
BERA SIG: Social Theory and Education  
TITLE: Putting People ‘Inside’ Education Policies

PAPER: Senior female academics in the English Academy: a classed exploration of success

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Draft paper not for quotation

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This draft paper draws on data collected from eight semi-structured interviews with senior female academics, from a range of academic disciplines and ethnic backgrounds.

**Introduction**

Gladwell (2008: 19) argues that to understand why and how successful people become successful, we must know something of their background; he argues that,

> People don't rise from nothing. We owe something to parentage and patronage... The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievements in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It’s not enough to ask what successful people are like, in other words. It is only by asking where they are from that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't.

This paper touches on three areas of data I have gathered as part of a larger doctoral study exploring the role of class background, gender and ethnicity in the experiences of 20 female professors’ understanding and perceptions of their ‘objective’ career success. First, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of habitus (a discussion of my decision to draw on this theoretical framework is briefly outlined below), this paper explores some of the familial dispositions of six of the respondents. Second, the paper briefly considers the influence of participation in a selective education (as a result of the changing policy context, specifically, the tripartite system introduced via the 1944 Education Act) in shaping four of the respondents’ educational dispositions. Third, the paper considers the disposition disruptions in one of the respondent’s experiences, indicating some limits of habitus theory in accounting for her story of progression to her objectively successful current career position, before a brief discussion.

The decision to examine the experiences of eight women (from a possible 20) was informed by space limitations and data analysis progress to date. I draw on a multi-theoretical approach in the larger study, utilising theoretical resources including social
constructionism, capital theory and intersectionality. In this paper I concentrate on habitus to explore 8 extended in depth transcripts.

**Sample details:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>ROLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Professor. Teacher educator. Humanities. “Lower middle class background”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Professor. Practitioner background as a teacher and teacher educator. Humanities. “Squarely working class background”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Professor. Practitioner background as a teacher. Humanities discipline. “Lower working class manual background”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Professor. Practitioner background as a teacher. Humanities. “Extremely middle class background”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Professor. Humanities. “I have always seen myself as middle class”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Professor. Practitioner background as a teacher. Humanities. “middle class, minority ethnic background”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camilla</td>
<td>Professor. Law. “Middle class”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Professor. Practitioner background as a teacher. “I am clearly from the working class!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why habitus?**

I elected to draw on the work of Bourdieu (1977: 1993) to understand any class processes in my respondents’ stories and to analyse any influence of the cohorts’ class backgrounds in their perceptions and experiences of success. My decision was initially informed by the following four points. First, habitus goes beyond an investigation of economic and or status disparities between people and social groups in its attempts to consider the

‘practical sense’ (sens pratique) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules (Bourdieu, 1993: 5).
The second and related point is that habitus facilitates an exploration of an individual’s dispositions, which themselves, “generate practices and perceptions” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5). The third point is that by analysing an individual’s dispositions to choose it is possible to illuminate and account for “the similarity in the habitus of agents from the same social class and authorises speaking of a class habitus” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5). Fourth, I agree Bourdieu’s work produces a conceptualisation of class that encompasses analysis of the “complex social and psychological dispositions that interact with gender and race to inform and influence everyday practice” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5).

Yet drawing on habitus has turned out to be somewhat problematic when I attempt to account for ‘disposition disruptions’, that is how the respondents from a working class background or fractions thereof, have been disposed to choose higher education and subsequent professional careers, despite coming from families who in some cases had no prior participation in such elite areas and/ or systems. This issue is returned to later in the discussion.

**Influences of family background in possibilities for higher education**

Family background is, according to Bourdieu (1977), the key site for habitus formation via the process of socialisation into appropriate familial norms and values possessed, embodied and produced by a particular family at a particular moment in time. Habitus is context specific and historically rooted. Manders (1987:428), surmises that “the family is the locus of the inculcation and development of an individual’s habitus” and describes the family unit as a site for habitus production and mediation, “in the form of lessons in morality, taboos, worries, rules of behaviour and tastes”. Exploring an individual's habitus can offer insights into, and illuminate the influence of, social structures on the individual by critically considering their “durable dispositions”, whilst recognising that this durability may alter. It is the dispositions that an individual acquires via familial socialisation that become, according to Bourdieu (1977), embodied, thus acting as markers, or signifiers, of their habitus, which can in turn illuminate an individual’s social class location. Because of its usefulness to the theorisation of class, I draw on habitus to gain insights into the respondents’ family background to explore their dispositions and the operation of these.
In the interviews I asked the respondents to tell me a bit about their family backgrounds. In some instances this elicited a range of responses which offered insights into cultural, social and political practices and beliefs and the economic position of a particular respondent’s family. Such insights enabled me to consider how familial dispositions might have shaped my respondents’ pathways to reach their current career status; these issues are now briefly explored.

