

**BEYOND ACCESS: EXPERIENCES OF
WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS IN ELITE
UNIVERSITIES OF PAKISTAN**



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this thesis entitled: **“Beyond Access: Experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan.”** submitted by Asif is accepted in its present form by the PIDE School Policy, Development and Governance, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad as satisfying the requirements for partial fulfillment of the degree in Master of Philosophy in Development Studies.

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DEDICATION

To the people of Palestine, whose unwavering courage and unbreakable spirit in the face of unimaginable suffering of a televised genocide may one day inspire the thought that emancipatory justice is only possible if we resist empire in all its forms, and dare to imagine a radically different, more humane world.

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My mother deserves a special mention. Her greatest wish was for us to be educated above all else, and this work stands as a small fulfilment of that dream.

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Last but by no measure the least, I thank Rehanullah, Suleman and Salman who were an immense part of this journey.

-Asif

Author's Declaration

I **Asif** hereby state that my M.Phil. thesis titled **Beyond Access: The experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan** is my own work and has not been submitted previously by me for taking any degree from Pakistan Institute of Development Economics or anywhere else in the country/world.

At any time if my statement is found to be incorrect even after my Graduation the university has the right to withdraw my M.Phil. degree.

Date: **July 22, 2025.**

Signature of Student



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Abstract

A key policy goal of expanding educational opportunities is social mobility, an outcome more recently linked with access to elite education. In Pakistan, elite universities, universities that enroll students from elite social, political and academic backgrounds, have expanded the access to include working-class students, students who otherwise could not afford to study at the elite universities, through outreach programs. This study is focused on these working-class students and their lived experiences in elite universities of Pakistan, examining how they navigate academic, social, and cultural life within institutions historically shaped by and for privileged classes. It investigates how class-based dispositions, aspirations, and challenges influence their university journeys, identity formation, and perceptions of social mobility, through in-depth interviews. Twenty-two (22) working-class students from two elite universities, who formed part of the sample, were identified and interviewed through purposive sampling, used in combination with snowballing to identify participants for richness of data, after establishing an inclusion criterion. Three faculty members were also interviewed to know how they experience and understand the arena of a classroom, whose members belong to vastly different social classes, educational backgrounds and cultural capital. The findings reveal a persistent mismatch between students' inherited dispositions and the dominant culture of the university, resulting in feelings of alienation, emotional exhaustion, and symbolic exclusion. Key sites of this struggle include language, clothing, food practices, spatial dynamics, and peer interactions, where elite norms remain unspoken yet powerful markers of legitimacy. While outreach students often engage in strategies to fit-in, they are reminded of their place in the field through markers of class identity and lack of cultural capital. Instead, students experience a cleft habitus, torn between their working-class origins and parts of the elite habitus they now inhabit. The study argues that elite universities reproduce class hierarchies, through subtle and embodied forms of exclusion that privilege those with inherited cultural capital, even after providing access to working-class students through inclusion programs i.e., outreach programs.

By unpacking the emotional and symbolic costs of upward mobility, this research contributes to critical debates on meritocracy, inclusion, and inequality in higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education, Social Mobility, Elite Universities, Outreach Programs, Bourdieu, Social Capital, Symbolic Violence

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Beyond Access: The experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan

1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The task is to produce, if not a “new person”, then at least a “new gaze”, a sociological eye. And this cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a mental revolution, a transformation of one’s whole vision of the social world.

-Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992

The dominant view of education and social mobility has its roots in the human capital theory, with education being termed as the “great equalizer” (Grove & Montgomery, 2023). The term “human capital” was introduced by Theodore W. Schultz in 1960 to conceptualize social mobility through education: investment in education would increase the skills and abilities of people, improve their earnings and ultimately set them on the path to social mobility (Brown et al., 2020). This forms the mainstream explanation of the link between education and social mobility: number of years of schooling (i.e., learning) equals income/earnings, and thus a more socially mobile individual. Gary Becker conceptualized the theory by defining the human capital as “a product of market investment” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 28), assuming that humans are rational economic agents investing in education to improve their earning potential. Another assumption is that our societies are “education-based meritocracies” (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016, p. 2), where two people having the same level of education would become ‘equal’ and be able to exploit similar opportunities in the market. This reframed the issue at the heart of the capitalism i.e., the issue of distribution and redistribution, and aligned it with the American Dream: everyone has a chance at a prosperous life based on the knowledge and skills one acquires, hard work and desire for success, irrespective of race, colour and social background (Brown et al., 2020).

However, people do not invest in education in line with the logic of human capital theory but rather to attain credentials as positional capital/good, a “defensive expenditure” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 102) in face of mounting competition. In a competitive environment where everyone is holding credentials, the only way of staying in the game i.e., to have any chance of availing an opportunity in the job market, is to hold a credential. This has resulted in the massification of higher education with exponential rise in the number of universities and number of people enrolled in different programs trying to collect credentials to be eligible for opportunities in the job market. This refers to the phenomenon of credential inflation (Collins, 1979), and more recently termed by Brown (2020) as “hyperinflation”. This, credential inflation, is defined as the rise in credential requirements for jobs as a rising proportion of the population attain more advanced degrees, and the value of a given credentials falls over time (Collins, 1979). This is very similar to how inflation affects the value of money. For instance, a commodity that can be bought today for \$40 cannot be bought after some weeks or a month because inflation has affected the price of that commodity as the exchange value of the commodity increases while the use value remains the same. Put simply, one can’t buy the same commodity for the same amount because of inflation and market forces. Similarly, with inflation in education qualifications people enter into the credential market to seek yet higher degrees, making it a perpetual process (Collins, 1979). This very market logic of supply and demand is applied to credentials in the job market. Mass education has exponentially increased the number of graduates while there is lack of opportunities, reducing the social value of education. This makes credential inflation a supply problem, rather than a problem driven by economic demand (Collins, 2002). Credential inflation is a global phenomenon (Chan & Zhang, 2021; Collins, 2002; Mok & Jiang, 2018; Mok & Neubauer, 2016; Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022), and Pakistan is experiencing a similar crisis. With the replacement of University Grants Commission (UGC) by Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, a shift occurred with

focus on ease of access (Ahsan & Khan, 2023)¹ and the number of universities expanded exponentially from 67 in 2001 to 259 by 2023 (*Higher Education Statistics HEDR Statistics*, 2023). Enrolments in higher education increased from a little over 0.267 million in 2001-02 to 3.036 million in 2020-21 (*Ibid*, 2023), which accounts for approximately 10 times increases in enrolments. Over two million students have graduated from 2016-2020 (*Ibid*, 2023), which overwhelms the labour market of a country where graduate unemployment is three times the average unemployment in the country (Ahsan & Khan, 2023). The sociological view of this crisis is that “the lives of many students and job seekers are not characterized by social mobility but greater social congestion, as they struggle to match the promise of the opportunity bargain to labour market realities” (Brown et al., 2013, p. 4). This complicates the assertion of human capital theory that education is the means to social mobility. In the past 50 years, access to education has improved for different social classes in Pakistan but this hasn’t reduced the gap in educational achievements and subsequent social mobility through economic opportunity (Naich et al., 2024). Similarly, Lindley & Machin (2012) notes that with educational expansion in Britain, those from affluent backgrounds responded with higher rates of educational attainment and the labour market incentivized it with higher wage differentials. The gains from expanding higher education primarily benefit high-income children, leading to a growing concentration of students from higher-income families in colleges and universities (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). In the top-tier universities of the United States, almost three-quarters of the entering class is from the highest socioeconomic quartile (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), as those from the privileged class gain access to exclusionary forms of credentials in elite institutions. Thus, mobility is increasingly a function of holding elite credentials: All degrees (of the same educational level) are equal in that they require the same years of schooling, but

¹ This is a Knowledge Brief published by Ahsan & Khan in 2023. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, the nation’s think-tank in Pakistan, publishes many products and knowledge brief is one of them. It’s a short and relevant brief of literature on the subject matter.

some degrees are more equal than the others because of the differential access they provide to economic opportunities. Organizations care for their reputational capital by matching the recruitment practices of their competitors by employing graduates from elite universities (the idea of institutional isomorphism) and linking themselves with the 'best people' to do the job (Sadik & Brown, 2020). This trend in corporate recruitment reproduces the societal hierarchies by placing graduates from elite universities on a premium pay (Sadik & Brown, 2020) while creating little opportunities for the rest.

But does an elite credential suffice on its own for success in the labour market, and social mobility as the goal? Drawing insights from the work of Brown, Reay, Vincent (2013), Granfield (1991), Khan (2022), Lehmann (2009, 2012, 2013) and Reay (2001), we understand the importance of richness of university experiences in terms of attainment of much sought after values, attitudes, beliefs, and other dispositions which are valuable in pursuit of social mobility. Elite universities offer much more than just an elite credentials, but rather these universities are avenues of middle-class dispositions, and thus social mobility through higher education is as much the process of learning elite mannerisms, behaviours, and “rules of the game” as much as it is the process of gaining credentials, skills and knowledge, making the transformation of habitus integral to the attainment of social mobility (E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013). Such transformation of habitus is studied (Jack, 2016; Khan, 2022; E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2009; McNamara Horvat & Earl Davis, 2011) by documenting the experiences of working-class students in elite universities in different contexts. Working-class students in elite universities provides such a space where one habitus encounters another habitus (working-class students' experiencing a the habitus of peers from upper-middle and elite class).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The experiences of working-class students in elite universities have been a key area of research in sociological studies (see Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023; Lehmann, 2013; McNamara Horvat &

Earl Davis, 2011; Reay, 2001; Silver, 2020), with much of these studies being conducted in the developed world. This subject is understudied in Pakistan and very few studies (see Khan, 2022; Naich et al., 2024) have been conducted thus far. The study by Khan (2022) documents the experiences of working-class students in four elite universities in Pakistan through interviews and participant observation. However, this research studies a sample (Khan, 2022) that includes student in elite universities under different scholarships. The type of scholarships they avail is not documented, as most of the scholarships available to students in different universities in Pakistan are awarded after admission. The sample could potentially include students who paid the tuition fee for the initial semester(s) and availed scholarships afterwards. Further, the research doesn't investigate an important population of working-class students in elite universities; the students which make it to such institutions through outreach programs. Such programs in the top-tier universities provide equality of access to elite education for underrepresented groups, however limited this may be (such program enroll a small number of students each year). This makes this group an interesting one to study because from the commencement of the university till graduation they do not face financial constraints to education². Thus, how students enrolled through such programs 'experience' university life, how their aspirations, tastes and dispositions change over times constitute the subject of my inquiry. While the current discourse on higher education is centred around the quality of education, skills (or the lack of it) and returns to education, this study will hopefully provide the much-needed shift towards making class (social class) relevant in educational debates. Whether people from different social classes, sharing the same classrooms and campus of elite

² Their tuition fee is covered by the scholarship extended under the outreach program, and the outreach students are also provided a stipend, though limited, to cater for other needs such as food. Thus, the words "the do not face financial constraints" are used in this specific context of tuition fee, which is a major barrier to affordability of such education in elite universities.

university, and being taught by the same instructors, experience university as equals or not will enrich the debate on class, inequality and reproduction of advantage.

1.2 Research Problem

Based on the narrative of statement of the problem, as stated in the preceding text, I am narrowing my research problem into “Beyond Access: The Experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan” and have operationalized my topic into following research questions and objectives.

1.3 Research Objectives

The following are my research objectives, which I will investigate through the questions in the following section.

1. To document the experiences of working-class students in Elite universities of Pakistan.
2. To understand how the working-class students' habitus undergoes transformation in the elite universities of Pakistan.
3. To investigate the elite university as a field of symbolic capital and symbolic violence.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were the starting point of my research, and informed my literature review, my research problem, and objectives:

- 1) How do the working-class students “experience” university life in elite universities of Pakistan by encountering a different (social) field?
- 2) In what ways do elite universities operate as fields where forms of symbolic capital are recognized and negotiated by working-class students?
- 3) In what ways does the encounter between working-class habitus and the elite university field lead to transformation, reinforcement, or fragmentation of student identity?

1.5 Units of Data Collection:

A unit of data collection (UDC) is any element from which data is gathered for the purpose of our research inquiry. A unit of data collection can be an individual, a group, an entity, a moving or still image, an event or any other element relevant to the research. For my study, the following will be my UDCs:

- Outreach Students: I will be collecting data from working-class students at elite universities of Pakistan (through interviews and think-aloud notes) about their experiences of the university.
- Faculty members: interviewing faculty members will help me understand their experience of the classroom where both outreach and non-outreach students share a space (a field).

1.6 Explanation of the Key Terms/Concepts

The key terms/concepts I will use in my study are following:

1.6.1 Elite Educational Institution

There is no definition of what an elite education institution is in context of Pakistan. However, we can categorize such institutions based on their tuition fee, other expenses (hostel, cafeteria and those in the social setting), the rather difficult entry (Khan, 2022) and the perception of people regarding these institutions as elite. Many universities in Pakistan could be categorized as elite, and my use of the term would mean an elite university in Pakistan that give access to working-class/underprivileged students through outreach program to study in the institution by eliminating the financial barrier.

1.6.2 Working-Class student(s)

This research refers to every student studying under the outreach program at the elite universities under study as working-class for two reasons:

1. These students are unable to pay the tuition fee of the institution, and hence it would be very unlikely for them to access these elite institutions save this outreach program.
2. The very status of being an outreach student in an environment, where majority of students belong to very affluent backgrounds and finance their studies, categorize them as working-class.

To avoid ambiguity, this definition of working-class is contextual; the students studying in these elite institutions through outreach programs may not be working-class if put in a different context. Thus, my use of working-class is very fluid and aligns with the broader debate at hand: the outreach students carry with them a working-class habitus. This is consistent with how Bourdieu extends the definition of class beyond a materialist conception to include the cultural, social and symbolic capital (Grenfell, 2014).

1.6.3 Habitus

Each social class is associated with a certain way of being; of how a person acts, the ways he/she thinks and speaks, the kind of hobbies he/she has and the kind of language one speaks (and the accent) and so on and on. This ‘way of being’ is what Bourdieu calls Habitus (Grenfell, 2014). Habitus is a property of the social agents that is both “structured and structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1994. P.170, as cited in Grenfell, 2014): structured by the past and the present (family upbringing, educational experiences, social class one belongs to, social experiences and so on), and structuring in how it shapes the present and the future (Grenfell, 2014). In simple terms, habitus is the set of habits, ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that we learn from our family, social background, our education and our socializations. It shapes how we see the world and how we behave, often without even realizing it. It’s like a personal lens built from our life experiences, as a baggage of our personal history.

1.6.4 Field

Field denotes arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate, exchange, and monopolize different kinds of power resources (Grenfell, 2014). To illustrate, Bourdieu has used the analogy of football field: a field with boundaries, rules, with players occupying different position, and what they can and where they can move depending on their positioning within the field (Grenfell, 2014). Similarly, social agents are occupying different places in the social field (society, a community, a university and so on). But this social field is different from a football field: some agents are at advantage based on the capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) they command within this field (Grenfell, 2014). To put it in context, imagine a group of players who have played cricket throughout their life being asked to play football against a group that has been playing football and are adept at the rules of the game. My research deals with a similar scenario: working class students entering an unfamiliar social field of an elite university, one they have not experienced before. Bourdieu's concept of field refers to a social space, like a school, university, or workplace, where people compete for status, power, or resources. Each field has its own rules, values, and what is considered important, and people do better in a field if their background and skills match what that field expects.

1.6.5 Capital

Capital, for Bourdieu, is accumulated labour, material or embodied, that agents privately appropriate to command social energy such as wealth, prestige and access and thereby reproduce or transform their position in social space (M. Grenfell, 2014; Jack, 2016). It appears in multiple interconvertible forms: economic capital; cultural capital, which manifests as embodied dispositions, objectified cultural goods and institutionalized qualifications; social capital, understood as the resources of durable networks and mutual obligations; and symbolic capital, the socially recognized form that legitimates other capitals (M. Grenfell, 2014). The

volume and composition of these capitals structure fields of practice, shape habitus and generate durable patterns of social reproduction and symbolic domination.

1.6.6 Outreach Programs

Outreach program is an institutional initiative designed by elite universities in Pakistan to identify, prepare, and support academically talented students from underprivileged or marginalized backgrounds, enabling their access to elite higher education. Such programs typically aim to bridge structural inequalities in education by offering academic training, mentoring, and financial assistance to students who demonstrate potential but lack resources or exposure. Beyond facilitating university admission, outreach programs seek to foster social inclusion and upward mobility by diversifying the student body and creating pathways for first-generation or working-class students to participate in spaces of academic privilege.

2. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility:

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
1	(Cunningham & Trinidad, 2017)	Scoping study (mapping the literature)	<p>A policy response by the governments of Australia and the UK to rising inequality in the wake of 2008 financial crises was to facilitate the massification of education to drive social mobility. While there have been participation measures to increase the access of disadvantaged groups to higher education (in a bid to increase chances of social mobility), many such groups are underrepresented in Australia. People in countries with low inequality have a greater chance at social mobility, while high inequality limits that. Neoliberal political discourse has framed social mobility as an individual action, detaching it from social dynamics at play, such as class, which makes it a complex issue. This neoliberal framing fails to take into account the interconnected nature of economic class, social capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds working (full time/part-time) to support their educational expenses have experienced negative impact on their studies and completion rates.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
2	(Marginson, 2018)	Discussion paper	<p>This study explores and compares the relationship between higher education, social and economic (in)equality and social mobility in case of United States and south Asia, while making references to Europe (Especially Nordic countries). Social mobility through education can be maximized under the certain conditions, as in Nordic countries:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) restricting the influence of affluent families (high public spending) 2) relatively flat stratification, where every degree is worth the returns in the market. (a highly stratified education will reproduce the social and economic inequalities)
3	(Haveman & Smeeding, 2006)	Exploratory Essay	<p>Those belonging to the highest socioeconomic quartile make up almost 75% of the entering class in elite colleges and universities in the U.S. (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).</p> <p>The number of young, qualified aspirants exceeds those admitted and enrolled in elite higher education institutes. More students can be enrolled without lowering the selection standards, and compromising on the quality of education (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>Higher-income parents can invest significantly in their children's education and academic success compared to those from with lower incomes and fewer resources (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Students are at an unequal footing as soon as they enter higher education.</p> <p>The gains from expanding higher education primarily benefit high-income children, leading to a growing concentration of students from higher-income families in colleges and universities (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).</p> <p>Public spending for higher education has eroded, leading institutions to rely on private giving, own-source funds, cost reductions, and tuition increases, which disproportionately affect access for students from less affluent families</p>
4	(Brown, 2017)	Discussion paper	<p>The article provides a critical analysis of the Increasing Merit Selection (IMS) hypothesis. This hypothesis forecasts that as time progresses, educational achievement will increasingly reflect meritocracy. Consequently, the influence of an individual's class origin on their academic performance is expected to diminish. Additionally, the hypothesis suggests that the connection</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>between academic success and career outcomes will become stronger, as employers prioritize expertise when hiring. This shift is anticipated to lead to a reduced impact of one's social background on their eventual occupational status. Sociological evidence refutes this by highlighting social inequalities in origins, education and destinations, based on social class, gender, race and ethnicity (Brown, 2017).</p> <p>Education alone cannot equalize life chances, especially amid wider social inequalities, challenging the effectiveness of a "deficit model" of working-class mobility.</p> <p>Social congestion, or intense competition for opportunities, reflects a deeper crisis in liberal democratic societies, highlighting the limits of the neoliberal opportunity bargain (Brown, 2017).</p>
5	(Jin & Ball, 2020)	life story interviews	<p>The meritocratic system, while enabling upward mobility for working-class students, also distances them from their origins, creating a synthetic habitus that is both flexible and fragile. Students carry with them cultural absences and foregone opportunities, leading to a sense of dislocation and inadequacy in the diverse university environment. The</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>meritocratic skills acquired by working-class students may not fully equip them for the elite university setting, highlighting the subtle forms of class domination that persist despite academic success.</p>
6	(Brezis & Hellier, 2018)	Mathematical Modelling	<p>The education system is characterised by a division of higher education into elite and standard universities leads to permanent social stratification between the middle class and the elite, the latter being to a large extent self-reproducing (through arrangements such as the mechanism of stratified education) (Brezis & Hellier, 2018).</p> <p>the greater the difference in quality and per-student expenditures between the elite and standard universities, the lower the upward social mobility of the middle class, and the more self-reproducing the elite group (Brezis & Hellier, 2018).</p> <p>High difference in budget allocation between elite and standard education= social reproduction of elite. Low difference in budget allocation= personal abilities prevail.</p> <p>Expansion of higher education increased social mobility as those from lower class entered the middle class, but this was the only group transition.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
7	(Crawford et al., 2016)	life-course approach	<p>Young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go to university than those from affluent backgrounds, with the cost of university being a major barrier (Crawford et al., 2016).</p> <p>Among the selected group of students from humble background, who do go to university, they are less likely:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To attend the highest status institutions 2) Less likely to graduate. 3) Less likely to achieve the highest degree classes. <p>Students from lower social class earn lower average earnings compared to their elite peers, despite having received the credentials from the same university. This highlights that earning differentials are driven by factors other than the credentials alone (Crawford et al., 2016).</p> <p>The family influence goes beyond a degree and extends to the job market as well where those from elite backgrounds secure a more professional job with higher income growth potential. The average graduate wage for a child from a poor family is comparable to the average wage of all graduates</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			and non-graduates combined from affluent families (Crawford et al., 2016).
8	(Brown et al., 2013)	Discussion	<p>Functionalist theories, such as human capital theory, assume that in meritocratic society would be efficient and just and provide ample opportunities for social mobility. This carries an inherent assumption that factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and so on does that influence academic performance and occupational destination (Brown et al., 2013).</p> <p>Much of social mobility post-world war-II has been because of the changing class structure (A shift from employment in agriculture sector towards production and services), rather than being the result of increasing equality of opportunity (Brown et al., 2013).</p>

Theoretical debates underscore the role of neoliberal discourse in individualizing social mobility, neglecting systemic factors like class. Despite higher education's potential for mobility, challenges persist for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, exacerbated by diminishing public spending and disparities in elite university admissions. Critiques of meritocracy highlight persistent social inequalities in education and employment outcomes, questioning the efficacy of education alone in equalizing life chances amidst broader societal inequities.

2.2 Social Capital and Education:

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
1	(Dika & Singh, 2002)	Literature review	<p>Bourdieu defines social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Dika & Singh, 2002; Grenfell, 2014).</p> <p>Social capital includes both material and symbolic exchanges and can be converted into economic capital under certain conditions. The volume of social capital an individual possesses depends on the size of their network of connections and the amount of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital possessed by each person in their network (Dika & Singh, 2002).</p> <p>Cultural capital, embodied in dispositions of mind and body, objectified in cultural goods, and institutionalized in educational qualifications, plays a crucial role in Bourdieu's theory (Dika & Singh, 2002; Grenfell, 2014).</p> <p>Habitus refers to the individual's set of dispositions brought to the field of interaction, shaping their behaviour and perceptions (Dika & Singh, 2002; Grenfell, 2014).</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>Field represents the social space where agents with different means and ends engage in struggles. The rules of the game in the field are dynamic, as they change over time through the interaction of agents of the field or through exogenous factors, and are not explicitly codified (Dika & Singh, 2002).</p>
2	(Croll, 2004)	Theoretical and Empirical debate	<p>Families have historically played a central role in the sociology of education, particularly concerning the relationship between socio-economic status and children's educational outcomes.</p> <p>Within-family processes, such as parental involvement in communication and activities, impact educational success.</p>
3	(Nayab & Zulfiqar, 2022)	discussion	<p>Social capital is commonly associated with networks of social relations characterized by trust and reciprocity, leading to mutual benefits.</p> <p>Social capital works as a facilitator for actors within a social structure, encompassing both informal and formal relationships. Two types of social capital are identified: bonding capital (links within similar groups) and bridging capital (links beyond one's group). Dominance of bonding over bridging can lead to isolationism and hinder social cohesion</p>

This section focuses the importance of social capital in educational outcomes. Social capital encapsulates the collective resources derived from enduring institutional relationships, convertible into economic gains through material and symbolic exchanges. The extent of an individual's social capital hinges on network size and the diverse capitals possessed by each contact; economic, cultural, and symbolic. Greater inherited social capital, and that at disposal (both within and beyond one's group) can lead to better decisions on education and higher chances for social mobility.

2.3 Working-class students' experiences in Elite Universities:

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
1	(Lehmann, 2012b)	longitudinal study (of working-class students over a time of four years) interview in first, second and final year	education is engaged in development of expressive order (character training or a certain way of life) and instrumental order (skills through different subjects). Working class students entering an elite university face a different expressive order (things work very differently and people act very differently than what they have grown up with). There is a conflict of habitus, as they are cultural outsiders. We are most likely to encounter and seek out experiences that confirm our habitus (set of dispositions of a class) (Bourdieu, 1990, as cited in Lehmann, 2012), and so the working class people interact with a different habitus and react to it and negotiate their daily lives within this habitus differently (depending on different factors)

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>A conflict with habitus, i.e., the expressive order of university, affects the instrumental order as well (affects learning in terms of skills and limits learning).</p> <p>University needs to do more than just providing access to elite education, exposing them to the instrumental value of education, without complementing the expressive order of that 'field' by integrating them through initiatives.</p>
2	(Lehmann, 2012a)	four-year longitudinal study (of first-generation, working-class university students)	<p>status inequalities are a product of extra-credentia experiences alongside credential inflation.</p> <p>Undergrad education more common> access to employment depend on “enriching” credential experiences obtained through extra-credentia experiences on campus (a lab opportunity, events or seminars) or outside the campus (an exchange program or a relevant internship). Students from underprivileged backgrounds with risk of financial resources do not have the luxury of such experiences as they have to work jobs for a living that are different from their studies (the experiences do not enrich their credentials).</p> <p>Thus, they do not form the social connections which contribute to their success in the field of</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>study.</p> <p>Students respond to and adopt to the academic and cultural demands in order to gain extra-credential experiences.</p> <p>Well-connected students (through their extended social network) guard connections in order to limit access to opportunities.</p> <p>Most of the internships or placements offered were unpaid and only those with family support could afford to avail them.</p> <p>Students had to revise their career goals and change their career paths because the programs they enrolled in (law and medicine) and rather enrol in graduate programs. programs of high status and mobility (such as law and medicine) are heavily guarded, and success depends of many other factors rather than just a degree (Such as relevant internship opportunities or someone from the social network who has a clinic where one might start working).</p> <p>Employers place value on extra credential experiences as it represents key skills such as leadership, communication and interpersonal skills.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
3	(Reay et al., 2009a)	Case study	<p>Social reality is like existing in two places at once: in the physical world and in our thoughts, both in society and inside us. When people are in a social situation that they're used to, they're comfortable and take things for granted, just like a fish swimming effortlessly in water. But when they find themselves in an unfamiliar social setting, it can be unsettling and make them feel unsure and anxious. For example, a person from a working-class background might feel out of place at a prestigious university.</p>
4	(Xie & Reay, 2020)	Mixed design on-going longitudinal study	<p>Students from rural areas entering elite universities are placed in a new field (an elite university with a different institutional habitus) which is very different from their way of life (old habitus). In this interaction, tension arises which either cause habitus transformation or habitus hysteresis (Xie & Reay, 2020).</p> <p>Rural students experience continuity in academic matters but lag behind on social experiences, which is at the core of the habitus. The two aspects i.e., the academic and social are interdependent and a successful transformation of one may or may not help with the other. Participation in social activities</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			in elite universities shapes chances to obtain social and cultural resources that are valuable for employment and long-term success in later career.
5	(E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013)	Mixed methods quantitative= Descriptive statistics from a large survey Qualitative= in-depth longitudinal interviews	<p>Social mobility is attributed to higher education, which is years of schooling and learning the knowledge would lead to a socially mobile life (in a linear fashion). But this is as much the process of “learning elite mannerisms, behaviours, and “rules of the game” as it is the process of gaining credentials, knowledge or skills” (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 18).</p> <p>For working class students in elite universities, adopting to a middle-class milieu is a difficult transitional period where there is a sense of belonging (habitus transformation) and being out of place (habitus hysteresis) simultaneously. This is termed cleft habitus by Bourdieu (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023).</p> <p>This cleft habitus makes it difficult for students from lower socio-economic class to connect with their family, friends and community back home.</p>
6	(Lehmann, 2013)	Discussion	working class students' experiences in an elite university are largely influenced by their social class.

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>Working class students' entering elite institutions are like players in a game of which they do not understand the rules, although they know the importance and the purpose of the game (Lehmann, 2013). The ability to play this game can be considerably increased through familiarity with the rules (through research and setting expectations accordingly) as well as interaction with the field. In spite of that, students struggle with the demands of the academic and social life in this new field. However, working-class or low-income students' group is not homogenous and rather experience and adopt differently. responding to the new habitus either by negotiating identity and becoming a part of it or by resisting it, depending on the individual factors of family, school experience and so on.</p>
7	(Liao & Wong, 2019)	semi-structured interviews Thematic Analysis	<p>Governments aim to equip students with higher qualifications to navigate the increasingly competitive labour market, emphasizing individual responsibility rather than addressing systemic issues.</p> <p>The transition to university is characterized as emotionally stressful due to concerns about the value of qualifications in a market saturated with</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>credentials, reflecting the competitive nature of capitalism.</p> <p>Rural students face emotional injuries and feelings of shame and inferiority while studying at university, adding to the stress of striving to escape poverty. While getting rural students into elite universities may be seen as a success in addressing inequality, it comes at the expense of their emotional well-being.</p> <p>An individualistic approach fails to confront the unequal opportunity structure, instead shifting the emotional and financial costs onto students, making their pursuit of a degree emotionally stressful.</p>
8	(Lehmann, 2009)	Three-year longitudinal Study	<p>Being in elite universities, working class students are faced with structural disadvantages which they negotiate and overcome through their working-class morals of responsibility, work ethic, real-life experiences and so on. These values are extracted from a collective (from the working class) but are interpreted and used-as-strategy in an individual capacity, reducing the struggle of mobility to an personal endeavour rather than a class struggle.</p> <p>While the focus of class based studies have</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>revolved around the grand narrative of class consciousness, the focus on this study is on class as living experience and the emotional and psychic response to class inequalities and the way class manifests itself in daily life in the context of elite higher education. Social mobility requires the transformation of habitus i.e., of becoming different and becoming middle class, which comes with an emotional cost.</p> <p>Working-class students do not evoke their moral values to distance themselves from middle-class values but rather as the foundation of middle-class values, which is the path to social mobility. Working class students make their class identity invisible; by subscribing to the middle-class values as recipe for success, and at the same time through working-class values as morality to achieve middle-class status. For instance, being enrolled in an elite university, the concern is not the distribution of resources but rather cultural inclusion.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
9	(Granfield, 1991)	interviews, participant observation, and questionnaires	<p>Stigma plays a significant role in social class relations and the challenges of upward mobility for working-class youth. Class identity is shaped through lived experiences and interactions within specific contexts.</p> <p>Upwardly mobile individuals often adapt their identities to fit into higher status environments, influenced by the stigma associated with their original class. The meritocratic ideology legitimizes the devaluation of lower classes, affecting how individuals manage their class identity.</p> <p>Efforts to overcome class stigma are seen as individual rather than collective endeavours, involving identity management strategies.</p>
10	(Jack, 2016)	in-depth interviews	<p>Engagement with figures of authority, the top academics of any fields, is influenced by prior exposure to elite environments, with the “privileged poor” being more adept due to their preparatory school experiences, while the “doubly disadvantaged” struggle due to a lack of such exposure.</p> <p>Educational success is shaped by early exposure to elite academic practices, with disparities in student</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>engagement reflecting the need for institutions to provide clear guidance and support, particularly for those without such backgrounds.</p> <p>The formative college years demand proactive faculty engagement and the development of a curriculum that promotes critical thinking and self-empowerment, aligning with the cultural expectations of higher education.</p> <p>To truly democratize education, systemic reforms are required that extend beyond financial aid, fostering an inclusive culture that bridges the gap from public schooling to college and addresses the broader structural inequalities.</p>
11	(Khan et al., 2021)	in-depth qualitative interviews (Semi-structured)	<p>Elite universities are alienating for working-class students, with little to no assimilation or social integration.</p> <p>Elite universities in Pakistan may be perpetuating elitism rather than disseminating a knowledge-based educational structure. Pakistani elite universities following the lead of Western institutions, setting standards that often cause working-class students to fall behind, exacerbating educational and social opportunity gaps. Working-class students reportedly feel discouraged from</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>participating in university activities and classroom discussions due to socio-economic backgrounds and language barriers.</p>
12	(Khan, 2022)	<p>in-depth qualitative interviews (Semi-structured)</p>	<p>Working-class students have poor or no social networking with peers due to stark class differences.</p> <p>Standards set by elite universities often lead to working-class students being unable to conform, resulting in class differences in educational and social opportunities.</p> <p>A perceived lack of attention from teachers and administration, with class background being a significant barrier. Experiences of alienation and minimal assimilation on university campuses are common among working-class students.</p>
13	(Ingram, 2011)	<p>Focus groups followed by interviews</p>	<p>Working-class boys who achieve success academically may face emotional difficulties in reconciling their identity with the expectations of academic success. This struggle is attributed to the clash between the social field associated with their background and the one associated with academic achievement.</p> <p>The development of habitus is influenced by</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>multiple social fields, resulting in a complex interplay between reflexive awareness and habitual dispositions. While some working-class boys may demonstrate the ability to navigate different fields with reflexivity, it does not necessarily lead to a seamless transition between social contexts. Success for working-class boys may entail diminishing their affiliation with their working-class identity.</p>
14	(Reay et al., 2010)	case study	<p>While there is a general trend of increasing enrolments in higher education, the percentage of students from lower classes are falling in elite universities (even lower than the benchmark participation rate). The small number of working-class students attaining places at elite universities face not only academic challenge, but also considerable contestations of identity, and the discomforts generated when habitus confronts a starkly unfamiliar field.</p> <p>Exceptionality is a dominant discourse where a few successful are presented as the success path for everyone else, but this bears little impact on highly classed and racialised inequalities in higher education.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
15	(Martin, 2012)	secondary analysis of a panel study and a longitudinal study	<p>Despite expansion of higher education, working- and lower-class students are underrepresented, especially in selective institutions. Class and a background is associated with participation in college activities and satisfaction with campus social life, whereby those from elite class are actively involved in campus life (with high forms of all sort of capital) while lower class students either do not socialize (because they do not fit-in or they can't afford to) or because of their expectations of university (again a clash of habitus--what one thinks of and wants university life to be, and what it actually is) (Martin, 2012; Reay et al., 2010).</p> <p>Dominant class students devote considerable time to social and recreational activities, while middle and subordinate class students are more likely to have a part-time job to pay for college expenses, which affects the "experience of university" (Martin, 2012).</p>

