

## Maintaining the role of habitus in graduate employment

The U.K. higher education system has witnessed an increasing number of university entrants and, subsequently, university graduates. However, the graduate market has not kept up with this influx of students. In short, there are too many graduates for graduate jobs. Brown and Hesketh (2004) write that over 40% of graduates are in positions that do not require a university degree. The effects of graduate inflation have been reported in the media with headlines such as ‘Graduate unemployment rate rises 25%’ (BBC, 2010) and ‘Graduate unemployment at highest for over a decade’ (BBC, 2011). In the face of an increasing population of graduates and the falling number of graduate positions, the issue of who gets these positions and why needs to be addressed. This paper will argue that an application of Bourdieu’s conceptual tools will lend itself to a greater understanding of graduate employment trajectories and current inequalities within the graduate labour market.

Within graduate employment research, there are two central positions: human capital theory and social closure theory. Proponents of human capital theory, such as Purcell and Elias (2004), argue that access to higher education will largely bring “success”. The authors report that 80% of U.K. graduates will find a graduate job within 7 years of leaving higher education. Similar figures have been offered by Brennan, *et al.* (2003) and HESA’s *Destination of Leavers Survey*. The issue with these statistics, however, can be found in their classification of a graduate job. Brooks and Everett (2009: 334) suggest that Purcell and Elias’ statistics can be questioned due to their ‘broad’ definition of graduate employment. The subsequent issue is that each of the other surveys discussed above adopted their model of graduate employment, thereby casting doubt onto regularly cited and consulted statistics agencies.

In contrast, social closure theory (Brown and Scase, 1994; Brown, 1997; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Atkinson, 2010) – a position this paper is trying to strengthen – argues that it is social status, in addition to credentials, that will “tip one’s favour” in the labour market. Brown (1997) writes that, in a changing occupational structure from a ‘bureaucratic’ to a ‘flexible’ one, credentials are not enough. He argues that, to be successful in these new forms of employment, a certain aspect of charisma must be present to be able to work with people and form personal relationships, as well as simply being good at your job. Brown and Scase (1994) question whether, in a restructured graduate labour market, graduates will approach it with outdated, meritocratic ideals. They contend that, due to broader structural changes in society, the appreciation of a structural change in the graduate market is probable. However, one of the most important factors influencing this understanding is family background. Middle class students have a much better understanding of these structural changes, while students from a working class background are ‘ill prepared for the realities of work in the 1990s’ (*ibid*: 113). They highlight that many working class graduates expect to get a job in the bureaucratic sector without realising that it is on the decline, thinking their qualifications will guarantee them graduate positions.

The issue this paper intends to discuss is the social closure theorists discussed above – with the notable exception of Atkinson (2010) – while providing insightful and extremely important commentaries on graduate trajectories and the labour market, have used Bourdieu’s conceptual tools as a gloss; they have fallen into the trap of the habitual use of habitus (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu’s (1977; 1992; 2002; 2004) conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field have been used to great effect within critical sociology of education (Reay, *et al.*, 2005).

However, he should not be seen as a sociologist of education; Bourdieu, along with colleagues, was quite vocal regarding the classed nature of graduate employment.

Bourdieu and Boltanski (1978: 209) discuss the differing levels of salaries from graduates with the same qualifications. Graduates who have quite low levels of *a priori* economic and/or social capital will only have their educational capital to exchange for monetary rewards, essentially creating a scholastic class. This is in direct contrast to middle class graduates whose salary will be independent of their qualifications. The importance of previous levels and forms of capital is supplemented by the changing face of the graduate labour market. Bourdieu (1979: 81-97) comments that the devaluation of qualifications, through educational expansion, has had a number of consequences for current graduates. Through the process of hysteresis of habitus, graduates, particularly working class graduates, will expect their credentials to have the same value as they did in the previous structural context.

Bourdieu (and Boltanski's) comments on graduate employment can be used to offer a greater insight into the two publications on which I have focused and the general social closure position. Brown (1997) discusses the role of charisma in entering the (graduate) labour market. It is clear that charisma is essentially *a priori* cultural capital; a middle class graduate's ability to "cash in" on previous forms of capital, separate from their scholastic capital which has been devalued by the current context of graduate inflation. Similarly, Brown and Scase (1994) discuss the frequency with which their working class respondents demonstrated a limited knowledge of the graduate labour market. This is, in effect, the process of hysteresis of habitus; Brown and Scase's working class graduates did not understand the changing nature of the labour market and, therefore, were unable to alter their strategies accordingly.

What this paper has attempted to demonstrate, in this relatively short space, is the role of Bourdieu's conceptual tools within graduate employment research. Bourdieu provided British sociology with the necessary language to discuss the agent and the structure without reducing or reifying either. Graduate employment research has been no different; however, there is still work to be done, and a renewed conversation on the application of conceptual tools and an examination of his specific comments on graduate employment is a place to start.

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