



Malt, Michael Stanley (2019) *Living through assessment: Towards a working-class lived experience understanding of assessment in higher education*. [MSc].

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Deposited: 29 October 2020



University  
of Glasgow

**Living through assessment: Towards a  
working-class lived experience  
understanding of assessment in higher  
education**

By Michael Stanley Malt

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master  
of Science at The University of Glasgow

27th August 2020

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank everyone who played a role in the completion of my dissertation, both in terms of academic and emotional support.

Firstly, I would like to thank all of the staff on the MSc. Educational Studies (ACY) course. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Bradley and Dr. Kirsty Finn for their guidance through the dissertation process, as well as their support in my further academic goals.

Secondly, I would like to thank the student cohort for building such a supportive and warm learning community that has helped me actually understand my topic with many talks and recommendations for reading.

And thirdly, I would like to thank Ellen Malt-Cullen for her supporting me through this degree and dissertation. Our discussions have helped me keep grounded in my approach to educational issues and her insights into education have been invaluable for this research.

## **Abstract**

Most approaches towards assessment take as their primary objects of analysis the procedures or outcomes that are part of assessment practices. However, an important part assessment practices are the experiences that the students have when they go

through assessment. The aim of this paper is to build a new perspective on assessment that makes working-class students' lived experience of assessment the focus of analysis through an integrative review. This review synthesises literature on socially just assessment practices with literature on working-class lived experiences in higher education. Working-class experiences are used as working-class students can benefit from a social justice approach to assessments, and their experience presents a wide spectrum of barriers that students might face when going through higher education. This synthesises this new perspective on assessment and suggests ways in which it may be put to use in empirical research in order to inform the use of assessments in pedagogy and curricula structures.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### ***Affect and the attainment gap***

In higher education, there are a number of disparities that exist between working-class students and their middle- and upper-class peers. A governmental focus on widening participation shows that there is a disparity between the proportion of working-class

students attending university when compared to other students from more affluent social classes (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; The Scottish Government, 2016). However, even if working-class students enter into higher education (HE), they are found to have 'consistently lower attainment and progression outcomes even after controlling for other factors such as type of institution' (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017, p. 102). In this paper, I will be focusing on the attainment gap between students from different classes, particularly the lived experiences of working-class students.

At every stage of education, working-class students attain worse grades on average than their middle- and upper-class peers (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016; Reay, 2017; Sosu and Ellis, 2014). Explanations for this gap can be found in the material and economic reality of working-class life (Reay, 2005; Reay, 2012; Silva-Laya et al., 2019), the society and culture of working-class people (Silva-Laya et al. 2019; Willis, 1978), and the educational history of the student's family (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016; Reay, 2017). These factors provide *a priori* considerations for interpreting the attainment gap and other disparities that exist between classes. However, these factors do not include the affective reality that a student experiences as they go through HE and how this can affect their engagement with various aspects of the HE journey.

Reay argues that an important part of a classed experience of life is 'how individuals think and feel about those practices' that they participate in (Reay, 2005, p. 912). As educational institutions require students to take part in social practices, how those students think and feel about those practices will affect the extent to which they engage with those practices and how successfully they perform them. One of the practices that students are required to take part in to attain their degree certification is assessment.

Assessment practices act as measures for student learning and a grade marks the student's ability to learn the material they are assessed on (McArthur, 2019). This process makes the class attainment gap visible meaning that we can bring to bear the considerations listed above in order to interpret why this gap exists. However, as assessment is a practice within the educational institution, and if we take Reay's claim

of a classed lived experience of practices, we can also include in our interpretation of the attainment gap the lived experiences that working-class students have of assessment. If we had this information, we could study how their lived experience affects their assessment performance and what generates classed lived experiences of assessment in the first place.

Studying assessment as an event that is lived through by students requires looking at assessment practices through a new lens which does not focus on the fairness of assessment procedures and outcomes (McArthur, 2019; Stowell, 2004). This is not to say that these areas of assessment should not be considered or factored into a lived experience view of assessment. It rather means that these should be interpreted through the lens of their affective characteristics and how they impact students. This would allow us to relate understandings of procedures and outcomes in assessment with the related affective influence that these practices have on working-class students. Hence, the procedures and outcomes are not forgotten in an account of a student's lived experience of assessment but are incorporated on two levels: firstly and primarily, they are analysed through the students experience of them, and secondly, the practices and outcomes themselves can be related to these experiences to provide new insight. Relating these to classed experiences of assessment practices will hopefully provide insight into the affective and emotional barriers that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face when taking assessments.

Developing this lens requires reframing our understanding of assessment, similar to Mol's (1998) approach to the dynamics of the multiple realities of anemia in different medical contexts. Taking assessment as a whole concept, it requires us to rotate it and find a different perspective that still admits assessment procedures and outcomes into our understanding while decentralising procedures and outcomes from their current positions as the primary objects of analysis. In order to make this new perspective useful, some theorising about how lived experiences relate to the concept of assessment is necessary. Doing this work gives us a better idea of how to research lived experiences of assessment in empirical studies moving forward.

This theoretical work is the aim of this paper. In order to develop a working-class lived experience understanding of assessment, this paper performs an integrative review that synthesises the literature on socially just assessment practices, and the lived experience of working-class students in HE. In bringing these sets of literature together, I hope to synthesise a new perspective which takes into account the factors that affect working-class lived experiences of HE and apply them to assessment practices to show that studying classed experiences of assessment practices empirically is both theoretically motivated and should not be left to '... the realm of individual psychology', as Reay argues classed lived experiences have been (Reay, 2005, p. 912).

### ***Dissertation Structure***

Chapter 2 of this paper describes my positioning with regards to being a working-class student that has lived experience of HE. It also discusses my new materialist theoretical approach, inspired by Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism. This covers why I believe that this approach is appropriate for this topic as it does not assume the existence of theoretical categories that we can use to interpret data, and it allows for a wider and more dynamic range of agents that influence working-class lived experiences of assessment.

Chapter 3 discusses why I have chosen to use an integrative review for this topic and how I have put it into practice, using Whittemore and Knaf'l's (2005) model as a guide. I focus on the literature search and data analysis stages of the review. In particular, the literature search returned few sources, so an intuitive literature search was incorporated to supplement these sources. I then justify the use of thematic analysis as the method used for data analysis. I finally discuss the methodological synthesis of the integrative review with autoethnography, as they are able to mutually inform the practice of the other, and provide insight into the usefulness of a classed lived experience perspective of assessment.



Chapter 4 reviews the literature on assessment practices and social justice. Here I present the results of the thematic analysis of this body of literature, identifying three core themes: analytical approaches to assessment practice, the social value of assessments, and assessment as learning and pedagogy. I then relate these themes back to the topic of the attainment gap and outline the key takeaways that will be used in the synthesis of this review.

Chapter 5 reviews the literature on working-class lived experiences of HE. I again present the themes that are identified in the literature: different ways of characterising working-class experiences of HE, the social and cultural influences on these experiences, and the experiences working-class students have of HE. I then conclude the discussion with some methodological considerations on studying working-class experiences of HE and how these relate to the project of this paper.

Chapter 6 brings together these two sets of literature to synthesise a new perspective on assessment practices that centralises the student's lived experience as the primary object of analysis. I detail how the themes of each body of literature can be related to construct this perspective in a way that will allow us to identify significant experiences and beliefs that students have regarding assessment. I then explain how this can be used to inform our understanding of assessment procedures and outcomes, as well as how we characterise working-class experiences of assessment and the factors that influence them. The chapter ends with a discussion of how future research can be conducted using this new perspective and how information from gained from this research can inform our pedagogical approach to assessment.

Chapter 7 concludes the paper, reiterating the need for more research in this area due to the relative lack of literature and the utility that it could provide when brought to bear in empirical studies. Tying this back to the attainment gap, the importance of lived experience in addressing educational disparities is discussed as it elucidates the barriers that impact students directly. I also relate this to the recent A-Level exams

scandal in the UK (BBC, 2020) and how this could have impacted student experiences of HE.

## **Chapter 2: Working-class positionality and agential realism**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter explores both my positionality and theoretical framework. The first section describes my positionality as a working-class student living through the process of assessment and discusses my previous educational experience. The second section explores my new materialist theoretical framework, inspired by Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism. This covers the benefits of adopting a new materialist framework from both sociological and methodological perspectives. The final section summarises the chapter, relating my positionality and theoretical framework to the project of synthesising a classed lived experience perspective of assessment.

### ***Positionality***

The positionality of a researcher plays a key role in the constitution of the research space, with the researcher and their data (and in qualitative research, their participants) constituting this shared space (Burke, 2014). In the case of this literature review, my

positionality as a researcher affects my interpretation of the literature, as well as the themes that I find through thematic analysis. A researcher's culture, race, gender, and other intersectional factors all have influenced the epistemological perspective that they apply in their analyses (Milner IV, 2007). Thus acknowledging my own positionality enables a clear understanding of the perspective I am using to interpret the literature of the integrative review and the theoretical analysis that I use in the synthesis of this literature. Discussion of class positionality in research has been difficult due to the definitional problems that class presents as it includes many disadvantaged demographics that do not necessarily share in the same socio-economic, cultural, or social realities (Mellor et al. 2014). Thus it is important to be explicit about researcher positionality with regards to how they are situated within their class as this can lend more precision to a reader's understanding of the researcher's interpretation of the data.

In reflecting on my positionality, I am positioned such that my educational experiences, socio-economic background, race, and gender play an important role in establishing the values that I have and express through focusing on the attainment gap for working-class students. I am a mixed-race (although I am usually recognised as white), male, working-class student from London that has almost 6 years of HE experience, with an undergraduate degree, previous post-graduate degree, and now completing this post-graduate degree in educational studies. This means that I am familiar with how assessment is used in HE from the perspective of a student, which informs the lived experience perspective that I am attempting to build in this paper.

