

Working-class Academics: Challenging Deficit Narratives Through Cultural Wealth.

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Abstract

When navigating higher education (HE), working-class academics (WCAs) encounter persistent socioeconomic, cultural, and personal barriers throughout their academic careers. This study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu and Tara Yosso, sought to illuminate the cultural wealth of WCAs. Employing a mixed-methods approach over a five-year period, the research engaged with 244 WCAs from various institutions across the United Kingdom (UK). The findings challenged the dominant deficit narratives surrounding WCAs, revealing that WCAs actively cultivate and leverage a rich array of cultural assets, encompassing examples of aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, social, and resistant capital. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: the profound impact of shared lived experiences in empowering marginalised students, and the crucial role of WCAs as change agents. The study demonstrates how WCAs employ their backgrounds as pedagogical assets while advocating for structural reforms. These findings suggest institutions should formally recognise working-class cultural wealth through revised hiring criteria, targeted support programmes, and inclusive decision-making frameworks. This research advances understanding of how marginalised groups can transform rather than simply adapt to institutional cultures.

Keywords

Working-class academics, cultural wealth, capital, Pierre Bourdieu, Tara Yosso

Overview

Historically, academia has been an elite domain, where class-privileged scholars benefit from unearned advantages that ease their entry and progression within the ivory tower. By contrast, working-class academics (WCAs)—representing just 8.3% to 23% of academics¹ and typically emerging from manual or low-paid backgrounds (Wakeling, 2023; Crew, 2024b)—face substantial economic, social, and cultural barriers in these spaces. A working-class identity develops through multiple intersecting factors—access to resources, cultural practices, social mobility, and community bonds (King, 2019)—revealing complex sociocultural dynamics (Savage et al., 2013). UK studies by Pilgrim-Brown (2023) revealed how cultural practices and financial precarity shape working-class experiences in academia, while Crew’s (2024b) research used Bourdieusian concepts of “habitus” and “capital” to analyse these class-based experiences.

¹ depending on the sample size

Drawing on similar Bourdieusian insights, foundational research from the US has documented parallel challenges. Classic texts such as “Strangers in Paradise” by Ryan and Sackrey (1984) and “This Fine Place So Far From Home” by Dews & Law (1995), have illuminated the myriad struggles and challenges faced by WCAs when it comes to “fitting in” and finding a sense of belonging within the often alien and exclusionary world of academia. Lubrano’s evocative book “Limbo” (2005), also from the US, delves deeper into the complex experience of navigating and straddling “two worlds” - the working-class milieu of one’s origins and the middle- and upper-class environment of higher education (HE). In her US-based study, Hurst (2010) examines the psychological and emotional costs working-class achievers face while pursuing academic success., while Haney’s (2015) research on Canadian academia demonstrates how WCAs must expend additional labour bridging cultural gaps and managing microaggressions. Roscigno et al’s., 2023 extensive study of US sociology faculty revealed how structural constraints and institutional hierarchies continue to disadvantage WCAs in their career, perpetuating barriers in elite academic spaces despite individual merit and achievement.

Contemporary scholarship from the UK has further expanded this field in several ways. Ricketts and Morris (2021) found that WCAs from the UK often feel like a “fish out of water” in academia, struggling with feelings of unbelonging and alienation within the exclusionary culture of HE. Wilson et al’s., (2021) research, demonstrates how WCAs inhabit an uneasy space between their origins and academia, continually negotiating their authenticity and belonging, while striving to maintain connections to their working-class roots. This tension is vividly illustrated in “The Lives of Working-class Academics”, where Burnell Reilly (2022) presents a collection of autoethnographies written by WCAs from the UK. These academics shared how they navigated their way through an industry steeped in elitism, often facing prejudice and discrimination. Rowell and Morris’s (2023) UK based research demonstrates how time becomes a structuring force for early career academics, who constantly work “against the clock” (p.40) while trying to “stay afloat” (ibid) on precarious teaching-focused contracts. While Walkerdine (2021) captures a common experience among UK WCAs, noting that “fear, shame, imposterhood and feeling that at any moment I would be found out, cannot be overstated” (p.62). Alongside this, Crew (2024b) noted how a lack of financial safety nets meant it is difficult for WCAs to manage academic precarity. These academics also reported experiences of hostility in academia which manifested as microaggressions based on accent, humour, clothing, and stereotypes. While this literature documents the institutional barriers faced by WCAs, this article moves beyond deficit perspectives to demonstrate how WCAs’ distinctive knowledge and experiences both enrich academia and offer strategic tools for institutional navigation. This shift in perspective draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Foundations: Pierre Bourdieu and Tara Yosso

