Class acts? Working class student officers in students' unions

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Class Acts? Working Class Student Officers in Students' Unions.

This article explores the recent emergence of 'working-class student officer' roles in students' unions associated with elite UK universities. These student representative roles are designed to represent the interests of working-class students within their universities and sit alongside student representatives for liberation groups and/or student communities. Based on interviews with postholders and using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field and Reay's applications of a 'reflexive habitus', I explore how these students have come to assert a public and political 'working-class student' identity within their universities. Their commentaries reveal the 'makings of class' in a context where students are very aware of claims for recognition and the 'hidden injuries of class' and offer an insight into how working-class students are finding new ways to navigate their classed identities in HE.

Keywords: students' unions; higher education; Bourdieu; social class; students

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, participation of young people from working-class families in UK higher education (HE) has slowly but steadily increased (DfE 2018). However, students from the lowest socio-economic groups are still in the minority and even more so within the most selective universities and courses (OfS 2018). In 2014/15, just 17.2% of young full-time undergraduate entrants to Russell Group universities were from lower socio-economic groups (according to the NS-SEC classification of social class), compared with 33% across the whole sector (HESA 2016). Research indicates that working-class students, as a minority in 'elite' HE institutions, can find the experience of HE confusing and isolating, needing to carry out considerable identity work to adapt to their environment (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2010). Many report feelings of inferiority, dislocation and concern about 'fitting in' in HE (Read, Archer & Leathwood 2003; Lehman 2009a; Reay et al. 2010). Although working-class students can and do successfully find a variety of ways to navigate the middle-class spaces of HE (e.g. Reay,

Crozier & Clayton. 2009; Keane 2011; Lehman 2012) there are indications that they experience university in different and 'uniquely working-class ways' (Lehman 2009b, 634). Working-class students may withdraw or distance themselves from 'traditional' university life, which emphasises both academic and social engagement (Keane 2011), not having the time, means or inclination to participate (Crozier et al. 2008). In comparison with middle-class peers, they are less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities such as volunteering, participating in student societies or student sport and social activity (Stuart et al., 2009). Some 'disidentify' with being working-class (Skeggs 1997), approaching the subject of class 'apologetically, as if it should no longer have any relevance for them' (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2010, 113). As students, they can struggle with their liminality, being 'to some extent removed from the class nexus, in a moratorium between their class of origin and their class of destination' (Bradley & Ingram 2012, 54).

It is notable then that some students at elite UK universities are claiming and campaigning for recognition of working-class student identities within HE, often through engagement in a representative role more readily associated with a 'traditional' student experience. Following sometimes controversial campaigns for representation[1], a small number of students' unions (SUs) have appointed part-time elected 'student

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[1] The establishment of a 'working-class liberation officer' by St Hilda's, Oxford in Nov 2016 was covered in The Times, Daily Mail, Express and The Guardian, with headlines including 'Over sensitive and so easily offended' and 'Stop the chav taunts chaps!'. Further press coverage of roles at The University of Manchester in Jan 2017 and the Oxford SU 'Class Act' campaign in Sep 2017 took a similar tone, criticising the universities for establishing 'patronising' and 'silly' roles. The YUSU campaign, covered by campus media, included several personal criticisms on the conduct of the campaigns and the politics of their leaders.

officer' roles specifically for 'working-class' students. Numbering around 10-15 positions in universities across the UK during 2017-18, these roles are accompanied by a small number of working-class and first-generation student societies and have spawned a national campaign '#Britainhasclass'[2].

Although the experiences of working-class students in HE, particularly within socially exclusive universities, have been explored by researchers (e.g. Reay 2001; Keane 2011; Reay et al 2009), few studies reveal the sort of direct political engagement or desire for representation that these roles imply, raising questions about how students are negotiating their identities in HE. Drawing on interviews with postholders of these 'working-class student officer' roles, as well as SU staff, this article explores what the experiences and motivations of these students can tell us about the contemporary experience of being working-class in elite HE. Using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, and particularly the concepts of hysteresis and habitus clivé, I argue that the experiences of these students are similar to those captured in previous research and that their actions can be understood as reflexive deliberations in a changing HE and political context. Their deliberations reflect an increased awareness of class in HE and political life and a changing culture of student political expression, where students are attempting to create new ways of being working-class in middle-class spaces.

