

## **Problems and Issues: the case for a Bourdieusian analysis of graduate employment. (0202)**

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This paper intends to argue for the continuing significance or relevance of Bourdieu's conceptual tools in higher education research. In contemporary Britain, education, especially higher education, is seen by many as a means of mobility. What this trust in higher education has done is to create a huge influx of students into higher educational institutions, leaving us in a situation of graduate inflation; quite simply, there are too many graduates for graduate jobs.

Previous educational research has understood education as a mode of social mobility, what Brooks (2005) refers to as the 'liberal' discourse. Blau and Duncan (1967) suggested that mobility is based on merit, or effort. Similarly, Halsey et al (1980) reported that working class students achieved almost as high results in A-levels and University exams as their middle class counterparts. More recently, Goldthorpe (2007: 9) has contended that social mobility can be observed within the university system, in spite of the role of influence of the habitus.

Bourdieu was quite vocal in regards to the social inequality experienced in the educational system, its processes and its results, what Brooks (2005) refers to as the 'social closure' discourse. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) displayed how the education system is an institution that reproduces social inequality rather than fostering mobility. Social norms of class stratification are transmitted in a school system that is superficially meritocratic. This 'social closure' discourse, albeit nuanced, has been continued by current Bourdieusian researchers such as Reay et al (2005). A theme that seemed quite evident from Reay et al's (2005) research was that working class students were not always certain about going to university and, settled for perhaps less than they could have achieved, either for social, racial or economic reasons. Middle class students, contrastingly, expected to go to university as their parents had gone before. There was a notion of feeling comfortable, where their cultural capital would flourish, what Ball et al define as, 'social class "in the head"' (2002: 52).

Higher educational research from a Bourdieusian perspective, has focused on aspirations and experiences of higher education, but not how they negotiate their career trajectory afterwards, with the notable exception of Brown and Scase (1994), thus creating a gap in mobility research. Graduate employment is inextricably linked to higher education and could be understood as the last stage of the educational process therefore, warranting as much attention as other educational stages, this apparent gap must be addressed. This paper intends to discuss how Bourdieusian concepts can begin to address this gap in mobility research, revisiting and developing his comments along with Boltanski (1978) concerning graduate employment and the influence or role of a priori capital when graduates enter a, graduate inflated, employment market. Building on Bourdieusian concepts, this paper will offer a discussion on the influence that the hysteresis of habitus (1977) may have towards strategies of graduate

employment, and, drawing on recent empirical research, how these processes may be observed.

The application of theory in social research does present certain dangers. Ball (1995) warns us of the casual use of theory in educational research, commenting it may become, 'no more than a mantric reaffirmation of belief rather than a tool for exploration and for thinking otherwise' (1995: 268). However, this paper will argue that theory is crucial to break away from the "triumph of individualism" (Reay, 2000), reminding us of the structural influences and constraints on mobility, removing the blame from the individual, who is not always free to make choices, but is always open to critique over those choices, the presence of theory reminds us of our task to address social 'issues' and not to understand them as 'problems' (Mills, 1959).

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