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

Kane, Christopher Richard

2023

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

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

By:

Christopher Richard Kane

1408143

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Community-Based Counselling Psychology)

Supervisor: Dr Vinitha Jithoo

February 2023

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

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted at any point previously for any other degree or examination at any other institution or university.

_____

Christopher Richard Kane

15 February 2023

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the support and input of many people. In particular, I would like to thank the students who participated in this research, as their ideas, discussions, and willingness to be open about their experiences were both personally enlightening, and genuinely enjoyable.

This work would also not have happened without the guidance of my supervisor, Dr Vinitha Jithoo. Throughout this process, I have learned an immense amount about research, writing, and analysis. I truly appreciate the opportunities that were created for me to develop the skills and resilience that this work has given me.

I would like to thank the people I have met through the School of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. Mentors, lecturers, and peers, thank you for opening this world to me, and allowing me to learn and grow from your knowledge, skills, understanding, and patience.

Also of immense importance to this work was the love and support of my family. To my mother, my father, my sister, and my sister, thank you for your truly endless support, advice, jokes, and distractions throughout this process and throughout my prior degrees. Thank you for your help, both practical and abstract. Thank you also for tolerating those moments when I was focused on my work to the exclusion of you all; I look forward to sharing more time, laughter, and ideas with you going forward.

I would also like to thank my friends for their support in keeping me sane during the years of my studies. While not all of the challenges we faced were caused by this work, it was a pleasure to spend time with you relaxing, and coping with the difficulties of the past few years.

This is also for Rex, beloved and departed. In many ways, it was your companionship that made all of this possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

Calls for national transformation and social justice in South Africa have placed a spotlight on Higher Education, which is a path to socioeconomic opportunity and improvement (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Students from working-class backgrounds occupy an intersectional and, at times, challenging position within academic contexts. This position is intersectional, as students from working-class backgrounds occupy a place between the spaces of wealth, poverty, and opportunity. This position is difficult as these students must also often overcome emotional, financial, and social challenges that students from more privileged backgrounds may not have to face. Tertiary education has been and remains associated with wealth, privilege, and access to resources that are more readily found within middle- and upper-class settings. This has tended to reflect in the physical and institutional culture of university settings.

Economic constraints continue to be an obstacle to university access for many. The implementation of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) by the South African Government has done much to improve access to universities for South Africans from working-class backgrounds. However, elite or prestigious universities risk being viewed as the domain of wealthy students, to the exclusion of students from other socioeconomic backgrounds (Stubbs & Murphy, 2018). Despite the gender, racial, and economic diversity prevalent at universities in South Africa, these contexts tend to reflect the values and lifestyles of minority and privileged groupings (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). This has the potential to affect student experiences of a sense of belonging and group affiliation within the university setting.

Students' sense of belonging and affiliation with their peers plays an important role in shaping their success in tertiary education settings, as experiencing a sense of belonging can have an impact on the type and quality of personal and academic support students receive. This can also impact on how students respond to and manage adversity, their sense of connection to their

fellow students, and the overall atmosphere or climate present on campus. It has also been observed (Bhopal 2022) that students from working-class backgrounds tend to experience additional challenges in terms of access, resources, and social mobility when entering into and remaining at universities. These challenges intersect with their sense of belonging and their experienced affiliation with other people in the university setting, producing unique experiences for these students.

1.1. Rationale

Understanding how students from working-class backgrounds experience a sense of belonging and group affiliation within an elite academic setting is valuable for two primary reasons. The first reason to consider is that a sense of belonging and group affiliation have been linked to individual academic performance, with positive feelings of belonging being associated with improved performance in academic spaces (Strayhorn, 2018). A positive sense of belonging contributes to the feeling that individuals are valued, and it can facilitate academic successes in student populations (Strayhorn, 2018). It is also important to achieve an understanding of the ways in which working-class students experience and negotiate a sense of belonging and group affiliation in the context of an elite university. This will offer tertiary education institutions the opportunity to identify ways in which working-class students can experience a sense of belonging in an elite academic setting, and to consider ways in which such belonging might be further promoted. The second reason to consider is that exploring the experiences of individual students from working-class backgrounds with regard to their sense of belonging and group affiliation at an elite university offers the potential to explore that sense of belonging and that affiliation as ends in themselves, rather than as by-products of other group-related phenomena. Previous work in the field of group psychology tends towards taking group membership and belonging as given factors, rather than investigating these phenomena as ends in themselves (Brown & Zagefka, 2006; Turner & Reynolds, 2011). Additionally, research on

university students, such as that conducted by Mallman (2017) and Cooper (2009), has focused on outcomes produced by the extent to which students perceive themselves as belonging in university settings. By shifting the focus to precisely that experience of belonging, rather than to specific groups, institutional settings, or personal outcomes of group affiliation, it is possible to explore what specific phenomenological factors contribute to a sense of belonging and group affiliation in individual students.

Understanding the specific factors that contribute to a sense of belonging and group affiliation offers practical benefits in elite academic settings. This is especially so when considering the experiences of working-class students, who can feel excluded or isolated from fellow students in university contexts. This was illustrated by Mallman et al. (2019), whose research on the experiences of working-class students at Australian universities revealed that these students felt as though they were moving between two different worlds. Students from working-class backgrounds felt as though the campuses they inhabited were alien to them compared to their home environments and reported needing to adapt and strategize ways to blend in with their peers in order to feel more welcome (Mallman et al., 2019). It is valuable to explore if this experience also holds true for South African students.

The value of examining the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds experience a sense of belonging and achieve group affiliation in the setting of elite universities lies in improving the experiences and successes of students in university settings. Positive experiences of a sense of belonging can support the students' academic success (O'Keeffe, 2013). A sense of belonging can also reduce the dropout rates among university students (O'Keeffe, 2013). Students who experienced a greater sense of belonging felt more able to take part in the processes and activities of the spaces they entered into, and displayed more resilience in the face of challenges encountered within those spaces (O'Keeffe, 2013). This makes

understanding how belonging in academic contexts is experienced, and can be improved, a matter of importance.

There is a dual benefit to improving the academic successes of working-class students, as in addition to improving these students' experiences and successes at university, the retention of working-class students has the potential to enrich the diversity of university campus settings. Increased diversity in university settings offers benefits to the entire university population and is associated with increased creativity in completing coursework (Leung & Chiu, 2010), a reduction of prejudicial beliefs (Pettigrew et al., 2011), and improved competence for working in diverse or multicultural settings (Jayakumar, 2008). This suggests that retaining students from working-class backgrounds within elite academic institutions has the potential to enrich the value of the degrees offered by these institutions.

People from diverse backgrounds attend universities. This diversity creates a context that is shaped by the co-existence and interaction of, at times, disparate groups (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021; Mallman, 2017). This is also true for elite academic institutions (Bhopal, 2022). Historically, universities in South Africa have been dominated by White and middle-class interests, with students from such groupings being both disproportionately represented and influential in university spaces (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). While this does not indicate that the university context is necessarily only accessible to wealthier individuals, it does acknowledge the ways in which tertiary education in South Africa and at elite academic institutions is associated with high economic status (James et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2011; Mallman, 2017). Increasing access to education in present-day South Africa has caused this to change, though it can be argued that educational spaces remain dominated by White and middle-class interests (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021). Thus, while universities are increasingly diverse settings in terms of the

students' backgrounds and socioeconomic status, they remain settings in which students from working-class backgrounds might not feel welcome (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021; Mallman, 2017). This produces negotiations of students' sense of belonging, and has implications for how group affiliations can be understood.

Class backgrounds can have a significant impact on which groups are accessible to individuals. In this context, groups can refer to informal social groupings and formal groups that form part of the university's context. It is important to consider how class groupings may serve to enable or restrict access to the broader range of group affiliations within the university setting (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021). It is also important to give explicit consideration to the ways in which class may serve to moderate a person's experience of belonging in social and academic contexts. One illustration of this is that students from working-class backgrounds, prompted by the experienced transition from their original socioeconomic contexts into a new context that is markedly different in terms of wealth, expenditure, and attitudes (Cooper, 2009; Mallman et al., 2019), are encouraged by this transition to reflect on their own experiences and values in relation to those of the people they encounter (Hurst, 2010).Thus, group membership can have an impact on the individual student's experiences and attitudes.

Group membership can act as a motivator for personal change and as a means of obtaining various forms of support. Historically, membership in groups has served to significantly shape what physical, emotional, and social resources individuals have been able to draw upon, while shaping their access to social spaces (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Alshawi and Gardner (2013) provide an example of this from their research on tribalism and citizenship in Qatar which highlights that affiliation and belonging serve to moderate the access and resources of individuals within the state. Understanding how students from working-class backgrounds define and experience their sense of belonging and achieve an affiliation to groups they

encounter in academic settings has implications for improving or better supporting how these students understand their experiences in those settings and may, in turn, have an impact on the extent to which they succeed at their academic ambitions.

The focus on groups in psychology has often fallen more on areas of political interest (Alshawi & Gardner, 2013), broad-level cultural importance (Hammack, 2008), workplace identity (Foster, 2012), or ethnographic significance (Terry et al., 2006). In the university setting, there has been an emphasis on promoting a sense of belonging *to* the institution (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021), which differs from examining belonging and affiliation as they arise between peers and the institution. An exploration of these phenomena as ends in themselves, rather than means to other observable ends, can serve to inform and assist policy relating to mental and emotional well-being, social cohesion, and cultural dynamics in the context of universities (Foster, 2012; Freeman, 1992; Hammack, 2008). Further, it permits an examination of phenomenological factors related to a sense of belonging for students from working-class backgrounds in an elite academic context. Given the link between group belonging, peer support networks, and student success in tertiary education (Astin, 1975; Mallman, 2017), this research stands to benefit efforts to promote academic functioning and the experiences of a sense of belonging of individuals from working-class backgrounds in contexts marked by the dominance of middle- and upper-class expectations.

In the context of an elite university setting, it is important to explore how belonging and affiliation combine to produce the experiences of working-class students. This will allow for a deeper understanding of these experiences, and may point the way towards improving the academic and social experiences of students from such backgrounds in elite university settings.

1.2. Research Aims

The focus for this study was specifically on a sense of belonging and group affiliation, and the ways in which these concepts are experienced and maintained by students from working-class backgrounds attending the University of the Witwatersrand, which is considered an elite tertiary education institution. This research explored the experiences of students from this background who were navigating and who had navigated issues of group belonging and affiliation with peers in the setting of the University of the Witwatersrand. This was intended to explore the ways in which these students understood and made meaning of a sense of belonging and group affiliation within the elite academic context.

1.3. Research Questions

- How do students from working-class backgrounds make meaning of their sense of belonging at the University of the Witwatersrand?
- How does socioeconomic status shape students' experiences of the types of group affiliation they enter into within the university context?

1.4. Chapter Organisation

The study was divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

This chapter introduced the study and included the rationale, which supported the aims and research questions of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The chapter contained the literature review, which examined empirical and theoretical literature that aimed to ground the conversation in previous and relevant work. It introduced

previous research on belonging and group affiliation and examined the theory that informed this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

This chapter provided a discussion on the purpose, aims, and objectives of the study. It also provided a discussion on the theoretical paradigm that underpinned this study. Discussions on semi-structured interviews, population, sampling and sampling size, research setting and context, research instruments, data analysis and ethical considerations for the study were provided.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter focused on the presentation of results as informed by the research questions and participant responses.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provided a discussion of the findings and related this to the previously established literature. The findings and interpretation presented in this chapter were used to highlight key aspects of the students' experiences of a sense of belonging and group affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary of the report's conclusions, and highlighted the limitations of the study. This chapter also explored recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The experiences of students from working-class backgrounds are complex, and influenced by a range of factors. These factors include class, race, religion, and gender, and have been integrated into or explained by a range of theories targeted at understanding and improving student experiences. This review will focus on common themes that emerged in the literature relating to student experiences of a sense belonging and their experiences of group affiliation. These themes include: socioeconomic class in higher education, academic coping, group affiliation and a sense of belonging, as well as the intersection between belonging and affiliation. A key distinction is noted in this review between belonging and affiliation. A sense of belonging refers to the emotional connections and value placed on group members and membership (Strayhorn, 2018), while affiliation is argued to be the practical act of choosing a group, rejecting a group, or having groups chosen or rejected for individuals (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). This review's primary focus as it relates to the above themes is on their application to the context of the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds in elite academic settings.

2.1. Socioeconomic Class in Higher Education

Socioeconomic class refers to the position of individuals in social hierarchies that are defined by economic means and status (Hurst, 2010). Conceptions of class contain within them expectations and attitudes relating to how people dress, speak, and show politeness (Hurst, 2010). In addition, class is shown through the hobbies and recreations different people pursue, which are, in turn, defined by the access to material and resources that members of a given class may experience (Hurst, 2010). Class is thus an intangible characteristic held and expressed by people through their possession or display of both material and non-material goods, attitudes, and behaviours.

‘Working-class’ refers to individuals who tend to hold positions towards the lower and middle-lower end of class hierarchies. Individuals from working-class backgrounds often experience levels of stigma, alienation, and sensations of personal insufficiency in contexts characterised as ‘elite’ (Mallman, 2017; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Such settings may be considered spaces traditionally associated with and populated by middle- and upper-class trappings and persons (Mallman et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2009). Such trappings may refer to both material signifiers of wealth and attitudes commonly associated with the middle and upper classes, such as the financial ability to support both study and leisure activities without having to work to pay for these activities, a prestigious and/or upper-tier education experience prior to entering university, and an extended network of family or contacts within middle- and upper-class professions or even within the university context itself (Granfield, 1991; King, 2019; Reay et al., 2009). Collectively, these embody what is referred to by Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) as cultural capital.

Research supports that students from working-class backgrounds experience less cultural capital than peers from more privileged class-backgrounds (Bhopal, 2022; Carolisen & Kiguwa, 2018; Mallman, 2017). The experienced lack of cultural capital by working-class students in elite educational settings has been highlighted as a source of significant personal obstacles, as well as experiences of distress and alienation, and serves as a discrete example of how group membership can affect personal experiences (Badat, 2010; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In particular, membership in a perceived low-status group can limit individuals’ ability to effectively access new groups in the academic setting (Badat, 2010; Bhopal, 2022). Thus, the group membership that students have experienced while growing up and when entering the university shapes their experiences and challenges in the university context, by shaping the cultural capital of students.

Cultural capital can shape the access students have to formal and informal support networks, resources useful for completing their work, and time to dedicate to the process of studying (Astin, 1975; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Astin's (1975) Student Involvement Theory highlights that the extent to which students are able to spend their time and efforts on university activities is significant for determining those students' perceptions and experiences of the university setting. Notably, differences in the ease of access to cultural capital at a personal level can complicate the process of understanding and identifying the class of students, who tend to be framed as occupying a transitional role characterised by the possibility of straddling class boundaries or entering into wealthier socioeconomic classes (Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). Further, social capital and differing experiences within the university context result in students who nominally form part of the same socioeconomic grouping nevertheless experiencing that grouping differently (Mallman et al., 2019). In this context, it is important to consider how students may identify their social class in academic settings.

Self-identification of class is a common means of identifying individual class status, though it does not always provide absolute clarity in the South African context given the varied expectations of what it may mean to belong to any given class (Roberts, 2009; Visagie & Posel, 2013; Zizzamia et al., 2016, 2019). Economic realities in South Africa place many supposedly middle-class families – as defined by reference to income relative to other households – beneath the poverty line (Visagie & Posel, 2013; Zizzamia et al., 2016). Despite this, individuals from such households might continue to self-identify as middle class due to their possession of certain socially symbolic items which signify middle-class status in the absence of middle-class wealth (Visagie & Posel, 2013; Zizzamia et al., 2016). This makes relying purely on student self-identification for class-groupings problematic.

Identifying the class to which an individual student belongs is relevant for financial aid and benefit programmes in South Africa. Several programmes exist to assist students with funding their tertiary studies. Of these, the NSFAS and the Wits Missing Middle Initiatives feature prominently at the University of the Witwatersrand. These financial aid schemes were targeted at assisting families with incomes below a target threshold defined with reference to national incomes and spending capacities (Government of South Africa, 2020; University of the Witwatersrand, 2016). The NSFAS is managed and funded by the Government of South Africa, which aims to assist students from historically disadvantaged or financially constrained families to be able to pursue tertiary education (Government of South Africa, 2020). Students who are eligible for this funding are required to maintain a suitable academic performance in order to remain eligible for this funding. The criteria for eligibility for this programme are primarily determined by combined family income, with families whose combined income rests below a chosen threshold of R350 000 yearly at the time of writing being eligible for financial support. Accordingly, families with a household income greater than this amount are excluded from the NSFAS funding.

The NSFAS programme has seen extensive uptake across South Africa, though it has not been without criticism. One issue identified at the University of the Witwatersrand was the observation that the cut-off threshold for funding eligibility created a gap of students whose families' incomes disqualified them from the NSFAS funding, but who could not support their children attending university (University of the Witwatersrand, 2016). Initiatives to address this have coined the term 'missing middle', representing people who are nominally middle class, but who are nevertheless not in a financial position to fund tertiary education without additional financial support (University of the Witwatersrand, 2016). The logic of this initiative builds off the assumption, created by government policy, university policy, and social attitudes,

that the capacity to send one's children to receive tertiary education is a 'middle-class' expenditure, and one that traditionally middle-class families can support within their incomes (Government of South Africa, 2020; University of the Witwatersrand, 2016; Wright, 1979; Zizzamia et al., 2016). This suggests that, in the context of the University of the Witwatersrand, students who rely on NSFAS to fund their education are not considered middle class. Families that are partially able to support this cost, and who benefit from additional support towards this spending, are thus considered working class, despite their self-identification as being middle class. This indicates that there are various ways in which identities can intersect and be affected by a wide variety of external social factors. It also highlights the impact of parental wealth or social standing on a student's inherited social class, and emphasises the transitional nature of university spaces with regard to social class.

The transitional, and additionally diverse, nature of modern university spaces in South Africa is an important consideration for tertiary education institutions (Dunn & Olivier, 2011). Dunn and Olivier (2011) highlighted that the mere presence of students from international or non-mainstream socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds does not guarantee their integration into the broader university community. Rather, it appears necessary for universities as institutions to make efforts to integrate and accommodate these students, thereby shaping their experiences of belonging and opportunities for affiliation within the student body context (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Dunn & Olivier, 2011). A common strategy for this form of university-driven integration might involve the use of formal institutional structures, such as events, clubs, and programs to promote the formation of informal student grouping that promoted a sense of being welcome in these originally less integrated student identities (Dunn & Olivier, 2011). This reflects the institution acting to promote individual identities that are contained within a broader

university setting, without necessarily promoting affiliation to a single institutional identity. In this sense the university institution acts as what Castles and Davison (2000) term a container.