Education serves a dual purpose: cultivating both expressive and instrumental orders. However, working-class students entering elite universities often experience a clash of habitus (cleft-habitus), feeling like cultural outsiders. This conflict affects not only their social integration but also their ability to access co-curricular and extra-credential experiences, such as social

clubs and events, crucial for developing a variety of skills (such as leadership). Thus, working-class students do not experience the ‘richness’ of university, which is the sum-total of all that a university has to offer its students for personal and professional growth. The focus has been on access to elite education, but systemic inequalities persist, exacerbating emotional stress and perpetuating class disparities.

2.4 Social Reproduction and Inequality:

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
1	(E. M. Lee, 2013)	Discussion	<p>Elite colleges, while providing access to lucrative careers and powerful networks, tend to reinforce higher socioeconomic status.</p> <p>Despite increased access for economically disadvantaged students, there’s a growing stratification within the college-going population. Alongside credentials conferred by elite institutions, they provide extracurricular benefits which leads to higher levels of satisfaction and greater degree of success in the labour market. (social networks and social capital reinforcing high socioeconomic status). Low SES students are limited by finances and low stores of (social) capital to experience university through social or extracurricular activities (E. M. Lee, 2013).</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
2	(Tsui, 2003)	literature review and empirical evidence from a national survey.	<p>Inequalities are reproduced through differential development of critical thinking skills in a hierarchical higher education structure. Institutional selectivity is positively related to outcomes of better future outcomes in terms of employment and status for multiple reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) human capital approach, which suggests that graduates of prestigious institutions are better rewarded in the labour market because they are equipped with superior educational training (Tsui, 2003). 2) Selection effect as per which positive outcomes of selective colleges are a result of the kind of students that make it to such institutions than the actual results of attending such institution (Tsui, 2003). 3)The institutional reputation of these selective colleges (Tsui, 2003). <p>This is also because critical thinking is a highly valued, for the students, parents and the employers. However, the general perception that selective institutes inculcates such skills should not be the inference (merely a positive relationship between institutional selectivity and critical thinking development) (Tsui, 2003).</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
3	(Ashley & Empson, 2017)	empirical data reported (drawn from two studies including 95 interviews)	<p>Within the organizational habitus, firms 'adopt certain rituals, routines and rules' in their recruitment process. By virtue of this habitus opportunities and social mobility is offered to those that are culturally fit, valuing only a narrow group of people as opposed to their claims of being inclusive and provider of equal opportunity.</p> <p>Through this narrowing set of criteria for corporate recruitment, exclusion becomes an organizational strategy, made possible by the virtue of power and prestige in the social structure. Corporate recruitment in elite firms distinguishes those from elite backgrounds and elite universities against those from humble backgrounds and universities with low social prestige and market positioning, which is akin of creating the phenomenon of "otherization". Organizations displays their human capital (i.e., their employees) as a positional good in a bid to match the competition. this creates social exclusion since the positional good is graduates from elite institutions and others are completely ignored.</p>
4	(Sadik & Brown, 2020)	analysis of the talent	Organizations care for their reputational capital by matching the recruitment practices of their competitors by employing graduates from elite

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
		management models	universities (the idea of institutional isomorphism) and linking themselves with the 'best people' to do the job. This trend in corporate recruitment reproduces the societal hierarchies by placing graduates from elite universities on a premium pay while creates little opportunities for the rest, and negates the promise of social mobility through education.
5	(Silver, 2020)	in-depth, semi-structured interviews	college education may lead to some level of cultural homogenization, there are still persistent class-based cultural differences, particularly in students' cultural schemas and their articulation of self and success post-college. This suggests that higher education does not entirely neutralize class distinctions in cultural dispositions. Similarities and differences in habitus can coexist simultaneously within different layers. For instance, while aspirations for graduate education and future careers may be similar across classes, deeper dispositions related to success and self-concept vary significantly, challenging the notion of a completely homogeneous cultural transformation through college education.
6	(Ullah & Ali, 2018)	Qualitative/In interviews	There is a direct correlation between the socio-economic status of parents, the type of school

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>attended, and students' career aspirations.</p> <p>There is a marked difference in the clarity and specificity of career aspirations between students from public schools and those from elite private schools.</p> <p>The type of school and the social class background of students appear to significantly influence their career aspirations, with privileged children from elite private schools aspiring to a wider range of professional careers. The dominant class's set of attitudes and values, known as the dominant habitus, plays a significant role in the educational success of their children.</p>

Elite educational institutions reinforce socioeconomic stratification through many ways: they provide extracurricular benefits (networking), they are associated with higher critical thinking (valued in the market), the institutional environment where students learn to desire prestigious jobs through the discourses on campus and campus drives by sought after organizations offering access to elite jobs. The arrangements within corporate organizations work the same way: the recruitment process is focused on a select group of graduates from elite universities in a bid for better market positioning (employees from elite universities as positional goods), and their reputational capital.

2.5 Class, Habitus, and Identity:

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
1	(Reay, 2015)	Empirical paper	The concept of habitus bridges personal emotional states and societal structures, suggesting that understanding affective dispositions is crucial for exploring the potential of habitus in driving social transformation.
2	(Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021a)	Qualitative study with life history analysis	<p>Habitus adaptations strongly rely on access to cultural capital-abundant environment, which exposes them to a different habitus, early on in their life. Whether a student is categorized as adapter, stranger or outsider depends on early socialization, where the cultural capital of the family is important.</p> <p>First generation or lower-class students are "strangers" to the habitus of the new field (i.e., to the cultural dispositions of the middle-class milieu) in their early stages (Lehmann, 2013), but this feeling of being a stranger may persist throughout university life and beyond them. This points to the experience of some people being at odds with the new habitus.</p>
3	(Chen, 2022)	Life history approach (using semi-	Rural students studying in urban universities, two different fields (rural space/city and an urban university, where a different class of students

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
		structured interviews)	<p>dominate the social space) are confronted with two levels of habitus– field disjuncture: the first is an rural–urban disjuncture (an student from the rural area coming to an urban city) and academic disjuncture (not only because the university is a different field than college/high-school but also because of the class composition of the urban university (Chen, 2022).</p> <p>Entering a new 'field', different from their previous environments, the disjuncture led to hysteresis effects and suffering in the rural students' university lives. The experiences of hysteresis effects and emotional suffering, such as a widely mentioned sense of inferiority when living at an urban university, makes the experience of university an emotional labour (Chen, 2022).</p>
4	(Lehmann, 2014)	longitudinal study (of working-class students over a time of four years) interview in	<p>Working-class students enter the arena of higher education with a high level of uncertainty (what to expect from university, how to navigate day-to-day lives, and so on) because they encounter such spaces (a foreign environment) as cultural outsiders (Lehmann, 2014).</p> <p>Students that successfully transform their identities and attain middle class habitus perceive members</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
		first, second and final year	<p>of old habitus (parents, family and friends) as narrow minded and unambitious by invoking their newly gained knowledge and newer ways of life (in terms of ambitions, individual values, and taste).</p> <p>While social mobility through education is considered essential, this mobility is accompanied by the displacement of habitus. These socially mobile students/graduates then downplay their own social class, which shows that universities "elevate certain forms of cultural capital over others."</p>
5	(Patfield et al., 2021)	Focus Group Data (Extracted from focus group discussions)	<p>Young people's interest in university is not predominantly consumerist; they aspire to higher education for diverse reasons, including learning, social connections, and personal growth (Brown et al., 2020; Patfield et al., 2021).</p> <p>The concept of <i>illusio</i> reflects a range of motivations for attending university, challenging the reductionist 'student-as-customer' metaphor prevalent in marketized education discourse (Patfield et al., 2021).</p> <p>Despite market rhetoric suggesting higher education is a commodity, young people's aspirations indicate a desire for the holistic</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>experience of university life, not just the acquisition of a degree.</p> <p>Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less influenced by the economic framing of higher education and are more interested in its broader cultural and social benefits (Patfield et al., 2021).</p>
6	(Reay, 2001)	Discussion based on three previous projects	<p>The dominant class used education as a means to maintain control over subordinate groups. The commitment of the middle class to the education of the working class in the late 1700s and early 1800s was not aligned with their educational ideals for their own class. Instead, it served as a strategy to make the subordinate class conform to the aspirations of the ruling class. Within the educational system, all authority is held by the middle classes. They not only administer the system but also ensure that it favours the cultural values and capital of the middle class over that of the working class. A working class subjectivity has been constructed that 'that's the way things are' and material success has been attributed either to individual talent or effort, or the combination of the two.</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
7	(Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023)	Case study	<p>The habitus, shaped by early socialization, subconsciously guides individuals to social fields that align with their ingrained dispositions, influencing their life choices and opportunities. Challenges arise when there's a misalignment between the habitus and new social fields, creating tension between inherent dispositions and the need to adapt to different social contexts.</p> <p>Reflexivity can disrupt the habitus' automatic tendencies, leading to conscious questioning of established practices and consideration of less familiar social fields with potential rewards (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023).</p> <p>Ultimately, the habitus instinctively avoids fields with a stark mismatch, while gravitating towards those with the best 'fit' or sufficient similarity to warrant gradual adaptation.</p> <p>Critical moments can catalyse a rupture in one's habitus, prompting a reevaluation of taken-for-granted life choices and opening up new possibilities that were previously unconsciously dismissed. The inertia of habitus and the difficulty of altering one's social trajectory underscore the challenges of adapting to new fields, even with</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			conscious effort and determination. A profound shift in priorities and perception of value, indicative of a change in illutio, can lead to a crisis of meaning, where established practices and social positions are questioned, resulting in a painful awareness of limited choices.
8	(McNamara Horvat & Earl Davis, 2011)	Analysis based on data from another project	educational interventions can intentionally alter students' habitus, leading to improved social and economic positions and a broader range of vocational opportunities. Habitus is dynamic and can incorporate new dispositions and practices, challenging the view of it as a static, deterministic model and showing its utility in understanding both social reproduction and change (Grenfell, 2014). Positive changes in material conditions and self-perception among graduates indicate a shift in social class trajectory, suggesting that habitus can evolve significantly through targeted educational experiences.
9	(Lehmann, 2007a)	semi-structured interviews	Social background plays an important role in how students experience university life, especially students from lower classes studying in elite universities. The clash of habitus (in a field with high class

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>dispositions), and the lack of resolving it, is a major reason for students dropping out. First-generation students, not “fitting in,” not “feeling university” and not being able to “relate to these people” were key reasons for eventually withdrawing from university (Lehmann, 2007a).</p> <p>While habitus is an open system of disposition (those with lower class dispositions coming in contact with high class dispositions, and managing their way through it), it ultimately reinforces itself (because habitus is rooted in the material conditions of life).</p>
10	(Aries & Seider, 2005)	Interviews	<p>At elite colleges/universities, there is substantial wealth disparity between students from elite backgrounds and those from lower classes. This leads to a heightened sense of class identity and those from lower classes feel “intimidated, uneasy, inadequate, deficient, excluded, and powerless compared to state college students” (Aries & Seider, 2005, p. 419).</p> <p>The dynamics are different at state colleges, where there is greater homogeneity of social class.</p> <p>Students acquire new forms of capital by interacting with people within a certain field, an</p>

Paper #	Author(s)	Methodology	Main Arguments
			<p>elite institution or a state college in this case, and try to cope with class based discontinuities (heightened for elite institutions given the stark class divide) (Aries & Seider, 2005).</p>
11	(Smith et al., 2023)	Qualitative, in-depth semi-structured interviews	<p>Indigenous people in Australia find it difficult to fit into the western institutions, creating barriers to their enrolment in higher education (Liddle, 2016 as cited in Smith et al, 2023).</p> <p>Indigenous and working class students experience cultural discontinuities in elite universities, given that such western universities present a completely different space and different set of rules of the game which require a certain form of cultural capital and social skills which they do not possess (Smith et al., 2023).</p> <p>A very small percentage of students from non-traditional backgrounds excel in such elite higher education, categorized as "renegades" or "committed students", who thrive academically and socially (Hurst, 2010 & Lehmann, 2014 as cited in Smith et al, 2023).</p>

Habitus serves as a bridge between personal emotions and societal structures, crucial for understanding its potential in driving social transformation. Adaptations in habitus heavily rely on access to cultural capital-rich environments, determining whether individuals become adapters, strangers, or outsiders. Despite its dynamic nature, habitus often reinforces itself, particularly evident in contexts of stark class disparities, intensifying feelings of intimidation and exclusion among lower-income students in elite institutions. Discontinuities in habitus, experienced by rural or working-class students in elite universities, often lead to hysteresis effects and emotional suffering. Indigenous and working-class students also confront cultural discontinuities in elite environments, yet some excel as "renegades" or "committed students," navigating academic and social challenges with resilience.

2.6 Gap in Literature

While global scholarship has extensively examined the experiences of working-class students in elite universities, the Pakistani context remains understudied, with only limited contributions (e.g. Khan, 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Ullah & Ali, 2018). Existing research have documented the experiences of working-class students in elite universities by defining the working-class students through their family incomes, which does not specifically address students admitted through outreach programs in elite universities of Pakistan. This omission is significant because outreach students, whose tuition fees are fully covered and who receive stipends for basic needs, constitute a distinct group that experiences elite education without the financial constraints, especially tuition fee, typically faced by other working-class students. How these students navigate university life, reshape their aspirations, and negotiate their identities in comparison to peers from different social classes remains unexplored. Addressing this gap will not only broaden the understanding of class-based inequalities in higher education in Pakistan but also enrich debates on inequality and the reproduction of advantage within elite academic spaces.

2.7 Conceptual Framework:

The theoretical framework (*Illustrated in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3*) of this study is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital i.e., economic, social, symbolic, and cultural, as well as his notion of field and habitus. Bourdieu posits that the education system perpetuates class inequalities by legitimizing the dominance of certain forms of cultural capital (Grenfell, 2009; Grenfell, 2014). Academic success often hinges on possessing the cultural capital associated with the dominant class, a form of capital that working-class students typically lack. This deficit in cultural capital results in a mismatch between the students' habitus and the expectations of the educational field, leading to academic struggles and social alienation (Khan, 2022).

