Chapter 2

# The Complex Question of Definition

*Keywords*: Definition; class; working-class academics; habitus; capital; precarity; casualisation

## Overview

Defining a working-class academic (WCA) is challenging for many reasons, not least in the context of Beck's notion that class is a 'zombie' category, one that obscures more than it clarifies in the landscape of 'second modernity' (Beck, 2011, p. 29). In his previous work, *Risk Society*, Beck (1992) explored how risks such as environmental degradation, technological accidents, and financial crises have become central to the modern experience. Unlike traditional industrial risks that affected working class people, Beck argued that the consequences of these contemporary risks are no longer confined to particular social classes but have a universal impact, transcending traditional distinctions. In contrast, Atkinson (2017) maintained that class structures, conflicts, and struggles have endured in the 21st century. Skeggs (2004), aligning with this view, asserted that class is shaped by and is in the interests of those who wield power. As such, scholarship about the working-classes, by the working-classes, i.e. those with lived experience, is crucial because symbolic class violence frequently places working-class people at a disadvantaged position compared to the elite and middle classes (Leeb, 2004, p. 16). WCAs are a complex case study since, superficially at least, their advanced qualifications and professional incomes may set them apart from the stereotypical working class (Leeb, 2004). However, conversations with my WCA respondents revealed that it is more nuanced than that. Chapter Two focuses on the definition and representation of WCAs, before turning to a discussion on academic precarity.

**The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity: A Class Apart, 9–32**

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## Perspectives on Working-Class Academics

Over a period of 40 years, scholars have intermittently investigated the challenging and unwelcoming environment WCAs experience in academia. Foundational texts from the United States such as *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (1984) by Ryan and Sackrey, and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* (1995) by Dews and Law revealed the struggles WCAs face, for instance, the feeling of not fitting into academia. The beautifully heartfelt *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams* (2005) by Lubrano extended this theme and discussed the internal conflicts WCAs experience when straddling 'two worlds'. In 1997, UK academics, Mahony and Zmroczek published a groundbreaking edited collection of essays entitled *Class Matters: Working Class Women's Perspectives on Social Class*. This book, influenced by a dissatisfaction with writings on social class written primarily from a middle-class perspective, brought together the experiences of working-class women who were studying and working in HE. Their narratives are 'troubled and paradoxical' (Hey, 2003, p. 320). Further texts from outside the UK have delved into contemporary issues in academia. Hurst's 2010 work *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades, and Double Agents* described the psychological and social costs of academic success. Whereas Michell et al.'s (2015) work *Bread and Roses: Voices of Australian Academics from the Working Class*, and Ardoin and Martinez's (2019) book *Straddling Class in the Academy* offered valuable insights into the obstacles faced by WCAs and the family support they receive.

Various journal articles have extended research themes relating to WCAs. Poole (2023) suggests the importance of discussions on WCAs also come from a positive space, transcending victimhood and heroic narratives (p. 522). Walkerdine (2023) recognises the challenges encountered by working-class researchers while highlighting the transformative potential of their research to inspire pride rather than shame. Pifer et al. (2023) conducted a content and thematic analysis of 218 published narratives from WCAs, to explore the impact of their class backgrounds at work and home. Their research highlighted the challenges that arise when contributing 'one's talents in the liminal space between two worlds' (p. 125). Their study also observed the need for intersectional research on the effects of other identity characteristics alongside their working-class identities (Pifer et al., 2023). Jones and Maguire's (2021) intersectional research on WCA women discussed their 'hybrid identities', as described by Walkerdine et al., (2003) and Lubrano (2005), which meant they did not comfortably 'fit' into either middle-class academia or their working-class 'homes'. The impact of their gender was that they were subjected to lower pay and fewer promotion opportunities compared to their male counterparts (p. 46).

In recent years, three books have emerged from academics within the UK. *Experiences of Academics from a Working Class Heritage: Ghosts of Childhood Habitus* by Binns (2019) focused on the role their background played in helping them to support and develop a rapport with working-class students. In Crew (2020), *Higher Education and Working Class Academics. Precarity and Diversity in Academia*, respondents recalled their lived experience of impostor syndrome,

alienation, and microaggressions. Last, but by no means least, Burnell Reilly (2022) book of autoethnographies, *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station* delved into the journeys and identity negotiation of WCAs. These books collectively expanded the discourse on WCAs by offering nuanced personal narratives. In its entirety, this literature, which also includes numerous US and various UK journal articles by influential academics such as Hey (various); Walkerdine (various); Rickets and Morris (2021), have provided valuable insights into the challenges WCAs encounter in academia. While significant progress has been made in the scholarship on the perspectives of WCAs, there are still gaps in this literature. Most notably, there is a lack of substantial critique of the term 'working-class academic'.

A working class identity serves as a powerful tool for challenging and interrogating the entrenched power dynamics within academia (Mazurek, 2009). Yet incorporating the social identifier 'working-class' into a study of academics introduces inherent tensions and conflicts because as Attfield (2007) critically comments, entry into academia is presumed to be a 'ticket out of the working classes' (p. 33). The term WCA might appear paradoxical as 'working-class' has traditionally implied a position 'below' those from elite or middle-class backgrounds. Working class people are often perceived as being uncouth, irrational, and as having a lack of intelligence (Long et al., 2000, p. 1). This characterisation is particularly intriguing when considering Skeggs's (2004) observation that 'attributing negative value to the working-class is a mechanism for attributing value to the middle class (p. 977), i.e. one is tasteful by judging another to be tasteless.

Those deemed "smart" are expected to climb the social ladder and abandon their working-class identities - problematising assumptions about social mobility (Todd, 2018) and also disregarding the intelligence of those who embrace their class heritage. My respondents had varied engagement with their backgrounds. Some continued to reside in the same neighbourhoods and/or preserved their cultural identities, while others had some distance from their heritage. Francis (2023), who had a hybrid experience, referred to living in the same area, drinking in the same pubs, but reported that he did not feel that he identified as being working class. He did acknowledge however, that he was 'active in its ecosystem' (p. 19), suggesting engagement without necessarily claiming membership.

Yet, I can also recognise that academics defining themselves as being working class may be perceived as denying one's privilege or '*wanting the best of both worlds*' as someone once said to me. One could argue that my respondents are fortunate enough to pursue their passions in research and receive financial rewards for what, for some, may be a pastime. They may engage in international travel, within the limitations of their research budgets, and typically enjoy flexible work schedules. Academia demonstrated increased flexibility amid the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting remote work arrangements. However, data from the Office of National Statistics (2023) indicate that this privilege is less common among working-class individuals. This disparity is also evident in manual employment, where workers, typically from working-class backgrounds, endure repetitive tasks,

fixed positions with little autonomy. Some manual jobs do pay well, typically the dirty, dangerous jobs that men often do, but generally, there is an obvious salary differential between manual and professional employment. For instance, manual roles are often hourly paid at or above the national minimum wage (£10.18), while the average salary for a Lecturer in the UK is £40,761[1] (Universities and College Union, n.d.).

