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Tales of the unexpected: The lives and experiences of working-class academics

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Abstract

This article explores and discusses some aspects of autoethnographies from a published collection written by working-class academics. The original objective was for each academic to write an account of their life and their experiences of becoming who they are in an industry steeped in elitism. I was interested in how they experienced becoming a working-class academic, what their journeys had been like, and how they navigated their way into their professional roles. I was also curious about their identities and if they continued to identify as working class, or if their social positioning and/or identities have undergone change. The autoethnographies are powerful and deeply personal accounts of the working-class academics' lives; they make a significant contribution to the field of research on higher education by providing unique insight into personal experiences. Within this article I have explored some of the accounts and considered how the academics overcame, for example, feelings of failure from previous educational experiences, feelings of (un)belonging and tackling imposterism.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Within this article, I attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and lived realities of working-class academics in higher education (HE), in the United Kingdom (UK). In this study, 15 academics who self-identify as working class wrote their autoethnographies that were published into a book in 2022. My objective for the

book, *The Lives of Working Class Academics: getting ideas above your station* (Burnell Reilly, 2022), was to give voice to working-class academics, a space to share their stories and to situate their realities, in order that they can be acknowledged and understood.

I feel that more needs to be known and understood about the lives and experiences of working-class academics, many of whom undergo unique and profound experiences; autoethnography is an appropriate method of research for capturing those lived experiences. The sector of HE in the UK is imbued with historical elitism and exclusion. Traditionally, the working class, and other under-represented groups such as women, and minority ethnic groups have very little history to identify with in this sector of education. For some, this makes the journey to becoming an academic all the more challenging. The 15 academics in the book are currently employed in a range of HE institutions within various parts of the UK including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

However, the working class are not a homogenous group—each person's experience is unique and individual. Add to this the intersections of race and gender, and we begin to realise that each person's subjective experience of their social world is individual to them. This is certainly borne out by each of the chapter authors. In the Foreword of the book, Maguire points out that 'For some time there have been problems in the way that class is applied in education research—there has been a tendency towards understandings that have ignored some of the significant and meaningful ways in which class is lived and class is done' (Maguire, 2022, p. xv). Therefore, I asked each of the autoethnographers to discuss their social class within the context of their own lives and background, and how it is relevant to them.

2 | MY POSITIONALITY

I too identify as a working-class academic and my own autoethnography is a personal account of my journey into academia. Having left school at 15 without any formal qualifications, I found my way back into education many years later via an 'Access Course'. Access courses are the non-traditional route into higher education and traditionally serve mature students without formal qualifications.

I decided to embark on a career in Further Education, and then later Higher Education, after graduating. I began to wonder about the experiences of other working-class academics, and if they were struggling with similar issues to mine. Having previously constructed myself as an educational failure, due to my negative past school experience, becoming an academic evoked feelings of imposterism, of not belonging and of re-negotiating my class identity; the assumption was that I was leaving one class to enter another.

I still identify as working class, although I have the class markers of the middle-class, and undoubtedly would fall into their SEG,[1] according to this measuring device which is largely based on one's social and financial situation. For me, identifying as working class is a political statement, as well as historical and cultural. I come from a long line of Irish farmers who fought to keep their land during the time of English oppression and colonialism (although my Father reverted to lorry driving when he came to England). The Irish starved during a period of forced hunger, known as the 'famine'; they had to lie about their religion, they had their names forcibly changed, and their language and cultural practices banned. To not call myself working class would be a betrayal—to my roots and to my cultural heritage. Therefore, for me, my social class is more than a place in the social structure, it is a positioning, and an allegiance of solidarity to those who are also in a struggle with their oppressors.

