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Bathmaker, Annmarie

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# Constructing a graduate career future: Working with Bourdieu to understand transitions from university to employment for students from working-class backgrounds in England

Ann-Marie Bathmaker 

School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

## Correspondence

Ann-Marie Bathmaker, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.  
Email: a.m.bathmaker@bham.ac.uk

## Abstract

In high participation systems of higher education, the link between undergraduate study and progression to graduate employment is increasingly tenuous. One response is a growing emphasis on the development of employability skills and preparing students to take advantage of future opportunities as part of university study. This paper uses a Bourdieusian-based conceptualisation of graduate capitals, combined with a concern for the psycho-social dimensions of classed experience, to consider transitions through university and into employment for students from working-class backgrounds in England, drawing on data from a study of students who attended the two universities in Bristol UK. It is argued that the assemblage of capitals that make up graduate capital could be seen as constituting a form of symbolic capital with magical powers, that hides the power relations involved in successful progression to graduate futures. While the move from university into work is more prolonged and precarious for students from all backgrounds, access to the resources that enable the development and mobilisation of graduate capitals, along with psycho-social dimensions of class, create additional challenges for the development of viable graduate career identities for working-class students such as those discussed in this paper. The paper concludes by noting implications for policy and practice.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With greatly increased numbers participating in higher education across Europe in the 21st century, particularly at Bachelor level,<sup>1</sup> the progression from higher education to employment has become a major focus of concern for policymakers. At the same time, as more people are gaining access to higher education, routes into graduate employment are much less straightforward, and there are increasing wage inequalities within occupations (Eurofound, 2017). While interest in graduate employment and the relationship between higher education and employment is not new—see for example Teichler (2002) and the special issue of this journal in 2002—there is now growing concern about graduate under-employment, or “over-education” for available jobs (Green & Henseke, 2016). Countries across Europe have introduced mechanisms to track and analyse the progression of higher education graduates into employment (Pavlin, 2019). *Employability*, that is, “steps to promote the likelihood that graduates will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment” (Holmes, 2013, p. 541), has a central place in the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, EACEA and Eurydice, 2016) and forms an increasingly important element of higher education curricula in Europe and countries across the world (International Graduate Insight Group, 2011; Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014; Vivas & Alvarez-Hevia, 2017).

This paper focuses on England as an instance where employability as well as transition to graduate employment form key accountability measures in higher education (Department for Education (DfE), 2017). Many employability initiatives follow what Holmes (2013) calls a “possession” approach, one in which graduate skills, competences and attributes are treated as if they are capable of being acquired, possessed and used to achieve labour market success. But, as noted by Tomlinson and Nghia:

The policy-endorsed formula of graduate employability = higher education qualifications + key employability skills has limitations when understanding the complex nature of graduates' relations to, and outcomes within a given labour market. (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020, p. 8)

A key theme in an extensive literature that seeks to address these complexities is the need for pro-active career self-management and identity work, involving learning to “act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed” (Holmes, 2013, p. 549). With ever fewer structured career pathways, individuals are expected to take responsibility for creating and making their own chances (Harris, 2004).

Yet there is a considerable body of evidence showing that individuals are not equally positioned to create their own chances. Social class, gender and ethnicity permeate the experience of moving through undergraduate study to future destinations (Allen, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2013, 2016; Bradley & Waller, 2017; Burke, 2015; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). They affect the possibilities for career self-management, and are crucial to processes of identity construction, as well as influencing the ways in which “employable graduate” identities are ascribed to individuals by employers and other gatekeepers to professional careers (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; McCracken et al., 2016; Morrison, 2014). Moreau and Leathwood (2006, p. 305) therefore argue that “the discourse of employability, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and neglect of social inequalities, has potentially damaging consequences” for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These concerns are set in a context where market competition and consumer choice are a central feature of policy, particularly in England, placing responsibility on individuals to make the “right” choices about whether to attend higher education, which university to attend, and what career to pursue (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Yet there is long-standing evidence that this rational choice approach to education and career futures does not match practice.

