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**Higher Education,
Social Class and
the Mobilisation of
Capitals**

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Constructing and maintaining privilege in a mass higher education system: The strategies and practices of capital mobilisation amongst undergraduate students in England

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Overview

- The Paired Peers project
- Which forms of capital?
- Cultivating, mobilising, and ‘packaging’ capitals – some examples from the Paired Peers project
- Using a Bourdieusian perspective on capitals
- Working with and beyond Bourdieu

The Paired Peers research project

AIMS

- ❖ To compare the experiences of students from different social class backgrounds, in 2 different universities – one post-1992 ‘mass’ university, one ‘traditional’, elite university, in one city in England, in a range of different subjects
- ❖ To do this utilising a matched pairs method
- ❖ To follow a cohort of pairs over their 3 years of undergraduate study
- ❖ To explore what factors help students to academic success
- ❖ To investigate the impact of different forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, virtual, embodied etc
- ❖ To experiment with a range of methods to explore experiences, behaviours and attitudes

Which capitals are important to understand questions of equity in HE?

Three key forms of capital, following Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (2001), Coleman (1997)

- Economic, cultural and social capital

Additional capitals referred to in the research literature:

- Academic/intellectual capital
- Moral capital (Lehmann, 2009)
- cultural-social capital or 'ethnic capital' (Maddood, 2012)
- Community capital (Yosso, 2006)
- Personal capital (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011)

Additional capitals, such as

Personal capital

Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) use 'personal capital' to mean both 'hard' (credentials) and 'soft' (personal qualities) currency that can be exchanged in the market for jobs.

Cultural-social capital or 'ethnic capital'

Modood (2011) uses this version of 'capital' to refer to three different stages or dimensions: relationships, norms and norms enforcement, defined in relation to HE as familial adult-child relationships, transmission of aspirations and attitudes and norms enforcement. His focus is on the experiences of students from South Asian communities in the UK.

Moral capital

Lehmann (2009) talks of the construction of moral advantages by working-class students, such as those associated with a strong work ethic, maturity, responsibility, and real-life experiences, to overcome structural disadvantages.

Capitals can be cultivated, mobilised, and 'packaged'

- Lareau (2003); Irwin, S and Elley, S. (2011): the *concerted cultivation* of capitals by middle class families
- Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011); Lareau (2003): increasingly overt and conscious strategising, particularly amongst the middle-classes, firstly to cultivate 'valuable' capitals, and secondly, to mobilise these capitals to gain advantage in education and the labour market.
- Tchibozo (2007); Tomlinson (2008): students need both tacit and explicit *know-how of how to 'package' their experiences, opportunities, and attributes* into valuable 'personal capital'.

Internships: mobilising family social capital to maintain advantage



Euan Blair (son of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair) did work experience with a congressman on Capitol Hill, thanks to his dad.

Following that, he began a career as an investment banker with Morgan Stanley. Carole Cadwalladr of the UK's Guardian newspaper commented:

"It's hard to know whether it was nepotism, connections or that helpful glamour internship that really gave Euan the edge. But it certainly did no harm."

Meanwhile, Tony Blair's own office runs unpaid internships. A spokesman for the office of Tony Blair said: "We support all our interns by paying travel and lunch expenses." A graduate offered one of these unpaid internships, who asked to work only four out of five days so that he could continue to earn money in his part-time job to support himself, was told that this wouldn't be acceptable and the offer was retracted.

Source: Guardian 28.10.2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/28/carole-cadwalladr-tony-blair-unpaid-interns>

Internships: mobilising family social capital to maintain advantage

It is a case of who you know not what you know in some cases. So I am trying to pull in any family ties...like my dad's quite friendly with one of the traders at [major bank]...he was head of the internship scheme...(and) my mum's a governor at my old school and one of the governors was a trader at [major bank], so I am trying to pull some strings there too.

(Dylan, middle-class UWE)

Internships: knowing what your family has not got

I find it so weird when people have parents that are lawyers or doctors and they can get you work experience in a hospital or....I just think “that’s crazy” that’s like something I’ve never experienced. Because my parents do just ordinary jobs. I don’t know how they would help me. I don’t think they would be able to.

(Anna, working-class, Bristol)

Cultivating capitals through extra-curricular activities

- Sports
- Leisure societies – debating, reading, photography
- Political societies
- Subject societies – philosophy, history, engineering, English

**‘We want it.’
The ‘personal
capital’ you
demonstrate
through extra-
curricular
activities**



The thing that makes
someone get up
at 5am and ride.

We want it.

Graduate Area Manager £40,000
rising to **£63,500** after 4 years.

