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**EMBODYING VALUE: SOCIAL CLASS AND GENDER IN  
THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE  
TRAINEE ACCOUNTANTS**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis constitutes my own original work and has been submitted to no other institute of higher education for the award of a degree other than the University of Warwick.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is about the experiences of 15 graduates as they made the transition over the course of a year from higher education into employment as trainee accountants at a multinational accountancy firm in the UK. The success of that transition has been argued to be a key stage in fostering individuals' life chances because it means building on their education in order to start a career. The thesis demonstrates that gaining certain credentials is the central mechanism by which the middle and working-classes can accrue value under neo-liberalism. Therefore this thesis is about the ways in which individuals who occupy similar and different social locations become subjects of value and are then able to exchange that value as they travel through the field of education and transition to the graduate labour market. I argue that taking an embodied approach to the transition from higher education to employment can show us a great deal about how class and gender play out in individual transitions to employment. Rose and Miller (1995) argue for the important contribution that studying individuals in their workplace settings can make to contemporary analysis of the social. This thesis seeks to do this by capturing graduates' experiences in their own words, in depth, so that we can better understand how processes of class and gender are seen, managed and negotiated by individual graduates. Analysis of 37 participant interviews demonstrates that becoming a subject of value hinges on complex social relations to which social class, gender and ethnicity are primary. Furthermore that some participants, owing to the advantages conferred on them by their parents, are further along this process than others. I have suggested that the ability to thrive as a neo-liberal subject does not just depend on the resources conferred upon an individual, but that how those resources – as well as transitional experiences – are

framed, reflected and acted upon by an individual affects their resilience and ability to thrive and therefore their ability to accrue value.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ACA = Association of Chartered Accountants

AGCAS = Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services

AGR = Association of Graduate Recruiters

DfES = Department for Education and Skills annual

DLHE = Destination of Leavers from Higher Education

HE = Higher Education

HECSU = Higher Education Career Service Unit

HEI = Higher Education Institutions

HESA = Higher Education Statistics Agency

PISG = Performance Indicators Steering Group

UCAS = University and Colleges Admissions Service

RG = Russell Group

SCR = Social Corporate Responsibility

ECA = Extracurricular activities

POF = person-organization fit

## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Before sketching out the general social landscape in which this thesis is situated, this chapter starts by outlining the intellectual, personal and political motivation for the research. This chapter will close with a delineation of the contribution that each chapter makes to the whole.

The motivation for this thesis was triggered by introduction to key debates in sociology of social class as a Master's student, and by my own lived experiences of class. My encounters with classical class theory as an undergraduate left me cold; it was a reading of Beverley Skeggs' (1997) monograph *Formations of Class and Gender* which first enabled me to begin to make sense of my own upbringing as a profoundly classed experience, and to understand the centrality of value to exchange, and exchange to life outcomes. Skeggs' work highlighted the indelible ways in which growing up working-class marks us long after the material categorisations of our existence may have altered. From reading Skeggs, who builds on the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, I began to recognise the habitus from which my mother came, one she reproduced but largely sought to reject as central to her and our everyday experiences. Skeggs' later book *Gender, Class, Self* (2004) resonated even more strongly as it fed into another aspect of my upbringing: namely, the ways in which my mother's marriage to my upper-middle-

class step-father triggered the making of me, by middle-class standards, as a subject of value. These values, Skeggs argues, operate on multiple levels as a gaze that shapes our horizons of the possible – for example, our sense of entitlement to occupy spaces and our taste, which then becomes a starting point from which we judge others and police those within the middle-class. These two books, and the damning way in which they characterise middle-class practices as symbolically violent, led me to want better to understand them as a way of honouring both my parents and myself, but also from a political desire to name and challenge processes of misrecognition which cause so much pain.

The reading of these books coincided with the rise in popular culture of misrecognition of some aspects of working-class culture; specifically, the media fascination with ‘chavs’ and the ever increasing number of ‘reality’ television programmes seemingly dedicated to the misrecognition of working- and lower-middle-class women and some men as of low cultural and economic value (Lyle, 2008, Parker and Lyle, 2005). Combined, this prompted the development of my Master’s thesis, which looked at the ways in which middle-class A-Level sociology students understood and constructed aspects of their identity in relation to what they believed they were not – ‘chavs’. This they did specifically through their current status as students and their projected futures as undergraduates and eventually graduates with ‘good jobs’. During my Master’s I worked part-time at the University of Warwick Careers Service as a CV and Application Advisor.

Here, I became aware of the classed dynamics of the transition process in which undergraduates participated. In this way the personal became political – both of which I subject to intellectual and empirical inquiry through this thesis.

The social landscape in which this thesis is set naturally has its own history. The acquisition of a university education has long been argued to shape access to privilege in Britain. The expansion of university places has most benefited the middle classes – initially the upper middle, and most recently the lower middle classes. Brown and Scase state that

[f]ollowing political and industrial revolutions the landed aristocracy preserved its position in society by cultivating an elite culture based upon Greek and Latin classics. The generally accepted version of events is that the rising industrial and commercial elites with whom it shared power could buy land but could not buy social acceptance save by educating their sons to forsake trade and bring money into the aristocracy, thus saving that social anachronism from extinction. (Brown and Scase, 1994:32)

This extract not only charts the historical development of higher education (HE), but also serves to illustrate the ways in which its acquisition has long been a means by which individuals and groups can become subjects of value. From this standpoint, HE is implicated in the preservation as well as expansion of elites through its relationship to the professions and their concomitant social status.

Simultaneously, the steady expansion and widening of participation in HE has been argued to serve as a social leveller (although it is more a levelling-up than levelling-down). The past thirty or so years are the most pertinent period of history to this thesis. This period has witnessed the marketisation of education through the discourse of standards and attainment which operates through the use of pupil testing, league tables and other elements, and is couched in terms of need for 'parental choice' (Ball, 1993). Sociology of education scholars predicted that such a path would most likely lead to the hyper individualisation of (in particular middle-class) educational experiences via active parenting and therefore the reproduction of class advantages and disadvantages (Ball, 1995, Crozier, 1997), which they now argue it has (Ball, 2007, Ball, 2010).

The period 1997-2010 saw successive Labour Party administrations explicitly link economic well-being, social inclusion and social mobility to participation in HE and entry into the so-called knowledge economy (Brown et al., 2004, Maguire and Maguire, 1997). Changes to the primary and secondary education system were met with the marketisation and steady expansion and widening of HE participation rates. And just as research shows that primary and secondary education has been shaped by classed processes, there is evidence that this pattern is mirrored not only in HE, but beyond it, leading to very different outcomes for graduates from different social groups (Blanden and Machin, 2004, Tomlinson, 2008).



The graduate labour market is radically different to that of thirty years ago, not only in size but also in form. Elias and Purcell (2003) have charted the changing nature of the graduate labour market and demonstrated that there are many more occupations than before which qualify for the title of ‘graduate job’. While there are specific new additions with the advent of technological changes (IT services) as well the wider impact that the e-revolution and globalisation has had across all occupations, key public and private sector industries have been ‘professionalised’, such as teaching, nursing, business services and their allied health care occupations. These changes have contributed to the expansion of HE and the graduate labour market. In turn this fed into debates concerning a range of issues, including the saturation or otherwise of the graduate labour market, and the suitability – or not – of graduates’ educational experiences for the labour market. In turn this has fuelled anxiety and debate around whether or not having a degree is enough (and what individuals can do about it) for making a transition into the graduate labour market and securing a ‘good’ job. The graduate labour market has not only been transformed by wider changes to labour market economies, but by specific aspects of the expansion of the HE sector – namely, successive Labour governments’ attempts to widen HE access to include more women, working-class members, and BME groups. The rhetoric of widening participation in HE has been reflected in employers’ own increasing take up of ‘diversity’ agendas in their recruitment strategies. The organisation at the heart of this study, like all large graduate recruiters, actively signals that it wants to recruit a more diverse range of

graduates with a specific focus on women and BME groups. This is the context in which the participants in this study are transitioning into the graduate labour market.

The themes of the thesis found across the remaining six chapters echo those found in my motivations for and the context of this research. These are the relevance of the body and appearance to social processes, the relevance of structural factors such as habitus, social location, global and national economies, government policy and rhetoric to individual life-paths and how these combine to inform participants' experiences of transition from HE into the graduate labour market. Chapter two outlines my research questions and takes a more detailed look at the literature that informs the research context. In so doing it brings together the work of sociologists from across the subfields of sociology of the body and social class, education, work and organisations; it argues for the relevance of social class, ethnicity and gender to participants' embodied experiences of transition into the graduate labour market. The primary focus is on the relevance of social class with ethnicity and gender being a secondary focus.

Chapter three looks at the methodological issues that emanate from doing qualitative research on social class from a feminist perspective. This chapter draws on debates regarding the avowal and disavowal of social class and the implications this had for the research process, in particular with regards to how to elicit class

talk during interviews. This chapter also details how participants are classified by social class. As well as detailing the mechanics of the fieldwork, from access to data management and write up, I also take time to consider the ways in which class politics and misrecognition informed the research process.

Chapter four is entitled *The enchantment process: prestige, meritocracy and diversity in the Firm's recruitment process*, the first of four data chapters introducing the site of research, a large multinational accountancy firm which henceforth is referred to as the Firm. The chapter historically situates the Firm within the wider field of the accountancy profession before moving on to an examination of the Firm's recruitment process and participants' experiences of it. This chapter highlights key rhetorical discourses at work in the recruitment process of the Firm's representation of itself as a prestigious, diverse and yet meritocratic organisation and graduate employer, and begins to un-pack the third research question, *How do participants experience the Firm's efforts to manage diversity?* This chapter also argues that participants' experiences of successfully gaining a training contract with the Firm, in the main, allows them to bask in the Firm's prestigious status, which has to some extent now been transferred to them.

*Meritocracy, hard work and privilege: contradictory discourses on the journey to accrue value* is the title of chapter five. This chapter seeks to address my first research question, *How does participants' social location inform how graduates*

*have become subjects of value and how does this play out during graduates' transition into employment?* Here, middle class participants' recollections of their educational experiences and sense of inevitability that they would make transitions into HE and graduate employment are firmly situated as the result of investments made by parents and schools as well as participants' own hard work. This chapter also provides some evidence that the widening participation agenda in HE informed the choices of working class participants, resulting in a sense of inevitability that they too would go to university. Themes in this chapter relate to the centrality of credentialism to value accrual, as well as the contradictory ways in which the concept of meritocracy is taken up.

Chapter six is titled *What (not) to Wear – Seeing is believing*. This chapter largely engages with the second and third research question, which asks *What light does looking at graduates' transition as an embodied process shed on the meaning of class and gender?* It does this through an analysis of participants' experiences of an induction session designed to inform them of the Firm's dress codes. The analysis takes as its point of inquiry the interrelated issues of embodiment and physical capital, identities and professionalism, and argues that the ideal embodiment of a trainee accountant in the organisational setting of the Firm is not only gendered but profoundly classed. This chapter also seeks to answer the third research question, *How do participants experience the Firm's efforts to manage*

*diversity?* through a focus on the specific experiences of female participants and one male working-class participant.

Chapter seven, *The embodiment of hard work: class, gender and the accrual of professional qualifications*, draws on the themes of hard work, professionalism and embodiment from chapters four and five, further to address the main research question about how participants accrue value through their transition to the graduate labour market. This chapter is focused on participants' experiences of studying for and taking their professional qualification exams, and will argue two main points: first, that participants continue to reproduce their various bundles of capital during this period; second, that professionalism is still perceived to be embodied in relation to the visibility of hard work and, moreover, it is given gendered meanings by some at the expense of other possible interpretations. The data for this chapter are drawn from across the whole of their first year of transition into the Firm, which allows insight to be gathered into the changes that participants experienced over subsequent rounds of exams. The final chapter is the discussion and conclusion.

## **CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

This chapter seeks to contextualise my research questions by locating them in relation to the relevant sociological literature. My research questions are as follows:

- How does participants' social location inform how graduates have become subjects of value and how does this play out during graduates' transition into employment?
- What light does looking at graduates' transition as an embodied process shed on the meaning of class and gender?
- How do participants experience the Firm's efforts to manage diversity?

This thesis argues that the transition from HE to employment can show us a great deal about how class and gender play out in individual transitions to employment. Graduates' transitions refer to the period when they leave university and obtain their first job. The success of that transition has been argued to be a key stage in fostering individuals' life chances because it means building on their education in order to start a career (Bimrose et al., 2005). Therefore, this thesis is about the ways in which individuals who occupy similar and different social locations become subjects of value and are then able to exchange that value as they travel through the field of education and transition to the graduate labour market. As

experiences of social disadvantage are better documented than experiences of advantage and privilege, this piece of research will add to our understanding of the former but more importantly will make a contribution to the latter, by including participants who are relatively privileged as well as some that are not. Indeed, to fail to do this would make the job of understanding the process value attribution highly partial. More importantly, this thesis seeks to capture graduates' experiences in their own words, in depth, so that we can better understand how these processes are seen, managed and negotiated by individual graduates.

This thesis seeks to identify some of the mechanisms through which participants become subjects of value and will argue that class and gender are central. I shall start with a definition of social class before an exploration of the nodal concepts of this thesis – value and exchange – and situate their usefulness within recent debates about the relevance of social class and the relevance of the body to the reproduction of social class. Following this, the importance of the British education system to social reproduction will be laid out, with particular attention given to ongoing debates by sociology of education scholars regarding students' experiences as they relate to their class, gender and ethnicity. The next section will contextualise the expansion of HE and the graduate labour market, and consider key themes in transitional pathways from HE into the graduate labour market such as 'the degree is not enough' mantra and the rise of extra-curricular credentialism to argue for the ongoing ways in which subjects are expected to become subjects

of value. Finally, this chapter briefly considers the emergence of a ‘diversity’ recruitment strategy by employers as a response to the expansion of HE and the concomitant drive towards a knowledge economy and the so-called knowledge worker.

### ***THE RELEVANCE OF VALUE AND EXCHANGE TO SOCIAL CLASS***

In this section I lay out the relevant aspects of Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of social class to this piece of work. This thesis adopts a Bourdieusian framework for an analysis of social class; it moves beyond structuralist accounts and conceptualizes social class as something that is not only re/produced through economic capital but also through cultural and social capital. Since the 1990s much has been done to reassert the relevance of social class within academic debates in Sociology and beyond. However, questioning the relevance of social class is nothing new; in responding to the question whether or not social class can be said to exist, writing with and against structuralism, Bourdieu (1979) argued that the existence of social classes could be proved or disproved by which he meant that the categorization of agents into groups on the basis of their occupations into groups was a statistical anomaly and could be used to argue for or against the existence of social classes:



[I]t is possible to deny the existence of classes and homogenous sets of economically and socially differentiated individuals objectively constituted into groups, and to assert at the same time the existence of a space of differences based on a principle of economic and social differentiation.

(Bourdieu (1987: 2)

Bourdieu (1987) also argued that social classes are to some extent brought into existence by those authorized to do so such as academics, politicians and other spokespersons, but that agents themselves have a sense of their place in social space because of the relational nature of the classification process itself. In so doing Bourdieu aims to halt the debate about the existence or otherwise of strict pre-existing social groups such as the working class and seeks instead to think about where individuals are located in social space and the differences and similarities in their conditions. Bourdieu defines social space as ‘the locus of the coexistence of social positions, mutually exclusive points, which, for the occupants, are the basis of points of view’ (2000:133). Those with similar conditions, he argues, may have similar experiences, perspectives and dispositions and as such may constitute what we think of as a social class. However, he cautions that this does not mean that because people are located closely in social space and may share similar dispositions and preferences that this constitutes a cohesive class, mobilized and ready to fight in a Marxist sense:

To point out that the perception of the social world implies an act of construction in no way entails acceptance of an intellectualist theory of

knowledge: the essential part of the experience of the social world and of the act of construction that it implies takes place in practice, below the explicit representation and verbal expression. More like a class unconsciousness than a “class consciousness” (Bourdieu, 1985).

He further argues:

The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or *forms of capital* which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study – those properties capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder (Bourdieu, 1987: 3-4).

From this we can see that central to Bourdieu’s conceptual framework is the understanding that it is not sociologically meaningful to understand social class in relation to one type of capital. Economic capital on its own, for example, is not enough to inform our understanding of the likely dispositions of an individual, or to help us understand their likely relationships to others in social space.

The social space is defined by the mutual exclusion, or *distinction*, of the positions which constitute it, that is, as a structure, of juxtaposition of social positions...Social agents, and also things in so far as they are appropriated by them and therefore constituted as *properties*, are situated in a place in social space, a distinct and distinctive place which can be characterized by the position it occupies relative to other places (above, below, between etc.)...social space tends to be translated, with more or less distortion, into physical space, in the form of a certain arrangement of agents and properties (Bourdieu, 2000: 134).

This understanding of social class as agents with various capitals and dispositions in social space is used to think about participants' experiences throughout the thesis. The process of classification into groups in social space (by agents themselves and by those others authorised to do so) are based on the bundles and volume of capitals, symbolic, economic and cultural in any given field. The relational, self classificatory aspect of social class is a particular feature of the way in which Bourdieu conceptualises it. For Bourdieu (2000) our sense of place in social space, or a knowledge of our social class, is an inherently embodied process, rather than a wholly conscious act of knowledge acquisition. He writes:

The world encompasses me, comprehends me as a thing among things, but I, as a thing, comprehend this world. And I do so (must it be added?) *because* it encompasses and comprehends me; it is through this material inclusion – often unnoticed or repressed – and what follows from it, the

incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures, of objective chances in the form of expectations or anticipations, that I acquire a practical knowledge and control of the encompassing space (Bourdieu, 2000: 130).

We come to know our place in social space through a practical mastery of our surroundings – ‘habitus, a system of dispositions’ (*ibid*) an embodied orientation to the world’. The concept of habitus, while relatively deterministic, also endows individuals with agency and gives them a ‘generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 136). It follows from agency and the relational aspect of classification processes that the inclusion of agents’ own understanding of the social landscape is relevant, see chapter three for a discussion.

Building on Bourdieu’s theory of class Skeggs (2004) argues that value and exchange are central to the formation of social class and therefore relevant to transitions in education and the labour market. Those who argue for the irrelevance of social class would disagree. Sociologists engaged with the issue of social class are well aware of the debates from the 1990s which saw pronouncements by some scholars that we were witnessing nothing less than the death of social class as a relevant sociological category. They argued that we were in a period of individualisation which was characterised by risk and the reflexive abilities of individuals to manage said risk (Beck, 1992, Beck and Beck-

Gernsheim, 2002, Bauman, 2000, Bauman, 2001, Giddens, 1991, Giddens and Pierson, 1998). The broadly termed individualisation thesis is diffused through texts and government policy, and can, at times, amount to an attitude or a presumption about the way the world works rather than a consistently tested set of concepts and ideas (Atkinson, 2010), making its use here more problematic. The withering of social class was argued in various ways to be a result of the rise of a new global social (extended compulsory education, democratisation) and economic order (neo-liberal *laissez-faire* style governments trumpeting a call to the individual) in which the individual is, was, or needs to be equipped and tasked better than before with the job of making their way through the world.

The key notion here is flexibility: in terms of production, mass production is exchanged for pliable niche production; in terms of organizational structure, hierarchies are flattened and managerial functions streamlined; and in terms of the workforce, 'jobs for life' are dissolved as contracts from top to bottom of the occupational ladder become temporary and insecure in a drive to improve efficiency. All this, the argument goes, demolishes working-class collectivism and the strength of the trade unions. (Atkinson, 2010:5)

It was argued that in lieu of traditional class structures which had previously been argued to dominate people's life chances, and in reaction to the flexible (read precarious) dynamics of economic life, individuals were required to think

*reflexively* on their circumstances and then act in a rational and enterprising manner, then to pursue their chosen life paths (Du Gay, 1996). Changes in cultural practices also spirited the idea that class is an increasing irrelevance in people's lives: claims are made that consumerism and other cultural habits are no longer tied to old class structures but are more free flowing and accessible. It has been argued that distinctions between high and low brow cultures have been eroded and choices expanded (Lash and Urry, 1994, Pakulski and Waters, 1996), and that *status* can be derived or is achieved from affiliation or membership to different subcultures, ethnic groups or religious groups. Furthermore,

[r]ising levels of prosperity, occupational shifts and, crucially, the emergence of 'post-materialist' issues and dilemmas through the 1980s – the threat of nuclear disaster, increasing environmental damage, equality for women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals – have, it is argued, ensured that the material issues that once propelled traditional class politics – taxation levels, working conditions and nationalization versus privatization – no longer play a significant part in shaping individuals' political attitudes, activism or ballot box decisions. (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, Clark, 2001) cited in (Atkinson, 2010: 7))

Atkinson (2010) argues that combined, the above factors ensured that the language of class became theoretically and politically unfashionable – unpalatable, even –

and that appeals to the rise of the individual were in some spaces embraced. Atkinson summarises the overall impact of the interconnected discourse of the decline of class and the rise of the individual:

[W]hether in the sphere of work, careers and educational pathways, or in the domain of lifestyle pursuits, identities and politics, and whether enforced or enabled, there is, it is claimed, a cosmic proliferation of options and, consequently, a demand for active, individual choice and deliberation no matter what sociological category one belongs to. (Atkinson, 2010:8)

However, Beck and Giddens did not argue that social inequality has been eradicated, but that people no longer needed or indeed could rely upon the 'old' structures of social class to determine their lives, which were now characterised as theirs for the taking (Atkinson, 2010). In the UK rhetorically the language of class was replaced by New Labour administrations with a focus on the perils of social exclusion and the so-called under-class debate. An extract and table from the, now defunct, New Labour Social Exclusion Unit website connects individuals' life chances to a nexus of inadequate parenting, poverty and low educational achievement, and proposed a whole range of solutions from birth onwards:

[W]hat happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown. When problems combine they can create a vicious cycle. Social exclusion can happen as a result of problems that face one person in their lifetime but it can also start from birth. Being born into poverty or to parents with low educational achievements still has a major influence on future life chances. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006)

From this perspective, proponents might explain the increased take-up of HE as evidence of the rational acts of individuals who have reflexively chosen to pursue HE in order to maximise positive social outcomes. Why, then, has the take-up been dominated by the children of parents with higher socio-economic status (New Labour speak)? Are they the only group to be able to perform this task? The politics and language of social exclusion, it seems to me, is the problem of social class by other linguistic or rhetorical means. The importance of this distinction is related to where responsibility or blame for social outcomes is perceived to lie; the answer from New Labour was a tricky relationship between the state and the individual, in which the individual was expected and/or coerced into improving herself (by becoming flexible and reflexive workers with, where necessary, the support of the state). Those that failed to do so were blamed and held responsible for their social outcomes (Kehily and Pattman, 2006, Skeggs, 2004, Kelly, 2006).



Table 1 makes clear that the Labour administration connected education with economic self-sufficiency, which propelled a whole raft of policies from Sure Start to the expansion and widening of further and higher education.

**Table 1 - Earnings relative to an unqualified person (Department for Education, 2000)**

Qualifications	Baseline
1-4 GCSEs A-C	+ 17%
5+ GCSEs A-C	+ 41%
2 A Levels	+ 67%
Degree	+ 111%

Becoming a person of value was therefore believed, to some extent, to be reliant on being able to achieve good educational outcomes. On the one hand, there are scholars pronouncing the decline of class and the rise of the reflexive worker, and on the other, a reading of New Labour policy would suggest that they were fully aware that only some people were able to participate in this new world order; thus the need for so much government intervention. This makes the proponents of the individualisation thesis appear to be more normative in their assessment, rather than reflecting an empirical reality. This is further reinforced by the huge lack of empirical evidence either cited or gathered by proponents advocating the withering of social class (Atkinson, 2010).

Atkinson (2010), like Skeggs, strongly rejects claims from the likes of Beck, Giddens, Bauman and Archer. He cites, amongst other reasons, the authors' lack of conceptual, empirical and theoretical clarity, which he argues radically

undermines their claims. Through empirical studies, others critique and refute the claims of 'individualization' theorists and argue that while traditional forms of class consciousness may have declined, people keenly experience class with consequent negative effects (Johnson and Lawler, 2005, Reay, 2005, Sayer, 2005a, Skeggs, 1997, Skeggs, 2004, Walkerdine, 2003). Skeggs (2004) argues that the individualisation thesis was reconfigured around theories of social and intellectual mobility, she further argues that Thatcherism, Blairism, market analysts and Third Way sociologists all produce a normative rhetoric of individualisation, implying that we can all be middle class now. Further, she charts how the most recent ideologies of the neo-liberal economic order privilege and naturalise what Paul du Gay ((1996) cited in (Skeggs, 2004:73)) terms the 'enterprising self', whereby people are required to become 'entrepreneurs of the self' – to accrue and exchange the 'correct' cultural, economic, and moral capital or resources; that is, to become a subject with value.

Becoming a subject of value has become a primary part of daily life and lifelong planning, and is achieved through recognition by significant others and powerful groups. Skeggs (2004), drawing directly on Marx's analysis of production, argues that becoming a subject of value refers to the processes by which individuals accrue value which can then be used in economic, symbolic and cultural systems of exchange. Although open to contestation and degree, employers, politicians and policy makers all contribute to decisions about what type of person has value,

and what counts as an asset or a resource, and therefore what can be exchanged. As I argued in the previous chapter, access to HE has been put forward by successive governments as a means by which individuals can become socially mobile (become a subject of value). It is argued that this is a good thing for both them and wider society as highly-educated citizens are said to be better able to compete in the emergent globally competitive knowledge economy, which is considered vital to national interests. In recent decades, rhetorically at least, successive governments have placed the acquisition of a HE and a job in the graduate labour market as a crucial means by which individuals can become subjects of value.

Skeggs (1997, 2004) distinguishes between two different but interrelated types of value. She argues that use-value refers to its worth to a person: an example from education would be the pleasure derived from learning for its own sake. Exchange-value refers to its use for exchange in various markets – from this example, the credentials earned from gaining an education which can then be exchanged in the labour market for employment. For Skeggs (1997, 2004), an understanding of the processes of exchange requires a consideration of who and what is attributed value. Moreover, she argues

[i]f we want to understand exchange we need to know from whose perspective and interest is value attributed. Who decides what is valuable,

what exists as a resource or asset and what can be exchanged? And what relationships make this exchange and valuation a possibility? (Skeggs, 2004:10)

The generation of value is achieved, Skeggs argues, through processes of inscription, exchange, evaluation and perspective, and it is these ‘processes that *make class* in the contemporary. This assumes that class is not a given but is in continual production’ (Skeggs, 2004:3). From this point of view, and following Bourdieu, social class is not reduced to economic, employment or other static categories, but is understood to be dynamic, contested and relational. Furthermore, unlike static conceptions, this perspective does not see class as something that stands alone; on the contrary, it is always, for example, gendered and ‘raced’. Value attribution is, she argues, a central sociological question, and as we shall see highly pertinent to the questions of this thesis – not only in relation to the means by which individuals can accrue value for themselves through the education system, but how they are symbolically positioned and their bodies inscribed with value. This is a highly relevant feature as much is known about the ways in which bodies are read and inscribed with varying degrees of value, which Skeggs (1997) argues has a real and lasting impact on individuals’ ability to ‘move through metaphorical and physical social space’ (Skeggs, 2004:2). She argues that ‘we have different access to becoming a subject with value’: those who cannot or will not submit to the processes that create an enterprising ‘self-improving’

aesthetic self which will hold up under the surveillance of the middle-class/bourgeois gaze can be identified as part of a variously-posed 'problem', not part of the 'solution' (Skeggs, 2004:77). For Skeggs, understanding the processes by which a person becomes a subject of value demands an interrogation of the cultural as well as the economic. This means that attention must be paid not just to the structures technically available such as the education system, but to the symbolic environment in which people are supposed to be accessing said structures. She writes:

Appearance has always mattered. It is the means by which others are recognized and it is part of the way in which we want to recognize ourselves. But this is not just a matter of interpersonal, even dialogical construction of subjectivity; it is a matter of how symbolic violence may or may not occur. Appearance and recognition are central to the processes by which some groups are denied access to economic and social resources because they are not recognized as being worthy recipients. (Skeggs, 2000:129)

From this perspective, the body and the ways in which embodiment is experienced by the self and others is symbolically highly significant for processes of recognition, and therefore for becoming a subject of value.

***EMBODIMENT AND PHYSICAL CAPITAL: THE REPRODUCTION  
OF GENDER, CLASS, ETHNICITY AND 'RACE'***

Skeggs' conception of classed subjects of value draws on previous work by Bourdieu and sociologists of the body on his work. In particular, the reproduction of social class and gender, because of the interconnection of the body and habitus; indeed, the body is considered to be an extension of habitus (Gunn, 2005, Skeggs, 1997, Skeggs, 2000, Skeggs, 2004, Shilling, 1992, Shilling, 2004, Witz et al., 2003, Williams and Connell, 2010). Shilling (1992, 2004) argues that through various educational and sporting regimes certain forms of embodiment amount to physical capital, which he argues is variously convertible into other forms of capital. He states that

[t]he ability of individuals to convert physical capital into other forms of capital varies enormously as while everyone is inevitably involved in the production of physical capital, by virtue of their very participation in social life, the sites and ways in which bodies are formed in society are not accorded equal value when it comes to converting that capital into other resources. For Bourdieu, physical capital is formed through an interrelationship between an individual's social location, 'habitus' and taste. (Shilling, 1992:4)

Similarly, Gunn (2005) and Skeggs (2004) highlight the specific ways in which appearance and embodiment were central to the formations of class and gender during the Victorian period and remain so today. Skeggs (2004: 17) argues that 'different bodies carry unequal values depending on their position in space, on

their cultural baggage – the capitals they embody’. First and foremost, she argues that social class is gendered, and associations of working classness profoundly so. Skeggs argues that female working-class identities centre on degrees of respectability in relation and often in opposition to imagined and/or real understandings of the middle classes. Skeggs argues that working-class women have been constructed by the ‘enquiring’ middle classes through their propriety in relation to sexuality, fecundity, dress, use of language and mothering, all of which are to be found wanting. Further, she argues that the middle classes pathologise the working class in order to shore up their own identities, and are therefore necessarily concerned with the preservation of power and concomitant justificatory discourses. This would suggest that the middle class have no difficulties in identifying themselves; however Savage et al. (2000, 2005a, 2010) argue that locating oneself as belonging to a social class is problematic for most individuals, and it has been recognised that those who sociologists might label ‘middle class’ struggle to identify with that categorisation. Contesting this, and in agreement with Skeggs, Johnson and Lawler argue that individuals are seemingly fluent in the signifiers of social class, at least during everyday micro social processes (the evidence of which are inscribed on the body) which are constantly (mis)recognised as expressions of an individual or group’s moral worth (Johnson and Lawler, 2005, Skeggs, 2004).



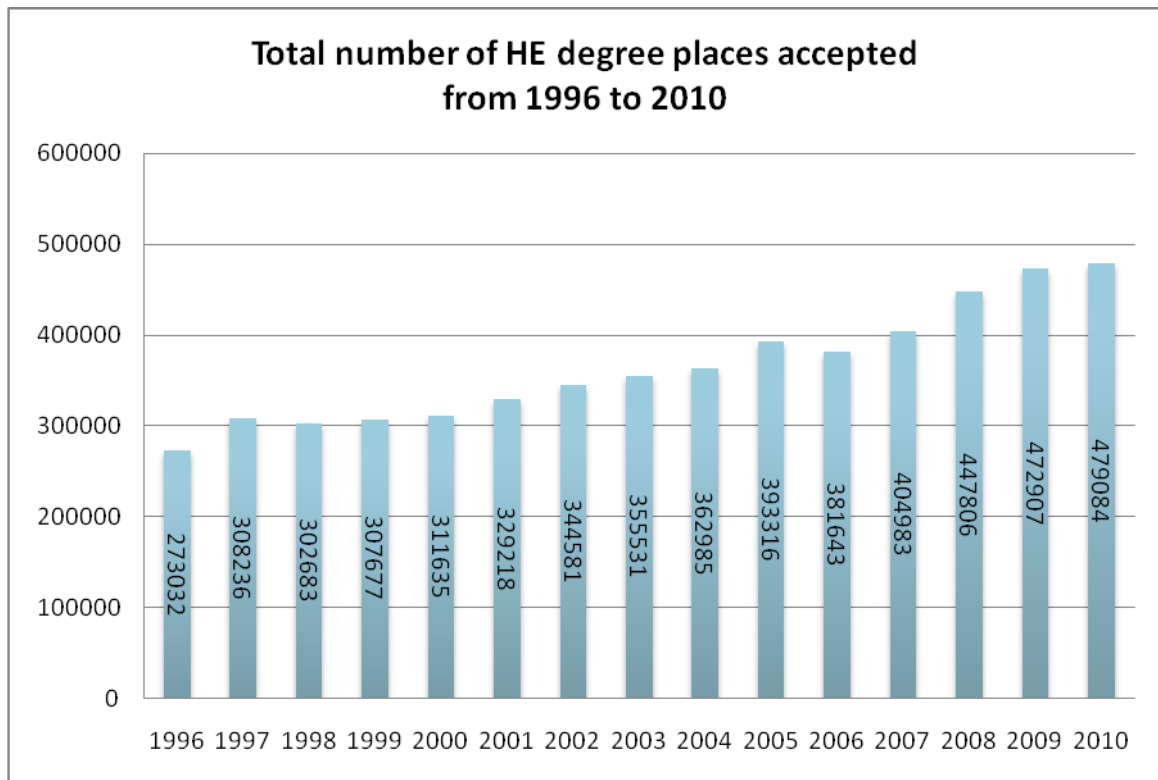
While Skeggs and others focus on the ways in which class and gendered meanings relate to women, there are also important specificities in the way that class is gendered male and/or 'raced', and is written on and through the body and the implications this had for their ability to accrue value and to exchange it into economic and symbolic capital (Majors and Billson, 1993, McDowell, 2003, Parker and Lyle, 2005, Puwar, 2004). Puwar's (2004) important text looks at the intersectional ways in which bodies that are inscribed by gender and in terms of 'race' or ethnicity are Othered through the dominance of a somatic norm in elite institutions. So configured are some institutional spaces around a somatic norm, and so embedded is the misrecognition of some bodies, that owners of these bodies are reported to feel like 'space invaders' rather than legitimate members of the organisation or institution, thereby making their working lives harder and more complex. So far I have argued for the conceptual relevance of social class and for thinking about the body as an important site for the reproduction of gender and class. The next section will move towards an analysis of the broader socio-economic changes that have taken place since the 1960s, and the impact these have had on the education sector and graduate labour market.

### ***WHO ARE THE WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE EXPANSION AND WIDENING OF THE BRITISH HE SECTOR?***

This section will sketch the political and economic landscapes that have facilitated the expansion of HE, which since the 1960s successive British governments have

put at the heart of their economic and social policies. The story of the decline of manufacturing industries, which led to a reduction of the number of jobs for youths not educated beyond tertiary level, and moves towards a service and 'knowledge' economy as well as technological revolutions, have justified an increased demand for a more qualified work force (Maguire and Maguire, 1997). A continuous message from successive Labour governments since their landslide victory in 1997 is that Britain's future depends on a highly educated and skilled work force in our increasingly globalised and therefore competitive economy (Brown et al., 2004). The rhetoric goes that highly educated citizens are able to compete in the emergent, globally competitive 'knowledge' economy, which is argued to be vital to national interest and, rhetoric aside, HE expansion *has* occurred (Gamarnikow and Green, 2003). Figure one shows increasing numbers of HE entrants to HE institutions by year, the numbers having doubled from 274,032 in 1996 to 479,084 in 2010.

Figure 1 - Total number of HE degree places accepted from 1996 to 2010 (raw data from (UCAS))

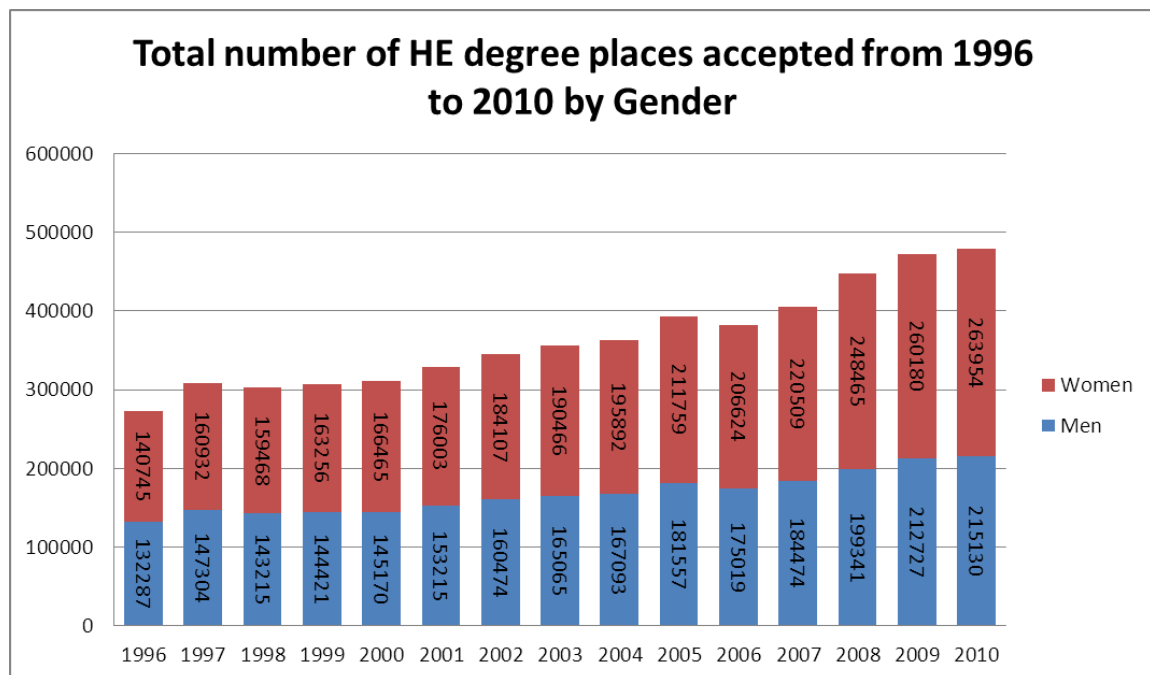


The expansion of HE since the 1960s is also argued to be part of policies that have sought to both respond not just to changes in the global economy, but also to demands for change to the democratic social order. Access to HE has been put forward by successive governments as a solution to the problem of a society stratified by social class; it is argued to be a means by which *individuals* can become socially mobile, which it is believed is a good thing for both them and wider society.

Despite an opening up of the HE sector of ‘graduate’ jobs, until as recently as the 1980s these were overwhelmingly the preserve of an elite. This is problematic as historically, occupations reserved for university graduates have all but guaranteed the recipient a significant premium and paved the way towards a ‘career’. This link between gaining a degree, social mobility and spending power justified the Blair government’s aim to have fifty per cent of the 18-31 population enter HE. However, it has long been acknowledged that despite extensive expansion of the university sector, take-up has been dominated by the relatively privileged middle class, highlighting the continuous benefit of HE provision to the preservation of the middle classes (Department for Education, 2007). The rhetoric of expansion was then accompanied by the rhetoric of the need to widen participation through various initiatives such as the government’s controversial Aim Higher programme (UK government, 2011), to those from ‘groups less well represented’ in HE, such as pupils from financially worse off families. A point worth noting here is that the Labour party was and is prone to use economic indicators in lieu of the language of social class to articulate who is included in the widening participation agenda – this is no mistake, and as I will argue later serves as evidence of the individualisation and reflexivity thesis at work in their so-called third way political agenda. Despite the persistently unequal take-up and, some might say, un-equal opportunity to participate in HE, its expansion and widening participation agenda has been used by successive governments to prove that its concerns with social justice are not merely rhetorical (Gamarnikow and Green, 2003).

In the UK the exclusion of social categories from HE is now ameliorated, at least for women and ethnic minorities. Figure Two illustrates that there are in fact more women accessing HE than men, and women's participation has increased from 140,745 in 1996 to 263,954 in 2010 (an 88% increase); however, men's participation has not experienced the same increase with the numbers in 1996 at 132,187 increasing to 215, 530 (a 63% increase).

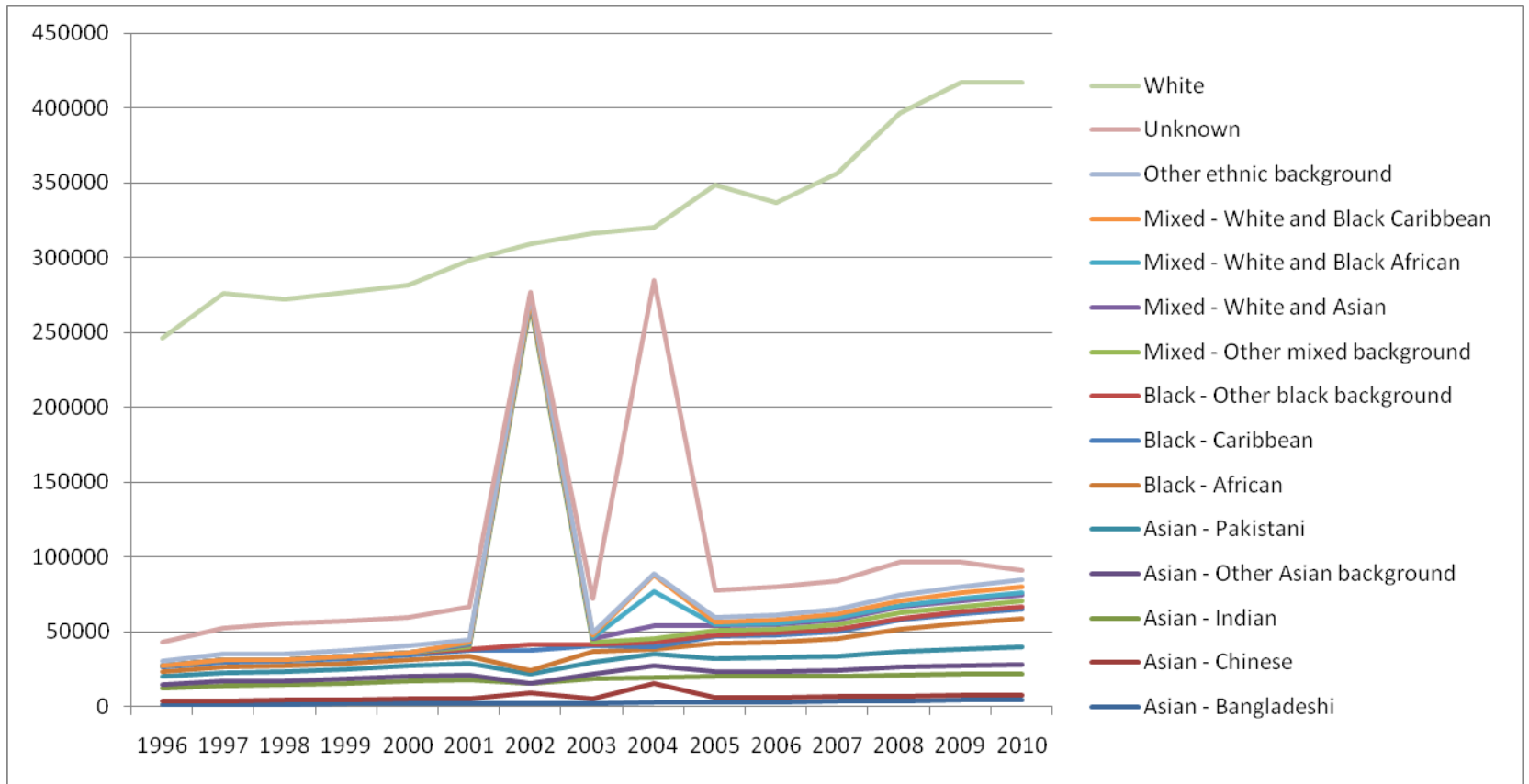
Figure 2 - Total number of HE degree places accepted from 1996 to 2010 by Gender (raw data from UCAS))



Likewise changes have been seen in the ethnic take-up and make-up of HE which reflect not only greater numbers of black, minority ethnic groups (BME) in the UK but also changes in racist and discriminatory practices and attitudes. Unfortunately methodologically speaking ethnicity is not as stable a category as gender and therefore figures remain frustratingly unreliable owing to changes in categorisation. For example 'Other mixed' ethnicity categories were not used until 2003 and 'White' being a homogenous category until 2001, was broken down into 'White Irish, White British, White Other' back to 'White' in 2004. On the other hand 'Unknown' is far less reported than it is for socio-economic status (e.g. in

2008 17% of respondents reported unknown social class compared with 5% for ethnicity) Figure three illustrates these changes.

Figure 3 – Number of degree places accepted by ethnicity 1996 – 2010 (raw data from (UCAS))





However, despite improvements in participation rates by gender and ethnicity, the picture for social class is more mixed (see Figures four and five below). As wider social relations have changed the middle classes have come to dominate HE and social class is also, methodologically speaking an un-stable category. Though Figures four and five illustrate lower socio-economic groups have begun to participate in HE in larger numbers than before, it is still the children of both sexes and of any ethnicity – whose parental incomes are in the top twenty percent – that are five times more likely to acquire a university education than the children of parents from other social groups (Blanden and Machin, 2004). Therefore social class is the greatest structuring force in HE today; this has profound implications for the make-up of the graduate labour-market entrants.

