

Chapter 3

Classism

Keywords: Classism; stereotypes; derogatory comments; microaggressions; minimisation; imposter syndrome; fitting in; isolation; poor health

Overview

Social class forms a hierarchical structure, that on an institutional level can be a classist system of domination and privilege, which inherently advantages some at the expense of others. Classism refers to the systemic prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion directed towards people with working-class heritage. It involves both conscious and unconscious behaviours that communicate negative judgements about the capabilities of working-class people (Lott, 2002). Notably, two-thirds of respondents (n. 162) identified various manifestations of deeply embedded classism within their academic experiences. This finding is particularly significant given the prevailing tendency to attribute the challenges faced by WCAs to their personal shortcomings rather than systemic classism. Chapter Three delves into the four manifestations of classism that my respondents commonly encountered within higher education (see Fig. 1).

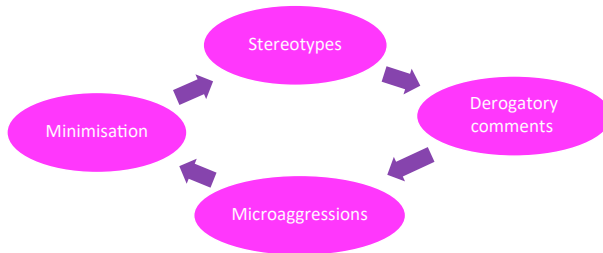


Fig. 1. Four Manifestations of Classism Experienced by Working-Class Academics.

The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity: A Class Apart, 33–49



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Stereotypes

Most respondents who cited classism as being part of their everyday experiences, encountered stereotypes about their identity. Disgust has played a central role in structuring stereotypes of working-class people. As George Orwell explains in *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

the...reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing... cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal...is summed up in four frightful words...which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: 'The lower classes smell'. (p. 74)

Lawler (2005) also referred to the feeling of disgust that the middle classes have towards the working classes. The former are presented as educated, well-mannered, and clean, while the working classes have historically been portrayed as mad, bad, and dangerous to know. Orwell offers another observation of the working class in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1958) which is particularly telling in the case of WCAs:

[Its] taken for granted that a working class person...is a figure of fun, except at odd moments when he shows signs of being too prosperous, whereupon he ceases to be a figure of fun and becomes a demon. (p. 8)

So not only are working-class people unfairly labelled as culturally inferior, but a 'prosperous' working-class person is perceived as a disruptive force, one that challenges the established social order.

Pathologising and entertaining fantastical notions about the working classes is often considered to be socially acceptable (Walkerdine, 2023). In popular culture, they have often been stereotyped as 'chavs', a term that portrays them as 'backward and worthless' (McDowell, 2006, p. 839) and as lacking ambition, possessing poor social skills, and exhibiting tasteless consumption habits (Adams & Raisborough, 2011, p. 83). Research by Kallschmidt and Eaton (2019) found that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face stigmatisation in the workplace. This is also true for WCAs, who, despite their advanced credentials, frequently encounter biased stereotypes that portray them as uneducated and unsophisticated. For instance, my respondents perceived that their academic peers assumed they were less intelligent due to their working-class heritage.

A typical moment was after giving a seminar with a friend about this study we were doing, my friend was asked questions about our research framework while I was 'bantered' with by the same posh people about football. [Riley, a Lecturer in Education at a traditional institution]

It's taken me a good few years of working life to figure out why when middle class people met me...the very first question they would ask me is 'how is your football team doing'. The assumption was clear, I was working class and that would be the only point of reference. [Frankie, a Student Support Officer at a Russell Group institution]

Despite my academic achievements, I feel my working class accent and heritage reduces me to a simplistic caricature of stupidity. [Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution]

These were not outlier views as most WCAs I spoke to referred to hearing negative or stereotypical views about working-class people. This is part of a wider tendency for academia to perpetuate unquestioned stereotypes and biases related to working-class people, alongside promoting the contrary notion of meritocracy and equal opportunity. Eddie's experience highlighted the differential treatment he and his colleague received after a seminar, implying that some 'typical' academics may resort to casual topics like sports when interacting with perceived WCAs, potentially dismissing their professional expertise. Frankie's statement, who also referred to being asked about football, illustrated how class-based assumptions can lead to narrow and inaccurate characterisations of individuals. In my interview with Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, his frustration and disappointment were evident that despite his evident success in academia, he still experiences prejudiced perceptions due to his class heritage. Collectively, these quotations illuminated the enduring nature of class-based stereotypes, demonstrating their resilience. The quotations also highlight the necessity of acknowledging the multifaceted nature of individuals' identities beyond surface-level indicators such as sports preferences.

