"No words, just two letters 'Dr'": Working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a Sociology PhD and into academia.

Newer Researcher's Award: Final Report

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

Acknowledgements and reflections on process

Firstly, I would like to thank Dr Kirsty Finn, for encouraging me to submit to the SRHE Newer Researcher funding scheme in the initial instance. For mentoring me through the application process, providing me with insightful guidance on how to focus and frame my project, for sharing some of the 'unwritten rules' of what a funding application requires, for introducing me to the work of Berlant and for stressing the importance of the projects themes and focus and indeed helping me refine them into something sociologically meaningful and manageable. On this note, I would also like to thank Dr Emily Danvers for very kindly sharing with me her successful SRHE Newer Researcher proposal for the project 'Prevent/ing criticality: the pedagogical impact of PREVENT in UK universities'. As mentioned in greater detail below, I would like to thank SRHE for their supportive approach to this project's timeline and methodology in light of restraints bought about by the pandemic as well as those pertaining to my own personally and professional trajectory, especially Rob Gresham. The SRHE's support and flexibility demonstrates their commitment to early career researchers and to equitable research practices per se. I would also like to thank my mentor on this project, Professor Yvette Taylor. Finally, I would like to thank the people that have made this research possible, the thirteen participants of this study that took time out of their working day to share with me their journeys to and through doctoral study and into and out of academia. Thank you for trusting me with your personal biographies and stories (many of which were deeply personal and sensitive). Importantly, I thank you for talking so openly and honestly with me, in a field as small as British sociology I am grateful that you trust me to talk freely and hope I have sufficiently conveyed your experiences, thoughts and feelings sufficiently.

A Note on Timeline

Much time has passed since I received confirmation that I had received the SRHE Newer Researcher Funding Award. This project spanned a far longer timeline that initially envisaged, a complex mix unforeseen personal, professional and pandemic issues arose. The first, moving from an academic job at the University of Glasgow, Scotland as a post-doctoral researcher to a teaching focused lectureship at the University of Sussex, England and the need to orient my time and attention to my new day job at hand. Then, the pandemic hit, with my initial plans on face-to-face interviews, group work sessions and on campus walking tours I decided to pause the project, in the hope that normality would soon resume. This was not, however, to be and so I decided to move forward with the fieldwork using online methods. Then in late 2020 early 2021 my endometrioses symptoms re-emerged, and it became apparent that I would need a second laparoscopy, and so the wait for surgery began, with symptoms becoming worse as time progressed thus subsequently delaying the speed at which the project progressed as I conducted interviews throughout 2021 starting in March and ending in December. Throughout this project, I have missed nearly every deadline given to me, as you can imagine as an early career researcher, imposterism pervaded. I had always been on time with projects and deadline, was it that this time I just couldn't manage? No, it was not. It was just because a lot of life had happened all at once, a major job change, a pandemic and then long wait for major surgery followed by recovery. I am exceptionally grateful to SRHE for their understanding and flexibility and especially to Rob Gresham for the support, care and empathy extended to me.

Executive Summary

Thirteen working-class early career researchers were interviewed across a range of universities in the UK, all of whom had studied for PhD's in sociology, twelve had completed their PhD's, one had left prior to completion. Ten participants were currently employed in academia (precariously or otherwise), and three had chosen to leave academia, working instead in the third sector. Participants described, in depth and detail their experiences of journeying to and through a Sociology PhD and into academia and highlighted several barriers and strategies for success. In journeying to the PhD, the importance of receiving scholarship funding and the importance of the VIP, often academic points of contacts, who are mostly (though not always) from a working-class background who functioned as a kind of 'gatekeeper' to post-graduate study and academia in terms of sparking the notion that doctoral study was as possible pathway and provided a window into academia, demystifying academia, the postgraduate applications / scholarship process. Participants accounts also demonstrate a range of barriers, including a rejection of the need to be hyper geographically mobile in order to secure academic employment, the precarious nature of navigating the academic job market and academia per se. Participants also spoke at length about the multitude of skills and experiences that they were required to demonstrate in order to navigate the academic job market. The future of UKHE and the diversity of leadership and scholarship is currently under threat. I argue that the values of diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity, especially that of class diversity that universities are quick to espouse be placed at the centre of higher education policy and practice, especially so at the postgraduate level.

Background and Rationale

This SRHE Newer Researcher's Award funded project aimed to explore the lived experience of being working-class and moving through doctoral study into the academic workforce. It was motivated by the fact that higher-education has historically existed as sit of exclusion for the working-classes, from participation to knowledge production and leadership. Despite the global massification of education higher education continues to operate as a classed pathway and bastion of classed knowledge, especially so given academia's classed ceiling.

