

Academics of working-class heritage
talking: a participatory critical storytelling
project with Russell Group academics

SRHE 2021 Newer Researcher Final Report

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Abbreviations

AWCH - Academic of working-class heritage

HE – Higher Education

WC – Working-class

WCH – Working-class heritage

Executive summary

Mobilising participatory critical storytelling approaches, eight UK-based Russell Group academics problematised what it means to be and become an academic of working-class heritage (AWCH).

Working with data from the study, the participants created interactive comics extending the possibilities of expressing lived experience as an AWCH beyond a narrow range of stereotypes.

The academics participated in story circles to share, unsettle and (re)imagine their experiences.

Working with an illustrator, they created three composite stories in interactive comic formats, representing roots, and routes into academia; career pathways and finding a voice as an AWCH.

While there were commonalities within the group, different cultural, temporal and spatial specificities reinforced the heterogeneity of identifying as an AWCH. The study highlighted how the emotional work of storytelling can be generative in creating sites of existential and epistemic exploration. However, working in such affectively demanding ways requires attentiveness to the ethical dimensions of work of this nature. This includes being sensitive to the possibilities of inquiry spaces becoming epistemic bubbles where some stories are cherished, while others are silenced. A key finding is the need for individuals to be willing to share and collectively interrogate stories for similarities and differences. This reciprocal relationship is crucial to creating the trust needed to allow participants to work with ambiguities and uncertainties to create new meanings.

Background

Globally, the lives of AWCH have been, and continue to be, rich sites of inquiry as part of discussions about diversity in higher education (HE) (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996, Michell, Wilson and Archer, 2015 and Crew, 2020). However, doubts persist as to whether people can be working class and hold an academic position (Wakeling, 2010; Binns, 2019). Often in such cases, the logic follows that academia is a middle-class space, ergo people in academic roles cannot claim to be working-class when benefiting from the socio-epistemic rewards of such a privileged position. However, others challenge these assertions, claiming that class is felt through a lifetime of cultural and affective factors as well as economic considerations (Skeggs, 2011; Beswick, 2022). This contestation demonstrates that characterising class is a theoretically slippery undertaking (Woodin, 2005; Appiah, 2018; Beswick, 2020).

Where expressive choice of representing being and becoming a person are limited, stereotypes are generated to reproduce culture's canonical accounts of how life is, and should be (Bruner, 1990). The experiences of academics of WCH are often limited to a narrow range of stereotypes, such as the plucky hero overcoming adversity or the perpetual victim (Brook and Michell, 2012; Morley, 2021; Poole, 2021). Such characterisations represent a hermeneutic gap where the possibilities of knowing and naming one's lived experiences are constrained (Goetze, 2018). This project sought to address this gap by creating a space where academics of WCH could inquire into their own lives as opposed to being the objects in inquiries of more powerful others (Walkerdine, 2021). The project contributes to discussions about how stories of lived experience can complement other forms of evidence used in decision-making processes to create more inclusive HE spaces for people of WCH.

Project aim

The study fostered narrative encounters where participants used their life histories as sites of critique and analysis to represent the complexities of becoming an AWCH. This was done using a range of multi-modal methods. The research questions shaping the study were:

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?

The narrative encounter is an unsettling dialogic process. Participants share cultural, social and historical experiences so different ways of understanding lived realities might develop (Goodson and Gill, 2011). The familiarity of everyday life is made strange to foster moments of creative rupture through which to imagine lived experiences from different interpretative perspectives (Mannay, 2010; 2021).

Methodology and methods

This was a co-production of knowledge approach aimed at creating a community of inquiry to challenge forms of social and epistemic injustice affecting participants' lives (see Banks, Hart, Pahl and Ward, 2019). The following methods were used to produce data:

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.

I used my reflexivity as a researcher/participant of WCH to shape the thematic analysis I mobilised (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Working iteratively across the data sets, I utilised deductive concept driven codes and inductive data-driven codes to arrive at the following themes:

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

The group of eight Russell Group (RG) academics worked in institutions across England and Scotland, which included the researcher. Two participants were based at universities in the North of England; one in the Northwest; one in Northern Scotland; three in the East and West Midlands of England and one in London. One participant, worked in an elite research-intensive institution outside the RG. However, they had previously worked at an RG institution. In terms of geographical origins, the participants came from rural and urban backgrounds in different parts of England, Wales, N. Ireland and Romania. The group was made up of people identifying as female (n=5). Within the female group participants identified as White British (n=4) and White Eastern European (n=1), with age ranges between 30-40 (n=3) and 50-60 (n=2). There were three participants identifying as male. In this group participants identified as White British (n=1), White European (n=2). All were aged between 40-50.