Containers in this sense refer to an identity organisation or institution, with an example often being a nation-state, which positions itself as capable of containing multiple identities or affiliations within itself (Castles & Davidson, 2000). Such containers might demonstrate a common identity, such as culture or nationality, that is positioned as natural or fundamental to membership within the container, but the scope of the container permits the formation of smaller identities and group affiliations that are meaningful for members of the institution (Castles & Davidson, 2000). These meaningful affiliations taking place within the broader container still appear to represent successful instances of affiliations and can grant a positive sense of belonging to individuals while not being a form of affiliation to the broader container identity (Castles & Davidson, 2000). The University of the Witwatersrand, as a tertiary institution associated with middle- and upper-class socioeconomic concerns, functions as a container inasmuch as the university pursues deliberate programs promoting acceptance and integration of new students into the institutional space.

Such programmes tend to take the form of orientations, First Year Experiences, and residential events that promote engagement with and affiliation to the university space. In addition, the University of the Witwatersrand engages in talks and courses throughout the year aimed at providing students with a shared body of knowledge necessary to function in the university setting (University of the Witwatersrand, 2023). Notably, while these programs do not specifically target students from working-class backgrounds, they do promote the understanding that students attending the university come from different backgrounds and accordingly possess different bodies of knowledge and experience. This nominally positions the university as container for the experiences of belonging and practical affiliations that shape

students' attendance at the institution (Castles & Davidson, 2000). It is valuable to acknowledge that even as students navigate and negotiate questions of affiliation and their subjective sense of belonging within the university setting, they do so against a backdrop of the University of the Witwatersrand's attempts to promote the common identity of a Wits student or "Witsie" that is nominally inclusive of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and cultural-religious experiences.

However, while efforts are made to facilitate students from working-class backgrounds entering into tertiary education, they do not necessarily address the institutional culture of the institutions these students attend (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Efforts to improve access to tertiary education for working-class students can be considered to be what Fraser (2009) termed affirmative or restorative justice. This is a form of justice that seeks to improve the conditions of those who have been harmed in the past to a state prior to the harm they have experienced, thereby restoring the situation to what it may have been if no person had been harmed (Fraser, 2009). Transformative justice, by contrast, seeks to undo the lasting consequences of harm (Fraser, 2009). For students from working-class backgrounds, entering into university spaces can be seen as a form of justice, as it offers these students an opportunity to transition from a socioeconomic class created and defined by limited opportunities, into a position which may offer them greater opportunities (Steyn, 2016; Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Universities can in this way be understood as transitional spaces. Universities are educational institutions that offer a wide array of tertiary education opportunities and specialised training. In South Africa, universities enjoy a perception as being gateways for social mobility and economic improvement (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). This stems from historic attitudes towards education in the country (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018) and contributes to the significant diversity in the university setting.

Universities are frequently diverse settings (Cooper, 2009). The nature of tertiary education, and the limited number of tertiary education institutions, creates an environment where people from across varied backgrounds gather at universities (Cooper, 2009; Mallman, 2017). However, university populations tend to remain representative of particular types of backgrounds or social groupings (Cooper, 2009; Mallman, 2017). The project and practices of tertiary education are often associated with middle- and upper-class incomes, resources, and attitudes, and the ability of such groups to project their interests and values into cultural spaces they share or occupy (Mallman, 2017). However, students from working-class backgrounds also enter into these spaces, and bring with them their own attitudes, values, and expectations (Mallman, 2017). Thus, universities can act as a forum for encountering lives and lifestyles from varied and diverse backgrounds, and they can also serve as melting pots where such differences and attitudes interact and students learn from each other.

Class can have an impact on students' personal experiences of a sense belonging and their affiliation in university settings (Granfield, 1991; Reay et al., 2009). Studies have highlighted that university settings can produce feelings of alienation and stigmatisation for students from working-class backgrounds (Badat, 2010; Mallman et al., 2019; Reay et al, 2009). This is significant, as it has implications for how students from working-class backgrounds manage their studies (Astin, 1975; Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016). This feeling of alienation is also significant as it produces an 'outsider' subjectivity in working-class students, which fosters and promotes an awareness and examination of group dynamics in campus settings (Badat, 2010; Hurst, 2010; Reay et al., 2009). This perspective is common across both developed country university contexts, for instance in the UK and USA, and the South African context, as highlighted by various studies (Badat, 2010; Granfield, 1991; Reay et al., 2009). Entering into

and remaining within the university setting can thus lead to students from working-class backgrounds developing a perception of themselves as outsiders within the university setting.

Student perceptions of their roles and statuses within the university have implications for their understanding of their identity and sense of self (Mallman et al., 2019). Granfield (1991) highlighted that students' experiences at university can involve a need to negotiate separate elements of their identities. This early finding was supported by more recent research (Mallman et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2009). One key theme appeared to denote a university / real-world dichotomy, where on the one hand, it is both prestigious and liberating to attend the university space, and simultaneously, the university exists in a 'bubble' that fails to adequately capture the priorities and experiences of the 'normal' world (Granfield, 1991). The negotiation of these two identities illustrates the ways in which working-class students' experiences of academic spaces can differ from those of other students.

Reay et al. (2009) highlighted that when students position groups as insiders or outsiders, this can serve to reinforce the boundaries between these groups. It can also increase the extent to which students experience themselves as affiliated with their chosen identities in the university context (Reay et al, 2009). For students from working-class backgrounds who do experience a positive sense of belonging at the university, this can create a position that is simultaneously insider and outsider (Hurst, 2010). This insider-outsider position can allow students from working-class backgrounds to observe the practices of the spaces they occupy – practices that may be more readily missed by the groups who enjoy dominance over those spaces (Granfield, 1991; Hurst, 2010; Reay et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of socioeconomic class being understood not only as sources of experiences for students, but also as sources of understanding and observing social dynamics within the university setting.

Socioeconomic class also contributes to the formation of a gap in success in Higher Education (Veldman et al., 2019). Identity compatibility, which is the extent to which a person's understanding of their identity and their values is compatible with the university context, plays a role in how students from working-class backgrounds adapt to the university setting (Veldman et al., 2019). Veldman et al. (2019) highlighted that students who came from backgrounds where parents and relatives had previously attended university tended to view going to university as normal, and were able to rely on a network of support that translated into better and more consistent academic performance. These students demonstrated a higher level of identity compatibility than many first-generation students (Veldman et al., 2019). First-generation students, many of whom came from working-class or poorer backgrounds, tended to lack this form of support and consequently struggled to complete their academic tasks as effectively (Veldman et al., 2019). This highlights the role that class plays in shaping identity, and academic performance, in the university setting, and in particular in elite academic spaces.

Bhopal (2022) argued that an elite academic space refers to educational institutions that are linked with elevated wealth and prestige relative to the already wealth-oriented field of Higher Education. Elite academic spaces are also reputationally associated with a superior quality of education and research than might be available in less elite settings (Bhopal, 2022). It is thus a qualitative evaluation of the value or significance of an academic space, and it is often linked with social expectations or attitudes towards the space that come to form a reputation or an on-campus culture (Mallman et al., 2019). Elite spaces, because of their association with wealth, are often linked to and dominated by the cultural expectations and attitudes of wealthier people (Cooper, 2009). The notion of elite can be contentious, although elite universities tend to be those that are considered to be 'better' than other universities in national and, at times, international contexts.

The actions and expectations of significant stakeholders and gatekeepers in university settings can play a vital role in determining the experiences of the students attending them (Bhopal, 2022). Bhopal (2022) found that academics who had negative experiences of racism while they had been students tended to occupy ambivalent roles at these institutions. Despite occupying ambivalent roles, these academics also expressed a desire to improve conditions for students they taught who might also experience racism or gate-keeping linked to stereotypes of socioeconomic class (Bhopal, 2022). However, once in a position as academics, they found themselves invested in preserving the reputation and legitimacy of the institutions where they worked, sometimes perpetuating the negative experiences they had suffered (Bhopal, 2022). This resulted in these academics feeling both connected to and separated from the students whose experiences were similar to their own. It left these academics uncertain about the extent to which they were able to properly help students from marginalised backgrounds successfully enter into and experience a sense of belonging in academic spaces (Bhopal, 2022). This highlighted the role that academics within education institutions can play in shaping the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds.

The melting-pot nature of universities can also be a challenge for students (Mallman et al., 2019). The social interactions and everyday routines present on university campuses can reinforce unequal patterns of power, based on the notions of class, race and ethnicity, and thereby produce negative experiences for students (Mallman et al., 2019). As a result, campus diversity and group membership can have a significant impact on the individual and institutional experiences of students at university campuses (Mallman et al., 2019). The ordinary interactions and daily activities of group members in social spheres were capable of reinforcing and propagating hierarchies of dominance and subordination (Mallman et al., 2019). These factors combined to create the effect that students from working-class or minority

backgrounds often felt as though they had to adapt to fit into the environment of the university setting in order to avoid negative interactions with the dominant groups on campus (Mallman et al., 2019).

Mallman et al. (2019) highlighted the finding that negative experiences, while significant for those experiencing them, were often overlooked by the broader student population and university management. It was suggested that the negative experiences of students who did not fit neatly into the dominant group at university were left less visible to the broader community, allowing for the perception of a harmonious student body at the expense of the experiences of students from non-dominant groups (Mallman et al., 2019). This suggests that students can have parallel experiences of university settings, where for some, the experience may be more positive than others. This is relevant for understanding the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds.

There is a common overlap between race and class positions in South Africa, attributable to the country's historical legacy, with Black people occupying a disproportionate space in making up the working class of South Africa (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). It is important to consider the role of race in shaping and intersecting with the experiences of belonging and affiliation of working-class students in an elite academic space, as it has been noted in previous research that Black students and students from working-class backgrounds can experience their rights as students as conditional, or dependent on the goodwill or open-mindedness of their fellow students (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) highlighted that this reliance on goodwill and other people who can provide access to the university setting can shape the extent to which students from working-class backgrounds are able to fully access the academic space.

Students from working-class and less wealthy backgrounds reported that their presence at elite universities was challenged both on and off-campus (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). Dominant images of these spaces held by people outside of the university setting would often conform to stereotypes or attitudes portraying such spaces as the domain of the wealthy. This resulted in students from working-class backgrounds being met with surprise when mentioning their place of study outside of the university setting (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). This accords with the findings of Mallman et al. (2019), which highlighted the ways in which on-campus and off-campus experiences can differ to the extent that people feel themselves to be moving through markedly different worlds, with different concerns and expectations. Having one's belonging or status as a student questioned was noted as being demotivating and distressing for students from less wealthy backgrounds (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). This points to the ways in which academic spaces have become linked with class and wealth in public perception (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). It also illustrates the ways in which elite academic spaces can be seen or experienced as foreign spaces for working-class students.

Access refers to the extent to which students are able to enter into and engage with the academic context (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). In the context of elite academic spaces, people from elite or privileged socioeconomic classes can seek to preserve the space for those who are deemed most worthy of entering into it (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). Faced with this effort, working-class students entering into such spaces often feel more visible because of their clothing, accents, or relationship to or within the shared space, and accordingly, they experience such places in ways that differ from the dominant grouping (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). Students from non-dominant backgrounds entering into an elite academic space reported social interactions and experiences where their right to attend the institutions where they were registered was questioned (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). For some of these students, coming from working-class backgrounds led directly to other students questioning their presence in the elite academic spaces they shared,

or else expressing surprise that students from these backgrounds could enter elite academic settings (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). This illustrated that both feelings of belonging and experiences of affiliation can be challenged in contexts where social attitudes or expectations conflict with the lived experiences of students.

This conflict between students' expectations and students' real experiences has consequences for students coming from working-class backgrounds (Badat, 2010). Being linked by others to a working-class group resulted in students feeling a greater sense of insufficiency, social isolation, and increased pressure to perform (Badat, 2010). In addition to being placed in these categories by the observations of others, working-class students felt that they were less welcome in the academic setting than some of their fellow students (Badat, 2010). They also felt that being identified as 'different' could negatively affect their work opportunities and perceived competencies (Badat, 2010). This was a key consideration for understanding the experiences of working-class students with regard to their sense of belonging and their group affiliation in elite university spaces.

2.2. Coping in Academic Settings

Social capital and the extent to which students perceive themselves as belonging within a university context play a significant role in shaping the academic experiences and successes for South African students (Steyn, 2016; Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018) highlighted that the role played specifically by social capital can be ambiguous, and dependent on the context in which students exist and interact. Closely guarded and inward-looking networks of social capital can serve to exclude students from working-class backgrounds and contribute to an experienced lack of support for these students (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). In this context, Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018) argued that it is important to identify 'brokers', who are people who can provide access to such networks for

working-class students, which enables affiliation and can in turn promote a positive sense of belonging for such students. Collaboration between brokers and students from working-class backgrounds can promote positive outcomes for such students (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). This supported the Student Involvement Theory of Astin (1975), and suggested that the nature and quality of peer relationships formed by students from working-class backgrounds plays a role in understanding their experiences of a sense of belonging and practical group affiliation. The role of peer relationships in student successes highlights the importance of informal and formal social and academic connections for student academic success.

Steyn (2016) supported the understanding that connections and preparedness were important factors in promoting the success of students from working-class backgrounds in South Africa. This research highlighted that the perceptions of Black students from working-class backgrounds played a role in how universities as institutions were experienced by these students. In turn, this shaped the academic involvement, retention, and success of Black students from working-class backgrounds (Steyn, 2016). It also highlights that the perceived supportiveness and openness of institutions to the values and experiences of students from working-class backgrounds can improve such students' sense of connection to the university and to their peers (Steyn, 2016). Thus, students' ability to cope can be promoted by encouraging increased social and academic connectedness within the university settings.

Karlsudd (2021) highlighted that feeling as though one belongs in a given context has positive implications for one's perception of self. Previous research has also demonstrated that in university and high school contexts, students who feel accepted into and welcomed by the institution tend to perform better (Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Conversely, students studying in a context where they feel unwelcome, or disconnected, tend towards negative personal and academic outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020; Maramba & Museus, 2013).

This illustrated that students' experiences of belonging have implications for their academic success, as well as their psychological health.

The act of affirming that people belong to a given group can improve their sense of belonging to that group, and in turn appears to improve academic performance and social functioning (Schnabel et al., 2013). This illustrated that the ways in which people understand and affiliate to the groups they encounter or perceive a connection with, and the way in which they experience a sense of belonging, has the capacity to fundamentally shape the individual experiences. A conscious understanding of belonging and affiliation can be valuable for the overall experiences and well-being of individual persons (Schnabel et al., 2013). While one's experiences of a sense of belonging are not always explicitly expressed, the findings of Schnabel et al. (2013) suggested that exploring and making explicit individual experiences of belonging, and understanding how such feelings of belonging are maintained and expressed, can be a valuable tool for improving students' academic experiences and performance.

This is significant, as research demonstrates that students from working-class backgrounds tend to feel a lower sense of belonging within academic contexts than peers from other socioeconomic backgrounds (Soria, 2015). This suggested that students coming from working-class backgrounds may benefit from efforts to promote their sense of belonging to the university where they study (Johnson et al., 2020; Soria, 2015). It also highlighted the importance of exploring how students who experience a lower sense of belonging in academic spaces make meaning of and cope with this experience.

Narratives, understood as the stories that students tell themselves about themselves, also serve as an important concept for understanding and exploring the experiences and successes of students attending university (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Students enter into the university space carrying narratives rooted in their past or in prejudices, which position certain students

as ‘lesser’ than their peers in terms of prestige or ability (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). However, being in the space of the university can afford these students an opportunity to challenge or re-negotiate these narratives, producing new stories and creating change in public spaces (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Narratives play a role in shaping the sense of belonging and students’ affiliation in university settings, and can be a vehicle of change as they work to tell new stories, and present new realities for themselves (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Positive narratives of self can be motivational, and can serve as a source of perceived connection to peers and the institutional support networks that improve academic outcomes (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). Exploring narratives of belonging thus offers a way to examine how individual students make sense of and understand themselves as taking up space within the academic context.

Schnabel et al. (2013) highlighted the positive effect of narrative affirmations of belonging on students’ academic coping, and the ability of such affirmations to positively affect negatively stereotyped groups. Their findings indicated that individuals tasked with affirming their values wrote about social belonging, as well as their experiences of and desires for a space where they could fit more comfortably into the social setting (Schnabel et al., 2013). This study also suggested that negatively stereotyped groups benefitted quite strongly from affirming their value, with writing about social belonging being positively correlated with improved grades and performance in the school context for individuals from negatively stereotyped groups (Schnabel et al., 2013). The positive academic impact of affirming that students belong within a given group to which they might affiliate highlighted the importance of students’ experiences of belonging to and in groups.

2.3. Groups in Academic Settings

The Social Identity Theory offers a useful framework for investigating how identity and group membership intersects (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). The experiences of working-class students in academic spaces highlight that groups and perceived group membership can have an impact upon the individual person's sense of self (Kende et al., 2021). Specifically, it was posited that individuals would seek or maintain membership in groups as a means to provide a positive sense of self and a sense of security in the world (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Reynolds, 2011). Group affiliation thus offers direct positive benefits to a person, in addition to whatever material or social benefits it may confer, by providing a means for the person to reinforce their sense of self against whatever challenges they might face. In elite academic settings, where they can experience negative judgements because of their backgrounds or group affiliations, students from working-class backgrounds can seek to improve or reinforce their sense of self by either working to blend in with more privileged or prestigious groups, or by changing how they value the groups of which they are already a part (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). This is significant, as it can shape how students from working-class backgrounds experience and make meaning of their affiliations within the elite academic context.

The Social Identity Theory posits that all groups present in a shared setting are organised into hierarchies by group members, and that it is the competition for a higher status for one's group that most drives the comparisons between in-groups and out-groups, as well as the movement and placement of individuals within groups (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel et al., 1979). In all contexts where grouping occurs, a competition is theorised to arise between these groups, as each seeks to establish itself as high-status relative to the others (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel et al., 1979). This competition acts both to motivate and shape the ways in which groups and group members interact within and across group boundaries, and also to determine the benefit or impact of

particular group memberships on those group members (Cho et al., 2013; Reay et al., 2009). Thus, the impact of groups on individuals in social settings is often fundamentally related to the perceptions that individuals within the setting have of the groups in question, and further influences how people within groups interact with others.

At their simplest, groups can be conceptualised as perceived or experienced associations between people, where a factor or series of factors serves to create a shared interest or experience that allows persons to identify with other group members (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Turner & Reynolds, 2011). At its core, the concept of group serves to identify a cluster or category of individuals that identify with each other and can also point to a sense in which people belong to a structure and/or concept that is broader than a single person (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). Groups thus rest on an act of identification.

The act of identification with others can be termed affiliation (Turner et al., 1987). This act of identification can be internal to the individual, or external, and can involve both asserting a shared identity with a reference group, or else denying a shared identity with a reference group in order to establish what affiliations an individual perceives as existing for them (Turner et al., 1987). Affiliation to groups draws upon a process of categorisation, which then has implications for the emotional connections between people and to institutions (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). The sense that group members share characteristics with each other forms an element of the identification or perception of groups (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Turner et al., 1987). Thus, while there is a measure of overlap between affiliation and a sense of belonging, affiliation can be understood as the extent to which people are actually linked to different groupings, regardless of how they experience themselves as belonging or not belonging to those groups.

