

What does it mean to be working-class? Exploring the definition of a social class identity through the eyes of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities.

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Abstract

What it means to have a working-class identity in the UK today is constantly under tension and debate. From socio-economic proxies used by large organisations as determinants of disadvantage, to POLAR data, self identification, and other metrics, academic literature has largely disagreed how to measure working-class as an identity over the last 20 years. This paper draws on the findings from two parts of an EdD thesis which looked to understand the experiences of working-class professional services staff in UK higher education. Here, it presents the findings of the literature review which discovered the multiple ways in which working-class identities are determined for the purposes of research recruitment in academic papers. In the subsequent part of this paper, empirical data from interviews with working-class staff in UK higher education looks at the facets which participants considered defined them as having a working-class identity. Moving away from traditional conceptualisation of a working-class identity as solely connected to the means of production, it suggests that a working-class identity is inherently connected to many factors in 2023, predominantly to economic disadvantage but also by occupation, social mobility discourse, and access to goods technology, and entertainment. Furthermore, it finds that there are implicit features of a working-class identity shared across the study which include access to facilitating networks, narratives of luck, and being underappreciated and undervalued. This interplay between the convergence of habitus and lived experience suggests that working-class people in UK universities are subject to a lamination of field, an intersection of multiple temporalities.

Keywords

Working-class, class, universities, higher education

Introduction

Conceptualising what it means to have a working-class identity in 2023 is complicated, complex, and consistently under debate. Previously, social class identity had been inextricably connected to type of employment, occupation and heavily associated with the means of production; working-class families had parents who were traditionally occupied with manual labour, artisanship and in some cases, low level administration (Gildea, 2021; Rolfe, 2017). As the picture of the UK labour market has changed over the past 50 years, with a movement towards a knowledge economy and away from traditional manual labour and production, so

too has the determination of a social class identity (Gildea, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2019). Blurring the lines between socio-economic status and class identity, markers exist in the UK and used by organizations to determine the intake of candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds, in turn enabling them to map the level of social mobility within their cohorts (Rolfe, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Such markers, as those indicated by the Social Mobility Commission of access to free school meals, parental employment, parental education, and attendance at a state school have been used as a proxy to identify those from working-class backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

There are two fundamental issues with the use of these proxies to determine class-based identity. At the former level, the presence or absence of a state school education cannot be seen to determine socio-economic status or social class identity. High performing state schools in expensive catchment areas are dominated by families with access to advanced levels of economic capital, in turn marginalising those from traditional working-class families (Adams, 2020; Donnelly, 2015). Similarly, whilst being in receipt of free school meals does indicate a certain level of economic disadvantage, international students and immigrants do not always have a sufficient and comparative marker from their own setting with which to be able to answer this question. Further, as Skeggs suggests, the markers of a working-class identity go beyond the facets of economic determinism and further into measures of culture; holding a working-class identity comes with intrinsic relationships to different tastes, hobbies, language patterns and a sense of community (Skeggs, 2004). The concept of a working-class identity has been explored with regards to academics in the UK, who often sit in an uncomfortable position between past experiences in their biographical histories and the new environment of an ostensibly middle class, privileged, professional remit. Rather than shedding the attributes of their working-class origins, Crew (2022) and Binns (2019) explore how working-class academics carry the 'Ghost' of their working-class habitus with them into their professional lives in a new, middle-class field. As Crew (2022) notes, this reliance of their past serves as a way for working-class academics to utilise [their] lived experience, exerting a high degree of emotional labour on working-class individuals, whilst also exacting a re-visiting of past traumas. As yet, these experiences have been documented with reference to working-class academics and students but thus far, professional services staff have been left out of the political economy of what is known about life (from an experiential perspective), within UK universities.

