

## **‘White Trash’ in the Academy: Working-class Women Professors Discuss their Backgrounds and Education**

Sonya D. Hayes<sup>1</sup>

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, USA*

Leslie Ann Locke

*Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Women from rural, low-income backgrounds holding positions within the academy are the exception and not the rule. Most women faculty in the academy are from urban/suburban areas and middle- and upper-income family backgrounds. As women faculty who do not represent this norm, our primary goal with this article is to focus on the unique barriers we experienced as girls from rural, low-income areas in K-12 schools that influenced the possibilities for successfully transitioning to and engaging with higher education. We employed a qualitative duoethnographic and narrative research design to respond to the research questions, and we generated our data through semi-structured, critical, ethnographic dialogic conversations. Our duoethnographic-narrative analyses revealed six major themes: (1) independence and other benefits of having a working-class mom; (2) crashing into middle-class norms and expectations; (3) lucking and falling into college; (4) fish out of water; (5) overcompensating, playing middle class, walking on eggshells, and pushing back; and (6) transitioning from a working-class kid to a working class academic, which we discuss in relation to our own educational attainment.*

**KEYWORDS:** rurality, working-class, educational attainment, duoethnography, higher education, women.

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Historically speaking, universities were designed for the middle class (MC) and systematically endorse and preserve similar values (Bourdieu et al., 1994). Although universities are becoming more inclusive (Marginson, 2016) and have broadened their mission statements to demonstrate expanded admissions and where students can ‘reach their fullest potential,’ many institutions continue to promote MC values, norms, and language, while appearing to be classless. That is, higher education aims to represent itself as a meritocratic system where class (as well as race and gender) are arbitrary to success. These norms, values, language, and an institutional dismissal of class are often foreign to people from the working class (WC). Consequently, WC people are still hesitant to attend four-year universities (Crozier & Clayton, 2019). Moreover, the majority of faculty in universities are from MC backgrounds and reinforce MC norms (Morgan et. al., 2022). Dews and Law (1995) published a collection of narratives from WC academics serving as faculty in higher education institutions. In this collection, academics from diverse WC families

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: An Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, USA. E-Mail: shayes22@utk.edu

share their stories of adapting to a MC profession while experiencing feelings of “ambivalence” about social mobility (p. 2) and “out of place in both worlds” (p. 7). Many of the chapter authors acknowledge that the acquisition of higher education is a dual-edged sword—meaning that education serves to advance social mobility, but it also serves to eradicate one’s sense of self. Phillips (1995) explains:

*Our society assumes that education is the great leveler. In a democracy, equality means equal opportunity, which means, in turn, that society does what it can to neutralize the physical, psychological, economic, and cultural disadvantages that its young citizens inherit and bring with them into the classroom. Crime, chemical abuse, racism, moral lapses, technological lags, and a host of other social and economic ills are blamed largely on poverty, inequality, and ignorance—all of which we assume can be erased by sufficient and appropriate education. Within this framework, a PhD presumably certifies that one has no relevant prior self. (p. 225)*

Although the narratives in Dews and Law’s (1995) book are a bit dated, the experiences of these men and women serving as faculty in the academy highlight the duality that WC academics face serving in a MC institution while honoring their WC families and backgrounds. Twenty-eight years after the publication of Dews and Laws’ (1995) book, we find the stories within to remain relevant. As white, first-generation college graduates and women professors who grew up in rural areas and in WC families, we relate to the stories of these WC scholars serving in the academy. Women from rural, low-income backgrounds holding positions within the academy are the exception and not the rule. Most women faculty in the academy are from urban/suburban areas and middle- and upper-income family backgrounds (Morgan et al., 2022) As women faculty who do not represent this norm, our goals here situate our own narratives and identities to discuss the struggles we faced in our pursuits of higher education and our socialization into the academy, and to critique the notion that the academy is classless.

We approach these goals in two ways. First, we engage the scholarship focused on class and rurality in educational attainment and discuss “white trash” stereotypes. Second, we situate this scholarship within our own stories as white women from low income, rural backgrounds in K-12 schools and in higher education. Specifically, we discuss our experiences with attitudes and expectations of educators; stereotyping; classist norms and policies; and encountering disbelief of our success. Using a duoethnographic and narrative inquiry research design, our article underscores our experiences as girls and women interacting with stereotypes about class and rurality and how educational systems often see our intersectional identities as deficits. Two research questions guided our duoethnographic and narrative inquiry:

1. What are our experiences as white women from low-income, rural backgrounds in K-12 schools regarding class and rurality?
2. How did these experiences affect our post-secondary education and currently, our faculty positions in higher education?

## **Review of Literature**

We recognize that a person’s identity and intersecting identities affect their educational experiences and attainment. For the purposes of this article, we reviewed the literature based on our findings and how we experienced K-12 schooling and college access, our experiences in

college as students, and our careers as professors in the academy. We understand that gender is also a significant component of a woman's experiences in educational contexts; however, gender did not organically arise from our dialogic conversations. Thus, we primarily focus on the literature related to class, rurality, and the intersection of class and rurality in educational attainment.

### **Low-income and Working-class Individuals and Higher Education**

Much of the literature on WC students in higher education focuses on students' experiences entering higher education as undergraduates and the challenges they face. WC students are less likely to enter college and obtain a college degree than their MC peers (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). WC students who attend four-year institutions are expected to leave their class at the door and "conform to middle-class norms" of the academy (Soria & Stebleton, 2013, p. 140). As a result of interacting with this seemingly meritocratic system (Liu, 2011), WC students struggle with feelings of belonging (Crozier & Clayton, 2019) and academic engagement (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). WC students also have limited social capital as it pertains to higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2013) and often need additional support from advisors and faculty to be successful (Hartley & Hayes, 2021; Locke & Trolan, 2018; McCallen & Johnson, 2020).

### ***Belonging and Academic Engagement***

Although WC students may possess a sense of pride for overcoming societal and/or familial barriers to gain access to the university (Crozier & Clayton, 2019), they struggle with a sense of belonging as compared to their MC peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). WC students are class-conscious and often struggle with their identities in socializing in the university setting (Crozier & Clayton, 2019). Brine and Waller (2004) explained that WC students often are conflicted about losing their WC identity and will adopt a MC persona in order to assimilate into university culture. Many students change their speech and mannerisms to imitate their MC peers (Crozier & Clayton, 2019) to avoid feeling alienated or embarrassed by their background (Hurst, 2010). Further, the meritocratic philosophies that are embedded in higher education ignore the real lives of many WC students (Liu, 2011).

Academic engagement is also cited as a barrier to the college attainment of WC students. While in K-12 schools, WC students may not be fully engaged with their academics due to factors such as having to care for younger siblings or having to work to support themselves and/or contribute to the family income, not having access to Advanced Placement or Dual Credit courses, and low-expectations for their academic abilities (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Consequently, these factors may influence their engagement with education, including their academic achievement and college aspirations (Locke & McKenzie, 2016; Thiele et al., 2017). Likewise, WC students who do attend college also face similar barriers to academic achievement, including needing to work, care for family, or lack the necessary academic skills for college curriculum and instruction (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020).

