

Navigating Academia in the ‘Welfare-class’

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Abstract

The growing field of working-class studies provides a valuable narrative of the experiences of working-class academics, illustrates commonalities among such experiences and provides a space for dismantling the structural class-based disenfranchisement which proves detrimental to working-class scholars’ careers. Recent articles in *The Journal of Working-class Studies* have identified and named the specific experiences of alienation faced by working-class scholars, which include issues of financial disenfranchisement, issues of taste, accent, and ‘respectability’ (Attfield 2016), issues of ‘passing’, the imposter syndrome, and feelings of class betrayal (Warnock 2016). However, as Nicola Wilson (2016) and others have noted, ‘working-class is a fluid category and grouping’. For many scholars living in or emerging from a background of poverty, the term ‘working-class’ is limited. The term ‘welfare-class’ more appropriately describes the experience of some poor and welfare-reliant scholars. Considering the welfare-class as a distinct category within the working or poor classes, this article documents some of the specific experiences of alienation which pertain to being welfare-class in academia by focusing on the lived experiences of the authors, two academics at postgraduate and postdoctoral level. The article aims to contribute to the representation of poor and welfare-class academics among the growing body of autobiographical and autoethnographic knowledge (Warnock 2016) in working-class studies.

Keywords

Welfare-class, alienation, academia

The term ‘welfare-class’ often has derogatory connotations, referring to individuals, families or generations who are or have been reliant on welfare for what is deemed an inappropriate or excessive amount of time or for illegitimate reasons (Handel 2009). When used disparagingly, the term can invoke individualistic understandings of poverty that link poverty to individual shortcomings rather than structural inequalities (Goodban 1985). Specifically in a late twentieth-century American context, it evokes stereotypes of the lazy poor, epitomised by the racist, misogynistic cliché of the ‘Welfare Queen’ (Hancock 2004). In the 1980s, sociologists defined ‘the welfare-class’ as ‘a segment of the lower class’, the existence of which is ‘a characteristic of modern urban-industrial society’ (Weed 1980). U.S. scholars across disparate fields have

documented the extent to which welfare dependence is stigmatised. Work by Nancy Goodban (1985), for example, illustrates the psychological impact of welfare stigma on welfare-dependent single mothers. More recent investigations have shown that, despite 1990s reforms, welfare recipience is still stigmatised in the United States (Gershon 2016). If the existence of a ‘welfare-class’ and the idea of providing financial assistance to the poor was met with ‘mixed feelings’ (Goodban 1985) by the general public in the mid-1980s, today the idea of a welfare-class in the United States is met with disdain.

The same is true of factions of the U.K. and Ireland. Paul Spicker’s 1984 *Stigma and Social Welfare* was reprinted in 2011 and many of its original observations ring true. As Owen Jones has noted, people dependent on unemployment benefits in the U.K. have, as recently as 2010, been subject to state-sanctioned stigmatisation through government campaigns which tap into ‘the age-old prejudice that the people at the bottom were breeding out of control, as well as conjuring up the tabloid caricature of the slobbish single mother who milks the benefits system by having lots of children’ (Jones 2011). In Ireland in 2017, a high profile bus advertisement launched by then Minister for Social Protection (now Taoiseach/Prime Minister), Leo Varadkar, claimed that ‘Welfare Cheats Cheat us All’. In the same year, a Social Welfare and Pensions Bill was published by the Irish government, which included provisions to publish the names, addresses and penalties incurred by people who have been convicted of welfare fraud (Clarke 2017). In an article entitled ‘Don’t Confuse the Working-class with the Welfare-class’, Irish journalist Ian O’Doherty deployed the term in order to differentiate himself, a self-proclaimed member of the working-class, from ‘families who are now into their third generation of claiming benefits and see no reason to change their ways’ (O’Doherty 2017).