Research by Warnock (2016) referred to incidences of WCAs being assumed by students to be janitorial or food service staff rather than academics. Among my own respondents, only a small number (n. 3) at elite institutions had experienced this, and it was their academic colleagues, not their students, who misclassified them:

One academic, whose department I had just joined, said loudly to another – isn't there a service lift – I was the only other person in the lift so obviously addressed at me. [Peter, a Lecturer in History at an Elite institution]

Peter's experience reflects how subtle remarks can make a WCA feel out of place or inferior. It also points to the scepticism that some WCAs may face regarding their qualifications and/or suitability for academic roles. These prejudicial attitudes serve to uphold class boundaries within academia and deny working-class scholars' full acceptance into elite professional circles.

Respondents also faced persistent stereotypes that undermined their perceived competence and merit. In all, 9% (n. 22) recounted instances of work evaluations

that disregarded their scholarly contributions and consequently impeded their career advancement and recognition.

My performance development review was horrible. There was no acknowledgement of the work I had put into my new modules, or my research. In fact, I was relentlessly critiqued. This was despite my research being cited extensively and the external examiner complimenting my new module. [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution]

My Head of School wouldn't put my name forward for either a promotion or for a university teaching award. She said I had to publish much more. But when my new Head started, they were surprised I had I not gone for promotion. I couldn't exactly say it was because of my previous Head. [Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an Elite institution]

These interview extracts go some way to support Lubrano's (2005) view that, 'if you are working class and an academic, you'll never receive the credit that you should' (p. 168). As mentioned earlier, Margaret's experiences highlighted a glaring disparity between her dedicated efforts and the recognition she received. This apparent discrepancy was further amplified by the contrast between the external acclaim for her research and the persistent criticism she faced within her institution, raising concerns about potential biases influencing the evaluation of her academic contributions. This lack of support and transparent communication left Alan feeling undervalued and potentially hindered his career progression. In both cases, these discrepancies highlight the need for fair evaluation criteria, as well as effective support from academic leadership within institutions.

Derogatory Comments

Reay (1997) referenced discourses that reinforced her working-class inferiority but celebrated middle-class superiority, leaving her feeling 'lesser than'. In my previous work, Crew (2020), I identified various instances where respondents expressed discomfort regarding aspects of their 'presentation'. I elaborate further by providing additional examples of derogatory comments that respondents reported, particularly in relation to accent.

Food

The refined taste often associated with the consumption patterns of the elite and middle classes served as a backdrop to the perceptions my respondents held regarding the strategic use of food choices by their academic colleagues to reinforce the existing class hierarchy. Ryan, a Research Associate in Palliative Care at a traditional institution, shared an experience of being '*made fun of for drinking*

granulated coffee and drinking Stella. This underscored how seemingly trivial choices, such as beverage preferences, can serve as markers within a hierarchical structure. Ruby, a Research Associate at a Russell Group institution, recalled an incident during a dinner with colleagues where her choice of steak and chips was met with raised eyebrows, as if it were an unrefined or ‘common’ selection, in stark contrast to their more restrained choice of a salad. This narrative highlights the loaded nature of food choices, laden with social meaning and judgement (Bourdieu, 1984). Amber, a Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution, conscious of her dietary restrictions due to irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), noted her manager’s tendency to disparage her ‘simple lunch’. She suggested that a chicken and avocado sandwich from Pret a Manger might have been met with less disapproval. This aligned with Smith Maguire (2016) observation that WCA preferences are often dismissed as being ‘basic’ by privileged colleagues, while foods from more middle-class establishments like Pret a Manger are elevated to a higher status, reinforcing the cultural capital and perceived ‘superior’ tastes of privileged academics.

Humour

My respondents frequently referred to their sense of humour as being a social barrier within academia. Eleanor, a Gender Studies Researcher at a traditional institution, noted she could immediately relax around others from similar class backgrounds, as they engaged in mutually enjoyable forms of ‘*taking the piss*’ (Crew, 2020). These responses mirror studies indicating that sense of humour often corresponds with social positioning and class habitus (Kuipers, 2010). Comedy frequently functions as a tool to uphold the boundaries of cultural and class identity (Friedman, 2014). Elite forms of humour tend to be based on tacit social rules so there are frequently greater limits on subjects considered appropriate for comedic treatment. Working-class humour tends to incorporate irony, and irreverence, allowing those from similar backgrounds to bond through mutually understood references considered fair game for mockery. However, working-class styles of humour such as playful teasing are often marginalised due to a lack of comprehension. Countering this requires openness to diverse modes of humour and avoiding universalising classed notions of ‘appropriate’ humour.