After discussing the idea for a book with some colleagues who identified as working class, I decided that it was time for us working-class academics to share our stories and let the world know about our experiences. I had been quiet about my experience as a working-class academic and, it seemed, many of my colleagues were too. Originally, I was going to interview and write a book about working-class academics by interviewing willing participants. However, rather than me writing a book about working-class academics, I asked working-class academics to write about themselves—their stories told in their own words. I decided that the voices, lives and experiences would be better captured by taking the autoethnographic approach. One of the advantages of using

autoethnography is to reveal and authenticate the power relations, the oppressions, the subjugation and the privilege within and between the stories of people's lives. Byrne notes that 'Autoethnography, writing ourselves into our work, is a way to give voice to marginalized groups and contribute to democratizing academic culture and writing' (2019, p. 146).

Autoethnography is a fascinating method of research that allows the author to reflect on their own lived reality and explore their personal, professional and cultural experiences, in this case, their journey and experience of becoming an academic. Byrne describes autoethnography within his own context as a 'tool with which to understand individual and shared experiences of class in higher education' (2019, p. 133). Autoethnography is a critical study of oneself, and how we understand our relationships to socio cultural contexts. It is underpinned by critical theory and allows for the conceptualisation of experiences within the social context. Hughes and Pennington remind us that 'using theoretical frameworks can serve to protect the auto ethnographer from accusations of narcissistic navel gazing' (2017, p. 51). Since my intention was not to add to anyone's uncomfortable feelings, I felt that this would be the most suitable method.

3 | A HISTORY OF THE WORKING CLASS IN HE

HE in England and other parts of the United Kingdom (UK) has traditionally and historically been dominated by the elite middle and upper class, mostly white males. Gradually that trend changed, and a diverse range of students and staff began to enter universities. This change came to be known as 'widening the participation into HE'. According to McCaig (2018), expansion of the sector began in the late 1980s, under the Conservative government, and continued steadily into the 1990s. It was during the late 1990s and early 2000s, an era known as 'widening participation', that saw the largest intake of students from working-class backgrounds and other under-represented groups. Although some under-represented groups, such as disabled people, women and minority ethnic groups, did have a presence in HE, the numbers were very small. According to Blackburn and Jarman (1993), 'Before the Second World War university education was very much a privilege for a small elite. In 1938, less than 2% of the relevant age group were entering universities, and among women, it was less than 0.5%' (p. 197). There were only 24 universities in the UK at that time; currently, there are over 160, with many more providers of HE provision, such as private providers and further education colleges.

The New Labour government of 1997–2010 elevated education to the top of the agenda as soon as they took up their place in office. Tony Blair, the New Labour Prime Minister, during his education manifesto launch speech pledged 'Our top priority was, is and always will be education, education, education…Our ten pledges cover education from nurseries to schools, colleges and universities' (The Guardian, 2001). This wave of expansion led to mass enrolment into universities and, with it, a representation of students who, thus far, had been excluded. The Institute for Employment Studies reported in 2000 that participation among students who identified as from 'lower social class backgrounds' represented 28% of the total entrants to full-time undergraduate study in England and Wales.

The Robbins Report of 1963 highlighted the narrow participation and inequalities in higher education at that time. McCaig cites the Robbins principle as 'the widening of access to this provision for all individuals who wish to benefit from it and have the necessary qualities to do so' (McCaig, 2018, p. 37). However, it would take another 37 years, and 12 changes of government before increased participation in HE would be noticeable. New Labour's education reform proposed a target of 50% participation rate of 18–30 year olds, by 2010. Trow (1987), however, foresaw these changes and was very critical of a mass expansion and, in particular, was concerned about academic standards. His worry was that in moving from an elite to a mass system of higher education, standards would become 'variable', indicating that parity of esteem among HE institutions might be compromised. Trow also commented that 'Where Americans feel guilt toward our racial minorities for past ill-treatment, and our policies reflect it, the United Kingdom shows a parallel guilt-driven policy towards its working class' (1987, p. 279). This implies

that widening participation policies were driven by positive discrimination and in a bid to right the wrongs of the past. Nevertheless, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) noted that '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 et al., 2010, p. 68).

