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Honourable mobility or shameless entitlement? Habitus and graduate employment

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the contrasting predispositions of a group of working-class and middle-class undergraduates to using nepotism to gain advantage in the labour market. Drawing upon a Bourdieusian framework, it is argued that the middle-class students, whose habitus was aligned to the field, were more likely to express a willingness to utilise whatever networks they could to secure a 'foot in the door'. Meanwhile, the working-class students, who were more insecure about the legitimacy of their participation within a middle-class field, expressed a commitment to a form of honour which ruled out using contacts on the grounds that it was morally unacceptable. They discussed a desire to 'prove themselves' which is arguably symptomatic of a deeply ingrained reliance on meritocracy. I explore how this may arise due to their habitus having developed within a dominated position in society where respectability is crucial to generating feelings of self-worth and value.

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Introduction

> In a period of 'diploma inflation' the disparity between the aspirations that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers is a structural reality which affects all the members of a school generation, but to a varying extent depending on the rarity of their qualifications and on their social origins. (Bourdieu [1984] 2010, 139)

The past 50 years has seen a mass expansion of the UK higher education (HE) sector, resulting in a somewhat diversified student body. In 2013 there were more students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE than ever before (UCAS 2013). However, it is argued that the widening participation agenda has done little to alter in any fundamental sense the composition of the HE student body, which is still dominated by the middle classes (Roberts 2010). The sector itself has become increasingly stratified, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds being much less likely to apply to or be offered a place at 'elite' Russell Group institutions (Boliver 2013; Reay, David, and Ball 2005), which may have profound effects on these individuals' 'employability'. Young people from low participation areas (POLAR2 quintile 1[1]) are still 7.5 times less likely to enter a higher tariff institution than their counterparts from the highest participation neighbourhoods (POLAR2 quintile 5) (UCAS 2013).

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Whilst these issues of inequality in access are extremely important, the focus of this article is on the equally important matter of inequality of graduate outcomes. The focus on access alone has resulted in the assumption of HE as the key to equality, ignoring the inequality in chances of securing jobs – and indeed specific types of jobs (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

As the opening quote from Pierre Bourdieu suggests, at a time where more young people are attaining degree qualifications, social origins become increasingly prominent in shaping graduate outcomes. As the labour market has failed to keep up with the rates of HE expansion, we have seen increased global competition for top jobs (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2010). There is not – as is commonly perceived – 'room at the top', because such increased participation in university has led to a situation of 'social congestion' (Brown 2013). Recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data have shown that those educated within the state sector with equal grades as their privately educated counterparts do as well – and at times outperform them – once at university (HEFCE 2014). Nevertheless, distinct inequalities persist in graduate outcomes (Brennan and Shah 2003; Brown 2014; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Purcell et al. 2012). So, arguably, differences in outcome must be related to factors external to 'ability' insofar as this is measured by pre-university qualifications.

One explanation attributes this to inequalities in access to development of 'soft credentials'. Brown and Hesketh (2004) chart the rise of a focus on 'personal capital' and of assessment centres purporting to be able to scientifically quantify and measure personality traits. They argue that employers – through the language of 'talent' – privilege certain types of students over others in a way which has become acceptable. One employer shared with them the struggle over balancing issues of equality in recruitment with the 'type' of person wanted, recognising that these characteristics are direct products of class privilege (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Tomlinson (2008) argues that young people are acutely aware of this increased focus on the personal: his participants all stressed that a degree was the minimum requirement to accessing a 'good' job; but not enough alone. They perceived the CV as an important opportunity to package themselves to employers (Tomlinson 2008).

It is relevant to note that Tomlinson's sample were middle class. Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013), through a comparison of both working-class and middle-class students, demonstrate that whilst the middle classes had a tacit understanding of how to 'play the game' and construct themselves as employable, the working classes – whilst equally aware of the need to build one's CV – were less able to engage in this because of possessing less economic, cultural and social capital (see also Ingram, Abrahams and Beedell 2012). Moreover, working-class students often rely on term time work which impacts on their ability to engage in CV building activities (Waller, Mellor and Hoare 2012). Purcell et al. (2012) similarly found that inequalities in outcomes can partially be attributed to inequality in the distributions of valuable networks. This article differs from the body of literature on this topic in that most discussions of social capital treat it as a resource which is more or less present, but here I am concerned with students' willingness to utilise such a resource. Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) do provide one example of a focus on the mobilisation of capitals; however, this article presents the other side of the story, focusing specifically on the non-mobilisation of capital, uniquely placing at its heart a group of working-class students who were reluctant to use their available social capital to secure jobs. This article takes forward theorising on this topic by directing attention to the 'affective' side of social capital, through a consideration of how young people actually feel about using their networks. One recent publication by Jo Watson (2013) similarly focused on social capital in

depth but in terms of students constructing support networks with their peers. She argues that the development of these networks, whilst not always successful, is crucial to enhancing and supporting learning both in terms of discipline content and in understanding how to successfully 'play the HE game'.