Notwithstanding the expansion of doctoral study, it continues to operate as a classed pathway (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018); a problem exacerbated by the surplus of doctoral graduates and an increasingly congested precarious global academic labour market. Although a prerequisite for academic careers, the doctorate no longer operates as a passport *into* the ivory tower. Instead, to get in and get on, survive, and thrive aspiring academics are required to demonstrate their academic par excellence though a portfolio of skills and successes, from teaching excellence, world leading publications to winning funding and everything else in between and on the periphery. Herein lay the 'enterprising' and 'superstar' early career academic (Knights and Clarke 2014: 338; the "'academic super-hero' [who is] capable of being everything to everyone" (Pitt and Mewburn 2016:99).

However, not everyone *is capable* of being everything to everyone. "The negative affects circulating in HE institutions have the capacity to attach themselves to particular bodies more easily than others" (Loveday 2016:1142) with the working-class academic being one such body (Taylor and Lahad 2018; Breeze 2018). It is now accepted that the 'leaky pipeline' (Handforth 2018) of academia, whereby 'non-traditional' bodies remain absent from professorial and higher managerial positions within UKHE threatens the diversity of scholarship and leadership. As Diane Reay argued over two decades ago "the experiences of the working classes get left out because they have no constituency in academia" (Reay 1997: 27). This project sees to add to this existing body of literature by conducting a concerted UK based study exploring the effects of neo-liberal academia upon working-class, aspiring academics navigating doctoral study and early career academia.

Project Aims and Research Questions

This project builds on feminist research that calls out the 'toxic impossibilities' (Pereira 2016) of neoliberal academic life (Breeze 2018; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Loveday 2018; Pereira 2016, 2017; McLean 2016; Nash 2019). Specifically, it explores how first generation, working-class ECRs navigate the "intolerable demands" (Gill 2010: 237) of neoliberal academia. The research recognises that academia, for working-class aspiring academics remains a seductive endeavour (Taylor 2013) as they often engage in the 'labour of love' (Cannizzo 2017) out of "an ethic of service to others less 'lucky' than them" (Mahony & Zmroczek 1997:5). It aims to explore the extent to which academia, for working-class ECRs operates as 'cruel optimism'; that is, "a relation of attachment to comprised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible and toxic" (Berlant 2011: 21). After all, it is "those less socio-economically affluent who are less able to 'ride the wave' of precarity in the sector" (Read & Leathwood 2018:346).

To do this, this study explored thirteen working-class, ECR lived experiences of moving through doctoral study into the academic workforce. It seeks to make visible the successes, hurdles and ambivalences of this precarious and often invisible group of academics. This project adopts a Bourdieusian understanding of social class, considering the role of economic, social and cultural capital when seeking to identify ones social-class positioning. Bourdieu proposes an understanding of social class based upon the notion of a "three-dimensional space" (Bourdieu 1984: 226) to which individuals are positioned and "distributed [in accordance] to the overall capital they possess [and in accordance] to the structure of their capital" (Bourdieu 1989: 17). Whilst participants self-identified as coming from a working-class background and as being a first-generation (at the undergraduate level), class background and first-generation status were further explored and confirmed through the in-depth interviews. All participants were UK domiciled doctoral students and ECRs across a range of university types. Whilst initially, the project sought to explore working-class doctoral and ECRs from across the social sciences, participant recruitment soon revealed a skewedness towards the discipline of sociology. Thus, the decision was taken to adopt a disciplinary case study approach, focusing upon the discipline of sociology for reasons outlined below.

Sociology as a Case Study

The discipline of sociology has been chosen as a manageable case study for a project of this size and scope and for its historical and epistemological significance. According to the seminal sociologist Becker, as sociologists "we can never avoid taking sides" (1996: 245) and thus sociology has subsequently emerged as a discipline with a long history taking the side of the underdog (Becker 1996). At this same time however, Sociology has been characterised by what Buroway summaries to be "the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study" (2005:4). According to Buroway the discipline of sociology has "spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science" (2005:5) and that it is now sociologies time to take "knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles" (Buroway 2005:5). Furthermore, sociology as a discipline, practice and way of thinking is currently undergoing a period of deep reflection in relation to the need to decolonise the sociological imagination (Bhambra and Santos 2017; Bhambra 2021; Bhambra and Holmwood 2021). It's therefore a fruitful moment in the discipline's history to initiate dialogue and discussion pertaining to the classed politics of knowledge and knowledge production in which the disciplines theories and concepts derive from.

This project is underpinned by the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do first-generation working-class ECRs perceive their working-class background as impacting upon their experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia?
2. How do they generate and navigate their own 'strategies for success' in their working context?
3. What are the wider implications of these strategies for success, for example in their personal lives and/or their imagined futures in the academy?
4. What can be done, if at all, by stake holders of UKHEs to address working-class doctoral students and early career researchers journey to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia?