Findings

The process fostered narrative encounters which created a space to share, interrogate and (re)interpret stories representing different ways of identifying as an AWCH. The inquiry became a space to (re)engage with ancestral voices to make sense of why some aspects of the past continue to shape how we make sense of life (Goodson and Gill, 2014). This allowed participants to come to terms with the complexities of their routes into HE as they imagined authentic selves in the past, present and beyond (Hall, 1990; Cleary, 2022).

The emotional work of coming to terms with a liminal existence as an AWCH

As one participant stated, the life of an AWCH was that of a class traveller betwixt and between different social worlds. The participants saw their liminal existence as beneficial in helping them to see things in social spaces others with more orthodox analytical lenses could not (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015; Reay, 2017; Walkerdine, 2021). Becoming an AWCH was represented as a series of intertextually linked spatial stories communicating how cultural, emotional and temporal boundaries in different social spaces shaped individuals' perceptions of an authentic self (Henderson, 2020). While the participants had mostly come to terms with their liminality, every now and again moments of emotional dissonance would remind them they were strangers seeking to fit in in places not created for them (Ahmed, 2014; Magalhães and Broeckerhoff, 2020). For some participants, the project represented a space for them to find a sense of fit without feeling compelled to perform an idealised version of their 'self' to make those in more powerful positions feel good about themselves (Jones, 2004; Ahmed, 2014).

Generating trust through the reciprocity of sharing and listening

Participants observed that through sharing their stories trust developed, helping to create a sense of safety in the storytelling space. However, some participants shared that when the larger group broke up into the smaller comic design groups, trust had to be renegotiated as participants navigated a new social dynamic. This experience illustrates how trust in participatory contexts can never be taken for granted and needs to be constantly reworked to reflect the situatedness of human interaction (Cook, 2009; Avner et al, 2014; Armstrong et al, 2022).

Subversively generative possibilities from working in a messy space

The inquiry space became a site of "playful actions", which allowed participants to explore and represent different aspects of their "patchwork selves" (Griffiths, 2003, p116). The slow pedagogic approach was appreciated by participants because it allowed an exilic space to develop unencumbered by overly determined demands to meet pre-defined expectations (Mountz et al,

2015; Brogan, 2017). The gradual pedagogic rhythm of the story circles created a messy place to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and to collectively explore new ways of understanding and working (Cook, 2009; Goodson and Gill, 2011). However, when moving into the design process, some participants called for more guidance and direction from the researcher in acknowledgement of their input, and their busy lives. This demonstrates the need for work of this nature to always be responsive to the participants' needs to ensure the inquiry process remains ethical.

Being vigilant against the development of epistemic bubbles

The project illustrated that being intersubjectively reliant on others to define a sense of self can be good, and bad (Stauffer, 2015). In the early stages of the project, a participant shared how they had considered not coming back after the first story circle because they did not feel working-class enough. The space resembled an epistemic bubble where only certain types of stories were shared (Nguyen, 2020). In this instance, however, the participant's admission created a moment of collective reflection reminding the group to be ethically vigilant against supposed spaces of liberation becoming sites of entrapment, where individuals feel they cannot express their authentic selves (Weiler, 1994; Holland et al, 2001; Lorde, 2018).

Limitations

This project did not capture in-depth the intersectional complexities of class and other identity characteristics such as race, ethnicity and disabilities. While many of the core narrative themes in the composite stories represented the intersections of class with experiences of people identifying as female, more could have been done to unpack this entanglement. Initially, I had intended to use diary methods which may have allowed these relationships to be explored further. However, due to the participants' busy lives, and the work the study demanded of them, I decided it was unfair to ask them to keep diaries. In future studies, I will use diaries to provide participants with a place to reflect on their experiences to capture and explore potentially nuanced moments of intersection (Plowman, 2010).

Conclusion

There is epistemically liberating value in creating participatory sites where people can learn from one another by situating their lives as sites of critique and analysis (Carmona and Luciano, 2014). Participants can (re)imagine representations of being and becoming an AWCH beyond a narrow range of expressive possibilities. For this to happen, however, participants need to feel trust that they can share and be heard. Trust develops when participants are willing to engage in narrative encounters which "can be surprising, disquieting, challenging or inspiring" (Goodson and Gill, 2011,

p79). When creating the moments of epistemic rupture needed for narratives to unfold, attention needs to be paid to the emotional work this requires. Revisiting the past to make sense of the present, and yet to happen futures, can be joyous and comforting (hooks, 2009). However, it can also be emotionally unsettling as traumatic and upsetting moments are potentially revisited. This demonstrates the need for ethical vigilance, recognising the participants are ends in themselves and not the researcher's means to an imagined triumphant end. This requires the researcher to be transparent about their intentions at every juncture of the work. It also includes being sensitive to the possibility of the space becoming an epistemic bubble where people are entrapped anew by canonical accounts of shared social realities which benefit only a few.

