

# Aspiring and Realising

Higher education, social class and career goals

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# 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 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



# Data Collection

- Interviews twice a year
- Student approaching the end of year 2 of their studies
- Developing a rapport (particularly important in longitudinal study)
- Types of interview
  - Biographical (focused on life path to university)
  - Settling in
  - A week in the life of a student
  - Study and future career

# Examples from Transcripts 1

## Example 1

I: Have you got any ideas for a career at all at the moment?

R : Probably.... no not really. I guess probably if I finish university I would either go on to further study or take some time out for activism, and then maybe...I suppose ending up with like a job somewhere within that kind of thing. Something. (UoB middle class female)

## Example 2

- But to do a degree, I just think I've always been quite driven by like success and like my dad did well in business and blah, blah, blah, so I always wanted to kind of emulate that really - well I don't feel like I need to compete with him but I always wanted to kind of do well really, like I'm quite success driven, money driven I suppose some people would call it, but yeah I'm prepared to work hard for...I'll put in the hours to earn a lot of money. I want a good career really, and I thought that Politics is something that is a good degree, it's not like a mamby-pamby degree that I think some people seem to take. And I don't know, I just thought it fitted quite well and I can use it, I can take it on to maybe do a Law conversion and then go to Bar School or...I don't really know. But at the moment, yeah, it was just something that I thought I could fit into a career and try and go quite far with it hopefully. We've yet to see. (UWE middle class male)

# Examples from transcripts 2

## Example 3

“What am I hoping to gain? A good degree first off. No I want to get a good level degree, a 2:1 or a First really is what I’m looking for. And then I’ve not decided whether to go for the Law conversion year or not yet, I think I’m not going to make any decisions yet, I think it’s silly to rush into anything, but that’s an option I think. Yeah that’s probably one of my options, that I’d do my year conversion into Law and then again maybe, if I loved that, go to the Bar. But that’s obviously all in the future. Or I’ve got a placement at (BIG INVESTMENT BANKING FIRM) internship what I can do not this summer it will be next summer, which is obviously a great like prospect if I can get in there but....” (UWE middle class male)

## Example 4

- Well a good degree would be nice. I’m probably going to do an MA, so yeah a degree where I can actually go on and do an MA. And they say you make your best friends for life at uni don’t they, so hopefully some good pals. Yeah I guess it’s just experience really isn’t it? Like a lot of my friends said.... because someone in the first year said “the experience is just awesome” so that’s it, yeah, I wouldn’t want to miss out. Both my sisters told me I had to go to uni as well. I mean I was always planning to but it’s the whole “you come out with debts thing” don’t you so it’s a bit naaaa. But yeah, think about that in 3 years time won’t we, you know.
- I        What kind of MA would you be interested in?
- R        I’m not really sure. I considered doing a Law conversion but I’m not sure. You can do so much with a Law degree obviously because my mum did one and she’s never done anything to do with Law. (UoB middle class boy)



# Examples from transcripts 3

## Example 4

Because being here has made me realise I don't want to be highly academic all my life, I want to be intelligent and employed and be articulate and use whatever brain power I have, but I don't want to be a stuffy academic or be a crazy lawyer because they don't have a life, and I want to have a life. (UoB working class female)

## Example 5

R: But I'm 95% sure I'm going to be a teacher - or I'd like to be a teacher.

I: And what's kind of contributed to that?

R :I'd say it's just the fact that... I enjoy the fact that I'd be a teacher, it seems alright, like it seems alright, it's one of the things that I want to do really and see what it's like. (UWE working class male)

# Examples from transcripts 4

## Example 6

I: Have you any thoughts on what you might like to do when you finish here?

R: Not a clue, just see what happens and just go with it.

I: Yeah, you've got 3 years haven't you.

R: Yeah.

I: Although that can go by quite quickly.

R: Mmm. (UWE working-class male)

## Example 7

All I really look to getting out of university, it might sound... but I just want a good qualification. I really want to do well and go on to do a Masters, and my lifelong plan is to get a PhD, but whether or not that will happen I don't know, but that is what I want to do. So when I come to uni I'm not too bothered about the social side of it, which sounds awful but I'm not interested in going out and getting absolutely wasted out of my face, I want to do my work and I want to do well. It sounds boring I know, sounds so old womanish but I can't help it, it's just what I want to do. I want to do well, so... (UWE working class female)

# Examples from transcripts 5

## Example 7

I: Have you got plans for what you're going to do when you've finished or are you just seeing how it all pans out?

R: I don't know. I'm going to see how it goes. I mean I've been offered the opportunity....well everyone has, to study abroad for a year during our degree, but I didn't feel I wanted to do that because....I feel just living here is a massive experience, I don't need to be in a different country, because it's a massive upheaval just to move somewhere for a year where you don't know anyone. Obviously I've done that here but it's different in a different country, I don't know. Yeah so I'm going to see. I probably will take a year out afterwards and just sort of chill out for a bit, I don't know. Don't know, maybe go travelling for a bit. I do want to see the world just for a bit, I haven't had the opportunity before because I haven't had any money or anything, like any spare money to go travelling, so maybe I'll do that. And then possibly do another year at university to get an extra qualification - I can't remember what it's called now.

I: Masters.

R: A masters, that's it, you never know I might do that as well, I don't know. I really have no idea though. (UWE working class female)

## Example 8

I: Did you have any career in mind?

