'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': class and capitals in, and after, higher education

Barbara Merrill, Fergal Finnegan, Jerry O'Neill & Scott Revers

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': class and capitals in, and after, higher education*

Barbara Merrill[a], Fergal Finnegan[b], Jerry O'Neill[b] and Scott Revers[a]

[a]Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; [b]Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Much research on adults in higher education has focused on issues of access and participation. As a result little is known about what happens to working-class students after leaving university even though employability is high on the agenda HE research on this topic in relation to such students is sparse. This research focuses on the voices of working-class students and their aspirations in relation to employability. Using two student narratives this paper draws on the findings of two countries, England and Ireland, from a six-country European project on employability of non-traditional students using biographical research methods. Their stories reveal an awareness of class inequalities in the labour market in relation to cultural, economic and social capital and issues of locality, gender and age. The stories also indicate a sense of precarity in their lifecourse in a society which has become highly reflexive and fluid (Alheit, P., and B. Dausien. 2002. "The 'Double Face' of Lifelong Learning: Two Analytical Perspectives on a 'Silent Revolution'." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 34 (1): 3–23).

Introduction

This article draws on the findings on class inequalities in and after HE in two countries, Ireland and England, from a six country (UK, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden) European research project entitled *Enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in HE'* (EMPLOY). The key aim and objectives of the project are to understand employability from the student and graduate perspective. By non-traditional we mean students and graduates who are from communities and groups who are under-represented in university and often also face obstacles in the job market. This includes a diverse range of groups such as mature students, working-class students, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. The specific focus of this article is on working-class students and graduates and issues of class inequalities in relation to employability based on biographical interviews with non-traditional participants.

We begin by locating the research in a socio-economic, political and policy context and move to a critical discussion of employability, followed by an outline of our theoretical and methodological framework. Our research indicates that despite significant continuities in working-class experience and structures there is clear evidence that class experience and expectations are changing in relation to education. The narratives of two students (Sharon, from England, and David, from Ireland) have been

---

selected as they illustrate many of the key findings of our research in relation to the nature of class inequalities, HE and employability. In particular, we will through these stories, draw on and adapt the concepts of Bourdieu to look at how class and capitals affect transitions after graduation in a society which is highly reflexive and fluid, as well as increasingly unequal and precarious.

'Mass' education and class inequality in HE

Higher education institutions across Europe have been transformed as a result of economic and socio-political changes, the reconfiguration of state/university relationships, globalisation and increasingly through marketisation. Perhaps the most obvious effect of these varied but inter-linked changes has been the remarkable global expansion of HE over a generation and Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) note that the number of HE students doubled between 1990s and 2000s. The same dramatic patterns are discernible across the EMPLOY network countries. In Ireland in 1980 there were 20,000 undergraduates in HEIs and in 2014 there were over 170,000 (Fleming, Loxley, and Finnegan 2017) while in the UK there were 68,150 undergraduates rising to 350,000 in 2011.

This has opened up opportunities for widening participation and access for groups who never previously entered HE (Scott 2001; Osborne 2003: Fleming, Loxley, and Finnegan 2017). As Osborne notes:

> To a greater or lesser degree massification is economically-driven; struggles for social justice have intentionally led to certain gains for historically excluded groups, though the resultant changes in HE practices are differentially distributed according to institutional history, tradition and form. (2003, 17)

We have seen progress in terms of gender equality, a large rise in the number of adult students and in some countries a significant growth in the participation of students with disabilities. There has also been an increase in working-class participation while in some countries elite social class participation has reached the point of 'saturation' (Shavit et al. 2007) which has created some space for working-class students (Clancy 2015).

This has made HE more vibrant and diverse and the significance of these processes should not be underplayed. However, widening participation initiatives in recent decades have had uneven success in addressing educational inequalities (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit et al. 2007; Attewell and Newman 2010). While greater numbers of working-class people are attending HE than ever before there is evidence of persistent inequality in participation rates (Attewell and Newman 2010) and in 'educational careers' and destinations (Burke 2014) as well as sharpening inequalities more widely (Sayer 2015). This brings us to a foundational argument for this article. The evidence indicates that the morphology of class inequality has changed and we need to pay more attention to 'branching points' and final destinations in educational careers than before; the issue is no longer solely about access but rather access to what? This new(ish) situation therefore requires a double focus – on the absolute participation rates of different social groups and classes as well as the extent to which wealthy and middle-class students predominate in prestigious institutions, disciplines and courses and are accruing the credentials which are highly valued in work and society. This necessitates research that takes the 'long view' and which can explore trajectories into, through and out of HE into the labour market.