This paper seeks to understand how the conceptualisation of a working-class identity is determined in 2023. To do this, it takes the findings from a literature review which assessed the ways in which class identity is determined for the purpose of research with working-class participants. Subsequently, it takes empirical evidence from data derived from an EdD thesis around the experiences of working-class professional services staff in Russell Group universities in the UK. This data sought to understand the extent to which the conceptualisation of a working-class identity has changed over time and what facets are important to holding a working-class identity in the UK today. This paper makes several key contributions. Far from being able to associate a working-class identity solely with occupation or type of labour, it finds that participants discerned their working-class identity from several critical factors, grouped as explicit associations and implicit references. Explicitly, where participants were asked to define their working-class identity the features identified included occupation, in response to a social mobility framing, financial hardship and poverty, housing and, access to technology, goods and entertainment. Implicitly, and embedded throughout the narratives within these interviews, a working-class identity was associated with narratives of luck, a lack of facilitating networks, guilt and financial anxiety and unrecognised potential and a lack of

respect. This paper hence finds symmetry with what Binns (2019) refers to as the ‘Ghosts of childhood habitus’, that an interplay between temporalities of time and space incur anxieties for working-class individuals through the consistent retellings of traumas from financial instability and growing up in environments of relative poverty.

The study

Data for this paper drew on the findings from two parts of an EdD thesis. Data collection for this thesis began in July 2022 and ended in August 2022 and was conducted at Oxford Brookes University. The literature review followed a systematic approach and sought to understand where working-class people had been present in academic research in relation to UK Higher Education thus far (Page et al., 2021). Here, the review focused on methods and theories used in research, the selection criteria of working-class participants as well as the groups of people who had been included in academic research. The second data set which is used within this study draws from interview data conducted with participants who worked in professional services and administrative roles in UK Russell Group universities. The data set comprises of thirteen different interviews which took a novel methodological approach. Here, a narrative inquiry approach was embedded within traditional sociological semi-structured interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were analysed using NVivo software. These interviews were analysed using the approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis whereby the perspective and experience of the researcher is also embedded in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Recruiting working-class participants in Higher Education research

This paper focuses on one of the key findings from a thesis literature review which was conducted through the process outlined in appendix 1.1. Whilst the review more broadly looked at themes, topics, methods, and theoretical frameworks used; this paper focuses on the selection criteria for working-class participants. From this it is quite clear that, at least in studies of higher education, the methods employed by researchers to identify and recruit working-class participants for studies in and around higher education differently between and among different papers. Study participants were identified in multiple separate ways which were far from ubiquitous. Studies predominantly conflated socio-economic class or status with a working-class identity, something we will return to later. Studies varied considerably in their approaches; using level of education, type of schooling, receipt of free school meals, parents’ education or employment, self-identification.

Several studies in the sample use one, or more indicators of social class as recommended by the Social Mobility Commission (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). These include receipt of free school meals, state school attendance and parental occupation and education (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Byrom et al (2013) selected students who were the first in their family to go to university, but other studies in the sample used first generation, in combination with other metrics (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013). Bathmaker et al (2021) use parental education status, parental occupation, type of school; area of low or high HE participation; receipt of financial grant support; self-identification to determine working-class status (Bathmaker, 2021; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013). Reay et al (2021) use parental occupation as a key factor of working-class status. They combine parental occupation with social and cultural capital (Reay, 2021a). Thiele et al (2017) and determine working-class status through receipt of Free School Meals in conjunction with receiving Pupil Premium payments (Thiele et al., 2017).

Class status was also identified through other financial markers. The National Statistics classification ‘NS-SEC 4-7’ was the parameter which Crozier et al (2011) used, and the same classification process was also used by Reay et al (2010), although they used NS-SEC 7014. Other studies were less prescriptive about how these parameters were marked, Wong et al (2019), for example, use an inclusion criterion of ‘low-income household’. In other areas, Education Maintenance Allowance (English, 2012) discerns class status whilst other studies use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation instead (Findsen et al., 2011). The income of Indian mothers is determined, and participants assessed for their suitability using a level of research subjectivity by Khambhaita (2014) and in some cases, indicators are used in conjunction with one another. Reay (2021) and Bathmaker (2021) relate more than one factor (such as economic capital, education, occupation and cultural capital) to provide metrics for assess participant suitability. Devas et al (2011) also discern that participants meet one of the following criteria;

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 (Devas, 2011).