Yet despite its derogatory connotations, for some living in poverty, the term helps to define their experience and differentiate them from other experiences of working-class life. The generalised stigma outlined above is something arguably all members of the ‘welfare-class’ have to contend with in daily life. When attempting to succeed in an academic career, however, the stigma and resulting feelings of alienation can be intensified; being a member of the ‘welfare-class’ and an academic presents its own unique challenges. In an effort to provide insight into the lived experience of navigating academia while currently or formerly welfare reliant, we will identify and discuss several key problems – social and structural – which contribute to the alienation of welfare-class scholars in academia. These are: assumptions of financial privilege, disparities between average student experiences of ‘poverty’ and welfare-class experiences of poverty, structural barriers and the inadequacy of structural accommodations for financially struggling students, and tensions between a welfare-class scholar’s life and the methodologies and practices of academia. As with an increasing number of studies within the field of working-class studies, this article is partially autobiographical, reflecting on the authors’ lived experiences. This decision is driven by observations made by scholars such as Tim Strangleman (2005, p. 140) that autobiography is of ‘tremendous value’ in working-class studies.

The Parental ‘Safety Net’: Financial Privilege and the Welfare-class Scholar

‘When you grow up poor, you don’t have a safety net in your parents. You are your parents’ safety net’ (Wood 2017)

As the above tweet from Twitter user Holly Wood (@girlziplocked) illustrates, parental financial privilege is not a guarantee for some people living below the poverty line. Rather than being in a position to rely on familial wealth in difficult times, poor or welfare-class people may in fact bear the burden of providing for their parents or family financially.

Assumptions about the financial and class backgrounds of academics profoundly impact the ways in which non middle-class scholars engage with the social and official spaces of institutions and academic communities. As the editors of the *Journal of Working-class Studies* have noted in their call for papers for this issue (2017), those who are working-class are often ‘perceived as solidly middle-class’ because of their educational status, qualifications or presence in a graduate studies programme. Indeed, as Claudia Leeb notes,

[T]he assumption that everybody in academia comes from a middle-class background is part of the disciplinary practices that aim to silence any attempts to address class disciplining in academia (Leeb 2004, p. 116).

Such assumptions can generate feelings of profound alienation, owing in part to the fact that they are starkly at odds with the realities of welfare-class scholars. The increasingly competitive job market and the precarity of academia as a career impacts all scholars, even those who are middle-class and relatively financially unburdened. Yet, for many middle and upper class scholars, this precarity is often offset by the existence of a parental financial ‘safety net’. Middle-class scholars, while they may experience temporary periods of low income living, can often turn to parents or family members for loans to cover travel, research expenses, living expenses and university fees. A common assumption, for example, is that a scholar approaching the cessation of their funding can rely on a loan from their family in order to pay the fees for a fourth or fifth year in a PhD programme. This is often impossible for working-class academics and certainly always impossible for scholars whose parents, in addition to themselves, are reliant on welfare as their primary or only source of income. As a result, welfare-class scholars face increased time constraints on their research; literally unable to continue their PhD beyond the period of allocated funding, they may be forced to rush in order to complete their project before funding runs out. This, in turn, impacts the quality of their research and their future funding and employment opportunities. The impossibility of continuing education with no financial support and no means to pay for fees can be met with incredulity by mentors, colleagues and peers who assume that a scholar’s family will simply be in a position to cover costs. Scholars who complete their PhDs in a time-frame seemingly unachievable for many doctoral students often appear extremely diligent and self-motivated to mentors and peers and are met with congratulations and praise for their self-determination. Yet the completion of a doctoral degree in an unusually short time-frame can be motivated as much by financial necessity as commitment: taking a fourth or fifth year to complete a PhD is, for many graduate students, impossible.