Some researchers have explored how low-income WC students successfully navigate and graduate from college. Karas (2016) found that students from low socioeconomic and WC backgrounds who successfully obtained a Bachelor's degree have strong networks of support and positive relationships with peers and older adults. They also have personal qualities that assist with overcoming adversity, such as effective coping strategies and self-reliance, and a network of positive role models in both high school and college. Likewise, McCallen and Johnson (2020) asserted that university faculty have a significant impact on WC students' academic success as,

*Those faculty perceived by students as having a significant effect on their college success played a pivotal role by conveying not only encouragement, but also navigational and intellectual resources that together facilitated students' access to academic support, sense of institutional belonging, and solidified their academic/career identities. (p. 329)*

WC students need support, understanding, and encouragement from trusted advisors, mentors, and faculty to bolster both institutional belonging and academic engagement.

### ***Social Capital***

Social capital is the effective functioning of groups through interpersonal relationships, a shared sense of identity, a shared understanding, shared norms, and shared values (Coleman, 1988). In the context of higher education, social capital is considered the norms, expectations, social networks, and knowledge of a university that help a student understand how to navigate it (Locke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Social class is an important factor in social capital because social class influences a student's values, expectations, and aspirations as well as role models and support networks (Beagan, 2005). MC and affluent students tend to have more social capital in higher education because of their parents' backgrounds and experiences in higher education (Marginson, 2016). Social capital for WC students is critical to their academic achievement (Almeida et al., 2021); however, students from WC backgrounds often enter universities without the social capital needed to successfully navigate the university culture (Locke, 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Additionally, parents of WC students typically lack personal knowledge about the college environment and are unable to understand some of the stressors their children encounter while in college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Without their parents' social capital, low-income or WC college students often lack a basic understanding of university academic support systems, such as faculty office hours, academic tutoring services, writing centers, and academic advising (McCallen & Johnson, 2020).

Since many WC students have limited experiences with university culture, they lack social capital and have greater difficulty adapting to a university setting than their MC peers (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). WC students need academic advisors and mentors who encourage social and academic integration while respecting their backgrounds and experiences (Jehangir et al., 2012). By investing time and developing meaningful relationships with WC students, academic advisors, faculty, and mentors provide additional guidance and resources to support low-income and WC students in developing and increasing their social capital within higher education (Hartley & Hayes, 2021; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

### **Rural Individuals and Higher Education**

Approximately 15–20% of the country's population lives in rural communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Rural students have different expectations for enrolling in higher education institutions as compared to students in urban or suburban areas (Molefe et al., 2017). Students who live in rural areas often have a strong attachment to their communities; consequently, their career and postsecondary aspirations are greatly influenced by this attachment (Petrin et al., 2014). Individuals who grow up in a rural community place importance on "connectedness and personal relationships" within the community (Burnell, 2003, p. 105). Historically, students from rural areas would choose manufacturing or farming jobs to stay near home, but over the past few decades, these options have significantly dwindled (Petrin et al., 2014). Although 74% of jobs in the US

require postsecondary education (Fraysier et al., 2020), only 21% of all rural students attend any type of postsecondary institution (Means et al., 2016). Further, living within a rural and remote area limits a student's postsecondary opportunities due to a lack of resources and geographic isolation (Petrin et al., 2014).

Educational attainment, defined as the highest level of education that an individual completes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), is viewed as a common marker of individual life outcomes and economic prosperity (Carlson & McChesney, 2014). In fact, there is a positive relationship between the completion of a four-year college degree and economic outcomes such as increased individual earnings, economic wealth, and improved local economies (Carlson & McChesney, 2014). Despite the positive outcomes of obtaining a four-year degree, students from rural areas more often value 2-year institutions and Associate degrees over four-year institutions and Bachelor degrees (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). Moreover, rural students from low-income backgrounds are often left out of the conversation about higher education, and many of these students “lack basic information about the nature and the amount of education required for postsecondary careers” (Aronson, 2008, p. 44). Students in rural areas face several barriers to preparation and matriculation to higher education, including family income, limited access to academically rigorous courses, lower expectations for achievement, and less exposure to post-secondary opportunities (Means et al., 2016). Despite these barriers, rural students have several assets to support them in their educational attainment, including a strong work ethic and community support (Means et al., 2016). Educators in rural areas play a vital role in helping students in their educational attainment by exposing them to a myriad of post-secondary opportunities, building a college-going culture, and mentoring and supporting them (Means et al., 2016; Petrin et al., 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality of Class and Rurality**

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) has become a common framework within the field of education (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Researchers who use intersectionality in their studies are concerned with “identifying, discussing, and addressing the ways that systems of inequality, including sexism, racism, and class bias, intersect to produce complex relations of power and (dis) advantage” (Nichols & Stahl, 2019, p. 1255). Although a sense of place or context is not traditionally part of intersectionality, there is prejudice against people who live in rural areas, and rural residents are often overlooked, underserved, and portrayed through negative stereotypes (Mohatt & Mohatt, 2020). Low-income white people from rural areas are often portrayed as ‘white trash’ (Drinkard, 2014).

The ‘white trash’ label often assigned to poor white people has been used by MC and affluent white people as a means to separate themselves from WC poor, whom they view as inferior (Hartigan, 2003). The white trash label portrays WC poor in rural contexts as “hillbillies” and blames them for poverty and social problems (Newitz & Wray, 1996). The white trash stereotype casts WC poor as lazy, incompetent, and welfare dependent; moreover, it allows MC and affluent white people to distance themselves from the poor and WC and treat these individuals as “others” (Hartigan, 2003; Newitz & Wray, 1996).

Few researchers have explored the rural identity of students and faculty in higher education and the intersectionality of rurality with other identities (Enke & Zenk, 2021). Because most children in rural communities come from conditions of poverty (Lavalley, 2018), the intersection of class and rurality play an important role in understanding college access and educational attainment. As white women from working-class, rural backgrounds, these identities have shaped our experiences in both our educational attainment and our careers as faculty within the academy.

Moreover, we have both been called “white trash” in our younger years and have experienced the white trash stereotype over the course of our academic careers.

