



Middle-Class “Chavs” From Working-Class Areas? Habitus, the Attainment Gap, and the Commodification of Higher Education Among Communication Students in England

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to compare and contrast higher education and research among public relations and journalism students of middle-class and working-class origin. The paper applied Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* to analyze prejudices against the working class, explores whether working-class students express an anti-education view, and whether the appreciation of education (and research in particular) is a predominantly middle-class attitude. Focus groups and an online questionnaire were used to obtain views of students at a university in Northern England. Triple coding (open, axial, selective) was used and the data was then analyzed and presented using thematic analysis. Findings show that early socialization about education as well as students’ type of neighborhoods (*habitus*) influence students’ views of higher education and research in particular. While the findings show some similarity with views in the literature of the middle-class being more inclined to value education, these findings show that this is true only for those who grow up in middle class areas whereas middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas show working-class attitudes toward education. Equally, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas show what is usually perceived as a middle-class view of education. Both groups of students show a tendency toward embracing a consumerist view of higher education.

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Introduction

This paper analyzes views of research education among public relations and journalism students, particularly concerning the class origin of students and the area in which they were socialized.

Questions of professionalism and integration of people from different backgrounds into public relations have been actively discussed with some authors arguing that to fully professionalize, PR education should not only focus on vocational teaching but also on research-informed teaching because it not only improves the quality of practice but also the representation within the industry (Fitch, 2014; Kruckeberg, 1998; Tallent & Barnes, 2015; VanSlyke, 1983). Other studies have analyzed developments in PR education, such as the state of crisis education and history of PR education (L'Etang, 2002; Welch, 2015; Wright, 2011), persuasive communication (Sarbia-Panol & Sison 2016), ethics (Austin & Toth, 2011), pedagogy (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999; Lubbers, 2002), and women in higher education (Theus, 1985; Weaver-Lariscy et al., 2009) to name a few; but again there is little to no discussion of the impact that class has on the student experience and outcomes in the field.

In journalism, the debate has mostly been centered on analyzing changes to journalism as a profession and questioning how course programs could respond (Mensing, 2010). Moreover, the traditional focus of journalism education research has highlighted the debate on vocational versus research-informed teaching to ground journalism education (e.g., Hirst, 2010; Macdonald, 2007). Like in public relations, little research has explored class aside from a few papers analyzing the impact of class on media consumption (e.g., Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018) and the diversity issues of representation in the profession (Merrill, 2019).

Despite evidence that a research-led approach leads to positive outcomes for students overall, there is a dearth of research on student attitudes toward this approach and the influence that class may have on the success of research-informed teaching, which is especially problematic because generations Y and Z are fundamentally different from those that came before. For example, Generation Z is known for taking technology for granted and preferring multimedia education (Pearson, n.d.). According to an analysis by McKinsey, Generation Z is highly individualistic but not necessarily consumerist because this generation is seen as caring and seeing consumer goods through access rather than possession (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

The situation is the same in communication education where there is little attention paid to differences in experiences of students based on class and socioeconomics more broadly. While the fields of public relations and journalism do actively debate and research the state of higher education, there is little attention to class issues. Class is simply not considered as a diversity variable in the extant research in the field and class research remains within the sociological domain of inquiry.

Therefore, of all issues of diversity, access, and privilege in communication-related higher education, the impact of socioeconomic status or class remains the one that is systematically understudied as we seek to begin to better understand some of the critical factors affecting student experience, attainment, and attitudes about modern approaches to PR and journalism education. We do so by comparing the attitudes and experiences of working- and middle-class students within the frame of the dominant pedagogical attitude of research-informed learning.

This paper endeavors to open an important discussion about class in higher education (Squire, 2020), especially in the United Kingdom. In so doing, we focus on the impact of habitus on student

expectations and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 2007) and we contribute to knowledge on higher education, expectations, and attainment from a class perspective arguing that class origin and personal background provide valuable information that can influence strategies on student attainment and student recruitment. This research focus is particularly relevant because, according to The Boyer Commission (1998), a practice has emerged in universities with active research staff to actively integrate research into the undergraduate curriculum with findings demonstrating several benefits from employability to an increase in enrollment in postgraduate programs. Moreover, PhD completion rates are improved when students participate in conducting undergraduate research (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Gonzales-Espada & Zaras, 2006; Lopatto, 2004). This represented a meaningful change in perspective because historically undergraduate education was seen as in conflict with research and, thus, Boyer's (1990) proposition to "break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate" (p. xii) suggested possibilities for integrating research and teaching and stop seeing these two activities as competing. Instead, Boyer proposed that research and teaching should be seen as complementary and inextricably linked.

