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Article

'They burn so bright whilst you can only wonder why': Stories at the intersection of social class, capital and critical information literacy — a collaborative autoethnography

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Abstract

In this article we connect critical librarianship and its practices of information literacy (IL) with working-class experiences of higher education (HE). Although the research literature and professional body of knowledge of critical information literacy (CIL), is one of the most theoretically-developed areas of wider critical librarianship (Critlib) movement, working-class knowledge and experiences remain underrepresented.

One reason for this is that the values, behaviour and assumptions of library and HE workers are shaped by a HE system which inculcates middle-class values and cultural capitals within students, and stigmatises working-class students as lacking or in deficit. Hegemonic, or non-critical, IL proselytises middle-class values and assumptions about academic practices and skills development including the notion of an ideal student with behaviour and markers of identity which reflect those most privileged by wider society. In contrast CIL, framed as *the* socially-just practice of IL is theoretically well-placed to support working-class library workers in destabilising this alongside middle-class accomplices.

Employing Yosso's (2005) concept of community and cultural wealth (CCW), we analyse how library workers can recognise working-class cultural wealth within the context of CIL and wider working practices. As such narrative accounts are lacking in the literature, we utilise collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al., 2013) to consider and interpret our own experiences of libraries when we were university students ourselves, and more recently as HE workers of working-class heritage.

Keywords

critical information literacy; ethnography; higher education; information literacy; social class; UK

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

> You will never understand
> How it feels to live your life
> With no meaning or control
> And with nowhere left to go
> You are amazed that they exist
> And they burn so bright
> Whilst you can only wonder why
> Lyrics from *Common People* (Cocker et al., 1995 verse 4).

> "Working Class is not an accent to be lost … a savagery to be civilised … a roughness to be polished … [or] a background to be assimilated" [Shukie, 2020]. Instead we sparkle with pedagogical gifts … and are armed with an immense cultural wealth that challenges academia." (Crew, 2020 p. 139).

Critical librarianship (Critlib) is a movement of library workers dedicated to "bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries," (Critlib, n.d.). Its practitioners employ various critical frameworks to theorise libraries and information; enable activist and social justice-oriented stances within library work; and develop online communities and discussion spaces (Preater, 2018). Critlib scholarship situates libraries, both unconsciously and consciously, as systems of oppression that are harmful to marginalised groups (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019). For instance, whilst most libraries aspire to a universalist, democratic and communitarian ethos, historically libraries have and continue to uphold hegemonic power structures and in social terms frequently uphold and advance middle-class orientations and concerns (Black, 2000; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016).

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a research method whereby multiple researchers, utilising multiple narratives, become empowered within a social context that is familiar to them (Chang et al., 2013), and represents "autoethnography done in community" (Hernandez, 2021, p. 62). It is particularly useful for those who want to provide a theoretical framework for analysing issues and experiences through a social justice lens (Phelps-Ward et al., 2021). We felt that it was appropriate as participant-researchers to use this methodology alongside our knowledge of critical theory, our practices of Critlib and our classed experiences, based on the autoethnography principle that, "a deep understanding of the social phenomenon resides in the individuals who are able to make sense of their own experiences" (Hernandez, 2021, p. 62). This article is the culmination of a process or 'product' of CAE undertaken by three library workers, an academic and a widening participation practitioner, all of whom are from working-class backgrounds and have experience of working in UK higher and further education.

The next section introduces us as authors and the context in which this CAE project developed.

1.2 About the authors

In line with the CAE method we want to outline our positionality explicitly in relation to this work, our histories and lives in academia. As a group, we share some similarities in our backgrounds,

and all identify as having a working-class heritage and identity; however we recognise that our experiences are intersectional and that individually we may have experiences which bring either benefits or additional disadvantages based on aspects of our identities.

Aligning with other authors' approaches to CAE, we refer to ourselves as "we" throughout this article, to bring us together as a group and to reinforce the personal nature of the CAE process (Phelps-Ward et al., 2021). We use participant-researcher's first names within the text and accompanying quotes to increase transparency and accountability, and to provide readers with context for those reflections through the positionality of us as authors. We want this paper to kickstart conversations between us and other working-class practitioners in our respective fields so that we can continue to build connections with like-minded people and address the gaps in the literature. Working-class experiences of libraries as sites of marginalisation are rarely interrogated critically within the literature, and as such we aim to improve this situation directly by writing about our own experiences of study and work in education.

As authors, we try to avoid alienating or excluding others by using overly formal language and strive to remain as approachable and inclusive as possible in our writing and our approach to this work - something we observe as being typical of working-class people in the academy (Crew, 2020). We also recognise how exhortations to 'plain' and 'clear' language are employed by library workers of privileged identities to devalue theories which challenge domination and oppression, and further assumes that "ordinary people" lack the intellectual life to develop critical theories and "reframe the world in unfamiliar languages" (Hudson, 2016). We ask those middle-class readers who find our engagement with theory challenging to keep in mind that this work was formed through our intellectual lives which are rooted in our working-class lived experiences within the academy. We also ask them to reflect on why they may wish to dismiss working-class critical theories of work and educational environments which were designed for their comfort. We maintain that this is the start of an ongoing conversation, to be added to by our fellow education workers of working-class heritage as well as middle-class accomplices who wish to increase working-class representation and amplify their voices.

Teresa (she/her/hers)

I am White and cis-female and identify as heterosexual. During my childhood I lived in two areas in the UK, Nottingham and then Runcorn, before settling in North Wales in my teens. I was the first in my family to attend university. Like many working-class people in HE, my choice of institution was based less on its academic credentials, but more on its proximity to my daughter's school. Our family's aspirational capital encouraged my siblings and now my own children to go to university. I am now a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the university I attended as a student, and I am also the subject lead for Social Sciences in my school.

Darren (he/him/his)

I am White and cis-male and identify as a gay man/Queer. I grew up in the West Midlands (UK) with parents who worked as retail and factory workers. I was and remain the first person in my extended family to attend university. Having first attended a Russell Group institution, I failed my first year and only found my feet in academia once I transferred to a Post-92 institution. I have worked in libraries for around 12 years and now manage a team of academic librarians. Outside of my main job I am a part-time PhD student researching social class and the academic library workforce.