Emily reported that within her minority ethnic middle class family, participation in higher education was a taken for granted aspect of her pathway and professional occupational status was desirable and something to strive for. She told me:

   In my family it was just understood, you go to school, you are going to go to college, university, and we never thought of – oh I don’t want to go to school any more. Because we were not forced, it was just part of who we were…. It was our family habitus (Emily).

Similarly, Claire revealed that her middle class family’s expectations for her were for a university education and subsequent professional career, “at the very least”. The majority of Claire’s family members, with just one or two exceptions (and those were clustered amongst the younger generations) are highly educated, at least to undergraduate level, with many progressing on to complete post graduate qualifications. When asked about the influence of her family background, Claire explained

   There was a complete assumption that we would go to university. All my mother’s family went to university and my father and his younger sister has a PhD… you know, we all went to university. And so careers was a matter of what university subject you would choose, it would sort of follow from there, and you know, that’s the way it’s worked (Claire).

Likewise, Camilla’s ‘middle class’ family, in particular her father, assumed that she, along with her two sisters, would attend a university. She told me;

   My father very ambitious for his daughters […] He was quite unusual in those days in that he saw absolutely no problem for women. He
was very ambitious for all three of us, and thought it was important that we had careers, irrespective of the fact that we were women, so that was important […] I can’t remember what particular career I wanted when I was younger. I mean [my current discipline] was very much one that simply emerged at the point of deciding what university to go to, and what subject to go for (Camilla).

Habitus theory is useful here; if we accept that dispositions act as “broad parameters and boundaries of what is possible or unlikely for a particular group in a stratified social world” (Swartz, 1997: 103) it seems that Emily’s, Claire’s and Camilla’s dispositions to choose would be circumscribed by the expectation to gain academic qualifications and a professional career. Indeed this was evident in some of Camilla’s and Claire’s later choices; they both attended elite universities directly after completing their respective compulsory and post compulsory educations. The respondents’ family backgrounds seem to reinforce the argument that “the relation to what is possible is a relation to power” (Bourdieu, 1990: 4).

In explaining how Laura found herself in HE, she cited her family background and class position as having informed her choices, telling me that;

in terms of explaining my trajectory in terms of class, social class, terms I do think that what I’ve always felt is very authentic. I have this kind of confidence that I think is very classed and, very much to do with partly my parents kind of liberal respect for the child’s voice kind of upbringing and partly I think because you’re also a sort of fish in water going through in middle class environments like the Academy (Laura).

Bourdieu (1977) was concerned with how the social world is structured to ensure reproduction, particularly through the education system. Whilst individuals have a habitus, so too do formal institutions, including schools, HE colleges and Universities (Bourdieu, 1977). All of these institutions produce their own sets of dispositions. The process of producing institutional dispositions is not neutral, but matches wider institutional political discourses as well as norms and ethos. Consequently, factors such as power relations, social class locations and valued forms of knowledge are tightly woven into an institution’s habitus, factors which Laura has benefitted from.
Angela’s discussion of her family background revealed some potential parental influences, which were framed in class terms. She told me;

I think I was probably brought up in what you might call a lower middle background. My father didn’t go to grammar school, he was rejected for grammar school and he started up as a messenger, but he worked his way up into a kind of office job and ended up as a Director of a small firm [...] My mother did go to grammar school… but she didn’t come from a very good family. She wanted to be a teacher but she had to leave at 16 and go and serve in a shop... And she was still working as a shop assistant went she got married… So they’re kind of white collar and became respectable (Angela).