Boyer (1990) thus proposed to see universities as ecosystems or communities where scholars and students research and learn together, thus coming up with the term "communities of learners" (The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998). Boyer's perspective complements Palmer's (2014) and van Ingen et al.'s (2015) research suggests that there are three principles needed to adapt to the needs of today's learners: (1) providing resources and learning materials supporting multi-modal learning ranging from visual aids, videos, in-class exercises, and lectures; (2) providing an immersive environment where students can discuss the convergence of theory and practice, developing exercises that maximize student learning, and collaborations between instructors and students to target professional skills; and (3) providing multiple methods to engage student learners using flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments to create "expert learners" that are resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, goal-oriented, purposeful, and motivated.

While there are different understandings of research-informed teaching in higher education, a common theme is that academics and students can use active research programs to collaborate and co-produce research with their students. This view of research integration argues that instructors should co-produce research with their students and that programs should formally teach students about the role that research plays in their discipline, but focus on knowledge produced by research (Healey, 2003; Willison & O'Regan, 2007). This view is also aligned with the English Higher Education Academy (HEA) suggesting that such approaches can increase student satisfaction, improve employability, and contribute to experiential learning (Burgum & Stoakes, 2019). This is emerging at a time when questions about the readiness of new graduates to enter the workplace are also generating considerable debate within the field of communication (Diers-Lawson, 2021). Some research suggests that new graduates have core skills deficiencies compared to supervisor expectations (Todd, 2014). For example, the research identifies the difficulties in developing the necessary critical and creative thinking skills to be effective corporate communication practitioners (Tallent & Barnes, 2015). However, in an era where crises are increasingly common and social responsibility is an emergent expectation for doing business research, this also suggests that new graduates ought to value transparency and ethical decision-making as communication practitioners (Curtin et al., 2011). Yet, only a minority of development needs for communicators are addressed through suitable training programs (Zerfass et al., 2012).

Therefore, in the subsequent part of the paper, we provide a cultural context of the class issue in the U.K. both generally and respective of the higher education system. We also elaborate on habitus research

generally and respective of higher education, and as the literature review below will show, we identify research gaps.

The main aim of the paper is to explore to what extent habitus influences differences in the educational experiences of working-class and middle-class public relations and journalism students in England and to what extent working-class students value research education in comparison to middle-class students. This focus of the research is relevant for several reasons, (a) as we demonstrate in the literature review below, there are general prejudices of working-class individuals in the U.K. seen as anti-intellectual and what is often known as belonging to consumerist culture, which also includes not valuing education. We wanted to probe this stereotypical perception and explore whether one's habitus or an area in which they grew up influences views of education rather than one's family class/sociodemographic origin; (b) as we already emphasized, most studies are tackling this issue in the context of communications education, and this is relevant because public relations and communications industry in the U.K. remains White and middle class, and the situation is very similar in universities, despite calls for diversifying the workforce (CIPR, 2020; Parker, 2019; Waddington, 2017).¹ Therefore, this study breaks these stereotypes, as findings have shown that it is not one's origin but rather a habitus that influences views which has the potential to influence university recruitment as well as hiring processes often entrenched in bias against working-class individuals (Kelly, 2019; Le Poidevin, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2019a).

Class, Prejudice, and Education in the U.K.

In the previous section, we summarized contemporary thinking in higher education, identified the emergent importance of research-informed teaching, and also problematized the dearth of diversity research in public relations and journalism education with regard to class. Unfortunately, the need for research connecting class and education is not simply a matter of filling a gap; the working class face deeply entrenched prejudices and disadvantages, especially in British society and is especially true in higher education where these prejudices are deeply engrained (Crozier et al., 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Squire, 2020). In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the class origin is still the largest predictor of a person's educational achievement, which explains why class must return to the research agenda instead of maintaining a focus on individualism and arguments that achievement is a result of personal effort (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; McCulloch et al., 2006; Social Mobility Commission, 2019b; Squire, 2020).