Rosie (she/her/hers)

I am White and cis-female and identify as bisexual/Queer. I am from the North East of England. My parents worked as a midwife and a factory worker when I was growing up. I attended my

local university as a mature student, aged 21, after an initial false start at another institution immediately after sixth form college at age 18. I have worked in a number of library and learning technology roles in both the Higher and Further Education sectors and currently work for a sector membership organisation.

Krishna (she/her/hers)

I am a British-born Indian cis-female and identify as heterosexual. I'm one of five siblings, and growing up in west London, my mum (a dinner lady) passed on her passion and love of learning to us all. I attended (and struggled at) a Post-92 institution, but found my feet and purpose working in the charity sector supporting communities and young people to campaign and self-advocate. I now work in educational outreach, focusing on widening participation, lifelong learning and ensuring universities engage with the communities they serve, as well as the communities they're located in.

Andrew (he/him/his)

I am White and cis-male and identify as bisexual/Queer. I am from Lewisham in south London and during childhood lived both there and in West Yorkshire, where my mother moved for her work. I am from a single-parent family and was a first-generation student, and attended my local university which is a Russell Group institution. I have ADHD which was not diagnosed until I was older, and affected my experiences of education. I have worked in a number of roles in further and higher education (HE) for about 18 years, and I am now a library director.

1.3 Background to the project

The genesis of this project was an initial conversation between Andrew and Rosie about self-consciously classed observations about prevailing attitudes within our profession to Information Literacy (IL) practices, and how this reflects middle-class values and assumptions about academic practices and skills development; including the notion of behaviours of 'ideal' students being interpreted as 'correct' student behaviours. In previous work, Andrew developed a Bourdieusean analysis which argued that these assumptions are represented throughout HE professional practice and cultures, and as such represent taken-for-granted classed positions, including:

- The pursuit of neutrality and objectivity within librarianship as a discipline;
- Our profession being populated by the middle-class;
- Library policies being developed for an imagined, 'ideal' middle-class student;
- Collection management and development that privileges middle-class forms of knowledge and experience;
- The acceptance and reproduction of deficit models of working-class students, alongside other marginalised groups (Preater, 2020, pp. 27–28).

These ideas and observations of our experience therefore provided our starting point to problematise IL using a social class lens. In this article we term these prevailing approaches 'hegemonic IL' as a contrast to Critical Information Literacy (CIL). We are therefore guided in our use of the term hegemony by Gramsci, conceptualising hegemony as a system of domination enacted through the control of ideas, values and norms that benefit a ruling class and are made the default 'common sense' across a society (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 5–23). In discussing CIL we mean practices of IL that are rooted in critical pedagogy and its theories developed within the Critlib movement since the mid-2000s (Tewell, 2015). The 'critical' in CIL references critical theory, with CIL falling under a "wider critical theory umbrella" (Downey, 2016, pp. 40–44) that includes multiple critical traditions of emancipatory and transformative education. CIL has an intellectual lineage tracing back to the critical theory of the Frankfurt

School, a term first defined by Horkheimer in 1937 (1972, pp. 188–243). As such, CIL is not to be confused or conflated with more mainstream and uncontested concepts like 'critical thinking'.

Alongside these conversations, Andrew and Teresa chaired panel discussions at the 2021 Working Class Academics conference (WCA, 2021). Darren is co-organiser of the Critical Approaches to Libraries Conference (CALC, n.d.) and had presented a working-class perspective on 'professional' behaviours in librarianship (Flynn, 2021). Bringing these conferences together, Andrew chaired a panel discussion of speakers from WCA at CALC 2021 (Preater et al., 2021). Krishna is an organiser of PURSUE (n.d.), a group for working-class widening participation practitioners who had interviewed Teresa as a working-class academic for their podcast *Open Circle* (Roe, 2022). Additionally, Teresa's book *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics* (Crew, 2020), which draws on Yosso's Community and Cultural Wealth Model (CCW) had been a touchstone work for all of us, and her critical conclusions recommendations and questions provided the original motivation to address IL practices within this article. As such, we wanted to use these lenses to analyse experiences of working-class library workers who have experienced the UK HE system as students, and now as members of staff.

Our experience as library and education workers involves implementing socially-just theories and practices within our work by reading outside of our professional literature and reframing ideas and theories from other disciplines. Crew's (2020) writing is an example of this, having inspired Andrew and Rosie to explore this area of working-class academic working within HE. This is partly because the literature within librarianship is extremely limited in addressing concerns of social class; even within the Critlib movement working-class knowledge and experiences remain underrepresented. For this reason, we do not present a formal literature review, but have cited relevant work throughout this article to ground our research in relevant research and scholarship. In doing CAE and in our writing, we aim to create the type of classed analysis we recognised as originally missing from the literature and that would reach and inspire other library workers of working-class heritage. In Sara Ahmed's (2023) words, "Books can be our buildings. We write ourselves into existence." (p. 186).

In developing our own Bourdieusean analysis, Yosso's (2005) CCW model provides a powerful critical race theory (CRT) reframing, in which she contests Bourdieu's view on the value of elite and middle-class knowledge, suggesting that it frames anyone outside of these classes of students of colour as someone deficient, which perpetuates deficit models of thinking (Crew, p. 12). Instead, Yosso (2005) outlines six forms of capital held by members of marginalised communities, outlined below:

- Aspirational capital can be understood as being resilient, despite the existence of various barriers. These barriers exist as institutions, such as universities tend to reflect dominant elite and middle-class cultures, although minorities may be able to overcome these hurdles if they have a broader sense of what is possible (Strangfeld, 2022, p. 2).
- Often discussed in conjunction with social capital, familial capital is the accumulated history, cultural knowledge and nuance obtained from family, kin and community experiences.
- Navigational capital is the ability to manoeuvre through systems and institutions, such as the academy, that were historically not designed with marginalised groups in mind. Yosso (2005, p. 77–81) notes that this form of capital empowers individuals to move through hostile environments. Covarrubias et al., (2022) note that navigational and social capital may combine to combat oppression (p. 38).
- Resistant capital, a further example of Yosso's (2005) CCW, is the inherited foundation and historical legacy of communities of marginalised groups in resisting inequality and pursuing equal rights. This includes resisting stereotypes that are not authentic to your sense of self. A typical stereotype being that working-class people lack forms of capital.