## Methods

### Research Design

The research questions guiding this study include: (1) What are our experiences as white women from low-income, rural backgrounds in K-12 schools regarding class and rurality? (2) How did these experiences affect our post-secondary education and, currently, our faculty positions in higher education? We employed a qualitative duoethnographic and narrative research design to respond to the research questions. Duoethnography, a form of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), developed by Sawyer and Norris (2004), involves co-constructing a narrative through intersecting autoethnographies (Ellis, 2004). In duoethnography, two researchers engage in dialogue centered on their personal experiences, their separate backgrounds in relation to each other (Zazkis & Koichu, 2015), and their experiences situated within a common phenomenon (Sawyer & Norris, 2004). Consequently, the authors are both the researchers and participants in the study (Norris, 2008). As such, duoethnography examines how different individuals give both similar and different meanings to a shared phenomenon and interpret the phenomenon based on their shared experiences (Sawyer & Norris, 2004). Furthermore, duoethnography is a research method that seeks to explore “narratives of superiority and oppression” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 7) through which people internalize structures of injustice (Spry, 2001). Specific to the current work, trying to interpret the meritocratic and ‘classlessness’ norms and values of higher education can be daunting for WC students.

Narrative approaches allow for participants’ stories and experiences to be restoried and constructed into pivotal events or chronologically to explain meaning (Lichtman, 2013). We include narrative in our process here not only for these reasons, but also because it has “the power to expose, break open, and revise unjust systems” (Madison, 2012, p. 37). Serving as both the researchers and the participants, using dialogic conversations and a narrative approach together allowed us to share our narrated personal lives and experiences, and “make meaning through the shaping and ordering of experience...into a meaningful whole...connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2011, p. 421).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Using duoethnographic methodology (Norris & Sawyer, 2004), we generated our data through semi-structured, critical, ethnographic dialogic conversations (Locke & Hayes, 2021; Madison, 2012). Our dialogic conversations for this project took the form of a combination of personal narratives, “an individual perspective and expression of an event, experience, or point of view” (Madison, 2012, p. 28), and a topical interview, “the point of view given to a particular subject, such as a program, an issue, or a process” (Madison, 2012, p. 28). Thus, our findings are narrated restories of our first-person accounts and memories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and are presented in a longer storied and thematic format, focusing on episodes and events (Bamberg, 2006) than perhaps some common qualitative analyses.

We engaged in three separate critical dialogues (via Zoom) about our experiences as white girls and young women growing-up in poor rural communities and our individual academic journeys. Each dialogue ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. We began each dialogue with a rough, semi-structured protocol regarding the focus of the conversation. While our protocols and associated



dialogues were centered on family, school, poverty, rurality, peers, college, and careers within the academy, we discussed these topics to varying degrees across all three of our meetings. As co-researchers, we embraced dialogic conversation within duoethnography because “we are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in a dialogue with others” (Madison, 2012 p. 23). We audio-recorded the dialogues and transcribed them for analysis. We coded the data in three rounds. In our initial coding, we reviewed the transcripts separately and developed a list of in vivo codes based on our individual analysis (Saldaña, 2014). After individual coding, we retained similar codes and discussed and negotiated the items that we coded differently. We then created a master code list that included our mutually agreed upon codes. Individually, we coded the transcripts against these pre-established codes (Miles et al., 2014) and then compared our coded data. After reviewing the coded data, we discussed similar patterns within the data and developed themes.

### **Backgrounds and Backstories**

Before presenting the findings, we begin with our backgrounds and backstories in order to provide context. We share a variety of identities. We are both straight, cis-gendered, white, first-generation college graduates, and women professors who grew up in rural areas and in WC families. Our families were steered by our strong and independent mothers, who were the main breadwinners in our families. While they were not often physically present, as they were at work more than they were at home, they instilled in us a number of assets such as independence, a strong work ethic, a high regard for education, and a sense to do good in the world and for others.

Growing up and living on our single mother’s WC income, we knew we were poor. Our schools made this fact even more palpable. We were not among those who had trendy clothes or electronics or those who went on family vacations over spring break. Nor were we among those who went on international trips with our high school language classes, bands, or choirs. Further, we were not among those whom educators seemed to expect much from regarding educational attainment. We were not among those recruited for Advanced Placement or Honors courses, or prepped for college, or even among those who were expected to graduate. However, we each experienced strong narratives about education in our households. Sonya’s mom reinforced that she should and would become a teacher, which she did. In Leslie’s family, there was a consistent theme about staying in school—even though all of her immediate family members left high school before graduation (Locke, 2017). Leslie stayed in school. These narratives helped us to persist in school.

While we both managed to graduate from high school and later attend college, we do not credit our K-12 schools with providing us with college knowledge or college preparation. Rather, as we detail below, we “lucked” and “fell” into college. We similarly describe our time in college as atypical. Being from WC backgrounds and the first in our families to interact with higher education, we often felt under-informed about all that college offered and what we were supposed to be doing in college besides getting a degree. We treated college like a job. When we were not in classes, we were at work trying to make ends meet. The colleges we attended, similar to some of our K-12 schools, did not inform us about activities, functions, groups, and organizations that were available to us and why it might have been important for us to know about and participate in these groups and organizations.

Similarly, as white, first-generation college graduates, and women professors from woman-dominated WC families, we experience the university differently than many of our colleagues and students (for more on these experiences, see Locke & Hayes, 2021). Mirroring our time in K-12 schools and in college, we continue to interact with MC norms, low expectations, and deficit ideologies of the WC. In the Findings section that follows, we discuss our confrontations of and interactions with these norms, expectations, and ideologies—that is, the meritocratic ways and

means of educational institutions and the assumptions that class can be ignored and that access and opportunity are broadly distributed. We detail these experiences with the hope that sharing them is a means to push back and expand access and opportunity for more students and faculty (especially women) who may not fall nicely into white MC norms and expectations.

### ***Backstories***

To provide further context for the findings, we provide more detail on our personal backstories. First, Sonya (SH) grew up in a rural area outside of Beaumont, TX with a single WC mother and a younger sister. She had a baby at 18 and was a single mother while she attended Lamar University and earned her Bachelor's degree. Leslie (LL) grew up in a rural area west of Minneapolis. As a teenager, she split her time between living with her dad and attending a rural high school, and living with her mom in an exurb of Minneapolis and attending a high school in a wealthier area. Not only do we share these rural educational experiences, and growing up in low-income, women-dominated homes, we also attended and graduated from the same Ph.D. program in Education Policy, Leadership, and Administration at Texas A&M University in College Station. Thus, we trained with many of the same professors and were exposed to similar curricular contexts while in graduate school.

### **Findings**

Our duoethnographic-narrative analyses revealed six major themes: (1) independence and other benefits of having a working-class mom; (2) crashing into middle class norms and expectations; (3) lucking and falling into college; (4) fish out of water; (5) overcompensating, playing middle class, walking on eggshells, and pushing back; and (6) the price of the academy and how we treat others. We detail each theme below with exemplar quotes and dialogic exchanges.

#### **Independence and Other Benefits of Having a Working-Class Mom**

As we dialogued about our backgrounds and growing up, it became evident that our mothers are to thank for our strong sense of independence and our ability to solve problems. Much of that independence and problem-solving stemmed from our mothers' need to work. Sonya's mom worked as a secretary in an oil refinery plant, and Leslie's mom worked as a waitress in a country club—and they worked a lot. As a result, we had to learn how to manage on our own and think for ourselves.