Methodology

A feminist epistemological approach was employed throughout the research and a number of research modifications were made in light of the pandemic and social distancing restrictions. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Sussex. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen participants between March and December 2021. Initially, planned fieldwork consisted of two phases:

Phase-One: One-one-one interviews were due to be conducted in person or skype with twelve participants to access subjective experiences. Participants were, initially going to invited to partake in a photo-elicitation component of interview or an additional on campus walking-interview. This is on the basis that photo-elicitation prompts talk that is more affective and ineffable (Bagnoli 2009) and makes the familiar act of being an ECR strange thus breaking the ordinariness of everyday ECR life (Collier 1957; Pilcher 2016). Furthermore, aware that "people and place combine" (Moles 2008:1) walking-interviews will employ the act of 'bumbling' to access "the transcendent and

reflexive aspect of [participant's] lived experience" (Kusenbach 2003:455) of being working-class and transitioning through doctoral study and academia.

Phase-Two: The second phase consisted of collective memory work (CWM) "a group method, involving always the collective analysis of individual written memories" (Onyx and Small 2001:773). CMW was due to be employed in order to elicit previously buried experiences (Crawford et al. 1992). It was initially envisaged that participants would have been invited to partake and asked to write about one remembered instance when they felt their working-class background helped or hindered their experience of and progression through doctoral study and into academia as part of the CRW. From this, the ideas was that, in the workshop participants collectively discuss and analyse said memories. The plan was to conduct two workshops (six participants in each), one held in Scotland and the other London. It was planned that the analysis would focus upon the discussion elicited.

However, due to the pandemic and social-distancing restrictions, face to face methods were dropped. The planned face to face interviews were moved online, and instead conducted through zoom and thus the walking interviews, and CMW did not go ahead. Far from being a hinderance, moving the interviews online allowed for ease of access of participants. This project occurred at a time of immense pressure on individuals and the sector of UKHE as a result of the pandemic a shift to online learning. The participants of the project were leading extremely busy lives, as a result zoom interviews allowed for ease to access as compared to face-to-face interviews, in that, interviews could occur one morning, afternoon or evening without the need to travel, confirmed and or rearranged at short notice. An additional benefit was that zoom also allowed for the ease of access of participants who were geographically spread, to put it simply, though conducting interviews over zoom I was able to access participants from across the country, from Scotland to the Northeast to the Southeast of England and everything in between. This would not have been as possible if the interviews had of occurred face to face, due to time and budgetary constraints upon the project. Moreover, rather than the initial planned nighty minutes, interviews lasted on average two and a half hours with the longest interview lasting three hours thirty-nine minutes. In total, this project elicited thirty hours and fifty-six minutes of interview recording, participant narratives were rich and detailed.

Participants

Participants were recruited through calls posted on the social media channels of relevant networks, including the British Sociological Association and the Society for Research into Higher Education. An initial pre-interview questionnaire was administered to collect demographic background data such as year of PhD completion, discipline of PhD, institution type and current employment status. Due to anonymity issues, information regarding participants presented throughout this report is vague as per the wishes of those who partook. This is to protect the identity of those who partook, given the relatively small field of the discipline of sociology within the UK, and even smaller field of those ECR's within sociology who are from a working-class background. In total, ten of the thirteen participants were working in academia, twelve had completed their PhD's and one participant had made the decision to leave academia prior to completing the PhD. Every participant that I spoke to received funding for their PhD, a finding discussed in greater detail below. All participants were female, twelve participants identified as white British, and one participant identified as North African.

Data Analysis

Interview data was transcribed, anonymised analysed using thematic analysis. Common themes were coded and explored drawing upon the theoretical tools of drawing upon Bourdieusian social theory (1972, 1984, 1989, 1990) alongside academic thinking pertaining to the contemporary landscape of higher education (Taylor and Breeze 2020, Wilson et al 2021, Read and Leathwood)

Findings

The following research questions underpinned this project:

1. In what ways, if at all, do first-generation working-class ECRs perceive their working-class background as impacting upon their experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia?
2. How do they generate and navigate their own 'strategies for success' in their working context?
3. What are the wider implications of these strategies for success, for example in their personal lives and/or their imagined futures in the academy?
4. What can be done, if at all, by stake holders of UKHEs to address working-class doctoral students and early career researchers journey to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia?

The report notes several key broad findings. Firstly, with regards to participants journeys to pursuing a PhD securing full funding and having an academic mentor to guide them through the process was key. Secondly, with regards to progressing from the PhD and into academia the importance of having access to resources (time, money etc) to navigate the precariousness of academia was essential, in addition to the role of place and space. Many of the participants I spoke to were geographically immobile, due to caring commitments, commuting commitments or an outright rejection of the norm that one should move away to secure employment. Interestingly this project found that the new norm of academia ushered in by the pandemic and associated social distancing measures would allow working-class aspiring academics to pursue a career in academia whilst remaining geographically close to their family and home communities. Finally, the inability to navigate precarity in academia, alongside academia as being envisaged as being incompatible with a secure future lead some of the participants I interviewed to leave academia altogether.