Lynch and O'Neill (1994) concluded that 'if one is working class and formally educated, in the sense of having obtained higher education credentials… one loses one's defining social class identity in part if not in whole' (p. 319). The implication is that even with a degree, one might not be considered working class, reinforcing the stereotype that working-class individuals are not intelligent. Wakeling's (2010) chapter entitled 'Is There Such Thing as a Working Class Academic?', also argued that academics cannot be working class as 'they do not "labour" in the conventional sense' (p. 38). His thoughtful analysis continues:

> It does not follow that the occupational position and life circumstances of a junior professional such as an academic can be compared to that of someone in a 'solidly' working-class occupation such as a bus driver, cleaner or a supermarket checkout assistant…In general, pay and conditions are better in the professions. (Wakeling, 2010)

Examining each point individually, Wakeling's argument, though persuasive, paints a partial picture of working-class employment and overlooks the shifts there have been in the labour market, wherein manual jobs are progressively being replaced by roles that demand technological skills and offer enhanced financial compensation (Deloitte, 2015). These narrow stereotypes of working-class individuals in traditional working-class jobs limits the idea that they may aspire to 'better things' (Hey & George, 2013, p. 102). Widening participation policies have resulted in a surge of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE (UCAS, 2023) with the aspiration of securing higher qualifications for improved job and career prospects. Additionally, it is crucial to recognise that not all members of the academic community enjoy high earnings, or the comfortable lifestyles often associated with academia. While some academics may indeed command substantial salaries and lead privileged lives, this is not universal. Many academics face financial challenges, evident in the disparity between the substantial salaries of professors and the comparatively lower pay received by individuals employed under precarious conditions. Academic casualisation presents a universal challenge, irrespective of class, but it is far easier if you possess independent wealth or inherited resources to cushion the financial blows of temporary contracts. Beyond these financial issues, the measurable outcomes for quality of life, which Wakeling also refers to, are subjective and can vary widely among individuals. Job

[1]According to the 2019 HE Single Pay Spine (and the typical 2019/2020 university grade system).

satisfaction, work–life balance, and wellbeing can also be influenced by personal factors beyond pay and conditions, such as workplace culture, job security, and the sense of purpose in one's work (Voukelatou et al., 2021).

Upon examining my data concerning definitions of WCAs, I noted that almost half of my respondents (44%; n. 111), were on casualised contracts. This circumstance often exposed them to financial challenges reminiscent of their childhood, as they lacked the necessary economic resources to navigate job insecurity. Furthermore, my respondents reported various other situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers (Warnock, 2016), when attempting to move from short term, casualised contracts to permanent lecturer or researcher positions. WCAs are also not a homogenous group which means there are likely to be differences in pay and opportunities across specific academic disciplines and institutions. There may also be negative experiences, influenced by intersecting aspects of their identity, i.e. gender, ethnicity, and disability, which may be more 'negotiable' when one has elite forms of capital – all of which I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five.

The following section aims to define a WCA. Traditional assessments of social class and socioeconomic status (SES) in higher education have relied on objective criteria tied to parental income, occupation, and education, as discussed in Chapter One. Zweig (2000), argues, it is more useful to define income as an effect, not a cause, of someone's class position: 'Class is not based on income. But income has a great deal to do with class' (p. 66). However, a narrow focus on resource inequalities as the sole determinants of social class, neglect the subjective and intersectional nature of social class, as noted by (Rubin et al., 2014, p. 196). The forthcoming definition places significant emphasis on self-definition. I aimed to ensure that this study accommodates individuals who resonated with a working-class identity in some way, aligning with Davis's (2021) viewpoint on the importance of allowing respondents to express their authentic selves rather than fitting into predefined categories. This consideration is crucial, given that, as Davies pointed out, one respondent 'considered not returning after feeling not working class enough' (p. 5). It is imperative to avoid silencing certain narratives, and subjective measures of class enable more accurate depictions by allowing individuals to reflect on their unique experiences (Rubin et al., 2014).

## Defining a Working-Class Academic

Phase One of this study provided a definition of WCAs as being 'one whom defines their background/upbringing as working class and continues to identify in this way' (Crew, 2020, p. 7). This definition emphasises an individual perspective, allowing for the role of memory and lived experience (Pifer et al., 2023). It suggests that being a WCA is not merely a historical label but an ongoing identification, reflecting a commitment to their working-class identity, even as they advance in their academic careers. This 'hints' that the dimensions of a WCA identity extend beyond economic factors, to include cultural and social aspects. In Crew (2020, 2022), I identified four main class markers that were inherent in the findings of Phase One of the study. These 'markers' consisted of a lack of a safety net to 'manage' academic precarity; an uneven access to capital; a complex habitus

and respondents discussed 'utilising lived experience'. In Phases Two and Three of the research process, I shifted the focus back to the respondents and asked them to reflect upon their own definition of a WCA. Specifically, I requested that they consider the statement: '*I identify as being a working class academic*'. They were then encouraged to elaborate on the reasons for their answer. Respondents were intentionally not provided with a predefined description, allowing them to independently reflect on what this term meant to them, and any challenges associated with using the descriptor 'working class' alongside 'academic'. This methodology aimed to capture spontaneously expressed, context specific keywords associated with this identity.

In all, 10% (n.26) of respondents struggled with the moniker WCA, replying 'maybe' or 'not sure' when asked about the term. Their primary source of uncertainty stemmed from their academic roles, which they characterised as not aligning with what they perceived to be representative of a working-class occupation – a sentiment previously noted by Wakeling (2010). These respondents were also similar to what Rowell (2018) described as being 'class drifters' as they perceived their class identity to be undergoing a transformation due to their academic achievements (p. 300).