Defining social capital

In this article I am using social capital in the Bourdieusian sense; Bourdieu ([1986] 2002) argues that social capital is a tool for the reproduction of class inequality in society. Through the unequal distribution of access to resources – in this case, networks – the dominant classes secure their position and ensure it is reproduced. He defines social capital as:

> The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119)

As is suggested by the concept of 'recognition', social capital is not just about how many people an individual knows, but is also measured by their position in social space – that is, the amount of symbolically legitimated capital one's network has access to:

> The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. (Bourdieu [1986] 2002, 286)

This article focuses on the social capital that students were able to access through their family, and how this was utilised by them in their attempts to secure internships, work experience and/or jobs. From a Bourdieusian perspective, those in dominant positions in social space are more likely to have access to networks of greater value since the capital they possess is of a symbolically recognised form. It is often assumed that the working classes merely lack social capital.[2] Whilst it is not the purpose of this article to mount a full critique of this 'deficit' view, and indeed it must be acknowledged that many of the working-class participants did lack forms of social capital valuable within this field, it nevertheless argues back to this discourse by presenting a group of students who do have access to such contacts but refuse to use them. It is important to note here that social capital does not just exist in its own right through 'knowing people'; as the term 'capital' implies, social capital is about investment:

> The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term. (Bourdieu, [1986] 2002, 287)

Thus we must consider the students' willingness and ability to 'invest' in social capital, not just whether they 'have contacts' because this is not automatically transferable into profitable capital. There is a distinction to be made between the reproduction of social capital through the transmission of networks from one generation to the next and the production of social capital for oneself through 'networking'.

As the competition for top jobs increases, young people are being guided by careers advisors to 'network' and specific events are run by universities to help students to do this. Whilst 'networking' is not a new phenomenon, in recent times we have seen an increased institutionalisation and formalisation of this process, a 'commodification of social relations' (Wittel 2001, 52–53). Hey (2005, 861) points to the recent explosion in the 'pedagogy of

networking', with advice books and resources aimed at helping players to understand the 'new rules of the network game'. She highlights the importance of networking for progressing in our current society: 'In "fast times" the agility for developing the capital and creating the feel for the network game is crucial. Networks circulate information, capital and labour, clients and products' (2005, 862). Networking entails a mutual understanding of the replacing of 'friendship sociality' with 'network sociality' whereby people are connecting with each other in terms of what they can bring to the table, in the form of a business arrangement (Hey 2005). This distinction between production and reproduction of social capital is interesting because it is deeply contradictory. From a neoliberal, individualistic, meritocratic viewpoint, relying on family networks to secure advantage does not fit because it implies that class position influences outcomes. Networking for yourself, however, is advocated as a legitimate strategy to advancement. It is important to bear this in mind and it will be returned to later.

Methods

The data in this article come from the Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Paired Peers' project which tracked a cohort of undergraduates from different backgrounds at Bristol's two universities: The University of Bristol (an old 'elite' Russell Group institution) and The University of the West of England (a newer 'post-1992' university). Students volunteered through an initial questionnaire administered during induction lectures of subjects taught at both institutions. The questionnaire collected demographic information including parents' occupations and educational level as well as whether students were receiving government financial support. These variables were used by the research team to classify all volunteers into middle class, working class or intermediate/unclassifiable.[3] Class is a notoriously complex concept to define and measure, yet being central to the project it was necessary to operationalise. Feeling dissatisfied with relying on occupation as a sole indicator of class, we used this composite measure which attempted to take account of other forms of capital and resources. This approach is in line with other recent leading research in the field (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Reay, David, and Ball 2005),

Ninety students[4] were sampled from the pool of volunteers – one-half from the middle-class group and one-half from the working-class group. Whilst there may have been interesting insights to be gleaned into the experiences of the intermediate classes in HE, sampling from polar ends of the spectrum of volunteers enabled clearer comparisons to be drawn around the students' classed experiences within and across institutions and subjects.