Putting employability into context

The term employability has long featured in HR literature and management studies but in recent years has become primarily associated with education. It has become a policy 'keyword' – that is a 'significant, binding word' (Williams 1988, 15) that discloses a great deal about how we view education and society. In the UK 'enhancing employability' through education is well-established in policy discourse while in Ireland it came to the fore in the period of crisis and austerity which followed the financial crisis. Employability is also a central concern of the EU, and named as a key goal of the

Bologna Process (EC 2010). It is now being directly aligned to widening participation as explained in a recent EU report:

> Widening participation does not stop at providing access to students from underrepresented groups … but has to include measures ensuring that such students complete their studies and have a successful transition to the labour market. (Eurydice 2014, 62)

It is argued increased access to education can simultaneously enhance the store of 'human capital' and overcome barriers to inequality. This is not so much a change but rather an elaboration of existing HE policy at an EU and national level. As the report cited above makes clear it is crucial to 'modernise' HE and make it more 'responsive' to society's needs. That access should entail access into work after university is unobjectionable, even necessary. Certainly, there are good social and economic reasons to demand that HE should become more responsive to wider society but we need to pay close attention to precisely how this is envisaged. Not least because this policy 'keyword' is often deployed in sociologically naive fashion wedded to 'a way of reasoning that seems to have no structural roots, no social locations and no origin' (Fejes 2010, 91). Tighter integration of HE with the labour market (Morley 2001) is understood mainly in terms ensuring that graduates meet the needs of employers in relation to skills, knowledge and dispositions and as an issue of individual competence and performance rather than a complex personal, institutional and social responsibility.

Such an individualistic and decontextualized way of thinking about employability has been fused with a human capital approach to access in widening participation initiatives. It is believed that acquiring a degree will facilitate upward mobility. In, and after HE, it is implied, adult working-class students will enter onto a level playing field with their middle-class counterparts. There is a dearth of empirical, qualitative research which explores what happens to non-traditional students after university but the available evidence indicates that this is not the case (Tomlinson 2012; Burke 2014) and there is little proof that widening participation on its own leads to equality in the labour market or society (Burke 2014; Tomlinson and Holmes 2017). In fact, it appears massification and economic conditions means that graduates are often underemployed or even unemployed (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Tomlinson 2008; Burke 2014; Tholen 2014).

Beside which we know there has been significant restructuring of the labour market linked to the technological and political transformations that have defined neoliberal globalisation. Cumulatively these changes have resulted in new forms of flexible and precarious labour in many working-class and some middle-class jobs (Standing 2009). This has led some thinkers to speculate that stable careers identities, which are vital for a sense of belonging and being valued in society, have been undermined (Sennett 1998). Of course this is a very broad set of social processes but we think access, widening participation and employability can only be properly analysed when we are cognisant of rising inequality, increased competition, social precarity and occupational uncertainty.

Theoretical framework: class, capitals and social space

Critiques of dominant understanding of employability such as Tomlinson (2008) and Kalfa and Taksa (2015) have turned to a 'social positioning perspective' which adopts a more relational and historical approach. We want to build on this using the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1986a) and especially his concept of *social space* as structured by the possession of various form of *capitals* (cultural, economic, symbolic and social) alongside the notion of habitus. To fully explain the trajectories of people through classed social space – in the educational field and the labour market – we think these concepts used relationally and reflexively alongside each other remain invaluable to understand class inequality and education. Our theoretical framework focuses on the work of Bourdieu. We are aware that other scholars have used his work in similar research contexts such as Diane Reay and Beverly Skeggs and have discussed their approaches elsewhere (Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg 2014; Finnegan and Merrill 2017).

According to Bourdieu the social world is 'accumulated history' (1986b, 46) in which class is defined by ownership over capital; this 'in its various forms is a set of pre-emptive rights over the future' (Bourdieu 2000, 225). Bourdieu links this to the formation of our dispositions and sense of the world, what he terms '*habitus*', to the volume and composition of capitals at our disposal. Habitus is partially defined by 'a sense of one's place' (Bourdieu 1990, 131) in relation to others and the wider social space. Bourdieu stresses the *situated, embodied* and *practical* nature of both conscious and subconscious social action.

Bourdieu does not envisage social space as unitary and undifferentiated rather he claims it is divided into various *fields* and each field has its own specific logic of practice with its own stakes and rewards (1984). Bourdieu also maintains that the boundaries and practices which constitute a field get redefined through struggle over time. Fields are therefore *dynamic*. He is particularly interested in how dispositions relate to a given field (1984, 2000): to use one of Bourdieu's favoured similes the relationship between habitus and field can be likened respectively to one's feel for the game and the game itself (2000, 151). A field is also defined by how the various forms of capital are employed within that field. By examining how well a given habitus functions in response to the demands of a given field and the sort of capitals that are required to succeed in a specific field, Bourdieu believes, we can begin to properly understand how the dynamics underpinning the choices, preferences and strategies of social actors in a specific field of practice reflect and mediate the divisions which define social relations as whole.