My working-class background ties me to the concerns of working-class people, both from the perspective of being a member of the class, and from the perspective of sociological awareness. To make my working-class experience more precise, I have witnessed alcohol and drug abuse at home, seen family members deal with mental health issues, and experienced the death of one of my parents at 15 as a result of these two factors. While these are not typical of a working-class experience across the board, they have influenced my focus on the affective and emotional experiences of working-class students in HE. In this paper, my position as a working-class student is expressed

by the autoethnographic excerpts that go along with every chapter. This gives voice to and analyses relevant aspects of my experience both as a student and a researcher. My sociological awareness is enacted through this paper and its focus on the class attainment gap as a problem for both society and education.

Identifying assessment as a key contributor to the attainment gap is not only due to the allocation of grades making the gap visible, but to my own experiences with assessments in HE settings. In my previous undergraduate and post-graduate experiences, the guidelines for assessment and the criteria by which they were marked were unhelpful to me as they were often expressed in ways I was unsure how to interpret. This meant that, for much of my HE experience, I was unsure about what constituted a good assessment versus a bad one, except for the grade that was given as a result. Having had this experience, I believe that assessment practices and pedagogical practice can be improved if we take into account these sorts of student experiences.

Finally, my previous degrees in philosophy mean that I heavily rely on critical analysis and theory as a method for understanding and explaining the phenomena throughout this paper. Due to this, I have chosen to lay out the evidence for points I make in an argumentative form, rather than using tables or bullet points. As well, as this is a theoretical work, I feel that this is how it is best presented. The next section covers the theoretical framework used for the analysis in the literature review.

### ***Agential realism***

The theoretical framework used in this paper is derived from Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism. For our purposes, there are three key theses that underpin agential realism that will guide our analysis:

(1) Objects only become determinate when they intra-act with other objects.

(2) As objects are indeterminate outside of intra-action, the phenomena in which the intra-action occurs is the basic unit of analysis.

(3) Phenomena include not only physical entities, but cultural, social, discursive, and mental entities as well.

Barad justifies (1) by considering the double-slit experiment and what it means for interpretations of quantum mechanics. Intra-action itself is defined as the '*mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (author's emphasis) (Barad, 2007, p. 33). This is defined in opposition to interaction which presupposes the existence of determinate entities that interact with one another on the basis of properties they already possess. Barad argues that entities are constituted and made determinate through intra-action with one another. Intra-actions, in this sense, are not limited to just two agents, but includes the entirety of the phenomena that we are analysing. As (2) claims, phenomena are the basic units of analysis as it is within the phenomena that the properties of the agents become determinate; using the terminology of agential realism, phenomena are where 'cuts' are enacted, separating agents from one another (Barad, 2007). This means that, in order to understand how agents arise and how they intra-act with other agents requires looking at the phenomena within which they become distinct. As a post-humanist theory, agential realism admits non-human agents into analysis. This includes entities like cultural, social, discursive, and mental constructions, as well as physical entities that are usually understood as inanimate (Barad, 2007).

As agential realism has these theoretical components, it is suited to conceptualising a working-class student's lived experience of assessment. For example, thesis (1) allows us to capture the co-constitutive nature of assessments and students. Straightforwardly, a student performs the assessment, be it a written exam or portfolio, which constitutes some of the physical composition of the assessment itself. These physical marks that the student has made get translated into a grade through various cultural, social, and discursive practices embodied in learning outcomes and marking rubrics. This grade then constitutes the student socially, signalling their merit with regards to their ability to learn. Thesis (2) captures the necessity of analysing the context within which the

practice we are looking at is situated. As we have seen above, there are agents beyond just the assessment and the student that impact the intra-action and it is only within the situation of the student taking the assessment that these other factors become determinate and relevant. Thesis (3) means that we can include non-human agents in our explanation of the intra-action between assessments and working-class students. Not only does this allow for a fuller explanation of the intra-action, it also allows for a wider scope of factors to be incorporated into an account of this phenomenon.

This framework informs the synthesis of a lived experience perspective on assessment as, in a thematic analysis of the literature, it does not presume the importance of some agents over others. Moreover, it allows the literature itself to present relevant agents and themes that can be used to synthesise this perspective. Hence, a lived experience perspective on assessments allows us to take into account not only the procedures and outcomes of assessment, but the affective influence that these have on students and the student's understanding of their context.

Agential realism, and post-humanist theories like it, are often used in education as a way of framing the intra-actions that occur in a classroom or when the process of learning is taking place (Barad, 1995; Barad, 2000; Murriss and Haynes, 2018; Perry and Medina, 2011; Perry, et al. 2013; Perry and Seel, 2019; Plauborg, 2018). However, they have been also been used to analyse the position and usefulness of certain concepts in education like language and identity (de Freitas and Curinga, 2015) as well as theorising children's philosophical education and its potential for transformative learning (Haynes and Murriss, 2012; Murriss, 2016). It is in this latter analysing and theorising capacity that we will be using agential realism.

Other theories that are used for analysis throughout educational research, for example critical theory or Bourdieusian theory, have a tendency to presuppose certain theoretical categories like mutual recognition (McArthur, 2019) or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) which inform their analysis. While this can provide us with a language with which to talk about assessment practices or student experiences, agential realism allows us to

define the phenomenon that we want to study and allow the relevant agents to become apparent from looking at the phenomenon (Barad, 2003), rather than presupposing them. In our case, this would allow the themes that are present in the two bodies of literature to emerge and inform the synthesis of them. Applying a theoretical framework that has a presupposed and strongly characterised ontology, like those involving mutual recognition or *habitus*, would require a more rigid synthesis that presupposes one of these categories as a key theme, creating a synthesis that is centered on a particular theme, or attempting to build a synthesis around that theme. Agential realism gives us no such issues as it allows the relevant agents to become apparent through the phenomenon, rather than attempting to fit the agents of a phenomenon into presupposed categories.

### **Summary**

My positionality as a working-class student has impacted my choice of topic as I can use my personal experience to inform the analysis. However, agential realism encourages an analysis that does not presuppose the importance of some agents over others, which becomes important when we consider the lived experiences of working class students in HE. In terms of conducting an integrative review, my positionality and theoretical framework allow us to identify important themes in the literature that are constitutive of current views on socially just assessment practice and working-class experiences of HE. Agential realism allows us to frame the phenomenon of study to be working-class experiences of assessment in higher education, and allow key themes about this phenomenon to emerge from the literature.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

In this chapter, I begin by justifying my choice of integrative review, referring to my initial literature search that did not return any literature that was relevant to the topic of this paper. I also defend my use of thematic analysis as my data analysis method as it provides a base from which to synthesise the literature. I then go on to describe my application of the integrative review process. I concentrate on the two areas that presented the most challenges: the literature search stage and the data analysis stage. I also discuss the use of autoethnography to ground the integrative review in my own experiences and provide an account which can be analysed using the perspective of assessment that is synthesised in this paper. I finally summarise the chapter, covering how the integrative review is suited to this topic due to the relative lack of literature on the subject.

### ***Justifications***

The initial approach I had planned to use was a literature review with a thematic analysis. In starting the literature review, I began searching the University of Glasgow library database for journal articles that contained the search terms 'assessment practice', 'working-class', 'lived experience', and 'higher education'. I chose these search terms as they would return literature on the topic of this paper: working-class lived experience of assessment in higher education. This search returned 500 journal articles. I conducted a search through the abstracts with the exclusion criterion that the abstracts explicitly indicate some discussion of working-class lived experience of assessments in a higher education setting to some extent. Applying this criterion returned 3 articles. I then applied the above exclusion criteria to a full reading of each article and found that none of these papers included a discussion of the above topic. One paper discussed the lived experience of classed and gendered academics and



staff in higher education (Loveday, 2015). The other two papers either focused too narrowly on the intersection of particular non-traditional student characteristics; class, gender, pregnancy and parenthood (Madden, 2018); or focused too broadly on non-traditional students in general (Wong, 2018). As a result, I excluded these from the literature review as well.

As this initial literature search returned no useful sources on the topic, it suggested that there was a gap in the literature. I decided to adopt an integrative approach to my literature review as integrative approaches aim at filling a literature gap by synthesising ideas from separate bodies of literature to provide a new perspective or theoretical framework from which to approach the topic (Snyder, 2019). However, this meant that I would need to identify two bodies of literature that I could use to synthesise a perspective on working-class lived experiences of assessment.

I chose to split the literature searches into literature on social justice and assessment practices in HE, and working-class lived experience of HE. I chose to add the search term 'social justice' to the assessment practice literature search because, in attempting to develop a perspective that can help to address the attainment gap, the project of this paper is a social justice project. This was not added to the working-class lived experience literature as much of this literature discusses social justice regarding the disparities between working-class students and others.

Having identified these two bodies of literature, I used thematic analysis to identify key themes that are used to synthesise a new perspective that focused on working-class student's lived experiences of assessment. I chose to use a thematic analysis as it is a 'flexible approach' (Nowell, et al., 2017, p. 2) that allows me to identify key themes in each body of literature that can be built on in order to synthesise a new perspective and start to address the gap in the literature. The next section discusses the process of conducting an integrative review, explaining the literature search process and the relative lack of literature that was returned for each search.

## ***Literature search***

As the initial search returned no relevant sources, this influenced the 'problem identification stage' of Whitemore and Knaf's (2005, p. 548) integrative review model, showing that there was a gap in the literature that needed further research. As an integrative review aims to synthesise two different bodies of literature, I split the search terms into two different searches. The first literature search was conducted with the terms 'assessment practice', 'social justice', and 'higher education'. The aim was to return literature that focused on analysing assessment practices on the basis of social justice perspectives. Both the University of Glasgow library database and the Google Scholar search engine were used, and restricted to the first 20 entries of each search to reduce the inclusion of irrelevant articles in the exclusion process. In reviewing the abstracts of each article, I excluded those that did not discuss social justice and assessment practices in a higher education setting. Applying this criterion returned nine articles with one duplicate across both datasets, leaving eight articles for a complete review. I excluded those papers that were not social justice analyses of assessment practices in higher education, which left five papers for review. Those that were excluded discussed assessment practices in high school (Hayward, 2007), fairness in education as whole with no reference to assessment (Grant, 2012), and student perceptions of fairness in classroom assessments (Rasooli, et al., 2019).