Project outputs and proposed future research

- The work has led to the creation of a website (Appendix 1) which contains the three interactive comics (Appendices 2-4) created through this process.
- The group presented a paper (Davis et al, 2022) at the EuroSOTL 2022 conference in Manchester in June 2022.
- Presentation of a poster at the 2022 SRHE conference.
- The story Coming Home (Davis, 2022), focusing on themes of liminality, featured in SoFi Zine in December 2022.
- A paper discussing the use of composite stories in qualitative research is being written by members of the group for the journal Qualitative Research.
- I am writing a paper focused on the concept of mess as part of collective life history approaches for a qualitative methods paper.
- A blog post is under preparation for the SRHE blog.
- I aim to seek funding for a community-based participatory project in the Coalfields area of Nottinghamshire. The approach will build on the storytelling approaches to create spaces for the participants to represent their lived experiences on their terms. The work will incorporate aspects of verbatim theatre to create a range of composite outputs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Academics of Working-Class Heritage Talking Website including interactive comics



Weblink URL - <https://bit.ly/awchtweb>

ROOTS AND ROUTES INTO ACADEMIA:

COMPOSITE STORIES WITH AND BY RUSSELL GROUP ACADEMICS OF WORKING-CLASS HERITAGE

Dr Penny Rivlin, Dr Adam Matthews, Dr Georgiana Mihut, Agnieszka Sokolowska

Dear Penny, I've attached my research proposal - I'm interested in issues around social class and education. Your lecture sparked some ideas for me, but some of the case studies of working class culture and heritage seemed quite negative, and I think a more positive view is needed.

Dear Jack, Thanks for your feedback - let's talk about this in our first meeting...

Hi, I'm Jack! I'm here for my dissertation meeting.

Hi Jack! Come on in, thanks for sending your dissertation proposal. Your ideas sound really interesting.

I really enjoyed your social justice module last term, but that lecture on working class communities being deprived rubbed me up the wrong way.

Oh... okay, why was that?

It's interesting that you mention crossing borders. Have you heard of a novel called *Border Country*? It's by an academic called Raymond Williams.

No, but I'll bet he's another middle-class academic talking about us victims, right?

Thanks! So you're working class then? How can you be doing your job? I mean, look at all these books...

Yeah, that's my academic book wall, but this side is my non-academic wall. Two sides of the border, I guess! I like being reminded of home.

Write middle class academics making judgements about a community I come from and ones like it? It's not all bad, I really enjoy crossing the border to go home - we have our own ideas on social justice and politics which are just as valid!

Oh, sorry it came across that way Jack - wasn't intended! Crossing the border, where's home?

Swansea

No, quite the opposite actually. Here, you can borrow my copy. I think you might like it - it helped me navigate this academic world we're a part of.

Cool! I wouldn't have guessed you listened to Oasis!

Yeah, a favourite through my undergrad studies. So, a plan for our next meeting...

Oh yeah, my mum does that too! My mates are always making fun of me for studying at a posh London university, but at uni I get laughed at for saying a French philosopher's name wrong - you can't win!

Those culture clash moments! They can make you feel like you don't fit in back at home or at university.

Hi Jack, how's your week going? Getting on with your reading?

Good thanks, and yeah, had lots of time to read when travelling - the border crossing we talked about, don't mind my background - the wall that is - my mum loves showing off all my achievements' haha.

I get what you mean, my mum likes to ask me about my lectures loudly in public so everyone knows what I do.

Especially since I don't really have time to take part in the university culture - I work in a pub and try to fit my studies in when I have free time, I just spend it reading.

Yeah, I think I still have my McDonald's uniform from when I was a student. I guess it's kind of like living on the border, in a liminal space.

So, what have you been reading?

Goodson and Gill, Beverley Skeggs, Raymond Williams

How's the literature review going?

Yeah, really good, I think I'm all set. I should have a draft for you by next week. I've been thinking, how did you get to do a PhD?

I like the idea of researching and teaching - sounds like a cool job. I guess I'm not really sure what else you do, though?

I don't fancy carrying a satchel - no offence, but it's not really my style!