Figure 4 - Total number of HE degree places accepted from 1996 to 2001 by class (raw data from (UCAS))

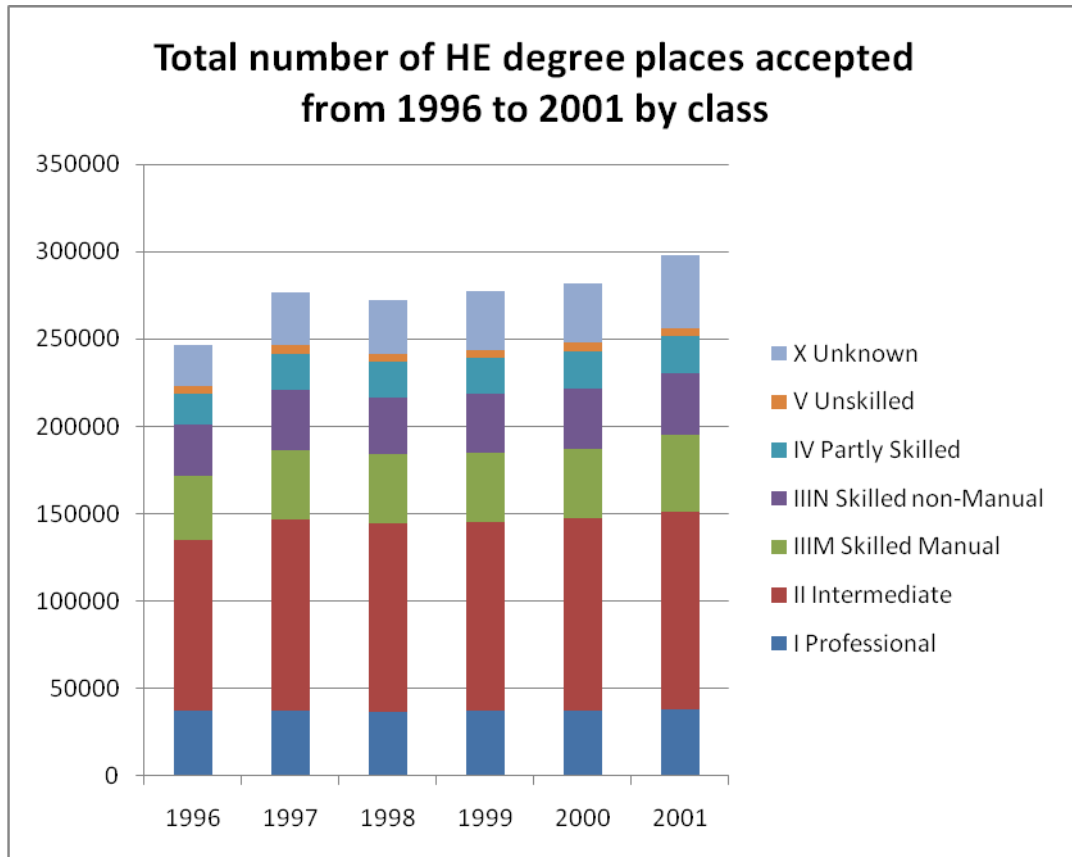
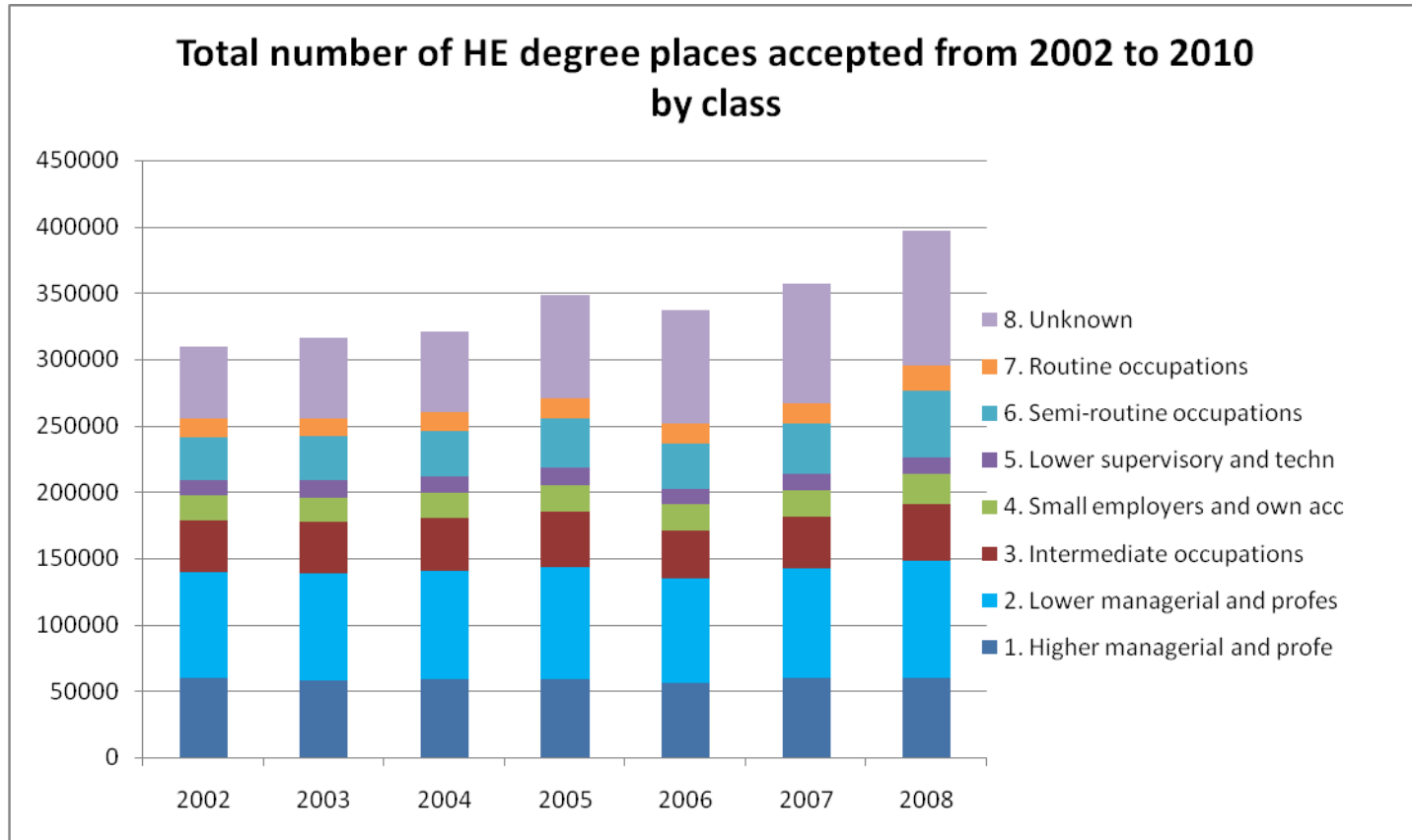


Figure 5 - Total number of HE degree places accepted from 2002 to 2010 by class (raw data from (UCAS))





***TRANSITIONS AND REPRODUCTION: SOCIOLOGICAL  
RESPONSES TO THE MAKE-UP OF HE***

How individuals make their way in the world is a central focus of sociological inquiry. Moments of transition are especially able to illuminate this question. The transition to employment straddles two key institutions: education – especially HE – and employment. This section will critically review current debates by sociology scholars with an interest in the reproduction of (dis)advantage, specifically those working in the areas of sociology of education and the graduate labour market, the re/production of cultural class affects and those scholars working broadly under the banner of the individualisation thesis.

I will begin with debates from the sociology of education. In the UK there are several key moments in a young person's educational journey where decision and performance dictate the immediate path that they can take. These include choosing subjects for threshold exams such as the GCSE or A Level; successful completion of both paves the way for particular educational futures. It has been recognised that parents, siblings, schools, educational and labour market policy all have a deep and sometimes lasting impact on the choices that young people make with regards to class subjects, college courses, furthering their education at university as well as their chosen career paths. What underpins the trajectories of different groups of graduates into employment? Sociologists have attempted not only to demonstrate that social and cultural

contexts hugely influence educational and employment outcomes, but to explain how wider social structures shape the behaviour of individuals who are successful and unsuccessful in the education system (Bernstein, 1972, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Flude, 1974, Goldthorpe, 1996, Willis, 1981). Given that HE has been linked to upward social mobility and the reproduction of the upper and middle classes, understanding who gets into HE and how is an important sociological preoccupation. Traditionally, sociology of education scholars have considered the ways in which the education is stratified and how processes of inclusion and exclusion are classed (Archer, 2003, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Burgess, 1986, Goldthorpe, 1996, Reay and Lucey, 2004), gendered (Arnot, 2000, Jackson and Warin, 2000, Mac an Ghail, 1995, Parker et al., 1996, Smith, 2003, Walkerdine, 1990) and 'raced' (Archer, 2002, Archer and Francis, 2007, Connolly, 2002, Gillborn, 2005). A disappointing aspect of the literature on the educational practices of the middle class is the relative absence of the ways in which middle-class experiences are imbued with issues relating to 'race' and/or ethnicity (Power, 2003a). While access to particular forms of education are argued to be a prime vehicle for class (re)production, it is of course also a site for the (re)production of other identities which are not separate from, but integral to the classed self. Scholars working in other areas of the sociology of education have done much to highlight how the other important identity markers – such as gender, 'race', ethnicity and sexuality – are differentially experienced by pupils, students and teachers, as well as the complex ways in which these intersect. Many of these studies are Bourdieusian in orientation and therefore the body or embodied experiences are well within

focus (Archer and Yamashita, 2003, Francis, 2002, Jackson, 2006, Evans, 2009, Williams et al., 2008, Archer et al., 2007, Rodd and Bartholomew, 2006, Jackson, 2010, Abbas, 2007); however, their work tends to be focused on working-class pupils and therefore findings may not reflect those of minority ethnic middle-class families.

Although social class has been a central concern for sociologists, examination of middle-class educational trajectories has only recently been given the fuller attention that it deserves. Ball (2003) and Power (2001) argue that the middle class is a social group which deserves as much attention as any other. It is essential that sociologists gain an understanding of how the stable (though not static) reproduction of middle-class privilege occurs. How does the relationship between the state, children, parents and the education system shape the specific practices of individual parents? Recent studies use the work of Bourdieu to understand these relationships and therefore place children's habitus – i.e. parents' role – as absolutely key to their children's educational trajectories. In much of the current research, parents are characterised as operating in a stratified, marketised, educogenic environment and it is argued that they are therefore driven by fear and anxiety to secure specific educational experiences for their children. It is argued that a fear of their children experiencing downward social mobility underpins this anxiety, which in itself reveals something about the relational, dynamic and pernicious aspects of the British class system (Ball, 2003, Ball and Vincent, 2001, Devine, 2005, Gamarnikow and Green, 2003, Lynch and Moran, 2006). As a consequence, parents, but

especially mothers (Reay, 1995, Reay, 1998, Reay and Lucey, 2000) are said to be deeply engaged in getting the best (as they perceive it) education possible for their children. Middle-class parents are constructed as knowing, instrumental and privilege-accruing on behalf of their children in an education system that they believe is the primary way they can reproduce or improve their children's life chances (Byrne, 2006). The end goals in this respect are graduation from a good university and the successful employment in a 'good job'. It is argued that middle-class parents monopolise the best aspects of the education system by virtue of their own social, economic, educational and cultural capitals. Furthermore, it is suggested that this is achieved (necessarily) to the detriment of those with less privileged bundles of capital (Reay and Lucey, 2004).

Some of the findings from the studies which focus on middle-class education practices tend towards a presentation of parents as strategising, extracting and maximising their various bundles of capital to maintain and extend educational advantage to their children, which at times borders on caricature (Reay, 1995, Ball and Vincent, 2001). Power (2003b) and Devine (2005) have argued that a more nuanced approach to the study of education and the middle classes is necessary because there is much variation in the combination of resources of capital over which middle-class parents have command. The middle classes are not homogeneous and therefore engage with a wide range of educational sites offered by the state and private sectors, which necessarily elicit a range of



more or less constrained experiences (Ball, 2003, Devine, 2005, Power, 2003b).

Overall, much of the current research on middle-class educational experiences is concerned with the 'hard work' and other behaviour exhibited by parents, and is less focused on the children's own efforts. With the focus on parents, children's own agency – as pupils, students, transitioning young people and (specifically) as classed agents – is less visible. Whether a focus on parents or children, this body of work claims that the field of education is a primary site through which habitus is reproduced for the middle classes; in other words, it is a key site through which classed practices are played out – and crucially, they argue – to the detriment of the working classes.

***THE RISE OF THE KNOWLEDGE WORKER AND THE  
GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET: WHAT IS A GRADUATE  
JOB?***

Having looked at the centrality of the education system to the reproduction of social class, this section will move on to think in more detail about one of the goals of all this education – entry into the graduate labour market. This section will also examine the rise of the knowledge worker before moving on to themes and debates around 'the degree is not enough' mantra, and its relevance for participants in becoming subjects of value by making successful transitions into the graduate labour market. The concern with the transition of middle-

class subjects of value from education to work is concerned mainly with access to graduate jobs. But how should these be defined? The short answer is that graduates are found across the occupational structure. However, 'good jobs' are considered to be those for which a degree is necessary at the point of entry, although these are subject to hierarchies. The graduate labour market has expanded alongside HE, not simply in numerical terms, but also in terms of the type of work that is now considered a graduate job. Table two illustrates a typology developed from a project which consisted of a survey of 4,500 graduates from 38 UK HE institutions who gained their first degrees in 1995 from a full range of institutions; there was a follow up programme of 200 interviews plus a thorough analysis of the existing data on graduate employment (Elias and Purcell, 2003). Although not repeated here, the authors suggest that these occupations are stratified in terms of their desirability, which is linked to perceived status and earning power. Key messages from Elias and Purcell's projects are: that the graduate labour market has changed considerably over the past twenty years; traditional categorisations are no longer appropriate; and there is still a premium for graduate earnings, although there is a considerable gender pay gap.

Table 2 - A classification of occupations for graduate labour market analysis. (Elias and Purcell, 2003)

Type of occupation	Description	Examples
Traditional graduate occupations	The established professions, for which, historically, the normal route has been via an undergraduate degree programme	Solicitors Medical practitioners HE FE and secondary education teachers Biological scientists/biochemists
Modern graduate occupations	The newer professions, particularly in management, IT and creative vocational areas, which graduates have been entering increasingly since the educational expansion in the 1960s	Chartered and certified accountants, software engineers, computer programmers. Primary school and nursery teachers Authors/writers/journalists

New graduate occupations	Areas of employment to which graduates have increasingly been recruited in large numbers; mainly new administrative, technical and 'caring' occupations	Marketing and sales, advertising managers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, probation, welfare officers, clothing designers
Niche graduate occupations	Occupations where the majority of incumbents are not graduates, but within which there are stable or growing specialist <i>niches</i> which require HE skills and knowledge	Entertainment and sports managers Hotel, accommodation managers Midwives Buyers (non-retail)
Non-graduate occupations	Graduates are also found in jobs that are likely to constitute under utilisation of	Sales assistants Filing and record clerks Routine laboratory testers Debt, rent and cash

	their HE skills and knowledge	collectors
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This new occupational classification, they argue, can be used to observe changes in the graduate labour market and for investigating the relationship between HE and skill utilisation (Elias and Purcell, 2003).

Participants in this study have transitioned into modern graduate occupations. Accountancy, like many of the graduate occupations in figure seven, are characterised as jobs within the so-called ‘knowledge economy’. Those who take up these occupations are termed ‘knowledge workers’. The concept of the knowledge worker has been around for over forty years, yet definitions remain ambiguous. Despite this, knowledge worker, with its concomitant term knowledge economy, has become embedded in public policy and the relationship between HE and employers (Joseph, 2005). The knowledge economy is said to have grown in relation to the decline of heavy industry, which was characterised by the dominance of manual labour. Knowledge workers are defined and positioned in opposition to manual workers in rather crude terms: knowledge workers are said to use their minds rather than their hands (Rooney et al., 2005). This embodied analogy actually has the effect of rendering the knowledge worker rather disembodied, in part owing to the pervasive although refuted idea of a mind/body split. In an extensive overview and critique of the concept, Darr and Warhurst (2008) argue that very little is known about the actual working practices of knowledge workers, and that

assumptions abound about the extent to which the knowledge worker uses her mental capacities as though distinct and separate from the (manual) body. They argue that research is needed fully to flesh out the actual working practices of knowledge workers. One area in which studies of knowledge workers has been achieved, albeit implicitly, is by researchers working in the area of organisational studies in general, and critical accountancy studies in particular. These scholars have begun to highlight that despite extensive knowledge acquisition, the successful execution of many graduate job roles – specifically, accountancy – relies on an embodied performance of professionalism (Alvesson et al., 2000, McDowell, 1997, Carrington, 2010, Evetts, 2006, Hatcher, 2008, Power, 2003a, Sinclair, 2005, Trethewey, 1999). This thesis responds and contributes to the debate initiated by Darr and Warhurst (2008) by drawing attention to the embodied aspects of one subset of knowledge workers – trainee accountants.

Now that I have established what a graduate job is, and more specifically located the concept of knowledge, we can consider how graduates go about turning a degree into a job. In so doing, this section looks at the role of employment enhancement activities and the situation of working-class students. Successful transition into the graduate labour market requires students to demonstrate their suitability for employment through competitive processes which seek to match graduate ‘skills’ to job roles. An important focus for research on transitions to employment is to consider how well positioned graduates of different social categories are to compete, and why this

is. Competition in the graduate labour market generates anxieties regarding 'graduate labour market saturation' and 'credential deflation'. Such claims by some academics and media outlets have long been the way in which anxieties manifest themselves (Brown and Scase, 1994). Indeed, employing (crude) market logic appears to justify the fear of credential deflation and decrease the scarcity of a resource (HE), potentially making that resource lose some of its value, although the reality is far more complex. Anxieties about saturated graduate labour markets have not been borne out by the statistics (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2007) until the most recent recession, and only in some sectors. Almost regardless of the facts of the matter, anxieties about the value of a degree in relation to the labour market abound. The most recent manifestation of these anxieties are claims that having a degree is not enough to secure good graduate employment, as graduates are said to lack the necessary skills-mix that employers are looking for (Higher Education Careers Services Unit, 2010).

The 'a degree is not enough' mantra, perpetuated by certain media and some academics, emanates from employers who repeatedly claim that students fail to graduate with the 'right skills' for life in the real world of employment (Andrews and Higson, 2008, Hilpern, 2008). A powerful lobbying group, the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), consistently claims that HEIs fail to equip graduates with the skills employers are looking for (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2011). These perspectives come from those in a position that assumes that HE is designed primarily to meet the needs of employers, and

eschews views which argue for education for its own sake. An anxiety that even with a degree students will not leave university with the necessary skills for them to make gains in the graduate labour market is pernicious, especially when we consider that as HE is highly stratified it does not make sense to talk about graduates as a homogeneous group all applying for jobs from a level playing field (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

Usually, the CV or application form is the initial way in which graduates are expected to demonstrate their employability and suitability for a job, and their first point of contact with a potential employer. University careers advice services work in conjunction with employers to disseminate information regarding how graduates should best narrate or display their employability through the CV and on the application form. Employability, according to the career advice website Prospects (2011a), refers to a set of skills often labelled as ‘soft’, ‘interpersonal’, ‘people’ and or ‘communication’ skills. Such skills are embodied and can therefore be learnt in a range of different settings; once acquired, they are then characterised as ‘transferable’ skills. Documents produced by the HE Careers Service Unit (HECSU) quoting research by industry figures stress the importance of acquiring transferable skills in settings outside the classroom, lecture hall and seminar. Outside settings refer to the other aspects typical of university life such as Students’ Union based activities, and extra-curricular activities (ECA) such as sports clubs and societies. More recently, part-time work is argued to be a suitable source of valuable ‘experience’ to be mined for its ability to demonstrate a wide range of



transferable skills (Higher Education Careers Services Unit, 2010). This would seem to allow those students who have to work for financial reasons and are therefore less able to engage in traditional Students' Union activities to capitalise on their less-favourable circumstances. Applicants are advised to demonstrate their accrual of these crucial markers of employability by citing the where, why and how they were deployed.

What has emerged has been an individualising discourse which emphasises the importance of students being able to demonstrate their 'employability' beyond formal qualifications (Prospects, 2011b). With universities under pressure to attract and retain students, positive claims to the employment destinations of graduates is a key judgment of a university's status. That 'a degree is not enough' has become received wisdom directed at all students, many of whom have fully digested the messages and understand the implications and personal responsibilities that they have for making themselves more employable (Tomlinson, 2008). It is no coincidence that both careers advisors and employers suggest that evidence of participation in ECA is a good way to enhance employability, as extensive research demonstrates a positive correlation between the two (Camp, 1990, Feldman and Matjasko, 2005, Mahoney, 2000, Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). Industry research suggests that more job offers are made by multinational accountancy firms to those students who have demonstrated their transferable skills through their ECA than those who did not (Yew, 2005).

Current research suggests that the take up of CV enhancing activities at university such as ECA differs by social class, with working-class students engaging in more part-time paid work than their middle-class peers, but often failing to recognise the added value this can give to their CVs. In the main, university clubs and societies have a sense of exclusivity, many of whom have their own codes, rights and rituals associated with them (Brooks and Everett, 2008). Questioning the access of working-class students to ECA in elite universities, Crozier et al (2008) found that they tended to avoid such activities owing to psychic costs to themselves in relation to embedded class in these encounters. Locking oneself out (or feeling locked out) of this crucial aspect of university life may have profound and long lasting consequences for students once they begin to make applications in the graduate job market, as they may find they do not have the requisite experiences to draw upon. Those who do not participate in extra employability work are exposed to risks in a job market which now require them to engage in specific ways.

Talking about skills and employability individualises the issues and allows for entrenched social disadvantages to remain missing from mainstream and journalistic analysis. Where robust research has been undertaken a less individualising picture emerges. A systematic literature review of research into career-related interventions for HE found that social disadvantage in relation to gender, socio economic class, age and ethnicity all influence career progression in negative ways (Hughes et al., 2005). The review also found that specific practitioner-led interventions such as one-to-one careers guidance and advice

help to ameliorate these negative effects, and also bring further advantage to those already well equipped. On the other hand, middle-class students are characterised as highly engaged in ECA, partly owing to their familiarity with them from previous stages in their education. It is suggested that not everyone is receiving the message about the importance of engaging in employment enhancement activities (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, Purcell et al., 2002, Brown et al., 2004). One response to this problem has been to embed employability training and skills into the undergraduate curriculum. However, a number of studies have highlighted their ineffectiveness for BME and working-class students in enhancing their employability, and/or actively increasing their rates of transition into the graduate labour market (Archer and Hutchings, 2000, Archer and Francis, 2007, Cranmer, 2006, Wilton, 2011). This thesis is keen to explore arguments put forward by Greenbank (2009) that suggest that the message is being heard by all, but that social class is a likely factor in how the message is received and acted upon. In looking at the relevance of my sample of graduates' education to their transition to work I will pay particular attention to the take up of ECA and the reasons why they do or do not participate.

***EMPLOYERS' RESPONSE TO MANAGING THE TRANSITION  
TO THE GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET IN A CLIMATE  
OF 'DIVERSITY'***

This final section looks at the contradictory discourses of governments' widening participation agendas and recruiters' 'diversity' agendas, alongside alleged graduate labour market saturation and the 'war for talent'. An examination of these competing and often contradictory discourses will be done with a consideration of the implications for the way in which employers seek to support employees' transition to the graduate labour market. Despite periodic scare mongering that the graduate labour market is on the verge of saturation, this is contradicted by a characterisation by recruiters of the graduate labour market as a 'war for talent' (Branine, 2008, Michaels et al., 2001). The so-called war for talent in fact stems from the idea that although numbers of graduates have increased, they are not all considered suitable candidates for transition into graduate employment. Therefore, the war is not for graduates *per se* but for the most talented – a concept that is highly contested amongst employers, graduates and institutions of HE (Brown et al., 2004, Hills, 2003, Morley and Aynsley, 2007). A concomitant discourse from recruiters is one which acknowledges and also celebrates the widening of HE through the linking of diversity with excellence and commercial competitiveness, despite little evidence strongly to support such a relationship (Bassett-Jones, 2005). Moreover, the promotion of diversity in the work place is linked to 'negative' outcomes such as workplace conflict (*ibid.*).

Partly as a result of the diversity agenda, but also owing to the expensive nature of recruitment, graduates' transition into employment is recognised by recruiters to be an important period of time. Managing the transition process, as far as big recruiters are concerned, includes not just selecting the 'best' candidate but also managing expectations of those who are eventually offered the job. This starts at the recruitment stage and includes ensuring that potential employees have realistic expectations of the job and the firm, providing opportunities and resources for successful applicants to meet, build networks, and access 'start-up loans' to help with relocation related issues. Once employment commences, it is usual for the organisation to hold induction sessions which seek to make the new recruit familiar with the organisation's processes and procedures, as well as offering new employees the opportunity to get to know each other. This is argued to be beneficial for a number of business-related reasons, in part owing to the perception that recruiters are engaged in a war for talent (Michaels et al., 2001). Recruitment is an expensive process and therefore employee retention is a significant consideration. This is an especially pertinent issue for large accountancy firms who invest resources in expensive external audit training for the first three years of graduates' contracts. Trying to ensure that there is a good fit between employees and the organisation is an example of a means by which employers believe they can better recruit and retain graduate 'talent' (Sheridan, 1992). However, historically, one of the problems of ensuring that there is a good person/organisation fit was the tendency to recruit in the organisation's own

image. This becomes something of a problematic paradox when the case for employee diversity is made on the grounds of social justice as well as commercial imperatives (Daniels, 2010).

While there is evidence to suggest that BME and working-class students are not entering HE and the graduate labour market in sufficient proportion to their white middle-class peers for widening participation agendas to be labelled successful, numbers have nevertheless significantly increased (Purcell et al., 2002). Seeking to recruit a more diverse range of graduates has become normal practice for large organisations, especially those in business and finance sectors, as a cursory glance around a graduate recruitment fair will reveal. Specific practices range from holding 'women only' recruitment sessions and having BME fast track application processes, to advertising the fact that LGBT or disabled graduates are desired and welcome in a given organisation. However, as researchers have highlighted, successfully recruiting graduates from diverse backgrounds is not straightforward, and presents the employer as well as the employee with possible challenges. For example, it can lead to potential problems in the workplace between employees and between employers and employees, especially when promises of diversity and equality at recruitment are not born out in reality, which ultimately can lead to poor retention of BME workers (McKay and Avery, 2005). Poor retention rates of BME graduates compounds existing inequalities within organisations, which researchers have documented are extensive horizontally and vertically and intersect with class and gender (Acker, 2006). McKay and Avery (2005)

suggest that organisations should be careful not to make false claims about how diverse their current workforce is. Visibility of other BME employees in the same or higher job roles, it is argued, is central to an individual's confidence in the organisation's commitment to diversity, which is often a central concern for graduates who are aware of work place discriminations and also keen to build a career (Kirton, 2009). Research suggests that employers could and should go some way to manage the potential problems associated with recruiting more diversely to a currently more homogeneous workforce (McKay and Avery, 2005). Actively managing the transition period is just one way in which employers might seek to do this. The ways in which organisations do this at the point of graduate transition is rarely researched – experiences of BME graduates during the period of transition, even less so. As owners of diverse bodies, BME graduates' experiences of transitioning into the workplace highlights the embodied aspects of this early period of employment.

A tendency in this area of research is to focus on disadvantaged groups in terms of social class rather than 'race'/ethnicity. This may oversimplify the issues and experiences relating to racism. Kirton (2009) argues that although education is seen by policy makers to be a way of attacking racial inequalities, the picture for BME graduates is mixed. As a whole group, they fare worse than their white comparison. However, on closer inspection, Chinese and Indian students fare the same or better than their white counterparts. In unpacking why some BME groups do better or worse, issues relating to racism, career aspiration, individual resilience, social class, location and parents'

experiences of the labour market are all relevant. Kirton's (2009) research showed that knowledge of the BME population in a sector or organisation was relevant to students and informed their career decision-making. Accountancy was an example where it was thought that higher numbers of BME people were successfully employed and therefore less racism would be experienced. Although it may be assumed that those students who do engage in ECA are set for success, there is little or no detail about how or why such students participate in these ways. Overall, there is a stronger focus on the situation of working-class students at the expense of more complex understandings which take gender and 'race'/ethnicity into account when analysing students' transition into the graduate labour market. Moreover, the focus is on working-class students who are not playing the game, and are therefore potentially losers in the graduate labour market. There is also a taken-for-granted assumption that middle-class students have relatively unproblematic transitions into the graduate labour market. My research is able to fill a gap by focusing on working-class and BME graduates who have been successful in obtaining a good job. I am also able to compare and contrast their experiences with students with more traditionally privileged backgrounds to consider factors like the relevance of university careers advice, the role of family members and the relevance of employment enhancement activities in practice, and, especially, their own self understanding of their trajectories.

## ***CONCLUSION***



I started this chapter with an exploration of the nodal concepts of this thesis – class, value and exchange – and situated their usefulness within recent debates about the relevance of social class and the relevance of the body to the reproduction of social class. Following this, the importance of the British education system to social reproduction was explored, with particular attention given to ongoing debates by sociology of education scholars regarding students’ experiences as they relate to their class, gender and ethnicity. The next section located the expansion of HE and the graduate labour market and considered key themes in their transitional pathways such as ‘the degree is not enough’ mantra and the rise of extra-curricular credentialism to argue for the ongoing ways in which subjects are expected to become subjects of value. Finally, this chapter briefly considered the emergence of a ‘diversity’ recruitment strategy by employers as a response to the expansion of HE and the concomitant drive towards a knowledge economy and the so-called knowledge worker. Overall, this chapter has situated my research questions within a range of literatures from areas of sociology of education, sociology of social class and the body, as well as bringing together key themes and debates from scholars working in the areas of transitions to the graduate labour market. The next chapter focuses on the methodological issues which emerged from the production of this thesis.

# **CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCHING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION, EMPIRICAL PROBLEMS AND METHODOLOGICAL ANSWERS: ELICITING CLASS TALK IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

This chapter examines the methodological choices that I made through each stage of the thesis, and will examine some of the key issues and dilemmas that emerged from the process. It does so through a consideration of current research on social class and feminist methodologies. A discussion of fieldwork dilemmas – such as the negotiation of access, ethical concerns and my own positionality – will highlight the centrality of class in the everyday practice of research. Following this I will outline in detail the key stages of data collection, analysis and writing of the thesis.

The work of feminists who research social class has highly influenced my methodological perspectives and choices. Skeggs argues that

[t]o ignore questions of methodology is to assume that knowledge comes from nowhere allowing knowledge makers to abdicate responsibility for their productions and representations. To side-step methodology means that the mechanisms we utilize in producing

knowledge are hidden, relations of privilege are masked and knowers are not seen to be located: therefore the likely abundance of cultural, social educational and economic capitals is not recognized as central to the production of any knowledge. (Skeggs, 1997:17)

I therefore take seriously the role of the methodology chapter to account for my research to the reader; I also see it as an important means by which I can account for the thesis's task of researching participants.

The main aims of the study were to explore the attribution of value of graduates as they transitioned into the graduate labour market. I built research relationships and conducted thirty-seven interviews over nine months during the 2007/08 academic year, with fifteen graduates in their first year of employment as trainee accountants. Class is a central mechanism for the delineation of value, though this is always inflected through gender, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality and (dis)ability. Through this process I have realised that whilst it is one thing to think and write about class in the luxury of an academic text, it is quite another to operationalise it for the purpose of research; it is something else, again, within the context of a qualitative interview. This chapter will examine some of the tensions and contradictions that occur at the interface between the practicalities of research on the one hand, and existing research as academic texts on the other. I begin with a consideration of the methodological problems when researching social class when disavowal of its relevance abounds. Next, I think through the usefulness of feminist

methodologies for researching social class within a framework of ‘no harm’, following which I outline the detail of access negotiations to the research site, the recruitment of participants, ethics and consent. The next section discusses the use of a narrative inquiry approach to illicit ‘class talk’ within the interview process, before a final section which outlines and discusses participants, data collection methods and analysis.

### ***METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS WHEN RESEARCHING SOCIAL CLASS***

In the social and political sciences, the process of classification of individuals into groups in quantitative research has a long and problematic history. Much energy has been spent refining different models of categorisation, so that a ‘clearer’ picture of social stratification may be achieved. It is a picture that is freer from moral undertones, and one that emphasises the mapping of economic realities of people’s lives as they relate to their assets (such as level of income, political participation, occupation, education, home ownership, consumption and leisure patterns (Skeggs, 1997). The use of quantitative methods to generate subjective understandings and meanings of social process (as experienced by individuals) has been criticised, while qualitative research methods are documented to be well placed to facilitate the generation and analysis of participants’ perspectives in such ways that generate thick and rich description (Bryman, 2001; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Both quantitative and qualitative research illustrates, time and again, that British society is

hierarchical and highly stratified around clusters of assets (Bottero, 2005, Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992, Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006, Oesch, 2006, Savage et al., 2005b).

Whether or not patterns of stratification are interpreted as evidence for the salience of social class has been highly contested within sociological debates (Atkinson, 2010). These debates have come at a time when the highly stratified nature of society is not denied, but the relevance and legitimacy of the language of social class is questioned. Whether or not change (such as an increase in social mobility) within and across these clusters is possible from generation to generation is a central focus of the debate by sociologists, and one that calls the very usefulness of the concept of class into question (Bauman, 2004, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Lash, 1994). Some social theorists dispute the usefulness of the concept and language of class because of changes to national and global economies. They argue that these changes have created greater fluidity between individuals in their relationships to traditional measures of social class, such as occupation, consumption and leisure habits, and political affiliations (Scott, 2002). Sociologists on the other side of this debate argue that empirical research demonstrates that class is still a highly salient sociological – as well as social – category; however, it is at the same time variously disavowed by research participants and theorists (not to mention politicians and the media) (Bennett, 2009, Savage, 2010). Theorists who insist on the relevance of social class as a structured and structuring force in people's lives have come to see the disavowal of social class not as evidence of its

irrelevance, but as a signifier of its immensely problematic explanatory power, not least in relation to the intense ways in which it is underpinned by moral economies and discourses (Bourdieu, 1987, Sayer, 2005b, Skeggs, 2004).

Considering the difficulties surrounding the avowal and disavowal of social class, how then can a qualitative empirical study – which has it as a central theoretical concept – proceed? One response taken up by scholars has been to argue that methodological problems, or ‘class denial’, serve the analysis and evidence the subjectively contested meanings of class, and the highly relevant relationship of social class to social processes (Reay, 1997a, Skeggs, 1997). To a large extent I share this position; yet I am aware that this does not necessarily serve as a guide to talk about class in the interview process. While much has been written on the problems and limits of operationalising the concept of social class, this has largely been taken up by researchers using quantitative research methods, such as the survey. Much less has been said about operationalising the concept for qualitative research (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992, Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006, Savage et al., 2005b). This extends into research methods books, which are strangely quiet on the issue of how to research class using qualitative research methods. This is particularly strange when, unlike topics related to gender, sexuality, children, trauma or ‘race’ and ethnicity, class is not often considered to be a sensitive topic of research (Babbie, 2007, Bernard, 2000, Bryman, 2012, Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Perhaps this is because investigating processes of social class almost exclusively through the use of interviews is difficult, and rare, as the topic

itself is conceptually problematic for all concerned. Indeed, as the research shows, asking direct questions about people's experiences of class often results in an obfuscation of the term and contestation of its implicit and explicit meanings (Savage et al., 2001, Savage et al., 2005b, Skeggs, 1997, Warde, 2010). Thinking about how to elicit class-talk (using the language of the sociology of class or stratification) is problematic because of the issues of the disavowal of social class – but it is possible.

A likely problem with researching social class is that the topic is infused with politically contested meanings, and everyday understandings of the terms employed; these terms are often complex and contradictory, for both researcher and the researched. Skeggs (2004) argues that research on class is itself always political; much of the research on class carried out by those who insist on its relevance has an emancipatory agenda, which has much in common with feminist research. The next section looks at how emancipatory agendas have been taken up by feminist researchers, and what they have to offer to scholars researching social class.

***THE USEFULNESS OF FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES FOR  
RESEARCHING SOCIAL CLASS OR EMANCIPATORY  
AGENDAS IN A FRAMEWORK OF 'NO HARM'***

This section will look at some of the issues that feminist methodologists have raised, and their usefulness for researching social class. This section will also discuss the relevance of an emancipatory agenda in research on gender and class, and how it informed my approach to qualitative interviewing and analysis. Feminist researchers and methodologists have fruitfully led the way in thinking about the complex relationships between research topic, researcher and the researched. Feminist methodological debates mirror feminism's political developments: from the call to do 'feminist' research crudely defined by women, with women and about feminist issues, to one that highlights the biases within this call (heterosexual, able-bodied, white and middle class, for example). Furthermore, there has been a post-structural agenda that questions the very existence of the category of women and gender (Butler, 1990, Butler, 2004, Hughes, 2002). We glean a more oblique debate from within social class research, which has historically sought to represent marginal voices of white, working-class boys and men, whilst feminists highlighted the absence of girls and women in some landmark studies – Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1981) is one example. Other sociologists highlighted the 'whiteness' of studies on class, and sought to challenge them with studies that look explicitly at the intersection of class, 'race' and ethnicity (Frankenberg, 1993). More recently there has been an increasing recognition that whilst attention must be



paid to marginal voices, it is important to explore and research the voices and experiences of the more advantaged *and* privileged members of society – the middle classes. This is important if only to gain a better picture of marginal experiences (Ball, 2003, Devine, 2004, Power, 2003b, Reay et al., 2011, Skeggs, 2004, Vincent and Ball, 2006). In this sense it mirrors the arguments by some feminists of the importance of researching men and masculinities within a feminist research agenda in order to get a fuller picture of women's circumstances (Connell, 1987, Connell, 2002). It is my position that, because of the ways in which Skeggs (1997, 2004) and others have highlighted the often symbolically violent impact of middle-class practices (such as misrecognition), wide-ranging middle-class perspectives must be investigated to further our understanding of them, in order that they might be challenged. Moreover, I believe that good sociological practice requires us to do research with all social groups, and the most privileged ones should certainly not avoid scrutiny, lest they become easily dismissed caricatures.

A central feature of feminist research is its political agenda and concern for social justice; this can also be said to characterise some research on social class. To my mind one of the most striking features of class research is, through its attention to affects such as morality and its by-product shame as well as income distribution, access to education and other matters, is its political nature; in this sense I suggest that some research has an emancipatory agenda. As a feminist and person committed to ideals of social justice, I would like my own research to fulfil my own political and academic agenda, which

challenges the misrecognition of working-class identities as spoiled, and to explore the contradictions and complexities of middle-class identities, and see where gender and ethnicity intersect. Before I started fieldwork I had entertained the possibility that some aspects of my agenda might be fulfilled with participants via their involvement in the research. That is, I hoped that through interviews, middle-class participants might come to see their privilege and challenge some of their behaviours, while working-class participants would have some of their experiences validated. However, feminist researchers have debated the ethical dilemmas and potentially (dis)empowering and harmful or disruptive consequences this might have for female research participants; this is particularly true when using a feminist praxis which has, at its heart, an emancipatory and proselytising agenda (for example Millen, 1997). I have now problematised my desire to use the research process as an emancipatory space; although emancipatory agendas may be central to feminists doing research on class, it is not for the researcher to seek to ‘emancipate’ research participants through the research process – although it may be a by-product.

All good researchers are aware of the potentially intrusive nature of doing qualitative research for participants, but researchers adopting feminist principles are aware of and sensitive to the fact that participants’ time is gendered in relation to life-stage, class and other social locations. Women’s time is often subject to gendered divisions of labour which prioritise the needs of others; this is further complicated depending on women’s social location and

material circumstances. Sensitivities to these issues (should) impact on the ways in which feminist researchers engage with potential and actual research subjects, and at least bring an awareness of the barriers and issues facing female participants.

Another important feature of feminists' work is that they have been at the vanguard of developing methodologies that adequately engage with the inevitable complexity of research subjects. They subsequently argue that there is a need to consider and account for the fact that participants often have identities that are not rigid or fixed into neat sociological categories, let alone that participants would share researchers' definition of them (Valentine, 2007). Furthermore, in critiques of other methodological frameworks – such as positivism – feminists have long pointed out that denying subjectivity and positionality does not serve the research process. Rather, the denial undermines it, and has historically led to the production of knowledge that has – implicitly, explicitly, by design or by accident – neglected various social groups, with the result that some groups' experiences have been privileged over others. For example, white middle-class feminists pointed out the ways in which women were missing from male-stream sociological research and worked to rectify this; however, other feminists argue that, in turn, working-class, black, disabled, LGBT and other women's voices were marginalised, both as research subjects, and as producers of knowledge (Skeggs, 1997, Davis, 1983). The post-structural turn brought into question the validity of those very categories (Soper, 1991). With each critique comes a demand for more nuanced

understandings, which can be satisfied through explicit attention to the ways in which research participants' experiences are refracted through, and intersect with, a range of social categories, including: gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and disability (McCall, 2005). McCall and others argue that the imperative to think in terms of the intersectionality of social categories impacts not just on whom and what is being researched, but also on who is doing the research and the difference this makes – if any – to the production of knowledge (Ribbens, 1989, Valentine, 2007, Johnson-Bailey, 1999). As a result, Olesen argues that:

[c]omplexity and controversy characterize the qualitative feminist research enterprise: the nature of research, the definition of and relationship with those with whom research is done, the characteristics and location of the researcher, and the creation and presentation of knowledges. (Olesen, 2005:238)

Perhaps, rather naively, I had originally intended to capture the experiences of working-class trainees as they traversed middle-class spaces; however, the self-selecting sample comprised, overwhelmingly, middle-class participants. Initially this was a source of disappointment to me, but I quickly came to perceive the opportunity to work with this group as a benefit, as I thought I might be able to ascertain 'first hand' their dominating and symbolically oppressive practices. I was to be disappointed again when I was only granted access to interview rather than observe participants. In my case it has been important to think not only about my own subjectivity in relation to

researching the (potentially) marginalised voices of my participants, but to think, too, in terms of the issues raised by researching more privileged social groups within an emancipatory framework of no harm. These issues relate not just at the point of doing the research through interviews, but at every stage of the process (such as access negotiations and gaining and maintaining consent). It is to this stage of the research that the next section will pay attention.

### ***ACCESS NEGOTIATIONS AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT TO THE STUDY***

This section will look at the processes involved in securing access to a research site and participants. As with other aspects of the research process I will highlight where issues of social class were present and in some cases developed into fieldwork dilemmas. This piece of research was, as it is for all researchers, constrained and informed by the practical considerations of securing access to a research site. As there was no clear logic for adopting a comparative case study, I therefore decided that I would need one organisation for a single case-study approach. In order to narrow down the vast number of potential research sites, I employed the following rationale: organisations that did not require a subject specific degree were considered potential research sites. This was chosen because of the explicit requests made by employers (in lieu of a specific subject) for applicants to draw upon non-academic or ECA experiences as part of the application process.

I chose to recruit participants from an employer, rather than from a university, for a number of reasons. First, to avoid clustering: elite universities in the UK are strongly associated with certain social groups, and to avoid this, some other rationale would have to be adopted to select which universities would be recruited to the study. Multiple universities would have required more time in order to gain and maintain access – a time-consuming process that I hoped to minimise. Second, recruiting participants through universities – rather than through a single firm – might have decreased my chances of using research methods such as non-participant observation, or getting interviews with recruiters, as this would involve individual time-consuming access negotiations with each firm. Furthermore, recruiting from an organisation would ensure that I made contact with graduates who had already successfully traversed the application process, and were therefore already in a process of transition. Once the rationale had been decided, the tricky process of trying to secure access to a research site began. This, as we will see, had an impact on the research design.

Bryman (1988) points out that people working within organisations may be suspicious of requests by researchers for access; this is, perhaps, especially true from a novice, thus making access difficult to gain. After taking advice from colleagues at the Careers Service (who had experience of gaining and maintaining relationships with private sector graduate employers), I contacted the heads of Graduate Recruitment in eight multinational organisations. I sent an invitation for participation via email and attached a Power Point presentation which featured, amongst other things, the main aims of the

research, and details of whom I hoped to recruit and for how long. After a few tentative responses, I failed to secure access at any of the organisations contacted.

Following further conversations with colleagues in the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick, I made contact with the Association of Graduate Research (AGR) and asked if they would allow me to contact their members about the research. After this was agreed, I then spent some time considering whom I wanted to contact. In order for anyone to agree to the inconvenience of the research, I thought it would be important for them to have a personal connection to the project. It was suggested to me that some of the female, senior graduate recruiters may well have done some class travel of their own, and would therefore feel motivated – by the project's aims – to invest their own time. It was further suggested that I could identify such a person from their biographies and accompanying photograph which were publicly available on the AGR website. I therefore spent some time looking into the biographies available on the AGR website and identified two women who appeared to fit the bill: one was the head of graduate recruitment for a multinational investment bank, and the other was the head of graduate recruitment for a multinational accountancy firm. I took the decision that I would seek first to interview these women about their own experiences of class travel, before exploring the possibilities of extending the research inwards to the organisation. At the time I thought that peering at photographs of women, reading their biographies, and trying to work out if they looked like they might

have been working class, seemed at best inappropriate and worst unethical based as many of these judgments are on processes of misrecognition (Skeggs, 2000). Considering the sort of processes that I was hoping to critique, the imagining and projecting – that is to say, the interpretation of appearance – with the explicit aim of fixing and locating individuals within a specific context disturbed me, and I had not expected such ethical dilemmas. Noting them led to the decision that I would step back from these judgments, and I, instead, contacted the administrator for the AGR board who fielded a request for participation, which was eventually successful. It resulted in the two women that I had identified tacitly agreeing to support their firms' participation in the research. The tactic worked, and on first meeting it was quickly established that it had worked based on the professor's suggestion; both offers of participation came from women who were the first in their generation to go to university – women who gained entry into a profession which was highly remunerated and who considered themselves to have transcended their social class of origin. Both women told me this very early on in our initial conversations; both women also asked me about my own background (where I conveyed my mother's experiences, which are similar to theirs) which seemed to me to authenticate further my reasons for doing the research, and legitimate their participation in it. I became convinced that their personal attachment to the ideas which I was interested in investigating underpinned all future negotiations; I was able to rely on them when access became more problematic as a result of the firm's processes and procedures – things that were out of all of our control.



