our kind of family thing and this one time we went to one down in Bognor Regis and if we'd had a car, it would have been you know, maybe a couple of stops. We had to…swap over trains and all these things, there's a lot of stuff that you have to plan around to make the cheapest journey you can to get somewhere.*

In other narratives, there was a complete absence of this kind of leisure time away from home or a dislocation between the kinds of UK seaside holidays that were often a feature of a working-class childhood and the skiing trips and exotic holidays they used as comparisons between them and the peers around them.[7] The above example also highlights a very real concern for many here who recognized that a lack of access to transport made journeys outside of their immediate locality incredibly difficult, if not, impossible. This lack of mobility highlights the localisation and geographic confinement that often underscores working-class realities; multiple bus trips to make relatively short journeys or the impossibility of having to walk multiple miles per day to get to work or school. The concept of geographic mobility, or in this case, restriction, links to the idea of space which was considered earlier in this chapter.

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[7] Additional examples can be seen in Appendix.

Class not only exists in the types of literal space (housing, buildings) that individuals are able to inhabit but the limitations of poverty mean that class and pace is also connected to geographic restriction and an inability to be able to move beyond, a status enforced by stasis.

There is a neoliberal narrative around working-class people in the UK which has been fostered during the last 40 years to explain poverty and economic disadvantage as being the fault of the people it affects through their own seeming fecklessness and inability to succeed (Bloodworth, 2016; Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2017). This attitude towards working-class people was explored at greater length in the introduction. Some of my participants were abjectly affected by issues like neglect but there were also many who experienced a desperation on behalf of their parents that their children would be successful despite the narrative that was perpetuated by the media (Jones, 2012). Annie* explained how her mother would walk her to a ballet lesson, sit and wait whilst she had her lesson and then walk her home again in order that she could have a hobby, even though she was most likely incredibly tired at the end of the working day:

> *My mum took me to ballet lessons. I grew up in a council estate in a village. And there were no buses after four or five at night. So, we would have to walk to the ballet classes. And my mum would have to bring my dinner with me that she would have made for me. And she would sit there with me when I did my ballet class and then walk home…it must have been about a 40-minute walk. And you just think she gave it like, three, four hours of her time just so I could go and do ballet classes. You know, it's a really loving thing to do. I probably moaned the whole way there and the whole way back.*

The elements of cultural capital which are in focus here both reinforce the traditional concept of class whilst also challenging that conceptualisation; aside from being employment oriented, many identified their class background based in response to the facets of a normative middle-class identity, yet the 'ghosts of habitus' of their childhood consistently interact with their life in the present (Binns, 2019).

5.3 Changing class, changing stations?

One theoretical concept which has been under discussion throughout the last 30 years in sociology is the possibility that class can change with circumstance, work, or salary (Phillips et al, 2020:1). Even in explaining to other researchers in education what the focus of this study is has met with some interesting criticism. One of the most memorable statements I

encountered was 'of course you can't have working-class academics, it's a complete contradiction'. The idea of tension between social class identity and academia persists. This tension was explored in the literature review in chapter two. The notion of social mobility itself as a construct implies that movement up the hierarchy is a movement away from something negative and towards something which is better, with the implication that a working-class identity is something to be moved away from. The normative discourse of class directs people towards an assimilation of the middle. The popular imagination and popular discourse constantly remind us that middle-class lives are normative, upper-class/wealthy lives are superlative, and anything else is deviant (Foucault,1982; Hook, 2001). The concept of being able to change social class therefore relies heavily on an economic understanding of social class; if you can acquire more wealth and a greater salary you can change your social class (Phillips et al, 2020). This narrative is strongly aligned with the concept of social mobility as it manifests in the UK today (Blandford, 2017; Case, 2018; Elliott-Major & Machin, 2018). However, as Skeggs has countered, personal narrative and history still affects the experience of the social world, because class is a cultural manifestation (Skeggs, 2004). In the next section I look at how these tensions, between habitus of origin and professional environment have manifested for those within this study.

5.3.1 Belonging and being 'in between'

In the previous section I discussed the dislocation sometimes experienced in the experiences of people who hold working-class identities and have come from subjectively working-class families once they move out of their original environment and into new contexts which may have different class-based associations. In research related to working-class students and working-class academics, sociologists such as Crozier et al and Reay et al (2009; 2010; 2019) found that people from working-class backgrounds felt a sense of being 'in between', a liminality, not quite fitting into their home life and family but also not quite fitting into their new university.

The sense of belonging in the context of working-class professional services was felt viscerally in two key spheres; one in terms of class-based belonging which will be discussed in the context of the university environment and the other, as feeling fraudulent or somehow disingenuous to their class origins as a result of their new occupation in professional services and administration at university. This wasn't something that was experienced by every participant, but a substantial number of individuals in this study described feeling in some way dissociated from their class origins. This was expressed colourfully here. There appears to be a strong internal tension between wanting to be authentic yet being removed from their origins.

One participant described this concept of the 'middle space':

It's a bit murky for me, because I feel like I'm in that like middle space. I identify as working-class, but I'm like a bit of a class traitor.

The use of the word 'traitor' here is an interesting one and relates both to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and Attridge's (2021) notion of the double agent. Here, the recipient of the symbolic violence has embodied the fact they do not belong to the cultural world in which they work by internalising the difference and outwardly professing themselves as a traitor to their own cultural roots (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Belonging is a central tenet of this tension. Participants commented on no longer belonging to their original environment due to their new profession, something which was also marked out by a new and often more comfortable wage. Describing a dissociation between their original identity it was remarked:

It's quite hard, because then you're in this weird position where you don't belong here, but you don't belong there, because they're telling you you've changed.

Participants felt this lack of belonging viscerally and often caveated their response by being self-deprecating. On more than one occasion, the idea of being a 'class traitor' was explicit:

…the phrase class traitor popped into my head…

This 'traitorship' was expanded on by nearly every participant in the sample. Explaining further, one male professional services colleague expanded that he felt himself to be working-class and that the experiences he had had growing up had enabled him to have a certain relationship with money, status and capital and that these powerful memories were impactful in his day-to-day life as an adult in his mid 30s. He described this further:

I would deem myself, so I would deem myself working-class, but certainly my salary and lifestyle now reflect people will look at me and say, I'm middle-class. And I think that's because, you know, it's, it's not necessarily an automatic shift from one to the other. And that's because of your experience. But also, your history as well. I think, particularly with something I particularly noticed in the Northeast is the reluctance to describe yourself, almost hold yourself back… it's almost a shame to say that you're middle-class now. It's like you've lost your roots or whatever. But it's also about forgetting where you come from, and you're constantly reminded of that.

This point emphasizes a Bourdieusian understanding of forms of capital. These forms of capital are valued differently in the working-class field compared to the middle-class field. In having access to both, this participant recognises and is attentive of the difference and the ability he was able to perform to each of the different circumstances. In making meaning of these cultural worlds, as social actors, we can play our part in reproducing the structures that help to define belonging and difference. And yet, this moves beyond Bourdieu; suggesting that the participant in question was in a state of limbo, being able to recognise the two cultural worlds in which he existed yet not feeling fully acquainted with either, despite his education and life experiences as an adult (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). It presents a more complex picture of field not as a single social context but rather a lamination of multiple social fields, lived in simultaneously.

The concept of being 'in between' speaks to the concept of class as one which is dynamic, fluid and able to change (Reay et al, 2010). Whilst participants were incredibly aware and often affected by their past historical narrative, they had, in some respects moulded to their new surroundings. This notion calls into conflict the theoretical framework employed. Bourdieu recognises that:

> …*agents or groups of agents are defined by their relative positions in this space. Each of them is confined to a position or a precise class of neighbouring positions, and one cannot in fact occupy – even if one can do so in thought – two opposite regions of the space.* Bourdieu, 1991:230).

The supposition is that a logical sense of the world can be made in attributing agents to certain positions which marked by the agents within those positions having similar 'dispositions and interests, thus producing similar practices and adopting similar stances' and yet, as we see in the examples here, whilst there is a physical embodiment of institutional space by the actors in this study, they continue to occupy the theoretical space both of their historic class position and their newly found working environment.

Jane* explained this conflict in terms of fashion. She had never entertained wearing a dress to work, but after a period of working within the university she had started doing so. She had noticed that the women around her wore dresses as part of their 'working uniform' and so to not participate in this way left her feeling dislocated from her new environment. She described feeling at odds with her own identity on bumping into a friend as she was leaving for work one day. Describing how her friend had asked whether she was going somewhere special, she

began to understand how the tastes of her new environment had come in direct contact with her existing class position and lifestyle; there was a direct conflict. Although she had embodied the classed position of the workers around her, there was a distinction between how she had dressed previously and how she had been confronted by a close friend.

In this example, we can understand how the theories of Bourdieu can be used to both explain this social distinction, but we can also question how applicable Bourdieu is (Bourdieu, 1991). The movement from her old style of dress to her new style of dress would suggest that she had fully transitioned between classes, taking on the dispositions that gave her, as an agent, part of that group identity. However, she had clearly not fully engaged or been absorbed into the full identity of her new group despite adopting this style of dress; she was still functioning in a physical space (the location of her house) therefore accepting some elements of this new group, whilst actively rejecting other parts of it. Bourdieu's discussion of capital does not adequately account for this kind of in-between living where one is able to draw on and experience the tension of living across different fields, where capital is deployed in different ways (Bourdieu, 1991). She describes this embodied sense that she portrays comfort in her middle-class 'uniform' yet feels deeply internally uncomfortable. This suggests that rather than being able to transit fully to a new class identity that there is a tangible conceptualisation of identity which fuses the experiences of employment in the present with historical classed experiences growing up, as well as continual classed experiences which are realised through maintaining personal relationships and occupying different spaces.

5.3.2 Accent and identity

To counter the concept of class as fluid, it is interesting to note how strongly participants identified as working-class within this study and how much they actively sought out people with similar backgrounds and experiences throughout their working lives. Accents and the relationships between accent and identity are often used as a proxy for working-class identity as explored in the literature review in chapter two. This proxy works on an understanding of normativity which places a neutral accent as being normative, an upper class 'posh' (or received pronunciation) as being the goal and by deficit, an accent associated with northern regions as being sub-optimal and disregarded. Molly* described how her accent and being from Yorkshire was strongly associated with a working-class background:

> *I think my accent is a thing as well, because I've got a Yorkshire accent. And I think that there's a sort of connotation sometimes that anyone that's got a Yorkshire accent comes from a working-class background.*

Some within this study who had clear, usually 'northern' accents spoke about how accents related directly to their identity as working-class and the expectations others around them had about their background, level of education or professionalism. This often took the form of microaggressions and were directed from students, parents of students and other employees within the institutions with participants explaining how others had interpreted their role in connection with their accent as being lesser or 'not in charge'.

It is important here to define the concept of a microaggression as it related to symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). The term has most recently been used to describe the abject experiences of working-class people in universities through the guise of working-class academics, with Crew (2020), and Warnock (2016) identifying examples of microaggressions such as criticising the intelligence and mannerisms of working-class academics explicitly. The origin of the term is closely aligned with Critical Race Theory and the experience of people of colour in the US (Pierce, 1970). People of colour in US academia are still regularly subject to microaggressions such as having their names misremembered, being subjected to intense scrutiny or being perceived to be less intelligent on account of their race or ethnic background (Campos, 2023; Escobedo, 2023). Pierce (1970) first coined the term 'microaggression'. 'Microaggression' as a term was originally conceptualised in order to describe insulting moments for BIPOC (Black, indigenous and people of colour) within American society. These moments included overt insults, passive dismissal, active prejudice and more concealed and antagonistic behaviour that black people had experienced and were continuing to experience at the time (Pierce, 1970). For Bourdieu, the concept of a microaggression is a symbolic violence, acting against the victim and dictated to by the perpetrator, often these symbolic violence's are imperceptible and yet present in the collective subconscious. In Bourdieusian terms they might therefore also be misrecognised as part of what is acceptable or 'normal' behaviour rather than something that should be counteracted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The concept of a microaggression is seemingly transferable between the context in which it was originally conceptualised and the experiences of people from less privileged class backgrounds. However, it is worth noting that the term requires that we exercise a degree of care in implementing it and using it without due caution. The experiences of different minoritized groups are inherently different and although not more or less prominent, are overt depending on the manifestation of the minoritized characteristic as either visible, or not. Here, I have used a broad interpretation of microaggression as a theme to identify points in which people in this sample experienced hostile, negative or derogatory behaviour as a direct result of being from a working-class background and not in possession of the embodied cultural capital of many of their peers.

Returning to the experiences of Rachel* It was clear that her accent had led people to question how far she was capable and was often misinterpreted as being less intelligent or lacking in seniority. She discussed with me that she had often been asked on the phone by parents to be forwarded to the 'person in charge', being met with a sort of cognitive dissonance when she explained that that person was her. She expanded:

> *'They're like, well, who are **you**? And I'm the [person in charge]. They're like, oh, are you **really**? and like, the parents are shocked'.*

Microaggressions related to accent and intelligence, or professional status were common among participants who felt that they had a traditional 'northern' accent in this study. The need to adopt a neutral accent is a key feature of many of these participants in their desire to be accepted and to fit in, in their new environment. The neutral accent here is associated with the normativity of the university environment as desirable in a professional context, with northern accents being seen as less desirable. It was palpable that there had been a conscious effort for professional services staff in this study who had a northern accent to try to adopt the more acceptable neutral accents of the academy. Molly* was keen to demonstrated how she had initially felt the need to change her accent and over-pronounce certain parts of her vocabulary but had stopped feeling the need to do that over time:

> *I think that my tendency was when I started working at the university was to do that to sort of change my accent a bit to pronounce my Ts to sound more intelligent. I had had a bit of a struggle with that. And it took me a bit of a while to kind of drop that and be who I am and be like, I don't need to speak a certain way or say certain words to be intelligent, because I can be professional, intelligent and not do that.*

Lizzie* described how in her late teens and early twenties she had actively taken further steps towards moderating her northern accent by attempting to emulate the accent of Keira Knightly before going to university:

> *I was like, Jesus Christ! I don't want to get bullied, so I basically just watched a bunch of Keira Knightley films and was like I'm going to try and speak like her.*

Accent features prominently in the discussion about fitting in and belonging in higher education. Whilst some participants were actively attempting to annunciate certain words or

change their accents, others were aware that this had been happening more subtly and became a feature which marked them apart from the people they'd grown up with when they came back to their home environment.

> *You can tell I'm Northern, but I didn't have a particularly broad Teesside accent. But even my friends said that when I came back home during the holidays, my accent changed slightly, and kind of ironed out some more of the kind of local mannerisms. So, you kind of you code switch a little bit sometimes that.*

This passage demonstrates that accent was not something that participants were using purely as a feature to enable them to 'code switch' and 'get by' in their new institutions but further was acting as a proxy for demarcating differences between their professional identity and their previous home environment. Again, this highlights how participants have identified the neutrality of accent in the university setting as being normative and acceptable, in contrast to their native accent. Rather than packaged as a tool for social mobility, this demonstrates that adapting accent to fit into the university context had negative connotations for these participants in their ability to fit in with their hometown and families on their return, again leaving them in a middling state between their place of origin and their new environment.

The idea of accent as a marker of working-class identity has been explored in many other studies around working-class experience, including Reay et al (2009; 2010) and by Attridge (2021). The 2022 Sutton Trust report *Speaking Up* found that the presence of accent bias still exists, serving to identify those from working-class backgrounds and to prevent career progression. The results in this study found that the presence of accent bias is still a very real experience for many young people and early career professionals; 25% of adults in the survey said their accents had been mocked at work, with a further 47% of university students and 46% of adults had also had their accents mocked in social situations (Sutton Trust, 2022). In relation to this study specifically, there are strong correlations between the findings of the Sutton Trust (2022) report and the experiences for participants here. Although none of the participants expressed experiences where they had been openly mocked, it was clear that from actively altering their accent to their heightened awareness that accent bias is something which these participants are all continuously aware of.

What, however, is missing from these studies is the explanation of the experience of those from working-class backgrounds from southern counties or regions which are not typically associated with stereotypical 'working-class' occupations. Three participants explicitly mentioned how their fairly 'neutral' accents had enabled them to move more seamlessly through their new middle-class environments. This allowed them, like those that had

moderated their stronger northern accents, to 'code switch' and integrate more seamlessly into their new environment without having to drastically alter any other parts of their identity. Despite more neutral or traditionally 'southern' accents giving working-class people transactional capital with which to integrate, interestingly, many felt the need to self-declare class identity in conversations because they were intensely aware that their accent could not enable people, they spoke to recognize their identity as working-class. This point acts as another moment in which we might diverge from the theories of Bourdieu. In Language and Symbolic power, Bourdieu associates region, accent and class inextricably with one another. As Thompson asserts:

> …different speakers possess different quantities of 'linguistic capital'…the capacity to produce expressions…for a particular market...the distribution of linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other forms of capital (economic, cultural capital) which define the location of an individual within the social space (Thompson ed. Bourdieu, 1991:18).

Rebecca* explained that her positionality with regards to her own accent had changed over time, from being mindful of 'masking' her accent in order to fit in, to being comfortable being herself as she became more experienced in her role:

> I think I put on a bit of a mask when I first started at the university…where, you know, I was maybe doing a lot of pretending to be different from who I am. I think getting into a position that I'm in now, where I'm very established… [I am] able to be a bit more authentic.

Participants here though were also describing how they recognise (being from southern parts of England) that they possess this linguistic capital but are actively trying to explain it, or denounce it, in front of those they believe to have a shared working-class identity and upbringing.

As Annie* explained:

> What I'll do is I'll negate the conversation by letting people know that I'm not who they think I am.

> …with my accent people think that I'm middle-class. So sometimes I hear things that I wouldn't hear if they knew that.

Negating conversations by explaining identity and social class background beforehand creates two distinct reflections. In being explicit about their social class, they are making sure that people know what kind of identity they hold to be important, but also as this participant reflects, she uses this tool of negation to opt out of discussions which take place within the institution which are derisory towards working-class people. Negating conversations then enables participants to protect their own sense of identity in conversations where they feel they will be misconstrued yet also acts as a self-preservation mechanism, implying that microaggressions are rife enough that this is a necessary step in protecting her wellbeing. To some extent, the discomfort of being mis-identified as middles class also reflects a discomfort with the normativity at play here; because Annie* does not see middle class attributes as optimal, the dislocation between self-perception and normativity is disrupted. Using this tool to forefront experiences in conversations might also be a way that working-class participants are seeking to build legitimate and authentic connections, to find 'like-minded' people who might understand their perspectives. Crew (2020; 2021) notes that quite often academics from working-class backgrounds feel more comfortable and find more common ground with cleaning and facilities staff than other academics (Crew, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

In *Navigating academia* Crew (2021) reflects on the concept of microaggressions materialising through working-class people selecting the 'wrong kind of dress'. Earlier in this reflection, I noted how Jane* had experienced a sense of not belonging due to her decisions around clothes and dressing for work. Jane* had had a very different experience of going to university as a teenager. Falling pregnant in her late teens, she had lived in a university owned flat with her infant son, growing up slightly detached from those living in halls and living a more traditional 'student' life on the other side of campus. When she returned to a Russell Group environment to work some years later, she had noted that her preferred style of dress and the styles of professional dress around her were different from what she expected. She explained to me that she had noticed that the women in the office always went into work wearing dresses, rather than trousers or a trouser suit. Arguably, altering her presentation of self suggests her own style was not acceptable. This transformation comes in response to the microaggression of presentation that Jane* had felt in this setting.

5.3.3 Revealing too much or not enough?

Where some in this study wanted to mitigate for queries about their social class background in conversations there were also several professional services members who felt mindful about 'revealing too much' about their backgrounds. Penny* explained how she tried to build commonalities through her love for books and was incredibly mindful about concealing her identity due to her personal history about having been neglected as a child. *It's not something*

I'm happy to talk about she explained. For her, she was quite happy to be misconstrued as having come from a certain background because revealing too much put her in a place of insecurity and, potentially, psychological harm.