It is assumed that they [people] will respond to the appropriate market signals in deciding whether to enter university or what jobs to go for. The fact that people rarely think or behave in these terms is well established as work is closely related to issues of self-identity. (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p. 3)

In practice, a considerable number of students do not have clear career goals or obvious career pathways when they commence university. A national survey in England (Shury et al., 2017) found that only half of the participants in their study applied to university with a career plan, and only one in five knew exactly what career they wanted to pursue.

This paper turns attention to the experience of such students, that is, students who do *not* have established career goals following defined graduate pathways. The paper is based on a research project located in England, an in-depth study, which explored students' experience of university and progression into future employment, with a particular focus on how these experiences were mediated by social class. The paper contrasts the experience of two young women, both from working-class backgrounds. Neither of them came to university with a strongly developed sense of future career and this paper traces their differing experiences of seeking to construct a viable future at university and post-graduation. Their education and career biographies trouble the possibilities of pro-active career self-management and the construction of a suitable *graduate* identity. They point to the significant ways in which psycho-social dispositions, alongside material aspects of class, including the generation and exploitation of "graduate capitals" (Tomlinson, 2017) mean that too often, a person's background affects their chances of realising a successful graduate future (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

## 2 | THEORISING WORKING-CLASS TRANSITIONS THROUGH UNIVERSITY TO EMPLOYMENT

### 2.1 | Graduate capitals and psycho-social dimensions of experience

In order to examine how students from working-class backgrounds develop and progress their career futures, this paper builds on conceptualisations of student and graduate experience that draw on the work of Bourdieu, who used the conceptual tools of field, capitals and habitus to understand social practice, and particularly to uncover the workings of power and inequality in different social spaces (Bourdieu, 1977, 1985, 1998). Recent research elaborates Bourdieu's tools in the context of graduate transitions in a number of ways. Tomlinson (2017; Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020) proposes that graduate employability can be understood as a set of "graduate capitals" involving "key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto graduates", which include "a range of educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions and are acquired through graduates' formal and informal experiences" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 339). While the capitals identified by Tomlinson include human, cultural and social capital, missing from the model, and from much discussion of graduate employability, is the role of economic capital, which, as the narratives later in this paper demonstrate, plays an important part in the possibilities of constructing a desired graduate future. What the model adds as forms of capital involves identity capital and psychological capital, which combine with other capitals to contribute to the construction of a strong possible career self (Papiflippou & Bathmaker, 2018), and enable students to realise successful transitions to graduate labour markets.

Tomlinson (2017, p. 345) defines identity capital as "the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability." It involves career insight and proactive job market strategies. He emphasises the importance of developing a graduate career identity as well as laying claim to this identity—presenting the claim to being *worthy* of graduate employment in such a way that it is affirmed by selectors and gatekeepers (see Holmes, 2013).

Psychological capital involves career adaptability, self-efficacy and resilience, and has roots in the positive psychology literature. Career adaptability encompasses "problem-focussed coping towards developing proactive strategies in the face of challenge, mainly in the form of learning from experience" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 347; see also O'Shea & Delahunty, 2019). Tomlinson emphasises that the key issue is how well individuals are able to withstand pressure and setbacks over the course of a career, as well as how flexible they are. Career adaptability

therefore requires self-efficacy and resilience. Self-efficacy refers to graduates' self-perceived ability to accomplish career goals but also the capacity to withstand adverse conditions. Resilience, in the specific context of graduate transitions to employment, involves withstanding pressures and disruptions in the initial stages of a career in a potentially uncertain and volatile climate. Tomlinson emphasises that different forms of capital feed off, and enrich, other forms. Moreover, it is not just possessing capitals and developing ways to enhance them that is important "[...] knowing how these have purchase and can assist graduates' entry to the labour market is likely to determine how effective they are for graduates' progression" (Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 340–341).