I have previously stated that the working class were vastly under-represented in HE, historically and traditionally excluded from an elitist system of education. The widening participation drive created opportunities to allow people from under-represented groups to succeed in HE as students. In my own autoethnography, I point out that '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' (Burnell Reilly, 2022, p. 118). However, this journey has not been easy for some and the autoethnographers' accounts demonstrate their struggles and difficulties with coping in a sector that is built on elitism.

4 | WORKING-CLASS ACADEMICS

The widening participation drive of the late 1990s and early 2000s resulted in increased participation among students from low socio-economic status groups, or 'lower social class backgrounds', according to The Institute for Employment Studies, commonly known as the working class. Some of those students, and I am one such person, went on to become academics in higher education. Many universities now have a sizeable intake of students who identify as working class, and they also have a proportion of academic staff who identify as working class. The Times Higher Education Supplement reported on a poll conducted by the Union of Colleges and Universities:

> The UCU polled 3987 members between 15 March 2022 and 1 April 2022. Most (86.2%) worked in higher education, while the rest worked in further education, adult and community colleges or prisons. Half of those who participated identified as working class, a figure that is below the 60% average for the general population. (Williams, 2022)

I became interested in the experiences of working-class academics in universities, in how they have become who they are in an industry steeped in elitism, how they have navigated their way, and what their journeys have been like. I am also interested in their social class identities, if they continue to identify as working-class or if their social positioning and/or identities have shifted. I have previously asserted that 'The legacy of elitism remains in HE, inequality and prestige have persisted, and with very little history or class culture in the field of HE to identify with, this can, for some working-class academics, make their experiences fraught and difficult' (Burnell Reilly, 2022, p. xxii). Sharing experiences and having people tell their stories, recount their lived realities, and the effects of their circumstances is an effective tool to challenge the dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate elitism and exclusion within higher education, not just for the working class but for all under-represented and marginalised groups.

In my recent research project, which involved a small group of working-class academics writing their autoethnographies, some very interesting phenomena emerged. In the autoethnographies, the authors recount their lived experiences of becoming academics, the effects of being born into their social class, and the social circumstances and life chances associated with that class. For example, some of the authors share their experiences of being the first in family to go to university; others discuss the effects of a lack of academic role models within the community and their social network; some refer to working-class values that are sometimes not conducive to educational achievement. Bourdieu, the great French sociologist, asserted that, although no fault of their own, working-class culture does not include educational aspirations and, therefore, is a barrier to educational success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Reay, also a sociologist of education, asserts 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). Reay mentions the mature student here because this research was concerned with the experiences of mature students who, according to Fuller and Heath (cited in David, 2010), also tend to be working class. I would argue that this point is just as applicable to working-class academics—if the university epitomises middle-classness, how can *they* hope to comfortably fit in?

Bourdieu, and other scholars who have worked with the concept of social class and education, may not have considered 'self-determination theory', which is concerned with human motivation and people's innate tendency for self-growth (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination, in this context, means having the ability to make choices, being in control and having autonomy over our lives. Cherry (2022), a psychologist explains:

> Self-determination theory can be helpful in understanding what might motivates your behaviors. Being self-determined, feeling like you have the autonomy and freedom to make choices that shape your destiny, is important for each person's well-being.

Working-class academics often have to display an incredibly strong tendency for self-determination, intrinsic motivations and other character strengths, in order to arrive at where they are. This reminds me of Maslow's (1962) theory of 'self-actualisation'; a process where people have an inherent need for self-fulfilment, self-growth and, given the right conditions, will become who they were always meant to be. One of the right conditions for working-class academics may have been created by widening participation policies and practices, enabling many of us to discover our authentic selves. Although, as I have pointed out, some people's experiences are fraught and difficult, so this is by no means an easy path for everyone.