Upon further discussions with these two women, they suggested that I would be more likely to get a broader range of participants at the accountancy firm, and a decision was made to cease access negotiations with the investment bank. Therefore, after many months of formal negotiations with their legal department – which included signing a confidentiality agreement – the bulk of the empirical work was carried out at a multinational accountancy firm; at their insistence I refer to them as the Firm. The access agreement that I made with the Firm both constrained and informed the scope of the research in a number of ways. First, I was only allowed to interview trainees during office hours; second, I was not allowed to observe them either at college, nor actively working at the Firm's offices or at any of the client's premises; third, I was not allowed access to a database, but was permitted to write a 'recruitment' email which the Firm then said it circulated to all new graduate trainees at four sites (three in London and one in Birmingham). The Firm suggested that I recruit for my study graduates based in a regional office, as well as those based in London, as it was thought that there might be some variation between them: applicants choose the region to which they would like to apply, and regions recruit specifically for their own area. In the end, out of my fifteen participants, four trainees were based in the Birmingham office, and the rest were in based in offices across central London.

### ***ETHICS AND CONSENT***

This next section looks in more detail at the issues of ethics and consent within the context of doing qualitative research on social class, and as it relates to the responsible production of knowledge. Producing responsible knowledge does not simply refer to the intellectual and practical rigour of the analysis and writing up of the research (Letherby, 2002) – it also extends to the ways in which the researcher treats her/his research participants during the entire process. For example, while empathy, rapport and respect are said to be an important component for conducting good in-depth, qualitative interviews (Bryman, 2001) – and the latter is compulsory insofar as it facilitates ethical research – leading participants into discussions about sensitive issues must be done with sensitivity to, and care for, the issues. My theoretical framework takes as its starting point the idea that effects, such as shame, are central to social processes such as class (dis)identification (Sayer, 2001). Moreover, aside from my own familial experiences, there is ample research evidence to suggest that growing up working class and moving into middle-class spaces can be fraught, distressing and painful experiences (Fanon, 1969, Sennett and Cobb, 1993, Reay, 2005, Skeggs, 1997, Walkerdine et al., 2001). Additionally, because of the need to pay attention to the intersectionality of social categories, I was also attuned to the potential psychosocial implications of growing up in the context of sexism, homophobia, Islamaphobia and racism. Despite my personal, political and theoretical leanings, my professional role as a researcher demanded that I not expose or deliberately set out to cause harm –

psychologically or socially – to my participants through the research process. It was very possible that participants' talk could be distressing for them and, as a result, they might come to regret some or all of what they talked about.

To regret talking about something is, I would argue, associated with negative thoughts and feelings, some of which might be connected to guilt, shame or anger. My consideration that participants might regret their talk comes from reflexively engaging with many of the affective issues raised, by thinking about social class in terms of morality, misrecognition and spoiled identities. My initial concern before I met my participants was that in eliciting class talk with those in a process of class travel, I might ignite or trigger talk that was upsetting. My concern was founded in the literature on social class, which highlights the ways in which class identities are at the same time spoiled and ambiguous, with individuals claiming and rejecting class identities with some ambivalence (Sayer, 2001). Data collected for my Master's dissertation confirmed this, and also served to remind me that participants may be articulating their thoughts and feelings on the topic to another person for the first time. Some of my participants during the fieldwork for my MA expressed surprise at their strong thoughts and feelings on the subject, and the explicit connections that I made to their experiences and social class. At the same time, in some sense their thoughts and observations were nothing new, but were perhaps just finding new expression in the interview context; nevertheless, there were distinct moments when I was alarmed at the potential disruption our talk had for participants' understanding of themselves. Participants sometimes

gave me the impression that our talk was revelatory; this was articulated through their own sense-making and supported by my answering their questions on the broader remit of the research – an act which, some would argue, characterises feminist commitments in research settings (Millen, 1997). In responding to talk and participants' questions, I offered insight which had the intention of remedying the impact which certain spoiled identities had on participants' experiences. On one level, I felt that not only did I *want* some of our talk to fulfil my own personal, political and academic agenda (to challenge the (mis)recognition of some identities as spoiled), but that it sometimes appeared to. However, after one such moment, far from being pleased with myself for this by-product of my research, I was faintly horrified that it could have any impact at all. Thus: during one, three-hour interview, Johnny<sup>1</sup> talked at length about how he thought the more middle-class boys at university perceived and treated him in relation to his and their masculinities. Both he and I made links and talked about how this might relate to his working classness; the talk was emotional and very personal. After that interview, Johnny did not reply to my next three attempts to contact him; I started to panic and began imagining that I had led him into talk that he was now regretting and was embarrassed to see me again. I wrote him an email asking if he was all right, trying to allay any fears he might have about the confidentiality of the interviews; however, a short while later he contacted me to apologise for his lack of response, explaining that he had been bogged down in revision and job

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<sup>1</sup> Just one of a number of participants that I interviewed for my MA dissertation.

applications, and we subsequently had another interview. Although Johnny professed that he was not bothered at all by the talk and had in fact enjoyed the process, I learnt a valuable lesson: I reflected on this incident and decided that despite all the ‘good’ data that I got from those intimate interviews, I felt out of my depth and it could have gone a different way.

From the perspective of social class as spoiled identities it becomes easier to see how qualitative research on social class can be viewed as a sensitive topic. However, as appendix one details, the vast majority of participants in this study, whilst not quite elites, come from privileged backgrounds. The happenstance which led to this study’s large population of relatively privileged graduates led me to consider a different – but not unrelated – ethical aspect of the research process in relation to interview. Many of the more privileged participants found it difficult to see themselves in class terms, other than broadly locating themselves as middle class and ‘lucky’ to be so. This made talking difficult when the topic concerned those moments when class issues might have been informing their experiences. I began to overcome this by saying things like, ‘others in this study who have a more working-class background/ethnic minority status/or are women have found that ... have you noticed anything like that?’ This allowed me to name and ground others’ experiences as class-based prejudice, as well as sexism and racism; it also allowed me to offer them the space to respond. This led to their being exposed to stories that were often about negative experiences around class, race and gender. Presenting them with an analysis of their own and their peers’ privilege

in the terms of the literature that I am using might well cause a great deal of anxiety if taken on board. Some expressed surprise, disbelief and concern – nothing too troubling; except, at the back of my mind, I was on some level wanting them to have a sort of epiphany about their relative privilege. There were two connected reasons why I did not push to explore *their* potential (mis)recognition of working classness, or challenge them to recognise their privilege, and the forms of symbolic violence that they may represent for others. Overarching all my interactions was my commitment to professional demands towards the adherence of ethics, which prevents me from deliberately harming my participants. I also took the opinion that having an emotional reaction during an interview does not necessarily mean that harm has been done; however, I wanted to make sure that my participants understood the limits of the interview and of my skills as an interviewer. In order to do this I assured them I would try my best to pick up on cues from them, and not pursue lines of questioning that seemed to cause distress. I also made it plain that I would not in any way be offended by their decision not to answer a question or halt the interview. In so doing, I gave clear boundaries in order that I could reasonably take responsibility for the care of my participants during the interview process. I could not say categorically if anyone was harmed or unduly distressed by the interviews, but no obvious signs were noted. In fact, quite the opposite: all those who took part in more than one interview repeatedly expressed their enjoyment of the interview process, variously describing it as ‘interesting’, ‘cathartic’ and ‘surprisingly enjoyable’, even when they had talked about issues and experiences that could not be described

as ‘happy’ or neutral. I really liked all of my participants in different ways, and, to my surprise, my likeness for some of the most privileged participants has challenged me to think reflexively about my own identity and its and their relationship to class.

I would argue that my professionalism eclipsed my political goals – and rightly so. The political project should be reserved for the dissemination of the research, and the researcher should not try to challenge participants in line with her political agenda, however tempting this might be. However, I acknowledge that it might be a by-product of the research encounter, for although I did not try to ‘force’ my most privileged participants to come to terms with the (un)intended consequences of their various advantages, there were moments in the later interviews where recognition did occur; this certainly did trigger moments that were clearly uncomfortable for us both. After one particular interaction where we were discussing the (un)intended impact that having a new designer bag might have on others in the workplace, the participant asked, ‘well what should I do, not buy the things I like?’ Her tone was not defensive, but one of inquiry, and expressed a concern that her pleasing purchase might negatively impact upon others. I answered by quoting a Marxist reference about the fact that we are born into circumstances not of our choosing; I did not want to say false things like it did not matter or not to worry, but at the same time (despite my initial preconceived ideas) I did not feel like judging her at all. She was after all a lovely, polite young woman who had nevertheless been born into very privileged circumstances, which she was

reproducing. Feminist researchers have debated the ethical dilemmas that can occur when using a feminist praxis which has at its heart an emancipatory and proselytising agenda, and the potentially (dis)empowering consequences this might have for female research participants (Millen, 1997). Whether our interaction counts as an intervention with potentially negative ramifications for this participant is unknown; however, my analysis on the day, and in subsequent re-listening to the recording, suggests that whilst I did introduce new ideas within the interview, this participant was open to thinking about the moral and political dimensions of her daily life.

Barnard, Gerber & McCosker (2001) argue that it is not just interviewees who might be considered participants when thinking about the impact of research. Researchers and transcribers should also be considered in relation to ethics and codes of conduct. Whilst I had planned and prepared for the potential distress of participants, I was also aware that I would be emotionally engaging with them and their experiences and might need some sort of support as a result. I found doing in-depth interviews an emotionally and physically exhausting experience, often to the extent that I felt unable to record my thoughts and feelings in my research diary beyond a few words. More often I spoke and related my experiences with/to friends, family members, supervisors and other PhD students; such conversations were, of course, not preserved in a written format. This does not mean that I have been unable to engage reflexively with many experiences of fieldwork. With my closest friend, we have been able to recall and examine some of the conversations that occurred at that time. Many



of our conversations focused on my relationships with participants throughout the process. We have recalled how I started out worried that I might not like the most privileged of my participants who were least aware of the impact of their privilege, and the potential of this for inhibiting good rapport. Conversely I was worried that I would over-identify with those participants whose experiences were knowingly shaped by the intersections of ethnicity, class and gender, and lose my capacity to think critically in our interviews. Neither of these extremes occurred; again, professionalism and politeness on both sides promoted excellent conditions for building research relationships.

These fieldwork examples pose a whole set of ethical dilemmas about whether or not the researcher should reflect back to the participant in the form of knowledge or analysis. Is an emancipatory framework a good enough justification to disrupt (even when asked) participants' own understandings of themselves in relation to gender, class and 'race'? Debates about the political and emancipatory value of research have been debated by, amongst others, feminist and Marxists scholars, with feminists insisting on its relevance, if not its centrality (Stanley, 1990). These debates relate to concerns about robust knowledge production; reflexively accounting for one's research has been one of the ways in which the inextricable relationship between politics and research have sought to be managed (Luff, 1999). In my mind, these concerns do not just relate to knowledge production from research design to output, but relate directly to how I should interact with participants during the data collection period. As such I wished to make certain I conducted my interviews

responsibly, and did so by ensuring that participants consented to participate in the research in a very informed way.

The fully informed consent of participants is considered essential to ethical research, although evaluating how this might be achieved is debated (Wiles et al., 2007). I considered that participants consented to take part in the research when they responded positively to an email that I sent inviting them to take part. As others have argued (Davies, 2008), consent is best characterised as something that is continually sought and received, rather than wholly given at any one point in time. I sought consent for their continuing participation before each round of interviews via email; I also asked for permission to record each interview with every participant. I encouraged participants to take part in all three interviews but took negative or evasive responses as a sign that they did not want to carry on and therefore did not continue to seek their participation. All participants had a Frequently Asked Questions and information sheet (see Appendix Two) which had full details about confidentiality, how their data would be stored and used, where the research would be published and who they could contact if they had any concerns about my research practice. These were sent as attachments in the first recruitment email and I brought printed copies to all of the first interviews. I also told them that my findings might, on occasion, form the basis of arguments that might be made in other public spaces, such as the radio as well as academic or political conferences. I explained that my duty of care for them might, in some scenarios, mean that I

break confidentiality – for example, if they disclosed to me that they, someone else, or a child, was in danger.

I explained that they would receive a copy of their transcripts on which they were free to make comments which I would consider. I sent all participants copies of their transcript; no participants sent back comments or requests for any changes. I also offered to send them any future publications. I made it clear that while I welcomed their feedback, I would not necessarily change my analysis as a result of it, thus hoping to highlight where the balance lay in my friendly and ethical approach to their participation. I gave them the details of my supervisors, should they have any concerns or questions about me or my management of the research process. In all of these ways I was trying to manage their expectations of me and the research process, as well as taking seriously the duty of care that I believe researchers have towards their participants.

### ***ELICITING ‘CLASS TALK’ WITH THE USE OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY***

So far this chapter has discussed the methodological challenges of doing research on social class and the important ways in which feminist methodologies have contributed to good practice. However, these do not serve as guides for how to conduct interviews. I was still troubled by the problem of asking people about their classed experiences within the strange context of

possible class disavowal, and with an awareness of not only the complexity of the intersection of other identities, but also sensitivity to the topic as potentially distressing. With that aim in mind, broadly speaking I took a narrative inquiry approach to my interviews (not necessarily to my analysis) which I understood as a ‘study of individuals in their social and historical context’ (Chase, 2005:651). Researchers using narrative inquiry come from a broad church, as Chase argues:

Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse approaches and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in the biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them.  
*(ibid)*

It seems a reasonable and sociological approach to qualitative research, which is not committed to generalisable findings, and thereby enjoys the luxury of being able to effect in-depth and time-consuming research with relatively small numbers of people. Contrary to my initial understanding, narrative inquiry is truly a methodology, in that its approach may encompass every – or any – stage of the research process, from methods to analysis. Taking a narrative approach to interviews does not necessarily commit the researcher to a purely narrative approach to the analysis, just as a narrative approach to analysis does not depend on the deliberate elicitation of stories at the interview stage. Narratives can be found in many forms, and do not rely on a narrow understanding of narrative as story telling or on a strict structural analysis.

While extensive life histories or stories, characterised by minimal interruption by the interviewer, are a common unit of analysis, a narrative inquiry may cover a relatively select area of a participant's life (Chase, 2005). Locating my approach in a *post hoc* manner, it seems that it sits fairly well with what Corrine Squire (2008) calls an experience-centred approach, which assumes the following:

- Narratives are sequential and meaningful.
- Narratives are definitively human.
- Narratives 're-present' experience, in the sense of reconstituting it; as well as mirroring it.
- Narratives display transformation or change. (Squire, 2008;58)

As I interviewed participants over the course of a year, the last point illustrates the particular relevance of using a narrative approach in this research, as it is especially suitable for capturing how participants understand continuities and changes in their experience over time. After the usual formalities and light conversation, I started the first interviews with 'Tell me how you came to be a graduate trainee at the firm', followed by 'Tell me the story of your education'. In so doing, I explained how a story differed to a chronological telling of events in the sense that: stories have beginnings, middles and (partial) endings; they tend to have characters; there may be obstacles that are overcome and outcomes that are achieved; scene setting is encouraged; and emotions and multiple perspectives can be told. If participants wanted to know where to start, I told them that it was up to them. Narrative inquiry differs to a timeline

of events in that the point of view of the narrator is privileged and understood as ‘retrospective meaning making’ (Squire, 2008).

Participants were fully aware that the research was interested in social class, and their experiences of both education and the graduate labour market. But, as aware as I was of the problems associated with the (dis)avowal of class, I sought to stimulate ‘class talk’ in the early stages of the interview process by eliciting narratives about people’s education and their efforts to join the graduate labour market; this is because research had already demonstrated their classed dimension. In the first interview, if the participant did not make direct reference to their social class of origin, I would ask them if they considered themselves to belong to any particular class, which would often elicit a conversation about what the word and the categories might mean. These exchanges often reflected the ambiguity associated with class terms, and I was frequently asked about them. In response, I sometimes took the standard recommended advice offered to qualitative interviewers that I should reflect the question back to the interviewee in order not to bias or lead them (Bryman, 2012). But from an early stage this sometimes felt like an inappropriate response and so the terms were sometimes explored, negotiated and reinterpreted between us. These moments are central to my analysis and are not considered to be failings on the interview technique or question formulation. Indeed, they are a reflection of the research topic.

Although I was not waiting for talk relating to class or social background to come up spontaneously, it became clear from the interviews that the language around the categorisation of social class was initially insufficient for the expression of classed meanings. In allowing the negotiation and interpretation to occur, I was sharing Mishler's (1986) perspective that 'interviewers and respondents strive to arrive together at meanings that both can understand [and that] we must attend to the discursive nature of the interview process' (*ibid.* p.65). In taking the approach that I did, I believe that I put myself in a very good position to answer my research questions and specifically to deal with the thorny issues of (dis)avowal that they create. Before turning to the details of my data collection methods, I will discuss the processes of gaining and maintaining access to my research site, the recruitment of participants, and issues surrounding informed consent.

### ***THE PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS***

I built research relationships and conducted thirty-seven semi-structured, qualitative interviews over nine months during the 2007/08 academic year, with fifteen self-selecting graduates in their first year of employment as trainee accountants, and three members of the graduate human resources team.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were split into three main rounds from November 2007 until September 2008 and over two sites. I aimed to interview all my participants

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix one for table of participants by name, degree classification, parental occupation, type of education and self-classification of social class.

three times (see appendix one for full details). During all stages of the research, interviews ranged from one to three hours, with the average taking approximately one-and-a-half hours, and were recorded with consent using a digital recorder. Data from the recorder were downloaded and stored on a password-secure hard drive. Interviews were arranged, sometimes months in advance, but were subject to change often at very short notice by participants, with employer demands cited as the main reason. Owing to the cost of travel and the additional expense of staying overnight, I tried to do two interviews each day I was in London and one or more when in Birmingham.

Interview questions were derived from the development of my research questions during the first year of PhD study, and in particular from analysis done on a pilot study at the end of the first year. My research questions remained broadly the same, but with a shift in my conceptualisation about who would be included in the study – i.e., both working- and middle-class participants. In addition, the intersectionality of other social markers or identities was made explicit. Sub-questions were developed once fieldwork began and themes emerged from initial analysis (about which more will be discussed later):

- How do graduates' social locations – for example, class, gender and ethnicity – inform how they have become subjects of value?
- How do they accrue and exchange value through the transition to employment?



- In what ways does the organisational setting contribute to graduates' embodied experiences of transition to employment?

The first round of interviews involved explaining the research to participants. This was, more often than not, a reiteration of the original email that they had responded to. I used the first interview to gain consent for continued participation in the research, with the expectation that they would be interviewed twice more over the next year. All agreed to do so in the interview, though some were only interviewed once. I conducted the first round of interviews with the same structure for all participants. If their stories about their education and how they came to be at the Firm did not refer to their job title, university, degree subject and grade, and whether they attended public or state schools, I sought clarification. I also asked them all what their parents' occupations were, and the highest level of education of both parents and grandparents.

During the early stages of interviews was concerned with building rapport and getting a general overview of participants' backgrounds in order to build up a summative picture of their lives and the lives of their parents. Based on my experiences of trying to gain and successfully gaining access to a research site, I had a growing awareness that for some participants their engagement grew out of personal resonance with the subject of the research. On encounters with gatekeepers and participants, I began consciously and unconsciously to position and amplify aspects of my own biography in a bid to maximise

opportunities for personal resonance with the project's aims. I imagined that this would help generate rapport and an interest in the research, which I hoped would lead to a deeper commitment from participants to participating in future interviews. This was somewhat problematic, as although I would argue that the peculiarities of my biography, combined with my theoretical interests, do allow an insight into working- and middle-class cultures, broadly speaking any identity work performed with the aim of building rapport with participants relied on judgments and insight gleaned from quite superficial criteria. This was certainly a danger with participants who came from upper-class backgrounds: rapport building based on shared knowledge was often difficult, because there were little or no similarities in background that I felt comfortable to draw upon, and I often resorted to stories and anecdotes from my (very different) experiences of being an undergraduate, in attempts to build rapport.

The desire and ability to build rapport with participants through identification with them based on assumed shared knowledge (based for example on ethnicity, sexuality, gender and/or class) is hypothetically seductive, perhaps particularly so for those whose research is fuelled by social and political injustices and carried out with those disadvantaged by them. Feminists, whose focus is on the intersectionality of lived experience in relation to a wide range of subjectivities, have critiqued the (im)possibility of doing research on the basis that a good rapport will inevitably develop between researcher and participant based on a match of their subjectivities (Ramazanoglu, 1989, Reay, 1997a, Johnson-Bailey, 1999). For a start, it can lead to feelings of personal

failure when rapport does not appear. There is a danger of early and wrong attribution of a lack of rapport to participants' dis-identifications with some aspect of the interviewer's self (Reay, 1996). Rather, other possible reasons for failing to build rapport, that may have nothing to do with the researcher – such as the participant's tiredness, for example – ought to be considered. Whilst the desire for rapport with participants is argued to be of great importance in the research methods literature, with the suggestion that once it has been established, 'good research' will naturally follow (Bryman, 2000, *inter alia*), it has been my experience that 'good' rapport can stand in the way of 'good' research and that 'poor' rapport can just as well elicit a 'good' interview. Even when an interview fails to feel warm, comfortable and easy going, it can still be empirically valuable.

After the first round of interviews, second and third round interviews were generally more relaxed, but although – indeed, because – the process became more familiar, I always made sure that I sought consent to record our talk. Before each interview I made notes: about my own frame of mind; on what I hoped to get out of the interview; a list of guiding questions; and, in later rounds, on the notes from the previous interview, which I reviewed and took further notes on. After interviews I completed a similar process, taking note of how I thought the interview went, my own frame of mind during and after, and other analytic thoughts, as well as – more often than not – questions for the next interview, my next supervision, or things to look up in the literature. I had

separate notepads for each participant, and once back at home I typed up my field notes into one document.

All but four of the interviews happened in the employer's offices and sometimes in client rooms, which were private, spacious, attractive and had refreshments. When client rooms were unavailable, interviews took place in the other semi-private spaces, smaller meeting rooms and Partners' offices. Partners' offices lacked space and refreshments but contained lots of company paraphernalia and were distinctly less private than client rooms as they had glass walls and doors; in contrast to the client rooms, voices both inside and outside these offices were more audible. Meeting rooms were spaces that were used by employees of Firm A to meet without clients, and had lower quality refreshments than those found in client meeting rooms. Participants were always very polite and considerate, not only of how the research was going, but about my journey to the interview and whether I needed food or drink. In the first round, participants' politeness extended to 'hosting' me in the meeting rooms through the offer of refreshments by use of the manual drinks machine and a place to hang my coat. After I had conducted around three or four interviews I became aware that I was much more familiar with the workings of the rooms than some of the participants, and at times it was as though I was hosting them. The familiarity that at times I conveyed was, I believe, a stumbling block for at least one participant, who made a number of comments that led me to believe that I had overstepped the mark. I reflected on the change in my own behaviour, and took to readopting a position of 'guest' in

future interviews. Feelings of ease and discomfort in the Firm's buildings and offices related strongly to my own concerns of self-presentation, which in turn relates to other issues connected to class, such as a sense of entitlement to be in certain spaces and places, as well as looking and sounding 'right'. These will be discussed below. For now, I will briefly outline the other methods that were available during the fieldwork year.

I had various encounters with other employees in administrative, hospitality and human resource roles. These ranged from the fleeting (passing conversation and contact via email) to the substantial (one off semi-structured interviews, face-to-face and over the telephone). I attended recruitment fairs and employer presentations, and collected recruitment specific and general literature produced by the Firm. I did the same for three other comparable firms in order to situate Firm A as typical for an organisation of its type and size. As already stated, opportunities for observation, though part of my initial access wish list, were very limited and mostly occurred while I was waiting for an interview to take place. Going to the offices to conduct interviews meant that I would be waiting in the spaces where clients of the Firm also waited; in this sense, I spent most of the time in front stage settings (Goffman, 1963). Glimpses into backstage settings occurred when an interview was conducted in a Partner's office or when we had to walk through the non-client areas in order to get to our assigned room; when possible I made notes of my impression of things that I had seen and heard. I was unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, not allowed to take photos of any of the internal spaces of the Firm's buildings. I

was able to collect materials that were available to clients of the Firm in the front of house settings, which I did. Again, I made hand-written notes while I was waiting for interviews to start, while waiting for trains and on journeys home. The next section details how interviews were turned into data.

## ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Interviews are loosely talked about as ‘data’ in postgraduate circles, but it is the analytic process that turns interviews into data, and as such we should pay attention to the mechanical, as well as the intellectual and creative processes involved.<sup>3</sup> The mechanical processes were as follows: digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself and by paid transcribers; these were then re-listened to in conjunction with the transcribed document, printed out and also downloaded into Nvivo 7. As I made notes all the way through this process and recorded them by hand and in a Word document, I produced summaries of interviews, thoughts and themes for discussion at supervisions, which were also recorded by handwritten notes in notepads that I kept secure. In this way the coding began early and was therefore iterative. An iterative process was necessary as the same participants were usually interviewed more than once; first and subsequent interviews were coded before the next interview was conducted. The interviews were coded manually for the first round, which involved printing out Word documents and listening to the recordings at the same time, going through them line by line and paying attention to key words and phrases, tone, pauses and other sounds. After this was initially done by hand, I used Nvivo 7 to develop a thematic analysis, group together codes as nodes and to grow ‘trees’ in order to analyse their

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Carol Wolkowitz for triggering this insight by repeatedly reminding me of this fact.

relationships. In so doing, I used the techniques favoured by advocates of grounded theory, in so far as themes, issues and areas of interest were raised during the first round of interviews, and informed the questions for the second, and so on (Glaser and Strauss, 1968). Using this process was particularly useful for helping me answer my research questions, especially in light of the specific problems associated with researching social class. This is because I was able to analyse participants' interviews for instances of class talk, and then, if seemingly fruitful, I could go back and check my analysis with them, seeking clarification either directly or indirectly in the next interview. It also meant that participants had time to reflect on our talk and sometimes requested clarification, or offered me their own analysis on things we had discussed or incidents that had taken place in between our interviews. Their analysis, coupled with my own, enriched the analytic process and actively contributed to the emergence of key themes. Long after the interviews were finished, and as analysis was iterative, I went back to the transcripts, refining and redefining my codes and themes until solid areas emerged which translated into empirical data chapters. The intellectual and creative processes developed alongside the mechanical ones, but often in different spaces – for example, time spent with my supervisors was an important time for me to try to articulate my thoughts, feelings and ideas about the interviews. As a dyslexic student, I found supervisions were a crucial space for me to verbalise what I often struggled to articulate in writing. On occasion, I recorded these sessions and was therefore free to return to them, which further contributed to my analysis. I will now



move on to discuss briefly one of the specific issues that emerged from supervisions, which facilitated the analytic and intellectual process.

Clearly the issue of classification is central to any analysis of social class and this became pertinent in supervision sessions. When I tried to talk about participants and the class talk that was/was not occurring, I ended up describing them using all sorts of short-hand ways of conveying their positionality. The following example highlights the various ways in which markers of class were used to classify participants – sometimes problematically. I would say something like ‘X does not recognise her class privilege when she says...’, and then to qualify that statement I would say something like ‘well she went to a fee paying school, her mum did not *have* to work and she looks and sounds posh, her Dad’s a financial controller and she has lots of savings so she’s obviously really middle class’. During supervision sessions and early analysis I used various forms of capital; economic (parental occupation as a proxy for income), cultural (education, professed consumer habits and preferences) as well as embodiment such as ease, confidence, poise, accent and taste in clothes to fix participants as middle or working - class. While these are the kind of indicators that researchers may use to build up a picture of social location that might meaningfully be described as a social class, reading class from the body order to fix someone in a social location is an unreliable, morally dubious, unscientific and therefore highly problematic way of assessing an individual’s social class. An assessment of an individual’s bundles of capital and the various value attributions that accompanies them is

however how everyday judgments of class are made in and outside of the academy where they take on a 'common-sense' meaning in particular settings. My own judgements cannot obviate my own common-sense understanding of the British class system, which is combined with an intellectual approach, itself situated in the work of class theorists who insist that social class is a hierarchical, relational, structuring and structured force. This force fuels misrecognition of the working class in problematic ways and largely leaves the middle classes in a position of relative privilege (Bourdieu, 1987, Savage, 2010, Skeggs, 2004, Atkinson, 2010). However, and for the purpose of this thesis, I endeavoured to move away from the more problematic ways in which judgements about an individual's social location are made and therefore have used participants own classifications in combination with objective proxy measures such as education and parental occupation to describe their social location. This is not withstanding the issues raised by others regarding the difficulties in self classification but as participants appeared to have little difficulty or unease with locating themselves it seems appropriate. It is also appropriate to use participants own classifications when adopting a narrative inquiry approach which seeks to present an analysis of participants experiences in their own words. Appendix 1 is a table which brings together various pieces of information which includes gender, ethnicity and class in order to help locate participants in social space thereby classifying them. Data in the table is based on the information participants provided about their qualifications, type of education, parental occupations and the answer they gave to questions asking how they would describe their social background. All participants used

the language of social class whereas I deliberately asked about social background in the first instance. Therefore the classification of participants as either working or middle-class is their own. During interviews I explored participants self classifications, which they overwhelmingly explained and justified either spontaneously or when prompted, with a list of proxy indicators as (parental occupation, income, and history; level and type of education; and adherence to certain values). Some participants described themselves as middle-class although they acknowledged that one or both of their parents would classify themselves as more working-class. This was because some participant's parents had themselves experienced upward mobility. Participants, whose parents had experienced upward social mobility, in particular during a participant's life time, drew on their own status as graduates as well as their parents more recent higher incomes to explain their self classification as middle-class. This highlights the difficulty that Bourdieu was trying to overcome when adopting a classification system based on occupation which clearly cannot fully encompass the cultural and messier aspects of social class across generations.

## ***CONCLUSION***

This chapter started from the position that accounting for knowledge production in the research process is an important and integral aspect of responsible research. I used existing research on social class to argue that the contemporary evidence of its (dis)avowal brings with it specific

methodological and analytical challenges for researchers. I have argued that my own research has an emancipatory agenda which raises issues analogous to those articulated by feminist methodological debates. Furthermore, I have stated my belief in the importance of doing research on the middle classes as a relatively advantaged and privileged social group. This chapter has used the different stages of the research process, including design, access negotiations, generating consent, and proceeding ethically, to discuss a range of issues that relate specifically to conducting research on the topic of social class. In light of the range of issues that I have highlighted, I have outlined the narrative approach that I took to the interviews, and argued that this dialogic approach works well for the specific research questions. Finally, I detailed the grounded approach that I took to analysis, thus turning the interviews into data, which is evident in the chapters that follow.

## **CHAPTER 4 - THE ENCHANTMENT PROCESS: PRESTIGE, MERITOCRACY AND DIVERSITY IN THE FIRM'S RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

Participants in this research were recruited from a multinational audit firm, the rationale for which is outlined in the methodology chapter. This chapter is divided into three main sections. First, through the use of existing literature, this chapter will locate the accounting profession through a consideration of its historical and contemporary occupational status. Next, I will contextualise the Firm using extracts from its own, and industry, literature, and argue that the Firm deliberately seeks to enchant potential employees and business by making strong claims to being prestigious, meritocratic, diverse and pre-eminent in the delivery of professional services and as a graduate employer. Next, attention will be paid to the various environments in which the organisation can be said to exist, as it cannot be isolated to one office or building but to a variety of spaces: permanent (offices, buildings); temporary (stalls at recruitment fairs, adverts); virtual (internet); semi-permanent (organisational literature); and imaginary (minds of others, discourse). I will argue that these spaces operate to enchant employees and clients alike. To be enchanted is to be attracted, delighted or bewitched via magic, spectacle and/or extravaganza of one kind or another. Temporality and illusion are implicit in the concept perhaps because

of its associations with magic, fairy tale, fantasy and sorcery. Enchantment is associated with a benign irrationality and a desire for narrative and fantasy. Enchantment processes are most often associated with practices of consumer consumption; however, researchers argue that processes of enchantment are not confined to consumption practices usually associated with shopping or the media, but are deployed in workplaces where employees are subject to and engage in similar cycles of enchantment and re-enchantment (Du Gay, 1996, Hughes, 2005). Processes of enchantment extend beyond advertising, however sophisticated, and include the very spaces in which goods are sold – shopping malls, casinos and theme parks are all examples of what Ritzer (1999) calls ‘cathedrals of consumption’, where everything is directed towards (re)enchanted consumers to encourage them to consume. Driven by capitalist imperatives for profit, maximising markets – as the thesis goes – are constantly under threat from a sense of disenchantment and potential consumer disengagement with specific consumption practices or perhaps the whole exercise. In an effort to secure past, present and potential consumers, great efforts are made to engage consumers through various affective experiences, which are said to be enchanting. The result, Ritzer (*ibid.*) argues, is that producers and consumers are to greater and lesser degrees participants in cycles of enchantment, disenchantment and re-enchantment:

Processes of re-enchantment involve a proliferation of the means by which almost every human experience comes to involve opportunities for consumption: through architectural configurations; hyperbolic

image and sign; festival and spectacle. Both the 'private' and 'public' domains of social life become replete with openings into the seductive fantasy world of commercial extravaganza. (Hughes, 2005; 610)

In relation to the workplace, whilst there may be specific acts of consumption occurring, consumption in and of itself is not the primary objective. In fact, activities provided by the workplace that involve consumption practices are one of the tools by which re-enchantment with the workplace or organisation by employees is (potentially) achieved. Examples include opportunities provided by employees to consume food, drink and entertainment (for free or heavily subsidised), often in environments similar to those that workers might choose to occupy outside working hours, such as bars, coffee houses, restaurants or other typically defined leisure spaces. The Firm's Birmingham and London based buildings are spectacular and enchanting places. One London office is in a beautiful location by the Thames, while another has an inside bifurcated water tunnel in its entrance way: the reception and waiting area looks like that of a chic hotel. Indeed, hospitality staff wait on you, offering a range of luxury coffees and pastries before your appointment. In the Birmingham building, the office has won prizes for its design. The atrium is enormous and laid-out like a civic space, complete with a subsidised Starbucks, free fruit, lots of plants, light, leather sofas, and other café-style tables and chairs. Towards the back of the atrium is a lounge which benefits from massive crystal chandeliers, enormous black leather sofas, carpet and oversized vases of exotic looking flower arrangements on plinths. By my own tastes and those of

my participants, a sense of cosmopolitan chic was conveyed in the atrium and deep luxury in the lounge, rather than incredulity or gaudiness. The building therefore signifies the prestige of the Firm and invites people who work there to benefit from its glow in constructing their own identities, in much the same way as people construct their identities through choice of clothes or food tastes.

Just as the ‘cathedrals of consumption’ deploy ever more fantastical techniques (within the limits of profit goals) to stave off disenchantment amongst consumers, so too do employers who, like nation states, have long recognised the relationship that an organisation’s built environment has with the public, clients, and employees (Gabriel, 2005). This includes producing an organisational aesthetic through the embodiment of employees, buildings, interiors, art works, advertising and other literature produced by the firm. Hancock argues that

such artifacts are able to function as technologies of enchantment and, in doing so, to enrich our broader understanding of one of the ways in which organizations are able to produce and perpetuate preferred regimes of meaning through the material dimension of their operations. (Hancock, 2005; 32)

A consideration of these spaces will allow the reader to gain an understanding through subsequent chapters of the relationship between them and research participants, and how this relationship informs research participants’ embodied



experiences of their transition from HE to employment. The final section will focus on the specificities of the Firm in this study and consideration of the Firm's approach to recruitment in relation to issues of diversity and equal opportunities, and its impact on participants' ability to become subjects of value in their transition to employment.

### ***ACCOUNTANCY AS AN OCCUPATION***

The development and growth of accountancy and audit are central in the historical development of democratic and late modern capitalist states such as the UK (Miller and Rose, 1995 and Rose, 1991). It is therefore interesting and important to understand their development. This section considers the practices of occupational closure that have been part and parcel of the professionalisation of accountancy. Occupational closure refers to a set of practices which have as their aim a regulating and limiting effect on who can lay claim to an occupation. Relative to the more established professions such as the clergy, medicine and the law, the professionalisation of accountancy as an occupation is a youthful project, and has received some attention by critical accountancy scholars. Cooper and Robson (2006) argue that much of the research from the 1970s and 1980s took the professional status of accountants as a given, which has since been disrupted by those looking at the processes of professionalisation. Since imperial times, accountancy and audit has been through a series of developments on its way to becoming a profession through the use of practices which amount to occupational closure. Occupational

closure operated at the same time that British audit practices were imperialistically imposed on colonies. Postcolonial scholarship gives an insight to the ways in which accounting practices have been central to imperialist and globalising projects, and highlights the ways in which indigenous accounting and audit practices have been destroyed or co-opted by commercial practices of the colonising elites (Annisette, 2003). Scholars investigating the English context have identified the changing relationships and statuses between book-keepers, clerks, chartered and associate accountants. The differences between these roles, they argue, are laden with gendered, classed and racial meanings that situate them hierarchically and produce moments of occupational closure. For example, until very recently, key practices have kept women and minority ethnic groups out of the most prestigious roles such as chartered and associate accountants, and relegated them to the least prestigious and remunerated roles such as book keeper (Annisette, 2003, Witz, 1992). Contemporaneously, occupational closure is achieved by more meritocratic means through the use of credentials.

Moving beyond the history of how professional closure was achieved by accountants, many researchers investigating contemporaneously look at the concepts and practices recently at work within the industry, as they relate to the ongoing professionalisation project (Cooper and Robson, 2006). Gaining and maintaining trust in the expertise of professionals individually and collectively is central to the way in which training and regulation of professional occupations have evolved over the centuries (Perkin, 1989). Relative to the

clergy, medicine and law, accountancy is a new – though far more technocratic – profession. Owing to the relatively mundane activities that make up the main components of audit, it also lacks the heroic romanticism often attached to medicine and the law (Evetts, 2003). Accountants are supposed to be neutral arbiters of accounts, merely accurately recording profit and loss in order that outside interests may judge the status of a business. However, accountants have access to knowledge and expertise which enables businesses to further maximise their profits and also minimise their losses. Therefore, there is a lack of clarity about whose side the accountant is on: outside interest, or the business that employs them to audit the accounts. Numerous fraud scandals and/or charges of so-called creative accounting have tarnished their reputation as neutral and objective measurers of profit or loss. Accountants are stereotyped in the public imagination through fact and fiction as – variously – boring, pedantic, dishonest, susceptible and geeky (Dimnik and Felton, 2006). Enron did not invent creative accounting – they just pushed it to its most recent extreme. Dealing with negative stereotypes is something that all professional occupations have to work with, and as with all highly autonomous and largely self-regulating occupations, there is a degree of public mistrust and ambiguity about the true nature of the accountant and accountancy firm.

Despite the perception problems that some professions have, the values of professionalism such as integrity, fairness and trust as *ideals* have not been tarnished, and are absolutely central to the identity of professional accountancy firms large and small (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001). One area pertinent to this

thesis has been an investigation into the socialisation of graduate recruits into embodying professionalism. Studies by Coffey (1993) and Anderson-Gough et al. (2001, 1998, 1999) looked at the variety of ways in which professionalism is taught and learnt during the three year training period. These ethnographic studies of multinational accountancy firms argue that the professionalisation project is not limited to the acquisition of specific credentials, but extends to aspects of 'appropriate' forms of embodiment such as clothing, personal grooming and posture, as well as use of language and tone of voice (Coffey, 1993). Unfortunately, these were studies that did not look at social class, ethnicity or even gender in relation to professionalisation, but serve as a useful starting point for understanding the wider and ongoing processes of professionalisation within large accountancy firms.

Anderson-Gough et al. (1998) use an interactionist theoretical framework to highlight the ways in which everyday practices contribute to the engendering of structures, relationships and identities of accountants as professionals. They argue that self- and peer-regulation is at the heart of the professionalisation project, through the adoption of certain behaviours and the reiteration of organisational and cultural practices, such as organisationally formed clichés. In their 1998 paper 'Work Hard, Play Hard' they argue that certain discourses are implicated in the (re)production of an organisation and its employees' practices. This paper looks at how cliché has often been dismissed in other discourse analyses as an overly obvious starting point. Their inquiry into the use of the metaphor illuminates the various ways in which the employer uses

the cliché as a rhetorical device that serves as a means of generating common understandings and behaviours. However, their research suggests that graduate trainees are resistant to, irritated by, and often cynical of employers' deployment of such clichés – this is especially the case when the cliché doesn't match individuals' preferred behaviours. For example, the ability to perform the sporting term *play hard* is either not available to an individual because they don't play sports, or is equated to heavy drinking and socialising, each of which can be problematic for some in relation to their gender, sexuality and/or ethnicity. Anderson-Gough et al. (*ibid*) also demonstrate that trainees frequently resist employers' socialisation strategies by invoking the clichés ironically and with irreverence. In a later paper from the same project, the authors argue that time management is constructed as a key skill of a professional, and evidence of an applicant's excellent time management is demanded by the firm during the recruitment process. However, the accountancy firm's insistence on the demonstration of good time management skills during the recruitment process, through evidence of balancing academic life with ECA, coupled with subsequent training and adoption of 'time management' techniques, is criticised by trainees. They argue that working life at the firm does not reasonably allow for ECA to be pursued, and that no amount of technique can counter a very heavy or badly organised workload generated by the firm (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001). This small body of work serves to demonstrate that the professional and the concept of professionalism extend well beyond the acquisition of specific credentials such as the ACA.

Professionalism is embodied, and needs to be actively (re)produced; it is therefore contestable.

This section has located accountancy as a profession and highlighted some of the problems that it has in relation to reputation and identity. A brief look at some of the literature in this area demonstrates that large accountancy firms recognise the issues around professional identity and through training seek to address these. The next section will look specifically at the Firm that is the fieldwork site in this study through an analysis of its location within the accountancy industry and its own rhetoric.

### ***THE FIRM: PRESTIGE AND ENCHANTMENT***

The last section highlighted that large accountancy firms actively seek to manage their professional reputation in a variety of ways through their employees. This section looks at the ways in which the Firm in this study seeks to manage its professional reputation rhetorically through the information publicly available via its website and other promotional literature, as well as through other inanimate objects such as its buildings and offices. Below is an extract taken from the Firm's 'About Us' section: straight away, the values of enterprise, excellence and integrity are spelled out to the reader and serve as a rhetorical device:

One firm – a powerhouse of a commercial enterprise that does the right thing for our clients, our people and our communities. Our goal is to build the iconic professional services firm, always front of mind, because we aim to be the best. We set the standard and we drive the agenda for our profession. (Firm website ‘About Us’ section)

An awareness of the Firm’s rhetoric enables a picture to be built up of the Firm’s stated values and ideals which can then be analysed in relation to participants’ experiences. Furthermore, an appreciation of the Firm’s rhetoric is important as participants engaged with it in a variety of ways and it informed their experiences of the Firm right from the beginning. For example, the recruitment process was but one space in which applicants were expected to demonstrate their suitability for a post by matching the Firm’s values and ideals with their own. The Firm in this study is one of the ‘UK Big Four’ global audit firms, and therefore a leading provider of professional services in the UK and the world. The Firm refers to itself as a provider of professional services rather than the now outmoded term ‘accountancy firm’; this is in part because its services have diversified. Approximately three quarters of its business is in assurance (audit) with the remaining areas including advice and services relating to tax, strategy and actuarial work. The use of the word ‘professional’ is somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, it is used to describe the specific nature of its audit services in that they provide services by professionally qualified auditors, tax and financial advisors; on the other, the

term is positively associated with more subjective intangible qualities and values.

Historically, as I have already shown, professions had to be in dialogue with others to (re)produce trust in their services. Recent scandals involving corruption and false auditing by large accountancy firms such as Enron have surely made the issue of professionalism even more sensitive for the remaining 'Big Four' accountancy firms. The complex relationship between professionals and the public, and, specifically in this case, the relationship between accountants, the general public and business, is evident on the Firm's website. In its 'About Us' section, the Firm goes into some detail to express its commitment to operating with moral integrity. It states:

We will achieve the three pillars of our vision by living and breathing a common set of behaviours.

### 3. Do the right thing

We will deliver exceptional value with integrity, confidence and humility. We support one another and our communities. We have the courage to express our views, even when they may not be popular. We will:

put ourselves in our clients' shoes

never be satisfied with second best

treat people in a way we would like to be treated

always be brave enough to challenge the unacceptable



act with integrity and enhance our reputation

We must all accept personal responsibility to play our part in driving our firm demonstrating these values and behaviours – opting out is not acceptable. Put simply, this is how we define success.

This is the [Firm] Experience. (Firm website ‘About Us’ section)

‘Opting out is not acceptable’ seems like quite heavy stuff; likewise their pledge to proceed ethically, to ‘[d]o the right thing’. But in light of the precariousness of the industry’s reputation in recent times, it is perhaps understandable to place such emphasis on integrity and trust.<sup>4</sup> The three pillars and, in particular, ‘Do the right thing’ are, I suggest, a way of expressing the Firm’s version/vision of professionalism, one that strongly appeals to a sense of individuality and collectivity. Rhetorically, at least, ‘being professional’ is a significant value for the Firm. Potential applicants and trainees must then be able to accrue this value in a variety of ways in order to demonstrate their competence in it. Through the Firm’s website, employability booklet, and the information and advice given out at recruitment fairs and workshops, it is clear that the Firm looks for applicants who are able to demonstrate their ability to embody and narrate through the application process the professional values as defined by the Firm. Later chapters will argue that this is not unproblematic once we begin to unpack the rhetoric of professionalism, especially in its

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<sup>4</sup> The majority of the Firm’s business is audit work (there is a legal requirement for most businesses to be audited), the basis of which relies on trust that the audits have been signed off as a ‘true and fair but not necessarily accurate’ record of a business’s financial status.

embodied forms, as it becomes clear that the Firm's values form something of a corporate gaze which is underpinned by classed meanings.