This study integrates Bourdieu’s theory of capital with Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model to examine how WCAs navigate and transform HE. While Bourdieu’s framework illuminates how class-based inequalities are reproduced, Yosso’s model reveals how marginalised groups convert challenges into assets. Together, these complementary perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding both the structural barriers WCAs face and their transformative responses.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital provide the initial framing. Field represents academia as a competitive arena (Bourdieu 1984) governed by distinct “rules of the game” (Lareau et al. 2016: 281), positioning agents in hierarchical relationships based on their

habitus and capital. Habitus—shaped by social biography and life experiences—generates "durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 53) that influence perceptions of opportunities, including assumptions about what is "not for the likes of them" (Burnell Reilly 2015: 103). Capital encompasses various resources: economic (material resources enabling academic activities), social (networks and mentoring opportunities), and cultural (valued assets like education and behavioural norms) (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital, while crucial for academic success, are conceptualised through an elite middle-class lens (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Such theoretical frameworks, including those of Schwartz (1971) and Bernstein (1977), problematically presents assimilation into privileged academic culture as the only path to advancement (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 31).

To transcend these limitations and capture how marginalised groups transform barriers into assets, a more transformative framework emerges through Yosso's (2005) CCW model. This framework, grounded in Critical Race Theory, illuminates how unacknowledged capabilities enable institutional navigation. While dominant hierarchies determine "legitimate" knowledge (Diamini et al., 2018), CCW recognises diverse forms of cultural wealth: aspirational (sustaining hopes despite barriers), navigational (manoeuvring through institutions), linguistic (contextual language abilities), familial/social (intergenerational knowledge and community networks), resistant (challenging oppressive systems) (Yosso, 2005), and perspective capital (understanding diverse worldviews) (Jackson-Cole, 2019). This asset-based framework reveals how marginalised groups actively deploy cultural resources for success and empowerment.

Aspirational capital captures how disadvantaged groups maintain educational ambitions despite facing systemic obstacles. This form of capital manifests as a powerful force for transformation. For instance, Basit (2012) demonstrated how aspirational capital drives improved life chances among young minority ethnic British citizens. Similarly, a US study of engineering undergraduates by Dika et al., 2018 found that their stores of aspirational capital positively impacted upon their enrolment, self-efficacy, and persistence, highlighting the need for educational institutions to foster this capital for student success.

Navigational capital encompasses the strategic approaches that marginalised groups develop to excel within often-hostile institutional environments. Tolbert Smith's (2016) research with UK Black male engineers revealed how they deliberately exceeded performance expectations to counter racial stereotypes, transforming institutional barriers into motivation for excellence. Straubhaar's (2024) study of Mexican high school students found they developed sophisticated learned behaviours centered on "getting by," characterised by performative displays of "paying attention" and embodying the "good student" role. These manifestations of docility generated substantial navigational capital that enabled their progression with strong grades and teacher support.

Linguistic capital encompasses disadvantaged groups' communicative skills, such as humour and language proficiency. While Bourdieu views linguistic capital as a social asset, often associated with middle-class linguistic dominance (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021), Yosso emphasises the role of language in bonding marginalised communities. Bourdieu's framework examines language privileges from a top-down perspective, whereas Yosso's asset-based approach highlights how marginalised groups leverage this linguistic capital for social mobility. For example, Kallis and Yarwood's (2021) study of Greek-Cypriot migrants in the UK illustrates linguistic capital in action, showing that while earlier generations view heritage language as essential for preserving ethnic and cultural values, later generations increasingly convert it into economic capital.