- Finally, linguistic capital is the sum of intellectual, social and communication skills attained through a particular language, history and experiences (Yosso, 2005 p. 77–81).

Yosso's (2005) work developed a critical theory rooted in the experiences of people of colour, however, Crew and other authors have used this lens to consider other intersecting marginalised identities in HE, including working-class identities (Crew, 2020, p. 13). Using a CAE approach, we utilised Yosso's (2005) CCW model to map the six forms of capital against themes that emerged from our data, and provide the theoretical underpinning to our lived experiences as HE workers from working-class backgrounds.

2. Methods

2.1 Collaborative autoethnography

In analysing the role of social class elitism and the exclusionary nature of libraries and IL practices, it was important to us that our researcher-participant group was formed exclusively by those of working-class heritage. As HE workers of working-class heritage, we found that we gravitate towards those of similar backgrounds. This is based on our recognition of the value of each other's lived experiences, and our knowledge of how these personal and professional ties can create spaces of trust in which we can critically reflect on our work and industry through the lens of social class. For us this is a form of 'recognition politics' (Fraser, 2000, pp. 108–109) and forms part of our response to class elitism in our working lives.

Although our experience as a group is our working-class heritage as a unifying factor that cuts across other aspects of our identities, we explicitly reject the notion of repositioning social class above other markers of identity whether from the left, for example traditional Marxist-Leninist analyses, or the right, such as contemporary British conservative discourses about the 'white working class'. We understand our shared, classed identity in terms of that which unites us, whilst also understanding the very significant differences and divergent experience in others. Informed by Stuart Hall's (1990) work, we think of identity not as a fixed position, but one that shifts and changes, "as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within [...] representation" (p. 222). We view our class politics as fundamentally intersectional and in developing an intersectional analysis we recognise this concept was introduced to legal scholarship by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who centred the experiences of Black women in her analysis. Since then, intersectionality has been more widely interpreted to reflect different facets of identity, including social class. Within librarianship we are indebted to scholarship developed by Black, indigenous and other people of colour (BIPOC) that are rooted in and informed by CRT. In particular, edited collections by Chou and Pho (2018) and Leung and López-McKnight (2021) have been foundational to our thinking in resisting hegemonic IL and reframing our understanding of IL utilising CCW as a model. However, we reject the notion of equivalence of lived experiences between ethnicity and 'race' and social class as facets of identity and aim not to conflate these in our work.

In our work as participant-researchers, we aimed to create a counter-space in which to make shared meaning from our experiences. In doing this we created one of the spaces we have previously sought in our work, one in which we do not have to explain working-class identity or the roots of our knowledge to middle-class peers to ensure we are understood and 'recognised'. Our experience is that such spaces are rare in HE, and virtually non-existent within librarianship. We have found even activist or social justice-oriented spaces in librarianship tend to be populated with middle-class library workers who have generally proved to be uncomfortable in engaging critically with social class elitism.

Our participant recruitment and selection was purposeful and non-probabilistic, employing a form of snowball sampling (Pickard, 2017, p. 65). From the early development of this work, we sought participants with specific identities and lived experiences that we anticipated would

present particularly information-rich cases for data collection. This recruitment was rooted in the social ties of our professional lives, with several events and groups that explicitly foreground working-class experience serving as connecting threads between us and our networks. Mentioned above, key to these were the Working Class Academics and Critical Approaches to Libraries conferences.

It was important for our work that our choice of methods, as well as underpinning theory, reflected the social justice agenda and liberatory potential of the Critlib movement. Our choice of CAE was informed both by Foreshew and Al-Jawad's (2022) application of CAE in a Boudieusean analysis of students' experiences of classism in medical education, and Deitering's (2017) experiences of autoethnography within academic librarianship (p. 1–6), where we found our personal values pointed us away from traditional research methods.

CAE methods are congruent with the overall social constructionist (Burr, 2015) theoretical orientation of our work. It was a good approach for our research as it is rooted in social practices, encompassing how classism is constructed by interactions between members of the learning community; and based on our discursive approach in forming meaning from sharing our experiences and stories. Practically, CAE had many advantages for the type of enquiry we envisioned; it allowed for the creation of a counter-space for participant-researchers who had experienced marginalisation and underrepresentation within wider academic structures (Solórzano et al., 2000); it enabled transparency and accountability by facilitating our engagement in the analysis of our own experiences (Lapadat, 2017); and it provided opportunities for participant-researchers to model reflexivity within the investigation (Tripathi et al., 2022). Finally, purposive sampling based on social ties and lived experience allowed us to build trust more easily within our group of participant-researchers and become comfortable with vulnerability in our writing and discussions (Chang et al., 2013, p. 143). This helped us in overcoming a barrier inherent in CAE, where lack of trust can limit participants' openness and honesty (Cheng et al., 2013, p. 30).

As a reflexive and highly personal method, CAE can introduce a range of complex ethical issues. We viewed CAE as an ethical research method as it fosters trust and solidarity among participants, and as the researcher and participants are the same people it removed an ethical issue of potentially appropriating others' words (Lapadat, 2017, p. 4) around social class as a personal, sensitive aspect of identity. Additionally, CAE provided a means to navigate institutional ethical research processes which are often "more effective at protecting the institutions themselves than research participants" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 7), while maintaining ethical focus on ourselves as participants. At the start of this project, Andrew sat on his institution's ethics committee and discussed the project with the chair, which is standard practice in his library for any research or scholarship involving human participants. Following this, it was decided a formal ethics panel submission would not be required for this work.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected by the group acting as participant-researchers. Initial meetings and email exchanges outlined the scope of the project and three primary areas to focus on during recollections: early experiences of libraries and information; experiences of HE study, libraries and IL education; and our experiences working within HE. Participant-researchers however were allowed and encouraged to deviate from these areas at will. Our initial data collection was 'personal memory data' in the form of written autoethnographic accounts intended to be descriptive, rather than analytical (Chang et al., 2013). These were shared with the wider group using a shared drive and participant-researchers were encouraged to use the personal memory data of others to inform, inspire and build upon their own recollections. Our personal memory data documents were designed as 'living' accounts, where participant-researchers were able to add additional reflections iteratively throughout the data

collection phase so that further points or recollections could be captured if prompted by discussions or reading the accounts of others.