This section has looked at some of the rhetoric that the Firm uses in relation to itself as an organisation within the accountancy and audit profession. In so doing I have been able to highlight that the Firm constructs itself as prestigious and professional not only through its commitment to commercial excellence but also through its professed commitment to moral values such as integrity and trust. These offerings by the Firm can be seen as part of continuous processes of professionalisation and occupational closure, which seek to engage with those it deems as suitable stakeholders – such as potential clients – but more pertinently for this thesis, potential employees. From this understanding of how the Firm wishes itself to be seen we can begin to unpack the rhetoric in order to better situate participants' experiences of the Firm, and to understand further their classed and other meanings.

I will next consider some aspects of the relationship between employees, the Firm, and its inanimate objects such as its buildings and offices, and will argue that the Firm uses its buildings and offices as a site where their prestige is (re)produced. Buildings have long been a site on which reputation, power relations and status have been inscribed, carved, and turned into social spaces that offer preferred readings to users and observers (Lefebvre, 1991). Puwar's (2004) important text argues for the significance of the relationship between buildings, bodies and spaces, in particular elite British institutions, while

Skeggs and Binnie (2006) and Massey (1994) similarly argue that the occupation of space can reveal much about social power relations. Space, its use, and the bodies that populate it, are important in sociology. Although not a primary consideration here, they cannot be ignored completely because of the significance they held for participants and the researcher.

I visited the Firm's buildings whenever I conducted an interview in London and Birmingham: they are located centrally in large buildings in prestigious locations. The Firm's internal and external buildings were a common reference point when participants discussed the Firm's prestigious status, when talking about how they felt during the recruitment stage when anticipating the prospect of working at the Firm, and again during their period of induction. These work spaces elicited a number of effects on all participants, as well as me. The participants' feelings became mixed as time went on, but broadly speaking effects included awe and excitement, which combined into a sense of enchantment with the Firm and their new graduate life. Participants in this study were, initially at least, bowled over by the overall effect of the Firm's aesthetic and willingness to devote resources to enchant potential applicants. This includes the Firm's presence at university careers fairs (free food and drinks, literature printed on high quality paper, oversized interactive marketing gimmicks such as enormous inflatable number 'N1' advertising its status as an employer amongst accountancy firms, and sponsorship of sports teams) as well as the environment (as described above) that they entered for interviews and induction events. Participants' discussions about their impression of the Firm

illustrates that its deployment of enchanting and spectacular spaces served to render the Firm's status as synonymous with its space. For instance, Louise casually brings these things together, reiterating the Firm's rhetoric in an unselfconscious way:

[I thought that the Firm] was this massive, huge, amazing company to work for and because it's number one 'N1' for best graduate. (Louise, first round)

Olivia appears to have been so enchanted by the Firm's aesthetics that it actually contributed to her decision about which employer she would choose to join. At the same time, she also conveys to me that she knows that these are superficial reasons and offers something more concrete (the car scheme) as a justification for choosing to join the Firm above a competitor:

When I went to visit [another Firm], I loved it, when I first went to visit them. When I came to [this Firm] I was like, 'Oh my goodness, this office is amazing,' just because, I don't know. Like their [another Firm] office is really nice, but this one is more modern. Oh and they've got a Starbucks in the atrium! That was my first impression, but *obviously* that didn't sway me, but then I looked into it more (laughter) and also, the main reason, because there really isn't much in between them, they are exactly the same, they are all the same, but [the Firm]

have got a car scheme for graduates, so yes. (Louise, first round. Italics denote conspiratorial, humorous tone)

It might be thought that these sorts of reactions were from people who had little or no experience of being in prestigious sites, but Olivia and Louise's reactions are typical of participants. For example, Harry, who was well used to living and learning in Oxbridge style architecture, and whose family home was rather grand, was still impressed by the Firm's deployment of resources on spectacular locations:

We went to a hotel for instruction [induction] for two or three days. It was in Kensington, a very posh hotel it was great! (Joseph, first round)

This comment from Joseph, who experienced privileged, beautiful and ancient settings for the entirety of his education, reminds us that none of the participants was oblivious or conveyed a blasé attitude to the various environments that they found themselves in courtesy of the Firm. This section has demonstrated that the prestige of the Firm is bound up with its deployment of resources and aesthetics in specific spaces. Later chapters will explore further the different ways in which these impact on participants' transitions from HE to employment, where it becomes obvious that after the initial experiences of enchantment, more concrete relationships of power intersect with the space to expose its limitations in maintaining some trainees' enchantment.

***RECRUITMENT, PROFESSIONALISM, PRESTIGE,  
MERITOCRACY AND DIVERSITY***

This section examines aspects of the recruitment process as a lens to think about the ways in which ideals of professionalism, prestige, meritocracy and diversity are taken up by the Firm and engaged with by employees. The Firm is a large employer and recruits approximately 18,000 graduates each year to its graduate training programme from an application pool of around 21,000. The recruitment process takes place in three rounds. First, a long completed application form is submitted electronically. Applicants who pass that hurdle are given a telephone interview, followed by electronic psychometric testing. If successful, the next stage is an invitation to a day of group exercises and one-to-one interviews with a member of human resources and one of the Firm's partners. Successful applicants are subsequently offered a training contract by letter.

The graduate training programme consists of a three-year training contract during which time the Firm pays for them to complete the exams necessary to become an Associate (ACA) of the Institute of Accountancy in England and Wales (ICAEW). The three year programme takes a 'learn as you earn' approach and consists of attending a six week block in a college where the course is taught by ICAEW accredited lecturers for the first two years, followed by exams. The third year allows them to 'time qualify' (ICAEW,

2010). Trainees are on a starting salary of £26,000 (London weighting) plus benefits, and work in multi-level teams 'on jobs' with the Firm's clients outside the blocks of formal learning at a college. This formal accreditation process, referred to as a training contract, forms the literal aspect of becoming a professional; meanwhile, the Firm's induction sessions, on the job training and other training sessions, such as the development of so-called competency based skills, aim to furnish trainees with knowledge about other aspects of professional life. The development of trainees' professional selves through competency based skills refers to their capacity to display and perform a range of embodied skills, such as looking and sounding competent and professional, learning to work with others in small and large teams, ability to reflect on one's own work and the work of others in a fair but critical manner, deploy empathy and coaching, and other communication skills. As other studies have shown (cited above) the recruitment process calls for applicants *already* to be able to demonstrate their awareness and ability to perform key competencies. Nonetheless, their development remains an area of focus during the three-year training period. The Firm has sought to build a reputation as an excellent and leading provider of professional services in both senses of the word. The concept of the professional is therefore highly visible as a descriptor of the Firm's services, and there is much emphasis during recruitment and induction phases on trainees' ability to be or embody professionalism. The term professional is used in three main ways: one, to signify possession of specific technical knowledge through acquisition of the title 'ACA'; two, through the deployment of a range of appropriate competences such as time management

skills; and three, through the development and deployment of embodied *signifiers* of professionalism, such as looking and sounding right. The term professional is frequently cited by the Firm to describe its services, ethos and people – especially in its recruitment literature. Aspects of the Firm’s graduate recruitment campaign of 2007/08 will now be examined – not only because participants in this study were subject to it, but also because it offers a window into the rhetorical space of the Firm in relation to its professional values.

Providers of accounting and professional services are by far the biggest recruiter of graduates in recent economic times, both good and bad, recruiting more than double the whole of the public sector, according to some sources (High Fliers, 2012)<sup>5</sup> The Firm is routinely placed and places itself as *the* number one provider of professional services in the UK and globally. The (re)production of its own prestige is front- and centre-stage as the main thrust of the 2008 graduate recruitment campaign: prestige is concerned with conveying a sense that the Firm is number one. Number one choice for graduates, number one in the graduate employers’ survey, *one* whole firm from which is supposedly enjoyed a commonality of experience; but, as we will see,

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<sup>5</sup> Whilst this organisation has been gathering data for some time, their research should be used with caution. High Fliers is a private for profit market research organisation which takes its figures from the demand side of the graduate labour market (i.e. employers). When they contact undergraduates, they only do so from pre-1992 universities, and so their data are partial and reflect the practices of traditional, blue chip organisations and a subset of pre-1992 university graduates.



it is done in such a way that encompasses diversity. At recruitment fairs the Firm has an enormous inflatable 'N1' with the Firm's logo outside the fair's site; smaller balloons with the same logos are freely handed out to students outside and inside the event; all of the sports societies that the Firm sponsor carry the same branding. The theme continues on the front cover of the 2007/08 recruitment brochure which depicts a very colourful cityscape with number ones inserted on to buildings in neon lights, parading the message that the Firm is 'One For All' alongside the word 'Experience'. Inside the first page are some facts about the Firm which serve to reinforce the sense that it is a site of excellence in three main ways: first, through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – the environment (recycling and CO<sub>2</sub> reduction), diversity (race, equality, disability) and communities (fair trade coffee, volunteering person hours); second, through the high achievement of its employees (three Olympic medallists); third, by its historic relationships with clients who enjoy a high public profile and are not for profit organisations. The second page lists all the awards that recognise the Firm as being 'the best' at various HR related things as well as industry specific awards, again reinforcing the Firm as a centre of excellence for clients and employees alike.

Being number one or first is primarily about telling potential applicants that they will be applying to 'The Best', which, once they have succeeded in their application, presumably confirms that they are one of the best too. Excellence is a form of elitism, but the Firm counters unpalatable forms of elitism with a meritocratic form in which the labels of 'best' and 'excellent' are teamed with

meritocratic terms such as ‘talent’. The Firm offers graduates a share in its prestige from the beginning; moreover, it suggests that the prestige and high status offered to successful applicants has been *earned* rather than arbitrarily conferred, as it once was through birthright:

We’re the **one firm for all** talented graduates. Graduates who shine in one way or another. And if we could bottle the qualities that make them special we would. The problem is, there isn’t a [Firm] type. *Everyone here is different, with different backgrounds and aspirations.* Which is just the way we like it. It’s our combined strengths as individuals that make us succeed as a firm: a firm that, for the last four years, students have voted us number one. (Firm Brochure. Graduate opportunities 2008 bold in original, italics added)

The above quotation is a good example of the way in which the Firm seeks to identify excellence with heterogeneity or diversity rather than homogeneity or sameness. This is an interesting and significant way in which elitism and prestige – terms historically associated with exclusion, snobbery and unfairness – have been democratised or re-written through a discourse of meritocracy and diversity. The Firm’s commitment to diversity within a context of meritocracy is reinforced by the maintenance of high entry requirement. Applicants need a strong academic background, which translates into the following entry requirements. Applicants should have at least 280 UCAS points at A Level (this could be made up of any combination – for example, B, B, C or A, B, D

grades) and be on course for a 2.1 or above in any subject. The Firm's minimum entry requirements are interesting as they claim to be of a high standard. However, put simply, the majority of graduates from the elite Russell Group (RG) of universities would easily meet and exceed the entry requirements (which, in terms of UCAS points, are at the lower end of entry requirements for most of the universities, where the most competitive courses routinely require 340-360 points – A, A, B and A, A, A respectively). The national picture shows that 61% of full time UK domiciled undergraduates graduated with a 2.1 or above (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2010), and the picture at RG universities is much higher. So the minimum requirements of the Firm are in fact the average requirements and expectations for students at RG universities. The Firm's academic requirements do not serve to exclude very many students from elite HEIs which, despite the government's and universities' own widening participation agendas, continue to derive most of their students from privileged social locations (Reay et al., 2005). In turn the entry requirements do serve to exclude potential applicants from universities with lower academic entry requirements who then graduate with lower degree classifications. On top of this the Firm has a policy of targeted recruitment which does not stray from Russell Group universities, students from less privileged social backgrounds are over-represented at non-Russell group universities (Reay et al., 2005). During interviews, members of the graduate recruitment team told me that the Firm's widening participation agenda was largely carried out in schools before pupils have selected their GCSE choices, and that it spends most of its recruitment resources at RG universities. From

this we can see that the Firm frames itself as demanding academically high standards through which it furthers its reputation for excellence; however, their recruitment solely from RG HEIs undermines their claim to attain diverse employment goals. Maintaining a reputation for excellence and fairness through meritocracy is a key way in which the Firm is able to maintain an outward discourse of diversity and inclusion, without having to lower its entry requirements (which would be one sure way of diversifying its employee demographic).

I will look at the issue of diversity through more closely drawing on interviews with senior members of the graduate recruitment team; I then explore in more detail the relationship between the Firm's recruitment practices, participants, and the Firm's status and prestige. The issue of diversity and talent is not confined to the above quotation, but forms a significant part of their recruitment strategy: both through their recruitment literature and through specific workshops targeted to encourage and support 'non-traditional' or diverse applicants. At the beginning stages of fieldwork I interviewed a senior member of the graduate recruitment team, with whom I explored the issues of recruitment, diversity, meritocracy and elitism. The Firm's literature and recruitment workshops are full of language that explicitly demonstrates its legal commitment to being an equal opportunities employer, and its wider aim to recruit diversely. The Firm explicitly celebrates and promotes its number one position in a poll as a top place where 'women want to work'. The Firm's various diversity and equal opportunities statements highlight that the Firm

values the principles of meritocracy and fairness through hard work and achievement, while recognising some of the structural limits to this position in relation to certain social groups. This is reiterated throughout the recruitment and application process. For example, the Firm is explicit about its academic entry requirements (equality and fairness) and makes no exceptions; the Firm details the whole of the application process and at the same time takes lots of opportunities to support the application process (diversity and inclusion) through hints and tips pages, application workshops, and employability questionnaires, and provides lists of the required key competencies. Here is an extract from their Employability Booklet:

At [Firm] we like to take people further. Which is one of the reasons why we're so committed to helping people get here in the first place. And it's why we've come up with this employability booklet. The [Firm's] guide will take you through the different competencies you're likely to need to become part of our global organization. You might have developed many of your skills through your studies. Others could have come from part-time work or summer travel. Or from somewhere else altogether. What's important is that you can recognize the skills that we are looking for, and then come up with a good example (or two) to evidence them. And this booklet should definitely help you along the way. The journey starts here. (Firm's online Employability booklet)

Being an equal opportunities employer is simply stated in stand-alone text at the bottom of all its recruitment literature. This is where their commitment to ‘diversity’ is given more detailed attention:

The basis of our diversity strategy is recognising all the ways in which people are different, both visibly – for example in gender or ethnicity – and subliminally, in ways such as social or educational background, or personality. Our diversity is our strength, driving business performance and success. It is an integral part of our strategy for competing in the current and future marketplace. (Firm webpage, careers/diversity)

The above extract seemingly acknowledges difference as what one might recognise as a result of the stubborn persistence of structural inequalities (gender, ethnicity, social, educational background), but it also reduces differences to the individual (personality). The Firm does not rank them, or say which may have more of an effect, or recognise the multiple ways in which an individual’s differences may make a difference to their ability to compete in the labour market, or what the Firm would do to ‘equalise’ the situation. In this way the language of Equal Opportunities is replaced by diversity, enabling the Firm to construct it as a positive force to be harnessed through their recruitment of diverse employees. An explicit and detailed commitment to diversity underlines the Firm’s commercial imperatives (i.e. diversity somehow equals commercial strength) and makes this its focus rather than a (necessarily more complex) response to inequality. Therefore, despite its repeated commitment to CSR, the Firm justifies its diversity strategy here not through a

reiteration of its commitment to social justice or social corporate responsibility, but with a commercial imperative. This echoes the prevailing orientation of diversity policy in the USA known as ‘the business case’ for equal opportunities, despite a lack of hard, empirical evidence that such a policy improves commercial outcomes (Omanovic, 2011).

The section on diversity comes under a wider section on social corporate responsibility which sees the Firm pledge to serve its communities ethically by doing the right thing, thus providing further evidence of its commitment to the professional values of integrity and commercial excellence. Despite the Firm’s clear commitment to diversity on commercial grounds, I spoke to a number of members of the human resources and graduate recruitment teams who recognised that there were three main reasons why the Firm had a diversity agenda within its recruitment strategy. Helen explained the Firm’s commitment to a diversity strategy in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR) as well as legal and commercial imperatives:

It’s all about projections – what do we want the firm to look like in 5 or 10 years’ times? A: we think it’s the right thing to do; B: it’s a legal requirement; and C: from a competitive perspective in our field within our market, we need that diversity because of the clients that we’re going to. (Helen, senior manager within Graduate Recruitment)

They argued that the Firm’s diversity strategy was directly connected to the Firm’s commitment to an understanding of its own history. Bea was a senior

member of the Graduate Recruitment team with a specific sub-role and interest in issues of diversity. I interviewed Bea prior to my interviewing trainees, and she articulated that the Firm was aware of its history and the wider legacy of social inequalities. She also affirmed that the Firm was aware of the impact that formal and informal barriers had on recruitment, such as those which excluded women (through the marriage bar) and ethnic-minority racialised groups (through the race bar):

These are old institutions and actually a lot of the way[s] in which the business works, they're centuries old at the end of the day: they are white, male dominated and it's about [prospective applicants] not understanding what the rules are and that's really, really, tricky to get across, and even as a female understanding what the rules are, and still they physically de-select themselves from the process. (Bea senior manager within Graduate Recruitment)

For Bea and Helen there is harmony between the different rationales for a diversity strategy. They represent the three main reasons as mutually compatible. Despite the publicly available recruitment support for applicants, participants in this study showed very little knowledge of it, and many navigated the application process without accessing such support. Even those at whom the booklet might be said to be aimed – i.e. those who might be concerned about having diverse backgrounds – failed to access such forms of support. This section has looked at how the Firm uses recruitment literature



and website to bring together its commercial, professional, legal and CSR commitments into a coherent rhetoric.

I shall now move on to the second half of this section, which follows up on the Firm's claims to be the number one provider of professional services from the point of view of participants. I have already set out the way in which the Firm promotes itself and is promoted as the best, 'number one', an industry standard-setter, and a centre of excellence as a provider of professional services and as an employer. There is no doubt that the Firm's rhetoric of its excellence and prestige was conveyed to all the participants of this study. Aside from the Firm's own claims to being the best, it seemed clear that the recruitment process itself served to reinforce or give the impression to participants that the Firm was prestigious by virtue of the fact that it recruited from the most prestigious British universities, which all participants attended.

You know from the outset that the people that this firm target, isn't far outside Oxbridge, LSE, Warwick, Nottingham, York, Leeds and possibly Manchester. (Thomas, first round)

Okay, well I don't know what it is about [Russell Group University], but [Big Four] accountancy firms seem to be everywhere, they are sponsoring everything, they are seen to be everywhere, all the careers events. (Olivia, first round)

I was told specifically that there were five universities which [the Firm] have most of their graduates from, that they tend to be from Oxford and Cambridge, the London universities, Leeds and Manchester, I think are they're sort of, the ones that they get the most students from. (Sarah, first round)

Members of the graduate recruitment team confirmed during informal conversations that indeed they did not stray away from careers fairs held at RG universities during the recruitment round.<sup>6</sup> Of course, university based recruitment fairs are not the only way in which people can apply to the Firm, as it also has a presence at large regional recruitment fairs based at other venues. The Firm's presence at their university – and the knowledge that they were present at some of the most prestigious universities in the UK and the world – sends feedback to participants that they are amongst the best and most prestigious students. This was reinforced for participants once they arrived at the Firm, as the majority of their colleagues had also graduated from elite universities. However, it is important to recognise that participants did not respond to this uniformly, and, I would argue, their response to the Firm as prestigious relates to their relative social location. For example, some were impressed by and in awe of the prestige and could hardly believe that it really

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<sup>6</sup> Bea stated that their widening participation agenda applied to secondary schools in deprived areas and it rarely, if ever, extended to having a presence at less established and less prestigious universities. Bea found this to be regrettable on the grounds that she was sure that the Firm was missing out on 'talent' as a result.

included them. Entry into the Firm conferred an intellectual prestige, which Giles had previously perceived himself to be lacking, despite the fact that he easily qualified for the Firm's entry requirements:

I kind of knew that [the Firm] was the biggest and I [thought] I was off the level ... so when I actually came round to getting it, I was pretty happy, I kind of, I never thought of myself as the Oxbridge type person ... I mean it's kind of ... I'm guessing ... it's probably not that Oxbridge is incredible, but it's just the perception I have of it is sort of more intelligent than I thought I was, and so I got this job – is something I was very happy to do. (Giles, first round)

Giles associates the Firm with being the biggest, although he does not state it is the best; but still, its association with recruiting from Oxbridge confers an intellectual prestige which prior to his employment at the Firm he did not associate with himself. Giles did not make an Oxbridge application, but graduated from an RG, and his comments serve to remind us of the significance of relative achievement for graduates when making the transition from HE to graduate employment. His success, to many, is impressive, but he perceives himself to be average or just below in his academic endeavours; this stays with him as he transitions into employment. I view his comments as evidence that his success at the Firm serves as a moment of repair: prestige is conferred which stays and benefits him enormously. Amir, coming from a very

different social background, gave an emphatic reply to a question asking what he thought the Firm stood for:

Success! [Laughs] Success! Big accountancy firm. Doing something which is very reputable, you know, it's in an industry which is regarded by society as being very prestigious, you know, so very skilled sector and for someone working there you must have something. So that gives you that automatic qualification to be – to you know – be regarded by society as someone worth, you know, worth commending.  
(Amir, first round)

Amir is not only highly aware of the Firm's status but, like Giles, assumes it to be a matter of fact that the Firm is located within a prestigious industry, and is associated with being the best, and with being a high status destination for many graduates. Although Amir's modesty prevents him from spelling it out, it is clear that he enjoys the Firm's prestige, and the prestige that working at the Firm confers on him. Others were enthusiastic about the Firm's prestige, while at least one participant presented a more critical interpretation.

Frances' father and uncle had both worked for Big Four accountancy firms for most of her life; she was therefore furnished with knowledge about them long before she came into contact with the Firm's preferred reading of itself via the graduate recruitment circuit. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that she was the most critical about the Firm's status as prestigious, and as a market leader. In

response to her question about why my fieldwork was located at the Firm, I answered that it was because it was a market leader; her response ridicules the basis of the Firm's status as being number one:

F In the results, in the Times Graduate [Top 100 employers] ... like that is such a joke though. Have you seen it yourself?

S What, the way they measure it?

F Yes. They don't actually ask you ... they just ask you, where did you apply? So it's not really representative. (Frances, first round)

Frances seems to be suggesting that the Firm bases its reputation on the claims of its recent employees; I must agree it is a tenuous position to make a claim for being the best in any field, as trainee graduates tend to have very little or no experience of working for another graduate employer. Her cynicism about the Firm's status clearly did not prevent her from making a successful application, but it does prevent her from conveying that she personally gains any sense of prestige from her employment in stark contrast to both Giles and Amir. Her reasons for applying were also not affected by the Firm's status: in another example of the significance of relative social location, Frances suggests that her employment at the Firm is born out of laziness:

I didn't have to think about what else to do, I suppose you know what ... you see what jobs your parents do and their friends do, and then, I

don't have to ... I don't know if I wasn't doing this, I don't know what I'd be doing. So it was just an easy option. (Frances, first round)

Giles was pleasantly surprised that the Firm's intellectual prestige included him, but for Amir, the intellectual prestige and cultural association with cultural elites raised doubts in his mind about how someone without that background could do well at the Firm. I asked him whether he could remember what his impressions of the Firm were before he was a successful applicant:

Well, before you could say typical white males, been to maybe private school, Cambridge and those sort of backgrounds; I know they take a lot of people from Cambridge and things, all those top universities...(Amir, first round)

His doubts stem from the explicit relationship that he makes between the Firm's prestige and high status with ethnicity, which he understands to be white and upper class – two things that he is not.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the Firm's suggestions that they welcome diversity, Amir's comments suggest that he expects that the onus is on individuals from diverse backgrounds to fit in with the Firm, rather than the other way round. And, as the last sentence reminds us,

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<sup>7</sup> This quotation is a good example of the way in which Amir talks: it is ambiguous whether or not he is talking about himself, but taken as a whole I believe he is. In subsequent interviews when we became more comfortable, I became more assertive in asking him to confirm whether or not he was talking about himself when he spoke like this. He always confirmed that he was.

the extent to which this is literally possible is of course constrained by somatic limitations. More will be said at length in a separate chapter about the complex relationship between the Firm, the somatic norm and the somatic Other (Puwar, 2004). Amir's, Giles' and Frances' comments are a reminder that the interface between diversity and prestige is not straightforward and needs to be navigated and analysed carefully, with particular attention paid to the intersectionality of differences that make a difference, as well as the relative nature of privilege and disadvantage. From these short extracts I argue that successful employment at the Firm confers prestige on to participants, but to varying degrees; that is to say that the recruitment and employment process enables some to accrue some value for themselves in ways that had been lacking previously. These are not straightforwardly along class lines; it becomes clear that *relative* social location and *relatively* perceived intellectual ability informs the way in which the Firm's own prestige is experienced.

## ***CONCLUSION***

This chapter has located the site of research within the accountancy profession in general, and the large accountancy firms in particular. In so doing I have highlighted the ways in which the relative infancy of accountancy and audit as a profession relates to historical and contemporary practices of occupational closure. Through an examination of the Firm's rhetoric, I argued that professionalism, prestige and meritocracy are its core values and ones of and to which potential applicants are expected to demonstrate their understanding and

commitment, throughout the application process and beyond if they are to accrue value and be successful at the Firm. This, I have argued, presents some challenges to the Firm in relation to its recruitment practices in an era of equal opportunities where structural inequalities along lines of gender, class and ethnicity impact on academic and labour market outcomes. The use of the 'business case' for diversity model as opposed to the social justice case for equal opportunities allows the Firm to assert that its commitments to SCR (read integrity) fits with its professionalisation project, as integrity is a key value of professionalism. These commitments make sense of the Firm's open, friendly and supportive recruitment practices which aim to make the process reasonably transparent and ostensibly open to a diverse range of people. However, I have argued that their commitment to diversity is compromised somewhat by seemingly contradictory recruitment practices, with claims to meritocracy on the one hand, and a limited recruitment pool (largely RG HEI) on the other. While none of the participants from diverse backgrounds in this study said that they engaged with the Firm's employability advice, all were aware of the Firm's commitment to diversity.

I have demonstrated that participants were fully conversant with the Firm's reputation as prestigious: a consideration of the Firm's use of space, place and aesthetic has been argued to play a specific role in the enchantment of potential applicants and new trainees. I have argued that the Firm's prestigious status and its ability to convey it through various spaces transfers on to participants, as most readily take up this reputation more or less comfortably, and begin to



associate the Firm's prestige with a burgeoning belief in their own. In this sense I suggest that through their successful application to the Firm, many participants have accrued value for themselves, but that they rely on complicated and potentially fragile relationships between space, place and the role of the somatic norm in their understanding of prestige and professionalism before they joined, during the recruitment process and their early days employed at the Firm. These themes will be taken up and explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

## **CHAPTER 5 - MERITOCRACY, HARD WORK AND PRIVILEGE: CONTRADICTORY DISCOURSES ON THE JOURNEY TO ACCRUE VALUE**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

Being credentialised is a core way in which all individuals can add value. For the working class in particular, this is considered to be a necessary condition as credentials have exchange value for a job with ‘prospects’ in lieu of other forms of cultural capital. This chapter locates participants’ transition to the graduate labour market in the context of an ostensibly meritocratic education system that underpins the system of value accrual and exchange. In so doing it seeks partially to answer my first research question, *How does participants’ social location inform how graduates have become subjects of value and how does this play out during graduates’ transition into employment?* Juxtaposed against the accounts of working-class participants, middle-class participants’ accounts of their educational journey and transition into the graduate labour market will be argued to be differentiated along lines of ethnicity and gender as well as the relative economic privilege of parents. Through these accounts of their educational journey and transition into graduate employment, contradictory discourses of hard work and inevitability of the transition emerge.

Researchers working in the sociology of education have long recognised the historical social forces that have structured parents' and their children's access to primary, secondary, further and HE in the UK; the link between education and life outcome is therefore well established (Ball, 1990, Ball, 2003, Byrne, 2006, Vincent and Ball, 2006, Tomlinson, 2005). The use of credentials to determine an individual's suitability for a specific occupation has long been in effect in the professions (Brown et al., 2004). Its relationship to occupational closure and, in turn, social exclusion was, perhaps rather optimistically, considered at least partially to be resolved with the onset of widening participation and expansion of further and HE (Guile, 2003). Guile argues that from this perspective, the main challenge has been presented as supporting national prosperity by ensuring that the vast majority of the population achieve qualifications or certified skills and knowledge that relate to their future employment. (Guile, 2003:92)

Critiques of the relationship between the knowledge economy – and the concomitant rise of a life-long learning agenda – have argued that it has paved the way for the growth of credentialism, as well as a set of discourses and assumptions about what is necessary to ensure successful transitions are made from education to employment. Credentialism, it is argued, is a process by which a whole range of skills and knowledge bases are formally laid out. They are subsequently taught, individuals are assessed on their competences in them, and the results are translated into credentials. The preferred skills, knowledge bases, and eventual credentials are legitimised and invested with power by

various governing bodies of the state (Young, 1990). Through this individuals are said to be able to transition into respectable and, more importantly, sufficient forms of employment (Brown et al., 2004, Guile, 2003, McDowell, 2003, Angwin, 2001). What some scholars argue is problematic about this state of affairs is that it has become 'compulsory' for all students to engage with credentialism; those who cannot or will not are constructed as failures and are left with very few positive transition options. This, they argue, is new for some sections of society, who until recently were able to eschew a pathway of threshold exams in favour of other means (well paid semi-skilled and unskilled labour). For others, current trends represent credential inflation whereby more and more credentials are needed; a degree for nursing would be one example. At the same time that these changes were occurring, graduate employers started to argue that graduates were not entering employment with the right skills to participate in the knowledge economy and other aspects of the graduate labour market. By this they meant that the formal curriculum failed to teach them to innovate adequately, react positively and quickly to workplace change, communicate, or adopt creative solutions to problems (Guile, 2003). Employers faced with a wide range of choice in candidates with high status qualifications have argued that they lack key competencies such as communication and problem solving skills, commercial awareness, the ability to innovate, and the ability to lead as well as work well in teams. These competencies and others have loosely been dubbed 'transferable skills', and graduates' apparent lack of them forms the basis of the 'degree is not enough' mantra. Moreau and Leathwood (2006: 320) argue that

[t]he conjunction of the ideology of equal opportunities and of the employability discourse reinforces the construction of the labour market as meritocratic. Failure in this context thereby becomes personal failure, something that is reinforced with the emphasis on personal skills. (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006: 320)

Initially implicit but by now explicit in the individualisation of ‘the degree is not enough’ mantra is the notion that the concept of credentials should be expanded to include evidence of participation in ECA, such as sports, drama, volunteering, and paid work. These are argued to require or develop an *individual's* transferable skills (Tomlinson, 2008). This is problematic for sociologists, because as Moreau and Leathwood argue

[e]quating skills and power fails to recognise that skills are socially constructed, and valued and rewarded in different ways by employers depending on workers’ identity markers and educational path (such as the type of university from which individuals graduate). Issues of inequality disappear within this discursive framing, with achievement and/or failure in the labour market located solely as the responsibility of the individual. (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006: 320)

Despite the individualising and apolitical tendencies that occur within a credentialist framework, it is generally recognised that institutions are the primary providers of credentials. ECA have been and continue to be a central feature of private and public school systems, particularly in boarding schools

(in practical terms), because evenings and weekends need to be filled; but, moreover, they have been central to meeting traditional ideas about the importance of a well-rounded education (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005). This is an expensive way to educate a child. State schools, but in particular grammar schools, have modelled their ECA on the public/boarding school, traditionally offering pupils a range of ECA to participate in during lunch time and after school. Again, sport is a prominent feature. Under the tripartite schooling system, and still today, at schools whose educational aspirations are not informed by producing university ready pupils, and/or are not well resourced, ECA have been scarce or absent (Brooks and Everett, 2008). In the absence of teachers and pupils living in a community together, over time, comprehensive schools incorporated ECA such as drama into their formal curriculum, while offering modest ECA provision. Clearly, access to the tradition and provision of ECA is framed by a class-based education system in the UK, which therefore problematises the demand for ECA as a specific credential. Central to this argument is the issue of meritocracy. Whilst it might be argued that the examination system in the UK is based solely on merit, it is much harder to argue for the significance of meritocracy in the acquisition of credentials via participation in ECA.

Moreover, the need for pupils and graduates to combine academic credentials with ECA as credentials in order to be considered good candidates has not been universally conveyed. This fact, researchers argue, is just one of the inequities of the British education system. The message that a combination of top grades

and ECA are a necessary part of a portfolio of credentials is conveyed not just at the point of entry for the graduate labour market, but prior to this. In the university application process, evidence of a portfolio of credentials is considered necessary in order to gain entry, especially for the most coveted places (Greenbank, 2009). The necessity of a portfolio of credentials is transmitted clearly in some schools and by some parents with knowledge of the evolving education system and graduate labour market. It has been argued by some sociology of education scholars that knowledge of this message serves as a distinct advantage, by allowing parents and children to maximise their educational and extra-curricular opportunities at the earliest possible moment (Ball, 2003; Devine, 2005; Power, 2003b; Reay and Lucey, 2004). These scholars argue that the unequal access to knowledge is matched by an inequality in access to resources. Entry into the most valued sites of the education market are constrained or even closed by structural inequalities. Where gaps appear, access to them is argued to be fiercely competitive and full of anxiety for parents (especially mothers) and their offspring (Reay and Lucey, 2001). Credentialism, which as I have outlined is understood to be a discourse emanating from the state in relation to the education sector and the economy, fuels anxiety about and competition for educational resources amongst parents and their children.

### ***CREDENTIALISM, HARD WORK AND MERITOCRACY***

Gaining credentials is a primary feature of participants' lives: their education has been a continuous process of accruing specific bundles of examinations and experiences that are thought to represent agreed competencies and skills; the beginning of their working lives are also filled with this demand. This section explores some of the ways in which participants' credentials have been accrued by examining parents' resources and strategies as understood by participants. In so doing, I will offer some understanding of what credentials mean and offer to participants, and the relationship between credentials and meritocracy, privilege, disadvantage, ethnicity, ability and hard work. These themes will also be used to reflect on the way in which ECA count as a type of 'experience based' credential and the impact this has on participants' experiences of the application process. Themes will be explored through participants' retrospective accounts of their parents' role and relationship to their education and motivation to succeed, and participants' claimed work ethic. Furthermore, through participants' talk, we will see that as well as evidence of parents' strategic deployment of resources to accrue the best education possible for their children, participants also draw on discourses of meritocracy and the concept of hard work as they narrate their educational journey.

Parenting and child rearing practices in the UK are a major area in which matters of class distinction and reproduction occur, with access to – and the



acquisition of – formal learning being the example *par excellence*. Despite the UK having an education system that is framed by ideals of equality and standardisation – such as the national curriculum and national standards for teaching and examination – it is distinctly stratified, rendering untenable claims that it is a purely meritocratic system (Ball, 1990). The issue of relative privilege is pertinent here in providing an analysis of participants' experiences, because labels such as 'middle class' do not accurately reflect the range of socio-economic circumstances in which participants in this study find themselves. Devine (2005) and Power et al (2003) argue that the middle class is a wide-ranging group, and the lower ends are in a relatively precarious position, especially when their middle-class status is a result of relative prosperity from occupations in small business and private sectors, which are sensitive to the vagaries of the market. This compares with middle-class occupations in the professions and other public sector roles which have been relatively stable, until recent government public spending cuts have put this section of the middle class into what Lauren Berlant (2011) describes as a situation of precarity. For example, although I have categorised participants – and indeed, participants have categorised themselves – as middle-class, in reality this covers a wide range of parental occupations and incomes which were subject to change over a period of their children's schooling. Therefore, parents' ability to devote economic resources to their children's education also varied over time. This means that the reproduction of class via the route of education and into a 'good job' is less secure for some than it is for others. One might expect that for those whose class reproduction was undermined by less

certain economic circumstances, reliance on hard work and a meritocratic system in order to benefit from the best available state education would be necessary. However, while hard work within a framework of meritocracy was frequently claimed as the primary reason for educational success, participants report that parents made a range of interventions into their education. I will argue that participants' claims to have worked hard and/or to have natural ability serve to support and perpetuate discourses of meritocracy and undermine an analysis of the interventions made by parents in their education owing to their relative privilege.

I understand the notion of hard work in a number of interrelated ways. For Sayer (2005a), concerns about what does or does not count as 'hard work' reveals that while there is most certainly an empirical reality to hard work – such as the numbers of hours and exertion spent digging a road, or reading, writing and editing an essay – there is also a moral framework that underpins the concept. The concept of hard work holds a slippery position within education: Reay (2004: 36) writes that there is 'an academic equation in which hard work is opposed to natural talents'. In this equation, excellent results should appear near effortless. The myth of natural talent and its concomitant reward system 'meritocracy' rests on the ability to 'master' and apply areas of learning with ease and joy. The echoes of this equation are found in recent research on boys in school, which show that the myth of natural talent serves to promote a performance of masculinity that seeks to hide hard work or suffer a loss of masculine status (Francis, 1999, Connell, 1989, Jackson, 2003). In

contrast, it is argued that far from being a solely gendered concept, hard work is also classed; historically, girls have always had to perform hard work, as there was no *a priori* assumption that there could be a natural academic talent. Moreover, it has been argued that middle-class girls who are ‘naturally clever’ are praised, whereas those who *have* to work hard (i.e. those who are perceived to have less ‘natural intelligence’) are not. In this analysis, working-class girls who sustain academic success are seen to have achieved this owing to their hard work rather than their ‘natural ability’ for which they are praised (Walkerdine, 1989). The concept of hard work is therefore classed as well as gendered, which of course are just two prisms through which educational experiences can be viewed. Other marginalised groups such as the parents and children of immigrants have had to make a virtue out of the necessity for hard work in an education system that has historically been formally and informally denied them (Lopez, 2001). The concept of hard work is therefore used to describe a set of behaviours that have an empirical dimension as well as serving a particular discourse about the relationship between status, ability, resources and meritocracy. Using the data from participants, the next section will argue that parents’ understanding of the education system and the labour market is underpinned by discourses of hard work and meritocracy, but that these discourses are contradicted and undermined by further understandings of the system as stratified. Discussion and conclusions on these contradictions will argue that privileged parents (through their children’s recollections) and their children amplify the importance of hard work, in a bid to make good the

inherent contradiction of operating in an education system that is underpinned by discourses of meritocracy but fractured by privilege and inequalities.

### ***THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAMILY, AND FAMILIES' AND SCHOOLS' EDUCATIONAL VALUES***

The relevance of education for a family – that is to say, the values that are attributed to education as well as the (in)ability of family members to mobilise specific resources in order to support their children's education – is central to the relationship between children and their education. For example it has been well documented that a child's education does not take place in the vacuum of a formal learning environment such as a school. The social location of a parent is argued to be a strong predictor of their children's educational attainment and own subsequent social location. Class privilege manifests itself in different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1987). Economic capital is but one (albeit significant), as educational advantage can explicitly and implicitly be achieved through the purchase of (part-private) education or access to a good school. All participants cited that their parents' support was significant during their education, but the specific ways in which this manifested itself reflected, I would argue, the varying forms of their parents' capital. This includes their understanding of the education system as well as the labour market. For example, data from Wen suggest that his parents had an understanding of the global HE system based on their networks as primary school teachers in Hong Kong. Although it is not made explicit here *why* Wen has to do 'really, really

well' and get into a good university, he reports that it is so and expresses the imperative in terms of its relationship to his family's values:

That's the family value that I have to do really, really well in all the exams and get into a university with a good reputation. (Wen, first round)

Wen, in a subsequent interview, expressed that his family values reflected wider cultural values writ small:

I can't think of a time that I don't recognise a university: it's so important in our culture that you have to study and get a place ... maybe when literally little, like five or six years old. (Wen, first round)

Here, academic attainment is expressed as a value in and of itself and no explicit connection is made to its relationship to the labour market, although subsequent interviews suggest that this connection is fully understood by both Wen and his parents. Although Wen positions his parents' educational values as specific to his Hong Kong/Chinese culture, similar educational values were found across all participants and their parents. For example, one of the most striking aspects of a quotation from a first round interview with Frances is the absolute certainty that she would go to university from a very young age – there was no doubt, and this demonstrates the effectiveness of the parents' expectations in forming the horizons of children. In Frances' case, her parent's

expectations are not an oppressive space: the expectation to attend university is not a terrible pressure but a normalised understanding of what one does:

I was always going to go to university; it was never a question of not going. It was always something my parents said to me, ‘When you go to university, you’ll do this ...’. If I hadn’t wanted to have gone, I think they’d have been ... well they’d have asked me why, but even before junior school, it was expected you’d go. (Frances, first round)

Although going to university is seen as something that all participants expect to do from quite a young age, these expectations and the values that accompany them are inflected with the specificities of their parents’ social location, such as occupation, income, ethnicity and immigration status. Data from interviews with Henry and Aisha illustrate the significance of having parents who were first generation migrants to the UK: both trained as doctors in the NHS. Henry’s recollection suggests that educational achievement was explicitly linked to an ability to make a good transition into the labour market:

My dad would always say, ‘you get qualified, you get a good degree, you get good A Level results, you’ve got a very good chance of doing something successful’, whereas if you don’t do well, you’ve got to work that bit harder. (Henry, first round)

I would argue that this quotation reflects his father’s experiences as a young man migrating to the UK in the 1970s to train as an NHS doctor. In contrast to

Wen and Frances, the implicit emphasis is not on values but on a common sense understanding of the education system and labour market, where effort and attainment are associated and rewarded with success. Henry's father's comments are underpinned by an understanding of the system as basically meritocratic. Here we see that the concept of meritocracy and hard work underpins the advice and expectations from parents, and works positively to facilitate Henry's pursuit of credentials. Explicit in Henry's father's argument is that qualifications are a highly effective route to success in the world of work, a social leveller, which is an important thing in a world where one might be at the mercy of forms of discrimination such as racism. There are similarities in Aisha's parents' experiences and her recollections of her father's advice. Both her parents came to the UK to train and work as doctors in the late '70s and early '80s. In contrast to Henry's more affluent upbringing, which included a private secondary education, Aisha spent the majority of her primary years moving around the UK owing to the demands of her father's training. She makes an explicit connection between her father's migrant experiences – working, and trying hard – and the benefits of starting off in a meritocratic education system:

[Dad's] like, 'I have only been able to do this [become a doctor] because of my education. So imagine you're starting from the UK and you've got a great education, what can you do? Because I came from there with this, so you are already starting from here.' So that's why education has been a big thing. They've never been like, 'Oh, get A\*s,'

they've just been like, 'Just try hard,' you get what you get, but try at it.

(Aisha, first round)

Interestingly, Aisha primarily cites her father in this quotation, but she drops into talking about 'they,' and at other points in the interview it becomes clear that while her mother was also a doctor and had to manage the double burden of sexism and racism while training to be a doctor,<sup>8</sup> it is her father who is the dominating motivator in her academic and work life. Very clearly here there is a discourse of hard work, which is not just related to the outcome for its own sake. Rather, the process of trying hard is said to be valued regardless of the outcome. Valorising 'hard work' is not unique to migrant workers, but it is a way of making a virtue out of necessity and promotes a specific moral framework in which those who might be the victims of social injustice can claim a moral victory should the worst happen and their goals are not achieved.

These data make clear that parents' experiences as migrant workers have informed their attitude towards their children's education. Data from other

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<sup>8</sup> Aisha shared family anecdotes which tell stories about when her mother and father were training to be doctors; reportedly colleagues and senior medical staff made repeated assumptions that her mother was training to be a nurse and or would stop being a doctor as soon as she fell pregnant with her first child. Aisha also talked about the unfairness of her mother not being easily able to combine motherhood with medical practice while her father had no such difficulties within the division of labour that was finally agreed between husband and wife.



participants highlight how participants did not just recall their parents' values and/or attitude to the education system and labour market and the resumed expectation that came with it, but also spoke about the time and energy spent on their education, which can broadly be characterised as emotional and practical support:

I think right from the beginning my parents have been *really* supportive, even from reception, when it comes to *having* to sitting all night long reading books and going through reading books and going through words and things like that. (Jessica, first round, emphasis in original)

While presumably also a loving act, Jessica's version of her parents' contribution highlights the effort involved in learning to read: 'having to, sitting all night long reading books.' This could be contrasted with discourses of education which prioritise a love of learning, or for this example, stories or storytelling. Instead, Jessica emphasises the work and effort involved in 'going through reading books', rather than any pleasure derived from storytelling for its own sake. Jessica was as young as four and five when her parents were reportedly contributing to her education in this way, leaving her with the strong impression that her parents were very supportive of her education. The motivation to do so in these specific ways does not, I would argue, just spring from love, but is rooted in the particular discourses about children, educational attainment and future outcomes outlined above. Amir's account also reflects

the effort and time given in this case by his father, which led to an outcome that would, within the terms of the debate, be considered an advantage:

My father used to educate me quite a lot when I was young with maths and English and things, so I was quite ahead of the class, when I was in my primary school. (Amir, first round)

Were Jessica's and Amir's parents knowingly and deliberately using the resources of time and knowledge to gain their children a competitive advantage in the school system, or was it, as Bourdieu's framework suggests, an act unconsciously reproduced by virtue of their habitus? Neither set of parents had received a HE, and only Jessica's parents attended a grammar school. Amir's father migrated to the UK in the early 1980s, but unlike Henry's father started and remained in semi-skilled and low paid work all his life, as did Henry's mother. In Jessica's case both parents were from poor, working-class families but had passed the eleven-plus and gone on to take their place at the local grammar school. Her mother, but not her father, took A Levels; he left after his O Levels, which, I was told, he attributed to not fitting in at the school and failing to recognise the value in pursuing a further and HE. According to Jessica, at that time her father wanted to earn some money, and although he did well as a businessman, he forever regretted not pursuing his academic life. In the recent past, and certainly in the present, there is evidence (Vincent and Ball, 2006) that strong discourses circulate that assert that 'good' parenting includes taking an avid interest in a child's education. Both Jessica's and Amir's parents lack the economic capital to ensure their child's successful transition through the education system, but draw upon their cultural capital to

resource their children with specific educational skills in order to give them an advantage in the education system. Both Jessica and Amir recognise that their parents worked hard to resource them; this has implications for their learning, which will be explored later on.