Groups also contain a logic of shared values or similarity (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). Groups serve as spaces where 'like' or like-minded persons can be with each other. This concept of 'like' is often extended to establish that those who are not part of the group in question are therefore 'not like' those who are in the group – with the logic of this at times being expressed as the understanding that people who do not form part of the shared group prove their difference from members of the group by the fact of their non-membership within the group (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). Groups can thus form the basis of both shared experience and exclusion. Groups used in this manner serve to exert control over and shape the broader social setting, and protect the interests of some people against or at the expense of others (Hargrove, 2009; Hook, 2011).

Locke and Trolian (2018) highlighted this in the academic context. Students from working-class backgrounds who were unwilling or unable to embrace middle-class status symbols were found to experience interactions with their fellow students that stigmatised and dismissed their experiences (Locke & Trolian, 2018). These interactions took the form of subtle insults, assumptions, or exclusionary choices, which produced negative emotional experiences for students from working-class backgrounds. These negative emotional experiences, while working to undermine a sense of belonging, also operated on a practical level by challenging the extent to which they felt they could actually affiliate with their fellow students (Locke & Trolian, 2018). This highlighted that affiliation is a negotiated status between individual people, and one that has implications for the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds in elite academic settings.

Group membership can become either more relevant or less relevant to individuals, depending on the particulars of a given context and setting (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). This observation appeared to reflect a level of contingency in grouping that is consistent with constructionist

and intersectional approaches to interpreting and understanding human experiences. Brubaker (2002) noted this contrast between a group functioning as a distinct, unifying 'thing', and the seemingly more 'relaxed' form of groups, which he termed 'categories' (Brubaker, 2000). Exploring experiences of nationalism and efforts to organise national movements, Brubaker's (2002) work established a valuable framework for speaking about how people understand themselves in relation to larger groups and categories.

Categories differ from groups in that they lack several of the features of groups that appear to define the existence of groups (Brubaker, 2002). Specifically, Brubaker noted that categories lack a sense of cohesion or oneness among their members, while groups tend to display a tighter level of cohesion between members (Brubaker, 2002). This was a useful observation for considering the phenomenon of individual affiliation to groups in university settings, as it raised the possibility of variation in the extent to which people do and do not perceive themselves as affiliated with, or possessing the potential to affiliate with, others. The understanding that group affiliation differs from category membership is a useful distinction for understanding, for example, insider-outsider experiences, where students may experience category membership in the university setting despite not identifying themselves as directly affiliated with specific people or groups in the university setting.

Johnson et al. (2019) highlighted that group affiliation is actively maintained through efforts to assert commonality, as evidenced by efforts to create and share content within the group, or else discuss and support ideas expressed by group members, and through access to spaces where the group's 'core idea' or 'affiliative element' could safely be discussed, or through simple regular interaction or communication between members (Johnson et al., 2019). These elements appeared to be a common aspect of other work examining the benefits of group affiliation (Chen & Li, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Mallman et al., 2019). It pointed to the need for

caution in approaching and investigating groups, and highlighted the importance of considering the ways in which personal details of an individual's life might contribute to or detract from their experiences of groups and affiliation.

Hurst (2010) noted that students from working-class backgrounds often reported having left the familiarity of their home culture and community to enter tertiary education. This produced a feeling of alienation which can make navigating the academic space more difficult, and can reduce the individual student's sense of connectedness to the university they attend. This is significant, as it contributes to a lack of experienced support networks and social isolation for these students (Hurst, 2010). This experienced lack of support can contribute to students from working-class backgrounds affiliating together within the academic setting, and while this can have positive outcomes in terms of meeting the psychological needs of these students, it does not address the need for academic support (Hurst, 2010). Experiences of alienation are thus significant, as a cultural mismatch between elite academic spaces and students from working-class backgrounds who enter into them can undermine the experiences and successes of those students.

Knoester and Plikuhn (2016) highlighted this, noting that many students from marginalised class backgrounds experienced a form of 'culture shock' when first coming to university. Due to the contrasting class expectations between Higher Education and working-class backgrounds, students from these backgrounds can feel unprepared for the social, financial, and academic demands of elite educational contexts (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016). However, adapting to the new context is necessary for their academic success, and students who are able to make social connections, or rely on peer support structures, are often better able to adapt (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016). Differences in cultural backgrounds in the university setting can

thus contribute to a reduced condition of affiliation for students from working-class backgrounds.

Stubbs (2006) highlighted a perception by students from working-class backgrounds that their affluent peers were lazy. This perception allowed students from working-class backgrounds to take pride in where they had come from, while simultaneously serving to create a measure of distance between them and their fellow students (Stubbs, 2006). While distancing themselves from their peers may have served to limit how these students affiliated within the academic context, it demonstrated an alternative way to protect their sense of self in a context where alienation was experienced (Stubbs, 2006). This also highlighted an important consideration for understanding affiliation and belonging in an elite academic context, which is the role of individual choice in shaping affiliation and the experience of belonging.

2.4. Group Affiliation and Sense of Belonging

Group affiliation is a significant element of human experience as people are embedded in and shaped by groups, communities, and societies. Individuals are fundamentally dependent on the social categories and structures within which they categorise themselves and are categorised by others (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel et al., 1979). Group affiliation and sense of belonging can influence how individual persons interact with, view, and treat others, and can further influence the behaviour and beliefs people hold (Foster, 2012; Hornsey, 2008; Mallman et al., 2019). In the context of a sense belonging and group affiliation in elite-education settings, groups make up the fabric of the social setting in which students interact.

Groups are an ubiquitous phenomenon, and can range in terms of formal organisation from friendship clusters and family structures to academic institutions and corporate or military structures, (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel et al., 1979). Group affiliation is also evident along less conscious or formally constituted lines. Affiliations can form along lines of culture, language,

race, gender, and class, all of which make for nominally distinct, but practically blurred group lines and affiliations (Bródka et al., 2013; McCallum et al., 2007). The ability of social groupings and affiliations to influence self-concepts and interpersonal interactions makes it both important and pragmatic to understand how persons negotiate and understand their belonging to different groups.

Self-concept refers to the idea or image a person has of themselves (Daniels, 1982; Rogers, 1959). However, self-concept is also not only how people see themselves, but indeed how they would like to be seen (Daniels, 1982; Rogers, 1959). Self-concept can thus, by this definition, differ phenomenologically from a person's experienced reality. This potential dissonance has been the subject of extensive research (Hogg et al., 2004; Rogers, 1959). Initially, researchers focused on the consequences of a dissonance between the experience of self-concept and imagined self-concept (Daniels, 1982; Hogg et al., 2004; Rogers, 1959; Rosenberg, 1989). This related to sense of belonging and affiliation inasmuch as a self-concept can − and often does − include an image of the groups a person actually belongs to. Understanding the self-concepts of students from working-class backgrounds in an academic setting is thus an important part of understanding their perceptions, beliefs and actual experiences of affiliation.

Different theories exist to explain how individuals integrate their affiliations and self-concepts into a coherent and personal identity (Franz & White, 1985; McLean et al., 2016). While these theories offer useful observations, the emphasis of identity formation research on early developmental contexts has produced a comparatively limited focus on the role of meaning-making and experience in shaping identity in later developmental and novel environments. While people appear to inherit their initial groups and affiliations from their formative years (Foster, 2012; McLean et al., 2016), the question of how these groupings are understood,

experienced, and maintained in contexts which differ from students' formative contexts, and in light of exposure to and affiliation with different groups, remained largely unanswered.

Group affiliation is complicated by the multiple and varied nature of groups and the ways in which the lines between them become blurred or overlap (Crenshaw, 1990; Hogg et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2005). As highlighted by Crenshaw (1990), and expanded by subsequent research, no person belongs only to one group (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Rather, people are situated within intersecting groupings and identities. Each of these groupings and identities can have an impact on their actions and experiences in ways that are determined by context, with identities that are more or less relevant to the needs of the moment coming to the fore according to what is suitable for the present moment and context (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1990). This is referred to as salience, with identities which are determined to be most relevant to a specific context being termed salient within that context (Callero, 1985). In academic contexts, defined by transition and diversity, it is useful to consider identity salience and intersections when seeking to understand how students from working-class backgrounds make meaning of a sense of belonging and their affiliations.

Understanding individuals in terms of intersectionality is useful for exploring experiences relating to a sense of belonging in academic settings, as students occupy a position that does not fit easily into a single category (Veldman et al., 2019). The transitional and intersectional position occupied by students from working-class backgrounds complicates processes of meaning-making relating to experiences within the academic space, as it introduces an element of uncertainty and fluctuation into the experiences of these students (Veldman et al., 2019). Further, affiliation appears to impact on general experiences within the university setting.

Group affiliation is significant in university settings as it has the potential to shape individual and collective experiences of such spaces. Cooper (2009) highlighted that participants from

non-majority or socially non-dominant groups, such as cultural, gender or racial minorities, felt as though the terms of interaction in social settings were disproportionately set by the dominant group. Cooper (2009) highlighted that this produced a 'soft' limit on a participant's level of comfort and participation in the social sphere. This meant that while affiliation to and interaction with the university remained possible, there was a degree to which this possibility was not fully realised for students, as boundaries between groups were maintained through discursive and habitual practices.

This finding was consistent with Mallman et al. (2019), who highlighted that students from non-dominant groups play an undue role in preserving the appearance of harmony on campuses (Mallman et al., 2019). This was a significant finding, and suggested that attention should be paid to how groups construct and reinforce each other in social contexts, and how such constructions shape the experiences of the various group members. It also highlights the ways in which group affiliations can promote common shared experiences.

As potential indicators of shared experience, group affiliations can also promote the sharing of resources, expertise, and opportunities with members in ways that benefit them and improve their capacity to act and function in society (Chen & Li, 2009; Crenshaw, 1990). Groups within society can help to organise and facilitate their members' needs and interests being met (Adger, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Maguire & Hagan, 2007). They can also serve to overcome many of the limitations that individuals experience regarding their own capacities to act and prosper in society (Adger, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Maguire & Hagan, 2007). In an educational context, the feeling that one has access to groups and individuals on campus is valuable for improving students' academic success (Astin, 1975). Thus, groups can have a practical impact on personal and academic experiences.

Groups also serve a psychological function, providing security to members, bolstering the self-image of persons belonging to the group, and improving the resilience of those within the group (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Adger, 2000; Maguire & Hagan, 2007). In this sense, group affiliation is responsible for shaping the experiences of people living in societies (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Foster, 2012; Hogg et al., 2004). Groups and group membership are thus significant for shaping the psychological experiences of individuals, and appear to play a role in their overall mental health and functioning. In an educational setting, self-image and security play a role in promoting academic success and student retention (Bhopal, 2022; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), which highlighted the positive impacts that group membership and affiliation can have on students.

The contexts in which group membership and affiliations exist shape the perceptions of the groups and their members, and not all unifying schemas have positive implications for the people unified by them (Duckitt, 1992; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004; Kagan et al., 2019). This is part of a broader issue, but for this study, it should be noted that while groups serve to unify or 'collect' students around a core concept, idea, interest, or experience, it is not always the case that the people so 'collected' are in favour of being grouped in that particular category (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Duckitt, 1992). In educational contexts, students from working-class backgrounds can feel isolated or singled out by being grouped into 'working-class' categories (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). This highlights the ways in which affiliation and a sense of belonging intersect, or at times fail to intersect. Further, it suggests that unwanted affiliations can have negative implications for students' sense of belonging within the university setting, and can make the process of accessing support and completing their studies subjectively and practically more difficult (Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). Group affiliation can thus have a significant impact, positive or negative, on students' sense of belonging in an elite educational context.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) highlighted belonging in educational contexts in terms of a sense of belonging to campus, which included three components: social belonging, academic belonging, and perceived institutional support. Social belonging referred to the extent to which students felt comfortable and connected to other students in social settings, and related to the connections students felt towards their peers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Academic belonging referred to the ways in which students felt respected and given the support they needed to do well academically (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Academic belonging included the feeling by students that they could comfortably contribute to their classes, and that they could rely on their professors to be caring, supportive, and respectful towards the students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Perceived institutional support referred to the extent to which students felt that they could access support services on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These components of belonging offered a useful starting point for considering how students from working-class backgrounds experience a sense of belonging in elite academic contexts.

These components also highlighted that a sense of belonging is relational in conception and focuses on the ways in which people's connections with those around them serve to produce a feeling of reciprocity and embeddedness, which in turn has an impact on their experiences and meaning-making within the academic context (Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2018) emphasised this, and noted that a sense of belonging goes beyond simple recognition of shared membership in a group. A sense of belonging can thus be understood as the feeling that a person is valued by, or valuable to, a setting or group of people (Strayhorn, 2018). In the context of the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds at the University of the Witwatersrand, a sense of belonging would thus refer to the extent to which students from working-class backgrounds feel that they value their affiliation or connection to the institution and to their peers (Strayhorn, 2018). It would also refer to the emotional impact

of their connections with others (Strayhorn, 2018), and this has the potential to shape interactions with peers and with the institution.

Research suggested that needing a sense of belonging, and a feeling of significance in the lives of others, is a fundamental element of human experience (Strayhorn, 2018). Previous work has tended towards assuming that this suggestion holds, and moved rather to investigate what factors promoted this sense of belonging in order to use this belonging to meet additional needs in individual people (Johnson et al., 2020; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). There is evidence to suggest that a sense of belonging can fulfil a need, or indeed facilitates the fulfilment of further needs (Strayhorn, 2018), but it is also of interest to focus on the experience of that sense of belonging as an end in itself.

This is especially important given that, from a theoretical perspective, the actual type or 'content' of a group does not appear to be important for the psychological benefits or emotional resilience it can offer (Hogg et al., 2004; McLean, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018). Groups can and do offer emotional, psychological, and sociocultural benefits for membership, but it is not argued that only specific types of groups can provide these benefits (Hogg et al., 2004; McLean, 2016). One can gain a sense of belonging from a friendship group, a place of religious worship, a sports team, or a family – groupings which all differ radically in terms of organisation and the expectations placed upon members (McLean, 2016). The theorists examined pointed to the benefits in terms of self, sense of self, and social resilience that group belonging can foster, but did not appear to link these benefits to only certain groups, or groups with specific types of unifying factors (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Brown & Zagefka, 2006). This is an important consideration, but does not explain how people might go about achieving the benefits of a sense of belonging through group affiliations.

As highlighted previously, individuals may affiliate with different groups depending on the perceived relevance of different groups to their present context (Collins & Blige, 2016). It is important to consider the extent to which people experience a sense of belonging to different groups. More recent work on the notion of a sense of belonging framed it as a basic human need and behavioural motivator (Strayhorn, 2018). It also included an acknowledgement of the ways in which individuals' narrative and discursive positioning of themselves relative to other people produced an emotional effect (Johnson et al., 2020). This emotional effect can be positive or negative, and is related to how students understand and make meaning of the people and groups they encounter in the university setting.

Research has demonstrated that individuals may feel a strong affiliation to a group, without necessarily experiencing a concurrent sense of belonging (Ellemers et al., 2002). This highlights that while affiliation appears to be based on the act of choosing or not choosing to be associated with particular categories (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Turner & Reynolds, 2011), a sense of belonging rests primarily on the emotional connections and value one may or may not feel with category members (Johnson, 2019; Strayhorn, 2018). This highlights that while a sense of belonging and group affiliation may intersect, they are not equivalent concepts. It does, however, appear that a sense of belonging depends at least in part on an affiliation to other people wherein an individual may experience the opportunity to be valued, and thus achieve a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018; Turner & Reynolds, 2011). This intersection of affiliation and sense of belonging is useful for exploring the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds, as it links a sense of belonging to research on affiliation and the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds understand and make meaning of their affiliations, voluntary and involuntary, in an academic setting (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Newman et al., 2007).

Certain large-scale groupings, such as race, provide examples of 'involuntary' affiliation, as while it is possible for persons to actively choose or self-affiliate with socially established racial groupings, the institutions and practices of culture serve to re-inscribe and reinforce concepts and divisions based on race such that a person's skin colour is used by others to classify them within the racial schema (Whitehead & Lerner, 2009). Thus, a person can experience group affiliation to race voluntarily, through active affiliation, or involuntarily, through being labelled or categorised by others in a social setting.

Involuntary affiliation, or 'being grouped' by others, is a commonly observed experience, and the outcomes of this can vary. Ellemers et al. (2002) highlighted how choosing groups and having groups chosen for people can produce different emotional effects and behaviours in the people experiencing the affiliation. These effects can be both positive and negative, and it can be noted that being grouped involuntarily can prove to be a source of distress for individuals when they experience what may be considered a low sense of belonging to the group with which they have been involuntarily affiliated (Ellemers et al., 2002). Students from working-class backgrounds studying in an elite tertiary education space could run the risk of being grouped by others into given categories (Bhopal, 2022), and so it is important to consider how this may have an impact on their experiences.

A person may resent being categorised in a particular group, and therefore experience externally imposed categorisations with the group as a threat to their well-being and positive sense of self (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Ellemers et al., 2002). There are many stereotypes and associations around individuals coming from working-class backgrounds, which can affect the experiences of students' affiliations with the working-class group (see Badat, 2010; Mallman, 2017; Reay et al., 2009; Stubbs & Murphy, 2019). These students enter into the university context while they are still situated within the working-class group, and accordingly, they

experience effects related to both their own affiliations and the perceptions of other students that they are working-class individuals (Granfield, 1991; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Reay et al., 2009). These affiliations impact on their experiences and access to the elite academic setting, and in turn appear to intersect with how students from working-class backgrounds experience a sense of belonging at university.

2.5. Critiques of Traditional Approaches to Understanding Groups

Traditional approaches to understanding the phenomenon of groups have tended to focus on the specifics of a situation as they affect a given person, rather than seeking universalist impulses or mapping disparate contexts onto a single template (Brown & Zagefka, 2006; Cho et al., 2013). However, there remain universalising impulses in the social identity approaches. The insistence on hierarchical status competition between groups is a fundamental element of the approaches that has received far less empirical validation than the approaches' predictions and theorisation focused on within-group dynamics (Hogg et al., 2004; Hogg & Williams, 2000). The notion of a stratified hierarchy appears to have merit, but to draw upon the work of intersectional theorists (Cho et al., 2013), risks simplifying the ways in which group membership can have an impact upon the lives of persons. In Higher Educational contexts, where the diversity of identities does not always fit neatly into hierarchies, a focus on single identities can miss the negotiated nature of students' experiences of belonging and affiliation within the academic context.

In addition, traditional approaches towards understanding groups do not always emphasise the significance of even arbitrary group membership. Results from minimal group paradigm experiments demonstrated a significant bias towards members of the in-group, such that even though there was no apparent reason for conflict between groups, participants would still work to ensure that their own group was better off than the other (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Lemyre

& Smith, 1985; Platow et al., 1990). This demonstrated that even the most marginal group belonging can have an impact on the behaviour of individual people and how they interact with others. This criticism suggested that for students from working-class backgrounds, it is not merely the formal groups they encounter that can shape their experiences of belonging and affiliation within academic settings. In addition to membership within the institution, student membership in arbitrary, and unpredictable, groupings may theoretically have an impact on how they experience belonging and affiliation at the university (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Platow et al., 1990). This highlighted the importance of examining how students define and understand the groups within which they situate themselves.

