Empirical Article

"Originally I Came from the Least of Society": Making Sense of International Students' Understandings of Social Class through Emotional Commentaries

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

To fully understand how socio-economic backgrounds shape the university experiences of international students, cross-national measures of social class are needed. This paper offers a contribution to understandings of social class cross-nationally through semi-structured interviews with sixteen international students. It argues that an emphasis on international students' emotional commentaries may offer important insights into subjective understandings of social class that may not otherwise be identified. Participants were able to locate themselves within the societal structure of their own country with conceptualizations of "top," "middle," and "bottom" related to income differentials. Emotional injuries relating to a sense of "working-class-ness" were evident in international students' narratives with hope, fear, and shame prevalent in these accounts. The findings from this study can inform tailored international student support provision, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the university experience of this group, and challenge the narrative that all international students are "privileged".

Keywords: cross-national, emotion, international students, social class, socioeconomic background

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Introduction

Countries around the world are moving towards "mass" higher education systems and the diversity in student

bodies are likely to increase further (Gesing & Glass, 2018; Van Mol, 2019). Nonetheless, international students are typically perceived as a homogeneous group, coming from privileged backgrounds (Garrison et al., 2023; Lee, 2022). However, a more fine-grained analysis of the demographic characteristics of international students shows a more complex picture with a proportion of this group increasingly coming from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Garrison et al., 2023; Ploner, 2017; Schartner & Shields, 2023). To fully understand the experiences of international students in relation to socio-economic background, measures of socio-economic background need to be meaningful cross-nationally. In the UK, the concept of social class is prevalent (Marsden, 2023). Furthermore, the UK is the second biggest recruiter of international students globally (Statista, 2023) with more than 600,000 students from overseas studying at UK universities (UUKI, 2022). Social class is known to have a significant impact on the experience of university for "home" students namely domestic UK students (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2010). However, social class is not necessarily conceptually meaningful for students from all countries. For example, Jin and Ball (2021, p. 610) comment that in the People's Republic of China (the biggest sending country of international students to the UK) "the discourse of class is infrequently addressed". This contrasts with seminal "Western" understandings based on economic stratification within societies (Marx, 1867/2018).

Social class can be understood conceptually in relation to economic inequality resulting in social stratification (e.g. Marx, 1867/2018) with the later "cultural turn" considering lifestyles and identities (Jackson, 2008; Sayer, 2018). "Das Kapital" (Marx, 1867/2018) highlighted economic inequities in society, arguing that society was divided into the "bourgeoisie" - the owners of the means of production and the "proletariat" - those who sell their labor to the bourgeoisie. Weber (in Gerth & Mills, 2014), however, perceived class as more than unequally distributed economic resources, identifying three facets to stratification in society: class, status, and party. "Class" being related to qualifications and occupations, with professionals typically having higher salaries and better working conditions in comparison to manual workers; "status" recognizing lifestyles and shared identities, and "party" focusing on group memberships, such as religion. The concept of class arguably should tell us about experiences, lifestyles, and life chances (Sayer, 2005).

Current conceptions of social class are based upon four stratified groups broadly related to occupation. First, the upper class is a minority group in society characterised by very high levels of wealth and power but are diverse in their origins, for example: aristocracy, celebrities, and transnational business owners. Second, professionals, managers and non-manual higher-grade occupations constitute the middle-class. The term "middle-classes" is often viewed as a more accurate term (Grimson et al., 2023) due to significant stratification and differentiation within this group in relation to income and qualifications. Third, the working-class are skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers again with some significant variation in relation to income and qualifications. Furthermore, theorists such as Goldthorpe et al. (1969) with the seminal study "The affluent worker in the class structure" suggested that increased incomes resulted in lifestyles offering greater disposable income and more opportunities for consumerism. Therefore, individuals with jobs objectively classified as "working-class" were likely to perceive themselves as middle-class because of higher incomes. The "working classes" in the "Global North" (Collyer, 2018) have shrunk over time as more opportunities in professional and service occupations have developed and manufacturing industries have declined. Fourth, the "precariat" (sometimes described as the "underclass" by right-wing commentators) are likely to be long-term unemployed or homeless. Overall, there is likely to be stratification within classes as well as between classes – in part related to diversity in occupation, but also in relation to styles of living. Nevertheless, the structural impact of economic inequalities should be explored as individuals experiencing deprivation are unlikely to view this as a lifestyle choice.