It is important to acknowledge that classes are not, in reality, fixed and rigid, and indeed we must acknowledge the existence of 'class fractions' (Ball 2003) which such a binary classification appears to gloss over. Following interviews with the sampled cohort we came to understand more about their locations with regards to such fractions, and inevitably some fell more solidly into middle-class or working-class boxes whilst others were located closer to the margins of these groups. However, we did not feel that the intra-class differences detracted from the overall positioning and the students could still be defined as falling into either the 'dominant' or 'dominated' Bourdieusian classifications (Bourdieu [1984] 2010) which indeed reflected differing patterns of experience, practice and resource possession (see also Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Similarly there did not appear to be any significant differences within the major class groupings warranting discussion for the purpose of this article. The students thus here remain classified in the binary system. Future analysis and output from this project is likely to be focused around exploring some of the class differences within our sample.

To protect the students' anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout and the university each student attends will not be indicated because it is not relevant to the discussion in this article.

'It's a really competitive world and it's all about people you know'

Our data highlight the central role that informal contacts play in helping young people to get vital work experience or even jobs. Some of the students said that the big firms present themselves as 'not discriminating', interviewing people from a 'wide range of backgrounds', but behind this appearance were hidden processes which assisted some in getting ahead. Bianca, a working-class student, talked about her attempts to get work experience in a law firm being overtly blocked through not knowing anyone there. She said:

> One of the law firms I went to, I said 'is there any chance I can gain some work experience'. She's like 'oh do you know someone at the firm then' and I was like 'no', and she's like 'oh, no we don't unfortunately'.

Across the sample, many more middle-class students secured work experience or internships than their working-class counterparts. In most cases this was facilitated through family networks (for further discussion, see Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). The middle-class students recognised the need to use their networks to gain work experience in particular industries and settings, and were often engaged in mobilising these with the help of their parents. Harriet, a middle-class student, put it thus:

> [Publishing is] kind of an area that you need to know people in to progress, and I was like talking to my parents and I was like 'I don't know anyone' and then we were like 'we must know someone'. And I've got a family friend whose daughter, our mums were in the antenatal group together, her dad though is like a CEO of a publishing house or something, so I was like 'oh, I'll go and see him over the summer'.

This quote is fascinating; it is taken as a given that the family 'must know someone' and indicates a very strategic approach to utilising social capital. No one springs to mind but there is a determination to find a link, no matter how tenuous. Yet however slender the connection, it is possible to argue that it is 'durable'; the mums were in antenatal group together, indicating the families have been 'connected' for many years. This durability enables the propensity to make the link manifest, for it to become a useful form of social capital (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In the following interview Harriet revisits this, discussing the plans to invite the contact round for dinner:

Harriet: I've got a family friend who is in publishing who my parents are having round to dinner next week so I'm going to just have a chat, even if it's just a talk with him and hopefully see if I can get anything or even just a couple of days over the Christmas holidays just so I have something already done that I can put into an application as experience […]

Interviewer: So have they invited him round to dinner especially for you or?

Harriet: No, no, […] they were just inviting him over because they haven't seen them in a while and then I was chatting and they were like 'Oh we'll slip it into conversation' and I was like 'Thank you' just to see […] I don't want to cold call him, even if it's just to ask advice, I'd rather kind of see him in a more normal situation and then if it comes up, have a chat.

Harriet displays an awareness of the rules of 'the network game'; she wants to speak to him in a 'more normal situation', avoiding the forced awkwardness of 'cold calling' which is much like what other students described as the forced and fake nature of the networking events put on by universities. The informality and naturalness with which she hopes to approach the situation indicates a tacit knowledge and feel for the game. Harriet's story is indicative of the problems facing young people attempting to enter this industry and the importance of having contacts within it, as she says in her first quote '[publishing is] kind of an area that you need to know people in to progress'. This echoes findings of Allen et al. (2013) who discuss the way in which constructions of the employable graduate student within the creative industries privileges middle-class students through their greater abilities to demonstrate their suitability for jobs by gaining work placements. Those working-class students who could not for practical reasons engage in crucial unpaid work experiences were constructed as 'slack' and as 'lacking' in the 'go getting' characteristics necessary to progress in such industries (Allen et al. 2013).

It is not just in the creative industries that our students discussed the centrality of contacts to helping them secure work experience. Another area was that of medicine, as Farrah a middle-class student explained:

> My friend's going for medicine and she's doing work experience and the only way she can get it is through like a doctor who she knew, like her mum knows. It's a really competitive world and it's all about people you know.