Accent

An often-cited indicator of class is accent (Levon et al., 2019) although having a regional accent doesn’t necessarily denote a working-class background. My interview data was filled with numerous examples of how accent was an immediate marker of class distinction, with 68% (n. 167) of my WCA respondents reporting at least one instance of accent bias. As Bourdieu (1977) notes, one’s language, including accent, reflects our social positioning, with working-class speech often framed as inferior, when compared to elite/middle-class language. Respondents described feeling judged in a negative manner due to their regional

accents. Gracie, Lecturer in Criminal Justice, and Policing,¹ who felt she had a pronounced Midlands accent, talked about times when she had been asked to ‘*speak properly*’. Lyla, a Research Fellow in Maritime Safety at a post-1992 institution, and Olive, a Lecturer in Organisational Psychology at a traditional institution, shared their experiences of being openly ridiculed for their speech patterns in academic environments. Both expressed the view that they had been stigmatised as being ‘common’. Gracie, Lyla, and Olive’s experiences highlight the bias against accented speech, which often results in assumptions about intelligence (see previous research by Sharma et al., 2019).

My respondents with regional accents faced scepticism about their qualifications. Michelle, a Lecturer in Health Psychology at a Russell Group institution, described how an employment recruiter’s tone shifted upon hearing her Northern accent:

I had some discussions over email with a senior civil servant recruiting for a job, everything over email was nice and pleasant, we arranged a phone call to discuss further and as soon as I opened my mouth her tone noticeably changed – i.e., as soon as she heard my Northern accent – she was Southern and well spoken.

This statement by Michelle highlighted a potential instance of accent-based discrimination in a professional context. Accent-based discrimination can be a form of linguistic bias, where judgements about an individual’s abilities, or suitability for a role are made based on the way they speak (Levon et al., 2021). While Adam, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at a Russell Group institution, felt comments about his accent were relatively insignificant, most respondents reported feeling downhearted with the frequent mocking and mimicry they experienced. Ryan, a Research Associate in Palliative Care at a traditional institution² recalled that a departmental head ‘joked’ that ‘*she’d be ashamed if her grandkids*’ spoke with Ryan’s accent. Kristen, a Lecturer in Healthcare Management at a Russell Group institution described being on a ‘Teams’ meeting with her boss, alongside:

really senior doctors, responsible officers and medical directors, people at that level, and we were having a projects advisory group meeting. So when we first you know, first come on saying hello to people on teams, somebody said Scouser [referring to Kristen being from Liverpool] hide your handbag.

The experience recounted by Kristen is an example of accent-based discrimination within academic and professional settings, while Ryan’s encounter with the departmental head, is a form of derogatory humour that also targets individuals based on their regional accents. The more positive view that Adam provided is

¹This respondent did not list their institution.

²A Research Associate in Palliative Care at a traditional institution.

contrasted with the vast majority of respondents who reported frequent mocking and mimicry. Adam's view, while a singular example, does highlight though, that there is a subjective nature to such experiences. Nevertheless, the persistent negative commentary about working-class speech patterns exerted a detrimental influence on my respondents, reinforcing the perception that certain accents were 'inferior' or less desirable, thereby potentially hindering their career advancement.

Microaggressions

Almost half (47% n. 115) of my respondents reported experiencing frequent microaggressions. A term coined by Pierce (1970), microaggressions, are defined as subtle forms of structural oppression that manifest as verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities (whether intentional or unintentional), that communicate derogatory, or negative slights (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Bourdieu (2007) described how some individuals appear to have reconciled with the view that this soft or symbolic violence was 'their destiny' (Ganuza et al., 2020, p. 455). The type of microaggressions experienced by my WCA respondents included surprise at or questioning of credentials/qualifications, having their ideas overlooked in meetings, and/or being denied advancement opportunities available to privileged peers. Haney (2016) described how 40% of his respondents had heard disparaging comments about working-class people and 63% held the belief that the university was/is a hostile place for those from working-class backgrounds (p. 91). Microaggressions are often described as being relatively minor by respondents, but respondents such as, Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution, described these experiences as being like a *'death by a thousand cuts'* as the continual questioning that she and others, experienced, felt as if it was slowly depleting any sense of belonging they had. Theo, a Politics research fellow with classed/ethnic minority heritage, recounted episodes where he felt his actions and speech had been policed. These microaggressions, often experienced by ethnic minority respondents like Theo, highlighted the subtle ways in which ethnic minority WCAs were subjected to scrutiny and surveillance, acting as persistent reminders of their marginalised position (Bhopal, 2022; Hill Collins, 1986).