Tomlinson's model therefore proposes that both psychological dispositions and the construction of a successful graduate identity can be understood as forms of capital. Other researchers locate these dimensions in an extended understanding of Bourdieu's (2002) concept of habitus, drawing on psycho-social interest in the embodiment of emotion and affect (Loveday, 2016; Lucey et al., 2003; Skeggs, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Wetherell, 2015). Reay argues that:

The concept of habitus enables links between individuals' inner emotional worlds and external social and structural processes; it both animates the social in the psychosocial and allows us to better understand how the psyche is formed in and through the social. (Reay, 2015, p.22)

A number of recent studies of higher education transitions engage with the concept of habitus in this way (Abrahams, 2017; Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Allen, 2016; Burke et al., 2017, 2020; Loveday, 2016; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017). These studies focus on the complex ways in which class operates symbolically, culturally and through the emotions (Reay, 2005a), shaping the habitus and displayed in levels of confidence and sense of entitlement to participate in higher education. For students from working-class backgrounds, who have succeeded in progressing to higher education and are surrounded by expectations to be socially mobile, their position in both the field of higher education and the field of future graduate employment is influenced by a mixture of psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions which shape perceptions of what it is acceptable to do and be as someone who is expected to *better* themselves. Insecurity and uncertainty are ever-present, along with feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority. Graduate capitals cannot, following this reading, be put to work equally by students from different socio-economic backgrounds, for "emotional assets of confidence, security and entitlement" (Reay, 2005b, p. 923) are part of what Reay (2005b, p.912) calls "the psychic landscape of class" (see also Walkerdine et al., 2001). As Wacquant emphasises, these assets are:

[...] deposited inside individual bodies in the form of mental schemata of perception and appreciation (whose layered articulation compose the "habitus") through which we internally experience and actively construct the lived world. (Wacquant, 2013, p. 275)

Alongside Tomlinson's elaboration of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capitals in the context of graduate transitions, the analysis in this paper is informed by the above understandings of the psycho-social dimensions of classed experience that become sedimented in the habitus, enabling or constraining movement through the social space of higher education and subsequent progression to various fields of graduate employment.

### 3 | METHODS

The data presented in the following section are from The Paired Peers project.<sup>2</sup> This project was a longitudinal study, which examined the whole student lifecycle of a cohort of students attending the two universities in Bristol, England: UWE Bristol, a medium-tariff modern university, and the high-ranking and prestigious University of Bristol. Phase 1 followed 90 students through their undergraduate degrees, and phase 2 followed 57 of these

students for four years after graduation (2010–2017). In relation to career-building and employment, the project investigated the impact of students' classed and gendered identities on their employment trajectories (including choices, aspirations and strategies), the use made of various resources (capitals) brought into university and/or acquired during their university years to achieve labour market positioning, and the ways in which post-university experience served to modify original choices and aspirations (Bradley, 2013).

All participants were young, progressing to university straight from school or after a gap year. The study had an explicit focus on social class and mobility and explored the differing experiences of students from working-class and middle-class backgrounds. Social class positions were assigned based on a combination of background information. This included parents' occupations and experience of higher education, type of school (private or state) attended, coming from an area of high or low participation in higher education, receipt of financial grant support at university, and students' own designation of their social class.<sup>3</sup> The main method of data collection involved in-depth biographical interviews, using a semi-structured interview schedule. In phase 2, interviews were face-to-face, and sometimes via Skype, once participants had left university. Participants were interviewed six times in phase 1 (while at university), and four times in phase 2 (post-university) as shown in Table 1. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all participants were anonymised using pseudonyms. An overall analysis of key themes and headings across the data was undertaken using the qualitative data analysis programme Nvivo.

The narratives of two students from working-class backgrounds are presented in this paper. They were selected because they provide contrasting experiences of the process of constructing a graduate career, from a starting point where neither of them had established career goals. Additional analysis was undertaken by reading and re-reading their transcripts, from when they started university to the final interview almost four years after graduation. Both students are young women, where intersections of gender and class mean that they face the burden of expectations that they *are* the future, and should become "top girls" (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). One student is from a mixed heritage Jamaican background, and faced the additional challenge of constructing a graduate identity in a context of "normative whiteness" (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Mirza, 2006). On the surface, their trajectories appear to demonstrate successful transitions from working-class origins to employment in the graduate labour market (see Table 2).