'Working-class student officers'

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[2] Set up by former London School of Economics' Working Class Officer campaigners, #Britainhasclass has campaigned for greater representation of working-class voices in the arts and for the establishment of working-class officers at universities. https://britainhasclass.org/about,

The role of 'working-class student officer' has emerged within or affiliated to SUs across the UK since 2015-16, largely within selective universities where working-class students are a small proportion of the student population. Almost all roles began with a student proposal and have gone through a democratic process of review within SU structures. In addition to seven institutions where roles were in place in 2017-18, at least two more have rejected proposals following a student vote.

The role of 'working-class student officer' varies but is generally a part-time representative role, undertaken by a current student for an elected one-year term. Role descriptions tend to stipulate that the post holder 'must self-identify as working class' (Students' Union, University of Manchester, 2017) but the remit and guidance on self-identification for potential nominees can also include 'low-income', 'first-generation', 'state school' and 'care leaver' students (Oxford SU, 2016; University of Manchester, 2017). These roles sit alongside other similar part-time representative roles, which typically include students representing 'liberation' groups or student communities. Within the SUs included in this research, liberation roles were variously defined as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and/or Questioning +), women, disabled students and BME/BAME/PoC (Black and minority ethnic/Black, Asian and minority ethnic/Person of Colour). In addition, there were also elected representatives for international, mature, postgraduate and student parents, which were generally referred to as 'communities' or 'associations'. This is broadly in line with the wider National Union of Students (NUS) structure which has five defined 'liberation' groups; Black, Trans, LGBT, Women & Disabled students and four 'sections' with representative for postgraduate, international and mature and part-time students. Whilst the NUS makes a clear distinction in only defining certain groups and campaigns as about 'liberation' and this distinction is generally upheld within individual SU

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terminology, in the SUs covered here these groups sat alongside non-liberation groups, accessed similar resources and were often supported by the same staff members. They were generally grouped by their roles as 'representatives' rather than by the purposes of their campaigns.

For clarity the term 'working-class student officer' (henceforth WCSO) is used here, but these roles have many different titles. Some avoid class terminology altogether, such as the role of 'Widening Participation Officer' whereas others, such as the 'Class Liberation Officer' explicitly align the role with particular groups and functions. The development of these role titles has often been a process of deliberation between SUs, universities, post-holders and fellow students. This has sometimes involved a student vote or has been imposed by institutions looking to apply consistent terminology. To some extent, these role titles reflect some of the wider debate around issues of defining class (e.g. Savage, 2016; Bathmaker et. al, 2017), particularly in the case of students for whom categorical approaches may capture the position of their parents rather than them as individuals. Staff and students viewed role titles as a compromise, based more on practical consideration of whether people at their institution would understand who the role was for than on their understanding of who would 'qualify' as being working-class. They tended to embrace a more relational view of class, largely seeing definition as a personal matter. However, in practice, in order to promote their work, most used a list of potential categories that may align with class, including family income, type of schooling and family educational history, often very similar to those used to identify 'widening participation' students. Just as with staff working on widening participation schemes, they were cautious about 'labelling' students (Moore, Sanders & Higham, 2013) and all WCSOs were keen to emphasise

that, in practice, they encouraged anyone who considered themselves working-class, regardless of these categorisations, to be part of their campaigns.

Research design

This article is based on interviews with six current and previous 'working-class student officers', across three Russell Group institutions in England, as part of research seeking to understand the value that students and students' union staff saw in these roles. Three SU staff members in roles supporting these students were also interviewed, though this article primarily focuses on the experiences of student postholders. All SUs with WCSOs were approached, as well as students directly where contact details were available. Although limited, these numbers represent nearly a third of SUs where these roles are active and offer insight into an emerging phenomenon, albeit small scale at present. Almost all interviewees were in the first few months of their roles and only one institution had a previous post-holder, meaning that the content of interviews was primarily their motivations and expectations for the roles, rather than longer-term outcomes. Interviews were 30-60 minutes in length, semi-structured in format and my interviewing style intended to be 'responsive in character, aiming to facilitate the elicitation of data relevant to understanding people's experiences and perspectives' (Hammersley 2013, 54). My approach to interviewing and analysis was strongly informed by feminist notions of a 'good' research relationship, namely 'empathy and mutual respect; the need for a less rigid conception of 'method' that allows the researcher flexibility; and for the researcher to not be constrained by an imperative for impersonal, neutral detachment' (Parr 2015, 198). Questions were based around interviewees' journeys to their involvement with their role, experience thus far and hopes for the future of their post. However, there was also space allowed for interviewees to guide the conversation, with some focusing more on their personal