Existing and adapting to different environments is something Hurst (2010) determines shows that socially mobile working-class students are 'double agents', existing among their different peers by using a sort of quasi-chameleon effect (Attridge, 2021). Whilst Hurst (2010) finds that a large majority of students occupy this chameleon-like status this study also finds there are a few students who fail to adapt and cannot fit into the prevailing narrative. I would argue that the opposite is the case in terms of the working-class professional services staff in this study: most are not actively seeking to become a double agent in different settings; instead, they feel not fully accepted into either (Hurst, 2010). This is interesting if we reflect on Bourdieu and the theories of both cultural capital and linguistic capital where a movement to adopt elements of the dominant culture are seen as positive, facilitating and being able to move up the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1991). Rather, as Hurst and Attridge find, my participants also reflect on the difficulty they encounter between trying to embody elements of their new working environment and the cultures that exist there and the experience and history they are mindful of (Attridge, 2021; Hurst, 2010). This is not experienced as a linear movement between social environments facilitated by different types of capital, rather that these participants experience an oscillation between their existing identity, their history, and elements of their working environment and normative practices within this environment.

5.4 Chapter conclusion

In this section I have explored some of the facets that working-class professional services and administration staff revealed around the notion of fitting in, belonging and being in between. This section has highlighted that professional services staff, much like the research around working-class academics, find themselves often being in a 'middle ground' in between the deprivation they experienced growing up in a working-class environment and the new environment they find themselves in in academia. For some, this results in feelings of guilt, uncertainty and dislocation between their own origin story and their current profession. Navigating this space is incredibly difficult for working-class professional services staff. Through the metric of accent and language, different participants took different approaches to mediating their presentation to fit in. Whilst some, with self-defined 'neutral' accents were happy to be mistaken for middle-class due to the traumatic incidents of their childhood and the responses they had experienced previously, others actively use a method to pre-empt questions by foregrounding conversations with their personal histories and social class backgrounds.

When it comes to those who believe they have a 'traditional' working-class 'northern' accent, difficulties were felt in terms of being taken seriously in their professional roles and being able to 'sound intelligent'. Some participants had actively refined their accent to be closer to the standard English mode of received pronunciation, in some cases using figures in popular culture to do so. For these participants though, it seemed to be an overt way in which they were judged by others within the institutions as well as students and parents. It became a way in which they felt they were categorised. Some forms of assimilation into the middle-class culture were much less purposeful, professional dress was one of these forms which seemed to infiltrate daily decisions around dressing but were subtly adopted rather than causing internal conflict.

This section has explored how some working-class professional services and administration staff perceive their own social class background. Fundamentally, whilst social class status has historically been associated with professional and occupation, this is no longer ubiquitous. A working-class identity for these participants was referred to with acknowledgement of working-class being an identity formed from different mechanisms, and most pertinently, from economic disadvantage and poverty. Here, participants all referred to economic measures of class, associating these measures with other notions such as cultural tastes and preferences, occupations and the sense of working-class culture and community. In the next chapter, I will explore how the participants in this study experienced their day to day working lives in Russell Group universities.

Chapter 6: Analysis: *Helping them shine:* **working in professional services and administrative roles**

This second analysis chapter looks at themes relating to the culture of higher education institutions. This predominantly focuses on relationships, career prospects and training, pay and working conditions. I wanted to explore the phenomenon of organisational culture in these institutions due to its importance in the context of inclusion and inclusivity, which is a popular framing for the operation of many organisations in contemporary Britain. Russell Group universities have been under pressure in recent years to increase the diversity and levels of inclusivity that are within their institutions, both from the perspective of diversifying student cohorts and from increasing representation across the body of staff within these organisations (Koutsouris et al, 2022). HESA statistics and data from the BERA EDI report (concerned only with education research) point to slight improvements in representation across the board over 50 years, although, as Belluigi et al (2023) note, higher education is still severely lacking equitable and fair representation. It is less easy to understand how well university organisations are becoming more, or less, inclusive places to work, for minoritized and marginalised groups (Belluigi et al., 2023). This follows on from the preceding chapter, exploring how participants' perceptions of class identity interact with their experiences of their working environments. Even if more people from marginalised backgrounds are working in these environments, are they able to be themselves, to ascend the promotional hierarchies and 'succeed', or do they continue to exist on the fringes, excluded by the status quo? In order to understand how this is substantive or performative it is necessary to understand the experiences of people on the ground (Harris, 1998).

In organisational culture literature, this has been explored in the conceptualisation of three areas: assumptions, values and artefacts (Schein, 2004). Where assumptions are a mental model used by managers to make sense of the environment, values are the socially constructed principles that guide behaviour; these are reflected through speech, approaches and spoken goals, artefacts are the 'visible and tangible layer', in the case of the university, the statues and buildings (Harris, 1998; Joseph & Kibera, 2019). In understanding the possibilities for development and promotion, career trajectories, workload, working environments and relationships between people in higher education it might be possible to make some small-scale assumptions about how much these institutions are indeed changing towards becoming more inclusive or how far removing cultural icons of oppressions, such as statues, is a purely performative act (Butler, 2006). By collecting first-hand experiential

evidence around the assumptions and values of an institution, the nature of organisational culture might be possible to discern (Harris, 1998; Joseph & Kibera, 2019).

In each of these sub-sections, the relationships were perceived to be entirely different. In every interview, the working-class administrators within this study found that their immediate teams, groups, line managers and team members were supportive, often incredibly so, and often enabled them to succeed through offering further training, supporting developmental activity, and fostering good working relationships. The same cannot, however, be said for the working relationships these participants had with academics.

6.1 Relationships with academics

During the interviews, participants were asked about their favourite and least favourite parts of working in their institution. Relationships with academics were specifically not mentioned in the question design so as not to lead participants to give guided answers. There was no direct questioning around these kinds of relationships in the interview schedule.[8] However, relationships with academics formed the leading theme which I identified from the responses to be what participants enjoyed the least about their work. There were many examples and answers which spoke to the concept of relationships with academics. Here, I group these into four sub-themes: academic hierarchies, superior academic value, treatment of staff (microaggressions), and language codes and patterns. These were grouped in accordance to following the process of reflexive thematic analysis where a significant process of reading and re-reading transcripts helped to develop the theme generation.

6.1.1 Academic hierarchies

Participants in this study noted the extrinsic value placed on academics by other colleagues both inside and outside of their institution. Participants perceived this value in two ways; the value of the work being done and the position of individuals within the hierarchy. This part of the chapter identifies how participants perceived other people's impression of where academics sat in this hierarchy in relation to professional services staff, regardless of remuneration. This is significant because despite academic and professional services roles having similar grading structures and pay remuneration, there was the sense that the role of the academic always sat higher in the hierarchy of the university.

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[8] See appendix.

As one participant explained:

> *I think people tend to think that the academics are what holds the university together. But…it's really not… it's all the people who are, uh, you know, data entry… [the] admin team do the heavy lifting, I think.*

The idea that the admin team do the heavy lifting in an institution sums up a large aspect of the participant experience. It appears to be in direct contrast to the concept of academic value as being more worthy and treasured from the perspectives of those in this study which will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs. The volume of work these participants explained having to contend with came with the added scrutiny of working in multiple different teams (both administrative and academic) and the need to fulfil different briefs, often concurrently. This notion also counters the idea that admin is 'easy' or basic; there is the visceral sense that it is complex, complicated and difficult to manage. 'Doing the heavy lifting' also implies a relationship to a statement we will explore later, that administrative staff and professional services staff are helping academics to 'shine', which speaks to the broader class dynamics of their professional experience. Whilst in this instance this was countered, because administrative work is of equal value, there is the understanding that many parts of the university could not run and academics could not teach or undertake research without a substantial amount of work on behalf of the finance managers, the student administration team, admissions, or the countless other vital roles in professional services and administration.

This was emphasised again in a different interview:

> *It's perceived that the admin work for the academics rather than the other way around…It's just absolute chaos.*

The sense that one group of employees is in effect 'working for' another group of employees poses an interesting question in relation to the status of working as an academic in contrast to working in professional services. This perhaps suggests that there are perceptions of class hierarchy linked to working in higher education that are external to HE (i.e., the university as an 'ivory tower') compared to the perceptions linked to working in professional services which are internal to HE (that it facilitates the greatness of academics, rather than being a role to excel in of itself). Feeling like they are working for another group within the university causes a degree of tension for professional services staff; feeling at once at odds with the rules, regulations and procedures of the institution, yet pulled towards acting on behalf of the interests of academics which is not always the same thing. Whilst it was tangible that the

feeling of 'working for' academics existed, Lizzie* was able to demonstrate how this materialised in a literal sense; that space and place helped to facilitate the manifestation of these hierarchies.

Speaking to the difference in hierarchy from the perspective of the university and the structures and protocol within it, she reflected:

> *Academics eat lunch in one room and professional services staff eat lunch in another they're differentiated because you're not like a fellow or you know, like a proper member, you're like…* **staff.**

These statements reflect on a deferential attitude when it comes to working in academia, when working on a separate career pathway to an academic trajectory. They reflect attitudes both from the perspective of those around the university and outside of it. They reflect how the distribution of value materialises both in the conceptual, through the imagination but also how this manifests through action and segregation.

6.1.2 Superior Academic value

The second type of value asserted by participants was the value of work conducted by academics when contrasted with the value of the type of work typically performed by professional services staff. The value placed on different types of work has been brought to the foreground in recent years, particularly since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pal & Shaw, 2022). During this time, the value society placed on different types of work was called into question. Whilst it became clear that society was unable to function without types of work which had been previously derided; like refuse collection, shop work and cleaners, the period encompassing the pandemic, subsequent legislation to increase the monetary remuneration for these roles failed to materialise (Pal & Shaw, 2022). The association of value through the mechanisms of monetary remuneration, respect and support, are a central consideration within academia, when comparing the trajectories and pathways of academic and professional services colleagues (Greatrix, 2018).

More specifically than relating to the simple hierarchies and structures at play in higher education, there is the notion that academic value is not just placed ahead in terms of hierarchy, as previously explored, but that it is seen to be superior when related to the value of the work of professional services and administrative staff. This type of work, differentiating between knowledge production and support directly reflected the value of different roles. This came through in the interview data foremost in the roles and position of administrative

colleagues in certain settings, when working with academics. There was a distinct feeling that academic voices were judged to be of greater worth than those from professional services:

> *I think academic colleagues are still held up as the like, the main deal, aren't they? And the rest of us are just, sort of, helping them shine.*

The 'rules of the game' in meetings and events where academics and professional services worked together were not always clear. Due to the increased value placed on academic voices, professional services staff in this study were not always sure what the rules of engagement were, or whether their voices or opinions would be heard:

> *You know, in terms of going to meetings like, what are the expectations of whether you will speak up within those? Whether there's a kind of expectation that you're just there to listen.*

As another participant noted:

> *Are you going in there or is the expectation that you're going in there to keep up with the conversation so that you can, you know, then be allocated work to do with it? … the boundary between academic and professional services is, to me, quite substantial.*

Kelly*, a young woman who had been employed by her institution for a few years hadn't gone to university herself, instead focussing on developing her professional capabilities. She explained that as a teenager, the prospect of going to university just hadn't felt within her grasp; not only was there no experience within her immediate family of gaining a university education but she also was very aware of being saddled with a high amount of debt, which had caused her to turn away from undertaking a degree at 18. Her journey throughout her professional career had been fast tracked when compared to her colleagues. She had been able to undertake a level of professional skills development in the time after leaving school which enabled her to advance expertise in marketing and communications. She was frustrated that due to her role and education that academics often failed to take her points into consideration. She mentioned in two excerpts that she had felt undervalued within her role, despite feeling confident in her own abilities and skill set:

> *I've worked in the marketing team and raised a valid point, just because of someone's hierarchy and their education our opinion doesn't matter as much, because we're professional services.*

Here, she distinctly suggests that it is the distortion between the appropriation of academic value in contrast to the value of professional services staff which lead to behaviour she explains made her feel less than her academic colleagues. The professional confidence Kelly* felt due to her vast experience developed over nearly a decade helped, in some regards, to enable her to speak up on occasion about what she felt to be inappropriate behaviour:

> *I've been really frustrated in the past and I've actually had confidence to argue it and kind of say, 'What's the point in being here if I'm not going to be listened to or heard and, and nothing happened of it?' And I moaned about it, and I was told to get on with what I was doing. It does leave you feeling undervalued.*

> *You kind of keep quieter in meetings and feel like your voice wasn't as, like, well received as the people that are of like upper class, if that makes sense.*

Feeling 'less than' for Kelly* seems to take on two distinct forms; she felt her role as professional services enabled others to treat her as inferior but and her class position had also led to experiences of that made her feel the same way. There is an interesting paradox in what she told me about not being listened to and being told to 'get on with' it. She had framed herself as being very confident in her role and capabilities which is something which is not always apparent in examples of working-class people operating in fields outside of their habitus; often we find in other research that working-class people in universities feel a distinct lack of confidence and imposter syndrome as a result of their immediate environment, despite their own capabilities (Burnell Reilly, 2022). Kelly* explains that she felt empowered to speak up and had the courage to make herself vulnerable and yet, her confidence is then shunned (by, she infers, her line manager), reinforcing the idea that she had no place to raise these concerns.

The rules of engagement in these descriptions seems to be unclear, sometimes by inexplicit actions by academics or other people within those scenarios. Often, these subtleties in engagement (which aren't unclear in professional services-only meetings, where participants felt comfortable to speak) are emulated through the division of labour and types of work requested by academics. Referring to a senior administrator being asked to collect a sandwich for an academic on one occasion Penny* explained that this inferior inflection of value is

espoused in the kinds of roles professional services staff as expected to fulfil, outside of their contracts:

> *I think that there is a real sort of divide between academic staff and professional services. And I feel like, you know, there's certain academics who just sort of treat you like their PA, which is really weird. They'll ask you to do things that are outside of your remit.*

Bound within doing tasks which were not part of their job role, some participants felt that they were only given very basic tasks to complete but felt like they had a lot more to offer. In these circumstances, there was a real sense of struggle that these people could not demonstrate their abilities, growing in experience or access better opportunities:

> *And my role is essentially making the rest of the team's life easier. It can mean just like coffee, tea, organising, catering, but also really silly things that, like, only the bottom people will do. I occasionally describe it as like, I'm the team bitch, basically.*

The sense that some working-class people working in professional services and admin are doing tasks beyond their remit is further compounded by an expectation that these roles, as well as their typical roles will be picked up despite illness, annual leave or other absences from work:

> *So, for instance, I'm off work so back in on Monday just last couple of days are getting over COVID and I'm still getting emails asking why things haven't been done.*

This participant outlined how he was expected to work and pick up regular tasks despite being off work with COVID, a demonstration of symbolic violence because his voice was not being heard. Where this does reflect his experiences working with academics, it also mirrors some of the issues espoused nationally through the current UCU strike action; that academia and life within the university is progressively an environment where workloads are problematic and there is a culture of toxic overwork. Even in the current UCU strike action, there is not a strong link with professional services staff or the recognition that any kind of complicity makes conditions worse for others.

In chapter five we heard from Rachel* about how she believed her working-class upbringing had made her less able to bargain for benefits, remuneration and argue against overwork despite noticing that colleagues around her from different social backgrounds were able to

resist these kinds of stressors. Above, the link between social class background and an inability to challenge was illuminated as a part of working-class upbringing and culture. Whilst it is tenuous to link each of the above quotes to this concept it does pose an interesting question which might be worth asking in further research in the future; are working-class people working in higher education subject to more pressure on their workloads and type of work undertaken due to a deference which is inherited through their social class status? We need to ask ourselves in this instance what kind of social reproduction is taking place, who is involved in the complicity of maintaining it and how it can be maintained. Understanding these facets of social reproduction and the modes that continue to replicate them will ensure that the tensions between social class status and the undertaking of additional workloads beyond the norm can become visible (Collinson, 2007). This visibility could lead to understanding the dynamics of power structures at play, enabling systemic structures of repression to be broken down.

Professional services staff have long been considered as the 'minions of management' (Allen-Collinson, 2009) or 'docile clerks' (Scott, 1997) within higher education, serving a purpose of implementation on the behalf of other, more senior academics or university managers (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Scott, 1997). As McKay and Robson (2023) demonstrate, 'these staff are frequently conceptualised in reductive terms as the less counterparts to academic/research staff', which often results in feeling invisible or not considered within the broader landscape of UK higher education (McKay & Robson, 2023:633). This section has reflected how these other pieces of research still have relevance in UK higher education today with participants here feeling undervalued, made to feel lesser or made to feel that their role is to help academics shine, rather than to display their own sense of agency, innovation or intelligence (McKay & Robson, 2023).

6.1.3 Language codes and patterns

Understanding, recognising and playing by the 'rules of the game' is central to a Bourdieusian understanding of the nature and significance of language, symbolic power and the relationship between hierarchies of taste (dispositions) and power in social structures (Bourdieu, 1972, 1992). In the interviews conducted in this study, this was represented heavily with references to styles, patterns and conventions in academic language. This study has outlined above how academic meetings often feel alien to the participants in these interviews and that they did not feel that their experiences and thoughts are considered. Further than this, though, is the concept that these meetings are inaccessible not just because these professional services staff don't feel valued but also that they tend to follow a pattern of language, speech, and deference which is uncommon to professional services networks and outside the realms of

their previous experiences in professional settings. These patterns of deference reproduce the societal norms which are expected within elite institutions and act as forms of symbolic violence; rejecting language patterns which do not conform (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Being aware of classed differences was a critical degree of separation for Kelly* who told me:

>*…there are other professional services staff that I think are working class, so I don't feel out of place within that environment of other professional services groups. I think when you go into the academic setting you notice more of what your class is and…that academics aren't…from that background.*

Kelly* further expanded on this point with regards to language later in the excerpt where she explained:

>*I've been in meetings before where it's kind of the language goes above me or that they're not being and I felt not included because of that, because I thought I haven't got a clue what they're talking about…some people that come from a working-class background that haven't been to university won't understand that thing, then feel embarrassed that they didn't know about it.*

Annie*, demonstrated how the language used by academics was different from in her professional services teams, exploring how it used deferential patterns:

>*[there is] this weird deference…when you go into academic meetings.*

Annie* explained that these deferential language patterns were made clear in the way academics spoke. She described a process where ideas would be presented, and other academics would respond by being indirect. She explained that an academic might say something unclear, rather than overtly declaring their disagreement. These deferential patterns of language in academic meetings often meant that she was unclear as to how certain ideas had been received. This left her feeling unsure how to communicate, unsure of trust and therefore like her ideas were not accepted. These kinds of engagement, where the rules of participation are not clear to everyone, can contribute to isolation, a lack of support and absence of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

In other ways, participants explained that the sense of belonging, and rules of engagement were not clear, with specific reference to issues relating to cultural capital and hierarchies of taste (Bourdieu, 1984a; M. Warner et al., 1985). David* regularly participated in conversations which were littered with references to classical studies and antiquity. As he described:

He's [my line manager] been in academia for 40 years or something, you know, and he brings out references to Greek mythology and things that, you know, like as if, I would understand these things that he's comparing something to, I can't even replicate the conversations because I'm just not aware. And it feels a little alien, dealing with a lot of academics.