However, the narratives in the following section reveal the complexities of their unfolding careers. As Merrill et al. (2020) argue, longitudinal methods permit an analysis of the interplay of structure and agency over time. While individual careers cannot be read off as straightforwardly following macro patterns of classed experience

**TABLE 1** Year and stages at which interviews were conducted in phases 1 and 2 of project

Interview #	Stage	Year
<i>Phase 1: Year 1 (first year)–Year 3 (final year) at university</i>		
1	Y1	2010
2	Y1	2011
3	Y2	2011
4	Y2	2012
5	Y3	2012
6	Y3	2012–2013
<i>Phase 2: 12 months–3 to 4 years after graduation</i>		
7	At 12 months	2014
8	At 18 months	2015
9	At 2 years 6 months	2016
10	At 3 years 6 months – 4 years	2017

Source: Author.

**TABLE 2** University, degree subject and employment destinations from graduation to 3.5 years post-graduation

Participant pseudonym	University	Degree subject	Degree outcome	Immediate destination post-university	3–4 Months after university	14 Months after university	3.5 Years after university
Jade	University of Bristol	Psychology	2:1	Administrative job (job she did during university vacations)	Investment Help Desk Consultant	Client Accounts Administrator	Administrative post (non-graduate job) Police force
Adele	University of the West of England	History and International Relations	2:1	Office supplies company	Financial services company	Same company, different department	Corporate partnerships manager Large national charity

Source: Author.

"Individual biographies reveal that personal experiences at the micro level are often shared ones of gender, class and ethnicity at the macro level" (Merrill et al., 2020, p. 167. See also Allen, 2016; Hordósy & Clark, 2018) Biographical accounts can therefore reveal the collective experience of class (and gender and race) and the interaction between structure and agency.

## 4 | INTERVIEW FINDINGS: CONTRASTING NARRATIVES OF CONSTRUCTING A GRADUATE CAREER FUTURE

### 4.1 | Jade: Struggling to establish a viable graduate career path

Jade and her older sister were first in family to go to university, encouraged by their parents, and Jade's sister inspired her to apply. The family lived in a village close to Bristol. Her father worked as a lorry and forklift truck driver, and her mother was employed in the local council until made redundant. Jade attended the local comprehensive school and then completed A-levels at college. Jade achieved high A-level grades (AAB) and originally started a degree in Pharmacy at Cardiff University, but withdrew after six weeks, because: "[I] absolutely hated my course. It was 'sending you to a job' and she thought 'I don't want to do this'" (interview 1, Jade, psychology student, University of Bristol, 2010). She returned to her college where her tutors helped her to re-apply for university, and then worked for a year in retail before starting a psychology degree at the University of Bristol.

Despite success at A-level and gaining places at two prestigious universities, Jade said this initial experience "knocked my confidence a bit" and from then on she avoided committing to a specific career goal. She viewed psychology as "a broad degree" that she could use for any career. The only work that she knew something about was in retail. But it was not a career she deemed acceptable for someone seeking to better themselves. "I know what other people's view of retail is, that it's mundane" and so she relegated this option to a "back up plan". She did not participate in additional career-oriented activities until late in her final year, when she started volunteering in a local school and registered for the university's employability skills award (interview 6, Jade, psychology student, University of Bristol, 2011).

While other students around her applied for graduate schemes, Jade said she needed time to decide what to do. Her experience of originally choosing the "wrong" degree made her fearful. "I didn't really know what I wanted to do so I just chose something that I thought would be OK and that went wrong, so I don't want to do that again" (interview 5, Jade, psychology student, University of Bristol, 2012). A future career was becoming an imaginary possibility in the distant future:

Hopefully in five years' time I'll have got a permanent job somewhere that I enjoy, that's helping me progress [...] and gives you a chance to move up the ladder and better yourself. (interview 6, Jade, psychology student, University of Bristol, 2013)

For now, she focused on getting a good degree. Her parents had told her it was probably best to complete her degree and then if the worst came to the worst she could go back into retail and work her way up. Her university tutor's advice "to concentrate on getting a good degree" was similar (interview 5, Jade, psychology student, University of Bristol, 2012).