experiences and others on the potential of the role. Given the hostility and derision faced by some incumbents of these roles from within and outside of their institution, as well as the fact that our conversations touched on personal and ongoing challenging experiences within their institutions, all institutions and individuals have been given or chose the pseudonyms used here. The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the BSA (2017) and BERA (2018) and was reviewed and approved through Sheffield Hallam University ethical procedures.

[table 1 near here] Interviewees

The practice of being working-class in higher education

This paper builds on previous research, which has made use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1990) to understand how working-class students encounter the middle-class space of university (e.g. Read et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2009) and to understand political participation (Crossley 2003). As an embodied 'system of dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990), resulting from socialisation in particular 'conditions of existence' (ibid, 60), a student's *habitus* can unconsciously direct their orientations to HE and student life, providing organisational forms or collective practices that may support or restrict their negotiation of the higher education *field* (Wakeling 2005, Thomas 2002). When habitus and field are aligned, this can create a 'powerful synergy' (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009, 1005), where it is possible to feel like 'a fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 127), thus enabling individuals to react in 'the right way' to their circumstances, to successfully 'play the game' (Vogler 2016, 69). In contrast, when habitus and field do not align, this can create feelings of ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty, prompting change or even 'crisis' (Reay 2005). In some circumstances, this misalignment can create a *habitus clivé,* or 'cleft habitus', where individuals may

struggle to reconcile different and sometimes contradictory dispositions in order to adapt to the circumstances of their field (Bourdieu 2007). For Bourdieu, awareness of this contradictory state and the moments of crisis and/or profound change it produced was a rare occurrence, but more recent researchers have found similar experiences to not only be more prevalent than he suggested but also potentially productive in providing opportunities to understand reflexive action (Friedman 2016; Lehman 2009b; Reay et al. 2009). Some have argued that this sense of being 'torn in two' can create a productive ability to 'step outside oneself' (Abrahams & Ingram 2016, 140), thereby enabling (to an extent) changes in habitus or ability to draw on different dispositions in different contexts.

This research draws particularly on the understandings of habitus as applied by Lehman (2009b), Reay et. al (2009) and Abrahams and Ingram (2013) in examining how working-class students negotiate HE. These emphasise the fluidity of habitus, the creation of a reflexive 'third space' and the importance of individual student agency in navigating fields and reconciling habitus. Reay et al. particularly draw on Sweetman's suggestions that 'for increasing numbers of contemporary individuals, reflexivity itself may have become habitual' (2003, 528). Sweetman argues that the concept of habitus, despite Bourdieu's suggestions that it is not amenable to 'voluntary, deliberate transformation' (Bourdieu, 1977) does not preclude the possibility of habitual reflexivity or a flexible habitus therefore more amenable to transformation. The development of a reflexive habitus, for Sweetman, is a condition of late modernity, caused by a faster pace of change and demands for flexibility in social and political life. Reay et al. (2009), in applying this to students in HE, point to how students in their study have become accustomed to managing tensions between habitus and field since early childhood, developing dispositions that call for movement between different

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identity positions, making processes of refashioning 'second nature' (2009, 1116). This is not to say that students are always consciously refashioning their habitus but that they possess a habitus which makes their adaptation to and movement between fields habitual. A reflexive habitus can therefore explain how some students manage adaptation to unfamiliar fields, whilst also allowing that their agency and reflexive deliberations have relevance to shaping habitus.

Alongside the dispositions of habitus, individuals and groups will also draw on and accumulate *capital,* understood as (economic, social and cultural) resources, which shape or enable practices and can determine the success of these practices within those fields (Crossley, 2003). Different fields may recognise and require access and accumulation of different capitals, making them sites of contestation and struggle (Webb et al.,2017), often leading to reproduction of social conditions as those with existing capital are able to accumulate and restrict access to limited resources. Students with a 'working-class habitus' and forms of capital may then struggle in the field of higher education or education, which may misrecognise or exclude their capitals and habitus.

Findings

Becoming working-class at university
For the majority of WCSOs, their class was not something that they had considered important before entering university. They were divided between those who were now very definite in asserting that they are working-class (Darren, Sam & Alex) and those who felt uncertain about being currently working-class, feeling it conflicted with their identities as students (Dave, Chantelle and Steve). However, they all identified that coming to university, interacting with other students and university structures had given

them a different outlook on class, making them more aware and often more certain of working-class identities. For these students, Diane Reay's assertion that 'emotions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities contribute powerfully to the makings of class' (2005, 912) was particularly evident. Steve spoke about a shift from being the 'nerdy one', living in a nicer area than some of his school peers, although still 'the chavs of our street', to finding that his class and income background was a 'massive difference' between him and his university peers. Although now in a WCSO role, he felt conflicted about his class identity, experiencing what Reay et al. called the 'difficult process of reconciling the disjuncture between working-class background and academic dispositions' (2010, 116):

> Because going to university you feel like you're sort of no longer working-class
> and you sort of have like a class identity crisis and in a way that like…in a way
> like..I think particularly with like media depictions and stuff you do feel like,
> you're not like proper working-class if you're even like quite academic. (Steve,
> Blue University)

Like some of the students described by Reay et al. (2010), an academic identity had been part of what helped Steve to transition to university, something he could share with his wealthier peers. He spoke about how a keen interest in books and philosophy at home had supported him, enabling him to engage with his peers at university and with academic study but otherwise setting him apart from what he saw as a working-class identity. He, and other students spoke about consciously adopting middle-class behaviours such as a 'retail voice' (Chantelle) or purposely seeking to develop their cultural knowledge and experience through visiting libraries, museums and applying for scholarships. Like many of the students in Reay et al.'s 2009 study, this was part of a conscious adaptation to education environments that had been going on for many years.

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I'm transitioning to middle-class at sixth form, I'm adopting aspects of middle-class life. But I'm still living in this shit house kind of situation! And then my view was that when I came to uni I would maybe become middle-class. (Dave, Blue University)

Although in many ways these students possessed and had cultivated the sorts of 'capitals', particularly cultural capital, that could enable and support their entry to university, they often found that this was not sufficient to bridge gaps between them, their peers and their institutions. Students particularly remarked on this in terms of economic capital, where lack of resources, particularly before entering HE or outside of term time, became a hindrance to their integration into the institution. Steve was asked to provide a new dyslexia assessment, costing £350, before starting at his university. Whilst the university would reimburse Steve upon starting his course, he couldn't access that amount of money. Consequently, he put off the assessment until he received funding and missed out on a term of support. He was frustrated, not primarily with the lack of support, but that he had been made to feel different and that his financial position was one of unacknowledged disadvantage. He had assumed that the forms of capital he had accumulated that had enabled him entry into his institution would also be sufficient to be successful within it and wanted recognition from the institution that this wasn't wholly the case.

The frustrations of being invisible

The emotional experience of feeling 'different' within HE, which had led students to reflect on their class as an important aspect of their identity was often expressed as a feeling of frustration borne from invisibility. All students described occasions when either the university or their peers either 'didn't get it' or explicitly denied the existence of class. Many gave examples of interactions with other students where they realised the

extent of the gap between their own experiences and those of their peers:

> but sometimes they just look baffled at you. They're literally just like 'what?'. I
> remember once this person didn't realise that like the average income was like
> £26,000 or something. They were like, 'but you couldn't do anything with that
> money. you couldn't go on holiday, you couldn't go to a private school, you
> couldn't..' I was like, well no! Most people don't go to a private school! [laughing].
> (Chantelle, Blue University)

These were often framed as amusing anecdotes, used to illustrate the strangeness of
university and reaffirm their own values or experiences, but these situations also caused
confusion and students described being increasingly frustrated as economic or class
divides were made invisible by the assumptions of their peers. While many of the
students were able to give examples of direct exclusion due to markers of their working-
class identities, usually either being mocked for a regional accent or a 'common' name,
these were generally dismissed as unimportant, not reflective of their overall experience
and the actions of an isolated few. These sorts of behaviours were expected, if not
accepted. It was the instances where they felt themselves and their concerns to be
invisible or wholly misunderstood that frustrated them.

