

The labour market transitions of recent graduates: narratives of classed experiences (0184)

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OUTLINE OF PAPER

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in issues of social class inequalities across educational sectors. Simultaneously we have seen the English higher education sector expand and diversify, with more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing university. But what does this mean with regards to issues of class inequality? How do young people from both privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds experience their trajectories through higher education and into work? Does attaining a degree qualification provide young people with an equal chance in the transition into labour markets or do they still experience significant disadvantages (or indeed advantages) due to their social class background? In this paper we consider these questions through an in-depth analysis of narrative interviews with recent graduates from Bristol's two universities (the University of Bristol and University of the West of England).

HE faces pressures to focus on employability and employment futures, in a marketized environment predicated on competition and competitiveness. Milburn (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009), and Dorling (2014) amongst others have written about the reproduction of elites and how HE is implicated in these processes. While participation in HE provides working-class as well as middle-class students access to a wealth of opportunities, working-class students are not able to mobilize and exploit different forms of capital in the same ways as their highly resourced middle-class counterparts (Devine, 2004; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). So while HE has the potential to be game-changing for working-class students, they may need greater resilience and resourcefulness to make HE work for them (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009, 2010; Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

This paper traces some of the practices involved that contribute to this, drawing on interview data from a Leverhulme Trust funded study (the Paired Peers project), a longitudinal, qualitative research project, which has followed a cohort of students through the first three years of undergraduate study and is now following them for three more years as they make transitions beyond undergraduate education. Students were interviewed twice every year during their undergraduate study, and once a year since graduation, enabling us to compare the fortunes of middle-class and working-class students during and beyond university study. In this way the project has aimed to explore the potential of HE as a vehicle of social mobility. Our analysis uses the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his concept of capital, and its exploitation in particular fields (Bourdieu, 1986). Using Bourdieu's tools, we examine how middle-class students may be able to maintain their advantages through and beyond higher education, through the acquisition, maintenance, development and mobilisation of cultural, social and economic resources, building on the cultivation of capitals that occurred through the family (Lareau, 2011).

The narratives of participants demonstrate that the transition from university is smoother for some young people than others. This can be a story of unexpected struggle, challenging pre-graduation optimism and hopes for a good graduate job. Faced with difficult labour markets, the class inequalities that appear to be smoothed over by a university education return to the fore, as additional resources are needed to progress on desired pathways. We consider how access to economic, social and cultural capital can afford some young graduates the resources needed to pursue their goals. For others the pathway to employment is determined more by economic necessity. Without the time needed to explore opportunities and mobilise capitals they have less opportunity to achieve preferred goals. Our data suggest that the extent to which university is a force for social mobility is affected by background factors which are salient in restricting or enabling opportunities for success in graduate labour markets.

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