Conceptual Framework

This study's focus is on exploring subjective understandings of social class using the conceptual framework of Reference Group Theory (Bott, 1954; Merton, 1968). Contemporary understandings of social class frequently use objective measures such as level of education and occupation. Occupation is typically used as an objective measure of social class as those in similar occupations are likely to experience corresponding levels of social advantage (or disadvantage) with comparable lifestyles and opportunities. Several lifestyle metrics in relation to, for example, health (Elo, 2009) and levels of disposable income (Sánchez-González & García-Fernández, 2020) can be inferred from these objective measures of social class. However, the use of objective measures related to occupation and educational opportunities is problematic when there is so much diversity in the opportunities that are likely to be available across

countries. The challenge of making sense of objective measures of social class comparatively across countries indicates that subjective measures are also required.

Studies have drawn upon subjective self-identification of socio-economic backgrounds (such as Trappmann et al., 2021; Xu, 2021) as being an important aspect of making sense of participants' experiences. Whilst subjective understandings of social class are important, unfortunately they are not a panacea (Oesch & Vigna, 2023). Subjective understandings of inequality are challenged by not necessarily correlating with objective measures, such as income. Furthermore, a belief in meritocracy can skew understandings of inequality (Littler, 2017; Mijs et al., 2022). Asahina (2022) argues that participants' perceptions of inequalities are shaped by: worth (related to "success" in the labor market), agency (the extent to which individuals believe in the possibility of a change in their structural location in society) and identity (shaped by comparison with others, with upward comparisons more likely to increase a sense of inequality). Hence, similar levels of inequality can be identified by participants as tolerable or intolerable in diverse cultural contexts, thereby making cross-national comparisons problematic (Asahina, 2022).

The level of income inequality within a country is likely to influence where a less socio-economically advantaged individual locates themselves within the social strata, as the least wealthy in society increasingly recognise that their lifestyles do not match those of others. However, it appears that the wealthiest in society are always aware of their economic advantages, therefore regardless of levels of income inequality in society, they are still more likely to subjectively position themselves towards the top of society. Therefore, the extent to which a country is characterised by economic inequality will impact most upon the subjective social positioning of the least advantaged socio-economically (Duman, 2020; Irwin, 2015; Kuhn, 2019). Greater economic inequality will increase the number of individuals identifying as being at the "bottom" of society. However, Reference Group Theory (Bott, 1954; Merton, 1968) is supported empirically with participants locating themselves in the middle of society regardless of how their social positioning may be understood with more objective measures, as they compare themselves with others in their social circle (Hvidberg et al., 2020). Furthermore, this comparison may encourage or discourage social mobility (Leites & Ramos, 2019). A greater understanding of the socio-economic backgrounds of international students is imperative if universities are to fully understand the opportunities for social mobility for this group, alongside any challenges they may encounter.

Literature Review

Two key challenges in identifying "working-class" international students are first, the lack of transferability of objective measures of social class across countries and second, the likelihood of subjectively misidentifying oneself as being in the "middle" of society. For both "home", namely domestic students, and "international" students coming from a less advantaged socio-economic background is likely to have a significant impact on university experience, therefore measures to identify socio-economic status are important. Given the significant impact that socio-economic background can have on experiences of university (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2010), an effective and nuanced approach is needed to understand and recognize this demographic characteristic to ensure that this under-identified group of students is effectively supported by their institutions.

In the UK, domestic students from less privileged backgrounds can be identified relatively easily because of a range of data collected when they apply to university. Consequently, the "student experience" literature recognizes and identifies this group, with concerns for them to develop a sense of belonging at university (Shields, 2021). "Home" university students from low socio-economic backgrounds have lower retention and progression rates in comparison to their socio-economically advantaged counterparts. Student attrition is associated with more fragile academic identities, familial commitments and financial pressures meaning they are a group of students less likely to thrive within a higher education context (Matschke et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies on the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds have identified "visible and hidden injuries of class" (Christie 2009; Sayer, 2005, p. 187; Reay, 2005). Research focused on emotions has considered the development of "student identity" in relation to financial, social, and cultural pressures for students without familial backgrounds of higher education (Christie, 2009).