Familial/Social capital encompass intergenerational cultural knowledge and community histories, which, together with social networks, provides both economic and social resources. The strength of family support shapes access to opportunities, as networks offer jobs, mentors and connections for education and employment. As theorised by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), social capital resides in reciprocal ties and trust. Expanding on this and Bourdieu's work in this area, Yosso (2005) explains how familial and social capital extends beyond individual connections to include intergenerational support that empowers communities by drawing on cultural heritage, transforming shared wisdom into valuable navigational resources. Wright, Maylor, and Becker's (2016) research found that excluded Black male students maintained strong bonds with their families (familial capital) and with Black community organisations, churches, and schools (social capital). These connections proved invaluable, as they often helped these men develop aspirational and resistant capital, both crucial for achieving educational and personal success.

Resistance capital refers to the skills and strategies marginalised groups employ to challenge and resist oppressive systems and discrimination. This is evident in the narratives of the Black male students in the aforementioned UK study by Wright, Maylor & Becker (2016) who utilised "turnaround narratives" to actively resist institutional labels of failure, transforming negative experiences into motivation for achievement. Alongside this, Revelo and Baber (2018) illustrated resistance capital in Latina/o engineering students who formed support networks that helped them persist while maintaining their cultural identity and empowering future generations. Similarly, low-income, first-generation students of colour in a study by Covarrubias Laiduc and Valle (2022) demonstrated resistance capital by urging faculty to challenge their assumptions about students' resources and abilities, proactively promote campus resources, and enhance cultural awareness to create a more inclusive environment.

In addition to Yosso's examples of community wealth is perspective capital, which refers to the ability to understand situations from diverse worldviews. Research by Jackson-Cole (2019) and Hurst (2010) demonstrated how marginalised students' outsider perspectives enrich academia. For instance, in Jackson-Cole (2019), one student leveraged perspective capital to explain vaccination reluctance in Roma communities, connecting historical persecution to inherent distrust of authorities. Her nuanced awareness of Roma communities' traumatic pasts and current challenges demonstrates the transformative power of inclusive worldviews. Similarly, Hurst's (2010) respondents sought out courses on diverse perspectives and courageously contributed their own experiences. Perspective capital highlights marginalised vantage points as being invaluable knowledge assets.

While Yosso's CCW model originally focused on ethnicity, it has also proven relevant to understanding how the working-class actively leverage cultural resources. For instance, Bettencourt's (2021) US study demonstrated how career and technical education (CTE) students used aspirational capital to pursue educational goals despite limited resources and academic stereotyping. Hope & Quinlan's (2021) UK study of mature working-class students revealed how they used their CCW particularly through familial support, aspirational mindsets, and social networks, to challenge traditional deficit perspectives of working-class learners. The research showed how their local connections and family resources became assets rather than barriers to HE success. Finally, O'Shea's (2016) UK study examined how first-in-family (FiF) university students, traditionally viewed through a deficit lens, demonstrated aspirational, resistant, and familial capital. The FiF students navigated HE by drawing upon both aspirational drive and family support, with partners sharing domestic duties and children

providing motivation. Mature students drew on life and work experiences to manage academic demands while fostering new learning conversations within families.

Researching Working-class Academics

Research Rationale and Objectives.

The rationale for this study is that despite there being detailed studies of widening participation among disadvantaged cohorts (See Tham, Raciti and Dale, 2023 for a recent systematic literature review), aspects of the upward mobility of academics are still insufficiently explored (Luczaj, 2023). This research study, conducted over the course of five years, had three research objectives: 1. to illuminate the lived experiences of WCAs (discussed in Crew, 2020, 2021, 2022; 2024a, 2024b), and 2. to explore the impact of intersectionality on the realities of WCAs'. (Crew 2024b). This article will focus on the third objective: to gain insights into the cultural wealth, or assets prevalent among WCAs.

This study comprised two phases of video-conference interviews (n=89, n=74), with interviews lasting between 40-120 minutes. While qualitative interviews have faced criticism regarding their lack of objectivity and potential for bias (Kvale, 2007), they remain valuable tools for understanding how individuals make meaning of their social experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To mitigate potential researcher bias, a third phase included a survey, which was completed by 90 respondents. This project recruited WCA respondents from diverse UK institutions, roles, disciplines, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and dis/abilities to build a multidimensional, collective picture of WCAs. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided informed consent and were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The project received ethical approval from Bangor University's Ethics Board².

