

Navigating Early Career Shocks: a Bourdieusian analysis of graduate transitions following COVID-19

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of COVID-19-related career shocks on early career graduates through a Bourdieusian lens. Drawing on qualitative data from 82 UK graduates, we analyse how disruptions such as job offer withdrawals, furloughs, and heightened labour market uncertainty influenced graduate transitions. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice—particularly the interplay of habitus, capital, and field—we explore how graduates navigated this period of rupture. We focus on the concept of hysteresis to understand the misalignment between graduates' dispositions and the transformed employment landscape. Our findings highlight how access to social and cultural capital shaped the ability to adapt, with implications for reproducing inequalities. The paper offers insights for educational and policy interventions to better support graduate transitions during societal disruptions.

Full paper

In this paper we explore the impact of the career shocks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic on early career graduates. Akkermans et al., (2018) define career shocks as 'a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control, and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career' (Akkermans et al., 2018:4). Career shocks are particularly significant for ECIs as these individuals have had less time to invest in developing resources (e.g. experience or networks) that may reduce the impact of career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2021; Hofer et al., 2021). The pandemic resulted in unprecedented challenges for recent graduates who faced heightened uncertainty, reduced opportunities and disruptions as organisations implemented a wider range of measures in response to the pandemic ((e.g.,

redundancy, withdrawal of job offers, furloughs, reduced working hours, remote working) (Mockaitis et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2023).

We apply Bourdieu's theory of practice (1984) to examine the role of capitals and hysteresis of habitus on how individuals navigated the career disruptions experienced. Bourdieu's theory of practice involves his key thinking tools: habitus, capital and field. These three elements work together and within each other to engender practice and maintain or question the ways in which social space operates. Expressed as "[habitus)(capital) + field] = practice (Bourdieu, 1984: 101), in stable conditions, this interplay facilitates the reproduction of social positions and practices. However, Bourdieu's model acknowledges space for a drastic change or rupture within social space or the field.

We propose that the career shocks experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Akkermans et al., 2021), were a form of significant social change, leading to what Bourdieu terms "hysteresis"—a lag between the transformation of the field and the adjustment of individuals' habitus to new conditions (Bourdieu, 1984; Burke et al., 2020). Effectively, when there is a change in the field there is a lag or time delay between the field changing and individuals within that field recognising the change in relations or expectations and pivoting to the new rules within the field. Burke et al. (2020) apply hysteresis of habitus when examining changes in the graduate labour market and the ways in which higher education students prepare to navigate it upon graduation. The central argument from Burke et al. being that the ability to recognise a field change and respond to this change is influenced by habitus and capitals therefore reinforcing an uneven playing field, even in the face of change. Bourdieu argues that misalignment can result in individuals' practices becoming out of sync with the expectations and norms of the transformed field, and as a result exacerbate existing inequalities. For instance, those possessing higher levels of social and cultural capital may adapt more readily to the new environment, while others may struggle to realign their habitus, leading to stalled or altered career paths.

This study draws on the response of 82 UK graduates, from a more extensive qualitative survey exploring career experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We designed a 21-item qualitative online survey comprising 15 questions to capture demographic details and six open-text topic-based questions to generate qualitative data (Frith and Gleeson, 2008). Although underutilised as a data collection method, qualitative surveys have been used to capture individuals' lived experiences in various disciplines, aiming to surface topical diversity instead of producing statistical data (Braun et al., 2021).

Understanding career shocks through a Bourdieusian lens underscores the importance of considering structural factors and individual dispositions in career development, especially during periods of significant societal upheaval. Through the discussion of our findings, this paper will debate the level of which the opportunity for a "rational habitus" is driven by resources (social class) or whether it is something open to participants irrespective of class backgrounds. This paper will serve as a counter argument to the presentation of reflexive graduates navigating a post-covid labour market through reflexive deliberations and

internal conversations. It will also offer insights for policymakers and educational institutions aiming to support graduates career transitions in times of disruption.