The 'weird interlude'

Gaps in understanding between these students, their peers and their institutions were
surprising to interviewees and were identified as the source of struggles to reconcile
their working-class and student identities. Many had anticipated that university would
be a 'middle-class space' (Darren) but not the extent of the financial and social
differences, nor the feelings of isolation this caused them. This disconnect between
expectations and their experience caused many of the students to feel that they were in
an in-between space, a 'weird interlude' (Dave) for those who saw themselves on a

journey to middle-classness, and a feeling of being 'stranded at sea' (Darren) for those who did not want to abandon their working-class identities. Students described situations where their ability to adapt to their new social environment was interrupted by the material circumstances of their life 'back home'. As most spent term-time away from home in university residences and then either returned home or took on full-time work as a financial necessity this exposed some of the material differences between them and their peers that confirmed for them their working-classness.

> Of course you're working-class still, in a sense, if you're at uni for 8 weeks and go home for 6 weeks and you're living in those exact same circumstances. You don't have a job, you don't have a proper disposable income (Dave, Blue University)

This experience of being 'half here, half there' (Dave), in many ways appears equivalent to Bourdieu's concept of habitus clivé, as a 'painful' experience of 'double isolation' (Bourdieu, 1998, quoted in Friedman, 2016). Yet interestingly, much as for the individuals in Friedman's study experiencing long range social mobility, this state does not appear to be constant or consistent. During term-time, the financial and social stability offered by university support tended to protect students, with the temporary economic and social capital, alongside their own determination to adapt, supporting them to reconcile aspects of their habitus to their new environment. This appeared to minimise what Bourdieu describes as a 'hysteresis effect', which can contribute to feelings of confusion and being unable to grasp opportunities within an unfamiliar environment (Bourdieu 1990). However, the support of these capitals did not wholly eliminate the experience of uncertainty and confusion, especially when faced with differences they had not anticipated:

> …it's just when they don't, when they say something that's so out there, like not realising the average income, and you just…you just kind of step outside you..like

how do you not know that? Why don't you understand? (Chantelle, Blue University)

It might be more accurate, in the case of these students, to talk about, as Friedman does, of 'moments of hysteresis' (2016), rather than as defining their whole experience of university. Perhaps due to their ages, still forming identities, or due to relative stability and development of capitals, their habitus appears adaptable to their new circumstances in a way that is not always emotionally disruptive. Like the students in Reay et al.'s 2009 study, they are comfortable with the idea of adaptation, recognising the need for this. However, where the gap is greater than anticipated, this can cause them to 'step outside' themselves, suddenly aware and able to reflect on the gulf between their realities and those of their peers. This would suggest that although adaptation may be made more possible by the possession of a flexible or reflexive habitus, this does not eliminate the strangeness of encountering a field out-of-step with pre-reflexive dispositions, nor the emotional impact of becoming consciously aware of such differences.

Identifying class

Unlike students in previous studies, these WCSOs have taken a somewhat unusual step in making a public declaration of their working-class identities in HE and in deciding to act as representatives of other working-class students. However, this has presented many challenges as they and SU staff have struggled to identify precisely who or what it is they are representing and how best to do so. Although WCSOs felt that they had become more secure in and aware of their own class identities whilst at university, they acknowledged that, in the elected roles that they had come to inhabit, the issue of defining their 'working-class' constituents was problematic. Most focused on trying to

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have as inclusive a definition as possible:

> Like anyone who wants to come along can. And I think that's the most important, useful thing in terms of defining the term, like what terminology you pick. You don't want to make it so like people have to commit to a certain aspect of themselves, have to be like too revealing of their experience if they don't want to be. (Steve, Blue University)

