Chapter 8

One's Place and the Right to Belong

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) in England and other parts of the United Kingdom (UK), traditionally and historically, has been dominated by privileged and powerful social groups. In recent decades, universities have opened their doors and encouraged participation by a diversity of learners including women, working class, minority ethnic groups and many others that might be deemed historically under-represented in HE. This movement came to be known as 'widening participation'. I consider myself to be a product of the widening participation movement having returned to learn in 1994 after a 10-year break in education. However, providing access to participate is only the first step. For many HE students from under-represented groups, like the working class, the journey through the academy, while earning their degree, can be fraught with profound and difficult experiences. This chapter charts my own journey into HE as a student, and back into HE as an academic, with some equally fraught and profound experiences.

Key words: autoethnography; widening participation; working class; habitus; imposterism; academia; social structures.

'*There is risk and truth to yourselves and the world before you' (Seamus Heaney)*[1]

How did I get here?

Bimrose and Barnes pose a question: 'Are individuals actually able to navigate their way effectively and "choose" their career biographies or do the social structures within which they make decisions constrain freedom to determine their own destiny'? (2011, p. 2). For a long time I presupposed that I would not go to university, that it was not a place for me; not because anybody had told me that, but because there were never any conversations about university, careers and professions amongst the working class people and the family that I grew up with. Therefore, my assumption was 'it is not for the likes of us'. Bowl notes this when she states 'working class people may not think they are eligible for opportunities to achieve because of their internalised assumptions that certain opportunities are "not for the likes of them"' (2003, p. 129). Another reason that further perpetuated the idea that university was not for the likes of us was that the working class, historically, had very little history or presence in higher education (HE). For a long time, HE had been dominated by middle/ upper class participation. 'Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class', according to Crozier, Reay and Clayton (cited in David, 2010, p. 74). We did not

[1] Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), my favourite Irish poet, made this comment as he addressed the graduating class of The University of North Carolina, 1996: '*…the true and durable path into and through experience involves being true to the actual givens of your lives. True to your own solitude, true to your own secret knowledge. Because oddly enough, it is that intimate, deeply personal knowledge that links us most vitally and keeps us most reliably connected to one another.'* (The Marginalian).

see people like us entering the doors of universities, unless it was via the back tradesman's door. Yates has discussed the factors that influence people's career paths and questions whether they are 'a product of their circumstances and to a degree, pre-destined by factors such as geography and social class' (2014, p. 25).

Given my early circumstances, the area that I grew up in, the failing school that I attended, and the values and practices of my family, I would have to agree that, to an extent, my path was pre-destined. Ryan and Sackrey might also agree as they assert that 'We do not get to choose a class to be born into – and since significant mobility is blocked to most people – our life experiences are importantly the outcome of a spin on the wheel of fortune' (1984, p. 3). Ryan and Sackrey also discuss the myth of social mobility and how it 'functions to make it appear as though one's position in life were a consequence of a fair game with all participants playing by the same rules, all with the same starting points – hence it is the individuals' efforts and talent that are determinative, not the class into which one is born' (1984, p. 2).

When my father arrived in England from Ireland in the 1960s looking for work, he was greeted by signs up in windows which said 'no Irish, no blacks, no dogs'; this was his starting point. He had just turned 16 and had left Ireland during what was the country's period of economic stagnation and emigration. He settled in East London, married, my brother and me arrived and my parents started a haulage business. As I was growing up in a traditionally working-class and culturally diverse community, which included an Irish migrant diaspora, I was well aware that we were all working-class – everyone was – we didn't know any different because we didn't see anyone different from us. Everyone worked, we possessed a strong work ethic and, growing up, I saw work as the route to freedom, to independence and having control over your own life. My father was the family role model and demonstrated to us that hard work meant not having to rely on anyone – including the state. He, most likely, inherited this mindset from his family – a long line of Irish farmers, some of whom survived the 'famine'[2]. 2 Both of my grandmothers were also incredibly hard-working women and given that this was in a period when women were yet to be deemed equal, they were also juggling child-rearing and the domestic chores. Thankfully, I inherited this ethos and grew up knowing that I need not be afraid of hard work.

[2] The 'famine' in Ireland was a period of great hunger and starvation while the country was under British rule. 'Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, which was the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Ireland was producing a surplus of food. However, between 1845 and 1852, more than 1.5 million Irish people starved to death, while massive quantities of food were being exported from their country to Britain. A half million people were evicted from their homes, often illegally and violently, during the potato blight. Another 1.5 million had no choice but to emigrate to foreign lands aboard rotting, overcrowded "coffin ships". The famine left a scar so deep within the Irish people, that it set in motion a war that would finally gain Ireland its independence from Britain in 1922' (Mulvihill, 2017).

The Irish farmers: my father, my grandparents and my great-grand-parents.