> *Its complicated… I would say I was from a working-class background but have had a middle class job for 20 years*. [Rosie, a Senior Lecturer Social Work at a post-1992 institution]

> *I feel as though working in academia in a fairly well paid job does mean I am now middle class, but I do have a working class background that I am proud of. It wouldn't figure in any identity of myself*. [Joseph, a Senior Research Fellow Education Policy at a Russell Group institution]

> *I certainly come from a working class background and for most of my own working life have been a factory worker. However, I am now an academic researcher (since the age of 54) and it's hard to see that as anything but a very middle class job*. [Gabriel, a Research Fellow in Employment Relations at a Russell Group institution]

> *Can't help but think that now I've been through the education system, earn the wage I do, have upward mobility and access to multiple opportunities (in multiple areas), it's fetishistic of me to still claim a working class identity*. [Mila, a Senior Lecturer in Gender-Based Violence at a post-1992 institution]

These responses revealed that there was a boundary between their heritage and their present profession, which introduced a flux in their class identities. Owing to their academic roles, acknowledging their working-class heritage posed a challenge for these individuals (Lubrano, 2005). Rosie's response reflected the tension between her roots and her current profession where she

identified with both classes to some extent. Joseph articulated a similar sentiment but retained pride in his working-class heritage even if he felt it didn't play a significant role in his current identity. Gabriel's narrative highlighted the class transition he had undergone, and the impact of occupation on his perception of social class. In comparison, Mila's quotation, which mentions upward mobility and access to opportunities, suggested a potential shift in class identification because of career advancements. Mila's use of the term "fetishistic," implied she was aware of how working-class realities are often romanticised portrayals, skewed towards men (Walkerdine, 2017). Throughout my research, respondents would refer to instances where they had observed class privileged academics temporarily embracing an attractive working-class image until it became inconvenient, where they would then discard it like a disposable accessory, or like 'a snake sheds its skin' (Crew, 2020, p. 23). This shedding of the working-class persona suggests that it was used to enhance their own image or gain social capital.

Despite these issues, the overwhelming majority of my respondents, comprising 90% (n. 229), confirmed an 'underlying and persistent working-class identity' (Hey, 1997, p. 143). An examination of the qualitative data revealed five dominant keywords: 'family' (n. 53 instances); 'identity' (47 instances); 'capital' (n. 44 instances); 'parents' (42 instances), and 'habitus' (n.27 instances). The prominence of these keywords suggests that, for most individuals, being a WCA is deeply embedded in their familial and personal experiences. Respondents such as Emily, a Senior Lecturer Criminology at a post-1992 institution, saw their working-class heritage as being a central part of their identity.

> *It [class] runs through me like a stick of rock. You feel class from where you live (I still live where I always have), my accent, the words I use, the people I know and friends I have. My views, lifestyle and values.*
>
> *Elements from my life experience – upbringing, education, family, geography, hobbies & interests, accent, clothing – and the classed nature of those experiences have a fundamental impact on my integration as a member of "the academy".* [Sadie, an Assistant Professor in Law at a post-1992 institution]

Emily suggested that her working-class identity is both ingrained and integral, much like the distinctive patterns found in a stick of rock. The passage also indicates that, for Emily and many others, their working-class identity was not a static label but a dynamic force that influenced their perspectives, interactions, and sense of self.

Three distinct themes emerged in the data with regards to how respondents defined their identity as a WCA: 'cultural background', 'financial challenges', and 'a subjective awareness of one's class identity within the academic context'. Given that respondents also referred to 'habitus' and 'capital', the impact of these two concepts will also be included and expanded upon.

### *Cultural Background*

Just over one-third (33%, n. 81) of respondents, emphasised that cultural background should be included in any definitions of a WCA. This can include concrete aspects such as language, leisure activities, and community, or more abstract examples such as values and beliefs.

> *It's so difficult because I think to the outside it almost seems like an oxymoron to put 'working class' and 'academic' together. But so many elements from someone's life experience – their upbringing, education, family, geography, hobbies & interests, accent, clothing – and the classed nature of those experiences have a fundamental impact on that person's integration as a member of 'the academy'. Especially in terms of belonging, fit, academic identity, building relationships with colleagues (and students) and more generally just whether the conditions of 'the academy' allow you to thrive both personally and professionally*. [Sadie, an Assistant Professor in Law at a post-1992 institution]

> *My working class culture, a range of cultures, from now and then, define me and others as a working class academic i.e accent, previously in manual labour, financial struggles, and* ***lifestyle*** *factors such as local sports, a strong work ethic and supporting students*. [Eddie, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]

Sadie's perspective was one that was reiterated by many of my respondents with most recognising that broader cultural and personal dimensions, alongside notions of belonging and fit were crucial aspects of their WCA experience. Eddie also challenged the notion of a singular, monolithic working-class culture and acknowledged the diversity and dynamism of working-class cultures, shaped by factors like gender, ethnicity, and location. Moreover, these cultures are not static entities but rather evolve over time, adapting to changing social, economic, and political conditions. It is also interesting that his perception of cultural identity included a commitment to supporting students. This aspect of social justice is one example of the positive impact that diverse backgrounds can have on the academic community.

### *Financial Challenges*

Respondents felt that exclusively concentrating on the economic dimensions of class meant that the definition would lack the necessary nuance for a thorough understanding of WCAs. Additionally, 20% (n. 52) acknowledged that they no longer grappled with the same economic challenges they had faced in the past. Nevertheless, a significant majority (63%, n. 154) discussed the financial difficulties they encountered in both their past and present circumstances. Ellis, a Senior Lecturer in Post compulsory Education at a post-1992 institution included

reflections on the financial aspects of his childhood into his definition of a WCA identity:

> *I would define a working-class academic as someone who hits the majority of these characteristics. Went to a state school, faced inequality of educational experience (e.g. could not afford to undertake educational enrichment opportunities, lacked connections to undertake work placements of genuine interest, limited educational support in home environment because of parent's lack of confidence). Parents did not go to university, worked in service or manual labour roles, and had limited free time. Undertook employment at an early age, alongside education. Was expected to contribute to household income as soon as earning. Had limited point of reference, from friends or family, as to how universities and accreditations operate*.

Ellis's reference to his parents being in manual labour roles, coupled with his observations about not having peers who could help him navigate universities (i.e. social, navigational, and familial capital) reminds us that financial challenges may also contribute to feelings of being an outsider within academia as economic capital often begets access to elite form of social and cultural capital.

Those on precarious contracts and WCAs involved in academia within the last five years, referred to current financial challenges in their definitions of a WCA. They would reference the substantial debts they incurred during their time as students, and the continued financial strains associated with juggling insecure contracts.

> *How do I define a working-class academic? It's a fiendish question because class is a construct. Nevertheless, a working-class academic emerges from a culture and society where working-class values and norms are perpetuated and also facing the kind of financial and societal restrictions that the working-class face. E.g. not being able to exist for any period of time unfunded, even when living at home with parents, in order to undertake study, intern work etc*. [Keith, Principal Lecturer in Teacher Education at a post-1992 institution]

This recognised the importance of personal experiences and societal influences in shaping a WCA identity. Keith's comment on the inability to navigate academia unless funded highlighted the economic constraints that WCAs still encounter.

