

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Making Connections, Going Places? Equity and privilege in access to academic positions

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Abstract:

With higher education expanding and academic careers becoming increasingly precarious, the returns of a doctoral degree, once a guarantee of an academic career, are uncertain. The proposed article draws on a research project on the transition from PhD student to academic in the UK (British Academy-Leverhulme research grant, 2020-2022). Thirty-five semi structured interviews were conducted with PhD students who had graduated less than 18 months ago and with PhD supervisors. The fieldwork was complemented by the analysis of social media material addressing the PhD-postdoc transition. Drawing on feminist post-structuralist theories articulated with Bourdieu's concept of capital, this article focuses on the role of supervisors and institutions as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities. In doing so, it sheds light on an under-researched topic: how equity and privilege related to gender, social class, ethnicity and age play out and are mediated by doctoral supervisors in access to academic positions.

Paper:

The current UK HE context is characterised by an increasing level of financial and political uncertainty. This is linked to changes to the funding mechanisms of HE, to increased national and international competition for students, and, more recently, to the UK exit from the European Commission (Blanden and Machin, 2013; Carpentier, 2004). The ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic has led to further uncertainties, with the closure of university campuses and concerns related to student retention and recruitment. Moreover, the expansion of higher education, the multiplication of doctoral routes (including Professional Doctorates and PhDs by publication) and the casualisation of academic jobs have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre, 2015; Leathwood and Read, 2020). There is also increasing evidence that the 'returns' of doing a PhD are gendered, classed and 'raced' (ibid.). These uncertainties and the rise in the costs of HE borne by doctoral students, the majority of whom are self-funded (HEPI, 2020), have well-identified effects on the well-being and mental health of doctoral and early career researchers (Moreau and Robertson, 2019).

Despite the many challenges faced by doctoral students, most research focuses on undergraduates (Wilcox, et al. 2005; Thompson, 2017; Scandone, 2018). In comparison, there is a scarcity of research exploring how doctoral students make the transition to academia and the influences that enable

these transitions. Work in this area often provides practical advice to doctoral candidates and, occasionally, to their supervisors. With few exceptions (Boden et al, 2004; Burke, 2010; Hoskins, 2012; Leonard, 2010), this work tends not to offer theoretical insights and to minimise the way equity issues affect the transition process. Extant literature also fails to acknowledge that the transition to academia is rarely a straightforward, linear process (Skakni, 2019). Moreover, there is limited consideration in the literature of the influence of the supervisor on future academic trajectories, despite the fact that academia is a highly structured and differentiated field and a site of social reproduction, and that academics themselves sit at the intersection of multiple power relationships which frame the resources they can utilise to support others (Reay et al, 2009).

On a theoretical level, the article is informed by Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) theoretical concepts of economic, symbolic and cultural capitals, articulated with post-structuralist feminist analysis (Davies, 2003) to provide analytical consideration of the way the participants are positioned within discourses of academia and negotiate particular pathways linked to their identities and biographies (Mendick, 2006). Consistent with these theoretical orientations, the study acknowledges the significance and intersection of power relationships of gender, social class, ethnicity and age in influencing opportunities for building an academic career (Clegg and Rowland, 2010; Deem, 2003; Leathwood and Read, 2008, 2020; Morley et al, 2003).

On an empirical level, the article is informed by a study of the transition from PhD to academic position (*Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions*, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020-2022). The aim of this broader study was to understand how students who have recently submitted their PhD thesis negotiate this challenging context in building an academic career, with specific consideration of the role of the doctoral supervisor in this process. Thirty-five interviews were conducted, of which twenty-five with students who had completed a PhD in a UK institution less than 18 months ago and ten with UK-based supervisors. The interviews were conducted online and lasted 45-60 minutes. The transcripts were subjected to a discourse analysis (Gee, 1996; Locke, 2004).

In terms of contribution to knowledge, the article highlights that, despite access to the higher levels of education, students face considerable inequalities in accessing an academic positions, as privileges and resources are unequally distributed and, mediated by their institution and their supervisory team, frame their access to academic positions. On a policy level, it is expected that the project findings will inform the case for change to inequalities of access to academic positions and to the routine casualisation of early career academic staff by providing in-depth evidence of how privileges play out and widen existing inequalities in the transition from PhD student to postdoc.

Key references:

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1970) *La reproduction: Eléments d'une théorie du système d'enseignement*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.

Leathwood, C. and Read, B. (2008) *Gender and the changing face of higher education : A feminized future*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Le Feuvre, N. (2015) *Contextualizing Women's Academic Careers in Cross-National Perspective*, GARCI Working Papers Series, n°3.

References: