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# Working-class students' sense of belonging and group affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand

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**2023**

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/36903

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# Abstract

Building upon existing research into a Sense of Belonging and Group Affiliation, this research focused on how students from working-class backgrounds experienced belonging and affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand, an elite university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students from undergraduate and postgraduate registrations. A thematic content analysis revealed that the students experienced a sense of belonging and affiliation as intersecting to produce unique experiences within the elite academic context. Students from working-class backgrounds initially experienced the university setting as overwhelming and alienating compared to their previous experiences. Lecturers, wealthier peers, and the physical space of the university were described as hostile, isolating, and judgemental. Race, gender, wealth and class played different roles in shaping the experiences of these students within the elite academic setting, and served to influence how students experienced individual peers within the context of the university. These socioeconomic factors facilitated affiliations with individual peers who were identified as similar, and thus safe. Student affiliations led to increased confidence which permitted class straddling and perceptions of developmental growth and autonomy that were in turn understood and framed as positive experiences. Students demonstrated a dissonance where they described negative experiences relating to affiliation and a sense of belonging, while also asserting a positive sense of belonging. This dissonance reflected a state of ambivalence towards the academic setting, and was explained as illustrating that students experienced a positive sense of social belonging which was conflated with a positive overall sense of belonging. This conflation was thought to facilitate and be motivated by students' attempts to maintain their presence and membership within the university setting, and also to facilitate students achieving desired academic outcomes despite the challenges experienced when they entered into the elite academic setting. The results of this study contribute to recommendations for improving experiences of students from working-class backgrounds in elite academic settings.



**Keywords: affiliation, sense of belonging, working-class students, diversity, elite academic setting**