Tracing movement through differentiated and boundaried social space over time allows us to understand class experience, how it shapes identity and how social inequality gets reproduced. The dominated sections of society, who Bourdieu largely, but not exclusively, identifies as the working-class, have less capital at their disposal than members of dominant classes and have this dispossession naturalised through early socialisation. This is confirmed and reinforced by limited upward movement through social space and restricted access to socially valued positions in specific fields of practice. As a consequence the 'position of a given agent within the social space can thus be defined by the positions he [sic] occupies in the different fields' (1984, 724).

For Bourdieu the immanent logic of the social world is usually reproductive and he assumes a high degree of social stability in class structures. It is important for our discussion though to note that Bourdieu does recognise that this can be transformed through the use of individual and collective agency:

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 133)

Such agency always involves the past, present and future so that agency has to be understood within both contexts and time. It has been defined thus:

> The imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears and desires for the future. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971)

This is, we believe, a relatively undeveloped idea in his work. We want therefore to draw on other research – which is quite distinct from Bourdieu and make the argument that this capacity for agency on a biographical level is widespread and increasingly necessary to cope with the challenges of 'reflexive modernity' (Alheit and Dausien 2002). Alheit and Dausien (2002) coined the term biographicity to theorise this as:

> a self-willed, 'autopoietic' accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively 'organise' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions. (Alheit and Dausien 2002, 17)

How, and to what extent, people can draw on their biographical stock of knowledge needs to be kept in view. Focusing on transitions between fields through relational social analysis of reproduction

alongside this theory of reflexive agency allows us to properly analyse the interplay of structure and agency and make sense of working-class experience in and after HE.

Methodological approach

Biographical narrative approaches are a popular research method within European adult education research (West et al. 2007) and reflects more broadly a 'biographical turn' within the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000). Its popularity lies in its adoption of a humanistic approach which places participants central to the research process and 'offers rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds' (Merrill and West 2009, 1).

Feminists contributed to this method by advocating for a democratic relationship between researcher and researched (Reinharz 1992). Oakley (1981) emphasises that interviews should be like a conversation, whereby the researchers' self is present. Importantly biographical research has illuminated the everyday lives of the marginalised and oppressed. For Jane Thompson, a radical adult education feminist, telling stories are:

> a way of exercising critical consciousness and of producing knowledge from the inside about gender, class and education, deriving from personal, particular and shared experience. Not in the pursuit of ultimate truth but in the search for greater, more nuanced, understanding. (2000, 6)

Feminist biographical approaches also highlight the interaction between the personal and political and public and private lives. Individual biographies reveal that personal experiences at the micro level are often shared ones of gender, class and ethnicity at the macro level. So, although a life history is an individual story it is always located within a social, historical and political context (Bertaux 1981) and biographical accounts reveal the collective experiences of class and gender and the interaction between structure and agency (Plummer 2001; Merrill 2007).

In this research, the Irish team conducted biographical interviews with 30 non-traditional students and graduates and as there was a longitudinal dimension based its findings on 46 interviews (18 of the 30 were working-class). The UK team carried out 40 interviews with 30 undergraduate and 10 graduate students all of whom were working-class. Ten of the undergraduate students were interviewed for a second time after they had completed their degree. In the first instance, we used occupational history for mature students and family occupational background for students who went straight from school into university to identify people who came from working-class backgrounds (routine and manual occupations in NE Sec/CSO Ireland categories). The biographical interviews supplemented this with rich insights into the other dimensions of class (cultural capital, educational history, community experiences etc.).

Each national team analysed data using open coding to identify general findings with a particular focus on the effect of class long-term outcomes for graduates. Following this the teams met for joint analysis of themes which built on earlier shared comparative work on working-class experience of HE (Finnegan and Merrill 2017). In the joint discussions, we illustrated themes through case studies, sought general patterns, looked for sub-cohorts and for 'outliers'.

The presentation of findings from this process can be presented either by a themed approach or through individual case studies which also highlight shared experiences and themes across the whole sample (Rustin 2000; Merrill and West 2009). We chose the latter and identified two stories as individual case studies which are particularly useful for illuminating the complex patterns of continuities and changes in class experience that we want to illustrate here. As Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) stress, such individual stories 'retain more of the "noise" of real life than many other types of research'. This approach is rooted in the tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology and studies by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958) and Clifford Shaw's (1966) study of Stanley in *Jack Roller*. Further, from a Bourdieusian perspective we are especially interested in finding ways to describe how class inequality operates over time – how it sediments in life stories and institutions – and how this is then responded to by agents in dynamic and changing fields.