In employing Bourdieu's theory to examine how working-class students are marginalized within elite universities in Pakistan, the aim is to explore the role of cultural and social capital in shaping educational outcomes and social integration. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are used to analyse how working-class students' prior socialization conflicts with the norms and expectations of elite universities. This clash between the students' ingrained habitus and the unfamiliar field of the university generates feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and ambivalence (Lehmann, 2007a, 2014). The research highlights how working-class students' habitus, shaped by their background, places them at a disadvantage in an environment dominated by the cultural capital of the elite.

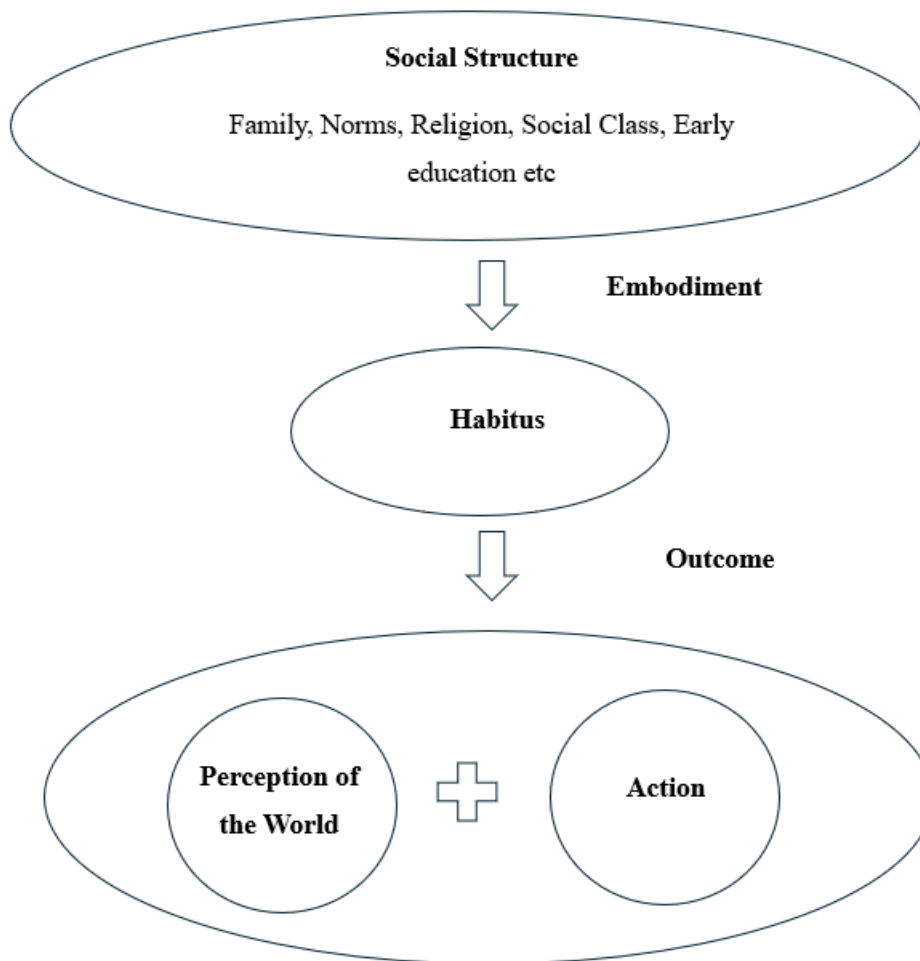


Figure 1: Formation of Habitus

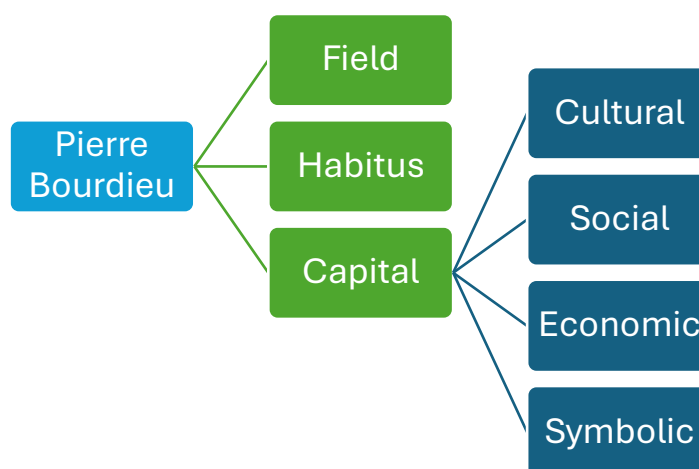


Figure 2: Bourdieu's thinking tools

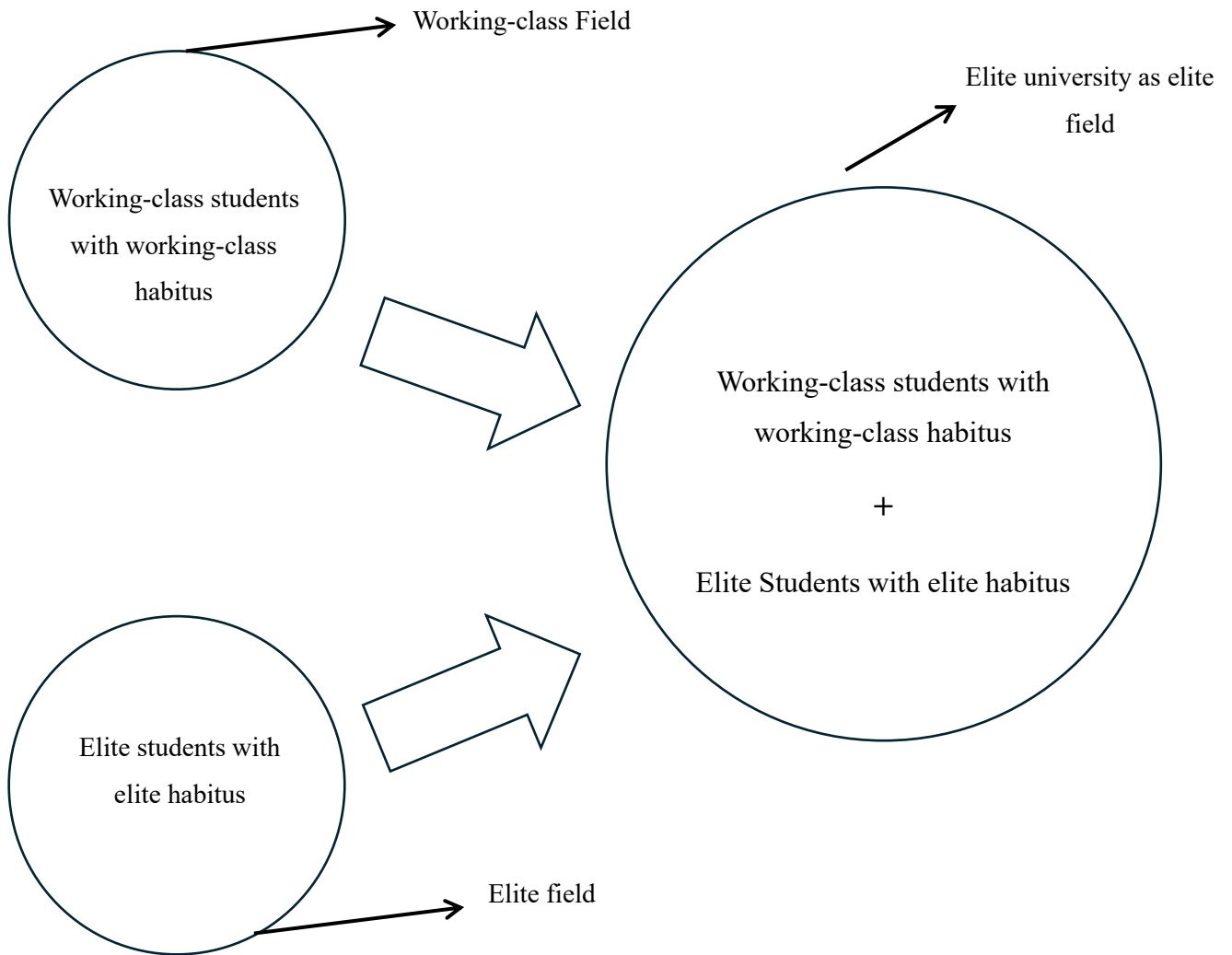


Figure 3: Working-class habitus encountering the field of elite university

3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Strategy

This research is qualitative in nature, as such a strategy provides for the most-suited methods and tools to explore the experiences of working-class students in elite universities of Pakistan under study. Through qualitative study, this research aims to explore the subjective and diverse experiences, contestations and identity formation during their time in elite universities, and their reflections. A qualitative design allows for coherence in ontological and epistemological position in carry out such research. My ontological position is *constructionism*, which asserts that “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors...social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision.” (Bryman, 2012, p. 76). Bourdieu himself “came to adopt a rationalist “Constructivist” orientation in opposition to crude empiricism or positivism in scientific methodology” (Grenfell, 2014). In line with the Bourdieusian approach to social research, the purpose is to capture the essence of being, i.e., of identity, when working-class habitus encounters habitus of the elite peers in a field unfamiliar to the working-class students. Habitus and field are “relational structures” (Grenfell, 2014, p. 57), and mutually constitutive as they shape each other.

Most of the Bourdieusian research I reviewed focused on whether the working-class students feel alienated (Khan et al., 2021; Reay et al., 2009a) and their identity is assimilated (Khan, 2022), whether there is a transformation of habitus or it is out of sync i.e., they experience cleft habitus, (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023; Lehmann, 2014; McNamara Horvat & Earl Davis, 2011; Reay et al., 2010; Xie & Reay, 2020) and how it shapes their identity (Aries & Seider, 2005; Crozier et al., 2019; McNamara Horvat & Earl Davis, 2011; Smith et al., 2023). These studies are focused on the subjective experiences of working-class students in elite universities in different contexts by operationalizing the concepts of field and habitus. The shortcoming of

such studies is that habitus, habitus transformation, cleft habitus, and hysteresis effects are studied in isolation without studying the field and how practices are shaped through their interplay, which combines to form a comprehensive framework of studying a social phenomenon using Bourdieu as a theoretical lens. As he says himself:

“On the one side it is the relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus...on the other side, it is the relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a, as cited in Grenfell, 2014)

A study conducted in Pakistan by Khan (2022) on the experiences of working-class students in some elite universities in Lahore and Islamabad explores the experiences of working-class students in elite universities of Pakistan does not sketch the field beyond the recognition of a distant social space for such students. Simultaneously, there are little insights on how the working-class students carrying working-class habitus impacted the field to be more responsive to the habitus of working-class students. The study also falls short methodologically where an interpretivist approach (as epistemology) has been adopted. Bourdieu demands us to go beyond the dualism/dichotomy of the objective and subjective, which is a common approach in social sciences, as “a focus on either one simply overlooks the significance of the other in constituting a particular (skewed) interpretation of the social world.” (Grenfell, 2014; Jenkins, 2013). Such a break allows for a nuanced understanding and analysis of habitus-field through “a science of dialectical relations between objective structures...and subjective dispositions within which these structures are actualized, and which tend to reproduce them” (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 3). Thus, the subject matter requires a dialectical approach to interpenetrate and encompass interdependence of the structure, i.e., the objective, and agency, i.e., the subjective.

To study this homologous phenomenon, of field and habitus, I will be turning towards reflexive sociology. Reflexivity may be defined as “a critical epistemological approach that consists of

objectifying the very conceptualization and process of scientific objectification. This means that it is not only the object of research that needs to be examined and reflected upon but also the very elaboration of the research object itself and the conditions of its elaboration.” (Grenfell, 2014, p. 200). Social scientists suffer from a widespread failure, an unconscious one, where they “project their own vision of the world on to their understanding of the social practices which are the object of their studies”(Grenfell, 2014, p. 201) as the social scientist has something to say about the world, that is (s)he has a worldview of his/her own, as (s)he possess a certain position “in that social space that constitutes simultaneously their object of study and their sphere of action” (Inanna, 2014, p. 63). Thus, constant reflexivity, of the researched and the researcher, at every stage of the research, that is, when developing questions and objectives, exploring literature review, developing questionnaire, collecting data, analysing data and reporting findings and so on, is essential to the research.

3.2 Research Design

A research design is a framework for the collection and examination of data (Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012) outlines three major types of research designs: Descriptive, Exploratory and Explanatory research design. Keeping in context my subject of investigation i.e., the experiences of working-class students in elite universities of Pakistan, an exploratory research design fits best as experiencing the social environment of a university is a social phenomenon and requires collecting data on the subjective experiences of students.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Under the qualitative research design, I collected data through semi-structured interviews. The literature on habitus transformation, cleft-habitus, and on class and identity investigating the experiences of working class students in elite universities have employed semi-structured interviews and life-story approach (see Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2007, 2009, 2013). This method provides flexibility to the researcher as “the

interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of question” (Bryman, 2012, p. 255). The researcher can extract data rich in details, encouraging “going off at tangents”, with greater interest in the interviewee’s point of view or experiences and the interviewer can build on that to ask further questions thus exploring the issue under investigation in great length (Bryman, 2012, p. 513).

3.4 Tool of Data Collection

I interviewed the working-class students through a detailed interview guide (*appendix 1*). Interview guide is “nothing more than a list of questions you intend to ask in an interview.” (Merriam, 2009). An interview guide is helpful for new researcher to feel confident when most of the questions are already drafted, and after a few interviews (s)he can go with the natural flow of the interview (Merriam, 2009). The study was conducted using two different semi-structured interview guides for working-class students, and the faculty members respectively. Alongside, I spent a few weeks in the university in Lahore which helped me observe the space (the field) and interact with people, beyond those interviewed as part of the sample.

3.5 Sampling

This section delineates the methodological approach employed to select participants for this qualitative study, focusing on the nuanced experiences of working-class students within the distinctive environment of elite universities in Pakistan. The sampling strategy is designed to ensure the capture of diverse perspectives while maintaining a focused scope on this underrepresented demographic. Given the nature of the research, non-probability sampling methods, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were deemed most appropriate to identify information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling is often used to deliberately select participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2016), while snowball sampling helps researchers reach additional participants through referrals from initial subjects (Bryman, 2016; Parker et al., 2019). This

combination is especially effective for studying hard-to-reach or specialized groups, as purposive sampling ensures initial relevance and snowball sampling expands the sample size and diversity (Bhardwaj, 2019; Memon et al., 2024; Naderifar et al., 2017; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered by these students and uncover the lived realities within a specific socio-academic context (Zubair, 2012). This method allowed for the deliberate selection of participants who possess specific characteristics pertinent to the research questions, such as their socio-economic background and enrolment in an elite institution (Reay et al., 2010). The strategy worked well because a certain degree of trust is required for participants to talk about their experiences (Parker et al., 2019).

3.5.1 Working-class students:

My investigation concerns the experiences of working-class students in elite universities of Pakistan. While there are many universities that can be categorized as elite universities in Pakistan, this study focuses on a very specific group of students that study in elite universities through national outreach programs which award scholarship on need cum merit basis i.e., the underprivileged students mostly from rural areas. Thus, my population is all the students studying in elite universities of Pakistan through these programs designed to increase the participation of underprivileged students in higher education.

During my field work and data collection phase, the saturation point was reached after conducting 22 interviews with working-class students, studying through outreach programs, in the two elite universities under study. The sample was diverse in terms the department and gender, as students from different departments and genders experience the university differently. Socio-demographic details of the respondents are presented in the following table.

