



# Higher Education, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals

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# Overview

- The Paired Peers Project
- Changing graduate recruitment markets: the opportunity trap
- Playing the ‘game’: using Bourdieu’s conceptual tools to examine processes of capital accumulation
- Knowing what the game is
- Generating capitals through Extra-curricular activities (ECA)
- Conclusions



# The Paired Peers project

- longitudinal study of undergraduate students through 3 years of a Bachelor degree in England (2010-2013).  
Aims and objectives:
  - to compare systematically the experiences of pairs of students from different social classes, attending two universities in the same city in England
    - 1: the traditional 'elite' University of Bristol (UoB)
    - 2: the 'new' more teaching-focused University of the West of England (UWE).
  - to identify the various kinds of capital that students from different classes brought into their university experience (economic, social, cultural, and so forth), and to explore the various types of capital they acquired over the three years.
  - to examine differing processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students that may enhance future social positioning.



# Participants in the PP project

	UWE	UoB	Total
Working-class female	6	15	21
Working-class male	13	6	19
Middle-class female	10	11	21
Middle-class male	8	12	20
Total working-class	19	21	40
Total middle-class	18	23	41
Total	37	44	81



# The opportunity trap

- Phil Brown and colleagues challenge the notion of a straightforward ‘graduate premium’
- Instead a ‘global war for talent’



# The war for talent in changing graduate recruitment markets

- Need for 'positional advantage' within the graduate recruitment market  
'(W)hile we can all be encouraged to do our best, we cannot all be the best' (Brown 2003:144).
- 'cashing in one's opportunities requires access to scarce credentials, jobs and networks' (Brown 2003:150).
- 'Ranking tournaments'  
social structures of competition for prestigious graduate careers  
switch in emphasis from meritocracy to market place



## Cont...

Changing recruitment criteria (Brown and Hesketh 2004)

- paper qualifications just the preliminary stage
- first class degree from a first class university, and a first class CV and 'soft skills' as well. Increasing emphasis on 'soft skills' at the expense of 'technical' ones (Grugulis and Vincent (2009) - "good" employees display the 'right' skills in acceptable and accepted ways' (2009:600).



# A 'global war for talent'

Brown and Tannock 2009

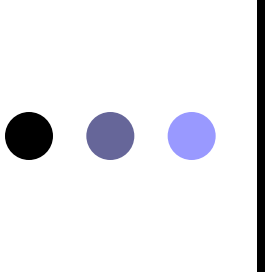
- upper- and upper-middle-class families seek 'to position their children in the most prestigious schools and programmes, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite' (2009:384)
- This 'global war for talent' is fuelled by the assumption that education remains the way to get ahead, to secure a high wage and a comfortable quality of life, and that this is rightly the case, for the individual, the employer and the nation state.





# Playing the game – using Bourdieu's conceptual tools

- The need to acquire and mobilise resources in the form of 'capitals' (economic, cultural, social and so forth) that are valued in a particular 'field' of social action
- Agents are positioned in the field in dominant and dominated positions as a result of the capitals they possess
- Conscious and unconscious 'strategising' by agents in order to position themselves



# Having a ‘feel’ for the game

You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*. The game is the locus of an imminent necessity, which is at the same time an imminent logic. In the game you can’t just do anything and get away with it. And the feel for the game, which contributes to this necessity and this logic, is a way of knowing this necessity and this logic. Whoever wants to win this game, appropriate the stakes, catch the ball... must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and the logic of the game. (Bourdieu 1990: p.64)



# Knowing what the game is

Our participants usually demonstrated a clear awareness of 'the game' of obtaining a much sought after graduate position. For example Garry:

Going back a few years it seemed to be, a degree in anything is you know, but you got a 2:1 was a statement in itself about someone, (but now)...more and more people do go on to higher education and have degrees, whether almost that seems to, perhaps unfairly, water down what a degree is or how it's regarded. I don't know. It's almost like sort of ... market forces being a bit like, if there's more of something that something becomes less valuable, like money in inflation. (Garry: W/C, UoB, History)



# But it's not straightforward

I've realised that, especially when it comes to university, that where you went is a lot more important than what you did. And there's people now that are doing...like they've got the internships that I'd love and they're doing sort of Sociology degrees and something like that. (Harvey: W/C, UoB, Economics)



# Middle-class advantage

I'm sure my networking helped as well, I'm absolutely convinced...I have one family member in an investment bank in London who is a distant, distant relative who my dad put me in contact with and said "oh yeah do you know such and such is in..." So I met with him in London, which was a useful contact, and if I'd got to the final stages of the interview process there that probably would have been quite helpful. As regards other contacts....(I)...worked for my mum and dad's accountant, for their work...spend a few days with him, whack it on the CV and they think "oh look he's done some accounting" – tick box. (Nathan: M/C, UoB, Law)