The Journey to the PhD

It's all about the money, money, money…

The financial barriers and burdens of educational 'success' are well documented within the sociology of education literature (Reay 2017). Privileges from the affordances of private tuition, postcode swapping, to not having to work part time at university are well documented within the literature, as are the associated financial challenges of being working-class at university, especially so in light of the tripling of the tuition fee and the rise of debt finance higher education by way of the student loan system. It was of no great surprise then that participants spoke in detail and length about the journey to doctoral study and of the importance of achieving funding. Participants, spoke

about the fact that without funding they just would not have been able to afford to study for their PhD. Many participants spoke about being awarded a scholarship to pursue their master's study, for others, study at the master's level was made possible through combining part time work and part time master's study. However, one thing was clear throughout participants narratives, study at the doctoral level would not have been possible without funding that met both the cost of tuition and living. A striking example is evidenced in the words of participant 5, when she recalls exploring the financial aspect of doctoral study:

"Oh no, not without funding. People told me, I remember someone saying, "It's totally doable." And thinking really naively, oh it can't be that difficult then. And then you look and again this was a few years ago so it's probably more now and it's £40,000 that you have to pay. It would have been completely impossible." (Participant 5)

"Erm, basically, I would never have been able to afford to do it on my own" (Participant 6)

The issue that is emerging here is that without financial support, and indeed full support by way of scholarship, from either funding bodies or universities themselves the participants of my study would not have been afforded the possibility of pursuing doctoral study. They would have been locked out of academia before they even began.

The Very Important Person

Participants journeys to doctoral study were also made possible as a result of what I have termed to be the 'very important person'. Participants encountered VIPs as part of their pre doctoral study, mostly during their time as an undergraduate student and occasionally during masters' studies. VIPs functioned as a kind of 'gatekeeper' to post-graduate study and academia in terms of sparking the notion that doctoral study was as possible pathway whilst also providing a window into academia. Participants described how the VIPs often encouraged them to consider further study beyond the undergraduate level. VIPs were academic members of staff such as academic advisors, module convenors or project supervisors that the participants of my study had encountered as part of their course. Participants told me of how, the encouragement on part of the VIP was often in response to academic work that they had submitted of which the VIPs had read:

"During my master's dissertation year because I did a whole year for it because it was so slow, the person who was supervising me, I don't know how it came up, we discussed it, she was really encouraging to apply." (Participant 12).

"It was just like an essay that had submitted, and a tutor said, you should look at doing a master's after this erm which was really what got me thinking because I've never erm really considered it before I guess I just didn't really know." (Participant 3)

"By my 4th year some of the PhD students that were tutoring on courses and stuff they would say to me, "Your stuff is really good. Have you thought about doing a PhD?" And I would be like, "No. What is a PhD?" (Participant 7)

As participant 4 describes below, the VIP provided a point of contact, someone to talk to, to ask for guidance and advice as well as being someone who also encouraged participant 4 to apply for doctoral study and doctoral funding. VIPs also served to demystify academia, its processes, practices, and rules of the game for participants. Participants described how their VIPs made explicit 'the rules of the game' and served as someone that they felt they were able to turn to for advice.

"The not knowing is the main one that I always come back to. And I think I have been lucky in that I had someone who was also working class in academia and understood what that meant and really helped me with that and made sure I didn't ever feel, like if there was something they would quite happily be like, "This is what this means…" there would be no questions and no judgement; I am very aware that I am really lucky to have found that and I wouldn't have done it without. I feel like if you don't know and you feel like you're floundering around then the imposter syndrome comes in and you start feeling out of place and all of those things, so I think I was sheltered from that from a certain level I think and I am aware of that." (Participant 4)

"I was curious but didn't have anyone to ask basically, or rather there was probably people in my life who I could have asked but I was too embarrassed to ask and so I asked this person, this academic about it in another meeting who very kindly explained it…" (Participant 12).

Many of the participants that spoke about having a VIP also made reference to the fact that said VIPs were from a working-class background. Participants commented that this was something that the VIPs had explicitly shared with them, and that this had made participants feel comfortable turning to and opening up to their VIPs in relation to academia. Whilst I cannot speak for the

motivations of the VIPs, the work of Wilson et al (2021) reflecting upon being working-class in contemporary academia writes of how, as working-class women within academia they held a sympathy and commitment to those students who were struggling socially with university. As the authors write "our own experiences of marginalisation within and outside of academia mean that we are empathetic towards students struggling" (2021: 34). It is clear from participants narratives the importance of having people like them that they could reach out to for guidance and advice. It is important to note that it was the VIPs themselves that often reached out to the participants of my study in response to an academic piece of work that participants had completed. VIPS were often responsible for discussing the possibility of pursuing education beyond the undergraduate level, often going out of their way to offer support and guidance, this was especially the case in relation to helping participants understand and navigate the ESRC scholarship application process, and especially so in relation to proposal writing:

"They looked over my proposal for me and edited it and all that kind of stuff." (Participant 7)

"I did find it all very confusing. And if it wasn't for my tutor who spent a lot of time explaining things to me and breaking things down and looking at drafts and explaining all these different bits and pieces I had to write and how to write them, I would have been really stuck, and I probably wouldn't have got as far as I did because I came in reserve the first time" (Participant 1).