In my previous work, (Crew, 2020), I detailed how my interviewees regularly faced pointed remarks about their working-class backgrounds. As Jack, a Teaching Associate in Mathematics at an elite institution recounted, he was at a formal dinner, and a fellow academic remarked, *'I bet this is the first time someone like you has been here'*. While Jack commented that this comment was said lightly, such remarks imply that WCAs don't belong in such settings. Another example of a microaggression is given by Luke, a Social History Professor at a traditional institution, who discussed attending an interview for a position at an elite university. During the interview, he was questioned about whether someone from his background could 'fit in' at such an institution (Crew, 2020). This crass form of questioning reiterated the class-based distinctions between him and his colleagues and served to reinforce notions that university spaces are the 'natural' province of the elite/middle classes (Gorski, 2012). These experiences also perpetuate underlying views that the working class must adapt to dominant cultural norms

rather than the need for academia to embrace and welcome diversity. Research by Lauren Rivera (2015) goes somewhat in explaining what Luke experienced at his interview. Her study examined recruitment practices in high-paying entry-level positions in the US, such as those in top-tier investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms. Her findings revealed that hiring decisions often hinge on the concept of ‘fit’ or, as Riveria described it, ‘cultural matching’. This research emphasised the systemic nature of the issues Luke encountered, illuminating the broader context of class-based disparities within academia and the professional world.

The intersection of class and ethnicity produced further, quite direct instances of microaggressions. Respondents such as Theo, a Black Politics Research Fellow,³ recounted incidents when colleagues have implied that his promotion was solely attributed to his ethnicity, disregarding his evident academic qualifications (Crew, 2020). Alongside this, four respondents, including one interviewee and three survey participants, identified as having Gypsy Roma Traveller heritage.⁴ All but one respondent recalled instances of offensive remarks from both staff members and students concerning Gypsy Roma Travellers. Research conducted by Hurst (2010) revealed that WCAs may face inquiries about their credentials and bear the burden of assumptions that their PhDs were obtained through ‘diversity scholarships’. Two of my WCA respondents with Gypsy Roma Traveller heritage referred to having to explain to their colleagues that their academic positions were not secured through such programmes. This assumption is particularly perplexing considering that the remarks originated from privileged academic peers, who, as established, enjoy various academic privileges themselves. Academics who intersected both working class and ethnic minority identities appeared to be subjected to a double burden of microaggressions, experiencing both questioning of their qualifications and promotions due to perceived worthiness, and experiencing a higher frequency of such instances compared to their White working-class counterparts. I’ll expand on this in Chapter Four.

My data also found that WCAs frequently faced microinvalidations, i.e. subtle comments and behaviours that negate or nullify their experiences of class bias (Sue et al., 2007). These invalidations can be deeply damaging as they deny people’s lived reality. A common example from my data was where respondents described hearing their privileged colleagues dismissing examples of classism, or

³Respondent didn’t give details of his institution.

⁴This represented a substantial number of respondents with Gypsy Traveller heritage, particularly noteworthy given the barriers they encounter in accessing higher education (HE) [source: https://www.cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/KINGWIDE_28494_FINAL.pdf]. The Gypsy Traveller community, as a cohort, has not received extensive attention concerning HE, potentially leading to gaps in academia’s understanding of their full representation in HE. Given my prior research experience with Roma and Gypsy Travellers, and my established networks within the community, it’s possible that my survey on WCAs reached a more comprehensive representation within this particular community.

flippantly declaring *'we are all middle class now'*. Such throwaway remarks serve to silence working-class perspectives by framing class identity and examples of discrimination as subjective. For instance, when reporting specific microaggressions, Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution, was told she must have *'read too much into'* an incident. While Leah, a Sociologist who has worked in various institutions, recalled how, at times, academic friends had invalidated her very real experiences by dismissing her concerns as paranoia. She described the challenge of addressing microinvalidations as *'it's difficult to confront feelings of vague uneasiness'*. Even when raising issues formally, Theo and other respondents found that perpetrators were frequently absolved. Theo recounted being told: *'you know she was joking'* (Crew, 2020, p. 86). Excusing these subtle indignities as mere unintentional actions minimises the cumulative harm caused by these persistent experiences (Fine et al., 2018). These narratives represent *'the symbolic violence behind...who (is allowed to) feel and what they are allowed to feel'* (Hey, 2011, p. 216). Such frequent slights can both isolate WCAs and wear down their confidence, once again signalling they will never fully belong.