A further consideration is the importance of groups as driving forces in traditional approaches to understanding groups. The fact that groups exist has been treated as sufficient reasons for people to interact with, value, and seek to join with groups (Brown & Zagefka, 2006; Turner & Reynolds, 2011). While research has highlighted that individuals are driven to join groups in order to reduce fear and uncertainty, and to protect their self-esteem (Hogg et al., 2008), this does not sufficiently explain why students from working-class might join one support group, and not another. Further, it does not fully address what specific factors might drive these students to distance themselves from other students from working-class backgrounds or alternatively why these students might seek to preserve their belonging in prior groupings at the expense of success in the academic context (Hogg et al., 2008). This criticism suggests that traditional approaches to understanding group belonging should consider the role played by individual factors in shaping member perceptions of groups in order to understand how groups are experienced and maintained.

Historically, research into groups and the interactions of groups in social spaces has tended towards an understanding that groups are driven by prejudices (Dixon & Levine, 2012). This

understanding, guided by historical concerns and patterns of interaction between dominant groups and subordinated groups shaped early studies of groups and belonging, and contributed to an academic understanding of group belonging as promoting prejudice or encouraging negative behaviours in group members (Dixon & Levine, 2012). This suggested that the importance assigned to prejudice in understanding how people interact with and join groups in social spaces can prevent a more nuanced understanding of how students experience a sense of belonging and affiliate to the groups they encounter. This highlighted the importance of examining the emotional responses that students experienced in response to the groups they encountered in the university setting.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how socioeconomic class interacts with academic settings. Class backgrounds can shape how students engage with each other and with their university settings. Understanding how socioeconomic status affects students' experiences of academic settings has highlighted that negative experiences are a common outcome for students from working-class backgrounds, and emphasises the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds can feel alienated in academic settings.

In exploring this experience of alienation, several factors were noted. The transitional nature of university spaces allows students to gain access to new knowledge, skills and opportunities, which may not be available in different contexts. However, this comes with an exposure to the attitudes and expectations of individuals and groups from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, which may be alien to students from working-class backgrounds. This chapter illustrated that it is within this context that students from working-class backgrounds negotiate their identities and sense of belonging towards peers and the academic institutions they attend. Student Involvement Theory highlights that the success or failure of this negotiation has

significant implications for the overall coping and academic success of students from working-class backgrounds. The literature highlighted that promoting a positive sense of belonging was valuable for academic outcomes, while also highlighting that students from working-class backgrounds can find themselves under pressure to promote a sense of harmony at university campuses that places an undue emotional burden on them.

Literature exploring students' experiences of affiliation highlighted an intersection between affiliation and belonging, and illustrated how these concepts differ. Affiliation represents the practical act of choosing, not choosing, and being chosen when it comes to groups, while a sense of belonging represents the emotional connections and responses to group membership and affiliation. While a sense of belonging is an important element of students' experiences, it is shaped by the affiliations that students identify for themselves and others in the university spaces. This differentiation was useful for considering how students from working-class backgrounds have framed their experiences of academic spaces.

Studies into students' experiences of belonging at universities have tended to emphasise the outcome of a sense of belonging to the university institution as a desirable outcome. In general, studies into students' experiences of belonging have not examined a sense of belonging as an end in itself, which has in turn limited how belonging as an experience relating to working-class students in academic spaces may be understood. The emphasis on a group-specific sense of belonging has offered useful insights to the literature surrounding students from working-class backgrounds, though it appeared to emphasise the role of the university in promoting belonging, in contrast to literature that suggested that a sense of belonging can be driven by individual affiliations and group membership.

This review also examined literature which argues that identities are negotiated, complex, and influenced by both affiliations and individual perceptions of the relevance of given affiliations

in specific contexts. The extent to which identities appeared to rest on individual negotiations and the intersection between belonging and affiliation highlighted the idea that students played an active role in shaping their own experiences of a sense of belonging and affiliation. This in turn, suggested that a sense of belonging should be explored as an end in itself in order to consider how affiliating to groups or identities other than those of the academic institution might shape students' experiences within the context of that institution.

The relative lack of studies exploring a sense of belonging as an end in itself suggested that it may be valuable to explore how a sense of belonging might be experienced and achieved in general terms within a shared context without being linked to a specific group or institution within that context. Further, the literature emphasising the negotiated and potentially subjective nature of groups, belonging, and affiliation, provided an insight into how belonging and affiliation might be experienced by students from working-class backgrounds in an academic setting. The literature surrounding a sense of belonging and affiliation contributed to the research design which was adopted for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

This study explored the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds adapted to and made meaning of their experiences relating to sense of belonging and affiliation within an elite educational context. Understanding these experiences could provide insight into ways to improve the level of institutional and social support that universities offer to students from working-class backgrounds. To this end, this research employed a qualitative exploratory design. Qualitative research is intended to address questions that relate to the dimensions of understanding, meaning, and experience within social contexts and individual lives (Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research is an iterative process which is oriented towards examining and developing a rich understanding of phenomena as they exist within the world and as they are subjectively understood by individual people (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research emphasises the subjectivity of knowledge production, and places epistemic value on individuals' unique understanding and interpretation with regards to producing knowledge related to existing and observable phenomena, making it appropriate for researching social and academic spheres (Fossey et al., 2002; Nassaji, 2020). Adopting a qualitative design was appropriate for this study, as it allowed for an examination of subjective experience and meaning making of the participants and aligned with the research questions.

3.1. Design

This research employed a qualitative exploratory design to collect data regarding participants' experiences and understandings around experiencing a sense of belonging and group affiliation. Exploratory designs seek to discover information about phenomena and to gain greater understanding about the various factors relating to the phenomenon under investigation (Laher et al., 2019). By seeking to uncover information, rather than focusing on the confirmation of previously established information, exploratory designs offer the opportunity

to explore new information and novel understandings to arise (Laher et al., 2019). Exploratory research allows for rich detail and flexibility in the data collection process (Laher et al., 2019). Exploratory research is also grounded in what has come before, and allows researchers to make use of existing literature in their exploration (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Rashidi et al., 2014). Accordingly, adopting such a design was useful for the goal of this project, which sought to uncover how working-class students negotiated and maintained their experiences of group affiliation and sense of belonging at the elite University of the Witwatersrand.

3.2. Social Constructionism

An approach underpinned by the principles of social constructionism was selected for this study as the primary focus of this research was on individual experiences. Social constructionism maintains that individual statements regarding experience and reality are constitutive of subjective reality for that individual (Foster, 2012). This approach maintains that individuals will develop divergent realities on the basis of a shared common experience of a phenomenon, and that there is no single reality to a phenomenon outside of these divergent constructions (Foster, 2012). Social constructionism assigns equal validity to these divergent constructions of reality, and maintains that all experienced realities of a given phenomenon have equal weight for developing an understanding of that phenomenon (Foster, 2012).This framework aligned with the research questions of this study due to the emphasis of these questions on experience and subjective meaning making, as it was understood that students from working-class backgrounds would have unique and epistemologically valid experiences of the shared phenomenon of attending an elite academic institution that may differ from the experiences and accounts of their peers.

The adoption of social constructionism as a framework allowed this research to consider the ways in which meaning and experience are shaped by the actions and words of individuals in

social interactions, which can include interviews such as those used to conduct this research (Laher et al., 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). As this research was oriented towards the social sphere, it was vital to remain aware of the ways in which what was said and believed by and about the participants was capable of influencing and altering their perceptions, experiences, and understandings of others and the context in which they attended the university (Cooper, 2009; Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2018; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). The constructionist approach is also useful in examining how people negotiate, define, and create the groups they are part of (Laher et al., 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). During this research process, it was thought that the action of speaking about their experiences with me in my role as an interviewer represented a process of construction and meaning making which allowed participants to develop, discover, and attribute meaning to the experiences they recounted. My presence in this process was thought to contribute to a co-construction of knowledge and meaning, as I sought to understand the experiences being recounted and the students attempted to convey their experiences and understandings.

3.3. Sampling and Participants

This study made use of a convenience sample of working-class third year and postgraduate students drawn from the University of the Witwatersrand. The process made use of volunteer and snowball sampling. Volunteer sampling entails approaching potential participants and asking that they volunteer for the study (Laher et al., 2019). Snowball sampling is a process that builds upon interest shown by participants by asking them to refer additional potential participants (Laher et al., 2019). These two approaches were useful for this study as they permitted a fairly rapid sampling process, and allowed for a flexible process that was capable of engaging participants' interest in the research topic in order to proceed with the study (Laher et al., 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). Volunteer and snowball sampling helped to match potential participants with the study's criteria by allowing participants to determine for

themselves if they would like to be included in the study sample, and to recommend potential candidates who would be a fit for the study (Laher et al., 2019).

Participants were recruited by word of mouth and the use of posters placed on campus at the university. The sample comprised ten students: six female, three male, and one non-binary, drawn from across different faculties at the university. In terms of racial grouping, four of the participants were White, four of them were Black, one was Coloured, and one was Indian. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 27 years of age. Eight of the participants had attended the University of the Witwatersrand for the entirety of their university education, while two participants had studied for a year at a different institution before moving to the University of the Witwatersrand.

All of the participants were from working-class backgrounds. The inclusion criterion for determining the participant's socioeconomic background was the student's use of the NSFAS funding. The NSFAS programme provides financial aid to students from working-class backgrounds, and its criteria excludes students from middle-class or wealthier backgrounds, which makes receiving the NSFAS funding an effective and readily determined inclusion criterion for this study.

3.4. Procedure

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand. The protocol number for this research was MACC/20/05 (Appendix A). Suitable participants were sourced through convenience sampling methods. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in challenges for obtaining a suitable cohort and collecting relevant data; hence, the data collection took place intermittently over a protracted period between May 2021 and May 2022. Once individuals responded to the initial call for participants, I established contact with them via email and

WhatsApp in order to explain the project, establish that they were an appropriate participant for this study in terms of the inclusion criteria, provide the information sheet and consent form, collect the signed voluntary consent form, and send them the meeting link. An interview schedule was developed based on the literature review findings and guided by the research questions. The raw data was transcribed and analysed using the method of content analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.5. Data Collection

Data was collected using a semi-structured online interview format. The advantages of the semi-structured interview include flexibility, the space to explore answers, and the ability to bring in information from established literature to probe for answers and prompt discussion (Rashidi et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews also promote rich, detailed accounts, and allow for the following of new ideas and the discovery of information without being as open ended as unstructured interviews (Rashidi et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews were suitable for exploratory research, and proved a good fit for this study. However, a disadvantage of semi-structured interviews is that it is possible for participants to go off topic or for unnecessary information to be collected (Laher et al., 2019). This necessitated a measure of caution when using this approach.

In my role as interviewer, I made use of questions and probes to facilitate the discussion, and allowed space for topics and lines of conversation that arose naturally during the interview process to be followed up. The research instrument for this study was developed based on the literature review and the research questions, and allowed for the exploration in depth of themes as they emerged in the interviews. For a full interview schedule, see Appendix B.

Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic's regulations, and the resulting need for physical distancing, data collection took place on a digital platform. Appointments were scheduled by

me using Microsoft Teams and Zoom, depending on the participants' preference. Times for the interviews were organised to be convenient for the participants, and each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The disadvantages of online data collection were participants having limited access to data or Wi-Fi and incurring the costs of connection. The reliance upon network connectivity was a further drawback, as participants sometimes experienced interruptions resulting in the loss of communication and the need to either re-establish communication or reschedule.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed using a thematic approach, which was informed by a constructionist position. The methods used to conduct thematic analysis were those outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a robust system that permits researchers to explore and engage with the data they have collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are six steps to a thematic analysis:

1. Data familiarisation. This phase required re-reading and immersion in the dataset, jotting down ideas and initial reactions, and laying the groundwork for the next phase (Braun & Clark, 2006). This process continued, with the researcher searching for ideas and concepts within the data, until the point of saturation was reached (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
2. Initial code generation. This phase involved creating codes that contribute to meaningful categories into which the data can be sorted (Braun & Clark, 2006). These categories formed the basis of the next phase.
3. Themes and subtheme identification. Themes and subthemes tend to be larger than the initial codes, and are useful for linking the data collected to the initial research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step involved looking for patterns and connections within the collected data, and was a fundamental step to discovering meaning within the data. While

time consuming, this process was suitable for this research topic, as it promised a means to uncover information as it occurred in the data, rather than relying on pre-existing knowledge gathered from the literature review or categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also foregrounded the themes that emerged from the voices and experiences of the research participants.

4. Theme review. This phase involved a review of the work of previous phases, and was focused on determining if there was a coherent fit between the data and themes used to organise it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase entailed re-examining the connections and patterns that had been identified in the initial readings of the data, and evaluating if these connections did indeed make sense within the data. This also served the purpose of the research project in examining and understanding the meaning-making processes of students from working-class backgrounds, rather than seeking to understand how such processes might be classified into existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
5. Theme definition and refining. The work of this phase focused on defining and refining the previously developed themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A key element of this phase involved considering how each theme fitted together with the other themes and with the data overall (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was important to ensure in this phase that there were clear differences between each theme and the relevant subtheme/s. The identified themes were then considered, compared, and analysed, and connections drawn between them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These considerations and connections were finally used to construct a coherent image of how the phenomenon under investigation was experienced and understood (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because of the experiential focus of the research questions, emphasis in the analysis was given to the stories and narratives the research participants constructed. This facilitated the discovery of the ways in which the participants

made-meaning of and framed their understanding of their experiences in the university setting.

6. Report production. The final stage of the analysis involved producing a report that was clear, concise, and interesting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step was necessary for both presenting the information gathered through the analysis and convincing the reader of the strength of the analysis.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Several ethical concerns arise when one seeks to conduct research. Foremost among these are issues of consent to participate and autonomy, confidentiality and anonymity, and non-maleficence.

Informed consent is a vital part of the research process. The information sheet and consent form were explained to the participants by me, and I highlighted that the interviews would be recorded for the purposes of data analysis. Consent needed to be freely given by the participants who needed to understand what was being asked of them and who were in a position where they could reasonably and legally give their consent (Arifin, 2018). To this end, the participants in this study were provided with information sheets (Appendix C) explaining the purpose and procedure of the research. Thereafter, all participants were required to provide written consent once they had read the information sheet and agreed to participate (Appendix D).

Participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants were free to withdraw at any point in the process, without consequences. Consent to voluntary participation is a vital and foundational aspect of participation in research, while consent to record and publish ensures that researchers do not infringe on the participants' autonomy in the conducting of the research (Arifin, 2018; Laher et al., 2019). Autonomy refers to the capacity of the participants to choose

for themselves their actions and involvement in the project, and to do so free from coercion and outside control (Laher et al., 2019). This project did not offer any incentive to participants, nor did it carry any penalty for people who declined to participate.

Anonymity refers to whether the participants' identities can be known during the collection of data (Laher et al., 2019). As this research employed interviews, anonymity could not be guaranteed as the identity of the participants was known to me. Participant identities were, however, protected in the presentation of the data and the final report as all identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms.

Confidentiality refers to the protection of the content of participants' responses (Laher et al., 2019). The nature of interviews is such that the responsibility for maintaining the confidentiality of the interview data falls to the individual occupying the role of researcher and interviewer, who must work to ensure that this information is not presented or revealed in ways that might harm the participant (Laher et al., 2019). Confidentiality in this case was adhered to by limiting access of the data to the researcher and the supervisor, and by anonymising direct quotations.

Secure data storage and limiting access to the data is also related to the concept of non-maleficence (Laher et al., 2019). Non-maleficence involves ensuring that participants do not experience harm as a result of their participation (Laher et al., 2019). I explained to the participants that the data collected was to be stored indefinitely, and that it would only be accessible to myself and my research supervisor. Digital transcriptions of the recordings were stored on a password-protected computer. In order to make use of hardcopies of the transcripts, identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and the physical copies were stored in a secure lockable container when not in use for analysis purposes.

While this research did not carry a significant risk of exposing the participants to potential harm, it remained important to ensure that participants left the interviews without concerns about what they had discussed. In addition to reflecting with the researcher on what they had shared, participants were also provided with the contact details of the University of the Witwatersrand's CCDU, a free-for-students counselling service that they could make use of if they wanted additional support.

3.8. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the ability of a qualitative study to demonstrate that it has reasonably established its findings and that these findings can be trusted. Guba (1981) suggested four criteria that could be used to assess trustworthiness in qualitative research. These are: credibility, which concerns itself with the internal validity of the study; transferability, which is similar to generalisability; dependability, which can be compared to reliability; and confirmability, which can be compared to objectivity (Guba, 1981). This study made use of these principles to ensure its trustworthiness.

3.8.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to ensuring that a study has in fact investigated what it intended to investigate, which requires assessing the study's findings against reality (Shenton, 2004). This is a matter of importance in research, and speaks to the overall success of any given study (Laher, 2019; Shenton, 2004). Making use of established research methods that are grounded in research practice is a good way to achieve this (Guba, 1981). The value of this lies in that using known methods and designs allows the researcher to draw upon established knowledge and the experience of others in implementing a design, and guards against common errors or shortcomings (Laher et al., 2019). The approach towards phenomenological experiences

adopted by this study is one such well-established approach to research design and data analysis (Laher et al., 2019), and thus supported the credibility of this study.

Shenton (2004) highlighted that voluntary participation by a study's participants is a valuable element of credibility. Voluntary participation ensures that the people who enter into the study are exercising their own choice, and can be expected to provide the data they give without reservation (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). A lack of reservation increases the likelihood that the data collected in a study represents the participants' real experiences, as opposed to what the participants might imagine a researcher wants to hear (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Given that participation in this study was voluntary, this also supported the credibility of this study.

Another valuable element of credibility is being open to review and scrutiny by peers and colleagues (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The initial stages of this study involved several presentations of the project to peers and academics within the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as discussions regarding the goals and design of the project with peers. The later stages of the project included a period of extensive review and consultation with my supervisor, in order to assess the data collected.

3.8.2. Transferability

Transferability is a matter of contentious debate in qualitative research. The context of research, and the experiences of people within these contexts, can vary to such an extent that it is often difficult to transfer or generalise findings established in any one context to any other (Guba, 1981). It is possible to support a limited transfer of findings from one context to another, provided that detailed backgrounds, which highlight similarities between the origin target context, can be identified (Guba, 1981). In such cases where contexts appear to be very similar or even identical, it can then be argued that what is true in one context can also be true in the other (Guba, 1981). This highlights that even when seeking to understand commonly occurring

or wide-ranging phenomena, qualitative researchers must be mindful of the extent to which their findings may represent experiences which are unique to the participants of contexts being studied (Laher et al., 2019).

However, there is little consensus regarding what constitutes 'similar enough' in terms of backgrounds (Shenton, 2004). Thus, the transferability of any project rests on a judgement call, which requires a detailed background of the given project that can allow it to be compared to the specific circumstances of other projects or applications of the study's findings (Anney, 2014; Shenton, 2004). This study included a description of the background against which it occurred, which is useful for the purposes of transferability, but there are no established standards for what is needed in a background to justify transferability (Shenton, 2004). Accordingly, the findings of this study into working-class students' experiences of belonging and affiliation at an elite university may be applicable for comparison in studies exploring similar settings and contexts.