Another industry which appeared to be rife with this form of nepotism was finance. Dylan a middle-class student told us about his attempts to get into trading:

Dylan: I'm looking at doing an internship at a trading [firm] but it's so difficult at the minute, so we will see how that goes.

Interviewer: Quite competitive is it?

Dylan: Yeah extremely. You know, it is a case of who you know not what you know in some cases. So I am trying to pull in any family ties.

Interviewer: Do you know anyone?

Dylan: Yeah, […] My dad's quite friendly with one of the traders at [large investment company]

Interviewer: Great, and is he in a useful position to pull strings?

Dylan: Yeah he was head of the internship scheme.

This excerpt highlights the strategic ways in which some of the middle-class students were attempting to beat the competition and get a place on an investment internship. These internships are well paid and extremely hard to enter. They usually lead directly to a high-paid graduate job. Dylan says 'it's a case of who you know not what you know', acknowledging that 'knowing people' is necessary at present when competition is stiff. It is interesting to compare this with the sentiments of Harvey, a working-class student who is similarly attempting to enter the financial sector, yet places greater emphasis on 'what you know' rather than 'who you know'. More aligned to meritocratic ideals, he believes in the value of his degree and sees that as the most important investment of his time and effort. He says: 'In this day and age I don't think that the contacts are as useful as they were'. It is possible to connect the difference between Dylan and Harvey's sensitivity to the rules of the game to Bourdieu's analysis of power.

Bourdieu argues that in order for one group in society to exert, maintain and reproduce power and control they must justify and legitimate its foundations through ensuring its arbitrary nature is 'misrecognised' (Bourdieu 1996, 265). The specific strategies of reproduction and legitimation vary depending upon the underlying source of the power in question (1996, 266). In our present skills economy, meritocracy is the ideology used to justify the dominant position of the 'elites'; they are framed as deserving of their position, having acquired it through hard work and ability (as demonstrated through institutionalised cultural capital, e.g. qualifications). As qualifications are increasingly compromised as a route to success, the rules of the game adapt, capitals are exchanged and other resources become more relied upon. Following Bourdieu's logic, these alternative resources then become legitimated as justified routes to power. Because the dominant groups are the ones who set the rules, they are more attuned to keep up with the changing nature of the game. In this case Dylan is aware that he must pull what strings he can to get ahead, framing the utilising of contacts as a viable and legitimate strategy in this period of enhanced competition. Meanwhile Harvey, along with many of the other working-class students in the study (as will be discussed later), is keen to rely on himself and his degree, continuing to see the situation as one governed by meritocratic principles.

'I'd rather know that I'd got in there myself'

Whilst the majority of the working-class students inevitably discussed not having access to valuable social capital enshrined in networks and contacts of the sort already discussed, what is of particular interest here is three students who said they did (Abigail, Charlie and Rob). In contrast to the sense of entitlement displayed by the middle-class students who were confidently pulling strings where possible to give them an advantage, these students expressed a deep commitment to 'a sense of honour', a rejection of practices they viewed as morally corrupt, discussing a desire to 'make it themselves'.

Abigail: Yeah, there are loads of people. It's just I'd rather do it for myself, do you know what I mean? My mum's best friend worked for a big accounting firm and she was quite near the top as well, and then my dad's got a friend at a different accounting firm who's near the top, and I just don't want to kind of, I'd rather know that I'd got in there myself. […] No, I won't. I won't touch them. I'll do it myself. I'll go somewhere else if I can't get in where I want.

Charlie: I could get contacts and stuff like that and a step up easily from the family but I just wouldn't. [Why not?] Out of principle really. I just would hate to be that guy in the workplace who just got there not on his own merit, off like just knowing someone higher up.

Rob: I wouldn't want my family to help me because I want to be able to say 'I've achieved this without the help of someone else', whereas some of my friends from school are very much relying on who their grandparents know or who their parents know to get them a job at the end of it, which I don't agree with because if your parents have managed to get a career for themselves so why can't you.