Recruitment and Sample

Respondents were recruited via social media (Twitter/X) and academic conferences using self-definition as the key criteria, requiring participants to identify as a WCA and to have been a current or recent (within the last 6 months) academic. This captured nuanced, fluid class identifications (Savage et al, 2013). Despite the difficulties with this sampling strategy³ the sample included professors, lecturers and senior lecturers, early career researchers, and PhD students from 34 subject disciplines within HE and from across all types of institutions within the UK. Approximately two-thirds were female, 20% had a disability, and 10% were ethnic minorities. Over three-quarters reported parents who were in manual occupations while just 10% had a degree-educated parent, indicating stark educational discontinuity. The following outlines the key themes found in over 1600 pages of interview and survey data.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and survey responses were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The analysis specifically looked for examples of cultural wealth aligned with Yosso's framework while remaining open to emergent themes.

² Reference Number: BLSS14

³ This recruitment strategy may have excluded WCAs who don't use Twitter or can't attend conferences due to financial constraints, disability, or precarious employment, potentially limiting representation of more marginalised voices.

Defining a WCA

Although 10% of respondents struggled to label themselves as a WCA due to their current academic positions, the majority (90%) confirmed a persistent working-class identification rooted in their upbringing, values and experiences. Analysis revealed WCA status encompasses cultural background, financial challenges, subjective class awareness, evolving habitus negotiations, and disparities across forms of capital, though experiences did vary. As one academic notes:

"elements from my life experience – upbringing, education, family, geography, hobbies & interests, accent, clothing – and the classed nature of those experiences have a fundamental impact on my integration as a member of “the academy”." [Sadie⁴, an Assistant Professor in Law at a post-1992⁵ institution]

This quotation and others that were similar emphasised how broader cultural dimensions, belonging and fit shape WCA identities alongside concrete class markers.

While some WCAs had moved beyond financial hardship, many still face precarity, especially early career researchers: *"The principal problem is precarity"* remarked Mia, a PhD Student in Administration at a traditional institution⁶. Alongside this, most WCAs mentioned that securing research funding could be particularly challenging, especially those working at post-1992 institutions due to competition and limited institutional support, further destabilising job security. For Kayden, an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at a post-1992 institution, WCA status meant *"striv[ing] to connect their identity and experiences to give back to their community"* through teaching and research - a commitment to increasing access and representation which echoed across many narratives.

As WCAs enter and adjust within academia, three equally common habitus adaptations emerged – cleft, abandoned and chameleon. Those with abandoned habitus often felt pressured to "pass" by altering mannerisms and suppressing outsider traits, though they would often feel inauthentic. A chameleon habitus (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013) enabled code-switching between worlds to retain working-class identities while acquiring the necessary capital to navigate academia. A cleft habitus reflected profound alienation between backgrounds, visible in strained personal relationships. As Bethany, a PhD Student in English and Art History at a traditional institution, describes: *"two bubbles"* exist where university and home feel disconnected. This duality creates tensions between individual advancement and community connection, as the WCA pathway enabled mobility while potentially straining social and cultural bonds.

The analysis of capital distribution revealed persistent disparities that appeared to systematically disadvantage WCAs, particularly in accessing research funding opportunities. As Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution, observed: *"everyone knows that the vast majority of research funding goes to the chosen few institutions...the rest of us are left trying to be put forward by our institution for the scraps."* - a pattern that perpetuates systemic inequalities across the sector. Frank, a Lecturer in Geography at a Russell

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

⁵ Post-1992 institutions (former polytechnics that gained university status after 1992)

⁶ Traditional institutions (pre-1992 universities)

Group institution⁷, talked of how his exposure to cultural events like attending plays without cost (due to his father's work as an usher) enriched his cultural capital, however, like other respondents he recognised that his cultural capital was still not as substantial as that of his colleagues from elite backgrounds who had been able to cultivate such capital from a young age. Respondents also reported having smaller academic networks compared to their middle-class peers, which they felt disadvantaged them in accessing opportunities. For example, Paige, a Lecturer in Health Sciences at a traditional institution faced challenges navigating academia without guidance from family members with academic experience, while Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution noted he lacked the "insider networks" that could help him understand the unwritten norms of academia.