Having a mother who attended grammar school, albeit only up until the age of 16, could have been useful to Angela as it may have offered her a model of what was possible (Swartz, 1997). Because people inhabit and possess differing dispositions, it is possible to see that “not all social words are equally viable to everyone” and thus “not all courses of action are equally possible for everyone, only some are plausible, whereas others are unthinkable” (Swartz, 1997: 107). Jackson and Marsden (1962: 106) found that “knowledge as to the best and the second-best (schools) only circulated freely in those families with some history of grammar school education”. Insider knowledge of what it means to attend grammar school, via her mother’s experiences, could have shaped it into a plausible choice for Angela to aspire to.

Dee came from working a class family, which produced distinctly different familial influences when compared with Claire and Angela’s. Dee’s mother was a full time housewife and later gained part time employment in the service sector, her father was a skilled labourer. Dee told me a little about her background;

The other thing about my background is my dad was a strong union person [...] and he was very involved in industrial action (Dee).

In the post Second World War period the unions offered sometimes powerful support and a sense of comradeship to workers, particularly those from the working classes who were almost exclusively engaged in manual forms of employment. Such unionised work was also tied in to supporting the Labour party, who had long presented themselves as representing the interests of the working classes. These unionised, political influences in her family background shaped Dee’s dispositions,
evident when later on in the interview she explained that whilst a primary school teacher,

I was doing masses and masses of quite political things as well; it was when I was still involved in the Labour party before I gave up on them, so I was very involved in the local Labour party and the union (Dee).

These links between the influences of her working class family background and her choice to support the union and the Labour party seem likely to have been shaped by the historical specificity of her experiences. As Critcher (1979: 17) explains;

The emergence of a whole generation of scholarship boys and girls who had a relationship to the working class and the Labour Party was crucial to their own identity.

To follow Bourdieu (1977), Dee’s “durable dispositions” made supporting the Labour party a common sense choice and part of what Bourdieu (1990: 64) describes as “what is and is not ‘for us’”.

The 1944 Education Act: putting the respondents inside education policy

Turning now to the respondents’ educational dispositions to choose a carer in higher education, I want to revisit their earlier educational habitus and particularly considering the role of passing the eleven plus and participating in selective education. Claire, Angela, Nancy and Dee attended some form of selective secondary school. Their experiences were varied and different, often reflected in the schools’ ethos, which ranged from the highly academic (i.e. preparation for university) to the relatively vocational (i.e. preparation for teacher training college or secretarial college). A traditional discourse of femininity also traversed these different schools and was manifested throughout and across the different reported experiences and perceptions of my cohort in various ways that are now discussed.

When I asked Nancy about the ethos at her secondary school, she explained that it was defined by religion. Nancy’s school, whilst no doubt influenced by the desire for academic achievement for its pupils, also focused on producing good wives and little mothers, who were educated so that they could become what Delamont (1989) describes as the ‘intelligent wife’. I asked Nancy how she felt about her school ethos and she pointed out;
The ethos was also, they prize academic success... so it was like a hothouse and they valued the very very clever and the rest could just float through, it was that sort of place (Nancy).

Nancy’s grammar school offered an academic education to the “very very clever” only, while the reproduction of faith via the family unit and school was offered to the majority.

Dee’s experience of her school ethos was quite different, she explained;

There was an ethos cos I remember trying to resist it […] I think it was being a very traditional, middle of the road grammar school and on the whole, it wasn’t very high achieving I don’t think, well it was but, they didn’t send anyone to Oxbridge and when I wanted to go to an elite university which I was passionate about, they said girls like me didn’t go there, we went to teacher training college (Dee).

Dee had to fight to attend university, and in so doing, had to challenge class stereotypes about the post compulsory education choices available to girls from her working class background. Dee’s narrative is supported by the literature reporting the experiences of educated working class women in the post Second World War era who found themselves similarly directed to teaching training courses (Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997). However Dee managed to resist this gendered positioning and obtained a place at university, although she did not attend the elite institution that had been her first choice.