Bourdieu discusses the way in which those in dominated positions in society reject things that are not available to them; the denial of what is already denied. Rather they develop tastes, practices and dispositions which are in line with their objective opportunities:

> The dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions […] generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands. The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable. (Bourdieu 1990, 54)

What is interesting here is that these students are rejecting the available. They explicitly discuss having contacts that they refuse to utilise. Here Bourdieu's theorising is helpful in a way in which he did not himself develop. He has not explained how and why some people choose not to exploit potential opportunities to advantage their position in a particular field. I argue that this phenomenon is a product and a part of social mobility; it is possible that these young people have developed a habitus in tune to a sense of honour which is in line with their field of origin in which meritocratic values are of central importance. They do not feel a sense of entitlement to exist in the middle-class field that they are venturing into; rather they feel that they must prove their worthiness. Honour is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as:

> Quality of character entitling a person to great respect; nobility of mind or spirit; honourableness, uprightness; a fine sense of, and strict adherence to, what is considered to be morally right or just. (OED 2014)

Bourdieu discusses honour mainly through his work in Algeria in relation to religious honour. Whilst this is a somewhat different context, the concept has validity and relevance for the present argument. Bourdieu writes:

> The point of honour is a permanent disposition, embedded in the agent's very bodies in the form of mental dispositions, schemes of perception and thought, […] what is called the sense of honour is nothing other than the cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body, schema and the schemes of thought'. (1977, 15)

A sense of honour is therefore part of the habitus, part of the 'system of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990, 53). Dominated communities are constantly subjected to feelings of shame (Sayer 2005b); their tastes practices and dispositions are arbitrarily devalued in a process of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977). Valerie Hey argues that traits of 'honour' and respectability are extremely important within such devalued communities as they attempt to fight against this discourse and present themselves as individuals of value and moral worth (Hey 2005; see also Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

It is possible to argue, then, that these young people have developed a sense of honour which, being part of their habitus, was developed from a dominated position within social space and in a sense pre-adapted to the demands of that location (Bourdieu 1990). Marcus, another working-class student, said: 'Where I come from the whole networking thing isn't really used'. From this location in social space, the act of utilising one's networks to secure a job in a middle-class industry is seen as morally corrupt. Andrew Sayer's seminal work on *The Moral Significance of Class* provides a useful foundation alongside Bourdieu to understand the underpinnings of the affective nature of class. He writes: '[Class] affects what we value, including how we value others and ourselves – for example whether we feel pride or shame, envy or contentment' (Sayer 2005b, 22). However, Sayer argues that morality is less classed than ascetic dispositions; people's tastes vary along class lines more so than morals and values. This, he argues, is what enables symbolic domination to occur through the shaming of those who appear not to adhere to the universal moral codes of acceptable behaviour: 'If there were not at least partial cross-class agreement on the valuation of ways

of life and behaviour, there would be little reason for class-related shame or concern about respectability' (Sayer 2005a, 955).

This is crucial to an understanding of what is happening here. The narratives expressed by the students may seem to suggest a classed nature to morality, with the working classes appearing to be behaving in a more honourable and morally just way. However, one could argue that whilst both groups may acknowledge that 'cheating' is wrong, it is the specificity of what exactly constitutes 'cheating' which is the point of contestation. This relates back to awareness of the rules of the game and who controls these rules. The middle classes who set the rules possess a greater awareness of the subtlety of them and are more adept to keep up with their changing nature. Thus they assert that using nepotistic tactics is not cheating, whilst for the working classes this appears to be dishonest and would undermine the legitimation of their status and position in the field. Instead they rely heavily on meritocratic principles as the 'right' route to success.

The quotes from Abigail, Charlie and Rob all display a commitment to ideals of meritocracy. Charlie explicitly uses the term 'merit', arguing that he would not want his position in the office to be defined by anything other than his own merit. Nepotism for them is seen as 'underhand'. Abigail and Rob express a wish for self-reliance. Abigail repeatedly says that she would rather 'do it for herself' and Rob says he wants to be able to say 'I've achieved this without the help of someone else'. It is as though they feel they need to prove themselves and accepting any help will devalue them and their achievements.

It is important to note that historically it is not uncommon for working-class communities to utilise contacts to secure their offspring jobs, it would be foolish to argue that working-class people are morally opposed to utilising contacts in general. What appears to be going on here is related to social mobility and understanding the rules of a new field. Why is it that these working-class young socially mobile people find the act of utilising a contact to secure entry into a middle-class occupation dishonourable? Arguably this is related to the higher stakes of the game; they have more to lose and further to fall as they attempt to climb the social ladder with caution. In a situation whereby a position of 'success' is defined by position within the labour market, these young people are certain that this must be attributable to nothing other than their own work ethic and commitment. They have had to fight harder than the middle-class students to get to where they are and they do not want their success to be undermined by a claim that they have cheated. This can be related back to the earlier discussion of power and the meritocratic tools used by the dominant to legitimate their position; the working classes need to believe in meritocracy in order to believe in themselves and to believe that they can 'make it'.