Research findings

Before we turn to our two case studies we want to give an overview of the key findings and say a little more about what we mean when we speak of continuities and changes in class experience.

The data indicates the significance of processes of detraditionalisation in relation to work, education, communities and intimate relationships and the importance of the biographical agency in everyday life. Detraditionalisation has opened up new pathways through work and life and biographical projects which do not follow predictable patterns. This the research suggests, along with other cultural and political changes, has loosened but not eviscerated collective notions of class identity.

Detraditionalisation has also changed the role of education in society, especially non-compulsory education and training. Education becomes, or at least is perceived as having the potential, to provide important resources for coping with multiple transitions of the modern life course. It is noteworthy that broken and truncated educational stories and the impossibility of attending university earlier in life was raised by many mature working-class students. This accumulated history of denial and restricted access followed by 'massification' in a rapidly changing and complex society, explains, we think, why HE was so highly valued by most students and graduates. It was described as a space of opportunity, development and upward mobility. The belief that HE changes lives and offers significant developmental opportunities was very common amongst working-class students. This was also repeatedly linked to a desire to find 'good work', typically described in terms of secure conditions, vis-à-vis income and contract, but also stimulation and a 'fit' with interests and passions. What comes out of the students and graduates accounts very clearly is the desire for what might be termed the *expansion of reflexive agency* whilst retaining a sense of *biographical coherence*. In particular students and graduates hope a degree will enhance their power to choose and shape a career that fits their interests and aspirations.

But as we argued earlier our and other research suggests there are new branching points and forms of differentiation in HE which effect these outcomes (in discipline, institution, postgraduate qualification). Besides which we know class inequality has sharpened and is also being modified by precaritisation. So it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the students and graduates we spoke to told us stories of managing unexpected dilemmas and contradictions which flow from these changes in the structuring of social space. To explore some of the changes and continuities in class experience in a reflexive era we outline the narratives of two students: Sharon, from England and David, from Ireland.

Sharon

Sharon is 37 years old and studied law and is the first person in her family to go to university. She went to a state school but left at 15 without qualifications. Her family background was an unhappy and troubled one. Sharon was put in foster care at the age of 12 after her father murdered her mother and was imprisoned. At the age of 16 she had to leave her foster home and ended up living in accommodation for the homeless. She became pregnant and lived on benefits looking after her child until the age of 20. She then had a range of jobs and was always successful at job interviews. She finally ended up working in the prison service prompted in part by wider personal and family experiences. She began to think about returning to education as she wanted a more fulfilling job so Sharon took an access to higher education course before going to university.

Sharon chose her university because:

> it's in the top five and it's very close to my house … I looked at the newspapers and X is the best especially for Law and I know that solicitors can be quite picky about which university you've been to, to whether they employ you or not. So, I thought I have to go to X and nowhere else really.

When she heard that she had been accepted she was:

> Over the moon … It was brilliant. It was the best thing ever. I was just so happy that I got into X because I didn't want to go anywhere else. I just felt so grateful. I was like 'oh my god I can't believe I've got into the top five universities from coming from nothing'.

Choosing law and the desire to become a solicitor stemmed from her life experiences of dealing with solicitors following her mother's death and later obtaining a divorce from her partner. Although Sharon enjoyed being at X she struggled with her studies, not helped by having to take paid work for financial reasons. Consequently, she missed many seminars and lectures. It was partly because she felt that the access course had not prepared her sufficiently for essay writing and seminars but it also related to class issues. She was aware that many of the younger students had attended private schools and used language differently to her. She didn't always understand what they were talking about and this made her feel 'even more unconfident about being a solicitor'. Sharon lacked the cultural capital of her fellow middle-class students. She is also dyslexic and had disability support. At times Sharon said she wanted 'to get out of here' as her marks were low and lacked peer support as she was a mature student amongst young, middle-class undergraduates. In Bourdieu's terms she felt 'like a fish out of water'. She reflected on her sense of disorientation in her first year of study and noted that 'traditional students seem to be trained at birth to write essays and sit exams and they know exactly how to do it where we were running around like headless chickens'.

> I think until after the first year I didn't really know what we were supposed to be doing in seminars. I know you are supposed to answer the questions but in the first week I didn't answer any questions because I was like 'Are we supposed to do that?' … I was 'What are they talking about?' because I just didn't know.

Law students have to find their own work placements but these are unpaid – something Sharon could not afford. She managed to obtain a placement at a high court through a lawyer she had met previously. She was aware of the importance of possessing social capital in the law profession in obtaining employment so she took an agentic step to attend a social event for solicitors:

> Last year I went to a Law Society dinner. It wasn't part of the application process – it was kind of discovering more about us but then from that they did invite me to apply to them. I think because it's informal but formal but there are employees who have been with the company quite a while so you can talk to them. And because it's dinner, it's not an interview setting you can ask them any questions you want to, you can get tips. It does actually help.