In all cases, the officers only had a small number of identified constituents, so one of the reasons for an inclusive definition was to enable them to build a community where one was not currently visible. The idea of 'self-definition' also mirrored the approaches of their fellow student officers in liberation groups, giving them a framework and, for them, justifying their inclusive approach. Most WCSO roles had been designed to mirror other part-time officer roles in SUs and particularly those with 'liberation' and/or 'community' functions. This appeared to be largely pragmatic, enabling the roles to be set up quickly and access resources, rather than a decision to locate working-class students as a liberation group in the sense of fighting oppression. However, the position of WCSOs, sitting between 'liberation' and 'community' groups was often ambiguous and sometimes a source of tension as students and staff tried to work out whether their main focus should be drawing attention to and challenging oppression and exclusion or building a supportive community. Although the issues of balancing priorities and defining the remit or constituency for a group are also present in other student liberation and community groups, the lack of history and established and visible community to draw upon meant that these were important issues for WCSOs as they began their roles. Definition and particularly the possibility of self-definition was a source of ideological tension, as some opposition to WCSO roles came from assertions that they could not be considered a group in need of liberation. Tensions also came from the fact that many WCSO roles were occupied by white men, and both they and SU staff were cautious of

inadvertently tapping into what they felt was a dominant narrative about excluded white working-class men, which then could exclude and obscure the classed experiences of other groups.

> … when you're just focusing on just one element of working-class people you kind of don't really address the rest…I think it does come back to stuff like nationalism and some more sort of insidious stuff about you know, who are we allowed to care about, you know, who do people care about? (Jameela, SU staff, Red University)

All postholders and SU staff were insistent that WCSO roles and how they defined the communities that they represented had to be inclusive of a range of different experiences of class. Postholders also emphasised that they, as individuals, were not representative of the range of experiences of working-class students at their institutions. Many were cautious about how they could best represent a community that they might not easily identify with:

> when it first come up I thought, 'well, I'm working class' so why shouldn't I..? Maybe a bit more recently I've just been thinking like, is that being like tokenism almost, is that just saying 'oh I must be the epitome of a working class person so I should have run'? (Sam, Green University)

Even with these flexible definitions of class and an appreciation of intersectionality, there were challenges to building a community. At Red University the community was small and largely inactive. After holding focus groups with students Jameela concluded that one of the issues was that, for many students, class simply wasn't the most important part of their identity. They identified more strongly with race or gender, already represented in liberation associations, and some felt that there were limited grounds for a community - 'just because someone's also 'widening participation' doesn't mean I'll automatically identify with them' (Jameela). Darren, who was just at the start of building a community also echoed this as a potential challenge:

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> …someone could come from the same background as me but not see their class as
> relevant or their background as being relevant. Whereas I do, I think it's obviously,
> it's just about personal opinion. (Darren, Green University)

Some had some success in community building, holding social activities, developing online communities and making connections with other liberation groups to hold joint events. However, these groups still tended to be small and persisting with arranging social events was seen as a challenging part of the role.

Becoming visible

The issue of class visibility was a common priority amongst WCSOs. This was informed by frustrations in encountering an HE environment that they felt ignored aspects of their identity but was also pragmatic, as without creating a public profile they could not build a community of others 'like them' and their roles would not continue. Most WCSOs saw visibility as a step towards recognition, which could 'normalise' (Darren) the experience of working-class students, potentially making it easier for students to speak up about concerns and to see themselves as part of a wider university community.

> I think trying to sort of cultivate the community as well, because a lot of people,
> there was like a quote from someone like the atmosphere at one of the events was
> just different from anywhere else on campus and just that sort of like, feeling that
> you can actually talk about stuff like ..I think we do want to sort of work on
> increasing that. (Steve, Blue University)

WCSOs tended to speak in terms of recognition, rather than of redistribution in relation to making class visible at their institutions. Although less commonly associated with class (Fraser, 1995), claims for recognition suggest a need for social or cultural change that either positively recognises diversity or upwardly revises social and cultural

assessments of worth for 'maligned' groups. WCSOs seemed motivated by a desire for students to be able to positively associate with a working-class identity and to be able to assert their legitimacy within the academy, though without threatening the positions of other groups. However, it was not entirely clear whether their focus on recognition was because this was deemed most valuable or came from a pragmatic sense of what they could realistically achieve in their short-term roles. Several students highlighted that the value of their roles was likely to be in building a supportive community, rather than challenging the practices of their peers and institutions.

