

## **Straddling Class in the Academy:**

### **26 Stories of Students, Administrators, and Faculty from Poor and Working-Class Backgrounds and Their Compelling Lessons for Higher Education Policy and Practice**

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Identity development experiences and theories are a mainstay of higher education coursework and research. Questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion dominate conversations about campus climate that are happening across the country. The identities discussed in these conversations tend to be those that have a great deal of scholarship behind them, such as racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation identities. In an effort to include into the conversation the stories of those identifying as poor or working class, *Straddling Class in the Academy* features twenty-six written narratives from members of the academy, spanning from undergraduate to professor emeritus, discussing their social class identity, how they came to understand their social class identity, how their social class identity impacted their undergraduate, graduate, and professional experiences, and how their class identity influences their personal and professional lives. The contributors come from all corners of the country and bring with them a number of intersecting identities that shape their experiences in the academy.

Authors Sonja Ardoin and becky martinez, who both identify as being from poor or working class backgrounds, begin with a discussion of how social class influences higher education, noting that “social class is often an

invisible and inexact dimension of identity” (p. 4). The authors discuss the prevailing belief that higher education is necessary for economic mobility and social class advancement, which could be a motivating factor for those from poor or working classes to pursue higher education. However, when students with these identities arrive at their college or university – a choice frequently driven by class status – nearly every aspect of the academy assumes certain levels of class standing and privilege. These assumptions continue to impact individuals who pursue graduate work and careers in the academy. Ardoin and martinez frame their discussions of class identity through four theoretical models: Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, Yosso’s community cultural wealth model, Liu and colleagues’ social class worldview model, and Hurst’s social class concepts.

Narrative inquiry is the authors’ selected method of qualitative data collection, and the narratives are grouped into chapters based on the contributor’s position in the academy (undergraduate, graduate, new professional, tenured professor, etc.). Each chapter contains narratives from three unique contributors and each ends with the authors’ analysis summarizing the commonalities and differences among the narratives. At the conclusion of the text, the authors present metathemes that are present in each positionality in the academy, as well as strategies for increasing class consciousness in the academy.

This book is an excellent resource for any orientation, transition, or retention professional who wishes to better understand how class identity is shaped and experienced by ourselves, our students, and our colleagues. As the authors and contributors note, class identity development as a theoretical construct is not as prominent in higher education compared to other identities, so scholarship about or discussions of class identity are likely not something that professionals in the field have encountered, even if they themselves may identify with those backgrounds. Ardoin and martinez, as well as their contributors, hope that the stories presented in this text will spark conversations about class identity and increase class consciousness.

The contributors’ stories are a compelling look at how a certain levels of class statuses are assumed within the academy and the effects of those assumptions. Hearing the first-person, lived experiences of

those around us paints a vivid and compelling portrait of what it is like to experience higher education as someone identifying as poor or working class. As professionals in the academy, we will certainly see the stories of our students, our colleagues, and ourselves reflected in the narratives in this text. Orientation, transition, and retention are often some of the first interactions our students have with the academy and are setting the tone for what students can expect to experience at their chosen college or university. Those of us who identify as poor or working class will likely recognize the metathemes discussed at the end of the text in our own lives. Those of us who identify as coming from other backgrounds will gain some understanding of what it is like to experience higher education through the lens of class identity.

Orientation, transition, and retention professionals will find the strategies presented at the conclusion of the text to be helpful starting points when looking at how programs and services for new students assume class status or reinforce class perceptions in the academy. In fact, orientation is mentioned as an area within the academy that perpetuates assumptions about class identity. Using the narratives, metathemes, and strategies presented in the text, orientation and transition professionals can examine their programs and services through a lens of class identity by considering some of the following questions:

- If our institution requires an in-person orientation experience, what assumptions are we making about the financial ability of our new students to attend a multi-day program in the middle of the week? Are we including equitable options for students who cannot attend an in-person orientation?
- If our institution requires an online orientation, what assumptions are we making about the ability to access reliable internet access and how does this ability intersect with class?
- What class assumptions are we making if we assess upfront orientation fees?
- Parent or supporter orientations are frequently offered in conjunction with new student orientation. Are we making assumptions about the class privilege that allows parents and

supporters to take time off work and pay for the travel to our campuses? How are we including these supporters who perhaps do not have the ability or privilege to attend orientation?

- Does the language used in our orientation materials assume a certain level of class status or social capital?
- Do our orientation sessions address topics that show students identifying as poor or working class that their questions and concerns are being addressed in orientation? Or are we assuming a level of knowledge and capital that comes along with certain class identities?
- Many orientation and transition programs feature, at some point, a discussion of diversity and inclusion. Is class identity part of this conversation?
- How are Welcome Week and other transition experience programs assuming class identity? Which involvement opportunities are highlighted during orientation and transition programs? Are these opportunities offered in a way that allows students of any class identity to see themselves as participants?

Of course, the questions for professionals to consider extend beyond our incoming students. Professionals can also apply the metathemes and recommendations to our student staff as we consider how our student employees are experiencing their own class identity in our higher education institutions.

- How do our student staffing practices make class assumptions?
- Does our interview process and selection criteria assume a level of class standing?
- Are we valuing the lived experiences of those from poor and working classes when selecting our orientation leaders?
- What requirements are we setting regarding additional employment or course enrollment while students are working as orientation leaders?
- Do the requirements, expectations, and responsibilities for the orientation leader position make it welcoming to all class identities?
- Are we addressing class identity in orientation leader training?

Understanding class identity is a valuable skill for all higher education professionals to have in their professional tool box. *Straddling Class in the Academy* provides readers from all areas of the academy and all class backgrounds valuable insight to the lived experiences of the students, faculty, and professionals who identify as coming from poor or working class backgrounds.

## References

Ardoin, S., & martinez, becky. (2019). *Straddling class in the academy: 26 stories of students, administrators, and faculty from poor and working-class backgrounds and their compelling lessons for higher education policy and practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.