Having read each other's personal memory data, we arranged our first collaborative data collection session. This was a free-form discussion of our recollections conducted through a Microsoft Teams meeting. The discussion allowed group members to probe individual experiences to gain greater insight, respond to topics raised with their own experiences and develop commonalities between the different and overlapping experiences of individuals. The discussion was recorded, and a transcript of the session provided another rich data source which the group used to develop themes, identify additional lines of enquiry and to prompt further data collection in autoethnographic writing. It also included elements of self-observation about our experience of CAE as a process and the affective experience of reading each other's personal memory data. Reflections, questions and observations were shared within the group through comment functions on the documents. A second, final discussion was arranged to collect more data for analysis and the transcript shared with the group. In total, 125 pages of data were collected for analysis.

The qualitative data generated was analysed collaboratively using thematic analysis. Themes were identified inductively from across the different forms of data collected in the study, including individual personal memory data and discussion transcripts. Initial individual notes on themes were shared and combined into a single document. Further discussions by the group were used to combine themes and identify those most prominent within the data. Six core themes were identified from the data that brought together common and individual experiences, perspectives and knowledge from the group members' personal, academic and professional lives. Themes were then analysed using several critical theoretical frameworks, in particular Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) forms of capital, and Yosso's (2005) concept of CCW.

3. Results and Themes

3.1 'Pushing back' information literacy

"Librarians wish to have had someone do it already, or to get it pushed back and back and back to the point where you can't go any further back—because they're [students] preliterate basically. There's this assumption that students 'should know'. And if they don't know, then there's some deficit there–but far be it from me to be the one to actually teach them…"

Andrew – discussion 1

A common refrain expressed in the librarians' personal memory data was the recollection of colleagues within our workplaces and at wider sector events bemoaning the lack of formalised IL skills and knowledge exhibited by their students. A consistent solution to this recalled by the group was the need for IL skills development to be 'pushed back' earlier in students' academic journey; at foundation level, at pre-arrival, at sixth form, at school, in primary education. Any point at which IL skills were needed was too late, and the content ought to have been covered previously. The IL skills deemed necessary, both in recalled workplace conversations and wider LIS literature, were narrowly defined and centred on scholarly practices and procedures such as Boolean searching, use of academic sources and adoption of referencing schema (Saunders, Severyn & Caron, 2017; Anderson & Bull, 2014; Varlejs & Stec, 2014). The theme was further expanded on in group discussions and a range of objections raised to this viewpoint. On a philosophical level we felt that this expressed a normative middle-class view of education; that HE is the only legitimate endpoint of study, and that pre-HE schooling was essentially

preparatory, with value derived from its ability to produce future graduates. Viewed in this way, it felt that IL was perceived as a set of discrete, decontextualised practices that seek to replicate the practices of middle-class dominated academic environments to the exclusion of developing the knowledge and behaviours necessary for democratic citizenship and lifelong learning (Hicks, 2018, p. 74–75; Hicks & Lloyd, 2016, p. 335–336). On a practical level, issues were raised regarding a lack of time in the curriculum to schedule university-level skills development and that this disregarded and delegitimised vocational forms of study where the type of skills academic librarians typically value, for example database searching, citation practices, identifying and using scholarly sources have less prominence. Finally, pedagogical objections were raised that 'pushing back' expressed a banking model of education where knowledge and skills could be divorced from context, deposited in early schooling and 'spent' on arrival at university (Freire, 1996).

This expressed desire to "push back" IL may be contrasted with Yosso's (2005) linguistic capital. Acknowledgement of linguistic capital allows us to appreciate that learners, otherwise marginalised in HE, develop methods of communication and intellectual skills within and outside of traditional schooling that have value and utility. While linguistic capital has particular relevance within marginalised communities who use minority languages, it also encompasses the learning of social and communication skills needed by and shared within disadvantaged communities, such as communicating needs and ideas within a sometimes dismissive or hostile environment, strategies for code-switching between social situations, and ways of diffusing conflict or resisting oppressive circumstances such as humour.

Group members believe that middle-class assumptions that secondary education should serve as pre-university preparatory training demanded the sacrifice of time spent by working-class students building the linguistic capital they needed to thrive, in favour of time spent transmitting middle-class cultural capital. While the group recognised the importance of building IL skills, we saw that in the "push back" concept, it was specific and particularly formal elements that were being mandated. These IL skills are those generally limited to a HE context, and that if these were desired or required in university study, the onus is on those within the sector to develop these skills equitably for our students.

3.2 Exclusion by architecture

"…it feels like people are looking down onto you [from mezzanine book stacks] and you feel like you're posing as an academic rather than actually working as one and I just feel very out of place. I don't feel like I should, I feel like somebody is going to come and clip me around the ear and tell me to get out or something because it's not a place for me."

Darren – discussion 1

"[The library] is a 30s beaux-arts building (named after [a] Tory MP and benefactor) that I occasionally needed to use for anthropology and history of science. It is an off-putting space that gives off a strong sense of grandeur and awe that doesn't welcome students. I felt grubby and out of place and never lingered."

Andrew – personal memory data

In personal reminisces, a number of us independently described early experiences of visiting and using libraries and the positive associations and memories of doing so. Noticeably in each of these examples we described smaller, local and community-based public libraries. Patterns of behaviour within the group varied from frequent short visits to exchange books, longer stays where fiction and non-fiction books were read in-situ, or using computer access and book stock for homework, study or reading for pleasure. In addition to use of library services, the consumption of community capital was expressed with members of the group describing engagement with members of their community; in particular elders, and known library staff. Experiences of using libraries for enjoyment or study were expanded on during collaborative data collection sessions, in particular sharing narratives of using libraries in education and professional settings. By contrast, both recalled and current experiences of university libraries did not evoke the same positive feelings of comfort, ease or productive pleasure. University libraries were described on the whole as sites of anxiety, exclusion and surveillance. Members of the group described the sensation of feeling over-awed or alienated by architectural features of libraries that felt out-of-scale within human activities such as soaring atria, expansive and imposing reading rooms and lofty ceilings. Reading, writing and studying within the library evoked feelings of being surveilled by staff and peers, and created a heightened feeling of visibility and exposure. Comparisons were made between older, more traditional library architecture with vaulted ceilings and domed roofs, and more modern designs with plate glass and atria, but interestingly the affective responses the group felt were similar. One member, who had studied at two different universities as an undergraduate contrasted their experience of a "big grand library" that had "big open space[s] and it made me feel like I was being observed" with a second library that "was not nice at all" and "hadn't been refurbished for years", but had "little nooks that you could sit in and you didn't feel like you were on display."