"I think I asked lots of people. Like my supervisor worked with me on it and then I knew... One of the people I'd been friends with at [university], she was already a PhD student there, so I asked her to like help me with my application and she was really generous with her time and like helped me write it and stuff. And so, yeah, I think I even asked her again for my like next application. She was probably like, "Why are you doing another one?" (Laughs)" (Participant 2)

It became clear then, that VIPs spent a considerable amount of time and emotional labour in relation to demystifying the doctoral process, from what a PhD was, to what it entailed to navigating the funding process. Such work represents the hidden work of academia and academia life, work that (some) academic members of staff do out of goodwill and a commitment to their students. It is clear from the narratives above that such guidance and encouragement were foundational in participants journeys to and through academia. However, I wish to echo Wilson et al when they write that: "this form of work and the time and emotional labour invested into it is often of a hidden nature, particularly when we choose to spend extra time with students, or they turn up at our offices upset. It is rarely a kind of extra work that is formalised or acknowledged, and yet it is vital" (Wilson et al 2021: 34). Today the contemporary university is marked by increasing commodification, time is

counted and squeezed, and accountability and audit cultures prevail (Read and Bradley 2018). Unmanageable workloads are the norm and academic 'goodwill' such as that performed by the VIPs count for nothing by way of the promotions process and thus are increasingly under threat because of the everyday demands of academic life. It is this backdrop that threatens the inclusion of working-class (and other non-traditional) students from pursuing doctoral study given that time left for acts of goodwill are increasingly under threat.

Navigating the Academic job Market as a Working-Class Early Career Researcher

Place, Space & Geography (im)mobilities

The themes of space, place, mobility, and immobility was central to participants narrative when reflecting on their experiences of navigating the academic job market. To get in, and get on, survive and thrive within the academic labour market geographical mobility across county lines, countries and indeed, even continents are often a prerequisite to securing academic employment (precarious or otherwise). However, being academically mobile was not something that characterised most participants desires or possibilities. For some participants, their desire to remain local was a result of caring commitments for family members and reflective of the intersections of participants class and gender that often-pervaded working-class women's lives.

"Massively for me it was I can't move, I can't move, and so I need to be around, and my dad is on his own and my dad has got long term health implications from drinking his whole entire life, and you know he's had strokes and things so I'm not down as a career. But there is only me and I'm the only, apart from one of his brothers is about. My dad has me and that's it and so. Any job, even when I was looking for other posts it was the reason it had to be it was in [cityname], or commute from [cityname]. I couldn't move elsewhere." (Participant 5)

For other participants, their desire to remain local was motivated by commitment to stay close to their family member. Participant 3 reflects on her decision to move to the next city, though not a million miles away it was far enough to not be considered as living close to her family.

"I get enough kind of my mum and stepdad to give me so much guilt, for you know, the fact that I'm going to be raising a child in a different city that's, that's kind of bad enough… Yeah so I never imagined that I'd move away from home it wasn't something that I set out to do at all, erm so I am super close to my family and I." (Participant 3).

For other participants, not wanting to move away was understood as being a direct rejection of the values of contemporary academia, one which is understood as being a hotbed of competition that "pits people against each other, can create nasty office environments and tries to encourage people that everybody's value is 100% in their work" (Participant 7) and simultaneously a valuation of the working-class value towards community.

"You see people like moving all over the world for work and that kind of stuff I don't buy those kinds of values. I think value is in community and it's in the communities that you belong in and being able to have good respectful supportive relations with people is what I think is valuable, not how many grand I can get, or moving to different countries to go to a more prestigious university, I don't buy it. But I think it's very easy to get caught up in it." (Participant 7)

Im(mobility) and the Pandemic

There was hope, given the pandemic and subsequent shift to at home working necessitated by lockdown that academia would open itself up to remote working. It was felt that this would then open up the academic labour market and work possibilities for aspiring working-class academics who wish to pursue a career in academia but who do not wish to or cannot be geographically mobile to work remotely. However, this ideal was met with both caution and suspicion.