3.8.3. Dependability

Dependability is comparable to what is termed reliability in positivistic, qualitative research (Anney, 2014; Laher et al., 2019) Dependability focuses on establishing that a study making use of the same methods, the same context, and the same participants will produce similar results to an initial study (Shenton, 2004). This is an ideal outcome for qualitative research, but it cannot be guaranteed (Shenton, 2004), because phenomena are fluid, and can change between the implementation of different studies (Shenton, 2004). In addition, the specific characteristics of any given researcher, participant, or interview setting cannot always be easily reproduced (Shenton, 2004). This presents a challenge to establishing dependability in qualitative research, but one which is not necessarily significant.

Guba (1981) argued that it is possible to achieve similar results in repeated studies, provided that sufficient detail is given regarding the processes and procedure of the initial study. Sufficient detail in this case refers to the detail necessary to allow for a near-identical repetition of an initial study (Guba, 1981). Dependability in this study was approached through the use of identical interview schedules and the use of standardised forms to convey information to the participants. Additionally, the research design and procedures outlined in this report can be followed as described in order to replicate this study.

3.8.4. Confirmability

Another element of establishing trustworthiness relates to confirmability. Confirmability is comparable to what qualitative research terms objectivity, and revolves around the elimination of biases (Shenton, 2004). True neutrality and the elimination of bias are not feasible, especially in the case of a qualitative study such as this one, which sought to explore phenomenological experiences (Anney, 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Measures exist to address issues of objectivity and bias, including methodological descriptions, and the use of reflexive processes and triangulation (Guba, 1981). Methodological descriptions address confirmability by allowing readers to assess for themselves the ways in which data was collected and where biases may have influenced the study (Guba, 1981). Providing a comprehensive methodological description, as detailed in this report, thus represents a means of addressing the issue of confirmability in qualitative research.

Reflexive processes entail that researchers should ‘own’ their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions in order to safeguard the analysis from being unduly influenced by them (Guba, 1981). Reflexive processes can serve as an additional source of data, but have primary value in eliminating the unconscious or unthinking nature of biases and allowing the researcher to attempt to move away from potentially counterproductive immediate reactions to evaluate the

data more reasonably (Guba, 1981; Laher et al., 2019). Triangulation involves the use of multiple data collection methods to eliminate elements of bias by approaching the research in different ways (Guba, 1981). This study did not make use of triangulation, although a reflexive process was used to promote confirmability.

Thus, in terms of the criteria of trustworthiness, this study can be seen to be acceptable in all the listed dimensions. Potential issues were identified, but they were either addressed by the design of the study or else mitigated for by the systems in place in qualitative data collection, so as to offer a reasonable level of trustworthiness. This gave the study the potential to accurately capture the phenomenon under investigation, and to point towards future directions in this field.

3.9. Reflexivity

While bias is inevitable in all research, the nature of this research topic made it vital that my own identity and identity elements did not significantly distort or detract from the analysis and interpretation of data (Laher et al., 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). However, my identity also posed a valuable source of data in its own right, both in the collection and moderation phase of the research, and at the level of analysis and interpretation (Laher et al., 2019). These elements can affect any researcher's understanding of what is expressed by the participants. Therefore, care was taken to ensure that my own reactions to any information did not influence the interpretation of this information. This took the form of reflexive writing and re-listening to the interview recordings.

Identity elements that were considered for me included a middle-class background, maleness, and Whiteness. In order to navigate the potential pitfalls and benefits posed by these personal identity elements, I was careful to maintain a space for the expression of experiences and identity elements different from my own. This was facilitated by the interview design, and

further by adopting a position of non-judgement during the collection process (Laher et al., 2019; Shaughnessy et al., 2000). Additionally, care was taken not to become too involved or 'lost' in the data collection, or focused on vicarious or self-directed curiosity. Such an examination of the experiences of others would have limited the capacity of the research to explore the questions of a sense of belonging and affiliation by relating presented information back to the researcher. The goal of this caution was to maintain a level of distance that would facilitate the collection of data from participants.

Certain responses during the collection process elicited a strong reaction from me. The reasons for this related at times to difference in experiences, surprise at the responses of the participants, or shared discomfort at some of the topics that arose during the exploration of grouping in South Africa. A note was made of these moments following the interview. I reflected upon these moments and reflected on them later during the analysis process. Additionally, I was able to make use of video recordings to revisit those moments of discomfort, allowing for a more thorough examination and exploration of the ideas and themes elicited. A similar process of reflexivity was followed for the analysis process, with reactions and initial thoughts journaled and added to the process of documentation.

Chapter 4: Findings

The focus for this study was specifically on group affiliation and sense of belonging, and the ways in which these were experienced and understood by students from working-class backgrounds attending the University of the Witwatersrand, which is considered an elite tertiary education institution. These experiences were complex, fluid, and marked by student-driven attempts to understand themselves and the people around them. Four themes emerged from the data set: Place and Emotions was the first. The second theme was Adapting to the University of the Witwatersrand. The third theme was Group Affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand. The fourth theme was A Sense of Belonging.

The first theme described how students understood the experience of being at the university, and highlighted challenges, uncertainty, and worries. This theme highlighted affective responses and perceived threats within the academic space. The second theme related to students' experiences of the institution, adjustment, and coping. This theme highlighted the role of place and institutional culture, as well as student-driven coping strategies within the academic setting. The third theme related to how students understood and experienced affiliation in the setting created by the elite academic context of the University of the Witwatersrand. This theme highlighted the role that factors such as gender, class, race, and religion, have played in shaping students' experiences of affiliation. The fourth theme related to how students experienced themselves as belonging or not belonging within the socio-academic setting. Specific factors which promoted a sense of belonging were highlighted, as were factors which detracted from a sense of belonging.

4.1. Place and Emotions

The University of the Witwatersrand was understood as both a physical location and a source of emotional experiences for the participants. Entering into this location and experiencing the

university setting was initially overwhelming for students. Subthemes for this section include Alienation, Anxiety, and Judgement.

4.1.1. Alienation

Arriving at the University of the Witwatersrand produced an immediate social contrast for students from working class backgrounds. Many students went to schools where their peers were from homogenous class backgrounds, and entering an elite university positioned them into a minority group. In addition, the magnitude of the university context was experienced as new and very different from past educational contexts and signalled a transition not only into adulthood but into a different class structure.

> *"Yeah so just having a year's worth of experience in an institution helped me when I came to Wits because there was a degree of weighing my options and preparing myself before coming here, whereas I feel like students coming straight out of high school struggle so much. I'm aware it can be really very, very anxiety making coming to university." – Akin*

The school context appeared to have been a social milieu that had either implicit or explicit rules for engagement which made it easier to adapt and succeed, while the university context was less structured and resembled the 'real world'. This lack of structure was a source of insecurity and uncertainty for participants regarding how to engage effectively with peers, which participants reported directly influenced how they attempted to affiliate with others when they first entered into the university space.

> *"It's just that everyone sticks to their own, to their own group of people that they know." – Elelwani*

The experience of alienation and the sense that students would position themselves within smaller groups within the university setting was noted as contributing to negative emotional

experiences for participants, who highlighted that it made them feel unsupported within the academic setting.

> *"In a university setting, the overall feeling of groups and people and connections, that can be negatively influenced when you feel like there's no one to support you." – Hazel*

Travel and on-campus navigation were also significant elements of student experiences of the academic setting. For some students, travelling to the university campus was a challenge, and for many it was initially difficult to navigate the buildings and people they encountered once there. This meant that transport, and the resources needed to attend classes and be in the space of the university, played a direct role in shaping their experiences of attending the university. This produced a perception of difference between students who could afford to spend most of their time on campus, and those who could not.

> *"Well, at first I had chosen not to go into residence. I was thinking I was gonna be able to travel, but I found out that was very costly and also exhausting with having to travel early in the morning and all that stuff. So I decided to apply for accommodation with the university and thankfully I was able to get a room and so after that first month I was able to stick around." – Elelwani*

The physical space of the university campus played a role in shaping how the students related to the new environment and how they understood their sense of belonging to the institution. On a practical level, the students struggled to navigate their way around the campus, and this tended to make them feel insecure, uncomfortable and uncertain. This is a common experience for students regardless of background, though for students from working-class backgrounds it represented another element of alienation in the already alienating context of tertiary education. They struggled to find their lecture venues and general information which led to many students feeling that the campus was a hostile place. It also served to enhance a feeling of difference or dissonance between them and the students who knew the campus. This feeling of division

created by knowing the physical layout of the campus was a significant part of the initial experience for students from working-class backgrounds, who were often explicitly aware of the role that space, and knowing their shared space, was playing in shaping their experiences.

> *"I think that distinction between myself not knowing the place, and seeing other students who already know where they are going, it was just creating a feeling of not-belonging." – Elelwani*

4.1.2. Anxiety

Participants highlighted an experience of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety linked to the academic setting. These terms convey both clinical and non-clinical meanings, and for the participants these terms emphasised a negative emotional state characterised by extreme worry and an emphasis on anticipating their experiences within the academic space. They noted that this anxiety was linked specifically to the process of entering into the university space.

> *"I can't even imagine the anxiety and existential dread most people felt coming to university in their first year [laughs]" – Akin*

In addition, the location of the university's main campus within Braamfontein, an area of Johannesburg which possessed for many students a reputation for being dangerous, produced for participants a sense of unsafety with regards to attending the university. Participants were keenly aware of the physicality of Braamfontein, and highlighted that arriving at campus would often entail moving through Braamfontein before passing through security to enter onto the university grounds. The experience of moving through and being close to an area of the city that participants felt was dangerous appeared to influence how students experienced the campus space. Participants expressed positive opinions about the fact that the campus space was separated from the surrounding city, though several participants spoke about wanting to do more to secure themselves and improve their sense of safety while attending the university.

> *"I guess I just started to notice things about the atmosphere, the social dynamics, the infrastructure I mean, Wits is like, really close to the City [Johannesburg]. So there there's not too much of a filter between outside and inside, so it does have that rough, cold, city edge to it. You see this in the infrastructure, like West Campus [located further away from Braamfontein] is Happy Campus, while East Campus feels a lot more dense, and a lot more influenced by Braam [Braamfontein]." – Akin*

Several elements of experience were noted as sources of difficulty for students: social interactions with other students, the feeling of being judged by peers, and competition between student groups. One key element which appeared to contribute to feelings of stress and discomfort for students from working-class backgrounds was the perception that they were being judged, or ridiculed by other students.

> *"... [they] can mock you for the wrong answers, can mock you when you go to the board, mock you when you are poorly dressed, mock when you come to class late..." – Dimonekene*

4.1.3. Judgement

Markers of social class were prevalent in many spheres of student life. These included: clothes, language, etiquette and culture. Students from working-class backgrounds perceived themselves as being judged for behaving differently, looking different, or standing out in the academic settings. The perception of difference contributed to feelings of alienation. Social class differences may have also served as an exclusionary mechanism, which was experienced as unfair assumptions about the individual based on class stereotypes. In this case, there appeared to be a concern that being judged would lead to other students making decisions about what kind of person these students from working-class backgrounds might be, regardless of how they understood themselves or their own identities.

"…one hopes that, one day, you won't be grouped into the category of men just purely based on your appearance and your voice. Those kinds of things." – Eloma

This was experienced as alienating, and contributed negatively to student experiences of the academic setting.

"…there will be certain people who judge you and who don't like you - and that's normal, not everyone will like you – but it's still difficult…" – Hazel

Participants also highlighted that it was possible for them to engage in this process of judging or labelling other students. Participants felt that it was counterproductive to engage in this practice, arguing that it complicated their attempts to interact with peers.

"… I feel like just identifying people by sight and labelling them is a very dangerous thing to do… it complicates how you see people and I guess, just categorises [or objectifies] them." – Sasha

Another negative element of initial experiences at university for students from working-class backgrounds was linked to the feeling that student groups were competing with each other for success and resources within the university setting. This competition added to the students' feelings of distress and worry, and reflected a perception that students from working-class backgrounds needed to demonstrate or prove that they deserved a position within the academic setting.

"Yes, it definitely fuelled competition, coz I'm like, okay, I need to prove that, you know, I don't need other people's approval to be here. That kind of idea, so that I had to prove myself to them. Like, yes, you can accept me, I am supposed to be here, I'm not just some random person." – Eloma

The perception that being within the university setting made students vulnerable to being judged or competed against was treated as a negative effect by the participants.

4.2. Adapting to the University

Participants spoke about the university as initially being a frightening, and anxiety-provoking place. Anxiety used in a non-clinical sense referred to concerns about not succeeding in navigating the university space in a comfortable manner and by implication fears about not realising their career aspirations. In response to this, students framed themselves as adapting to the university context. Subthemes for this section include Coping, Adjustment, and Meaning-Making.

4.2.1. Coping

Students' attempts to manage fear played out in a number of ways. One strategy involved withdrawing from the broader socio-academic setting in order to avoid the feelings of distress and worry that being on campus or interacting with peers produced. Having a space within the broader academic context which could be termed 'personal' or 'private' was comforting for students, and was noted as a positive element that made attending the university and dealing with the distress, alienation, and dislocation of their initial experiences at the university more manageable.

> *"There's a lot of, like, 'hype', and social dynamics that need to be navigated […] But I guess like, having an access card, there is still an ability to isolate myself. I don't have to worry about outside [speaking here about Braamfontein] and even having a key, like, having a studio space I can, I can lock myself away [from other people] So that's an interesting dynamic, which I am really grateful for." – Akin*

A similar dynamic was reported by students who felt that valued peers and colleagues would associate with or come to dominate a particular location on campus. These students described a sense of connection between specific locations or landmarks on campus, and social groups to which they affiliated. Examples of this included private studios for art students, tables outside the Matrix Student Centre where students would

meet for lunch and to smoke, or the steps of an outdoor auditorium on campus where students would often smoke. One student highlighted that simply knowing where her friends would normally wait on the Wits Library Lawns was comforting for her. This perceptual connection between location and affiliation to groups was experienced by students as conveying a sense of privacy and safety even in the absence of tangible barriers between the student group and the broader campus setting.

> *"They [students from working-class backgrounds] come here to do what they gotta do, and then they go home. [Whereas] with us, we have residences, so we can stick around for a while […] So with us, it's kind of like more comfortable to stay on campus because we know that we have residences."* - *Elelwani*

Another strategy involved seeking connections with other students. When faced with the newness and uncertainty of being at university, students from working-class backgrounds looked for people or groups that allowed them to feel more comfortable. These connections served to comfort students, and appeared to make the stress of the university environment more manageable. These connections also contained a practical element, allowing the student to access support and resources, which otherwise they might not have had access to.

> *"… [Wits was] like a foreign place. Like we all didn't know anybody. It was the first year of varsity and I think that you want to hold on to something and feel comfortable and… and have resources or people you can ask for help." – Chelsea*

As students developed adaptive coping strategies, their confidence within the academic setting improved and they felt more comfortable participating more freely in social activities and relationships that straddled the class divide. Some participants linked this to a sense of greater confidence or understanding when interacting with other students that permitted them to feel less intimidated within the socio-academic setting.

> *"They [other students] make this pretentious face of not wanting to be bothered, but as soon as you talk to them the face just immediately changes and you're like 'ohh, you're just that kind of person'. I see these people in class and I find some of them intimidating like they don't want to be talked to, but then as soon as you talk to them that whole anticipation changes." – Elelwani*

This resulted in later experiences of the academic setting being characterised as more positive, and less distressing than initial experiences. However, much of this change was linked to students' perceptions of developmental growth and individualised coping strategies, as opposed to institutional efforts to help students from working-class backgrounds adjust and integrate into the academic setting.

> *"... you have these pre-established notions of yourself before you come to university, and [then] you're like, No no no, I'm not this person. Like, I'm* this *person, you know." – Sophia*

One contribution that participants felt was made by the university setting was the perception of increased autonomy and freedom afforded them by their status as university students.

> *"... as you get older and reach university level, I think there is definitely much more liberty and freedom of choice in which groups you belong to." – Juliette*

This was framed as allowing greater autonomy in how students attempted to cope with the negative emotions the participants experienced from being in the academic setting.

4.2.2. Adjustment

While the previous theme highlighted that students often perceived themselves as receiving limited support from the institution or from lecturers, not all lecturers produced this experience for students. Some lecturers notably made an effort to ask about the home circumstances of the students, and made allowances for differences in circumstances that would have an impact on

the student's university adjustment. These lecturers encouraged students from working-class backgrounds and attempted to make them feel welcome and supported in the academic space.

> *"There are some lecturers who are supportive. They do give out surveys to students so that they can, like, get a sense of what's happening at home. […] There are some lecturers who do help." – Elelwani*

This suggested that identifying lecturers who were perceived as sympathetic, or caring was a valuable strategy for adjusting to the university setting. While students did not exercise any agency over whether particular lecturers might be experienced as comforting or supportive, identifying lecturers who contributed to a supportive experience appeared to mitigate student fear in the academic context.

As students settled into a routine and developed greater familiarity with the elite academic setting, they developed more confidence in their ability to master the physical space which overwhelmed them initially. They also experienced a degree of personal maturity and growth which reinforced their ability to be resilient, and which was framed in terms that emphasised both agency and discovery. Being at an elite university such as the University of the Witwatersrand, and successfully navigating the space enabled them to fantasize about class straddling.

> *"I remember growing up in a Jewish school where wealth was quite a big thing, and it wasn't something I had so I often found myself in an outgroup. You're still part of a Jewish school but you're on the outside of that. […] At university it was so different, like, money was never something that defined you. I even get shocked when I hear stories from a very close friend of how money wasn't a thing at all when they were in school." – Hazel*

Class straddling was evident in students developing connections with peers who came from wealthier backgrounds. It was also evident in alternative and novel expressions of identity that were consistent with and enabled by the perceived increase of liberty and autonomy which

students enjoyed within the academic setting. In addition, exposure to other identities and backgrounds was highlighted by participants.

> *"... you start to realise that you know, certain people have certain beliefs or interests, and other people might not have similar values or whatever it is as you, and so you're more attracted to people that are kind of similar to you in a sense." – Sasha*

This straddling involved incorporating attitudes and characteristics which students initially attributed to the academic environments and their fellow students into their personal sense-of-self. These attitudes included different approaches to recreation, different patterns of speaking about money, and different approaches to taking up space within shared social and academic contexts. By engaging in a process of class-straddling, assimilating specific values within the academic context and positioning themselves to better receive support from the institutions, participants demonstrated different strategies for adjusting to the socio-academic context.

4.2.3. Meaning-Making

Students made meaning of their experiences in varying ways, and highlighted accounts of their time within the academic space which emphasised that they have developed strategies which allowed them to cope with their initial uncertainty and fear. In addition, students described this process as meaningful for them, and demonstrated practices of meaning-making that attributed positive outcomes to their negative initial experiences.

