The class ceiling in accessing postgraduate education

Contact

Dr Neil M Speirs
Widening Participation
University of Edinburgh
neil.speirs@ed.ac.uk

https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-neil-m-speirs

The Class Ceiling

Duta *et al (2021)* note that

'graduates from lower social classes of origin have more diverse and less stable trajectories, are less likely to enter top-level jobs in their 20s and more likely to enter and remain in lower social classes than their more socially advantaged counterparts'.

While Jacob & Klein remind us that 'there is a direct impact of social origin on occupational destination net of educational attainment even for degree-holders'.

Friedman and Laurison (2019) referred to a *class ceiling* when highlighting class-based gaps in

- accessing various professions
- pay

Duta, A., Wielgoszewska, B., & Iannelli, C. (2021). Different degrees of career success: Social origin and graduates' education and labour market trajectories. Advances in Life Course Research, 47, 100376.
Jacob, M., & Klein, M. (2019). Social origin, field of study and graduates' career progression: does social inequality vary across fields?. The British Journal of Sociology, 70(5), 1850-1873.
Friedman, S. & Laurison, D.(2019). The Class Ceiling - Why it Pays to be Privileged. Policy Press

The Class Ceiling

Jessica Calarco (2020) surmises Friedman and Laurison when she notes that

'neither merit nor character sufficiently explains class-based inequalities within those fields. Instead, the authors find that those inequalities are produced by the "class ceiling"—an invisible economic, social, and cultural barrier that limits the career advancement of elite workers from working-class backgrounds.'

'even when holding constant educational attainment, educational pedigree (i.e., having attended elite schools), and educational achievement, people from working-class backgrounds are still less likely than people from more privileged backgrounds to have elite occupations'.

Calarco, J. M. (2020). The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged. Social Forces, Volume 99, Issue 1, September 2020, Page e5.

The Class Ceiling

Friedman and Laurison (2019) provide a Bourdieusian model of capital to explain this.

Again, Jessica Calarco (2020) surmises

'Because of their economic, social, and cultural capital, elite workers from privileged backgrounds are able to

- take risks without fear of consequence (facilitated by access to their parents' financial support)
- demand work-related opportunities and negotiate pay raises (facilitated by informal sponsorship from superiors in their organizations with whom they have cultural affinity)
- assert themselves in professional settings (facilitated by their sense of cultural fit)'.

The Post Graduate

Mateos-González & Wakeling (2022) tell us that

'those from socioeconomically advantaged households have higher rates of transition to postgraduate study than their less advantaged peers'.

'socioeconomically advantaged families try to secure better types of education for their children'.

The economist Thomas Piketty reminds us that '…there is never anything "natural" about social inequality. It is always profoundly ideological and political'.

We must ask who has decided that we will live this way?

After all, as Piketty asserts, 'Every society has no choice but to make sense of its inequalities'.

Mateos-González, J. L., & Wakeling, P. (2022). Exploring socioeconomic inequalities and access to elite postgraduate education among English graduates. Higher Education, 83(3), pp673-694.
Piketty, T. (2020). Capital and ideology. Harvard University Press.

The Post Graduate

There are classed limitations in accessing postgraduate education – a class ceiling.

This is despite the fact that 'postgraduate study has expanded to become a core part of a mass higher education system' (Wakeling, 2010).

The national priority of growing the postgraduate sector has eluded to reflexively engage with 'the role of postgraduate degrees in reproducing socio-economic inequality' (Wakeling and Laurison, 2017).

The authors *(ibid)* assert that 'social class inequalities extend beyond first degrees into entry to postgraduate degrees'.

In fact 'social class inequalities not only persist at postgraduate level, but have widened over time' *(ibid).*

So, any 'gains in equality of access to first-degrees are indeed at risk from postgraduate expansion' *(ibid).*

Wakeling, P., & Laurison, D. (2017). Are postgraduate qualifications the 'new frontier of social mobility'?. The British journal of sociology, 68(3), 533-555.

The Post Graduate

As more and more students graduate from undergraduate courses, there is a push to distinguish yourself from the crowd.

'Groups and/or individuals strategise ways to create advantage over others using any resources necessary, including educational ones'. (Tholen, 2017)

Those from dominant classes and cultures use their symbolic capital to access prestigious positions in the labour market.