In contrast to the other participants in this study, David* described having a generally positive relationship with his academic line manager, despite having tense relationships with other academics in his institution. References to classical studies and ancient history have been described at length by Kenway et al (2017) as mechanisms for private school education to continually keep the elite in position. Classics and ancient history courses are not regularly taught in UK mainstream secondary education; in 2010 research by the organisation Classics for All found that classics related subjects such as ancient history and Latin were only taught in 25% of state schools compared to 75% of independent schools. Further, in 2019, only 26% of those admitted to Cambridge to read Classics came from state schools, let alone working-class backgrounds (Classics for all, 2020; Perale, 2022). Perale (2022) notes, the subject of classics is still very much associated with elitism, a private education and outside the realm of reality for many working-class students (Perale, 2022). The historian Shrosbree argues 'the classics [in public schools] fulfilled the same sociological function in Victorian England as calligraphy in ancient China – a device to regulate and govern entry into a governing elite', something Verkaik (2018:13) acknowledges explains why politicians 'like Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have such fondness for Roman and Greek Historians'. The ability to make references which indicate knowledge of these subjects distinctly marks individuals out as coming from certain backgrounds, most notably from independent and private education (Kenway, 1990; Kenway & Lazarus, 2017; Perale, 2022). Whether or not the interpersonal relationship between David* and his line manager was good on a day-to-day basis, he felt alienated by these references to subject areas that were completely out of the scope of his experience and knowledge.

Other participants had similar experiences relating to the types of conversations which were had within their places of work and particularly related to the topics within these conversations which often felt isolating and distant from their own experiences. Annie* described the cultural tensions she felt when she first took on her job working within a Russell Group university, as she notes:

> *You're having conversations about things like theatre and you're not having conversations, because you don't know what they're talking about, because you've never been to the theatre. And I think there's this sense that your culture isn't worthy.*

Lianne* explained in further detail about how knowledge around these types of 'higher' culture separated her experiences and culture growing up from the kinds of experiences she had within work. She spoke about how people would ask her if she'd been to the proms and about classical music noting:

> *They're talking about books and opera and like music and…Oh do you like Vivaldi? Blah blah and I'm like, I don't understand any of these like, these specific things.*

6.1.4 A 'weird kind of middle space'

It was clear that Lianne* was constantly aware of an internal battle between her current situation and the experiences she had had growing up. She told me about her experiences growing up in a deprived council housing estate which had been designed as an overflow from a major city and how her parents had been incredibly impacted from both a financial and professional perspective by the 2008 financial crisis. In small vignettes, she described situations where she would revisit the place in which she grew up and yet felt dislocated from the experiences of those around her because she had moved away and started working in a middle-class environment. Yet, as she describes here, she lacked the cultural knowledge to take part in the kinds of conversations which were being had around her, yet also lacked the specific current knowledge about her hometown in order to be integrated into that community either.

She described her current position as being in a 'weird kind of middle space' neither at home in the environment of her formative years nor fully a part of the place where she worked. Referring to Bourdieu and the distinction between habitus and field, and the discussion in the previous chapter, this sense of in betweenness demonstrates a move beyond Bourdieusian conceptualisation; it is the merging, overlapping, lamination of fields experienced simultaneously which creates the feeling of oscillation between these fields. Individuals bring with them their historical pasts as they move through new environments, something Binns (2019:3) refers to as the 'ghosts of childhood habitus', I consider this to be a lamination of

field. Rather than shedding the chrysalis of their working-class identity as they accrued educational 'non-genetic' capital, they instead brought with them the traumas, historic references, past understandings and feelings that had punctuated their working-class lives (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990; Binns, 2019). As we can see, this was borne out in feelings of exclusion and liminality in everyday conversations during meetings at work. This kind of experience was common among my participants.[9] Using Bourdieu as our theoretical frame we can understand how these kinds of experiences help to illuminate the kinds of dominant cultural preferences which are pervasive within middle-class institutions such as universities. There is a clear distinction that for those coming into the university with very different cultural experiences, that these experiences will not enable them to relate to the other people around them, leaving them ostracised from the normative experiences of working within a Russell Group university.

6.1.5 Treatment of staff: Microaggressions and symbolic violence

Participants reported types of behaviour, referred to as 'toxic,' microaggressions. These instances are not as associated with jobs and tasks as they are associated with a sense of elitism and hierarchy which emulated from academics towards professional services staff. These are apparent through explicit bad behaviour. One interpretation of bad behaviour was expressed through the experiences participants had of academics speaking to professional services staff, in terms of tone, phrasing and intent. Here, I list several examples from four different participants for clarity:

> *I mean yeah, they can be absolutely awful to us, they think that's legitimate just because they're like 'oh I'm such and such I'm a leading expert'… and they talk to people horrifically. I guess, they just talk to all their PhD students like that, they speak to them horrifically because they can.*

> *And they speak to you like you're something on their shoe like they and they think they can because I guess their PhD students have to take that.*

> *Like they think I'm a pleb and I'm always trying to make them think that I'm not, basically.*

> *They just act and behave however they like. And everyone just is expected to suck it up.*

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[9] More examples of these kinds of experiences can be found in Appendix.

There is a feeling within these statements, each from different participants, that the academics they refer to here believe they are superior in hierarchy and value, and demonstrate this through their tone, language, insinuations and patterns of behaviour.

This connection back to the concept of academic value is an interesting one: professional services staff here believed that academics felt an entitlement to speak to them in a certain way due to their academic expertise and position within the institutional hierarchy. It is a strong possibility that this overt articulation of class relations may not be seen as bluntly as in other institutions due to the more extreme dislocation between habitus and field which exists in Russell Group universities. There is also a critical thread which appears in other interviews around wanting to be perceived to be intelligent or to be capable. Interviewees were often highly academically qualified themselves and at times very keen to display their academic achievements and certification capital in a way to mitigate the impression academic staff had about them. One participant, Lianne* spoke in depth about achieving her master's degree and actively displaying it in her email signature to show to the academic staff that she was intelligent and capable. She had previously explained to me that her mother's own lack of formal education had prompted her to instil the importance of education in her daughter and there was therefore the suggestion that Lianne* had placed formal education in high regard.[10]

She wanted to indicate to the academics around her that she wasn't stupid:

> *If we ever get into a conversation, I feel a bit smug to be able to say that, like, I'm not dumb. I've got [a particular degree] …I've got that in my signature I'm trying to like signal to them that I'm not an idiot, I've got qualifications that are useful.*

Lianne* has built a picture in her mind of how academics perceive her, either because of her role in professional services, because of her class background, or the way she had already experienced being treated within her institution. Professional services staff, either as a result of their own presumptions about how they will be perceived or as a result of treatment they have experienced are keen to demonstrate their own intelligence and capabilities.

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[10] Educational aspiration is a critical point of contest in UK rhetoric. In 2018, then Chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman claimed 'Working class communities lack aspiration!' (Burns/BBC 21st June 2018). This has been critiqued and discounted by education research, see for example Baker et al., (2014).

Connected to the previous discussion about heavy workloads in academia, there were some in the interviews who suggested that the behaviour towards professional services and administrative staff was in some way a result of the stresses of academic life and in some respect, legitimised.

> *I can understand that, for academics, there just aren't enough hours in the day. To do all of this, let alone like supervising dissertations or theses, I can see why they don't have time for questions from the admin team. But I don't think it means that they should treat professional services, like, lesser.*

> *We'd be running sessions with schoolchildren, and academics would come out of their offices and shout at members of staff because the students were being too loud. And it's like, we're all trying to do a job. Just because you're stressed in yours, doesn't mean you should treat people in disrespectful ways.*

At times, there was a tension around this kind of narrative with the professional services staff in this study. Whilst a couple of them acknowledged the highly stressful nature of the work involved in being an academic, pointing to them even having to put 30 minutes in the calendar to be able to take lunch, this was caveated by the dislocation between academic stressors and the stressors for professional service staff. Noting the difference in the academic calendar to the typical professional services calendar, three of the participants spoke at length about the stress of working in an institution which was year-round for professional services staff due to the admissions processes and summer schools on offer. For these participants, this compared to the academic calendar which they perceived as being intense but reaping the reward of 'the whole summer off'. This appears to be at the root of the injustice these staff felt at being spoken to in a negative and disparaging way; whilst they understood the stress of being an academic, they also felt that academics had strategic points in the year to unwind, whereas professional services staff do not.

In discussing behaviours and relationships between academics and professional services staff it is worth also noting that the type of language employed in these areas of conversation took a different tone. Generally, throughout the interviews the language used was not particularly 'colourful' or emphatic. Whilst these weren't 'swear words' as such, some of the words chosen were particularly powerful. One participant mentioned simply:

> *They just think you are, like, scum.*

The use of the word 'scum' here has an impactful resonance. Not just expressing that she thought academics believed professional services staff to be lesser or inferior she selects the word 'scum' to create a more powerful image. This language is impactful, the association of working-class people to this kind of imagery has connotations beyond academia. As I explored in the opening chapter, McKenzie (2015; 2017) and Jones (2012) have both demonstrated how political language developed throughout the early 2000s and mid 2010s to deride the behaviour of working-class people, depicting at every opportunity the working-class family as 'feckless' and 'scroungers' (Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2015; McKenzie, 2017b).

Part of the pervasive narrative throughout each interview is how any positive experiences of working within these institutions is often punctuated by distinctly negative or demeaning behaviours from academics towards professional services staff.[11] Due to the small sample size in this study this is far from representative of a wider picture across academia, or even across the Russell Group and studies such as Caldwell (2022) show this is far from ubiquitous (Caldwell, 2022). However, the multiple instances referred to by participants within this study at multiple different institutions, which each have different systems of governance, staff training and accountability, paints a concerning picture around the treatment, value, and self-worth of staff working hard to support students, teaching, and academic research. I return to this in the conclusion.

6.2 Relationships with professional services and administrative teams

To understand how organisational culture is transferred by the interactions and relationships within universities it is necessary to understand the different facets of these relationships and how they are different between different groups of people. Relationships between professional services staff and academics has painted a negative picture of the culture of work by the participants in this study. To add further understanding, a theme developed around the relationships professional services staff had with other (non-academic) people in their teams. There are several different dynamics to the way in which these relationships are discussed. On six separate occasions participants directly referenced support; either supportive line managers or the supportive teams they found themselves in. They define this level of support in several various ways; support for development, support for training specifically and supportive environments (a sense of support in the team without explicitly describing the facets of these supportive teams).

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[11] For further examples, please see appendix.

6.2.1 Support, training and development

The overriding sentiment among participants in this study was that they generally felt well supported by their immediate administration teams and their line manager at present. At times, they reflected on how this wasn't always the case when working within other areas of their current or previous institution. All the participants in this study discussed at length how they felt professional services teams were generally good teams to work in, well supported by their line managers (even if at times, not by the university itself). Several spoke about the fact they knew how to engage in professional services meetings, in a way which used language which was much more straightforward and easier to navigate. Here, participants described feeling well respected, listened to and able to contribute. This was exemplified where Michael* discussed the difficulties in going between different types of meeting:

> *Professional services contacts are more, I guess, more like the corporate setting, you know, there are clear ways of being in a professional service realm.*

6.3 A shared experience?

Within these supportive environments, however, there is nuance. The sense of support from close working colleagues and immediate teams is in tension with a conceptualisation of 'institutional support', support from academics or support as it is manifested through policy, governance and enactment. Support then, is highly dependent on the professional services and administrative teams which shape departments and directorates. Despite a notion that institutions were striving to be supportive through directives and legislation, this written intention acted as little more than lip service in the context of the employees within this study.

I have identified several occasions where administrative and professional services staff in this study recognized that they were working within supportive environments or had support for training and support from their line manager, and occasionally from working-class academics, this position was heavily caveated with other experiences.[12] Often, participants described supportive teams and line managers in contrast to other experiences they'd had elsewhere. This comes in contrast to the findings from my literature review, where working-class academics found their fellow academic colleagues unsupportive (Crew, 2020). Here, students and academics both reported feeling supported by other people from working-class backgrounds but there was not a good level of support available in the profession.

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[12] Further examples of working-class people supporting each other in these interviews can be found in the appendix.

As I will identify later, participants often also felt that they were lacking access to certain training or skills that they needed to be able to access promotion or different levels of the professional hierarchy. This feeling is referenced directly by Rebecca* who explained:

> *I feel there are maybe people who are more conventionally used to some of the kind of hidden stuff in universities that have the knowledge to be able to progress.*

This is an interesting paradox on the surface: whilst many described being supported in accessing training or studying for a further degree, the same people often identified lacking in specific skills they felt were vital in their career development. There is a space that exists between skills and formal training which is the gap professional services staff were identifying; soft skills acquired through class-oriented education system which exist in contrast to the formal offerings that the university can provide in specific qualifications (undergraduate, postgraduate, or professional learning such as project management).

6.4 Relationships with students

Relationships with students appear to form two distinct sets of experiences: relationships with working-class students, and the experiences of working with middle-class, upper class or 'elite' students. It is worth noting here that many participants in this study had a role which was student facing, either from a widening participation, outreach or admissions perspective, or as someone directly responsible for certain groups of students within the university. In the following sections, the relationships identified with these two types of students helps to exemplify some themes we have previously explored, most notably around microaggressions and 'fitting in' and the sense of shared experiences and belongingness.

6.4.1 Relationship with working-class students

The dominant theme in assessing relationships between working-class professional services and working-class students is one of an overwhelmingly positive, supportive and nurturing experience. For many in this study, where they had relationships with working-class students, these relationships were defined by having had a shared experience as the students they were working with and feeling a sense of compassion, empathy and a desire to ensure that these students were well supported and able to achieve. I identified many moments within the interviews of those who had roles which involved working with working-class students which help to demonstrate these feelings.

For Penny*, the desire to support working-class students was something she was particularly passionate about, and she had the overwhelming sense that this work needed to be carried out by professional services staff who deeply resonated with the experiences of the students they worked with:

> *I think growing up like that [working-class] has made me a lot more empathetic and a lot more compassionate. Once you've experienced something like that, you don't ever want someone else to feel that way as well. Whereas I think some people who have never experienced that, like that isolating feeling, almost like shame as well. Yeah, they just don't quite understand it in the same way. Especially at work when we're dealing with PhD students. A lot of them either have caring responsibilities or children or they're working at the same time, and they just need someone to be there like this is I know, this is really hard, we'll try and do everything we can to support you.*

Being able to resonate with students was incredibly powerful for many of the participants who had student-facing roles in this study. One participant, Lianne* spoke to me about how she just wanted to make sure that the students from less privileged backgrounds who came into the university were able to have experiences that they would never usually have been able to access. From her perspective, these experiences would be vital to the students as they left university and went on to careers in a specific industry. In a way, she articulated her perspective on this through the sense of capital-building, in giving students experiences they could talk to employers about, she was enabling them to access cultural and relational capital that they could use as a transaction to future employment and work:

> *I've been that student and really struggled. And had, I feel like to be able to give other students the opportunity to like, not go through that and give them a bit of a…it's not even giving them a leg up… It's just kind of like supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to kind of like have experiences they can talk to employers about…is incredibly, like rewarding.*

> *And they live in in like quite dire conditions, but I was like trying to be like I think I can like probably to relate to them a bit more in like have some ideas of how we can help them be successful.*

The desire to help working class students was also exemplified by Rebecca* who felt a responsibility to improve this support network within her institution:

Before I moved roles, I designed a project around working-class students and trying to write a kind of manifesto for working class students.

In understanding how their own personal experiences related to the students in terms of the nature of these interactions, participants described both directly remembering their own struggles and therefore being able to 'stay grounded'. For Chris* who had achieved a PhD and chose to work in professional services instead of academia, the struggles he had faced completing his PhD and accessing the University meant that he felt he could relate to these students in terms of academic success and identity:

…it means that I remember the struggles that some people will go will be experiencing. And if anything, I think it makes sure that I stay grounded to the struggles that someone experiences that some people are facing.

In a slightly different interpretation, Lizzie* mentioned how her own experiences may not have been directly related to the students within her care but that the experiences she had had enabled her to access a repository of empathy that other people would not understand. She later went on to discuss at length some experiences she had had herself whilst studying within a Russell Group University. Within these experiences she spoke about multiple instances where she herself had faced microaggressions, from being labelled as 'poor', to not understanding conversations about different sports, to having money thrown in her face by a roommate when she asked for some money for bills that had been outstanding for over 6 months. It is clear to see that these kinds of experiences had informed the way she could put herself in the position of her students and to be able to understand the nature of the struggles they might be facing:

I don't pretend to know exactly what it's like to be a working-class teenager now because it's different, but at the same time, I still have levels of understanding of like the anxieties that they go through, and things like that, and like worries they might have.

The sense that working-class professional service staff could relate directly to working-class students manifested itself in distinct emotional responses from the professional services staff I interviewed. David* described in detail that this ability to relate to the students he worked with manifested directly into feelings of needing to be protective:

And I've definitely noticed working around a lot of students, very few working-class students. And there's only one or two. And I tend to be a little bit more protective of them, I guess. Because working-class students are absolutely a thing. It's just they're absolutely shadowed. Like at the start the pandemic, there was a student that came and asked if he could have a laptop to use to work from home because they didn't have one to work on which just blew my mind away. You're like in 2020, that a student didn't have a laptop, and was having to use the library, but because the library was closed in the pandemic, they didn't have access to technology.

The ability to resonate with students' experiences by having had a shared sense of historical past narrative enables the professional services staff in this study to work hard for the students in their care; they believe that they are the best-placed and best equipped people to do this work and take on this responsibility themselves.

Here, I will return to the point of ethics. At the start of this chapter, I outlined the importance of understanding the emotional toll of researchers in research where they were closely related to the experiences of the participants within their research. Earlier, I echoed work by Wild and Brown (2022) which calls for greater responsibility on behalf of the university ethics process to protect and mitigate for emotional toll and the reimagination of trauma felt by researchers. Similarly, we need to be mindful that many in this study have made an association between their own experiences and the experiences of the students they support, which many having shared events in their history which might be considered traumatic. Where these links have been made, participants in this study described that they were best placed to lead this kind of work because they know, on a visceral level, what impact taking the time to care and support these students properly would have on the student's eventual outcomes.

I argue though, that whilst this might well be the case, for the same reason that researcher experiences can enhance research where experiences are similar, that there is very little time taken to consider the emotional support for the repetition of trauma which may happen to professional services staff when they are working so closely with working-class students (Wild & Brown, 2022).

6.4.2 Relationships with students from different social class backgrounds

Instances where participants identified relationships with students from other backgrounds differ greatly in their nature and feeling to the reporting of relationships with working-class students. It is worth noting that many of these examples refer to the extreme edges of social

class which exist in the student population and often refer to those from 'upper classes' or public-school backgrounds. I found that the interactions with these students in this study could be characterised in the following ways: through microaggressions, symbolic violence, and feelings of inadequacy, a sense of inherited elitism and 'toxic' behaviour.

Rachel* described how the students who attended a certain part of the university she worked at actively behaved in ways which might be considered as microaggressions towards staff and students. She described how she had dealt with the fall out with a working-class girl where the girl in question had been subject to multiple instances of abuse surrounding her Mancunian accent; to the extent she had considered leaving. She also described instances where students could not believe that she was the person in charge of the office on any given day due to her working-class accent (which, consequently, was an accent associated with the local area in which the university was situated – more detail on accent can be found in chapter five).

She had tried to tackle this from the perspective of the university:

> *I was responsible for overseeing discipline. So, I would see that and be like, right, I think we need to look at this from like, either bullying and harassment perspective under the policy, or we need to look at, you know, what the values and expectations are being a member of this college? And, and then you'd be told [by the university] no, no, no, they're not doing anything.*

Her frustration at having to deal with these instances of poor behaviour or entitlement was expressed above, even though she was responsible for the behaviour and discipline at the university, the pervasive culture in the institution was such that no action would be possible. The idea that the university as an institution would not support their staff in the face of poor behaviour from students helps to re-emphasise the isolation that many colleagues experienced and the notion that support was only found by the individuals in their teams and immediate management structures, rather than within the institution. This apparent prioritisation of students from elevated class backgrounds is a form of symbolic violence on behalf of the university; continuing to emphasise the reproduction of the current cultures and norms as an antithesis to the welfare of staff from other class backgrounds.