**SH:** *My mom worked all the time and she was gone all the time. She had to leave and be at work at seven. She worked a 12-hour shift every day, seven to seven. My sister and I had to get ourselves up, get ourselves dressed, and walk to school. My mom was like, 'Don't do anything to have the school call me.' She never wanted us to be in trouble because she wasn't going to take off work to come up to the school. Work was everything.*

**LL:** *Yeah, I grew up very independent too. My mom had to work all the time. And she was tired and had zero patience. I learned to not get in the way. My mom was like, 'if you want to do X, you're going to need to figure out how to do it because I've got to work and there's nobody else around*



*here, so figure it out.’ So, that sort of ‘you need to figure some shit out on your own’ has been how I’ve had to work and live.*

As we shared stories about our mothers and their strong work ethic, we considered how their work ethic affected us as both children and adults. As children, we were both afraid of our mothers and did not want to concern them with our problems. Here, we acknowledged that our mothers indirectly helped us develop a sense of independence. We had to take care of ourselves and figure out how to solve our own problems.

While our mothers indirectly empowered us to develop independence and problem-solving skills, they also ensured that we understood the value of education. Additionally, because they understood this value themselves, both of our mothers exercised agency in ensuring that we were exposed to good schools.

**SH:** *My mom had a little house across the street from an elementary and a middle school. And that was one of the best elementaries and the best middle schools in town. The schools fed into the best high school in Beaumont. We just had to walk across the street to go to the school. She had it all planned out.*

When Sonya was about to go to intermediate school, the district decided—and sent a letter accordingly—that she would be bussed across town to attend a different and reputedly less rigorous school. Sonya’s mom advocated for her to stay in her current school so she could receive a quality education:

**SH:** *I still remember my mom reading that letter and screaming. She wasn’t going to have it. She was livid. She went all the way to the school board, she said, ‘No, I live here strategically, so my daughters can go to school right across the street. I work all the time. This is where they need to go to school. Of course, she lost the battle and moved us to the sticks.’*

Because Sonya’s mom was adamant that her daughters would go to a good school, she sold her home and moved the family to a rural community, where Sonya stayed until she graduated from high school. Leslie shared a similar story about her mom and her manoeuvres to ensure that her daughter could go to a good school.

**LL:** *When my parents got divorced, my mom moved us to a studio apartment just inside the Orono School District lines. This district always had a really good reputation and still does. She moved us there so I could go to that school. It is also a pretty wealthy district, so once there I learned quickly that we were not rich, not even close. But my mom did successfully move so that I could go to a good school. I went there for a few years, then moved in with my dad—and went to a very, very average, maybe below average, rural high school for a few years before moving back in with my mom and graduating from Orono.*

Leslie encountered challenges (discussed later) in her rural school, so much so that she was barred from progressing to the next grade level. Before her senior year, she moved back in with her mom so she could successfully graduate with her class and earn her high school diploma. She was the first in her family to do so.

### **Crashing into Middle-Class Norms and Expectations**

While our moms did the work of ensuring that we attended good schools, our experiences inside those schools were likely not as stellar as our mothers envisioned. That is, our WC backgrounds and limited resources came into play inside our schools in ways that our moms likely did not imagine. Further, we had limited support in our families to assist with our schoolwork, or to understand the academic role of school. For example, while Leslie liked school, she did not understand the scholastic aspects of school to be more important than the social aspects.

*LL: I liked going to school, but not because I thought it was some place to learn stuff, but because all my friends were there and there was nobody else around at home. I guess the schools probably taught me to read and to understand my multiplication tables, but I didn't know that was the purpose, I really thought the purpose was for me to go somewhere and have something to do. And so that's kind of how I treated school. It was just something that I got to do so I could see my friends. I didn't understand the value of why I should study and what the benefit of studying would do.*

Eventually, Leslie figured out the scholastic pieces of school, but was then frustrated by a dead-end of assistance at home.

*LL: I remember trying to do my homework at home and I started crying because I had asked everybody like, 'How do I do this? I don't understand how to do this.' And nobody could help me. They were just like, 'I don't know' and that was it. One time I was at my grandma's house and I asked her if she knew how to do a math problem, and she didn't know. I started crying. And she was like, 'Why are you crying?' And I'm like, 'I can't do my homework. I don't want to go to school without my homework done, and I don't understand it, and none of you can help me.' She laughed at me and said I was acting like a baby. Just that realization that I've reached the end of the road here. I don't know how to do it. Nobody can help me.*

Sonya discussed a similar lack of support but from her school. She pointed to a lack of rigor, as well as a dearth of development and exposure to diverse fields.

*SH: I wish I could have known that I could have done anything, that I could have gone into business, or I could have been an interior designer, or I could have done whatever. I just didn't understand that there were options available. I mean, I had [athletic] coaches who taught science and just gave us worksheets, so I never knew that science could be fun and interesting. We didn't go on field trips to learn about physics. I wasn't exposed to STEM opportunities to make me interested in those things to think that I could be an engineer, or I could be a doctor, or I could do*

*something different. I don't remember any teacher pulling me aside saying, 'Hey, you'd be really good at this, and how can I help you do this?'*

LL agreed, “Yeah, me neither.” Sonya went on to point out the systemic lack of opportunities in rural schools.

**SH:** *But if you're in a rural area, some rural areas don't have dual credit classes, they don't have AP courses. These students are already behind because they don't have opportunities that kids in urban or suburban areas have. I was one of those kids.*

We gauged that neither of us were adequately prepared for college or future careers. It seemed like our MC peers had it figured out. Their parents talked to them about college or careers, and since our mothers did not know about college or career opportunities for us, those were abstract concepts. Our teachers and counselors should have provided that information to help fill the MC knowledge gap, particularly, information about what college was, how we were supposed to prepare, and how we were supposed to get there, but that did not happen. Rather than our schools being purposeful in this endeavour, we each recall pivotal individuals who opened the proverbial door for us. That is, these individuals were instrumental in not only ensuring that we graduated from high school, but that we also got into college.

### **Lucking and Falling into College**

Leslie recalled a significant incident that facilitated her being able to finish high school successfully, a prerequisite for entry into college.