The second literature search was conducted using the search terms 'working-class', 'lived experience' and 'higher education'. These search terms were used so that they would return literature about working-class student's lived experience of HE. As above, the University of Glasgow library database and the Google Scholar search engine were used and restricted to the first 20 entries to reduce the appearance of irrelevant literature. In reviewing the abstracts of the journal articles, I excluded those that did not discuss the working-class lived experience of higher education. Applying this criterion returned five articles with no duplicates across the two searches. Of these articles, only one was excluded as I had previously rejected it for the initial literature search that motivated the integrative review (Loveday, 2015).

Both of the literature searches returned a small amount of literature on which to conduct a thematic analysis, affecting the trustworthiness of the resulting analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), and undermining the foundation of the synthesis which is the aim of this integrative review. This lack of literature is also noted within the literature itself (Ballysingh, et al. 2018; Reay, 2005; Taras, 2008). Consequently, I incorporated an intuitive approach to the literature search to increase the number of sources and increase the trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell, et al., 2017). This involved including texts from key theorists in these areas as well as reviewing the references of the articles that were returned in the literature searches. (Tables including the lists of literature included in the reviews can be found in Appendices II and III). The next section discusses the data analysis stage of the review and how it differs in this paper from Whitemore and Knaf's (2005) model.

### ***Data analysis***

In Whitemore and Knaf (2005), they note that data analysis is the least developed stage of the integrative review and as such is subject to the most error. They suggest a rough structure within which the data analysis can be conducted which includes the synthesis of the review. This structure is compatible with the thematic analysis presented here as it allows for codifying and presenting the literature relative to themes that are found. Snyder (2019, p. 336) notes that this stage of the review is difficult as it requires the researcher to express 'superior conceptual thinking' while 'being transparent' through the analytic process.

However, there is a challenge where the synthesis portion of the data analysis stage is concerned. Whitemore and Knaf note that the synthesis of the identified themes must be analytically honest and that 'rival explanations and spurious relationships' must be 'thoughtfully explored' (Whitemore and Knaf, 2005, p. 551). What analytical honesty and thoughtful exploration are is not elaborated on in the text, however what thoughtful exploration and analytical honesty will look like can depend on our assumptions about

how reason, argument, and justification should look in an academic context. Hence, I have chosen to structure the review around key themes (Torraco, 2016) identified in the texts to keep the arguments clear, and to clearly present the themes that will be used in the synthesis. This also creates boundaries for the phenomenon being researched, so that relevant agents are easier to identify throughout the analysis.

### ***Autoethnography***

While most of the discussions in this paper are written in a standard academic mode of expression, I include some autoethnographic excerpts in Appendix I. Autoethnography can be practiced in an analytic way (Anderson, 2006), using the tools of analytic ethnography and applying them to researcher experiences, or in a postmodern way that is designed to push back against analytic methods of ethnography, presenting a more evocative account of the researchers' experience (Stewart, 2007). I use autoethnography here to challenge standard academic expression, attempting to merge the analytic and rigorous approaches to social science with the drive to include 'personal and social phenomena' (Ellis, et al., 2011). This allows an account of working-class lived experience of assessment to be expressed alongside the integrative review that can be analysed using the findings of the review and informs the review itself. This synthesises literature review and autoethnographic methodologies to show that each can mutually benefit the work of the other as the literature review gives identifies analytic tools that can be used to interpret the autoethnography, and the autoethnography humanises the literature review process by signalling the affective motivations behind sociological research from the perspective of a working-class student.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter, I have justified the use of an integrative review relative to the lack of literature that exists on working-class lived experiences of assessment. This lack of literature carried over to the literature searches conducted as part of the integrative

review. However, both of these areas of study are developing fields and supplementary literature was added using an intuitive approach to literature search in order to increase the body of literature from which I could identify themes to be used in the synthesis. I also describe how I am challenging standard academic modes of expression synthesising the methods of autoethnography and literature review in a way that is beneficial for understanding the lived experience of a working-class student in the process of completing an assessment.

## **Chapter 4: Assessing Assessment**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter is a review of the literature surrounding assessment practices and social justice in higher education. The first section is a discussion of the two main analytical approaches of assessment practices: procedural approaches and outcomes approaches. The second section discusses how social value is conferred on assessment performances due to assessment's political nature and its positioning as a measurement tool of student ability. The third section takes assessment's relationship to

learning and pedagogy, specifically how it relates to certain understandings of the purpose of education and the role it plays in the development of student learning. The final section summarises the review, relates the literature to the attainment gap between working-class students and their more affluent peers, and what we can take from the literature.

### ***Analytical approaches to assessment***

#### *Procedural approaches*

There are two main analytic approaches to assessment practice that tend to frame the phenomenon being studied: procedural approaches and outcome approaches (Adams, et al., 2019; Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Elton, 2004; Matshedisho, 2019; McArthur, 2014; McArthur, 2016; Sambell, et al., 1997; Stowell, 2004). The difference between these approaches is not that they exclusively focus on either the procedures or outcomes of assessment practice with no consideration to the other, but they weigh the importance of these factors differently. The contention of those that adopt a procedural approach is that, by focusing on the procedures that make up overall assessment practice, they can ensure that no students are advantaged or disadvantaged by taking assessments (Adams, et al., 2019). Theorists that adopt an outcomes approach to assessment practice argue that analysing student outcomes from assessment practices can lead us to the causes of grade inequalities. By addressing these problems, we can adjust our assessment practices to be more socially just.

McArthur identifies a Rawlsian root in the procedural approaches to assessment practice (McArthur, 2016). As procedural approaches share this root, they tend to share three focuses that are present in Rawls' work: fair procedure, mutual disinterest, and an assumption of sameness (McArthur, 2016, p. 969-970). These same focuses are also noted by Stowell (2004) in her discussion of the growing 'technicization' of academic standards, where having fair procedures and reducing bias are the key issues in assessment practices. Both of these theorists argue that, while these values seem to

lead to better assessment procedures, this does not mean that they will lead to better outcomes for students in general, and may disadvantage some students over others.

With regards to the notions of fairness discussed in the literature, Stowell argues that fairness involves both social and political value judgements that means trying to define 'fairness' objectively becomes 'impossible' (Stowell, 2004, p. 506). In social and political settings, where we are positioned will influence how we understand fairness (Sambell, et al., 1997). For example, working-class students may feel that their grade for an assessment unfairly reflects their ability as they have to work alongside their studies, where other students that do not need to work may find their grades are fair representations of their ability. This presents a worry about the use of fairness as a basis upon which to evaluate assessment practices. In focusing on fairness, we are trying to reduce the amount of disadvantage suffered by any social group that goes through education. However, if our ideas of fairness are socially and culturally informed, then our application of fairness in assessment practices (and beyond) could introduce bias into these procedures.

The value of mutual disinterest is meant to guide the elimination of bias in assessment practices, removing the special interests of students and markers as agents that influence assessment. This can be seen in practices such as external examination and the procedural application of marking rubrics for all assessments of a particular type (Elton, 2004 and Matshedisho, 2019). However, McArthur argues that disinterested assessment practices can 'lead to unfair outcomes for students, including unintended biases' (McArthur, 2016, p. 970). Both external examination and the procedural application of marking rubrics ignore differences between students that may affect their assessment performance. For example, a student balancing work, family, and academic commitments and a student focusing purely on their academic life will both be assessed in the same, disinterested way in spite of the fact that the number of commitments a student has will affect their assessment performance.

Underlying the focus on fair procedures and mutual disinterest is an assumption of sameness (Elton, 2004; McArthur, 2016; Stowell, 2004). To some extent, an assumption of sameness of students justifies reasoning about universally fair procedures and mutual disinterest in assessment. As we have seen, students come from different classes, races, genders, and countries, all of which have particular material realities, social values, discourses, and cultures relative to one another. Elton notes that in HE institutions 'all students in a given year group must pass the same examination paper, and we do not allow examinations to be tailored to individual needs' (Elton, 2004, p. 49). This means that institutions tend to marginalise educational performances from non-traditional students into systems like 'good cause', rather than adjust their assessment practices to accommodate.

While promoting social justice in the application of assessment practices, each of these values are agents that can contribute to unjust student outcomes. These unjust outcomes stem from the differences between students and how these differences feed into the 'fair procedures' and 'mutual disinterest' of assessments, both acting as functions that take into account differences rather than eliminating them.. Stowell (2004, p. 497) expresses the worry that '[i]mpartial processes do not guarantee just outcomes'. Due to this, McArthur argues that we need 'an alternative to current, mainstream practices' that use 'different conceptions of social justice' and their 'implications [...] for assessment' (McArthur, 2016, p. 971)

### *Outcome approaches*

Shifting the focus away from the procedures of assessment practices to their outcomes, theorists can analyse whether assessment outcomes are socially just and promote social justice in society. In the literature, there are three approaches that are used to establish whether assessment outcomes are socially just: capabilities approach (McArthur, 2016), critical theory (McArthur, 2014; McArthur, 2016), and distributive justice (Stowell, 2004).



Capabilities approach frames social justice in terms of the capabilities a person requires to 'fulfil their potential within whatever social context they live' (McArthur, 2016, p. 971). Taking into account the social context of a student moves this approach away from an assumption of sameness to a recognition of difference. This means that the capabilities some students need are different to students from other social contexts. What these capabilities are for any social context is dynamic and changeable, meaning that not only are the necessary capabilities between students different but the capabilities needed by a student will vary across time. Capabilities approach moves us away from the idealised sameness of procedural approaches to the realistic difference that is present in society, 'by focusing from the start on what people are actually able to do and to be' (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 30).

