

Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals

Strategies employed by middle-class families to ensure successful educational outcomes for their children have long been the focus of theoretical and empirical analysis in the UK (e.g. Themelis, 2008) and beyond (e.g. Devine, 2009). This resonates through all education sectors, from accessing the most desirable pre-school provision, to achieving places at the most selective universities. The topic has also been at the forefront of wider public debate recently over progression into the job market, including media exposés of how internships are secured, and government enquiries on access to the professions.

Contracting higher education numbers following decades of expansion, and changes to funding regimes from 2012 in England, mean this issue's saliency increases during the current period of austerity, with university access remaining a key social justice concern given the graduate entry-level requirement of middle-class careers.

Using largely semi-structured interview data from the Leverhulme-funded study of working- and middle-class undergraduates at Bristol's two universities (the Paired Peers study), we draw upon theorists employing Bourdieu's conceptual tools (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Clegg, 2011; van der Werfhorst, 2010) to examine differing processes of capital mobilisation and acquisition by students and their families to enhance future social positioning. In particular, our analysis highlights efforts by those occupying insecure or contradictory class positions, i.e. those operating at the boundaries of social hierarchies or straddling both working- and middle-class positions simultaneously, to avoid downward and increase the chances of upward social mobility.

In this intensely competitive struggle, where there is insufficient room in the middle, never mind at the top of the social and occupational hierarchy, the importance of a socially just system of educational opportunity remains obscured by a continuing political discourse of meritocracy, with opportunity falsely presented as equally accessible to all. Following Brown's (2003) notion of 'the opportunity trap', we argue that the increasingly competitive nature of the employment market with the expansion of graduate numbers makes capital mobilisation and acquisition a progressively more important aspect of social mobility enhancement. We highlight middle-class advantage over privileged access to valued capitals, and the attempts of those in insecure or more dominated positions to compete in this struggle. Finally, we argue that the emphasis on competition, both in terms of educational outcomes and the accrual of capital in the lives of working-class and middle-class students, compounds rather than alleviates social inequality.

References

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