# Mobilising capitals through Extra-curricular activities

- Sports
- Leisure societies – debating, reading, photography
- Political societies
- Subject societies – philosophy, history, engineering, English



# Active generation of capitals

I'm...carrying on really, trying to do well in academic side of it but also keep up like the sports and stuff, because that's...so many people have good academic skills and academic qualifications. And also you're up against pretty much a lot of people from other countries as well, because I always forget it's not just like English unis.

Francesca: M/C, UWE, Law



# Active generation of capitals

assuming positions of responsibility:  
being on committees, becoming  
secretary of the cheer-leading squad  
(Harriet, UWE, middle-class), Vice  
President of the Aero Society  
(Jennifer, UoB, middle-class) and  
president of the English society  
(Melissa, UoB, working-class).

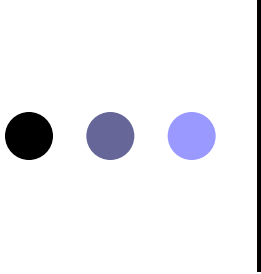




# Instinctive generation of capitals

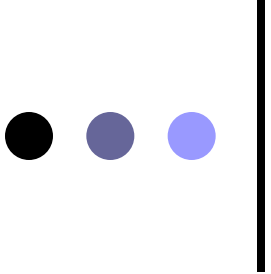
Jack carries on where his parents left off. What they did:

Oh just making sure we've got something that we can have for the future, like windsurfing, surfing, trumpet, climbing, I've done so many activities when I was little it's just stupid. And then so now my sister's now working all round the world doing windsurf teaching and stuff like this, and I've taught break dancing and stuff like that. So kind of setting us up for the future rather than just giving us PS3s [PlayStation 3 games machine]. (Jack, middle-class, UWE)



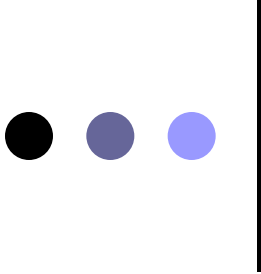
# Barriers to the generation of capitals through ECA

I love to meet new people so it was a bit disappointing, [...] but this year unfortunately I couldn't really afford to join any societies or anything. But I have been playing football and stuff with my mates just down the local park and stuff [...]. (Henry, working-class, UWE)



# Barriers to the generation of capitals through ECA

I physically don't have time. [...] I'd love to get involved but I physically can't. Which is another frustrating thing then because I feel like I am not making the most out of my time here.  
(Zoe, working-class, UoB)



# Barriers to the generation of capitals through ECA

the person who runs the society isn't one we'd sort of generally think that we'd include in our social group as it were. [...] The sort of vocabulary he uses and things like that, sort of very well spoken vocabulary whereas ... we use sort of more relaxed vocabulary as we're good friends, because when you're with friends you don't use a form of vocabulary like you would for example in an interview or something. (Rob, working-class, UWE)



## Engaging in activities unlikely to generate 'valuable' capitals

... there's like four of us in my flat especially that get on really well, we just sit in the kitchen, make food together, have a chat. It's nice to like catch up after like a day, because we all go like our separate ways in the day and then come back. It's quite like a little family. (Jade, working-class, UoB)



## Engaging in activities unlikely to generate 'valuable' capitals

- Working-class young men spent time playing X box
- Sariah (working-class female, UWE) explained that she spent her time 'going out clubbing and stuff and, you know, shopping, every girl likes to shop.'



# Conclusions: playing the 'employability' game

- Uneven or unequal playing field but also the game has changed
- There are disadvantages in not being ready for the game – lack of pre-disposition towards capital accumulation
- Those in dominant and dominated positions likely to remain so based on the capacity to generate and exploit additional capital, particularly middle class advantage over privileged access to capitals (through not having distraction of work, through having economic support of parents, through privileged networks)



# Conclusions: implications

- It is not just the habitus that prevents working-class students from mobilising capital in the same way as middle-class students, but structural barriers and access to valuable capitals. Identifying these issues shows up areas where institutions could and should intervene, e.g.
  - the need for resources such as time and finances
  - the need for social capital – connections
  - the need to develop capacities to mobilise these resources effectively.
- Bourdieu's conceptual tools provide a means of surfacing patterns of inequalities and thus provide the possibility of seeking to challenge and change established practices