Despite facing repeated slights and microaggressions, WCAs are often expected to manage their emotions and suppress their natural feelings of anger or frustration. This expectation stems from the unwritten rules of conduct prevalent in elite academic circles, which emphasise composure, restraint, and a detached demeanour. As Warnock (2016) observed, this expectation places an additional burden on WCAs, who must navigate the academic landscape while also conforming to these unspoken norms of emotional regulation. The experiences of respondents like Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution, and Tomos, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at a post-1992 institution, exemplify this pressure to maintain emotional restraint. Both individuals described feeling confined by the elite/middle-class norms that permeate academia, which often demand that academics remain *'civil'* even in the face of rude behaviour or insults. This expectation, they felt, constrained their ability to express their authentic selves and added another layer of complexity to their already demanding professional lives. The enforcement of emotional restraint on WCAs can have detrimental consequences. By suppressing their natural reactions to negative experiences, WCAs may internalise feelings of anger, frustration, or even humiliation, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and a sense of alienation from their academic communities.

Minimisation

WCAs also reported examples of classist attitudes that devalued their scholarship, especially when their research addressed issues of inequality. My WCAs such as Peter, a History Lecturer at an Elite institution, discovered that openly discussing class backgrounds seemed to trigger defensiveness among his more advantaged colleagues. As Arner (2017) notes, *'few are comfortable with their own privilege being highlighted'* (p. 79). Classism can also manifest through a perception that those from disadvantaged backgrounds lack academic capabilities (Gorski, 2012;

Lott, 2002) (hence why the idea of a WCA is so contentious). While some WCAs incorporated a class-based perspective into their scholarship, there was a diversity among the WCAs who participated in my research, and not all incorporated class as a component of their research. Several respondents mentioned the assumptions they encountered about their research, namely that, as they were WCAs, they *only* specialised in subjects associated with class:

I conduct research in the broad area of sports, but due to my background and accent, its assumed that I conduct research on football hooliganism!. [Eddie, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]

Colleagues expect me to do community based research. These presumptions have meant that I've not been put forward for departmental funding as they don't provide for community based research. [Tomos, a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at a post-1992 institution]

These dismissive attitudes underestimate the intellectual rigour of WCAs, revealing a bias rooted in class-based stereotypes. This highlighted the challenges WCAs face in dispelling preconceived notions about them based on their social class.

Reay (1997) observed that the lived experience of inequality held by WCAs is frequently undervalued and subjected to substantial criticism by more privileged academics. Nearly one in five (19.5%, n. 47) of my respondents reported encountering instances where their research on social class was not accorded due respect:

I wanted the role of Director of Research, but despite having a strong research and funding record, my research on social class was perceived as being emotionally charged, and I was told I needed more experience. [Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution]

I had my yearly review with my line manager [a female, very middle class professor]. Halfway through, without it being the topic of discussion, she dismissed class as a zombie category, berated me about a small research project I produced about class and then preceded to tell me I needed to have more academic outputs if I wanted to be taken seriously. [Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution]

Several respondents also believed that while they faced critique whenever they produced research on social class, peers from prestigious backgrounds who also conducted research on inequalities and marginalised perspectives, which included class, did not appear to encounter the same level of scrutiny for their work. This

perception may stem from the presumed neutrality often ascribed to academics from privileged backgrounds, where elite knowledge is equated with objectivity and academic excellence. Conversely, as many of my respondents discovered, their scholarship was more likely to be characterised as a form of advocacy rather than academic scholarship. Dominic's experience raised questions about the fairness of the evaluation process, as despite his strong publication and funding record, he felt there was a hidden bias against him based on his class heritage. Flynn's observation of his yearly review raised questions about the recognition of research related to class issues in academic institutions. Both accounts indicated potential bias or at least some insensitivity towards research about social class, which can adversely affect further research opportunities, ultimately undermining inclusivity within academic institutions.

As an aside, Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution commented that:

The academy will never accept people like me, like you. If you are working class and an academic, you'll never receive the credit you should. If you publish in a field, you won't be recognised as the leading person, even if your work, your research, your concepts have changed that field. You will always be secondary to a middle-class academic.