Working-class Academic Cultural Capital

Studies of WCAs typically paint a stark picture of their uphill battle - navigating financial precarity, confronting class-based microaggressions, and struggling to understand the unspoken rules of an elite environment. These challenges, though real, overshadow the diverse cultural assets WCAs bring to academia. They arrive equipped with a distinct toolkit, forged from their lived experiences, and brimming with what Patricia Hill Collins (2019) eloquently termed "counterstories." Close reading of the interview and survey transcripts revealed that WCA experiences aligned with and mapped onto Yosso's CCW framework, illustrating how their cultural resources enriched the academic environment.

Aspirational Capital

WCA respondents exemplified aspirational capital by pursuing academic careers, despite challenges. As Lucas, a Senior Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, noted, "*the mere presence of people like us demonstrates resilience.*" Respondents persevered through financial anxieties and precarity, channelling their resilience into an unyielding commitment to academic success. Although some considered leaving academia due to financial pressures, they remained driven by a purpose to uplift underserved communities, a dedication rooted in their early hardships. By achieving success amidst barriers, these WCAs embodied aspirational capital that empowers their communities. Bev, a Sociology PhD student at a post-1992 institution, expanded on how her early struggles strengthened her resolve: "*I think if I didn't have that as part of my character, because of my upbringing, I would have quit by now.*" In facing and overcoming these challenges, WCAs not only demonstrate resilience but actively reshape academic spaces to be more inclusive for future generations.

Respondents' aspirational capital was evident in their commitment to positive change in academia and beyond. Becky, an Oxbridge PhD student in English, initiated community art projects to preserve her neighbourhood's cultural heritage. Yvonne, a Health and Social Care Lecturer at a Russell Group institution, found inspiration in mentors with similar backgrounds: "*Seeing professors from backgrounds like mine showed me I could do it too. They paved the way.*" Driven by a commitment to "pay it forward," WCAs like Yvonne aim to challenge the "deficit discourse" about the working class and inspire marginalised students through visible representation. As Ellie, a Lecturer in Health Sciences, emphasised, relatable role models counter stereotypes, and as Darren, a PhD student in Gaming, explained, "*I want to inspire people from all backgrounds to show them what is possible.*" Through mentoring, these WCAs'

⁷ The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK research-intensive universities, often considered Britain's most prestigious higher education institutions.

aspirational capital not only supported the next generation but also had the potential to drive systemic change, helping marginalised students pursue HE despite societal barriers.

Navigational Capital.

Drawing on navigational capital, respondents assisted students in deciphering the hidden rules of academia. For instance, Craig, a Lecturer in Mental Health, utilised his personal experiences to clarify academic expectations for students. Respondents also mentioned offering hands-on writing and research mentorship, while other respondents were explicit about the need to develop networking skills. This “paying forward” of hard-earned knowledge exemplified navigational capital. Additionally, respondents aimed to empower students and early career researchers through innovative initiatives such as writing retreats, cross-year mentorships, and peer mentoring. Nonetheless, some respondents encountered resistance; for example, Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution, stated:

"I've worked hard on providing these resources for my students, all students...and all my institution can do is call it handholding."

This loaded term implied biases regarding the legitimacy of support based on student demographics. Despite this, many persisted, with Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an elite institution, describing it as a "*moral obligation*."

Precarious staff found it particularly challenging to access navigational capital. Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, remarked, "*I faced significantly reduced access to professional networks*." Talia, a Research Assistant in Nursing at another traditional institution, concurred: "*I don't have the same level of academic support, including mentorship and professional development opportunities*." This uneven access to navigational capital often exacerbates the challenges faced by WCAs. Nevertheless, most WCA respondents remained committed mentors and empowered their students despite facing institutional hurdles. By drawing on their own experiences with inequality, these WCAs leveraged their navigational capital to advocate for policy changes aimed at addressing systemic barriers affecting WCAs and other marginalised academics. Collectively, these findings illustrate how WCAs harness the potential of navigational capital for grassroots empowerment, providing both individual guidance as mentors and broader recommendations on how to challenge inequitable institutional cultures.

Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital illuminates why regional accents are often viewed as “undesirable” in academia. Yosso's notion of linguistic capital further elaborates on this, emphasising that the communication skills nurtured within one's community can differ from HE's dominant linguistic norms yet remain powerful in their own right. Some respondents experienced stigma for their regional accents; however, this linguistic identity also cultivated a shared sense of community with students. As Dominic explained, "*Students often express appreciation for my Geordie accent, as it helps them feel more relaxed and comfortable*." Similarly, Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care at a Russell Group university, remarked, "*My local, regional accent is a reminder to students that academics are not just posh people*," emphasising the importance of authenticity and approachability. By resisting “posh” stereotypes, regional accents made these WCAs more relatable, helping to humanise academia

for their students from marginalised backgrounds who often did not identify with the dominant academic culture.

Respondents demonstrated both linguistic and navigational capital through their openness about adapting communication styles across different settings. For instance, Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an elite institution, described his approach:

"I tell students to use the language that fits where you are... I explain how I shift between home dialect with family and academic speak at university. Both have value. It helps students know that academics code-switch too."

Alan highlighted the skill of seamlessly navigating academic and social registers, which often allows WCAs to connect effectively with diverse audiences. By sharing these "hidden rules," WCAs empower students to understand the demands of academic discourse. Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution, noted, *"I let students know that the game is tough, but it can be done—with luck and hard work."* This transparency often helps students to grasp and manage the expectations of HE, equipping them with the essential tools to succeed both in academia and beyond.

Familial/social capital

Analysis revealed that the interlinked forms of familial and social capital, proved indispensable for my respondents who had disabilities. As Tina, a Lecturer in Secondary and Post-Compulsory Education at a post-1992 institution shared, *"My parents happily read my work aloud when my vision worsens. They're my rock"* - family assistance enabled resilience. Campus groups like Afro-Caribbean societies also provided community and validation when WCA respondents struggled with adversity. Additionally, online networks offered solidarity, with Brandon, a teaching assistant in Health Studies at a post-1992 institution emphasising, *"I couldn't navigate ableist campuses without [them]."* Examples of familial capital included WCAs drawing upon their lived experiences to conduct research illuminating issues like poverty and discrimination. They also engaged in outreach projects in community centres that shared academic skills with potential students. Furthermore, social capital facilitated building student support networks, as WCAs discussed how they often mentored those from similar backgrounds, empowering them to overcome shared academic challenges through peer solidarity. Moreover, their community ties helped to connect academia with grassroots organisations, enabling impactful collaborations. These WCAs drew on diverse forms of capital from their support networks - including family, online forums, and community ties - which provided stability and resources to overcome academic barriers.

Resistance Capital

My WCA respondents demonstrated resistance capital through a working-class pedagogy that challenged dominant narratives and recognised class-based experiences as valuable "funds of knowledge" (Crew, 2020; 2024b). Their teaching approach often deliberately highlighted systemic inequalities while using their backgrounds to empower marginalised students. WCA teaching also utilised counter-hegemonic methods, as Alan noted *"projects applying theory to real world scenarios"* which often fostered students' intellectual resistance by empowering their critical analysis of unjust social structures. Beyond critical research and teaching, resistance capital manifested through direct inclusion of lived experiences. For instance, Brandon described using the history of (his) disability to expose and combat ableism by making

the “*invisible visible*”. Some WCAs directly challenged imposter syndrome narratives that often perpetuated barriers, as Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution asserted “*I refuse to buy into the idea that I don’t deserve to be here.*” Collectively, these practices reframe marginalised backgrounds as assets, enriching academia.

Perspectives on resistance tactics like the University and College Union (UCU) strikes⁸ varied. Some participated to address pay inequalities, while others had reservations, noting that there were “*more effective ways to bring lasting change*”⁹. For instance, a few respondents even proposed leveraging collective power over their research outputs, arguing “*if you want change, stop giving them our intellectual capital*”¹⁰. Though opinions on specific resistance tactics were mixed; by mobilising their cultural wealth through critical scholarship, counter narratives, and ground-up empowerment, my respondents collectively demonstrated the profound change making potential embodied within the resistance capital possessed by WCAs.