Although she went to one event she did not join because of the expense. To become a solicitor, graduates have to take a Legal Practice Course (LPC) after their degree but this was too expensive for Sharon.

Life has been difficult for her since finishing. A good mark in final exams is also important and Sharon did not obtain this, putting her at a disadvantage in the labour market. She witnessed younger middle-class students walking into a job because of their connections:

> Some of the students I've spoken to, their parents are partners in solicitors so obviously they're going to walk into a job. Definitely down the barrister's route it's about what private school you've been to. I think money definitely because if you haven't got the money you're just not going to the bar. It costs too much money – £18,000 and £12,000 for solicitors and then books. I think it's more who you know as well as what university you're from.

However, she left university determined to obtain some type of (lower status) job in the legal field and started applying for jobs but is confined to the local area. Overall, despite the difficulties experienced at university she remained positive at the end of her studies about having chosen X rather than the other local university because she is aware of the hierarchical inequalities in the HE system. She feels that law firms are not interested in students with a degree from there. She raised this issue again in her second interview which took place six months after graduating. Sharon explained that 'I got really ill in my last year … and I failed the first two exams but then I got a bit better and I passed all the others'. Sharon was 'devastated' by the low degree classification she obtained and initially felt 'I didn't really think there was any point in having it'. The Exam Board took the decision to allow her to re-take the Trusts module as this is required to become a solicitor. She described this

stage in the following way: 'I am kind of in limbo because my exam is in May so I can't do anything … until I have passed Trusts'. However, she used her agency and quickly obtained a job as a PA at a solicitors' to help her accrue some experience of the field.

Although the low grade at degree level put her at a disadvantage in the labour market she believes that the reputation of X University was crucial in achieving the PA job:

> Putting X on my CV got me the job because the first thing they said in the interview was 'X – that's a very good university. How did you get in there? What did you do?' And that basically got me the job.

She continued that when she met the other solicitors at the firm they asked:

> What university did you go to? And whenever you say X they gave an exclamation of surprise … ' Okay'. It's as if you are in a different light all of a sudden. Because they had all been educated at Eton, and Oxford, Cambridge so they felt I fitted in because I'm from X. If I had told them I had been to Y (the other university in the city) I'd have been cut out.

Her story reveals the exclusivity of the law profession in relation to class, habitus and capitals.

Sharon's aim is to become a coroner but realises that she is in a precarious situation financially as the training costs are expensive. To help her finance her law training she has turned to gambling as a survival mechanism to pay her bills.

Sharon, despite the set back with her degree grade, remains resilient and determined to succeed in a field which she realises is highly middle-class and elitist. She was aware, like other students we interviewed, of the advantage of having social, cultural and economic capital and a particular habitus, as well as a degree from an elite university. This for her was particularly evident in a traditional subject area and her experience of resulting professional opportunities. Sharon, however, was also good at being agentic to overcome these barriers and inequalities. She responded strategically to her circumstances by making choices to circumvent the barriers she experienced. She recognised the advantages gained by being at an elite university and calculated that institutional reputation would carry weight. In contrast, she observed that friends who had successfully completed their degrees at other less well-recognised universities were now failing to find a position. She also cultivated relationships with other students while at university, building on the social and cultural capital she had accrued in this environment, recognising that this could serve her in the future.

David

David is in his forties, a family man with two children, who did an Arts and Humanities degree as a mature student and went on to do a postgraduate teaching qualification.

In an early interview, David describes leaving school as a crucial turning point in his life. Being edged out of school at 16 was very disempowering and associates it with losing some control over his life. He thinks he left school too early; his father and mother had very little formal education and because of this his parents 'didn't really know how to support me'.

Beside this the school as an institution 'was pretty dire looking back'. The fact he came from a disadvantaged community which had a reputation for being 'rough', was mentioned by teachers to David a number of times

> Going there, there was certain discrimination because of where you were from. I was from a poorer area. We didn't have an influence in the community; we didn't even have the opportunity to have an influence in the community […] You were just lucky to be there. You were on short order. […] I was a kid who always conformed. I didn't cause any trouble. I was the quiet kid, who tried to fit in and make as many friends as possible but you're still targeted. There is no getting under the radar.