Cultural Denigration of the English Working-Class

Cultural denigration of the working class are manifested through pejorative language and negative symbolism of the working class is prevalent across the U.K. Within England, one example of class-based cultural prejudices includes derogatory language like "chavs" or Chavers.² Strong regional accents associated with working-class populations (e.g., Liverpudlian, Geordie, Yorkshire) are consistently mocked across popular culture including television and film. Additionally, there are also style-related prejudices like negative prejudices against tracksuits, hair, and makeup stylings. One common prejudice, for example, is linked to clothes where chav identity is linked to types of clothing like sportswear or

1. It is notable that CIPR reports often emphasize race as a diversity issue and while research and resources mention that practitioners are White and middle class, there is rarely any mentioning of experiences of working-class practitioners. This is common in the U.K. and the Law Gazette called this problem an "unseen prejudice" (Law Gazette, 2020).

2. Chav or Chavers are typically used for specific geographies and is often more broadly linked to parental occupation, geography, belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, and are associated with brash or loutish behavior (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009).

fashion brands like Burberry, Rockport, Kappa, Berghaus, and Lacoste; thus creating a negative brand reputation amongst middle-class consumers because they do not want to be identified as a chav (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009). Moreover, chavs are seen as people who belong to the underclass and celebrate consumerism as a culture (Burchill, 2005; Hayward & Yar, 2006; Young, 2012). They are also viewed as possessing low cultural capital and are thus alienated and disfranchised from the rest of the society (Martin, 2009; Sutton, 2009). Moreover, members of the middle class often construct their identity as being in opposition to the working-class chav as a way to mark themselves as “respectable” instead of as a threat to good social order (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2007; Skeggs, 2004).

In the context of education, this discourse has three effects on the social perceptions and judgments of people: (1) “aesthetic (regarding matters such as décor, clothing and appearance); (2) performative (regarding behavior and performance expectations); and (3) and moral (regarding values)” (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009, p. 468). Class identities often represent moral judgments and are used to “other” members of working classes because the privileged experience comes from the middle-class socioeconomic status ascribing negative characteristics and “othering” the working class.

Class and Perpetuating Inequality in Higher Education

There are both economic and cultural implications to the class that affects life opportunities and exacerbates attainment gaps between the groups that are exemplified and reified in education systems from early childhood education through higher education (Archer & Francis, 2006). E. O. Wright (1998a, 1998b) addresses economic relations when defining classes arguing that the material welfare of one class depends on the exploitation of another class creating the opportunity for structural economic oppression. Simply stated, higher education centers on middle-class expectations and thus disadvantages working-class students (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Friedman and Laurison argue that this disadvantage to the working class is reflected in working life because most professional and managerial occupations are still largely held by the middle class in the U.K. compared with people from working-class backgrounds. Therefore, to better understand the problem of the economic and cultural exploitation of the working class and address ways for higher education to respond, it is important to understand the cultural experiences connected to education attainment (Bergman & Joye, 2005).

The prejudices against the working class have included two primary judgments about working-class students: that they are disruptive and not serious about their education (Byrne, 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Willis, 1977). For example, in a study of middle-class pupils in London, Hollingworth and Williams (2009) found these prejudices among middle-class children who defined working-class students as those who do not care about their education. What is worse is that these prejudices seem to be reflected in continuing attainment gaps in the U.K. where working-class students are significantly less likely to attend university—especially the so-called elite institutions (Squire, 2020). Moreover, research demonstrates that working-class students often report feelings of inferiority, dislocation, and struggle to navigate the middle-class spaces of higher education (Crozier et al., 2019; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010; Squire, 2020). They report often finding themselves struggling to manage their identification as working class while also not fitting into the middle-class social group either (Byrne, 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Squire, 2020). Authors argue that because British higher education typically emphasizes middle-class values to the exclusion of creating valued space for working-class experience, students have to work to overcome their identity as working class and modify their behaviors in order to be seen as conforming to the middle-class expectations (Ingram, 2011, p. 288).