**LL:** *So, in 10th and 11th grade, I went to a rural high school when I was living with my dad, and my friends and I were skipping all the time, doing whatever we wanted with little parental interference. When I got to the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I had to meet with a counselor, Mrs. Petal (pseudonym), about classes for the following year. Mrs. Petal says flippantly, 'Well, you have skipped so much that you don't have enough credits to advance to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. So, your options are to either quit school or you can repeat 11<sup>th</sup> grade.' Those were dire options for me given that I had heard this constant narrative growing up about how everyone in my family regretted dropping out of school. And I was like, 'Mrs. Petal, neither one of those things are going to happen.' I frantically started thinking about how I could get out from under Mrs. Petal and her two absurd options. So, I got in my car and I drove to Orono High School—the district where my mom lived—asked to talk to the counselor. The counselor came out and I asked him 'What do I need to do to come here and start as a 12<sup>th</sup> grader?' So, he goes into his office, comes back, and says, 'Sure, you can come here. Do you want to graduate early? You have enough credits to graduate early if you want to. And do you want to take an AP class?' I was like, what? How could this be? It was wonderful. So, I went from Mrs. Petal, who was about to ruin my life—to this guy at the fancy school being like, 'Sure.' I mean, he just opened doors. It was so easy. All I did was drive over there and ask, and that was it. How do you go from one place telling you that you basically*

*should quit school to the next place, 20 miles down the road saying, ‘oh no, it’s fine. You want to have some advanced classes and you want to leave six months early? Fine, do it.’ I mean, what if I would’ve listened to Mrs. Petal?*

Not all educators have students’ best interests at heart, and many times they punish students for their mistakes rather than trying to find solutions to help them. Leslie was lucky enough to have somebody—her mom—who lived in a better school district where she could attend a different school and graduate. Many WC students do not have those opportunities and are at the mercy of educators who will not advocate for them.

As the conversation turned to how we began our college careers, we discussed “lucking into or falling into college.” Sonya had a non-school person in her life who opened the door to college for her.

**SH:** *My mom kept saying, ‘You’re going to go to school and be a teacher.’ She always kept saying “school,” but she never said “college.” I never understood college. College was just this mystery to me. I was going, but I didn’t know where I was going. It was just like, ‘You’re going to go to college.’ I didn’t understand that you had to apply to go to college. So, I graduated high school and had not applied to one college, even though I had 4.0 and a 1250 on the SAT.*

Sonya discovered she was pregnant the summer after high school graduation, and she did not attend college that fall. When her son turned a year old, she realized that she needed to go to college to get a degree to support herself and her son. She recalls how she lucked into college.

**SH:** *About that same time my older sister had gotten a job at Lamar University in the career center, and she was the one who connected me with an advisor. And that advisor told me about financial aid and scholarships, and how I could get money to go to school and to pay for day care and to live in an apartment and all that kind of stuff. If my sister had not worked at Lamar and knew that advisor, I don’t know if I would’ve ever gone to college. It was just luck.*

Sonya attributes her success in getting into college and successfully completing her degree to her older sister. Although her sister did not have a college degree, her job in the career center helped open the mysterious college door for Sonya. Leslie had some previous exposure to college before finishing high school, but, similar to Sonya, it was not a result of her high school providing information or opening that door. Rather, it came through a boyfriend.

**LL:** *I had this boyfriend in [the rural] high school, and he decided that he was going to do PSEO [post-secondary education option] and go to a community college. And I was like, ‘Well, what’s PSEO?’ And I decided to go too. I took a few classes at a community college and kept going for a couple of years after high school, too. That’s how I found out about college and how to fill out the FAFSA and then later how to transfer to the university. So, I just sort of fell into college.*

Although we both lucked into or fell into college, we found the college experience to be foreign and obscure. We demystified the college process for ourselves. And even though we both made it to college, once there, we were reminded that we were different. Because of our limited knowledge of how college ‘works’ and what we were supposed to gain, outside of a degree, we interacted with college differently than many other students. For example, neither of us could afford to live in dormitories, and we always worked while taking classes. Further, we did not participate in extracurricular clubs or organizations, nor were we members of a sorority. We were like ‘fish out of water.’

### **Fish Out of Water**

As we reflected on our college years, we recognized that our experiences differed from many college students who had more freedom to explore capital-producing activities such as sororities, campus organizations, and leadership opportunities. At the time, we did not understand these aspects of college life—nor do we recall being encouraged to participate. We had the following exchange about this lack of knowledge and exposure.

**LL:** *I didn't participate in college, I mean, not like students who live on campus who can participate in the mixers, the socialization stuff or the leadership opportunities with exposure to this or that. I didn't participate in any of that. I felt like I needed to be either in class or I needed to be making money—and eventually I got a part-time job on campus. Now I see what people get out of college besides the education piece, the degree. It's the networking and the social capital and the exposure to different things and people, things that I didn't know that I was even supposed to be doing or how it could pay off.*

**SH:** *College to me was a job. I didn't have time for anything because I had a baby. I didn't go to parties. I didn't do the sorority thing. I didn't even go to a basketball or a football game. I just didn't do that. College was just this place where I went to school, did my job, and then left. I was kind of a fish out of water.*

**LL:** *When I did meet and talk with other students on campus, the stuff that they could do and the sort of capital that they already had in terms of their parents because they were professionals—they were like accountants, lawyers, business people, whatever, it was pretty glaring. So, they already had doors open to them. I had a very different story and so it was hard for me to relate. I was in the water but I wasn't swimming as fast as they were or even in the same direction.*

In looking at our shared experiences in college, we determined that as non-traditional students, we simply did not fit into the MC university world. We each had peers whose parents paid for their school, and they did not have to work. Most of our peers engaged in the college experience—went to parties, athletic games, or engaged in other social and leadership activities. Further, the university seemed to be set up such that those with the means could easily access these activities and events. We continue to interact with the MC norms and expectations as higher education faculty.

## Still Crashing into Middle-Class Norms and Mentalities...Even in the Academy

Our trajectories into college, and later graduate school, and even later the professoriate, were not linear. There were many bumps, twists, and turns along the way. Even now, as professors in institutions of higher education, and even though we have ostensibly “made it,” we still manage to crash into MC norms and mentalities that remind us that we are outsiders, not the usual, and not what people expect.

A MC expectation that we frequently run into as faculty is that we are to be reimbursed for conference travel. That is, our universities expect us to attend and present at multiple conferences every year as required by our jobs, yet we are supposed to pay for many of the required expenses out of our own pockets. We had the following exchange about being reimbursed.

*LL: Why does the university expect that I’m going to be able to front this money? Conference presentations matter in terms of merit and promotion. You’re supposed to go to these conferences and present and travel all over the place and spend all of this money but, oh, wait, you spend your money and then we’ll reimburse you. Like, what? We’re just supposed to sit around with \$1,500 worth of charges from a conference to collect interest while they take their sweet time to reimburse you and then bicker about the charges? This bloated university system that forks out tons of money on the daily for any number of things, wants me to float them this \$1,500? I don’t get it.*

*SH: When I first got to UT, we were expected to pay for everything, and then we’d get paid back two months later. I was like, ‘What if I didn’t have a credit card?’ Then, by the time you pay me back, I owe another \$300 because of interest fees, because I didn’t have the money to pay it off that first month. It’s like, they just expect us to be able to pay for these things. It’s ridiculous. I don’t go to conferences overseas because I can’t afford it.*

The assumption that faculty have money just sitting around to spend on required conference travel was not the only finance-related barrier. We also discussed how our MC colleagues perceive and critique how we choose to spend our money.