Table 1: Socio-demographic details of respondents³

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Province/Region</i>	<i>University City</i>	<i>Program of Study</i>	<i>Year of Study</i>	<i>Average Monthly Family Income (PKR)</i>
1	Bilal	Male	Punjab	Lahore	Business Administration	14	70,000
2	Ashok	Male	Sindh	Karachi	Social Sciences	13	60,000
3	Usman	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Economics	15	80,000
4	Sania	Female	Balochistan	Karachi	Business Administration	14	90,000
5	Daniyal	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Social Sciences	16	85,000
6	Mahnoor	Female	Gilgit-Baltistan	Lahore	Social Sciences	15	55,000
7	Hamza	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Karachi	Business Administration	13	70,000
8	Yaseen Yousafzai	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Law	16	110,000
9	Suhail Baloch	Male	Balochistan	Karachi	Business Administration	15	60,000
10	Mubeen Dogar	Male	Punjab	Lahore	Business Administration	14	70,000
11	Ali	Male	Gilgit-Baltistan	Lahore	Engineering	13	65,000
12	Hina	Female	Sindh	Karachi	Social Sciences	16	80,000
13	Aijaz Masood	Male	Punjab	Lahore	Business Administration	13	95,000
14	Amrita	Female	Sindh	Karachi	Social Sciences	15	55,000
15	Saleem Wazir	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Social Sciences	16	60,000
16	Ahmed	Male	Punjab	Lahore	Economics	14	105,000
17	Noman	Male	Balochistan	Karachi	Social Sciences	16	90,000
18	Imtiaz Shar	Male	Sindh	Karachi	Business Administration	15	80,000
19	Kashif	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Social Sciences	14	60,000
20	Ruqayya Soomro	Female	Sindh	Lahore	Business Administration	13	70,000
21	Ali Haider	Male	Sindh	Karachi	Business Administration	14	115,000
22	Ejaz Chitrali	Male	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Lahore	Social Sciences	15	130,000

3.5.2 Faculty Members:

To document and understand the views of the faculty members on the classroom environment as well as outside where both the working-class students and their elite peer interact, I interviewed faculty members through purposive sampling. This informs the research on how the faculty members observed such experiences and their interaction with an apparent clash of social classes (inside and outside the classroom). During my data collection, I interviewed three

³ All names are pseudonyms; identifying details have been generalized.

faculty members⁴ on the subject and tried to understand their perspective, observations and experiences. Of the three faculty members, two were from the elite university in Lahore and the third one from the university in Karachi.

These faculty members did not consent to audio recording of the interview. However, they did allow me to take notes. I was accompanied by two assistants, who took independent notes during these interviews, and the notes were cross-referenced right after to ensure accuracy. Later, these notes were read with the emerging themes from interviews with working-class students to reflect on them and add depth to the quality of the data.

3.6 Data Analysis

I analysed the data collected from the interviews through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis as a tool of analysis is used to recognize patterns and categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool, rather than a methodology itself, that helps us in coding the data and categorizing it into over-arching themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis is marked by flexibility in terms of a) theory and b) Research design (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This makes it a helpful tool of qualitative study as the back-and-forth motion between theory and data improves the research throughout.

This was an iterative process; the interviews were first transcribed and later analysed for any emerging themes. This was an extensive exercise where I read and reread the interviews to create familiarity with the interview script and make linkages with my theoretical framework and the literature review. After much thought and conceptual rigor, I analysed the data through broad emerging themes instead of dividing it further through sub-themes. The purpose was to present findings and discuss them through a broad theoretical understanding, instead of

⁴ The main purpose of this study was to document the experiences of working-class students. I interviewed three of the faculty members to add value to the study by incorporating the views and observation of the faculty members (triangulation). They do not form the primary units of data collection.

narrowing the focus. The whole process of coding the data and thematic analysis was conducted manually, without the help of any software.

3.7 Locale

I collected my data from two elite universities: one elite university in Lahore and the other in Karachi. The respondents in Lahore were interviewed face to face, while those from Karachi were interviewed using Zoom.

3.8 Significance of the research

Experience of richness of university varies by one's position (capital) in the elite university (field) and transforms one's way of being (habitus). Students from working-class backgrounds encounter significant obstacles at elite universities due to entering an unfamiliar field and encountering a worldview that differs markedly from their own. These challenges are crucial to consider within the framework of educational policy. Merely viewing education as a panacea is insufficient as long as societal class disparities persist, especially when these disparities are perpetuated by the academic institutions themselves.

Further, the debate and research in Pakistan on higher education revolves either around access to higher education or the outcomes i.e., the returns to higher education. While comparisons are drawn between the returns to education of different academic programs and varying levels of education, the differential based on the type of university (elite/private/public), and then the labour market outcomes are attributed mainly to acquisition of skills, or the lack of it. This comes with the assumption that every student experiences the university in the same way, i.e., they study their respective academic programs under the same roof and thus are thought of as equals; everyone has an equal chance of benefitting from the institution. However, the presence of working-class students in elite universities of Pakistan problematizes this assumption. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the (in)equality of experience of university based on social class. To quote Orwell, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than

the others”⁵. In a similar way, every student in the elite universities is equal in the sense that they study in the same institution, but there are factors (such as social class and how it corresponds to the experience of elite university) that affect the experience of university. The purpose, thus, is to make social class relevant to research and discourse on education in Pakistan.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Academic research demand upholding ethical standards. Ethical considerations hold particular significance in qualitative research given the in-depth nature of the study process (Arifin, 2018). During the data collection process, informed consent was sought from the respondents. They were briefed on the topic under research, and their queries were addressed if there were any. They were given the option to speak either in English or Urdu, and in their mother tongue in cases where I could understand and transcribe it. They were also given the option to withdraw from the interview at any point during the interview, and the right not to respond to any question they did not want to answer. Further, permission was taken to audio tape the interviews, and in some cases, notes were taken upon the request of the respondent instead of recording the interview. The privacy and confidentiality of the data were ensured, and the names of the respondents were kept anonymous despite permission from some of the participants in order to keep them from any harm or action. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, privately, and in locations that the participants preferred for their ease.

3.10 Issue of Reflexivity

I started exploring this topic initially because I, and my friends, have suffered from the same phenomenon: belonging to middle-class and working-class backgrounds and sharing spaces with elite peers. I later realized that this was most of my academic life, only that I hadn't

⁵ This quote is taken from Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945)

introspected much. During my middle school years, I got a scholarship to study at a prestigious school, which my family could not afford otherwise. Thinking back of the years at that school, there were experiences/hidden injuries (Lehmann, 2014) that I can understand only now. There were fellow students who would share the same desk with me in the classroom, but they would have their own group beyond the class to enjoy the break with, eat with, and play with. The only friends I have from that time are those who were at the same social standing at the time. Similarly, I attended a university which my family could not afford if not for another award of scholarship. The university had people from different social classes, and while my friends circle was diverse, daily life was a struggle for multiple reasons. The most prominent one was financial, as the prior quality education through scholarships ensured that I had the required language skills. The topic is as much an exploration and explanation of my own life as it is to study the lives of working-class people studying in elite universities of Pakistan. This study is an attempt to bring to fore the lived experiences of those students.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand and comprehend the lived experiences of working-class students within elite universities, institutions typically dominated by affluent and privileged individuals. The data, collected through interviews and by spending time in those institutions, offers an intricate and detailed understanding of the interactions and relationships between working-class students and their peers, teachers, the university as a structure itself and their families back home. The analysis considers how the campus environments of elite universities contribute to the formation and perpetuation of class distinctions and inequalities. Drawing on the experiences of working-class students, this chapter centres on the discourses the working-class students employ to make sense of the explicit and implicit mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in their daily lives within these institutions. To understand these discourses, as researcher, and be able to analyse the field data, I have drawn upon the theoretical concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, and the extensive research carried out by Diane Reay and Wolfgang Lehmann, among others, to understand the interplay of field and habitus in elite educational institutions. In line with their work on processes and practices of inclusion and exclusion, assimilation and alienation, the hidden injuries of habitus-field mismatch and so on, as perceived and experienced by working-class students, my data reveals that working-class students often felt alienated in these elite institutions. Many respondents consistently employed the language of otherization to describe themselves in relation to their elite peers or vice versa, felt as outsiders and experienced a sense of estrangement even after spending considerable time in those elite institutions. In the words of one of my respondents, Khalid Ali⁶:

“I am enrolled in the last semester of my four-year undergraduate program at the university. I have made friends with people from different social classes, and I am a

⁶ All the names used in reporting the findings are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of respondents. Any similarities to real names are unintentional and purely coincidental.

transformed person in the way I dress, eat, and talk and so on. But there is still unease, and a constant self-reminder that I may be able to sit with them, talk to them, and eat with them, but I am still not one of them.”

This chapter develops four themes that explain how working-class students navigate elite university spaces:

- Encountering the elite university—“It’s a strange new world”
- Language, social class and classroom— “I could speak English, just not the way they did”
- Dressing the Part, Speaking the Code: Navigating Class in Elite Spaces
- Between Two Worlds: Cleft Habitus, Doxic Breaches, and the Emotional Cost of Mobility

4.1 Encountering the elite university—“It’s a strange new world”

My inquiry into the subject began with participants’ earliest memories of entering the elite university. I was particularly interested in how they perceived the environment upon arrival and how those impressions reflected the dissonance between their own backgrounds and the dominant culture of the institution. The aim was to understand what it means for a working-class student, with a habitus shaped by a different social world, to enter a highly elite academic space. The very infrastructure of such universities, the aesthetics of the campus, and the social behaviours embedded in its culture serve as constant reminders of a classed environment. These material and symbolic structures often create an overwhelming impression on students from non-elite backgrounds (Reay, 2001; Ball et al., 2002; Lehmann, 2014). One student, reflecting on their first day at a prestigious university in Lahore, said:

“Before coming to the university, I watched multiple videos on YouTube about the campus and its vibrant life. I was eager to be here, but as soon as I entered, the

infrastructure, the cars in the parking lot, the way people were dressed and behaved felt overwhelming. It felt like a different world.”

This vivid recollection reveals how elite academic institutions signal privilege not just through academic content, but through everyday cues. The respondent did not speak of lectures or curriculum first, but of clothes, cars, and behaviour. The university’s landscape is saturated with cultural capital, capital that the student did not possess. In this sense, the initial shock is not about difficulty but about unfamiliarity. The deficit in cultural capital is not neutral; it generates feelings of displacement; like a fish outside the water, an analogy used by Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014). For working-class students, elite universities are not simply spaces for learning, they are also social theatres where one’s lack of conformity is always potentially exposed (Bourdieu, 2002; Reay et al., 2009a). This form of subtle, but deeply consequential, exclusion resonates with the idea of symbolic violence (Watson & Widin, 2015), where structures of power are internalized and enacted through norms and expectations (Bourdieu, 1990). Another participant recalled a similar disorientation. On the very first day of Orientation Week, the student felt detached. While their peers actively engaged in conversations, joined societies, and moved through the campus with ease, they could not participate in the same way. The student said:

“The day I arrived on campus and checked in to hostel, everything seemed normal. The next day was the beginning of O-week (Orientation week), and we were divided into groups headed by a coach. I went there, but I could not participate much in the discussion. The others could speak in English and were familiar with it. They also knew about the societies working in the university and were clear about which ones they would join, and I did not. As a response, I would avoid the group and only participate in sessions focused on academics, such as grading policy.”

The emphasis here is not on the content of the sessions but on the mode of delivery. Language, as a form of cultural capital, functions as a gatekeeper. This student's instinct to retreat toward academics, the one domain where they think they can compete to some extent, shows how exclusion is experienced first at the level of social interactions in the social field. The elite university is filled with "the right way" to do things; ways that remain largely invisible to those who grew up with them, but that appear strange and intimidating to those without the same exposure (see Reay, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Crawford et al., 2017). This reflects the operation of what Bourdieu describes as doxa: the taken-for-granted norms that structure action in a given field, and that often go unquestioned by those privileged by them (M. Grenfell, 2014). Another participant narrated an encounter during orientation week that made him deeply uncomfortable:

"During orientation week, the members of co-curricular and extra-curricular societies and clubs came to interact with the freshies to try to convince them to join their society/club. During the session, I was confronted by a female student who started talking in fluent English and spoke for two to three minutes. During this duration, I was wondering where to look; straight at her, to the side or lower my gaze. I had never been confronted by a female like this before. Not sure what to do, I just went straight to my room."

The respondent used the word "confronted" twice while referring to the encounter with the female student. As per Merriam Webster, the word confronted means "to oppose (something hostile or dangerous) with firmness or courage". The respondent's repeated use of the word "confronted" reflects a sense of intimidation, not due to hostility, but because the encounter disrupted his habitus i.e., his internalized sense of what is normal or appropriate, shaped by his working-class background. This is compounded by the language of the student (who was speaking to him in fluent English), which is not the language of daily life conversations for the

working-class student. The student, when asked about the content of encounter, said that *“I hardly remember anything she said. I could not understand English when spoken that fluently at the time, and the whole time I was trying to find a way out.”* The student might have been equally intimidated and puzzled by the situation even if the encounter was with a male student, because of language and unfamiliarity to the codes of the elite space.

This interaction also highlights a moment when gender, language, and class intersect in ways that the outreach students rarely encounter. The uncertainty was not merely about how to respond to the person, and in what language, but about how to behave in an unfamiliar gendered space. For this student, the interaction was alienating because he was unable to interact with a fellow student having a different gender identity and thus the feeling of not belonging to a space where such interactions are normal. These types of encounters illustrate how the elite university operates with a hidden curriculum, an unwritten code of behaviour, gestures, language, and confidence, that privileges those already socialized into it (Lehmann, 2012b; Reay et al., 2010). For students from working-class backgrounds, these codes are atypical, sometimes even intimidating. As Zahid Khan, a 4th semester student of Accounting and Finance at the elite university in Karachi, shares such an experience:

“I remember first time I went out with some friends from the elite background to a high-end restaurant. The very moment I entered, I thought the whole world is looking at me: the reception staff, the waiters, and all the people in the restaurant. I was conscious of how to walk, how to talk, how to look around, and how to eat. While my fellows were very easy with the environment.”

The failure of working-class students in decoding these codes often results in social withdrawal (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021a; Lehmann, 2013). In recent years, research (Chen, 2022; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021b) has brought attention to the heterogeneity of resources that first-generation students bring with them to higher education and the factors that assist in these students’ social

and academic adjustment to university life. One such resource is English language in the context of Pakistan, which plays an important role in the initial contact for working-class students with the elite university. These students are educated in public schools or low-fee private schools, who employ low-cost resources. On the contrary, their elite peers come from schools and colleges, considered as high-end, such as Lahore Grammar School, Beaconhouse, Atchison college, the Lyceum⁷ and so on. In these elite schools and colleges, English language, spoken and written, is a key focus. Thus, the two sets of students enter the university with very different sets of linguistic capital i.e., the ability to speak in the language of the field (English language being the dominant language of the elite university).

Working-class students' struggle with English and their unfamiliarity with institutional customs stems from their habitus, their ways of life before coming to the university, which does not align with the dominant cultural practices of elite spaces. These shortcomings are not individual failures but structural mismatches, where the habitus of these students is out of sync. The inability to participate fully in everyday interactions becomes a constant reminder of one's social location i.e., their capital, the position they hold in the field. The habitus of the elite university is so ingrained that deviation from it often leads to quiet forms of marginalization (Reay et al., 2009; Crawford et al., 2017). The sense of inferiority is internalized not because students lack intelligence, but because they lack the symbolic and embodied resources to move freely in these spaces (Ball et al., 2002; Silver, 2020).

Each social class, and each field shaped by that class, reproduces what Bourdieu calls “legitimate culture” (Grenfell, 2014). This culture, legitimated through elite norms and practices, renders working-class culture invisible or inappropriate. It makes students question

⁷ These, and other such schools, are viewed as elite schools and colleges in Pakistan. Elite families enroll their children in these schools, and their fee starts from around PKR. 15,000/- and ranges more than PKR. 50,000 per month.

themselves: their accents, their mannerisms, even their ways of sitting or making eye contact. It renders them hyperaware of their difference. For elite students, these spaces are extensions of their homes and schools. They walk in already knowing how to belong to such spaces. As Khan (2022) argues, for elite students, there is no rupture between habitus and field. Their background seamlessly aligns with the university's expectations (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021). For working-class students, the mismatch between habitus and field becomes most visible in mundane interactions, such as knowing what to wear, how to form a sentence in English, how to approach a faculty member. These are not trivialities; they are the very mechanisms through which power circulates quietly (Ball, Jin & Brown, 2020). A faculty member in the social sciences commented on this dynamic during a discussion:

“The class inequality plays out very visibly and manifests itself in different ways. For instance, the way students dress, the way they speak, their language and how they behave in general. The students studying through outreach program usually find it difficult to approach us (faculty members) and take considerable time, while those with elite education start interacting with faculty right away. This has to do, in part, with elite students being exposed to ideas and thus the ease to discuss things.”

These differences, owing to cultural capital, produce cumulative effects, and shape their relationship with the university, their peers, and often with themselves. This also shows how cultural capital compounds the inequality in experiences of those from the elite background and those accessing the elite university through outreach programs.