Perspective Capital

My respondents showed perspective capital through their ability to understand marginalised experiences. As Amy, a Teaching Fellow in English at a Russell Group institution explained, “*having come from a disadvantaged background, I see injustices and inequities that others don’t.*” And Mila, a Lecturer in the School of Education and Communities at a traditional institution echoed, “*We bring understanding, we bring humour, we bring authentic news, we bring sadness sometimes.*” These excerpts show how these WCAs often provided a deeper awareness of societal issues, a sensitivity to injustices, and a unique empathy - assets often overlooked in academia. Moreover, they often applied this capital towards progress, with Sal, a Lecturer in Social Studies at a traditional institution noting “*insights into the reforms needed in higher education*” and Jamie, a Lecturer in History at a traditional institution arguing “*our ability to understand varied perspectives, built from navigating different worlds, can solve problems and reduce conflicts when applied collectively.*” As Theo, a Politics Research Fellow¹¹ summarised, “*Because our journeys have often been a lot less traditional we see institutions that are rooted in tradition...where everything is old fashioned. We can come in with our different perspectives and we can...change, modernise, awaken these institutions and be a force for good.*” This change making potential of inclusive worldviews compels institutions to recognise marginalised assets.

Discussion

This study has illustrated that a cohort of WCAs contribute to academia with their CCW. In addition to this, two prominent themes emerged across the findings: empowerment through shared experiences, and WCAs as change makers.

⁸ From 2018 to 2023, UK university staff, represented by the University and College Union (UCU), were engaged in an industrial dispute with their employers, represented by Universities UK (UUK) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension plan and issues of pay equality, workload, casualisation, and pay levels. While the UCU successfully resolved the USS dispute in March 2023, returning to 2017 terms, they were unsuccessful in addressing the “Four Fights” as a November 2023 ballot to extend action failed to meet the required turnout. (house of Commons Library, 2024)

⁹ This respondent preferred to give no identifying details

¹⁰ This respondent preferred to give no identifying details

¹¹ This respondent did not wish to give details of their institution.

Empowerment through Shared Experiences

A major theme that emerged from the research findings was how these WCAs leveraged their backgrounds and shared lived experiences to empower their students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Respondents recounted their own educational challenges and offered resources to unveil the "hidden curriculum" — the tacit knowledge and skills influenced by privileged backgrounds (Jackson, 1968) that often poses hurdles for first-generation, minority, or marginalised students. Through sharing what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) term as the "rules of the game" that guide expected behaviours and interactions within the academic realm (Giazitzoglu and Muzio, 2021), these WCAs actively equipped students with tools for success through multiple forms of cultural capital. Their linguistic capital, demonstrated through regional accents, helped create more relatable academic spaces, with Dominic noting how his accent fostered student comfort and engagement. Similarly, Yvonne's local accent challenged traditional academic stereotypes and elitist assumptions about who belongs in academia. Through navigational capital, respondents like Craig utilised personal experiences to clarify academic expectations, while others developed comprehensive approaches to writing and research mentorship. Some WCAs initiated innovative programmes like writing retreats and cross-year mentorships, channelling their personal journeys into tangible strategies for student development and success.

The foundation of this guidance lies in a shared humanity and commitment to "paying it forward" (Walker & Yip, 2018). As respondents openly shared experiences of navigating academic precarity and imposter syndrome, they demonstrated what Rumsby (2022) identifies as the power of empathetic approaches in sparking ambition among working-class students. Alan exemplified this through his approach to code-switching, emphasising the importance of linguistic flexibility in academic success. However, this support sometimes faced institutional resistance. As Eddie noted, his comprehensive student support initiatives were often dismissively labelled as "handholding" revealing how support initiatives can often be undermined by deep-seated classist biases within academia. Despite such challenges, many of these WCA respondents persisted in their commitment to student support, with Alan describing it as a "*moral obligation*" and arguing that WCAs have a unique responsibility to make academia more accessible and inclusive for marginalised students.