### Critiques About Our Houses, Clothes, and Families

Many of our colleagues and peers were critical of our houses, clothes, and families, which reminded us of our WC, rural backgrounds. For example, Leslie recalled an incident with a colleague just after she moved to Iowa City and bought her first house.

*LL: When I moved to Iowa City, I bought my first real house. But the houses that I could afford, because it’s just me, I’m one person on a single salary, those houses were not super nice. I found this house that met all of my criteria, plus it was within a mile of campus so I could walk to work. It was a real fixer-upper, but I thought I could figure out how to fix those things. And I did eventually do that and I sold it for a fat profit. But [colleague] told people in our field, at conferences, ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with her. She moved to Iowa City and she bought this hovel.’ She*



*called my house a hovel and told other people that I lived in a hovel. I was like, 'Well, it's not a hovel.' And why do you feel the need to run around and talk shit about the kind of house I can afford?*

In our dialogues, we decided to frame these kinds of interactions as attacks on our personhood or insults to our humanity. That is, some of the MC norms in higher education and those carried by our colleagues affect us and insult who we are as people—they disrespect who we are and where we came from. Oftentimes, insults or attacks came from slights about our clothes or our familial obligations. Leslie shared this anecdote about critiques of her clothes.

**LL:** *I can't tell you how many times other faculty members now or advisors when I was in grad school made some snide comment about my clothes. So, I am from the Midwest. We are more casual here than in the South. So that is one thing they never consider, that my clothes might be a cultural thing, just like their clothes are. But yeah, I have been told that I am '100% casual all the time,' which I am not. And lots of times, hearing that I somehow look like a slob. I don't wear suits to campus or dress up like I am some kind of a corporate woman, because I am not. But I don't think the clothes that I wear to work are sloppy. I like them, and I know what professional clothes are and what is appropriate. All of that is really offensive to me.*

As Leslie reflected on the attacks about her clothes, she discussed the hypocrisy of how some MC women talked about her clothes when they themselves dressed inappropriately:

*Remember in grad school how Dr. Harlow (pseudonym) dressed? She looked like she shopped at Forever 21, and she was an old woman. To me, she just looked so ridiculous all the time. But like, that's okay? Why in the world would that be okay and what I'm wearing is somehow not? And Dr. Winifred (pseudonym) looked like she worked at a shop that sells crystals and magic wands. But I don't tell these people that I think they look weird or I think that their clothes are inappropriate for work. They have every right to look how they want to look. But they sure don't have any qualms about letting me know their opinions.*

Sonya has also experienced critiques about her clothes and her general appearance.

**SH:** *Yeah, there's still this mentality that if I come to work in jeans or if I come to work without makeup or my hair in a ponytail, 'Oh, you look like a student. You don't look like a faculty member.' Or, 'This isn't how we should be dressing in the leadership academy when we're working with people who are going to be superintendents or principals or whatever. We need to dress the way they would dress for work—by wearing a suit and makeup.'*

We both encountered situations where our appearance was critiqued. We were expected to dress or appear a certain way, and as we analyzed this expectation, we realized that we were expected to dress as MC faculty. And further, that we needed to be told how to do so.

Leslie discussed another experience with crashing into MC norms in the academy—that of the expectation that you are supposed to leave your family and their needs at the proverbial campus gate. She noted the insensitivity she experienced from a department leader about her family situation.

*LL: A couple of years ago, I moved home to help take care of my mom who had a massive stroke in 2018. I arranged with the then department head that I needed to do things remotely. We worked out a system. I was having a meeting with a current department leader and she's like, 'What are you going to do with your mom?' I was like, 'What do you mean? I'm going to take care of her.' She's like, 'Well, are you going to move her here? Is there a place that we can have her here? How are you going to be here and there?' I was like, 'Well, I'm going to be here and I will come there when it's necessary.' She was just really rude. If she had somebody in her family that needed her, I wouldn't be like, 'Well, what are you going to do with them?' They act like this job is the most important thing in the world. It's just a job. If I quit, you know what's going to happen? They will find somebody else.*

Leslie summed up these snide remarks and insults when she shared, “Just flippant comments like that. It’s consistent and seems to come from a variety of people. After a while, it’s very weighty and it just gets to you. These people are attacking my personhood.” Critiques have not solely focused on what we look like, what we wear, or our responsibilities to family. Our practical experience, our scholarship, and our preferred methodologies have also been criticized—that is, what we do as professionals.

### **Critiques About Experience, Research, and Methodologies**

Our preparation, practical experience, and research have also been scrutinized. Leslie shared one memory of a colleague’s critique of her professional experience.

*LL: My college is a very quantitative place and people are used to thinking about qualitative work like, 'Oh, that's cute. That's cute that you talk to people and get their stories, but it's not legit.' That's the message I get, loud and clear. A former department leader told me several times that I should change my research agenda. And others have said that I should do quant work. I'm like, what? No. That's not how this works. It's like they really expect me to be naive.*

Sonya was also advised to focus on more quantitative studies rather than continuing her qualitative research.

*SH: Right. Because I'm now an associate, [colleague] is all like, 'Well, now that you're an associate, you need to be publishing only in AERA journals. You need to write grants and do more quant work.' I'm like, 'Where is that in policy? That's not what I value.' I'm not going to play this game where it's all about quant work or it's all about grant writing. That's not what I want to do. That's not what I signed up to do.*

We have felt unsupported in the academy because we are qualitative researchers, and our colleagues value quantitative research over qualitative research. Moreover, we both graduated from the same Ph.D. program, and we were trained in qualitative methodology by Dr. Yvonna Lincoln, one of the most renowned qualitative scholars in the world. We took our qualitative methods courses with Dr. Lincoln, and now we both specialize in qualitative research and teach these methodologies at our universities.

As we reflected on our experiences in the academy, it seems as though we continue to battle and push back on MC norms and expectations, in an environment that is more inclusive in theory than it is in practice. Leslie reflected on this point.

**LL:** *I feel like I am attacked on the inside and the outside. The inside, I mean, what I care about in terms of my research. Then, on the outside, in terms of who I am, what I wear, where I came from, how I choose to take care of my family. I just feel like the chilliness that I have experienced in academia is a result of them interacting with my identities that they don't necessarily embrace.*

We have experienced critiques that are both personal and professional. As we moved through our dialogic conversations, we discussed the diverse ways we negotiated these critiques and our individual responses.

### **Overcompensating, Playing Middle Class, Walking on Eggshells, and Pushing Back**

We discussed different ways we respond to the chilliness, the low expectations, and assumptions of naivete in the academy. Some ways that Sonya responds is by doing what she frames as overcompensating, playing middle class, and walking on eggshells.