Critical theory is the name for a tradition of thought that stems from Marxist theory, using it alongside other social theories to provide sociological analyses of particular phenomena (McArthur, 2016, p. 971). McArthur uses the critical theories of Theodore Adorno, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth to provide analyses of the role of assessment practices in student outcomes (McArthur, 2014; McArthur, 2016). These theories introduce mutual recognition (Honneth, 2004) and the necessity of failure in intellectual progress (Adorno, 2015) to guide a different analysis of assessment outcomes from the capabilities approach. Recognising students in assessment practices requires recognising them as bringing a set of background knowledge and experiences that 'impacts the social justice outcomes' of the assessments they take part in (McArthur, 2016, p. 975). Additionally, reframing failure as a key part of the learning process changes our perspective on what student outcomes mean and how we should approach them both as students and as educators (McArthur, 2014).

Distributive justice is a form of social justice that seeks to distribute resources to people that are due to them relative to their 'relevant characteristics and circumstances' (Stowell, 2004, p. 497). What is 'due' to students in assessment practices is a grade that reflects 'their productive efforts, academic capacities and individual merit' (Stowell, 2004, p. 498), and this value is generally expressed in anti-discrimination legislation.

However, just as with the concept of fairness above, what is due to a student 'is a social decision and is a product of social relations' (Stowell, 2004, p. 498). Therefore, a more sophisticated understanding of what is just distribution is necessary in order to socially unbiased how we grade students and address attainment gaps across society.

Each of these outcome approaches pushes us to address inequality in assessment practice from two different perspectives in a way that reasserts our responsibility to providing students with their best possible outcomes. As educators in the classroom, they push us to consider the various material, social, and cultural contexts that students come from and how assessment can be used to evaluate student learning. As curriculum builders, they push us to critically evaluate the barriers that students face as a consequence of our assessment practices and those practices' resistance to student-context diversity. Both of these issues are considered in the next two sections of this chapter.

### ***The social value of assessment***

A number of theorists have noted the social value that is associated with assessments (Ballysingh, 2018; Boud, 2007; Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Crossman, 2007; McArthur, 2014; McArthur, 2016; Pitt, et al., 2019; Stowell, 2004). This value has come to be associated with assessments by their apparent ability to sort students into groups that are more or less academically able and creating a social hierarchy based on socially informed notions of success and failure (McArthur, 2014). Understanding how this social value is an agent that intra-acts with student assessment performance is important as it plays a role in what outcomes are for students in HE. Ballysingh et al. (2018, p. 93) reinforce this importance as they note that 'scholarship of assessment is relatively nascent and disconnected from social justice efforts'.

How society understands the function of assessment practices can influence how social value is conferred on students. Assessment is understood as a positivistic measure of a student's learning and the grade they receive is thought to be a true representation of

their learning and their ability to learn. Elton (2004, p. 44) argues that this measure is too simplistic, as 'we even grade eggs on two scales, size and age'. However, grading creates a social hierarchy within a student cohort that represents the abilities of each student and signals to other stakeholders the merit that students have.

This is justified by the 'political nature of assessment' (Ballysingh, 2018, p. 99).

Assessment's political nature is a result of its position as a measure of learning. In measuring learning, assessments must prescribe what ways of knowing, what knowledge, and what methods of enquiry are legitimate (Ballysingh, 2018). This is political because choosing particular ways of knowing, knowledge, and methods of enquiry necessarily requires excluding others in spite of the fact that they may be legitimate (Pitt, et al., 2019; de Sousa Santos, 2001; Young, 2013). These choices will have an impact on how particular types of students, who are not familiar with the ways of knowing that have been chosen, perform on these assessments. For example, most assessments in HE philosophy courses are essay based and they require the student to write in a way that constructs a chain of argument in a non-fictional style. However, there is a long tradition of philosophers expressing their arguments by fictional stories from Plato's dialogues to the novels of French Existentialists and these are studied in HE philosophy courses for their philosophical contributions. These assessments present non-fiction as the dominant way of 'doing philosophy', discouraging students who find it easier to explore philosophical topics in a fictional style. While this is a niche example, it demonstrates how particular ways of knowing that students could use to contribute to the knowledge base of a subject are discouraged and delegitimised, disadvantaging those students that are disposed to express their knowledge in these ways.

Given the way that assessments embody dominant knowledge practices, and the positivistic measure that they present, students that are less familiar with expressing their knowledge in the dominant way are placed lower in the social hierarchy that is informed by the grades they receive. However, assessments are not the only agents that constitute this social hierarchy. It is also due to the societal assumptions of what constitutes success and failure (McArthur, 2014). As society attaches the stigma of

failure to particular assessment performances, this intra-action affects how we view certain sets of students that are disadvantaged by the dominant ways of knowing that are embodied by the assessments that they have to take. McArthur argues that reframing failure will provide us with an opportunity to lift the stigma that is attached to students through current assessment practices (McArthur, 2014). One area in which we can begin this process is by adjusting the role we see failure and assessment playing in pedagogy and learning which is discussed in the next section.

### ***Assessment as learning and pedagogy***

The role that assessment plays in learning and pedagogy is closely linked with what we see as the purpose of education. Autin et al. (2015) argue that education can be understood as having two functions, an educational function and a selective function, that are in tension with one another when it comes to pedagogy and understanding learning. The educational function is meant to 'equip all students with knowledge, skills and capacities for learning' (Autin et al., 2015, p. 2) and be 'pertinent to the everyday world' (Sambell, 1997, p. 361). This promotes social mobility, as working-class students are educated to the same level as their peers in other social classes, and ensures that no talent is wasted (Autin, 2015). Using the educational function, assessment practices can be seen as an agent in the educational journey, where students are assessed to see how far they have progressed and are given feedback in order to take the next steps towards a higher level of knowledge and understanding. In this sense, students and assessment intra-act in a way that develops student learning.

When education is viewed with this function in mind, formative assessments can be used to afford students the opportunity to have their learning and ability assessed and for feedback to be given to them, without worrying that their grade will constitute part of their overall mark (Autin, et al., 2015). Formative assessments are an opportunity for both student and teacher to collaborate on the educational journey the student is going through in a way that will not impact their educational outcome (McArthur, 2014; Yorke, 2003). As formative assessment allows us to assess the ability of the student, it also

tells us which students need more help and in what areas they are weak, allowing us to give specific feedback, fulfilling the educational function.

The selection function of education serves to choose the most academically able students for academic opportunities, thereby training students for the social position most suited to them relative to their aptitude (Autin et al., 2015, p. 2). Autin et al. argue that this function is informed by social meritocratic values which dictate that an individual's social position should be relative to their individual merit. However, the merit assigned to an individual is a feature of the person themselves, rather than the stage of learning they are at, and the educational institution is 'perceived as a neutral place where individuals can express their inherent qualities' (Autin et al., 2015, p. 2). Here, assessments intra-act with students to visibly mark some students as more able than others.

When education is viewed with this function in mind, summative (or normative) assessments can be used to assess the academic ability that the student has as it represents their performance by a single quantifiable indicator, their grade, that can be used as a social marker of success. These assessments are important for students as they contribute to the overall grades they will get for a course and consequently their degree certification. Autin et al. (2005) argue that, due to the traditional conceptions of knowledge, standards, and assessment methods, summative assessment iteratively reconstitutes the pre-existing social order and this is borne out by empirical research.

As educators, the view that we take of education, educational or selective, will influence our pedagogy, at least to the extent of choosing a particular type of assessment to serve the relative function. However, the purpose of education is not the only factor that we should take into consideration when deciding how to use assessment in higher education. The relationship between assessment and learning is important for our understanding of how assessments function pedagogically and how assessments can characterise a student's educational journey.

On the relationship between assessment and learning, McArthur argues that 'it is through assessment that one learns what to learn and how to learn' (McArthur, 2014, p. 175) This theme of assessment as a key element of learning is found throughout the literature (Autin, et al., 2015; McArthur, 2014; McArthur 2016; Stowell, 2004; Yorke, 2003). As part of the learning process, assessment directly influences the educational outcomes that a student attains, and when there are disparities in these outcomes across social demographics, assessment practices have contributed to this disparity.

Our view of assessments can inform how they impact the learning process for students. Insofar as assessments give students a grade, they provide the students with a measure of their ability and the amount of learning they have done. This learning is measured against the learning outcomes of the course and academic standards of the institution expressed in their marking rubric (Matshedisho, 2019). This means that the grade a student receives correlates with their adherence to learning outcomes and academic standards. Moreover, these grades are meant to be meaningfully exact in that grades of 61% and 62% are both meaningfully differentiated in either the learning outcomes or marking rubric. However, Elton notes that precise marking 'seems completely arbitrary' (Elton, 2004, p. 51). The application of both learning outcomes and marking rubrics is imprecise, all the way up to the level of examination boards (Matshedisho, 2019; McArthur, 2016; Stowell, 2004). The presentation of precise marking in assessment practices means that students attribute clear meanings to their grades; success or failure relative to their expectations and the expectations of society (McArthur, 2014). However, due to the arbitrary and imprecise nature of marking, attributing a clear meaning to their grades can lead to confusion for a student attempting to interpret their grade relative to marking practices. This means that it is difficult for the student to work out what stage of learning they are at and how to develop from there.

The stigma that precise marking in assessment practices confers on students means that students avoid taking part in 'creative, risky, and real engagement with knowledge' in favour of 'only walk[ing] within the lines of established knowledge' (McArthur, 2014, p. 13). This is as a result of both the above presentation of precision marking and the

social value that is placed on the grade that a student receives. McArthur suggests that we should reframe our social understandings of success and failure so that failure becomes an important part of the learning process, and that this can be incorporated into our pedagogy to produce better outcomes for students (McArthur, 2014). This would enable students to become better engaged with their learning without fear that their engagement may result in failure which will reflect on their grades.

An important part of ensuring this engagement is the feedback that students get from assessments (McArthur, 2014; McKay, et al., 2019; Pitt, 2019; Yorke, 2003). The feedback that students get, from successful or failed assessments, needs to be tied to past and future achievements in order for the student to understand how they are progressing and how they need to go about developing their learning (McKay, 2019). Formative assessments are ideal for this pedagogy as they focus on feedback as opposed to providing a grade. However, the distinction between formative and summative assessment styles can be broken down by providing substantive feedback on assessments whose grades contribute to the student's overall mark (Yorke, 2003).