### *A Subjective Awareness of One's Class Identity Within the Academic Context*

This theme, which was discussed by 51% (n. 125) of respondents, explored the 'subjective awareness of one's class identity within the academic context'. This reflected the commitment of WCAs to infuse their working class identity into

their academic work. For instance, Miriam, a Lecturer in Education and Communities at a post-1992 institution defined a WCA as:

> *someone who genuinely cares and supports students, particularly those from widening participation backgrounds. Strong, stubborn, and often lacking the confidence to truly see all they are capable of, and how incredibly special they really are. Fierce and loyal, protective of their ethics and morals and usually supportive and non-judgemental…Possessing an indomitable spirit, many working-class academics are able to reflect on their pedagogy, they possess the important ability to form trust in their teaching relationships, however, are often not trusted themselves, within the institution…this is a huge mistake, in my humble opinion. We rock*!.

Miriam's quotation provided a multifaceted analysis of the characteristics associated with being a WCA, particularly in the context of her interactions with students. The quotation below also emphasised the outward oriented aspects of a WCAs role in connecting with and benefiting communities through academic endeavours.

> *A working class academic is someone who strives to connect their identity and experiences to give back to their community in some form through academic expertise. Whether this is by highlighting the prevalence of class inequalities within society through teaching of students or being motivated to produce academic work that can provide some benefit to communities they identify or emphasise with (e.g. outreach)*. [Kayden, an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at a post-1992 institution]

Both quotations reflected the strong sense of personal and ethical commitment tied to the WCA identity. While Miriam emphasised the caring and supportive nature of WCAs, particularly towards students from widening participation backgrounds, Kayden's perspective reflected a sense of social responsibility. Both respondents demonstrated an awareness of the challenges and biases faced within academia.

### *The Impact of Habitus*

Habitus, a fundamental concept in Sociology pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu, also serves as a useful lens through which to observe how the behaviours, perceptions, and interactions of WCAs are shaped within the academic sphere. This concept encapsulates both our history (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 82) and our present reality (Reay, 2004). It's an ingrained framework that operates unconsciously and significantly influences how individuals, such as WCAs, think, perceive, and act, thereby moulding the norms, values, and attitudes that they internalise.

The embodiment of social class begins early in life, exerting a lasting impact on our capacity to generate and accumulate capital. Cruz (2021) notes that as the working-classes are constantly exposed to the values and aesthetics of the ruling classes, it's nearly impossible for working class people not to be influenced by their pervasive presences (p. 11). This stark observation helps us understand the characterisation of a working class habitus, which is often defined in opposition to a middle class habitus, and by a lack of educational aspirations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) (because few people in their family have attended university). A working-class habitus is portrayed as valuing practicality; thus, they typically work in manual employment. The social circles of working-class people are frequently family based, and within their local neighbourhood (which consists of other working-class groups) (Savage et al., 2013, 2015). Working-class communication styles are presented as being more emotive and plainspoken, compared to the reserve and objectivity of elites/middle classes. In contrast to the favoured middle-class habitus, a working-class habitus is often portrayed as one that is perceived to 'lack' and need further development. Habitus has been criticised as being deterministic concept (Archer, 2007), yet ones habitus is dynamic, demonstrating that classed identities can be fluid and adaptable to new experiences. Entering a new field, such as academia, presents an opportunity for one's habitus to evolve, as individuals engage with the unfamiliar. However, the hierarchical landscape of academia often demands that WCAs adapt to the dominant cultural norms, which may necessitate a transformation of their habitus. The following section discusses the different ways my respondent's habitus responded/adjusted to the elite/middle-class field of academia.

### *Cleft Habitus*

Approximately one-third (31%; n. 78) of respondents expressed a sense of being 'in limbo'. Lubrano (2005) resonates with this sentiment, characterising himself as 'two people. I now live a middle-class life…but I was born blue-collar' (p. 5). Respondents conveyed similar experiences:

> *I…come from a working class background and for most of my own working life have been a factory worker. I am now an academic researcher…and it's hard to see that as anything but a very middle class job. But I don't feel like a 'whole' person, I'm split down the middle, a foot in both camps, but not feeling right in any*. [Gabriel, Research Fellow in Employment Relations at a post-1992 institution]

> *Even when I was studying at undergraduate level, I used to define it as two bubbles. I'd go to university, and it'd be a completely different circle of people, completely different group of friendships and relationships, and then I'd come home, and it'd be a completely different environment*. [Bethany, a PhD Student in English and Art History at a traditional institution]

Both respondents articulate their experiences as embodying a dual identity. Friedman (2016) terms this as a cleft habitus or 'habitus clive', where ones personal identity is 'torn by contradiction and internal division' (pp. 129–130). Gabriel's phrases like '*split down the middle'* and '*a foot in both camps*' illustrate the internal conflict and the struggle to reconcile disparate aspects of their identity. Bethany's analogy of '*two bubbles*' is akin to descriptions by Friedman, Cruz, and Lubrano, highlighted the stark contrast between her academic world and her familial environment. These experiences may be expected because as Cruz (2021) explains, working-class people in this situation come up against the threshold of the middle-class world (which will not allow them access), so they become 'a ghost, existing between worlds' (p. 11).

Reay (2013), reflecting on her own experience in an autobiographical essay, stated that 'social mobility can often be a difficult, alienating process… It can tear community and sometimes even the family out of the heart of individuals. I struggled to keep my family close despite moving so far away in terms of social space' (pp. 672–673). Hey (2003) suggests that 'crossing class boundaries' is a chosen 'self alienation' (p. 327). Social mobility had detrimental effects on some of my respondents' closest relationships, and they reported that emotional labour was needed to maintain successful ties with family members and friends:

> *I started doing all this stuff that she [mum] doesn't really get. And it was quite hard…I think we lost a bit of mutual understanding of each other and what's going on. So that was hard. I think it's a bit better now. Now I've been in it [university] for so long, she's kind of had to adapt*. [Claudia, PhD Student in Sociology, at a traditional institution]

> *Although my family have been so supportive, and they've sacrificed a lot of things… every day I'm trying to explain, I'm doing this for my PhD, or I'll go to a conference. They have no idea what I'm talking about…I don't have that person who has gone through something similar to communicate…It can be difficult at times*. [Bethany, a PhD Student in English and Art History at a traditional institution]

A sense of duality extends to social circles, relationships, and communication styles, as both respondents reported a distancing effect that WCAs may experience in academia. Bethany's statement which expressed a sense of isolation, highlighted the emotional strain of navigating academia without a relatable support system. Claudia talks of acquiring new forms of knowledge prized in HE, while her mother is perhaps more anchored in their working-class community, which can make it harder for them to relate. This shift can be particularly challenging for working-class women especially because 'women's desires for…respectability and material wealth' have long been portrayed as markers of 'pretence and triviality' (Lawler, 1999, p. 12).