Through the partial tracing of Amir's and Jessica's parents' habitus we gain an insight into their relationship to the education system and the labour market. It reminds us that Jessica's and Amir's parents did not benefit from a widening participation agenda or expansion of a HE sector. The parents' experiences are, of course, reflected in their upbringing, and offer us an understanding of the way in which structural factors of the past such as class and ethnicity impact on the present.

Other participants talked about the inevitability of them going to university and the relationship it held to the labour market, which was understood purely as the graduate labour market in general and a handful of professions in particular. It was something that was discussed with parents from a very young age: in these homes there was never a discussion of 'if' university – it was more a case of 'which?' and to study 'what?' in order to go on to 'do'. Tola was born in Nigeria to Nigerian parents, but her mother moved to the UK when she was eight; in conversation with her about her decision to study accountancy at university, the utter assumption that she would go to university is revealed in the way she lists the sorts of jobs she did not want to do, all of which require HE plus vocational training:

S Why did you choose to do accounting at university?

T Erm ... I didn't want to be a doctor, I didn't want to be a lawyer, because I didn't like reading books; didn't want to be a doctor because I was squeamish. I was like, 'Oh, accountant, I'm good at maths, I'll be that.'

S So how would you even know about accountants?

T I don't know, it's like something that your parents, especially Nigerian parents, always ask you, 'What do you want to be?' and it's one of those things that people will say, doctor, lawyer, engineer, accountant. (Tola, first round)

The advice given to Tola, Wen, Henry, Jessica, Amir, Francis and Aisha by their parents is evidence of the close relationship between parents and their offspring's education. Sociology of education scholars claim that this serves to reproduce class privilege. It is also evidence of what Bourdieu argued is the internal logic of practice, where 'habitus is a "conditioned and conditional freedom" and generates "things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable 'upcoming future'" (Bourdieu, 1989) cited in (Ball, 2003). Participants' recollections also suggest that there is no shame in the close relationship between their educational success and their parents' close relationship to it. In fact, I would argue that the sense of pride that emanates from participants' stories supports the sense that active parental support of children during their educational journeys is considered the norm and a mark of 'good' parenting. This section has argued that family values in relation to

education, hard work and a belief in meritocracy was cited by participants as relevant to their educational experiences. The next section will look at the relationship between parents' resources, the interventions that they made into their children's education, and their take up of discourses of hard work and meritocracy.

***AN INTERVENTIONIST APPROACH TO EDUCATION:  
PARENTS' RESOURCES, WORKING HARD AND  
MERITOCRACY***

Researchers since the 1990s have argued that neo-liberalism has had a strong impact on parenting discourses and practice which extol the virtues and the risks of not taking responsibility for children's outcomes up to an age where they are entering the labour market. This has led to what Hays describes as intensive mothering/parenting, which takes many forms (Hays, 1996, Shirani et al., 2012). Parents are increasingly held to account for the full range of their children's social behaviour. Successfully traversing the education system and entering the (graduate) labour market has come to represent the ideal outcome by which 'good' parenting is judged. Other research has consistently shown that those parents with the financial ability to resource their children's education on the whole do so; it is only those with the strongest political commitments to egalitarian educational ideals who do not (Ball, 2003, Devine, 2005, Power, 2003b, Reay and Lucey, 2004, Power, 2001). This section will look at the contradictions in participants' accounts of their relationship to

working hard and meritocracy when we take into account the strategies that some parents were able to pursue – namely, buying, in one form or another, their children access to the more privileged aspects of the education system. These accounts will evidence an argument that parents exploit their social location in order to resource their children, not just in some cases in order to reproduce their class privilege, but in line with what some have argued are neo-liberal demands on parenting. However, I will also suggest that parental interventions into their children's education does not necessarily mean that the children themselves cannot claim to have worked hard, but that when these accounts are juxtaposed against those whose parents did not intervene, it can be argued that well-resourced parents were most advantaged in securing their children's future. I will go on to argue that participants whose parents took a non-interventionist approach to their children's education were from working-class backgrounds, and that they built a narrative framework of their success which positioned them as more hard working and morally better entitled to claim that their individual work ethic has been the key to their success than their middle-class peers.

Financially resourcing a child's education includes paying for extra tuition to help with entrance and threshold exams, moving into a specific (usually more expensive) area for the 'good' schools, and paying school fees. Whilst paying a private tutor to help secure a pass in the eleven-plus was something of a dirty secret in the recent past, it is now routine and common place (Ireson, 2006).

Critiques argue that league tables,<sup>9</sup> credentialism and other stratification processes in education have fanned the flame of competition for the most valued educational resources, leading to parents becoming fearful and anxious of the implications of their children not gaining entry into these hallowed sites (Reay and Lucey, 2003, Vincent, 2000). Participants' recollections of their academic journey tell the tale of parents' anxiety about their children's place in the education system. For example, for some, despite being high achievers in primary school by virtue of their SATs results (the very concept tells us something about the credentialist nature of our education system), participants reported that their parents adopted a 'better safe than sorry' attitude. This attitude led them to adopt all or some of the following strategies: move to live in a specific school catchment area; pay for private tuition to coach for the eleven-plus; pay private schools fees; and pay for assessments to identify their child as especially bright in order to gain additional resources in state schools. The following sections illustrate that parents seek to place their children in schools that are commensurate with their family values and educational ideals. Those participants whose parents intervened in their education through the use of economic resources also cited their school as a site for the reproduction of the logic of the education system. Data from interviews with Joseph illustrate that where the family and the school share the logic of the education system, participants' horizons are further solidified:

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<sup>9</sup> League tables have come under specific criticism for the lack of statistical validity (Wilson and Piebalga, 2008).

There's an expectation of going to university both in school and parents. It's not sort of forced on you, but ... I suppose friends kind of talk about it, but going back to why the friends are all talking about applying to Oxbridge, I don't really know. It's hard to pinpoint. If you ... I can't really pinpoint when it all kicked off ... so you built up an image of where you go in education and at some point university appears on that and the closer you come, sort of concretises your view of it. (Joseph, first round)

The sense of fit and inevitability that comes from this fit means that going to university seems natural and inevitable, based on their own academic abilities, and yet it has quite clearly been ensured – insured, even – through the active contribution of parents' material resources. Olivia, a dyslexic, makes the point:

I remember my mum once saying to me that someone asked her, 'Have you considered what Olivia will do if she doesn't make it into the sixth form?', because there's grades you had to get to carry on to our sixth form, and she was like, 'no'. So I don't think it was ever really considered that I wouldn't go on and do A Levels; my parents thought they'd put me through this far through private education, I'm sure I'd get to the end. (Olivia, first round)

How she might have fared had she been born into a family without the resources to mitigate her dyslexia, we cannot know. The luxury of



inevitability, in regards to university entry that the above participants received by virtue of their parents' financial and ideological<sup>10</sup> commitments, was also evident in those who went to grammar schools:

After a year [of A Levels] it was like right, 'you're going to uni, what are you going to do?' kind of thing. It wasn't as if there wasn't a choice, but the way our school was it was just kind of assumed that everyone was going to uni, so we would have tutorials with UCAS application training and things like that, which is quite good I suppose.

(Louise, first round)

Sarah's parents are a good example of the number and type of interventions that they made in her education. Sarah was aware of her parents' first intervention while she was at primary school, when they believed that she was bright enough to be moved up a year. Her state primary school refused their request even after the presentation of privately acquired IQ test results, which reportedly demonstrated that she was brighter than average. As a result, Sarah's parents paid for her to attend a private school in the belief that she would receive a more appropriate level of education. Her private education, however, stopped there after preparation for the twelve-plus gained her entry into a prestigious local grammar school, for which her parents had specifically moved location:

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<sup>10</sup> When asked, no participants offered ideological explanations for their parents' decision to send them to a fee paying school: a good education was the implied reason.

N Well I guess like any parents would kind of pre-select the ones that you kind of go and see, because they aren't going to just say 'go anywhere you want'.

S Yes.

N Because we moved to an area so that we were good for a number of schools, it had all been set up kind of thing. (Sarah, first round)

Here, Sarah suggests that the multiple interventions made by her parents in her education – moving, tutoring, assessments, private fees – are normal and routine things that any parent would do. All but three of the most working-class participants presented their parents' interventions in securing 'appropriate' schooling as natural, inevitable, in the best interests of them, and therefore unproblematic. Moreover, as Sarah suggests, simply to have allowed children to make their own (presumably perceived to be uninformed) choices would have been considered reckless behaviour on the part of parents. Sarah's parents, like many in this study, constrained her choices by moving into an area where the choices were limited to those considered to be 'good'. There were few articulations that parents' interventions were because of concerns about children's lack of academic ability – in fact, quite the opposite. Despite achieving top grades in all her SATs, Jessica's parents (like many of the others) paid for a tutor to help her with the eleven-plus examination:

I think I would have probably been all right to get there, but my parents wanted to make sure because the other schools in the area weren't that

great, but I did get into the grammar school, but I had some extra tuition. (Jessica, first round)

Moving into a certain neighbourhood and/or hiring a private tutor was routine amongst participants, even when it was perhaps unnecessary, if participants' academic ability was anything to go by. While Aisha's parents encouraged her to develop an individualist ethic of try hard/work hard, their actions suggest that they recognised that such a strategy may be risky or insufficient, as they too contributed to their children's education by getting them into the best free schools available. Aisha lived in a working-class area in South Wales for her last few years at primary school, before her parents deliberately moved into the right catchment area for the former grammar school. In Wales, for a period, grammar schools were turned into comprehensive schools, but as Aisha illustrates, parents still knew which schools they should value, and property prices in certain catchment areas still served as a way in which more affluent parents could get their children into a 'good school':

A Pwll Du High used to be a grammar school, hence it's slightly more ...

S So it had all the accoutrements of being a grammar school without officially being one, so no testing, just ...

A [interrupting] Just move into the catchment area. I think it was financially okay for them, it was a bit of a stretch, but they were like, 'It's worth it because it's a nice area, it's a nice place, not only is the

high school good, the primary schools are good as well. (Aisha, first round)

Henry's parents go further by bussing him to a private day school for boys. Further underlying his commitment to positive educational outcomes for his children, Henry does not report that his father shared quite the same try hard/work hard discourse – perhaps because of his relatively superior economic position and his ability to pay school fees, he does not need to make a virtue out of necessity:

I went to a private because there were no decent schools in [our area].

(Henry, first round)

There is evidence here that suggests a concern by parents that academic ability – that is to say, merit – is not enough in the face of the British education system. Getting the best for their child is clearly not something that some parents are happy to be left to chance or their child's 'natural' ability; interventions can and must be made. Parents do so by marshalling their economic resources. This sort of approach was most pronounced in participants' families where getting to the best free schools was the main aim. Grammar schools were widely acknowledged to be the best the state could offer, with a suggestion that could parents afford to send their children to fee paying schools, they would. Parents' actions stand in stark contrast to the idea that merit and hard work are enough to ensure academic success; parents

clearly recognise the stratified nature of the British education system and deploy individualistic responses to circumnavigate it.

There was no evidence that the strategies and choices that parents made prompted them or their children to feel uncomfortable: such choices were often easy to achieve in financial terms and were spoken about in terms that rendered them as not unusual and therefore unremarkable. Only through questioning was I able to elicit this information: it was not presented as a striking feature of their education. For some parents at the lower end of the middle-class economic scale, the considerable financial burden that these choices carried were acknowledged, but again the benefits were seen to outweigh the cost, and where possible, compromises were made. For example, Louise's father's business failed during the recession of the early 1990s; a divorce followed which resulted in her having to leave her fee-paying primary school. However, she recalls her parents' commitment to her education, despite their financially precarious position:

L My mum and dad got me a tutor to do the eleven-plus.

S Even though there was little money around, why do you think?

L Well my mum and dad both went to a grammar school, I don't know, I suppose that might have something to do with it I guess. I suppose they just wanted me and my brother to try and get into the best schools. (Louise, first round)

Time and again research shows that for the middle classes, accruing value for your children through engagement with experts (private tutors) is simply what you do. Ball argues 'the middle classes are filled with a combination of dread and confidence' (Ball, 2003: 4) which leads them to seek such expertise. I would argue that this is particularly true for the lower middle classes, whose downward social mobility can be just a fluctuation in interest rate away. While both of Louise's parents completed their A Levels, neither went to university, opting instead to go into business. They were certainly at the lower end of the middle classes, relying on her father's business acumen and the precarious nature of the economy to ensure their stability. Their anxiety is further evidenced by the fact that Louise applied not to one but two of the local grammar schools to increase her chances of attending one of them; in the end, she got into both. Despite the financial burden and drop in lifestyle for the whole family, ensuring the children's upward mobility was a top priority for the parents.

Parents' strategies, which were more or less difficult to achieve in financial terms, were met with (some of the) participants' own strategies of hard work. As the literature suggests, claims to work hard in school and university were gendered and most often cited by female participants as a means by which they did well in school, with male participants either denying that they had worked hard, or claiming that any hard work was at best sporadic, although they still prescribed hard work as central to meritocratic understandings of success. However, there was little evidence of it being classed: all the girls except one

(who was the most privileged) claimed to work exceptionally hard throughout their education. Working hard was something that female participants said that they felt compelled to do because of the fear of failing to follow the path of good grades, good university and good job. Sarah, like all participants, had a firm understanding of the system she was in (stratified but ostensibly meritocratic) and the undeviating path she was on (FE, HE and towards a 'good' job). This became clear during a discussion about how hard Sarah had worked at school and university, where she talked about how she felt compelled to work hard for her threshold exams in order that she could get through to the next stage, with the final one being securing a 'good' job. I started by asking her whether or not she enjoyed working hard:

I liked the end, when it was all over. But the actual working, I don't know, I just felt like I had to do it otherwise I wasn't going to get good grades and that seemed to be the focus of like, if you don't get good grades you won't be able ... because you had to get Bs and above to go on and do A Levels in your chosen subjects and then obviously in other ones you had to get above a certain level as well. I think you had to ... I think if you got more than three Cs or something, you weren't allowed back to sixth form. (Sarah, first round)

Sarah made clear that the point of her educational journey was to secure a job. I remarked that a job could be gained without the need to go to university, and, though she agreed, it was made clear that getting 'any old job' (to paraphrase)

was not the point of education, but that parents and schools were paving the way towards the graduate labour market:

Sarah [T]hat was just the way that they'd always kind of ... I'd always seen it. I don't know if that was a school thing, a parent thing or whatever, but that was like the progression, that was what you do.

S Did you ever, or did anyone ever question that progression?

Sarah No I didn't, I just thought, right I've got to get onto the next bit, and got to get onto the next bit, keep going that way. (Sarah, first round)

Related to the last quotation is the issue of their relative success. Hard work was perceived to be necessary in elite schools because everyone was clever or cleverer than you. Olivia, who went to a small, expensive private school, illustrated this point in discussion of her GCSE and A Level results. She is uncomfortable not only with her results but also with her thoughts and feelings about them. Below, she articulates something of the complexity of relative achievement in an environment where parental and school expectations are high:

S How did you do at GCSEs?

O I did OK, I worked hard, I got a mixture of 4 A\*s, 3As, 3Bs, [GCSEs] something like that.

S Is that only okay? [Olivia looks uncomfortable] It sounds pretty good to me, are you embarrassed?



O No, I'm not embarrassed; I'm embarrassed that I'd say that, because there was a lot of very bright people in my school, so straight A\*s were the norm. Relative, yes but be careful what you say, I never felt I did as well compared to them. (Olivia, first round)

Benefiting from elite schools and other parental interventions, as so many of the women in this study did, does not seem to negate the need for hard work; in fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the issue of relative ability fuels the need to work hard for some participants. I would argue that participants were not just engaging in a discourse of hard work to make sense of or 'make good' their privilege, but did actually work hard. Literally working hard by putting in lots of study hours or more generally being a 'good' student does, however, seem to render their privileged education innocuous or less visible, allowing for the discourse of meritocracy (and their place in it) to remain intact.

This section has looked in some detail at the ways in which parents make interventions into their children's education through the deployment of financial, emotional and practical resources and support. I have suggested that these interventions are normalised and do not interfere with participants' own perception of themselves as hard workers, which also serves to keep discourses of meritocracy intact.

***A NON-INTERVENTIONIST APPROACH TO EDUCATION:  
HARD WORK AND MERITOCRACY***

This next section will look at the experiences of three participants whose parents were neither university graduates nor employed in middle-class occupations. These participants reported a different relationship between their parents and their education: one that also draws upon discourses of hard work and meritocracy, but one where parental intervention in their education was seemingly absent.

Three participants recalled their parents' involvement in their education in different terms, as well as terms that emphasised their academic independence. When asked to tell their educational story, there was no mention of specific interventions in the form of relocation to 'good schools' or catchment areas, no private tuition, and none of them attended private or grammar schools. In the absence of these references I asked participants to describe their parents' relationship to their education. Participants described themselves as self-driven, as independent learners and their parents as having a supportive but distant approach to their education, which participants described in neutral or positive terms:

I don't think they [my parents] put much pressure on us, I think me and my sisters are quite self-driven, we knew we had to get our work done, there was none of this 'Oh, have you done your homework?, do your homework, go do your homework' sort of thing. (Harry, first round)

Harry constructs pressure to do well in terms of parents actively steering children towards their academic studies as a sort of mild harassment; Thomas also interprets support or parental contributions as vaguely negative:

I never felt any downward pressure from them [parents] to succeed or whatever. (Thomas, first round)

Indeed, one of the main differences between those from a white, British working-class background was the absence of active and explicit interventions by parents into their children's education; this was also matched with the attitude of the schools they attended whose ethos was seemingly not guided by a commitment to getting their charges to university 'at all costs'. Although Thomas, Kathryn and Harry were all marked out during their primary and secondary school days as, relatively speaking, academically exceptional, there was little or no mention of parents' contributions to their education in general, nor to their contribution to learning in particular, beyond attending parents' evenings and being pleased and proud of participants' growing academic achievements. In contrast to the participants of middle-class parents, working-class parents' contributions might fairly be characterised as passive up to and including choices about further and HE. Below, Thomas recalls how his parents did not actively contribute to his decisions to go to university, which he constructs positively as a lack of pressure:

T I wouldn't say that there was ever any pressure from my parents to go to university, I mean ...

S Did they talk about it?

T Not that I can remember in all fairness, there was, I think, they would have been happy with whatever. I mean, there were times where if obviously you got a bad report or whatever or things slipped a little, it was like, ‘Well, what happened?’ But I never felt any downward pressure from them to succeed or whatever. (Thomas, first round)

There is no evidence of parental anxiety – in the guise of specific interventions such as parental tutoring, private tutoring or paying for a private education – surrounding any stage of their education, including their HE (‘they would be happy with whatever’). In Thomas’ and Kathryn’s cases, their parents’ material circumstances might account for this – both families were on restricted incomes; even so, I got the impression that, had private tutoring been on the agenda, these parents would have found a way to find the money. For example, in order that he would have extra money for the first year of university, Thomas’ father worked extra shifts in the factory where he was employed. Unfortunately, this back-fired, because when it came to means testing, in the Welsh system he had earned just over the threshold for Thomas to get full financial support from the government. This is a classic misunderstanding of the system, but demonstrates that the working-class parents in this study cannot easily be characterised as uncaring or uninterested in their children’s education. It would be more accurate to say that they are not engaged with regimes of knowledge of the education system – or in parenting practices – in the same way which middle-class parents typically are.

Despite the fact that neither Kathryn, Thomas nor Harry had a parent that was a university graduate, or were themselves educated in schools which prioritised attendance as a general policy, they, like their middle-class peers, had a strong sense that going to university was inevitable. This is an important commonality across all participants and serves to remind us just how pervasive the widening access to participation rhetoric has been, as well as the neo-liberal agenda which exhorts individuals to take responsibility through the education system for their socio-economic future (Reay et al., 2005). All three assumed that going to university was what people (with good grades) did nowadays, regardless of social background. I asked:

S Can you remember a time when you didn't think that you were going to go to university?

H No.

S Was there a light switch on moment of 'Ah ha, I'm going to go to university'?

H No, both my sisters went to uni, so again, I felt that I had to.  
(Harry, first round)

The presence of older siblings who went to university serves to pave the way for the inevitable sense that Harry had that he would go to university. And, as Kathryn says, things are not the same as they were in her parents' day. It is here that we can begin to see ways in which parents have in fact contributed to their children's education, though in very different ways to white middle-class participants. In some cases their contributions were potentially unbeknown to

parents, Kathryn argues, since she felt an enormous pressure to achieve; but it was indirect and based on observations about the circumstances of her own background, rather than as a result of her parents' intervention into her education:

K Um [academic] failure has never been an option for me.

S Why not?

K [pause] I think that [pause] I'm, I know that given my opportunity my mum and dad would've absolutely flown because they've got fantastic brains, both of them, especially my dad he's one of those people that can just do anything um [pause]. And I suppose a little bit of me would feel guilty if you know they've given me so much that [pause] I'd feel guilty that I hadn't done the most with it when I know that they might've done. (Kathryn, first round)

Likewise for Thomas, university was inevitable because he was clever, but not possessing any one talent that would enable him to forgo a HE and achieve his goals of a good job with good financial prospects; this, in itself, can be viewed as a form of pressure. Although working-class participants did not benefit from the double-whammy of graduate parents and highly motivated schools, they did reflect the growing expectation by successive governments that HE is what all young people with the right academic ability should go on to do if they want to maximise their potential. The New Labour messages about the demands of a knowledge economy had certainly got through to Thomas:

T        Definitely, I always intended to go on to college, like even from very young, it's very clear that university was the way to go.

S        How did you know that?

T        Well just from my perception of like, just watching the news and stuff you got the impression that in order to get good jobs, and get well paid in the future, then you needed to have the university education. (Thomas, first round)

In Thomas' case, aside from the general acknowledgement that going to university is what clever people do, he cites the death of his much elder brother from cancer while an undergraduate as a major motivating force for his own academic achievements. Kathryn's parents' life chances served as a motivating factor for her, while Harry attributes inter-sibling rivalry and his elder sisters' completion of HE as strongly motivating and because, in his own words, 'I am quite clever'. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that these three working-class participants did not feel a pressure to go to university; but there are other motivators or pressures that drive them towards attaining an HE qualification, which are not connected to parental interventions and schools' expectations. For these three participants, going to university was inevitable, not as a direct result of the intervention or contribution of their parents and schools, but through a combination of different factors which include: an understanding of the HE system as meritocratic (clever people go to university); the wider circumstances of the labour market; and a desire to make the most of their circumstances and to do better than their parents had done.

From the accounts of their parents' working lives, Thomas', Kathryn's and Harry's parents worked incredibly hard to provide a financially stable – at least as far the children were aware – and respectable home life. In other words, I do not believe that the lack of parental intervention was derived from a lack of care or commitment to their children's lives; however, the form of hard work necessary to provide a stable home is not articulated as a contribution to their children's education, though a contribution it must surely be. This stands in contrast to all of the middle-class and non-white working-class participants who, as I have demonstrated, talked about their parents' active contributions via interventions to their academic achievements. All three participants were proud – and emphasised the independent nature – of their educational path. They were able to contrast it with their perception that more middle-class peers were the beneficiaries of their parents' interventions into their academic work. In stating the contrast, Kathryn distances herself from its potential benefits by asserting that she would not like it if her parents had been able, or were forced, to help in those ways. Kathryn highlights that her parents' support is confined to taking a passive interest, based on what she chooses to share with them. This allows them to offer words of support, or to help with morale boosting, as opposed to specific academic tasks:

Although my parents had been to visit me at uni and been to my house and seen campus and all the rest of it, they really didn't have a clue what I'd been doing for the last four years. Like, I knew that some of my friends' parents knew all the deadlines that they had for their



coursework and things like that, and would ring them and would proofread things for them, um, but there was none of that in my house. [Laughing] Like, um, ... my parents certainly wouldn't have proofread anything for me and I wouldn't have liked that; if I told them I had a deadline coming up, like I had a big essay to write or something, they would say, 'oh good luck,' kind of thing, but they certainly wouldn't be checking my progress or anything like that. And they wouldn't know the names of my lecturers or anything like that. (Kathryn, second round)

Evidently, an individualised work ethic – and the hard work that this entails – is more greatly valued and used to defend against the un-meritocratic practices of middle-class students and parents. Harry also spoke in ways that indicated his unease with a stratified British education system in general, and middle-class parental interventions into their children's education in particular:

H [I] have [an] argument all the time because most of my [university] friends are grammar school taught, and we have this argument most times when we're drunk.

Sam How does the argument go?

H Like, it's usually jokingly: 'Oh we're better than you 'cause we went to grammar school.' 'Oh, we'd never say that at grammar school,' sort of thing, sort of in jest. But then I just turn round: but I got a 2:1, you only got a 2:2, so, enough said really. 'Cause I don't think – I think if you're willing to put the work in then it doesn't really matter

what school you go to. 'Cause I didn't go to the best primary school in [home town], I went to the one closest to me. And, OK secondary school was quite good, it was one of the better ones but it wasn't as good as say the grammar schools and the King's School in [home town]; it was nowhere as good as that, so who knows what I would have got if I went to that, but then I probably wouldn't be happy with my parents paying £10,000 a year when I was quite happily plodding along with free education. (Harry, second round)

Harry (explicitly) and Kathryn not only demonstrate an accurate understanding of the range of interventions made by some middle-class parents into their children's education; they also implicitly invoke discourses of meritocracy and hard work to defend against the unfair aspects of the education system, and parents' specific forms of intervention. Interestingly, Kathryn's and Harry's evocation of meritocracy and hard work does not stand them apart from their peers who also draw on them, despite living out the enormous contradiction of advocating meritocracy, whilst enjoying a private education. None of the participants explicated this contradiction quite as succinctly as Henry, who went to a fee-paying school:

I feel like in life you get what you deserve, if you work hard. You get what you deserve, I think, and that's the moral I take into most things. (Henry, second round)

Scholars argue that success in the British education system, just as in the United States, depends on an unequal measure of effort, ability and class privilege (Ball, 2003, Rau and Durand, 2000). However, for participants in this study, both interventionist and non-interventionist parenting practices have yielded the same net result in the sense that all attended top universities, and the same, top graduate employer has employed all. Does this prove that middle-class parents were more anxious about their children's education than working-class parents? Perhaps, but of course this study did not include interviews with the parents themselves. It might be that working-class parents were just as anxious about their children's academic and future prospects but managed that anxiety in very different ways. Indeed, managing their anxiety through an array of active interventions may not have been possible for any number of reasons: access to material resources; a differing sense of entitlement on behalf of their children; and the lack of grammar or private provision in their area. However, what I have shown so far is that middle-class parents appear to preach a discourse of meritocracy, whilst simultaneously making a series of interventions that directly undermine meritocratic principles of equality and fairness. This might suggest that middle-class parenting interventions are, at worst, evidence of paranoia, and, at best, unnecessary. Another explanation might be that this serves as evidence for the precariousness and uncertainty of the middle classes; whether or not this represents a change in status for the middle classes would need to be verified by further research that is able to take a historical approach to middle-class educational practices. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that while this

study is neither representative nor generalisable, perhaps the tiny numbers of working-class participants in this study (and by their accounts in their year) reflect that those who got to the Firm did so in spite of their background. From this perspective, a non-interventionist approach looks riskier as it leaves the responsibility for outcomes more squarely with individual pupils. This is less likely to be the case at schools which base their reputation on their pupils' successful transition to excellent universities. Through an examination of participants' recollections, I have been able to demonstrate that some parents in this study intervene in their children's education specifically to facilitate their children's ability to accrue value through credentialism. I have also been able to show that this is something that fits, broadly speaking, not only with neo-liberal ideas about individualism and responsibility, but parenting regimes which the middle-class parents in this study have embraced. This brings me to think about the other forms of credentialism aside from qualifications gained through threshold exams, such as ECA, and the relationship that parents, schools, universities and participants have with them

## **CREDENTIALISM: THE SPECIFIC CASE OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

This section takes the issue of ECA and examines their role in participants' transition to university as well as the graduate labour market, by drawing on the literature on ECA outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Universities and

graduate employers advocate the notion that evidence of ECA and part-time paid work serve to distinguish applicants in a crowded application process; they, supposedly, illustrate their possession of a range of transferable skills (Tomlinson, 2008). As I have already outlined at the beginning of this chapter, proponents of ‘a degree is not enough’ mantra argue that graduates are not leaving university with the right skill sets; they see the accrual of key transferable skills as a solution to this problem. Setting aside the question of whether or not participation in ECA such as sport or part-time work does indeed furnish individuals with the desired skill set, it is routinely positioned as fact from a range of sources (see above). So much so that recent research has highlighted the proliferation of ECA for the under 5s as a growing area in which parents are engaging their children with the belief that this will set them on the right or superior path of embodied development (Vincent and Ball, 2007). As I have already detailed, fee paying, grammar and other ‘good’ schools are, or are considered, specialists in offering pupils many opportunities in which to engage in a wide variety of ECA; this later enables pupils to draw on a wide range of examples to illustrate their possession of key transferable skills on their university application forms. This also leaves them well positioned to participate in ECA once at university, furthering their opportunities to add value for future job application forms. The association of ECA with elite schools as being time consuming and often expensive inevitably lays the path for critics to highlight the potential problems for students who do not access ECA. This has led to the inclusion of part-time paid work as a valuable site for the accrual of key transferable skills (Blackwell et

al., 2001). A further problem providers of careers advice highlight is that despite applicants actually engaging in ECA and/or part-time work, they often fail to recognise the ways in which they can serve as evidence of their skills. Teaching undergraduates how to narrate their activities in such a way that makes explicit the connection between the activities and the skill sets is a primary aim of such services.<sup>11</sup> All of the participants in this study recognised the value of ECA as credentials; that is to say, they understood that evidence of their participation in ECA enabled them to illustrate a range of skills for which employers explicitly stated they were looking.

For all those participants who went to elite schools, their heavy involvement in ECA at school continued during their time at university. ECA during their school years were perceived to be a blend of hobbies: the pursuit of things that they enjoyed doing; things with which the school engaged them – such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme – that were explicitly stated to be fun, rewarding and useful for university applications; and, in some cases, activities that parents very much wanted their children to pursue, such as music lessons to a certain grade. From the sixth form onwards, participants whose parents had made interventions into their education seemed to gain greater awareness of the dual role that ECA could play in their lives (pleasure, leisure and credential). Louise went to an all-girls grammar school. Like many other

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<sup>11</sup> This was a primary aspect of my job role as a CV and application advisor during my time at the University of Warwick Careers Service. Informal conversations with my peers and senior management there also confirmed this priority.

participants who went to selective state schools, she was exposed by the school, and by her parents, to the sorts of activities which are thought to develop a range of transferable skills. Louise is a good example of the near lifelong engagement with ECA, and the seamless transition from education to employment:

I've always kind of been into everything. I did dance all my life really. In 'freshers' week, me and my friend went along and signed up for everything; then we saw this army stand and we were like, 'What's this about?' and they said, 'Oh well you get paid for it and you can go on adventure training,' and we were like, 'Okay ...'. (Louise, first round)

Similarly, Jessica had a life-long relationship with ECA which she explicitly connects to her parents' desires for her not to miss out – on what, she does not say – but her comments clearly connect with the general discourse of competitiveness within the education system, and parents' concerns that their child might be left behind (Vincent and Ball, 2007)

J I took part in quite a lot of extra stuff, did a lot of dancing. I was in the choir at school, sometimes we had concerts; I played the clarinet, I was in an orchestra. Played netball in my earlier years, going back to primary school and up to about year nine, so I always took part in a lot of extra activities that were going on.

S And why was that, do you think?

J Probably because my parents encouraged me to get involved in other things and be sociable; I think they always think that they just

don't want me to miss out and take every opportunity that's coming, sort of thing. (Jessica, first round)

By the time university came around, all participants who had an education history which included exposure to, and participation in, ECA, were aware of the advantage that their engagement would bring to their graduate applications:

S [In] my second year when I joined the rock gospel choir, and then in my third year I joined the music society choir in addition. In third year I was on the committee for the gospel choir, so it ended up taking up lots more time. I was treasurer, so I was trying to sort out all the money and all that stuff as well, going to committee meetings and people fighting with each other.

Sam And were you thinking, 'Oh well, these are all transferable skills, I'll be able to put them down in my application forms'.

S Yes. Ha ha. (Sarah, second round)

The relationship between the leisure, pleasure and credential aspects of ECA were held together with some ambiguity and equivocation for some participants who had taken part in ECA for most of their lives. Participants' habits for engaging in ECA ensured a familiarity and ease with the process that enabled them to continue engaging in them, even in the new setting of university. However, the social imperative to participate in their ECA pursuits – on which they then draw in strategic ways – left some with a sense of unease



and equivocation surrounding their participation. This is in spite of the pursuits' ease and the participants' enjoyment of them:

O I was involved in lots of different societies and that kind of got the ball rolling to start thinking. I know it seems the logical step then on to careers, and what I wanted to do and yes, summers are long and you need to get paid work; so I thought I'd probably be best do something that would get some good experience. I do a lot of hill-walking and hiking, so I got involved with the society that does that at university and on their committee, which was fantastic. I did a lot of stuff in the Students' Union ... and also was involved in societies, and so I was treasurer of that and was in charge of all the finances of the societies.

S And were you doing that strategically for your CV?

O Hard question. I enjoyed ... I think initially I thought, 'this will be good' the CV bumf, yet, no. Initially I think I went for it, and then I really enjoyed and just kept doing loads of different stuff and getting involved. There's so much you could do. One thing I did do, I was on the audit committee for the Students' Union, I was chair of that, and I suppose that was probably a strategic thing.

S Half an eye on the prize?

O Yes. A lot of my friends would agree with that, CV bumfing, that's the reason why I did it – but I enjoyed it as well; hopefully I did a good job. (Olivia, first round)

On the one hand it is clear that participants are definitely seeking to accrue value for themselves. At least to some extent, they view their pleasure and leisure as convertible into a credential which, as I have already detailed, is an advantage in the graduate labour market (Greenbank, 2007). On the other hand, it would be inaccurate to try to convey participants as somehow not ‘authentically’ engaged in these activities. Their ability to do so is, however, greatly facilitated by their educational background: they have, in a sense, carried on where their parents left off in their education. The logic of habitus is complete; but the equivocation that they feel is because the logic is disrupted by the external demands of the graduate labour market. This forces them consciously to reflect on their activities. Where participating in ECA previously felt natural and normal, now the added weight of the ‘demands’ of the graduate labour market asks that they mine their experiences and offer them up for exchange value.

Not all participants expressed ambivalence about the relationship between ECA and the graduate labour market. I asked Frances about her experience of the Firm’s application process, and, specifically, about how she approached the section where the Firm asks applicants to draw on their ECA to identify their transferable skills or ‘key competencies’:

S       And what did you think about the competency based questions on the application form?

F       I found it quite easy because I’d done all this stuff at school and uni. I had quite a few examples of what I’d done: of teamwork, problem

solving, analytical skills. It's all jumping through hoops in my opinion; if you do the right thing, you'll get there. (Frances, first round)

Like the others, Frances fully understands the value of her ECA experiences from her time at school and university; she appears utterly at ease with drawing on them to maximise her application. When she states that 'it's all jumping through hoops,' she is referring to the Firm's application process. She seems comfortable with mining her experiences in order to 'do the right thing', which was 'quite easy'. While Frances recognises that her ease with the situation is related to her wealth of experiences, unlike me, she does not make any connection between this and her privileged social location. The fact that participants are able to use their educational and cultural capital and transition into the graduate labour market with relative ease is, of course, to their advantage. The next section will look at two examples of how a lack of ease with ECA participation disadvantages participants.

Wen's and Thomas' experiences highlight some of the ways in which a late awareness of the need to be able to evidence their transferable skills through their participation in ECA can have uncomfortable consequences. Both young men developed an understanding of the necessary requirements as they moved through their time at university: information was picked up from peers, older students and their university careers services. Wen picked up on things much earlier than Thomas, and set about doing something about it in a highly strategic manner. Unlike the others previously cited, they did not already have

a plethora of experiences on which to draw. Wen demonstrates that he had acquired a feel for the ‘game’ very early on, and sought to exploit the abundance of ECA available at his elite university. He explains:

W I tried to join some, you know, there’s always the game of getting ... when you want to get a place in job, you do something else, set-up societies, join committees as a student ... it doesn’t learn anything, it just wastes your time, you just put it down on your CV. But then I have to do something exactly like that.

S So did you not see it as allowing you the opportunity to broaden your, sort of like, softer skills?

W That depends on who I talk to: if that’s the employer, of course, there’s the way I tell them I have so much soft skills, leadership!  
[laughter]

S Of course! [laughter]

W Just remember from whatever guidebook you read.

S If you had your time [at university] again, what would you do differently?

W No, I think I’m in the same game you know, if I want to get a job, I can’t just sit there and play ... not joining any societies, so it’s just ... I would do the same. But then there’s nothing I can change – it’s what the employers want. (Wen, first round)

Wen has an explicit understanding and sense of humour about the role of ECA as credential, and operates accordingly. However, unrecorded conversations

revealed that trying to participate was not as straightforward as he makes it sound here. Wen found that some activities were informally reserved for British students. For example, anything that was an elected post was near impossible for an overseas student to penetrate, and after a while he identified the societies where he felt welcomed and could make progress (the Hong Kong Society as well as a Gaming Society).<sup>12</sup> I asked Wen whether or not he had enjoyed his role in the societies that he had joined; he stated explicitly that he had not, and that, moreover, he had not learnt anything new in terms of skills or friends. His assessment was that he had to endure participation in ECA because he knew that it was what employers were looking for. This stands in contrast to the others' experiences, where ECA had started out and – to some extent – remained as a form of leisure and pleasure, but that could be subsequently mined for the benefit of the graduate application process later.

Thomas' experiences were very different from the majority of participants and from Wen's. As mentioned above, Thomas went to a secondary school in South Wales, where he was one of two boys to go on to university; his hard working and working-class parents made no explicit intervention into his education. Thomas had worked part-time throughout his sixth form at a supermarket. This, if the careers guidance is to be believed, is a prime ECA

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that Wen did not discuss the more problematic aspects of his student life when the digital recorder was turned on. I asked him in our final interview if it was OK to use our informal conversations as part of my analysis, and he said it was, but of course direct quotes would not be possible, so I am paraphrasing from my field notes.

that can be drawn on to demonstrate a whole range of transferable skills (Knight and Yorke, 2003). However, when it came to making applications to the summer internship scheme, he did not draw upon his part-time work;<sup>13</sup> Thomas believed that it was a lack of traditional ECA that meant he had failed to secure a summer internship. The Firm said that his application could be used instead as an application for the training contract. In stark contrast to Frances and those like her, he did not find this an easy process:

S       What do you remember of the application process?

T       Quite intense. I found it was quite difficult because you never know exactly what they're looking for on these applications: you don't know whether they're after some whizz who is in a million-and-one societies, or does all sorts of extra-curricular stuff; or whether you just want to be like, you, as you are, just chilling out with friends or whatever. So, it's a bit daunting in that respect – you never really knowing exactly what they were after. (Thomas, second round)

In Greenbank's (2007) research he identifies that working-class students believe that being honest, being yourself, and expecting employers to take you as you are, and to see the positives, are good strategies for gaining entry into the graduate labour market. He argues that this research shows reliably that this is not the case, if 'who you are' is not what employers are looking for.

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<sup>13</sup> James made an internship application to the Firm not because he was trying to increase his work experience or as a form of ECA, but as he had heard it was a route to a trainee contract offer. This application failed.

Greenbank (2007) reports that working-class students whose values are at odds with playing the game are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to making the transition from education to the graduate labour market. Students like Thomas who believe that their experiences do not constitute the appropriate form of ECA, and want to play the game, face stark choices, some of which are risky. At the point when Thomas made his application for a summer internship with the Firm (first term of the second year of his degree), he had learnt that his part-time work experience in a supermarket is worthy of inclusion on his application form. He draws on it to illustrate the competencies for which the Firm states that it is looking. Once this application fails, he then goes on to describe how he embellished his leisure pursuits (playing football in an informal university league) and claims that he was not the only one to do so:

S        So when you were answering the competency based questions

T        Oh yes, wonderful.

S        ... what examples did you draw upon?

T        A lot of them ... some were from the time when I worked in [Supermarket], from just before I started uni – that came in quite helpful. And a lot of them were football related ones; I have to admit, they were slightly embellished.

S        Really?

T        So, I think everyone that I played with claimed on one application or another, to have been the captain of the team and organise training and whatever, so. (Thomas, second round)

This comes across as CV-padding, something that hovers between the lines of embellishment and lying; however, it becomes clear that he goes much further than embellishment in order to play the game successfully. Thomas outright lies on his application form in order to be able to meet the demands of the application process as he sees it:

S Did it feel like you were playing a game for the application form?

T I have to admit it did because on my internship application, I'd thought I'd be honest, straightforward, to the point; but then when that wasn't successful, they allowed you to re-submit part of the application for the graduate scheme. So I will admit that certain extra bits got put on the application that second time round. Like being captain of the football team, being members of certain societies that I wasn't even a member of like the Welsh Society, I thought would be a very good one because I knew people who were members, so it was very easy to get an idea of what was going on and things like that. So in a sense, there was a certain element of playing the game the second time round.

S Was there any fear that you would be found out?

T Yes. Big fear. (Thomas, second round)

While Thomas did not claim to participate in anything that he did not know about – after all, he is Welsh and he did play football – he clearly felt the need to lie about how he spent his time at university. In the end, it seems that he was



right, as that application was successful; however, the fear that he would be found out during subsequent rounds of interviews, and throughout his first year at the Firm, haunted him. He expresses a sense that his dishonesty would be revealed through fantastical scenarios where the *real* captain of the football team would be in an interview before him or *actual* members of the Welsh society would be at a work social, and would inadvertently expose his fraudulent claims. Despite his fears, Thomas was absolutely clear that many of his friends had done the same sort of thing on their application forms. He was also clear that it was a direct result of the perception that they were competing for places against those who were very well furnished with ECA from their elite educations prior to starting HE; they were also perceived to be the ones who participated in them once at university.

Obviously, outside the Firm it has a bit of a reputation for even the kinds of people that it might tend to do [get into the Firm]. Say, it might favour people from public school, good backgrounds or whatever, as opposed to people that don't have that sort of background or have all that extra stuff behind them; so I think I did feel, to a certain extent, that I had to have something down, that would make me stand out. (Thomas, first round)

The lies and acts of embellishment – while reasonably well justified by Thomas, and made in reference to needing and wanting to play the game – suggest that he is acutely aware of the stratified nature of the education system and the graduate labour market. But his choices are not without some personal psychic cost: he expressed both fear at being found out, and guilt at the acts of

dishonesty, keenly felt in juxtaposition to the industry's and Firm's alleged values of honesty and transparency:

T There's a definite amount of fraud that goes into the applications but ...

S Which is ironic when considering the field of work that you are going into.

T Particularly ironic, yes you're right. But you just become aware that this is a game that everyone plays and, like, if you want to get a job, or the job you want, then you might well be required to play the game in order to get where you want to be.

S Do you feel guilty?

T Yes, definitely. It's never sat well with me knowing that there were certain things on the application, but I was of the opinion that that was a necessary step to get my foot in the door, and that once I was then in the door, I could show that I was worthy of a place here all along. (Thomas, second round)

There are echoes here of the writings by working-class, feminist academics who share their own sense of fear and shame that they might be found to be fraudulent in their burgeoning stakes and claims in academia (Reay, 1997b). In their writings – like Thomas' talk – there is a dual recognition that 'one is a decent person worthy person of merit', but it is undermined by a sense that 'still this will not be recognised'. In this sense, Thomas does not, unlike Greenbank's (2007) working-class participants, believe that honesty is the best

policy, because he recognises that the system and myth of meritocracy is fractured along class lines:

In the work that I did I was just ... I know that I've always got the impression that if I was true to myself on the application, then I might not have been given the opportunity, because I didn't feel, necessarily, that I was any better or worse than like say, other people on my course; but I felt that the extra-curricular stuff that they did or that they were involved in, would have given them that extra advantage over me, at an application stage. (Thomas, first round)

Inevitably, Thomas' analysis of the situation, like all of ours, was partial. I asked him why he had not just joined and participated in the societies of which he claimed to be an active member, and his answer was complex and somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, he claimed that it was laziness that stopped him from taking part; then, he said it was his studies; and, finally, he said that taking part when you were not really interested in doing so – just for the sake of the CV – was *more* dishonest and time consuming than simply lying about it. My interpretation of Thomas' reasons for not 'simply' participating in the ECA does not rely on blaming him (laziness), but relies instead on a classed understanding of his time at university. For example, his claims to need to study are based on his educational experiences. When he started at his RG university, he described having a hideous time when he came into contact with his peers who *appeared* not only to be cleverer than him, but to have an abundance of confidence in seminars even when they did not know

the answers. The ‘posh’ and clever students’ intimidated him to the point that he claimed not to speak in a single seminar for the entire three years of his undergraduate degree. This reproduced extremely high periods of anxiety, during which he would spend lots of time avoiding studying but not engaging with anything else either; this was a pattern of work that stayed with him not just throughout university, but also during the exams periods at the Firm. Much more will be said about the relationship between school, HE and the ACA exams below. Many of the feelings that Thomas had at university are underpinned by the class dynamics that he was thrown into during his time there. The class-based dynamics operated at many levels. Thomas talked about the strangeness and sense of difference and inadequacy that sprang from the proximity to richer students. He experienced this in his halls of residence when, for example, they unpacked their food shopping, discussed their parents’ jobs, or shared stories about their elite educations, expensive holidays and gap years.