### ***Summary***

Assessment practices, insofar as they grade and mark the students that participate in them, directly contribute to the class attainment gap. However, the reason for this contribution requires reference to a set complex and inter-related factors such as the knowledge practices that assessments establish as dominant, as well as the social value that is placed on successful (and failed) assessment performances. How this mechanism disadvantages working-class students requires an understanding of how working-class students intra-act with assessment practices, and educational structures in general.

That being said, what we can take from this review is that there are two dominant approaches to analysing assessment that take different objects as theoretically significant. We can also take from this discussion that the position of assessment

practices in education means that social value is conferred on assessment outcomes in a way that disadvantages students that receive lower grades and advantages those that receive higher. However, there are ways that we can reframe assessments such that they can be used as a tool of learning for those that are disadvantaged by current assessment practices.

**Chapter 5: The same but different: Working-class experiences of higher education**



## ***Introduction***

This chapter is a review of the literature surrounding working-class lived experiences of HE. The first section is a discussion of the different ways in which theorists have characterised working-class lived experiences in HE, the factors they have identified that influence these student experiences, and the theoretical tools they have used to analyse them. In the second section, the factors that influence lived experiences for working-class students are elaborated on, particularly their institutional and social environments. The third section explores accounts of the affective and emotional realities that have been partly constituted by these influencing factors and specifically how these factors impact working-class student's feelings and attitudes towards their educational journey. Finally, the summary brings together the main points of each section and discusses using lived experience as the analytic focus for understanding the educational barriers faced by working-class students.

### ***Characterising working-class experiences of higher education***

Prevalent in the literature surrounding working-class lived experiences of HE is the influence of low socio-economic status on how working-class students proceed through HE, their experiences, and the outcomes at the end of their educational journey (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Jehangir, 2010; Jin and Ball, 2019; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Silva, Laya, et al., 2019; Thiele, et al., 2017; Willis, 1987). The economic disadvantages that working-class students experience relative to their middle- and upper-class peers means that they are less likely to have access to financial, geographical, cultural, and educational resources which could impact their educational outcomes and lived experience of education (Reay, 2004). However, while economic disadvantage does characterise the lived experience of working-class students, and working-class life overall, Reay, et al. (2010) and Thiele et al. (2017) discover in their ethnographic studies that this does not lead to homogeneity in their experiences or feelings towards education.

Reay et al. (2010) use the notion of a learner identity to explain where these differences might lie. Learner identities that students build are generated from their experiences of education in the past, their feelings about their learning ability presently, and their future imagined use for their education. Some of these previous experiences of education will be influenced by the socio-economic status of the student and this may result in negative educational experiences. For example, one of the study participants in Thiele et al. felt '[d]espite having good grades [...] they had to push hard to take certain challenging subjects, and sit higher level exams' (Thiele, et al. 2017, p. 58). They attributed this to the awareness of them being a member 'of a group that was less likely to do well' (Thiele, et al. 2017, p. 58). These types of student experiences, of struggle to assert themselves as strong learners, can discourage the cultivation of a confident learner identity.

In spite of the economic influence on educational experiences, there are some students that have positive experiences, show strong commitment to learning, and develop confident learner identities. Lehmann (2010) interviewed working-class, first-generation students at a Canadian university and found that these students used their low economic status, and the hardships that result, as reasons why they were successful in their education. This reframing of working-class reality as generating characteristics like strong work ethics that are advantageous to success in higher education presents a challenge to the view that a working-class upbringing only results in educational disadvantage. Furthermore, Reay et al. argue that '... there is a compounding of advantage...' where students that experience more positive experiences early on in education will develop more confident learner identities, becoming more committed learners, thus moving on to '... better resourced and supported universities.' (Reay et al., 2010, p. 119)

Given this heterogeneity of working-class experiences of HE, it is clear that something further than socio-economic status is required to give an adequate account of these differences. Jehangir (2010) constructed a course designed to reach out to first-

generation, low income university students in America and help them settle into their new setting. These students represented a varied intersection of cultures and ethnicities (Jehangir, 2010, p. 534). This provides us with one explanation of these variances in working-class student experiences; while these students inhabit the same socio-economic position, they do not necessarily intersect with one another in other respects which can influence their attitudes towards and experiences of education. For example, a white male British working-class student attending a university in Britain will come with a different set of experiences and attitudes, and elicit different reactions from others, than a Asian female Bangladeshi working-class student attending the same university.

Theorists also use the notion of *habitus*, borrowed from Bourdieu, to distinguish different domains of influence on a student's experience of HE (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010). Reay et al. describe *habitus* as a 'dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective' (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 108). This concept encompasses the background knowledge and dispositions that a person has towards social phenomena like people, institutions etc. The intersectionalities noted above show that each of these working-class students may have a different *habitus* depending on their culture, family attitudes, and past experiences. Institutions can also have their own institutional *habitus* that influences students' attitudes towards and experiences of education. In Reay, et al.'s (2010) study of working-class students in four HE institutions (ranging from elite to colleges), they employ the concept of an institutional *habitus* as an explanation for the difference in learner identities and dispositions that they found amongst working-class students attending these different institutions.

These are the ways in which working-class experiences of higher education have been characterised in the literature and the theoretical tools that the theorists have used to explain the relationship between these experiences and a working-class background. The next section explores more fully the social and cultural factors that influence working-class students' lived experience of HE.

## ***Social and cultural influences***

In spite of the heterogeneity of working-class experiences of HE, most of the students in each of the studies did experience some anxiety about socially integrating at their respective institutions. This manifested in decisions about mobility (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Finn, 2017; Reay, et al., 2010), how far they should express their commitment to learning (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay, et al., 2010; Thiele, et al. 2017), and participation in student activities (Archer and Hutchings, 2010; Jehangir, 2010). The reasons for this were varied across the studies, however there is one reason that students gave for their anxiety: the perception of how other students may see and treat them. Reay et al. found that '...there is a greater tendency for working-class students and students from minority ethnic groups in the UK to go to post-1992 universities...' where there would be a greater amount of students in similar social positions (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 109). Students also claimed that family perceptions played a role in these decisions where family would worry that their working-class values may make the student socially incompatible with other students at the university (Archer and Hutchings, 2010; Reay, et al., 2010).

Working-class students also express that the competing interests that often come with a working-class life affect their experience of university, both academically and socially (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Jin and Ball, 2019; Lehmann, 2009). On a superficial level, this is because it leaves them less time to study and socialise with their peers. In some cases, this resulted in student's not handing in work on time, or deciding to go to institutions closer to them in order to better balance their multiple commitments (Reay, et al. 2010). This meant that '... the students only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students, and their learner identities remain relatively fragile and unconfident.' (Reay, et al., 2010, p. 115)

In his study on working-class deficiencies reframed as moral advantages, Lehmann (2009, p. 632) notes that '[w]orking-class university students also appear to face the unique challenges of reconciling the conflict between social mobility, class loyalty, and

class betrayal ...' that he describes as 'habitus dislocation'. This reconciling of a working-class background with middle-class aspirations can impact how students experience their journey through HE, especially where their families do not value HE or where their past educational experiences involve low expectations of their academic performance (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013).

Conversely, some of these factors play a causal role in positive educational experiences that working-class students have in HE, or motivate success in HE. Family backgrounds and low socio-economic positions can be strong motivators for engaging with HE and successfully navigating institutional structures (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Thiele, et al., 2017). In Lehmann (2009), students recognised that their upbringing instilled in them a disposition to work hard, reflecting on their parents' work ethic as a reason for this. They also compared their own work ethic to their more affluent peers', linking their peers' lesser work ethic to their relative financial advantage. A student in Thiele et al.'s (2017) study recognised that there are stereotypes surrounding families whose parents are on benefits and wanting to prove this stereotype wrong by being educationally successful.

Additionally, students in the elite Southern university in Reay, et al. (2010) expressed that social class played a minor role in their identity as the institutional *habitus* meant 'being a university student becomes the individual's main source of identity' (p. 115). This is due to the particularly strong institutional *habitus* at Southern university which encourages students to be involved heavily at the university, leaving no opportunity for work or social activities outside of the university environment.

As we can see, social and cultural factors can influence working-class students' experiences both negatively and positively. This relies, to some extent, on how the student interprets these factors and whether they frame them as moral goods or barriers which disadvantage them relative to their middle- and upper-class peers. What causes this heterogeneity in working-class student experiences is not clear when relying on only those factors characteristic of working-class culture. The differing views of working-

class families on the value of HE suggests there may be a discontinuity of values between different working-classes that needs to be accounted for. The final section of this chapter discusses the character of working-class lived experiences of HE and how this might impact student success.

### ***Working-class lived experiences of higher education***

As we have seen above, anticipating issues socially integrating into university can motivate decisions which affect a student's lived experience of HE. Students that had strong learner identities that attended the two least elite universities in Reay, et al. (2010) expressed concerns regarding their commitment to learning. Despite working hard and attaining good grades, these students felt that, if they expressed how hard they worked or whether they had complete assessments ahead of time, they would be labelled 'the clever one or the swot' (Reay et al., 2010). This shows that some working-class students, whose learning identity is at odds with the attitudes of their peers attending the university, can become anxious and worried about sharing their achievements for fear of the social implications. This was not a problem that was found for students studying at more elite universities with a greater proportion of middle-class and high achieving students.

Jehangir (2010, p. 536) identified that the students she engaged in multicultural learning '...carry not only their own individual hopes but often the aspirations of their families and communities'. This hints at the complex perceptions and imaginings that influence a student's understanding of and aspirations for their own education (Jin and Ball, 2019). It also identifies the potentially conflicted nature of working-class students as they try to reconcile and make 'sense of multiple and sometimes conflicting identities' (Jehangir, 2010). Carrying aspirations and reconciling conflicting identities influences how a student experiences their education. Depending on their attitude towards these aspirations and identities, the awareness of these dynamics can affect their experience both positively and negatively. For example, students in both Reay et al.'s (2010) and Archer and Hutchings' (2010) studies felt the need to hide their work ethic from their

peers. This can be seen as trying to keep separate their social identity, that does not value work ethic, from their learner identity, that has a strong work ethic component. This dynamic meant that the student could not express their learner identity without worry. Similar considerations carry over to students who are attempting to reconcile working-class identities and values with middle-class aspirations.