When I left school, the only expectation of me was to get a job; any job would do. As long as I was earning enough to keep myself, nobody minded what I did. Typical of most working-class families in this period of the 1980s and 1990s, education was not valued or held in high regard. Families had to work to keep themselves, and people of my background rarely had the privilege of staying on in education, even if they wanted to. Because of my lack of formal qualifications, I spent most of my young adult life bouncing from one meaningless job to another. That is, they were low-paid, unskilled positions that anybody could do. They did not feel like careers or vocations; they were not professions, or skilled work. Some jobs I really enjoyed, like delivery driver – driving a van around central London every day was a lot of fun. However, I knew that if I wanted a skilled profession, a career, I would need to return to education and acquire some qualifications. An additional reason for wanting a career was that I felt under-used and unfulfilled by the jobs that I was doing prior to going to university. I felt as though I was not fulfilling my potential. Reay reminds us that there are 'very many different ways of being working-class' (2017, p. 5), and this was certainly evident in the area that I grew up in. My parents ran their own business and this was our source of income; other families relied on other means, sometimes through illicit activities. Some families had very limited opportunities and were extremely poor.

Class is a social structure and social structures shape and socialise us into adult members of society. My working-class culture, values and practices socialised me into believing that education was not important – but working was. Bourdieu, the great French sociologist, asserted that some people will succeed in education, and some will not, and this is largely down to which social class they belong to (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu explained that, through no fault of their own, aspirations of the working-class culture do not include education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Therefore, coming from the working class can have implications on one's educational achievement. Reay (1997, p. 552) also asserted that 'working class identities are not associated with academic success'; quite possibly because working-class people tended to leave school and go to work. If they did not participate in HE it was out of the economic necessity to find a job. When Bourdieu said that working-class culture limited educational aspirations, he was not implying that excluding oneself from education is a deliberate decision on the part of somebody from the working class, but rather it

is a situation that is created and reproduced unconsciously and 'without any conscious concertation' (1984, p. 173). In addition, Bourdieu noted, the exclusion is 'internalised as a second nature' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56) and becomes what he called 'habitus'. As well as my working-class habitus, I lived in what the Higher Education Statistics Agency [3](HESA) (2021) calls a 'low participation neighbourhood'. 3 In fact, nobody that I knew when I was growing up went to university. The notable lack of visible role models further strengthened the notion that university was not for the likes of us. However, in a previous publication I claim that:

> Bourdieu's theory of habitus is compelling. He asserted that one's habitus is deeply engendered within individuals and that this creates a disposition below the level of consciousness which determines how we act or think …However, Bourdieu did not account for individual differences within the working class, and that some people may aspire to different goals. (Burnell, 2015, p.106).

Evidence from my previous research strongly implies that 'habitus is not as enduring as the theory suggests' (Burnell, 2015). As I approached my mid-twenties, I had an epiphanic moment and decided to enrol myself into college. Initially, I was aiming for a vocational qualification in sport and fitness; I was a sport and fitness enthusiast and had an idea that I could work at my local leisure centre. While on this course, a chance remark from the tutor about my academic ability led me to enquire about an Access to Higher Education course. This was to be the beginning of my journey into HE, and not via the tradesman's door. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) 'One of the great achievements of the English HE widening participation policy and strategies is that it has helped working-class students to overcome that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel that are rightly theirs' (cited in Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2010, p. 68). This was an opportunity for me to work hard, not in the traditional working-class sense of getting your hands dirty, but working in the academic arena to achieve and succeed educationally, and start to build a career – a profession. At this point I didn't have a plan, I just knew it was the right path to pursue.

Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984) is one book that has influenced my motivation to produce this one. *Strangers* is concerned with the issue of social class mobility and, in particular, what happens to people from the working class who choose academia as their path to a 'higher social station' (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984, p. 1). Strangers in Paradise was published in 1984 when I was 15 years old. I had already left school – a year before the legal leaving age. It was a sub-standard failing secondary comprehensive – what would now be called a 'sink school' (Reay, 2017). I was a bored, disruptive and disillusioned pupil who could not see the point of going to school. There were far more interesting things to spend my time on. Interestingly though, there was a university campus about 1.5 miles from where I lived; it was, until 1992, a polytechnic. However, I did not 'see' this building; I had no conceptualisation of what it was. I was aware of a building – bricks and cement – but had no understanding of what it contained, that it was an institution of education, that people went there to obtain degrees; I had no understanding of what a degree was. This was because, as a value, education was not part of my habitus. Bourdieu used his theory of habitus to explain how working-class culture limits educational aspirations and that, consequently, being from the working class is like a barrier to educational success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). According to Webb, Schirato and Danaher, habitus can be understood as the 'values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts'

[3] HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, collects, processes and publishes data about HE in the United Kingdom.