These findings suggest that working-class students not only face access and privilege problems because they must overcome negative stereotypes but also are likely to struggle to meet the expectations of a middle-class environment because they have not been equipped to know how to meet those expectations (Doolan et al., 2016). One of the core assumptions in higher education is that middle-class students attending university invest in their education while the working class often sabotage their education (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009). This view ignores the lived realities of working-class students who often do not have the luxury of the typical “student experience” both in and out of the classroom because they have other inhibitors, like needing a full-time job while they are at university (Crozier et al., 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Squire, 2020). Thus, an important question to consider is whether universities themselves also systematically limit working-class achievement. And this is potentially the great irony in higher education—it is supposed to be a way to enable people to change their socioeconomic reality; however, it may be the system itself that perpetuates inequality with schools in working-class areas regularly performing worse than schools in middle-class areas and creating a glass ceiling that perpetuates both the prestige of the middle class and underachievement for the working class in higher education (Doolan et al., 2016; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Reay et al., 2005).

Habitus

In research exploring the impact of working-class identities on educational attainment, one of the critical conclusions is that the conditions in which people grow up unconsciously direct their attitudes and experiences in higher education, including the ways that they experience student life (see, e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Crozier et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2010; Squire, 2020). These findings suggest the concept of habitus may well be a critical factor in understanding and evaluating the student experience in higher education. Habitus represents the lasting predispositions, expectations, and schemes of perception that the environments in which people grow up have toward the institutions and environments they will come across throughout their lives (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 1993; Reay et al., 2010). In educational contexts, it has been used recently to better understand how working-class students engage with and react to the middle-class space of universities (see e.g., Squire, 2020).

Bourdieu (1977) argues that people grow up with their views on higher education being guided by early socialization and habitus. In particular, Bourdieu (1977, 2007) emphasized life experiences and the internalization of schemes that life experience produces, suggesting people rarely challenge how things are because practices are deeply ingrained into the assumptions of their social reality. While Bourdieu recognizes that there will be individual experiences that differ, the larger point is that systems or structures influence people’s lives and any individual can still be influenced by those systems or structures directly or indirectly. Therefore, people who share similar backgrounds and experiences also share a similar “habitus.” Ingram (2011) found that because of the shared life experiences, people growing up in working-class neighborhoods shared many attitudes with their families and neighbors.

Habitus and Educational Attainment

Research connecting habitus to educational attainment has also found that parental aspiration for their children is different amongst working-class and middle-class parents. For instance, Reay et al. (2009) found differences in parental aspiration for their children attending universities. In particular, they found that middle-class parents plan their children’s university education in advance whereas working-class parents make fewer plans and sometimes even communicate negative attitudes about the value

of university education. Given the findings about habitus and the shared worldview, it would not be surprising that middle-class and working-class students might view education differently.

However, there is also a material reality to habitus, not just an attitudinal one. When we focus on systematic differences in experience, we must also consider the material differences affecting working-class education attainment. For example, in England, working-class students face obstacles accessing higher education as a result of austerity policies in higher education unique to England and Wales compared to the rest of the U.K.³ For example in 2017 *Metro* warned that the doubling of tuition fees and the rising cost of living would cause working-class students to drop out of the university (Smith, 2017) and *Fact Check* documented that working-class, part-time, and mature students are leaving universities in record numbers (Full Fact, 2017). Similarly, students from specific working-class neighborhoods—low participation neighborhoods (LPN)—remain significantly less likely to attend university compared to further education colleges (Atherton & Mazhari, 2019). In particular, authors found that over 50% of English universities admit less than 5% of White students from LPNs demonstrating a serious attainment gap in access to higher education for working-class students. However, according to data from UCAS (2018, cited from Discover Society, 2018) when working-class students attend university they are significantly more likely to attend post-1992 universities (teaching universities) compared to elite universities. This suggests that if we are to understand the working-class university experience, we should first focus on these university settings, which is another example of institutional habitus.

The U.K. has historical inequalities and working-class citizens historically face lower prospects in life and difficulties in changing their social status with social mobility being stagnant since 2014 and that class privileges remain entrenched from birth to work (Social Mobility Commission, 2019b).

Taken together, this literature review has demonstrated that: (1) class remains largely ignored in higher education and certainly within the communication disciplines; (2) class prejudice permeates English society including education attainment; and (3) attitudes about higher education and experiences in higher education are likely to be different between working-class and middle-class students. However, the present research leaves three critical research questions unanswered:

1. In what ways does habitus influence differences in the educational experience of working-class and middle-class public relations and journalism students in England?
2. Do working-class students value research education compared to middle-class students?
3. If there are differences in views of higher education between the middle-class and working-class students, can this be attributed to habitus?