Whilst this paper highlights the difficulties in defining social class across countries (Heisig et al., 2020; Linos & West, 2003; Marks, 2005), the emotional injuries of social class are pervasive (Reay, 2005). The relationship between emotion and class-based inequities can be effectively encapsulated as "emotional responses to the inequalities and

struggles of the social field and how people negotiate them are to be taken seriously both because they matter to people, and because they generally reveal something about their situation and welfare" (Sayer, 2005, p. 37).

Regardless of the academic debates about the term "class", Sayer (2005, p. 15) identifies that "it continues to be "a loaded moral signifier in everyday life". Simply, emotions can be described as "something people experience" (Scheer, 2012, p. 195) and that "emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social lives" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 1). Generally, the socially constructed nature of emotions is widely accepted (Sayer, 2005) and there have long been concerns about if cross-culturally the same emotions can be experienced (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992), for example pride at passing an exam may be interpreted differently in an individualistic or collectivist culture. There is some evidence that culture may influence the valuation of emotions (Miyamoto et al., 2017). However, Nussbaum (2001, p. 159) argues that "behavioral universality can be accepted in the case of some emotions without at all compromising a case for cultural variation." Sayer (2005, p. 37) concurs stating "emotions like anger, happiness, pride and shame appear to be common to all cultures." For example, there is evidence of universality in how people recognize emotions in facial expressions (Finch & Fernández, 2019). Therefore, further consideration of emotional commentaries could be considered when trying to understand the university experience of international students.

Method

This study used an explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design (Ivankova et al., 2006) which included a quantitative self-report online questionnaire, used as a scoping tool, and semi-structured individual interviews used to explore the lived experiences of international students from less privileged backgrounds. The quantitative findings from the self-report scoping questionnaire are reported elsewhere (Schartner & Shields, 2023). A key research objective of the project was to discern the impact of socio-economic background on international students' identities, their experiences of university life and understandings of mobility. Considering this the qualitative interview schedule incorporated two interview questions which are the focus of the analysis in this paper:

        1. What do you understand by the term "social class"?
        2. How would you describe your position in society in your country?

Data Collection

Sixteen interviews were carried out by students self-selecting to voluntarily participate, based on an identification with the term "socio-economically less advantaged". Four participants self-identified as "working-class" with nine participants describing themselves currently as "lower middle-class". Seven students were undertaking Postgraduate Research (PGR), for example a PhD. Five students were undertaking a Postgraduate Taught programme (PGT), for example a master's degree. Four students were undertaking an Undergraduate degree (UG), for example a BA or BSc. The UK higher education system is stratified in terms of "prestige". Russell Group universities are research intensive and score highly in league tables with competitive admission policies for students. "Plate Glass" universities were built in the 1960s during a period of university expansion and these universities also score highly in terms of "prestige". "Red brick" universities were historically regional colleges of established universities, but typically gained university status in the earlier half of the twentieth century. Similarly, to "Plate Glass" universities, some "Red Brick" universities are part of the Russell Group, but not all as indicated in Table 1. Post-1992 institutions were historically polytechnics (focusing on vocational higher degrees) and they gained university status in 1992. Their long tradition of teaching has meant that they do not typically have the research funding associated with Russell Group universities and the concomitant "prestige". They tend to have inclusive access policies for university students. Seven of our participants were studying at Russell Group universities, three were studying at a post-1992 institution, one at a "Plate Glass" university, one at a "Red Brick" university and four at non-English universities.