5 | FEELING LIKE AN IMPOSTER

Many academics recognise the imposter phenomenon and feelings of not belonging, particularly if they have also experienced negative past educational experiences which, for some, means overcoming feelings of failure. The imposter phenomenon was first explored within the context of academia when Clance and Imes (1978), two American psychologists, used it in their study of academic women. Clance and Imes asserted that 'The term impostor phenomenon is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women' (1978, p. 241). They claim, from their research study 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' (1978, p. 241). Many academics since have discussed their feelings of imposterism in relation to various aspects of their identities, including gender, race, ethnicity and religion. Khalil Akbar presents an example in his autoethnography when he recalls how 'the negotiation of my identity has been fraught with many challenges from which I view the world through the lens of intersectionality; British born, Pakistani heritage and a Muslim male' (Akbar, 2022, p. 74). Intersectionality is a term that helps to explain the ways in which one oppressive trait is interconnected with another, it is the cross-over between two or more distinct discriminations. Introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw when she was a legal scholar, she stated in a recorded interview for the National Association of Independent Schools, People of Colour Conference, that 'Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking' (Crenshaw, 2017). Akbar highlights this by explaining that 'If one looks at the amalgamation of my intersectionality and marginalisation issues, the concept of failure has undoubtedly contributed to imposter syndrome' (Akbar, 2022, p. 83).

For some, imposterism is the unfortunate after-effect of educational success and maybe the cost to moving away from one's working-class habitus; Simmons and Smyth (2018) call this 'cultural suicide'—the result of altering

our relationship to the working-class culture and habitus. While some academics experience unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings, they have, one might argue, 'self-actualised' by becoming successful academics. Some have overcome overwhelming obstacles such as negative past educational experiences, absent role models, feelings of not belonging and, in some universities, exclusionary practices. Burke argued that Western binary thinking reinforces the notion that '…middle-class culture is superior and working class culture deficient…' (2002, p. 86), implying that the working class have internalised feelings of failure before they even reach university. I have discussed in my own chapter, my introjected feelings of failure brought about largely by my school experience. Walkerdine however points out the 'dream of possibility—of a desire for a different life—a dream and the difficult path of following that dream' (Walkerdine, 2022, p. 220). Nonetheless, as I have discussed, and borne out by the autoethnographers, their experiences are far from straightforward and are often fraught with difficulties and uncomfortable incidences. Jo Finch recounts how she experienced university life:

> I felt confused about class, identity, accent and why I was subject to such diverse perceptions about who I was. I lost my voice, confidence and felt othered. I did not know the rules of academic engagement, how to reference or what to do in a lecture or seminar. I lost confidence to talk in seminars and doubted my intellectual ability to be in that institution. (Finch, 2022, p. 193)

Michael Pierse, in his autoethnography recalls how he 'fretted about being 'found out', long before I entered academia and discovered (without knowing the word for it) those feelings of imposterism' (Pierse, 2022, p. 209). Pierse also refers to the 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) that he carried with him. Although 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), it is the 'potent sense of fear of failure' that Walkerdine refers to as a characteristic of the working class (2022, p. 220).

Education has been synonymous with working-class failure, not because we were incapable of achieving but because we lacked the opportunities and the cultural capital needed to access and achieve. Willis (1977), in his seminal work and study of 'working-class lads', explained that each class has its own cultural capital but that each capital is not equally valued; that although the working class do possess cultural capital, as defined in their own terms, it is different to that of the middle and upper classes, and it is not, as Bourdieu explained, the 'desired type' (1977).

6 | THE CAPITALS OF ONE'S CULTURE

Samantha Broadhead, in her autoethnography, discusses Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, within the context of her life. Broadhead is an arts education academic and professor.