TUNDRA and POLAR data have been used as ways to assess socio-economic background in university admissions processes. Using this type of data has been criticized by Boliver et al (2022) who demonstrate that they tend to produce a high degree of ‘false positives’; marking students out as being disadvantaged when objectively they have not come from these kinds of socio-economic situations (Boliver, Banerjee, et al., 2022; Boliver, Gorard, et al., 2022; Gorard et al., 2019) They instead suggest developing new metrics for assessment to include ‘verified individual-level measures of socioeconomic disadvantage’ to make access to higher education more equitable (Boliver et al., 2022).

Rickett et al (2021) use the approach of self-identification, outlining their intention to understand the complexities of working-class identities in greater detail (Rickett & Morris, 2021). They centre their argument on the need to disentangle class from measures of socio-economic status because, as they suggest, 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 & Morris, 2021). Self-identification is used differently by Field et al (2013). Instead of using an objective measure of class, the participants were asked instead to describe their class background in their own words during data collection. This approach is different from the approaches where participants are asked to self-define as a selection criterion. 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. 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 an indicator 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 (Friedman et al., 2021). In this paper, they assert that individuals occupy a false sense of

belonging to a working-class identity because of their parents or grandparents' level of deprivation, education and social position. 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 (Friedman et al., 2021). As such, they advise that care is taken in studies that require participants to self-identify and recommend the use of objective indicators.

This literature review has found that there is not one standard, formalised way to determine working-class research participants, despite some recent movements towards self-identification (Crew, 2020; 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. Where some studies use economic metrics such as Pupil Premium payments, these studies tend to associate social class identity solely with economic circumstance. Different measurements of working-class identity show different interpretations of social class, for example, self-identification which can capture a sense of 'feeling, tradition and convention', yet is littered with inconsistencies and caveats.

Part two: Interviews

The results of the above literature reviewed showed that researchers have been using different metrics and methods to define working-class participants, with markers of social class being 'difficult to quantify' (Perale, 2022). Subsequently, the interview schedule for this study included questions formed through a narrative inquiry approach which formally asked participants to determine why they had chosen to identify as working-class. These have been categorised here in two ways; those that were explicit, in response to the question 'What does having a working-class identity mean to you?' and those that were implicit or referred to as a distinction of their class background in responses to other questions in the interview.

Explicit definitions of a working-class identity

Occupations and professions

Several participants understood their working-class identity as having originated from the roles and occupations that their family had traditionally been involved with. Often in these scenarios, they felt they were working-class because of these professional roles. On reflection, participants identified their family members as having certain jobs; one described that his father had been a bricklayer, another spoke about her grandfather's job 'down the pits' and a further participant explained her class identity in relation to her father's previous role as a miner. In other interviews, family occupations were mentioned to explain to a greater or less extent why the participant considered themselves to be working-class, these included family members working as decorators, shop workers, bus conductors, cleaners, at the docks, in factories and as being unemployed. The traditional distinction of a working-class identity being associated with occupations has become distorted in recent years because of a change in the labour market and a movement away from manual labour and towards a knowledge economy (Rolfe 2017). ONS data shows the dramatic decreased in manufacturing between 1960 and 2018 with a parallel rise in the services sector during the same time. (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Gildea discerns the 1984/5 miners' strike as a pivotal moment in the 'unmaking' of the working-class, the 'last great battle of the organised industrial class, of which the miners were the heroic vanguard', explaining that occupation and social class identity was never the same again

(Gildea, 2021). The changing nature of class is recognized by the participants in this study. Annie* understood that a change had taken place during her lifetime, a change which continued to make defining being working-class more problematic;

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

Social mobility framing

Some participants in this study worked in roles related to widening participation, admissions and equality, diversity and inclusion. As such, three of them indicated their social class status as being working-class partly in alignment with this narrative. The Social Mobility Commission (2021) indicates the metrics of receipt of free school meals, level of parental education, parental occupation and type of school attended as proxies for socio-economic class status, to track and monitor social mobility in organisations. None of the participants described their social class status solely in alignment with these metrics, yet the participants indicated mentioned being the first in family to go to university and receipt of free school meals as factors alongside other elements.