Table 1

Demographic vignettes of interviewees

Interviewee	Host university	Demographic background
1	UK "Post-1992"	37-year-old female self-funded master's student from Sri Lanka who supports her children in Sri Lanka with paid employment in the UK. Self-identifies as 'lower middle class'.
2	UK "Russell Group"	Female Chinese undergraduate student between 18-21 years of age. Family work very hard in China to support UK study. Self-identifies as 'working class'.
3	UK "Plate Glass"	Female Italian doctoral student between 31-35 years of age. Receives a fully funded PhD studentship. Self-identifies as 'in the middle'.
4	UK "Russell Group"	Female undergraduate student from the Czech Republic between 21-25 years of age. Started studying in the UK prior to Brexit. Receives a scholarship and undertakes paid employment (35-55 hours/week). Self identifies as 'lower middle-class'
5	UK "Red Brick"	30-year-old female Chinese doctoral student. Parental anxiety about the cost and benefit of the PhD they are funding. Self-identifies as 'working-class'.
6	UK "Russell Group"	Male Indonesian master's (International Business Management) student between 21-25 years of age. Studied a Foundation year and BA at a UK university before starting master's degree after returning to Indonesia for two years. Self-identifies as 'high above average middle-class.
7	UK "Post-1992"	Female Algerian doctoral student between 26-30 years of age. Receives full scholarship from home country. Describes feeling income and status as 'taboo'.
8	UK "Russell Group"	Male Indonesian master's (International Business Management) student between 31-35 years of age. Funding from employer and own savings. Self-identifies as 'at the entry level of the middle-class'
9	UK "Post-1992"	Male doctoral student from Uganda 36+ years of age. Received full scholarship. Self-identifies as 'lower middle income'.
10	UK "Russell Group"	Male Indonesian master's (International Business Management) student between 21-25 years of age. Reliant on family financial support. Self-identifies as 'when I live on my own maybe lower class'.
11	UK "Russell Group"	Female undergraduate (Biomedical Sciences) student from Singapore/Malaysia between 21-25 years of age. Financial support from father but requires part-time employment. Self-identifies as 'working class'.
12	Kazakh university	Male Indian undergraduate student (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery) between 21-25 of age. Funded by parents. Self-identifies as 'belonging to a middle-class family'.
13	Hungarian university	Female Colombian doctoral student between 31-35 years of age. Grew up in financial difficulties. First person in family to go to university. Self-identifies as 'low, close to medium'.
14	UK "Russell Group"	Female Chinese master's student between 21-25 years of age. Relies on financial support from family. Self-identifies as ''I think it is the lower…it is not very rich'.
15	Scottish university	Female doctoral student from the USA, 36+ years of age. Received scholarship. Self-identifies as 'lower middle-class.
16	Scottish university	Self-funded female Chinese doctoral student between 31-35 year of age. Self-identifies as 'lower middle class'.

A narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2016) was adopted as a powerful way of capturing stories and identifying commonalities across stories. The narrative semi-structured interviews were carried out by an international Postgraduate Research Student who was a bilingual Mandarin-English speaker. She offered (where relevant) interviews in Mandarin as well as English and the option for in-person or online interviews. Mindful of potential power dynamics at play in the process of interviewing (Edwards & Holland, 2013), we ensured that the interviewer had no prior relationship with any of the interviewees. The interviewer's positionality as an international postgraduate student and therefore "cultural insider" (Ganga & Scott, 2006) allowed her to establish a rapport with the participants. The interviews were often one hour and thirty minutes long, as students opened up about the "emotional injuries" based on their social class backgrounds and their personal quests for social mobility. The average interview time was 54 minutes. Each participant had the opportunity to member check their transcript and one participant took the opportunity to do this. The focus of our interview call had been for "socio-economically less advantaged" participants. Consequently, three transcripts are not discussed in this paper (one participant was uncertain about their own structural location in society with too many contradictions to aid meaningful analysis and two participants had a strongly middle-class background and had participated in the study because they had wanted to learn about research interviews).

Data Analysis

The research team analysed the transcripts separately using NVivo following a 6-step procedure that included (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) coding excerpts relevant to the research question, (3) grouping excerpts into potential themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) assigning meaningful labels, and (6) selecting compelling data extracts to illustrate the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).   The identified themes were then discussed and cross-checked to form a robust peer debrief and audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Ethics

The study was approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee at the institution where the research team is employed. The interviewer was able to signpost participants to university support services if there were any concerns raised about mental health or finances (Hunter-Johnson, 2022). The researchers were mindful of the need for confidentiality and anonymity for participants (BERA, 2018), but also were concerned about the culturally sensitivity/appropriateness of any pseudonyms adopted, consequently, in this paper participants are identified by a number, e.g., "Interviewee 1" (see Table 1).

Findings

Theme 1: Cross-national challenges

Understandings of social class depend on factors such as culture and the extent of real and perceived social and economic inequalities. However, there are wide-ranging differences in political histories, religious affiliations, and different economic/employment opportunities in the countries of origin for international students. All of which can influence understandings of social class and therefore make comparative understanding of international students' experiences of university in relation to socio-economic background difficult. Participant 4 exemplifies the idea that class as a concept was not part of the political history of her country of origin: "The Czech Republic was under the rule of Communists for decades, and there weren't really any classes". It has been suggested, for example, that former Communist countries have a greater legacy of societal beliefs in equality (Evans & Kelley, 2004). Whereas for other international students it appeared that religious beliefs which express hierarchical views about society were influential in their understanding of class, such as for Interviewee 8: "Basically because I came from Indonesia, we know a little bit about class stratification or class in our history is quite related to Hindu culture".

