

"I just focused on my studies": hysteresis of habitus and widening participation (0280)

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Widening participation and increased access to higher education is predicated on the human capital narrative of “access equals success” (Burke, 2015). The general understanding is that, within a knowledge economy, equal access to education (across class, gender, ethnic and disability lines) creates opportunities for social mobility and increased life chances for all in the form of graduate employment and in contrast to social reproduction of privilege and position. Within research (Bradley, *et al.*, 2013; Reay, 2012; Reay, *et al.*, 2005) examining the continued inequalities in relation to access and experience of higher education, Bourdieu (1977, 1992) has become a galvanising figure. The concepts of habitus, capital and field are synonymous with this particular brand of sociology, addressing the ongoing social inequalities of access and experience of higher education.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a synopsis of the application of Bourdieu’s thinking tools, revisiting well-established and generally understood arguments from previous research. This paper will focus on a particular process within Bourdieusian social theory which lies at the heart of an effective widening participation policy – both in terms of experiences during higher education and students’ subsequent graduate labour market trajectories: hysteresis of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu (1984), habitus and capital interact within the field, leading to agency, or, in Bourdieusian terms, ‘practice’. A particular field – whether education, employment or family – is a site of competition and aggression. Rather than the field acting as a passive receptacle for habitus and capital to interact, it, too, is an active piece of the puzzle, affecting practice. Hysteresis of habitus occurs when the field changes, and, with it, the various rules and required resources, there is a period of time or a gap between a change in the field and the habitus’s (whether group or individual) ability to realize the structural change and act accordingly to manoeuvre within the altered set of rules. Previously, hysteresis has been used to discuss marriage strategies, displacement of identity during war and social suffering and poverty (Hardy, 2008); however, the concept lies at the centre of addressing barriers to widening participation in terms of experiences during higher education and pathways upon graduation.

As a result of the opening up of higher education through *Higher Education: a new framework* (DfE, 1991) and the central importance New Labour placed on education, in the context of a knowledge economy, the UK higher education system witnessed an increase from 6 per cent of 19-20 year olds attending university at the beginning of the 1960s (Brooks and Everett, 2009) to 47 per cent in 2012 (Heath, *et al.*, 2013). An expected increase in graduates quickly followed the same pattern with the percentage of graduates in the UK more than doubling from 17% of the population in 1992 to 38 per cent in 2012 (ONS, 2013). Despite the meritocratic narrative at the heart of New Labour’s push towards mass higher education, the increase in UK graduates was not met by a similar increase in graduate positions. Findings from the most recent Futuretrack study (Purcell, *et al.*, 2013) report that 40 per cent of UK graduates are not in graduate employment, while ONS (2013) reported a figure of 47 per cent of UK graduates. The hysteresis

of habitus that this paper takes as its starting point is the classed ability to recognize the depleted buying power of a degree and the combination of additional resources students/graduates require to re-balance the devaluation of scholastic capital. A common form of additional resources come in the form of work experience, internships (linked to a student's degree) and extra-curricular activities (Tomlinson, 2007, 2008). Research has demonstrated, however, a working class tendency to focus exclusively on the academic elements of a degree course due to an outdated understanding of scholastic capital's market potential (Bathmaker, *et al.*, 2013; Bradley and Ingram, 2012; Purcell *et al.*, 2013).

Based on the life histories of 27 university graduates, this paper will identify the formation of this hysteresis of habitus and document the role of various institutions, such as the family and school, through the inculcation of a general meritocratic narrative. Through focusing on a number of specific respondents, the paper will demonstrate the classed nature of attitudes towards the merit of additional resources, expressed as a consequence of hysteresis of habitus. A clear classed dimension of attitudes to extra-curricular activities and the singular importance of academic qualifications will be presented. This paper will also discuss the durable – at times, constant – presence of a gap between working class students' attitudes/perceptions and the objective reality of the graduate labour market throughout their time in higher education and life post-graduation, demonstrating the need for pro-active policies.

The paper will conclude with a discussion on the clear presence of a human capital narrative within UK higher education social policy, such as *Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy* (BIS, 2009) and *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011), and the detrimental role it plays in exacerbating hysteresis of habitus. It will argue that a neo-liberal narrative of “access equals success” places the onus on the individual to “succeed” once in university, reducing the classed ability to recognize and move with a shifting field – in this case, graduate employment – as an individual trouble rather than a public issue. Stemming from the empirical research on which this paper is based, it will conclude with a number of recommendations to address the durable level of hysteresis of habitus many working class graduates experience.

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