So, David's educational trajectory was shaped by both an unresponsive and classed institution and his family's lack of cultural capital. There is a peer group element in this as well as he had been an 'ok' student and had consciously distanced himself from a group of friends who were 'messers' but at the beginning of secondary school in his mid-teens he became more interested

in sports and girls. When he failed important exams at 15 he was 'devastated' but still hoped he could turn it around. However, because of his results, he was moved into a 'mickey mouse' vocational stream within the school which operated according to a different timetable to mainstream classes. The school's limited, and limiting, expectations of the students on this course were made abundantly clear to them and they spent much of their time messing around with a stripped-down car. David says he became cheekier as a result. He recounts an incident when he realised his school days were finally over. He was at a school disco and there was one of his teachers outside who was acting as a 'sort of bouncer' and was

> nicknamed Basil Fawlty because he looked like him. I said to him 'I am going to come back next year'. […] I remember distinctly your man saying 'you are not coming back here!'[…] It might of been an off the cuff remark but it stuck with me and the changed my direction, I decided I was going to get a job, it affected me, it was one of those moments of clarity. That one statement meant I did not come back. I wasn't a particularly bad student I don't know if he was peeved with me … I don't know what was going on in his life. That one statement sent me in a different direction.

David tells me this experience at school really bothered him subsequently.

He put school behind him and after a couple of jobs where he felt 'like a square peg in a round hole' he started driving a taxi. He worked at this for over twenty years. Talking to people in his care made him cognisant of the difference education can make. After the industry was deregulated it became more competitive. He became increasingly dissatisfied as he was not spending enough time with his family and driving was becoming more dangerous.

His love of films eventually led him to do a script writing course and later gave him the confidence to sign up for an access course. This and other coincidences and changes in educational policy led him to enrol on an access course.

Realising that he was in fact – despite the judgement of staff at his school – a capable learner was described by David as a slow and tentative process which happened after he got into university. When I met David first he told me how much he liked it. HE was the exact inverse of school; he said it is a place where 'anything goes' and then remarked 'Its poles apart. The majority of lecturers are approachable, not aloof, I love the place'. The experience of university was seen as transformative because it provided him with an opportunity to prove previous formal educational evaluations wrong and this set the basis for a greater sense of self-worth. He said 'I am the new me. I am somebody else now. I don't associate myself with Ytown, that background […] I would call that a deprived background, deprived of education and knowledge, deprived of capability and opportunities'.

One of the interesting aspects of David's story is the way education and a changed learner identity is linked to the possibility of a deeper biographical transformation-what David called the 'new me'. David associates education with recognition and resources for agency and the extent to which these ideas of change and transformation rely on him seeing himself as a capable learner. A series of previously fixed and unwanted designations – early school leaver, from Ytown etc. – become provisional and contingent once he went to university. He kept working as a taxi driver but as a student he proves he has the 'ability' to be something else – this is why he says 'I am not just passing the assignments and the exams they are giving me I am doing well'. Despite the fact that like a lot of working-class students he was overworked right through his degree course the change in routine creates the perception that the future is unwritten. In positing an 'unfinished' learning story David subjects his own past to scrutiny. By reflecting on his learning story David subjects his own past to scrutiny and attending university has encouraged him to ask 'what if?' he had support and opportunities earlier in his life.

He successfully worked his way through a degree and then a teaching postgraduate degree. Becoming a teacher appealed to him from quite early on in his degree – it would be family-friendly, secure, satisfying and allow him to give 'something back' to people and draw on his love of learning. After graduating he immediately started looking for teaching jobs, first locally and then across a much wider area. He found work subbing (temporary teaching hours which cover for core staff

who are on leave or ill) and actively built his CV. David approached this in his characteristically focussed and optimistic way and paid for supplementary courses from his own pocket, did extracurricular work and cultivated social networks. He developed an in-depth knowledge of how to approach interviews. When nothing secure became available in his second year he decided, very reluctantly, to teach abroad. This put pressure on his family life and he came back the following year determined to find something closer to home. This was difficult because austerity policies in Ireland following the economic crises led to a hiring freeze. The emergence of private colleges offering educational qualifications also made things highly competitive.

David did find a position but was in a very insecure and nerve-wracking situation where he was highly reliant on the assessment of management of his performance. When he ran into difficulty with a course which he was asked to take on but felt unprepared to do, it was exhausting and anxiety inducing. He focussed sharply on trying to do well overall and most of his work, especially with vulnerable students, was successful. But when he applied for a permanent job for this role he was in he did not get it. He moved on and is currently teaching in a school where he has no security and has to commute several hours a day.

The long ordeal after university, five years of precarity as a teacher have been wearing: 'I have done everything I can' to 'be, try and make myself invaluable' 'trying to fecking please everybody'. He is quite clear about the heavy emotional cost of these circumstances for himself and his family. He says he feels his age is a disadvantage and blames himself for some of his choices (going to the UK and taking on the course which did not work out). Although David is highly agentic, well qualified and committed to teaching he says he may not get the job he hopes for reflecting that while he will always be 'on the squad but may not be on the team'.