Fully expensed Audi A4.
Opportunity for directorship within 5 years.
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Active cultivation of capitals

I'm...carrying on really, trying to do well in academic side of it but also keep up like the sports and stuff, because that's...so many people have good academic skills and academic qualifications. And also you're up against pretty much a lot of people from other countries as well, because I always forget it's not just like English unis.

Francesca: M/C, UWE, Law

Active cultivation of capitals

assuming positions of responsibility: being on committees, becoming secretary of the cheer-leading squad (Harriet, UWE, middle-class), Vice President of the Aero Society (Jennifer, UoB, middle-class) and president of the English society (Melissa, UoB, working-class).

Instinctive cultivation of capitals

Jack carries on where his parents left off. He explains what they did:

Oh just making sure we've got something that we can have for the future, like windsurfing, surfing, trumpet, climbing, I've done so many activities when I was little it's just stupid. And then so now my sister's now working all round the world doing windsurf teaching and stuff like this, and I've taught break dancing and stuff like that. So kind of setting us up for the future rather than just giving us PS3s [PlayStation 3 games machine]. (Jack, middle-class, UWE)

Instinctive cultivation: The rise of *boffin rock*



Indie quartet Alt-J won the prestigious Mercury prize for their album *An Awesome Wave* (November 2012). **The four-piece met at Leeds University in 2007 where they were all studying** (fine art and English literature)

Source: [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Thursday 1 November 2012 22.37 GMT
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/02/alt-j-mercury-prize-win?intcmp=239>

Barriers to the cultivation of capitals through ECA

I love to meet new people so it was a bit disappointing, [...] but this year unfortunately I couldn't really afford to join any societies or anything. But I have been playing football and stuff with my mates just down the local park and stuff [...]. (Henry, working-class, UWE)

Barriers to the cultivation of capitals through ECA

I physically don't have time. [...] I'd love to get involved but I physically can't. Which is another frustrating thing then because I feel like I am not making the most out of my time here. (Zoe, working-class, UoB)

Barriers to the cultivation of capitals through ECA

the person who runs the society isn't one we'd sort of generally think that we'd include in our social group as it were. [...]The sort of vocabulary he uses and things like that, sort of very well spoken vocabulary whereas ... we use sort of more relaxed vocabulary as we're good friends, because when you're with friends you don't use a form of vocabulary like you would for example in an interview or something. (Rob, working-class, UWE)

Using a Bourdieusian perspective on capitals

- Understanding capitals is about more than an index or list of particular types of capital. There is a need to acquire and mobilise resources in the form of ‘capitals’ (economic, cultural, social and so forth) that are **valued** in a particular ‘field’ of social action
- Agents are positioned in the field in dominant and dominated positions as a result of the capitals they possess
- Agents engage in conscious and unconscious ‘strategising’ in order to position themselves
- Habitus shapes dispositions and orientations towards a particular field – feeling like a fish in or out of water.

Having a 'feel' for the game

You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*. The game is the locus of an imminent necessity, which is at the same time an imminent logic. In the game you can't just do anything and get away with it. And the feel for the game, which contributes to this necessity and this logic, is a way of knowing this necessity and this logic. Whoever wants to win this game, appropriate the stakes, catch the ball... must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and the logic of the game. (Bourdieu 1990: p.64)

Moving beyond Bourdieu

- ❖ The significance of the psycho-social:
if we are to develop complex understandings of social reproduction and class privilege we need to give serious consideration to how class is lived internally since 'Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being' (Kuhn 1995:98, cited in Perrier, 2012)
See work by Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Reay, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003
- ❖ Debates about 'knowledge' and 'powerful knowledge':
social realists argue that knowledge is not just arbitrary, and simply defined by its value in a particular field.
See work by Clegg, 2011; Moore and Muller, 1999; Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2008
- ❖ Gender and ethnicity raise further questions and challenges:
women do not simply accept their 'positioning' in a particular field; community capital changes the workings of capitals and fields, particularly in minority ethnic communities (Yosso, 2006; Modood, 2011).

Challenging privilege in a mass higher education system

It is not just the habitus that prevents some [working-class] students from mobilising capitals in the same way as other [middle-class] students, but structural barriers and access to valuable capitals. Identifying these issues shows up areas where HE institutions and systems could and should intervene e.g.

- the need for students to have sufficient resources such as time and finances
- support with the generation of social capital and valuable 'connections'
- overt work to develop students' capacities to mobilise their resources effectively.

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capitals provides a means of surfacing patterns of inequalities and thus provides the possibility of seeking to challenge and change established practices.

Research Project links

The Paired Peers project (2010-2013)

www.bristol.ac.uk/pairedpeers

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The FurtherHigher Project (2006-2008)

<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher>

Funded by the ESRC

NOTE: references in this presentation are provided in a separate document