

## **A4** Caldicot Wednesday 5 December 12.00-12.30

### ***Class matters in Australian HE: exploring the relevance of class analysis in explaining disadvantage in an Australian University. (0318)***

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the issue of class within HE in Australia. It argues that far from the effects of class being ameliorated throughout university study, new boundaries of class are being produced. This is examined through a feminist reading of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class. Across the three key stages of HE – access, study and graduation – students from working class backgrounds must continue to demonstrate and struggle over their deservingness to be in university study. These struggles play out through the embodied and emotional circumstances within day-to-day life, and so do not readily conform to simplistic categorical explanations of disadvantage. Thus, a relational theory of class that can be applied to the social, both outside and *inside* the university, is crucial in recognising the dual role that HE plays in ameliorating and perpetuating class and social closure.

#### **Paper**

Australian HE research rarely mentions the concept of class. Primarily, literature utilises the dominant language of equity discourse: low socio-economic status (LSES) along with other simplistic categorisations of disadvantage. While disadvantage and advantage are hence acknowledged there is a resistance to ascribing this to durable patterns of inequality, even though these inequalities can usually be predicted based on traditionally class-based divisions. Instead, public discourses regularly perceive universities as key sites for the ameliorating of structures of inequality. Young people who are first in family, and/or from underrepresented backgrounds dare assumed to be in the process of breaking class boundaries.

In this paper, we draw from a recent study (authors) based on 32 in-depth interviews with final year or recently graduated students from varying class backgrounds. We aim to provide a nuanced analysis of class and its impact upon the prospects of students within Australian HE. It views class within social practices and contexts rather than as correlating with preformed objective categories. In other words, we consider class as an ongoing day to day performance that is structured and restructured through everyday practice. Class, used heuristically, is thus useful for both speaking back to objectivising structures such as SES, and for giving greater recognition to the permeability of class boundaries. This acknowledges that definitions of inequality themselves are contested and form part of the 'symbolic struggle' around systems of privilege and disadvantage (Crossley, 2008: 98). Class need to be recognised, therefore, as constantly performed, and as *in process*.

Moreover, when class boundaries weaken, more effort needs to be put into the struggle for both their contestation and maintenance: '...it is the ability of energy to leak beyond its inscribed containment that makes a class struggle. The refusal to accept inscription and be bound by its value is a significant act in challenging the dominant symbolic order' (Skeggs, 2004: 13). Put simply, privilege is not readily surrendered. Widening participation, as much as its role may be to produce social justice, also opens up new class battlegrounds. As Gale and Parker (2017) note, 'increased access to and participation in higher education no longer ascribes its graduates with distinction'

(Gale and Parker, 2017: 91). Because of this, class boundaries must be *reinscribed* in order to maintain advantage and distinction.

To explore class in Australian HE in more detail, we examine three key aspects of Australian HE. These are access, the experience of study, and entry into the labour market. It is useful to put these processes side by side, as the movement into, through and out of university all play significant roles in ordering class experience. Access to higher education is governed through rankings and systems that favour people from more privileged backgrounds. Better ATAR outcomes are generally given to students from privileged backgrounds, meaning that more prestigious degrees and institutions are far more accessible for students from privileged backgrounds. This results in a clustering of advantage and disadvantage in predictable ways.

This clustering allows for the structuring of systems of symbolic struggle *within* university. Students, particularly those struggling with their sense of identity and purpose within the university, are susceptible to a sense of shame. Class boundaries are not simply objective conditions for which rational and responsible individuals are caught within. They themselves shape the character and the plausibility structures of individuals. As embodied perceptual and emotional schemas, class is carried out within the day-to-day experiences of university, where traditional aspects of class struggle can be eschewed or renewed, and where new ones can be formed.

Reinscription is hence an effort at 'marking out difference' (Burke & Crozier, 2014, p. 64) whereby students make judgements regarding the motivations, aspirations, and ultimately value and worth of students entering into the university setting. This has been effectively demonstrated in struggles over class boundaries in Australian culture more broadly (Pini et al., 2012), where, in effect, those from lower classes who don't demonstrate the correct dispositional configurations are seen as undeserving of any possibilities of social mobility. Thus, students from working class backgrounds are still positioned, in varying degrees of subtlety, as 'inferior or lacking' (Pini et al., 2012, p. 150) and this misrecognition functions as a means to maintain the symbolic status and power of the middle class.

Finally, these experiences of access and experience in HE study need to be considered as part of a classed trajectory into the labour market. While trajectories can be altered, graduate jobs often require strategies to have been enacted early during HE study. Extracurricular activities, work experience and the timing of graduate job applications all require careful planning and timing. In our study many students from working class backgrounds struggled to become orientated to the demands of the graduate labour market. Ultimately, the idealised 'employable' HE student has become someone who sees their own interests being met through making themselves perfectly exploitable. This is often incongruent with working-class student's motivations to attend university, yet must wrestle with how to salvage their aspirations within this eventuality.

Class still plays a significant role in Australian HE. As Skeggs (2004: 19) notes 'Bourdieu distinguishes between those who only have to *be what they are* as opposed to those who *are what they do* and, therefore, have to constantly prove that they are capable of carrying the signs of national belonging' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 19). Or in this case, university students from working class backgrounds must continually prove themselves worthy of their place within the university. Or else, as Gagnon (2018) demonstrates, they are likely to need to hide their backgrounds from their peers. Class, far from being ameliorated within the Australian university, has entered into a new space of struggle.

## References

Authors 2018

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