Methods

In order to answer these questions and explore the impact of habitus on the learning environment for working-class students as well as their attitudes about the higher education experience, the present study explored student attitudes about research-informed teaching in public relations and journalism courses in post-1992 universities. These data focus on students' views and perspectives on the value of research in the communication discipline as a part of the learning process at university. Thus, the paper explores the habitus in which working-class students were socialized and questions whether growing up in a working-class habitus has led to a working-class devaluation of higher education and research.

3. University students from Scotland pay tuition fees at Scottish universities and students from Northern Ireland pay half the fees at Northern Irish universities compared to students from England and Wales attending university at English and Welsh universities.

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to better understand student attitudes (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) using two qualitative approaches. First, a semi-structured focus-group interview methodology was employed using a purposive heterogeneous sampling method to focus on those participants within the same course groups, separated based on self-identification as working-class or middle-class to ensure as homogeneous of a sample as possible within each of the groups included (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Second, an open-ended set of questions were distributed to additional students in order to ensure thematic saturation from the focus group interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected from students enrolled at a post-1992 university in Northern England. “New universities” are valuable sites for class-based higher education research because previous research suggests that working-class students are significantly more likely to attend these than the more “elite” Russell Group universities (Reay et al., 2010).

Three focus group sessions were carried out at the beginning of March 2020 and the research was then interrupted with a lockdown in the U.K. due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 23 students participated in focus groups including seven men and 16 women, which is proportionate for the present enrollment in public relations and journalism at the university. All of the participants in the focus groups were enrolled in public relations, journalism, or public relations with journalism courses at the university.

Though the intention was to collect all data via focus groups, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change of method once lockdown was instituted. A further 18 participants (three men and 15 women) from the university were recruited to respond to an open-ended questionnaire addressing the same themes as discussed in the focus groups. Of the 18 participants, 13 were members of the journalism, public relations, or public relations with journalism courses; three were in fashion marketing; and one business studies. In order to ensure sample homogeneity, students who were not enrolled in public relations or journalism courses were excluded from the analysis leaving a total of 31 participants, of which 12 students were identified as working class and 19 were identified as middle class.

Class origin was decided based on the profession of the student’s parents. Aligned with E. O. Wright’s (1998a, 1998b; E. O. Wright & Cho, 1992) conceptualization of working-class and middle-class work, students whose parents do manual and service jobs were classified as working-class students (e.g., cleaners, drivers, chefs, guards, etc.) whereas students whose parents do the so-called white-collar or professional work were classified as middle-class students (e.g., teachers, priests, teaching assistants, lawyers, GPs, etc.). This reflects traditional approaches to studying class and education where scholars have focused on studying a combination of influences such as the education of parents, the institutions, and the social profile of students all of which are relevant for educational attainment (Cepić & Doolan, 2018; Condron, 2009).

Students were asked questions on their background (e.g., where they grew up, what the profession of their parents is), and the questions on their education socialization attitudes (e.g., what was the view of higher education that their parents promoted, which conversations of higher education did they have when growing up, who most influenced their views and expectations of higher education, what conversations did they have at home about employability and the value of higher education, whether they were the first to go to university, in what kind of area they grew up in), what their expectation was of the university

experience before they started their course, views of equal chances for employability, the dichotomy of higher education as focused on employability or enrichment through obtaining knowledge, the view on what type of learning fosters critical thinking, and their preferences toward research education and involvement in research. Students were also asked how they see themselves (e.g., as customers or members of the community).

Data Analysis and Reporting

The focus group data were transcribed then all data were analyzed using thematic analysis. At first, answers were analyzed generally and then cross-referenced against the class origin of participants and the data on socialization. The coding process implemented was an approach introduced by Morse and Richards (2002) and, thus, open coding was done first. This approach identified critical themes that emerged from the data and then axial coding helped in analyzing data against the class origin of students who participated in the research. Selective coding helped in capturing themes that emerged from each category of students and these themes were then analyzed to form a final thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was then carried out. This approach to analyzing data is

a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles. (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926)

The data is presented following the guidance offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) where findings are summarized in a figure and themes are presented using a narrative supplemented with direct quotes from participants. Thematic analysis is especially useful in research contexts when researchers work with rich data sets such as this one where there are transcripts from three focus groups and an open-ended questionnaire with 14 qualitative responses.