It is interesting to contrast these meritocratic sentiments expressed by the working-class students of doing it yourself and of 'proving oneself' to the discourse expressed by some middle-class students of a more confident entitlement, claiming that they have already proven themselves. Take Luke for example:

Interviewer: Do you think that people from different backgrounds will have the same opportunities as each other after university?

Luke: No. No, it is all about who you know. I mean obviously my job is essentially who I know. And even if I didn't get this job I would have been able to get another decent one just because of family members, or people that I know through my dad, or mum, […] I could think of about 3 or 4 people that would give me a decent paying job. I mean obviously maybe it is also to do with the fact that I have proven that I'm capable enough of doing it with the whole uni thing, but it is just a foot in the door. Like if you don't know anyone there's not really much to distinguish you, so I guess yeah, your opportunities are different.

Luke appears to have an awareness of a whole map of opportunities which are available to him primarily through his social capital. He appears to justify his right to use these through suggesting that he has 'proven himself' worthy of such careers by doing well at university. It could be argued that this is a product of a middle-class dominant habitus, confidently moving into a world where the habitus experiences ease, recognition and familiarity as Bourdieu puts it in the most well known of all his statements about habitus and field:

> When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like 'a fish in water': It does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted'. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127)

Like 'a fish in water', the students whose habitus was developed within a middle-class social space feel confident and entitled to exist in that field. As such they do not see a problem with using a contact to help to 'flag them up' to potential employers as they feel they are worthy of the job. They justify their right to top jobs through their qualifications; in a similar vein to how Bourdieu writes about the dominant bourgeois elite justifying their positions of power through reliance on diplomas (Bourdieu 1996), these middle-class students justify their worthiness to high flying careers through their success in university, whilst recognising that the degree is no longer enough to secure access to these jobs. In contrast to this, the working-class young people who are less familiar with the middle-class social space and whose habitus is not yet fully adapted to this world are more insecure about their worthiness to exist in this field. They are also less attuned to the changing nature of the game and thus 'read' their degrees as occupying a bigger space in shaping their opportunities than do the middle-class students. This need to prove in contrast with having already proven oneself is interesting when we consider that all the students discussed have in fact 'proven themselves' in the academic sense; all of the students mentioned were solidly on track for at least a 2:1 in their degrees.

The narratives of 'making it themselves' and rejecting 'the networking game' echo the sentiments of the 'Purists' discussed in Brown and Hesketh (2004), who – in contrast to the 'Players' – refused to engage in the competitive war for jobs. They rejected what they saw as cheating (the reconstruction of the self to fit with the company), feeling that they should be true to themselves which would result in greater happiness in employment when they find a job that is right for them; where the employer wants them for who they are. However, Brown and Hesketh (2004) question whether these young people will adapt their strategies when they fail to find employment in such competitive times and resign themselves to the fact that unless they engage in Player strategies they may never find a job. Similarly one might question whether the young people discussed may resort to using whatever contacts they can when they find that what they believed to be a meritocratic market place is in fact a tough-entry, cut-throat industry where mobilising of whatever capitals one has is crucial.

'I do feel guilty but …'

It is important not to overlook the fact that not all of the middle-class students expressed a sense of shameless entitlement with regards to their social capital; some of them expressed a deep sense of guilt, but this was usually followed or preceded by awareness that this was necessary in the competitive market. One middle-class student Sebastian discussed this:

> My dad has contacts and stuff but I haven't used them. I would feel quite bad doing that, but a lot of my friends certainly have. Like they've very shamelessly got their dad to get them internships and things – that definitely helps.

Sebastian does not indicate that he would 'never' use his dad's contacts but says that he has not used them to date, providing one example of a middle-class student who appears to be morally opposed to gaining an advantage through social capital. This sentiment chimes with that expressed by parents in Reay, Crozier, and James' (2011) seminal work on *White Middle-class Identities and Urban Schooling*. Many parents in the study discussed being opposed to using unethical tactics to secure their children 'the best' educational opportunities. However, they were reluctant to rule them out completely, keeping them as a – less than ideal – fall-back plan if their social position was seriously threatened (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). Sebastian's response is rare amongst the cohort and, as afore-mentioned, in the majority of instances the middle-class shame was felt in conjunction with a willingness to 'do whatever it takes'. Nicholas provides one such example of these feelings:

> My dad's quite high up in renewable engineering, so like advises the government. So a lot of people owe him a lot of favours around the country. So when it comes to finding an internship, if everything doesn't go well this summer, I can pretty much go to France and study in Lyon for a couple of months, because people owe him a lot of favours. Which is really, I'm really not proud of it, it's quite embarrassing to say.