Thomas is explicit that in his home town, the middle-classes and their consumer habits were routinely subject to scorn and their privilege understood as unjust. He also suggests that the expression of scorn and resentment was partially born out of jealousy:

Where I lived, public school had such a stigma – a posh-boy-stigma – attached to it ... the middle class and people like that aren’t really seen in the best light where I come from, so there was always very much a

stigma. I guess a lot of it though was born out of jealousy. (Thomas, second round)

He moves from talking about how the middle class are perceived more generally to the specifics of the class system which affect him most directly – access to the apex of the university system entry into Oxbridge:

[L]ike I was always thinking you know, you always thought private school people get into Oxford or Cambridge, that's just the way it is. Their school or background guarantees them almost a place at a top uni, if that's what they want to do, or that what their parents make them do. Yes, so there's always a certain amount of I guess, jealousy and resentment in that respect, that I would never have got that chance, that I'd have to take my chances going through the normal system which wasn't particularly great on everyone else, and see where it went. (Thomas, first round)

In the above extract we can see that Thomas holds in his imagination a not inaccurate analysis of the secondary and HE system which reproduces existing privileges which provokes in him, and others who share his working-class background, feelings of resentment and jealousy. At this point of his analysis he presents his feelings of resentment and jealousy as justified because of the perceived inequity and injustice of the system (Sayer, 2005b, Hughes, 2005). Through the example of entry to Oxbridge Thomas demonstrates that he feels excluded from a fair crack of the whip by virtue of his social location although

he implies that he is not alone in that fact. In fact, Thomas did not apply to Oxbridge, so there is some evidence that his feelings of potential exclusion actually contributed to serve as a mechanism whereby he took himself out of the running.

Thomas goes on to talk about the way in which going to a RG university and living in halls of residence, which was the first time in his life where he encountered ‘posh people’ *en masse*, and initially his preconceived ideas were reinforced through proximity to their consumer habits.

T [L]ike the first few weeks, you are thinking, ‘Wow, you’re a bit of a posh boy aren’t you, if you can afford to drink all this sort of, or eat this sort of nice food.’ £3 for a thing of Innocent Smoothies in the fridge and they’d have three of them and all this, that and the other, fair enough then. You’re quite a bit of a muppet but the more I got on, well there’s a reason why you can afford it, fair play to you, I’m not going to begrudge you that.

S No?

T I think initially there might have been a certain amount of ‘I wish I had that’ but I think, yes, all the time that resentment is to maybe the fact that they got where they are, not entirely on their own back, as it were, that faded away.

Thomas’ mocking of his middle-class class peers’ consumer habits is, Skeggs (1997) would argue, a way of defending against potential judgments of his own

habits which are born out of necessity (i.e. not having enough money to ‘waste’ on expensive fruit drinks). But almost in the same breath Thomas asserts that his judgments of them as ‘muppets’ were refined as time went on, and he recognised their consumer practices were born out of their circumstances – having well-off parents. Implicit in the comment ‘fair play to you’, which means ‘fair enough’, is the recognition that how a person has played the game is fair enough within a system or context which is inherently un-fair. Thomas says he’s ‘not going to begrudge you that’ because he recognises that his peers, like him, were born into circumstances not of their choosing and that they are ‘just’ living out the logic of their circumstances. His analysis supports a Bourdieusian interpretation of his experiences, where the logic of class reproduction through habitus (parents inevitably passing on their privilege to their children) is rendered a-political, and the potential for class conflict is diminished as the differences and division between people are increasingly naturalised, inevitable and seemingly ‘fair enough’. As time went on his experiences caused him to rethink his opinions about the middle classes; he says that they weren’t all ‘ridiculous toffs and muppets’:

[Living in Halls] was really good because obviously it changed my perceptions on people totally, that they weren’t all ridiculous toffs and muppets, that they were actually, a lot of them were very down to earth people that I got on with very, very well. No, so it was good fun.  
(Thomas, first round)

Thomas' story starts off with a sense of exclusion, but it ends happily for him, having had a good time in Halls – 'it was good fun'. His own analysis suggests that this was possible because the reality of his experiences contradicted those from his imaginary in which being around 'toffs and muppets' was sure to be a miserable experience. He argues that his negative preconceptions of the middle class are challenged as the individuals he meets were 'very down to earth' – praise indeed, if we are trading in stereotypes. To some extent, then, the nice down to earth people that he shares his halls with compensate for the overall unfairness of the class system that sees some young people entering university with very different bundles of economic and symbolic capital.

However, Thomas tells me that the jealousy, (justified) resentment and sense of difference that he felt at bearing witness to his middle-class peers' consumer habits faded away only to reappear during the end of his time at university, when the bundles of capital that they had become visible once more:

S        So it [your resentment] didn't increase? It faded away?

T        I'd say the only time it became a little bit apparent again was when applying for jobs because then obviously, like once you're out of uni, your background it seemed to be like, it would have opened certain doors for you. Certain people stuck together or did certain lavish sort of activities, like going to casinos and all this that and the other, well I could never afford to do that. But it was never ... I never found it an issue or something that necessarily bugged me until, like job applications started coming round again and you're thinking, well



maybe now this sort of stuff is going to open doors to certain institutions that I might want to apply to, and they'll get in based on background, not necessarily academic achievement, even though, in fairness, they all got 2:1s. (Thomas, first round)

My interpretation here is that Thomas is articulating his fears that the logic of class reproduction would work against him – that somehow, through specific activities and consumer habits, some of his more privileged peers would have ‘open doors to certain institutions that I might want to apply to’. Thomas had already told me that he had wanted to be an accountant since he was thirteen, and his dream job was to work at the Firm; however, to his mind this was potentially in jeopardy, owing to the workings of a fairly invisible set of processes potentially taking place in situations and contexts in which he was unable to participate for financial or other reasons. On the one hand, this speaks to the power of class imaginary, because in fact the application process (to the Firm at least) as I have already detailed is not opaque and is reasonably meritocratic. On the other hand, Thomas is right; a successful application to the Firm does depend on the applicant being able to draw on their experiences gained during their participation in ECA. But I would argue that this is not quite the same thing that he is describing, which is grounded in a more fantastical class landscape of casinos, clubs and balls where deals are done. I have little doubt this happens routinely across a range of sectors, and certainly the higher up one goes, but the reality of the graduate labour market is that, inequities of the education system aside, the process is more open to people in

similar positions to Thomas than his fears allow. The accuracies of Thomas' fears and concerns about his ability to compete in the graduate labour market are a serious point, and ascertaining the extent to which privilege reproduces privilege in the graduate labour market should be a central sociological and political concern. But for the purpose of this thesis I am not so interested in the extent to which his fears were accurate; they were real, and I would argue they impacted on his ability to compete in the graduate labour market.

His experiences could accurately be described as a form of symbolic violence (Skeggs, 2004). A sense of his own academic, social and material difference – and at times, inadequacy in relation to many of his peers – was something that he had worked hard to manage from his earliest days at university; something which had, at times, a serious emotional and mental impact on him. While Thomas was able to recognise that more privileged students were, like him, born into circumstances not of their making – you cannot choose your parents – this was not enough to defend against his tendency to feel personally inadequate. This is one of the many by-products of class relations where stratification cannot be understood as a process in which some people simply have more or less than others; but it is one that must recognise that effects such as shame and self-blame are inherent and have material consequences that go beyond the immediacy of the effect (Sayer, 2005b). The affective impacts of social class also influence Thomas' ability to participate in a system that is ostensibly based on principles of meritocracy, such as the accrual of credentials. Although some of these credentials are within his reach, other

forms that some of the credentials take – such as ECA – are reflective, if they are class-based practices and systems of activities which have generally been exclusionary. Thomas has made a pragmatic response to a situation in which his social location, and the personal way in which he was affected by it, have disadvantaged him in the graduate labour market. In so doing, he recognises the ostensible principle of meritocracy must be performed, faked and embellished in order to maximise his opportunities to accrue value for himself.

Of course not all working-class participants experienced their transition to university in the same way. Kathryn's tales from university offer a different insight to the ways in which class practices and embodiment work to reproduce a sense of difference and exclusion. Kathryn's story is different to Thomas' in that hers revolves less around fear and more around moral standards and the ways in which these distinguish or separate her from her middle-class peers. Kathryn is the second daughter of Irish Republicans who came to London to find work during the early 1980s. Kathryn's Catholic upbringing is a strong feature of her childhood and is reflected in her parents' choice of schools for her and her sister. Brought up in north west London, she states when asked about the mix of people she found at university, '[W]here I am in London, I'm well used to different colours and races being around me' (Kathryn, first interview), and so attending a RG university in a large cosmopolitan city was not a big deal to her in those terms. However, embodied markers of social class held some significance. Although she goes on to allude to embodied markers

such as deportment and clothing, it is the speaking voice of strangers that makes an early first impression:

I remember hearing people and thinking, (whispering) ‘God, you know, they’re really posh’, and like, everyone that I can hear was really posh, umm, yeah, I don’t know what I think the next class up to me is, but I think I saw it. Probably, you know, girls who, I don’t really know how to describe it now, girls who I could imagine horse riding, or being quite comfortable, or on a yacht, you know, you, that kind of thing.

(Kathryn, first round)

This recollection of her visit to the university campus can be used to illustrate a number of interesting points. First, that a taken-for-granted aspect of the British class system is illuminated – namely, that accents are used as a short hand way of locating people within it. Second, accents, like other embodied markers of social class, are interpreted relationally with the consequence that Kathryn is implicitly locating herself when attributing characteristics to another ‘I don’t know what I think the next class up to me is, but I think I saw it ... girls who I could imagine horse riding, or being quite comfortable, or on a yacht, you know, you, that kind of thing’. As the stranger comes into view, Kathryn fixes her within a social location. This illustrates a founding concept in Skeggs’ framework that appearance is read as conduct, and I would add accent/voice to that, and, more importantly, that it operates not just from valued to de-valued subjects. Kathryn’s experience of ‘posh’ people on campus did not put her off making her university choice; it did not result in a sense of anxiety or exclusion that meant that she took herself out of the game:

Me and my Mum walked into campus and I said, 'This is it ... Yeah. It's here or nowhere'. (Kathryn, first round)

Like Thomas, Kathryn's ideas about posh people were initially reinforced during her time in halls, and again preconceived ideas about posh people are illustrated through their consumer habits. In this story, Kathryn tells a tale which fits into a 'daddy's little rich girl' narrative, which positions the daughters of rich men as taking advantage of their fathers' wealth and indulging themselves in conspicuous consumption:

Okay, umm ... I would never, I- I think I'm quite proud, in that I would never ring my Dad, and say 'I fancy going on holiday, can you send me some money?', umm, or, 'I need this, can you get it for me?', um, unless I was quite pushed, umm, m- my parents really do bend over backwards for me, and always have, and would give me their last penny, but I remember being in my first year at uni and overhearing this conversation where this girl said, 'Umm, yes, Daddy, uh, me and the girls have booked a holiday, so shall I get them to send the bill to your office, or to home', and I remember just being absolutely astounded and staggered, and telling somebody else the conversation that I'd over heard and she went 'Yeah.' And I remember just thinking, like, they, they live in a different world, like, it was totally normal for them to go out, and go shopping, and come back having spent hundreds of pounds! (Kathryn, second round)

I would argue that this is a story about difference and exclusion, but one that is steeped in moral meaning for Kathryn, one where she asserts her own moral superiority to the more privileged women in her halls. Kathryn positions the behaviour of the girls in the story in relation to her own. She starts with framing her own moral position that she would never run to her dad for money, even if they could afford it, and she ensures that I understand that this isn't because her parents are mean with money (an accusation made of rich people by way of explaining their wealth, which is used in opposition to poorer people who are characterised as generous with what little they've got – 'give you the cloth off their own back', etc.): 'my parents really do bend over backwards for me, and always have, and would give me their last penny'. She then goes on to state explicitly the extent of the difference between her and her hallmates – 'they live in a different world'. The world Kathryn describes that they inhabit is one characterised, in contrast to her own, by luxury, conspicuous consumption and a distance from necessity such as an absence of domestic knowledge:

I had a student budget, whereas they didn't really consider things like that. But it wasn't even the money that they were spending, it was the, just the way that they acted, they were all confident, spoke very well, umm, wouldn't have had a clue how to operate a dishwasher, or a washing machine, and didn't [quietly laughing] ... .(Kathryn, first round)

Kathryn's descriptions of their consumer habits do not stand alone but are given greater meaning by the way in which she intertwines their embodied habits alongside them 'it wasn't even the money that they were spending, it was the, just the way that they acted'. Kathryn's perspective on her experiences highlights the differences as she saw them between her and the posh girls in their halls of residence, but in what she says next we can be in no doubt that all concerned were profoundly aware of the differences:

For the first year that [their behaviour] was hilarious, and on my corridor I was called 'real-life Kathryn', umm, because I just happened to be on a corridor which was all private boarding school girls, which was fine, you know, it was a joke ... .(Kathryn, first round)

In naming her 'real-life Kathryn', her hallmates reinforce her difference – they literally reinscribe it by simultaneously naming her and her difference. Kathryn presents her difference positively through the positioning of the girls' behaviour as undesirable and morally suspect. Unlike Thomas, there is no evidence that Kathryn is envious or desirous of the habits that these girls conspicuously perform, but both Thomas' and Kathryn's stories echoes the themes of Skeggs' (1997) research, which argues that claims to respectable and moral behaviour (not being profligate, paying your own way) are a product of a relational class system where one group has to defend against the potential judgments of the other. Moreover, I would argue that this tale serves to illustrate the ways in which working-class participants experienced social difference as exclusion, even if in the retelling of difference the story is imbued

with humour, and ‘posh’ girls are derided and positioned less favourably than the teller. Unlike Thomas, Kathryn’s awareness of her difference did not seem to have a negative impact on her experiences at university. In stark contrast to Thomas, Kathryn was very involved in ECA, found and took on many opportunities for relevant work experience and did not convey a sense that the graduate labour market was not meritocratic. Their different reactions do not work to invalidate one or the other – they simply illustrate that people respond in similar and different ways to the embodied experiences that the close encounters at university provide. Some reactions are more profound and problematic than others; the common theme to remember is that differences are not neutral or entirely relative, but have the capacity to reproduce social exclusion.

### ***CONCLUSION***

Through an analysis of participants’ retrospective accounts of their educational journeys, I have located some of the roles and relations that they and their parents have to the British education system, as well as the graduate labour market. In so doing, discourses of meritocracy, credentialism and hard work were understood to be highly relevant to parents’ and participants’ experiences of traversing the British education system, but in different ways for participants of different backgrounds. Specific levels and forms of intervention into participants’ education were understood to be a dominant feature of the vast majority of participants’ lives. I argued that this was evidence of what Reay



and others identify as a degree of anxiety around middle-class children's education. Parental interventions were understood to be central to participants' access to specific types of education, such as private tuition, elite fee-paying schools and successfully gaining entry into state-funded selective schools. I problematised participants' evocation of merit and hard work as the basis of their educational success, by recognising that parents made a number of financial interventions into their education. This secured very, and relatively, privileged educational experiences for their children. Interventions were not just understood to be financial, but also took into account how family values in relation to educational attainment were transmitted to participants through talk. Parental talk reportedly emphasised the possibilities of children's' success by contrasting participants' opportunities with their own; in this way, parental talk had a powerful, motivating force on participants, and can be understood to be a form of intervention.

Credentialism, which is most often recognised as educational qualifications, was also a central theme of this chapter. I expanded this definition to include ECA, which have become an important yet informal mode of credential in the graduate labour market. The last section in this chapter has confirmed that the possession of ECA is important for a successful transition into the graduate labour market; moreover, participants understand this at various stages of their education, which is largely informed by their location in the education system and the level of intervention made by parents, as well as the relevance of their knowledge. These findings support the work of sociology of education

scholars, who argue that the middle classes monopolise the best educational sites as a means of reproducing their cultural, economic, educational and ultimately symbolic capital. In contrast to the focus on middle-class educational practices, the experiences of two working-class participants highlighted that subsequent governments' message about the relevance of educational attainment beyond FE and into HE have reached beyond the middle classes; this may amount to evidence for a neo-liberal discourse on the role and responsibility of individuals to secure their future. Analysis of Harry's, Thomas' and Kathryn's transcripts identified that their parents' relationship to their education could not be characterised by interventions; in fact, the opposite was the case. Whilst all cited their parents and immediate family as motivating forces in their lives, in comparison to the other participants in this study, Harry's, Thomas' and Kathryn's parents were *passively* involved in their children's educations. Kathryn, Harry and Thomas were all aware of the interventions that the parents of their middle-class peers made into their education, and had different responses to it. For Kathryn it was a source of pride, as she was able to recognise her achievements positively within the discourses of meritocracy and hard work; these were further shored-up in opposition to her middle-class peers. Thomas and Harry had a more problematic relationship, as they variously recognised the inequity of a system where peers were systematically advantaged by their parents' interventions. Tales from Kathryn's and Thomas' transition to university illustrate the powerful impact that embodied class practices have on individuals and their ability to make the most of their time at university. Their quite different

abilities to cope with the symbolically violent experiences of their transition periods at university point to the fact that the system is risky, and only the most robust and resourceful make successful transitions, to the psychic detriment of some.

Through participants' talk about their educational journeys, I have been able to demonstrate that all but three participants in this study are aware that their parents draw upon a range of resources and capitals in order to make interventions into their education. However, participants' understandings do not translate into recognition that their relatively privileged educational biographies may appear to disrupt their claims to have succeeded largely on the basis of merit and hard work. Clearly, the presence of three working-class participants in this study demonstrates that, for some, the combination of merit and hard work is enough to accrue value in the British education system and graduate labour market. However, the evidence from interventionist parenting practices reveals that the majority of participants' parents do not trust the system to work effectively for *their* child, and therefore work hard to mitigate against the potential risk for failure and to ensure that their children accrue just the right amounts of value.

## CHAPTER 6 – WHAT (NOT) TO WEAR: SEEING IS BELIEVING



### *INTRODUCTION*

During the first week of participants' induction period at the Firm they attended a session that concerned instruction on appropriate employee dress codes. This chapter draws on participants' experiences of the sessions to think about the interrelated issues of embodiment and physical capital, identities and professionalism. I will argue that for the Firm, an ideal organisational body is a classed body and that this has specific implications for the Firm's 'diversity' agenda. This chapter will further argue that the inclusion of the induction session contributes to the reproduction and misrecognition of some bodies as having greater and lesser value and that the session amounts to a process of symbolic violence or class-in-action. Finally, it will be argued that despite my analysis of the session, it also held some positive implications for employees' identities and participants' ability to perform organisationally-desired modes of professionalism; thereby they accrue value within the Firm.

My analysis of the induction session draws together literature from sociology of the body and organisational studies to understand better the relationships between embodiment and physical capital, identities and professionalism. Researchers interested in the sociology of the body have found the work of Bourdieu a productive site for recognising the relevance of the social reproduction of the body as a means by which physical capital is converted into other forms of capital. Shilling (1992: 6) argues that for Bourdieu, physical capital is formed through an interrelationship between an individual's social location, 'habitus' and taste. Social locations refer not only to where people live, but to the material circumstances which contextualise their daily lives.

Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Shilling (1992, 2004) and others have argued for a recognition of the embodied form of cultural capital that operates 'in the form of long lasting disposition of the body and mind' (1992: 3). These long-lasting dispositions impact on an individual's body schema – 'the individual's sense of their bodily boundaries and capacities' – (Shilling, 2004: 480) which is developed from their relationship to their habitus. This research was focused on the role of educational institutions in the production of bodies with sporting capacities, which then have the potential to convert their physical capital into other forms of capital, such as economic, social or different types of cultural capital. The relevance of physical capital to social reproduction has since been usefully applied to other fields and disciplines to illuminate the formation and reproduction of social class. For example,

historian Simon Gunn (2005) argued that a focus on physical capital illuminates social processes which are often absent from analysis of social class which traditionally focused on men's' public activities. In his study of the 'formation' of the middle-classes in Victorian England, he argues that

[w]omen, especially married women, represented embodied cultural capital; they were arbiter and proof of distinction (or of its vulgar other) ... While little studied by historians, bodily self-control and the appearance of command have represented some of the most fundamental components of class ... The body was thus an instrument of cultural capital, expressed in physical ways of being. The long process of education within the middle class inscribed a particular bodily manner[.] (Gunn, 2005: 55-60)

The exact forms in which physical capital has greater or lesser value is a matter of empirical investigation; however, what current studies highlight is that physical capital is as relevant to social processes today as they were in Victorian times. Skeggs (1997, 2000, 2004) has long argued that contemporary class relations are much better understood from a historical perspective and, like Gunn, sees the Victorian period as a specific epoch in which class formation occurred through the development of new forms of taxonomy. Moreover, she argues that based on appearances, the middle classes are particularly situated to classify themselves by differentiation from Others (Skeggs, 1997: 2), and argues that the appearance (at least) of 'respectability was the central mechanism through which class emerged'. Embodiment and

physical capital are for Skeggs, as for others, a central aspect of class formation and has an effect not just at the level of the symbolic, but necessarily has a complex and very real relationship to material outcomes.

It has been recognised that appearances are central to ‘being’ a professional and that the concept of professionalism has become a dominant discourse in occupations that extend far beyond the traditional professional occupations (Waring and Waring, 2009). It has also been recognised that the ‘correct’ embodied dispositions have evolved from middle-class habitus, thus making it difficult (but if willing not impossible) for those who do not share a middle-class habitus to embody the ‘correct’ dispositions (Nixon, 2009). Collin (2011), also using a Bourdieusian framework, demonstrates through an analysis of portfolio programmes<sup>14</sup> in American schools that students are explicitly taught how to be, and practice being, professional through the use of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ regarding deportment and what students should wear for their interview. In such ways, professionalism has become a type of physical capital

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Typically, these programs call students to assemble items that point to the qualities and skills they have cultivated in their academic and non-academic lives. A student, for instance, might indicate her creativity and artistic sensibility by including in her portfolio: excerpts from sketch books; papers written for art history classes; and awards for fashion design. Moreover, students are called to compose introductory essays describing how these items plot out their personal trajectories through official spaces (e.g. schools and professional organizations) and into paid work. Once completed, students present their portfolios/themselves to exit interview panels comprised of businesspeople and educators. These events function as dress rehearsals for job interviews, college interviews, and the like.’ (Collin, 2011: 785).

which can be converted into other types of capital; analysing the embodied aspects of professionalism as a type of physical capital therefore becomes an important way in which we can understand social reproduction. In particular it becomes important when wanting to analyse the ways in which social class is reproduced through misrecognition.

Collin argues that the programme he researched structured students' experiences in terms of class misrecognition through the use of ideals of respectability and professionalism. It does this 'in ways that value the bodies and ways of being of the powerful and devalue and police those of the less powerful' (Collin, 2011: 802). Collin's (2011) study highlights the significance of physical capital at key moments of transition for young people, such as from secondary to HE, and from education to employment, as a means by which it is used to reinforce positively and negatively specific relationships between young people and their present and future potential in the labour market. Shilling (2004: 474) argues that '[w]hile our physicality has become a possessor of symbolically valued appearances, it is additionally implicated in the prosaic buying and selling of labour power and the accumulation of other forms of capital'. Exhortations for professionalism in the work place can therefore be seen as a call to perform or embody a set of behaviours that are classed, such as 'respectability', as much of what seems to count as *being* professional resembles older versions of respectability. These understandings of the body clearly lend themselves to an analysis of the relevance of physical capital, not just for the site of education, but also to employment relations. The



following section looks in more detail at the relationship between employment and physical capital through the lens of labour process theory and Foucauldian analysis of organisations.

Academics interested in labour process theory have also used a Bourdieusian analytic framework to think about the relevance of the body to paid work, and have developed the concept of aesthetic labour to illustrate the exchange value of physical capital within certain occupational fields, such as hospitality and retail. Witz, Warhust and Nickson (2003) write: ‘We offer a working definition of aesthetic labour as the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied “dispositions”’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 37). The precise make-up of the aesthetic desired by an organisation depends on a range of organisational and occupational factors. Williams and Connell, researching high-end high street stores in the USA, detected a specific aesthetic which they describe as middle class:

Aesthetic labour includes a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness. Employees at these stores must embody particular styles of standing, speaking, and walking. ‘Looking good’ and ‘sounding right’ are their jobs’ primary requirements. In virtually every case, the right aesthetic is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white. (Williams and Connell, 2010: 350)

As with Collin’s (2011), students’ employers are directly involved in the reproduction of social inequalities, as they choose employees who ‘naturally’

embody the aesthetic of the dominant and privileged classes, as it suits their commercial needs. Labour theorists recognise, therefore, that physical capital is an important aspect of the labour process, as employees' embodiment is used or deployed for direct commercial exchange value.

Those writing in the field of organisational studies have also found privileging the body to be productive. Many of these scholars have employed a Foucauldian framework to think about the relevance of the body in organisational settings and its relationship to power (Hatcher, 2008). More specifically, they employ this framework in thinking about the relations within the professions and the ways in which the concept of professionalism has been utilised both within and outside professional occupations. Being a professional is associated with a range of benign, noble and prestigious values such as rationality, which emanate from the traditional professional roles such as medicine and law organisations – whose commercial viability relies on its employees to *be* professional – are deeply engaged with fostering and furnishing employees with the appropriate means by which they can appear, at least, to *be* professionals (Hatcher, 2008). Embodying professionalism requires individuals to engage with discourses which pertain to a whole range of real and imagined attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which are to be either embraced or avoided. It has been recognised from a number of different perspectives that being a professional is more than credentialism: it is argued that 'bodily performance is an important part of any professional identity' (Hatcher, 2008:

160). Surveying a body of work on the professions and professionalism, Hodgson argues that

[b]roadly, a distinction has been drawn between the traditional view of the profession as *a purely productive organization of experts* possessing skills and knowledge vital to society and the critical view of the profession as the mobilization of monopoly power to secure power and influence for a privileged minority. (Hodgson, 2005: 52)

In her well-cited article, Evetts (2006) largely agrees with this assessment and lays out the recent history of approaches taken in the analysis of the professions and professionalism within sociological disciplines. She argues that analysis of the professions focuses, in the 1970s and 1980s, on the status of occupational groups such as lawyers and doctors, how that status was achieved through credentialism and market closure, and the often (negative) implications this had for users of those services, governments and allied occupations or quasi professions. Evetts goes on to argue that this led to an analysis of the concept of professionalism as a discourse and a focus away from the substantive issue of the occupation to a focus on the body, which it argued is a vehicle for professionalism. This perspective fits with interactionists who argue that ‘professionalism involves not only professional knowledge/expertise but equally importantly the processual *enactment* of professionalism, where “to be accepted one must have learned to play the part”’ (Becker, 1970: 4, cited in Hodgson, 2005: 52). Through a focus on the embodied and performative aspects of professionalism, scholars have argued that the *behaviour* of the

person bearing the credentials is as important as the credentials themselves, and is therefore worthy of empirical analysis.

Scholars have already noted that organisations operate with gendered understandings of what professionalism *looks* like. Hatcher (2008) interviewed women who self-identified as professionals, and her analysis highlighted that a gendered professional identity is closely associated with certain ideal body types; it is also associated with an aesthetic that patrolled the boundaries of 'appropriate' femininity, where excess of flesh and/or sexuality was regarded as deeply undesirable and indeed problematic for an individual wishing to be seen as 'professional'. It is through an analysis of what professionalism means for women that the issues of respectability are most obvious, as excess is oppositional to respectability. Excess is do-able in specific circumstances; usually when it is done by individuals whose respectability and professionalism is already secure; they are then more able to 'do' excess through the use of irony and humour (Skeggs, 1997, Skeggs, 2000, Skeggs, 2004). Specifically, this is 'done' through more amenable occupations, such as the creative industries, that in fact require a degree of irony and humour to be deployed through self-presentation (Nixon and Crewe, 2004). Current studies suggest that in corporate organisations, women's professional status is not yet so secure that it can withstand excessive bodily performances without some risk being posed to women's status as professionals (Hatcher, 2008, McDowell, 1997). Moreover, studies show that women are acutely aware of this fact and engage in lots of body work to ensure as far as possible that their

bodies fit with organisational ideals surrounding embodiment (McDowell, 1997, Sinclair, 2005, Trethewey, 1999). It is unclear how the women come to know what the rules of the game are in corporate life with regards to appropriate embodiment, unlike the participants in this study who are explicitly taught them. The specificity of these embodied practices relate to the particular values of the profession *and* the organisation that houses it in combination with normative understandings of gender and class. While there are commonalities across professions, there are also differences owing to the nature of the work, and the historical circumstances in which the profession has evolved. Embodied professional practices are also affected by time and space, and the relationship between individuals, the profession, the organisation and discourses of professionalism are complex.

### ***BODIES AT WORK: THE SPECIFIC CASE OF ACCOUNTANTS***

This section will look in more detail at the specific case of accountants as knowledge workers in relation to their embodiment and the necessary physical capital that, it is argued, is a requirement of the role. The period of the three year training contract has been identified as a time when trainees are ‘socialised’ into the profession; critical accountancy scholars have argued that the conduct, bodily performance or embodiment of the accountant is central to the successful execution of the role (Abbott, 1988, Anderson-Gough et al., 1999, Anderson-Gough et al., 1998, Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, Coffey, 1993, Coffey, 1994). In summary of the literature in this area, Anderson-

Gough et al. (2002) quote the findings of an early study by Macdonald (1995: 207) that '[g]reat care is taken to get the right work performed, in the right way, by the right people, wearing the right clothes. Of such stuff is the garment of professionalism made: and such is the display of knowledge and trustworthiness that justifies monopoly'. Grey (1998: 568) reported a similar finding and highlighted the interrelated complexities of 'issues of fairness, physical appearance, gender, sexuality and hierarchy' at work in the Big Six accountancy firms in the socialisation of trainees to be professional accountants. The issue of women in accountancy has been given specific attention by scholars, not only in relation to their ability to gain entry and progress in accountancy firms with regard to their gender, (Ciancanelli et al., 1990, Loft, 1992, Kirkham and Loft, 1993, Kornberger et al., 2010, Lehman, 1992) and gendered expectations of the role of the accountant, but also in relation to their roles as mothers (Haynes, 2008) and their status as BME women (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006); finally, also as they are represented in organisational literature such as financial annual reports (Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002, Duff, 2011) and recruitment materials (Jeacle, 2008).

Accountants are engaged in forms of knowledge work that critical accountancy scholars have identified as problematic because of the degree of ambiguity involved in audit processes and procedures (Carrington, 2010, Power, 2003a, Alvesson, 2001). The inherent ambiguity is managed by members of the profession in a number of ways, including the appeal to clients as experts. While tough examination processes are designed to contribute to the discourse

of accountant as expert, *looking right* for the job is also central to the active management of clients' expectations in a climate of ambiguity:

The ambiguity of knowledge and the work of knowledge-intensive companies means that 'knowledge', 'expertise' and 'solving problems' to a large degree become matters of beliefs, impressions and negotiations of meaning (Alvesson, 2001: 870).

Alvesson (2001) argues convincingly that the more ambiguous the organisation's form of knowledge takes, the more energy is spent on impression management at all levels: 'professional-industrial, corporate and individual' (Alvesson, 2001: 870). The issue of ambiguity is compounded by the limited ways in which audit can be done, which makes competitive differentiation amongst firms difficult, despite their rhetoric to the contrary. Current attempts at competitive differentiation have, Alvesson suggests, been underpinned by a philosophy that bigger equals better, hence the numerous mergers in the last fifteen years of the main audit firms, which, at the time fieldwork was undertaken, stood as The Big Four. The Big Four are in fact enormous trans-national entities: (re)producing a cohesive image, reputation and commercial success requires the use of resources and techniques at every level of the organisation. In other words, 'macro-constructions of professionalism, auditor independence, and institutional trust in audit practice are accomplished, built up from, and reproduced by micro-interactions' (Power, 2003a); viewed from this perspective, employees looking and sounding right, at a glance, become commercially important to the

organisation. Historically this led firms to recruit in their likeness but, ostensibly at least, times have changed and a 'diversity' recruitment strategy is now central to large organisations' business models.

The chapter on the use of prestige, enchantment and diversity argued that the Firm places a good deal of value on recruiting diversely to its graduate trainee programme. Recruiting diversely, and a focus on person-organisation fit (POF) are two interrelated trends in human resource management that are making an impact despite some ambiguity regarding their success (O'Reilly et al., 1991, Sheridan, 1992). POF is thought to impact on the productivity of workers and retention rates, clearly two issues central to HRM in any organisation, and specifically pertinent for audit firms who devote significant resources to qualifying graduates with the Association of Chartered Accountants. Organisations' motivation to adopt diversity into their recruitment agenda has been driven by equalities legislation, emergent 'minority' commercial markets, fears of labour shortages, impression management (a.k.a. Social Corporate Responsibility) and a belief that a 'diverse' workforce promotes desirable forms of innovation and creativity (McKay and Avery, 2005). The research suggests recruiting more diversely works best when members of BME groups are supported in the work place with a range of policies and procedures which aim to facilitate their presence. The Firm in this study had a range of policies and procedures including active and resourced networks for different identities such as gay, lesbian and women, prayer rooms and the provision for specific dietary requirements. It was also their policy to provide details of the Firm's



dress code in employee joiner packs as well as to devote a session during their induction on the Firm's dress code – 'business-casual' – which is the empirical focus of this chapter. Now with an emphasis on diversity, the organisation has to ensure that employees look and sound right – that is to say, look and sound professional – in new ways, as they can no longer rely on the fact that employees automatically come with the correct habitus. Aside from the other perceived benefits (namely commercial) of having a cohesive organisational aesthetic (Strati, 1996, Hancock and Tyler, 2007), giving clear instructions on dress codes is a very simple way of enabling people to *appear* to fit into an organisation from day one.

### ***CLOSE ENCOUNTERS; BODIES AT WORK***

In case there was any doubt that embodiment is classed and was central to participants' early experiences of the Firm, we shall turn now to hear briefly from Kathryn and Thomas and their recollections of their early experiences at the Firm, which were strikingly classed and embodied. As the previous chapter illustrated, Kathryn is fully conversant in the embodied forms in which class differences take shape: she experiences it and names it. The same is true during the first few days at the Firm, where she once again encounters class privilege through the embodiment of her peers:

Um when we first started I remember that a few people just sort of glided in like, not like they owned the place, but that they were just entitled to be here, that kind of thing; and you know in the months since

I've got to know them, you know all of their parents are professional people and it's that kind of background and just kind of flowed and you know their older sister's a doctor and their younger brother's training to be a dentist and he's going to be an accountant, you know, and it's just that kind of works, like, for them they just kind of follow this little road, and yeah I think and of course they're at [the Firm], of course, whereas I remember when I started I was like 'oh wow isn't it exciting' kind of thing. (Kathryn, second round)

By doing this she accounts – rather accurately – for their embodiment in class terms, and is thereby able to value her experiences of excitement and awe and find criticism in the appearance of ease and nonchalance of others. Kathryn is doing more than finding a way to value her own experiences, also hinting at the inevitability of her middle-class peers finding themselves at the Firm: 'they just kind of follow this little road and yeah I think and of course they're at [the Firm]'. Kathryn contrasts her interpretation of her peers' behaviour with her own experiences of their early days at the Firm. In a manner which is recognisable from her earlier stories of her university days, I would argue that she is subtly reinforcing her own entitlement to be at the Firm on the basis of merit, and without the privilege of treading a path that others in her family have used before. This, I would argue, is a means by which she is able to take the moral high ground, either for its own sake or as an act of defence against the hidden injuries of class in which repeated misrecognition of working-class identities occur (Sennett and Cobb, 1993, Sayer, 2005a, Skeggs, 1997, Skeggs,

2004). Kathryn spoke about her unease during the first few days of starting the job, and immediately situates how she felt in relation to how she experienced her peers' embodiment. She does not state that she feels nervous (as anyone might in the first few days in a new environment), but reacts directly to the embodiment of those around her. Kathryn's articulation is interesting again for its inclusion and use of language as a signifier of social class/competence/familiarity with a situation. As far as I am aware, voice, language and accent was totally absent from the 'What Not to Wear' session, interesting because it is so commonly perceived to be central to impression management.<sup>15</sup>

S: How did you feel during the first few days of induction?

Kathryn: Oh yeah um a little bit sort of inferior in the way that ... maybe that the language that they used they were totally au fait with, you know, business driven situations, not even business but formal, polite, wearing suit situations, um ... (Kathryn, second round)

I suggest that Kathryn's analysis reinforces arguments made by Skeggs (1997, 2004), that those who come from a working-class background are aware of and

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<sup>15</sup> I remember Kathryn and I talking while the recorder was off about accent and language and how her own changed as she went to university (for which she was teased by her long term England-resident Irish family) and she laughingly noted that she sometimes adopted a 'work voice' similar to the more well-known 'phone voice' parodied by the character Hyacinth Bouquet in the television show *Keeping Up Appearances*.

are active agents in the class relations in which they find themselves, and are not passively experiencing processes of domination. As I have already outlined, Thomas, like Kathryn, came from a solidly working-class background, and spent time at an RG university living in halls of residence where, in his own words, he ‘met quite level headed people that went to public schools and were generally nice people on top of that’. This challenged his prejudices about ‘posh’ people whom he previously broadly labelled as ‘wankers’. In contrast to his time at university, this period of transition into the Firm seems to reaffirm the most negative stereotypes of ‘posh boys’:

[T]he ones that tend to come here don’t seem to be, they seem to be that other side of the public school boy, the people that walk around, not with a chip on their shoulder, but almost as if they’re walking a little bit taller than you just so that they can peer down on you regardless of, whatever, like they can always find a way that they can find something to look down on you for. (Thomas, second round)

Thomas went further in articulating his anger and frustration at the embodied ways in which class differentiation and misrecognition manifested itself at the Firm. He considered the deployment of clothes and designer labels as a key way in which class distinction was sought:

S: How do you tell they’re ‘posh’?

T: I guess just in the way they dress, with their labels, and you’re like, okay, it’s a piece of bloody fabric, get over it! ... Like your Ralph Laurens and oh God, all other sorts of crap, it’s just like, there’s

nothing wrong with Primark or H&M or any other high street shop, like there'll be a few people in the team that like exclusively only wear certain designers, like the fashion for a public school boy; well a former public school boy now, wears like shirt, jeans, jumper or bloody bomber jacket thing and you're, like, oh dear God. (Thomas, second round)

Reading from the body and making judgments is not unidirectional, but it does happen within social/moral structures and therefore (re)produces painfully felt inequalities 'like they can always find a way that they can find something to look down on you for'. On the exact issue of the 'What Not to Wear' session, Thomas had little to say and this may be a reflection of his time at Top Ten University where he would have been exposed to the expectations of dress codes over a number of years from his peers and the repeated opportunities of contact with The Big Four from his course (Accountancy and Finance), and at the career fairs where they had a very strong presence. However, Thomas' experiences perfectly underscore the rationale behind the 'What Not to Wear' session: his own experiences at university have shown that there is the potential for misrecognition when appearance is read as conduct,<sup>16</sup> and while

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<sup>16</sup> His encounters at university, however, are very specific: the halls experience forces an interaction and a closeness that is not matched in this workplace environment and it seems he was lucky with the group that he lived with who were open to him. This was not his experience on his course, where he felt extreme sense of alienation from his course mates, which was deeply felt as classed.

he articulates his contempt for some aspects of the performance of social class, the sense of difference and misrecognition is nonetheless keenly felt. Both Thomas' and Kathryn's experience remind us that social class, as a system of social inequality, is believed to be revealed in a walk, a posture, or through spoken accented words; it is truly embodied. Thomas and Kathryn's experiences support a Bourdieusian analysis which insists on the centrality of the body for an analysis of class relations. The second half of this chapter looks at the experiences of participants who attended the instructional induction session which covered what trainees should and should not wear in order to look professional and comply with the Firm's dress code of 'business casual'.

So far I have argued that embodied forms of professionalism operate as a type of physical capital which can be converted into other forms of capital such as economic, cultural and symbolic. I have also drawn on literature from the sociology of the body and organisational studies, and used data from this study to argue that professional embodiment is classed and gendered and that organisations are, and should be, deeply invested in ensuring that employees embody professionalism.

### ***WHAT (NOT) TO WEAR – (RE)PRODUCTION OF REGIMES OF CLASS AND GENDER AS PROFESSIONALISM***

Actively recruiting people from a variety of backgrounds and on the basis of merit means that employers can no longer be sure that recruits come from a

background that has furnished them with a taken-for-granted understanding of the right aesthetic for the job. External corporate image consultants are routinely used by blue chip companies to convey an organisation's dress code to new recruits, or to offer existing employees tips on how to increase their appeal to clients (Marshall, 2011). Participants in this study attended such a session on the first day of their induction, despite already having a formal outline in their contract/starter packs which seems to have been designed to introduce new recruits to the organisation's dress code – 'business casual' – in an interactive way. I am unable to ascertain the explicit aim of the session, as I was not allowed to attend (in fact my HR contact within the Firm did not even know it existed to the point of expressing her extreme doubt that the Firm would 'instruct' its employees in these ways). From participants' descriptions I have ascertained that the session was delivered in a light-hearted way by a woman in her mid-forties from an external organisation, and was focused on the art of embodied impression management. Participants report that the opening of the session was interactive, where the audience was invited socially to locate the facilitator based on what she was wearing. This introduced the concept that appearance matters and operates as a device to pigeonhole people positively or negatively within 'common sense' understandings of the British class system. Participants also reported that the session included instruction on the importance of embodiment, including deportment and personal hygiene, to 'looking professional', and how to interpret the Firm's 'business casual' dress code and the different practical implications that this had for women and men.

Frances' description of the session focuses on how it highlights the connectivity between aesthetic choices and impression management:

She [session leader] came in an outfit and then went, 'Right, did I go to school? Did I go to university? Did I go to boarding school? Private school? Did I grow up in a village or a town?' And we had to say what we thought from what she was wearing, so to instil in you that how you dress does impact about what people think about you and the perceptions they have. So that was quite interesting. And we got most of them wrong; we thought she was a lot posher than she actually was, just because of how she was dressed ... (Frances, first round)

Frances's description suggests that the facilitator invited them to judge her (class) background based on her appearance, where attendance at a private school or university are used as proxy indicators of social status or mobility. Here the session facilitator serves as a live learning manual, instructing attendees on the relationship between appearance and the impressions that are drawn regarding an individual's social background. The facilitator uses her own embodiment to drive home messages not uncommon to many a sociological theorist – namely, that appearance counts and is perceived to be a key signifier of social class: 'we thought she was a lot posher than she actually was, just because of how she was dressed' (ibid.). It is well documented that social class is treated by many as a proxy by which a whole range of moral judgments can be made about a person's respectability and self-worth (Sayer, 2005b, Skeggs, 1997). The session invites new recruits to apply their own



(shared?) common sense understanding of the British class system, to play a game of 'Guess Who' or perhaps more specifically 'Guess Who, Where and What'. Frances says that when invited to guess the speaker's social background, they got it 'wrong' – that is to say, they got the impression that she was from a social background that differed from her 'real' one. The session seems to convey the message that impression management is thought to be achievable through the acquisition and deployment of the 'correct' forms of aesthetic knowledge. The 'correct' aesthetic is implied by the positive association of the facilitator's dress and trainees' judgment (before she took them off) that she was 'posh'. In so doing, the Firm is actively participating in the reproduction of class meanings and judgments. From Frances' description of the session we can see that there is a suggestion that embodiment in the work place amounts to physical capital which, depending on the aesthetic, has more or less exchange value. From another perspective, the session may be interpreted as offering valuable information to trainees, in particular to those who do not already embody the 'correct' aesthetic. From this perspective, by demonstrating that 'appropriate' embodiment need not be closed off to anyone, regardless of background, the session offers an opportunity for employees to increase their value, first by teaching them that messages are read off the body, and second by arming them with the 'correct' aesthetic knowledge in order to inform how they might be read. Of course, this is a two-sided coin: the other side of this coin is that there is danger in not achieving the correct aesthetic, which could result in the 'wrong' messages being read off the body. While the session may offer a pragmatic solution by plugging an information gap, it does

so on the basis of a deficit model of class, aesthetics and the body. This constitutes an act of misrecognition of a working-class aesthetic, which is brought into presence (and then banished) by being contrasted with the explicit championing of a ‘posh’ aesthetic. This reading is made even more pertinent when we consider the dominant response by participants to the session.

The vast majority of participants indicated that the session had been nothing more than a bit of fun, an entertaining interlude during their induction that ticked the box that trainees had been told what the dress code was:

Sam           What did you think of the [‘What Not To Wear’]  
session?

Frances           It was quite amusing. (Frances, first round)

Sarah’s response was typical:

Sarah   Ahh I think they [the Firm] wasted money [laughter] ... It was a bit different on our first day, it was all right, made for some light entertainment on our first day.

S       [A]nd did it teach you anything you didn’t know already?