(2002, p. 36–37). In other words, if education is not valued in your family as you are growing up, and its success is not celebrated, then it is unlikely to be something that you aspire to. However, Leathwood and O'Connell explain that 'poor self-esteem or lack of confidence are not individual traits or personality failings but the product of social relations' (2003, p. 609). In a previous publication, I argued that:

> …the relation is one built on history - of the middle/upper class being in a dominant position, and the working class being in a subordinate position. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) explain that it is this social relation between the two classes that has manifested feelings of self-doubt and caused people to question their position as they move into middle class territory and experience feelings of not belonging. (Burnell, 2015, p.100-101)

Given that habitus is operating below the level of consciousness, with habits 'internalised as a second nature' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56), it might seem that changing one's habitus to include educational aspirations would be too difficult. However, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009, p. 1104) suggest that habitus is 'permeable', and can be adapted and modified as one's circumstances change. One of the most significant changes in circumstances for many working-class people was the widening of participation into HE. This was one of the major educational reforms that was to take place in England and other parts of the United Kingdom. It was decided by the then government that HE was too exclusive, that too many social groups were under-represented in it, and one of those was the working class. Zinciewicz and Trapp (2004) define under-represented groups as 'those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities' (cited in Taylor & House, 2010, p. 46). Widening participation aimed to redress the balance and enable these under-represented groups to benefit from accessing HE and achieving degree success. However, this change in circumstances meant that our habitus would be changed too and would now include HE as a new practice. The result was that the habitus we had been socialised into, and could identify with, would be altered and adapted, as a result of participating in HE.

After a dismal start in education, I resigned myself to thinking that I would never be academically successful or gain a professional position in employment. However, the New Labour government of the 1990s changed people's perception of HE by opening up possibilities for participation in HE that had not been explored before. In addition, the access course movement had created an alternative route into HE that meant people like me, without formal or traditional qualifications, could apply for places on undergraduate degree courses. Learners who entered HE this way came to be known as non-traditional students, and I became one such person. I returned to education after a 10-year period of absence, completed an access course and progressed to university. I could be deemed a widening participation success story, or, in Bourdieusian terms, 'un miraculés' (1988). A miracle, according to Bourdieu, is somebody who survives through unfortunate circumstances; in this context, a member of the working class who becomes educationally successful. Similarly, Ryan and Sackrey state that they 'considered ourselves to be exceptionally lucky to have risen from non-professional families to middle-class careers. We are the "exceptions" upon which the American social mobility myth was based' (1984, p. 4). In Britain, we too have the social mobility myth; however, Bourdieu would argue that because the culture of the dominant classes continues to be held in the highest esteem, they use their power to maintain their advantages. In this way, class inequalities are normalised and perpetuated. Jones calls this a 'rigged society' and explains that 'the demonization of working-class people is a grimly rational way to justify an irrational system. Demonize them, ignore their concerns – and rationalize a grossly unequal distribution of wealth and power as a fair reflection of people's worth and abilities' (2020, pp. 182–183).

Accessing Higher Education

Access to Higher Education courses became the popular route for non-traditional students who wanted to return to learn and enter HE but lacked formal qualifications. By the late 1980s, a wide range of subject areas were on offer. Students could gain entry to a range of degree courses from physical sciences to philosophy by progression from the access course route. Burke refers to this as the 'access movement' (2002, p. 7) and she explains the phenomenon as 'education that explicitly aims to widen access to groups who have been socially and culturally excluded from educational participation' (Burke, 2002). This also meant that non-traditional learners, such as the working class and minority ethnic groups who may not have considered entering the historically white middle/upper class elitist institution of HE, could now aspire to pursue a degree course. Burke asserts that these courses were begun in order to widen the participation to marginalised groups: 'The access movement was initially driven by a commitment to redress the balance set by the legacy of institutional classism, racism and sexism' (2002, p. 64). Thompson, interestingly, notes that 'It was largely women who had been denied education earlier in their lives who took up the opportunities offered by Access' (2000, p. 25). Many working-class students are also women, and, historically, women were excluded from HE. Arnot notes that 'it was not until 1948 that the last bastions of male privilege fell and women were allowed to take the same degrees as men in Cambridge University...this battle for equal rights and equal treatment of men and women still has resonance today' (2002, p. 188).

Access courses have, therefore, become the popular choice for people like me – mature working-class students returning to learn after a break in education. Burke argues that a lack of confidence in this type of learner is not as a result of being out of education for a long period. She explains that western binary thinking reinforces the notion that '...middle-class culture is superior and working-class culture deficient...' (2002, p. 86), implying that working-class students have internalised feelings of failure. I certainly had internalised feelings of failure, having left school early with no formal qualifications. Reay points out that 'The university sector, more than any other sector, epitomizes middle classness ... How then can the mature working-class student maintain a sense of authenticity and still hope to fit in?' (2002, p. 338). Access courses were designed to accommodate a new type of learner, one that was, historically, excluded from education and unlike those students who progressed from the earlier and traditional A-levels. Access courses, therefore, have evolved out of the widening participation drive, and educational reform, based on raising HE participation rates of learners who were non-traditional and/or returning to learn. This was a significant and lasting social change.