6.5 Career and institutional environment

The relationships between people within an institution are defined and influenced by the structures, processes and legislation which comprise the body of that institution (Ahmada & Fakhr, 2022). To add further depth to our understanding of relationships in Russell Group

universities, this section explores how the people in this study perceived these structures and processes within their own institution. Here, I focus on careers and career prospects, training and development, safety and the physical environment and how the institution functions with regards to administration and bureaucracy.

6.5.1 Career prospects

I wanted to understand the career trajectories which existed for all the participants in this study, where did their current role fit into their perceived career path? Where could they go next? What would the typical career trajectory look like? Was it achievable? How does having a working-class identity impact career progression? This is important in understanding how inclusive the institutions in this study are; to understand what it takes to navigate these pathways and achieve success is integral to understanding whether these requirements adversely affect or actively promote individuals from certain groups and demographics. Feeling 'stuck' was a common experience for many of the participants in this study.

Participants explained that they were unable to achieve a higher pay scale in line with their current job role due to the lack of roles in the position above them, the lack of availability of roles that aligned to their current interests and specialisms and their aversion to taking on roles with people management skills. In a couple of examples, participants explained that they were reliant on waiting for their current manager to vacate their role, go on maternity leave or retire in order to be able to have the opportunity to apply for their position. In each of these scenarios there was a perceived lack of availability of roles at that level and therefore whilst a movement sideways to a different kind of role at the safe grade point was possible, moving upwards in the career ladder was not. Whilst it appeared that participants in some cases had managed to ascend the hierarchy easily, there was the sense that on reaching a 'grade 7' further movement upwards was not possible. As one participant explained:

> *I came in as an administrator. And then you know, it's been maybe a couple of years in each role. And each role has been an advanced up until I'd reached the kind of grade seven level a few years ago. And then I've done sideways moves.*

> *Within my team, there's not much opportunity for progression. But there is opportunity for progression to other parts of the university. Within my current team, the opportunities for progression aren't fantastic.*

Several participants explicitly mentioned the fact that the grade boundaries above where they

currently are in their career require people management and line management responsibilities which some of them did not necessarily feel comfortable with. Peter* elaborated on this:

> *From my point of view, where I'm at the top of grade seven, my options, because I don't want to people manage, are literally an architecture role. That's it. My progression route is very well defined. But it just depends on whether there is a role that I want to do that fits that profile. At the moment. It could be that they, they might look at roles, which for example, mirror things in the actual in the private sector, which gives you gradations of things like developer, senior developer, principal developer, that's not there yet.*

As another participant expanded:

> *It's a bit of a weird one progression within my role, I'd need to take on a more management-based experience, like within the kind of family tree I'm in, and which something I'm not really into.*

6.5.2 Skills differentiation and ascending the career ladder

I wanted to understand whether the people management and 'soft skills' element of ascending these professional services hierarchies were at all classed, and wanted to explore whether there were certain facets of the promotional opportunities available which ensured that candidates from some, more privileged backgrounds were more likely to achieve or to be comfortable with going into these kind of people-centric management roles. Peter* explained how the manifestation of soft skills in those who had had different life experiences and often private education was a direct factor in succeeding in the kinds of jobs he had associated with being the next grade above or related to 'people management'.

> *So, I think the kind of soft skills that you may have got in say, if you've been to and independently schooled, and you picked up things like the soft skills that people normally associate with kind of a private education, which tends to get you promoted into kind of people, management jobs.*

The importance of 'soft skills' is often highlighted in education research work, particularly in relation to the development of student skills for life and the workplace outside of school (Touloumakos, 2020; Wats & Wats, 2009). The somewhat intangible nature of 'soft skills' leads it largely open to interpretation and soft skills can be used as a phrase to refer to management, time keeping, project management, listening, conversations, constructive debate and problem

solving. The term 'soft skills', although popular, seems to have a far from ubiquitous meaning and deployment (Touloumakos, 2020). The intended meaning of 'soft skills' in relation to accessing a higher grade on the professional services career trajectory moves away from notions of empathy, listening and communication and towards notions of people management, strategy and delegation. This dislocation of the meaning of soft skills, between humanistic characteristics of empathy and interpretation and strategic thinking and management could be the point at which class-based segregation exists. When participants talk about soft skills in this study, they aren't referring to the kinds of skills that might be considered humanistic characteristics or traits but the kinds of skills around management and strategy. These soft skills can be considered part of habitus, which relates to capital, which relates to class: soft skills are inherently not a working-class possession (Bourdieu, 1984). It is these skills that Peter* speaks about in relation to what is taught in independent schools compared to state funded schools.

This segregation plays out in examples where participants are asked to talk about their relationships with other working-class staff members, or people they perceive to be from working-class backgrounds. These are demonstrated both with relationships between the participants and working-class students and relationships between the participants and other colleagues. These kinds of empathetic skills are wound within a larger narrative of support, a sense of pastoral reflex, and care.

Explaining how her working-class upbringing had developed soft skills of empathy and care one respondent noted:

> *I think growing up like that has made me a lot more empathetic and a lot more compassionate. Once you've, once you've experienced something like that, you don't ever want someone else to feel that way as well. Whereas I think some people who have never experienced that, like that isolating feeling, almost like shame as well. Yeah, they just don't quite understand it in the same way.*

Empathy is particularly associated with a working-class background for another participant:

> *I think it makes sure that I stay grounded to the struggles that someone experiences that some people are facing.*

Further, empathy and understanding as soft skills relate to how one participant responds to working with students where she noted:

I don't pretend to know exactly what it's like to be a working-class teenager now because it's different, but at the same time, I still have levels of understanding of like the anxieties that they go through, and things like that, and like worries they might have.

From this collection of narratives, we could imply that soft skills related to care, empathy and the pastoral role of the university are in abundance in professional services employees and how they view the world. They are particularly pertinent here in this sample, where the professional services staff have come from working-class backgrounds, often fraught with anxieties around money, employment and security. This has helped to unpick what is meant by 'soft skills' when the participants in this study have related the notion of soft skills to the roles which sit above them in the professional services hierarchy. Whilst it is apparent that this need to 'man manage' is only a concern for some in this study who are at a certain grade, it is also very apparent that every participant in this study foregrounds empathy, listening and these kinds of soft skills within their work. What is missing then, is the alternative definitions of soft skills as they relate to ascending the hierarchical nature of the professional world within Russell Group universities. These alternative soft skills relate to man management, opportunities and confidence. On many occasions participants explained that they lacked the confidence or knowledge in being able to challenge directions of behaviour, a skill which would be useful in man management.

As one participant explained:

All these things like confidence that affect how you are able to move through the university, to know the rules and find the right opportunities.

What is being described here as confidence could also be described as the possession of capital. Possessing the capital to be able to move seamlessly in these kinds of scenarios is also exemplified by the transition between confidence and arrogance by students mentioned above, who exhibit this micro-aggressive behaviour.

6.5.3 Qualifications

In many cases within this study, interview participants were either studying for a higher-level postgraduate degree (PhD or other doctoral qualification), had already achieved this level of qualification, were applying for doctoral programmes, had completed a master's degree or were currently studying for another degree. However, this was not the same for each participant and a couple within this study had not been to university and in one case, had not

studied beyond GCSEs. Qualifications were therefore referred to in two ways; one was the way in which higher professional services roles seemed to demand academic qualifications in order to progress and the other was the way in which a lack of qualification was dealt with by the university. Here, being experienced but less qualified on paper was important for the two participants who talked about being incredibly competent but lacking the certification capital (Bourdieu, 1991).

Where progression opportunities were related to qualifications, some felt that this ceiling of progression was in place until the point at which a PhD qualification was achieved:

> *[There's] like the ceiling of progression in professional services if you don't have a PhD.*

Some attributed the lack of progression opportunities to a lack of transparency.

> *[Sometimes I] don't see that progression route, but I also think being made aware of when things are coming up in other teams that we may be suited to, I think that's something that [redacted] as an organisation could do, I remember at [redacted]we'd get weekly vacancies email through to us that were from other areas of the university. And I think that transparency around other areas of university that you could move to, is something that would be beneficial, not just for me, but for anyone, in any team considering a move, I think, yeah, transparency of what's available would be beneficial.*

David* hadn't gone to university as a teenager. Instead, building a range of experience from working in kitchens to working in an administrative role for a decade, he had become highly proficient on applying to work in his university. At one point in our interview, he described an occasion when he had just been employed by the university, where he had emphasised all his varying experiences in professional settings to mitigate the fact he did not have as many formal qualifications as other people who might be applying for the role:

> *The process of applying was interesting because the again, there's a big push for asking for qualifications and experience and I felt quite defensive when I was applying that I had to put a lot more emphasis on my experience. Whereas I think in a lot of cases, if you were just to put down your qualifications and your academic experience that would just be taken a as far as when I was [unclear]*

things like that were definitely more of a focus on trying to make them aware of the things that I can do the things that I have done because that wouldn't just be taken for granted.

He mentioned that, shortly after starting, he had been contacted by HR asking him to provide proof of his qualifications. He described that the email he had received had caused him to feel a sense of terror, a sense that someone had immediately found out that he wasn't good enough to be in his role and that he would shortly be fired. This was one of the key areas, relating to hiring practices that he felt could have been much improved by the university. First, to move away from the necessity of having certain qualifications and instead focusing on experiences but also to refine the HR processes that accompanied the hiring process. Explaining this in his own words he recalled:

After that I got into a panic, like they've realised they've made a mistake and they shouldn't have taken me on…You know, if the qualifications hadn't been added to the CV, then it was strange, let's ask about qualifications. I think it would be standard, a standard thing. And that was one of the things [that] I saw [about] your study…about making things more accessible. I thought that was definitely something that could have been different. Not email, somebody who's just started, who's not put their qualifications on their CV for a reason. Who's got the job? And why does it matter? If you're asking, why do you need to add the qualifications, if I've got the job. I felt like I was going to lose my job. So, it was an experience…designed around that expectation of anyone that's going to get hired into the role will have kind of academic experience of some sort, or very good grades out of school, depending on you know, if it's their first job, or whatever.

6.6 University functions and bureaucracy

When people are thinking through inclusion, they need to think about whether they're just inviting someone into a pre-existing structure. And whether that structure fits that person or not.
Rebecca*

Within the interview schedule, I laid out a set of questions to try to understand how participants experienced the University. I wanted to know what things worked well in their institution and the things that they struggled with. At first, this does not appear to have a direct association

with social class, I was keen to understand whether there were any class-related barriers that participants experienced with regards to institutional function and administrative bureaucracy. Class marginalisation is hence entrenched through systems and management structures. In this section, I explore these entrenched structures through the guise of centralisation, demands on time, remuneration and promotion which adversely impact those from different social classes. A critical reflection on the application of Bourdieu is particularly recognised in the sense of remuneration; working in a 'beautiful environment' comes at the expense of providing additional pay, a structure which therefore continues to create reproduction in the class system.

6.6.1 Centralisation

In current debates about the marketisation of universities, the centralisation and narrowing of provision has proven key. Academics have explained at length during the UCU rising (2022) strikes about the increasing pressure put on academic workloads as a result of the narrowing of provision, taking away critical support structures and networks particularly from departments. From the University management perspective, narrowing provision to centralised locations which often have responsibilities for multiple faculties and departments reduces the associated manpower costs, streamlining resources and economising research and teaching. From academic perspectives this often results in leveraging more administrative work onto academic work loads, often which is not technically work loaded into their week to week working schedule.

This centralisation of provision has also caused issues for those within this study, in terms of reducing potential opportunities and stifling career progression and promotion. Peter* spoke about how his university had centralised their process and staff base to a different physical location, some 60 miles south of where he was originally employed. Having not moved too far away from his hometown originally to get the job at the university, Peter* had nurtured his life adjacent to his work at the university and had family, friends and social personal networks in the immediate vicinity. When the university decided to centralise provision to another location, he simply could not move both for financial reasons and in order to continue to support his children. Administrators and professional services staff can often be formed from people within the local community, more so than the academic staff base or incoming students. By centralising provision in this way, the university in question had stifled the opportunities for Peter* to develop his career skills further and progress. This instance is an example which might detrimentally affect working-class professional services staff and administrators to a greater degree, removing opportunities from local communities which rely on their employer for professional promotion. His position was not unique in terms of the study sample. His work

prior to this move had been in a role that combined technical skill with teaching, albeit without the requirement of having a PhD to do so. It was something he explained that he had enjoyed. However, he explained how the consolidation of the university programmes had affected his career trajectory:

> *I left [redacted] in 2016, when the university decided to consolidate all of his graduate programs back down to [redacted] and I didn't think that I was in a position to move down there.*

He further expanded:

> *In 2014, when the announcement happened, I looked around me and thought, I don't want to move further away from my family. My father is only about 12 miles down the coast. And, and [the new location] is about 60 miles south of me. So, I looked at it and thought I don't really want to move. From a from a logistics point of view, I couldn't really afford to move at the time. And the commute would have been hellish. So, I decided, I can't do it. And because I hadn't completed a PhD, I thought my chances of getting an academic course somewhere else in the region, were not as good. So, I looked around and solid job in professional services…and applied for that, because it was kind of, I need to pay the bills.*

Being restricted by geographic mobility exemplifies the spatio-temporal qualities of the experiences of class that these participants articulate. In historical literature, the increased geographical mobility that is perceived as being part of the post-war culture of the 1960s and 1970s is often dealt with as fact; people in Britain experiencing greater financial security overall were on the move to big cities, new suburban homes and the rise of the new town (Griffiths, 2019). This narrative is often considered to reflect a homogenous experience and yet, the picture of Britain in the era of geographical mobility is contentious, particularly when considered alongside metrics of class and socio-economic status. As Griffiths (2019) argues, the notion of geographic mobility, which is often taken for granted by historians and sociologists alike, is better considered as the experience of the wealthier middle and upper classes than it is within the remit of the working-classes (Griffiths, 2019). Working-class families are much less likely to be geographically mobile, demonstrated in depth by Hecht et al (2023) where they depict how social class advantage can be reproduced through geographic mobilities (Hecht & McArthur, 2023). Stereotypically, a heightened sense of community and a need, economically, to remain close to the family (either to provide financial

resources or care in a care market which has been increasingly monetised) has ensured that working-class young people tend, on average, to remain much closer to home that other groups. The excerpt I have identified above shows this in very real terms; despite any feelings of desire to move that the participant may have had, the economic cost of moving alongside the cost to his family in terms of being able to see his daughter and provide adequate care for her, meant that he had to forgo career opportunities as the role moved south. University centralisation and moves to consolidate faculties and departments therefore can negatively impact working-class professional services staff due to the economic and care-related toll that would be induced by moving. This kind of organisational decision is taken from the perspective of the normative, middle class, gaze. Equality scholars have instead called for an institutional approach to equalities mainstreaming to help address how these decisions may be made with all groups considered properly.

The concept of equalities mainstreaming emanates from the notion of gender mainstreaming in political science. As outlined by EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality):

> *Gender mainstreaming has been embraced internationally as a strategy towards realising gender equality. It involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimina*n (EIGE 2023).

The process of gender mainstreaming requires a thorough consideration of new policies within their design which fully considers how far and to what extent these policies will affect women, and how. It is recognized that in many cases, different policies will affect women in ways that they do not affect men (for example when taking into regard issues related to pregnancy and childbirth) and therefore including gender mainstreaming in policy decisions helps to improve and maintain equitable outcomes. The principle of "gender mainstreaming" as a strategy for ensuring gender is treated as a cross cutting issue, rather than siloed in the "equalities" agenda. Going one step further, the concept of equalities mainstreaming more broadly seeks to replicate this process, taking into consideration other demographic identities and protected characteristics, in order to discern the impact of policies on different marginalised and minority groups (Guerrina, 2020). Squires (2005) analysis of equality mainstreaming regards it as a key tool for transformational change in organisations, policies and institutions. She argues that equality and diversity mainstreaming is essential in order to address the requirements of a diverse population. Equality mainstreaming increases accountability and transparency, thus providing an important tool for "inclusive deliberation" (Squires, 2005: 367). As outlined by

Squires (2005) mainstreaming Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has proved to be a challenge for commentators, researchers and practitioners, in so far as it requires detailed understanding of the impact of policies traditionally seen as "neutral" on different groups, as well as how policies interact with intersecting inequalities (Squires, 2005). In relation to this study, we can see how policies at the institutional level, such as relocation and centralisation have affected different people. Peter* detailed that the university had assumed that all groups were able to be geographically mobile during university centralisation. Yet there were factors like location of family, caring responsibilities and local ties, which more readily impacted those from working-class backgrounds, making such relocations impossible. The concept of equalities mainstreaming will be considered further in the recommendations section, it would be an interesting avenue for University policy to adopt given the issues that have been outlined here with regards to institutions and working-class professional services and administrative staff.

6.7 Workloads and pressure

Workloads, stressors and pressure feature prominently within the interviews here. There are a couple of critical themes which I subsequently identified regarding workload and overwork, lack of financial remuneration for hours worked and the nature of professional services and administrative work as having a constant pressure throughout the year.

6.7.1 Workload and stress

One of the key themes I have identified with regards to work and pressure is workloads. Workloads and the increasing pressure on staff to complete more tasks in their working week without additional payment or care for the number of hours being worked is a key feature of the UCU rising strikes which have been taking place in 2022 and 2023. These strikes have outlined how additional responsibilities are often undertaken by professionals within universities, both academics and Professional Services staff who feel pressure to take these on. Whilst the EU Working Time Directive (2003) states that employees can be expected to work no more than 48 hours in each week, employees suggested they worked 12-hour days, came in at weekends regularly or were up working until the early hours to make sure that things were completed. This seems to be more applicable where staff members have student-facing or partially student-facing roles, with lots of pressure created around circumstances like admissions and summer schools. This phenomenon is not necessarily specific to working-class professional services staff within universities; we know that academics and other professional services staff are also under similar pressure (Morris et al, 2023; UCU 2022). However, one participant suggested that she was less likely to advocate for her mandatory

employee rights around long working hours because she lacked the confidence to negotiate or the bravery to contend the number of responsibilities being placed on her due to her working-class background.

6.8 Financial remuneration

A few participants outlined their actual hours worked in comparison to the hours they were technically employed to work during the working week. Rachel* outlined how her working week was technically supposed to be 35 hours per week:

> *Yeah, I mean, I get paid for 35 hours a week. Don't get paid any overtime and TOIL doesn't happen, I probably regularly work 12-to-13-hour days. You know, I was in all day Sunday. I am not alone in that. That is, you know, sometimes you think is it me like I'm not managing my time right not do is not doing that. We're all the same across the board. We're extremely overworked in order to deliver this world leading student experience that people talk about*

Although she outlined how much she enjoyed her work in general, the pressure of working such long hours had taken its toll. For Rachel* working at a high level in one Russell Group institution, she was unsure how much longer she would stay working in academia, with such high demands yet little opportunity for career progression. She explained further how she had struggled previously to advocate for herself in terms of feeling that she had worked above and beyond the expectations required of her and that she should have been financially remunerated for this work. Her experience was that she had been working in roles well above her pay grade and had fought to be eligible for a discretionary pay award at the end of the year to reflect that work. She explained to me that after tax, this award had been around £500 and was supposed to reflect the additional contributions to work she had made totalling hours in the hundreds over the course of the academic year. Yet, this had been a struggle to negotiate for and she had felt uncomfortable asking for it in the first place. For her, this was a specific feature of having a working-class identity. Asking for additional pay was not something she was comfortable with despite the fact she felt like it was something she had deserved. She defined this concept by contrasting with the experiences she had had of other people around her:

> *There's other people who have had the networks had the opportunity. Who've had the networks and the support where they know that they're never going to accept that as the bargaining chip. And I think a lot of us locally, again, because of this whole thing, where we think we're lucky to have a job, we're never going*

to go into that, and negotiate that in the right way, or the way that's gonna get us
a positive outcome.