For others, it appeared that the economic foundations of a country and the career opportunities available were likely to shape understandings of social class. This is significant as countries in the Global South are typically characterised as having a small minority of wealthy individuals demonstrating conspicuous consumption in comparison to a majority experiencing poverty. Interviewee 9 gave an example of social class based on the experience of living in a country with largely agricultural employment opportunities: "It could be land, cows, cattle, chickens, areas of your forest. If one has more and can therefore influence the rest by what he/she owns. She or he will be seen as a higher social class."

It could be anticipated that coming from a Global South country would increase the likelihood of participants' subjective social positioning as identifying as being below the middle of society. Subjective social positioning scales typically use 10 – 1 (with 10 being the highest structural location in society and 1, the lowest). Yet, most participants in the Evans & Kelley (2004) study from the Philippines (their only Global South country) still only identified as being just below the middle of society in strata 6. This could be compared to the United States of America (USA) as the richest country in the world and is characterised as the most unequal country in the Global North. Yet participants from the USA in Evans and Kelley (2004) subjectively identified their social standing as: 30% in strata 5 (middle of scale) and 17% in strata 6 (just below the middle). The fact that subjects from countries differing in their proportions of "professional" and "unskilled" labour can both identify as being part of the "middle" of society can appear puzzling at the outset. Furthermore, this does not easily aide the analysis of how socio-economic background impacts upon educational experiences, with overall, the likelihood of subjects indicating a "working-class" status is relatively low regardless of country (Evans & Kelley, 2004). Reference Group Theory suggests that individuals tend to identify as being part of the middle strata in society based upon a recognition of being similar in terms of income, occupation and educational levels as their family and friends (Pittau & Zelli, 2021). However, broader understandings of wealth distribution in countries of origin were clear amongst our interview participants. For instance, Interviewee 15 stated that "an American standpoint, social class would be like if you are poor or middle-class or richer or upper-class."

> My understanding is basically like there's the people who are wealthy like the higher class, those upper-class. And then there you have the middle-class, which is kind of like they're rich, but they're not as rich. And then you obviously have like the lower class. (Interview 11, BSc, female, Malaysia)

Therefore, despite conceptual challenges for cross-national understandings of social class in relation to political histories, religious affiliation, and employment opportunities, it appears that real or perceived levels of inequality within a society will influence conceptions of stratification in terms of individual subjective social positioning. This also challenges the "death of class" discourse. Several theorists have argued that "class is dead" (Pakulski & Waters 2019; Beck, 1992). It is argued that "class-based cultures, identities and communities fade away in this individualised society of employees" (Caínzos & Voces, 2010, p. 386). Inequalities become individualised as a person's situation is largely contingent on their own choices. Pakulski & Waters (2019) suggest that we are living in a postmodern world and consequently class inequalities have been exchanged for strata based on lifestyles with consumption patterns, opinions and tastes replacing identities shaped by social class. However, social class as a term has challenging analytical issues (Pittau & Zelli, 2021), therefore, the "death of class" becomes an elusive concept. Studies relating to political behaviors, such as voting have tested the "death of class" thesis and have concluded that: "across countries with quite different economic, social and political arrangements and histories do not square with a picture of general class decomposition – and, more specifically, of a break down in class politics" (Caínzos & Voces, 2010, p. 407). Furthermore, international students are likely to have additionally sophisticated understanding of socio-economic status as they compare themselves transnationally with "old" and "new" reference groups in their country of origin and in their study location (Tu & Nehring, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2020). Consequently, a participant's understanding of societal structures and their own subjective position within this are needed to aid transferability of conceptualizations of social class across different countries (Trappmann et al., 2021).