This sense of anxiety and exclusion was accentuated by feelings of difference members of the group observed between their own feelings and those of their peers, who presented as being impressed with library spaces and at ease working in such environments; while architectural grandeur appealed to other students, to the group it felt oppressive and exclusionary. Strategies for managing these feelings ranged from avoiding use of the library wherever possible including accessing library-subscribed online resources, finding alternative entrances and routes that bypass uncomfortable spaces and locating hidden working locations that were less exposed. In a social and physical sense we understand the insight in Sara Ahmed's (2023) 'killjoy truth', "You notice worlds when they are not built for you." (p. 158).

This sense of exclusion by architecture could be understood as a specific, class-based instance of library anxiety (Mellon, 1986), in particular a conflict between the architectural aspirations of university administrators and librarians that arguably prioritises a middle-class taste for grandeur and impressiveness with working class preferences for comfort, human-scale and practicality. That libraries as spaces can serve to alienate, overawe, or discomfort users from marginalised communities has precedent within LIS literature. That the group's members consistently reported this phenomenon despite having a diversity in the types, ages and geographical diversity of institutions attended suggests a level of consistency in both library design philosophy and its attendant impact on working class students. The imposition of architectural approaches that give precedence to middle class over working class preferences and needs can be interpreted as an incidence of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence; the adoption and domination of the values, behaviours and assumptions of a dominant social group through the conscious or unconscious assumption that these represent a default or a universal standard

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167–168). In a study exploring Latino/a college students' experiences and perceptions of libraries, Adkins and Hussey (2006) found that participants expressed negative emotional reactions to the size and design of their college library and, in common with some of our recollections, described a negative comparison with smaller, more personal community-based libraries. Within the context of CRT and critical whiteness studies, Beilin (2017) explores this inherent conflict between the exclusionary experience of marginalised library users, specifically people of colour, and the desire of other library users and librarians from hegemonic groups to project their own values. They argue further that from the perspective of marginalised users, library architecture may have "an association with elitism, exclusivity, and class distinction" (Beilin, 2017, p. 86), a conclusion that was shared in the experiences recounted by the group. Brook et al. (2015) similarly draws on CRT and critical discourse analysis to analyse the effects of library architecture on users of colour, which may have applications to other communities including working-class heritage users. By analysing literature and professional standards relevant to library design, Brooks et al. (2015) demonstrate that traditional and contemporary library architecture is used to legitimise and espouse traditions and concerns based in whiteness to the exclusion of underrepresented or marginalised groups. Of note, the study explored professional literature to locate strategies that address, or even acknowledge, the experiences of users outside of hegemonic groups but found instead only guidance that "perpetuate[s] th[e] notion that there is a neutral one-size-fits-all type of space that will serve all users equally" (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 260).

In analysing personal and collaborative memory data on this theme, Yosso's (2005) concept of familial capital was used. Familial capital refers to ideas of kinship and care beyond individuals or blood relations to those within a community or sharing a social reality. Early memories of smaller, community-based and community-inhabited public libraries were understood as sites in which CCW was built, exchanged and celebrated and architecture served to emphasise the connection between individuals. By contrast, in university settings the scale, size and design of the library worked to atomise and accentuate individualistic pursuits and behaviours.

3.3 Hidden curriculum

"When I went to uni, no one taught me how to behave or engage with my learning at university and being a working class student who had moved away from home. I mean it wasn't that far but I had moved away from home. My parents weren't educated in this country. They [parents] didn't understand how to navigate the higher education system… They [the university] were just like, 'well, you just get on with it'. And I was like 'but I don't know, I do not know the basics of how to get on with it' and I didn't feel there was a culture of feeling like I could say that actually. I literally don't get how, how to 'university' if that makes sense and like 'what are the things that I need to make this a success', 'cause everyone just kept saying you were spoon-fed at sixth form."

Krishna – discussion 2

Ideas relating to the hidden curriculum were expressed in both personal memory data and collaborative discussion. Group members, independently and collaboratively, explored experiences in which some of the unwritten rules and norms of HE were assumed of all students by our universities' educators and procedures, but were not explicitly taught or

explained. For example, one group member who had been successful academically in school described the experience of receiving a mark on a first-year assignment of 50:

"I was a really bright kid and I was very academic in school, at least in the subjects that I did so I was used to getting 95%+ and I was happy with that. But then I would get an essay back and it would be a 50/100… nobody said to me like 'yeah, you know you can't get 100?' Nobody said '70 is a really, really good mark'… I just saw this number and was like "holy ****! I thought I was failing at this and here's the proof. Here's the actual proof of it"

Darren - discussion 1

The term 'hidden curriculum' is often cited with little illustration of pertinent examples. However, as the authors themselves navigated university without knowledge of these 'customs, rituals, and taken for granted aspects' (Lempp & Seale, 2004, p. 770), they were able to provide multiple examples they encountered. Members of the group reported a lack of adequate guidance on lecturers' expectations for assignments or conventions they were expected to display in work such as academic writing style. One group member told a story about an assignment using extracts by Charles Dickens wherein a peer referred to the writer as 'Charles' throughout, and while there was a recognition of the humour that was found in this, the root cause of the error highlighted that the convention of using an author's surname in academia had not been explained. Another story was relayed about writing an assignment in which the group member had first-hand experience, having worked in that area professionally. They explained how they were excited to write about an area they felt confident with and drew on personal experience to complete the assignment but then received a lower-than-expected score and feedback stating, "This is really good what you've written. But where's your references? You've got no citations. No references".

