

Constructions of class: defining students' social class in the Paired Peers project

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The Paired Peers Project
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Overview

- Why research social class and higher education?
- The Paired Peers project
- Defining and assigning social class positions to students in the Paired Peers project

Why research social class and higher education?

Class hasn't gone away...

"Of course we don't mix with the state school people, they are so backward."

Comment by ex Bristol University law student

on Guardian on-line responses to Paired Peers press item: How does class affect student behaviour? Rich and poor students have different experience of university life. (Guardian on-line, 25.1.11)

Why class matters in relation to higher education

- Deep-rooted social divisions in wealth and income persist in the UK (Gordon et al, 2006)
- Education contributes to reproducing and challenging inequalities of class (and gender and ethnicity)
- Higher education is perceived as crucial to social mobility in government policy
- But there is an emphasis on individual mobility and equalising opportunities rather than equalising outcomes between social classes as a whole

Aims of the Paired Peers project

1. To explore the differentiation and stratification of HE in one UK region.
2. To identify negative and positive experiences of working-class and middle-class students, how these may change over a three-year degree, and compare educational outcomes.
3. To explore the relative impacts of degree courses, students' backgrounds, places of study and spatial relations.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of a matched-pairs research design.
5. Theoretically, using ideas drawn from Bourdieu and others, to study micro-level impacts of different forms of capital in replicating or challenging existing patterns of social inequality.

Project design:

3 year longitudinal study

- 'Paired' 'peers'
- 11 subjects matched at UWE and University of Bristol (biological sciences, drama, English, engineering, economics and accounting, geography, history, law, politics, psychology and sociology)
- 2 middle class, 2 working class students in each subject at each university e.g.
History:
UWE – 2 working class, 2 middle class
UoB – 2 working class, 2 middle class
- 90 students recruited
- Followed for 3 years

Defining social class

- Class as an economic relationship
Class as a broader set of social relationships, including lifestyle, educational experiences, patterns of residence, as well as economic wealth.
- Class as a system of social structures that can be categorized based on a variety of indicators
Class as process, emphasising the individualized experience of inequalities, and the diversity of social experience.

What informs our understanding of 'class'?

A definition which seeks a broad conceptualisation of class, combining an understanding of material structures of inequality with understandings of the diversity of personal experience:

'a nexus of unequal lived relationships arising from the social organization of production, distribution, exchange and consumption.' (Bradley, 1996: 46)

'a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions.' (Reay, 1998: 259)

The significance of different forms of capital: economic, cultural and social.

Class as related to consumption as well as production: HE is increasingly conceived of as a commodity which is positioned in a consumer market via league tables and university rankings

Using the C word

We do not necessarily anticipate that students will speak the language of 'class'. We are aware that, as Bradley (1996) has commented:

'class is now a passive rather than an active identity. We could go further and say that at the moment class identities are submerged identities, pushed out of sight by others which jostle more urgently for public attention.

Moreover, people are often reluctant to talk in class terms in a society in which classlessness though not attained, is seen as the desired ideal.' (Bradley, 1996: 72)

Classifying HE students by social class

Variables used by HEFCE and HESA

- NS-SEC (UK National Statistics Socio-economic Classification)
- POLAR (postcode categorisation of home neighbourhood by participation in HE)
- School (state school or private school) or college attended.

NS-SEC

| Class | Occupation |
|-------|---|
| 1 | Higher managerial and professional occupations |
| | 1.1 Large employers and higher managerial occupations |
| | 1.2 Higher professional occupations |
| 2 | Lower managerial and professional occupations |
| 3 | Intermediate occupations |
| 4 | Small employers and own account workers |
| 5 | Lower supervisory and technical occupations |
| 6 | Semi-routine occupations |
| 7 | Routine occupations |
| 8 | Never worked and long-term unemployed |

POLAR

A five point scale developed by HEFCE and HESA, to represent the proportion of young people in a particular area who progress to full-time higher education.

1 is lowest participation: <16%

5 is high participation: > 40%

1 and 2 are defined as low participation neighbourhoods.

Very broadly speaking, it is expected that working class people (NS-SEC 4 to 7) are predominantly found in areas with a low POLAR statistic (POLAR 1 and 2).