Researchers from the LSE conducted a 2017 study using data from the UK Labour Force Survey (2016) identified a significant class pay gap in certain professions, in finance, medicine and IT (Friedman, Laurison, et al., 2017). These findings were again reiterated in 2022 by research conducted by the Social Mobility Foundation who found that on average, professionals from working-class backgrounds earned on average £6718 less than their peers, with women from working-class backgrounds earning on average £9450 less (Department for Opportunities, 2022). In their 2020 book, *The Class Ceiling: Why it pays to be privileged* Friedman et al explored the determining factors which enabled those from more privileged backgrounds repeat these cycles of privilege and benefit from the class pay gap. Here, they identified several factors including informal sponsorship and embodied cultural capital as being overriding facilitating factors in the success of those from more privileged backgrounds. They were able to pertinently identify embodied cultural capital through professions in media and broadcasting where it played out 'very clearly, both in terms of alignment with dominant organisational modes of bodily praxis and through the value of a highbrow aesthetic orientation' (Friedman & Laurison, 2020:206). They understand this tension in who 'gets on' as a space between Bourdieu's later concept of technical capital and embodied cultural capital. Using the example of accountancy, they demonstrate how technical capital (core skills) is vital to the progression of junior staff in the lower levels but that 'as one moves up the business the emphasis shifts more to polish, gravitas and the demonstration of entrepreneurial flair'.

This kind of conceptualisation can be related to academic trajectories in work by Crew (2020) who identifies specific features of those who succeed in academia and who are ostracised, with particularly reference to embodied cultural capital, mannerisms, confidence, styles of dress, body size and the use of language. The participant in the previous passage spoke adamantly about the skills that she did not have, that others did have, in terms of negotiating salary and being able to use certain skills as 'bargaining chips' to access fair pay for the work that was being done. In many ways, this is a representation of the class pay gap and relative embodied cultural capital in action; others who possess the tools to negotiate, the confidence to do so, and the financial protection that if they don't succeed, they will still survive, are able to access appropriate pay for the level of work being done.

The concept of fair pay for work done was not an isolated theme within this study. Lizzie* explained how at one, ancient, institution that pay was significantly lower there because the institution placed an assumed reputational value of their name on the employees CV and

working record. She explained that financial remuneration for work being conducted represented a 'systematic under appreciation of assistant staff'. She referenced a job advertisement which had recently been posted and explained:

> *One of the perks of the job that they that they listed was the opportunity to work in a beautiful environment.*

She explained why this was particularly problematic to her:

> *I think it undermines real employee benefits like decent pay and perpetuates this awful view that people, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, should put up and shut up and feel grateful and blessed to be given the opportunity to study or work in [the university].*

The idea that those from non-traditional backgrounds should feel 'lucky' or 'grateful' to be employed within a prestigious Russell Group university was echoed in other interviews. As Rachel* further discussed:

> *I think the university work runs a lot of the time on the goodwill of all staff. And I think a lot of that is actually to do…with working-class identity, actually, the majority of people who keep this university going in terms of like, housekeepers, and porters, and admin, staff, and everything are probably all working-class are all local. And you're constantly told, you know, not by the university, but like, it's just the mentality around here that you're lucky to have a job. So, you know, nobody's going to push back on it. Nobody's gonna say anything about it, because you're lucky to have a job. And you're lucky to have a job at the university, do you know what I mean?*

The notion that institutions rely on prestige and reputation to keep staff wages low is an interesting one. Whilst it beyond the scope or approach of this research to negate or corroborate this point of view, elements like suggesting a 'beautiful environment' are a tangible perk of the job still asks questions about the nature of employment and the way in which those in charge of recruitment perceive benefits to be, and how this looks to those who have come from less privileged backgrounds. in any case this plays into well-established discourses of hierarchy that suggest working-class staff should feel grateful for the opportunity to be able to work in a historically elite context and to enjoy the company people deemed to be superior.

6.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has looked at critical themes which emerged in participant interviews with regards to working in their current institution. I have identified critical components: relationships with academics, professional services staff and students, career prospects and trajectories, functions and bureaucracy, workloads and skills. I made several key findings; participants often enjoy working within their institutions and immediate teams but are subjected to poor behaviour from academics whilst also taking on responsibility for working-class students. Participants feel unable to contribute in some settings due to not understanding the rules of engagement and references to things like antiquity which are part of the normative culture, but not prevalent in their own habitus. This disjuncture represents a dislocation between habitus and a lamination of field which often means working class professional services staff are not included within the fabric of the institution.

Chapter 7: Analysis: Interwoven threads

Within each of the themes I have outlined, there were several interwoven narratives that cut through the conversations. These focus on a few areas including narratives of hard work and luck, a sense of guilt, networks, an overriding financial anxiety, and a sense of unrecognised or untapped potential. The repeated references to specific anxiety around finance, guilt and luck transcended the two key areas of class conceptualisation and current experiences, therefore justifying their exposition in a separate chapter. I deal with these themes in turn in order to consider how these are facets of working-class identity that are implicit, rather than the explicit facets of identity that participants outlined when asked to describe their social class.

7.1 Narratives of hard work and luck

The concept of being lucky or having luck is something that runs strongly throughout all the interviews. Running a text-based query through all the transcripts shows that the word 'luck' was used explicitly 27 times in all but three of the interviews in this study. Luck is referred to in three distinct ways. Participants explain their trajectory to date as having been 'extremely lucky', that chance meetings with influential people enabled them to develop experiences that they could use to form their professional identities, or that they were 'lucky' to have access to certain forms and types of education. In one respect this is referred to in relation to education by a couple of participants who felt they were 'lucky' or fortunate enough to get scholarships or succeed through entry tests to grammar schools, thus having vastly different school educational careers from some of their peers.

Some also felt they had been lucky to receive help in applying for their current jobs, chance meetings with friends of friends or extended family who could offer advice were instances where this kind of luck was seen to be transformative in terms of outcome. Annie* discussed this in relation to her team at work:

> *I'm very fortunate that I work in a supportive team, and I work doing something that matters to me.*

This was further exemplified by Rachel:

> *I think about myself, I'm you know, quite lucky to be in this position…I often think well, I'm really lucky to have this job.*

In terms of participant's current career standings, many participants describe luck in the context of their teams, immediate working colleagues or departments. One participant describes being lucky to 'be in a rich department' where others describe the luck, they feel to have been given certain line managers, bosses, or close working relationships with their teams. The final way in which luck is described as a concept in these interviews is in relation to some perceptions that some participants have of the University's attitude towards pay, remuneration and prestige. Participants described a university-wide attitude towards staff that they should feel lucky or grateful to work at a prestigious Russell Group or historic university as a type of payment, seen to be of reputational value to the individuals concerned. Participants who explored this concept were particularly frustrated by the notion that reputation or prestige could be used as currency as they understood fully the complexities of failing to afford a good basic standard of living.

The narrative of luck within this study is cross cutting and under tensions at times. Luck plays a significant role in participants explaining their career journeys, successes and how they have come to achieve a role in a middle-class, prestigious institution, often in comparison to the quite different career trajectories of people they had left behind at home. This is interesting when considered alongside the narrative of meritocracy which has been perpetuated throughout the political rhetoric of the UK in the last 30 years. As Friedman et al (2020) note that post war fortunes place emphasis on technical capital in the UK which was used usually by young men from less privileged backgrounds. Using new technical skills and capabilities these individuals were able to become the 'new man', the socially mobile man. Thatcherism and Neo-Thatcherism under the New Labour Blair government of 1997, and subsequent conservative party governments have continued to pursue the 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' narrative. This serves as two distinct political tools; individualising success as being a matter of someone working hard moves the responsibility for inequalities away from the structural and systemic deficiencies that reproduce privilege, and lack of it. Individualising success also individualises 'failure' enabling the manifestation of derogatory rhetoric towards those from typically working-class backgrounds (Harvey, 2007). Interestingly in this study, whilst 'hard work' does appear a few times, it is the narrative of 'luck' which appears to be pervasive. Despite decades of political narrative which has sought to place success at the feet of individuals, the participants in this study still felt that their success in being relatively stable and in relatively secure institutions were a result of fortunes which had somehow fallen to them.

There is a broader political and societal question here; if middle-class or privileged individuals tend to adopt the rhetoric of meritocracy more readily than their working-class counterparts,

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has the pervasive political rhetoric achieved its goal? We might ask whether the rhetoric of meritocracy is only ever intended to enable the middle-class to solidify the positions of themselves, and in consequence the position of those from less privileged backgrounds (Bloodworth, 2016; Reay, 2021b). The use of meritocracy as a political tool has been much discussed by scholars in sociology, philosophy, and political science (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016; Reay, 2021b; Sandel, 2020). As Sandel (2020) argues, the use of merit in modern democracies fosters hubris, encouraging resentment and the maintenance of the status quo, ensuring that inequalities persist (Sandel, 2020). His argument is that refocusing on elements such as luck and privilege reinstate human values such as humility within society (Sandel, 2020). It is interesting, therefore, to note how participants consider their ascension to their current position as being heavily intertwined with notions of luck, more so than a result of their own hard work or 'talent'. This is a representation of practice theory; participants here are complicit in the reproduction of a discourse that frames their own success as the result of luck or exception rather than their own agency. This comes in contrast to the discourse of meritocracy that is deployed by the middle classes to obscure the advantage that comes with their class status (Bourdieu, 1972). Hard work then, is misrecognised as luck because the assumption is that even with hard work, the rules of meritocracy do not apply to working class experiences. Going any further than this is far beyond the reaches of this study and warrants further research.

7.2 Networks and Social capital

The importance and presence of advantageous social networks was a point that participants often mentioned in reflection to the experiences they had had growing up in working-class communities. Networks, and the absence of those which are 'facilitating' is one of the tools necessary to ascend the hierarchies of the dominant cultures within UK society. Rachel* who worked in an institution in the north was adamant about the absence of networks and the lack of facilitating connections that she had had growing up. Rachel*, one of the first interviewees I spoke to during this project had an interesting relationship with her own conceptualisation of class. She had grown up in a working-class community although she was aware that her current situation outwardly appeared to be one of relative fortune and affluence, despite the fact she had lacked what she depicted to be critical skills and influences that would have helped her to ascend the hierarchies of her chosen career path. She explained that part of her working-class identity was forged in response to an absence of facilitating networks, people and connections who could help her to navigate middle-class spaces, institutions and environments. It seemed quite clear that she had struggled with this reflection throughout her career, managing to ascend through her career whilst simultaneously being unable to draw on

the types of connections which would have helped her to make these transitions more smoothly. I asked her to explain to me what she meant when she referenced these networks in our interviews in relation to her perceived identity as working-class. She described how is meant:

> …knowing how to navigate university. I had no networks…my mam and dad don't know lawyers or people who work in universities or doctors, or you know people in those level of professional service…[not] knowing how to navigate university and knowing how to play the game as such, I think that inevitably affects your confidence.

The presence, or absence of these kinds of networks, networks that could help to facilitate progression or the development of experience or confidence were evident throughout the interviews I conducted. Michael* reflected on his journey to professional services which had involved embarking on a career in the financial district of the city of London. He connected the concept of being 'well connected' to being 'more well off' especially in the post-graduation job market after leaving his undergraduate degree:

> I guess it kind of kicked home for me when I came to graduate from university and lots of my friends, all of a sudden had jobs, and I didn't and they all had these other networks they were tapping into to get other jobs, whereas I didn't have that. It was a really difficult gap to me at graduating and then going into the working world.

He explained, by chance, how a romantic relationship he had started during university had enabled him to understand the benefit of networks from a first-hand perspective. This relationship seemed to be a facilitating relationship, through which he was able to access connections and people with 'important' jobs in the city who he had not been previously associated with:

> I started going out with a girl whose parents were quite affluent…and they started like, introducing me to people in the city. Then, all of a sudden, I had access to a chap who was the owner of an asset management company in the city of London, you know. He met with me, we had a chat and it turned out…all these doors were open to me…

Whilst Michael* had been an active recipient of the benefits of these kinds of networks, he described how the types of connections he had been linked to did not, eventually, come to fruition and he found that the type of culture and work he was introduced to was not aligned with his interests. I developed the sense through this part of the interview that Michael* felt that he had seen the benefits and ramifications of these kinds of facilitating networks, whilst he had been the recipient of accessing new networks which could point him to 'better' careers in the hub of London, the place of work he had then accessed was not aligned with his personal, social and intellectual values, he didn't seem to feel that he had fully fitted into the environment the network had given him access to.

In the first example, Michael* references the presence of networks which, although were unrecognised by those in possession of them, were very clear to him. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, Chris* who had come from a very different career trajectory. Chris*, who had achieved a PhD in STEM was a very active member of the widening participation agenda within his institution. His dual intensity as being part of the LGBT community intersected with his working-class heritage and he proudly possessed both key facets of his identity when talking about the students he helped at his university, hoping to advocate for making their experiences more equitable. He identified these networks as things that other people:

> *… [don't] understand things like 'oh, I can get you an internship with someone I know that's in the area you want to go into'….it doesn't matter that it's unpaid because you can spare six weeks of your time in the summer when a lot of other people would have to go and work so they've got the money to keep them going.*

Molly* who had similarly come from a previous career to working in professional services, for reasons relating to job insecurity (perceiving professional services as being secure), noted how she had seen these kinds of networks in her former working life.[13] She explained that these networks had helped people around her gain prestigious roles in TV and media, and that similarly the networks that she had witnessed herself had meant that those around her had been able to go to and navigate University life in a much more seamless way, whilst she was only able to rely on her first-hand experience of starting a degree, with no frame of reference from her parents or wider family:

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[13] These networks in the realm of performing arts were explored with regards to class in the paper, 'Skydiving without a parachute', Friedman et al., 2016.

You read a lot about people who got a TV show or have got an agent and that's because they've got an uncle who works in the BBC, or they've got a family friend here and there. And then I didn't have any of that…I didn't really know what to do or what to expect, and my mum didn't know how to like to fill in the forms or navigate that process.

In the context of her role, working with students to help them access industrial placements, Molly* related her own experiences as a young adult and starting out on her first career path to the plight of the students she saw around her, who experienced the inequalities of opportunity as they related directly to the presence or absence of their own personal and professional 'facilitating' networks. For Molly*, one of the central tenants from having had been brought up within a working-class environment was that she had had to actively develop her own networks within academia in order to explore what additional opportunities might be open to her:

I've created my own networks and then that has made it easier for me to go into different roles in the university and sort of understand my potential here and what I can offer from my perspective, and sometimes what you can perceive as limitations previously, can really work in your favour.

The language participants used to describe these sorts of networks was, fascinating. Whilst Michael* referred to it as 'almost like a secret', Molly* further described it as a 'secret world', Rachel* understood it as 'learning the rules of the game'.

Comparing the experiences of people within this study to precedent within the literature helps enable us to reflect on a deeper level about the social inequalities which are embedded and realised within society in the UK today. As Friedman & Laurison (2019) note, certain professions which are idolised and rewarded with high salaries and social status tend to be occupied by people from very homogenous social backgrounds, with the children of former lawyers and doctors for example being 24 times more likely to work in those professions. There are two alternate perspectives here which will be investigated in greater depth in the concluding chapter of this thesis. The first considers how far universities and places of employment should be mitigating the unequal access to these kinds of networks that tend to define the experiences of young people from less privileged social groups. The second, and an alternate perspective stems from the comments made by Michael* in relation to his experiences on accessing some of these privileged networks. Michael* by his own omission had been able to access a career pathway which was a celebrated form of employment in the city and yet had felt that the type and nature of the work he had accessed was not aligned to

his social and intellectual values. As we will explore in the concluding chapter of this thesis, issues such as networks and belonging prioritise the pursuit of a social mobility agenda. This is an agenda which pursues the idea that a neutral accent, middle-class professions and middle-class life is normative, that advancing these spaces is optimal and that working class environments are somehow suboptimal. However, the experience of some of the participants in this study suggests that even when provided with these facilitating tools to access higher social and vocational hierarchies that, when they get there, these people often feel more isolated, in between home and contemporary life and unable to bring their previous life experiences to work with them. In essence, I will discuss further in the conclusion how far the social mobility narrative which is facilitated by enabling access to things like better social networks causes harm and results in individuals having to ignore facets of their own ingrained identity, in order to assimilate with a dominant sense of culture (Bourdieu, 1984).

7.3 Guilt & Financial anxiety

Money and concepts of financial anxiety are littered throughout participant's accounts of their backgrounds and their feelings towards work and their environments in the present. I have already examined how this has played out in feelings of guilt and incomprehension at being financially secure through having a permanent or 'safe' job within a large institution. However, feelings around money also manifested in these interviews as worries and anxieties through a fear of debt, an inherited fear of poverty and deprivation. These feelings extrapolate the sense of being a 'class traitor' as I found in chapter five, being in a sense of relative financial comfort is at odds with enduring sense of economic precarity linked to a working-class identity. I asked one participant, who had said that she was financially quite secure now, how it felt to now be in the position of security when she had grown up in relative poverty. She explained how the feeling left her with a divided opinion and a constant fear or anxiety around being able to afford things:

> *It is the strangest feeling in the world. It's like, I don't know, as long as I can remember, it's always been in the back of my mind, it's something you can't forget about. I'm sure you've kind of experienced the same of like, it's just always there, it's always in the back of your mind that I can't afford this, or I can't do that.*

> *Or, you know, I've got to be really careful this month, and all those little things, they never go away. So having that now is a bit of a shock and really comforting. And I don't think me worrying about money is ever gonna go away. Because that's kind of how I've been programmed to go through life. So, yeah, I still, I still*

> *worry about it. But I have to keep reminding myself that I know exactly how much I'm going to be paid every single month…Yeah, it might not be much, but like, it's just a safety net that I've never really had. So, it means a lot to me.*

Financial anxieties for this participant were reiterated constantly over the course of the last year with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Emphasising the nature of a previous financial trauma and how it continued to affect her day-to-day life she added further clarity:

> *You know, with the few increases and stuff, the cost-of-living crisis, I'm really worried about it. I thought actually, it's, it's not okay that it's going up. But we'll still be okay. But I still feel really worried about, like, really worried about it. So, it's that kind of like, there's like a balance between like, I feel happy that I'm now secure. But I still have this kind of in the back of my head. Like, I'm still worried about it, if that makes sense. Like, irrationally.*

For Chris* the anxiety over money and being financially secure helped to clarify some of the choices he made to work in professional services after achieving a PhD. A job in professional services was seen by Chris* to be a much more secure route and one that was going to be able to support him and his family into the future, rather than relying on the often-precarious early career researcher and academic contracts that are common in academic trajectories (Morris et al, 2023). He spoke explicitly about avoiding academia on achieving his PhD due to the funding not being available and seeing people following an academic trajectory:

> *…slogging their guts out in the office until two in the morning with a young family at home.*

Making himself as educated as possible, though, was the focus for making sure he was secure financially despite moving into more secure roles in Professional Services:

> *It's remembering a situation that I don't want to find myself in again. And making sure that I don't…that's to an extent why I made sure that I was as educated as I could be, to make sure to try and rule out the possibility of finding myself in those situations again.*

Debt aversion and aversion to risk also played a part in the financial anxieties that participants described, in addition to the wider financial anxieties already explored. For a couple of participants who did not go to university at 18 but chose to study for an undergraduate degree

later, they described how being 'scared about debt' or having 'debt aversion' and not wanting to put themselves in financial debt was a crucial and often deciding factor in attending university earlier on. Alongside issues like feeling like they would not fit in, this sense of debt aversion is a common narrative in widening participation literature (Callender, 2005).