> I just generally look after the welfare side of things. Sometimes all you need is a good rant. Like, there's nothing you can do. The issues of class are ingrained, and access and widening participation is ingrained in our education system and class is there so there is literally like nothing we can do as individuals..we can try when we go into the world… I do struggle to see what we can do. Like we can support people but…I can't change anything. (Chantelle, Blue University)

The extent to which students saw the purpose of recognition as transformative or destabilising to an established order was sometimes limited, with some, like Chantelle, seeing the potential for change as restricted and others, now being students of selective institutions with conferred advantages, understandably reluctant to wholly challenge the structures that they had worked hard to benefit from.

WCSO's engagement with ideas around class and visibility were also partly informed by their interpretations of their social and political contexts, as they spoke about their personal political affiliations and their exposure to academic debates about class and class visibility in HE. Many felt that class was largely invisible in student politics and that this led to a lack of engagement with issues that would negatively affect working-class students.

> I think that largely particular sections of the left...there's almost an ignorance of class-based disadvantage. (Darren, Green University)

Margot, an SU staff member from Green University echoed Darren's comments, feeling that the student press and political groups at the university tended to be led by wealthy students who, whatever their political affiliation, had opposed the nomination of a WCSO role on the grounds that class was no longer relevant. Similarly, at Red University, Alex was motivated to propose the WCSO role because he felt the SU had failed to recognise the importance of housing issues to working-class students, despite a supposed left-leaning affiliation.

Most students interviewed in this study had some interest in party-politics, primarily as Labour supporters or party members, or otherwise self-declared as 'left-leaning'. With explicit references to class having re-entered political vocabulary in recent years (Mckenzie, 2017) and politicians clashing over who might represent the authentic voice of the British working-classes, students were surprised at the absence of class or class representation in their experiences of student politics. Nearly all also studied social sciences or had some interest in social policy. They could also point to examples within their own courses that spoke about experiences relevant to them:

> I don't know if you've read, well, presume you have read Diane Reay? Brilliant ain't she… (Darren, Green University)

For many of them, the motivation to be more personally visible in their class background and working to make class more visible within their SUs and universities was partly motivated by a desire to reconcile the contradictions between the seeming importance of class in wider politics and their own studies and their own experiences of class being invisible or denied in their institutions.

Strategies of subversion?

Although the students were keen to raise the profile of class-based disadvantage at their institutions, they were also cautious that they not be seen as too radical or disruptive. They were concerned that being associated with a particular political or personal agenda would limit their ability to influence their institutions and alienate other working-class students. They were cautious about upsetting peers and friends who struggled to understand the need for their roles. WCSOs were keen to emphasise that they were not motivated by a desire to cause 'divides' (Darren), particularly in terms of political divides already evident in some of their campus politics (Darren, Dave & Steve). Most took a cautious and pragmatic approach to their roles, wanting to be visible to students like them but not threatening to other students or the university establishment.

> ...it's difficult. There's sort of a lot of attitudes that need to sort of carefully work with and I think I've been very lucky that I haven't had to explain it that much but do have to start taking that into consideration a lot more. That people… I guess almost slightly feel threatened and sort of when you sort of bring that up as an issue..and yeah, I think you do have to be very careful in sort of handling that. (Steve, Blue University)

They were thoughtful about 'directing energy where it is best placed' (Dave) and about working with the university and SU. They used the language of university and SU administration and politics, reflecting on needing to 'talk to the right people' (Sam), to present their activities in a 'very constructive, positive way' (Dave) and to produce 'impact' (Steve). This alignment with the institutional hierarchy and structures is noted in research on UK SUs, which suggests that the processes of marketisation and massification have encouraged them to become increasingly subject to university priorities (McLeod 2011). Students are encouraged to act in accordance with their interests as consumers within legitimated and sometimes restrictive structures, rather