However, as suggested in the notion of graduate capitals, the cultural capital acquired in the form of a good degree is not enough on its own to realise a successful graduate career (Tomlinson, 2008). After graduation, she initially returned home and continued working in the company that employed her while at university until her employer advised her that this was not where she needed to be with her qualifications. She considered care work, but after some work shadowing said "it was just horrendous". She applied (unsuccessfully) for a job with the police, saying "that's always been in the back of my mind to work for the police". Three months after graduation, she found



a job through the classified ads website Gumtree with a financial services company. They were looking for “good graduates”, and she had a 2:1 from the prestigious University of Bristol. After one weekend of training (“I could just about tell you what a share was, that was it”), she was employed as an Investment Help Desk Consultant. The job involved “answering any query the general public might have about their investments.” She described this job as “a stepping stone [...] a taster of finance” and a way of moving back to Bristol (interview 7, Jade, Bristol, 2014).

A year later she was still with the same company, in the fraud department “checking withdrawals to make sure there’s no fraud going on.” Her salary had increased, and her employer was paying for her to complete accountancy qualifications. She still viewed the job as “a stepping stone”, but it was unclear to where. “I don’t want to work in finance, I don’t really fancy HR any more. I don’t really know what I want to do.” (interview 8, Jade, Bristol, 2015).

Jade left after three years with the company, giving a variety of reasons: working full-time and completing a qualification through self-study was too much; she was unhappy because “we were working so hard and getting no appreciation for it”; and “I didn’t know how I was going to build a career”. She took a non-graduate level administrative job in the police force, with a cut in pay. But with no insider knowledge of the career structure, she did not realise until in post that “the ones that have done well come in as a police officer and have moved up.” Jade now believed she needed “extra education, like a masters” to further her career. But she said “I feel like I’ve got to be more certain to do something like that than some of my friends, because their parents will pay for it” (interview 10, Jade, Bristol, 2017).

Without financial resources to fund further study, and not wanting to invest in something she was not sure about, a master’s course was impossible, and three and a half years after graduation, she remained unable to imagine a graduate career identity, admitting “I don’t know what I want to do. I don’t know how to plan it.” She concluded “I think I just need to not give up and just keep trying” (interview 10, Jade, Bristol, 2017).

## 4.2 | Adele: From no career plans to ambitious goals for the future

While Jade struggled to establish a graduate career path, Adele’s narrative is indicative of how critical moments can open up opportunities for success. Adele studied History and International Relations at UWE Bristol. Her Jamaican father left when she was nine months old, and she grew up in Cardiff with her mother, who worked in retail sales, and who Adele described as “aspirational white working-class”. She attended the local secondary school, which she described as “not one of the best schools”, and after a brief period at 6th form college where she did not fit in, feeling uncomfortable and awkward around people from wealthy social backgrounds, she returned to school to complete A-levels. She achieved average grades (CCC), and reflected “if only I’d worked harder I could have gone to a more prestigious university”. Initially she was accepted at university in Cardiff to take business studies, but came home after the induction day and said “I can’t do it [...] I was insecure [...] it was a confidence thing”. Instead, she worked in administration for two years until she realised she could not do that “for the rest of her life”. Her older sister, who was the first in the family to go to university, “kept pushing” Adele to do the same. Her sister eventually gave her the confidence to restart university, and this was a move to independence for Adele (interview 1, Adele, history and international relations student, UWE Bristol, 2010).

In her first year she aspired to a career in journalism or the diplomatic service but knew that it would be “really hard” to get into these occupations. Her main aim was to find a career she would enjoy. She only began to focus on future-directed activities at the end of her second year, deciding she needed something for her CV. She applied for UWE’s paid internship scheme, aimed at students who could not afford to do an unpaid internship. Following interviews with various organisations she accepted an offer from a regional charity, because she “had a really good impression from them”. This was a major turning point. She admitted: “I’ve never thought about working for a charity before [...] but found] I quite like the sector”, even though her family said “why do you want to do that? You’re going to get no money.” (interview 5, Adele, history and international relations student, UWE Bristol, 2012).

Adele fitted in, got on well with her manager and was kept on part-time during her final year and then offered a full-time post. Adele described this as “unlucky and lucky. Lucky that I had a job that I could go into which I liked and that paid, unlucky in the fact that maybe I didn't really have time to [...] discover what I wanted to do”. Her decision to “stick at what I'm doing” was initially based on not having the resources to continue with further study and consider other opportunities. She explained: “I didn't plan to be in the charity sector, I just somehow, I just opened the door of the sector” (interview 7, Adele, Bristol, 2014).