Theme 2: "Top", "middle" or "bottom" - Intragenerational self-identification of social class

Intragenerational mobility is the change over time of an individual's location in the occupational structure. Thus, the temporal element of subjective social positioning is important for understandings of social class. Furthermore, Sayer

(2005, p. 188) identifies research participants as displaying "embarrassment about class." It was possibly a combination of these factors that resulted in our interview participants tending to "identify in the middle" as indicated by Reference Group Theory (e.g. Evans & Kelley, 2004). Eleven of the sixteen international students that we interviewed identified as "middle-class", albeit nine of these having recently moved into the "lower" middle-class from working-class backgrounds. However, for these nine participants who perceived themselves to be "lower" middle-class, this identification was to do with conceptions of upward mobility and difference from their natal backgrounds, rather than a similarity of background to others as suggested by Reference Group Theory. This may be related to living in a country where greater opportunities for social mobility are perceived, and an individual may believe that they have good long-term opportunities for enhancing their position within society (Heuer et al., 2020). The analysis indicated a tendency for participants to understand "being middle-class" in a plural sense - recognizing stratification within the "middle-classes". For example, a doctoral student from Uganda explained that "right now, I understand myself as lower middle income, but originally I came from the least of the society" (Interviewee 9). Similarly, a doctoral student from the USA stated "I consider myself – the thing is I grew up in a poor location because I have six brothers and sisters, and it's just like really, but I consider myself lower middle-class right now… I think it's a lot to do with education" (Interview 15).

> We are also divided something like 'estado' [Status]… which is like for example 1,2,3,4,5,6 – so like 0,1,2 is low and 3 is middle-class… I think that mine is from like low, close to medium, because we own a house, like I grew up in my grandmother's house. So at least we had property, so we didn't pay rent. However, it was like the place where everybody lives, like my uncles, my mum… I am the first person like in this family who got an education. (Interview 13, PhD, female, Columbia)

> I think it is because of how much I get from my jobs, and how much saving do I have in my bank account. I think it is a little bit in the middle, at the entry level of the middle-class… I come from a worker class family. My family don't have a good fortune to feed me enough, to fund me enough for my good education. (Interview 8, PGT, male, Indonesia)

However, this tendency for our interviewees to identify as "lower middle-class" meant that they were unlikely to be identified as a group of students in need of university support structures. Yet, the "balance between privilege and precarity in ISM is being drawn into stark relief exactly because of the diversification and stratification of the geographies, socio-economic characteristics and implications of educational migration" (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 353).

Theme 3: "Hope" and "fear" - education as a gateway to upward social mobility
The emotion of hope was imbued into the international students' accounts of what they felt would be the transformative power of education through a belief in meritocracy for upward social mobility. Nussbaum (2001, p. 146) comments that hope is an emotion with a "robust sense of future possibility" and furthermore hope is one emotion that is cross-culturally relevant: "all known societies contain some varieties of anger, hope and grief" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 152). The international student's accounts were infused with hope for education as a vehicle for future upward social mobility. Interviewee 1 (PGT, female, Sri Lanka) explained "so I thought it'll be a good idea if I'm going to promote in that sector and climb the ladder. Then I thought that it'll be a good idea to study a master." Similarly, Interviewee 2 (UG, female, China) said "my dream job is like that you can travel around the world."

> I do think that I want to do a master's degree as well. Um, because especially if I still want to pursue translation and interpreting or interpreting, especially it is kind of expected, I think, of you to have a master's degree, because it is a pretty ambitious profession. But I also know that I'm probably not going to be able to immediately become an interpreter, because, as far as my experience. So maybe either try and spend more time in French and German-speaking countries to get my language to be even better. (Interview 4, UG, female, Czech Republic)

Sayer (2005, p. 202) comments "in the case of the upwardly mobile, it may even take the form of a heroic narrative in which the individual overcomes the injustice of a lowly class position and moves upwardly by her own

efforts… they have made it into the middle-class because they are worthy people." However, our international students' accounts were also infused with fear and uncertainty about if their educational mobility project would be successful and several caveats about its likely success were evident amongst the interview participants. Interviewee 1 (PGT, female, Sri Lanka) explained "after university, of course, I will have to find a job in the related field. If not, I will continue to do the caring job."