While thematic analysis is commonly used for identifying research gaps rather than theory building (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rohwer & Topić, 2018; Topić, 2020; Topić et al., 2019); in this case, the approach was deemed as useful as it enabled coding and cross-referencing data while providing meaningful themes that emerged from data. Additionally, with the dearth of research in the communication field about education and class differences, the thematic analysis helped identify trends in data in this case study and thus enabled recommendations for further research, as well as contributed to existing knowledge on the class origin and its distinctive impact on attitudes on education.

Thematic analysis is a sense-making approach meant to systematically analyze qualitative data and, as such, it is most similar to the quantitative methodology because it does not include a large critical analysis based on qualitative comments from research participants. Instead, thematic analysis enables a more systematic analysis of research data and a simple presentation of main themes that derive from data, and the findings are supported with some direct quotes from research participants. This approach helps in identifying trends, systematically presenting and analyzing them and thus also informing further research but it does not aim to generalize findings as a quantitative method would.

In the next section, we present findings from the thematic analysis focusing on main themes identified from data, and our interpretation is supported with direct comments from students who participated in the study.

Findings

The thematic analysis demonstrates three main themes that derive from the analysis; these are consumerist views of higher education, research as employability, and area of growing up as a predictor of one's views of higher education and research (see Figure 1), thus showing that students come to higher education from a habitus where there are meaningful differences between middle-class and working-class areas; however, this means that the socialization is the main predictor of views of higher education rather than individual class origin.

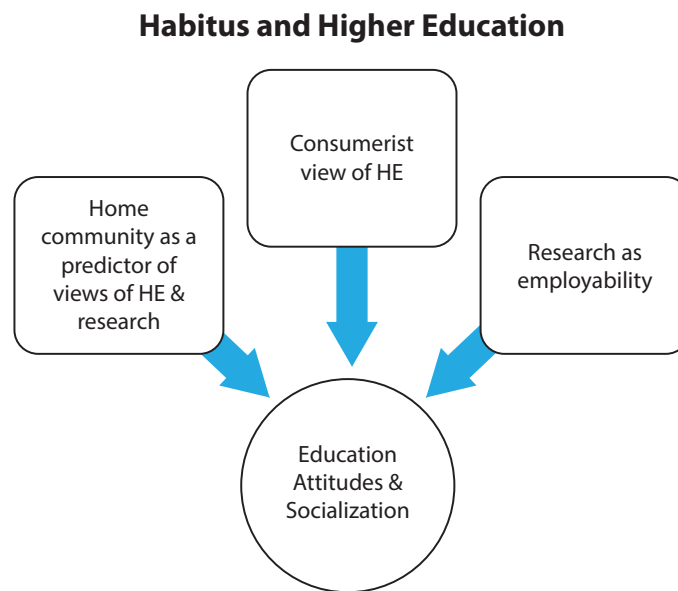


FIGURE 1 Thematic Analysis Results

Home Community as a Predictor of Views of HE and Research

These data provide a comparison and contrast of views and experiences of students from middle- and working-class backgrounds. One of the clearest findings is that habitus itself seems to have greater influence than socioeconomic status alone. For example, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas tend to show what is usually perceived as a typical middle-class view of valuing education. Middle-class students who grew up in working class areas equally tend to show attitudes more commonly ascribed to working-classes and equally working-class students who grew up in the middle-class area tend to show a middle-class view of education. For example, participants reflected:

“It would be good to go into higher education however it was too expensive for my family to afford” (M-C student who grew up in W-C area).

“It was praised and I’ve always been encouraged to go to university—almost as if there was no other way” (M-C student from an M-C area).

“Essential” (W-C student who grew up in an M-C area).

Further, among the public relations and journalism students, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas maintained their parent’s view that going to university was essential; therefore, they experienced social pressure at home, by their peers, and in schools to consider attending university.

Alternatively, working-class students who grew up in working-class areas reflected that university was a choice; that their parents would have supported them whether they went to university or not. For example, one student reflected:

“My parents have always said that if we want to go to uni then we can, same as if we’re to go straight into work or whatever. They’re fine with the idea of uni and just want best for us, just didn’t appeal to them.” (W-C student who grew up in W-C area)

Taken together, these data suggest that habitus more so than class influences both the pressure and attitudes about a university education with PR and journalism students from middle-class areas feeling pressure to go to university (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Ingram, 2011; Willis, 1977) and working-class parents taking a more *laissez-faire* approach with less planning for their children’s higher education (Reay et al., 2009).