A lack of middle-class cultural capital that might shed light on aspects of hidden curriculum was understood as a further disadvantage to working-class students, and had an impact on their confidence in achieving within an academic environment and contributed to a sense of alienation. Librarians and taught IL classes were described as both a source of assistance and a further area of disadvantage and alienation due to librarians' assumptions and attitudes. For some, guidance from a librarian had enabled them to overcome barriers in understanding the university's expectations and requirements:

"Stuff around referencing was so hard because I just couldn't get it. I was like, 'why don't you believe what I'm saying? Why do I have to prove it?' … and it just didn't click for me for a really long time until someone sat me down and it was one of the librarians in the media department. She was like 'look, this is what you have to do and it's about getting the points for your essay and proving your working out.' And when she explained it was like maths and I had to show my working out, it just made sense to me."

Krishna – discussion 2

For others though, librarians and IL classes were not seen as aiding working-class students' acquisition of the hidden curriculum either through their absence, their content–typically explaining 'how', but never 'why'–or because of negative perceptions held about working-class students. Some group members' experiences as both working-class students and library workers allowed for insight into how they themselves may have been seen by now-colleagues:

"Library staff often made assumptions about student ability, and some were frustrated if this did not match reality… some members of library staff were particularly impatient with students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and international students. This made me uncomfortable whenever I witnessed it"

Rosie – personal memory data

In addition to sharing experiences of the hidden curriculum, group members also discussed how they themselves manage this in their roles as educators now. The authors drew upon their navigational (skills and abilities to navigate social institutions) capital to support students throughout HE (Crew, 2020). The consensus was that in their own practice they attempt to 'un-hide' the curriculum, centre transparency in their teaching and make the implicit explicit. This was enacted with the specific aim of supporting working-class and other marginalised students to succeed and with an embedded sense of equity and social justice. In doing this though, some members experienced a degree of pushback from middle-class colleagues and accusations that attempts to support working-class students represented 'spoon-feeding' content.

"[of 'spoon-feeding'] all you're doing is giving them the knowledge that these middle class students have already got… I give my students so much help for the assignment because I just think the hard task is essay writing, you know? I give them example essays, I give them example paragraphs, I give them example introductions and what a conclusion should look like… It's just so strange isn't it that when we support working class people in higher education, it's seen as spoon feeding."

Teresa – discussion 1

Within libraries, the concept of spoon-feeding was similarly recognised. Members from library backgrounds expressed a common, though unacknowledged, trope that library services and processes often appeared deliberately byzantine or inaccessible so that users were required to 'prove' a particular need or that enquiries should only be half-answered because students needed to 'work things out for themselves'. In addition, distinction was made between actions being regarded as legitimate pedagogical approaches when they benefitted middle-class students, and those that represented falling standards when they only benefited working-class students:

"If it's with, you know, working class students, if it's with students of colour it becomes spoon-feeding and you're lowering standards. Whereas if it's with other students, it's called scaffolding knowledge and it's ok. It's really loaded".

Darren – discussion 1

The descriptions found in the data of the hidden curriculum confirmed many ideas of cultural capital found in the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990). Knowledge of and familiarity with practices and behaviours encompassed within the hidden curriculum were seen as extensions of cultural capital that were unevenly distributed between middle-class and working-class students. Further, middle-class students' ability to draw on the social capital of familial and peer networks who had previously experienced university education brought advantages that working-class students lack. The lack of social diversity within academic settings perpetuated this inequity due to an assumption that students came from homogenous social and educational backgrounds

where implicit knowledge and expectations could be taken as given. Folk's (2019) conception of IL as academic cultural capital was resonant in regard to interactions with librarians.

Some members' experiences demonstrate that IL classes, although representing hegemonic IL practices, did act as a means of transferring capital, though the extent to which a dedicated and genuine desire to formulate this to produce social equity might be questioned, given the negative perceptions some members reported hearing of working-class students from library workers. Reflecting on working-class students' ability to manoeuvre through a HE environment that can be dismissive, negligent, or even hostile to their needs and experiences, we were drawn to Yosso's (2005) description of navigational capital. Navigational capital is the ability to work through, past and around barriers erected by institutions designed to exclude marginalised people. As working-class students who despite negative experiences at university were able to succeed academically and professionally, we recognise and celebrate the grit and tenacity this takes while acknowledging the toll this can exact. As working-class educators this appreciation allows us to better empathise, support and equip marginalised students to achieve their goals.

3.4 Librarians' positionality and power

"…so there's a real imbalance there in terms of how the librarian is perceived by the academics. Unfortunately it's the other way around as well, so the librarians tend to see the academics as these mighty, powerful figures and they are sometimes reticent. Librarians, in my opinion, are often very timid and they will not push academics because they fear being pushed back out of the classroom…"

Andrew – discussion 1

In both personal memory and collaborative data collection, universities were perceived as being deeply hierarchical organisations where power was allocated primarily on the basis of role and position and not by virtue of expertise and job function. Within this hierarchy, librarians were generally perceived as being in a lower position in the hierarchy than all academic staff and performed supplicative roles in regard to IL teaching; having to request access to students, deferring to academics' requests regarding content and in a weak negotiating position when discussing how teaching would be delivered. This power imbalance was seen as consistent throughout the academy, though manifesting more strongly in research-intensive institutions where differentials in the institutionalised cultural capital between academics, who typically hold a doctoral qualification, and librarians, who typically hold a masters qualification, was seen as reinforcing hierarchical power structures. A marginally less definitive hierarchy was observed in teaching-focused institutions where many academic staff hold a masters as their highest academic credential. That, in terms of IL skills development, the librarian held greater knowledge and experience than a typical academic was not seen as enough to challenge hierarchical power structures of the academy. Although we had experienced peers' dissatisfaction with their hierarchical position in relation to academic staff, it was also felt between the participant-researchers that, as a group, librarians often upheld and reinforced the existing power structure. This was viewed both in terms of deferential behaviours towards 'superiors' while also emphasising their distinctive place as separate and superior to other professional services who were less academically aligned, above 'paraprofessional' library staff and in contrast to marginalised students who didn't meet expected values and standards of behaviour. This perception echoes the argument made by Pawley (1998) that librarianship as a

sector seeks distinction through a demarcated 'professional' status as well as alignment with and service to groups with a higher, more secure status.