4.2 Language, social class and classroom— “I could speak English, just not the way they did”

“In the classroom, this inequality (class inequality) mainly plays out in how students engage in the class discussions. Elite students with O and A level education from elite schools of Pakistan are more confident and self-assured, as their education focuses on

broad range of skills. This (confidence) is also because of the daily education they get at their homes from parents, tutors, and their interactions with peers from the high social class. They are exposed to literature, short stories, and ideas on a variety of topics. This gives them a disproportionate advantage in the classroom and beyond. In comparison, students coming through outreach programs lack that confidence, mainly because of language and they suffer in terms of class participation marks in the initial semesters.”

The faculty member’s use of language is telling. The statement, “They [elite students] are exposed to literature, short stories, and ideas on a variety of topics,” appears, on the surface, as a neutral observation, what Bourdieu calls the things of logic (Bourdieu, 1990 as cited in M. Grenfell, 2014), a rational statement about differences in cultural exposure. However, when situated within the unequal space of elite university, it reveals deeper structures of symbolic power. While the faculty member expresses concern about inequality inside and outside the classroom, his framing simultaneously participates in the marginalization of outreach students. By contrasting elite students' cultural capital with the presumed lack thereof among working-class students, the comment reproduces a hierarchy of intellectual legitimacy. This naturalization of unequal participation in classroom discussions and beyond it are not merely an innocent reflection of academic preparedness but rather demonstrates how the logic of the field, with its unspoken norms about who belongs, who is articulate, and who is intellectually valid, gradually becomes internalized as the logic of things (Bourdieu, 1990 as cited in M. Grenfell, 2014). The faculty member’s language, perhaps unconsciously, reflects how even well-meaning actors can become agents of symbolic domination within a field governed by inherited privilege.

This excerpt also reveals one of the most immediate ways in which class manifests itself in the classroom space i.e., through language. The language of instruction at elite universities in

Pakistan is English, and while all students who qualify through outreach programs are proficient in English on paper (they pass admission tests and interviews), their relationship with the language remains vastly different from that of their peers from elite urban schools. The interviews conducted with students from working-class backgrounds who entered elite universities through outreach initiatives make this distinction painfully clear. Despite formal competence in English, their discomfort with the tone, accent, pace, and idiomatic usage in classroom interactions contributed to feelings of alienation, self-doubt, and intellectual insecurity (Reay, 2004; Crawford et al., 2017; Ball et al., 2002). A student from the elite university in Karachi remarked along the same lines:

“I could understand English, but their accent, their attitude of speaking, their tone of speaking makes it difficult to understand it. I need to listen very, very, very carefully to just take a gist of what they were saying at that time. But still I couldn't figure out and I was really disappointed in myself also.”

These early moments in the university space do not merely reveal language as a technical barrier, but as a carrier of class dispositions: modes of speaking, debating, and engaging that signal cultural capital, which is consistent with the findings of Grenfell (2014), Lehmann, (2013) and Reay (2001). Students from elite schools, often fluent in English not just as a language but as a habitus (English being their language of daily life), dominate classroom spaces not necessarily due to superior knowledge, but because they are familiar with the rhythm and style of discourses in elite academic institutions and can use those dispositions to further their position (capital) in the class/university. A faculty member said the following when asked how this inequality manifests and materializes:

“Students in the class try to speak in fancy English. This is because language (English) is rewarded in terms of class participation marks, in the way teachers value those students by paying special attention towards them, and by rewarding good vocabulary

and structure in written examination. Ask around and see how many outreach students get A grades in their initial semesters? You would hardly find few.”

The faculty member further explained that as these students progress in their academic programs, they develop “*what it takes*” to succeed at the university. Some of the working-class students adopt to the culture of the university, develop the same tastes (in music, food, books, sports and so on) and conform to the logic of the field. A major component of this conformity is language. Working-class students were in consensus in this regard: elite students speaking fluently in English language, using difficult vocabulary and jargons, and with particular accents are generally rewarded. This linguistic distinction, then, is not just about fluency or grammar but also about accent, vocabulary, confidence, and the ease of engaging in discussions inside and outside the classroom. Bourdieu referred to this as the “legitimate language” of the field (M. Grenfell, 2009; Bourdieu, 1991). Students from working-class backgrounds, despite their high merit⁸, given their working-class habitus have a different language, usually their mother language, as the legitimate language of daily life. Their education, usually in mother tongue, Urdu or functional English, has little emphasis on pronunciation, debate, expression of opinion, or critical dialogue. While these are the skills that are assumed, expected, and rewarded in elite classrooms (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

Consequently, they find themselves speaking less, and internalizing the idea that their thoughts are not valuable because they cannot present them in the “right” way. Many students reported receiving lower class participation marks, particularly in the first two to three semesters, and expressed the fear that asking questions or speaking in a language other than English might expose their difference. Silencing is not institutionalized through rules but is a product of subtle yet pervasive classed norms that regulate what is perceived as intelligent or articulate (Reay et

⁸ Scholarships through outreach programs are very competitive

al., 2009; Ball, Jin & Brown, 2020). A student enrolled in management science responding to the question of the use of English language in classroom provides the most apt example:

“During discussion in an economics class, I was talking about the presence of oligopolies in some sectors of Pakistan. As soon as I said the word ‘oligopolies’, there were whispers all around and instead of finishing my sentence, I went quiet. Later a class fellow told me that I mispronounced the word: it wasn’t ‘oli-go-polies’ but ‘oli-gap-li’”

Over time, this linguistic and cultural gap begins to erode, but not for all students, and not without cost. Some students make deliberate efforts to mimic accents, learn new phrases, and engage in social environments outside their comfort zone, but this process is often described as exhausting, artificial, or even alienating. Students talk about spending hours outside class watching YouTube videos, practicing pronunciation, and second-guessing their word choices before speaking in class. One student reflected:

“It’s not that I didn’t have ideas. It’s that I had to translate them twice; first into English, then into the kind of English they understood.”

This double translation, linguistic and cultural, adds a cognitive load that elite students. They first have to understand what the teacher or class fellow says in their mother tongue, aided by the cultural understanding of things, then translate it into English the way they understood best before coming to the university and then try to translate into and speak in the type of English spoken in the elite university. This is a phenomenon that elite participants of the university are not burdened with. While some faculty recognize and attempt to address this inequality, the broader institutional culture tends to treat all students as equals post-admission, ignoring the significant variation in their preparedness for academic engagement in an elite English-

speaking setting. During a discussion with a faculty member on the question of how responsive teachers are to linguistic and social inequality, he said something profound:

“To understand the classroom, we have to understand the positionality of the instructor as well. Think of someone who is born to a diplomat in a foreign country, gets education from the most elite schools and colleges in that country, goes on to attend the most elite universities like Princeton and Harvard, and comes here to get prestigious faculty positions. How sensitive would he/she be towards these inequalities?”

Faculty members in elite universities are either from privileged social class or have studied at elite universities (attaining the cultural capital). The study by Lee (2024) highlights how elite universities perpetuate inequality through hiring practices that favour candidates from prestigious institutions, which reinforce an academic caste system. This preference for elite backgrounds creates a tight hiring network that rewards those with privileged social and cultural capital (Lee, 2024). Thus, the outreach students have to face the challenge (in most cases) of being taught by and being graded by such instructors, alongside sharing classroom with students who would benefit from this arrangement (elite students who are taught by faculty members with elite backgrounds). In another exchange with a faculty member on the subject, he shared his own experience of dealing with the issue of language and class in the classroom:

“The very first day I tell my students at the start of the semester is that I do not care about your English or your accent. A student may speak in any language that I understand, as long as the student is speaking something of substance and adding to the classroom discussion.”

Thus, the positionality of the instructor, has implications for how knowledge is perceived and produced in the classroom. When only a specific kind of English and argumentation is heard,

the diversity of perspectives, especially those that working-class students can only express in Urdu or their mother language, is either left out or filtered through dominant modes of speaking. The classroom becomes a site of both learning and erasure. Working-class students slowly learn to “pass” in the elite space, but often by silencing parts of their identity, modifying their speech, and distancing themselves from their prior educational and social backgrounds. In extreme cases, this leads to what one student described as a “*crisis of authenticity*,” where speaking up means pretending, and staying silent means being left behind. The university experience, rather than being a liberating one, becomes a constant negotiation between belonging and invisibility (Reay, 2010; Khan, 2022).

It is important to recognize that the language-related disadvantages these students face are not individual deficits, but structural inequalities rooted in the class-stratified schooling system of Pakistan. English, as a medium, is not neutral but embedded with histories of colonial power, class distinction, and symbolic capital. To treat all students as linguistically equal merely because they cleared a standardized English test is to overlook the deeper, embodied nature of language (Grenfell, 2014). More importantly, it is to overlook how language in elite universities is often the first and most persistent marker of difference, shaping not just participation but also self-perception, grades, peer networks, and ultimately, confidence in one’s place in the academic world (Lehmann, 2014; Reay et al., 2009; Brooks et al., 2012).

4.3 Dressing the Part, Speaking the Code: Navigating Class in Elite Spaces

“Except for a few close friends, nobody in the university knows that I am an outreach student. I take great care of my clothing, I eat well, and I try to speak English with an accent. I don’t want people to find out (that I am an outreach scholar) because people (elite peers) would exclude me from their circles and would no longer look at me as one of them.”

“It doesn’t matter if I do not eat (much) for days, but I should be able to afford branded shirts every month and look good. Clothing is the first indicator based on which people categorize you into social classes and include/exclude you.”

The quotes above unveil the everyday negotiations students make with their identities, where appearance becomes a battleground for belonging. In elite universities, clothing is not simply a matter of personal style or choice. It becomes a performance, a calculated expression of conformity. Students from working-class backgrounds are deeply conscious of the class-coded aesthetics of their institutions. The branded shirt, the right cut of trousers, the understated elegance of expensive watches or accessories—these are not minor details. They are communicative tools. They say: “I belong here.” And this performance is a survival strategy. Clothing is deployed as a shield to deflect attention towards their working class background. Outreach students often know that being visibly different may trigger exclusion, mockery, or worse, pity. Hence, clothing becomes a carefully curated façade. The effort and the cost of such performances are rarely visible to those who never have to think twice before dressing for class. But for these students, every item worn is a choice loaded with meaning and implication (Lehmann, 2013; Reay, 2001). The symbolic power of clothing emerges even more starkly in moments of humiliation. One student shared:

“The very first time I wore a two-piece suit with a tie and a tie clip, a fellow student from an elite background laughed at me. He said that my tie clip is not placed in the right place, and he then adjusted it himself, as I had placed it much lower. He then went on to tell many other students about it to make fun of my lack of sophistication.”

This incident could mean two things in this case. A) the fellow student being a friend placed his tie clip in the right place to make and shared it with friends as a light-hearted moment. Or b) because the outreach student is placed in an unfamiliar space, his experiences of

marginalization (material and symbolic, owing to his social class) gives this a different meaning. In the latter case, the incident is not just about a misplaced accessory.

This incident can be interpreted in two ways: a) The fellow student, as a friend, corrected the tie clip and shared the moment with others in a light-hearted way; or b) When viewed from the standpoint of an outreach student navigating an unfamiliar and class-coded space, the incident takes on a different meaning. In this context, shaped by both material and symbolic marginalization, it becomes more than just a matter of a misplaced accessory and reflects deeper hierarchies of taste, belonging, and cultural capital. It is about the embodied knowledge of elite social behaviour assumed to be natural (things of logic), and the failure to perform it correctly becomes a spectacle. This form of ridicule is what Bourdieu would describe as symbolic violence i.e., a subtle, insidious imposition of norms that humiliates without necessarily being recognized as coercive (Bourdieu, 1990 as cited in Grenfell, 2014; Silver, 2020). The outreach student is not excluded for lack of effort, but for failing to perform per the logic of the field. The ability to dress “correctly” thus becomes a test of legitimacy, a marker of whether one truly belongs. Like clothing, Language is another feature of the field. As one of my respondents recalled:

“I was once sitting in one of the cafes in university, with a group of fellow students sitting on the adjacent bench. I overheard their conversation, because they were speaking very loudly, with one student mocking the other by saying: ‘You are speaking in outreach student accent’. The rest started laughing.”

Language, like clothing, is not neutral in elite academic spaces. It carries the weight of class history and schooling backgrounds. The mockery of the “outreach student accent” is not about linguistic fluency alone, but about the right kind of fluency: the rhythm, tone, and accent that marks someone as having attended the “right” schools and grown up in English-speaking homes. Outreach students may know English, may even be technically fluent, but their English

is often marked. It is an English that reveals class. And in a space where language is a primary mode of participation and expression, being marked becomes a form of social vulnerability (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Reay, 2010; Lehmann, 2009). This linguistic exclusion continues into spaces beyond the university. One outreach student shared a particularly revealing moment:

“During an interview at an organization founded by the alumni of the same university, the interviewer remarked that: ‘You can’t even speak English fluently. The outreach students are a liability of the university.’ I received a rejection email from the organization.”

The reach of elite university norms extends far into the labour market, shaping hiring decisions and professional futures. Here, the outreach student is not evaluated on merit or potential but is immediately disqualified based on their perceived lack of polish. The university’s promise of equal opportunity and the goal of social mobility through education is contested; it is not only elite education but the embodiment of the symbolic capital of the dominant field. Symbolic capital, in this case, the ability to perform linguistic and cultural ease, becomes a gatekeeper, consistent with the findings of Jin & Ball (2020) and Khan (2022). Thus, it is not enough to have a degree. One must also embody elite habitus, and students adopt strategies to do so. As Ruqayya Soomro shared in response to a question on what she does to create that harmony:

“Over the past two years, I have made numerous friends in the university. I sit with them, talk to them about a variety of topics, and we also discuss clothing and fashion. To align with the group, I have changed my wardrobe completely from what it was when I got into university.”

Ruqayya reflected on how friendships in the university are a continuous struggle, because they are not simply about shared interests. In stratified spaces like elite universities, friendships are often formed along class lines. Outreach students may form relationships across class boundaries, but doing so requires labour. It involves adapting, concealing, and often transforming aspects of one's identity. In the quote above, the student's wardrobe becomes the site of this negotiation. The wardrobe is not simply updated; it is completely changed. The self is remade to become legible and acceptable within a particular social circle (Reay, 2001; Lehmann, 2013).

The idea that “birds of a feather flock together” holds especially true in classed environments. Students from elite backgrounds tend to form friendships with those who mirror their own social experiences. Outreach students, aware of this dynamic, often have to work harder emotionally, materially, and performatively to earn inclusion. And even when they succeed, the friendships remain fragile, always susceptible to rupture at the moment of any visible “slip” that reveals class difference. Talking about such struggles, Mubeen Dogar, a student of business management at the university in Lahore, shared the following:

“When I sit with them, they would randomly decide to go to a café or restaurant outside the campus. I did go out with them a few times, but my budget is limited. They can afford to eat outside daily. I had to excuse them, and this affects the friendship.”

Mubeen had to struggle over the years to embody the capital of the elite university. He developed his English language skills, started wearing branded clothes, made friendship with elite peers and tried best to change his habits and ways of life. But this constructed identity would face a challenge every now and then; in this case, the ability to go to high-end restaurant in Lahore on a regular basis. Food, like language and clothing, becomes a subtle site of class distinction. Eating is a daily activity, but where, how, and with whom one eats carries social meaning. Outreach students may sit in the same classrooms as their elite peers, but they often

eat in different spaces. The ability to afford certain cafés, to be spontaneous with money, to split bills without hesitation are a pattern of class performances. In being unable to participate, outreach students are reminded of their difference. And in excusing themselves, they risk being seen as disinterested, distant, or even unfriendly. As Reay et al. (2009) observe, even mundane practices like eating are embedded within wider relations of power and identity, particularly for students from marginalized class backgrounds. Food thus becomes both a marker of class and a mechanism of social exclusion. Skeggs (1997) argues that the markers of respectability and belonging are always linked to forms of embodied capital: what people wear, eat, and how they behave. For students from less privileged backgrounds, even joining friends for a casual meal becomes an economic calculation and a symbolic test of worth.

The dynamics of food and friendship take a more spatial form when observed in the physical layout and usage of the university's campus. During fieldwork, my own observations pointed to a subtle but powerful segregation that existed within campus spaces. In one of the elite universities I spent considerable time in, there were multiple cafes and dining areas. One such café had a distinctly upscale design, complete with modern interior décor, soft lighting, and curated background music. Outside this café, there were benches, common seating spaces that theoretically belonged to everyone but were in practice occupied by elite students. This spatial segregation was not mandated. It was not formally enforced, but it was no less real. As a student shared:

“I try to eat from this café... despite being financially constrained... to give people the impression that I belong to the community that eats here, and it helps me make friends from the higher social class and integrate with them.”