> *"... it opens a whole new world. Wits is kind of similar to the real world: it's preparing you for the real world. So that is very important; to get out of your comfort zone and explore these different pieces of who you are." – Elelwani*

In particular, students understood these negative experiences as being linked to an initial phase of their time at university wherein they were less authentic. Meaning-making around experiences at the university tended to position the negative experiences

participants had as being driven by a failure to be authentic in the manner that the university context permitted. Adjusting to the university context and incorporating the environmental values was thus made meaningful by discursive practices which asserted that the process of adjusting was positive, self-driven, and valued.

> *"Well, can I just tell you, I think what changed in me was that I just started becoming authentic."* - *Chelsea*

This highlighted that participants made meaning of their adaptation to the university setting in predominantly personal terms, as opposed to the institutional terms offered to them. The process of adapting to the university context was highlighted as being fundamentally linked to a form of identity shift that some participants felt to be radically different from the identities they had occupied prior to entering the university space.

> *"It just made me change the trajectory of my whole life and who I am. I think if I hadn't gone to Wits, I would have been a very different person." – Hazel*

This highlights that the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds at the university would fluctuate over time. Different approaches to coping and adjusting resulted in different experiences, which were in turn made meaning of in terms of identity-shift and authenticity. Participants highlighted that once the initial anxiety of being at university and on campus became more manageable, they then started to feel more able to explore. This exploration was framed as being driven by personal growth and development, and highlighted that the students from working-class backgrounds were resilient and adapted socially and academically.

4.3. Group Affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand

The participants reflected on groups that they had encountered and those to which they experienced an affiliation within the university setting. Groups reflected the diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds in South Africa, and were fundamental to how participants engaged with the and understood their own experiences of the academic space. Subthemes for this section were Group Purposes and Socioeconomic Factors

4.3.1. Group Purposes

Overall, there was a sense that there were many different groups among students attending the University of the Witwatersrand, which was concurrent with the perception that many of these groups were formed to serve a purpose. Participants felt that, consciously or unconsciously "groups form[ed] for a reason, and exist[ed] as long as they [could] fulfil that reason" *[– Lethabo]*. The perceived purposive nature of groups was held to contribute to a level of fluctuation in the composition and magnitude of identified groups. There were different types of groups, of varying sizes, which were dynamic and constantly changeable.

Sharing a space was valuable for creating opportunities to connect with and affiliate to other students, and with the university as an institution. Students looked for minor similarities, such as sense of humour and interest in TV shows, and used those similarities as indicators that it was safe to join specific groups and foster peer relationships.

> *"... [It was good to find other people] who have similar traits to you and similar interests, and you know, there's someone else who's like you on a different level."*
> *– Hazel*

This process was often enabled by sharing spaces, such as a lecture venues or recreational spaces on campus, which in turn provided the opportunities to speak with other students and look for connections.

> *"If you were just in a new classroom or I guess a new setting altogether, you stress a lot of the tiny things like 'oh, I like art too!' or I like, I like, I don't know basketball and then you go from there." – Lethabo*

The need for affiliation at university was linked, in part, to questions of participants' adjustment and academic success.

> *"And I chose them. I know that I chose my friends like, in regard to just sitting next to people and having chats and trying to build connections and relationships and try to find people who are like me" – Chelsea*

Students spoke openly about the value that peer support had for their academic success, and several participants suggested that they had deliberately attempted to affiliate with people whom they perceived would be able to support their needs for academic success. General needs that participants highlighted included academic support, social support, and friendship. These needs, which were primarily social needs, pointed to the necessity for students to address the feeling that the university was an isolating and stressful experience.

> *"Because with us as well, it really helps to have people to talk to cause it kind of makes you forget all the stress that you have, the academic stress." – Elelwani*

The transition to university meant that most young adults had to leave the comfort of their well-established support systems, and navigate new environments and people. This act of leaving a more familiar support context would happen several times for students over the course of their studies, reflecting experiences of returning home for holidays and re-entering the academic setting each year.

> *"... so, I've always been comfortable to be part of different groups and immerse myself into new environments and be open to anything, but I think it's [being at university] a change and it's sometimes difficult and you can't ignore that." – Hazel*

As a result of this, loneliness and emotional challenges were commonly experienced, and being with other students who were also facing this transition was experienced as permitting the creation of a new supportive community.

> *"I definitely say that's something that I've experienced a lot is finding people who are like, the same as you, or who think the same way, it definitely encourages you to love your own identity truly." – Eloma*

Participants also highlighted that groups permitted them to feel that they shared personal and ideological similarities with other people within the academic setting in a way that was comforting to them.

> *"[It is comforting when] you have people who have similar traits to you and similar experiences, and you know, there's someone else who's like you on a different level." – Hazel*

Additionally, participants noted that affiliating with their peers was useful for academic support. The idea that succeeding alone is not feasible reflected an understanding that students could not practically distance themselves from their peers or be too reserved in an academic or group setting, even if they felt unwelcome or uncertain within this shared setting. Again, this reflected a feeling that groups have a purpose, while highlighting that group affiliation served as a way to overcome and manage negative experiences of attending the University of the Witwatersrand.

> *"Definitely, I mean whether it's just … I guess the avoidance of loneliness, especially in a new space if you are, say, a first year. It's like that just avoiding the feeling of loneliness or if it's like, you know a year [cohort] or it's a study group, you know, it could…. There's a… always some kind of reason as to why you come together." – Lethabo*

Further, this introduced the possibility that affiliating to groups may have impacted on affective experiences and improved participant's sense of belonging.

> *"... alright, this might not be the best thing or the thing that I like, but we have to do it [make connections; rely on other people] anyway, because we live in a society, which is a big group, with its drawbacks and its positives and that's part of the social contract." – Juliette*

When speaking about groups, participants tended to frame groups in terms of satisfying mutual and diverse needs. They understood group affiliations in terms of both receiving and giving emotional, practical, and academic support.

> *"I am not saying that we can't see ourselves as individuals or that we need to carry each other's burdens as our own, but just acknowledging, showing support, where you can and within your capacity is important for maintaining your connections with other people…" – Chelsea*

In keeping with the purposive and needs-fulfilling nature attributed to group membership, participants highlighted a need to be deliberate when connecting with other students. Participants spoke about being careful to choose who they affiliated themselves with, and highlighted a need to form connections with people who would help them achieve their goals within the university setting.

> *"Well, as people we're different, and we all have different backgrounds and needs and all that stuff. So, getting friends who are good, I would say it's like getting friends who know that yes there is a time to play around but also there is a time for academics as well." – Elelwani*

This reflected an understanding that people were different, and that different experiences or needs growing up could result in different attitudes to studying, which might not always be compatible with the other participants' goals.

> *"I think making friends and meeting people is about like, you know, how much experience you have, how open-minded you are and how willing you are to like communicate with other people that share different views to you." – Sophia*

Overall, participants demonstrated an understanding of groups as being purposive, while arguing that affiliating to groups carried personal and academic benefits.

4.3.2. Socioeconomic Factors

It was also important to consider the role of socioeconomic status and class in shaping connections and feelings of belonging. Several students highlighted that especially in the South African context, sociocultural legacies linked to wealth, race, religion, and gender all played a role in shaping what groups and connections people were able to choose, and what was chosen for them. This role can serve to assign, or force, people into groups. However, students also noted that at least with regard to some of these groups, people were free to reject the idea that they had to belong to them, and in turn, they were free to take up membership in groups they felt suited them more. This reflected an understanding of students as being able to shape their own experiences of affiliation.

> *"I think it's [referring to freedom of affiliation within the university setting] a bit of both. I think that certain life situations have forced people into groups. If we think back to the apartheid, People of Colour were forced into being their own group, who were discriminated against, who were marginalised, and the Whites were forced into a group who were privileged and just put on this pedestal. You're given a gender; you're either born a male or female. So, you're forced into that group. But there's that element you choose. If you feel that you don't actually connect with the male gender, instead you connect more with the female gender then you can choose to change that. You can choose who your friends are. You can choose which music you like and which bands you want to listen to and who you choose to share that with, so it's a mix of both." – Hazel*

The tensions of being in a socio-academic milieu were also experienced by some students, as they struggled to find a sense of self and a balanced measure of support. This represented a challenge for these students which they associated with the academic context and interacting

with peers from wealthier class-backgrounds, however, it was not clear whether this was indeed a function of class or personality.

> *"I think I actually realised that groups of people can sometimes be a bit toxic, because I'm a person who believes in quality over quantity, and you know, when you bring different groups together, they might not mesh well." – Sasha*

Not having access to peer and social support was thus problematic for some participants. Several participants noted that they felt envious of other students who appeared to have better access to support and connections with their peers. This reflected the potential for affiliations to produce affective experiences which shaped perceptions of the academic context for students.

> *"But yeah, I think that's what I envied the most, the semblance of support that she got from her friends." – Sasha*

Race played a role in group affiliation, with participants initially seeking out other students of their own race group. Race was treated as symbolic of similarity, and thus safety within the uncertain milieu of the academic setting, and participants noted that in the initial encounters at university they felt strongly guided by race in choosing who to affiliate with.

> *"I think I'm very aware that I'm stereotyped as a Blonde White Female in some ways, and then I'm also aware that I'm judging others as well and wondering who they are based on their identity and how they come across before I even know who they are" – Chelsea*

However, students also highlighted the realisation that in the present era this was not a legitimate method of affiliation with others, and that this method of affiliation was personally limiting.

> *"I mean, I feel a bit uncomfortable realising this now but yeah, race seemed to be a thing that did kind of dictate how people came together." – Sasha*

Notably, some participants felt that the university setting reduced the impact of race on how students would connect with and affiliate to each other.

> *"I feel like it's better that way [referring to a perception that being at university creates ambiguity and encourages people to look outside of familiar groups] because you can't just form a connection using let's say wealth or race or whatever. It allows you to gain more perspectives and experiences than if you've only ever had friends who are just obscenely wealthy or whatever. And like I guess if you only had White friends or Black friends or Indian friends, then you wouldn't get to learn more about other cultures and how they tend to shape people." – Lethabo*

In addition to race, students noted that gender shaped how people came together and developed connections in the university setting. Participants felt that people tended to group together with people of similar gender, with the result being that groups were often viewed as homogenous when seen from the outside. Gender was a common feature identified by participants as signalling similarity and safety, and was perceived by participants as an underlying element which enabled many of their earliest connections within the academic setting.

Class and wealth similarly played a role in shaping and permitting early connections with others. The presence of these shared factors within observed groups within the academic setting promoted a perception of homogeneity for groups as observed by outsiders. This underscored a perception that class and wealth were visible features of a student's identity in the academic setting, with participants framing class as visibly shaping how people affiliated with other students. Participants presented this observation as unremarkable, and in contrast to how they reflected on race, students were not uncomfortable with the idea that people tended to gather with people from similar wealth or class backgrounds.

> *"…rich girls would hang out with rich girls, and the middle-class girls with middle-class girls and so on…" – Sophia*

Although some participants did argue that groups which appeared extensively homogenous might be personally off-putting, they did not argue that all students should be wary of such homogenous groups.

> *"Yes, so if I see a group that kind of portrays this close-mindedness or a lack of diversity; a group where kind of just everyone is the same as [each other]. Yeah, I wouldn't associate with that group. Even if I share some characteristics and that they have in common." – Eloma*

Class status dictated the type of socialisation experiences students engaged in. Certain pastimes, such as expensive lunches, being mobile and having cars, taking day trips during the academic week, and prioritising recreation over academic work were not economically viable for students form working-class backgrounds, which limited their ability to participate with peers who pursued these pastimes.

> *"... whereas you know, you see the White girls were able to drive to Rosebank during like a 15-minute break, and come back with, you know, Starbucks cups [at the time of interview, the nearest Starbucks to the university was in Rosebank, roughly 6km away from the campus], and you're like, wow. I mean that was something that would always come up if I was in a conversation, talking with my friend, I'd just be like, okay, that's how you know, they're privileged because you know one minute they didn't have Starbucks cups, the next minute they did" – Sasha*

This highlighted the privileges that higher class status afforded some students, and how privilege may have resulted in working class students being excluded from certain socialisation experiences.

> *"All that [working-class students] do is come to class. When that's over, then some of them just leave immediately. Now that I'm in res [residence] it's different because I can maybe have lunch after class or socialise or just chill and de-stress from everything while the others just leave." – Elelwani*

Class structure was overtly experienced by students from working-class backgrounds at the University of the Witwatersrand, resulting in these students feeling excluded at times. This contributed to perceptions that people from similar class backgrounds were more 'familiar', and thus safer to affiliate with. Some groups, defined by status, privileges, or inaccessible pastimes, felt alienating for students from working-class backgrounds.

> *"Alright, another thing I guess about culture and men is a large amount of talking about women and finding women attractive is something I don't relate to because I'm gay, and that kind of tradition excluded me for not really fitting into that kind of discussion. It ostracises a person a lot, and being at Wits I finally started to meet people who weren't like that; who were more accepting of me." – Eloma*

Despite experiences of alienation, students felt that attending the University of the Witwatersrand gave them a sense of place where they could assert their belonging. As a part of this, students expressed a sense of attachment and pride in maintaining their identity as students at the University. It enabled students from working-class backgrounds to feel that their educational experiences at Wits would allow them to achieve a higher economic status. They also felt that being at Wits allowed them opportunities to experience diversity in gender identity, class, race, religion and culture, and that these experiences were valuable.

> *"I grew up in a Jewish school. So that was the only group I'd known up until university. We used to call it the bubble. So, you're a part of different groups based on your religion. At university I met people from other religions, and it was just an eye-opening experience." – Hazel*

In cases where participants framed encountering different religious believers as interesting, this tended to follow a similar dynamic to that described for sharing experiences with people from different class backgrounds. It was viewed as a chance to learn from different perspectives, without necessarily reflecting on or feeling threatened in terms of one's own class status. To

the extent that participants felt that religious belief was relevant to their interaction with others, belief was understood as representing unique and potentially interesting differences in how their peers might think about or approach the world. Students found encountering different religious beliefs and attitudes liberating and highlighted the ways in which these encounters allowed them to question or rebel against elements of their own religious identity with which they had been dissatisfied with.

> *"I come from a very religious background [and] I wanted to fit in with that. I would feel like an outsider if I wasn't abiding by all these things, but I'm very curious, I question so many things and that's not really allowed. Like you must just believe and do as you're told you know, and I had this really big conflict since I was about 18, and particularly since I started getting into an academic institution and becoming more rebellious. [I mean I wanted to change things] in the sense of wanting to change what no longer served me well. [After that] I didn't actually fit in with my [previous religious] group to be honest." – Chelsea*

Participant responses to questions around religion did not frame religious identity as being of elevated importance or relevance to their overall identities within the university context. While some students appeared to treat religion as a marker of similarity similar to class or race, the majority of participants framed religious as a private and personal element of their identity which might or might not be shared with their friends. Their questions regarding religious beliefs were framed as personal and family-related questions, and did not seem to be determining factors of their affiliations within the academic space. It was not clear if this reflected the largely secular institutional culture of the University of the Witwatersrand, or if this reflected individual and potentially idiosyncratic participant responses.

4.4. A Sense of Belonging

The institutional culture of the University of the Witwatersrand played a role in shaping students' experiences of a sense of belonging. Factors, such as the dislocated nature of this

setting in comparison with students earlier socioeconomic backgrounds, reduced a sense of belonging, while others, such as student driven affiliations and processes of meaning making, appeared to promote a sense of belonging. Subthemes for this section were Barriers to Belonging and Valued Differences

4.4.1. Barriers to Belonging

The nature of the academic space, and the way help is offered within it, seemingly led to students from working-class backgrounds experiencing the setting as less supportive of them than it may have been of their peers. The participants reflected the feeling that the onus was on individual students to ensure that they were able to access their lectures and lecture venues. Lecturers, many of whom occupied a position both practically and symbolically as representatives of the university, were not involved in ensuring that any specific student attended their lectures.

> *"But no one would actually call in to check on you. You have to do the reaching out to get the lectures [referring here to discussion notes, slides, or phone recordings]." – Sasha*

This contributed to the students' feelings of dislocation and insecurity at times. The understanding that they needed to ensure that they could properly engage with the academic space, without relying on the university to make them feel included, was described as challenging by participants. Participants noted that navigating this perceived lack of support was significant for their early experiences of the university setting, and contributed to concerns about being able to effectively engage with their coursework, or perform to the standards of the university setting. Participants also highlighted how this undermined their sense of belonging inasmuch it demonstrated for them that their presence or absence within the university setting was not remarkable.

Participants reported that some lecturers appeared to favour specific students. This difference in treatment, and the feeling that certain students were given help without having to make a special effort compared to other students, left these students with ambiguous perceptions of the university and their sense of belonging within it. This ambiguity in turn contributed to a general perception that the academic setting was insufficiently caring, or even hostile at times. While there was an acknowledgement that the university, as a formal organisation, attempted to position and frame itself as caring and welcoming towards students, the participants highlighted that in practice, students from wealthier or socially connected backgrounds appeared to be more welcome than others.

> *"… as progressive as schools or institutions can be […] Okay, I do get the sense that a lot of the lecturers care. And in some instances, they would go out of their way for particular students. But I also get the feeling that, that you won't get anything where you don't give. So definitely, the onus is on students to stand up, or get a handout, or ask for help, or bring something to a lecturer's attention." – Akin*

Overall, this emphasised that in most cases, it was left to the students themselves to take responsibility for being at the university and integrating themselves into the normal functioning of the campus.

Competitiveness on campus was another source of distress which undermined participants' sense of belonging, with participants noting that it produced a strong sense of separation from their peers and the academic setting. Participants noted that students at the University of the Witwatersrand tended to interact in isolated groups, or present themselves in ways which discouraged socialisation, interaction, and supportive exchanges with fellow students. This was framed as disappointing, as it was linked to an understanding that the competitiveness that

many participants experienced was driven by a desire to ensure one's own success in an environment that could be hostile, alienating, or unwelcoming.

> *"Well, while students are walking around on campus, as I'm looking at them I'm often just wondering, like, where are they going and everything? Because usually there's no interaction on campus. People are always in their own selective groups of people they know." – Elelwani*

Notably, not all students felt that the competitiveness they experienced was linked to social class differences. Some participants felt that competition was not necessarily unhealthy and could be understood as a desire for academic success.

> *"…I always felt that there was a sense of competitiveness. So, who was going to share what they had? No one, because who was going to allow someone to get ahead or have the information, you know …" – Chelsea*

This highlighted that various factors could affect students' experiences and their sense of belonging and affiliation during their early encounters with the academic context. Whether linked directly to socioeconomic status and grouping, or shaped by additional factors, the early encounters with the university tended towards being dislocating and distressing.

4.4.2. Valued Differences

By contrast, students highlighted that those experiences which resulted in them feeling valued by the university or their peers contributed positively to a sense of belonging. The experience of care from their group members or friends played a significant role in allowing students to feel as though they were truly connected to the students and university around them. In addition to being an indicator of affiliation to specific people within the university setting, the perception that their affiliation was assigned positive meaning by students was symbolic of their belonging with those specific people, and within the university context.