Respondents described how upward mobility created complicated emotions such as guilt and embarrassment, straining relationships with family and friends. For instance, Diane, a Professor of Engineering Teaching and Learning at a traditional institution recalled how: '*My dad wouldn't make a speech at my wedding because he didn't want to talk in front of my friends*'. The implication being that he didn't want to embarrass her. This tension between familial and academic backgrounds not only set respondents apart from their peers but also accentuated a separation from their families. Lee and Kramer's (2013) research on social mobility aligns with these findings, indicating that even when respondents reported low levels of 'social distance', there was an underlying sense of loss. While the transformative process led to positive employment outcomes, it simultaneously complicated relationships with loved ones.

*Abandoned Habitus*

The abandoned habitus is one that becomes disconnected from its initial field (Ingram & Abrahams, 2015, p. 150). With the secondary field, specifically the university, exerting a more prominent influence, the primary habitus is effectively 'usurped or overwritten' (Ingram, 2018, p. 68). Among the three discernible 'types' of habitus, a slightly larger portion, just over one-third (37%; n. 78) of respondents, often associated with elite universities, manifested this habitus. This meant that they would 'pass' (or attempt to pass) or assimilate within academic spaces. This strategic response aligns with the recognition that 'maintaining alliances with the working-classes' is typically not rewarded in academia (Arner, 2017, p. 78). Respondents talked of engaging in self surveillance (Leeb, 2004) wherein they concealed details about themselves that might reveal their class background, such as their school attended. As some noted, hiding aspects of themselves was difficult:

> *I try to 'pass', but its easy to slip up. I once defended working class people who voted for Johnston and now my colleagues make comments about it*. [Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an Elite institution]

Alan's quote emphasises the challenges WCAs may encounter when navigating professional environments, where conforming to the dominant culture can lead to identity tensions and social pressure (Lubrano, 2005).

My respondents adjusted their mannerisms and fashion choices to align with what they perceived as being academic norms (Crew, 2020). This approach is also documented by a respondent in Leeb's (2004) study who appropriated academic norms of dress, behaviour and speech as felt they were crucial for being treated with respect (p. 135). Among my respondents, Lucy, a Teaching Associate in Law at a Russell Group institution, and others recalled adopting a more reserved style of dress and speech in academia for this reason. These adaptations were not only driven by a desire for social acceptance. '*Looking/acting middle class will help me when I go for promotion*', said Ellie, a Reader in Health Sciences at a Russell Group institution.

The statement by Ellie connects the act of '*looking middle class*' with potential benefits in professional advancement, such as promotions. This strategic approach reflected the ways in which these WCAs felt they needed to navigate their professional environments.

There was also a gendered and racial element to the data on 'passing' as WCA men and ethnic minority WCAs, in particular, felt pressurised to assimilate in academia by adjusting their sense of humour and speech. Although HE has a 'white male template' (Thomas, 2017), a shared masculinity doesn't guarantee acceptance among privileged male colleagues. A WCA masculinity is a complex interplay of social class, gender identity, and the academic environment. In all, 20% (n. 16) of my WCA male participants faced challenges connecting with their privileged male colleagues, with Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an Elite institution describing it as being a '*clash of cultures*'. Other male respondents felt that they had more in common with WCA women than they did with elite men. Despite some privilege gained by those who assimilated, WCA men still experienced gaps in their confidence. Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution explained, '*I changed how I dressed and spoke. But I still feel like an imposter at fancy receptions*'. A pervasive feeling of not fitting in was a common theme among respondents. The 'compulsion to pass' was also a response to racialised expectations, as 28% (n. 12) of ethnic minority WCAs faced pressure to conform to dominant norms and expectations, including altering their appearance and suppressing cultural elements. I elaborate on 'these themes' in Chapter Three.

### *Chameleon Habitus*

In all, 32% (n. 78) of respondents exhibited a chameleon habitus, which could be interpreted as the most favourable adaptation strategy as these respondents navigated both the working-class and academic worlds, they retained their working-class identity while simultaneously acquiring the cultural capital necessary to thrive in academia. This ability to code switch between different social spheres highlighted the adaptability and resilience of WCAs. While acknowledging there were difficulties from time to time, such as negative comments about their accent etc, these respondents adapted to their new environments. As Bourdieu (2000) commented 'changes were incorporated, like unremarked adjustments to the habitus' (p. 157).

> *You don't just leave behind your whole landscape of childhood and life and values and all of that just because you enter into a certain job*. [Jacqueline, a Senior Lecturer in Drama at a traditional institution] (Crew, 2020, p. 36)

> *Academia is an interesting part of my life, but it's not my whole life*. [Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution]

Jacqueline's perspective challenged the prevailing notion that professional identity should entirely subsume one's personal history and values upon entering academia. Her experience demonstrated resilience in navigating academia without compromising her authenticity. Similarly, Dominic exemplified a balanced approach to professional life, as he acknowledged his diverse interests and commitments that extended beyond their academic roles.

Respondents with a chameleon habitus spoke about a duality to their sense of being:

> *I change according to my environment, the same if talking to my GP or best friend*. [Pat, a Professor in Biological Sciences at an Oxbridge institution]

> *I am one 'me' when I am dealing with students, colleagues etc, and other with my family. We have more than one side to us*. [Lynn, a Graduate Teaching Assistant in Mathematics at a post-1992 institution]

Listening back on these interviews it appeared that not only did they have multiple facets to their identity, but their adaptability was a professional strategy to navigate diverse social and professional settings. Instead of assimilating, respondents with a chameleon habitus adapted their identities to suit the context and different fields (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013). Crucially, these respondents valued the opportunities that academia provided, such as teaching, research funding, and a salary for their studies, without compromising their authentic selves outside academia. In doing so, they carved out a space within academia that accommodated their classed heritage, ultimately contributing to a more diverse academic community.

### *Disparities in Capital Accumulation*

Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised capital as a form of wealth which allows actors in a specific field to increase their power. One of the persistent observations is that working-class people have limited access to elite forms of capital, likely stemming from their upbringing in resource scarce households (Manstead, 2018). While most WCAs recognised their advanced economic, cultural, and social capital upon entering academia compared to their working-class peers, a closer examination revealed that they felt they were 'behind' their academic peers in terms of capital accumulation.

#### *Economic Capital*

Access to economic capital remained a complex challenge for most respondents, with the exception of those in the 'late career' stage (Crew, 2020). Economic capital refers to material assets that are 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu,

1986, p. 242). Wendy, a Postdoctoral Researcher in History, challenged the assumption that academics enjoy financial prosperity, noting that for her, this was far from the truth as she had poor levels of this form of capital in comparison to her peers. Among my respondents, only those in the 'mid and late career' stage did not refer to periods of casualised employment. However, for early career researchers (ECRs) such as Mia, a PhD Student in Administration at a traditional institution: '*the principal problem is precarity*'. Respondents discussed how their precarious contracts resulted in fluctuating and unpredictable incomes. For instance, Daisy, an Associate Lecturer in Human Geography, on a fixed-term contract at a Russell Group institution, talked of earning less than minimum wage, once the preparation of teaching resources was taken into account. Some respondents supplemented their income with ad hoc university work (Crew, 2020, p. 28). Other respondents referred to being financially vulnerable as they lived in expensive cities like London, where multiple jobs were often necessary to make ends meet. Respondents also described how, even after attaining a 'permanent' position in academia, their financial situation did not improve for some time. For instance, Paul, a Teaching Fellow, in Engineering at a Russell Group institution, mentioned that he had spent years paying off debts from his education (Crew, 2020, p. 29).