In discussion, librarians' hierarchical position and institutional capital was explored further, and the metaphor of domestic service and the governess was used to explain this liminal and ambiguous position:

"[Librarians] occupy this weird position in a university where it's almost… it's like you're sort of a servant of the academics but at the same time you're a bit of an academic yourself. You're not seen as functional as somebody who works maybe in IT, but you're not a full blown academic either. The best way I can describe it is like when you read 19th Century literature. They talk about the governess who is sort of a servant, but also part of the family. They have some of the capital of the family, but a lower status."

Darren – discussion 1

The metaphor of the 'academic governess' also brought in considerations of intersectionality in the power politics of the university, in particular gender, given the library profession is predominantly women, and archetypal expectations and the idealisation of White middle-class femininity (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). The overall position was seen as the deployment of limited power to secure a precarious place within the hierarchy.

As working-class university workers, the group recognised the hierarchical nature of the institution and the uncodified but distinct place librarians occupied within the structure. We also recognised that while job role, gender and institutionalised cultural capital in the form of academic credentials form a hierarchical structure, social class conflict and prejudice cuts across these stratifications, ensuring that working-class academics and working-class librarians both experience oppressive practices within *and* outside of these strata (Crew, 2020).

"I did experience what I perceived to be some classism from colleagues elsewhere in the university, as well as within my immediate department. This included making comments about my accent, questioning my ability and knowledge and contacting another, male, colleague in my department to ask the same question when they didn't like the answer."

Rosie – personal memory data

Despite this, the group recognised considerable reserves of resolve to resist and challenge hegemonic power structures within the institution. Yosso (2005) describes this as resistant capital, that being "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality". Among the group's librarians, resistant capital was expressed as a desire to integrate critical practices into their work both in terms of action, that is *how* they teach; and content, *what* they teach. The working-class librarians in the group also described a high degree of solidarity with students from marginalised backgrounds and a particular desire to design and deliver services that met their needs, rather than the perceived needs of an imagined, idealised middle-class student. For Teresa, the working-class academic in the group, challenging inequality within a hierarchical system was expressed in different ways. In teaching, Teresa described recognising the expertise and unique contribution a subject librarian had on her modules and a practice of co-creating meaningful and relevant IL sessions. To achieve this

however, she described first having to overcome the hierarchy-prescribed status gulf between herself and a librarian and to build trust based on an equitable power balance:

"Yeah about timidity, I remember being invited to a session… and the librarian who I work with kept pointing out [to students] that 'there's an academic here'. And I was like 'Oh my gosh no, don't do this'… It was all of a sudden when I was in that environment she started treating me completely different and I was like we've had this really good working relationship because I told her right from the start 'we are working on this together. So it's my module however, I need, I can't, give my students the expertise that you have and that's what I was always trying to get across to her. And I think lucky enough she did know that I was coming at it from that, so anything she needed she would always come to me."

Teresa – discussion 1

3.5 Deficit models

"I find that staff are always very critical of students who haven't got skills and I'm sure it's something that you said… they've not needed those skills yet. So that's why they haven't got those skills and I think this is something about being working class, we collect skills we need, you know, sometimes we don't need the skills of like, for instance driving until we need driving. We you know, we won't learn to drive until we need to"

Teresa – discussion 1

Members of the group reported personal experiences where they observed, or were subject themselves to, a perception that working-class students lacked and were unlikely to gain the academic skills, including IL, required to succeed in HE. Group members observed that academic and library staff frequently expressed not only a negative assessment of the skills students had, but also a degree of fatalism towards the possibility of students gaining skills to the degree required for academic success. This assessment was seen as having a significant classed element, with students from widening participation or non-traditional backgrounds (the term 'working-class' was rarely encountered) having particularly low levels of skills. Regarding skills training, including IL, with students who were or were perceived to be working class the work was characterised as remedial rather than developmental; that is, it was undertaken to address a past deficit in education rather than building on existing skills. This idea was deeply linked to the "pushing back" concept discussed above, whereby members noted a feeling of frustration among academics and librarians that time was being spent in HE 'correcting' deficiencies in secondary and further education. Moreover, the concept of skills was deployed in a somewhat two-dimensional and reductive sense, referring only to the performance of routines and behaviours seen as valuable within a narrow academic environment, excluding competencies that manifest in private, intellectual or social domains. This experience reflects how deficit models are explored in detail by Heinbach, Mitola and Rinto (2021, pp. 37–39) and Hicks and Lloyd (2016), who identify how the narrow framing of academic IL, including those whose information and knowledge creation practices are valued as knowledge, contribute to deficit thinking. In this conceptualisation of hegemonic IL, 'community knowledge' is devalued. Regrettably, as Terrile (2019) observes, CIL is no panacea as this tendency to "undervalue students' prior lived experiences compared to our expert understandings of information and authority" also occurs within Critlib and CIL scholarship. Additionally, in a sociological sense, IL

skills act as embodied cultural capital that enable admission and acceptance into the academy, while perceived lack of these warranted rejection and necessitate further socialisation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Drawing on their own experiences, the group formed a deeply contrasting perspective. The view expressed in our personal and collaborative reflections were that working-class students were able not only to draw on significant reserves of skills and experiences that were useful in academic activities but also generally held positive and optimistic perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE. That working-class students often bear significant personal, professional and financial risk by pursuing HE demonstrates that they have an optimistic view of their prospects, sometimes more so than middle-class peers who may be undertaking higher study to fulfil expected and normative views of their educational trajectory. While recognising that such ambitions are frequently stymied by social, organisational and financial obstacles, the group saw working-class students as possessing resilience and resourcefulness to overcome them. Yosso (2005) summarises this form of capital as aspirational capital, a set of knowledges and skills that allow members of marginalised communities to sustain themselves through optimism despite experiencing barriers. In reflecting on skills and skills development, the group felt that the deficit viewpoint they had observed both reified middle-class cultural capital and dismissed working-class capitals that were valuable in supporting students' academic success. A more critical and inclusive approach to skills development there would seek to acknowledge and draw upon marginalised students' capitals and connect IL practices to these as a further development. For example, emphasising the non-linearity of the research process, that skill in this area is the ability to find an approach that suits the individual, their needs and their context and that their aspirations to education and the perseverance they've shown to this point has equipped them well for this task.