Cos I don't know if I can earn what I cost for my studying abroad in the future. In terms of the risk, mine is much higher than the higher class... as I said, high risk and high cost and we don't know the results. There might be some unexpected or uncertain things. The unexpected and uncertainty, they always happen. They always occur, and my family just thought they are unsure about the high risk and this high cost, whether it is worthy. (Interview 5, PGR, female, China)

And I won't say that I'm trying to get to middle class, but I would like to be financially free… so my plan is to graduate hopefully, if I can find work in the UK, I'll just work here. If all else fails, I plan to go back to Singapore and then work full time there… And then after that see if I want to continue pursuing a further education which I most likely will, because my aim is to do like forensic anthropology. So that I think is very specialized. You need like PhD or Masters for that. I'm not sure. (Interview 11, female, UG, Singapore and Malaysia)

The fear and anxiety of being successful beyond educational achievement permeated the accounts of the international students in this study. The recognition that academic success is not a guarantee of future economic success has been identified in working-class "home" students concerns about "risk versus reward" in going to university. However, these emotions of fear and anxiety have largely not been associated with international students as they are typically perceived as being part of a privileged transnational elite, with emotional concerns typically focusing on academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment to the host country (Schartner & Young, 2020). Sayer (2005, p. 36) identifies "emotions are *about* something, particularly things which are important to our well-being and which we value, and yet which are not fully within our control". This lack of control over the future is evident amongst this group of international students and these emotional commentaries are clearly tied up with financial concerns, much like those identified in Christie's (2009) study of students from widening participation backgrounds.

Theme 4: "Shame" - signifiers of financial impoverishment

The shame associated with financial impoverishment which identified the students as being "different" was present in both past recollections of childhood as well as current accounts in relation to how this impacted upon their experience of university.

So we couldn't really afford to buy enough clothes, and we don't have the uniforms at school in Italy. So it would be visible that I'm wearing the same jumper and the same pair of trousers for a year. It's quite visible the difference between children and I could not attend friends' birthday party because I could not afford to buy a present to go to the party. It was very visible as a child to come from a different economic situation. (Interview 3, female, PhD, Italy).

This chimes with Sayer (2005, p. 188) who identifies research participants as displaying "embarrassment about class". "Shame follows an attribution for failure to an internal and uncontrollable cause" (Graham & Taylor, 2014, p. 101). Graham and Taylor (2014) further discuss the extent of emotional injury caused by shame citing disengagement and the desire for invisibility. Our interviewees described the emotion of shame as a response to signifiers of financial impoverishment, such as differences in clothes, social activities and living accommodation. "Othering" is a comparison between oneself and others: "as a form of social comparison, othering usually frames a perspective of one's feeling of superiority or inferiority… the result of all comparisons… will evoke emotions and impact self-image" (DeCuir-Gunby & Williams-Johnson, 2014, p. 548).

When I was doing my MA in the UK, some Chinese students are very interested in other's family financial status by looking at the cosmetics you use, your clothes and food, even where you live. All can indicate your social class. For example, Vita [student accommodation chain]. When everyone knows the price of all accommodation, if you speak up where you live, it indicates your financial status and social class. Someone would visit my home and my decoration to judge my financial status. This makes me uncomfortable and guilty. (Interview 5, female, PhD, China).

You can just feel like people are spending more than you. You just feel like things they wear, things they have… They've travelled a lot, but you don't. Like the experience you have doesn't match. (Interview 2, female, UG, China).

I also compare myself to my peers around me. I think most of them study abroad because they're rich… they travel a lot; they go to the fancy restaurant a lot… or they live in a student accommodation that costs a lot for their living fee. I can see that. (Interview 16, female, PhD, China).

The impact of the emotion of shame on socio-economically less advantaged international students is of great concern. This analysis indicates that shame and "othering" amongst international students may mean that it is difficult for those identifying as being from a socio-economically less advantaged background to make friends and access support from other international students. Nussbaum (2001, p. 196) comments "it is only because one expects oneself to have worth or even perfection that one will shrink from or cover the evidence of one's nonworth or imperfection" and this suggests that for socio-economically less advantaged international students there is a real danger of an increasing feeling of isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging for this group.

Discussion

This study identified that our interview participants tended to "identify in the middle" of society as indicated by Reference Group Theory (e.g., Evans & Kelley, 2004) which meant that they were unlikely to be identified as a group of students in need of university support structures. Consequently, university support mechanisms are unlikely to be enacted for socio-economically less advantaged international students, as they are not routinely identified as needing additional structures of support. This under-identified group is likely to experience university in a less positive manner and encounter several challenges not experienced by their more privileged counterparts. The socio-emotional narratives of social class were enduring for the international students in our study, regardless of the socio-political-historical-cultural contexts of their countries of origin. Thirteen interviewees exemplified enduring emotional injuries related to working-class backgrounds, with a feeling of shame a commonly reported emotion.

