

Aspiring and Strategising: Preparing for the labour market



Higher education, social class, career goals and
imagined futures

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Outline of presentation:

- Interview data used to illustrate classed approaches to career planning and ‘imagined futures’
- Outlining of M/C, then W/C student aspirations and strategising
- Family connections
- Conclusions
- Whose aspirations?

M/C Career Planning 1:

Driven by success and money

“ I’m quite success driven, money driven I suppose...but yeah I’m prepared to work hard...I’ll put in the hours to earn a lot of money. I want a good career really, and I thought that X...is a good degree, it’s not like ‘a namby-pamby degree’ ...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...”

(UWE middle class male)

M/C Career Planning 2:

Law or investment banking?

“I’ve not decided whether to go for the Law conversion year or not yet...it’s silly to rush into anything, but that’s an option...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 (investment bank) internship...I can do...next summer, which is obviously a great like prospect if I can get in there...”

(UWE middle class male)

M/C Career Planning 3:

‘A good degree would be nice’

“Well a good degree would be nice...a degree where I can actually go on and do an MA....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 male)

M/C Career Planning 4:

Confident ‘something will come up’

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)

M/C Career Planning overview:

- Clear evidence of aspirations - concrete goals
- ...And of strategising to achieve them
- Law and/or banking the choice of many – classed nature of aspirations apparent
- Further study frequently considered (with relatively few worries about costs)
- Even where little evidence of planning, an apparent confidence in career outcomes

W/C Career Planning 1:

‘I want to have a life’

“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)

W/C Career Planning 2: 'I'd like to be a teacher'

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

W/C Career Planning 3: Social sacrifices necessary for achievement

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...I want to do my work and I want to do well. It sounds boring I know...it's just what I want to do; I want to do well.

(UWE working class female)

W/C Career Planning 4:

Chilling out and travelling

I don't know. I'm going to see how it goes. I mean I've been offered the opportunity....to study abroad for a year during our degree, but I didn't feel I wanted to do that because.... 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... 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... maybe go travelling for a bit...I haven't had the opportunity before because I haven't had...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.

(UWE working class female)

Working Class Career Planning 5: 'Not a clue'!

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)

W/C Career Planning Overview:

- Far less evidence of ‘imagined futures’
- ...Nor of strategic planning to achieve them
- When mentioned, ‘lower status’ occupations aspired to
- Greater desire to ‘give something back’ apparent
- Several ‘waiting to see what happens’ – greater passivity
- Generally intangible goals, and less confidence in likely outcomes

‘Playing the game’ and realising goals: M/C and W/C comparisons

- The following slides outline examples of classed approaches to strategising around securing internships and broader CV building
- Middle-class and working-class strategising
- Drawing on resources
- All are from UoB; generally more evidence of such approaches from the cohort there than at UWE, something that may even explain their presence in a more competitive HE environment?

Middle Class Strategising

“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...for a Certificate in Corporate Finance...also Investment Society, so helping other students get into the industry...looking through CVs and things like that. What else? Like mooting, things like that, just things that build up your CV really... Everyone has a 2:1 at least.

Everyone has As at GCSEs, you’ve just got to try and differentiate yourself by doing something extra like Investment Society, or [doing] an internship, or do mooting... I know particularly if you want to become a barrister it’s ridiculous, you see these people who... 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...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.”

(UoB middle class male)

Working class strategising on 'an uneven playing field'

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)

Family Connections:

A taken-for-granted privilege

I: And do you think your family will be able to help you to find a job? Do they have any contacts or, you know, support?

R: 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)

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

Middle class:

- Concrete aspirations - defined goals
- Strategies for achievement
- Even where little planning evident, confidence in career outcomes – ‘internalised security’

Working class:

- Greater passivity; less evidence of ‘imagined futures’
- Any strategising is on uneven playing field
- Generally ‘lower’ status occupations aspired to, but desire to ‘give something back’

A degree is no longer enough – ‘the game has changed’
- middle classes have a tacit understanding of this

Whose aspirations?

“And I love swallows and I've got this swallow, like a ceramic swallow with 'follow your dreams' on it. And I was in my room the other night doing... [course] preparation, and I looked at it and I just cried. I was like 'I'm not following my dreams', like this isn't my dream, whose dream is this?”

(UoB working class female)