3.6 Undervalued knowledge and cultural capital

"I wrote an essay for my Social Policy module on Public Private Partnership (PPP) [a UK Government policy where private firms are contracted to complete and manage public projects]. Having worked in an organisation appointed by the NHS to provide a PPP initiative I knew I could write lots about this and provide an interesting angle in this essay. I was distraught to get my marks back and receive 48 for the essay. Why was this? Well while I answered the question I had been set, I wrote the essay mainly using my own experience. As my lecturer gently pointed out, the essay was very good, but I had not used the reading list or any academic sources. Why did I not realise that I needed to do that? Better still, why was this not pointed out to me? It would have been mentioned, but I didn't understand the way this information was presented to me. This was my rather bumpy introduction into the world of academia and its need for citations and references, where personal experiences no matter how interesting, was not encouraged."

Teresa – personal memory data

Personal memories from members of the group recalled instances of significant disparity between the types of knowledge they have (or had) valued, and what was valued by others in their academic and personal life. The group, as people from working-class backgrounds, often felt they could draw upon rich lived experiences in their personal, social and professional lives but that this was rarely recognised or legitimised within academic discourse. This sense

included contexts where topics in which the lived experience of working-class people had direct relevance such as widening participation strategies and interaction with government services. Instead there was a sense that the experiences of working-class and other marginalised communities required legitimisation through the filter of a normative academic and middle-class lens; the voices of marginalised communities gained value once they had been collected, analysed and presented in the form of research outputs by an assumed middle-class researcher. The fissure between practical, embodied knowledge and 'objective', detached analysis was found to be problematic for group members and has parallels with feminist pedagogies which are concerned with the "validity of experiential knowledge…the knowledge produced through the actual lived experience of students" (Accardi, 2013, pp. 37–40).

As students, they felt a cultural dislocation between their social hinterland where first-hand knowledge of an issue was highly prized and respected, and their experience of typical assessment practices where this goes unappreciated. For the group, the process of 'performing' academia therefore was not simply learning and replicating academic norms and conventions but required a cognitive and cultural shift that was more akin to developing intercultural competence than simply learning the 'rules of the game' (Hofstede, 2002). This is not to say the group placed little value on academic literature or felt that personal experience alone is sufficient in an academic context, rather that we felt there was a lack of transparency on the expectations educators had in assigning work. As working-class students, we felt that the primacy of published literature in academic work was an instance of the hidden curriculum previously described and better effort could have been made to explain, justify and model this when assigning coursework. Instead, the experience of group members of gaining academic competence was done through trial and error and responding to negative feedback on completed work. As students who often felt othered, displaced and inadequate, that this process was unmediated, unacknowledged and unsupported could heighten these feelings and be a debilitating experience.

It was also acknowledged in discussion and personal memory data that issues about how different knowledges and capitals are valued was not one-directional. As a group of primarily first-generation students and working-class people working in a middle-class dominated environment, group members also reported difficulties discussing their scholarly pursuits with working-class family and friends. While not approaching the levels of antipathy or conflict described by Lubrano (2010), members described the isolation and fracture experienced when managing a working-class background and a middle-class profession.

"Despite devouring book after book, and article after article, I have no one in my family to talk to about what I have read, and to hear about what they have read."

Teresa – personal memory data

Value conflicts between different forms of knowledge were understood as fundamentally a tension between middle-class cultural capital and the types of social capital as described by Yosso (2005). While for Bourdieu (1977), social capital, meaning the familial and social relationships an individual can utilise, acts as a hindrance to working-class communities, Yosso (2005) describes the beneficial abilities of working-class and marginalised individuals to draw upon community as a resource. First-hand personal experience of problems, issues and strategies was a deployment of Yosso's social capital in an academic setting. The problems

described in recognising what knowledge sources would be valued in different contexts, might be understood as a mis-deployment of capital; as working-class students, members of the group attempted to use their social capital to complete assignments and were penalised for this, whereas middle-class peers recognised in the context of academic assessment institutionalised cultural capital, in the form of published literature, was more highly valued.

4. Conclusions

The experiences, perceptions and reflections we outline in this paper show that dominant practices of libraries and hegemonic IL rarely met the needs we had as working-class students and could at times exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginalisation experienced within the academy more broadly. The promise of IL educational activities to act as a 'tide that raises all boats' was unfulfilled, particularly given that IL practice appeared to centre the needs and expectations of middle-class values and experiences, and engagement with social class remains very limited within the IL literature. As working-class people in academia, we also recognise the distance left to travel to achieve equity and the scale of the change needed to make libraries and HE more widely a place where working-class students and workers can flourish. Librarianship is in this way a microcosm of our wider workplaces. Creating space within the IL sphere for working-class and other marginalised people to discuss, resist and empathise acts both as a liberatory experience for people within those communities and offers the potential to develop practices that better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Spaces within librarianship analogous to Working Class Academics, with explicit focus on social class as a social justice agenda informed by Critlib could support this.

We also urge librarians of working-class heritage to seek out others and begin to build these networks locally as well as engaging with other associations and societies. In our workplaces and classroom settings in HE, it is CIL that uniquely centres social justice with an aim to destabilise societal structures of domination and oppression. However, in considering IL strategies to engage and support working-class students, library professionals will need to avoid the dominant discourse that sees working-class students as either a problem to be managed or a community to be acculturated into liberal, middle-class values. Middle-class accomplices can support this work by introducing CIL as their default IL frame (as seen at University of West London, 2022); by practising critical reflection on their class positionality and our profession and learning how they "prop up the status quo" (Heinbach, Mitola & Rinto, 2021, pp. 92–95). This is challenging but necessary, as Fleming and McBride (2017, p. 118) argue in their call for intersectional feminist library leadership, "Self-examination is a lifetime of work, but is critical to successfully engaging in and leading anti-oppression work". Accomplices can also implement better recruitment practices (Fair Library Jobs, 2022) and new routes into the profession which support working-class entrants, for example in England at the time of writing a masters-level apprenticeship is in development (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2022).

We urge librarians in our workplaces and professional networks to consider social class alongside other aspects of identity when developing intersectional analyses. One starting point for this is a recognition of the social, cultural and community wealth they share and an identification of how and where this may be drawn upon to thrive in HE.

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