Working-class students are also aware of socio-economic differences between themselves and others (Thiele, et al., 2017). Although there are some differences in the importance that this carried relative to each institution's *habitus* (Reay et al., 2010), students still felt that their socio-economic position affected their studies and how they felt about and practised their learning. However, socio-economic position manifested differently for each student, '... their accounts differed widely in the impact they perceived their socio-economic/family background to have' (Thiele, et al., 2017, p. 57). These differences included viewing the family issues that more affluent students have as 'menial', and worrying about other students finding out they receive financial assistance or do not have the 'right things' (Thiele et al., 2017, p. 56-57).

Coming from a working-class background does not necessarily impact a student's experience of education negatively. Often being the first-generation in their family to go to university, working-class students can leverage their upbringing to be morally and educationally advantageous (Abrahams, and Ingram, 2010; Lehmann, 2009). Students identified that their working-class background instils values that allow them to successfully face the challenges of HE. These values included '... maturity, responsibility, independence, and a work ethic ...' and that gaining these characteristics was representative of '... experience in the real world ...' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 640). Recognising the structural disadvantages they have faced as producing moral and educational advantages allows these students to build confident learner identities in spite of a relative lack of cultural and educational capital.

The differences in working-class lived experience of HE here signals that the construction of a homogeneous experience that we could expect a working-class

student to have is not an appropriate theoretical assumption. Rather, there are a range of experiences that result from shared economic, social, cultural, and educational factors. However, it is still important to understand how these factors produce certain experiences that act as barriers for working-class students participating and succeeding in HE.

### **Summary**

As we have seen, the literature on working-class lived experiences of HE uses different frameworks to characterise student experiences. This allows us to identify a network of factors that influence how these experiences are produced. We have seen that it is not only socio-economic positioning that produces these experiences; factors like learner identity, family, institutional and personal *habitus*, and identity reconciliation all play a role in this process. This leads not to one type of experience but a spectrum of working-class lived experiences of higher education that range from successful and central in the student's life, to difficult and decentralised in favour of other competing commitments.

This part of the literature review reaffirms the importance of student experiences and their value for identifying factors in a student's life that have led them to their understanding and experiences of HE. It also suggests that we require a sophisticated understanding of the factors that influence working-class students' experiences and the relations between them. In building this understanding, Thiele et al. (2017) provides us with an approach that puts the student's lived experience at the centre of analysis: taking a phenomenological approach that does not impose an *a priori* theoretical framework. Doing this means that the student experience leads us to an understanding of the relationships between educationally significant agents and how students understand their influence on their education. This will be especially important for us in constructing a view of assessment practices that focuses on working-class lived experiences as it suggests that we should not expect a heterogeneous experience for all students from a working-class background.



## **Chapter 6: A working class lived experience perspective of assessment**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter details the synthesis of the main themes identified in chapters 3 and 4. The first section synthesises the analytical approaches of both the assessment and working-class lived experience literature, arguing that adopting elements of both allows us to start to build an understanding of assessment as an event that is lived through by students rather than a procedure that students must go through or impose a particular outcome on them. The second section discusses the overlapping social and cultural factors that influence assessment practice and working-class experiences of education. In identifying where these overlap, we can begin to construct a picture of the dynamics that uniquely impact working-class lived experiences of assessment, which can help to suggest directions for empirical research. The third section covers the implications of a working-class lived experience view of assessment for our pedagogical approaches towards assessment and its incorporation into curriculum and learning. Finally, the summary will tie the concept together across all of the three above areas and suggest how this can be studied through empirical research.

### ***An analytic approach to assessment as a lived experience***

As we have seen in chapter 3, the analytical approaches to assessment tend to focus on either the procedures of assessment and their fairness for students, or the outcomes of assessment and how they lead to inequalities for students (Adams, et al., 2019; Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Elton, 2004; Matshedisho, 2019; McArthur, 2014; McArthur, 2016; Sambell, et al., 1997; Stowell, 2004). Rather than being exhaustive in their analysis of assessment in conjunction, both approaches capture only partially the factors that constitute the student intra-action with assessments in HE as they do not account for the student's lived experience of assessment; the emotions and sensations that students have. These approaches also operate at an abstracted level, less often discussing the physical reality that confronts a student when they take part in an assessment and the complex affective intra-actions that constitute it.

The literature on working-class lived experience of HE is couched in terms of displacement or not fitting in relative to their peers in terms of socio-economic status, socialising, academic ability, and *habitus* (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Jehangir, 2010; Jin and Ball, 2019; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Silva, Laya, et al., 2019; Thiele, et al., 2017). The benefit of this is that it expresses the discomfort felt by working-class students throughout HE. This was also the case where working-class deficiencies were reframed as moral and educational advantages (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Jehangir, 2010). Capturing these physical and affective elements of working-class experiences is important as it allows us to identify the barriers that these students face through the students' experiences without assuming the importance of particular institutional practices or greater contextual factors.

We can bring the practices of studying working-class lived experiences of education into the domain of assessment analysis, especially where our aim is social justice. Both assessment approaches have identified the importance of procedures and outcomes for social justice goals in education (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Elton, 2004; McArthur, 2016; Stowell, 2004) and these approaches do not deny the importance of the other, but rather weight the analysis more heavily towards either procedures or outcomes.

Understanding assessment in a way that centralises lived experience similarly does not remove procedures and outcomes from the picture, it includes them as educational agents that intra-act to constitute the phenomenon of how a student experiences assessment physically and emotionally. What becomes important in this type of analysis is a student's understanding of the barriers that they have faced and the issues these barriers cause for them.

Accessing this information is difficult if we bring to our analysis a strong *a priori* theoretical framework that provides us with categories for interpreting a student's lived experience. Approaches to analysis that focus on procedures, outcomes, *habitus*, and other categories have the advantage of a presupposed language with which to talk about the phenomenon we are studying. However, this does mean that they restrict our theorising to those categories that constitute the ontology of the theory. In restricting ourselves to a presupposed ontology, we also restrict the power of our epistemic abilities, attempting to fit the phenomena, or an interpretation of it, into the ontological categories we have already identified. This makes it difficult to explain intra-actions in the phenomenon that do not fit our ontology very well.

A way around this issue is to approach students' accounts of their lived experience of assessments without an *a priori* theoretical framework (Thiele et al., 2017), or a weak theoretical framework that does not assume the importance of particular practices, outcomes, or cultural artefacts like mutual recognition or *habitus*. In doing this, we can use the student's account as a guide to build an agential realist understanding of their experience and relate this to the greater educational and social agents. This enables an approach that is dynamic enough to capture shared experiences amongst students from working-class backgrounds and incorporate the heterogeneity of working-class experiences, tracking this to significant agents in students' lives. For example, if we take two working-class students that are doing the same assessment, one feeling confident and the other feeling anxious. We may track this difference down to the fact that one student enjoys the subject more than the other and has consequently done more work, their enjoyment being an important agent in this intra-action. However, we may take a

similar set of two working-class students both with the same feelings about their assessment but the anxious one has studied more because they are living at home and a condition of this is that they do well in their assessments. Here, the student's home life is an important agent that plays a constitutive role in the assessment lived experience.

Framing assessments this way provides us with a lens that incorporates features from the assessment literature, recognising procedures and outcomes as aspects of assessment within HE, and features from the working-class lived experience literature, centralising student lived experiences in our analysis. By synthesising these themes, we get a method and view of assessment that allows us to study it as an event that is lived through rather than a set of procedures that can be fine-tuned or a practice that provides students with grades in a way that produces (and reproduces) social disparities. The next section highlights the social and cultural factors that influence assessment practices and working-class experiences of HE, and how they interact with one another to affect working-class experiences of assessment.

### ***Social and cultural influences***

The political nature of assessments means that a social understanding of what is valuable and useful knowledge informs how assessments are structured and established (Ballysingh, et al. 2018). This then reinforces those dominant notions of knowledge, ways of knowing, and modes of expression as it is against these standards that students are measured (de Sousa Santos, 2001). If they do not adhere to them well, they are given lower grades where others who adhere better are given higher grades.

As assessment has this positioning as an agent intra-acting with education, it both enacts social and cultural values in its measurements of student ability, and is sensitive to the economic, social, cultural, and discursive capital that the students have. Values about what useful knowledge is, what success and failure look like, and how knowledge is best expressed, inform and are enacted by assessments. These values are embodied

in the marking rubrics and learning outcomes we use to judge whether students have passed and the extent to which they have (Elton, 2005 and Matshedisho, 2019). These values are then enacted by the measurement that assessments perform. As assessments pass only those students that adhere to dominant knowledge practices and modes of expression, these students more often take positions higher in society which allows them to make decisions about what sorts of knowledge practices and modes of expression are more useful (Au, 2008; Reichelt, et al., 2019; Willis, 1978). We can recognise assessment and all of the capitals that students have as agents in the intra-action that constitutes a student's lived experience of assessment.

In reinforcing these values, assessment marginalises those students that are not familiar with dominant knowledge practices and modes of expression, thereby marking the assessment performances of these students with failure. Many of the factors that lead to a lack of familiarity with these dominant practices are present in working-class communities, as we saw in chapter 4. The lack of economic capital means that students from working-class families have had access to fewer educational, social, and cultural resources when compared to the middle- and upper-class peers (Lehmann, 2009). This is also reflected in the lack of resources in schools in disadvantaged areas. Socially, working-class students feel discomfort fitting in with students from other classes and make the choice to attend universities where they will feel more comfortable, but are often less well-resourced (Reay et al., 2010). Working-class culture is various depending on the intersectionality of the student in question as working-class now captures a wide intersection of people (Jehangir, 2010). However, these students are disadvantaged insofar as they do not participate in the cultural events and artefacts that middle- and upper-class students are able to. Working-class students are also less confident with academic modes of expression due to weaker learner identities (Reay et al. 2010) meaning that the knowledge they attempt to express in assessments may deviate from how the assessment requires the knowledge to be expressed.