> When I reflect on my early years, I think it was the cultural resources in my parents' home that created my desire to be an artist that was not stymied by the lack of cultural capital associated with my particular habitus. My parents by exposing me to the work of John Constable gave me the cultural resources for becoming an artist/academic in spite of not having the economic, social and cultural capitals of the dominant classes. (Broadhead, 2022, pp. 141/150)

It is apparent, from Broadhead's account, that exposure to art from a young age shaped her interest and later her career. She notes the difference in what Bourdieu termed the desired type (associated with the middle/upper class) and the undesired type (associated with the working class) of cultural capital, and ponders this question: 'If working-class people are disadvantaged in education and their cultural objects are not recognised as having merit,

how do working-class people engage with the arts?' (p. 143). The dilemma involves exposure and whether one is exposed, through their class culture, to the 'desired' type of cultural capital.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that educational attainment is directly related to the cultural capital that is possessed, and that this will be socially reproduced from one generation to the next. Therefore, if certain capitals are not possessed, they cannot be reproduced. Bourdieu (1977), explains that

> ... [the] educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (p. 494)

In this way, the education system legitimises and maintains class inequalities, reinforcing privilege by favouring those who arrive with competences that were acquired from family, networks, social class and schools.

Education in England is a class-based system, underpinned by exclusion. I have already argued that before the second world war, university was for the elite, while schools were also exclusive. It was the 1944 (Butler) Education Act that saw the introduction of a compulsory system of free schooling in England up until the age of 15. Schools therefore are also built on the legacy that education was not for the working class, they were not the priority. Reay et al. (2005) point out that education among the working class is far from straight forward; '...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). Bourdieu posited that 'education is a mechanism for consolidating social separation' (cited Grenfell, 2008, p. 29) and this is achieved by the type of cultural capital that is elevated as having high value in education. This type of cultural capital is also deeply ingrained in the social structure and in the roots of British society, leading us to believe that it is the most highly esteemed and therefore superior type.

For some of the autoethnographers, feelings of failure which had been acquired through their previous educational experiences and carried into adulthood, produced a cycle of failure—if they failed in education previously, they entered university feeling that they may fail again. For me, because I had already constructed myself as an educational failure, my feelings of imposterism were, at times, overwhelming. Peter Shukie, in his own account, remembers that 'On many occasions I got as far as the lecture theatre, having read what was needed, but looked in and fear made me walk off, wandering alone and drenched in self-loathing. I cannot know this was all rooted in class' (Shukie, 2022, p. 132). 'Hidden injuries of class' was a phenomenon written about by Sennett and Cobb in (1972); the authors examined and defined the internal and emotionally hurtful forms of class difference in America during that period. The phrase has stayed with us undoubtably because it has resonance for so many people who identify as working class. But why? Is this feeling connected to the cultural capital that is so desired and valued in academia, and that many of us arrive without it? Broadhead, through exposure to art in her parent's home, acquired some of the desired capital that was later to inspire her to become an arts educator. Other authors, however, did not share experiences of acquiring the desired capital, and this may have led to different outcomes for them.

Sullivan quotes Bourdieu as stating that 'cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use "educated" language' (2002, p. 145). Linguistic competence is an interesting aspect of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and several autoethnographers allude to it in their accounts. Teresa Crew narrates that 'While I can 'decode' the cultural capital of the dominant culture by using the 'right' language and mannerisms, my natural speech and behaviour is informal, and I tend to revert to that when I am relaxed, or when I am nervous' (2022, p. 178). Many people can 'code switch', as referred to by Finch (2022, p. 191), between different dialects. Standard English is a dialect and if your native dialect is a regional one, you may adapt by reverting to a more acceptable style of speech, to fit the field you are in. This switch may also come about to avoid 'accentism'. Judgements are made about us when we speak, just as they are about how we appear. Pierse refers to appearance in his concluding chapter, discussing 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett &

Cobb, 1972), he recalls the 'still-fresh memories of being followed around shops by security guards because of how I looked (tracksuited, short-cropped hair)' (2022, p. 209). However, unlike appearance, speech and accents are social markers not so easily shed. Accentism is a subtle and covert type of discrimination that involves making connections and assumptions between stereotypes and styles of speech. Crew asserts that 'Accentism is cited as an example of how academia is not an especially welcoming environment for working-class scholars' (2022, p. 179). This type of indirect prejudice can result in feelings of imposterism and questioning one's acceptance. Crew further explains that