Discussion

We think Sharon and David's stories illustrate what was also evident across the research: that the morphology of class inequality, especially in terms of access to education, has changed. Class cannot be tidily traced just through lines of continuity in manual occupations or wholesale exclusion from HE. De-traditionalisation and the massification of education has opened up new pathways in education, self-understanding and even identity. Obtaining a degree for Sharon and David, like many others, has affected their sense of self, confidence and aspects of their habitus. Just as importantly, acquiring credentials had changed the composition and volume of cultural capital at their disposal. These are significant biographical changes and is clearly linked to the structure of HE as a field.

But does this significantly alter their position in social space overall? Here the research findings are less clear: across the research cohorts there is a great deal of movement – often into professional occupations but frequently in conditions which are not secure in various ways. This was the experience of the majority of Irish graduates. For example, Sharon and David's trajectories, at least in the pared down terms of standard class taxonomies based on occupation such as NS SEGs, are upwardly social mobile, but both of them have encountered significant barriers in moving through social space and are in quite ambivalent situations. David's degree and postgraduate qualification gave him an enhanced sense of agency, of moving away from a prescribed 'social fate' but also notably a diminution of income and security. Sharon recognises she will never have the same social, economic and cultural capitals of her middle-class counterparts but at the same time recognises that she has changed and 'grown' as a result of studying at an elite university. Moving into education and onto new career paths has involved risky transitions and their final destinations are still uncertain. Significantly, they, and most of the other interviewees, feel it is their personal responsibility to bear the cost and burden of making these transitions.

If we explore why access to HE does not result in more linear movement we can discern the impact of both new and persistent forms of socio-economic inequalities. What is new is precaritisation across non-elite groups (Standing 2009) – leading to a lack of occupational security, lower than expected

income, a privatisation and individualisation of the costs of training alongside the fragmentation of professional narratives.

The narratives also indicate a shift in the value of various forms of cultural capital (embodied and non-embodied) and the continuing and increasing importance of social and economic capital. Across the two research cohorts we can see evidence of devaluation of basic degrees and the differentiation of higher education disciplines and pathways. Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) argue that the global expansion of HE in a period also characterised by neoliberal globalisation has fiercely intensified competition for graduate jobs. There has been a rapid restructuring of occupational and educational fields and the value of formal cultural capital in the form of HE degrees has decreased. In these circumstances Field points out: 'Education in adult life becomes both a resource for individuals seeking to promote their employability and mobility, and at the same time a cause of further uncertainty and risk'. (2006, 1).

When a basic degree loses value our research indicates other resources – including wealth alongside social and specific forms of cultural capital, especially embodied cultural capital- come into to play in securing good graduate jobs. In Bourdieu's terms the availability and volume of *capitals accumulated over time* in making the transition into graduate work is very marked. In this way old inequalities – which shape early biographical choices and trajectories- related to wealth as well as social and cultural capital, continue to affect labour market outcomes in later life.

David and Sharon are passionate learners who worked hard at university. They are thoughtful and reflexive and highly agentic in pursuit of clear life goals. Like many of the participants in our research they are also keenly aware of what employers are looking for: they have learnt the rules of the game and the tricks of the trade in making applications and interviews. Yet they still encountered real difficulties in finding the type of position they want. The conclusion we draw from this is that biographicity is a very real phenomenon but it is sharply constrained by structural limits and objective possibilities. In highly competitive, and/or open parts of the labour market small differences can have a significant impact (time out of paid work for internships, expensive postgraduate qualifications, modes of self-presentation and embodiment, developing extensive professional social networks). Here accumulated class advantage is crucial in having that 'little bit extra'. This concurs with research in the UK which has discovered the trend of underemployment of working-class graduates and suggests that it may also be taking longer for such graduates to find a secure position (Tomlinson 2008).

On that basis, we can say that class boundaries and cultures are shifting, and the field of HE is being reconfigured, but without significantly altering the basic structure of class inequality. We conclude from this that access to capitals over generations continues to affect social trajectories in highly differential ways. These findings point to the depth and historically sedimented nature of these inequalities and *the limits of widening access to a specific field* without significant change in the structure and dynamics of social space as a whole. Specifically, the research points to the limited autonomy of HE as a field and the importance of social structures linked to employment and the division of labour in the circulation and conversion of capitals.

Yet as we noted earlier there is an assumption, in policy but also more widely, that once working-class students enter university inequalities disappear. While attending HE brings benefits the full extent of these risks becomes clear when one explores what happens after university especially in a period characterised by increased precarity and competition in the labour market. The unwarranted belief that expanding access will tackle inequality has been supplemented by the equally unproven claim that orientating educational policy in HE towards employability will achieve the same goals. Placing this in a broader frame what this research points towards is that the promises and possibilities of reflexive modernity in social democracies has been largely undermined through the rise of financialised neoliberalism. Consequently, although projects of self-realisation in and through HE have become more common amongst working-class people (Reay 2003; Finnegan and Merrill 2017) for many, including Sharon and David, the outcomes of taking this path are far from certain.