A further economic challenge discussed by 14% (n. 34) of respondents was the crucial task of securing research funding from nonprofit organisations and government agencies. Obtaining research funding, while not personal income, is an integral and pivotal aspect of academic life that can significantly improve promotion opportunities. There is a growing emphasis on grant acquisition as a measure of academic and institutional success, but it's important to recognise the demanding and time-consuming nature of the research funding application process. Moreover, it has become progressively more competitive and demanding to gain funding. While not explicitly linked with economic capital, respondents would mention in passing that the grant writing process demanded substantial effort and emotional labour. Given that success rates are usually only slightly better than one in five (Times Higher Education, 2019), academics should not have to additionally contend with the inherent biases within the research funding landscape. Review panels may unintentionally favour applicants from more privileged backgrounds, which inadvertently places marginalised groups at a disadvantage, as they may not conform to the conventional mould (Gladstone et al., 2022).[2] The lack of concrete evidence regarding the specific challenges faced by WCAs in accessing research funding leaves a gap in understanding their experiences. My respondents referred to having limited access to established academic networks, which is problematic as this social capital can act as a gateway to the funding opportunities and collaborations needed to advance their research agendas. My respondents discussed the challenges they faced to secure research funding, even when their proposals were promising and innovative.

[2]For clarity, the aforementioned report referred to statistical data on minoritised 'groups', it did not mention WCAs.

> *Everyone knows that the vast majority of research funding goes to the chosen few institutions, and no matter how forward thinking I am, the rest of us are left trying to be put forward by our institution for the scraps*. [Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution]

The stark reality, as exemplified by Dominic's statement, was that respondents affiliated with post-1992 institutions faced additional obstacles. I'll expand on this example of institutional economic capital later on in this chapter.

*Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu (1984) defined cultural capital as 'familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society'. There are three types of cultural capital: objective (cultural goods, books, and works of art); embodied (language, mannerisms, and preferences); and institutionalised (qualifications and education credentials) (Bourdieu, 1986). Academics with more substantial reserves of this form of capital can navigate the academic landscape more easily. For instance, Cruz (2021) explained cultural capital by referring to her boyfriend having superior cultural currency as he had grown up absorbed in art, giving him a sense of ease in that field. Access to cultural capital was varied, with most respondents perceiving there to be disparities in their access to cultural capital in comparison to their academic peers. Some respondents possessed forms of objectified cultural capital, i.e. owning vintage clothing, and the ability to 'consume' classic literature. Frank, a Lecturer in Geography at a Russell Group institution, referred to his father working as a steward in a London theatre, which afforded him the privilege of attending plays without cost (Crew, 2020). While Ruth, a Lecturer in Geography at a traditional institution, referred to her father, who worked as a professional jazz musician:

> *[T]hat's not necessarily what you think of as a working class profession…but it was…an unstable source of income…I felt like I had access to cultural influences that perhaps others didn't, but at the same time, I was the first in my family to go to university*.

Frank's exposure to cultural events enriched his experiences and cultural capital. It also demonstrated that access to this form of capital is often influenced by family connections and opportunities, something which may be difficult for WCAs to accrue. Ruth's transcript offers a complex perspective on the relationship between cultural capital and social class. Despite her father's profession as a jazz musician, typically associated with middle-class cultural capital, Ruth refers to the financial precarity her father experienced. Although Ruth also recognised her access to cultural influences were resources not readily available to many working-class people, which emphasised the multifaceted nature of cultural capital. Moreover, her status as the first in family to attend university highlighted the significance of educational capital in breaking traditional class barriers.

Respondents acknowledged that their cultural capital had evolved within university, which had enabled them to better understand and navigate the cultural norms of the dominant culture, compared with when they first entered university. Nonetheless, they still felt disconnected within academia due to a lack of shared cultural experiences with middle-class peers, and consequently, reported that they were consistently trying to catch up with their colleagues (Crew, 2020, p. 29).

> *I have got friends whose family have PhDs and they know what they are doing, and they understand the system, what you are supposed to do. Whereas it's been a lot harder for me to figure it out*. [Paige, a Lecturer in Health Sciences at a redbrick institution]

Paige's reference to friends with family members with PhD degrees emphasises that some individuals may have an inherent advantage due to their family's academic experiences. This is likely to give them a deeper understanding of the unwritten rules, expectations, and pathways for success in academia. Paige, lacking guidance from family members unfamiliar with academic careers, faced challenges in navigating the academic world. '*We're not only expected to excel in our field but also to navigate a foreign culture with limited support, constantly adapting to middle class norms*' [Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution]. The quotation by Flynn is an example of the additional hurdles that WCAs may face during their academic journey, whereby they must contend with an unfamiliar terrain and a weaker support network. Despite improvements in understanding and navigating the dominant culture, the WCAs I interviewed struggled with the need to constantly adapt to their middle-class colleagues' cultural expectations and norms.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital is the 'sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). In other words, talent alone may not be enough to support a successful academic career, and you need personal connections, particularly at prestigious institutions. As Grimes and Morris (1997) noted 'academic work requires a high level of politics' (p. 100) which can open doors to research partnerships or funding. There was relatively less discussion regarding levels of social capital among interviewees, with most referring to their limited academic connections. For instance, Eddie, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution said he didn't have '*insider networks*', and his social circles external to academia could not help him unravel the unwritten norms of academia such as '*self promotion etc*'.

Even when my respondents attended elite and Russell Group institutions, they reported fewer ties to alumni or others who could broker opportunities:

> *Academics look for like minded people, so my network is small*. [Frank, a Geography Lecturer at a Russell Group institution]

> *If there was a project available, I don't believe I would be 'first on the list' of who colleagues would contact*. [Daisy, associate lecturer in Human Geography, on a fixed-term contract at a Russell Group institution] (both cited in Crew, 2020)

When reflecting upon their social capital, others noted that while they had academic networks did not have the same 'reach' compared with their middle-class colleagues. They cited a variety of reasons. For instance, Frank's quotation refers to the presence of 'unconscious bias' which reflects the inclination of people to gravitate towards people who resemble us or belong to our ethnic 'group' or social class. Similarly, Daisy perceived that her identity as a WCA may have influenced whether her colleagues would include her in project collaborations. Her experience finds support in the research of Friedman and Laurison (2019), who conducted comprehensive studies across various professions. They found that risk aversion in recruitment and promotion often lead to a preference for hiring individuals who share similar backgrounds. Moreover, the prevalence of class based microaggressions, to be discussed in Chapter Four, adds to the challenges faced by WCAs in their efforts to cultivate social capital.

