

Is 'solidarity' the most important word in the language of the working-class academic?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

There is an increasing body of literature which discusses the lives and experiences of working-class academics or those who identify as having a working-class heritage (notably the work of Carole Binns, Teresa Crew, Diane Reay). This paper outlines some initial findings from an ongoing doctoral study exploring the career decisions, journeys and trajectories of working-class academics. The study is underpinned by a constructivist narrative methodology, drawing on a series of three one-to-one conversations with six participants. This paper focuses on the theme of solidarity, suggesting that connecting with working-class peers is a key mechanism for academics with working-class heritage to enact transformational change, both within their own careers and across the sector.

Full paper

American labour leader and activist Harry Bridges is quoted as saying, "The most important word in the language of the working class is 'solidarity'". This paper draws on findings from an ongoing doctoral thesis exploring the career decisions, journeys and trajectories of academics with working-class heritage, to conclude that solidarity might be as important to improving the lives of working-class academics as it was to the longshoremen and maritime workers that Bridges represented.

In 2010, Wakeling asked if there can be such a thing as a working-class academic. Crew (2020) drew on research data from 89 qualitative interviews to confirm that it is indeed possible to be both working-class and an academic. Aligned with this, Beswick (2020) captured the messiness of class, acknowledging that individuals can still *feel* working-class, even if external measurements no longer quantify it. Whether or not academics are quantifiably or affectively working-class, Crew's statement that "the material conditions of my heritage have a lasting impact on my identity, especially in a hierarchical institution like academia" (2020, p.50) resonates. Poole (2021) suggests that class identity is a process of bricolage, where individuals create an identity that is authentically congruent with their experiences. Davis et al (2024) build on this to highlight that being working-class in academia is not a homogenous experience, instead suggesting that classed identities are complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory.

Although educational opportunities have increased, Lindley and Machin (2012) suggest that this has hindered social mobility, as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have not been able to take

advantage of these opportunities as readily as their more advantaged peers. Similarly, Reay (2016) suggests that the massification of higher education has resulted in working-class students being more likely to be excluded from 'elite' universities, which impacts their access to the academic career pipeline.

The project that this paper draws from utilises a constructivist narrative methodology (Denicolo et al, 2016), rooted in the notion that all knowledge is constructed from experience. During the summer of 2023, six academics who identify as working-class or as having working-class heritage took part in a series of three one-to-one conversations with the researcher. The first conversation reviewed their career timelines and journey to date; the second drew on photovoice methodology (Wang and Burris, 1997) to examine their current role and career trajectory; and the final conversation was a form of co-production, where the researcher worked with each participant to reflect on earlier conversations to answer the research questions. This centred participant voices in the research process as a way of limiting testimonial injustice (Steers-McCrum, 2020).

Findings from this research cover a broad range of topics, from the complexity of class identities to the different ways that class can impact career journeys and decisions. The most relevant theme for this paper is one of solidarity: that working-class academics value having the space and time to find and connect with working-class peers, through both formal and informal work opportunities. The value of project participation was also discussed, with one participant noting that the conversation was "a little bit of therapy", enabling them to consider their classed experiences and make connections that might otherwise have been missed. This resonates with findings from the Academics of Working-Class Heritage Talking project, where "the project represented a space for [participants] to find a sense of fit without feeling compelled to perform an idealised version of their 'self'" (Davis, 2023, p.4).

When discussing how institutions can support working-class academics, participant recommendations centred around creating spaces to share knowledge and to break down barriers for working-class students to access a career in academia. For example, through increased outreach activities across the academic pipeline, with one participant suggesting that "maybe we need some sort of equivalent to widening participation, but for academic staff!". This resonates with career development literature which explores how practitioners can challenge epistemic injustice in careers guidance (e.g., Bengtsson, 2022).

Whilst it shouldn't be left to working-class staff to 'do the work', it seems unlikely that others will seek to challenge the entrenched classism of academia, particularly when doing so might undermine their own position. Additionally, it is impossible for any individual to single handedly resolve the myriad of challenges that working-class people face in navigating an academic career. Therefore, it logically follows that solidarity – the collective agreement of feeling or action among those with a common interest – is a desirable and necessary mechanism for change, not just for the longshoremen and maritime workers that Bridges represented, but for working-class academics too.

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