Other economic factors

Financial hardship and poverty

Other definitions relating to working-class identity were connected to economic factors. These factors included explicit reference to poverty, types of housing and housing concerns and an inability to access certain resources. Individuals reflected on the economic hardships they had felt growing up, often seeing their parents' making trade-offs between heating, eating, housing and looking after their children which formed battles of survival.

A young female professional services worker in the south of England, Penny* described her experiences of poverty and neglect as she was growing up. She explained that this was something she didn't want to talk about with other people around her at work, because she worried about being judged or pitied. Instead, she focussed on what she termed 'neutral' interests like reading, rather than seeking empathy. As a child, she told me that her family could;

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

She knew that she was aware when she was a child that the things other people had were out of her reach, even when it came down to affording necessities. She drew on one memory of having holes in her school shoes and being unable to buy new ones due to the cost. In retelling these stories, she didn't linger on the finer details in recalling the memory, perhaps because, as she had already explained, she didn't want anyone to feel sorry for her. Nonetheless, the imagery of having cold, perhaps damp, feet explains her situation quite emphatically. Experiencing this level of financial deprivation creates a sense of trauma for people this study which, on occasion resonates throughout their formative and adult lives, even beyond points where they became financially stable. Penny associated being working-class and this referring to economic deprivation, something which has continued to stay with her through her professional career, noting that she continued to worry about rising costs and her low wage in professional services.

Housing

Three participants referred to their working-class identity through the scope of housing; a repossession because of the financial crisis in 2008 and other experiences relating to growing up living on council estates.

Annie* saw her time growing up in a council house as being directly related to her working-class identity;

I grew up in a council house, or social housing, as we say now, because we don't say council house anymore.

This extract helps us understand the relationship between social class identity and housing, and the state of flux that has existed over time. At the end of the second world war, most of the population of the UK lived in council-owned housing. As the historian Sandbrook details, until Right to buy was instigated in 1980, the concept of home ownership was not the norm (BBC History extra, 2020; Sandbrook, 2019). Annie* also interestingly describes how the frame of 'council housing' and how it is understood has changed over time. Calling it 'social housing' because 'we don't say council house anymore' directly describes a movement in behaviours and attitudes and reflects how the occupants of council housing have, over time, been subject to ridicule and disgust.

Annie* further described the experiences of living in council housing accommodation 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. Like, my parents had part time jobs, sometimes we were on benefits, sometimes those benefits were stopped, because there might have been a little bit of work on the side that someone did at some point.

Michael* was one of the few participants who spoke about financial hardship as a teenager and as an adult rather than as a child. Whilst Michael* pointed to occupation and deprivation as indicative of his working-class identity, he predominantly centred his description on being made homeless as a young adult. As someone who had grown up in difficult family circumstances with parents who were not happily married and in relative poverty, he had managed to rapidly ascend a professional career ladder. He described at length the struggles he had faced to fit in to these settings culturally, even when he had adopted the connections, knowledge and dress codes of those around him.

Access to goods, technologies, and entertainment

Participants referenced their economic hardship through the mechanisms of things that were unaffordable to them growing up, which included things like emerging technologies, new or expensive hobbies, holidays and the latest fashions. For David* and Penny*, not having the same access to these goods and resources as others around them made them feel a pronounced sense of disadvantage. This was not true for all participants and David* and Penny* speak specifically about how this lack of material goods left them unable to belong within their local

and immediate communities. Penny* spoke about the things in people's houses that she saw around her, viewing the materials within them as delineating a space between these people and herself;

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.