> *"I think it [belonging] means having a sense of purpose and, and impacting someone else's life on a positive note. So, you belong to something greater. You stand for something together, you belong, you're not in isolation on your own, you have people who care and who support you…" – Hazel*

Notably, several participants highlighted specifically that it was important to feel as though they were able to care for other people and have a positive influence on peers, in order to affirm their sense of belonging.

> *"Yeah, so for example, you may just feel that you're 'the tall friend' or whatever, in a group, but in actuality you provide a sense of stability to that group. Because I guess metaphorically, but also physically, they were literally looking up to you. It might be a silly example, but I think it's like, well, there are different ideas in everyone's head about what the group means for them. So, even if you think you don't have a major role in that group, you might find out that there's a void in the group for other people that actually you filled." – Lethabo*

This highlighted a need for students to feel able to contribute meaningfully to the people around them. This contribution was believed to be linked to unique characteristics, knowledge, or perceptions of the students. These unique characteristics were thought to satisfy the needs of other people in the group context, which contributed to the student being valued by that group.

A common element of students' responses was that difference, and how people reacted to or treated difference in the university setting, was a fundamental element in shaping their experiences of a sense of belonging. In particular, these students highlighted that feeling as though their personal differences were still valued played a significant positive role in their sense of belonging. Participants linked the feeling of belonging to being able to be less defensive and more authentic with the people around them, and share parts of themselves with those people.

This framing of belonging intersected with students' accounts that highlighted that the perceptions of their identities and sense of self shifted during their time at the university. Students noted that identities could shift, and could be shifted to fit in with the context and the people around them, but felt that despite this it was important to ensure that core elements of their own identities were preserved throughout this change. Students expressed a desire to not shift in ways which felt unauthentic for them, and maintained that there was value in holding on to a core identity, even if that identity did not fit in with the people or places around them.

> *"... sometimes I never really felt like I fit into the groups, and my identity plays a part in that because people form groups because they share similar identities, but obviously identity is something that isn't fixed. You could obviously like mould your identity time and again to fit your different circles, right, but my identity alone, is something that I never want to morph into something else that suits other people like it's, it's not something that I'm ever willing to change to appeal to other groups." – Sasha*

Feeling able to hold on to a core element of their personal identity despite adapting to the university setting was thus considered to be positive for participants' sense of belonging. This was a common element in participants' responses, and highlighted that they placed value on their identities and understandings of who they were, separate from how the university, and people within it, would value them. This highlights that in some cases students did not feel forced to adapt their identities to fit in to the university setting.

> *"... when you're trying to change yourself in order to fit with a specific group, you'll find that you come across these things that you just don't want to change about yourself in order to fit into that group. So as much as you might want to be part of that group, like deep down, you know, like something just doesn't feel right." – Sophia*

This illustrated that students from working-class backgrounds maintained a measure of wariness regarding the various groups they encountered in the academic setting. This wariness,

which was linked to a sense of separation from the groups and people they encountered, was framed discursively in self-driven and autonomous terms, but also reflected a sense that larger groups of people in the academic context could not be trusted to be welcoming of difference. This underscored that students from working-class backgrounds placed significant value on the idea that their differences from their peers would be valued before they would attempt to affiliate or experience a sense of belonging in the university setting.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Informed by Astin's (1975) Student Involvement Theory, which underpins later work that delineated the concept of a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), this study asked two research questions. The first question was: how do students make meaning of their sense of belonging at the University of the Witwatersrand? The second question was: how does socioeconomic status shape students' experiences of the types of group affiliations they enter into within the university context? This study sought to answer these questions through the use of thematic content analysis of interviews conducted with students from working-class backgrounds attending the University of the Witwatersrand who had completed at least three years of tertiary education. This produced four themes: Place and Emotion, Adjusting to the University, Group Affiliation at the University of the Witwatersrand, and A Sense of Belonging.

Previous research in the South African context has established that students from working-class backgrounds experience significant threats to their sense of belonging within elite academic spaces that in turn impede successful adaptation and coping (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018). The results of the present study suggested a dissonance between experiences of a sense of belonging, and their subjective understanding of that experience for students from working-class backgrounds. Student accounts of their time at the university highlighted negative experiences which produced feelings of alienation, fear, and worry. These experiences detracted from their sense of belonging, and were out of keeping with student subjective accounts which asserted a positive sense of belonging. This seemingly represented a dissonance between students' experiences and their understanding of those experiences.

Core elements of the dissonance which these students experienced involved an array of affective responses to the experience of entering into the university setting. These responses

included a sense of alienation, dislocation, and elevated worry. Alienation for students was created by the experience of difference, where students from working-class backgrounds appeared to feel as though the university space was dominated by different attitudes and expectations to those which dominated contexts where they had grown and developed. This accords with the findings of Mallman (2017) which highlighted that students from working-class backgrounds experience university settings as dominated by values and attitudes which are at times unfamiliar to them. Accordingly, these students felt that they did not have an adequate grasp of social norms, or sufficient familiarity with the context of the university. This was a particularly prominent affective experience for students during the initial phase of their attendance at the university, and was frequently highlighted as a source of stress and fear as these students attempted to navigate an unfamiliar context.

Developing from this, a sense of alienation within the academic setting was a core subtheme for this study. The apparent experience of dislocation and alienation for students from working-class backgrounds was in keeping with international (Bhopal, 2022) and local (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018) studies, which highlighted that students from working-class backgrounds perceived themselves as being at risk of negative judgement and failure to fit into a context characterised by wealth, privilege, and material resources. This previous research established the nature and scope of the threats that working-class students appear to experience, without seemingly establishing what factors allowed for student success and involvement despite these threats.

Within this study, students from working-class backgrounds framed their initial experiences of the university setting as producing feelings of dislocation and alienation which faded over time. Key drivers of this change were highlighted as increased familiarity with the context, both in terms of norms and physical layout, and the creation of affiliations with peers. Increased

familiarity was highlighted as helpful for students, as it allowed them to be more confident in moving around campus, interacting effectively with lecturers, and proactively engaging in help-seeking behaviours when needed. It was thought that increasing familiarity with the university was helpful in reducing uncertainty, as it reduced the extent to which the environment was unknown. Trawalter et al. (2021) reported a similar finding, noting that the feeling that one is unable to fully make use of a space, or unfamiliar with the rules governing a space's use, can directly reduce an individual's sense of belonging towards that space and communities which use it. In reducing the extent to which the environment was unknown, students were able to assure themselves that they would not face threats or challenges for which they were unprepared, and seemingly develop a greater sense of belonging though investing time within the space of the university setting.

Time spent on university activities and tasks, or time spent at the university campus for other purposes, appeared to play a role in how students experienced a sense of belonging. This was in keeping with Astin's (1975) Student Involvement Theory, which highlighted that time spent working on university tasks and socialising with peers can improve a student's sense of belonging. Understanding dislocation and alienation as being temporally contingent, and influenced by increased familiarity with the apparent social attitudes and physical layout of the academic context, was thought to explain why students from working-class backgrounds could assert both positive and negative experiences linked to their sense of belonging. Under this understanding, these assertions were not necessarily describing simultaneous affective states, but rather referring to the range of affective states produced by attempting to enter into the university context.

Other barriers to belonging were present. In addition to the difficulty of navigating an unfamiliar context, it was understood by students from a working-class context that wealthier

peers acted to police the university context. This policing took the form of increased competitiveness directed towards students from working-class backgrounds, as well as negative social interactions which produced a sensation of being judged, humiliated, or found wanting. This accords with Bhopal's (2022) research which explored the ways in which boundaries between the students from working-class backgrounds and students from wealthier backgrounds were maintained in elite university settings. This policing served to produce a feeling of hostility between social groups present in the university setting. This experience of hostility appeared to be variable, but common, with students from working-class backgrounds reporting different strategies that they had developed to mitigate and minimise the experience of hostility within the university setting. This hostility thus appeared to represent an obstacle to initial efforts to experience a sense of belonging.

The experience of elevated concern for their safety produced by the physical location of the university campus was a difficulty experience for students from working-class backgrounds. The University of the Witwatersrand is situated in the Braamfontein suburb, to which students attributed a negative reputation concerning safety and elevated crime rates. While the physical space of the university campus appeared to provide a measure of protection for students from the city outside it, students from working-class backgrounds highlighted that needing to safely navigate danger in order to attend their lectures or to get home from lectures made it difficult to feel fully safe or relaxed in the university setting.

This experienced difficulty related to feeling safe or relaxed was noted as being markedly different from what these students identified as a home environment, thereby reducing the extent to which they felt they belonged within the university setting. This reflected the findings of Mallman (2017) who noted that students from working-class backgrounds feel as though they are obliged to navigate between different worlds in order to attend university institutions.

It was thought that this continued need to navigate different spaces, combined with a perception of danger, produced a negative affective response for students from working-class backgrounds which impacted negatively on their overall experiences and meaning-making with regard to the elite academic setting.

The campus' physical spaces also played a role in shaping the extent to which students from working-class backgrounds felt they belonged while on the university campus. Trawalter et al. (2021) underscored the intersection between physical space and a sense of belonging, which is further supported by the findings of this study. Students noted that different areas of campus appeared to be dominated by different groups, and this perceived link between group membership or affiliation, and permission to access given spaces at campus played a direct role in shaping how welcome these students experienced the university setting to be. The perception that different groups dominated or controlled physical locations within the campus setting highlighted that group affiliation impacted directly on how students perceived the academic setting, and was held to explain why students from working-class backgrounds might struggle to feel adequately welcome within the elite academic setting. The affective-perceptual experience that certain spaces on campus were less welcoming than others suggested that students from working-class backgrounds experienced at least some parts of the university as a hostile context, which reduced their sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging was also influenced by the ways in which lecturers interacted with students. Students from working-class backgrounds appeared to be sensitive to the ways in which lecturers interacted with and treated students, which reflected the findings of Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018). Further in keeping with Vincent and Hlatshwayo (2018), there appeared to be a measure of ambiguity in how lecturers interacted with students, with some lecturers seeming to produce a greater sense of being welcome for students from working-class

backgrounds than others did. Participants in the present study noted that there appeared to be a sense in which students who did not come from working-class backgrounds might be prioritised by lecturers, or else seemed to understand better how to interact with and access support from the institution. This understanding was concurrent with the observation that there were resource-based limitations on the ability of students from working-class backgrounds to participate in academic activities. The experience of uncertainty with regards to lecturers and lack of knowledge around how to access support appeared to be a barrier towards a positive sense of belonging, as it produced an experience of uncertainty which undermined student attempts to affiliate within the campus setting, and which reduced student comfort with spending time on campus or on academic activities.

Meaning-making relating to this experience of hostility appeared to emphasise the role of competition and judgement in explaining why other students contributed to a hostile context. McClure and Brown (2008) found that high levels of competitiveness within a workplace environment were associated with a reduced sense of belonging, and it appeared that a similar dynamic occurred for students from working-class backgrounds attending the University of the Witwatersrand. Read et al. (2003) also highlighted the negative impact of a subjective sense of competitiveness on the sense of belonging of students from "non-traditional" university backgrounds (p. 261). In the context of this study, it was understood that the experiences of hostility and dislocation within the university context were limiting with regards to a genuine sense of belonging for students from working-class backgrounds. In addition, this process of meaning-making highlighted that interactions and affiliations with other students were significant for how students from working-class backgrounds experienced a sense of belonging.

Student accounts in this study emphasised a perceived interaction between their sense of belonging and their affiliations to groups and peers. This illustrated an intersection between student sense of belonging and student experiences of affiliation that is in keeping with Astin (1975) in that it established a relationship between social interactions and a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2018) argued that student sense of belonging is informed by the affiliations or connections to others which students develop within the university setting, inasmuch as affiliations with others, and the importance ascribed to those affiliations, influence the extent to which students experience themselves as being welcome, or valued within the university setting. The experience of being valued by others is a significant element of a positive sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2018). Participants in this study reflected this understanding in their subjective accounts of belonging by highlighting experiences or circumstances where they felt personally valued by people to whom they felt an affiliation as contributing meaningfully to their overall sense of belonging within the university setting.

Further, connections with peers were noted as being useful in terms of accessing social capital, and support in completing their degrees. This offered support, in keeping with Astin (1975), had a positive effect on the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds, who framed this support as helping them to feel a greater sense of belonging to the institution. This greater sense of belonging appeared to be related to the way in which being offered support in attending the lectures implied for some students that their presence, and ability to attend the lectures, was valued by the university. It also allowed them to feel as though the university as an institution, and lecturers as representatives of the institution, were concerned with their challenges and the home circumstances of the students.

Affiliation was influenced by socioeconomic factors including race, gender, wealth, and religion. These factors influenced student perceptions of who could be approached in order to

develop affiliations, and who among their peers was assumed to be unapproachable. In keeping with Walker (2005), it was found that race tended to serve as a unifying factor for students seeking to form connection with others. Students generally reflected the understanding that it was safe to approach people of similar racial groupings to their own, and treated other racial groupings present on campus with a measure of wariness.

A similar dynamic appeared present in how gender influenced affiliation, with students expressing that they found it easier when they initially began to attend university to group themselves with people who shared a gender with them. This reflected the findings of Laniado et al. (2016), which demonstrated that homophily is a common observation in the development of adolescent peer relationships and affiliations. McPherson et al. (2001) outline homophily as a basic organising principle, noting that with time people tend to develop heterogenous social networks, but that initially it is common for individuals to select affiliations with reference to perceived similarity. This appears to hold true in this study, where participants felt that gender was a common factor in determining who was perceived as similar enough to approach.

It was considered important in this study that there appeared to be a relationship between uncertainty and the influence of gender and race on affiliation. Participant accounts suggested that as they grew more confident of their membership within the university context, they felt more able to interrogate or reject the idea that people who shared a race or gender should automatically affiliate with each other. This is in keeping with research regarding the influence of homophily on friendship patterns (Laniado et al., 2016) and suggests that these factors may not be durable influences on experiences of affiliation within the university setting. The observation that a subjective sense of confidence can influence behaviour and interactions with other people was further supported by Strayhorn (2018), and appeared to moderate the impact

of these factors on shaping student experiences of affiliation as they continued to study at the university.

One key element of student accounts was the understanding that over time and with increased confidence, the shared experience of being a student at the University of the Witwatersrand would serve as a sign of sufficient similarity to risk approaching other people within the academic space. While race and gender appeared significant in early experiences of the university setting, they appeared to become less significant factors in how students from working-class backgrounds understood and made meaning of their experiences of affiliation as they spent more time in the academic setting. This was understood as reflecting a sense of shared group membership, which carried with it the assumption of similarity (Mallman et al., 2019). The assumption of similarity created by a shared student identity in turn appeared to serve a valuable function in mitigating the economic disparity which influenced students' confidence in class straddling and their experiences of group affiliation.

Religion appeared to be a notable exception in regard to the limiting role played by socioeconomic factors in shaping affiliation. Specifically, participants highlighted that in general religion did not appear to play a prominent role in shaping who they would approach and interact with. This is in keeping with Mayrl and Uecker's (2011) findings which suggested that the diversity of social groups in academic settings serves to permit personal religious practices without producing a strong pressure to conform to specific religious affiliations. This reflects the phenomenon of religious liberalisation in university settings which, while contested, maintains that university students are likely to develop liberal attitudes towards religious practice and commitment, or even abandon previously held beliefs (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Reimer, 2010). Research suggests that institutional culture plays a determining role in this process, with students attending explicitly religious institutions being less likely to develop

liberal attitudes (Reimer, 2010). The University of the Witwatersrand was understood by participants as a broadly secular institution.

The secular nature of academic setting may explain why religious identity did not appear to be a particularly salient element of overall student identity. Salience refers to the understanding that different aspects or characteristics of a person's identity or identity roles might be subjectively evaluated as more or less relevant to a specific context, and will accordingly have a greater or lesser impact on how individuals behave in that context (Callero, 1985). Given the seemingly limited salience of religious affiliation, students from working-class backgrounds appeared to understand encountering people from different religious backgrounds as a positive experience. Meaning-making around these encounters framed them as opportunities for additional learning and a chance to think more meaningfully about existential and personal topics, but did not appear to be salient to students' immediate affiliations or overall sense of belonging. This suggested that, possibly due to the broadly secular institutional culture of the University of the Witwatersrand, religious affiliation did not have a significant impact on student experiences of affiliation.

Wealth and socioeconomic class appeared to have a more durable impact on student experiences of affiliation, with students highlighting that the attitudes and access to social and physical capital that characterise class-status continued to shape interactions and affiliations within the university setting. The influence of class was highlighted as ambiguous, in keeping with Mallman et al. (2019), though most accounts in this study supported the interpretation that students would affiliate with other students of similar means and socioeconomic status. This was driven by the practical consideration that certain pastimes required resources and leisure time which were not equally available to students of all socioeconomic classes. Wealth and class appeared to play a predominantly practical role in limiting opportunities for students from

working-class backgrounds to experience affiliations with other students. This reflected the findings of Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) and Mallman (2017), and suggested that wealth and socioeconomic class have a durable impact on experiences and opportunities relating to affiliation within the university setting.

The perception of ambiguity related to class and wealth was introduced by students who noted that despite the practical difficulties created in seeking to maintain affiliations across perceived class boundaries, there were educational, social, and developmental benefits to be gained from such affiliations. It was thought that these apparently cross-boundary affiliations were explained by the unifying element of shared membership in the overarching university student group, though it can be noted that in contrast to race and gender, wealth appeared to persist as a limit on how students experienced and understood affiliation, despite continued attendance at and familiarity with the university space.

The understanding that there were benefits to creating affiliations with other students who might not appear sufficiently similar was related to the understanding that there were an array of benefits to attending the University of the Witwatersrand which students from working-class backgrounds sought to achieve. These benefits were framed by participants as linked to their academic performance, their access to resources and support, and by implication their future prospects within the university setting and after they had completed their degrees. This accords with Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018), who highlighted the positive value attributed by South Africans to university attendance. In a context where students from working-class backgrounds ascribed positive value to attending and succeeding at university, it was understood that these students were motivated to protect their status as students of the university in spite of the obstacles to affiliation that they experienced.

It can be noted that these obstacles to affiliation were thought to reflect a sense in which being from a working-class background conferred a lower status within the academic setting than being from wealthier backgrounds. Turner et al. (1987) theorised that individual membership within groups in a social setting influences an individual's estimation of their identity, and has implications for positive psychological functioning. Further, they argued that the perception of low status will be experienced as a threat to an individual's sense of self (Turner et al., 1987). It was thought that students from working-class backgrounds experienced this sense of threat when attending the University of the Witwatersrand. It was understood that this sense of threat manifested in worried ideations, where students questioned if they were an adequate fit for the university context, or where they experienced a sense of elevated scrutiny from peers.

Social identity theories note that when people experience threats to their identity predicated by their membership within a perceived low-status grouping, they are motivated to engage in different strategies which serve to mitigate this threat. One strategy highlighted by Turner et al. (1987) involves exiting the perceived low-status group and seeking membership within a group that enjoys high status within the social context. This strategy is only viable in contexts with a high level of social mobility, as rigid boundaries between groups can serve to prevent such movement.