**SH:** *I overcompensate for things. I will spend more money on stuff than I will experiences, because I want people to think that I am middle class, so I will have nice stuff. I know that stuff is not important. I realize that, but I overcompensate for growing up and not having anything. For example, when I was a little girl, I bit my nails until they would bleed. I always had dirty fingers or dirty hands because I didn't have anybody who was really making sure I was bathed or whatever. People just knew I was white, trashy poor, because of my hands. Today, I get my nails done all the time because I'm overcompensating for that. I can't stand it when my nails aren't done.*

Sonya went on to explain that she hides her WC background from people in the academia because she is embarrassed, and she is constantly trying to legitimize herself in middle-class society.

**SH:** *I don't tell people my background or my story. I don't let people know that I grew up poor. I don't really tell people that I work with because inside I always feel like that poor little girl from the sticks and trying to play at middle class. I'm trying to fit-in. I always feel like I walk on eggshells around people who grew up differently than I did and don't understand. Then, when they say something about poor kids and that poor kids don't have parents that care, poor kids are lazy, or there'll never be*

*anything, social reproduction blah, blah, blah. I'm afraid to speak up because I don't want them to know, 'Well, that was me.' But it's embarrassing for me to tell people the way that I grew up. My peers did not grow up poor. They grew up in two-parent homes and middle class, and their parents were on school boards or were in the Junior League. They talk about things that I don't know or understand, so I don't have anything to say. I just don't participate.*

Alternatively, Leslie feels compelled to share her story as a means to push back, even though she admits it is not a comfortable exercise.

**LL:** *Since I've learned that my story is something that they see as deficit and deficient, I've just decided to use it. I've told people, like, 'Stop talking about people in poverty as if they are lazy and they don't care about things, because I'm one of those people and I'm here standing in front of you teaching this class.' Or 'I'm here standing in front of you presenting my published research.' Or 'I'm sitting in this faculty meeting too—with you.' I've been much more outspoken about it than I am comfortable with because their comments and actions are just so thoughtless and insensitive, and also wrong. To be honest, it gives me butterflies every time I share my story, but I also feel like I'm taking some power away from them when I share it. I'm just like, 'You know what? This is who I am, I do good work, and I am tired of your presumptions.'*

We have found different ways to cope with the MC norms and values, as well as the critiques in the academy. We understand that our familial and collegiate experiences differ significantly from those of most of our colleagues. As we continued with our dialogic conversations, we reflected on our transition to the academy. We consider ourselves to be WC academics.

### **The Price of the Academy and How We Treat Others**

As we reflected on moving through high school, college, and into the professoriate, we knew our stories differed from those of our colleagues. We did not have linear trajectories in higher education like many of our counterparts. We made it to and through college, with the support of hefty student loans and jobs, and of course, with an independent drive and a respect for education that our mothers ensured we had. We made it similarly to the professoriate. We do not, however, share similar capitals developed from college like many of our colleagues. We shared the following anecdotes about capital and student debt.

**LL:** *It's just perpetuating the social hierarchy. They tell us, 'Go to school!' And they also tell us, 'Take out the loans!' I remember the financial aid people were like, 'Yeah, that money is cheap. The interest is low. If you get all these degrees, you're going to be making more money and so it'll be easy to pay them off.' That's how I remember it. I don't remember anybody hitting the brake pedal like, 'Whoa, just so you know, this is going to be a lot of money. You could buy a house with this money. And here is how much you are going to make.' But there's that narrative—take out all the money*

*because it's going to equalize you somehow. Well, when, in fact, the people with the money, they of course come out without any or much debt, but they also get all of these other perks and opportunities that we can't take advantage of because we have to work constantly while they're going to the sorority mixers or while they're going on study abroad trips for a semester here or there or making strategic connections. I certainly don't regret my degrees. I don't regret going to college. I learned a lot. But at the same time, it was like, 'Well, I'm not financially so much better. I don't know, I mean maybe I could get a job without a degree making 80 grand. But still, how am I supposed to pay off all this student debt? Unless I live to be 150 years old, I will never see a zero balance.*

Sonya shared a similar narrative with regard to capital:

*Yes, I took on a large amount of student debt to get my PhD because I wanted to be a college professor. I didn't have the same doctoral experience as my colleagues. I worked as a school principal and had to commute two hours for my classes. Consequently, I did not have the opportunity to do research with my professors. I have colleagues who only had to be Grad Students and had amazing opportunities to do research and travel with their professors. They came into the professoriate with grant experience, numerous publications, awards, and travel experiences. They had capital that I did not have, and they are heralded by my administrators as superior research scholars. Even though I have successful leadership experience as a school principal, and they do not, my background and experience are not as valued.*

Although we are concerned about our student debt and lack of social capital, we feel we gained what we could in our graduate programs and now open doors for others as a result. This is perhaps the most important lesson we learned—the ability to attend and graduate college from a WC background comes with a responsibility to expand access and opportunity for others. Sonya aptly makes this point:

**SH:** *I think this is another factor that feeds into my outsiderhood along with, I just didn't grow up like MC people did. Here's one thing that I know. Both you and I have been hired to be consultants in various capacities, and I think for you, in working with people on equity and justice issues and how just to be a good human being, you bring that to the table. For me, it's in leadership and human relations and how you treat employees and how you be inclusive of different people and ideas and be empowering. It's like, both of us come from this mindset of it's really about how you treat other people and how you make other people feel valued. That is something that people like the [MC colleagues] of the world, they don't get it. They don't understand it because they've never been undervalued. They've never been looked down upon, they've never felt like nothing. How can you teach them empathy? How can you teach them to be kind? How can you teach them to understand what others are going through when they've never had to go through anything like that? I think that is an asset, and it's because of our*

*backgrounds, because of everything that we've been through, that we want people just to be good people. Just be a decent human being, and provide all the access and opportunity you can.*

Even though we have effectively 'made it to the other side,' that is, we are professors working in the academy—as we have described, we still experience what we frame as low expectations and stereotypes about our abilities and ambitions. These low expectations do not always stem from inside the academy. We have seen that our success is an anomaly to people outside of academia as well. Apparently, we do not fit the stereotypes of “professor.”

### ***Defying the Stereotypes***

We had the following exchange about how old friends and new acquaintances alike react when they learn that we are professors.