David*, who was slightly older and working predominantly in the Northwest described this lack of access to goods in the frame of new and emerging technologies. As he was growing up in the 1990s, he could see how the new technologies other children had available to them were giving them new tools and advantages;

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* understood having to work towards accessing these technologies (such as videotapes and the internet) as a broader metaphor to describe working-class experiences; that thing other took for granted had to be worked hard for. 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 which 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 (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). Coupled with this, the small village he grew up in had started to become a destination for people moving out of the city, looking for places from where they could commute to work. As such, he became incredibly aware over time that those around him who had moved from the city out to his village had different mannerisms and different access to materials, opportunities, and networks (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

Having contrasting experiences to those around them helped participants to define their own tastes, cultures and pursuits, which relates Bourdieu's concepts of hierarchies of tastes and social class. Participants in this study framed their own tastes in antithesis to those of their middle-class peers

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

Participants used examples of hobbies and holidays to then contrast their own experiences. David* explained in detail at how his holiday experiences were related to his working-class background;

We would go to Butlins, that was our kind of family thing, and this one time we went to one down in Bognor Regis or somewhere. If we'd had a car it would have been you know, maybe a couple of stops wherever, but we had to make for train journey swap overs train 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 interviews, leisure time and holidays were completely absent and yet examples of the middle-class holidays they saw around them still featured and were directly referenced as exotic holidays and skiing trips. David's excerpt also highlights a concern of mobility and the inaccessibility of transport as being geographically restrictive, something which often underscores working-class realities; difficult complicated bus journeys and long walks to commute.

An individualised narrative has developed during the last 40 years around working-class people to explain poverty and economic disadvantage as being their own fault through their fecklessness and inability to succeed (Bloodworth, 2016; Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2017). However, I found this narrative to be at odds with the experiences of growing up in working-class communities that my participants described (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). Annie* described how her mum would walk her to a ballet lesson, sit and wait then walk her home again, despite being tired after work and simultaneously shouldering complaints from her daughter who did not want to walk;

My mum took me to ballet lessons. And where I grew up, 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. And in [redacted] it wasn't that far. But for kids, 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.

These kinds of excerpts which were abundant in my interviews were discussed by participants at length and demonstrated the level of care and regard for learning, hobbies and education that they believed to be facets of their working-class identities.

Implicit definitions of a working-class identity

Throughout the rest of the interview questions with participants in this study, collaborators referred to several other things which defined their working-class identity in relation to other things. These 'implicit' definitions cut through different questions within the interview at different points for different participants, but form mechanisms of working-class identities not yet considered.

Narratives of luck

There was an underlying thread throughout the interviews in this study where participants discussed how lucky they had been in their lifetimes. Running a text-based query through all the transcripts shows that the word 'luck' as used explicitly twenty-seven times and featured in all but three of the interview transcripts. Within this study, 'luck' or being 'lucky' is explained within three contexts. Primarily, participants explained their career pathways and trajectories to date as having been 'extremely lucky'. On these occasions they refer to chance meetings with people who could help them to gain different experiences or opportunities, or that they had been fortunate or 'lucky' to gain entry to different types of education. Here, two participants mention getting scholarships to local grammar schools, which they frame as 'lucky' by comparing their educational opportunities to those who they had grown up with, and subsequently witnessed their educational outcomes. Two participants felt they had been lucky

in receiving expert help in completing job applications, either by way of chance meetings with mutual acquaintances or reconnecting to extended family who were able to offer more precise advice and insight on how best to display their abilities. Feeling lucky within the institution that they worked in was expressed in two different ways. Whilst some participants felt fortunate and lucky to be placed in the department they were working in because it was a 'rich department' or because they had supportive line managers, some also expressed how luck was used outwardly by the institution itself. In this sense, one participant in particular Lizzie* explained how her institution promulgated an attitude *towards* staff that they should feel lucky or grateful to work at a prestigious Russell Group university, and that this should be treated as a kind of remuneration.