Others use their economic capital to fund taught programmes or doctoral research.

Working class students do not have the required symbolic or economic capital to be able to flourish in a field that they are not the product of.

Tholen, G. (2017). Symbolic closure: Towards a renewed sociological perspective on the relationship between higher education, credentials and the graduate labour market. Sociology, 51(5), pp1067-1083.

The Post Graduate

However, as more and more students graduate from undergraduate courses, we can identify with the process of *credential inflation* (Collins, 1979), where the worth of higher levels of educational attainment is devalued by their ubiquity.

We are familiar with this in the context of how *'a degree is not enough'* (Tomlinson, 2008) to secure entry to graduate-level employment.

Araki et al (2022) remind us that 'returns to education differ depending on fields of study and prestige of education institutions, as well as socio-economic statuses of individuals'.

Collins, R. (1979). The credential society: An historical sociology of education and stratification. New York: Academic Press.
Tomlinson, M. 2008 '"The Degree Is Not Enough": Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability', British Journal of Sociology of Education, 29 (1): 49–61.
Araki, S., & Kariya, T. (2022). Credential inflation and decredentialization: Re-examining the mechanism of the devaluation of degrees. European sociological review, 38(6), 904-919.

The Post Graduate

We might want to be aware of two specific elements of the class ceiling to accessing postgraduate education.

Firstly we should be cognisant of *social closure*.

As Tholen (2017) notes 'The process of social closure produces and preserves stratification among groups. Social closure occurs as groups seek to increase the advantages of their situation by monopolising resources to their group and restricting access to outsiders'.

'Wherever groups can successfully label characteristics such as race, language, social origin, religion or lack of credentials as inferior, closure can be achieved' *(ibid).*

Secondly, we can think about Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*.

Tholen, G. (2017). Symbolic closure: Towards a renewed sociological perspective on the relationship between higher education, credentials and the graduate labour market. Sociology, 51(5), pp1067-1083.

The Post Graduate

Diane Reay (2004) writes about how 'Bourdieu views the dispositions, which make up habitus, as the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's earlier life experience…as a result, the most improbable practices are rejected as unthinkable'.

Sweetman (2009) tells us that 'habitus is a product of our upbringing, and more particularly of our class. It is class-culture embodied'.

Bourdieu and Wacquant tell us that when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted.

Reay, D. (2004). 'It's all becoming a habitus': beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. British journal of sociology of education, 25(4), 431-444
Sweetman, P. (2009). Revealing habitus, illuminating practice: Bourdieu, photography and visual methods. The Sociological Review, 57(3), 491-511.
Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.J.D. (1992) An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology. Cambridge: Polity Press.

What can we do?

Bourdieu (2002, p29) tell sus that habitus 'may be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education or training (which implies that aspects of what remains unconscious in habitus be made at least partially conscious and explicit)'

Although 'It is difficult to control the first inclination of the habitus, ... reflexive analysis, which teaches us that we endow the situation with part of the potency it has over us, allows us to alter our perception of the situation and thereby our reaction to it' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p136).

So as well as challenging institutional policies and practice that facilitate social closure and the continued dominance of certain classes and cultures there are educative projects that can aim to influence habitus through new experiences – to challenge what is the unthinkable and the improbable.

Bourdieu P., (2002), 'Habitus', in Hillier J., Rooksby E. (eds), Habitus: A Sense of Place, Aldershot: Ashgate.
Bourdieu P., Wacquant L., (1992), 'The Purpose of Reflexive Sociology (The Chicago Workshop)', in Bourdieu P., Wacquant L., An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, Cambridge: Polity.

What can we do?

Funding received from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) - Richard Essery, Stephanie Robin, Kay Douglas, Natasa Honeybone & myself. NERC set the following criteria

- Demystify PhD research for applicants from diverse backgrounds
- Improve inclusivity with PhD programmes
- Develop resources for widening participation in future PhD recruitments

Mentoring triplets were set up involving a school pupil, UG student and doctoral candidate - a total of 32 hours contact time.

A series of short video pieces were created to tell the stories behind a selection of doctoral research projects.

Here we are challenging what is unthinkable and the improbable - making sure that students from working class backgrounds do not *feel the weight of the water.*