

Gaining an advantage through education?

Social class and student experiences of higher education at an elite and a non-elite university in one UK city

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UK University Education and Social Mobility

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

The Paired Peers Project

- The two universities in the city of Bristol
- 1 Post-92 (and former polytechnic) and 1 Russell Group
- 80 students in total recruited from 10 subjects taught at each university
- 4 students from each subject
- 2 working-class and 2 middle-class
- Pairs matched by social background, class and subject
- 3 year project: from freshers to finals

A brief note on assigning social class

- Questionnaire data
 - Parental employment
 - Parental educational qualifications
 - School
 - Estimate of proportion of friends who went to university
 - Grant bursary
 - Self definition of class

The Two Universities in Bristol

- UWE Facts and Figures
 - 11.1% students are from independently educated backgrounds (2005-2007)
 - 2.5% students with FSM entitlement



The University of the West of England

- Campus University
- Bristol Suburbs

The Two Universities in Bristol

- University of Bristol Facts and Figures
 - Third most elitist university in England (36.8% of students in 2005-2007 period were from independently educated backgrounds)
 - 0.9% had FSM entitlement



The University of Bristol

- An old university in the heart of the city

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Data Collection

- Interviews twice a year
- Student approaching the end of year 2 of their studies (degree programs are usually 3 years in UK)
- Types of interview
 - Biographical (focused on life path to university)
 - Settling in
 - A week in the life of a student
 - Study and future career

Class, Cultural Capital and University

- Students bring different forms of capital with them to university depending on their prior experiences
- Not just acquiring a degree whilst at university
- Building other forms of capital and resourcing the self
 - Extra-Curricular Activities
 - Voluntary Work
 - Involvement in the Students' Union

Class and CV Building

I'm incredibly career focused really. So obviously applying for internships, because that's the main way in that industry that you get a job. Like learning in my spare time, I'm studying at the minute for a Certificate in Corporate Finance...Also Investment Society, so helping other students get into the industry or get interested about it as well, so looking through CVs and things like that. What else? Like mootng, things like that, just things that build up your CV really, all the things that I'm doing at the moment... [I] do mootng in my spare time. Because you see some of these people – I know particularly if you want to become a barrister it's ridiculous, you see these people who are, you know, run a soup kitchen in their spare time, got a First Class Honours in their degree, been to Africa and saved a school from famine, you know, it's absolutely ridiculous how much they have. So you've got to try and aim for that or try or match it, try and build up your CV because it's so competitive. **(Bristol Middle class male)**

Class and CV Building

One thing that does confuse me is the fact that, as I say, like I wish I was a bit more sort of on the ball when it came to the internships, but I didn't...it's the first time I've ever done it and I didn't realise how early you need to prep. As I say, it's for summer, and pretty much all the deadlines are done now and people who knew whether they had anything were getting interviews back in July, and I wasn't even thinking about it by then. **(Bristol working-class male)**

Class, Social Capital and University

- Internships and family connections
- Exclusive friendship networks

Do you think your family will be able to help you find a job?

Well I guess this interview I had over Easter was through a family friend who is the partner of the firm so hopefully, so that would help. But I don't look to go back, I'm not looking to go back to (home locality) afterwards so, I can't see it helping after this too much. Saying that, my previous work experience last summer was over here in Bath and that was through one of my dad's contacts through work, so I guess there's always the chance that you can find something through them.

(UoB middle class male)

Yes in terms of...well they'll do everything they can, but we're not exactly... Well my dad worked for the BBC, but...I don't know, actually...he does do a job every year. He runs a conference, oh no, streams a conference.....So he's got me, he might get me a job there this time in the kind of PR, just doing press releases all the time, which would be tedious and quite hard work, but it's only for a week and it's in Abu Dhabi so... **(Bristol middle class male)**

Indirect Family Support

I: Will your family give you help to find a job do you think?

R: I just don't....it's not that they won't give me help, my parents are the most helpful people I could ever imagine. It's just I don't know whether they've got the skills to be able to find me what I want, because I know what I'm looking for, it's not really a 'them' sort of thing. But they support me in anything, in whatever I want to do. Like I'm so lucky, so, so lucky to have them as parents, they're amazing.

(UoB working class female)

Conclusions

The middle classes are really good at maintaining their advantage; so even when working class students have access to higher education class inequalities will manifest through unequal access to forms of valued cultural and social capital.

References

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