The narrative of luck within this study is cross cutting and under tension 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) describe post war fortunes place emphasis on technical capital in the UK, which young men from poorer backgrounds took advantage of. Utilising technical capital these individuals became the 'new men', socially mobile individuals who could ascend classed hierarchies. Subsequent governments under Thatcher, New Labour and the subsequent 12 years of conservative party governments have tirelessly rallied around this 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' narrative. This narrative individualises success and further, moves the responsibility for inequality away from the structures that reproduce privilege. Individualizing success also individualises failure and therefore establishes a derogatory rhetoric towards those from typically working-class and less privileged backgrounds. Although decades of political rhetoric have tried to make success or failure the remit of the individual, participants here still felt that their relative stability was a result of chance, happenstance and random fortune.

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, 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, 2021). 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, 2021; 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, rather than their own 'talent' (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

'Facilitating' Networks

The importance and presence of advantageous social networks was reiterated in nearly every interview in this study and was often in comparison to the networks which had been available to the participants when they were growing up in working-class communities. Networks were

understood as ‘facilitating’ and as a tool to ascend the hierarchy of dominant cultures in UK society.

Rachel*, A high-ranked professional services employee working at a university in the north explained that she had had no access to networks or connections who could facilitate her moving into a professional career as a child and young adult. She was one of the first interviewees for this project and demonstrated on many occasions that she felt a tension between growing up in a working-class community and her professional position which, on the face of it, seemed to be financially stable and extremely comfortable. She still believed, though, that she had lacked what she saw as critical influences and skills which would have helped her to ascend her professional career pathway with greater ease. 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. I asked her to explain to me what she meant when she used the word ‘networks’ in our meeting. She described how she interpreted ‘networks’ as;

...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...internships were just not a thing I could even consider. I worked throughout my whole degree...knowing how to navigate university and knowing how to play the game as such, I think that inevitably affects your confidence.

On multiple occasions, networks that could help to facilitate progression or the development of experience or confidence were evident as having been absent throughout the interviews I conducted. Michael* reflected on his journey to professional services which had first involved starting a career in finance in the City of London. He made a connection between having ‘good connections’ and ‘more well off’, particularly in the realm of the graduate job market;

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 that it had been by chance that a relationship at university had given him personal connections to people with ‘important’ jobs in the city;

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 the owner of an asset management company in the city of London. He met with me, we had a chat and it turned out...all these doors were open to me all of a sudden.

Michael* had been an active recipient of the benefits of these kinds of networks but on using these networks and starting work in these different environments he explained at length how the culture, type of work, and people around him were not aligned with his own interests and sensibilities, he didn't seem to feel that he had fully fitted into the environment the network had given him access to.

In the above excerpt Michael* referenced the presence of networks which were clear to him but were assumed and unrecognised by his middle-class peers. A similar sentiment was also

repeated by Peter* who had come from a different career trajectory, and originally from working within an academic context. Peter* had achieved a PhD in a STEM related subject but had chosen to avoid working as an academic. He identified that networks were noticed by those who did not have them and underappreciated by those that did;

...don't necessarily appreciate...[they 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* had also come from a previous career to working in professional services, believing that professional services could offer her a level of stability she was not able to access in her previous, precarious form of work. She explained that facilitating networks around her had assisted other people with gaining more prestigious roles on television and in the media. She noted that it was also these kinds of networks which had made navigating university life much easier for other people, where she had had no frame of reference for starting a degree or navigating university life from her family;

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.

Molly* believed that one of the associated central considerations from having come from a working-class background was that she had to create and manage her own networks to explore any other additional opportunities;

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. Sometimes what you can perceive as limitations previously, can really work in your favour.