Sarah   No I don’t think so, it was all basic kind of things (Sarah, second round)

Sarah claims to have found the session of little value beyond that of entertainment. This is not surprising – having already done an internship with the Firm, she was well versed in the Firm’s dress code. Furthermore, her

habitus had made her very familiar with an organisational aesthetic like the Firm's, as the middle-class daughter of a father who worked as a financial controller in private business. As Sarah's comment suggests, 'I think they [the Firm] wasted money', there was no evidence of an awareness that others might not share the same aesthetic knowledge as her. The majority of middle-class participants who shared Sarah's sentiment about the session expressed themselves similarly on this topic:

Well everything just seemed like common sense really ... that 'What Not to Wear' woman, everybody joked about it and I don't think anybody took it to heed at all. (Giles, second round)

Giles, like Sarah, came to the Firm from a family home that furnished him well for working at the Firm: his Father worked in the City as an insurance broker, and he attended private schools and played sports, the after-events of which required knowledge and understandings about various forms of dinner dress. These responses are typical from the majority of participants whose social background is easily described as middle class – that is, those who had one or more parents who worked in similarly professional environments. These participants were more than familiar with the Firm's dress code from their immediate family; moreover, all of them had considerable work experience in these environments for a year or more prior to starting work at the Firm. Their ease and familiarity with the information delivered in the session meant that the information session was experienced as entertainment, to the extent that the facilitator of the session was referred to as the 'What Not to Wear lady': an

explicit reference to the once popular light entertainment ‘reality’ television programme ‘What Not to Wear’. This reference underlines not only the entertainment factor of the session for these participants but also serves to underline the status of the content of the session as frivolous and unnecessary. Key to the success of television shows such as ‘What Not to Wear’ is the display of the body before and after the transformation has occurred – the moment in which the transformed body is ‘revealed’ to the subject of the show for the audience is the pinnacle of the show and what all else leads up to. The ‘before’ shots invoke a primary outcome of the television programme, which is to experience moments of misrecognition of the show’s participants as of lesser value because of the show’s framing of them as having poor aesthetic knowledge and taste (Skeggs, 2009, Wood and Skeggs, 2008).

Through the symbolically violent act of misrecognition, one’s own identity may be shored up, and as comforting as that might be, it also serves to legitimate and reproduce Othering class discourses. It is through the ‘reveal’ where audiences are invited to judge the success of the transformation. As I was not able to attend the session, I cannot know the extent to which its delivery deliberately played on the well-known television series, which itself merely exemplified age-old tropes relating to appearance and social and personal success. Perhaps the ‘amusing’ or ‘funny’ aspects of the session point to participants’ anxiety; indeed, it may be that the session disrupted participants’ previously secure understanding of their sense of self. As the session facilitator took off the material signifiers of social class – and hence,

respectability – conceivably, participants felt a little uncomfortable in having the social constructed-ness of it all laid bare. Another perspective on participants' insistence on the irrelevance of the session for them may point to a particular facet of middle-class identity. Middle-class identity is in many ways based on contradictory experiences of security and insecurity derived from their social location, which is based on their differentiation from those below and from those above them, and characterised by a fear of falling below (Ehrenreich, 1989). Having an identity based on what you are not, Skeggs (2004) argues, makes the patrolling of those boundaries very important but highly problematic because of the shifting and contested meanings attributed to them.

The relationship between class location and embodiment was profoundly gendered; the rules of the game for women and men were understood to be different. It was suggested in the session that the Firm's dress code was particularly problematic for women, as the choice of clothing items was much larger compared to men's – which was stripped down to a suit and shirt – thus increasing the likelihood of 'mistakes' being made:

S Did the session suggest what was inappropriate to wear?

A She [session facilitator] talked more about the women side of things, I think more about the women's side of things, she was saying about wearing low-cut tops and what not, and that kind of thing. (Amir, first round)

Amir's recollections suggest that women's sexuality was rendered visible by highlighting the issue of 'low-cut tops' as something that was inappropriate for women to include in a business casual wardrobe. However, Frances recalls that while low-cut tops (and perfume) might be out, it seems that high heels and make-up were in:

F        You should wear it [make-up] because apparently women who wear make-up are more likely to be promoted and earn more. You shouldn't wear perfume because some people find it very strong and offensive, especially men shouldn't wear after shave. Heels, I think she said to wear heels instead of flats.

Sam    Because?

F        They look smarter and make you walk better. (Frances, first round)

The advice to not wear low-cut tops but to wear make-up and heels may seem contradictory and arbitrary, but on closer analysis the women were advised to make aesthetic choices and carry out acts of body work that conform to standard, if rather narrow, ideals of femininity (McRobbie et al., 2004). Frances interpreted the facilitator's call to wear make-up as sexist 'because men like it', but in fact, the session facilitator gave a different justification for women to wear make-up on the basis that it was in women's best interest to do so in relation to their earning power:

S        Did she say why women should wear make-up?

F Just purely, I assume, because men like it, and also it makes you earn more money. That was the main reasoning for wearing it, that was her big shock that all the girls went like [sharp intake of breath] as you would do.

S Because men like it?

F Oh she didn't say because men like it, that was just my assumption.

S Oh, right.

F But yes, her big shock was that you'll earn ... I can't remember ... there was some study that had been done, and you'd earned twenty percent [more]. Yes exactly, it's like, so all the girls were like, 'that's not right', everybody wears make-up pretty much. (Frances, first round)

According to Frances, she and others were skeptical and shocked at the facilitator's justification for wearing make-up. They found it implausible that it was in their financial interests to do so, not because they questioned the validity of female enhancement through the application of make-up, but because it was understood that this was such a routine and normal aspect of women's femininity that they found it hard to understand where the added value came from when 'everybody wears make-up' anyway. Frances' recollection neatly demonstrates the balancing act that McRobbie (2004) argues women – when they have carefully understood the neo-liberal ideals of femininity – are supposed to be trying to strike. On the one hand, young

women are expected to want to make their appearance a focus of attention through the use of make-up and heels; on the other, they are advised to refrain from using other techniques – the use of perfume or low-cut tops – both of which are commonly understood to represent an excessive version of femininity (McRobbie et al., 2004, Skeggs, 1997).

The application of make-up is explicitly part of the labour process in some industries, in particular those that are dominated by women and where female beauty/sexuality is central to the commercial product (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). However, in the knowledge economy (and one which has historically been dominated by men), it might be expected that women are exempt from such labour processes, or at the very least it is an issue of personal preference (if such a thing can exist in the context of sexism). But from this session we can clearly see that the female application of make-up and the wearing of high heels are not just reserved for retail, hospitality or sex industries, but also form part of professional women's lives, not simply from their own interpretations of what the right organisation 'look' is, as in the other studies of professional women's embodiment. What I find striking from participants' experiences of the session was the lack of direct references to the language of professionalism or other organisational aims. Participants seemed to experience the session as a sort of 'top tips' from which they could benefit, rather than a top-down instructional, heavy with organisational goals and compliance. This fits with Foucauldian understandings of how power and surveillance work in organisations where responsibility for compliance to organisational goals are



distributed amongst members through the belief in POF, where those who are successfully recruited are already self-disciplined and *discipline each other* through the policing of boundaries (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Clearly, my analysis demonstrates that the Firm is interested in shaping how employees should look, and this look is in line with its own dress codes which reflect its organisational aesthetic. However, it does so by framing it within a discourse that eschews the benefits to the organisation in favour of emphasising the individual rewards. The session offers an uncritical assessment of the potential and power of physical capital. In so doing, it reproduces an aesthetic which is rooted in historically specific regimes of class and gender. These regimes of class and gender are not benign but are themselves rooted in sexist and class-ist discourses, which simultaneously have the capacity to avow and disavow certain bodies and tastes. Positively valuing one embodied aesthetic in favour of another serves to draw boundaries around what and who is and isn't acceptable; this has implications for those whose embodiment is less favoured, according to the organisational aesthetic. The next section moves on to examine more closely issues pertinent to the Firm's 'diversity' agenda, Person-Organization-Fit, professionalism and the specific moment of transition that the induction period marks.

### ***WHAT (NOT) TO WEAR - SOLVING THE 'PROBLEM' OF DIVERSITY AND PERSON-ORGANIZATION-FIT***

One of the problems associated with recruiting diversely in a formerly

homogenous organisation is that the make-up of the organisation is – at best – likely to reflect the demography of the national population. For example, while an organisation might increase its number of minority ethnic group employees, by definition they will still be in a minority and are likely also to have a minoritised status (O'Reilly et al., 1991, Sheridan, 1992). The same can be said for recruiting more diversely in class terms, which can only happen from the pool of applicants to come through the hierarchical university system, therefore decreasing the likelihood of recruiting working-class employees in significant numbers. From this perspective the research suggests that those recruited from 'diverse' backgrounds may struggle to 'fit in' and make a smooth transition into the organisation. Not fitting in is likely to be an unpleasant experience for employees and can result in a higher turnover of staff – which is costly for the business and risky for employees' career path, and can result in their under-achieving in their field. Through an analysis of Amir's experiences of the induction session, I will argue that the Firm appears to provide an opportunity for some participants to arm themselves with aesthetic knowledge which can help them make a smooth transition into the organisation, and thereby serve as some form of defence – albeit by maintaining the status quo and reinforcing social and aesthetic hierarchies.

Amir, a working-class Muslim man, articulated that his experiences of the 'What Not to Wear' induction session had been positive. Like his middle-class peers, he said that he found the session amusing, but unlike them he also said that he found it useful, informative and believed what was being taught to be

based on a truth about the way the world worked:

It was good to know that, in hard-core facts, this is actually the way things work out, especially for someone coming from that background and knowing how things work within those environments. So she just sort of, she just gave it to me in a way that I knew that this is actually true. (Amir, first round)

Amir's appreciation of the session is usefully read alongside his general impression of the Firm as an elite organisation, and a clear understanding of his own socially located habitus as working-class.

I know they take a lot of people from Cambridge and things, all those top universities, and I used to always think, well I still do think, it's probably difficult for someone coming from you could say, a working-class background, to a not so elite university, just that whole adjustment process, or fitting in thing, because you haven't come ... you're not accustomed to that whole scene and things and how accounting firms are, so, it's a bit different. It might be a bit difficult to portray yourself as someone who can adjust and adapt to the environment you're coming into. (Amir, first round)

The combination of his own background, in conjunction with a belief in the Firm's prestigious status, provoked a degree of anxiety in his own ability to

transition successfully into the Firm.<sup>17</sup> When I ask for more detail about what exactly he means when he says ‘the whole scene’, he directly refers to various forms of embodiment, dispositions and tastes in hobbies

The scene, I just say ... how can I describe it? Again, probably speaking in certain manners, the accent you could say maybe, the sort of, the things you like, the hobbies you may have and things like that. I’m stereotyping a lot here, but that’s the impression you might get. Thinking of them having posh dinners all the time, dinner parties, entertaining clients and what not. (Amir, first round)

Amir tempers the examples he uses by saying that he is drawing on stereotypes to illustrate his point, but his examples are not caricatures; nor am I sure that they are stereotypes. What he says suggests that his perception of the middle classes are of a group who are quite separate from the working classes in habit (hobbies, dinner parties) and form (deportment, voice). Those who dominate the Firm seem to engage in embodied practices that are not only separate but are separating, as the real or imagined activities are experienced as actively contributing to others’ sense of not belonging. In other words, these embodied practices are conscious and unconscious acts which serve to reproduce modes of distinction between social classes (Bourdieu, 1984). As he engages with the

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<sup>17</sup> Despite talking in something akin to the third person it was clear to me at the time that he was describing to me his own experiences, but as the interview had only started ten minutes earlier his distance and discomfort are understandable and so I persevered.

classic nightmare fish out of water class scenario (attending a formal dinner in a public place), he is fearful that he will humiliate himself by trying and failing to ape the embodied practices in which he imagines the middle-upper classes engage:

It's obviously it's a different ... it's a sort of elite class you know, you have to have these certain characteristics and you sort of look at that, and it can be a bit intimidating if you're not used to it. It's not like you're ... those things don't happen at your own house and things; you're just not experienced at those kind of things. You may think to yourself, 'how will I adjust to that? I might make a fool of myself you know.' And you're having dinners and things and you don't know what spoon to eat with, forks and things like that. (Amir, first round)

Amir's use of the dinner party/dining room scenario is familiar to us as it is routinely written into popular culture as a site where class distinctions manifest themselves, and where an individual is at risk of being publicly unveiled as either an imposter, misfit or some other inauthentic and out of place Other trying to 'make it' in another world/class/scene. What Amir anticipated was located in his imagination, as he himself acknowledges, and much of it draws upon stereotypes of what 'posh people' get up to as he rehearses the well-known 'cutlery (read class) test' beloved of films and television dramas. However, Amir's sense of shame and anxiety at the thought of being 'caught out' echoes a fundamental aspect of class relations in the UK – namely, that it is underpinned by concerns of authenticity, morality and penetrating effects

such as shame (Sayer, 2005b). Amir uses the dinner party scenario (an unlikely event in this work place) to illustrate his wider concerns with the relationship between embodied practices and successful transition into the Firm, and illustrates the difficulties for some bodies in making that transition. From this reading we can situate and understand how and why he found the 'What Not to Wear' session useful. From this perspective, the Firm's choice to run a session which seeks to deal with at least one aspect of these anxieties (what [not] to wear) seems progressive and inclusive and goes some way to address potential problems of recruiting people from backgrounds dissimilar to the majority in an organisation.

There was another aspect of Amir's experiences of the induction session, which may shed light on how we might interpret the Firm's preferred regime of meaning as demonstrated through its organisational aesthetic. Despite his fears that the people and the Firm would be so 'posh' that his own embodiment would betray him, the induction session seems to have convinced him that the Firm was not into 'posh' and in fact embraced a far more middle-of-the-road, inclusive or democratic aesthetic which was less complex, intimidating and therefore achievable for Amir. The first reference comes as he recollects how the facilitator advised the women on the Firm's dress code:

She talked more about the women side of things, how to dress especially how to dress and stuff, you know, wearing a scarf maybe, you would be seen as 'posh' so take it off if you are going to a client or something, you don't want to come across like that. (Amir, first round)

His interpretation of what the facilitator was saying was that trainees should be careful not to appear to come across as ‘posh’. Whether or not the facilitator intended to convey this message is debatable, as no other participants’ recollections supported this interpretation. I got the impression that she was simply illustrating that a scarf does give the impression of the wearer as posh, but *not* that this was undesirable. However, ‘posh’ as undesirable was certainly the message conveyed to Amir, and one that was reinforced by other transitional experiences at the Firm:

From my experience of things of being in the firm whilst working, I’ve realised that coming across too posh, can actually be adverse towards like winning business, so you don’t want to always do that. But being taken seriously, I guess you have to dress right, and show that yes, you know what you are talking about, you have some authority, you are a person of class and you know, some degree of, you have knowledge and you are accustomed to the environment and what not. (Amir, first round)

Amir’s analysis is interesting because of the emphasis on the appearance of being ‘posh’ as potentially problematic. His fears about not embodying the habits and dispositions of the upper classes are relegated as anachronistic; the ‘right’ embodiment for the Firm (i.e. for ‘winning business’) is someone who embodies a far more middle-class – read *professional* – aesthetic. Why ‘read

professional’? Because he lists commonly perceived characteristics of professional behaviour ‘being taken seriously, know what you are talking about, some authority’, and a ‘degree of knowledge’ and in the middle of that list is to be ‘a person of class’. He is not suggesting that *actually* being posh or that having lots of money is a hindrance, but his analysis suggests that what is important is to avoid the extreme ends of the social class spectrum, both of which may hinder the development of the right professional embodiment. Amir is very clear that within this context, striking a balance somewhere in the middle is the central goal of impression management at the Firm, and the secret to success within the organisation. What sets Amir apart from his already middle-class peers is that striking the balance is initially, at least, a conscious effort and one that was underpinned by a fear of getting it ‘wrong’ with the concomitant risk of humiliation. Amir is fully aware that he had something to gain from the session that some of his peers did not:

To some people it was probably a waste of their time, I think; maybe coming from that sort of background, they probably realised ... they knew it already. Someone like me, not accustomed to that environment, was actually, even though I was sort of expecting that, but it was good that she actually laid it out how it is and explained why certain things are, you know, why certain things are done in certain ways and what the actual benefit is of it, to dress in a certain ways and things ... So I think they specifically did that just to maybe reach out to the people coming from those non-elite backgrounds, and just letting them know in hard core facts, just the way things are and how to go



about and do it and so that they don't turn up maybe one day in a dinner or anything, dressed inappropriately maybe. So they thought that they would take the onus upon themselves and educate everyone. (Amir, first round)

Amir does not offer a critique of the session. On balance, he takes a positive view – he considers the Firm to be benevolently educating and supporting him and others at the other end of the social spectrum in an environment that is potentially fraught with misrecognition. The session seems to have enabled him to make a smoother transition into the organisation than he initially feared. At the same time, the Firm's focus on a business-casual dress code and its democratising potential for the men, at least, enhanced his sense of entitlement to be at the Firm.

### ***CONCLUSION***

Other chapters have argued that the Firm's preferred regime of meaning is one in which prestige and excellence are produced through merit. That is to say, it wants its commercial excellence to be grounded in stable, democratic and most of all rational processes. The content of the 'What Not to Wear' session feeds into this preferred reading of the Firm in ambiguous ways. Although it claims its rationality on the basis of its status as a provider of professional services in the credentialist sense it also promotes a discourse of professionalism, which, as I have demonstrated, is little more than impression management through a

set of aesthetic choices which with the 'right' knowledge 'anyone' can embody. I believe that the session covers a number of issues and specifically meets some of Amir's perceived needs in relation to impression management. He does not explicitly experience it as a moment of class reproduction, where misrecognition of some forms of embodiment and physical capital as having lesser value is reproduced. In short, there is little evidence here of symbolic violence being experienced by Amir. However, I would argue – without wanting to fall into the trap of 'false consciousness' arguments – that one of the consequences of holding the session is that it reinforces or highlights the difference between those from middle-class backgrounds who 'know it all already' and consider it to be a waste of time, and those who don't profess such confidence. The general agreement among middle-class participants was that the session was an entertaining waste of time, and if, as I suspect, this opinion was generally spread amongst the intake, it could have degrading consequences for some who did find it a valuable and informative session. From Amir's experiences of the session, there is, then, evidence that it went some way to compensate him as someone who does not have a taken-for-granted and embodied knowledge of what (not) to wear in this particular workplace setting. However, this is the experience of one man, and further research would be needed to ascertain whether his experiences were shared by others, or whether the potential for symbolic violence in the form of misrecognition that such a session holds pans out.

The provision by the Firm of the 'What Not to Wear' session provides evidence for the importance that the Firm places on its employees embodying the 'right' aesthetic in the workplace. It also serves as a practical means by which the Firm's, not un-contradictory, business-casual dress code could be disseminated and explained to new recruits. This chapter has highlighted the significant ways in which, during their induction period at the Firm, participants were in a phase of transition from being students to becoming workers and employees in the graduate labour market at a large international accountancy firm. It is recognised in the HE to labour market transition literature, that periods of transition are times when one's bundle of capital informs how smooth and successful the transition will be. The significance of physical capital and its ability in general to be converted into other types of capital, such as economic and symbolic, has been asserted; as such, the analysis of an induction session which seeks to educate its audience on these issues is of interest.

Using participants' experiences of one induction session held by the Firm, this chapter has brought together two different but complementary literatures from the areas of sociology of the body and organisational studies, to argue that a Bourdieusian understanding of the body in social space is well placed to understand the body as classed, and the implications that this has for bodies in organisations. In looking at what the literature in organisation studies has to say about professional occupations and the concept of professionalism, I have sought to argue that a professional body can be understood as synonymous

with a version of the middle-class body, and is still profoundly gendered. This version of a middle-class body is conservative and echoes Victorian values of propriety, restraint and boundedness (Gunn, 2005). I would argue that this is not the only type of body that can be said to be ‘middle-class’ but it is one that is associated with the professional classes. This is reinforced by critical accountancy scholars who argue that ‘professional’ embodiment is central to the profession in light of the ambiguity of the work, and yet again by participants’ descriptions of the session. The gendered aspect of the ‘right’ body comes through loud and clear in participants’ recollection of the session, and reminds us of the tricky balancing act that professional women still have to negotiate in order to be taken seriously *as* professionals in the workplace. Moreover, the balancing act is repackaged back to these young women as inevitable, and yet something they will personally profit from if done well. I have suggested that the ‘right’ female professional body is profoundly classed and have speculated on the symbolically violent implications this might have for working-class women at the Firm who may either embody that aesthetic themselves or have loved ones who do.

Through the provision of the session, the Firm seems to recognise the potential of physical capital, and promotes it as a legitimate mode of communication. Analysis of middle-class participants’ experience of the session suggest that there was an overwhelming sense that it was viewed as source of entertainment of little factual or practical value. I would go further than this description of their recollections, and suggest that the session had a specific value as it served

to reinforce to middle-class participants that their habitus and embodiment was valued by society in general, and at the Firm in particular. This is evidenced in the very gendered nature in which the ‘correct’ form of embodiment was promoted through the association of the ‘wrong’ female body as excessive, in terms that have long been associated with the pathologised working-class woman. Through the provision of this induction session, the Firm is a site for the reproduction of the misrecognition of a gendered aesthetic and mode of embodiment associated with a pathologised working-class. I would argue that this is a negative consequence of the session; however, I have also argued that the session provided a site for the remedy of some of the ills associated with ‘diversity’ recruitment, such as the potential for not appearing to fit in, in general, and for one male participant, in particular.

## **CHAPTER 7 – THE EMBODIMENT OF HARD WORK: CLASS, GENDER AND THE ACCRUAL OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

This chapter will continue to argue for the relevance of social class and gender to the professionalisation process of trainees through their acquisition of professional qualifications via the ACA exams. I will argue two main points. First, that participants bring bundles of capital with them to the Firm and that these bundles have a direct relationship to their experiences of the ACA exam. Second, I will argue that there is a relationship between the concepts of hard work, professionalism and embodiment and that they are given gendered meanings at the expense of other possible interpretations.

So far this thesis has focused on the early period of participants' transition into the graduate labour market and has examined the ways in which participants in this study have been invested in accruing value for themselves symbolically through the successful completion of threshold exams, gaining a training contract with the Firm, and learning how to embody professionalism. As I have already argued in the last chapter, much of the scholarship in the area of critical accountancy studies has demonstrated that there is much more to the

accomplishment of a professional accountant than passing exams. Where attention has been paid to the issue of professional accomplishment through the acquisition of accountancy credentials, it has focused on the relative irrelevance of the process to professional occupational identity formation. In contrast to other professions, such as the law and medicine, the accrual of expert knowledge of accountancy – through the study of its practices and procedures, and through sitting exams which result in professional qualifications – are argued to be achieved in an instrumental manner (Abbott, 1988, Anderson-Gough et al., 1998, Anderson-Gough et al., 1999, Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, Coffey, 1993, Coffey, 1994). Trainees, it is argued, construct the acquisition of the ACA as something to get through, rather than the bedrock of their professional identity (Anderson-Gough et al., 2002). This has led to a focus on the day-to-day accomplishment of professional status through embodiment.

The previous chapter documented that gender has been an increasingly central focus for critical accountancy scholars in this regard (Ciancanelli et al., 1990, Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006, Haynes, 2008, Kirkham and Loft, 1993, Kornberger et al., 2010, Lehman, 1992, Loft, 1992); the same could not be said for the issue of social class, which the last chapter sought to rectify. Social class has been given scant attention in general in critical accountancy studies, the work of Jacobs (2003) being the main exception; indeed, the major contributing scholars in this field believe that ‘insofar as class issues are germane, these are often reflected in the recruitment process of Big Five

firms<sup>18</sup> (Anderson-Gough et al., 2002: 54). Although they go no further to explain or expand this statement, I can only assume that they are referring to firms' recruitment bias towards the middle classes as a result of their strategy to focus on graduates from elite universities. Or perhaps they are aware of, but fail to detail, their understanding of what Jacobs highlights is the emphasis in the application forms of all Big Five accountancy firms: to ask applicants to demonstrate through evidence of ECA their 'charismatic qualities, also known as generic or transferable skills' (Jacobs, 2003: 569).

Regardless, their assumption that germane issues of class during the recruitment process would not follow through to the training contract leaves them vulnerable to charges of class blindness in the way in which scholars were once accused of gender blindness in their exclusion of women from their research. In his historical framework of the profession, as well as through a Bourdieusian analysis of the recruitment practices of Big Five firms, Jacobs clearly delineates the relevance of social class to the make-up of accountancy firms as overwhelmingly middle-class institutions. In his fascinating paper based on his PhD thesis, he argues that

[f]rom this study it is evident that the application forms are biased in favour of some applicants and against others. It is also clear that ideas of generic, transferable, personal or key skills, particularly when

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<sup>18</sup> Depending on when the literature is published depends on whether authors refer to the Big Six, Big Five or what is now the Big Four.



defined as leadership and team-working skills, constitute an effective mechanism to reproduce class advantage in a modern setting where nepotistic transfer is no longer feasible and educational credentials have become widespread. Within this setting the argument that social mobility and professional membership is or ever has been meritocratic is false. To prove actual discrimination remains difficult [...] as the practices are tacit it becomes exceptionally difficult to observe or record the process. However, this does not mean that practices of discrimination do not occur or that as researchers we abandon the challenge to study them. (Jacobs, 2003: 593).

Indeed, as this thesis has already argued, to document the multifarious ways in which class operates is challenging for researchers.

Even though there is some evidence that, like in other studies, participants in this research had applied for the training contract for reasons other than to fulfil an ambition to become career accountants, it would be difficult to exaggerate the centrality of the ACA examinations to participants' first year at the Firm. Their successful completion is the means by which a permanent job is secured and professional closure is achieved: they are also highly valued in other areas of the financial sector. Exam failure leads to termination of the training contract at the Firm. Following on from the chapter titled *Meritocracy, hard work and privilege: contradictory discourses on the journey to accrue value*, we shall see how during several rounds of examinations, participants rely

inevitably on, and come to frame discursively their own and others' experiences, through their educational capital (past educational experiences, learning styles and habits) and capacity for 'hard work' which is inflected with discourses of gender, ethnicity and class.

For participants in this study, the ACA examination is yet another threshold exam with its own set of rewards and consequences, come pass or fail. A hard fail is a mark below 45 per cent; 55 per cent and above is the pass mark; and in between these two grades, trainees will be allowed to re-sit the exam at their own time and expense. However, a second fail will more than likely result in a termination of the contract, regardless of how well on-the-job performance is perceived. Trainees were released for college in six-week blocks, during which time they were not supposed to go into the office or take on office work remotely. Trainees went through new material with their college tutor for three weeks followed by three weeks of 'revision' and mock testing in a classroom setting. Trainees were ranked into quartiles based on their mock results which were publicly posted at the college; those who were consistently in the bottom quartiles were subjected to further testing and verbal inquiry into their performance by professional development managers from the Firm. Trainees attended college from 09.00-16.00 five days a week, and were also expected to cover material in their own time – professional development managers suggested three-to-four hours per evening, plus an unspecified amount of time over the weekend. At the end of the six-week block, trainees sat three exams into two days. Trainees typically waited between four-to-six weeks for their

results, which were sent to them via text, email or post; results were also published on the ACA website and in the Financial Times newspaper; ‘Well done to ...’ messages were also circulated via team emails. The cohort from which my participants were drawn consisted of approximately 1800 graduates, and work-teams went to college in staggered blocks; therefore not all my participants went to college at exactly the same time. However, fieldwork ended up roughly coinciding with three rounds of exams.<sup>19</sup> Six participants, by virtue of their undergraduate degrees in accounting or finance, held exemptions from one or two exams; but on the whole participants were facing the same number of exams during the same time-frame.

### ***HARD WORK - ALL IN IT TOGETHER?***

The Firm puts some energy into creating a sense that trainees past and present were ‘all in this together’. This reflected the Firm’s overall marketing and recruitment campaigns – the theme of ‘one’, such as being rated or ranked number one in industry awards, graduate labour market surveys or by women employees, or being ‘one organization’ in the sense of wholeness despite its various commercial strands and its purportedly diverse workforce. Working to one set of ‘common goals to put clear blue water between us and the competition’ was an oft-repeated mantra during the induction phase and through the intra-workplace communications, where the Firm’s ethos and goals

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<sup>19</sup> By a round I include the six-week learning period at college, and the four-to-six week period during which they waited for or received their exam results.

were robustly communicated. The identity of the Firm as working together as one was reinforced to some extent by the fact that trainees arrived together as a cohort in September and participated in some induction sessions as one large group ('What Not to Wear', welcome from the CEO, etc.). The exams were something that all graduate trainees had to do to complete successfully the training contract. Everyone was doing this for the first time; even those who had followed similar material during their A-Levels or degrees had not sat the same exams, and certainly no one had done them in the conditions set up by the Firm. At the beginning of their first period of exams, participants gave the impression that they felt that they were experiencing it as 'one' and that they were all in it together; this was reflected in the remarkably similar ways in which they expressed their experiences – all participants mentioned the exams and spoke of them in similar tones. *All* participants stated what hard work the exams were and how fearful they were of failing; all participants unfavourably compared the ACA exams with other threshold exams:

It was ridiculously intense, not even finals at uni came close to mimicking that in terms of pressure and time constraints. (Thomas, second round)

Hard, really hard it was much harder than university and harder than A Levels I would say as well. (Giles, first round)

Yes [exams are] quite a lot of work. It's just like, this last set of exams is more stressful than the Oxford finals. (Wen, first round)

I would say that, yes, compared to university finals, these are nothing – I mean university are nothing compared to what these are. (Olivia, second round)

Regardless of their specific bundle of educational capital, all participants talk about how the first round of ACA exams converged around the theme of hard work. The Firm is very up front about the amount of hours that trainees are expected to input during these periods in its recruitment material, and participants' talk acknowledged that the Firm had tried to communicate how arduous the process was; however, fuelled by the desire to secure a job, some participants admitted that they either did not fully take it into account or that there was perhaps nothing that could have prepared them for it:

I don't know, they [the Firm] do warn you, they do tell you how hard the ACA exams are and they do tell you how hard college is but the same with everything you don't really believe it's that hard until you do it. (Kathryn, first round)

As I have already argued, the concept of hard work has an empirical reality and can be calculated in relation to time spent at a desk, reading and taking notes. In this sense, despite the labelling of accountancy as knowledge work, as defined against manual work, participants' accounts of their hard work is very

much embodied. When asked to describe how they worked during the six-week block, again participants painted strikingly similar pictures:

It was horrific, it really was, because you literally, all of you did every day, was get up, go to college, come home, cook food, work, go to bed. And it was like that seven days a week, pretty much, for six weeks. (Henry, third round)

So it's like every single night I'm working 'til half ten and every weekend I'm literally getting up at seven and working the whole day, Saturday and Sunday, so it's no rest at all. (Jessica, third round)

Participants clearly articulate the embodied strain of the six-week block of college, and while the female participants more readily talked about instances in which they cried or were emotionally as well as physically drained, male participants also shared some of the corporeal aspects of the process. Indeed, notably absent from these accounts is any attempt by male participants to pass off the exams as requiring little or no effort of any kind: gone is the discourse of so-called effortless achievement articulated by some in earlier descriptions of their educational histories (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). To the extent that all participants spoke of their fear of failure, job loss and their comparing the exams unfavourably with previous threshold exams, I would argue that participants were very much in the same boat, and it is not difficult to imagine that this generated a sense of camaraderie, and all being in it together.

While effort and hard work was made visible in the relatively private space of the research interview, these efforts were usually describing private study time. Some participants' talk suggests that the public setting of the classroom was a site of banter, humour and high jinks. Female participants recorded that the college classroom was as much a site where they could have fun and let off steam as it was for hard work:

When you are at college you are all together again in the classroom, it's like being at uni, mess around and then, exams, so it's quite good.  
(Kathryn, second round)

Yea, I enjoy hanging out 'cause it is like school now because we have been together for so long that we spend too much time together ...  
There is so much banter in the class, yes I enjoy that. (Tola, second round)

The delight they express at being in the classroom where hard work is combined with how they '*mess about*' and enjoy '*so much banter*' contrasts with the often negative ways in which 'low achieving' girls who behave in these ways are perceived in school classrooms (Jackson, 2006, Archer et al., 2007). Inevitably, however, what constitutes banter is in the eyes and ears of the beholder; Tola and Kathryn's experiences were not uniformly experienced. Amir's and Thomas' classroom experiences challenge the perception that boys largely engage and enjoy these sorts of classroom behaviours; their experiences

offer us the opportunity to speculate what classroom life might be like for those unable or unwilling to participate in the banter:

Erm ... I think, college is competitive in the sense that okay, everybody's battling to get the highest results for one, I'm not even gonna go there– erm there's a certain minority who do that slutty you know brag about what they got, things like that. Erm other things, just general banter and stuff like that, there's a lot of that in my class, it's quite a laddish class, so any sort of slip-ups that you do in class like ask a stupid question to the teachers or something, they just pick up on it, just laugh, there's a few who just provoke everyone to just laugh and things, just take the absolute mick out of you for weeks on constant. Yeah so you do realise there's a few characters, there's a lot of banter happening there, so you know, you've got to be quite strong. (Amir second round)

Amir expresses a number of things (competitiveness, bragging, teasing and banter) that make him uncomfortable and that set him apart from those dominating the classroom. He associates these behaviours with 'laddishness' which, by stating that 'you've got to be quite strong', suggests he is using the term to denote the commonly perceived interpretation of 'laddishness' as problematic and unpleasant to be around (Jackson and Dempster, 2009, Jackson, 2010). This sense of 'laddishness' as problematic was also experienced by Harry who describes how his male colleagues seem to be heavily invested in behaviours that perpetuate the idea that their achievements



are effortlessly achieved, leaving them plenty of time and energy for classroom antics:

Everyone tries to give off the image that they're not too stressed out about the exams, yeah that they're not, not *overly* working themselves at home you know, they're just like whatever, I haven't done the pre-reading, I've just done this much, this and that, I'm behind, whatever, but when the results come out, you think, hooway, this guy was chatting rubbish wasn't he, he's got very good results, you know, he's done very well, erm, even the interim mocks and stuff we had, you get a sort of idea of how everyone's doing, so er but yeah that's one thing. I think it's pride that people try to show that they haven't put much effort in and they've still smashed the exams. (Harry, third round)

These reports echo the behaviour which Kathryn and Tola profess to enjoy in the classroom, and also suggest that some trainees dealt with the amount of hard work and effort required at college through the use of humour and fun. For some, the experience of high volumes of work combined with the jocularly of some others was far from enjoyable, and in fact became a site for some extreme discomfort:

It was more a case of surviving it more than anything else, because it was very intense, very ... I don't know, it was unlike any sort of learning environment I've ever been in before ... I think there was a lot of peer pressure there in terms of feeling a bit stupid for asking

potentially stupid questions ... I was kind of trying to analyse like well, are these people actually friends? ... Let's just say that a few of the people enjoyed a betting culture in terms of how we did in exams and results. Like I was saying it added some extra, additional pressure. (Thomas, second round)

These data illustrate that a culture of classroom banter, whilst a helpful diffusion of work-load and tension for some, actively worked against the classroom being a supportive learning environment for others. Despite the sense of all being in it together through their common experience of hard work, there were specific aspects of the classroom interaction that some enjoyed which others found quite divisive and oppressive. I suggest that this has implications for how successfully participants were able to traverse the ACA exam process, which is a specific way in which they must, according to the terms of their contract, accrue value for themselves.

After the first set of exams there was a notable change in the way in which participants spoke about subsequent rounds of college and exam time. This was also the time when the global and British financial crisis was gathering pace – the week before one set of interviews saw the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. I asked all participants about their thoughts and concerns about the ‘current economic crisis’. All participants suggest that they felt insulated from the financial crisis, as accounts were said to be ‘recession proof’. This was reinforced by the dramatic experiences of many of their

friends who worked in other sectors of finance such investment banking – some of whom lost their jobs within weeks of the crisis occurring. The Firm also gained high profile clients as a direct result of the collapse of other businesses – insolvency and recovery being a portion of the Firm’s business. Despite their claims to be lucky enough to be in recession-proof jobs, the Firm made a number of changes to trainees’ terms and conditions: for example, changes were made to the bonus structure for trainees (it was scrapped) and to the team building budget (it was reduced). Management communicated these changes, citing the current economic crisis as justification; this, to some extent, may have disrupted their confidence in the security of their jobs and perhaps contributed to the importance of passing their exams. More likely is that the rest of the finance sector now looked so insecure that the loss of the training contract through exam failure would have been even more concerning. Further analysis of data collected during fieldwork and perhaps further research would need to be done to explore further the impacts of the economic crisis of 2008. As participants went through successive rounds of exams, it became clear that their experiences could be distinctly categorised into two main groups: those who continued to profess their fear of failure, and those who did not. It might be thought that participants’ fearfulness related to their exam performance in the first round, but in fact the picture is more complex than that, as Table Three suggests. As we can see, those who did fail or experienced a near miss such as Thomas, Jessica, Aisha and Amir, have perfectly logical reasons to fear failure; but there are three out of these seven who had no objective reason to fear failure in the ACA exams.

Table 3 – Exam performance cross-tabulated with participants' fearfulness

	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Near miss</i>	<i>No failure</i>
Fearful	Thomas, Jessica, Aisha	Thomas, Amir	Olivia, Sarah, Kathryn
No fear	Henry	Giles	Joseph, Harry, Wen, Sarah, Tola

In fact, Olivia, Kathryn and Sarah all got marks in excess of 60 per cent, well clear of the 50 per cent needed. Inversely, one might have thought that Henry and Giles would profess their fearfulness, but they do not, despite a failure and near miss respectively. How might we understand these results? Once it became apparent from the second round of interviews that despite their positive results some participants were more fearful of failing exams than others, I made sure I asked all of them about it. I will start with those who did much better than pass. This group comprised of Tola, Wen, Joseph and Sarah; Wen and Joseph had an Oxbridge education, Tola and Sarah went to RG universities; all of them had a wholly or partially privately educated primary or secondary education. Many of them decided that although far from easy, the exams were not as bad as all that, and that they would not work quite so hard or get so stressed next time. There were some who adopted this attitude based on 'good enough' results and calculated that the stress involved in trying to achieve very high scores was not worth it when all you needed to do was pass.

T: I did fine, I mean talking about people that are killing themselves working but I just think that you can do enough to just pass comfortably. I mean I got 69 in all three of them ...

S: How hard do you work?

T: Mmm I don't know it just depends on how I feel and sometimes I'm a bit lazy and sometimes I am like – come back from college and I am so tired ... and also because they give you such unrealistic homework – like they would expect you to do four or five hours of homework per night, sometimes you just look at that and you realise that you are not even going to be able to get halfway through that and you just don't bother. Sometimes, however, for example, when we had a tax run everyone was saying that it is going to be really hard I made effort to do my homework then because I knew that I did not want to get behind ... I think everyone is more relaxed because they know how much work they need to put in whereas before people were worried that other people were doing so much work and that they would get behind.

(Tola, second round)

Tola takes a pragmatic approach, calculating how hard she will work based on the information available, including her own self-knowledge and other information. She knows how hard she worked the first time round and that she did well; she compares herself to those she thinks are working too hard 'killing themselves' and opts out. Her assessment is that 'everyone is more relaxed' during the subsequent round of exams, but this contradicts her statement that there are some who are 'killing themselves' to get high grades. Similarly, Wen draws on his experiences of the first round of exams at the Firm to justify his lack of fear of failure and a change of pace in relation to how hard he worked:

This time in college you sort of know the expectation that oh, a lot of people are going to pass anyway ... So it's not as much pressure as the first time. And definitely not fear of job loss or getting sacked, it's not like that anymore, last time I did quite well, and this time, even being lazier, not working weekends, and not really working every evening. (Wen, third round).

We can contrast Wen's comments at this point, where he reports being relaxed – even blasé – about the process, with those he made after the first round of exams where he said that they were 'more stressful than Oxford finals'. He draws on his experiential knowledge that he has done well so far and calculated that he doesn't even need to work evenings or weekends in order to pass. His thought-process is logical and, in contrast to his early thoughts on the ACA exams, seems to reflect his feelings and attitude towards the rest of his educational experiences. Wen is clearly 'clever' and has historically done well across all previous threshold exams; as such, I would argue that his stress and self-doubt during the first round of exams was a blip, which owed more to the fact that it was a new process and the fear of falling at the first hurdle and getting the sack. It did not disrupt his general sense of ability for long. Joseph gave his Oxbridge training and hints at the highly prestigious secondary education he received as a reason for his more relaxed approach in subsequent rounds of ACA exams:

My average is about, I mean fifty-five is the pass and my average is about seventy-eight, which is probably the highest in [dept]. But I've just been very lucky because I had a tough time at uni, but I think I've been really well trained up to deal with this sort of stuff<sup>20</sup> ... It's been much more relaxed [this time around]. (Joseph, second round)

Although he is able to tell me that his exam results were the best in his department, this is done modestly, and he links his success to his educational habitus, for which he describes himself as 'lucky' rather than making claims for innate ability or natural talent. In this sense he is in a small way acknowledging that his ability has happened within a specific context in which he has been privileged. Similarly, Frances' positive experiences in the first round of ACA exams led her to slow down the pace of work and adopt a more blasé attitude:

I came top in the final assurance exam, so I was just like [shrugs shoulders]. Which is not the attitude you should have because they're always like, assurance, everybody fails, everybody does well in the mock and then on the real day, they don't do as well everyone fails,

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<sup>20</sup> What Joseph is referring to is his educational history: he went to an elite fee paying school which had an historical association with Oxbridge, which he attended as an undergraduate. Despite the extremely high social and academic status of the school, he did not feel adequately prepared for the academic rigours of Oxbridge, and expressed that he intellectually floundered during his time there.

well, but, I just kind of, I got to the point where I was, I knew what I was going to know and what I wasn't going to be able to know any more if I continued to revise so I did practice questions but I kind of relaxed, but that's always how I've been. (Frances, third round)

She makes a reflexive comment 'Which is not the attitude you should have', suggesting that she might be aware that others would find her attitude risky. However, like Tola, Wen and Joseph she draws on her previous educational experiences to reinforce her belief that she will be okay: 'I kind of relaxed but that's always how I've been'. It is, of course, impossible to gauge the extent to which what participants say in the interview reflects the whole picture as they know it. I tried as much as possible for them to have the space to offer contradictory or inconsistent explanations or thoughts. I did this at various points across the interviews by saying things that sought to reassure them that people's telling of themselves were not straightforward and that tensions, contradictions or inconsistencies were normal. Tola was the only one out of this more relaxed group who reflected some doubt in her choice to work less hard. Here, she describes finding it difficult at times to maintain her own path of calm in the face of others' anxiety and claims to be working (excessively) hard:

I don't enjoy the fact that other people – I mean, I do get stressed about the fact that other people are working so hard as well, I just think, I can't do it, and I can't kill myself. I would be lying if I said it didn't get to me – like I know some people go home and do five hours a night. I



mean most of them don't really need to do that but it is probably just because they are worried that they would fail. (Tola, third round)

Not only does she recognise that she too gets stressed about the exams, unlike Wen, but she does not universalise from her own experience: she is able to recognise that other people might be motivated to work hard because of a fear of failure. Data from this group suggest that a fear of failure motivates them to work hard and that they are sufficiently confident in their self-knowledge to be able to calculate what this means in real terms, thereby allowing them to work less hard, become less stressed and still achieve the necessary results. From this perspective, it can be argued that these participants are benefiting from a lifetime of educational success, which has resulted in the accrual of specific forms of value – not just the similar credentials that all participants have accrued, but also the ability to judge accurately their abilities and limitations. The ability to succeed without working ‘too hard’ are resources that have exchange value at the Firm because they facilitate a more pleasurable and less stressful working life, but, moreover, because they contribute to dominant discourses of what a professional should be like: hard working but calm and reliable under pressure (Evetts, 2006).

I shall move on now to look at the experiences of those participants who, despite passing their exams, continued to express that they feared failure, worked hard and claimed to be very stressed out by the subsequent round of ACA exams. This group includes Olivia, Jo and Sarah. There are just three in

this situation and they are all female – this is the only thing they have in common in educational terms. As I have previously articulated in chapters two and four, there is a rebalancing occurring in the sociology of education from a dominant focus on boys' and men's educational experiences, to many aspects of girls' and women's (Archer et al., 2007, Evans, 2009, Rodd and Bartholomew, 2006, Mendick, 2005, Clark, 2009). However, there is less research on the experiences of academically privileged girls and women. Power *et al.* (2003) is an exception in that it focuses on the experiences of the middle classes and education; although gender is only part of the analysis, what their work illustrates is that girls' experiences within the middle classes are very varied. Olivia, who received a wholly private education, and Sarah, who went to a state and private primary school followed by a grammar secondary education, serve as a good reminder of this fact. Jo's experiences remind us that upward mobility through the British education system is possible despite attending state funded, non-selective schools in her local community in an economically deprived part of London, and being the first in her family to attend university. All three women gained a 2:1 or above at the time of graduation from RG universities.

All three women profess that they *need* to work hard and harder than others (although for different reasons), and could be characterised as over-workers in that they go beyond a point where studying achieves peace of mind and becomes in itself a depleting process (Covington, 2000). In an interview which focused on the imminent start of the second round of ACA exams, Kathryn

talked about her mixed feelings about starting at college. As she reported, in the first round of exams she enjoyed college and found the banter and classroom atmosphere fun and familiar; however, she was also anxious about the amount of hard work and anxiety she was about to endure, which to her mind was necessary to ensure exam success. I asked her to describe her work pattern last time round:

K: I was sick, um.

S: What physically, with anxiety?