R: No I have no idea what I want to do, I really haven't got a clue at all. (UoB working-class female)

# Descriptive Typology

- Aspirations
    - Concrete goals → loose goals → no idea
  - Realisations
    - Actively making it happen → letting it happen
- →

# Literature and theory: drawing connections

- ‘subjective expectations of objective probabilities’ (1970/1990: 156).
  - What is perceived as possible is informed by what has been experienced as probable. This is not necessarily rationally calculated but operates through the habitus. A student’s means of strategising for their future will be framed by how they ‘know’ their world.
- ‘Habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth-coming’ (2000: 210).
- As Wacquant explains:
  - People are ‘pre-occupied’ by certain future outcomes inscribed in the present they encounter only to the extent that their habitus sensitises and mobilises them to perceive and pursue them (1992: 26).

# Letting it Happen

I: Yeah. You mentioned the internship that you're thinking of applying for. Are you doing anything else to try to get a job in future?

R: Not currently. I often worked during the summers but it's never kind of related to any kind of career I want. Last year I did a lot of sport and this year I've decided not to and I'm focusing on myself and trying to get good grades, so there's still I'm trying to get a job and then I might try and maintain some kind of job next year – hopefully it might be one that's relevant to a future career, or if not just a standard job for financial reasons. (UoB working-class male)

# Playing the Game (Bourdieu 1990: 64)

Q. But who produces the rules of the game you are talking about, and are they any different from the rules of functioning of societies which, when they are laid down by ethnologists, lead precisely to the working-out of models? What separates the rules of the game from the rules of kinship?

A. ...You can use the analogy of the game to 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 immanent necessity, which is at the same time an immanent 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. Should one talk of a rule? Yes and no. You can do so on condition that you distinguish clearly between *rule* and *regularity*.

# Realising your goals: middle class and working-class comparisons

- Well I've always been interested in sort of working in the City. It was either Law or Maths at uni though, I did Law because it's broader. It's all about being a lawyer. And then after the work experience last year, like I did apply for like all the banking stuff in the first year so I was thinking about it as a career but just hadn't nailed it down finally. And arguably I still haven't nailed it down finally because I haven't experienced it, so after the summer I'll be able to say "I can't handle this, this is too much stress for me" or "this is crazy hours, I'll be dead by the time I'm 40", but at least then I can say I've done it. And ultimately I don't want to be working those kind of crazy hours for ever. Like I'm quite interested in doing something entrepreneurial, start a business. The thing is, after like three years in the City, if you're speaking with CFO's, CEO's of big firms, you can go pretty much anywhere in management, start your own business, start your own firm. So it's like opportunities, it isn't necessarily the ultimate career path, but it's a really, really good sort of enabler for future success I think. (UoB middle-class male)



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, which has slightly fallen by the wayside because the volume of work at the minute is very intense. 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 mooting, things like that, just things that build up your CV really, all the things that I'm doing at the moment. And then because sort of unfortunately by the time you get to that stage of applying for things academics are taken as a given, like 2:1 is the minimum expectation. Everyone has a 2:1 at least. Everyone has A's at GCSEs, you've just got to try and differentiate yourself by doing something extra like Investment Society, or did an internship, or do mooting 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. (Middle class male UoB)

I: So what is your career plan?

R: Well the internship that I really want is for an intermediary broker. So they're not buyers or sellers in a trade but they bring together the buyers and sellers who sort of look at the whole package, you look at the whole process of a trade and it's quite social inter personal skills and stuff, and it's more sort of waffle and nice lunches and stuff so....

I: What company have you applied to?

R: ICAP, Ernst and Young and that's it to be honest. I'll do a bit more next year once I know what grades I've got or what so....yeah it's difficult because I don't have a lot to fill in on the work experience front, and the work experience I do have I can't really talk about, because I don't really have anything relevant.

I: Do other people?

R: I think a lot of people have sort of some work in their dad's mate's company or something, I don't know, maybe I'm a bit bitter about the whole thing but I don't have any contacts. There's always a question about "do you know anyone who works at the company" or "do you have anyone who can refer you" and then the work experience is always like...I try and best relate....I work in the gym still and I try and best relate that, and go on about how much work I get relies on the customer relationship, so I can try and loosely relate that. But in terms of relevant stuff and industry it's difficult. (UoB working-class male)

I: But you have got the interviews so....

R: Yeah, yeah. My biggest worry is not that I'm not good enough, it's not being able to show that I am if you know what I mean. Because on paper everyone's the same and nobody's going to be wasting their time on applications, everyone can put the same rubbish, the same sort of....yeah, arbitrary answers in the open questions. I'm just a bit worried that because I don't have any contacts, no-one in my family's ever been to university or anything, like it will hold me back from getting there. But once I get the interview, I'm not arrogant but just a bit confident, I feel like even with people on my degree who have the same aspirations, who are doing a lot better than me, I'd still feel like I'd have some sort of upper hand when it comes to the interview stages in them sort of people-related jobs I think. I don't know. (UoB working-class male)

# Conclusions

- Data: students talk about their aspirations (or lack thereof) and the things they are doing to make it happen (or not)
- Descriptive analysis: describing the responses on a continuum from concrete to vague to non-existent plans.
- Students' attempts to put plans into actions
- Moving to interpretation: thinking with Bourdieu
  - Bourdieu's notions of the habitus shaping what is thinkable
  - Playing the game "appropriating" the stakes.
  - 'Knowing' the logic. Being geared towards assuming control of the game.