Having completed the access course, I went to my local university to embark on a degree in Linguistics. There were opportunities for careers in teaching and, although I was not inspired to teach children, I was interested in teaching adults so, after leaving university, I trained to teach English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and began working at the local college. Whilst there, an opportunity to teach academic skills on the access course came my way. I ended up teaching on this course for eight years. I felt very passionate about the access course and the students on it. I could empathise with how they were feeling, having felt the very same myself when I was an access student. Preparing and sending cohort after cohort off to university every year, seeing people transform their lives, realise their potential and fulfil their dreams was, for me, extremely satisfying and rewarding, and I thoroughly enjoyed my job. Being an access course tutor in a college of further education (FE), often referred to as the 'second-chance nature of FE provision' (Green & Lucas, 2000, p. 172), certainly fitted with my personal values, given my class, background and non-traditional

route into HE. However, I also felt that my job was part of my identity; I had been an access student, gone to university as a mature student, completed teacher training and returned to teach students like myself, about whom I felt passionately. Yates discusses the concepts of 'career identities' and 'professional identities' (2014, p. 30). She quotes Schein (1978) who defined the professional identity as a 'relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role' (Yates, 2014, p. 30). I felt as though my job was a part of my identity as a working-class, non-traditional student, who had returned to learn after failing in education first time round. These circumstances were what brought me to the job, which actually felt more like a calling.

After 13 years of working in a college of FE, I decided it was time for a change. Two changes in government had meant that the political landscape of the sector had shifted; I felt that the job no longer fitted with my personal values and I began to feel discontented. The FE sector had begun to be run like a business, with a profit margin, and the ethos of learning and education seemed to be mislaid. However, I had not lost my passion for students, teaching, and enabling learners to reach their potential, so I wanted to remain in the industry of education. While in FE, I had completed further degrees at master's and doctoral levels, so I was now qualified to teach in HE. It was a hard decision to make, given all that I have discussed around values, identity, a calling, etc. but I had an instinct that I could continue my good work in the HE sector, making just as much difference there, and although my identity would shift a little, I could still 'pay forward' by enabling learners to believe in themselves and reach their potential. My doctoral thesis was on the topic of widening participation into HE, and the experiences of working-class students, so I felt something of an authority on this subject, which further strengthened my professional identity.

Fish out of water

While I was extremely grateful for being given the opportunity to study in HE, given my dismal educational background and lack of formal qualifications, I was also aware that learners like me had no history and very little to identify with within this historically and traditionally middle/upper class institution. Until World War II, university education was the preserve of a small elite, less than 2% of the relevant age cohort were attending university, and among women, the percentage was less than 0.5 (Blackburn & Jarman, 1993). Moreover, the concept of mature students at this time did not exist. Even though the Robbins Report (1963) endorsed the principle that a HE should be available to all those who had the ability and qualifications to benefit, it was not until the government Department for Education and Science (1987) white paper HE: meeting the challenge, that alternative routes to HE started to become popular and non-traditional and mature learners like myself were really able to participate in HE. Even then, it would take another 10 years and a new government's educational reform for the widening participation movement to get into full swing. I entered university to complete my first degree in 1997 at the height of the widening participation movement.

Widening a traditionally narrow arena to include learners from under-represented groups is a major step towards social inclusion. However, if this new type of learner does not feel comfortable, included, or does not have any history in that arena, then the effects will be felt. In a previous publication (Burnell, 2015) I addressed the question posed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) – of why people from middle-class backgrounds are more likely, and those from working-class backgrounds less likely, to attend university. Maton (cited in Grenfell, 2008) explains how habitus works in practise, and in relation to the social field, or social setting, in which we find ourselves:

> Imagine, for example, a social situation in which you feel or anticipate feeling awkward, out of your element, like a "fish out of water". You may decide not to go, to declare it as "not for the likes of me", or (if there already) to make your excuses and leave. In this case the structuring of your habitus does not match that of the social field... Social agents thereby come to gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and try to avoid those fields that involve a field-habitus clash. (cited in Grenfell 2008, p.57-59)

For me, the effects of field–habitus clash were minimal. I attended the local university where many learners were from similar backgrounds. This university had taken full advantage of widening participation policies and strategies by encouraging large numbers from the local working-class community to participate in what the university had to offer. This meant that I studied alongside people from my own social class who were also enjoying the benefits of widening participation. I did not consider applying to an elite university, or even an institution outside of my local vicinity. In fact, while at the local college of FE, completing my access course, I was encouraged by my tutors to apply to universities that had a large proportion of mature and working-class students. It was felt that widening participation students should apply to universities who were engaged in the widening participation movement; they felt that otherwise we would feel out of place and experience the 'fish out of water' phenomenon, as described by Maton (cited in Grenfell, 2008). Interestingly, Crew notes that 'Research on students by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) found "staying at home and studying locally" is something that tends to be found in disadvantaged communities' (2020, p. 27). Maybe the safety net of remaining close to home is what minimises the effects of field–habitus clash?

Reay, Miriam, and Ball (2005) write about how education amongst the working class is far from straightforward; '...the link between class and education, in which failure is emblematic of the working class relationship to schooling, frequently makes working class transitions to higher education complex and difficult' (p. 84). Another contested area is the question of what type of HE we are preparing learners for. Reay has also examined the stratified system of HE in terms of the elite and mass institutions (1997). In more recent work, she comments that the 'majority of working-class students end up in universities seen to be "second class" by both themselves and others' (2017, p. 121). The statistics for the two types of universities indicate that non-traditional mature learners are also severely under-represented within the elite universities. Northedge argues that widening participation has meant that 'non-traditional students have been treated as "charity" cases to be rescued from ignorance. The stately home of elite education is simply extended by adding a large paupers' wing. "Proper" students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can' (2003, p. 17). If this is an accurate interpretation of the situation, then the purpose of widening participation to give people fair and equal access to a once elite education system is undermined. Nevertheless, for me, going to a 'working class university' in my local area and studying alongside people like myself was a transformative experience and one that I benefited from, both personally and professionally, as it set me on the path that I am on now.