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than from political positions that challenge the marketised structures of HE (Raaper 2018; Leathwood & Read 2009). WCSOs were ready to 'play the game' of student politics, writing papers, attending committees, making connections and conforming to the structures of their SU and university to build a community. This was perhaps because the value of asserting a working-class identity through the WCSO roles was not, for them, about separating themselves or standing apart but about trying to assert themselves as part of their university. Hence this could only be achieved by cooperation with the university and acting within established structures. This desire to work within the system is consistent with Bourdieu's description of actions within fields which suggest that those who wish to change 'the game' are 'condemned to use the strategies of subversion, but, if they are not to incur exclusion from the game, these strategies have to remain within certain limits' (Bourdieu 1993, 74).

Conclusion

The experiences of students presented here represent what is a very limited phenomena, similar to the experiences of working-class students from previous research but also seemingly a new way in which students are choosing to express their working-class identities. These students, like the 'strangers in paradise' in Reay at al.'s 2009 study, appear to have developed a habitual reflexivity that has supported their negotiations and deliberations of education up until this point and has become a source of strength. This awareness appears to have prompted refashioning of their identities, with some choosing relatively early in their schooling to identify as 'academic' or as someone on a journey to becoming middle-class through accumulation of behaviours and forms of capital. Consequently, they mostly entered HE with the confidence that they could both maintain elements of their previous identities and adapt to a new environment.

However, although reflexive adaptation may have eased their journey into university, it appears that the *emotional* experiences of their encounters between habitus and field in practice were still profoundly significant, prompting them to consider their class identities and how these might be negotiated in their new context. This highlights the importance of understanding the habitus as embodied and interacting with fields – not all can be anticipated. In some moments, despite their best preparations, they still find themselves 'lost at sea', temporarily unable to navigate their way through the contradictions they identify.

This study also highlights the importance of context for understanding student responses to moments of hysteresis and experiences of invisibility. For these students, they have identified making claims of recognition based on their class identity as a valid response within existing SU representative structures. This strategy to navigating their identity appears to be informed by their awareness that they are not alone in their experiences and that, within the context of wider politics and students unions, claims for recognition can form part of the student political expression. However, the slow growth of their student constituencies and the small scale of this phenomena would also suggest that this response is not usual for students identifying as working-class. It was not clear within this research whether this may be due to some of the ambiguities of class for students, due to their liminal status, or because there was something particular about these students' experiences and dispositions that prompted their engagement with these forms of student political action. It is however notable that these students, in contrast with some working-class students, had relatively stable social and economic resources during term time, giving them the capital to engage with this sort of activity.

There is currently limited research in a UK context looking at these types of

roles or how identity politics is shaping student experiences. This makes it difficult to establish whether the experiences of WCSOs are reflective of other students' understandings of identities and whether identity politics is a significant part of student political engagement or the student experience more broadly. Students' Unions are still an emerging area of research and study of student politics has tended to focus on protest and national political engagement, rather than on identity or formal roles, but there is certainly scope for further research in this area that addresses issues of identity politics and political action.

As noted, these roles were at an early stage, though slowly increasing in number. It is therefore still too early to see how students represented by these roles may feel about them or even whether these roles will continue. How universities and SUs also respond to these roles will be important. The students interviewed here were cautious about their potential to make a difference, feeling that many of the issues that they and others like them faced were embedded in society and in the structures of their universities. Nonetheless, they still felt that there was some value in their roles and, for them personally, they appeared to provide an opportunity to be working-class in a middle-class space in ways that appeal to the 'authenticity' of both identities and is consistent with their contexts.

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Table 1. Interviewees

Institution	Interviewee	Year of Study	Role
Green University	Darren	1	WCSO
	Sam	1	WCSO
	Margot	n/a	SU Staff Member (Representative roles)
Blue University	Steve	2	WC Society President
	Dave	2	WCSO
	Chantelle	2	WCSO
Red University	Alex	Graduate	Former SU Sabbatical Officer (original proposer of WCSO motion)
	Jameela	n/a	SU Staff Member (Liberation & community roles)
	Jasmine	n/a	SU Staff Member (Volunteering & community roles)

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