As Penney has highlighted, assumptions about a parental financial safety net are rooted in the belief that a scholar’s parents or family members are employed in the first place. Many welfare-class scholars’ family members are in fact only partially employed or unemployed. For Penney, being a student from a household kept afloat by a single-parent welfare payment is highly significant in the context of her experience in academia. As Penney notes, being described as ‘working-class’ does not account for those who grow up in households where employment is not

part of everyday life. For large single-parent families, work outside the home is often made impossible by how employment removes or reduces certain necessary welfare entitlements, and an ability to provide childcare, which could never be covered by part-time employment. Penney only saw somebody work outside the home for a very brief period of time and at a young age, so doing so was not a normalised experience for her. She was a PhD student before she felt confident enough to juggle education with part-time work. The idea of getting a part-time job while also being the first in her family to go to college was overwhelming, and it raised questions: What would that money do? Where would it go? How could it help? By contrast, more financially secure friends who worked used that money to subsidise an already existent allowance. The money they earned was spent on social activities or maybe bills and food that could, in an emergency, be covered by a parent or guardian. For a middle-class student a part-time job is often casually conceived as something that can amp up the experience of college life but for Penney it carried the weight of a lot of unknowns that already surrounded the idea of going to college in the first place. She writes:

I was the first in my family to go to college: no brothers, sisters or parents had gone before me. I had one older sibling and he didn't even go to secondary school so in my immediate family I was also the first to sit my Junior Cert and Leaving Cert. As a single-parent at a young age my mam didn't have the opportunity to pursue higher education but she was highly self-educated and hugely nurturing; it was expected that I would go to college. For most of my life we lived on a single-parent welfare payment of 188 euro per week which, at one time, had to cover food, bills, clothes and other necessities for six people. My mother wrote poetry and read - a lot, but when I started college it was a totally unknown world. I hadn't known anyone who had gone. (Penney 2017)

For many doctoral graduates, including Lovejoy, the elation of completing their PhD is dampened by the cessation of funding and the loss of a reliable income. Given the difficulties of surviving with income only from precarious graduate teaching assistant positions, many doctoral graduates turn to social welfare. In Ireland this is a lengthy process which involves the investigation of a claimant's bank account and home by an inspector; it can take three months after the initial declaration of underemployment or unemployment before any payments are made. As a result, scholars with no parental safety net may have no choice but to spend several months immediately following the completion of their PhD working as a graduate teaching assistant and applying for more funding while earning barely enough to cover their monthly rent. By contrast, those who have recently finished their PhDs and are job hunting are more likely to be in a position to borrow several months' living expenses from their families to keep them afloat until they found full time work, or are in a position to supplement their modest earnings from adjunct teaching positions with the income of financially comfortable family members.

Student Poverty and the Welfare-class

In 2016, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) published the results of a study which revealed that 58.1% of students in Ireland miss meals in order to fund their education (Waugh 2016). Indeed, much of the public discourse surrounding student poverty in Ireland appears to focus on hunger as a key issue, with advertisers latching on to the student's often precarious relationship

with food. In 2015, Irish rail company Iarnrod Eireann launched an advertising campaign via public transport and social media urging students to 'go home'. The text of the advertisement was devised by marketing company Publicis D (2015) and read 'Go Home Students – you need a bit of looking after & we have fantastic fares just for you.' The accompanying image showed a young woman looking miserable and unkempt while eating cornflakes out of a wok. Implicit in this advertisement is that the poor student, reduced to eating the most basic of foods, can be saved from this state of misery by returning to her family home where she can eat a balanced and satisfying meal in comfort – be 'looked after' by her parents. But for the welfare-class student, however, their family's staple meal may well be cornflakes.