From this moment on, Adele began to engage in strategic career self-management. She studied hard in her final year so that she could count on the cultural capital of having a good degree. She targeted applications on charity sector corporate fundraising “because that's where I have my experience and what I enjoy”. She knew she had accrued human and social capital through working for her first manager, who gave her tasks that utilised and expanded her skills. She signed up to “every kind of agency”, she checked regularly on Charityjobs.com, and her networks passed on recommendations: “I get emails from people like ‘oh there's a job going here’” (interview 7, Adele, Bristol, 2014).

She described her second job with a bigger charity (interview 8, Adele, Bristol, 2015) as “just a stepping stone to something else [...]. I'm just gaining a bit more experience, putting something on my CV.” She explained: “I'm ambitious in this industry that I'm in.” Three years after graduation, she succeeded in getting a job in London as corporate partnerships manager with a major national charity (interview 10, Adele, London, 2017). She saw this as

[...] part of a career plan [...] I want to work my way up the ladder [...] I want to be a senior person in a major charity. I want to have that kind of influence on an organisation to really feel like you [...] are an integral part of making that organisation tick and making a difference. (interview 10, Adele, London, 2017)

She was well aware of the importance of social connections at work. Her direct line manager was personal friends with the Head of Partnerships, “which is good if I'm doing well because that gets relayed back [and] if the head lady likes you then you get promoted” (interview 10, Adele, London, 2017).

Adele's successful career trajectory was not without cost. Realising her career goals meant moving away from family, and she regretted this separation. Furthermore, even in London work was not well-paid. At this point in her life she was happy with this trade-off: “I'm not going to get rich working in the charity sector [...], but it's not about that, and the industry in general is a very nice environment to be in.” But, she concluded, “I don't want to leave but it will come to a point where I will” (interview 10, Adele, London, 2017).

## 5 | ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 | Symbolic alchemy: The interaction of the psycho-social and “graduate” capitals in constructing a career future

Throughout the narratives presented above, there are indications of the ways in which psycho-social class-inflected uncertainties, insecurities and fears influenced the unfolding of careers. Not knowing what they wanted to do, fear of failure, and pragmatic risk-averseness to debt, were key factors in decisions early on about whether to go to university, change course, or drop subjects, and they contributed to subsequent decisions about future career direction and investment in further qualifications. But neither of these young women lacked aspirations, *resilience* or willingness to adapt. Both identified lofty career aspirations in their first year at university, but these were highly idealised, and mirrored the similarly idealised futures posted on university websites, such as “Many of our graduates have secured employment in government, the civil service, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), accountancy, human resources, media and journalism” (UWE Bristol, 2020).

However, without economic resources to invest, nor the social capital from family and personal connections to turn idealised aspirations into realisable possibilities, these high-flying careers were abandoned. The goals that took their place were in occupations deemed less competitive, and therefore more accessible. Not only were these alternative career pathways difficult to identify and navigate, but they lacked the prestige associated with well-known professional occupations. As Adele said: "I'm not something [my nan] can easily explain to her friends. [...] 'She works for a charity as a Corporate Fundraiser.' People are like 'what does that actually mean?'" (interview 10, Adele, London, 2017).

While Adele had gained the confidence to manage questions about when she was going to get a "proper job", Jade's sense of what it was acceptable to do and be, as someone who was expected to "better" themselves, led her to refuse to consider a career in retail, even though she enjoyed this work. An underlying fear of shame and having nobody psychically or economically there to help (Lucey et al., 2003), meant that she floundered to identify a viable career direction. "I don't know what I want to do" turned into the insecurity of "I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing" (interview 10, Jade, Bristol, 2017).

In contrast to Adele, Jade finished university without a clear idea of what career she wished to pursue. An apparent openness to uncertainty quickly developed into a fear of going backwards. She did not want to leave family behind but wanted to gain independence and not fall back on limited family resources. Returning to live in the family home was a sign of failure, of not moving on.

