

# 324 Academics of working-class heritage talking: a participatory storytelling project with academics working in UK-based elite institutions

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## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

This paper discusses the outcomes of an SRHE-funded participatory storytelling study with eight UK-based academics of working-class heritage (AWCH). Using story circle approaches, lived experiences became sites of critique and analysis to reflect on what it means to become an AWCH. Working with narrative contributions from the story circles, the participants created three composite stories representing aspects of their collective transitions into and through academia. These stories were transformed into interactive comics alongside an illustrator/coder. Key findings from the study highlight the generative possibilities of composite storytelling approaches and comic-research to create reflexive opportunities to (re)imagine what it means to become an AWCH. However, the study demonstrated the need for participants, and the researcher, to be ethically vigilant to ensure the inquiry space does not become an oppressive space where participants feel silenced, owing to some stories being more valued as authentic representations of working-class experience than others.

## Full paper

### Introduction

The lived experiences of academics of working-class heritage (AWCH) continue to be the focus of studies concerned with themes of equity and inclusion in higher education. Despite a growing body of work, a sense that academic spaces were not created with working-class people in mind persists (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; Morley, 2021). Perceptions of exclusion are reinforced by stubborn stereotypes representing AWCH in limited ways, e.g. the perpetual victim or the plucky socially mobile hero overcoming adversity as part of a rags-to-riches narrative (Brook and Michell, 2012; Morley, 2021). These characterisations reinforce pernicious representations of working-class life as something to escape owing to a perceived lack of epistemic and cultural wealth (Lawler, 2014; Lee, 2017). However, such depictions belie the rich diversity of experience among working-class groups, and by extension AWCH (Poole, 2021). Therefore, more needs to be done to create opportunities for people of working-class heritage, in all areas of academia, to research their own lived experiences on their terms, rather than being objects of curiosity in the work of other more powerful others (Walkerdine, 2021).

This SRHE-funded participatory storytelling project represents a commitment to creating spaces where life histories become the sites of critique and analysis to challenge forms of social injustice. Over 18 months, eight participants working in elite UK-based institutions came together to unsettle, interrogate and reimagine how their transitions into and through academia affect their sense of becoming a person of working-class heritage. Mobilising creative storytelling methods, the participants reflexively considered “the many discomforts, discords, and frictions involved in a subject position of being working-class in socio-cultural organisations that were never designed to include them” (Morley, 2021: 10). The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the diverse and multiple experiences which represent becoming an AWCH?
2. How does the interplay of different social, cultural and historical aspects of the participants' lived experiences affect the storytelling experience?
3. What creative conditions are needed to facilitate narrative encounters which lead to participants unsettling and interrogating their lived experiences so new interpretations might develop?

Narrative contributions were produced through a series of story circles in which participants shared experiences shaping their sense of becoming an AWCH. Participants reorganised into smaller groups where they worked with contributions from the story circles to create three composite stories: roots, and routes into academia; uncertain career pathways into academia and developing the epistemic confidence to be heard. Alongside an illustrator/coder, the groups transformed the composites into a series of interactive comics. Utilising audio, text-based and visual modalities, the participants worked with transcripts and observations from the research process to create comics which troubled binaries placing creative forms of knowledge production in opposition to 'traditional' forms of research (Nisbet, 2002).

## Methodology and methods

The concept of narrative encounter provided an analytical lens through which to understand how convergent and divergent lived experiences shaped the stories participants created to represent becoming an AWCH. Drawing on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Goodson and Gill (2011: 74) characterise the "narrative encounter" as an interpretatively disruptive process providing individuals opportunities to develop new "understandings of self, other and the world."

A series of data production methods were used:

1. Biographical questionnaire seeking basic demographic data and reasons for participating.
2. Story circles (x5) in which participants shared and critiqued stories on themes of being and becoming an AWCH.
3. End-of-project interviews (x6) – one participant was not interviewed.
4. Researcher observations and reflections.

Data from the study were analysed using a reflexive thematic approach. I worked across the data sets using deductive concept driven codes and inductive data-driven codes to iteratively generate themes forming the basis of my findings.

## Key findings

The main findings of the work are represented through the following themes:

- The emotional work of coming to terms with a liminal existence as an academic of working-class heritage
- Generating trust through the reciprocity of sharing and listening
- Generative possibilities of working in a messy space
- Being vigilant against the development of epistemic bubbles

I argue that the narrative approaches mobilised in this study are transferable to other contexts where efforts are made to provide under-represented social groups opportunities to tell their stories about their lived experiences on their terms. I stress, however, that for this to happen a great deal of ethical care needs to be taken to ensure spaces designed to explore the effects of marginalisation do not become sites of further exclusion because some stories become more valued than others.

## References

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