Classification of undergraduate students at UoB and UWE based on variables used by HEFCE/HESA

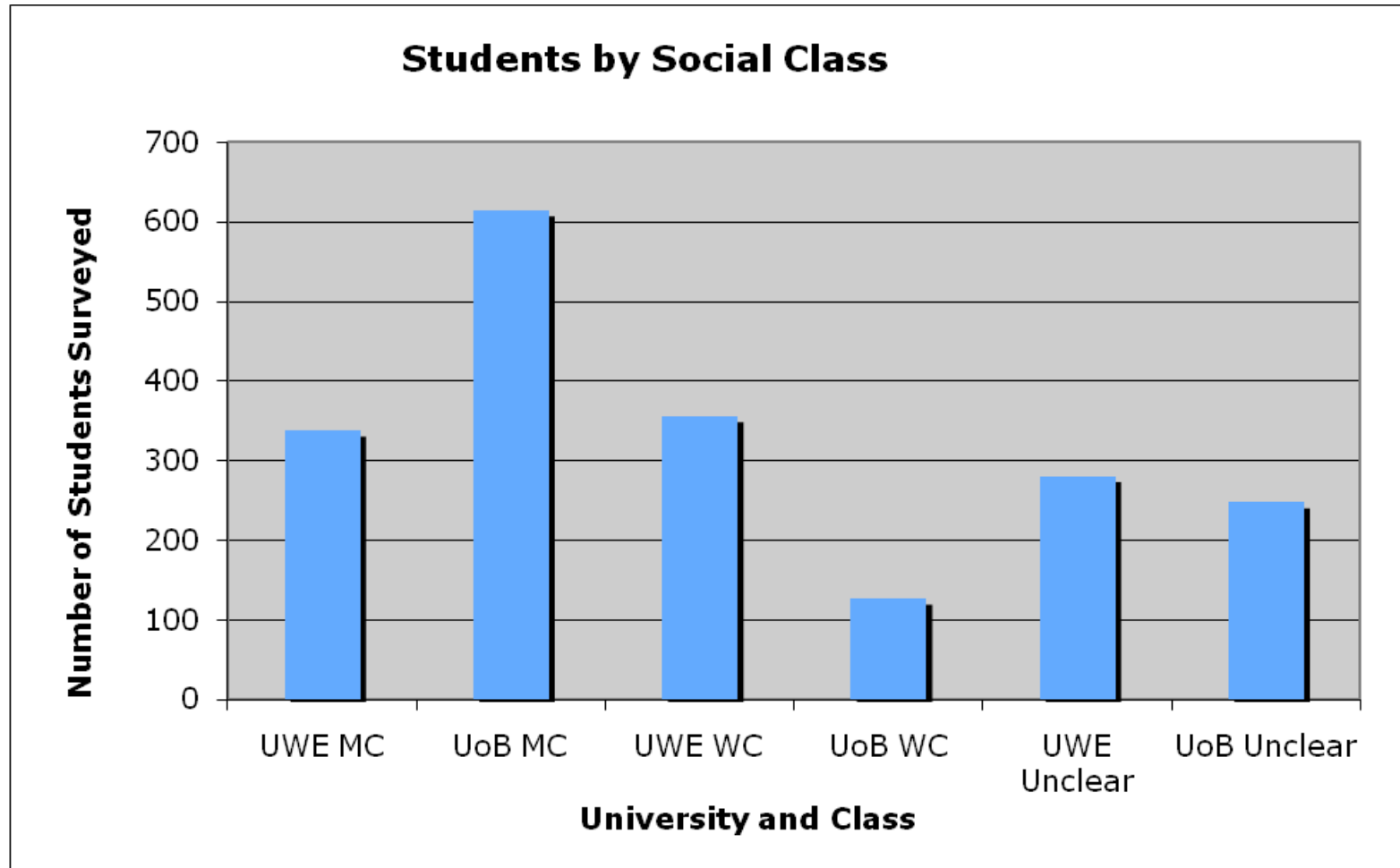
| Category | | 2009/10 |
|--|-----|---------|
| % Students from socio-economic groups 4-7 | UoB | 13.4 |
| | UWE | 28.9 |
| % Students from Low Participation Areas (POLAR2) | UoB | 11.9 |
| | UWE | 10.2 |
| % Students from state schools | UoB | 60.1 |
| | UWE | 89.6 |

Recruiting students and identifying social class in the PP project

Preliminary questionnaire gathered information on

- Parents' occupations
- Parents' experience of HE
- Home postcode
- School/college attended
- Whether students at school/college had gone on to HE
- Receipt of grant or bursary
- Students' own designation of their social class.