Research as Employability

Generally, these data found that amongst PR and journalism students, working-class students are more pessimistic about having an equal opportunity for employability compared with their middle-class counterparts who tend to be more optimistic about employability. However, middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas communicated a more “working-class” pessimistic view of employability post-graduation compared to middle-class students who grew up in middle-class areas. Both working-class and middle-class students related that post-graduate employability is discussed at home and one common experience was that most parents, regardless of class or habitus, emphasized employability as the main factor for choosing a course.

However, a critical difference between working-class and middle-class PR and journalism students emerges in their views of research-informed education. Though research-informed education has emerged as providing a meaningful benefit to students (see e.g., Boyer, 1990; Palmer, 2014; Tallent & Barnes, 2015) in a system that is biased toward the middle-class experience (see e.g., Crozier et al., 2019; Ingram, 2011), our findings suggest that working-class students not only better appreciate practical education but also research-informed teaching. Specifically, our working-class participants communicated their interest in collaborating with their instructors and each other on research projects and action-learning research more so than did the middle-class students. These data also suggest that PR and journalism working-class students connected research-based learning to employability and communicated their interest in research as a way to improve their post-graduate employability. Conversely, middle-class students expressed less interest to be engaged with research during their studies but also articulated that research education helps to foster critical thinking. Thus, it suggests that there is not only a difference in interest but potentially anticipated outcome in research-informed teaching between middle-class and working-class students.

Consumerist View of HE

There were also critical differences in the core values emphasized that students reported growing up within working-class versus middle-class habitus. Working-class students reported that their parents emphasized hard work as the core value whereas middle-class parents emphasized kindness, respect, and honesty as critical core values. However, these values were also meaningfully influenced by habitus as middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas emphasized the value of hard work and like

their working-class peers reported having several jobs compared to their middle-class counterparts that grew up in middle-class habitus (see Bourdieu, 1977, 2007). For example:

“Work hard.” (M-C student who grew up in W-C area)

“Respect, forgive, work hard.” (W-C student who grew up in M-C area)

One of the critical differences in our findings with PR and journalism students, compared to previous research, is that while working-class students articulated the view that employability is an (if not the) end goal of their education experience, middle-class students also expressed this view. This communicates a different trend than what is recognized in the literature where previous findings suggest that the middle-class values education qua education (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Willis, 1977). It is not clear from these data whether this is unique to PR and journalism students or reflects a broader trend in England.

Our participants consistently articulated the view that they see themselves as consumers of education rather than learners or members of a learning community. There was indication that habitus or early socialization influenced this view. These findings suggest that as higher education is increasingly viewed as a commodity to be consumed, self-enrichment in education itself is not intrinsically valuable. This view is aligned with the government’s policy and the marketization of higher education. It is fair to conclude that the U.K.’s corporatization and marketization of its universities have aligned the perceived purpose of completing a degree with the neoliberal policies that have led to privatizing other state-owned services like rail transportation, water, and electricity. It is also aligned with a generation of students who now have completed secondary education and come to higher education after the 2012 tuition hike in England and Wales that saw fees for universities nearly double.

In this system, universities are liable to the Consumer Act and universities are seen as selling the service with students (customers) having rights similar to those normally granted in other service outlets. This view undermines the university system as a public good and the mission of universities to first enrich individuals and create critical thinkers instead leaving a neoliberal system that celebrates consumerism and places an emphasis on universities serving businesses and funding themselves (Lynch, 2006). Because these data found that the majority of students express the consumerist view, these data reject previous analyses suggesting that only the working class embrace consumerist values (Burchill, 2005; Hayward & Yar, 2006; Young, 2012) as it seems that the consumerism and marketization spans across classes.

Conclusions and Implications for the Higher Education

These findings provide an initial investigation into the possible effects of class among students enrolled in university courses in public relations and journalism in England, finding some critical differences between working-class and middle-class students on their views of the dominant model of research-informed teaching and providing valuable insights into the role habitus plays to inform student expectations and attitudes as they enter and navigate higher education. As a result, there are three contributions these data make to our collective understanding of PR and journalism education, class, and education design.