Disclosure statement

Funding

References

Alheit, P., and B. Dausien. 2002. "The 'Double Face' of Lifelong Learning: Two Analytical Perspectives on a 'Silent Revolution'." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 34 (1): 3–23.

Attewell, P. A., and K. S. Newman. 2010. *Growing Gaps: Educational Inequality Around the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bertaux, D. 1981. *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bourdieu, P. 1986a. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1986b. "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups." *The Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32: 1–18.

Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P., and L. J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Brown, P., and A. Hesketh. 2004. *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., H. Lauder, and D. Ashton. 2011. *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Burke, C. 2014. *Culture, Capitals and Graduate Futures*. London: SRHE/Routledge.

Chamberlayne, P., J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf. 2000. *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*. London: Routledge.

Clancy, P. 2015. *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective*. Dublin: IPA.

Emirbayer, M., and A. Mische. 1998. "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023.

European Commission. 2010. *An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: A European Contribution Towards Full Employment*. Strasbourg: EU.

Eurydice Report. 2014. *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, retention and employability*. Brussels, EC.

Fejes, A. 2010. "Discourses on Employability: Constituting the Responsible Citizen." *Studies in Continuing Education* 32 (2): 11–23.

Field, J. 2006. *Lifelong Learning and the New Educational Order*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Finnegan, F., and B. Merrill. 2017. "'We're as Good as Anybody Else': A Comparative Study of Working-class University Students' Experiences in England and Ireland." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38 (3): 307–24.

Finnegan, F., B. Merrill, and C. Thunborg, eds. 2014. *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education: Challenges for Theory, Policy Practice in a Time of Change*. London: Routledge.

Fleming, T., A. Loxley, and F. Finnegan. 2017. *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hodkinson, P., and H. Hodkinson. (2001). "The Strengths and Limitations of Case Study Research." Learning and Skills Development Conference, Making an Impact on Policy and Practice, Cambridge.

Kalfa, S., and L. Taksa. 2015. "Cultural Capital in Business Higher Education: Reconsidering the Graduate Attributes Movement and the Focus on Employability." *Studies in Higher Education* 40 (4): 580–96.

Merrill, B. 2007. "Recovering Class and the Collective." In *Using Biographies and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning*, edited by L. West, P. Alheit, A. Bron, A. Siig Andersen, and B. Merrill, 71–89. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang.

Merrill, B., and L. West. 2009. *Using Biographical Methods in Social Rresearch*. London: Sage.

Morley, L. 2001. "Producing New Workers: Quality, Equality and Employability in HE." *Quality in Higher Education* 7 (2): 131–8.

Oakley, A. 1981. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." In *Doing Feminist Research*, Reprinted 1992, edited by H. Roberts, 30–61. London: Routledge.

Osborne, M. 2003. "Increasing or Widening Participation in Higher Education? – A European Overview." *European Journal of Education* 38 (1): 5–24.

Plummer, K. 2001. *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism*. London: Sage.

Reay, D. 2003. "A Risky Business? Mature Working-Class Women Students and Access to Higher Education." *Gender and Education* 15 (2): 301–17.

Reinharz, S. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rustin, M. 2000. "Reflections on the Biographical 'Turn'." In *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*, edited by P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf, 33–52. London: Routledge.

Sayer, A. 2015. *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Scott, P. 2001. "Triumph and Retreat: British Higher Education at the end of the Century." In *The State of UK Higher Education: Managing Change and Diversity*, edited by D. Palfreyman and D. Warner, 186–205. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Sennett, R. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: Norton.

Shavit, Y., R. Arum, A. Gamoran, and G. Menachem. 2007. *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Shavit, Y., and H.-P. Blossfeld. 1993. *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shaw, C. 1966. *Jack the Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Standing, G. 2009. *Work After Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Tholen, G. 2014. *The Changing Nature of the Graduate Labour Market*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, W. I., and F. Znaniecki. 1958. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. New York: Dover Publications.

Thompson, J. 2000. *Women, Class and Education*. London: Routledge.

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.

Tomlinson, M. 2012. "Graduate Employability: A Review of Conceptual and Theoretical Themes." *Higher Education Policy* 25: 412–31.

Tomlinson, M., and L. Holmes, eds. 2017. *Graduate Employability in Context*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

West, L., P. Alheit, A. Siig Andersen, and B. Merrill, eds. 2007. *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European Perspectives*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang.

Williams, R. 1988. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. and expanded ed. London: Fontana Press.