During Reay et al.'s (2005) research into the overlapping effects of social class in the process of applying to HE, and especially on the issue of which HE institution to apply to, they used Bourdieu's (1984) theory of 'objective limits'. Placing objective limits on oneself means to avoid places where we have no history or sense of identity: a 'sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded' (p. 471). More recently, Reay notes that 'children from working-class backgrounds account for just 1 in 20 enrolments into the elite Russell Group of universities' (2017, p. 118); although the number increases as those working-class students pursue postgraduate degrees. As my academic journey progressed, and my confidence grew, I found that applying to more elite universities in order to complete higher

degrees, did not seem so unusual, and many of my peers were also applying. I went on to complete a master's degree, and then a doctorate at a Russell Group university; and although elite, I did not experience it as elitist. Crew notes that:

> Classism has been the hardest bias to reverse as it requires the redistribution of wealth, and opportunity and 'class' is not a protected characteristic under the equalities legislation. One could argue that by virtue of having a PhD or being employed as a lecturer or researcher in the academy, this redistribution has been successful (2020, p.82).

Introjected values

Introjected values, according to counselling psychology, are messages absorbed in childhood, from, for example, family and education. Carl Rogers, a prominent psychotherapist, believed that introjected values get in the way of people being their true selves (Rogers, 1951). We become conditioned to believe a myth about ourselves and the myth becomes our internalised core belief; this is a similar concept to Bourdieu's habitus theory. Wakeling comments on 'what Bourdieu calls hysteresis: the habitus of their family and community of origin is ingrained and will not easily go away, leading to the reported (and very real) feelings of guilt, inadequacy, alienation but also anger' (cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 43). As we grow into adults, these messages from childhood that have formed our beliefs about ourselves become our script and we live our lives according to this script. In my case, as a child I left school early, before the legal leaving age, before sitting any exams, and in the belief that, educationally, I was a failure. This was the message that I received from the education system, backed up by some of the adults in my life. I had swallowed the message from school and others around me that I would 'never amount to anything', that I had failed in education and therefore in life. I felt written off by the system. Not only that, according to my experience, I was a failure. This, then, became my script, and for many years during my teens and early twenties, I lived my life according to this belief, backed up by my experience. I had internalised these ideas and didn't attempt to do anything professionally or educationally for many years.

Wakeling notes that 'many traditional working-class occupations are literally dead end jobs' (cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 38), meaning that they do not lead to increased social status, promotions or higher salaries. For 10 years I drifted from one dead-end job to another, believing that was my lot, that I was not capable of, nor deserved, anything more. Then, I discovered what was inside that building one and a half miles from my home. I hadn't 'seen' the building, despite travelling past it a million times. What came into my awareness, what I had not been conscious of, was that it was a university, a place of education, a place where people like me, working-class educational failures, would be welcomed through its doors in order to get a second chance at education. However, that also brought other kinds of feelings, such as imposterism, and a constant questioning of one's place and the right to belong. Wilson, Reay, Morrin and Abraham note that 'There probably aren't too many individuals who feel at ease with every aspect of the academy and that never encounter some form of imposter syndrome' (2020, p. 6). Wilson et al. go on to argue that 'there are powerful and affective class-based experiences, particularly when you have been and become upwardly socially mobile. This is particularly acute for those who occupy positions of intersecting marginalisation...' (Taylor, 2010). Although I have only alluded to it briefly here, my gender, as well as my social class, undoubtedly had an impact on the ways in which I experienced the world.

The problem, according to Rogers (1951), is that often, our experience cannot be relied upon and the messages we have internalised, that become our core beliefs, are not true. My perception gave me a way of seeing the world, a 'truth'. However, the ways of the world can contaminate who we really are and lead us to hide our true selves. Therefore, our 'way of knowing' is not a reliable source and often these 'truths' can be challenged and changed. If, like me, you grew up in a working-class family, in a working-class community, and attended a failing school, and were consistently made to believe that you were 'not going to amount to anything', that becomes your truth. I now know that wasn't true, I was not a failure, the system was – the education system and the social class system was fraught with systemic failures, and to an extent still is. Introjected values are little more than assumptions and, like habitus, when the illusion is shattered, anything is possible. A chance opportunity can often be the key to breaking down the barrier of a lack of self-belief, leading one to fulfilling one's potential.