Class breakdown of students responding to initial questionnaire (n=1959)



USING NS-SEC: Class categorisation of participants shown against NS-SEC categorisation of parents' occupations

| NS-SEC category (average of both parents where applicable) | 1-2 | 3 | 4 | 5-7 | Unclassified |
|---|-----|---|---|-----|--------------|
| UWE MC | 16 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| UWE WC | 4 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 4 |
| UoB MC | 22 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| UoB WC | 5 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 5 |

Examples of occupations from different NS-SEC categories in Paired Peers sample

| | NS-SEC categorisation | Examples of occupations |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Higher managerial and professional occupations, including large employers | Accountant, ICT Analyst, University Lecturer, Chartered Building Surveyor, Army Officer, Dental Consultant, Lawyer, General Practitioner, Vicar |
| 2 | Lower managerial and professional occupations | Music band tour operator, Teacher, Personnel Manager, Midwife, Lettings Agent, Head Teacher, Occupational therapist |
| 3 | Intermediate occupations | School secretary, Accounts clerk, Nursing auxiliary, Clerical worker |
| 4 | Small employers and own account workers | Taxi driver, Window cleaner, Restaurant owner, Painter/decorator, Chauffeur |
| 5 | Lower supervisory and technical occupations | Printer, Landscape gardener, Heating engineer, Yard Worker |
| 6 | Semi-routine occupations | Care assistant, Sales assistant, Special needs carer, receptionist |
| 7 | Routine occupations | Van driver, storeman, cleaning supervisor, lunch-time supervisor |
| 8 | Never worked and long-term unemployed | None in questionnaire returns |

**USING POLAR: Class categorisation of students
(as assigned in the PP project) set against POLAR
classification of neighbourhood**

| | POLAR category | | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------|---|---------|---------|
| | 5 (High) | 4 (High) | 3 | 2 (Low) | 1 (Low) |
| UWE MC | 7 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| UWE WC | 2 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 3 |
| UoB MC | 9 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| UoB WC | 4 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 1 |

Class categorisation of participants shown against parents' participation in HE

| | 1 parent with HE qualification (in 2 parent families) | 2 Parents with HE qualification | Single Parent with HE qualification | No parents with HE qualification |
|-------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| UWE MC | 6 | 12 | 3 | 1 |
| UWE WC | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 |
| UoB MC | 7 | 14 | 2 | 0 |
| UoB WC | 0 | 1 | 0 | 20 |

Students in receipt of grant or bursary

| | Award of bursary or grant | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|-----------|
| | Yes | No |
| UWE MC | 4 | 18 |
| UWE WC | 14 | 10 |
| UoB MC | 4 | 19 |
| UoB WC | 12 | 9 |

Students' self-designation of social class

| Project designation | | Self designation | | |
|---------------------|----|-------------------|--------------------|-------|
| | | Middle-class (MC) | Working-class (WC) | Other |
| UWE MC | 22 | 13 | 1 | 8 |
| UWE WC | 24 | 4 | 15 | 5 |
| UoB MC | 23 | 20 | 0 | 3 |
| UoB WC | 20 | 6 | 8 | 6 |

Contradictory class positions

We found:

- A considerable number of single parent families, and allied to this, downward mobility in terms of income and economic resources
- Some highly educated parents who were working in poorly paid jobs and/or who were very over-qualified for the job they were doing
- Some 'working-class' students who had attended private school
- Some 'working-class' students judged by markers of cultural capital such as parental education and school/college attended, but whose parents had considerable disposable income
- Students whose self definition of class did not match the class assignation we gave them e.g. the son of a consultant surgeon who self defined as working-class
- Students from "mixed class" families where one parent had a professional job and higher education and the other did not. Resulting in 'contradictory class positions' (Bradley, 1996; Reay, 1998), or 'the muddle in the middle'.

Assignment of social class to participants in the Paired Peers study

| | Total number | % |
|--------|--------------|-------|
| UoB M | 23 | 26% |
| UWE M | 20 | 22% |
| UoB M- | 0 | |
| UWE M- | 1 | 0.01% |
| UoB W+ | 10 | 11% |
| UWE W+ | 8 | 9% |
| UoB W | 11 | 12% |
| UWE W | 16 | 18% |

Approximately 20% (19) of our participants are in the 'muddle in the middle'. This grouping may represent an 'intermediate class' (Goldthorpe, 1996) and provide insights into:

Processes of upward mobility amongst aspiring working-class and lower middle class families

The mobilisation of cultural and social capital by middle class families to prevent downward mobility by families.

Mobilisation of capital

We have found that students talk about access to different forms of capital that can be mobilised to make and shape participation in HE and potentially influence the effect of participation in HE on future life.

