

Navigating the Ivory Tower: Mental Health Experiences of Working-Class Academics

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the mental health experiences of working-class academics as they navigate the culturally elite and often exclusionary environment of higher education. Drawing on qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals how class-based disparities intersect with institutional expectations, professional norms, and social capital to shape psychological well-being. Participants describe feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, financial strain, and the emotional labor involved in code-switching and navigating classed microaggressions. The study highlights the invisible barriers faced by those from non-traditional backgrounds and underscores the need for more inclusive institutional practices that prioritize mental health and socio-economic diversity in academia.

Keywords: working-class academics, mental health, higher education, class inequality, academic culture, imposter syndrome, social mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) is often perceived as a pathway to social mobility and intellectual fulfillment. However, for individuals from working-class backgrounds, navigating the academic landscape can present unique and significant challenges that impact their mental health and well-being [2, 6, 7, 25]. While there is growing awareness of the pressures faced by all academics, including issues of workload, precarity, and the 'publish or perish' culture [12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 35, 37], the specific experiences of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often overlooked [18, 25].

Defining 'working class' within the context of academia can be complex, encompassing not only parental occupation and income but also cultural capital, identity, and lived experiences [14, 34]. Despite initiatives aimed at widening participation, individuals from working-class backgrounds remain underrepresented in academic careers, particularly at senior levels [3, 43]. Those who do enter academia often report feeling like outsiders, grappling with a sense of 'otherness' in an environment shaped by middle-class norms and expectations [2, 6, 25, 26, 44]. This can lead to a range of mental health challenges, including heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of not belonging [25, 47].

The transition into academia for working-class individuals involves navigating a new set of unwritten rules, cultural codes, and expectations – a clash of 'habitus' as described by Bourdieu [4, 36]. This can manifest as 'limbo,' a feeling of being caught between two worlds, no longer fully belonging to their class of origin but not fully integrated into the academic middle class [26]. Furthermore, the intersection of class with other identities, such as gender, race, or disability, can compound these challenges, leading to unique experiences of marginalization and microaggressions [10, 32, 38, 40].

Given the documented crisis in staff well-being across the HE sectors [22, 24, 35], and the specific barriers faced by working-class individuals in academia [16, 25], it is crucial to explore the mental health challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ to cope. This article synthesizes insights from existing literature to shed light on these experiences, contributing to a better understanding of how HE institutions can better support working-class academics.

METHODS

This article is based on a synthesis of insights drawn from the provided collection of academic and grey literature.

The approach involved reviewing the abstracts and, where available, the full content of the referenced works to identify recurring themes related to the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of working-class academics concerning their mental health and well-being. The provided references cover a range of perspectives, including sociological analyses of class and habitus [4, 36, 44], qualitative studies exploring lived experiences [2, 6, 7, 25, 39, 45], research on mental health and stress in academia [12, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 35, 37], concepts such as imposter phenomenon and microaggressions [32, 33, 38, 40], and discussions of resilience and coping [8, 23, 28, 29, 46].

The synthesis process involved categorizing findings from the references into key areas corresponding to the mental health challenges reported and the coping strategies employed. While not a formal systematic review or qualitative analysis using specific methodologies like thematic analysis [5], this approach allowed for the identification of prominent issues and patterns discussed across the provided sources. The structure of the article (IMRaD) was then used to organize these synthesized findings, presenting the identified challenges as 'Results' and discussing their implications and associated coping strategies in the 'Discussion' section. Citations are provided using numerical referencing corresponding to the list of provided references.

RESULTS

Based on the synthesis of the provided literature, several key mental health challenges are frequently reported or implicitly evident in the experiences of working-class academics:

- **Identity Conflict and Non-Belonging:** A pervasive theme is the feeling of being an outsider or not fully belonging within the academic environment [2, 6, 25, 26, 44]. This can stem from a clash between their working-class habitus (ingrained dispositions, tastes, and cultural practices) and the dominant middle-class norms of academia [2, 4, 36]. This can lead to a sense of performing an identity rather than being authentic, contributing to stress and alienation [21, 25]. The experience of navigating different social worlds can create a feeling of being in 'limbo' [26]. Even at prestigious institutions, working-class students and academics may feel their identity is not fully understood or accepted [1].
- **Imposter Phenomenon:** Feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being exposed as a 'fake' are common among academics [33], but they can be exacerbated for those from working-class backgrounds who may internalize societal class biases and feel they lack the inherent cultural capital of their peers [2, 6, 38]. This can lead to persistent anxiety and self-doubt [33, 38].
- **Microaggressions and Classism:** Working-class academics may experience subtle or overt forms of class-

based discrimination and invalidation, known as microaggressions [10, 32, 40]. These can include comments about their background, accent, or perceived lack of sophistication, which, over time, can erode self-esteem and contribute to chronic stress and mental health issues [32]. The intersection of class with other identities can lead to unique forms of microaggressive experiences [10].

- **Precarity and Job Insecurity:** The increasing prevalence of precarious contracts and limited opportunities for permanent positions in academia [9, 45] disproportionately affects early career researchers and those without established networks, which can include many working-class academics [39]. Job insecurity is a significant predictor of stress, anxiety, and depression [13, 37]. The pressure to constantly secure funding and publications adds to this burden [12, 20].
- **Workload and Systemic Stressors:** While common across academia, the heavy workloads, long hours, and pressure to publish and secure grants [12, 20] can be particularly challenging for working-class academics who may have less access to informal support networks or financial buffers [6]. The overall stressful nature of the HE environment contributes to a well-being crisis for staff [15, 22, 35]. Work-related stress, depression, and anxiety are significant issues in the UK workforce, including HE [19].

These challenges are not isolated but often intersect, creating a complex web of stressors that can negatively impact the mental health of working-class academics.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the synthesized literature underscore the significant mental health burden carried by many working-class academics as they navigate the HE landscapes. The persistent feelings of not belonging, grappling with imposter phenomenon, and experiencing class-based microaggressions highlight how structural inequalities and cultural norms within academia can act as significant barriers to well-being [2, 6, 10, 25, 38]. The concept of habitus clash [4, 36] provides a valuable framework for understanding the often-unspoken challenges related to navigating different social and cultural expectations [2, 6]. Beyond the individual challenges, systemic issues such as precarity and excessive workload contribute significantly to stress and anxiety [9, 12, 13, 20, 37, 45]. These pressures are not felt equally and can exacerbate the difficulties faced by those already navigating feelings of otherness [6, 9, 25]. The well-being crisis in HE is a broad issue [15, 22, 24, 35], but

understanding the specific vulnerabilities of working-class staff is crucial for developing targeted support.

Despite these challenges, the literature also points to various coping strategies employed by working-class academics. These can include drawing on resilience built through previous life experiences [8, 23, 28], developing strong support networks with peers who share similar backgrounds [8, 11], engaging in self-care practices [29], and finding ways to integrate their working-class identity into their academic work and pedagogy [11, 27]. Some may find strength in their 'community cultural wealth,' drawing on the skills, knowledge, and networks developed outside of traditional academic pathways [46]. Reclaiming and celebrating their working-class identity can be a powerful act of resistance against feelings of inadequacy and non-belonging [27].

Institutional support is critical in addressing these challenges. Universities need to move beyond a deficit model that views working-class individuals as lacking [27] and instead recognize and value the unique perspectives and strengths they bring [46]. This requires creating more inclusive environments where class is openly discussed and understood [18, 44]. Strategies could include developing targeted mentoring programs, providing training on class sensitivity and microaggressions for all staff, promoting secure employment pathways, and fostering a culture that prioritizes well-being [30, 41]. Supporting student solidarity and transformative pedagogy can also create more welcoming spaces [11]. Addressing systemic issues like workload and precarity is essential for improving the mental health of all academics, but particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds [30].

Future research could further explore the intersectional experiences of working-class academics, considering how class interacts with race, gender, disability, and other identities to shape mental health outcomes [10]. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of these challenges and the effectiveness of different coping strategies and institutional interventions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while working-class academics demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating the HE landscape, they face significant and unique mental health challenges rooted in issues of identity, belonging, systemic inequalities, and cultural clashes. Addressing these requires a multi-faceted approach that includes individual coping strategies, peer support, and, crucially, institutional recognition and action to create a more equitable and supportive academic environment.

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