Academic mobility is a defining aspect of academic life. Regional stickiness, or emotional ties, can often affect decision making and influence mobility (Finn, 2015). My interviews revealed that WCAs were typically less mobile than their counterparts from traditional academic backgrounds. Female WCA respondents in particular noted that their local ties often negatively impacted their careers, as they were expected to take on caregiving responsibilities within their family, such as caring for relatives. This is supported by existing research as the Women's Budget Group (2020) reported that women typically have the 'double burden' of paid and unpaid work, with women, carrying out 60% more unpaid work than men. Women also spend around twice as much time on unpaid cooking, childcare and housework compared to men, with transport (driving self and others) being the only area where men did more unpaid work than women The female WCAs I interviewed, who did not fit the mould of the '*typical young mobile PhD student*', such as Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a traditional institution, felt that their mobility was constrained in other areas. Respondents such as Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care, at a Russell Group institution, mentioned how their international collaborations were affected by having children, as it was difficult to arrange childcare for trips abroad.

## Statistical Data on Working-Class Academics

In 1992, a comprehensive study of academics, which solely centred on the British Sociological professoriate, was carried out by Oxford Sociologist AH Halsey. In this study, Halsey found that 17% of his sample had fathers who had or were working in manual occupations (this fell to 13% when analysing professors) (Halsey, 1995). Wakeling (2023) analysed data collected as part of the Great British Class Survey in 2011 and observed that around 23% of the 2,500 academics who

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Academics from Working-Class Backgrounds in UK Labour Force Survey 2014–2022.

| Dataset Year [Number of Academics] | Working-Class Background (% of All Academics) | Sex (% of WCA) | | Disabled (% of WCA) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | *F* | |
| 2022 [192] | 20 (10.4) | 10 (50.0) | 10 (50.0) | 3 (15.0) |
| 2021 [275] | 39 (14.2) | 19 (48.7) | 20 (51.3) | 4 (10.3) |
| 2020 [223] | 21 (9.4) | 13 (61.9) | 8 (38.1) | 4 (19.0) |
| 2019 [219] | 25 (11.4) | 16 (64.0) | 9 (36.0) | 2 (8.0) |
| 2018 [226] | 21 (9.3) | 9 (42.9) | 12 (57.1) | – |
| 2017 [216] | 18 (8.3) | 10 (55.6) | 8 (44.4) | 2 (11.1) |
| 2016 [249] | 36 (14.5) | 20 (55.6) | 16 (44.4) | 2 (5.6) |
| 2015 [247] | 24 (9.7) | 13 (54.2) | 11 (45.8) | 4 (16.7) |
| 2014 [242] | 36 (14.9) | 21 (58.3) | 15 (41.7) | 5 (13.9) |

*Notes*: WCA = Working class academics.

completed the survey reported working-class origins,[3] although only 10% of the sample self-identified as being working class. Statistical data from the labour force survey (LFS), which drew upon a large survey of professional occupation employees, reported on by Friedman and Laurison (2019) found that in academia only 14% of academic respondents were from a working-class background. Phase four of this research study involved a further analysis of the LFS, conducted in 2023 by Rebecca Linnett.[4] Table 1 provides statistical data from 2014 (when data on the social class of academics first began to be collected).

According to Table 1, the percentage of WCAs ranged from 9% to 15%, with no clear upward or downward trend over the years. The reason for this disparity is potentially because Friedman and Laurison (2019) included respondents working *outside* of academia, while Rebecca Linnett's analysis, as part of this study, focused on statistical data on those working *within* academia. There was also a roughly equal distribution between male and female academics, although in some years, there was a slight skew towards female academics, but this difference was not substantial. Disability status varied between 2% and 5%, with some fluctuations over the years. An explanation of the analysis procedure produced by Rebecca Linnett is discussed in Appendix Two.

Table 7, which is included in Appendix Three, presents data on the ethnic backgrounds of WCAs from 2014 (when data on the social class of academics

[3]This was likely to have been influenced by its subject matter.

[4]This was part of seed funding I was awarded from Bangor University. I would like to extend my thanks to Bangor University for this funding, and to Dr Rebecca Linnett for her detailed examination of these statistics.

first began to be collected) to 2022. Some key observations included the majority of WCAs across all years were White, ranging from 87.5% to 96.0%. There was limited representation from individuals such as from Mixed/Multiple groups, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Other Asian backgrounds, Black/African/Caribbean, and Others. These groups typically accounted for a small percentage of WCAs, often less than 10%. While White academics consistently comprised of the majority, there was some variation in the representation of individuals from other ethnic backgrounds across different years. For example, there was no data for WCAs of Indian or Pakistani heritage in some years, alongside minor fluctuations in the representation of Mixed/Multiple, Chinese, and Black/African/Caribbean heritage. The data indicated a slight increase in the diversity of WCAs in more recent years, with the inclusion of individuals from Mixed/Multiple, Black/African/Caribbean, and Other ethnic backgrounds.

It should be acknowledged that collecting data on WCAs poses challenges, considering the complexity of class identity. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, some may not identify as being working class due to their academic roles. Understanding intersectionality in relation to WCAs is also difficult as while there is a wealth of studies examining the intersection of class and gender in academia, there same cannot be said for other intersections. For instance, when conducting a literature search for research on, 'class and ethnicity and academics', the available literature typically focuses on academics from ethnicity minorities and excluded a class analysis. Incidentally, there was also a significant gap in the available literature regarding the intersections of social class and disability, as well as how class intersected with institution and subject in relation to academics.

The oversight of these crucial intersections in academic research may result from various factors. A significant reason related to gaps in the literature on class and ethnicity could be due to representation as WCAs from ethnic minority backgrounds experience a multitude of barriers in engaging with academia and becoming an academic. Perhaps research on classed intersections has inadvertently suggested that class may have a lesser impact than ethnicity or disability on academic trajectories. This observation could hold significance because, as I will elaborate on in Chapter Four, the microaggressions encountered by my respondents from ethnic minorities, and those with a disability, appear to be less influenced by their class background and more closely related to their ethnicity or disability (See Bhopal, 2022; Rana et al., 2022; Rollock, 2019 on ethnicity; Lorenz, 2022; Brown & Leigh, 2018; Dolmage, 2017 regarding ableism). The lack of attention to these intersections, as well as subject and institution, may also stem from a broader lack of recognition within academic circles regarding the intersectional nature of classed experiences. These collective issues perpetuate the marginalisation of specific groups within the WCA population, reinforcing the need for further scholarship to address these gaps.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I revisit the encounters of WCAs employed on casualised contracts (previously discussed in Crew, 2020). Here, I further elaborate on this discussion to refer to obstacles in gaining research funding when on a fixed-term contract, as my respondents reported this as a significant area of inequality.