Some students can mobilise family economic capital

Justin, working-class, Psychology, University of Bristol

Justin's mother is a secretary and his father is a self-employed window cleaner and neither of his parents have been to university. However during the interview he explained that his university education is being funded by his wealthy maternal grandmother, and his mother appears to be from a middle class background.

J: My dad is a self-employed window cleaner at the moment but he used to drive taxis. My mum is a secretary for a local branch of nurses in the NHS - for the time being, but she's hunting around at the moment.

I: You talked about your affluent grandmother?

J: She has built up a small fortune on the basis of my....my late grandfather did a lot....he was pretty high up in Kodak and he earned a lot and she got lucky with investments I think. And I think she's sitting on top of a pretty small fortune.

Some students can mobilise family social and cultural capital

Elliott, middle class, English at University of Bristol

I: So how did you go from being in Northern Ireland to going to (TOP PUBLIC SCHOOL)? I kind of want to understand the mechanisms there, the decisions that were made, and why you decided to go there.

Elliott: my parents were from public school I think it's kind of a....you know, if you go to a public school you want your children to go - well aren't averse to having your children going. But as I said, I never would have been able to financially. But one of my dad's friends was a....it was actually one of his teachers way back in the past, was involved....or knew about this scheme that (TOP PUBLIC SCHOOL) did and he said "why not go for it". So I went to (TOP PUBLIC SCHOOL) for 2 days of testing, testing everything. The idea of the scheme, it's meant to be kind of broad, you're meant to be able to kind of make the best use of the school pretty much, so it was testing on everything from....well not everything, but academic and sport and everything we were into by kind of headmasters and house masters and all that. Actually there was a programme about it, Too Poor for Posh School, it was called.

The scholarship was worth nearly £200,000 (two hundred thousand pounds) in total.

Some students do not have family cultural capital to mobilise

Amelia, working-class, Biology, University of Bristol

I: Yeah. So who influenced your decision to go to university?

Amelia: It was entirely my choice to be honest. My parents didn't really....it's not that they didn't take an interest but they didn't really know anything about it so....Like some of my friends, their parents were kind of like they were wanting them to go to a certain place or they didn't want them to go to a certain place more so, but my parents, they just sort of....they wanted me to go where I wanted to, just do whatever I wanted to do. They didn't come on the Open Days with me, not because they didn't want to but because they couldn't with work and things like that. Like they've come to see it since I've got in, like we went down to visit but they hadn't seen it before then. And they seem impressed by it all but I don't think they really kind of understand that aspect of things. They know it's a good uni but they don't really understand like the ins and outs of it.

Some students' experience is shaped by access to economic capital

Aaron: Working class studying Geography at UWE

We are currently renting a 4-bed house, and because my mum's not working at the moment, she's looking after my youngest brother, if I moved out during term time then she would have to move house again and go into a 3-bed, because they wouldn't pay for me to still be there. So that was the main reason I was kind of staying local, because otherwise then it would mean the whole family having to move just for the sake of me going away to university, and I didn't really.....although I wanted to I didn't....you know, on balance I couldn't really expect them to do that for me.

Some students appear to want to leave their 'class' behind...

H- male: Working class Economics University of Bristol

Like a lot of my friends all throughout my life, my peers have not been by friends. Because the people who have the same sort of aspirations, or the people who are at the same academic level as me are not in the same social groups at all. But what I quite like about being here is that the people I'm friends with here wouldn't be people I was friends with at home, just because of social groups, common interests. I wouldn't be friends with the people who are on my floor [Hall of Residence], I mean they're completely different to me, but because I live with them you sort of have to talk to them. And now I really like these people that I wouldn't have even took the time to know at home just because of....I don't' know.

Some students' experience is shaped by a semi-conscious understanding of 'class'

T – female: Working class Politics UWE

A lot of people on my course I just don't understand them at all, like they're just....I don't know. Although they're doing the same course as me I just....I find some of them really difficult to talk to...Snobs I guess. I know that's horrible, but a lot of them are just....yeah I just find them like intimidating and sometimes they're quite like patronising towards me.

there's this one boy and he's from....somewhere.... he's had quite like a wealthy background, and every time I try to speak to him he's just really like "off" with me and really funny about it. And every time I say my opinions in the seminars he will just like completely cut me down, just like "no".

Class matters

I did my undergraduate degree at a Russell Group university just over 10 years ago. Class differences were not very evident in terms of making friends, socialising etc. But (and this is a big but) class differences became very evident when it came to gaining work experience and obtaining jobs.

(Guardian on-line comment 3)

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