"I think erm something i'm really hopeful will come out of it is that people who are maybe situations like I was who couldn't move away from home. We actually are seeing that they can, they can participate in this labour market and it's, it's a legitimate when you're not working from home… But it's a double edged sword that I think that the universities will use that as a way to, to cut resources to staff well-being and, and you know getting rid of that physical space and that physical space is so important." (Participant 5)

Despite geographical mobility being a hallmark of the prerequisites of a successful academic career (Sautier 2021) the majority of my participant eschewed such a path. Whether this be a result of the financial costs associated with moving away, the pain of leaving behind family and friends or an outright devaluing of hyper mobility that 'success' within academia often demands.

Locked Out of Academia

Navigating Precarity in Academia and Imagined Futures

Precarity is a theme central to contemporary scholarship pertaining to the landscape of academia (McIlvenna 2022, Read and Leathwood 2020, Read and Leathwood 2018) and has been at the forefront of national union action for the past few years in UKHE. Precarity was also a theme central to participants narratives, especially those who had been forced to leave academia as a result of contemporary conditions. Participants often spoke about precarity experienced whilst studying for the PhD and also illuminated some of the difficulties endured as a result of doctoral funding ending. The precarious, insecure nature of academia was incompatible with participants imagined futures. A stable job, a secure income and at times the aspirations of home ownership and/or being able to meet the monthly bills were viewed as being incompatible with a career in contemporary academia. Participants desires of their imagined futures were not framed around lavish lifestyles, designer handbags or materialism that pervades contemporary consumer culture. Instead, participants simply wanted a stable job, stable enough to secure a home.

"I want to just live really comfortably, like I think that's... I don't want to ever live hand to mouth, that's my aspiration. Yeah, that's like the only thing." (Participant 2)

"I just started kind of think you know yeah and also like not, not, not, I've been like a permanent contract, or you know, like if I want to have a family… yeah, no contract. You know just being potentially employed every year." (Participant 10).

For participant 2, securing a well-paid job was one of the reasons as to why she quit her PhD:

"Yeah, I've got like a really good job, like which is like part of the reason why I didn't really care about quitting because suddenly I was earning like a significant amount, so it didn't really matter as much. That's really awful to say, isn't it?" (Participant 2).

Above, participant 10 who was on universal credit immediately after submitting her PhD speaks of how, her desire for a family is incompatible with the insecure, temporary contracts that academia largely affords. The notion that academia was so incompatible with a financially stable future that the participants of my study craved was a constant theme throughout. Academia as a career option did not offer security in the same way that other 'middle-class' professions could offer. Whilst it is

important to note that precarity in academia is not confined to working-class persons its effects are perceived to be more acute for those from a working-class background, as participant 2 explained:

"Like, yeah, everything is always uncertain, like, you know. But the thing is like when a middle class person has like a period of unemployment it doesn't really matter because there's like other things to get them through that period and like, you know, they can like, yeah, have some savings to fall back on and like, you know, they might just tighten their belts a bit but it's not the same as like "I've got nothing." (Participant 2)

It was not uncommon for the participants of my study to turn to state support such as universal credit during time of precarity either as a result of them finishing their PhD, a short-term contract ending or during periods of job searching. Whilst PhD funding was vital in allowing the participants of my study to pursue doctoral study it should not be seen as a passport into academia. The lack of financial support immediately after PhD submission is limiting for working-class PhD students when they embark on the tricky and competitive process of navigating the academic labour market.

Navigating Precarity During the PhD

It was not just those who had made the decision to leave academia that had faced precarity throughout their PhD despite having been awarded funding. Participant 12, for instance had informed me of her need to care for an immediate family member due to illness. Participant 12 was not able to temporarily withdraw or go part time as financially this was not possible, and so, she continued with her PhD whilst also caring 24/7:

"So basically, my option was: stop doing your PhD to care for [family member] because [family member] needed fulltime care at that point, so either do that but you won't get paid because you have to pause your funding, or juggle that caring with still doing your PhD. So basically, what happened was I had to do the latter; I wouldn't have been able to afford my rent and I wouldn't have been able to live without my PhD wage, but that meant nothing was paused. There was a long period of caring and then [family member] died… It meant that when I went back, I was really behind because by now I was in the middle of my second year and as far as my funder and the university were concerned that clock had just been ticking all that time, so I felt really rushed to try and get things started because I hadn't started data collection or anything. If I had money then I could have gone and cared for [family member] and it wouldn't have mattered if my wages had stopped, but equally if I had money, I could have afforded more outside care to care for [family member] because care is so expensive." (Participant 12).