Here again, food is not simply nourishment but rather works as a social currency. Eating in a visible, elite-endorsed space becomes a strategy of assimilation. For the outreach student, eating at this café is not about taste or comfort. It is about signalling and thus creating an

impression of belonging. But the cost of this performance is high, both financially and emotionally. The strategies adopted by students to fit-in with the elite participants often require students to suppress or transform aspects of themselves to fit into dominant social environments, and this can lead to long-term emotional fatigue.

Right next to this upscale café is another dining area, simpler in design, significantly more affordable. A student can get three meals from here for the price of one at the elite café. This is the space where outreach students, and others on financial assistance, tend to eat. The division is unspoken but absolute. The café and its associated benches signal class privilege; the affordable dining hall signals modest means. The benches become symbolic territories, occupied not through official policy but through the quiet rituals of presence, consumption, and class-coded comfort. This reflects what Ivermark and Ambrose (2021) describe as the micro-organization of elite space, where class is reproduced through spatial coding that appears informal but is deeply systematic.

I myself, belonging to a middle-class background, found my body reacting to this spatial division. I was uneasy at the café where elite students gathered and felt out of place. In contrast, the affordable dining space, where working-class students gathered to eat and talk, felt welcoming. These feelings were not coincidental. They were the result of habitus, that deeply internalized sense of what feels right or wrong, familiar or alien, comforting or threatening. This is in line with previous research which has extensively operationalized Bourdieu's ideas on habitus (see Crozier et al., 2019; . Grenfell, 2014; Wacquant, 2014), a set of dispositions that shape our "sense of place", in this case the elite university, and defined by one's classed history. The outreach students' discomfort is thus not a reflection of personal failing, but of structural dislocation. Aijaz masood, a resident of Rahim Yar Khan and an outreach scholar at the elite university in Lahore reflects on the struggles in the following words:

“Am I as good as these people you see here? Because they speak different than you, they wear things different than you, they have hobbies different than you, they have friends different than you. It remains with you till 2nd or 3rd year, and you may do good academically and have good GPA, but these things remain at the back of your head. It's (the feeling of inadequacy) is very common among the outreach students.”

This excerpt captures the invisible wound that many outreach students carry with them. Academic success does not automatically translate into self-worth. The sense of being “less than” is not about grades, but about social and cultural fluency. The outreach student may do well, may even excel, but still feels misaligned with the norms, values, and practices of the institution. The feeling lingers; it is not erased by A's or by praise from faculty. It sits quietly, internalized, shaping how the student sees themselves in relation to others.

This internal dissonance is structural. It arises from a mismatch between habitus and field. The outreach student's background, shaped by a different set of economic, social, and cultural resources, does not align with the dominant logic of the elite university. When the habitus is not in sync with the field, it results in tension, self-doubt, and a chronic sense of being out of place (Grenfell, 2014; Lehmann, 2007b). Reay et al. (2010) similarly emphasizes how institutional environments are experienced very differently depending on whether one's background harmonizes or clashes with the dominant culture.

What makes this situation even more painful is the dual reality that these students live in. They walk the same halls, sit in the same classrooms, write the same exams, yet their experience of the university is vastly different. They are physically present but socially invisible. They are successful but not secure. They achieve, but never quite belong. Lehmann (2013) observes that even upwardly mobile working-class students in elite institutions experience deep cultural dislocation, often leading to internalized marginality.

“I keep telling myself one day I’ll have enough to buy those things, then I’ll really belong.”

This longing for material goods such as branded gadgets, watches, smartphones are not just about consumption, but about invisibility on campus. In elite spaces, being visibly poor is not just stigmatized; it is a constant source of discomfort. The outreach student wants the branded phone not for its functions, but for its function as camouflage. It offers the possibility of passing and not being noticed as different. Students also shared how casual conversations about things such as vacations, favourite restaurants, hobbies became sites of alienation. One female student shared:

“They’ll never say it directly, but you can feel the judgment. They’ll talk about family vacations abroad, brunch at places I’ve never even seen, and I’ll just sit quietly, pretending I know what they mean.”

This quiet pretending for working-class students is exhausting. It is the performance of knowing, the acting of familiarity, the simulation of ease. It is about surviving social situations without exposing one’s difference. But it comes at the cost of emotional fatigue, “imposter syndrome”⁹, and the gradual erosion of confidence. These micro-moments, moments that reminds of your capital i.e., one’s place in the field, though often invisible to others, accumulate into a sense of not fully belonging.

In theory, the elite university is a space of meritocracy. In practice, it is a field structured by inherited capital; economic, cultural, social. Outreach students enter this field with different tools (viewpoints, habits, skills, and so on) and must adapt, perform, or pretend. Some succeed, some falter, but nearly all feel the weight of misalignment between their ontological roots and

⁹ The student quoted above used this word during the interview.

the new field of university. They inhabit a paradox: visible but not seen, present but not fully welcomed. Jin & Brown (2020) argue that elite institutions often present an illusion of inclusion while retaining the underlying mechanisms of exclusion. What appears as merit-based achievement often rests upon an invisible scaffolding of privilege. Meritocracy is the production of the elite, which masks the deeply rooted social and economic inequalities. Meritocracy, often promoted as a path to social justice and upward mobility, actually reinforces class domination. Jin & Ball (2019) argues that while working-class students in elite universities distance themselves from their working-class backgrounds through hard work and academic achievement, they also remain outsiders to middle-class sensibilities, forming a "third class" defined by meritocratic values. Thus, meritocracy does not enable true transcendence of class but instead creates a new form of symbolic domination.

4.4 Between Two Worlds: Cleft Habitus, Doxic Breaches, and the Emotional Cost of Mobility

As Bourdieu (M. Grenfell, 2009) observed “*habitus is a state of constant flux.*” Nowhere is this more evident than in the experiences of working-class students navigating elite universities. The entry into elite academic spaces does not only open new possibilities but also induces profound affective dislocations of habitus (Lehmann, 2014; Reay, 2015; Xie & Reay, 2020). As the numbers of working-class students at university grow, we need to gain a better understanding of the different ways in which they consolidate their working-class habitus with the middle-class culture of the academic field. Drawing on data collected through interviews, I focus, in this theme, on the experiences of those participants who embraced the dispositions of a different class, and become integrated in a new field, while at the same time holding to the ways of life of their own social class, i.e., the working class. They spoke about gaining new knowledge, but also about growing personally, changing their outlooks on life, growing their repertoire of cultural capital, and developing new dispositions and tastes about a range of issues, from food to politics and their future careers. During one of the interviews with Suhail

Baloch, a student of economics at the elite university in Karachi, when asked about this rupture or departure from the previous class logic to the newly attained one, he replied:

“There are differences (with parents) mostly over the preferences of mindset and the worldview. One of those things is career choice. The type of career I want, you know, my father doesn’t know about it. My father is, you know, old-minded. He wants me to have a government job and would ask me to apply for them....you see, there is a visible difference between what and how I understand things and the way they do. The world is much much bigger, which I have seen, and I don’t know if they know or understand.”

The same student, when asked about how the linguistic experiences of elite university have affected his views of his own language, said the following:

“This experience has made me value my culture, language and people. Now I really want to know about my culture, my people, you know, my history and my language. I wouldn’t have realized the importance of all that if I hadn’t confronted an environment like. I think our culture is very unique and needs to be explored a lot, and our people are very good.”

These excerpts from the interview reflect a complex and complicated mix of allegiances to and dismissal of their working-class roots, as many recognize this transformative process as having made relationships with parents or former friends and peers more difficult. This has implications for working-class students who increasingly distance themselves from the class culture in which they grew up, but who are still likely to find themselves in situations in which they are perceived as cultural outsiders (Lehmann, 2014; Reay, 2001; Xie & Reay, 2020). This came up during a conversation with Yaseen Yousafzai, a final year law student at the elite university of Lahore:

“You may be friends with them (the elite students) for a long time, you may eat with them on campus and outside, dress like them, you have share so much with them, but deep down you know that you are not one of them. And they know it too.”

What appears at first as social mobility often becomes a site of symbolic rupture: a disjuncture between who one was and who one must now become. The concept of cleft habitus (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023) helps us understand this layered experience, where one’s inherited dispositions clash with the demands of a new field. The affective and dispositional disjuncture these students experience echo *“doxic breach”* i.e., the moment when previously unquestioned beliefs and ways of being no longer align with the surrounding social world (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023). These breaches are neither purely cognitive nor entirely visible; they are deeply affective, often taking the form of shame, guilt, confusion, or longing. Imtiaz Shar, a business student and day scholar at the elite university of Karachi, offers a poignant glimpse into the social and emotional divide that cleft habitus produces. He shared:

“My discussions with friends on campus are very different than the one I have at home. I used to talk to my parents about those conversations in the beginning, but now I keep them to myself. They are not educated enough to understand.”

This quote illustrates the rupture between habitus and field in both directions. At university, Imtiaz is acquiring new linguistic codes, new references, and a new social disposition. But the very acquisition of these new resources estranges him from his roots. His affective ties to his family remain intact, but his cultural vocabulary now orbits another world, one that renders his parents’ frame of reference obsolete. This is not simply an individual adaptation but a symptom of doxic breach, where *“ways of being that were once taken for granted become visible and unsettled”* (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023). In this breach, students begin to see their old world with new eyes, not always with pride, but often with embarrassment or unease. The transition

thus produces what (Patfield et al., 2021) describes as a “cleft” between emotional belonging and cognitive distancing, where neither home nor university feels wholly inhabitable.

The internal split becomes even more visible in how students reimagine their futures and their domestic aspirations. This is reflected by the following excerpt from Ejaz Chitrali’s interview, whose family moved from Chitral to Lahore 15 years ago and is currently undertaking his undergraduate studies in social sciences at the elite university in Lahore:

“I don’t feel at home at (my own) home. This has changed for me; on campus, I have my own room and personal space. At home, we don’t have many rooms, I have to live with my siblings and there’s no concept of personal space. So, that (lack of) sense of space, and the noise all around. One wonders how do they even live here? I constantly think about how I will live in my own house after graduation. I feel that I need to upgrade my life (living standards), to have my own personal space.”

On another occasion, the same respondent, while talking about his relationship with his parents, said:

“In the initial years, while going through all the trouble in university here, I was angry at my parents for not providing me enough. I would even question: why am I born into a poor family? But now I understand, and I want to do something for them”

The experiences of Ejaz Chitrali reveal how the affective register of cleft habitus is not only about identity but also about desire. Bourdieu’s notion of *illusio* (Grenfell, 2014), the belief that “the game is worth playing”, resonates here. Ejaz does not merely experience discomfort at home; he has internalized the values of the elite field to such a degree that he aspires to replicate them in his personal life. The elite university has recalibrated his sensibilities; about space, noise, privacy, and aesthetics. These aren’t superficial preferences; they are newly cultivated needs attained from the elite field of the university. The student at this moment is

not simply mobile, he is divided. He inhabits two habitus simultaneously, neither of which feels fully complete. This is the hallmark of cleft habitus: the simultaneous pull of two contradictory value systems, neither of which can be reconciled without some form of loss (Reay, 2015). The structure of the university promotes hyper individuality, leading to the students inculcating those in their own habitus. As a respondent commented on the process of making friends in university:

“We hardly spend time with our class fellows. All of us rarely share the same classroom, as students register in different courses and even take the same course from different instructor based on their preference...other take courses in different departments based on their interest...and so you never create that bond over time. Most of the students you share a class with are new faces every semester. Everyone is busy with their own assignments and projects or sit with their own group of friends. Nobody spares any time for you, and everybody is short of time.”

I experienced the same phenomenon during my field experiences. As soon as I told my respondents that the interview may last for an hour, the expressions of some of them would change. They would then request if the time period could be reduced. There was an interesting exchange with one of the key respondents, who helped me identify other potential participants for the study, on the subject of hyper individuality on campus. He requested a break during the interview for smoking. During smoking break, I asked him why he smokes so often. He replied:

“You see the environment here. Hardly anyone spends time with you and tries to have a nice conversation. I come here (to the smoking area) and smoke to spend five minutes in peace”

The field of university affects the habitus of working-class university in phases. First, there is confrontation (one of the respondents angry at their parents), and then they adopt the ways of

life inspired by the participants of the field that are culturally dominant (the respondent's newly attained preference for personal space). Sometimes, the experience of misalignment leads to more overt acts of concealment. Saleem Wazir, an anthropology student at an elite university in Lahore, reflected on this dynamic in relation to the outreach candidates he had helped guide into the university:

“Coming from a very far-flung and underdeveloped area to this university, I felt it a responsibility to help other students in the process. The following year I assisted some aspiring candidates, and two girls made it to university. Later I came to know that they were introducing themselves to be from Rahim Yar Khan and Peshawar subsequently, as their fathers worked in those cities. I was amazed. They were doing this to conceal their identities of belonging to their hometowns.”

This act of self-reinvention reveals the emotional labor demanded by elite fields. The symbolic geography of Pakistan is not flat; the urban centers and some hometowns carry more prestige than others. Students from marginalized regions often feel compelled to perform spatial mobility and claim a more acceptable origin that aligns with dominant assumptions. Ivemark and Ambrose (2023) argue that doxic breaches often produce reflexivity, but this reflexivity is not emancipatory. It is a painful awareness of one's misfit, often resulting in identity strategies marked by concealment, code-switching, or silencing. In Saleem's account, we witness what Ingram (2011) describe as reflexive coping—a strategic recalibration of identity to manage symbolic risk. This tension of dual belonging was echoed by Hina, a student of social sciences at the elite university in Karachi, who explained:

“At university, I speak English and participate in debates about global politics. But when I return to my village during holidays, I can't share these things with anyone. I feel like I'm performing two versions of myself. One that fits here, and one that doesn't fit there anymore.”

Hina's reflection underscores the psychological fragmentation that accompanies cleft habitus. The self does not merely shift—it splits. She articulates the 'ontological double bind' described by Reay (2001), where belonging to two worlds ultimately makes both feel incomplete. Similarly, Ali Haider, a business management student hailing from a rural town in Sindh, described a quieter version of this breach:

“When I'm at home, I get irritated by small things—like the noise, or how people talk, or even how tea is served. I didn't notice these things before. Now I do. That's what scares me. Maybe I'm becoming someone else.”

Haider's unease is not prideful. It is mournful. He doesn't want to lose the ease of home, but elite education has restructured his perceptual field. As research on the subject (see Ivemark & Ambrose, 2023; Lee & Kramer, 2013) notes, such affective dissonance, i.e., feeling unmoored from one's past self, is a common feature of mobility shaped by misaligned habitus. What these accounts cumulatively suggest is that elite universities are not just sites of academic instruction. They are arenas of symbolic struggle, where working-class students must learn not only the curriculum but the unspoken codes of class, taste, and decorum. Their pre-existing habitus, formed in materially constrained and culturally distinct environments, do not map neatly onto the institutional field they now inhabit. The result is a deep dispositional disjuncture, which is not experienced abstractly but rather embodied in different ways. Students talk about the noise at home, the tone of voice in class, the accent of speech, the feel of furniture, the spacing of conversations. These are not aesthetic preferences. They are sensory and emotional manifestations of a social mismatch.

The experience of cleft habitus is not static. Some students learn to “pass” i.e., to mimic, to adapt, to polish. But as Ivemark and Ambrose (2023) emphasize, adaptation often comes at the cost of emotional exhaustion and authenticity. Students report feeling like impostors in both worlds. They cannot return home without feeling “too changed,” and they cannot fully occupy

elite spaces without feeling “not enough.” The internal cleft produces not just ambivalence, but what Wacquant (2014) calls “ontological insecurity.” The ground beneath the self feels uncertain, always shifting. Even success is shadowed by loss; of language, of roots (family and social class), of confidence in who one was and what one might become.

This study’s findings resonate strongly with Granfield’s (1991) classic notion of “making it by faking it,” as well as Jin and Ball’s (Jin & Ball, 2020) work on camouflaging strategies adopted by first-generation students in elite institutions. What’s striking in the Pakistani context is how these strategies are compounded by regional, linguistic, and gendered markers. Students do not merely perform in class. They must unlearn entire ways of speaking, dressing, and remembering. Some, like Imtiaz, distance themselves from home. Others, like Saleem’s mentees, mask their geographical identities. This illustrates that cleft habitus and doxic breaches are not theoretical abstractions, they are lived, felt, and performed by students who traverse the boundaries of class through education. The elite university does not merely open doors; it remakes interiors. The outreach student arrives hoping for mobility but undergoes emotional toil and symbolic violence.