7.4 Unrecognised potential and a lack of respect

The last overriding thread that ran throughout the themes I have identified was the notion that many of the respondents in this study felt that they possessed a degree of capability that often meant their potential or work was unrecognised, or that they felt more capable than some of the work they were allocated, examples of which can be found in chapter six. Crucially, this wasn't the case for all participants, and several felt they were able to participate in the working environment to their fullest potential, without fear of repercussion. Interestingly, for the men in this study this seemed to be largely the case and they each described feeling comfortable within their job role and the expectations they had placed on them. These individuals also were more likely to be involved in technical roles than others in this study with them occupying positions in IT and development. Whether or not there is a gendered or role-oriented relationship between worth or not is undecipherable at this stage. It might be that women tend to feel less appreciated in their roles, it might be that greater degrees of technical capital enables people to feel more secure in demonstrating their abilities, or there may be other connections to be made. This might well form the basis of some future, richer research.

7.5 Findings summary

Working in Russell Group universities is a multifaceted experience for participants in this study, oscillating between feeling supported and protected to feeling 'othered', spoken down to, unable to participate and not belonging to the pervasive university culture. Throughout chapters five, six, and seven, I have identified two key threads; the definition of class and its characteristics and the experiences professional services staff have working in the academy. With regards to class identity, I interpreted themes which related to explicit working-class characteristics; things participants told me made them working-class and implicit class characteristics; cross cutting narratives which were pervasive throughout. Much like inclusion criteria for working-class participants in other research, the explicit class characteristics that were outlined by participants were open to discussion, not fully agreed upon and took many forms. These included iterations and amalgamations of the following: poverty and economic circumstance, parents' professional roles and education, housing, access to material goods, cultural tastes and holidays, sports, dress, and hobbies.

It is clear there is a movement away from discerning working-class identity to a sole association between work and profession. Many participants regarded factors like receipt of free school meals and parental education as critical to their understanding of class and there was a recognition that class might be wound up with occupation but that it could also be the experience of economic deprivation and poverty. Participants also framed their social class identity in relation to the cultural tastes they saw around them growing up and identified things like holidays, transport, access to technology, clothes and types of housing as things they believed made them working-class. Interestingly, different participants placed different amounts of emphasis on these areas, I found that participants from northern working-class backgrounds tended to acknowledge the position of work and jobs roles in their family as underlining their association with a working-class identity whilst those working at universities in the south tended to place more emphasis on economics, poverty, and deprivation. In all cases, participants noted the difference in cultural tastes that they felt demarcated their working-class identity. Implicitly, there were themes which were pervasive throughout answers to different questions during the scope of the interviews which relate to a sense of social class identity but were not explicitly mentioned when asked to define the reasons for their self-identification as working-class. These themes included narratives of hard work and luck, financial anxiety, guilt, networks (or lack thereof) and unrecognised potential.

The findings chapters have explored how navigating a working-class identity in Russell Group is multifaceted and comprises many different norms, values, and interpretations. The pervasive narrative suggests that a working-class identity is largely not acceptable in the middle-class environment of a Russell Group university. This has become clear through the internal tensions and conscious self-representation that participants felt throughout the course of these interviews. At the start of this section, I introduced the theoretical concept that social class had the ability to change depending on economic constraints. Of course, when understanding the definition of class as economically oriented and solely concerned with financial situations, this idea seems plausible. The premise of the social mobility movement is built on the concept that by changing financial fortunes, through accessing different new professions or realms, that a person can ascend the social hierarchy, leaving their original class roots behind (Loveday, 2015). In this study, the cultural elements of class which Skeggs (2004) noted prominently have joined the economic considerations and come to the foreground. What is clear from the interactions in this study is that most of the participants here, being removed from their childhood by many years, were still able to relate their current situation and thoughts at feelings at work in the present to the cultural understandings and experiences they had had growing up, experiencing a lamination of field. Even if economically, they did not currently consider themselves to be deprived in terms of financial remuneration

or availability of funds, certain elements relating to cultural capital, memory, guilt, luck, shame and belonging rang heavily throughout their accounts. This suggests that for this cohort at least, facets relating to class that move beyond profession, employment and economics are still heavily impactful on the way that people from working-class backgrounds experience their own lives, even when navigating new middle-class environments (Loveday, 2015; Binns, 2019).

This chapter has demonstrated the literal heavy lifting that administrators and professional services staff do in terms of workload, pressures and managing behaviours. Yet, it also demonstrates that working class professional services staff also carry around the multi-layered complexity of class identity which is often not visible to those not doing it. This duality of 'heavy lifting' has been pronounced and evident throughout these chapters.

8. Conclusion and reflections

8.1 Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of thirteen professional services and administrative staff working in Russell Group universities who self-identified as having a working-class identity. Using narrative inquiry as a theoretical tool embedded in semi-structured interviews, it sought to access the deeper meaning and context of personal life histories and experiences which grounded how the individuals in this study were also experiencing their current, day to day working lives. The findings from this study demonstrate a contribution to knowledge in three keys areas: the understanding of working-class as an identity by working class participants in a sociological framing, working-class identity in relation to other themes, and the experiences of working within Russell Group universities as someone with a working-class social background.

In the literature review, I uncovered a thread between the papers which suggested that there was a level of disagreement between how people were identified for studies of the working-class by their working-class identities. Here, studies used various methods of identification such as self-identification, POLAR data and access to things like free school meals in order to discern working-class participants (Boliver, 2018). I also found here that the established literature predominantly used semi-structured interviews as the primary method and Bourdieu as the central underpinning theoretical frame. Here, it was interesting to note the connection between Bourdieu as a central underpinning theory and the lack of agreement about identification parameters for working-class study participants.

This suggests that whilst Bourdieu is being discussed heavily as defining the theoretical parameters of many class-based studies due to relationships such as between habitus and field, that Bourdieusian theory alone does not provide substantial guidance for identifying social class. This in turn, allows us to question how far, indeed, Bourdieusian theory is an appropriate framing for studies of this kind without further nuance. There is also a little-reported irony in the accessibility of Bourdieusian text, which is widely noted for the complex nature of the works produced. Essentially rendering Bourdieusian literature to the understanding of a particular intellectual elite which is inaccessible to the majority of society.

This thesis finds that studies at present observe the experiences of academics, students and on occasion, parents, but omit the experiences of the other populations of people who are associated with the university in a professional capacity. In 2020/21 non-academic staff

accounted for over 191,000 of total employees working in Higher Education Institutions in the UK (HESA, 2022). Of this group, over 157,000 individuals worked in roles encompassing 'Managers, directors and senior officials', 'Professional occupations', 'Associate professional and technical occupations' and 'Administrative and secretarial occupations'. HESA (2022) counts the entire body of staff in UK Universities as 380,880 (HESA, 2022). Research around personal experiences concerning class with paid employees has therefore currently omitted over 41% of those employees, people who form a considerable part of the employee workforce in UK Higher Education (HESA, 2022). As such, they inform the ways in which the university operates, contribute to the working life of the university and are part of the key functional roles which enable universities to practise excellence in teaching, learning and research. There is significant scope for further research in areas which have currently not been examined in academic research. Primarily, the experiences of professional services and administrative staff need to be understood in order to be able to better understand the organisational culture, behaviours, norms and values that exist within higher education. These voices in university are not currently being heard within academia (McKay & Robson, 2023). Lastly, there is significant opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how class is performed, perceived and lived by participants, to understand what being from a working-class background and holding a working-class identity means to individuals. Doing further research on the manifestation and definition of class can not only help to broaden understanding of class on an epistemological level but broaden the scope for research.

As a result of the disparity between identification methods found in the literature review, one of the key research questions for this study was to understand how participants defined their own working-class identities and this formed the basis of one of the main questions in the interview. Here, I found that participants mention several explicit characteristics which for them, defined their working-class identities. These characteristics focussed on economic deprivation (access to material goods, access to transport, type of housing, access to necessities and type of hobbies, holidays and pursuits), occupation (their own previous occupation and the occupations of their parents), accent and dispositions of taste related to things like dress, music, and other forms of cultural capital and habitus. Participants also acknowledged that, in agreement with the analysis of the literature review, the definition of what it meant to be working-class had been in flux and changing over time, perhaps as a reflection of changes in the wider workforce and economic condition of the UK over the last 40-50 years. Adding further complexity to this understanding of a working-class identity, I thematically analysed references to social class identity which were made in response to other questions, which I refer to here as being 'implicit'. These responses which were not made in response to the explicit question covered several different facets which, although related to

explicit definitions of working-class, were overarching mechanisms which added a sense of 'cultural baggage' which these working-class participants did not explicitly use to define their social class status but were carrying throughout the discussions of other elements of their lives. These facets included the following topics: narratives of hard work and luck, networking and facilitating networks and feeling undervalued and underappreciated. Here, I have made a key finding: different articulations of classed identity emphasise the spatio-temporal dimensions of what it means to be working class. Memories and past inhabited spaces are relived in new middle-class fields, offering a much richer, more complex understanding of the experience of working-class identity in participant narratives (Binns, 2019).

Whilst this study has not been able to answer the greater epistemological question of 'what is it to have a working-class identity?' I have challenged the epistemic validity of the question, as there is no single answer but rather many complex instantiations of what it means to working-class in the specific lived experiences of my participants. I have further illuminated the findings of the literature review; being working-class in 2023 has many different interpretations, understandings and impressions than being solely linked to job roles and the means of production. If anything, the further emphasis of class as being connected to poverty and economic circumstance does suggest a certain degree of flux; working-class identity is no longer solely connected to the job role you hold but also is deeply connected to economic circumstance, education, poverty and disadvantage.

The second key strand of findings within this study relate more specifically and directly to the way in which Russell Group universities are experienced by working-class employees. Participants reflected on key areas, relationships with academics, relationships with students, relationships with other professional services staff, workloads, tasks, value, appreciation, careers and university processes and bureaucracy. All participants reported generally good relationships with others in professional services teams and working-class students who they sought to help in order to make sure that they were able to flourish at university, because they personally understood their circumstances and challenges. Where participants mentioned relationships with students from other social class backgrounds and academics, these relationships were reported with a distinctly negative framing. Working-class professional services staff are subjected to poor behaviour, disdain, a lack of respect, with derogatory and demeaning action on the part of academics and students from other social class backgrounds.

The single most common theme when asked what the least enjoyable part of their role was, was unequivocally the relationships they had with academics. This key, important, finding has implications for further research and a need to investigate this phenomenon further.

Participants referred to these behaviours as being a result of a higher degree of value placed on academics, a sense that academics were the ones who were 'shining', a lack of regard for professional services work and a sense that professional services staff could be used to carry out often demeaning and non-contracted work, even whilst ill or on leave. The mechanisms at play which demonstrate this lack of value include direct examples of poor behaviour towards professional services staff, using deferential language, not valuing professional services voices in meetings and placing expectations on staff which were unreasonable or unfeasible. At times where professional services colleagues demonstrated historical instances of speaking up (which does not seem to be a normative course of behaviour for working-class staff members), they were shushed or told to get on with their work, and therefore not taken seriously.

Not feeling fully included in the culture of the organisation in which they worked materialised in different ways across this study. Many participants in this study were highly qualified individuals and yet felt unable to progress in their careers due either to a lack of qualification, or because the career path or trajectory had no further steps on it. In these instances, technical colleagues expressed their dissatisfaction that future promotion would have to come at the expense of people management, despite their functional roles in IT and programming. It was clear that where universities were making big decisions, such as relocating a campus, that they failed to take into consideration the impact these policy changes would have on people with different personal demographics.

This study has highlighted a need to be able to understand the wider narrative around pastoral care and the research that exists in this area around female academics (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Phillips et al., 2022; Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023). Within this research it has often been acknowledged that female academics bear an additional load around pastoral care for students which does not exist in the same capacity for male academics (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Phillips et al., 2022; Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023). Reflecting between the literature and the findings of this thesis allows me to question whether working-class professional services staff in roles that work with working-class students are bearing a greater load of pastoral care than their counterparts who do not have this shared background (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). This extra degree of care and ethical support is something which it would be vital for universities to explore to enhance their provision for their students and also to ensure that staff who are doing this often-difficult work are given adequate support networks (Phillips et al., 2022). Not being included also manifested through dominant cultural tastes and preferences, exemplified and demonstrated by those who had come from upper-class backgrounds. Many spoke about their inability to engage in

conversations about art, theatre, opera or 'high culture', a lack of understanding about classical antiquity, or an inability to fit in with the style of dress which seemed to pervade the workplace. Despite feeling a tension of not fitting into their workplace environment, colleagues noted that this shift in working life and (sometimes) geographical relocation also made it very difficult to fit into their previous home environment, rendering them often as feeling like 'class traitors' to their roots, yet also not being able to fully integrate into their new local environment.

This study has illuminated themes around class which ask larger conceptual questions about the need for social mobility and the social mobility agenda which is currently being pursued across the board by large governmental organisations like the Social Mobility Commission. These social mobility programmes emphasise the need to make opportunities for people from less advantaged social class backgrounds more open, to see greater representation within these kinds of organisations (Elliot-Major et al.,2018). These social mobility initiatives operate with a similar trajectory and purpose to the widening participation agenda in UK HE. This model is predicated on the ability of the individual to both access the opportunity and to then integrate into the organisation itself, with organisations utilising things like mentoring to better assimilate people from different backgrounds into the fabric of the organisation (Field, 2013; Elliot-Major et al., 2018). In chapters five and seven I discussed the normativity which is associated with both accent and the agenda of social mobility.

This association sees things associated with a middle-class experience (such as a neutral accent, wearing a dress to work, working in certain environments) as normative, the pursuit of an 'upper-class' accent or wealth and situation as optimal and the embodiment of working-class facets as being sub-optimal and something to be denounced. However, as this study has shown there are two fundamental issues with this approach. Individuals may never fully 'integrate' and always feel a sense of flux between their origins and the new environment at work, resulting in being 'symbolically indebted' to their institution (Loveday, 2015:1). This raises significant questions about well-being, belonging, mental health and community which is often lacking within these narratives (Loveday, 2015; Binns, 2019).

Social mobility and the integration of people from working-class backgrounds is predicated on the prioritisation of the kind of cultural tastes and behaviours which are already practised within that institution (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). In the case of large city-based firms and organisations and in 'elite' universities, these cultural tastes and behaviours have been set in place by decades, sometimes centuries, of this space being dominated by the upper and upper middle-classes (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). This kind of approach advocates for the adoption of these kinds of cultural tastes and dispositions in opposition to the cultures and tastes of the

working-class (Walkerdine, 2021). This is inherently problematic and divergent from the notion of true inclusion as an idea which seeks to include difference rather than promote assimilation and the adoption of a dominant cultural narrative. It suggests that working-class tastes and culture is, somehow, inferior to the dominant cultural narrative at place, which is not only problematic but damaging to communities and inherently untrue (McKenzie, 2017). This 'stickiness' of working-class habitus is often ignored in these kinds of discourses (Jin & Ball 2019:5). working-class culture and cultural preferences as they hold true, remarkable values as the participants in this study have demonstrated; a sense of community, hard work, collective, safety, cohesion, determination and a genuine desire to help one another succeed.

This study has underscored a theoretical gap in the application of Bourdieu as a theoretical framework in studies of class and culture. As was made clear in the literature review in chapter two, using the theory of Bourdieu in its many forms tends to create the basis of theoretical frameworks for many studies of social class and institutional culture within UK academic literature. However, participants in this study recognised that they sat at an intersection between types of habitus where they were continually affected by their historical pasts, bringing these experiences and memories with them into their present lives. Rather than taking on the social and cultural norms of the spaces that many of them had been able to access through their educational lives and working experience, many were still left in a 'middle space' contemplating their current existence within the guise of their own lived narratives. I refer to this phenomenon as a *lamination of field*. This spatio-temporal framing of habitus and field is an original theoretical contribution of this thesis.

Reflecting on this process has been interesting in terms of looking at the process of ethical approval, care and wellbeing in the research environment. As a research student, it is imperative that appropriate safety measures are put in place for participants, but these are very rarely, if ever, made open and available in the research ethics process for the researcher themselves (Brown & Wild, 2022). Researcher welfare in the ethics process is rarely considered and is either absent from ethics processes or lacking substantial care (Brown & Wild, 2022). Previously, I have always been slightly detached from the core research question. On this occasion my life history, narrative and professional experiences were closely aligned with the participants in this study; returning to these narratives uncovered considerable anxieties. The reflection of the participant whose mother walked her to dance class prompted me to reflect on a time where my own mum didn't have access to a car and struggled to get to work or school. The sadness I felt revisiting this reflection was a reminder of these events of my childhood, alongside a profound sense of empathy for my mum and how she must have felt at the time, something I have never properly revisited. It reminded me of being a young

adult in my early 20s struggling to pay rent among a mass of growing personal debt, the 'ghosts of habitus' lingering (Binns, 2019). These kinds of interactions in research, where the researcher is so intertwined with the subject and research questions being asked, demand better duty of care from institutions and ethics boards, to protect the mental and emotional wellbeing of those working in research as well as the participants that we work with (Brown & Wild, 2022; Nelson, 2020).

This study opened by discussing how far universities were truly adopting an inclusive agenda alongside a new determination for widening participation, access and the recruitment of marginalised students. True inclusion within organisations can only be realised through the lived values of the institution and the people who work within it. This thesis has shown that whilst many of the institutions within this study have sought to increase inclusion through measures like widening participation schemes, removing statues of problematic historical figures, renaming buildings, increasing state school intake, increasing scholarships and admitting more people from marginalised backgrounds, that the experiences of working class people within these institutions still suggests that they have not experienced true 'inclusion' – to be fully accepted, integrated and valued. We can identify this through several themes; working-class professional services staff feeling undervalued, feeling burdened, feeling overworked, spoken to inappropriately by academic staff, not being listened to and not feeling comfortable to express their own tastes and cultural identity. Participants in this study are not solely doing a theoretical 'heavy lifting' of administrative duties in universities but continually confounded with the weight of emotional, introspective, labour.

8.2. Reflecting on being reflexive: the approach of reflective thematic analysis and the EdD journey

I am reminded each time I engage with the work of Braun & Clarke, through publications, books and seminars that I am a visible part of research (Braun & Clarke, 2006;2021;2023). I have therefore been mindful to include my own interpretations and feelings where they are relevant throughout this thesis. I wanted to end the conclusion of this study with a reflection on the process of learning to include myself, as visible, within the narrative here. Using narrative inquiry to allow participants the space to discuss their own life histories opened a space for me to share my life histories with the people who had so selflessly given their time to talk to me, even at a point in the academic year where they were under an immense amount of pressure and workload stresses. Often, I found that participants encouraged a two-way conversation having been given the space to reflect on their own histories and how my own experiences related to theirs. It would be a vast oversimplification to conclude that this process

had been cathartic or 'healing' in some way, and in fact I think reporting that kind of narrative would be unethical and, at worst, dangerous.

Whilst I have been reminded of some of the more tongue-in-cheek or amusing stories of growing up in a single-parent household, I have also been reminded of some of the experiences I had as a child which affected my ability to build relationships far beyond being a child and well into adulthood. Some of these were not associated with growing up with little money, rather, they were connected to the family situation I lived in; completely detached from my sibling who had chosen to spend his formative years in a stable, middle-class household with my father. Reflecting on the experiences where I could emphasise and 'trade' stories with my participants opened some of these complexities that I had not necessarily envisaged at the outset. At times, this study has been difficult to conduct, transcribe and write up. Battling the negative connotations of revisiting episodes in my childhood has on occasion, moved me to tears and left me questioning whether it is possible for me to move beyond rehearsing these personal histories as I move through life. I could thoroughly empathise with the struggles my study participants explored through our conversations; how do you get a better job if you can't afford a car? How can you provide for your kids if you already work at your limits? How can you build the confidence to move through unfamiliar spaces if your face doesn't fit? This, and this alone, has encouraged me to do my absolute best to translate these narratives into academic writing. I hope that this will illuminate areas which need to develop a better, more inclusive approach to employee welfare and organisational culture in universities which so negatively impact those at the margins.

8.3 Limitations

This study is limited by a range of factors from the methodological and theoretical approaches to the outcomes, analysis and areas of discussion.