Juggling 24/7 care, grieving whilst the PhD timeline was ticking away subsequently meant that when participant 12 was able to return to her doctoral studies not only was she was pushed for time, subsequently requiring an extension, but that she then needed to find a job during her unfunded extension period just to make financial ends meet. This left her not only juggling paid work with the work of her PhD, often finding a few spare hours here, a few spare hours there, but due to a lack

of time was also precluded from spending time gaining more academic aligned skills and experience. As participant 12 informed me:

"When I went back, I was really rushed and really trying to finish, trying to get everything done as quick as possible. And I didn't feel like that was recognised really by the university; it felt like there was no other option really than the one I took… I got like a 3-month extension at the end by which time my funding had run out anyway, so it didn't make much difference. That was all fine but then at the end the last year and 3 months I went back to my job in the college to survive the last year financially... it was a high-pressure job, like I was writing statutory reports for the Government. I remember going to a coffee shop near where I worked at lunchtime and after work to try and do PhD work and it was just a lot. I've known people who have managed to do things like publish during that time or get other good opportunities and I just didn't have a lot of latitude for that kind of work at the time, I think that's basically how it went. A lot of it comes down to just the university haven't foreseen the circumstances of someone who doesn't have money, they'll just assume you'll be alright and it's often not the case." (Participant 12)

Academic Rejection, Rejecting Academia

In the current market of academia, doctoral students are increasingly required to demonstrate an ever-growing list of skills, experiences, and achievements, from funding, to publications, to teaching and impact (Pitt and Mewburn 2016, Hay 2017). However, these experiences and achievements require time. In contemporary academia, to survive, one must 'publish or perish'. However, academic publishing is a slow and tedious process, one that demands much time, time that that participant did not possess. The need to work in order to yield an income outweighed the possibility of time being spent writing, rewriting and editing in order to secure publication.

"I'm on Twitter and everyone's going just got this paper back from four years ago I'm thinking I haven't got four years to be you know. And then like applying for a job that takes weeks to apply for." (Participant 10)

"I remember everyone was like, "we've got to publish" and I was like, "okay, great, I need to publish," and then someone would come to me and be like, "okay, I want to do this journal and you can be like the co-editor" and so I was like, oOkay, great, that's really good for my career," but then that takes away so much time from your actual PhD. I don't know how people manage it." (Participant 2)

"I've known people who have managed to do things like publish during that time or get other good opportunities and I just didn't have a lot of latitude for that kind of work at the time."
(Participant 12)

Participants often found themselves locked out of academia, unable to access the materials and resources required for successful progression within it. This was especially so in relation to the academic publishing process, the great paywall of academia. Once participants had completed their PhD, time had passed they often were not able to access the academia library system, this in turn meant that academic publishing was difficult if not impossible due to not being able to access the latest material within the field, as participant 6 expressed:

"It's just like you know I've been an academic Siberia, for fuck knows how long and you're like omg I got rejected from this Journal and it's like I can't even submit to a journal at the minute haven't got the time I haven't got any affiliations fuck all I have got no access to you know libraries, libraries I can't access any of the latest series in the pay world, so and get fucked please with your omg I got rejected from this highly peer reviewed journal, like you know I am on the dole again…" *(Participant 6)*

Inherent in the academic career is the reoccurring occupational hazard of rejection (Jaremka et al 2020). Whether it be from funding bodies, academic journals, job applications or the alike, everyone in academia at some points, gets rejected. Rejections are thus, the fabric of academia. Whilst participants spoke about being rejected and gave examples (below) of their rejection they also explained that the constant rejection, and their inability to navigate rejection due to a constraint on time and other resources as discussed, in brief above, subsequently led them (among other factors) to leave academia. Overall, it was the complex mix of the precariousness of academia, the lack of security it afforded yet at the same time the impossible expectations and standards that entry level jobs within academia demanded and participants lack of time (and other resources) that left them unable to navigate such demands that subsequently left them to leave academia. This is no more perfectly captured that in the words of Participant 6.

"I've got to leave the academia, because I am not going to have a career here in five year's time, you know that that classic interview question where do you see yourself in five years, well actually I see myself still sitting in this fucking attic by myself doing projects where that never see the light of day and scrambling for work and I sort of was like I can't I can't take it anymore yeah I started the process of applying for MED school." *(Participant 6)*

Recommendations

This study proposes several recommendations for institutions, funding bodies, and those working in academia in their recruitment, engagement and support with doctoral scholars and early career researchers from working-class backgrounds:

1. It would be valuable for institutions to put in place schemes aimed a demystifying academia and supporting working-class aspiring doctoral researchers through their doctoral applications and funding process. Rather than working-class students being 'lucky' enough to have stumbled across a member of staff who is committed to the aforementioned it would be beneficial if there were more formal processes in place, rather than working-class students depending on personal contacts and the goodwill of staff members.

2. In order to foster an academia that is more reflective of the wider community that it serves doctoral funders are increasingly adopting 'widening participation' strategies. Funders, instructions and the alike should include a working-class background /and being the first in the family to attend university into 'widening participation' definitions / criterions and subsequent 'widening participation' efforts. For example, the ESRC SeNSS scheme currently allows for one additional nomination from applicants who are from a widening participation background. However, social class is not taken into account, and coming from a working-class background and being the first in your family to attend university is not considered as a 'widening participation' criterion. Whilst POLAR 4 Quintiles 1 and 2 are drawn upon to identify low participation areas this does not always map onto class background, and there will be many working-class persons who do not live in POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2 and thus fall outside of this 'widening participation' measurement.