> ...when I teach, I'm confident, I feel at ease, so if a member of my family was listening I would more than likely "sound like me". While the two fields of home and work are opposing, they are integrated, otherwise known as a reconciled habitus (Ingram & Abrahams, 2015, p. 148). On the other hand, when I present to colleagues, I have a resurgence of imposter syndrome and I worry about my legitimacy. (2022, p. 179)

Crew, in her autoethnography, also discusses her own experience of 'microaggressions'. Crew cites (Sue, 2010) who describes microaggressions as the 'everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership' (2022, p. 180). These examples could be considered a soft violence, often dressed up as snobbery and elitism, that many working-class academics encounter on a regular basis. Although difficult to evidence, we know they are there as we have been sensitised to them most of our lives. In a filmed interview in 2001, Bourdieu alluded to this phenomenon when he said 'my personal experience sensitises me to things that others wouldn't notice; makes me nervous or irate at things that others would find normal' (Sociology is a Martial Art, Video file, 2001).

7 | HABITS OR HABITUS?

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is a useful lens with which to look at education and attempt to explain why some social groups aspire to higher education, and some less so. Because cultural capital is not fairly or evenly distributed throughout the social class structure, the type of cultural capital that one possesses will depend on the habitus that one has been born into habitus is an acquired set of dispositions of thought, behaviour and taste, shaped by the choices individuals make and blended with the experiences of their interactions with others, and their responses to their environment—which ultimately determines who they are and how they respond. The set of dispositions are acquired from one's social class, family and culture and also school.

Although Bourdieu argued that habitus is 'engendered and internalised', he also suggested that 'habitus can be changed by changed circumstances' (Bourdieu, 1990, cited in Sullivan, 2002, p. 152). The changing habitus has been researched and written about by several scholars who have described varying types of change, including 'the permeable habitus' (Reay et al., 2009); Bowl's (2003) theory of 'habitus clash'; Abrahams and Ingram's (2013) 'chameleon habitus' and the 'habitus clivè' (Friedman, 2015), which Bourdieu himself identified with as his own educator identity was forming, through a process of disruption, hence the term 'clivè', which means cleft or divided. Friedman (2015) describes habitus as a 'set of dispositions (i.e. long-lasting manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking) that flow from your primary socialisation, and in particular from the social class position of your parents when you were growing up—what Bourdieu referred to as your "conditions of existence"'. Friedman explains that when these 'conditions of existence' change, sometimes dramatically, a person may feel 'a sense of self torn by dislocation and internal division' (2015).

Rowell and Walters allude to this in their own jointly written autoethnography:

> As working-class, early-career researchers, our journey(s) into, and through, academia were unforeseen, unexpected, risky and marked with uncertainty. Yet, we both pursued doctoral study and then later, academic careers, in spite of the sector's turbulence (Taylor & Lahad, 2018), our individual self-doubt and feelings of imposterism … women who come from family backgrounds where university education, let alone an academic career, is somewhat alien. (2022, p. 42)

A changed habitus means that you do something different to what you have been used to or feel comfortable with; something that does not match with your set of dispositions—more than merely the breaking of a habit. Bourdieu asserted that we have 'internalised, embodied social structures…[which] function below the level of consciousness' (Nash, 1990, p. 442). These structures impose limits on what we feel we can and cannot do, and it is these limits that determine our actions and choices. Brar (2016) further explains the habitus as 'like genes, naturally compelling an individual to deal with the present and anticipate the future based on past experiences' (p. 58). However, as compelling as the theory is, in a previous research article I assert that 'habitus is not as enduring as the theory suggests' (Burnell, 2015, p. 107). During a research project involving higher education students who identified as working class, I concluded that they were not deterred, and their social class did not prevent them from pursing higher education. Individual differences within the working class, and the fact that some people aspire to different goals, means that one's habitus can be, however compelling, overcome, changed or transformed.