Widening participation into HE opens doors that might have remained forever closed. However, entering these doors may have certain profound effects on people's personal lives. The phenomenon of 'imposter syndrome' has been written about extensively (Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Funk, 2000; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011; Slank, 2019; Wilkinson, 2020) since Clance and Imes (1978), two American psychologists, noted that 'despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they really are not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise' (p. 241). Breeze suggests 'that we cannot understand feelings of imposterism as an individual problem or private issue, isolated from the social contexts in which they are felt' (cited in Taylor & Lahad, 2018, p. 195). Imposterism is the effect of deep-rooted social, historical and political structures of the institution; these structures contain oppressive forces such as neoliberalism, class stratification, class privilege, racism and other inequalities. It is these social structures that emanate the absorbed messages which condition us to believe a myth about ourselves – that then becomes our limiting core beliefs. My own experiences of imposterism are entrenched within my social class, my gender and my cultural heritage. These characteristics and their intersections heightened my sense of risk, the fear of being found out. Breeze explores imposter syndrome as a 'potential source of action and agency, in relation to the feminist ambivalences of being "within and against" university institutions, as feminist academics are both complicit with and struggle against the neoliberal university' (cited in Taylor & Lahad, 2018, p. 193).

'You're getting ideas above your station, Iona', one family member told me when I announced my intention of returning to education and enrolling into the university. I almost choked on my introjected value but decided to dismiss it and push on; after all – what was the worst that could happen? Actually, although I didn't realise it then, this was to become an example what Reay termed 'classlessness' (1997). In other words, you would now be deemed middle-class, according to your education and qualifications, but you weren't born there, so you're not really middle-class. Issues of identity and social class, and their personal struggles to fit into a social class, may not be issues that, generally, traditional students who are progressing to HE straight from school, would have to deal with. One such issue, for example, and one that I can empathise with, is re-negotiating one's identity within the social class into which one is born, after having been re-educated into a different social class. Freeborn asserts that 'Educating yourself out of your own class, but doing it at an age where assimilating into the educated class is not realistic, not even entirely desirable, means that you become, forever, neither fish nor fowl' (2000, p. 10). The metaphorical concept of 'neither fish nor fowl' is one I can intensely identify with. 'We are often told that a working-class scholar is a contradictory notion' (Crew, 2020, p. 24); that the term 'working class academic' is a contradiction in terms – an oxymoron. I may feel working-class, possess working-class values, and come from a family/ background who all very much identify as working-class, but I am perceived as middle-class.

People often look at me and assume I am middle-class. My students often say that because of my job, my salary, my qualifications and education, that I am middle-class – and they don't know where I live! (I live in a middle-class postcode). However, maybe these are now the yardsticks with which to measure one's social class; it seems to be less about perception and more about conceptualisation. Wakeling, in his article 'Is There such a Thing as a Working-Class Academic?', argues:

> …there is no 'going back' to working class origins because university education and upward mobility change the individual psychologically and set them apart in the eyes of those 'left behind'. At the same time, coming from a different class background to that dominant within the academy means one is similarly marked out and never quite able to gain full acceptance (or self-acceptance). (cited in Taylor, 2010, p.41).

These are the after-effects of widening the participation into HE.

Speaking the wrong language

When I got to university, as a student of Linguistics, I realised that my cockney accent, with its glottal stops, and *th*-fronting, was going to be a hindrance to me. I was already alive to the impact that my regional accent could have because I had experienced a very embarrassing moment while at the second high school that I had been sent to for a brief period at aged 14, before making the decision that school was definitely not for me and left for good. It was a drama lesson. The school was three miles from where I lived – in the wrong direction. It was in a posh middle-class area that is now considered to be part of East London due to expansion of the Greater London area. I had managed to stay silent for most of the time in the new temporary school but when I entered the drama lesson, we were required to speak. 'You're new' the teacher said, 'do you like drama?' 'Not really' I said. 'Not really? alright mate, alright mate' the teacher mimicked. Everyone laughed. My face turned beetroot red. The teacher had mimicked my cockney accent because nobody else in the school spoke like that. Crew discusses the concept of 'microaggressions' (2020, p. 81):

> Bourdieu (1990) would describe this as symbolic violence, a "soft" violence that includes actions that have discriminatory or injurious meaning such as racism, sexism or classism... Microaggressions appear to be a common ingredient of professional life both for women and for people of colour, but they are also found to be present in the experiences of professionals from disadvantaged social backgrounds. (Bourdieu, 1990)

Moving socially means moving your language and the way you speak. Accentism is a prejudice – people make social judgements when we speak, it's a subtle and covert type of discrimination, making connections and assumptions between speech styles and stereotypes. This is also a type of classism; one of the assumptions made about you if you have a regional accent is that you are from the working class. Crew comments that 'the association between accent and social class in Britain has a long history. Hiraga (2005) found speakers of urban accents like Birmingham were perceived to be the lowest in status measures such as wealth and intelligence, whereas speakers with received pronunciation (RP) were classified highest' (2020, p. 72).