K: Yeah that always happens before exams ... um ... probably for about a week to two weeks before and definitely on exam day ... Um and for about a week to two weeks after I'll be snotty nosed, butterflies, IBS type of stuff. (Kathryn, third round)

Like Frances, Kathryn reports that her pre- and post-exam experiences are not unfamiliar to her in that they follow a trend from her previous educational history. She tells me that she had to work 'really, really hard' in order to pass the first round of exams, but this is said in hindsight and is used to motivate or justify how hard she must work *this* time. But Kathryn did not just pass – she got marks in the late 50s and early 60s. Another way of re-positioning what she says might be that she worked really, really hard as she always does and she was successful as she always is; but her hard work and her abilities are never framed so positively. Kathryn reduces her academic ability to her ability to work hard, which has the effect of distancing herself from her achievements. Kathryn repeatedly positions her hard work and academic success as attributes

from her parents, whom she judges as hard working and exceptionally bright, but whose opportunities were blighted by their experiences as working-class, Catholic, Irish immigrants to London in the 1970s. Kathryn loads moral responsibility on to herself to do her best from the opportunities afforded to her generation, as she states more than once in our interviews, and often in contrast to what she sees as her super privileged peers: ‘failure is not an option for me’. Taking her habitus into account, it is not difficult to understand why Kathryn would continue to be fearful of failure and to adopt hard work strategies regardless of her success, as she clearly feels that she has more riding on her success or failure than others, more privileged than her, might. Reasserting or reminding ourselves of Kathryn’s habitus offers a possible explanation for why she would continue to be fearful of failure and to adopt hard work strategies regardless of her exam results and the toll it takes on her. I understand Kathryn’s experiences to be a continuation of her educational experiences, which are largely successful; her grades are not wildly different to the previous group, but the impact of her work ethic has a deleterious effect on her body, which is visible to others. Later on, she describes colleagues coming up to her and acknowledging in a friendly way that the strain of the exam period was easily read from her body:

On the morning of the first exam, uh, one of the lads came up, put his arm round me and went ‘Kathryn, you win “looking the worst before an exam award”’ because apparently I was just plain white. (Kathryn, second round)

While she reports a sympathetic response to the embodied form that the strain of the exams took, from what we know about the relationship between embodiment and professionalism, it is not difficult to imagine that this might to some extent affect the amount of value that Kathryn is able to accrue herself in regards of looking/being professional. Further research would be needed to think about the relationship between hard work and professionalism in order to consider what constitutes the 'right amounts' of hard work to maintain a mode of professionalism, and when that balances tips into working too hard and thus undermining a sense of professionalism.

I turn now to Olivia, whose educational experiences could not have been more different to Kathryn's, as a privately and exclusively educated child. Although Olivia passed all of her exams by 10-20 per cent clear of the pass mark, events such as a poor college tutor, repetitive strain injury of her wrist and her boyfriend's health taking a very serious turn for the worse, coincided to ensure that her second round of exams were, in her words, 'dire', and resulted in her having a 'minor break down'. Olivia's experiences are interesting, considering her comments in light of the fact that she had passed with excellent marks from her first set of exams:

I'm dyslexic so maybe I have to put in an extra bit, but workload? That's [four-to-five hours' evening study per night] generally what people have to put in, and it's just keeping the momentum up over such a long period of time, that crashing and burning, which is what's also so hard about it. (Olivia, first round)

In the first round of interviews, Olivia offers her dyslexia as a reason as to why she has to work so hard, but later on she reflects that perhaps she does work *too* hard: ‘I probably did too much work’, ‘I always feel like I have to work twice as hard as anyone else’. She offers her dyslexia as a reason for this and mirrors her thoughts on her academic results in school, where her excellent results paled in comparison to her peers. Olivia presents her achievements as a by-product of her ability to work hard rather than as a direct result of being ‘clever’ or having passed through an elite education system. She also suggests that her degree has given her an advantage, owing to the nature of the teaching, learning and assessment which is similar to that of the ACA:

I’m quite fortunate having come from a science background, that the style of learning it is really intense, just regurgitate and apply it ... So having come from a science background, doing a similar thing for my degree, that does help. (Olivia, second round)

In all, Olivia offers competing narratives about the exams, where she is at the same time disadvantaged by personal circumstances and dyslexia, and at the same time advantaged by her first degree. Her reference to feeling always like she has to work harder relates to her dyslexia diagnosis as a child, where she reports that she was academically written off, and for one reason or another chose to resist that outcome throughout her educational journey (with the help of a private education). Central to her narrative is her reliance on hard work to get her through, although her ability to do this hard work was compromised by

her personal circumstances (ill boyfriend) and as a direct result of the hard work itself (repetitive strain injury). Despite the fact that Olivia offers extra reasons as to why she was fearful that she might fail and therefore had to work so hard, her previous educational experiences, such as battling with dyslexia, are where she has used hard work to make up for any academic deficiencies brought about by being dyslexic. Olivia's experiences were not dissimilar to Kathryn's, in that the combination of fear and hard work resulted in unpleasant embodied experiences in the exam:

[I became] quite hysterical. I almost had a panic attack in this exam ...

At one point I was like, okay, I'm going to get up and maybe I'll leave the exam room, go and have a walk around, be composed and then come back. (Olivia, third round)

Both Kathryn and Olivia emphasise the embodied aspects of the fear and hard work of the ACA exams; they also highlight that these experiences did not differ wildly to those at school, during which the fear they felt around failure was countered by adopting 'hard work' strategies. It is hard to argue against the success of their strategies, insofar as they had reached the same stage as their peers, but the toll on their bodies was alarming, and I would suggest potentially disruptive for the smooth presentation of the professional body.

I turn now to Sarah who, like the other two women, articulated that throughout her schooling she had to 'work hard', and her time spent at the Firm was no exception. She described a rigorous study system (methodical, comprehensive,

steady with long hours), which she also combined with a highly regulated diet and exercise regime. This system of study was responsible, she argued, for her long record of academic success from her state/private schooling through to graduating with a first from an RG university. She explained that her study system was not very compatible with the high volume of work that the ACA exam presented, and this resulted in her being fearful that she might fail:

I worry that I might fail because I'm used to starting the work and just kind of over time, building up, building up, so that you know everything by the time you come to the exam. But this one [ACA exam], you're just like, I'm not used to cramming and I'm not that good [at it]. (Sarah, second round)

Unlike the two other women, Sarah fears that some of the ways in which she works hard at her studies were not all that compatible with the demands of the ACA. Like all the trainees quoted in this chapter, Sarah also got high marks in the exams, despite her doubts about her ability to do so under the circumstances she describes. In contrast to Olivia and Kathryn, I did not develop such a lively and open rapport with Sarah, who was more closed in general during interviews. However, as we were saying our goodbyes after the second interview, I wished her good luck for the next round of exams, and she quipped that she would remember to eat and sleep more this time round. This was not something that she had referred to at all during the interviews, although I did get a sense from things she said that she took her work very seriously and disciplined her body through exercise and diet as a matter of



course. Like Kathryn and Olivia, Sarah still fears failure despite the evidence to the contrary, and suggests that there is a distinct toll on her body – ‘I’ll remember to eat and sleep more this time’. Implicit in this comment is a recognition that her strategies take a toll on her body. All three women in this group persist in using the strategies that they have acquired as they traversed their particular educational journeys to get through the ACA exam. They do so successfully, although it is not without its costs: the costs they describe are emotional and physical anxiety and exhaustion but there may be others that are more hidden.

### ***GENDER HARD AT WORK?***

These women display many of the stereotypical study habits attributed to all women (often by men trying to perform modes of ‘effortless achievement’) who want to do well in their studies, such as high anxiety, conspicuous work habits, non-strategic learning habits such as trying to learn all the material, and high anxiety behaviours on exam days (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Although they all describe crying or complaining to friends or parents in private, many of these habits are highly visible and occur in workspaces either in college – before, during or after an exam – and in the office. As such the women are at risk of sexist ideologies and myths, which, I would argue, work to undermine them as professionals. Consider the following comments, which reveal some of the gendered discourse circulating around trainees, the exams and hard work:

[T]he difference between girls and boys as well, blokes see a bit further ahead and see six weeks and think ‘I don’t want to burn out in the first week’, I want to measure it perfectly so that I’m peaking right at the time of exams. Whereas a girl, if they’ve got four chapters of homework and they’ve only done three and it’s ten o’clock, they think ‘Oh, I’d better do that last chapter, otherwise I’m behind tomorrow.’ Whereas I would ... I mean you can’t do the homework at night, so you think, ‘Okay, I’ve got four chapters to do, I can’t do all four of them, if I just do every question, so if I just do every other question. I can’t do all of this, so I’ve got a general understanding and I’ll make it more and more specific as it gets to the exams’, which is what I try to do. (Henry, third round)

Here Henry paints a stereotypical picture of how boys and girls allegedly approach exams, in which he positions boys (i.e. himself) as taking a logical, rational and measured approach to the task in opposition to the girls whom he imagines are working *too* hard. Henry might well read the behaviour of Sarah, Olivia, Kathryn and other women he works alongside<sup>21</sup> as a product of their gender rather than attributing it, as the women do, to other reasons such as fear, habit or other personal circumstances. Henry’s comment relies on sexist assumptions regarding gender and education, which may well be reinforced by

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<sup>21</sup> He is not directly referring to them as he was in a different office and exam cohort. In fact, none of these women worked in the same office or attended college at the same time.

some of the behaviour by women in his cohort. In his analysis, working too hard is defined negatively as an irrational approach to the exams – assigning irrationality to women’s behaviours is sadly nothing new, but in this context this sexist understanding of women and men’s behaviours does something more, as rationality is a highly prized aspect of professionalism. Therefore, implicit in Henry’s analysis is a built-in correlation between women’s work place strategies and a lack of professionalism.

Henry was not the only man to report a gendered division in approaches to the exams – Thomas did too:

[T]he boys were more relaxed about the way they approached study and the way they did everything, whereas the girls seemed to be a lot more determined and focused, I mean that’s not to take away from what the boys are actually doing, they just seem to have a different method for doing things, like everyone has their own ways of studying, but it seemed that there was a very distinct divide between the [way the] boys liked to do it and the way girls like to do it, another way which is just strange to see it, ’cause like to see it in such a blatant divide as well.

(Thomas, second round)

Thomas’ observations are similar in content but not in tone to Henry’s, and are particularly interesting because he himself fails to conform to the observation that he notes, unlike Henry who appears or wishes to appear as though he does. From the data that I collected, there is little evidence to support anything like

the gendered segregation that these two men describe. I do not deny that both women and men in this study appear to conform to the stereotypes, but equally, there are as many that fail to. Thomas' comments suggest that it is important to remember that any conformity, real or imagined, is likely to be reinforced in the mind of the observer as it fits preconceived ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour, regardless of an individual's reality. It is clear that not only are women like Olivia, Sarah and Kathryn at risk of being misrecognised as devalued gendered subjects, but men like Thomas who are unable or unwilling to conform to masculine stereotypes are also at risk of being assigned a devalued gendered subjectivity. Furthermore, none of the women associated or attributed their hard work, fear and learning habits to devalued gender subjectivities. It was only male participants who referred explicitly to the gendered aspect of learning. As such, the potential implications for women and men in the workplace need to be explored further.

## ***CONCLUSION***

I started this chapter by arguing for the relevance of social class and gender to the professionalisation process of trainees through their acquisition of professional qualifications via the ACA exams. Next, I reminded the reader that in a variety of ways and for a range of reasons the Firm invested in an organisational discourse that promoted itself as 'one firm'. For trainees, the sense of all being in it together was emphasised during the induction period and the first round of exams, where participants expressed very similar fears

relating to the ACA examination process. I have illustrated that all participants' claims that a fear of failure leading to a loss of the training contract motivated all of them to work very hard. I then argued that there was a notable change in later examination rounds where some participants lost their fear and claimed not to work as hard as they had previously done, and others, despite examination success, remained highly fearful of failure and worked as hard if not harder than they had done before. Those in the former category appeared only to be partially aware that not everyone took a more relaxed approach to the exams. Data from Tola provided insight to the contradictory feelings such as anxiety, guilt and feeling positive about one's own ability that can be generated when some people are able to work less hard than others want to or feel they should. From participants' experiences over subsequent rounds of exams, I have demonstrated that after the first set of exams the majority of participants reverted back to their normal study habits, which are a result of the accumulation of their educational experiences. In this sense I suggest that the advantages and disadvantages that participants bring with them to the Firm, in the form of various bundles of capital, are reproduced over the period of their transition. As a result, overall I argue that any sense of oneness that the Firm is able to generate is to an extent undermined, which leaves trainees vulnerable to their own specific bundles of value, their ability to accrue more value (via ACA credentials), and to exchange that value at the Firm for a permanent job at the end of the training contract.

Next, through an analysis of participants' experiences amid claims about

working hard, for subsequent rounds of exams I presented evidence that participants' embodied experiences of hard work, and the visible and public toll that it took on their bodies, had the potential to undermine their capacity to convey just the 'right' professional body. This is especially concerning for women owing to the gendered meanings that were attributed to hard work. This chapter has focused on the experiences of participants as they seek to accrue value for themselves through the acquisition of another set of credentials, ACA examinations, which are the formal manifestation of their soon-to-be professional status as accountants. My analysis has highlighted the embodied aspect of this experience and argued that these are classed and gendered. In so doing I have filled a significant gap in the critical accountancy literature, which has thus far done little to highlight the relevance of social class to the acquisition of the professional identity of the accountant.

## CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION

This final chapter will now return to the research questions and, building on the analysis of the literature in chapter two, answer them by drawing on the data presented in chapters four to seven.

- How does participants' social location inform how they become subjects of value and how does this play out during graduates' transition into employment?
- What light does looking at graduates' transition as an embodied process shed on the meaning of class, gender and ethnicity?
- How do participants experience the Firm's efforts to manage diversity?

Predominantly, through the work of Skeggs, I argued that becoming a subject of value hinges on complex social relations to which social class and gender are primary (Skeggs, 1997, Skeggs, 2000, Skeggs, 2004, Sayer, 2005b). I began by arguing that being able to have exchange value by becoming a subject of value is a central feature of social life and the key to survival and success. Building on the literature from the sociology of education, work and organisation, I have demonstrated that gaining certain credentials is the central mechanism by which the middle and working classes can accrue value under neo-liberalism. This thesis has argued that some participants, owing to the advantages conferred on them by their parents, are further along this process than others when they enter HE and the graduate labour market. I have argued

that periods of transition are key moments in which such differences can be seen and their relevance understood. Moreover, I have suggested that the ability to thrive as a neo-liberal subject does not just depend on the resources conferred upon an individual, but that how those resources – as well as transitional experiences – are framed, reflected and acted upon by an individual affects their resilience and ability to thrive and therefore their ability to accrue value. I have also demonstrated that the graduate employer at the heart of this study is an agenda-setter in relation to how and in what ways an individual can accrue value; in so doing they not only reproduce pernicious and problematic regimes of class and gender, but, more positively, they work within a diversity framework. The diversity framework is a limiting one in that it does not seek to challenge explicitly deep and lasting inequalities, but rather presents itself as welcoming of ‘difference’, as long as that difference conforms to key meritocratic criteria. In reality, who becomes eligible to meet that criteria is limited, owing to the wider socioeconomic structures that inform people’s lives and increase access to participate in credentialism. Moreover who becomes eligible is constrained by the Firm’s recruitment strategy which is complicit with an assumption that ‘the best students’ are primarily found in Russell Group universities. It is hard to envisage how these things will change under the current government’s plans for further marketisation of the education system and the entrenchment of the economic downturn.

Through the presentation of key literatures from the sociology of education, sociology of class and from those writing about pupils’ transitions into



employment, I argued that access to different types of secondary, further and HE have always been strongly related to outcomes for individuals and social groups. The literature demonstrated that those aspiring to upward social mobility have long recognised the value in accruing the ‘right’ amounts and types of educational capital to facilitate upward progress. I argued through an analysis of successive governments’ attempts to expand and widen participation in HE that overall there was a greater emphasis on the relationship between securing academic credentials and positive life outcomes as economically defined. The literature review detailed the recent ways in which sociology of education scholars have presented the relationship between class, mobility and education; they argue that securing the best possible education for their children is a central feature of middle-class parenting practices. In particular, in lieu of significant economic capital, some parents become heavily invested in securing what they perceive to be the best ‘free’ education the state has to offer. That is to say, securing key educational credentials for their children has been a primary aim because it is believed that they are a chief way in which individuals can become subjects of value in the UK. The studies to which I referred largely focused on the practices of parents of school-aged children up to and including the transitional period to HE. My focus on graduates and their perspective on their parents offer a novel perspective on parents’ value-accruing practices. My contribution to the field has been the recognition that many of the same issues and themes are pertinent to graduates’ transitions into the graduate labour market. This, I suggest, is because of the many ways in which life in a graduate job involves many of the

same practices and experiences in which children, pupils and students have been engaged during the years prior to their entry into the graduate labour market. In other words, for the middle class participants in this study there is a deep congruence between their habitus and the environment that the Firm creates; this means that they are well prepared for the transition that they embark on upon entering employment. Data presented here demonstrates the ease and comfort with which middle class participants make the transition from HE into the environment of the Firm. Likewise there is evidence a plenty that working class participants' experiences are characterised by a deep sense of discomfort at the point of transition and for some time beyond. The ease and comfort experienced by some and the discomfort of others is deeply embodied. These facts reiterate the significance of habitus for participants' experiences of transition and serve as a salutary reminder that habitus is not necessarily over deterministic but certainly continues to shape experience long after agents have left one social field and space and moved (partly) into another. My data have demonstrated that the Firm goes some way to compensate those whose own background does not furnish them with a familiarity with the Firm's aesthetic values. The data also suggest, however, that much of the preparatory work has already taken place during participants' transition to and successful completion of a Higher Education at elite universities.

To some extent, all of the data chapters contribute to answering all three research questions; this is because the fieldwork continually sought to engage with participants' ongoing experiences and their social location, and the impact

this had on their ability to progress within the Firm, and because I took an embodied approach to all aspects of fieldwork. I shall now move on to discuss each data chapter and its contribution to answering my research questions, before going on to consider the impact of my methodological choices. Finally, I will highlight where further research into this field could prove fruitful.

Chapter four, *The enchantment process: prestige, meritocracy and diversity in the Firm's recruitment process*, located the Firm as the site of the research within the accountancy profession, broadly speaking, and the large multi-national firms more specifically. This was important as it allowed the reader to situate accountancy, audit and – the most recent incarnation – providers of professional services within a wider debate about professional occupations as a group. I presented literature that illustrated the historical and ongoing professionalisation project with which the accountancy industry has been engaged, which highlighted its rather fragmented nature owing, in large part, to the different historical and regional development of its professional regulatory bodies. Anderson-Gough et al. (2002) argue that this has contributed to the current state of play, where accountants are loyal first to their firm or organisation, and second to the profession. This, they argue, in combination with the mergers of the eight largest accountancy firms to four, has challenged these organisations to differentiate themselves in a relatively homogenous market. I demonstrated through an analysis of the Firm's rhetoric in its recruitment processes, including web- and paper-based literature, observations at careers fairs and interviews with members of HR, that professionalism,

prestige and meritocracy were the Firm's core values and ones of and to which applicants were expected to demonstrate their understanding and commitment. I argued that being able to demonstrate competently their commitment to the Firm's core values during the application process – but crucially beyond it – was the primary means in which participants were able to accrue value for themselves at the Firm, which in turn had exchange value outside it.

Other core values of importance to the Firm were integrity, fairness and social responsibility, and again participants were expected to demonstrate their commitment to these values; more interesting was the way in which the Firm demonstrated *its* commitment to them. Through my analysis of the Firm's rhetoric, I identified that this was partially achieved through its commitment to recruitment processes that promoted a 'diversity' agenda. I demonstrated that the justification for a diversity agenda was achieved through a careful balance in argument, between the belief in the commercial benefits to the Firm, (the business case for diversity) and the Firm's commitment to corporate social responsibility ( the social justice case for diversity). I further established that the former justification was used to ensure that the latter did not undermine the Firm's prestige.

Chapter four further analysed data from participants which illustrated that the Firm had successfully communicated its core values to trainees. Frances was the only participant to outwardly resist, through scepticism, the Firm's rhetoric as the number one accountancy firm in the UK. This, I suggest, reflected her

proximity to the Firm and other similar accountancy firms through her family's relationship to them as longstanding employees. This also suggests that a great congruence in habitus could actually undermine the Firm's efforts to get trainees to engage with and commit to the organisation; perhaps Frances' data suggest that familiarity breeds contempt. Further research would be needed to understand how widespread resistance to the Firm's rhetoric was for others and what, if anything, it can tell us about the relationship between the habitus of individuals and an organisation.

Furthermore, chapter four detailed participants' understanding of the Firm as prestigious, and that this prestige was synonymous with an elitism that was bathed in signifiers of class drawing upon white, upper-class, Oxbridge educated males as the somatic norm to concretise its prestige. Overall, through the identification of the Firm's core values, together with an analysis of participants' understanding of the Firm's status from their experiences of the Firm's physical and rhetorical presence, I argued that participants largely took up and bathed in the positive glow of the Firm as a preeminent graduate employer. I argued that this was particularly the case for participants whose sense of self and assessment of their own value was diminished in one way or another. In answer to the first research question, I argued that successful entry into the Firm in itself accrued value for participants. However, I was mindful of the precarious nature of this value, as it was premised on participants' positive understanding of the Firm's status and the somatic norm. After situating the Firm and participants' understanding of it, the next chapter

engaged with processes that preceded their entry. It is to a discussion of this that I now turn.

Chapter five, *Meritocracy, hard work and privilege: contradictory discourses on the journey to accrue value*, in particular sought to answer the first half of the question *How does participants' social location inform how they become subjects of value?* Overall, I argued that participants' habitus was central to how they became subjects of value, and that working hard and meritocracy were dominant discourses in all participants' narratives. A primary feature of these data was the sense of inevitability from *all* participants that they would go to university. These were for different reasons: broadly speaking, middle-class participants derived their sense of inevitability from their parents and schools, though not solely as a result of their academic talents. Through an analysis of participants' recollections of their parents' role in their education, I argued that middle-class parents accrue value for their children through a range of interventions, but that participants' role in the deal was to 'work hard' within the opportunities that were provided for them. Working-class participants derived their sense of inevitability from wider social expectations, such as the expansion and widening of HE and the concomitant knowledge economy, and from being marked out as academically exceptional by teachers and the school. Working-class participants reported that motivations for working hard also stemmed from their back ground, but was framed as a necessity as schools and parents were not in a position to provide extra support. This was sometimes framed in opposition to the perception that their middle-

class peers had their educational opportunities handed to them on a plate that required them to work less hard. In this sense, working-class participants can be thought of as having a more individualised experience of value accrual and transition into further, HE and the graduate labour market than their middle-class peers. That they would make a good transition into the graduate labour market was less certain, and all transitions were deeply shaped by participants' classed experiences of privilege and disadvantage.

Through an analysis of participants' retrospective accounts of their educational journeys, many of the parenting practices reported in the sociology of education literature were evident. I argued that all of the middle-class participants reported that their parents were engaged in what I described as interventionist practices. In practice, these included moving into particular, more expensive, neighbourhoods for the schools, paying private school fees and/or private tutoring to help with threshold exams, such as the eleven plus, GCSEs and A Levels. I also reported that it was not just in such practical ways that parents helped participants to accrue educational capital, but that their rhetorical engagement with their children was also important. I demonstrated that parents passed on important messages regarding the value of a meritocratic education system and about the need to work hard within it in order to progress through the education system and into the graduate labour market and secure a 'good job'. I demonstrated that this led participants to experience a sense of inevitability that they would go on to HE and make a good transition into the graduate labour market. Through an analysis of the data, I argued that the

concepts of meritocracy and hard work amounted to a discourse that was, in relation to the economic privileges that these parents exercised through their interventions in their children's education, rather contradictory. With regards to social location, aside from class, I argued that parents' experiences as migrant workers to the UK were used further to stress the importance of these two values to their own and their own children's lives, and their potential for even further upward mobility.

The interventionist approach taken to middle-class participants' education was contrasted with what I characterised as a non-interventionist approach to working-class participants' education. However, I pointed out that a non-interventionist approach should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in participants' educational outcomes; rather, emphasis was put on the extent to which working-class participants drew on their parents' lives to motivate themselves to work hard and do well in the meritocratic elements of the education system. I argued that this, in combination with the knowledge that working-class participants had about the full range of interventionist practices adopted by their middle-class peers, served to render their own experiences as of greater value in relation to the two values of hard work and meritocracy. That is to say, working-class participants rated themselves as necessarily having worked harder, and having had to rely on the meritocratic aspects of the education system in order to get to the same level of transition as their middle-class peers. This was in itself a source of pride and congruous with the Firm's values and, therefore, I would argue, a means by which working-class



participants accrued value for themselves in relation to their middle-class peers. However, the majority of middle-class participants were also deeply invested in discourses of hard work and meritocracy, and were largely unable to grasp the advantages that their relatively privileged economic and therefore educational capital had given them. Their investment in these discourses therefore served to preclude an engagement with any evidence that suggested that something other than hard work and merit had got them to the Firm. This was not problematic for middle-class participants (why should it be?) but there was some evidence to suggest in later chapters that their lack of self-awareness may have contributed to their sense of entitlement to be at the Firm, possibly conveyed through their embodiment. In turn this was experienced problematically by working-class participants during their transition. The issue of embodiment and working-class participants' experiences of middle-class embodiment will be returned to in more detail shortly; for now I would like to flag up that it is one of the examples in which an embodied approach can shed light on participants' transitions, which is the second question of this thesis.

In relation to the second half of the first question, *how does this [social location] play out during graduates' transition into employment?*, all four data chapters contribute to answering this question. To begin: there are specific ways in which participants' social location contributed to their ability to make the transition into employment – chapter five deals with this by indicating the centrality of experience-based credentials for a successful application to the Firm. I argued that participation in ECA throughout their education is a

primary means by which participants were expected to be able to demonstrate that they had accrued value for themselves through the acquisition of key competencies and skills argued to be transferable into the labour market. I also demonstrated that historically – and still today – fee-paying and elite state schools, as well as elite universities, are generally thought to be in the best position to provide pupils and students with the opportunities to engage in ECA. Therefore, those participants who attended such schools were not only at an advantage in gaining the necessary academic credentials, but were also very well suited to gain necessary experience-based credentials.

Inescapably, by virtue of their involvement in this research study, all participants were successful applicants to the Firm. However, through the example of Thomas' experiences of failing to get the right amounts of experience-based credentials through the participation in ECA, and having to embellish and lie on his application form and the deleterious impact this consequently had on him, we can ascertain the import of gaining experience-based credentials to a successful transition into the graduate labour market. Or, put another way, we can see the relevance of social location in the likelihood of succeeding or failing to gain the correct form and amounts of credentials. However, this should not be overstated, as Kathryn's experiences just as succinctly demonstrate that despite not coming from a social location where the opportunities to engage in ECA were abundant, this did not stop her from engaging with them at university, where the opportunities were plentiful. I concluded that these two examples do not cancel each other out; rather, they

highlight not only the variation of experiences amongst the working-class, but also the precarity and risk for those who are not robust enough to acquire for themselves all that is more easily provided for others.

*How did an embodied approach shed light on graduates' experiences of transition?* One of the key findings of this thesis is the confirmation that participants' experiences were most certainly embodied, which included them talking about their experiences of their own bodies as well as their experiences of the bodies of others. Working-class participants who lived in university halls of residence shared their deeply embodied experiences of university and the profound difference that they felt from being in such close proximity to the embodied habits of their middle-class student peers. These were gradually overcome in some ways, but not in others. What these stories illustrated was the visceral ways in which day-to-day practices, habits and embodiment communicate social location. My analysis of Thomas and Kathryn's university stories highlighted that similar practices can be variously experienced and are not always a source of negative judgement or misrecognition. In fact, Kathryn was able to reinforce her own positive sense of self in opposition to the girls she lived with. Nevertheless, what these data highlighted was that overall, working-class participants who attended RG universities certainly felt that they were entering into spaces dominated by the middle classes. In turn, this reinforced a difference that they felt between their working-class identities and the middle-class identities of their peers. This involved a degree of emotional work that was easier for some than for others – it had quite negative

consequences for Thomas in his ability to make a secure transition into the graduate labour market, as his non-participation in ECA testifies.

In the early days of their transition to the Firm, my analysis of working-class participants' experiences confirmed the findings of other studies which highlight the dominance of the somatic norm; in this case, it is not just understood as white and male, but is also profoundly middle class. All working-class participants shared stories about the ways in which seemingly middle-class colleagues inhabited spaces in a manner that conveyed an ease with the setting and an unquestioned sense of entitlement to be there. The ease and confidence that exuded from these middle-class bodies again contrasted with their own sense of difference. Again, these experiences were not homogenous: Kathryn positioned her experiences more positively than Thomas, who experienced his middle-class peers' difference as symbolic violence. This was owing to his interpretation of their behaviour as acts of misrecognition of him as lesser value in relation to the clothes that he wore. In contrast to the number of stories and anecdotes that working-class participants told me about their embodied transitional experiences at the Firm, middle-class participants' stories were largely absent. I do not take from this that middle-class participants' experiences were not embodied; rather, I conclude that it is more difficult to notice and therefore convey congruence in a setting than incongruence.

However, chapter six and my analysis of the Firm's induction session goes some way to recognising the implicit ways in which participants were embodied. *What (not) to wear: seeing is believing* illustrated the very real ways in which being a professional accountant is embodied, and the role that the Firm had in shaping and promoting a specific aesthetic. Through an analysis of participants' experiences of an induction session, I argued that, through the Firm's dress code, it communicated its preferred interpretation of what professionalism looks like. I drew on the work of Skeggs and other sociology of the body scholars to argue that a professional embodiment was synonymous with a middle-class aesthetic. I argued that the Firm's preferred organisational aesthetic was middle-class and also highly gendered. I argued that the session reproduced gendered and classed regimes of meaning about the body which valued some forms of embodiment over and above others.

Through a specific focus on Amir's experiences of the induction session, I further developed my answer to the third research question: *How do participants experience the Firm's attempts to manage diversity?* I argued that the Firm's diversity recruitment agenda, coupled with wider changes to the make up and take up of HE, had left graduate employers with something of a problem in relation to POF. I argued that POF was thought to be a very important aspect of current organisational thinking, owing to the resource-intensive nature of recruitment and the reported potential for conflict amongst employees, and between employees and the organisation. I argued that the Firm's induction session was not just devised as a light hearted way to

reinforce their dress code. Rather, I suggested that the Firm was seeking to enable participants from 'diverse' backgrounds to make a smooth transition into the Firm by recognising that they might not have access to the same sets of knowledge as their less diverse/more white and middle-class peers. In answer to the question, I argued that despite the problematic content of the session in terms of the reproduction of class and gendered ideals of embodied professionalism, the session had in fact helped at least one participant. Through an analysis of Amir's experiences of the induction session as a working-class Muslim man, I argued that it had enabled him to concretise his knowledge about what was expected of him in terms of looking right. I also argued that the session allayed his wider concerns that the Firm was super elitist, and in fact enabled him to believe that the Firm was far more interested in furrowing a 'middle ground'. This, I argued, facilitated his sense that fitting into the Firm was accessible to someone like him.

Furthermore, chapter six does a good job in demonstrating the extent of congruence between middle-class participants' embodiment and the Firm's aesthetic. This, I argued, was evidenced by their belief that the Firm's induction session on what participants should and should not wear to work was unnecessary. Through an analysis of the literature of embodiment and professionalism, I argued that looking right was a key way in which the professional requirements of accountants and audit work was achieved. Therefore, the ability to embody the right professional look is critical for trainees wanting to accrue value for themselves by fulfilling the Firm's

expectations. A key finding of this chapter was that middle-class participants' dismissiveness of the usefulness of the induction session, and their reading of it as frivolous entertainment rather than a source of important information, can be seen as evidence of their congruence with the Firm's aesthetic. Moreover, it further reinforced their ease and knowledge of the setting and smoothed their transition to the Firm. Therefore, in answer to the question, I argued that the Firm's attempts to manage diversity through the inclusion of the induction session to some extent further facilitated middle-class participants' transition to the Firm, by reinforcing their taken-for-granted understandings of professionalism in general and the Firm's aesthetic – 'business casual' – in particular.

The final data chapter, *The embodiment of hard work: class, gender and the accrual of professional qualifications*, built on the understanding of the profession as outlined in chapter four, and further explored the relationship between social class, gender and trainees' professionalisation process. This was first achieved through an analysis of the induction session, as outlined in chapter six and again in chapter seven, through an exploration of participants' experiences of studying for and taking the professional accountancy qualifications – the ACA exams. Through an analysis of the literature that looks at the socialisation of trainee accountants, I argued that there was definite lack of appreciation for the way in which social class continues to be of relevance to trainees' experiences beyond the recruitment process. In particular, despite a focus on the socialisation of trainees into becoming

professional auditors in these studies, and a recognition of the embodied forms which this can take, there is a total absence of any analysis which focuses on the relevance of class. An analysis of the gendered aspects of trainees' socialisation experiences is also limited. This chapter makes a significant contribution to the field by recognising the ways in which trainees' socialisation as professionals is embodied in relation to both class and gender, not just through the obvious embodied ways in which studies have shown professionalism is manifest, but through the explicitly embodied ways in which the study and exam process is experienced. In so doing I brought together two usually separate ideas within the literature. After briefly demonstrating that the first round of exams were a period of time where trainees were brought together by a sense of all being in it together and having to work hard, I argued that this sense of togetherness quickly fragmented. This fragmentation occurred for a number of reasons. One was the extent to which the classroom was dominated by certain groups. Some participants, both men and women, both working- and middle-class, relished the banter of the classroom; however, those who did not enjoy – let alone participate in – classroom banter highlighted the gendered and classed elements of the exchanges. The jocularity of some of the behaviour was interpreted as typical of white upper-class men, and for some this contributed to a sense of their own diminishing, because others' confidence in the classroom was considered as part and parcel of their social location, and as oppressive. More generally, I argued that after the first round of exams, participants appeared to revert to the study habits that they had adopted throughout their education, and in this sense they were reliant on the



bundles of habits that they had already acquired. I argued that for some in this study this resulted in a reliance on their ability to work hard.

The fact that I took an embodied approach to my analysis enabled me to recognise that the concept of hard work was deeply embodied. I paid attention in interviews and during subsequent analysis to the stories that participants told me about the physical impact that working hard had on their bodies. This was something to which all participants alluded in the first round of exams, when everybody worked hard. However, by the second and third round the physical toll evident on some participants' bodies from their hard work began to be interpreted by others as evidence of working *too* hard. Some participants were perceived to be irrational in their attitude to working hard; this, I argued, was counter to the somatic norm of the professional ideal. I presented data that demonstrated that for some participants, working hard was gendered and that it was 'girls' who were thought to work too hard, while 'boys' were characterised as either not working hard enough or getting the workload just right. I argued that this was potentially problematic for female trainees hoping to develop a robust 'professional' identity.

This thesis has argued that participants had already accrued value for themselves through their educational experiences, which they exchanged for a training contract with the Firm. However, once at the Firm, the training contract demanded that participants continued to accrue value for themselves through their professional development and eventual accreditation as chartered

accountants. I demonstrated that this required them to acquire a specific set of knowledge through the formal accreditation process, as well learn how to embody the role of a professional accountant. I have provided evidence through the existing literature and empirical evidence from this study's fieldwork that both routes to professionalism are embodied, as they are gendered and most significantly classed. Therefore, participants' social location necessarily impacts on their experiences of and ability to make a successful transition into graduate employment as a trainee accountant.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

There are a variety of limitations to this study and these relate to the competency of the author and methodology. Having not conducted a piece of research of this size before, many of the flaws are those of a novice. A lack of understanding of the whole research process and confidence in my abilities led to a reticence to engage fully with the research at various stages. However, in contrast to some of my peers, who were deeply engaged with their research early on in the process, I have become more and more engaged as time went on, and now find myself deeply frustrated by data that have only been given a superficial analysis and have become marginalised or do not appear at all in this thesis. Examples include the economic crisis that was in its infancy as I conducted the fieldwork – participants and I talked and speculated about it at far greater length than this thesis suggests. Trainees attended lots of work-based socials which produced many interesting conversations about work/life boundaries and performance of professionalism outside office hours. I am very disappointed to realise the extent to which ‘race’ and ethnicity has become marginalised and reduced to a limited analysis of the somatic norm. There is so much more to say about the relationship between gender and ethnicity: participants told me stories about their daily encounters with low levels of sexism and racism with which my analysis has not really begun to engage. Choices have to be made about the story that will be told, and I will do my best to go back to participants’ narratives that have not made their way into this

version – not just to honour participants, but to strengthen my understanding of this thesis’ key themes and to consider others.

Other limitations spring from the methodology. Writing a thesis on embodiment and having only the most scant opportunity to do observation seems counterintuitive; although I think I have done well with the interviews, I wonder how fieldwork and analysis might have been different if I had been able to attend induction sessions and work socials. Likewise, I am sure I could have generated a greater understanding between embodiment, space and value accrual had I been able to spend more time observing participants in their college classrooms and at client offices. In chapter three, I discussed the limitations of researching social class owing to the avowal and disavowal of the concept. This seems to be most problematic when seeking to understand middle-class participants’ experiences as potential perpetrators of misrecognition. Above all else, the participants in this study were generous and polite with their time and conversation. As I mentioned in chapter three, politeness on all sides can hinder the research process, but it also facilitates the gaining and maintaining of access agreements. Striking a balance is key, and I think that during my next piece of research I will look more closely at the boundaries of politeness and the possibilities that non-face-to-face methods have for asking awkward questions around issues of class. As there was no opportunity to see participants relaxed and interacting in the workplace I was unable to observe where moments of symbolic violence may have occurred and of course the language of symbolic violence is inappropriate for use in

interviews. The closest I came to un-picking this problem was by posing them with scenarios where I relayed some of the stories told to me by working-class participants' experiences of 'posh' people at university and in work. I got very little response from them when I did this, which in and of itself is worthy of greater analysis.

### ***AREAS OF RESEARCH THAT COULD BE FOLLOWED UP***

In discussing the limitations of the thesis, I have touched on some areas that I would like to follow up. In general, I believe that sociologists need to spend more time researching the practices of the middle classes in a bid to gain greater understanding of the everyday way in which value is accrued and judgments are made, and the specific ways in which these intersect with ethnicity and race, gender, sexuality and, in particular, disability, which is a highly marginalised area of sociology. Moreover, I would like to continue to develop these ideas through the lens of embodiment. I think it would be very interesting to follow up on the participants of this study, one of whom contacted me very recently to see how I was doing. She has now left the Firm, and started telling me class and gender stories about her time there post-fieldwork, and also about the other areas of the finance sector where she has since been employed. More conceptually, I would like to have the opportunity to develop further my analysis and thinking around the concept of 'hard work', and how claims to do it or not are used to generate value, and conversely how the lack of hard work of others may be used to make claims about their value,

or lack of it. Furthermore, and in relation to the concept of hard work, I would like to think about the concept and the reality of having – or desiring to have – a ‘good job’ within the context of the graduate market. My fieldwork, analysis of participants’ journeys, and my own experiences as a postgraduate student have led me to question what a ‘good job’ actually is. I think there are probably fruitful connections to be made of the relationships between value, ‘good’ jobs, ‘bad’ jobs, and hard work within and outside the graduate labour market.

### ***CONCLUSION***

This concluding chapter reminded the reader of the research questions, and resituated them within the literature and in particular to the nodal concept of this thesis – value. I stated that accruing value through the education system and making ‘good’ transitions into the graduate labour market is a primary way in which middle- and working-class participants become subjects of value. Next, I discussed chapter by chapter how my analysis of the data answered my research questions, restating the relationship between participants and the Firm, and that looking at moments of transition and taking an embodied approach allows for a good understanding of these processes. I finished by discussing some of the limitations of the study and future potential areas of research.

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## APPENDIX 1 – PARTICIPANTS’ INFORMATION

Name	Sex	Ethnicity	class	Primary	secondary	Either parent HE	Mother Occ'n	Father Occ'n	Degree subject	classification	A-level grades	GCSE Grades
Thomas	M	W.Welsh	working	ES	ES	NO	Housewife/retail worker	Factory worker	Acc't & Finance	2.1	AAAA	1A*, 7A's, 1B
Amir	M	British Muslim	working	EP	ES	NO	Housewife/retail worker	Factory worker	Econ&Maths MA:Finance	2.2	ABD	1A*,6 A's, 5B's
Wen	M	Hong Kong Chinese	middle	ES	ES Int'	YES	Primary school teacher	Primary school teacher	Eng, econ & management	1		
Kathryn	F	Irish Catholic	working	ES	ES	NO	School secretary	Labourer	Finance and French	2.1	BBBB	2A*s, 4 A, 4 B's
Louise	F	Mixed Race -BB	middle	PP	ES GS	NO	Financial advisor	Self-employed businessman	Maths	2.1	ABC	1A*,8 A's, 1B's
Henry	M	Mixed Race -BA	middle	ES	EP	YES	Nurse	Doctor	Finance, management and Acc't	2.1	AAB	2A*s, 5A's, 3B's
Sarah	F	W British	middle	PP	ES GS	YES	Housewife/voluntary worker	Financial controller	Management	1	AAAA	9A*s, 1A
Jessica	F	W British	middle	ES	ES GS	YES	Police officer	Company director of own company	Maths	1	AAA	11A*, 1A
Olivia	F	W British	middle	EP	EP SS	YES	Housewife/Charity worker	Small business owner	Biology	2.1	AAA	4 A*, 3A's, 3B's
Harry	M	W British	middle	ES	ES	No	Childminder	Local authority civil servant	Accounting & Finance	2.1	AAB	5A's, 5B's

Tola	F	Black Nigerian	middle	EP Int'	ES SS	YES	Nurse	Lawyer/ gover ment	Accounting & Finance	1	AAB	5A*s 4A's, 1B, 1C
Frances	F	W British	middle	EP	EP SS	YES	Housewife	Financial contro ller	Geography	2.1	AAAB	5A*, 4A's
Joseph	M	W British	middle	ES	EP SS	YES	3rd sector senior manager	GP	Economics	2.1	AAAA	11A*
Giles	M	W British	middle	PP	PP GS	No	Housewife	City insurance broker	Engineering	2.1	AAC	1A*, 4A's, 4B's
Aisha	F	Welsh Muslim	middle	ES	ES	YES	Doctor	Docto r	Economics	2.1	AAB	1A*, 8A's, 3B's, 1C

Glossary: PP = part privately educated, EP = entirely privately educated, ES = entirely state educated International, ES GS = entirely state - Grammar School educated, EP SS = entirely private selective school educated, PP GS = part private, part Grammar school educated, Int' = International



## **APPENDIX 2 – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### **PhD research: Graduated Lives**

#### *What is the purpose of this study?*

I am investigating the role of social class in individual's experiences of higher education and career choices

#### *Who is funding it?*

I have won a prestigious research grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to carry out this project. For more details view their website [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)

#### *Who can take part?*

Graduate recruiters, recent graduates, HR personnel.

#### *What will happen to me if I take part?*

If you are happy to be contacted again, I will ask you to take part in an initial interview which may or may not be followed up with a request for a further interview during the next year. Please indicate in your email whether or not you would be happy to do this.

***Will my involvement be confidential?***

Yes. All the information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The only person with full access to the data will be me. During the research process, I may discuss some of the data with my supervisors, but I will ensure that it has first been anonymised (in other words all names will have been changed).

I may use some of your words from the form or interview in my thesis and in reports of the research, but your name and other signifiers will be changed so that you will not be able to be identified.

***What will happen to the results of the research project?***

The results of this project will be written up in a thesis in 2010, which will be kept in the library the university of Warwick modern records office. I will also produce a brief report on the research which I will send to all participants and to any organisations who may find it useful. The results may also be used in future research publications.

***Who has ethically reviewed the project?***

This project has been ethically reviewed and approved by the ethics review committee of the department of Sociology at the University of Warwick and my funding body the Economic and Social Research Council.

***What if I decide to withdraw from the project?***

You can decide to withdraw your participation at any stage. All you need to do is contact me to let me know (see details below). If you decide to withdraw then any information that has been gathered about you will be destroyed.

***What if something goes wrong or I want to make a complaint?***

If you have any worries or wish to make a complaint about the conduct of this research, you can either contact me directly, or you can contact my supervisor, Dr Christina Hughes, at the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, Cv4 7AL

Email: C.Hughes@Warwick.ac.uk

Contact details for further information

If you would like to take part in the project, or if you have any questions about it at any stage, please contact me:

Samantha Lyle

Email: S.A.Lyle@warwick.ac.uk

Tel: 07968386026

Thank you for reading this information sheet and expressing an interest in the project.

## APPENDIX 3 - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### *Round One*

- Tell me the story of your educational journey?
- Tell me about how you got to the Firm?

### *Rounds Two and Three*

- What's been happening since we last met?
- Have you thought about any of the things we talked about last time, last time you talked about...exams, boys club, settling in
- Last time we also talked about how you felt being at the Firm, have your thoughts and feelings changed at all?
- Can you take me through your last working week, including when you get up and getting home?
- How's your work/life balance working out for you?
- Are you still doing the sort of work that you expected to be?
- How do you manage your 'capacity' and get 'good' work?
- Do you still feel valued?
- If you could change something about your working life what would it be?
- Have your parent's, friends or other family come to visit you in London, how was that?
- Do you feel comfortable here?
- Have your expectations been met?
- Have you been through an appraisal system, tell me about that
- What do you think about the Firm 'messages' aka propaganda, what forms do you get it? Can you tell me about your training days?
- Do you think your job is fulfilling?
- Do you feel and equal in the firm?
- What do you think about people eating lunch at their desks?
- Do you think the next six months will be harder, easier or the same?
- How robust do you think you need to be to work here?
- Which aspects of working for Firm do you enjoy (the most)?