Dominic articulated a profound sense of disillusionment within academia, particularly regarding the acknowledgement and opportunities available to him as a WCAs. His opinion was reiterated by other respondents.

The Impacts of Classism

In addition to the specific incidents of stereotyping discrimination and exclusion highlighted previously, my respondents also referred to various psychological and emotional impacts resulting from their cumulative experiences with classism in academia. Profound feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and imposter syndrome alongside isolation, loneliness and the perennial feeling of being a 'fish out of water' were typical for my respondents. Other respondents referred to their deteriorating mental health, alongside strained family relationships, and in some cases, periods of grief over 'shedding' their working-class identity. However, there was a glimmer of positivity as respondents also referred to their solidarity with other WCAs.

Imposter Syndrome

My research aligned with Hurst (2010) and Lubrano (2005) and found that WCAs experienced both anxiety and imposter feelings. Imposter syndrome is estimated to affect around 70% of high achievers (Buckland, 2017), although Breeze (2019) theorises it as a 'public feeling' disproportionately situated among marginalised

groups. I could see evidence of this in my interviews as respondents from all types of institutions expressed concerns about inevitably being ‘found out’ and would talk of having a lack of confidence:

I had an idea for our department, but I have no self-confidence so kept it to myself. The imposter syndrome sometimes comes. In case someone figures out that we’re not meant to be here. [Ivy, a Research Fellow Health Services at a traditional institution]

Ivy’s hesitation to share ideas further exemplifies the self-doubt and inadequacy WCAs feel in academic spaces. Yet, her narrative suggests that imposterism is not a constant state but rather an intermittent struggle, exemplified by her fear of being exposed as an imposter amidst the academic elite. Listening to many of my female WCA respondents I was reminded of an excerpt from Reay’s (2018) book *Miseducation: Inequality, Education, and the Working Classes* where she said that ‘there is a terror of getting it wrong. And the chances of getting it wrong intellectually are enormous for working class girls’. Amelia, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, revealed a deep sense of anxiety and insecurity with regards to her work. Whereas other female WCAs such as Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution reported that ‘no matter how well people tell me I’m doing, I always feel I can and should be doing better’. Margaret expressed a perpetual feeling of inadequacy. Driven by a desire to impress both students and peers, she and others would often engage in excessive preparation, leading to debilitating stress and an unsustainable workload. Academic spaces can impose a persistent, internalised belief that specific individuals are undeserving of their professional success and status. These respondents talked of feeling like pretenders who had somehow ‘slipped through the cracks’ into academic environments not meant for them. Reay (2021) referred to her working-class respondents frequently talking about ‘never being good enough’, which she felt was linked to a perception that more elite students were both more intelligent and socially accomplished (p. 58). My respondents felt imposter syndrome due to cultural differences in diet or accent etc clashed with unspoken academic norms, putting pressure on them to assimilate.

I gathered limited data on male WCAs who reported experiences of imposterism, as the topic wasn’t extensively discussed. When it did surface, their narratives centred on distinctions between themselves and academics from elite social classes and the privileges these academics had – or ‘*unearned advantages*’ in the words of Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an Elite institution. Male WCAs were candid about their masculine privilege, particularly if they could successfully ‘pass’ as elite or middle class. Notably, a subset of participants (n. 5) touched upon their interactions with female academics from affluent backgrounds. The encounters described by Lucas, a Senior Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, mirrored the experiences of other male respondents addressing this issue. Lucas acknowledged his gender-based advantages and discussed advocating for

his female colleagues. He stated that he made efforts to be an ally, promoting female colleagues for keynotes, panels, and publication opportunities, but he observed that female academics from advantaged backgrounds were often content to '*address their gender related disadvantages but would remain silent on their class privilege*'. This statement, echoed by four other male WCAs served as a poignant reminder of the intersectionality of privilege, illuminating that elite or middle-class women may not always recognise or be willing to acknowledge the privilege they have due to their class background. This insight aligns with Meadhbh Murray et al. (2023) research, who drew upon Sara Ahmed's (2012) 'diversity work'. They argued that the imposter feelings experienced by marginalised academics are often a response to and reinforced by the exclusionary atmosphere prevalent in universities (p. 749).