I hadn't spent much time outside of the East End of London, so I had no awareness of there being regional varieties of English. Apart from my neighbours' non-native English speakers' accents, the only other accent I was aware of was Irish. Cockney is one variety of English, a dialect found in the region of London where I grew up. Standard English is also a dialect, not a regional one but one associated with the middle class. Standard English is also used as the medium for education – it is the language of the classroom, lecture theatres and academics. Returning to learn and entering HE,

particularly as a student of Linguistics, meant that I became conscious of my language, and the features of my regional dialect. During my final year of the degree in Linguistics I decided that I wanted to become an English language teacher; this was the real test of my language mettle. Learners of English as an additional language will model your pronunciation so if you say 'erf' instead of 'earth', they will say that too. The importance of modelling accurate language for students learning English was drummed into me during teacher training and I became adept at switching between dialects – Standard English for the workplace and my regional variety for home. However, language, and one's dialect, is very much a part of identity, especially class identity. Previously, I quoted Freeborn, who alludes to the idea of 'Educating yourself out of your own class... assimilating into the educated class is not realistic' (2000, p. 10). For me, this became part of that re-negotiating one's identity that I have previously discussed – in fact, what I developed was a dual identity; some aspects of myself were retained and some were changed. I can relate to one of Skeggs' research participants when she said: 'what I was is not what I am now' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 97).

Lynch and O'Neill note how working-class identities are changed by HE: 'no other group finds that school is about learning to be the opposite to what one is' (1994, p. 322). This strongly suggests that pursuing a HE means you can no longer occupy a working-class identity. This is a frustrating situation to be in for people who have constructed their identity, especially while growing up, around being working-class. Experiencing this shift in class identity put me into a complex subject position where I had a foot in both worlds. Previous relationships were forged within the constraints of working-class values, and those values did not include education. Becoming an academic, with an emerging sense of identity set within the boundaries of the dominant class, meant the need to negotiate both worlds simultaneously. Byrne, in his own autoethnography, reflects that, 'Existing, now, as a working-class academic, I realize that I am neither entirely working-class, nor entirely academic. Being among academic people, who act, speak and think in unfamiliar ways, has meant building a new identity that has become simultaneously less and more working-class' (2019, p. 145).

Byrne's experience heavily resonates with me when he reveals 'I have all but lost my regional accent: when with my family, I sound different to them, and yet the occasional rhotic "r" still betrays me, revealing my West Country origins to my colleagues. ... when the accent creeps in unexpectedly, there is a risk of being caught trying to "pass" as something you are not' (2019, p. 143). By the time I started work as an academic in HE I was a confident Standard English speaker, and reserved my native dialect for informal occasions, where I felt it was more acceptable, and where I felt more comfortable with it. This could be an example of what Abrahams and Ingram (2013) term the 'chameleon habitus' – the ability to adapt to both environments, 'Despite being immersed within two somewhat contradictory fields they can sometimes develop various strategies to enable them to overcome any internal conflict' (p. 213). Although I wasn't aware of any internal conflict, and I felt fairly well equipped when I entered HE as an academic, Coogan points out that 'Prolonged exposure to the academic environment can affect the way we dress, the way we behave – both in public and online – and even the way that we articulate our thoughts in everyday conversation. Over time, we might find ourselves passing as academics so naturally that we don't even realise that we have changed' (Coogan, 2019).

Changing the way one speaks is often seen as pretentious. Addison and Mountford (2015) conducted research into features of classed identities in higher education. They describe one of their research participants who:

> …sees herself as being part of a respectable working class and emphasizes her difference to those she sees as being part of a more devalued working class in her discussion. She does this by working on her accent to converge with what she views to

> be a more middle class version of her own. She is conscious of slippages and how this might be read negatively by others, signifying a lack of fit…(p.8).

For me, it's less about pretending and more about developing and evolving into a comfortable and confident version of myself. I have evolved with my job role into a member of the *neo* working class, one that has adapted her working-class habitus to include HE, both as a practice and a value. Although my cockney dialect is not quite as strong as it used to be, I'm definitely comfortable with dropping the odd 'h', or slipping in a glottal stop, and although I don't *th*-front very often, when I do, it is done to assert my working-class identity – which I don't attempt to hide.

Who am I now?

Previously, I cited Maton (Grenfell, 2008) who explains the 'fish out of water' phenomenon and how that leads to a field–habitus clash. For me, the effects of field–habitus clash were minimal as I learnt to re-negotiate my identity within my professional position. Looking back, I can say that the transitional journey – from access student to widening participation undergraduate, then into the teaching profession, completing doctorate and becoming a HE lecturer – was fairly seamless and integrative. Hodkinson (cited in Grenfell & James, 1998) discusses how people find 'turning points' in their lives, which means that they change course and, in turn, alter their habitus; 'As a person lives through a turning point the habitus of the person is changed' (p. 101). Hodkinson also explain that 'At a turning point a person goes through a significant transformation of identity' (Grenfell & James, 1998). My transformation began as soon as I enrolled at university as an undergraduate student. Nevertheless, Crozier et al. (cited in David, 2010) assert that 'Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class' (p. 74), and they, therefore, have no history and nothing to identify with in the academic arena. The uneducated working class were traditionally excluded from HE, the educated middle and upper class were included. This was our starting point – striving for a place and an identity within the academy, a place where we can feel that we belong. The widening participation movement enabled that to happen and several decades later, working-class academics are firmly established within HE.