First, these data suggest that neoliberal policies that corporatize and marketize higher education may fundamentally change the value placed on higher education. The only point at which there were class or habitus influences evident in these data was in the finding that higher education is viewed as a commodity. Whereas previous research suggested a clear difference between middle-class and working-class attitudes about the inherent value of education that was inexorably tied to class concerns, these data suggest that education has become a mere vehicle toward employability rather than intellectual

development. Because these data were collected at a post-1992 university in the U.K., these may not reflect the attitudes prevalent at traditional research universities or “elite” institutions of higher education. Future research should further explore these attitudes and differences in the value placed on education. However, with proposed changes to higher education that would further stratify post-1992 universities compared to other institutions of higher education (BBC, 2021), it is possible that education reform may also further contribute to the commodification of education by students attending these institutions.

Second, these data demonstrate the importance of considering habitus and class together. While these data clearly suggest class differences exist, they also demonstrate that the identities developed within a neighborhood or community are instrumental in students’ views of higher education, their values, and views of research-informed education (Bandura, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, future research on higher education in general, but especially in PR and journalism, should consider habitus as a critical factor or variable to account for differences in attitudes, evaluations, and experiences. Critically, these data found that on most topics the area (i.e., working-class or middle-class) that students grew up was a more meaningful predictor of their attitudes on education compared to traditional conceptualizations of class. Based on these data, we would expect middle-class students growing up in the working class to articulate views and values more common with working-class students and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1977; Ingram, 2011). However, this is a prediction that should be empirically tested in future research.

Third, these data refute stereotypes that middle-class students value intellectual pursuits more than working-class students. While findings did show that middle-class students value research-informed education more as a vehicle to improving critical thinking, the findings also indicated that working-class students would like to be involved with research and learn more about it because they view it as a way to improve their employability and social mobility. More importantly, these data suggest that all students—regardless of their class or habitus—at post-1992 universities value employability in their courses. Concerning the literature on Generation Z, these data also indicate that views of this generation as more activist and caring, and thus less consumerist, might be romantic and our data indicates strong consumerism and individualism. While individualism is seen as a characteristic of Generation Z (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), caring and being more sensitive did not come out of our data. Further research should explore the characteristics of Generation Z and their consumerist views in more detail using a large-scale study.

These findings, in particular, provide academics in PR and journalism better clarity on not only how students view and react to research-informed teaching, but also provide opportunities for academics to better relate theory, research, and practice to their students. In so doing, it can help these universities improve the evaluation of their courses of study (e.g., student satisfaction and employability) and improve their institutions’ reputations. Moreover, because of the parallels between U.K. and U.S. higher education, it is likely that similar patterns would emerge there; however, future research should evaluate the influence of habitus on attitudes about higher education and research-informed teaching in a cross-cultural context as well.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that in practical disciplines like PR and journalism, one important way to improve educational attainment in working-class areas is to highlight the value that the university or course can provide to their future employability and life opportunities. This may be one critical recruiting and retainment strategy to reducing the attainment gap in LPNs and providing a more level playing field for those students as they enter the university. In so doing, an approach that supports the “universal design” in education (see e.g., Palmer, 2014; van Ingen et al., 2015) would also seem to remove much of the systematic potential for discrimination and stereotyping of working-class students that they

normally experience when entering a system created to support middle-class attainment. As such, we argue that this may also contribute to improving equality and diversity in the communication industry, which is presently dominated by middle-class practitioners (Parker, 2019; Waddington, 2017). Improving representation by the working class in the field of public relations will not only provide social mobility for working-class graduates but also likely improve the profession as well. Previous research has found, for example, that practitioners make unflattering assumptions about working-class consumers, which undoubtedly lead to poorer communication strategies with those consumers, potentially damaging their brands or offering less return on investment (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020). More importantly, by both understanding and adapting to the views and needs of all students, academics do not compromise the value of a research-informed curriculum but make it work for all students in a world where education is increasingly viewed as a commodity.

Therefore, to answer research questions, our data suggest that habitus or the area in which one grew up influences educational experience and views on research education by students who participated in this study. Research education is seen positively by both groups of students, and views of research education are linked to parental influence and most importantly an area in which students grew up in, either working class or middle class, rather than individual class origin. Therefore, habitus seems a relevant theoretical framework to explore differences between classes and how privilege gets perpetuated systemically.

This study provided readership with interesting findings that in some cases reject previous findings. The latter came as a result of the thematic analysis that does not aim to critically interpret data nor does it start from any particular critical stance. However, the limitation of this study is that it is a qualitative study using a small sample. Further research using a large-scale quantitative method is needed to confirm and further explore the results of this study.

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