8.3.1 Methodology, approach and rationale

I) This study was grounded in the literature review which asserted key areas of contention. These included a prominence of Bourdieusian theory in studies of working-class people in higher education, scholarly disunity about identifying working-class people, dominant patterns in study formation and methods used (with interviewing being the predominant choice for preceding studies). These avenues of inquiry were informed by the systematic approach to the literature review which formed the basis of chapter two. Systematic literature reviews are perceived to be a more 'scientific' and robust form of approaching literature review due to the eradication of potential research waste and the dismantling of biases which can be associated

with conducting snowball sampling of the literature using the most cited sources as guidance (Chalmers et al., 2023). However, it is also worth noting here that taking a systematic approach to searching for literature requires the formulation of Boolean strings, which are dictated to by the researcher and therefore carry, inherently their own sets of biases within their design and implementation. As I outlined in the summary of chapter two there were sources that I knew to be available which did not appear as a result of the search. To mitigate this, I included a discussion of some of these sources alongside the results of the systematic search.

II) The second limitation is the method, methodology and study design. Small-scale interviews which focus on a depth of response are never intended to be representative of the entire population with whom the study is concerned (Cohen et al, 2017; Egbert & Sanden 2020). I identify that as such, this limitation prevents this study from being generalisable. There is also the possibility that, as Friedman and O'Brien (2021) note, it is possible that participants have downplayed their backgrounds in terms of deflected privilege or adoption of a historical narrative. However, as was discussed in the methods section of this thesis, it was not felt appropriate as Burnell Reilly (2022) suggests, to take an objective measure of this position, due in part to the multiple interpretations offered for working-class identity as found in the literature review. At this point it is appropriate to note that this study took the approach of Braun & Clarke into consideration and uses their concept of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). This approach contends the argument that a lack of generalisability or the presence of bias affects a study and its efficacy. This study therefore illuminates quite genuine findings, yet these findings may potentially be far from typical. Braun & Clarke (2023) instead promote the understanding that each piece of research is a construct between the researcher and the participant, which is unique, specific to both people meeting at a certain point of time and welcomes the experiences that each brings to the creation of the narrative. As such, I recognise that sociologists may believe that the lack of generalisability here is a limitation, whilst also suggesting that it is this lack of generalisability and the creation of a space for depth of understanding which brings value to this research.

III) Using narrative inquiry within this study enabled me to situate the experiences of the participants in this research. This enabled me to understand their definition of working-class as a response to their personal biographical histories. This depth not only added additional contextual meaning but, I believe, developed the relationships between myself as a researcher and the participants. From this I believe I was trusted with sensitive information. The participants in this study come from very different backgrounds, with some originating in Scotland, the North-East, South-West, London and everywhere in between. These people grew up experiencing significant factors which impact their education, career prospects and

immediate working lives on becoming adults. In some cases, they experienced complete destitution, poverty, crime, prostitution, neglect and bereavement. This is not a ubiquitous tale of working-class people in the UK today. Being trusted with telling these stories is both an enormous duty and a privilege for which I am enormously grateful, and conscious of retelling accurately. Narrative inquiry undoubtedly strengthened the relationships, I was able to build, whilst also placing a great amount of responsibility on me as the researcher.

IV) Participants were not asked to record their occupation for the purposes of this study, yet a substantial number of them worked in areas related to widening participation, student outreach, social mobility and had distinct relationships with working-class students. As such, they may have displayed a more sophisticated understanding of class, hierarchies, power and capitals through the political and societal narrative which is currently at play. The definitions around 'first in family to go to university' and the receipt of free school meals are metrics which are used today to define students from less privileged backgrounds on their application to university. Whether these terms have been applied retrospectively to childhood episodes by those in this study is unclear, yet it is interesting to note that these kinds of delineations operate concurrently to the use of anecdotal examples of poverty, economic constraints and cultural pursuits. This may have affected the ways in which they described their class backgrounds.

V) Identity is a concept which can be conceptualised in many ways which were not fully explored within the remit of this thesis. Psychological perspectives, for example, would offer different interpretations within the social world which were not featured here (McAdams et al, 2021).

8.3.2 Analysis limitations

I) Reflexive thematic analysis focuses on an understanding that there is not a universal truth which is ready to be 'uncovered' through the process of thematic analysis and as such prioritises instead the interpretation the researcher makes from the text which is in front of them. In understanding where this might present us with a limitation in the traditional academic sense, this therefore embeds researcher 'bias' within the framework of the analysis. However, as Braun & Clarke themselves posit, 'bias' is not a welcome framing in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022; 2023). Instead, they welcome an approach by which it is the reflection of the researcher and the demonstration of their own experiences throughout the analysis process (field notes) allowing them to illuminate certain themes within the transcripts available to them.

9. Recommendation for future research and practice

9.1 Research

This study is the first to my knowledge which considers the first-hand experiences of professional services and administrative staff in UK HE. This opens space for future work.

Whilst this study is small in scale, the findings echo some of those found in other bodies of literature with working-class participants, suggesting that there are real inequities, inequalities, inconsistencies and forms of organisational culture at work which further marginalised those from lower socio-economic and social class backgrounds. At the centre of these recommendations is a tangible need for the landscape of higher education research to broaden its remit when it comes to class and understanding class in universities. The omission of professional services staff in this research to date ensures that education research thus far has been complicit in the reproduction of social class and norms by only attending to a small part of how class is experienced within higher education. There is a staggeringly large part of the puzzle currently omitted by this area of research and the political economy higher education desperately needs to be attended to in the round. As it stands, sociologists of education have been complicit in leaving this void unattended to, therefore leaving this negligent gap in our understanding. This study lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive and large-scale mapping of professional services experiences which can be reconciled in part by the following recommendations.

I. Further clarification and work around the use of 'working-class' as terminology to describe social class identity.

II. Expanding this study into other areas such as the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff in other classifications of university in the UK.

III. Expanding this study to include the first-hand perspectives and experiences of professional services and administrative staff who come from a broader range of social class backgrounds in a broader range of universities across the UK.

IV. More in depth research around the relationships between academics and professional services staff in the UK.

V. There is a lack of research currently which understands how working-class identities intersect with other demographic and protected characteristics. Research in the future would benefit from understanding the specificities that surround intersectional

experiences, particularly with additional attention being given to the intersection between social class, race and ethnicity, gender, disability and sexual orientation.

9.2 Practice

Bearing in mind the small-scale of my research, I suggest that Russell Group universities need to go further with their programme of inclusion for staff, past the points of widening access, nominal awards and tokenistic gestures. As is often the case, those who are on the margins of the dominant culture are often those who become responsible for the change in that organisation. They feel, as Wilson and hooks note, 'responsible for changing the system' (Wilson et al 2021:36; hooks 1989). Here, I suggest that it is the responsibility of the institution itself to change the system.

I.   Universities should use experiential and qualitative research evidence to support policy development.

II.   Using an equality mainstreaming approach to policy development would enable universities to understand the impact of new and current policies.

III. Universities should seek to understand the working lives and experiences of more groups and individuals within their professional services teams using an evidence-based approach.

IV.   Roles and responsibilities within professional services contracts need review and further definition.

V.   Appropriate channels of complaint and reporting poor behaviour and practice need to be more strongly implemented and developed, particularly within professional services and administration teams. Instances of poor behaviour and practice need addressing properly and with consequence. Universities need to review how these kinds of complaints and reports are handled in order to ensure that those at the receiving end can get adequate support and legitimacy.

VI.   Further concern and regard should be levied towards the careers and skills development opportunities available to professional services and administrative. This study has demonstrated the need for more robust career pathways and transparent opportunities. In doing so, universities will be able to further retain talent whilst also enabling that careers progression happens in an equitable manner.

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Appendix

Working-class experiences

Experiences of being working-class: access to material things

Participant	Excerpt
Penny*	*So, people would always have like, the new iPhones. And there's me, like this shitty, like, passed down phone already size years old*
David*	*And my household could just never afford anything like that. So, I was always acutely aware that other people had more in terms of everything really, you know, they constantly had more things new things. And there's me with like, my school shoes that have holes in, you know?*
David*	*For instance, we got the family computer in 98 when we had a lot of friends where it was 94, 95 that they were [getting] computers. And they had a lot of proficiencies and skills sets that they built up to that point where, you know, I felt quite behind everyone else. Things like the internet as well. We didn't get broadband until maybe like 2005 whereas a lot of families had it before then. But even just access to a car, we didn't have a car*
Annie*	*We didn't always have a car when I was growing up. So, you know that those kinds of things just weren't available to us*

Experiences of being working-class: growing up in poverty

Participant	Excerpt
Michael*	*I was kind of homeless for quite a long stretch as well. So, I've kind of like, I've had to like, basically exist on the generosity of others throughout my kind of like, personal life, anyway*
Molly*	*We had; we were eligible for free school meals but back then you had to go in with a token. And she [mum] didn't want us to be identified by that token as the poor kids. And so, she'd make a packed lunch to try and avoid us being seen as that*
Annie*	*I grew up in a council house, I grew up with parents who were on benefits, I had free school meals*
David*	*Living in a lot of poverty, not making enough money to make ends meet typically. Tend to miss a lot of opportunities that probably would have been afforded to those that are more middle-class*
Chris*	*I had all these peers that were from wonderful families that didn't have to worry about where the next meal was coming from. And then I'd come home and mum's making sure she sells stuff on eBay so we can carry on buying school uniform and this sort of thing.*

Experiences of growing up working-class: culture, leisure and taste

Participant	Excerpt
Annie*	*You're having conversations about things like theatre and you're not having conversations, because you don't know what they're talking about, because you've never been to the theatre. And I think there's this sense that your culture isn't worthy*
Peter*	*In that kind of financial strata, we weren't well off, but we were comfortable enough to be able to pay the bills…but we weren't a foreign holidays and kind of a large car family*
Annie*	*Not doing the things that other people did in a really casual way. So, we didn't go on holiday abroad till I was 18. We had to apply for grants for me to go into classes*
Annie*	*I think when I first started particularly working at universities it felt like a foreign country that like I've been to Uni, but I've been to the type of unis that I was working in. I seem to have got through most of it without engaging a lot. I didn't know a lot of stuff. So, I thought like, the pervasive culture was not mine. And that was quite hard because I think I felt like I have to act in a different way.*
Jane*	*When I went to university there were people there who had very different life experiences to me. I had presumptions about what that means how I might be expected to dress, to talk, to behave and that was very different from how I might have spoken and behave and dressed at home. And I definitely saw it with friends, I remember inviting some friends to my graduation and they felt uncomfortable in the environment*
Jane*	*They served Pimm's and nobody I knew had ever drunk Pimm's, you know they didn't even know what it was, and it was those kinds of things that you associate with another class*

Experiences of growing up working-class: family occupations

Participant	Excerpt
Peter*	*My parents, just before I was born worked as bus conductors for the [redacted] corporation bus company. But there was a fairly long winded and quite antagonistic strike at which point they decided they were gonna quit, my mum was going to be a stay-at-home mother and my dad moved into the building industry as a labour. [I was] surrounded by people who were doing kind of skilled jobs, manual jobs or unskilled jobs, lots of people working in the steel industry, docks, shipyards, the chemical industry.*
Chris*	*My mum working in sort of financial management for a small local steel company and my uncle's a radiographer, so none of us have particularly what you would consider to be working-class roles, like jobs, none of us are manual labourers, for example.*
Kelly*	*I guess I identify as working class, it's kind of based on my upbringing and who my parents were and who their parents were. And so, for me, my mum and dad didn't go to university, although there were others that went to university. In the family this was more of a male, all the males went to university, on my mum's side but the women didn't. On my dad's side, my dad's a carpenter and he'd kind of like, everyone had gone to work, nobody had gone to university. My sister went to university, my older sister went to university, but I decided not to go to university. I had a bit of debt aversion for that, not really access to kind of connections that would help you overcome those problems and kind of my parents, were like, just get a job, get some*

	money and those types of things. So, I kind of, that's how I encapsulate working class mentality… I relied heavily on parent advice. And I think it was just reliance on parents and kind of them saying you don't need a degree to do well. So, you'll be alright getting a job, those types of things.
Jane*	*[I'm] from a family background where parents grandparents had very manual labour-intensive job, it's not necessarily low skilled but manual skills labour, not necessarily office-based work. And it also means being part of, I suppose it's a part of society that's very much at the receiving end of the decision that happen in society rather than at the making the decisions end*

Not belonging / feeling in between.

Participant	Excerpt
Lianne*	*And again, I feel a bit fake and like a plastic person because I'm identifying with all these things that when you look at me and see me now, there's no evidence of any of that*
Lianne*	*When I'm with people so, for example, like recently I went to like the local community centre at home for a bingo night. We were sat on a table with these people like from the estate where my mum and dad live, I don't know them. I was just like 'Oh my God' like we're so different even I like grew up on this, like it's a mixture of council housing…like, it's not great. I feel so different to you like, I feel like I don't relate to you, and you don't relate to me at all*
Chris*	*It's almost a bit like wanting to assimilate to that atmosphere of academia. But it's trying to keep a foot in both camps, and almost feeling like a fraud as a working-class person because you're not what some people would consider to be working-class. But then also knowing that you're very different from some of the people that are in your sort of academic and professional setting. So, I've often felt at times in this sort of limbo place.*
Jane*	*I was a single parent by the time I went to university, I had my son when I was 16…and I went to university same as everybody else, but I took my son with me so even though I went and move away and lived on a campus I was in a different environment to most undergraduates. I lived on in halls, but I had my own separate flat, I didn't have to share with anyone else so that made it a bit harder to sort of really get immersed in university life… I was very aware that I'd moderated my accent…so that was one way I suppose of fitting in.*
Kelly*	*If I moved outside of that role, will I be accepted? Potentially because of my background? Or kind of like an imposter syndrome in a way. Thinking about, who are the people who work in that group? Am I gonna fit in? Because I don't have a degree or because my knowledge isn't as good as them. And I think I've definitely experienced that lately, even after working here 10 years. And I'm, I think I know I'm capable of doing it, but it's just about fitting in.*
Rebecca*	*[I] tried to have a real distinction between what I was doing for work and, like my personal life and things like that as well. I work from people, with people, from probably quite different backgrounds to me and so yeah, I think, you know around the social aspect of things. I, you know, I didn't necessarily join in as much in that side of things. And maybe not being massively open about,*

	you know, the personal side of things either. I'm still in touch with a lot of people that I grew up with, and you know that I've known since I was a teenager and there's always been a bit of a kind of worry about, like mismatch, you know, if people were to be like, when people get on and things like that.
Rachel*	*So, um. I would deem myself, so I would deem myself working-class, but certainly my salary and lifestyle now reflect, and people will look at me and say, I'm middle-class. And I think that's because you know, it's not necessarily an automatic shift from one to the other. And that's because of your experience. But also, your history as well. I think, particularly with something I particularly noticed in the Northeast is the reluctance to describe yourself, almost hold yourself back and say it's almost a shame to say you're middle-class now. It's like you've lost your roots or whatever. It's also forgetting where you came from, and you're constantly remind of that.*

Cross-cutting themes

Narratives of hard work and luck

Participant	Excerpt
Peter*	*When you go to university you realize that if for instance, you're after summer jobs or internships…it was always the case of lot people were 'oh my dad knows someone, or my mum knows someone, or friend of the family has a place for something. It's those kinds of connections and networking opportunities that you have, you have networking in working-class backgrounds but they're not the same networks. They're not the things that get you into the professions. So, you have people who know people in the working-class areas, but it works in the same way. So, it's kind of if you'd come out of school and you wanted to be a builder, you know, you'd say 'oh, my dad knows someone who's a builder'. So, it's kind of, you have different kinds of social networks and the kind of networks I wanted to be in as a student going into graduate level or postgraduate work, I didn't fit into those networks because that's not where my background was.*
Chris*	*I think to me, working-class just means it's being almost able to recognize that the hard work from the ground and building yourself up and not already having that platform that you can sort of piggyback on to help progress your own career.*
David*	*I just seen a job being advertised for IT, administrative role, at my current place. And I needed to get out of [redacted] and went for it, so it was pure luck.*
Michael*	*You get University closure days, you know, I'm quite lucky in that, you know, I don't have anyone kind of writing about numbers or figures all the time*
Penny*	*I think I'm lucky that I work in a really great team…. I'm lucky that I work in [a certain department] and my undergraduate degree was in English*
Michael*	*I was really lucky that my parents afforded for me to had extra dyslexia tuition as well*

Rachel*	And I think a lot of us locally, again, because of this whole thing where we think we're lucky to have a job, we're never going to go into that and negotiate that in the right way or the way that's gonna get us a positive outcome
Penny*	I feel very lucky to actually have access to those sort of opportunities
Rachel*	I think the university work runs a lot of the time on the goodwill of all staff. And I think a lot of that is actually to do with working class identity. The majority of people who keep this university going, in terms of like housekeepers and porters and admin staff are probably all working class, are all local. And you're constantly told, you know, not by the university but it's just the mentality round here that you're lucky to have a job. So, you know nobody's going to push back on it. Nobody's gonna say anything about it because you're lucky to have a job. And you're lucky to have a job at the university, do you know what I mean?
Michael*	I'm a bit of a workhorse. It's my natural, like, way of being, is to be the one doing the doing
Jane*	I think there's this perception is you work hard enough and if you're intelligent and you work hard, you can achieve the grades to need to get to a university like [redacted]
David*	They took me on a secondment while a member of staff was on maternity leave. And that was basically how I got into the job. It was pure accident.
Lizzie*	[There's an assumption] those from traditional backgrounds should just put up and shut up and feel grateful and blessed to be given the opportunity to study or work in [redacted]
Lizzie*	Because we should feel grateful for the opportunity to work here, and like, [sarcastically] think how good it would be for your CV to even do like any sort of admin role at [redacted]! You know, that's really an honour and that'll open doors for you

Networks

Participant	Excerpt
Peter*	When you go to university you realize that if for instance, you're after summer jobs or internships…it was always the case of lot people were 'oh my dad knows someone, or my mum knows someone, or friend of the family has a place for something. It's those kinds of connections and networking opportunities that you have, you have networking in working-class backgrounds but they're not the same networks. They're not the things that get you into the professions. So, you have people who know people in the working-class areas, but it works in the same way. So, it's kind of if you'd come out of school and you wanted to be a builder, you know, you'd say 'oh, my dad knows someone who's a builder'. So, it's kind of, you have different kinds of social networks and the kind of networks I wanted to be in as a student going into graduate level or postgraduate work, I didn't fit into those networks because that's not where my background was.
Chris*	I think to me, working-class just means it's being almost able to recognize that the hard work from the ground and building yourself up and not already having that platform that you can sort of piggyback on to help progress your own career.