He continues when prompted by the interviewer as to whether he has family who could help him directly get a job:

Nicholas: Not really to give me a job, just help with, there's a family Law firm – which makes me sound really rich, it's not, just I suppose a family law firm which none of the family are actually in anymore it's just got the name of the family, so that comes in handy I suppose – or will. It's come in handy for my parents and it might come in handy for me for a lot of things but I don't know, probably not any companies where I could directly just ask for a job and get it. No. […] And that's probably a good thing.

Interviewer: Why is it a good thing?

Nicholas: Well I already feel bad for like relying on my dad to get an internship so much, but complete nepotism is a bit, it doesn't show like you've actually achieved anything yourself.

Nicholas mentions that his dad is 'owed a lot of favours'. Bourdieu discusses the way in which social capital is constructed and maintained through mutual exchange:

> Exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, re-produces the group. (Bourdieu [1986] 2002, 287)

So if we consider that social capital relies on a mutual exchange it is possible to speculate that the working-class students who reject the idea of utilising any contacts may be doing so due to feeling like they have nothing to offer in exchange. Perhaps, in contrast to Nicholas' comment, they do not feel they or their parents are 'owed any favours' or are potentially not confident in their ability to return the favour in the future.

It is clear that Nicholas is not completely comfortable with this mutual exchange or 'favour' expressing feelings of internal conflict and guilt. He comments at the end that by using social capital to give you an advantage you are essentially devaluing your achievements. This chimes with the sentiments of Abigail, Charlie and Rob; however, it differs in that Nicholas accepts that he will use the social capital if he cannot find anything himself, but he is conscious that resorting to this is a marker of a failure to make it himself – this is something the working-class students discussed refuse to accept. Perhaps this can be linked

to their resilience, an asset they have had to demonstrate throughout life as they fight to be recognised as worthy in society (Bradley and Ingram 2013).

Implications

As the analysis presented highlights, the expansion of HE may have brought along with it further inequalities. Upon graduating, young people are faced with a number of obstacles to securing jobs emerging from their differential resources and beliefs. The working-class students discussed here who committed to meritocratic principals are at risk of being left behind. Their middle-class peers appeared more willing to disregard such a framework and use social capital, engaging in competitive 'player tactics' (Brown and Hesketh 2004) to secure jobs. Before concluding this article I will discuss why these young people may be more predisposed to believing in meritocracy and then go on to consider some policy implications regarding equalising the graduate recruitment playing field.

The myth of meritocracy

Bourdieu argues that meritocracy is a 'sociodicy', an ideological tool used to mask the real structural inequality in the system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). Reay powerfully sums this up: 'The myth of meritocracy normalises inequalities, converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities' (1998, 1). Sayer (2005b) highlights that those who have individualistic explanations for inequality are more likely to experience feelings of 'shame' which is a pre-requisite for symbolic domination. Thus it is possible to argue that dominated groups are more likely to accept the meritocratic framework as it was constructed to ensure they remain hopeful that they can make it if they just work hard enough. If they 'fail' they blame themselves, rather than turning their anger towards the state. Meanwhile, the middle classes are more able to overlook meritocracy. If they 'fail' in education they can exchange other resources (e.g. social capital) to ensure success (Bourdieu [1984] 2010). Thus they need not rely solely on their own talent and hard work. For the working classes, meritocracy is their only hope for experiencing social mobility.

It is interesting to revisit the paradox outlined in the Introduction. That young people are being encouraged to 'network', yet at the same time the dominant ideology of meritocracy implicitly rules out nepotism because it relies on an individualistic framework of self-reliance and hard work. Arguably 'networking' for oneself is more acceptable because it is in line with the individualistic discourse. However, it remains problematic for those working-class young people who buy strongly into meritocracy because it appears that, despite being encouraged to network, it seems to contradict their aims of making it themselves.