The ethos at Claire’s school was couched in academic terms, evident when she described the dominant message as “we’re all going to Oxford if we can get in!” I pointed out that the aspiration was high, particularly for a girl, to which Claire responded;

Absolutely… very high aspirations… there was a list as you go into the hall there’s this book with a list of the people who’ve ever got into Oxford and Cambridge… the old girls… not many… one novelist… I mean it might be better there might be more now. Certainly in my day there weren’t…. oh yeah… absolutely….. Speech gowns, we would all look hard at the hoods and see who’d gone where… you know we used to work out which of our teachers had
Claire’s school ethos concurs with that outlined by Evans (1995), suggesting that direct grant schools, or ‘super grammars’, were generally attracting at least half of their school population from the middle classes. Some of the middle class parents may have paid for their daughters to attend these schools, but there were also free places available, attracting some social class mix; although as Claire pointed out “one of the things about this school was there were 50% free places .. but an awful lot of those free places went to kids like me…” Claire went on to explain that in her secondary school:

Half the people on free places could have afforded to pay the fees if they really cared... I mean my parent’s attitude was, she can go there if she can get in free but it’s not worth it... you know... getting in on a free place for them was a marker that I needed that level of education that’s how their reasoning went (Claire).

Some members of Claire’s family believed that the eleven plus selection process was an effective way of allocating children to the right schools evident when she explained:

My grandpa was certain... you know, as an educationalist and a school teacher… he really believed that it (1944 Act) was about suitability to the right education (Claire).

This sentiment reflects those expressed by many of Jackson and Marsden’s (1962: 213) mainly working class cohort, who felt that eleven plus “had separated them merely from ‘the dim ones’”. Many of the respondents in this study felt that the only changes they would like to see in the post Second World War education system were those that would ensure that “grammar schools should become more selective still” (Jackson and Marsden, 1962: 213), suggesting the success of the tripartite system, perhaps in its appeal to a historically stratified society.

Angela’s school ethos was also couched in terms of academic achievement. She told me;

It was very academicy. I mean we had nearly all the teachers were women and they were very academic women and a lot of them had been to Oxbridge or had very good degrees and so on… there was also a slight bit of being nicely mannered and speaking nicely… and
wearing white gloves and things like that so there was a bit of an edge there. I mean for example, when I was, I think, in the first year, we had auditions for reading at a carol service and afterwards I was taken aside by the English teacher who explained that I hadn’t got it and I probably had the loudest voice… because in this school we usually said bath instead of bathe … and it was explained to me very clearly… that my accent wasn’t quite right! (Angela)

Angela, along with Dee and Nancy, received an education that was both academic and gendered to some extent; whilst offering an academic education, there was a distinct subtext which operated to reproduce middle class femininity. This concurs with Brine’s (2006: 437) research, which found that “the grammar school girl was constructed into middle class ‘respectability’ through practices and expectations of acceptable ladylike behaviour”. Similar to Claire’s experience of direct grant school, the focus at Angela’s school was on an academic education, which offered progression to university. This is in contrast to Dee’s ‘middle of the road’ grammar school, which was focused on producing the next generation of teachers and Nancy’s elite grammar school with its primary focus on reproducing the family unit. For Claire and Angela, the expectation was for excellence in relation to academic achievement, something they both consistently managed throughout their compulsory education.

The above stories both confirm and disrupt familial habitus. To highlight this confirmation and disruption, I want to briefly take each of the respondent’s mothers’ experiences of education as a point of comparison to their daughters’ experiences. The defining aspect of the way habitus operates within the individual’s choice-making processes and dispositions to choose is dependent on its formation;

the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class location) produce habitus (Bourdieu, 1977: 72).

Claire’s choice-making processes and dispositions to choose broadly correlate to a pattern of contingency with her mother; she notes “all of my mother’s family went to university”. This overwhelmingly academic environment appears to have shaped Claire’s habitus, in part the product of her early socialisation.
Dee and Angela’s mothers had somewhat similar experiences in that both had passed the eleven plus but had their time at grammar school cut short by the economic necessity of providing money for the family. Angela’s mother “did go to grammar school…” and she had wanted to teach but “had to leave at 16 and go and serve in a shop…” Angela attributed this to the fact that her mother was not from a very good family, yet what constitutes a ‘good’ family was not discussed. Similarly, Dee told me that her mother

actually did pass a scholarship and got a scholarship to grammar school but she had to leave at sixteen cos they needed her to go and earn some money (Dee).

These examples show the contingency between experiences of mother and daughter and also differences as both Angela and Dee continued on to university after undertaking their A-levels. But for Nancy, the shift in habitus was perhaps the most notable. Nancy was the first generation of her family to attend grammar school. Also, as the eldest daughter, she found herself the first of her sibling group to attend secondary school. Nancy had no point of comparison and nothing to prepare her for the different world she was entering. Such a shift in habitus is complex and difficult to account for as there is little consideration within Bourdieu’s work of the disruptions and challenges to habitus.