The comedy in the advertisement comes from the acknowledgement that student life often involves poor levels of self-care and poor domestic skills, owing in part to the financial challenges levelled by pursuing third level education in Ireland. Yet the normalised experience of temporary student 'poverty', epitomised in the United States by the microwavable hot pocket or ramen noodles, is vastly different from the experience of welfare poverty in full time education. Penney notes, of her experience of student poverty and hunger:

Unthinkingly, I developed tactics for survival in college. One was experiencing hunger differently. I didn't always experience a feeling of needing food but had a generalised and incorporated ability to not eat that much. Although this might sound alarming to most, food is one of the only areas that a single-parent family on a very low-income can actually cut down on. I very rarely ate in college. When my middle-class friends in academia discuss workplace precarity, tight budgets, eating cheaply and going out rarely I don't experience this as an opportunity to feel less alone. My particular experience of poverty is still inharmonious with theirs. (Penney 2017)

For the poor and specifically welfare-class scholar, 'budgeting' means a very different thing than it does for middle-class students and academics experiencing temporary financial difficulty. Somewhat normalised discourses of student poverty still have the potential to alienate the welfare-class scholar by presenting a version of poverty which can easily be alleviated by a return to the financially stable embrace of the family home. For many welfare-class scholars, the dynamics of 'being looked after' are reversed: family members are dependent on poor scholars' (often insufficient) incomes. As Penney observes:

This student poverty is a different shape to mine and it throws the crooked angles of my life into relief. Inside my house there is my mother and my brother who is studying too. With my bursary and small number of teaching hours I often earn more than both of them (Penney 2017)

To an extent, it is socially acceptable among middle-class scholars to discuss the temporary 'poverty' of life as a graduate student or underemployed academic. Yet despite the alarming commonness of complaints about low and unreliable income in academia, the necessity of claiming social welfare is a topic which is often met with discomfort or incredulity by peers. Most frequently, it is simply not a polite topic of conversation, even in the context of academic precarity. There is a climate of paranoia surrounding claiming social welfare, particularly in Ireland, where recent high profile government-led campaigns have encouraged members of the

public to be vigilant about welfare fraud, and have framed social welfare fraud as a grave crime which hurts the individual and society. As Bernadette Gorman, a former social welfare inspector, remarked, 'it is implicit in [Varadkar's] campaign that everyone on social welfare is some kind of cheat, some kind of scum' (*Social Welfare Fraud Campaign* 2017). Such a culture of stigma and paranoia creates further barriers to welfare-class scholars disclosing their sources of income and revealing their financial limitations to colleagues and mentors when they are unable to attend conferences or purchase materials.

Barriers to Access: Structural Accommodations

As Vivyan Adair and Sandra Dahlberg note in 'Welfare-class Identity and the Rhetoric of Erasure in Academia' (2002), success in a university is often determined by the student's adherence to the qualities associated with the 'model student', a normative standard which is necessarily classist. Adair and Dahlberg write that

The normative Universal student today is marked and read as naturally singular, rational, ordered, stable and mobile...These privileged codes are juxtaposed against the alleged multiplicity, disorder, irrationality, illogic, instability, and stagnation of those who do not – and therefore, in this logic, should not – enjoy power and authority (2002, p. 75)

As Adair and Dahlberg noted in the early 2000s, American education envisioned to facilitate upward class mobility is designed 'for a model student'. These observations resonate, especially for the welfare-class academic in Ireland. Adair and Dahlberg's identification of the features of the 'model student' – ordered, logical, deserving – raises key issues for the discussions about welfare-class academics in this article. Namely, coming from a welfare-class background or navigating higher education, employment, postdoctoral research and teaching while reliant on welfare compromises the scholar's access to and performance of the qualities of the 'model' student or researcher. Forms of financial, geographical and social mobility and stability associated with a middle-class upbringing, for example, often evade or appear alien to the welfare-class academic. Additionally, a second issue is that, if the scholar's welfare status or background is known or 'given away' through accent, clothing, taste, or administrative intervention in the formal welfare system, characteristics of disorder, illogic and instability are often ascribed to the poor scholar, whether or not they existed in the first place. As such, the poor or welfare-class scholar must navigate an educational culture which values these 'privileged codes' (Adair and Dahlberg 2002, p. 75), while managing the precarity of a life reliant on social welfare assistance combined with the stigma and damage which results from others' perceptions of a poor individual's incapability.