Each of these factors leads to a further degree of marginalisation of working-class students as they all represent educational barriers that act as agents, influencing the

character of working-class students' experiences of assessment. This is one way in which assessment practices are sensitive to these disadvantages, impacting the grades that working-class students receive. As assessment enacts these dominant knowledge practices and modes of expression, and is yet sensitive to the those factors that make it more difficult for working-class students to grasp these practices, assessment, in its current instantiation, disadvantages working-class students and marginalises their own knowledge practices and expression. It is this intra-action between the values that assessment embodies and the realities of working-class experience that demonstrates the social and political importance of addressing working-class lived experiences of assessment. When going on to do empirical research on lived experiences of assessment in HE, the above interplay can act as a guide to help us understand the sources of the barriers that students identify from their experiences. In the next section, we discuss the implications of a lived experience perspective of assessment for pedagogy and learning.

### ***Lived experiences of assessment and pedagogy***

This new perspective on assessment allows us to explore the experiences that students have when they have to engage with assessment practices. Knowledge of these experiences and how they arise can help inform our pedagogical use of assessments and raise awareness of how they may be received by students from different social groups. Working-class students will have experiences of assessment that are informed by their working-class background, and there will also be differences amongst these students as the intersectionality of those students diverge from one another (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Finn, 2017; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al. 2010; Thiele et al. 2017).

Depending on the student demographic, we can adjust our use of assessments to more specifically address the barriers that particular students face, or use more general assessment methods to accommodate a wider range of possible experiences. For working-class students, we can ensure that these students are familiar with how learning outcomes and marking rubrics translate to well performed assessments, have a

clear understanding of their current abilities, and understand how they need to approach their development from their ability level (Archer and Hutchings, 2010; Matshedisho, 2019; McKay, et al., 2019, McArthur, 2014). These concerns carry over to all student demographics, however this style of pedagogy can be used to address some of the unfamiliarity and discomfort that working-class students may experience when sitting assessments.

Deciding what style of assessment to use for a given student cohort can be influenced by our understanding of how the cohort feels about assessments in general and how these assessments will factor into their educational development (Autin, et al. 2015). For example, we could choose to build a curriculum that includes three assessments, two summative and one formative. We could choose to place one summative assessment at the beginning to get a sense of their ability first of all, the formative in the middle of the course to measure their development and give them in-depth feedback about their development and how they can continue to progress, and a final summative assessment at the end to provide them with a final and substantive measure of their learning across the course. Aside from types of assessment and their sequence in curriculum, we can make decisions about what kinds of assessments we want working-class students to participate in to develop their academic abilities. For example, using assessment practices that will develop their skills for the intended use of their education may be beneficial in improving their engagement (McKay, et al. 2019) and addressing fears about the irrelevance of HE held by themselves or their families (Archer and Hutchings, 2010).

This is a small number of the pedagogical considerations around assessment that can be influenced by our understanding how students may experience assessments. Having this information at our disposal, we could also adjust the course content and pedagogical delivery to better suit the assessments that we decide on and the learning that we want students to do. Thus, while we may use this new perspective to study assessments, the information that it would provide us could inform strategies in our pedagogy outside of the field of assessment.

## ***Summary***

In this chapter, we have seen some of the ways that we can build, understand, and use results from a lived experience perspective of assessment, specifically for students from a working-class background. These points motivate its use in future empirical study, where working-class students can be interviewed for their experiences of assessment and the interpretation of this data can be guided by the student's own understanding of their experiences. Involving these students in this way has a two main benefits: 1) it allows us to develop our pedagogy so that we can better serve our students, contributing towards socially just educational practice, and 2) it engages and involves working-class students in thinking about and developing HE on a structural level as it influences our pedagogy and the provision of assessment.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout this integrative review, the literature on working-class experiences of HE is still under-developed. In the introduction of the paper, we saw that



Reay (2005, p. 912) attributes this underdevelopment to the view that '[e]motions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities appear to lay firmly in the realm of individual psychology'. However, as shown in chapter 4, there are some consistent themes that appear in both positive and negative accounts of working-class experiences of HE (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Jehangir, 2010; Jin and Ball, 2019; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al., 2010; Silva, Laya, et al., 2019; Thiele, et al., 2017; Willis, 1987).

We might also accept that it is in the realm of individual psychology, but challenge the assumption that this is then not able to be researched. Looking into individual experiences of HE can still provide us with useful information about the broad spectrum of experiences that students may have and allow us to get a better understanding of the intra-action between working-class students and HE. An individualised understanding of working class experiences is evidenced in the heterogeneity found in the accounts that students have given in the literature (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Finn, 2017; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, et al. 2010; Thiele et al. 2017).

This means that the answer to whether there is such a thing as a working-class experience of HE lies somewhere in the middle; that there is a working-class experience, but not all students from working-class backgrounds have it, and others have it to varying degrees. Regardless, this does not diminish the necessity to learn what the student experiences so that we can begin to address the affective barriers that impede student progress. The perspective on assessment that we have built is able to take this into account as it allows for the recognition of relevant agents from the intra-actions that students express in their explanations of their experiences.

Literature on social justice and assessment is also sparse (Ballysingh, et al. 2018). Theorising about what social justice would mean in terms of assessment procedures and outcomes is still at the centre of debate in this area and, while it has not been the focus of this paper, it is important to know what social justice would mean in this context (McArthur, 2016; McArthur, 2019; Stowell, 2004) . One way that we can begin to

approach this is to begin to incorporate the lived experience of students going through assessment. By addressing barriers in students' experiences of assessment, we can begin to make the process of assessment easier to go through, further engaging students in their assessment performances, thereby improving their outcomes. Providing this new perspective on assessments can enable us to find new ways to deploy assessments in curricula, motivate changes towards alternative assessment styles that are more effective for certain groups of students (Sambell, et al., 1997), and allow students to have a voice in addressing structural concerns in HE.

In this paper, the aim has been to provide this new perspective of assessment, built from key themes in both bodies of literature that are identified as agents in the intra-action between working-class students and assessment practices. This new perspective provides an alternative basis from which to conduct further empirical research into working-class lived experiences of assessment (and education by extension). One possible approach is to use interview accounts from the students themselves, allowing their reflections on the barriers they have faced when going through assessment to guide our understanding of the space of possible lived experiences students might have when being assessed. If this sort of research is fruitful, we can use this information to guide pedagogical decisions about assessment as well as justify assessment changes in curricula structures at universities.

Framing the lived experiences of assessment in HE as the phenomenon that we are researching, places it as the basic unit of analysis (Barad, 2007) which encompasses all of the agents that constitute the 'entanglement' that gives rise to these experiences. Taking this holistic view enables us to leave the space of possible agents open to characterise different experiences that result from unique intra-actions of the student with their socio-economic, social, cultural, and educational environments. Conceiving of experiences of assessment with this agential realist lens means not only that the heterogeneity of working-class experiences can be account for and explained, but it can be applied further to other social demographics to provide us with insights into

experiences in these demographics arise due to the unique intra-actions that these students are also involved in.

Recently in the UK, A-Level students faced potentially having their results downgraded due to the algorithms used by Ofqual to offset the disruption caused by the COVID-19 lockdown (BBC, 2020). As the next cohort of students to enter into HE, this could have disadvantaged a large proportion of the population that already come from disadvantaged areas because of their school's or college's academic history. We might take a procedural approach to this event and argue that the algorithm did not output fair results. We might also take an outcomes approach and argue that the grades would not have been fairly allocated. However, we could also take a lived experience approach to this phenomena, arguing that the lived experience of these students was ignored in the interests of fair procedure and fair outcomes, under a certain definition of fairness. Were the algorithm's grades not rejected, the lived experience of these students would have been impacted by the fact that they were assessed based on where they came from.

While this is an obvious and serious barrier that could be identified by a lived experience perspective on assessment, there may be other more subtle barriers that working-class students face when being assessed in various contexts. Only by addressing their lived experience, and letting their experience guide our analysis, could we identify what these barriers are and start to address them. In this way we can listen to working-class students and involve them in improving their educational experience.

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**Appendices:**

Appendix I - Autoethnographic excerpts

Appendix II - Social justice and assessment literature

Appendix III - Working-class lived experience of higher education literature

## **Appendix I - Autoethnographic excerpts**

### *Chapter 1: Introduction*

Coming to this topic for my dissertation involved a lot of emotion. The initial motivation to work on working-class experiences and their relationship to education came from a paper that I was reading for the first assignment of the course. Silva-Laya et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature analysis covering urban poverty and education. While the entirety of the paper is interesting in its own right, they write about the '[l]imited capacity for aspiration and restricted frameworks for opportunity' for students from urban poverty (Silva-Laya, 2019, p. 5). This section describes how aspiration and frameworks used for understanding opportunity for these students are constrained and only reach working-class outcomes. Having come from urban poverty in London and a working-class family that relied to some extent on benefits, it surprised me that other working-class students from both similar and different geographical contexts could have their aspirations and understanding of the opportunities available to them diminished due to their socio-economic position. This lack of understanding came from the fact that I had resolved, and thought it an open opportunity to me, that I was going to become a theoretical physicist at the age of 8.

While that position never materialised for various reasons, I still felt that the option was open to me and the accounts of others in a similar socio-economic position not having those options due to their understanding of their position moved me emotionally. I contacted those that I felt allowed me to develop a wider world view and self-understanding to say thank you for encouraging me to pursue interests that were not in the usual wheelhouse of working-class culture. At that point, I decided that understanding working-class experiences of education are from the lived perspective of students themselves, rather than as a function of economic, social, discursive, and cultural factors, was key to understanding how aspiration is influenced. I believe that this paper is a small contribution towards the theoretical work necessary for using lived experiences to understand how working-class aspirations are produced.