Guilt and financial anxiety

Participant	Excerpt
David*	*I'm in a little bit more of a privileged position now, I'm on an OK wage. A wage that would have been a hell of a lot better 10 or 15 years ago, with living costs but I'm doing OK. My fiancée, she's working-class as well. We are very much aware of how lucky we are to be able to afford food. And well, we're not getting the opportunity to go on holidays or anything like that as much we're, we're getting by OK. And there's a lot of guilt in that, that I feel if I was maybe a few years late, later than I am right now I wouldn't be in as privileged position right now. Even things like there's a hole in my shoes, and I'm able to just go and buy a pair of shoes and sure, like a little bit, not very much money from my bank account, it's, I can afford to go and do that. I know a lot of people who can't do that. There's a lot of people on the streets that probably could be in a similar position I am. If they had some of the opportunities I had. I think especially now being working-class, I think it's a hell of a lot harder to get into a decent paying job or just be able to drop into a role without any real experience…So there's certainly a lot of guilt being in a place that's a bit more privileged. Yes, Yes definitely feel guilt around that now.*
Penny*	*Yeah, oh, like you know with the few increases and stuff, the cost-of-living crisis. I'm really worried about it. But I'm also like me and my partner…it's not ok that it's going up, but we'll still be okay. But I still feel really worried about, like, really worried about it. So, it's kind of like there's a balance between like, I feel happy now I am secure, but I still have this kind of in the back of my head. Like I'm still worried about it if that makes sense, like irrationally.*
Penny*	*I'm like, oh god, what can we do [about energy price increases and the cost of living] but like, it's fine. Realistically we can afford it. But at the same time, it doesn't make me stop worrying about the people who really can't afford it. Because I know what, we know, we know what that's like a relative poverty, not being able to afford it [rising costs]. I'm kind of like irrationally worried and that's just my default setting. But I'm also worried that there are people who truly cannot afford it and it's such a horrible situation to be in*
Penny*	*Salary will always come first. For me, I think, as a default. I now know how important it is to always have savings and always have emergency funds and always have these safety nets in place, because no one else is going to be my safety net, I've kind of got to be my own. And financial security is the only way to do that*
Rebecca*	*There's maybe a little bit of expectation to kind of move away to a different place to study or to, like develop your career and things like that, as well. I think there's another aspect to me around risk taking as well, which is maybe linked to that a little bit, you know, kind of my family have kind of you know been in a situation where they've worked kind of consistent jobs. And I think that there's an element of that has always been around kind of financial risk and not wanting to do anything too risky*
Rebecca*	*So that [financial risk], you know that's made me potentially probably feel like less like doing things, you know, things like holidays and like wanting to buy a house. It's kind of sketchy at first and the maternity cover contracts are sometimes a step up. The last one that I did was a step up of two grades so If I hadn't remained on that team then I would have stepped down two grades again. So, I suppose that was a worry.*

Kelly*	*I think I had a bit of debt aversion from that, and not really access to kind of connections that would help you overcome those problems, and kind of my parents were like just get a job, get some money, those types of things*
Chris*	*It's remembering a situation that I don't want to find myself in again. And making sure that I don't. Whether that's to an extent why I made sure I was as educated as I could be, to make sure to try and rule out the possibility of finding myself in those situations again. But it was also, I think, one of the reasons that I've always been so motivated to carry on studying and things like this, is because I wanted, and this is something you might hear a lot, is I wanted to be able to help my family if they were in this situation again. And I also wanted to, I wanted my mum to know that all the sacrifices she made when I was growing up weren't in vain.*
Chris*	*This role that I've been in now, since January is my first permanent contract. Prior to that, I, so I finished my PhD in I want to say about 2019. And from then I've been on fixed term contracts, but I've seen that as great, gather that experience step on to the next one, gather that experience. Step on to the next one. I think looking at permanent roles is something I'm always keen on. My partner is on a fixed term contract, so it's always making sure that one of us is in a permanent role. And so, for example if I were to look at fixed term contract as my next role, we'd make sure that he was in a permanent one. I don't always necessarily panic at the idea of being in a fixed term contract because as I said, I see them as gather that experience and move on. The only thing that does, I don't want to say panic me, is the idea of redundancy mainly because when I was [redacted] we went through a restructure…that's one of the reasons I avoided academia as a researcher because the area that we were working in, the funding just wasn't there, particularly for permanent positions and I used to see my academic supervisor slogging his guts out to the office till two o'clock in the morning with a young family art home, trying to make sure that he could prove his value as a researcher so that he could secure another contract. And yeah, that was, I think that's why I move towards professional services, amongst other things.*

Working in universities.

University structures, workload, and career opportunities

Participant	Excerpt
Rebecca*	*I had no idea about all the kinds of structural kind of stuff. I understood that it was a large university. And you know, I've worked for large organizations before that operated as more coherent…whereas coming here, its, you know, the faculties and schools that operate in quite disparate ways…I think there's aspects of that, that potentially leads to competition between people when the field they're vying for the kind of next rung on the ladder and things. And I feel there are maybe people who are more conventionally used to some of the kind of hidden stuff in universities that have the knowledge to be able to progress.* When asked to expand on what she meant by 'hidden stuff' Rebecca* replied; *I supposed the things like the conventions of working within a university environment. You know, the things like, you know the expectations around, you know there's quite a lot of documentation for things. There's more of an*

	expectation of, I suppose, meetings and a lot of people have their say in a particular situation.
Rebecca*	*So, I came in as an administrator and you know, it's maybe been a couple of years in each role. And each role has advanced up until I'd reached the kind of grade seven level a few years ago. And then I've done sideways moves. But that's like, the way I want to operate and things that I kind of want, you know, different experiences at this level. I think being able to establish my relationships within the university, through the work that I've done, so that's made things easier as well.*
Rebecca*	*Certainly, the last role I was in I felt a bit stretched across a number of different project areas. And I found that difficult to manage in terms of the expectations around, I was on two teams, and the expectations around the impact of two different sets of meetings for two teams but then also like other project meetings, and it's having time to do alongside having the time to, you know, attend and kind of talk through things.*
Kelly*	*I think I've always progressed; I've been continually progressing since I started. And I'm now at a stage where I've been the longest in a job that I have been previously. So, I think I've been in mine three or four years. So, kind of at the top of my salary scale, and I should be looking at going into other areas. I think I've got a broad range of career opportunities, there are jobs coming up. I've worried about doing it for the reasons I've just mentioned in terms of fitting in. I'm comfortable in my role and I'm weighing up now whether I'd rather be happy and have a good work life balance, those types of things than to move into a role I'm unhappy with. I think it's a bit of the imposter syndrome, it's thinking whether I'd fit in another place that's the underlying cause of it.*
Kelly*	I think the thing I enjoy less is obviously given that I have a high level of autonomy, like as described, when the hierarchy kind of just stays…I think that that makes me feel undervalued and unappreciated. Again, it doesn't happen all the time but when it does, it does make you feel undervalued…

On inclusion

Participant	Excerpt
Rebecca*	*I think when people are thinking through inclusion, they maybe need to think about whether they're just inviting someone into a pre-existing structure. And whether that structure fits that person or not, or whether they're actively looking to change it to suit the person. So, I'll give an example, if I were invited out to things with work, I might be included in an invite to go to a specific place. You know, we're going to these set of bars. But if I'm, you know, LGBT, is there a chance to adapt that night out? So, we would take into account that we might go to a gay bar, for example.*
Rebecca*	*[On the relationship between class identity and inclusion]* *Two aspects. I suppose there's things like inclusion in terms of things like events, social events that might be planned as part of the kind of work environment. It's also about recognition that things are quite difficult at the moment, like maybe financially for professional services. I've seen quite a bit of disparity there was like, there's maybe some people who do understand that kind of really visceral level and have maybe the lived experience of that versus like with the people who may not have really ever experienced that and can't necessarily conceptualise it and what it means to you,*

	psychologically, to be scrabbling around for food and things like that, you know feeling that insecurity.

Working with academics

Participant	Excerpt
Penny*	I think whenever someone who works in admin asks an academic to do something, whether that's like, I need you to send something or a student needs help, can I refer them to you? There's been multiple times when I've had like, 'I don't have time for this'. I appreciate, you know that obviously there's a lot going on, but I don't think it would happen the same other way around. Yeah, I think that the admin, it's perceived that the admin work for the academics rather than the other way around. Yeah, I just had a couple of emails like, I'm really sorry, I don't have time for this. Or they go on annual leave, like five weeks at a time. Trying to pin anyone down in July or August, it's just absolute chaos… It's a bit immature to reply, like, 'I don't have time for this'. You could there's other ways, like, have a look at my calendar, you can book in a meeting…it's basic communication skills. Um, yeah, just treat people with respect? …Oh my god, yeah, you're spending the energy like sending me this email about all the things you've got to do. Like, just do it in five minutes?
Michael*	I think when you're speaking to kind of like, so to speak to corporate organizations there are clear kind of rules and ways of being in a corporate setting, that they carry forwards with them into their meeting with you. So, there's, you know, your, the rules of engagement are a bit clearer. Whereas with academics, it is kind of like, you've got to wait and see how much they're willing to give away.
Rebecca*	So, I would say, there are a few academics that I know that are from working class backgrounds. And we've been able to, especially over the last few years, collaborate on some kind of working, like widening participation type area. And there are other academics, maybe a little harsher and more direct…that make me feel a little bit more self-conscious.
Kelly*	I think it's like, it can be in terms of the language they use, I've been in meetings before where it's kind of the language goes above me or that they're not being, I felt not included because of that, because I thought I haven't got a clue what they're talking about. And I think when I first came to the university sector, there was a lot of terminology I didn't understand which I do now. But in terms of assuming everyone's aware of what university is, and what every aspect of it should involve, for example the hierarchy of Professor, Doctor, those types of things, I think with some people from a working-class background that hadn't been to university won't understand that thing, and then feel embarrassed that they didn't know it when they were there. I think I definitely experienced that initially. However, obviously now I've worked for about 10 years and within the environment, I think, I now understand it, but I think sometimes you do find yourself changing your behaviour. And especially prior, you you've kind of keep quieter in meetings and feel like your voice wasn't as well received as the people that are of like upper class, if that makes sense.
Molly*	I mean even my managers said that, like, you know she has been sent down the road to pick up some food and drink things for people. Just like, this isn't my job. Yeah, I mean, I feel like there's lots of that in the university

Lianne*	*Actually, like a lot of the time our biggest frustration is like these guys have absolutely no common sense. Like they don't even know how to send me an exam mark, like for god's sake, they can't even log into Teams.*
Chris*	*Academia can be a little toxic. And you have the academics that have been there for 20 years that do their nine to five, they go for their long lunches, they treat it as a job. And then you get the early career academics that have to treat it as a lifestyle because they have this constant battle of 'I deserve to be here' alongside people who have been here 25 years. And so, I sometimes find because there's so much stress and pressure that it can be a culture of enough is never enough*
Annie*	*I still get 'urgent' emails where someone needs an answer by the end of the day, because they are used to people moving around them. I've spoken to colleagues who work in my department, because they're often the people who know a lot about what's going on. And they're often set unrealistic deadlines by certain members of staff who think that they've got nothing else to do but pick up for them.*
David*	*There's a push for 'this is your life', you know, this assimilation you have to kind of change to get by in academia and to do well in it. And I don't think anyone should have to go through that, whether they're working-class, upper-class, whether they're from an academic family background, anything like that. There's definitely a push to behave the way the university wants you to behave, it's the same across the board, it's everywhere. Like, honestly, my Fiancée this morning was saying 'my boss is emailing me at six o'clock in the morning' and you're looking at your emails at six o'clock in the morning you know, and they're both forced into doing this.*
Lizzie*	*I generally work, if I need academics, I go to PhD students instead of fully fledged academics, because they're a lot easier to work with.*
Penny*	*Being around academics is a weird situation. I think it's definitely changing. It isn't the same. Like you know, if your parents were academics, you tend to be an academic.*

Interview schedule

Interview schedule (Summer 2022)

The missing piece of the puzzle? Understanding the experiences of working-class professional support staff in 'elite' Universities

Screening:

Participants must currently hold a contract which is considered to be administrative or in professional services.
Participants must currently work at a Russell Group institution.
Participants must self-define as working-class.

Items in bold are key questions. Items in italics are follow up questions or prompts.

Introduction	*Aim: Familiarisation*
Individual Introductions Introduction to the project Consent to interview Introduce yourself.	
Questions around identity	*Aim: Understand what participant interpretation of what working-class is. Understand how (if at all) it impacts their identity both in their personal life and at work.*
Thank you for making the time to talk to me today. You have agreed to participate in this interview as you self-define as working-class and work in a Russell Group University. - **What do you understand about the term 'working-class?**	
How much does identifying as working-class impact your daily life? - *In your personal life?* - *At work?*	

Are there any particular features about having a working-class identity that are more important than others? *Can you say a bit more about why they are important?*	
Is defining as working-class important to you? - *In what ways?* - *Why is this important?*	
Has your working-class identity impacted your life so far? *In what ways?*	
I am interested in your experience of working in a Russell Group institution.	*Aim: Find out about participant's experience of working within a Russell Group University*
How do you feel about working at your current institution? *Why do you feel that way?* **Does your class identity affect your work?** *In what ways?*	
Can you briefly describe your career journey to date? **What is your role at [insert institution] and what are your responsibilities?** **What drew you to your current role?** **Is working at [insert institution] different to how you had expected?** *Why?*	
What do you enjoy most about your work? *Why?*	

What do you enjoy least about your work? *Why?* **Who are the key people that you work with on a daily basis?** **What are your relationships with these people like?**	
Career and progression	Aim: Understand anything that has affected career to date, or which might affect career progression in the future.
What are your ambitions for your career in the future? **Have these changed over time?** *If YES, why do you think that is?* **Is there any support available for career development at [insert institution]?** *What support is available? Have you used it? If so, was it useful?* **In your opinion, is there anything your institution could do better in terms of career development?**	
Inclusion and identity	
What does the term 'inclusion' mean to you? **Is 'inclusion' important to your institution?** **Is your university an inclusive place to work?** *If yes, can you tell me how this is demonstrated? Are there particular examples you can think of?*	

If NO, why do you think inclusion is not important to your institution? **How does inclusion relate to class identity?** *In what ways?*	
Could your institution do more to promote inclusion with regards to class identity? *If YES, what would optimal inclusion look like?*	
Conclusive Remarks and Questions	*Aim: Wrap up and evaluate if the participant has any concerns about the interview and/or the premise of the project.*
Is there anything you didn't have an opportunity to say that you would like to? Are there any topics you think I should have covered? Is there anyone else I should speak to?	
Thank you and conclusion of the interview	

Ethics approval

Prof. Roger Dalrymple
Director of Studies
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Oxford Brookes University

12th July 2022

Dear Prof. Dalrymple,

UREC Registration No: 221605
Study Title: The missing piece of the puzzle? Understanding the experiences of working-class professional support staff in 'elite' Universities to inform inclusive practice in institutions

Thank you for your email of 5th July 2022 outlining your response to the points raised in my previous conditional approval letter regarding the PhD study of your research student, Jessica Brown and attaching the revised documents. I am pleased to inform you that, on this basis, UREC is happy to grant full approval for this study.

The UREC approval period for the data collection phase of the study is two years from the date of this letter, so until 12th July 2024. If you need the approval to be extended please do contact me nearer the time of expiry.

As Director of Studies, your responsibilities include:

∀ Ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained

∀ Reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the University Research Ethics Officer

∀ Submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the study to the Research Ethics Officer for approval.

Should the recruitment, methodology or data storage change from your original plans, or should any study participants experience adverse physical, psychological, social, legal or economic effects from the research, please inform me with full details as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

David E. Evans

Prof. David E. Evans
Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee

cc. Dr Patrick Alexander, Supervisory Team
    Jessica Brown, Research Student
    Dr Carol Brown, Research Ethics Officer
    Dr Robyn Curtis, Research Ethics & Integrity Officer
    Mrs Tracy Barber, Head of Research Degrees Team

Search strings

Database	Search term	Refinement	Results
Elsevier (Scopus)	working-class [AND] Higher Education	Titles, abstracts and keywords	83
Elsevier (Scopus)	"working-class" AND "Higher Education"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	8
Elsevier (Scopus)	"working-class" AND "Academia"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	1
Elsevier (Scopus)	"working-class" AND "University"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	9
Elsevier (Scopus)	working-class [AND] University	Titles, abstracts and keywords	126
Elsevier (Scopus)	working-class [AND] Academia	Titles, abstracts and keywords	8
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"working-class" AND "Higher Education"	Abstracts	123
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"working-class" AND "Higher Education"	Titles	14
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"working-class" AND "University"	Abstracts	120
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"working-class" AND "University"	Titles	13
EBSCO host (ERIC)	working-class AND academia	Titles	1
EBSCO host (ERIC)	working-class AND academia	Abstracts	13
TOTAL			**519**

Participant pen portraits

As per the ethics application form, no formal data was collected regarding participants ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, legal sex, age, marital status, or religion as these were not felt, at the time, to be directly relate to the scoping project. Therefore, these were not characteristics that were deemed ethically appropriate to collect data on (see ethics approval form). Age is only mentioned in a few of the below descriptions, where it was specifically referenced in the interview by the participant. Below is a 'pen portrait' of the participants based on information provided during interview.

David*	Refers to themselves as 'he'. David* is an IT administrator who grew up with his grandparents after his parents divorced in his early years. David left school at 15 and initially started working as a kitchen porter, among other part-time, piecemeal work. David* dropped out of school with no formal educational qualifications and started from scratch whilst at college, working towards a national certificate level.
Lizzy*	Works in a role related to Widening Participation, having previously worked in a variety of roles in HR. Lizzy* refers to herself as 'she/her' and originates from the Northeast of England. She comes from a family who have a historic mining connection. Her Dad had done a degree later in life, at age 40 after having received the funding from his work. Her mum's side of the family had grown up with few formal qualifications and as such, her mum was very supportive about her achieving an education. She described growing up during the 2008 financial crisis as 'strenuous', with her family having 'lost everything'.
Penny*	Penny works* as a low-paid administrative assistant and refers to herself as 'she/her'. She explains that her starting salary only a few years ago was just £19,000. She grew up in a single parent household in the South-West of England. She explains in her transcript that her primary caregiver was long term unemployed growing up and reliant on a lot of different benefits.
Annie*	Annie* works in a role related to Widening Participation. She grew up in a council house and talks about being picked on for being poor whilst she was at school. She marks out some of her experiences like 'having a TV you put 50 pence's in' and hiding from the person who would come to collect the money. She is originally from the Midlands area of England. She talks about being teased because of her accent growing up. Her Dad had worked as a farm labourer.
Lianne*	Lianne* is a programme manager, having been in post for two years. She has a university education and currently earns what she believes to be well above the national average. Lianne's* parents did not go to university, and both had emigrated to England in the 1950s. They had worked in agriculture and in the care sector. Lianne* talks about the devastating effect the 2008 financial crash had had on her parents' economic position. Her parents still live on a council estate.
Molly*	Molly* is originally from the North of England and works in partnerships coordination. Educationally, Molly* was about to start a PhD. Molly's* father had come from a mining background and her mother had worked in retail and in factory work. Molly* was the first person in her family to go to university. Molly* was one of the few

	participants to mention her age and was in her late 30s at the time of interview.
Chris*	Chris* works in a widening participation role and comes from a single parent family. None of Chris'* immediate family held manual roles and Chris* had achieved a PhD during his education.
Kelly*	Kelly* originally chose not to go to university due to financial debt aversion. Kelly* works in an academic department, having built a career which started off working in cafes and in hospitality. Kelly* currently studies part time for a degree alongside working. Both Kelly's* parents did not attend university but both sisters had gained a university degree. Kelly* is originally from the Midlands in England.
Rebecca*	Rebecca* works within the university library and openly identifies as having an LGBT identity. Rebecca* grew up in a single parent family with a young mother in the North of England. Rebecca* had first encountered the university environment when she took a study break during her original career.
Rachel*	Rachel* works in a higher managerial role at a collegiate university. Rachel* had originally attended a private school, having received a scholarship as a child. Rachel* refers to themselves as 'she/her' throughout the interview. She had achieved an undergraduate and a master's degree but was the first in her family to do so, with neither parent gaining a university education. She is originally from the Northeast and her family historically has worked in the mining industry.
Peter*	Peter* works in an IT role and had started a PhD previously but had to leave the programme. Peter* was in his 50s and grew up on a council estate in the North of England. His family had previously worked in the building industry and in the cleaning industry and neither of his parents had received a university education.
Jane*	Jane* works in widening participation administration. Jane* had been the first in her family to go to university and was also first a mother as a teenager. Jane's* parents and grandparents had worked in roles which were manual labour intensive.
Michael*	Michael* works in partnerships administration and had originally attended a grammar school, having passed the 11 plus exam. His parents had worked in manual labour, retail and in care work and he had been the first in his family to go to university. Michael* originates from a region in the South of England.