As Adair and Dahlberg note, in academic institutions and cultures, welfare recipients, one particularly visible and stigmatised class among which is the single mother, are 'marked as internally deviant as they are juxtaposed against the 'deserving' normative students who are read as ordered, stable, singular and progressive' (2002, p. 75). While academic institutions often perpetuate the myth of the 'classless' society (Langston, p. 77), institutions can also end up emphasising distinctions between working-class and poverty-class scholars. As Adair and Dahlberg remark, 'working-class students are read as deserving albeit 'rough' idealized students. This is not so with poverty-class individuals' (2002, p. 75).

Another way in which welfare-class scholars become structurally alienated from institutions is when financial accommodations ignore or deny their particular experiences and needs. In higher level institutions in Ireland, even the accommodations made for struggling students are made for struggling students from middle-class backgrounds. This is evident, for example, in awards such as Ireland's Ad Astra academic scholarships, or the All Ireland scholarships, which are awarded on the basis of points attained in the Irish Leaving Certificate (equivalent to a U.S. High School Diploma or British A Levels). Middle-class students are more likely to receive higher grades in certain subjects and as a result are more likely to be in a position to compete for points-based scholarships. In revealing this pattern Kathleen Lynch warns against a bonus-point system for students who take the higher-level maths paper for their Leaving Cert. In a 2011 article Lynch urged policymakers to recognise 'the increased social divisiveness of the bonus points entry criterion' which will 'further advantage the already advantaged' (those able to pay for expensive grinds) (Holden 2011). In speaking of the new mandatory entrance exam for medicine, (the HPAT), Lynch also reflects on how these exams are 'a new barrier for lower-income students to higher educational entry. Proficiency on the tests requires practice and insider knowledge that is only available to those who can buy it' (Holden 2011). As such, the university scholarship system further rewards those who are usually already financially secure, impacting undergraduates' opportunities to pursue an academic career from an early stage. When Penney started her PhD in 2015, she was awarded the only PhD bursary in the Department of English. The generalised rules attached to the bursary are similarly conceived with a middle-class student in mind: a 5,000 euro bursary would be made but, because of the bursary, she would not be prioritised for teaching hours – a source of income which is often vital for scholars at doctoral and postdoctoral level:

Even the best departmental measures to tackle student poverty make me feel alien. There is an assumption that other supports are available. The overall impact of this is one of feeling unwelcome in university, an imposter, an always-almost not admitted student. I still get anxious when I scan my student card at the library turnstile because I am on the 'special rate grant for disadvantaged students' and the state pays my fees. But they often make a wrong award and come September I am locked out of the library and locked into an administrative battle with the authority funding my education. The mistake is always on their end. There is never an apology. I will never quite belong here. (Penney 2017)

In *The Working-Class Woman in Elite Academia*, Claudia Leeb argues that the disciplining of the working-class woman's body 'finds its purest manifestation in academic institutions' and that women who are the first generation to enter higher-education are of 'specific interest' (18). Leeb argues that this is because we threaten middle-class subjectivities (which currently exist as the natural order of academic institutions). The 'administrative battle' Penney describes highlights the specific ways in which welfare-class academics must navigate the surveillance structures of the university. As Leeb notes:

[T]here are some individuals who have to be surveyed more than others. These individuals have to be produced as even more docile than others: working-class individuals. Surveillance of working-class individuals resonates throughout the institutions of modern societies, but its purest

manifestation in the institutions of higher education because working-class individuals are not supposed to enter institutions of higher education in the first place, since institutions of higher education are the places where middle-classes are reproducing themselves (2004, p. 102)