Unequal outcomes: policy implications

Regardless of the reasons for this difference in young people's ability and willingness to use social capital, it is crucial to challenge the inequality in outcomes due to this. Why is it that experiences middle-class students have a greater ability to engage in are favoured by employers? In doing so they are missing the value of the working-class students' experiences. Many of the working-class students displayed immense amounts of resilience (Bradley and Ingram 2013), a characteristic which one might expect to see recognised and valued in the

labour market. Lots were engaged in term-time employment; this itself was often a barrier to them being able to participate in CV-building activities or unpaid work-experience placements (Waller, Mellor, and Hoare 2012). The skills they develop through balancing paid work alongside their degrees are invaluable and need to be viewed as such by employers. Lehmann (2009) writes about the way in which the working-class students in his research constructed 'moral advantages' to enable themselves to negotiate and overcome the structural disadvantages they faced at university. Zoe, a working-class student from Paired Peers, powerfully makes this point:

> The vast majority of people in this university have never *worked-worked* but they've had work experience because someone's arranged it. They don't know what 'work' is yet. But I already know what work is, so I think that any employer that I talk to would appreciate and value that as much, or even more, as saying 'oh I have this work experience' blah, blah. 'Oh well you couldn't really have work experience at the time because you had other commitments, you were working-working to support yourself through university'. So I think that's probably more of a beneficial thing to have – well I hope anyway.

The project ended just as the students graduated[5] so whilst the picture at graduation was indeed one of inequality, with many more middle-class students securing graduate jobs or indeed work-experience placements for the post-graduation summer, it remains to be seen whether Zoe is right that her experience of actually working will benefit her in her attempts to enter into her chosen career. For now the implications of this article for policy-makers, universities and those responsible for graduate recruiters across the sector are threefold. First is that there is a need to recognise that the work experiences which are (arbitrarily) located as superior are unequally accessible to all students. There is a move towards this within universities in the sense of removing financial barriers, with some institutions offering to pay for unpaid placements; however, this understanding of the inequality within this process needs to be broadened to encompass the inequality in access to setting these up through informal contacts. Secondly, in an era when access to these CV-building activities are extremely unequal, employers must be encouraged to recognise the value in working-class students struggles, resilience and paid forms of term-time employment. Finally, working-class students need support to know how to package themselves in such a way that draws out the skills they have developed throughout these jobs and their life experiences.

Conclusion

Bourdieu argues that in times of diploma inflation those who possess social capital are able to substitute it for formal qualifications or indeed use it to ensure they get the 'maximum return' on their investment (Bourdieu [1984] 2010, 143). This article has provided unique insight into this field through demonstrating that it is not only about 'who you know' but also about a feel for the game and a willingness to engage in it. The middle-class students discussed here, whose habitus was acutely attuned to the rules of the game in this field, were aware that a degree was no longer enough. Thus, whilst it was not always shameless, they were more able and willing to 'pull strings' to secure themselves desired jobs. Arguably this is related to their habitus and a taken-for-granted sense of entitlement to occupy particular industries; feeling worthy of the middle-class jobs but just needing someone to 'see' them. Meanwhile, the working-class students discussed in this article displayed a commitment to 'a sense of honour' which ruled out using social capital to gain an advantage as morally

unacceptable, preferring to make it themselves. Only three working-class students have been discussed here as rejecting using contacts. As such, it is not my intention to generalise these findings to all working-class students; nevertheless, looking at these unusual examples presents an interesting case which arguably warrants future research. The sentiments of 'making it themselves' and an (over-)reliance on the degree, however, was discussed more widely by the working-class cohort who, similar to Brown and Hesketh's (2004) 'Purists', bought more fully into the meritocratic ideas regarding employability than their middle-class peers. These students are in the process of social mobility; as such their habitus may be changing and it remains to be seen whether those attempting to make it in the 'elite' competitive marketplace may change their mind about the strategy of 'making it themselves' if they find it to be unsuccessful.

Notes

1. POLAR (Participation of Local Area) is a classification devised by the Higher Education Funding Council which represents the proportion of young people who continue to HE from each area. POLAR2 represents that this is the second version.
2. This focus on the working classes as lacking entirely in any form of capital is often the central tenet of criticism directed at Bourdieu, who is seen as a determinist. However, this is usually merely due to a misunderstanding of his concepts. Social capital is about having contacts who possess capitals which – whilst not objectively superior – are misrecognised as such and thus are more able to be traded in society and to return some form of profit.
3. Intermediate/unclassifiable was used for participants whom we felt did not solidly fall into either the middle or working classes. These were either those in intermediate classes or those whose parents appeared in differing class positions.
4. Following some initial dropouts, our sample remained relatively stable at around 70 whom we interviewed six times over the course of their degrees (2010–2013). For further information about the project, visit: www.bristol.ac.uk/pairedpeers.
5. Thanks to the Leverhulme Trust, the project has now been awarded funding for another three years to follow our students into the labour market; as such, this issue will need to be revisited later down the line to establish the extent to which nepotism continued to affect their chances of employment.

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