### *Chapter 2: Working-class positionality and agential realism*

Taking into account my positionality as part of an academic work was unfamiliar to me throughout my education in philosophy. Working in the area of logic and language, there was an assumption of either a positivist relationship between the theories and reality, or theories were a useful but fictional heuristic with which to understand the phenomenon being studied. However, learning about how knowledge production is influenced by society and how certain values frame our interpretations of reality has made me reflective about my positionality, especially with regards to my approach to education.

However, a difficulty I find with this kind of reflection is what aspects of positionality are relevant to the work I am doing. As noted in the chapter, the class positionality that I occupy is relevant to researching working-class lived experiences and articulating this will make the interpretation of my analysis easier for the reader. Claiming a class positionality is difficult both due to the definitional difficulties surrounding social class as well as the heterogeneity of working-class experiences noted in Chapter 5. Being more precise about my positionality, within my class positioning, required gaining a deeper understanding of how my specific working-class experiences have shaped certain aspects of my approach and being aware of how these experiences related to and differed from other working-class experiences.

### *Chapter 3: Methodology*

As philosophy of language encourages a positivist view of theory-making and its relationship to reality, attempting to find a framework which captures the multiple agents that intra-act to produce certain experiences and structures in education. Agential realism gave me a framework for understanding how important factors such as socio-economic position, cultural capital, and social interactions play a constitutive role in education. The most useful feature of agential realism was the ability for it to incorporate agents like past experiences of education, current understandings of educational ability, and imagined futures into the construction of educational experiences, as well as objects that are usually considered benign and neutral like the physical objects that students have to use in order to complete assessments.

Having this explanatory power means that I could use this framework to explore the affective reality of education and assessments but also present them through the lens of working-class experiences as these experiences would be characterised by certain ways of responding to and

feeling affected objects in their environment. This helped me become comfortable with explaining and understanding my own educational experiences.

#### *Chapter 4: Assessing assessment*

In the process of completing the MSc. Educational Studies in Adult, Youth, and Community Contexts course, I received some grades that, were I to get them consistently, would have resulted in my failing to attain a passing grade. I knew, when I got the grades, that they did not represent my ability and potential as a student but they still had a profound effect on my identity as a learner.

Assessments are supposed to signal the amount of learning I had done. I knew that if I took the feedback my lecturers had given, I could improve and develop my learning. However, I could not stop myself from initially feeling shame about doing badly and being marked as having done so. This shame was intensified in two ways. The first was due to the fact that I am an active participant in the learning community myself and the other students had built and I thought that these grades showed that I did not belong. The second was that my shame about my grades meant that I was complicit in reinforcing the view of assessments as marking students as people rather than marking how well they had learned the material and how close to academic standard their expression of that learning was.

Each of these issues indicate two ways that assessment can affect social justice outcomes in education. The first is that the grades that a student receives from an assessment carries a social value (McArthur, 2014). While my initial concern was that of my peers in my learning community, the same concern carries to employers and universities that I want to apply to for a PhD. This is especially direct in the job market or doctoral education as the grades that I received are a significant factor in whether I would be judged adequate for a role, especially as these grades contribute to my degree certification. The second is that there is an awareness amongst students and teachers that assessments are inadequate in fully capturing students' abilities and that academic expression is not the only, nor necessarily the best way for the student to express their learning for their intended purpose.

#### *Chapter 5: The same but different*

Reflecting on my own experience of higher education, I do not recognise much awareness of my socio-economic status or the role that it played in my integration to university which is contrary to much of the literature in this chapter. This may have been due to the institute I was going to having what Reay et al. (2010) call a strong institutional habitus. I attended Heythrop College, University of London which was a college run and funded by the Jesuit order of the Catholic Church. Unfortunately now disassembled, this college only offered courses in philosophy or theology with a small provision of peripheral topics in psychology. This unified subject of study for all students resulted in a passionate attitude towards education which ran through the institution as well as permeating the social life of the college.

Having had a strong interest in philosophy since the age of 12, this was the first place that I felt an intellectual and social belonging as I was not able to study philosophy or talk to many people about it until I got to Heythrop. This sense of belonging held in the face of clear socio-economic differences between myself and the friends that I had made; the majority of whom were private schooled and were having their tuition fees paid for by their parents. This gives further evidence for the heterogeneous character of working-class experiences of higher education and the strength of influence that institutional *habitus* can have on working-class students.

#### *Chapter 6: A working class lived experience perspective on assessment*

In writing this paper, I have been living through assessment as a working-class student. Because of this, I am going to use this autoethnographic excerpt to discuss a barrier I faced in my experience of writing a dissertation at masters level during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most significant barrier I experienced was embodied in a changed proximity to university work. I had built up a strong routine surrounding going to the physical university campus from 9am to 5pm, and it was in this period of time that I would do my university work. I did this to create boundaries between work and personal life, and this was successful. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the distance between my work and personal life went from a physical journey to university to a journey to my spare bedroom where the desk is in the flat. The diminished physical distance and increased accessibility to my working area meant that it was more difficult to separate work from personal life. Work spilled over into the personal both in terms of the time I spent working as well as often being psychologically stuck thinking about work. This has led to

an assessment experience that has been characterised by tension, between work that I felt I needed to do and taking time to recover and process the developing social situation due to COVID-19.

### *Chapter 7: Conclusion*

The most significant barrier I experienced was embodied in a changed proximity to university work. I had built up a strong routine surrounding going to the physical university campus from 9am to 5pm, and it was in this period of time that I would do my university work. I did this to create boundaries between work and personal life, and this was successful. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the distance between my work and personal life went from a physical journey to university to a journey to my spare bedroom where the desk is in the flat. The diminished physical distance and increased accessibility to my working area meant that it was more difficult to separate work from personal life. Work spilled over into the personal both in terms of the time I spent working as well as often being psychologically stuck thinking about work. This has led to an assessment experience that has been characterised by tension, between work that I felt I needed to do and taking time to recover and process the developing social situation.

## **Appendix II - Social justice and assessment literature**

<b>'Assessment practice', 'social justice' and 'higher education' search results used in review:</b>
Autin, F., Batruch, A. and Butera, F. (2015). Social justice in education: how the function of selection in educational institutions predicts support for (non)egalitarian assessment practices.

*Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (707), pp. 1-13

Ballysingh, T.A., Hernández, I. and Zerquera, D. (2018). Teaching Assessment: Preparing our Colleagues Through Graduate Education. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2018(177), pp.87–104.

McArthur, J. (2015a). Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(7), pp.967–981.

McArthur, J. (2015b). The Learning-Feedback-Assessment Triumvirate: Reconsidering Failure in Pursuit of Social Justice. In: C. Kreber, C. Anderson, N. Entwistle and J. McArthur, eds., *Advances and Innovations in University Assessment and Feedback*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, pp.1–15.

Stowell, M. (2004). Equity, justice and standards: assessment decision making in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(4), pp.495–510.

Yorke, M. (2003). Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education*, 45, pp.477–501.

**Literature from intuitive search:**

Adams, A.-M., Wilson, H., Money, J., Palmer-Conn, S. and Fearn, J. (2019). Student engagement with feedback and attainment: the role of academic self-efficacy. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), pp.317–329.

Boud, D. (2007). Reframing assessment as if learning were important. In: D. Boud and N. Falchikov, eds., *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp.14–25.



Boud, D. and Falchikov, N. (2007). Introduction: assessment for the longer term. In: D. Boud and N. Falchikov, eds., *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp.3–13.

Crossman, J. (2007). The role of relationships and emotions in student perceptions of learning and assessment. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(3), pp.313–327.

Elton, L. (2004). A Challenge to Established Assessment Practice. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 58(1), pp.43–62.

MacKay, J.R.D., Hughes, K., Marzetti, H., Lent, N. and Rhind, S.M. (2019). Using National Student Survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4(1), pp.315–330.

Matshedisho, K.R. (2019). Straddling rows and columns: Students' (mis)conceptions of an assessment rubric. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), pp.169–179.

Pitt, E., Bearman, M. and Esterhazy, R. (2019). The conundrum of low achievement and feedback for learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), pp.239–250.

Sambell, K., McDowell, L. and Brown, S. (1997). "But is it fair?": An exploratory study of student perceptions of the consequential validity of assessment. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 23(4), pp.349–371.

### **Appendix III - Working-class lived experience of higher education literature**

<b>'Lived experience', 'working-class', and 'higher education' search results used in review:</b>
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Jehangir, R. (2010). Stories as Knowledge: Bringing the Lived Experience of First-Generation College Students Into the Academy. <i>Urban Education</i> , 45(4), pp.533–553.
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Lehmann, W. (2009). Becoming Middle Class: How Working-class University Students Draw and Transgress Moral Class Boundaries. <i>Sociology</i> , 43(4), pp.631–647.
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Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), pp.107–124.

Thiele, T., Pope, D., Singleton, A., Snape, D. and Stanistreet, D. (2016). Experience of disadvantage: The influence of identity on engagement in working class students' educational trajectories to an elite university. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), pp.49–67.

**Literature from intuitive search:**

Abrahams, J. and Ingram, N. (2013). The Chameleon Habitus: Exploring Local Students' Negotiations of Multiple Fields. *Sociological Research Online*, [online] 18(4), p.21. Available at: <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/4/21.html>.

Archer, L. and Hutchings, M. (2010). "Bettering Yourself"? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(4), pp.555–574.

Finn, K. (2017). Multiple, relational and emotional mobilities: Understanding student mobilities in higher education as more than 'staying local' and 'going away.' *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(4), pp.743–758.

Jin, J. and Ball, S.J. (2019). Meritocracy, social mobility and a new form of class domination. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(1), pp.64–79.

Reay, D. (2004). Education and cultural capital: the implications of changing trends in education policies. *Cultural Trends*, 13(2), pp.73–86.

Reay, D. (2005). Beyond Consciousness? *Sociology*, 39(5), pp.911–928.

Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation : inequality, education and the working classes*. Bristol: Policy

Press.

Silva-Laya, M., D'Angelo, N., García, E., Zúñiga, L. and Fernández, T. (2020). Urban poverty and education. A systematic literature review. *Educational Research Review*, 29, pp.1–20.

Willis, P.E. (1978). *Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Routledge.