These modes of surveillance are heightened for poor and welfare-class scholars and often serve to 'out' the working-class scholar or highlight their lack of 'fit' in with the institution. There are several instances where institutional and structural surveillance are heightened for welfare-class students. Firstly, structural surveillance impacts the scholar's engagement with the administrative culture of the institution. As Penney notes, the 'special' status of students on specific low-income grants is made known to administrative staff and often results in instances of humiliation and alienation. Another instance of surveillance is when administrative staff are required to participate in the state's surveillance of a social welfare recipient when the scholar/recipient is engaged in partial work. Welfare systems for the partially employed require the signing and stamping of weekly forms by an employer or representative and the signing of a declaration stating that the welfare claimant did not turn down full-time work in a given week. This system requires weekly disclosure of welfare status to administrators in an institution, effectively singling the welfare-class scholar out. Resulting issues can include university administrators questioning the legitimacy of the scholar's welfare claim, refusing to sign forms, or treating scholars and/or adjunct staff differently once they have disclosed their status as a welfare claimant. Furthermore, the scholar may (often legitimately) feel that administrators and faculty with whom they had previously had a congenial professional relationship now view them differently; at best, with pity and, at worst, as illegitimate claimants or potential 'welfare cheats' – those social deviants the Irish Minister for Protection's high profile campaign identified. This can intensify the poor scholar's feelings of alienation and their sense that the institution is a barrier, rather than an aid, to escaping poverty. As Sara Ahmed has noted in relation to issues of social justice, equality, and welfare for students, the higher education institution can take on the qualities of a brick wall when a marginalised student attempts to be seen, heard and recognised (Ahmed 2012). In situations where partially employed or unemployed scholars require official signatures, letters, and stamps from their institution in order to verify that they are not in full-time employment and are 'deserving' of financial assistance, both the institution and the state are complicit in surveillance. As a result, the scholar feels an intensified sense of difference from their colleagues and peers.

Classlessness in the Classroom: Academic Methodologies and the Denial of Poverty

Once Penney began to think about her class position, she began to feel tension between her life and academia – crucially, not just with the formal structures regarding access and internal policy but with the academic projects that were supported by the institution and with the critical practices that were dominant. As a critic of literature, she began to consider the dominant philosophies influencing this field and found that poetry criticism, her area of expertise, manages to de-problematise capitalism by announcing the aesthetic as a pure space. The biopolitical space of poetry criticism reveals an inherent classism at the heart of literary criticism as a discipline: the neutral space, the pure space, is a middle-class space.

Another way in which academia clashes with the experience of welfare-class people is in its promotion of cultures of overwork. Working overtime, on evenings and through weekends has

become normalised in academia and is often considered a necessity. Scholars have pointed out the sexist nature of this – the fact that women do more childcare and housework, and the fact that a singular devotion to academic work, working up to seventy hours per week, is only possible if others (often women) take on the burden of domestic labour and forms of less ‘visible’ labour such as administrative work. Yet demands of overwork and a working week of seventy hours in academia are also often classist. Working-class students, postdoctoral researchers, and anyone who is not fully employed frequently hold multiple jobs in order to survive, many of which are outside of academia. For many working-class and poor scholars, relying on income from stipends and teaching alone is insufficient and many scholars take up multiple jobs in retail or other service industries. This makes it less possible to engage in or *perform* overwork.

Another issue is that the welfare-class academic, particularly if they come from a generation of welfare recipients, has witnessed and internalised a lifetime of rhetoric which constructs social welfare recipients as illegitimate, lazy, and defective members of society. As such, the productivity narratives – which presently dominate higher education in the West, and the increasing commodification of higher education, have a unique impact on the welfare-class scholar – someone who contends with an intensified form of the imposter syndrome. Feelings of laziness, inadequacy and the language of ‘handouts’ which vilify welfare recipients shape the poor scholar’s engagement with and response to academic narratives of productivity and standards of work/life balance. As a result of internalising dominant cultural narratives of welfare-class laziness, welfare-class scholars may feel an increased pressure to work demonstrably harder than their middle-class colleagues, many of whom are already locked into an unhealthy work/life balance. Internalised messages of the laziness and illegitimacy of welfare recipients can lead PhD students, early career researchers and tenured academics to pursue unhealthy work patterns to prove themselves to mentors and colleagues. The guilt which accompanies almost all PhD students when ‘not working’ is intensified for the welfare-class scholar, as many of us have internalised models of labour which equate work and productivity with our very value as members of society. The welfare-class scholar’s relationship to the academic culture of overwork is markedly different from the middle-class scholar’s as welfare-class scholars face an increased pressure to ‘prove themselves’ and to dispel claims that welfare recipients are lazy, unproductive and illegitimate members of society. Yet despite welfare-class academics’ frequent commitment to demonstrating capability, commitment and skill through overwork, our contributions to the research and teaching culture of our departments are often not valued as much as those of our middle-class peers, owing at least in part to the characterisations of the welfare-class as illogical and disordered.