4.5 Limitations:

Despite the effort to study and research the topic extensively, there are some limitations to the study. The research methodology was initially designed to collect data through three steps; to ask the respondents to rewrite their personal statements for comparison with the personal statements submitted at the time of admission, to interview working-class students, elite students and faculty members, and to collect students’ records from the university to analyze the social mobility trends of students from different social classes. While setting out, the intention was to visit the universities in my sample (one in Lahore, and another in Karachi) and spend time there to understand the environment, connect with people, build rapport and collect data effectively.

The process was hindered by financial constraints. I visited and spent time in the elite university in Lahore only, while collecting data from the respondents of the elite university in Karachi through zoom recordings. The financial constraint also meant that I could not stay in Lahore longer and thus collected data only by interviewing working-class students and engaging in discussions with faculty members in their offices and any other space in the university. Efforts were made to incorporate the views of students from different regions of the country, with different gender, linguistic, cultural, religious and department/subject-wise diversity.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This research set out to explore how class shapes experience within elite educational spaces in Pakistan. At its core, the study was an attempt to engage with the enduring question of whether elite universities function as institutions of social mobility or as sites where class hierarchy is reproduced under the guise of merit. The voices of working-class students in this study have illuminated a deeply stratified landscape, one where success does not always equate to belonging, and access does not necessarily translate into inclusion. The findings echo much of the existing literature while also drawing attention to the specific cultural terrain of Pakistani elite institutions. Here, the divide between economic classes is not merely expressed through access to resources, but also through language, mannerisms, consumption habits, and informal social codes that serve to reproduce distinction. In the context of elite universities, the transition from working-class backgrounds to these prestigious institutions brings about profound transformations in the habitus of the students. These transformations involve a shift in their dispositions, values, and behaviors, as they navigate unfamiliar social and cultural environments. Coming from a rustic setting, working-class students at elite universities in Pakistan might initially feel a strong sense of separation and unfamiliarity with the university ethos.

From the moment of admission, working-class students are made aware of their difference. The elite university is not just a space of learning; it is a site of symbolic production where particular ways of dressing, speaking, and behaving are implicitly valued and others subtly devalued. The students recounted how class was inscribed in the very architecture of the university, in the fashion choices of their peers, in the brand of phones that were casually laid on canteen tables, and in the ease with which others navigated English-speaking academic spaces. These encounters are not incidental; they are structural. They reveal how cultural capital functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that rewards those already fluent in the codes of the elite. As

Bourdieu reminds us, such institutions do not merely reflect class distinctions; they actively reproduce them (M. Grenfell, 2014).

What emerged from the narratives was not simply a tale of economic hardship but a more profound account of symbolic exclusion. Students reported feeling hesitant to participate in classroom discussions, not because they lacked insight, but because they feared their accents, vocabulary, or lack of fluency would mark them as inferior. They spoke of being mocked for the phones they carried or the clothes they wore. Many were isolated from the informal networks of study groups and co-curricular societies, which often serve as vital spaces for peer learning and social integration. In such moments, the working-class student is not just a minority in numerical terms but is rendered visible in a way that is uncomfortable, exposed, and often humiliating.

Teachers and administrators, while rarely overt in their biases, were perceived as more responsive to students who could speak with ease, network confidently, and present themselves in ways aligned with elite sensibilities. The burden of proving one's worth, both intellectually and socially, was reported to be heavier for students from low-income backgrounds. The idea of merit, so often valorized in elite discourse, appeared in practice to be intertwined with access to cultural and social capital. Fee waivers, installment plans, and other forms of support are available and expanded recently, are embedded within institutional attitudes that often views financial need with suspicion rather than empathy (a student availing food voucher categorizes and puts him/her under gaze of other as being an outreach/financial aid student).

This persistent experience of marginality produced a quiet but enduring alienation. Students spoke of not being able to participate in gift exchanges, of withdrawing from campus life, and of feeling that the university, while accessible on paper, remained emotionally and culturally distant. They were present but not always included. They learned to survive, often by mimicking, withdrawing, or simply enduring. The glamour of the elite university, with its

polished facades and globalized aspirations, became both a source of aspiration and of quiet exhaustion. The effort to belong was not just social, it was existential. For many, the university remained an alien place, and they felt as “strangers in paradise” (Reay et al., 2009b). But at times this marginality is contested. One of the faculty members during a conversation said that *“they (the working-class students) develop theoretical understanding, especially those from social sciences, and use it to contest their marginalities”*. During a random conversation with a student from Gilgit Baltistan on students’ election in the university, he said something along the same lines:

“There is a student contesting election who is the nephew of the chief minister of a province. People refer to him during conversation as the nephew of that CM. This is how he is identified on campus and not by his own name, or his ethnicity or any other identity marker. By invoking this relationship, he is associating himself to an elite group of students. This is common here. Social class and social status dominate life in this university. This is particularly true in times of student body elections as 90% of the students are from the elite and they identify with someone from their own social class.”

On another occasion, the same student said:

“We (working-class students) are the ones thinking of ethnicity, religion and other factors. After getting rich or coming from a rich family, no one’s Pathan, or Balti or Baloch. They are rich and belong to the rich.”

The interplay of field and habitus is not unidirectional but rather goes both ways; working-class students engage critically with their social environment, drawing upon their academic training to understand and articulate the structures of exclusion they face and try to create counter discourses. Their awareness of how privilege is performed and perpetuated becomes a tool to contest the dominant ways of being and ways of life on campus. But often these

contestations are marginalized as well, as the space of elite university is dominated by elite students. Such working-class students, thus, develop the understanding to resist the hegemonic ideas and ideals of the structures as individuals.

In sum, this study reveals how class operates not only through material inequality but through the invisible architectures of everyday academic life. Elite universities in Pakistan do not merely reflect class divisions; they often reinforce them. The working-class students who enter these spaces do so with dreams of mobility, yet they find themselves navigating a world that continually reminds them of their place. And while many succeed academically, their journeys are marked by a persistent negotiation between their own sense of self and the institutional scripts they are expected to perform. What becomes evident is that access to elite education, though necessary, is not sufficient. Without a transformation in the culture and practices of these institutions and without a conscious effort to democratize not just admissions but everyday life on campus, the promise of higher education as a force for social mobility will remain deeply compromised.

To sum up the discussion, I recall the words of Zaman Khan, a law student at the elite university in Lahore:

“How can we dream of a classless university if the society we live in is so unequal?”

5.1 Recommendations:

The findings of this study call for a deep and honest reconsideration of what inclusion truly means within elite academic institutions in Pakistan. If these universities are to live up to the ideal of being sites of knowledge, development, and transformation, they must confront the quiet, everyday exclusions that persist within their walls. It is not enough to open the gates to a more diverse student body. Inclusion must be enacted not only through access but also through care, recognition, and structural change.

First and foremost, elite universities must acknowledge the hidden curriculum that governs campus life. The fluency in language, confidence in expression, and familiarity with institutional codes that many privileged students take for granted are not neutral assets; they are products of classed socialization and the ability to afford elite schooling for their children where such skills are nurtured. Institutions must invest in sustained support systems, language assistance, mentorship programs, and peer networks that help bridge the cultural and social distance experienced by working-class students without pathologizing their difference.

Secondly, there is a pressing need to sensitize faculty and administrative staff to the multiple ways in which class bias manifests, often unconsciously, in pedagogical and institutional practices. This requires more than token workshops and calls for a structural commitment to equity in the classroom where all students feel they are spoken to and spoken for. Teachers must be trained to recognize how performance is shaped not merely by individual aptitude but by access to resources, confidence, and prior exposure. Grading, participation, and student evaluation must account for these complexities.

Efforts to create an inclusive campus must also extend to co-curricular and social spaces. Societies, clubs, and student-run initiatives should be actively encouraged to reach out to those who feel alienated from campus life. Representation of working-class students in leadership roles within such bodies can serve as both a symbolic and practical step towards reimagining the student body as diverse and dialogical rather than exclusive and self-replicating.

An elite university in Karachi, which does not form part of my sample¹⁰, has a liberal core program, which is a mandatory part of every degree program. Whether a student enrolls in Computer science, engineering, or social science, they must undertake the liberal core program.

¹⁰ The university does not form part of my sample because the outreach program offered is designed differently. They take a student through this program irrespective of the social class and financial background, if (s)he has not studied through O/A level. A student coming from an elite or upper middle class family having studied through matriculation/intermediate education system can avail it.

The Program consists of seven forms of thought and action: historical and social thought, philosophical thought, rhetoric and expression, formal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, scientific method and analysis and creative practice. The students are required to take a determined minimum number of courses under each form of thought and action. The program has a significant impact on the students at the university. The working-class students enrolled in the university benefit from these courses through exposure to ideas and subjects such as philosophical thought and historical and social thought and improve their language skills through courses such as formal reasoning and language and expression. While elite students are sensitized about the deeply rooted problems in society. This was evident from my interviews with the students¹¹; those students experienced university in a relatively inclusive space. Other elite university should design a similar curriculum.

Perhaps most importantly, universities must begin to value difference not as a deficiency to be corrected but rather value diversity in terms of the perspectives it brings to the table. The working-class students who navigate elite spaces often carry with them unique insights into inequality, resilience, and the politics of aspiration. Their experiences are not marginal; they are essential to any serious conversation about the issues of education, health, infrastructure, justice, governance, politics and inequality. To truly democratize the university, institutions must be willing to listen and embrace them as equals.

The project of inclusion cannot remain rhetorical. It must be rooted in everyday practices that humanize, dignify, and support those whose presence in elite institutions is often treated as anomalous. Only then can university become what it claims to be: a space where knowledge is not only transmitted but transformed by those who carry it from the margins.

¹¹ I interviewed four students from the university before knowing in detail about their outreach program. They do not form part of the sample, and their views and experiences are not included in the findings chapter or any other part of this thesis.

An effective policy intervention would be to increase the proportion of students admitted through outreach and financial aid programs. This would gradually reshape the university's social fabric by diversifying its student body. A greater presence of working-class students would not only enhance representation but also strengthen their capacity to negotiate and assert their identities. Over time, this could transform the university into a more inclusive field where the dissonance between field and habitus is not a site of conflict, but of reconciliation.

Appendix 1:

Topic: Beyond Access: Experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan

Interview Guide

This interview guide is designed to conduct an in-depth interview for my postgraduate thesis. The topic of the thesis is “Beyond Access: Experiences of Working-Class Students in Elite Universities of Pakistan”. This study aims to document the experiences of working-class students in elite universities in Pakistan, focusing on their journey of studying and living in an unfamiliar environment, as well as their negotiation of identity and evolving aspirations.

Section A: Socio-economic Characteristics (*Will be kept confidential*)

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Age: _____
4. Place of Birth: _____
5. Program enrolled in: _____
6. Education (In years): _____
7. Marital Status: _____
8. Family Structure: _____
9. Average monthly family income: _____

Section B: Upon entering the elite university.

10. How would you introduce or describe yourself?
 - Would you describe yourself the same way on your first day here at university?
 - Why has it changed over time?
11. Why did you want to join this university?

- How would you compare your expectations to your experience now that you a part of it?
12. What were your initial impressions of the university? (What was your first day like?)
- Did that impression fade away over time and what is that impression today?

Section C: The “experience” of university

13. How did you make your first friend at university, and in what ways is that friend similar or different to the friends you had before?
14. Has making friends at university been a natural process for you so far, and how diverse is your circle of friends in terms of background and experiences?
- Among your friends, who comes from the most affluent background, and who comes from a humbler background?
 - How would you compare your friendship with the two?
 - Has the friendship with the elite peers changed you in any way?
15. Do you feel comfortable in the company of your friends at university or those you had before the university?
16. Do you feel “at home” on campus? (as in do you feel like “a part of” this space?)
- *(13 and 14) (if there is difference and they aren't feeling at home) why do you think this is so? What makes you feel that way, if you may please recall some instance or an experience?*
17. Can you share any experiences where you felt like something affected your friendships or social interactions on campus?
18. Do you feel you have to “perform” or adapt to certain behaviours, languages, or mannerisms to fit in with other students?
19. Do you face financial and social pressures of living on campus or participating in campus life? If yes, give some examples, and how do you navigate through it?

20. Have you observed any pattern or division in the type of facilities or activities different students' avail? For example, in cafes, hostels, or recreational activities?

Section C: The experience of Classroom

21. How is your experience of classroom interaction with your fellows and teachers?
22. How would you rate your ease of engaging in conversations with your classmates, particularly in terms of classroom participation and interaction? What factors influence this for you?
23. Are you a member of any study group or study circle?
- If yes, do you feel at ease being a part of that group/circle? Why or why not?
24. Have you ever experienced any implicit/explicit behaviour/comment during the class which made you feel different from your peers?
- What is your opinion of nicknames? Is it something common in your class or the campus community? (*push for nicknames of outreach students vs non-outreach students*).
25. When you participate in class discussions, do you feel your contributions are valued equally compared to your peers? What factors might influence this perception?
- Are you given equal opportunity to participate by your fellows and teachers?
26. Were you at a disadvantage in terms of class participation marks?
27. Have you ever felt out of place in classrooms or academic settings? Can you give specific examples?
28. How did you adapt to the teaching style at university, and how easy or difficult was it for you to grasp the subjects and concepts initially compared to others? What factors influenced that?
29. What was the experience of the first project/research assignment you were tasked with? How well did you do compared to others?

30. Are there any subjects or skills where you feel at a disadvantage compared to your peers? How do you cope with that?
31. What is your experience of interaction with teachers? And has it changed over time?

Section D: To understand how a change in field has affected the student's experiences.

32. How different do you think the environment and culture is at university than the environment/culture you were brought up in?
- How was your experience of adjusting to this environment?
33. On a day-by-day basis, how much thought do you give to your identity as an outreach student¹²?
34. Are there contexts in which it becomes prominent?
35. Would you say your identity of an outreach student is expressed in the way you present yourself physically, in your clothing, hairstyle, cosmetics, the way you interact with others?
36. Was your identity as an outreach student ever a factor in your interactions on campus?
37. Has there ever been an incident here on campus where you felt your identity of an outreach students caused you to be left out, put down, dismissed, or discriminated against?
38. Have you overheard students talking about outreach program students? (What were they talking about and if there is anything that stuck with you?)
39. Do you feel your university experiences have changed the way you see the world, the way you think about things, your attitudes, your tastes, your values?
40. How do you feel when you spend time with your friends and family back home?
- Can you connect with what their conversations are about?

¹² By outreach student I am referring to the students that are enrolled in elite universities under study and that constitute my population for sampling the outreach students.

41. How have these changes affected your relationships with friends at home?
42. How have your experiences at college affected your relationships with parents?
- Do you find it difficult to talk to your parents/friends at home? What are some prominent points of disagreement/difference?
43. Do you find yourself changing your language or dress when you go home?
- What happens if you don't switch to what's expected at home?
44. Have the changes you've made brought you closer, or made you more distant from friends at home?

Section E: Regarding students' tastes, preferences, and attitudes

37. Are part of a society or club in the university?
- Have you ever applied for the dramatics/theatrics club of the university?
38. What's your favorite way to spend your vacations? What's your idea of a dream vacation?
39. Who do you prefer to spend your vacations with? And why?
40. What are your preferences in terms of visiting places to explore?
- What's your favourite travel destination? And why?
41. How do you prefer to spend time in this city?
- What is your favourite recreational space?
 - What is your favourite food? And favourite restaurant?
42. What is your favourite movie/series?
- When did you watch it? And what's your favourite character and why?
 - Do you have access to Netflix?
 - Is it your own account or a shared one?
43. What is your favourite sport?
- How long have you been playing that sport?

44. Are you interested in watching sports?
- If football, which team? Fav football club, memorable match?
 - How long have you been following that sport?

Section F: Career aspirations & Open-ended questions

45. Where do you see yourself in the next 5-10 years?
- How do you plan to get there?
 - What hurdles do you expect?
46. Have your career aspirations changed over time by studying in this university? And what in particular contributed to these changing aspirations?
47. What do you think is an ideal job position for you have upon graduation?
- An ideal company?
 - If academia, which university?
48. What are your suggestions for the aspirants or incoming students of this program to help them prepare for the university life?
49. If I say that the university does enough to create an inclusive environment for everyone, what would your response be? Explain
50. Anything you would like to share anything apart from all this?

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