My research revealed a distinction between the experiences of respondents at elite institutions and those at post-1992 universities, where respondents at the latter institutions were less likely to mention experiencing imposterism. This difference may be attributed to the increased diversity of staff and student bodies at post-1992 institutions, including a higher proportion of WCAs. This nuance suggests that while imposter syndrome may be a shared experience, its intensity or visibility could vary based on the perceived status of the academic institution. The lower frequency of references to imposter syndrome at post-1992 universities could also be influenced by different institutional cultures, or perhaps even there being a more supportive atmosphere that can mitigate the intensity of imposter feelings, as respondents were more likely to mention informal peer support structures. Conversely, the prominence of imposter syndrome in elite institutions may be attributed to there being a more competitive environment. This observation warrants further exploration into the factors contributing to imposter syndrome in different academic settings.

Not Fitting In

Skeggs (1997) posed the thought provoking question, 'what happens when we become academics?' (p. 33). My respondents' narratives were permeated by discourses of 'not fitting in', with some referencing Bourdieusian social theory, such as the metaphor of feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This feeling was often exacerbated in elite university settings, where there was a perception that one's values diverged from the prevailing majority. My female WCA respondents specifically reported experiencing anxiety in these prestigious university settings, whether as employees or invited speakers. This anxiety appeared to stem from a variety of factors, including feeling like an outsider and/or having a lack of confidence. Amelia, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, described her decision to decline a position at an Oxbridge institution, a role she felt she would have excelled in. However, she opted against it, stating, '*working there would make me ill. I'd never feel as if I belonged in such a place. I wouldn't feel good enough*'. This finding aligned with research by Binns (2019), where just under 80% of her respondents expressed

a preference for remaining at their current institution, even though they were suitably qualified to apply for academic positions at Elite and Russell Group universities. Amelia's quotation exemplified the extreme anxiety associated with working at an elite university, while others described a general sense of feeling as if they would not fit into academia. Such a feeling is not exclusive to WCAs, but it can be particularly pronounced for these academics. Some respondents attributed this to their lack of private schooling or not having attended at prestigious universities, which they believed hindered their progress in academia. Harper, a PhD Candidate in Sociolinguistics at a Russell Group institution, echoed these sentiments: *'I have admittedly compared myself to other academics who have studied in private schools or had wealthy parents'*. Harper, and others would talk of comparing their own background in comparison to that of their colleagues, which often left them feeling inadequate as a result. Comparing their own working-class background to the more privileged backgrounds of their colleagues is inherently negative as their social class is a disadvantage in academia. While Hunter's comparison to others may be indicative of imposter syndrome, respondents would continually reference a desire to fit in.

Some ethnic minority WCAs referred to aspects of their culture as impacting on how they felt they 'fit' within academia. Three female ethnic minority WCAs referred to avoiding displaying cultural elements such as braids, headwraps, or saris, as they perceived that they faced additional scrutiny if they wore colourful, cultural attire – experiences which align with findings by Rollock (2019). Those respondents who described themselves as 'passing' within academia, reported having to constantly navigate a tightrope, balancing their professional aspirations with a desire to maintain their cultural authenticity. This was exhausting, requiring them to constantly adapt and conform to external expectations rather than being embraced for their unique identities. The privilege of blending into academic spaces, as Showunmi and Maylor (2013) point out, is one that whiteness affords. For ethnic minority WCAs, this privilege is often denied, forcing them to navigate a more challenging and exclusionary environment. They must not only contend with the classed barriers but also the racialised expectations that demand assimilation into white cultural norms. The scholarship of Kalwant Bhopal (see reference list) is vital here in highlighting the urgent need for institutions to address these systemic issues and create more inclusive and equitable spaces for all, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

Isolation

Isolation refers to a state of being physically or emotionally separated from others – something that runs contrary to the concept of academic collegiality (Churchman, 2002). Isolation can be voluntary or involuntary, temporary or chronic, and can occur due to social characteristics, geographical distance or if one has mental health issues. All of the working-class students Reay (2021) interviewed from 'Southern University' mentioned experiencing some degree of isolation. Despite all the positive aspects of being an academic (to be discussed in Chapter Six) a slight majority (51%, n. 125) of my respondents referred to being

isolated, with most saying this was due to a loss of connection to their family, friends, and working-class culture since entering academia. WCA respondents in Hurst's (2010) research described how they experienced disconnection from childhood friends, a sense of alienation from family members, and a perception of growing apart from their former selves. Like Lubrano (2005), my WCAs powerfully described how the transition into HE as being one that induced a huge sense of grief and bereavement, with some, such as Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care, at a Russell Group institution, describing it as '*losing a big part of me that I'll never get back*'. These respondents described there being a cultural separation from their tightknit working-class roots. Others lamented the need to 'shed' parts of themselves: '*my accent to my cultural references now seem redundant if I am going to keep navigating academia*' [Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a post-1992 institution]. These were complex emotions, as Ellie, a Reader in Health Sciences at a Russell Group institution, and other respondents had experienced a sense of grief over '*the impact on my working class identity*' [Rudra, a Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]. While acknowledging the progress they had achieved through upward mobility, for Rudra and others, it exacted an emotional toll, a mourning for discarded parts of self and '*cherished relationships*'.