Conclusion

While the visibility and representation of the working-classes in academia is limited, the visibility and representation of welfare-class academics is almost non-existent. For us, the precarity of academic life and the sense of alienation experienced as a result of a perceived incompatibility with elitism and the qualities idealised in academia takes on unique, specific dimensions. The stigmatisation and denial of the welfare-class scholar, on interpersonal and structural levels, has implications for our self-image, scholarly output, engagement with research communities, and future employment opportunities. As scholars with welfare-class backgrounds, the welfare-class status is a taint which may cling to us throughout our careers. In her navigation

of this, Lisa Waldner writes that ‘some will always define me as less than middle-class, a type of sub-class, because of my welfare history. My former welfare status overshadows all my other achievements, including graduating magna cum laude, attending graduate school, and earning a Ph.D’ (2003, p. 104). Waldner is one of a number of scholars within working-class studies who notes a distinction between ‘the non-welfare working-class’ and ‘those with a welfare history’ (2003, p. 104).

We hope that this article highlights some significant issues for the welfare-class academic, including the assumption that employment is a part of every poor scholar’s life, and the assumption that education is a route out of poverty or that one can (or should) ‘overcome’ or transcend class by attaining a high level of education. We are also cautious in allowing the availability of our testimonies to stand as ‘evidence’ for an increasing equality of access to higher-education in Ireland which does not exist in reality. A recent article in *The Irish Times* asks ‘why do almost 90 per cent of students in Donnybrook (an upper-middle-class neighborhood) go to college but just 16 per cent in Darndale (a working-class area)?’ (McGuire 2016). *The Irish Times* feeder school database is free to use online and tells a disturbing story of where our university populations *don’t* come from: progression can be as low as 8% in areas of North Dublin such as Finglas or Ballymun and as high as 112% in areas of South Dublin such as Blackrock. This absence of students from low-income areas is reflected in Penney’s experience with university access officers:

When recently applying for emergency aid through the university access office, I was surprised to hear that my particular ‘case’ was extremely rare and that the university simply doesn’t encounter ‘access students’ who make it ‘all the way’ from further ed. to PhD. This absence causes issues in attaining aid because authorities are not familiar with the circumstances of students’ whose family income is often made up of different *kinds* of welfare payments and certain patterns of unemployment that the system just isn’t set-up for. This often leads to funding authorities incorrectly denying students the financial aid they are entitled to (Penney 2017)

Now in the final year of her PhD, Penney is still living in a single-parent, welfare reliant household and still subsidises this household where she can with small financial awards and other forms of student aid. The experience of the welfare-class scholar is still incongruent with the access policies and scholarship structures of third level institutions. Without structural supports for working-class people at primary and secondary level the economic measures used to widen access at third level don’t make sense. This way of tackling inequality seems to naturalise class divides and support the myth of a meritocracy. As Waldner notes, ‘Working-class, welfare, and poverty are unimportant concepts if we imagine that anyone can leave a status behind through hard work’ (2003, p. 104). It is important for us to find a space to share our experiences. Most of the time, telling people about our personal lives happens in the forced contexts of a school or welfare office - in these contexts our privacy is not respected and having to prove our poverty in this environment can be humiliating and frustrating. Going forward, we hope to grow new networks of sharing and to support others in telling their stories.

Author Bios

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