3. Participants often spoke about the need to acquire CV building skills and experiences alongside doctoral study in order for them to be competitive in the post-doctoral academic labour market. However, participants also expressed confusion as to what to prioritise, it would be valuable for institutions and funders to put in place some schemes / workshops aimed at addressing this. For working-class students who are the first in their family to study at university, knowing which endeavours to seek out and prioritise serves as a great source of confusion and anxiety.

4. Funders and institutions could recognise and provide further assistance with specific challenges for working-class doctoral students and early career researchers wishing to pursue a career in academia, such as academic CV building, writing cover letters and applications, interview norms and practices. As well are more equitable opportunities to gain experiences and skills aligned with academia (for example, transparency in distributing graduate teaching and research assistance opportunities).

5. Funders, postdoctoral or otherwise, should not look more favourably on those applications where the applicant holder is moving university, and should accept that some applicants might just not want to be geographically mobile (without having an exceptional reason i.e., such as caring commitments, or other exceptional academic reasons). For example, the British Academy encourages applications to consider moving, as the post-doctoral guidance notes writes that": "Applicants are encouraged to consider moving to a different institution for the Postdoctoral Fellowship from that at which the doctorate was undertaken, but there is no requirement to do so" (The British Academy 2022:3).

6. Funding bodies could recognise the financial precariousness for doctoral students, especially so for those from working-class backgrounds and thus financially support funding holders beyond the PhD and during times of ill health and exceptional circumstances. Periods of paid sick leave, and additional financing available for exceptional circumstances as well as a funded grace period following the submission of the PhD in order to support working-class aspiring academics navigate the immediate post PhD submission period.

Conclusion

This project has explored the experiences of thirteen working-class early career researchers' experiences of navigating doctoral study on Sociology PhD programmes across various UK universities. Twelve had completed their PhD's, one had left prior to completion. Ten participants were currently employed in academia (precariously or otherwise), and three had chosen to leave academia, working instead in the third sector. It has explored working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a Sociology PhD and into academia in three ways. Firstly, it has explored what ways, if at all, do first-generation working-class ECRs perceive their working-class background as impacting upon their experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia? Secondly, it sought to uncover participants 'strategies for successes within their working context. Thirdly, this project sought to explore the implications of pursuing academia and thus the various strategies for success, in participants personal lives and/or their imagined futures in the academy. In journeying to the PhD, the importance of receiving scholarship funding and the importance of the VIP were highlighted. VIPs were often academic points of contacts, who were mostly (though not always) from a working-class background functioned as a kind of 'gatekeeper' to post-graduate study and academia. VIPs often sparked the notion that doctoral study was a possible pathway and provided a window into academia, demystifying academia, the postgraduate applications / scholarship process and beyond. Participants accounts also demonstrate a range of barriers, including a rejection of the need to be hyper geographically mobile in order to secure academic employment, the precarious nature of navigating the academic job market and academia per se. Participants also spoke at length about the multitude of skills and experiences that they were required to demonstrate in order to navigate the academic job market. The future of UKHE and the diversity of leadership and scholarship is currently under threat. I argue that the values of diversity, accessibility and inclusivity, especially that of class diversity that universities are quick to espouse be placed at the centre of higher education policy and practice, especially so at the postgraduate level. Further analysis of this research findings and data is planned.

I am also planning a further dissemination event to occur in the 22-23 academic year. This will bring together those interested in the field of inequalities in higher education that was unable to go ahead earlier due to the pandemic. Furthermore, receiving funding from SRHE has not only allowed this project but has also allowed me think about how I can expand upon my research project and upscale it in the future.

Presentations and Publications

Rowell, C. (2021). "No words, just two letters 'Dr'": Working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia. *SRHE*

International Research Conference 2021: (Re)connecting, (Re)building: Higher Education in Transformative Times, 6 – 10 December 2021.

Rowell, C. (2022). "No words, just two letters 'Dr'": Working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia. *BSA Annual Conference 2022: Building Equality and Justice Now, 20 – 22 April 2022.*

Rowell, C. (2022). "No words, just two letters 'Dr'": Working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia. European Conference on Educational Research. *Education in a Changing World: The impact of global realities on the prospects and experiences of educational research. 01 - 10 September 2022.*

Rowell, C. (2021). "No words, just two letters 'Dr'": Working-class early career researcher's reflections on the transition to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia. SRHEblog.com

In process:

Rowell, C. (in progress) Class Dismissed? Peripheral Participation and The Pipeline to Academia: Working-class academics trajectories to and through a PhD in Sociology. To be submitted to *Sociology* in Autumn 2022

A blog on 'It's all about the money' (in progress) to be submitted to the LSE Impact of Social Sciences or similar blog.

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