The context of the university setting, understood as a space of transition and opportunity (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Mallman et al., 2019), is generally characterised as a place of elevated social mobility and relatively limited social rigidity. This seemingly allowed students from working-class backgrounds to exit their initial grouping of 'working-class' and take up membership in groups specific to the university context. One common group that students appeared to identify and affiliate with was that of 'Wits student or "Witsie",' which was thought to represent a form of shared group identity, though it can be noted that in terms of salience,

other smaller groups such as year cohort, course enrolment, course specialisations, or hobby groups appeared to be more relevant for how students interpreted and made meaning of their daily interactions in the university context.

Meaning-making around the experience of affiliation to groups within the academic setting where students from working-class backgrounds felt valued as individuals was centred on the understanding, expressed by students, that 'if they were valued then they belonged.' This notion, which reflected the findings of Strayhorn (2018), underscored that for these students it was subjectively important, and subjectively comforting, to feel as though their status as affiliated to others within the university setting was valued by those others.

Overall, students from working-class backgrounds appeared to understand their sense of belonging to the university in clear terms relating to relationships and connections with other people. This also demonstrated the intersection, theorised by Hurtado and Carter (1997), between affiliation and a sense of belonging, as it demonstrated a mechanism for group affiliation to impact on sense of belonging. It also serves to explain the dissonance in the findings in this study, where students reported a sometimes fluctuating sense of belonging which might be characterised at times as positive or negative, as it allowed for the understanding that while students might experience a sense of belonging in small groups within the academic setting, they might not always experience a positive sense of belonging to the broader context created by the university setting.

This highlighted that students from working-class backgrounds may conflate different elements of a sense of belonging with their overall sense of belonging. Specifically, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) conception draws a distinction between the social belonging within an academic context and academic belonging. Students' accounts of their sense of belonging appeared to demonstrate a dissonance that might be understood by using these different dimensions of

belonging. Within this framework, students appeared to experience both a low sense of academic belonging and a high sense of social belonging simultaneously (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Additionally, participants appeared to experience an ambiguous estimation of their perceived institutional support as outlined by Hurtado and Carter (1997). The apparent dissonance between experiences of alienation and assertions of belonging are explained by the fact that participants in this study appeared to conflate their positive sense of social belonging with a seemingly incongruous positive overall sense of belonging.

The incongruous sense of overall belonging appeared to allow for a positive estimation of student experiences of the University of the Witwatersrand despite the fact that many of their experiences were framed as negative. Thus, in the context of this study it was understood that the dissonance between experience and subjective understanding of that experience served a useful function for students in terms of protecting their status within the university. Despite representing a disconnect between what appeared to be their experienced reality, and the underlying reality of these students, this dissonance was understood as allowing students from working-class backgrounds to subjectively experience a positive sense of self in the university context. This positive sense of self appeared to be beneficial in the university context, and rested upon the experience of strong affiliations to smaller groups within the university setting that were meaningful for students from working-class background despite the experienced ongoing threat created by comparisons between a working-class and middle- or upper-class socioeconomic groups.

Subjective understanding of experiences is a complicated and controversial topic in research (Sytsma & Machery, 2010), though it can be noted that there is broad support for the understanding that subjective experience shapes how individuals interpret events and interactions around them (Huta, 2016). This is in keeping with a social constructionist

paradigm, which argues that subjective experiences of reality are constitutive of individual realities even in cases where such subjective experiences appear to deviate from a common or external reality (Foster, 2012). Equally, there is support for the understanding that a disconnect between subjective understanding and experience can be a source of difficulty and distress for individuals (Rogers, 1959). The presence of this dissonance within the context of this study suggested that students' experiences of the university might be termed ambivalent.

Ambivalence refers to the experience of multiple affective responses elicited by a single affective object (Cecchini, 2021; Jonas et al, 2011). Theorised and refined by psychodynamic researchers (Conner & Armitage, 2008), ambivalence serves as a meaningful concept for understanding situations where individuals display seemingly contradictory responses to a single stimulus. In particular, it highlights that different affective responses to a single affective object may be driven by conflicting desires or representations of the object within an individual's psyche. Further, in the context of the social constructionism paradigm, ambivalence can be understood as contrasting experiences of reality (Cecchini, 2021; Foster, 2012). These contrasting experiences of reality, despite seeming to be in conflict, can be understood as subjectively real and equally meaningful for the individual who subjectively experiences them (Foster, 2012). In this sense, the dissonance which participants demonstrated can be understood as multiple subjective realities of the university space, positive and negative, each of which is experienced and valid independently of a supposed but ultimately inaccessible core experience of the university.

The participants of this study appeared to demonstrate conflicting desires, representations, and realities when speaking about the University of the Witwatersrand. A dominant conception of the university as a transitional place of opportunity which might permit students to elevate their socioeconomic status and wealth (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018) was thought to play a

prominent role in motivating students from working-class backgrounds to remain at the university. This conception was, however, in conflict with a dominant representation of the university as a hostile and alienating environment which produced a desire to isolate oneself from the institution and exit the academic environment. The ambivalence here was identified in this conflict between the representation of the university as beneficial, and the university as hostile. Subjective representations of the university as both a positive space and a negative space may be driven by how students make meaning of their subjective experiences of the university setting, and what realities appear to be most relevant to students. Understanding what drives different realities to be considered relevant at any given moment can be centred around the question of what appears to be subjectively the most important or relevant dimensions of the university for the students experiencing it.

While the motivation to remain appeared to be stronger for most participants than the desire to exit this alienating environment, this did not in itself obviate the distress created for them by their experience of the academic setting; nor did it obviate the potential stress created by the dissonance between their desire to belong and the perception that they might not. This represented a way in which different subjective realities which the students experienced were, at times, felt to conflict for the students. This conflict entailed the possibility of students accepting a reality that they did not find acceptable, specifically the reality that they might not belong in the academic setting. Accordingly, it appeared within this study that students engaged in a process of denial (Baumeister et al., 1998), whereby they rejected the understanding that they did not fit within the university setting, and deliberately asserted a positive sense of belonging. This assertion was reinforced through the development of strategic affiliations with peers within the academic context that served to create spaces of safety and familiarity where these students could expect to feel valued by others. In this way students appeared to actively

and deliberately construct a more positive subjective reality for themselves within the university context.

In addition, participants may have engaged in processes of introjection (Baumeister et al., 1998), whereby they incorporated elements of the attitudes, personalities, and identities of the people around them in order to forestall conflict and mitigate affective distress. These defence mechanisms appeared to have served a useful function in permitting the participants to experience themselves as valued by other students in the elite academic setting. This experience of being valued appears to have produced a positive sense of social belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), which in turn participants appear to have conflated with a positive overall sense of belonging. This conflation of social belonging and overall belonging appears to be central in understanding how students from working-class backgrounds experience a positive sense of belonging within the elite academic context. This subjective positive belonging appears to constitute a reality wherein they do belong at the University of the Witwatersrand. This subjectively positive reality is maintained despite negative interactions which could contribute to a subjective reality characterised by negative belonging. It may also hint at the manner in which participants are able to selectively emphasise those parts of their experience which they find meaningful and valuable in order to construct a positive subjective reality.

This conflation underscores that through their experiences of affiliation in the academic setting, students from working-class backgrounds experienced the theorised components of a sense of belonging in different ways, and suggested that the overall sense of belonging these students experienced might be characterised as ambiguous. While there is one component experienced positively, and one negatively, it does not appear reasonable in the context of this study to ascribe greater weight to either component. Student accounts suggest that students from working-class backgrounds may subjectively construct an experience of the university setting

which facilitates and emphasises a positive sense of belonging, but this experience must also be considered in the light of negative experiences which are reported by students. Further research might explore this ambiguity, and develop a fuller understanding of how and in what ways students from working-class backgrounds do and do not experience a positive sense of belonging within the university context.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research sought to understand the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds understand and make meaning of a sense of belonging in elite academic settings, and specifically at the University of the Witwatersrand. This provides opportunities for further research and initiatives contributing to goals around national transformation and social justice. The findings of this study suggested that there were several barriers to a sense of belonging that impacted negatively on this sense of belonging for these students. Key among these barriers was a sense of dislocation and alienation which, in keeping with research conducted by Bhopal (2022), Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018), and Mallman (2017), produced for these students a sense in which they were unwelcome, and thus did not seem to belong within elite academic spaces. Additional barriers included a perceived lack of safety, limited knowledge of campus norms and practices, and ambiguous perceptions of the University and lecturers' efforts to include students from working-class backgrounds within the setting. This finding was interpreted using Astin's (1975) Student Involvement Theory as reducing the extent to which students from working-class backgrounds would spend time within the university setting, or on university-related activities. This in turn had the potential to limit the experiences of affiliation for these students, which influenced the manner in which they could experience a positive sense of belonging in an elite academic context.

This research also sought to understand how socioeconomic factors influenced students from working-class backgrounds' experiences of group affiliation within the elite academic context. The findings suggested that factors such as race and gender played a strong initial role in shaping on-campus affiliations. This role was moderated by time spent on campus and an increasing sense of confidence in understanding and navigating the campus milieu. Religion appeared to play a minor role in shaping affiliations due to the seemingly low salience of

religious identities to students attending the University of the Witwatersrand. Wealth and class were socioeconomic factors that played a strong and durable role in shaping experiences and meaning making around affiliation in the university setting, with participants noting that social and material capital continued to shape how they could interact and affiliate within the campus setting. Overall it was found that students from working-class backgrounds did appear to form strong affiliations with groups in the university setting, which was interpreted in keeping with Hurtado and Carter (1997) as contributing to a positive sense of social belonging despite earlier accounts highlighting a limited sense of academic or place belonging.

The interpretation that students from working-class backgrounds experienced the component dimensions of a sense of belonging in different ways was thought to explain a dissonance in the findings between negative accounts of experienced belonging, and subjective assertions of positive belonging. This dissonance was thought to represent a conflation of a positive sense of social belonging with an overall sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) that did not otherwise appear to reflect the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds within the university setting.

Conflating social and overall belonging was thought to serve a positive function in allowing these students to exit a low-status group and take up membership in a higher status group within a shared context (Turner et al., 1987). This appeared to allow these students to continue to experience a positive sense of self despite their initial experiences of threat and alienation within the university setting, in keeping with the social identity theory (Turner et al., 1987).

This research also underscored the manner in which a sense of belonging and group affiliation appeared to intersect, with experiences of affiliation contributing to a positive sense of belonging. This research further suggested that student experiences of the University of the Witwatersrand might be characterised as ambivalent, while the dissonance between student

descriptions of a sense of belonging, and student accounts of their experiences relating to a sense of belonging, suggests that further research may be valuable to explore the extent to which students from working-class backgrounds experience a fluctuating sense of belonging in elite academic settings.

6.1. Limitations

Qualitative research is shaped by the researcher, and accordingly, it was important to consider the role played by the researcher in this project in shaping the production of these findings. In this study, it should be acknowledged that the researcher was new to research and to this form of research, and this may have resulted in information being missed during the interview process that may have been relevant to fully understand the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds.

Beyond this, the socioeconomic characteristics of the researcher were believed to have influenced the results collected during this study. The researcher's status as White influenced the ways in which several participants spoke about race, and produced in one case a tension where it was reflected that the researcher was explaining dynamics to a participant that the participant was already aware of. This was explored in the interview, and produced an opportunity to examine the ways in which a common identity as students of the University of the Witwatersrand produced knowledge and experiences for students that were familiar in spite of their socioeconomic differences, and reflected further on the role that race can play in shaping interpersonal interactions for students from working-class backgrounds.

The majority of the participants from this study were enrolled within courses organised under the Faculty of Humanities. This was the result of the random and snowball sampling procedures, but it may have served to skew the samples' representativeness towards the attitudes and experiences of students enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities. This faculty is

characterised by liberal and humanist oriented courses and modules, many of which include an emphasis on reflexivity, questioning the status quo, and open-minded investigation. It is possible that the experiences of students enrolled in Business, Sciences, or Health Sciences courses might differ significantly, given the difference in institutional micro-cultures between different faculties.

In addition to the potential for demographic overrepresentation, the assessment of social class as an inclusion criteria may have represented a limitation in this study. While the use of NSFAS funding as a determinant for social class offered a practical and readily assessed inclusion criterion, it is possible that a more nuanced inclusion criteria which assessed multiple markers of class may have contributed to a broader and more representative sample of the population of students from working-class backgrounds at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The dataset for this study was collected using online interviews. This decision was driven by the contingencies of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the national shelter-in-place policies implemented to mitigate it. Accordingly, traditional face-to-face interviews were not feasible for this project, which in turn may have influenced the collection of data. In particular, the distance created by interviewing online, combined with the difficulties in pursuing meaning or following up on complicated topics may have resulted in valuable information being missed during the process. A future project might take this into account in designing and adapting the collection process.

It was also noted during the research process that the researcher defaulted to a form of interviewing that had elements in common with therapeutic listening. While this may have served to foreclose on certain questions, it was useful as a form of establishing rapport and openness with participants, and allowed for a measure of trust between the researcher and participants, which facilitated the exploration of difficult ideas and experiences in a way that

was potentially less guarded, if also more narrowly focused than might have been useful in this project.

Another element to consider for this project was the researcher's own status as a graduate of the University of the Witwatersrand. This entailed that the researcher approached this research with their own experiences and exposure to the shared environment of the university. It was necessary to reflect on this, and to re-examine the ways in which this had shaped initial readings of the data collected in order to produce the present results, and may have related to the understanding that attending university is a deeply personal, and thus potentially varied, experience.

Another limitation for this project was the nature of the sample as it related to the research questions. While the purpose of these questions was to explore experiences of affiliation and a sense of belonging for students from working-class backgrounds, the sample deliberately targeted students who had spent a minimum of three years in the academic setting. While this was believed to contribute positively in terms of producing a reflective sample capable of discussing the themes under investigation with insight into their own experiences over time, during the process of completing this study it became apparent that the strategies which these students used to affiliate with the university and cope with its challenges potentially served to obscure experiences of difficulty and challenges from their earlier years. A first year cohort may have been able to offer more insight into the challenges to belonging experienced by this student population, though this project has been able to highlight coping strategies which appeared effective enough in the long-term that students are able to remain within the university context which might not have emerged from a younger sample.

6.2. Implications for Future Research

This study contributed to a gap in the literature that focused on understanding the experiences of belonging within the context of an elite academic environment. Studies such as this are relevant for supporting students from working-class backgrounds, who were noted for experiencing lower levels of belonging within such environments. It was expected that the findings of this study would benefit from further research to assess the credibility, and explore the extent to which similar factors might arise in different student populations.

This study suggested that students from working-class backgrounds experienced alienation and uncertainty during their initial encounter with the university environment; while the uncertainty may have diminished as social belonging and experiences of affiliation increased, there remained a feeling of dislocation within the university setting due in part to conflicting desires and representations of the university as both a transitional place of opportunity, and an alienating hostile environment. This finding could inform the efforts to support the sense of belonging and academic successes of students from working-class backgrounds.

This research highlighted that students from working-class backgrounds appear to experience an ambiguous overall sense of belonging while being unable to resolve which dimension of belonging – social belonging or place belonging – appeared to play the most significant role in shaping these experiences. Future research might seek to explore in more detail the ways that these students experience a fluctuating sense of belonging within the elite university setting.

In keeping with the design used for this study, future research in this field might beneficially adopt the use of focus groups, in order to explore how experiences emerge and are understood in shared settings by students from similar backgrounds and experiences.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/20/05**
PROJECT TITLE:	Working class students' sense of belonging and group affiliation at an elite university.
INVESTIGATOR	Kane Christopher (1408143)
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	15 May 2020
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Low Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2022

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 21 May 2020 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Dr Vinitha Jithoo)

cc: Dr Vinitha Jithoo (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

_____ ___16___/____05___/____2020___
Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Introduction and explanation of participant information letter.

Explanation of Consent to record and report on responses

Questions:

- To start with, which class would you say you fit into (Upper, middle, lower)?
- In terms of being at Wits, how would you describe your experience?
- What is it like to be a student at Wits?
- If you were talking to a friend about Wits, what would you say is an experience that stood out for you? Positive or negative?
- Is there anything that makes you feel like you belong at Wits?
- Is there anything that makes you feel like you don't belong?
- Does money come up when you are on campus/in classes?
- How would you describe your interactions with your lecturers?
- How does being at Wits compare with other areas of your life?
- What does the word 'groups' mean to you?
- How do you identify groups at the university? Are there any groups you encountered for the first time at Wits?
- Are there spaces at Wits you would associate with any specific groups?
- What groups do you feel you belong to?
- What makes you feel like you belong to these groups?
- What does belonging mean to you?
- What groups are most freely chosen?
- What groups are least freely chosen?
- We have spoken a bit about groups and belonging, is there anything you think we have missed?
- Do you have any closing thoughts?

During this process, give time to follow any concepts or idea that arise.

Conclusion, thank student for participation, re-highlight the possibility of a request for a summary by the researcher for the participants.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

Participant Information Sheet

Greetings,

My name is Christopher Kane, and I am a Masters student in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, and I am investigating the ways in which people understand and experience group belonging in the university context under the supervision of Dr Vinitha Jithoo.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. This activity will involve meeting with myself either at a venue at the Wits Braamfontein Campus or online to discuss a few questions and topics relating to what experiences you may have had regarding groups in the university setting. These groups can be anything from simple cliques or cultural groupings to formal or political organizations. This discussion will take around 60 to 90 minutes (one to one and a half hours). With your permission, I would also like to record the interview using a digital device.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project. You will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The nature of focus group-based research means that neither your anonymity nor your confidentiality can be guaranteed during the data collection process, as you will be meeting with myself and several other participants, however, I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. In addition, the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the discussion or resume another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the focus group, these are available free of charge the Wits Crisis Line (0800 111 311) or Lifeline (0800 322 322).

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you on request. The data collected from this research project will be stored in a secure folder on a password protected computer. With your permission the data collected from this research project may be used by other researchers. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrec-nonmedical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Kane

Researcher: Christopher Kane,
1408143@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor: Dr Vinitha Jithoo,
vinitha.jithoo@wits.ac.za, 011 717 4523

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

Title of project: ***Working-class students' sense of belonging and group affiliation at an elite university***

Name of researcher: Christopher Kane

I, …….., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his research report	YES NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES NO
I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained	YES NO
I understand that due to the nature of this project my responses will not be anonymous, but that my confidentiality will be protected in the reporting of these responses	YES NO

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

Appendix E

Barbara Wood
Tel: +27 44 873 5145
cell: 082 9022 571
E-mail: woodlandsmedia@gmail.com
8 Suikerbossie Street
Bergsig
George 6529
South Africa

To whom it may concern

Editing Certificate

I, Barbara Wood, hereby confirm that I am a registered professional researcher and editor and have edited the following academic document:

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

By:
Christopher Richard Kane
1408143

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Community-Based Counselling Psychology)

Supervisor: Dr Vinitha Jithoo

December 2022

Signed:

Barbara Wood