**SH:** *This summer, I met with [old friends from high school] and Joe (pseudonym) says, 'Well, imagine that. Who would've ever thought that poor little white trashy Sonya would grow up to be a college professor and a doctor?' I was like, 'Really?' And my friend Jane [pseudonym] was just like, 'Oh, I just can't believe that you've done so much with your life. You're so successful.'*

**LL responded:** *Yeah, I guess we are really defying the stereotypes! I've had those kinds of things too, where people will say, 'You are a professor?' Like, they are shocked. Recently, I was talking with a neighbor, and he asked, 'So what do you do again?' I said, 'I'm a professor at the University of Iowa.' And he stopped what he was doing and said, 'No way!' Like loud. I said, 'I know. Nobody believes it.' Sometimes I don't even like to tell people when they ask me what I do because they certainly don't picture me when they think of a professor. Maybe I will start making up something instead of saying that I'm a professor, like, I'm a bear trapper, or a dog food taster, or a snake milker. Maybe that is more believable. They would probably have an easier time believing that, because the professor stuff really throws them for a loop.*

Perhaps the most difficult assessment of our experiences in our educational attainment was the stories of the “shock and awe” of others who knew us as poor girls from WC families and their disbelief of our success. Both of us acknowledge that people from our past expected so little of us, and some people even expected us to struggle. Our mothers worked very hard in WC jobs, and they wanted *more* for us, although they did not know exactly what *more* was. As we engage in our scholarly work in a MC space, we still are pushed against MC expectations and biases against WC individuals. The shock factor from MC peers of our success in their world is perhaps the most painful because, in many ways, we are still seen as the white trashy girls from the sticks who are playing middle class.



## Discussion of the Findings

Our dialogic conversations resulted in restoried narratives regarding our personal experiences in K12, college, and as academics from WC and rural backgrounds. The analyses produced six major themes: (1) independence and other benefits of having a working-class mom; (2) crashing into middle-class norms and expectations; (3) lucking and falling into college; (4) fish out of water; (5) overcompensating, playing middle class, walking on eggshells, and pushing back; and (6) the price of the academy and how we treat others. We now discuss these themes in relation to the literature.

Our mothers instilled in us a strong sense of independence and problem-solving skills. They also started and perpetuated strong narratives about education and manoeuvred as best as they could to ensure that we had access to quality schooling. We credit our mothers with our abilities to resist and persist. Like other rural children, our mothers instilled in us a strong work ethic (Means et al., 2016), which empowered us to persevere throughout our careers. We recognize our battles are molehills compared to our mothers' mountains. Our mothers, however, would likely be disappointed that our rural schools did not pick up the education narrative where they left it. Sadly, this is not unusual.

Rural students, and especially those from the WC, are often left out of the conversation about higher education as well as the preparation for college (Aronson, 2008). We found this to be true in our experiences, having graduated without a supportive hand from our schools to help us make that transition. Rather, for us, we each had individuals in our lives who opened the proverbial door to college—as we recalled, it was more luck than anything else.

In college, we struggled to belong (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), not understanding that we should or how we could engage in capital producing activities (Almeida et al. 2021; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Our lack of social capital compared to our colleagues in the academy remains clear. That is, not only has it been made unnecessarily explicit to us on numerous occasions, but we feel it every day. Our low-income and WC roots are visible and visceral.

As we think about the literature and our findings, we see we are not so unlike other WC academics who came before us. Institutions have not changed much in the almost three decades since Dews and Law (1995) published their text inclusive of stories from WC academics like those we share here. Perhaps we are naïve, too idealistic about the academy and all that it and we can accomplish. As our stories demonstrate, we feel the dual-edged sword of higher education. We have felt the attacks on our personhood—a chipping away at our humanity, as well as the impact of crashing into MC norms and values—challenges to belonging and socialization. We have questioned the social mobility we assumed would result from, as Leslie noted, having figured it out, and making it all the way... to the academy.

WC people often are not able to get as much out of higher education as MC people, simply because they do not have the time. They cannot holistically engage with the institution and all it offers (and build related social capital) because they are working and/or have familial obligations. Thus, the meritocratic ways and means of the academy often highlight inequities based on class, despite their missions and larger aspirations around access and opportunity.

We continue to experience stereotyping, classist norms and policies, and others' disbelief in our success. Although we have both obtained terminal degrees from a respected university and work at R1 institutions, we encounter people who use “white trash” when expressing their disbelief at our success. We often feel like outsiders in the academy; that is, we are still fish out of water, trying to find a sense of belonging in the academy (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). As Sonya explained, she often finds herself ‘playing middle-class’ and noted how she works to overcompensate for her poor, rural background, and she keeps her backstory to herself (Crozier & Clayton, 2019; Hurst,

2010). In contrast, Leslie noted that she uses her backstory and upbringing as a means to push back against the white trash stereotype. Thus, we struggle with a constant figuring of the risk-to-benefit ratio of exposing ourselves and disclosing/sharing our stories and backgrounds. Essentially, we walk on eggshells.

Stories are a means to healing and wholeness (Nash & Viray, 2014). Sharing our stories here is way for us to continue to make sense of and figure out who we are in the academy—how can we bring our whole selves to campus—a place that was not built with us in mind (Bourdieu et al., 1994) and continues to perpetuate this norm. While we shared many stories here that are painful, we assert that we love what we do. We believe in education and its ability to change people’s lives. Ibarra and Lineback (2005) suggested that “only love, life, and death could be more important” (para. 9) than one’s career. Our careers are important to us. We feel fortunate to have the opportunity to move the world forward—to contribute knowledge, and to provide access and opportunity—even a little bit, through our research, teaching, and service. We see our work as a means to do good in the world and for others. We hope that sharing our stories is a means to push back and expand access and opportunity for more students and faculty who may not fall nicely into white, MC norms and expectations of the academy. At a minimum, we hope they spark a conversation about change.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Our stories as WC women working in the academy can challenge traditional narratives around faculty in higher education institutions. We offer a diverse perspective that highlights issues of social mobility, challenges stereotypes, and underscores the importance of inclusivity in higher education. We hope that our experiences may inspire others with similar backgrounds to pursue academic careers. Additionally, we hope that higher education continues to develop into a more diverse and accepting space with appropriate changes to best meet the needs of WC people. That is, we hope that institutions of higher education critique and wrestle with how meritocracy is manifested through norms, values, and expectations—and how it continues to perpetuate inequities rather than expand access and opportunity, particularly for WC people.

Although we share similar backgrounds and experiences, we recognize that our experiences are unique to our positionalities. As white women, we realize that our experiences cannot be generalized to other women, especially women of color, who not only have to contend with issues of gender bias but also racism. We recommend that other researchers consider exploring how women of color from working-class backgrounds experience their educational attainment and socialization into higher education. We recognize that as women who attended rural schools, our experiences cannot be generalized to all rural schools, and other researchers may consider exploring K-12 conditions that support low-income rural students to successfully navigate postsecondary readiness and attainment. Finally, our narratives are from a duoethnographic research design, and data were collected through our self-reported stories. Other researchers may want to collect data from multiple sources to explore the experiences of faculty who hail from WC backgrounds.

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### Notes on Contributors

**Sonya D. Hayes, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee. Her research interests include leadership development for both pre- and in-service school principals, qualitative research methods, and rural students' post-secondary attainment.

**Leslie Ann Locke, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her research interests include leadership for justice and equity, schooling for students from systemically marginalized groups, equity-oriented education policy, and qualitative methodologies.

### ORCID

**Sonya D. Hayes**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6826-2117>

**Leslie Ann Locke**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7042-3840>