A key issue for both young women was finding employment where they "fitted in". Whereas the literature on becoming employable requires individuals to adapt and fit in to the company or organisation, these young women expressed clearly that they wanted to work in sectors and companies which fitted them and where they felt they belonged. It involved being treated with respect and working with people who shared the same values. For Jade, this was an elusive search for employment where she felt appreciated. For Adele, it was a very strong sense that working in the charity sector was the right place for "a person like me". While both participants demonstrated considerable stocks of psychological capital in terms of coping with setbacks and adversity, this was not enough to succeed in employment where they did not "fit in".

It would be easy to read these narratives as demonstrating what happens when there is a lack of strong, goal-directed future career identities, identified as crucial in literature on graduate employability (see Artess et al., 2017; Holmes, 2013). Defining identity, psychology and emotions as forms of capital allows an alternative reading, following the Bourdieusian conceptualisation of capitals as resources that are not equally accessible to all, but are affected by relations of power and positioning in a particular field or social space. But these narratives go further than this. They point to the "symbolic alchemy" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 102) involved in putting graduate capitals to work, whereby relations of domination and submission are transfigured into affective relations, which are sedimented in the habitus (Loveday, 2016; Reay, 2015). Neither of these students could draw on taken-for-granted stocks of confidence, security and entitlement (Reay, 2005a) in the field of higher education, nor in the fields of employment to which they initially aspired. This, combined with the inability to mobilise social capital through personal networks, made it difficult to generate the career insight and appropriate job market strategies that Tomlinson (2017) identifies as necessary elements of identity capital, because this requires social agents whose modes of thought "are constituted in such a way that they know and recognize what is proposed to them" (Bourdieu, 1998, p.104).

For as these narratives demonstrate, career insight is not a generic form of knowledge or capital, it involves knowing the norms and practices of particular workplaces, their career structures, and what is needed to progress. Adele was able to exploit her growing knowledge of the charity sector to develop social networks and build a career. Jade, in contrast, based her understanding of careers with the council and the police on limited information obtained at a distance. Without any insider knowledge of her own, or gained through social networks of family and friends, she only realised after taking a low-level administrative job with the police, that it did not represent the first rung on a ladder of opportunity.

The assemblage of different capitals that make up graduate capital could thus be seen as together constituting a form of symbolic capital that has “magical power” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 102), and which “appears in the social relations between properties possessed by an agent and other agents endowed with adequate categories of perception” (*ibid.*, p. 104). In the context of graduate employment, graduate capital as symbolic capital can therefore hide the power relations involved in successful progression to graduate futures.

At the same time, the narratives point to key factors that made a difference to these young women's lives. The contrast between Jade's continuing uncertainty and recourse to a non-graduate job, and Adele's determination to achieve a senior position, indicate how futures are influenced by class origins, but not straightforwardly determined by them. Formal and informal interventions by those with power open up opportunities for individuals to exert greater agency and achieve career goals. Formal career-oriented initiatives such as internships and work experience are therefore important. Adele had the opportunity to develop cultural and social capital through a paid internship, that she mobilised successfully to develop her future career. This was a specific scheme offered by her university, to support students who could not afford to participate in unpaid internships. However, these schemes are not enough simply on their own. Jade demonstrated the importance of the social capital that college tutors can provide as trusted others, when she turned to them to help her start again at university. In contrast, university tutors appeared to offer only generalised support and no focused advice to either of these young women. For both women, the transition from secure structured education pathways to insecure graduate labour markets involved going it alone to “make up” a future, with limited support and guidance. Once in employment, supportive managers made a difference, particularly for Adele, who recognised and mobilised the social capital that she generated from getting on with her line managers to progress her career.

These narratives, then, provide insights into the ways in which access to a range of different capitals interact with enduring dispositions and emotions to shape and influence the unfolding of careers. They highlight the importance of economic, social and cultural capitals to enable the development and effective use of identity and psychological capitals and make clear the importance of the psycho-social in the development of graduate identities. But perhaps most significantly, in speaking back to dominant narratives of employability, they point to the ways in which “graduate capital” operates as a form of symbolic capital with what appears to be magical powers (Bourdieu, 1998).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 | Graduate employment in a complex world

Graduate employment is both complex and diverse in the 21st century. While there are still graduate schemes and structured career pathways in some professions, a vast number of jobs are in new or redefined occupations, requiring individuals to be flexible and agile and to construct their own career futures. There is an extensive and growing literature that proposes ways in which students can engage in pro-active career self-management (see Artess et al., 2017) in order to achieve successful transitions to graduate labour market opportunities.