## Academic Precarity

In 2021/2022, 62,730 staff were employed by HE providers on atypical contracts. These types of contracts meet one or more of the following criteria:

- for less than four consecutive weeks;
- for one-off or short-term tasks and;
- involve a high degree of flexibility (Higher Education Statistical Agency, 2023).

The total full time equivalent (FTE) value of atypical staff in 2021/2022 was 5,595 (Higher Education Statistical Agency, 2023) although it is particularly difficult to calculate the exact number of casualised workers in universities as individual situations differ across departments and institutions, and reliable information about research and teaching contracts can be difficult to access and. higher education statistical agency (HESA) data is also inconsistent as they do not collect information on the length or type of contracts, or on the use of hourly paid staff. It only collects data on the balance of fixed-term contracts, as against open-ended contracts, and on the use of 'atypical' contracts (Crew, 2020, p. 46). Courtois and O'Keefe (2019) reported challenges in engaging with casual university employees, possibly due to their reluctance to discuss their experiences. In alignment with this, the University and College Union (UCU) (2020) found that 17% of those on precarious contracts faced difficulties affording food, while others encountered challenges in keeping up with rent/mortgage payments (34%) and utility bills (36%).

In all, 45% (n. 110) of my respondents were on precarious contracts, and of those, 17% (n. 18) had been regular users of foodbanks and 10% (n.11) had been on the verge of homelessness. Jeremy, a postdoctoral researcher in Geography at a traditional institution, said that his continuous struggles with precarious employment, had left him '*contemplating leaving academia*'.[5] Respondents who experienced precarity, highlighted a number of intersecting issues, summarised in this quotation from Talia, a Research Assistant in Nursing at a traditional institution:

> *My contract currently ends on the fifth of September. And so, for the past, I'd say two or three weeks, I've been searching for maybe like three or four hours a day for new jobs. And that definitely of demotivates you for the job that you're working on now. Because you're not giving it your all, because in the back of your head, you're constantly worrying like, okay, is there more funding coming up, and you're putting energy and effort into different job applications. For you know, hopefully one contract, another 12, one contract, only to be worried again, and under a couple of months' time.*

[5]It is vital to collate the experiences of those academics who have left or are about to leave academia to see what support they need from the academy.

This quote provides insight into the challenges and anxieties faced by individuals on fixed-term contracts within academia. The speaker describes the unsettling experience of knowing that their current contract is ending soon and the subsequent pressure to secure a new job. Jeremy, a postdoctoral researcher in Geography at a traditional institution, alongside other WCAs, described the recurring pattern of securing a contract, only to face uncertainty on what to do next once the contract ended. The cyclical nature of academia perpetuates these feelings of instability and insecurity.

These structural barriers also meant that WCAs on precarious contracts found it difficult to gain research funding. My respondents on precarious contracts, mirroring Soria (2016), rarely accessed professional development, which then hindered them in crafting competitive research proposals.

> *I need to develop to have a chance at a permanent role, but there are no opportunities*. [Talia, a Research Assistant in Nursing at a traditional institution]

> *Catch 22 – I can't get research funding as my institution won't support me. I can't get a permanent job without a better profile, I can't work unpaid as I'm poor if I don't work, but I can't find work without more opportunities*. [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution]

Respondents on precarious contracts talked of how limited access to institutional support, including research development programmes hindered their ability to navigate the intricate grant application processes. Without this critical support, WCAs struggled to establish a track record of successfully funded projects. Respondents also reported that their heavy teaching loads and administrative responsibilities, which often accompanied precarious contracts, had left them with limited time and resources to develop robust research proposals. Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, and other respondents on precarious contracts, reported that the absence of job security in his role may have reduced their competitiveness in grant applications as he suggested funding agencies were '*seeking more stable project leads*'. Addressing these issues will necessitate institutions and funding agencies to acknowledge the unique hurdles faced by WCAs on precarious contracts and to implement policies to promote their inclusion within the academic research community.

Among my own respondents on precarious contracts, it was WCA women and WCAs with a disability who were more likely to report difficulties in accessing research funding to pursue their research projects. My data is supported somewhat by statistics from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (2023), although their statistical data does not refer to social class. In the 2020–2021 financial year, UKRI reported funding distribution data. In 2020–2021, White males received 57% of principal investigator awards, compared with 24% that were awarded to White females. The next largest difference by gender was for the Asian ethnic group with Asian males receiving 6% of principal investigator

awards, while only 1% were awarded to Asian females. Proportions from the Black, Mixed, and other ethnic groups were similar in terms of the gender of principal investigators. For co-investigators, the highest proportion of awardees in 2020–2021 was also among White males, at 49% compared with 25% that were awarded to White females. The next largest proportion of awards went to Asian males at 6%. Females from the Black and Mixed ethnic groups received 1% of co-investigator awards each. Burns et al. (2019) proposed two potential explanations for gendered (and potentially ethnic) differences in funding application success: either women's applications were inferior or bias against women contributed to the gap. In terms of gender, Burns et al. (2019) emphasised that there is no compelling evidence supporting the notion that male and female researchers are not equally capable. I too did not find any supporting evidence for that, but this was not the remit of my research. Research by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) in 2023a found that while award rates by number of grants were similar for men and women, women consistently applied for smaller grants. Alongside this, research has found that ethnic minority researchers tend to face funding biases (EPSRC 2023b), while those with disabilities often struggle with inaccessible systems (Gladstone et al., 2022).

Gender bias in funding awards is a multifaceted issue influenced by interconnected factors. Speaking with my female WCAs on casualised contracts and most referred to an example of an incident where they experienced unconscious bias relating to grant proposals.

> *I believe in the strength of my ideas, but I've struggled with funding applications. I can't be sure but, even though it was well thought through and composed… a proposal I submitted was criticised for its content. But I had modelled it on one submitted by my male supervisor and he was awarded the funding. So, it's disheartening to think that unconscious bias might influence the evaluation process*. [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution]

Margaret reported perceiving that her ideas were not being judged fairly, suspecting bias or discrimination in the grant evaluation process. This was despite her observing, and attempting to replicate the approach of her male supervisor who shared his funded proposal with her. This is similar to research by Morgan et al. (2018) who argued that gender bias persists within research grant peer-review processes, reflecting the historical and systemic gender disparities present in academic institutions and beyond. Respondents were silent on class/ethnicity/disability funding gaps as such further investigation of these complex dynamics is crucial.