There have been many debates and discussions about people from the working class entering HE and what that experience is like for them. Reay (2002), for example, and her 'imposters', so called because they felt that they did not belong in the world of HE. Askham discusses the anxieties and identity conflicts of 'the adult who chooses to leave one world to enter the intellectual world of learning' (2008, p. 89). Askham cites Elliott (1999) as calling this 'inhabiting two discourses at once' (Askham, 2008). Reay also uses a case study to highlight issues of 'classlessness' (1997), and recounts how Christine, a working-class woman with a degree deems herself 'classless' because she is now not working-class, but nor is she middle-class:

> Christine told me later in the interview that she "came from a very working-class background". To claim middle-class status for Christine would constitute a denial of her past, while to continue to call herself working class could be construed as a denial of her educational achievements. For Christine, classlessness is the consequence of compromise (1997, p. 228).

However, the research at this time was implying that there were two polarised positions – the uneducated working class and the educated middle class – and that learners inhabited one or the other. What seems to be the case now is that we have a foot in both worlds, with a requirement to negotiate both worlds simultaneously. Baxter and Britton comment that 'The process of moving between classes has very strong emotional and affective aspects which colour the lives of those who experience it' (2001, p. 95). For me, the negotiation has been an interesting experience; I started

working as an academic in the university where I had been a student – a post-92, ex polytechnic, with a strong tradition of educating the working class. Although it now has university status, it has not lost its ethos, and remains committed to widening participation. For a while, I felt like an imposter in the academy, a trespasser even, not because of my class but because of my job role. Binns, interestingly, cites Warnock as asserting that 'Behaviours that appear to the working-class academic to signal arrogance are viewed by the middle-class as markers of confidence and self-assuredness ... Because self-promotion and networking are necessary to professional class success, the working-class academic is once again at a disadvantage' (Warnock, cited in Binns, 2019, p. 94). After a couple of years, I settled into the role, grew in confidence, started to use own my voice, and my views, and was not afraid to express them in the company of other experienced academics, some middle class, who also became my network of colleagues. Crew notes that her 'respondents from "new universities" were the most likely to describe themselves as being working-class' (2020, p. 22) and this might be because the new universities employ the most number of lecturers who identify as working-class. I don't describe myself as being anything else.

Crew quotes one of the participants from her own research whose words are reminiscent of Reay's participant, Christine, who she interviewed 23 years previously:

> I look around at my life and I think I have no right to call myself working class at all because me and my partner have more money…we live in a very sort of proper kind of middle-class area and we do very middle-class things… But then I can't describe myself as being middle class because I always feel like I have one foot in the working-class world (2020, p.23).

However, Crew goes on to explain that the phenomena is not always as straightforward or easily explained:

> We already see a fetishization of working-class culture in fashion, music and in the street food revolution, while in academia, inequalities experienced by working class people are colonised by middle class academics for publications. There are examples of white elite academics, oozing with privilege, who desire that attractive working-class status, until it's not inconvenient, and then they shed it like a second skin. (Crew, 2020, p. 23)

Byrne's experience doesn't concur with Reay's 'imposters' (2002), or Askham's 'identity conflict' (2008), but rather he cites Tapp's (2013) 'hybrid identity' and describes his experience as conforming to an 'internal duality' (Byrne, 2019, p. 139). Having a dual identity is certainly a concept that I can identify with; although I don't hide my working-classness, there are aspects of the working-class culture that I leave at the door as I enter HE because they don't fit with what the expectations of being an academic are. As I previously stated, I have evolved with my job role into what might now be deemed a member of the *neo* working class, one who has adapted and changed her habitus to include working in HE, a job not traditionally associated with being working-class. I have learnt to re-negotiate my identity from where I was to where I am now, and that re-negotiation includes inhabiting two worlds simultaneously, something that very many working-class academics do. Wakeling (2010, p. 38) argues that an occupation as an academic cannot be compared with 'solidly' working-class occupations 'such as bus driver, cleaner, supermarket checkout assistant or lathe operator' (I confess I had to look up *lathe operator*, never having come across that job); maybe not, but that is not to say that, given the right opportunity, that bus driver or cleaner could not become an academic. Crew makes reference to the 'organic intellectuals who, on the other hand, emerged

from their own culture and could act as change agents' (2020, p. 112). I have used the phrase here *'neo* working class' to describe my adapted working-class habitus, with added practices and values to the existing traditional practices and values of my social class, and to indicate that working-class habitus has changed in many respects, as well as acting as an agent of change.

Nevertheless, HE is still shrouded in elitism and snobbery does exist in many institutions, albeit more so in one type of institution than another. I have experienced some uncomfortable exchanges with academics at elite institutions that I would attribute to snobbery. Despite these challenges, more and more of the working class are finding their way into academic roles in HE and this is partly due to the widening participation drive: HE widened its participation to allow under-represented groups to take part, 20+ years on and many of those students are now academics; not only did we take advantage of that opportunity educationally, we also benefitted vocationally. To use Wakeling's phrase: 'there is no going back' (cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 41).

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