This article deliberately turns to a Bourdieusian-based model of graduate capitals, which problematises the possibility that different forms of graduate capital are equally accessible to all. It reinstates into the model the importance of the habitus and positioning in the field (Bathmaker, 2015). Following Bourdieu, capacity to engage in pro-active career self-management requires an understanding of the “rules of the game” in a particular field, which may be taken-for-granted in a habitus that is attuned to the field, while others will feel like a fish out of water (Clark & Zukas, 2013). Under current conditions, career self-management also demands dispositions that are open to uncertainty and risk, to the extent that Reay (2005a, 2005b) has previously referred to the emotional assets of confidence, entitlement and security as forms of capital in their own right. More recently Reay (2015) and others (Abrahams, 2017; Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Allen, 2016; Loveday, 2016; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017) have focused

on the habitus, informed by an analysis that asserts the importance of the psycho-social; that is, the ways in which psychic and social processes interweave to influence and shape behaviours (Walkerdine et al., 2001). It is this interaction of psychic, emotional processes with the social and cultural that helps to make sense of the experience of the young women from working-class backgrounds considered in this paper. Underlying what appear to be highly individualised and varied experiences, their narratives point to how social class plays a significant but often hidden role in shaping opportunities for the future (Bathmaker, 2021). And while the experiences reported in this paper are based in England, they highlight the ways in which social class disadvantage continues in the crowded graduate labour markets that are increasingly common across countries in Europe and elsewhere across the globe.

## 6.2 | Implications for policy and practice

Graduate employability and employment outcomes have become a growing priority for governments and higher education institutions, with strategies put in place to address these issues. What the evidence from this paper highlights is the absence of the sorts of *concerted* intervention and *targeted* assistance for students from working-class backgrounds, that middle-class students get from their families, where students' progress and careers are a family affair (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Lareau, 2003). This would require active assistance for students from knowledgeable others, such as university course tutors and mentors from the world of work, that is specifically targeted at those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and continues beyond graduation. Instead, Jade and Adele had to go it alone in "making up" their careers (Lucey et al., 2003).

But successful graduate transitions are not just a matter for higher education institutions. Universities do not operate in isolation: "Just as students' experiences prior to higher education are formative, employer practices, and the labour market, play an integral part in influencing who gets ahead, and the mechanisms associated with this" (Bridge Group, 2017, p. 6). The Bridge Group (2016) proposes collective responsibility and collaborative action between universities, employers, as well as the school and college sectors to address the unequal ways in which students experience the transition through university and into employment. Again, the evidence from the longitudinal data presented in this paper indicates the potential value of collective effort and action, starting in school and going right through to employment.

## 6.3 | Concluding comments

The students in the project reported in this paper started university in England in 2010, less than two years after the global financial crisis of 2008. They completed their undergraduate studies three (sometimes four) years later, in a socio-economic environment that was dominated by the austerity programme of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010–2015) in the UK. Graduate employment opportunities were in this time period becoming increasingly insecure. Writing at the time of another global crisis, with the spread of the COVID-19 corona virus pandemic, the impact on graduate futures appears to be even greater insecurity:

The class of 2020 leavers are graduating into a really tough labour market, graduate vacancies are down around 12 per cent (ISE data) and general job board vacancies down around 60 per cent (ONS data). In addition, quite a few of the students who got on to graduate schemes have had places deferred. (Edmondson, 2020)

Moreover, it is already becoming apparent that the crisis is having a comparatively greater negative impact on the current and future lives of those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Major et al., 2020). In this context, where

national economies and labour markets are undergoing unprecedented changes, addressing differences and inequalities in graduate employment futures are even more crucial.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Ann-Marie Bathmaker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0274-2828>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In 2017, there were 19.8 million tertiary education students across Europe, of which 61% were studying for bachelor degrees (Eurostat, 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> The Paired Peers project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust [grant number F/100 182/CC].
- <sup>3</sup> For further details of participant recruitment, the status and reputation of both universities, as well as the operationalisation of social class, see Bathmaker et al. (2016) chapter 2.

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