The impact of coming from a socio-economically less advantaged background is of great concern as it affected friendships and wellbeing. The literature on international students typically laments the difficulties that they experience in making friends with "home" students (Elturki et al., 2019), whilst international students are generally perceived to act in a supportive way of each other (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). However, our findings indicated that if financial signifiers such as type of student accommodation can cause feelings of shame, this suggests that there is a real danger of an increasing feeling of isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging for this group of socio-economically less advantaged international students. There is ample evidence that students from "working-class" backgrounds worry more about their mental health and wellbeing than their middle-class counterparts and a significant proportion of students generally are unaware of the support available to them (Norton, 2021). Given that disclosure rates for mental health conditions are low for international students relative to their domestic peers (Frampton et al., 2022) and only a modest number seek out university support services such as counselling (ICEF, 2022), it seems especially crucial that student wellbeing support is proactive and culturally appropriate. This includes an awareness of global events and the impact these can have on individual students (e.g., financial crises in a country of origin) (Frampton et al., 2022). More broadly, a holistic approach to international student support can possibly generate a shift away from neoliberal interpretations of HE internationalisation pervasive across the Anglophone HE spheres, towards more values-based approaches that emphasize inclusion and social justice (Choudaha, 2017; Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). Consequently, institutional programmes which help with the emotional

transitions to university, through a focus on self-compassion, are identified as a way of supporting international students (Zabin, Bosacki & Novak, 2022).

Socio-economically less advantaged international students are also most likely to find that the high cost of tuition and accommodation for international students can result in pressure to engage in employment (Hastings et al., 2023). "Work precarity for international students occurs in most advanced economies" (Hastings et al., 2023, p. 42). Examples of good practice that emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the establishment of emergency hardship funds specifically dedicated for international students (Office for Students, 2020) could be permanently incorporated into international student support structures alongside offering student-led practical financial advice (Drabier, 2020). That said universities need to consider how cultural norms may mean that international students are reticent to disclose financial hardship, thus it is crucial that any support is clearly signposted and communicated (UUKI, 2021). International students often draw on multiple sources to finance their studies and many do not have access to familial wealth or scholarships (Glass et al., 2022). Financial hardship has been reported by international students across the Anglophone world, including in Australia (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019) and the USA (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Financial support in the form of scholarships and campus jobs may improve the satisfaction of international students (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Self-funded international students are likely to find themselves in precarious financial positions (Mogaji et al., 2021) and thus likely clustered in low-skilled, low-wage jobs (Campbell et al., 2016) that are not commensurate with their academic discipline or career aspirations. Moreover, university students from working-class backgrounds are often relatively less successful in their transition to the labour market (Reay, 2021), thus career advice that is sensitive to the socioeconomic backgrounds of students, both "home" and "international" should be offered routinely. This would also respond to a lack of effective career support offered to international students, especially in the UK context (HEPI/Kaplan, 2021) and respond to anxieties about future career opportunities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, socio-economic status metrics not being routinely collected by higher education institutions for international students is a concern. Whilst differences in socio-political-historical-cultural contexts make cross-national understandings of social class challenging to analyze, this qualitative study emphasizes that the emotional narratives were the same across cultures. The emotions of hope, fear and shame were relevant for thirteen of our sixteen participants. This suggests that as the international student literature continues to further challenge the narrative of privilege – the emphasis on emotional commentaries and the recognition of these may offer important insights into subjective understandings of social class cross-nationally for international students. However, this qualitative data has been collected and analysed largely in the UK higher education context and we would caution against the wholesale transferability of these findings to other Anglophone centres of higher education. Nevertheless, some implications from this study may well be transferable to other countries that have historically hosted large numbers of international students. Intersectional approaches to international student support that recognize the specific emotional and practical support needs of those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may be applicable across host countries. This includes a consideration of how universities can better promote and encourage the use of support structures offered to students, with specific attention to the likely emotions that socio-economically less advantaged students may be experiencing. Practical support may include (1) culturally sensitive wellbeing clinics, (2) financial assistance and (3) tailored career guidance and employment support. Finally, we call for further research on the economic, social, and cultural challenges facing international students from less privileged backgrounds. Data of this kind could help host universities in setting up evidence-based and tailored support services. Given the momentum of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) agendas in UK HE and a burgeoning intersectional research literature (e.g., Glass et al., 2022; Liu, 2017), it is timely that due attention is paid to this under-researched group of international students.

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