Comparing the experiences of people to the findings of the literature review helps us to reflect on the social inequalities which are embedded in UK society (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). The experience of some of the participants in this study suggests that even when they are helped to develop better, facilitating, networks to achieve higher social and professional status that when they get there, these people often feel more isolated. These people report being in-between home and contemporary life and unable to bring their previous life experiences to work with them. The question here is how far the social mobility narrative, facilitated by enabling access to things like better social networks, causes harm. We might question how far adopting some of these facilitating tools results in individuals having to ignore facets of their own ingrained identity, to assimilate with a dominant sense of culture (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

Guilt & Financial anxiety

A sense of financial anxiety is a common thread between and among the interviews in this study. Feelings around money were depicted in this setting as a fear of debt and an inherited fear around poverty, which was visceral and actively remembered by participants in relation to

experiences they had had as a child. Asking one participant about how she felt to now be more financially secure, she explained that being more secure had left her feeling divided;

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.

These financial anxieties had been exacerbated over the course of the preceding year and the impact of the contemporary cost-of-living crisis. This participant emphasized how her previous experiences of financial trauma as a child had continued to influence her day-to-day life as an adult and she clarified her position;

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.

Financial anxiety had informed how Peter* had decided what to pursue following receiving his PhD, providing a clear pathway out of academia and towards professional services which was equated, at least for him, with relative security rather than abject precarity. He spoke explicitly about avoiding academia on achieving his PhD due to an unavailability of funding and research allocation. He told me how he had seen how an academic career trajectory often meant that people around him had had to take on extreme workloads, 'slogging their guts out in the office until 2 o'clock in the morning', vying for research funding and struggling to produce research papers. He clarified that he had still chosen to pursue his PhD to avoid the chances of finding himself back in poverty;

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 financial risk also played a part in the financial anxieties that participants described, and this was best exemplified by the two participants in this study who had not gone to pursue an undergraduate degree at 18. Instead, both participants had chosen to go straight into a professional environment for fear of the debt that would be accumulated by attending university. Not wanting to put themselves in financial debt was a crucial and often deciding factor in choosing not to attend university earlier on. Not wanting to attend university for these two professional services employees also came with other elements not described here; feeling like they wouldn't fit in and feeling like the dominant culture at universities was not theirs. Nevertheless, debt aversion and financial risk still played a dominant part in the

decision-making process to accessing a university education at 18.

Unrecognised potential and a lack of respect

Some respondents in this study felt that they possessed a degree of capability that often meant their potential or work was unrecognized, or that they felt more capable than some of the work they were allocated. Crucially, this wasn't the case for all participants in this study and several also felt that 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. This might well form the basis of some future, richer research.

Conclusion

The way that a working-class is defined is open to interpretation, oscillating between traditional understandings of class as associated with occupation and an underlining economic disadvantage. Using the findings from a literature review which was conducted systematically, this paper has identified that even in the realms of research around working-class people's experiences, the parameters of what it means to be working-class are fluid and open to interpretation. The second part of this study therefore went further, to understand how self-defining working-class research participants defined their own working-class identity and through which parameters. Here, this study finds that the working-class participants who took part in this research defined their working-class identity explicitly through the metrics of profession but more routinely through economic considerations; housing, poverty and economic deprivation and access to technology, goods, and entertainment. Moreover, implicitly through responses to other questions, participants also referred to their social class identity by underlining their lack of 'facilitating' networks, a feeling of not belonging or being 'in between,' guilt and financial anxiety and feeling disrespected and undervalued. The repeated association between past historical lives and present anxieties demonstrate a lamination of field. Rather than disregarding their working-class upbringings the implications of maintaining a working-class identity exacerbated a visceral tension for individuals in this study.

Whilst this study has not been able to answer the greater epistemological question of 'what does it mean to have a working-class identity?' it has further illuminated the findings of the literature review; that 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, poverty, and disadvantage.