Beyond individual mentorship, WCAs acted as cultural navigators, fostering the caring relationships and inspirational support that Eller, Lev, and Feurer (2014) identify as essential to effective mentoring. This was particularly evident in how respondents often leveraged their familial and social capital to support students with disabilities. Tina's experience highlighted the crucial role of family support in enabling academic success despite her visual impairment, demonstrating how family assistance often enabled resilience and academic progression. Additionally, respondent reported how campus groups and online networks provided crucial community support structures, with Brandon emphasising their transformative potential for disabled students navigating academic environments.

WCAs as Change Agents

This study also demonstrated that this cohort of WCAs often served as change agents within educational institutions - defined by Fullan (2011) as individuals who possess the ability to effectively transform organisational operations. Drawing on their perspective capital, respondents consistently identified inequities invisible to others, with Amy and Mila highlighting how their backgrounds enabled them to recognise systemic barriers and bring

authentic perspectives to academia. This can position WCAs as what Sandhu (2017) terms "experts by experience," whereby offering valuable firsthand insights into social issues and potential reforms. WCAs often demonstrated resistance capital through a distinctly working-class pedagogy that challenged dominant narratives and recognised class-based experiences as valuable funds of knowledge (Crew, 2020; 2024b). This manifested through various approaches, from Alan's application of theory to real-world scenarios to Brandon's efforts to expose institutional ableism. Their approaches to resistance varied, particularly regarding union activities like UCU strikes, with some participating in traditional industrial action while others proposed alternative forms of collective action such as leveraging control over intellectual capital.

This cohort of WCAs often combined resistant capital (critiquing institutional practices) with navigational capital (implementing practical reforms) to effect institutional transformation through their commitment to "paying forward" hard-earned knowledge and advocating for policy changes. As Theo summarised, their non-traditional journeys positioned them to modernise traditional institutions, echoing Hills Collins's (2019) emphasis on the transformative potential of marginalised voices. Their strategies encompassed implementing inclusive pedagogy, undertaking applied research addressing real-world issues, and directly advocating for policy reforms. While study participants demonstrated success in introducing inclusive pedagogical techniques within individual classrooms, expanding this impact across entire institutions remains rare. Through this work, these WCAs actively contributed to aligning institutional frameworks with principles of equity and fairness, benefiting the entire educational community through both individual advocacy and structural change.

Study Limitations and Future Directions.

This study has several limitations. The Twitter ("X") based recruitment may have excluded WCAs who don't use social media or discuss class identity openly. The UK-focused sample also limits broader geographical generalisability.

Future research should examine WCAs' cultural wealth across different disciplines as well as social and geographical contexts, assess long-term mentorship impacts, and explore international comparisons. Institutions need to formally recognise WCAs' cultural wealth through mentoring programmes, revised promotion criteria, and funded initiatives that value working-class perspectives in pursuit of educational equity.

Conclusion

This study advances scholarship on WCAs in three significant ways. First, by applying Yosso's CCW framework to 244 UK academics' experiences, it moves beyond deficit narratives to theorise how working-class backgrounds generate distinct forms of cultural capital within elite spaces. Second, it reveals specific mechanisms through which WCAs transform their class experiences into pedagogical and leadership assets, showing their unique capacity for institutional change. Third, it documents how WCAs' combination of lived experience and commitment to social justice enables them to both support disadvantaged students and challenge systemic inequities. Rather than viewing WCAs as outsiders lacking cultural capital, this research demonstrates their role as transformative agents who actively enrich academia.

These insights can offer concrete recommendations for institutional change. Moving forward, universities must reform hiring and promotion practices to recognise working-class cultural

wealth, establish targeted financial and professional development support, and create formal channels for WCA perspectives in decision-making processes. This implementation will require robust accountability mechanisms, including regular data collection and progress reporting. Moreover, institutions must also actively cultivate environments where working-class cultural wealth is no longer ignored or merely acknowledged but valued as being essential to academic excellence. By centering WCA perspectives and contributions, institutions can move beyond producing symbolic diversity initiatives toward meaningful structural transformation that benefits not only working-class people, but the entire academic community.

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