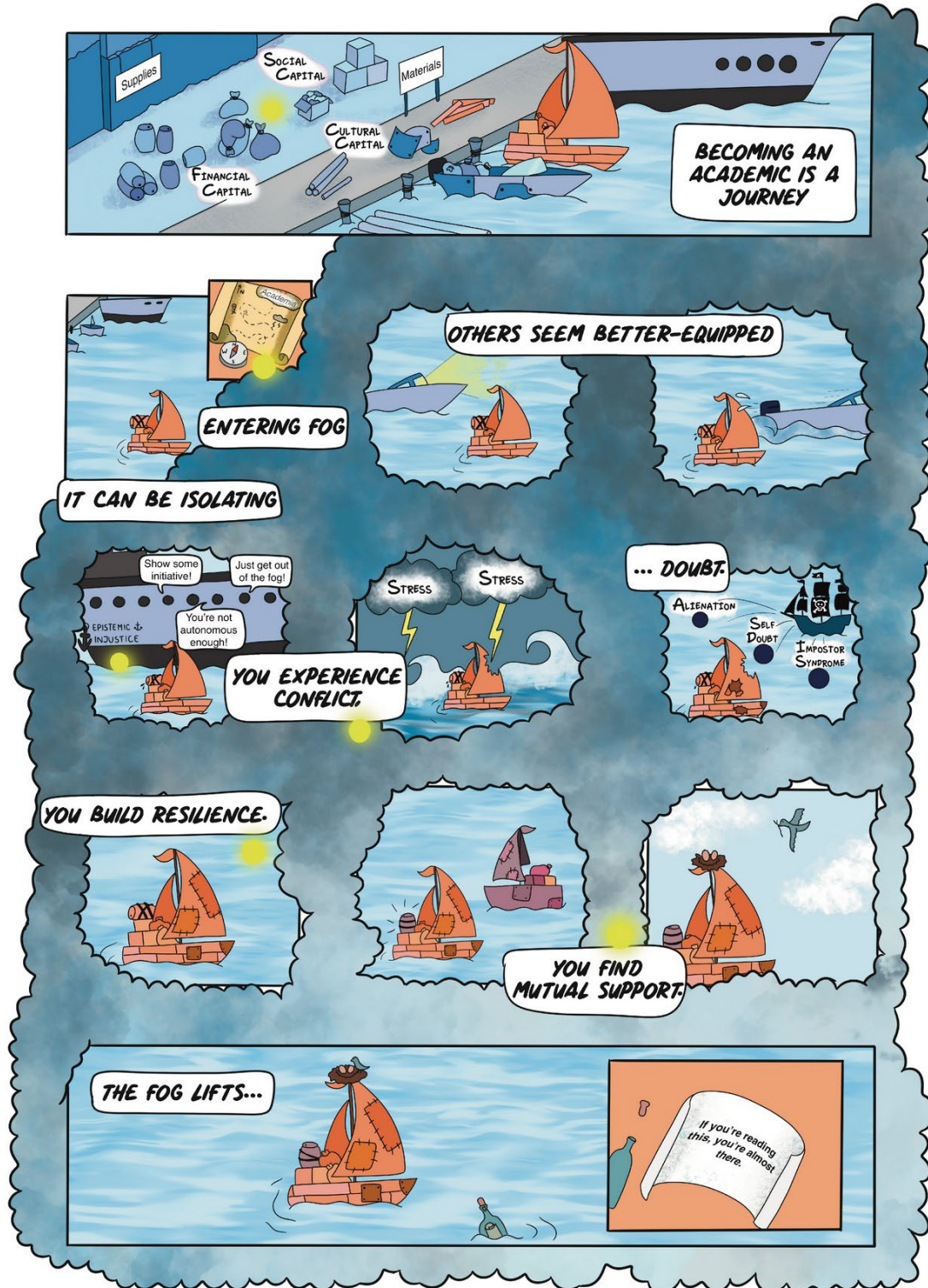
There are many different routes in. Actually, I'm working on a project about stories of working-class academics. We're producing comics and other stories of our experiences. All of their routes are different and definitely not linear!

Right, let me get my 'tools of the trade'. It's funny, my mum and dad's tools of the trade were scissors for haircuts, and a carpenter's toolbox. Mine's a satchel for books and papers, and an academic diary!

Haha, no, don't worry - it's not essential for the job! Years ago, one of my undergrad lecturers had an old, battered satchel stuffed with books and papers - I think it kind of symbolises the 'real' academic to me. Same goes for the academic diary.

NAVIGATING THE UNKNOWN: CAREER JOURNEYS INTO AND THROUGH ACADEMIA

Stacey Mothershaw, Dr Blair Matthews, Dr Jessica Hawkins, Agnieszka Sokolowska



SPEAKING UP AND BEING HEARD: FINDING YOUR VOICE AS AN ACADEMIC OF WORKING-CLASS HERITAGE

Dr Charlie Davis, Dr Melanie Smallman, Agnieszka Sokolowska

