

‘Project future self’: The strategies used by privileged middle-class male students to secure elite graduate roles

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Part One – abstract

This paper reports findings from a three year Leverhulme Trust funded project *Paired Peers* (2010-2013). The longitudinal project explored the experiences of over 80 students selected from those studying one of eleven undergraduate degree courses taught at both of the two universities in Bristol. The research looks at the impact of the students’ social class background upon those experiences, and we explore here how the undergraduates acquire and mobilise various forms of capital during their time at university to enhance their employment opportunities after graduating. This paper will focus upon eleven of the participants, all young men, and all seeking lucrative and prestigious corporate ‘city’ careers in London upon graduation. We discuss key findings in the paper, including how the young men’s’ class background seemed to inform their whole disposition towards neo-liberal individualism and competition for these elite graduate positions.

Part Two - paper

Background

This paper explores the university experiences of four working-class and seven middle-class young men who aspire to lucrative ‘city’ careers in finance or law. It draws on their life history narratives, charts their progress through university, the development of their career goals, their strategising to maximise their career chances and the implementation of their plans for the future.

The cohort discussed in this paper are a subset of the *Leverhulme Trust* funded Paired Peers project, which mapped the experiences of a group of 88 mixed background male and female students through their three years at the two universities in Bristol, an English provincial city. The University of Bristol is a research intensive member of the Russell Group, whilst the University of the West of England is a large post-1992 institution which traditionally prioritised teaching and the quality of the student experience. The cohort were all studying one of eleven degree subjects taught at both universities, and were paired up according to subject and social class background. We interviewed the participants at six key points during their

undergraduate studies, following them from induction week in year one to their final exams in year three. Other data was gathered in the project too, including personal journals, focus groups, time-sheets and photo diaries. We also mapped their use of the city for various activities including study, paid work, socialising and various leisure pastimes.

The data presented here draws largely upon the interviews, especially the final one towards the end of their third year, and in particular focusses on two key questions: 'Over the past three years what have you been doing to prepare yourself for finding and getting a job?', and 'Where do you see yourself in five years' time?'. We are seeking an understanding of their dispositions towards the increasingly competitive graduate careers' market (Brown *et al.* 2011), and how this has manifested as a project of the self (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992).

Theoretical underpinnings

This paper builds upon other work coming from the *Paired Peers* project, notably Bathmaker *et al.*, (2013). In this earlier work we outlined the highly complex process of mobilising and converting different experiences into forms of capital it was hoped would prove valuable in achieving the desired career goals of some of our participants. The experiences often included university time Extra Curricular Activities (ECAs) and internships undertaken during vacation periods. We draw upon that earlier work here, and that of others including Tchibozo (2007), whose study of UK graduates found ECAs had a significant effect on their transition into the labour market, with activities demonstrating leadership capabilities being particularly beneficial. Tchibozo highlighted how students need to understand and exploit the 'strategic potential of extra-curricular activity' for transition to the labour market (2007: 55), a process requiring both tacit and explicit know-how of how to package ECA into valuable 'personal capital' (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Tomlinson, 2008).

This paper develops our previous work focusing specifically on internships and work experience and the significant role they play in accessing graduate labour markets, as highlighted in two UK government reports on accessing the professions (Millburn, 2009, 2012). Browne's (2006) research into recruitment to the UK's financial services industry provides an example of this. She found employers recruited an elite cohort to their fast track leadership programmes specifically via internships. However, as Browne and others highlight, there are clear patterns of inequality in students' access to and experience of such opportunities raising concerns about the implications for

social mobility, with media coverage and policy documents like Milburn's Reports keeping it to the fore.

Phil Brown's work with a number of colleagues (Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown and Tannock, 2009; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011) demonstrates how an international explosion of HE has driven changes in the UK graduate labour market. Brown *et al.* (2011: 132) argue that the competition for 'good, middle-class jobs' is increasingly a global struggle, with aspirational families adopting increasingly desperate measures to 'stay ahead' of the competition for future employment. The consequences of this are efforts by upper- and upper-middle-class families 'to position their children in the most prestigious schools and programmes, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite' (Brown and Tannock, 2009:384). This paper draws upon Bourdieu (1990) in referring to this strategic enhancing of graduate employment opportunities as 'having a feel for the game', and uses his conceptual tools (Bourdieu, 1986) to examine processes of capital acquisition, development and mobilisation by students and their families designed to secure and enhance future social positioning.

Employing the project's interview data in particular we argue that upper middle-class young men are especially well positioned to 'play the game' in a climate of pervasive individualism where extreme competitiveness is seen as a moral imperative. Drawing on and building upon their stocks of capitals, many of these young men strategise effectively to ensure a secure future in elite industries. Keenly aware of the increased competition and the fragility of the graduate labour market, they are responsive to subtle game changes and hyper-mobilise their various capitals accordingly to maintain privileged access to these careers. Their invulnerability is maintained through both an embracement of the spirit of neo-liberal individualism (which defines 'the game'), and the incorporation of the rules of the (changing) game, which enable them to 'play to win' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

The working-class men on the other hand, generally see their aspirations as connected to a desire for an improved lifestyle which will enable them to provide financially for others (parents and anticipated future families), and are perhaps less individualistic in their attitudes. Moreover their approaches to realising their goals demonstrate a struggle to get to grips with the rules of the game, a game whose rules are weighted against them.

We conclude the presentation with a consideration of how university personnel might seek to level this uneven playing field to re-balance the differential graduate outcomes enjoyed by the different class groups and fractions.

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