My respondents also described how they resented the dominance of elitist academic norms which defined their working-class heritage as inferior. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, respondents feared revealing details about their family upbringing, or their current family situations which might invite judgement or awkwardness:

You bet I've hidden my cultural roots from other colleagues – what, let them know my mum works in a supermarket, my dad left us and that my sister was pregnant at 16? I would be judged. [Eddie, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]

My colleagues do not know me. I'm afraid they won't understand where I'm coming from if they knew about my family's struggles. They might judge me and make assumptions about my background and my capabilities. [Rudra, a Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution]

Both reported that it was difficult to build authentic friendships within the academy as they could not openly discuss their working-class heritage. Eddie's comment highlighted the fear of judgement he felt from colleagues who might not understand his class experiences. This reflects the sense of vulnerability and potential stigma that WCAs may face. Rudra's quote encapsulates respondents have a fear of judgement and have a constant need to prove their worth in the face of societal biases.

On a much more positive note though, there was a sense of solidarity and unity throughout my interviews with WCAs as they would refer to 'us', when they shared their frustrations. Respondents, particularly those from post-1992 institutions would refer to having friendships among other WCAs which they

said served as a ‘*vital support system*’ [Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a post-1992 institution], a unique bond rooted in shared experiences. In all, 22% (n. 54) of respondents mentioned examples of support networks and advocacy for WCAs such as the Working Class Academics Conference, the Alliance of Working Class Academics, and various university-led networks and associations which provided support to WCAs. Respondents would often tell me that ‘we’ needed to build upon these existing support networks and class-focused conferences. Other respondents referred to a need for a dedicated peer support space⁵ as they felt such spaces could play a vital role in providing resources, mentorship, and a sense of belonging to WCAs. This was something reiterated by a majority of respondents (61%, n155).

Respondents also mentioned the various small conferences, with a central theme of ‘class’, that they had attended. They referred to the class solidarity and friendship that they experienced at these events and how it was overwhelming (in a good way) at times. Such events provided a platform for discussing class-related issues in academia but also fostered a sense of class solidarity:

Being among others with the same experiences, I can be me. [Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care, at a Russell Group institution]

Attending such conferences was empowering as my respondents could find validation in their experiences. Respondents attended these conferences even if they did not conduct research in this area as it meant that they had likeminded academics to ‘*reach out to*’ [Amelia, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution], and they ‘*didn’t feel like they were alone*’ [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution]. The unity and sense of belonging experienced by WCAs at these events helped to combat feelings of isolation.

Poor Health

Respondents like Florence, a Research Fellow at a post-1992 institution, and others, lamented that ‘*the constant need to downplay my background has made me feel quite distressed*’. Florence went on in more detail about how depressed this had left her. Sadly, she wasn’t the only one. Around 38% (n. 92) of my respondents described experiencing profound physical and mental health impacts stemming from the cumulative toll of concealing one’s class identity. This finding is a continuation from Crew (2020) where I revealed that female WCAs, were more likely than their male counterparts to report challenges related to their mental and physical health. Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution, who described how:

You have to put on a mask every time you step into that environment, and it takes a toll on your mental and emotional wellbeing.

⁵There are a few of WCAs like myself who are considering setting up something like this, so do feel free to contact me if you are interested so we can gauge what is needed.

Margaret's statement encapsulates the profound impact concealing aspects of themselves on their health. Those on precarious contracts were more likely to describe their poor health, with 72% (n.79) reporting symptoms such as chronic stress, insomnia, and physical ailments. A synthesis of research on the effects of academic precarity on academics revealed conditions such as stress and anxiety, as well as a lack of development opportunities (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Jeremy, a postdoctoral researcher in Geography at a traditional institution, explains the stark situation they face: '*You better hope no relative is seriously ill, or that you don't get ill or actually are disabled*' (Crew, 2020, p. 60). Deb, a Teaching Fellow in Health at a post-1992 institution, emphasised a cascading effect: the loss of institutional access between temporary contracts interrupted their research progress. This then complicated their ability to secure stable employment. This then created a ripple effect that took a toll on their overall health. All the while they looked for the next temporary contract. Chapter Four expands on these issues by including the intersection of disability.