Hodkinson (cited in Grenfell & James, 1998) points out that people find 'turning points' in their lives which can result in a change of course and, consequently, alters their habitus; 'As a person lives through a turning point the habitus of the person is changed' (p. 101). The autoethnographers cited in this article all experienced turning points as they altered their course and became academics. Hodkinson also explains that 'At a turning point a person goes through a significant transformation of identity' (ibid). Habitus refers to embodied dispositions, traits and behaviours, acquired from our class culture, and these are also entrenched in our identities. The working-class identity, Bourdieu asserted (1984), is less adaptable to change than the middle-class habitus; he insisted that because of how deeply working-class habitus is ingrained in individuals, those who have altered their habitus, and in the case of working-class academics who have ascended the social mobility ladder, still retain their original habitus. This can cause uncomfortable and awkward feelings and some of these are recounted by some of the autoethnographers.

The 'fish out of water' metaphor is often used by those who describe feelings of imposterism. Some of the autoethnograpers refer to being like a fish out of water when they describe their feelings of not belonging, imposterism and questioning one's place. Maton describes how habitus operates in practise, and in relation to the social field, including the social setting, that 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. (Grenfell, 2008, pp. 57–59)

The 'field-habitus clash' that Maton refers to is an example of the working-class habitus being less adaptable to change than the middle-class habitus, as asserted by Bourdieu (1984). The struggle to adapt, cope with the clash, and consequently the feelings of imposterism, are all occurring simultaneously within many working-class academics as they inhabit their role.

8 | CONCLUSION

This article explores some of the experiences that have emerged from a collection of autoethnographies written by working-class academics. Each author used autoethnography as the research approach to recount their lived experiences of becoming academics, including what their social class means to them, discussing their definitions of social class within the context of their own lives. This connects to Reay's assertion that there are 'very many different ways of being working-class' (Reay, 2017, p. 5). These 'different ways' emerge from the collection, with each author recounting their own story of a working-class life.

The autoethnographies make a significant contribution to the field of research on higher education by providing unique insight into the experiences of academics working in the sector. These are powerful and deeply personal accounts of working-class academics' lives. When I originally approached the academics and asked them to write their autoethnography as a book chapter, I was particularly interested in how they have navigated their way into academia, if they continue to identify as working-class, or if their social positioning and/or identities have shifted. Some similarities in their stories began to emerge—some of the academics reported experiencing feelings of failure from previous educational experiences, feelings of (un)belonging, tackling imposterism and a longing for more, for personal and professional fulfilment.

The emerging similarities are connected to familiar social issues, for example, being the first in family to go to university; a lack of academic role models within the community and social network and working-class values that are sometimes not conducive to educational achievement. The authors recount uncomfortable feelings such as the imposter phenomenon and I have included Clance and Imes' (1978) theory of 'imposter phenomenon' as it goes some way to understanding how the authors coped with overcoming uncomfortable feelings of self-doubt. Bourdieu's theories of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' also serve the discussion and help to explain some of the phenomena that have emerged from the autoethnographies.

I began this article by stating that more needs to be known and understood about the lives of working-class academics, many of whom undergo unique and profound experiences. Some of those experiences and associated phenomena are discussed and explored here, providing deeper insight into unique stories. Overall, the research—both the book and this article—demonstrate how the working-class academics have shown incredible determination and have arrived at where they are by overcoming and managing difficult and, for some, adverse experiences that are associated with their social class.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Iona Burnell Reilly: Investigation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE
[1] The Office for National Statistics in the UK uses the 'Social Grade' which is a socio-economic classification. People are grouped together by type, and this is mainly based on their social and financial situation (Approximated Social Grade data—Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)).

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