Author Bio

Jess Pilgrim-Brown is a research associate at the University of Bristol and a current EdD student at Oxford Brookes University. Her thesis research focuses on social class and organisational culture in higher education through the experiences of working-class

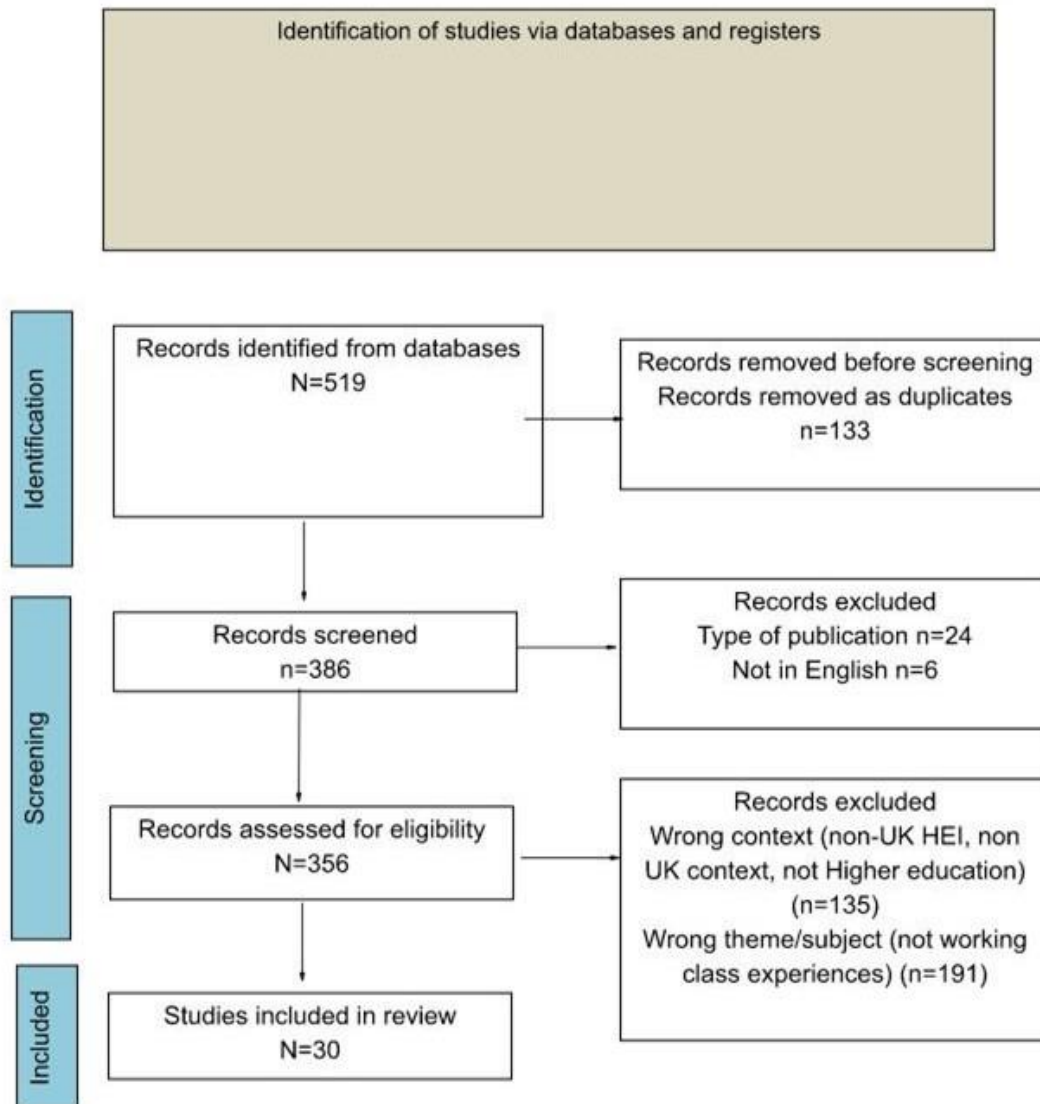
professional services and administrative staff. She is interested in issues related to research ethics, equality, diversity and inclusion, and innovative ways to apply qualitative approaches in the social sciences.

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Appendix
Appendix 1.1
Prisma flow diagram



Above shows the search process and screening process for refining the sample for this literature review. The flow diagram is produced in accordance to [PRISMA](#) protocol as per a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021b).

Appendix 1.2

Search strings applied to databases within the search for literature.

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