**Disposition disruption: the limits of habitus theory?**

The final section considers the discordance produced when trying to explain the respondents’ disposition disruptions. I pressed Grace on the issue of ‘disposition disruption’ and she agreed that it was highly problematic – evident in the following exchange:

Kate In my analysis I am using Bourdieu’s habitus, but it’s proving problematic when I look at women who come from that sort of working class, manual background, because how does it explain the dispositions to become an academic?

Grace I couldn’t agree more. And intellectually that’s the space I am trying to think about as well. I’m sure many of your respondents will say the same. They are intrigued by that, but they know it doesn’t work.
Because if it does how come we haven’t reproduced ourselves in quite that way? We shouldn’t be where we are, and who we are. So, you know, it doesn’t, the central explanatory device of habitus doesn’t work. […] So I am interested, intellectually and politically, in precisely that space. […] There is something about feelings here. There is something about motivation, but not in that cognitive, psychological sense. There is something about being driven that is about feeling pissed off and angry. You know? And resentful and rage-full, and all sorts of things, that I think just drives your resistance, that kind of gets you through in a way. Something about desire, and I don’t think we’ve got a language that describes desire for something that cuts right across, I think, habitus. You know? There are a lot of people who shift, and we know next to nothing about the shifters. We all know about the stuck, the feckless, the this, that and the other, the chavs and the working class – the deficits. We don’t, you know, which is a completely slanderous description, of course, but we don’t know anything about A, why people would choose to invest in staying put, rather than see it as a deficit, or B why they would choose to invest in escaping. […] I think it’s about the too real cultural ideological circumstances around what resources were available, what did your parents say, what did the policy framework say? You know, if the further education college hadn’t been there, that would have been it, perhaps. Who knows?

This exchange highlights some of the problems associated with accounting for Grace’s progression. Drawing on Reay’s (1997) work offered me some ideas about how to address this issue of ‘disposition disruption’; she contends that habitus is dynamic because of the interconnected nature of habitus to the field. Considering flow of influence and power that operates between these two concepts (habitus and field, field and habitus) enables me to examine how the field of, for example, attending a selective technical college, as Grace did, might influence her habitus, offering her alternative courses of action which move her beyond the “‘practical sense’ that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5). This disposition disruption between an individual’s habitus and the field(s) they
operate in may have problematic consequences, as was the case for Grace. As Reay (1997: 231) argues

when women make the transition, through education out of the working classes, the conjunction of working-class habitus and middle-class field produces … discordances.

However, familial and educational dispositions do not operate in isolation – the policy and historical context an individual is born into will shape the possibilities available to them. As Gladwell (2009: 137) argues

The sense of possibility so necessary for success comes not just from inside us or from our parents. It comes from our time: from the particular opportunities that our particular place in history presents us with.

The findings reported in this paper concur – the historical and policy context, e.g. the 1944 Education Act, alongside other pivotal policies not discussed here such as the inception of the welfare state and changing ideologies of a ‘dual role’ (Deem, 1995) for women in both home and work spheres, were key factors in shaping the respondents’ dispositions and subsequent choices they made.

Discussion

These brief insights into the respondents’ family backgrounds and their participation in selective secondary education frame and contextualise some of their experiences in relation to their habitus and offer some understanding of their dispositions to choose to pursue a career in HE. The data reported here suggests that certain sorts of familial habitus have inclined some of the respondents towards a professional career pathway. But this is not necessarily the case for the respondents from working class backgrounds. The data indicates that participation in selective education is a factor in accounting for how the respondents from working class backgrounds were disposed to choose a career in HE.

Yet the data reported in the paper also raises questions about disposition disruptions and the limits of habitus theory in explaining some of these women’s progression to high status employment in the academy. In trying to understand how these women became objectively successful, it will be necessary to draw on a multi theoretical approach. It will also be necessary to consider several other key dimensions, or levers,
of success, which might have shaped their pathways to academe, including; propensity for hard work (Brooks, 2009); luck (Frank, 2009); serendipity (Prestine, 2009); executive function (Carey, 2008); culture (Gladwell, 2008); and circumstantial factors (including historical context) (Gladwell, 2008), highlighting several key areas for further analysis.

*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 19 January 2010*