Critical Perspectives on Graduate Employability

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Introduction

Fundamental changes in the nature of UK Higher Education have led to an increased emphasis on the notion of Higher Education (HE) investment 'paying off' for individuals and society with graduate labour market outcomes increasingly being used to evaluate and demonstrate the value of this investment. For example, one of the four UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs) for HE is the employment of graduates (HESA 2016), some however, question the appropriateness of this as a goal of HE, arguing that there is a need for universities to emphasise the importance of

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university education beyond employability and 'pay cheques' (Redmond 2014). This is not a new debate and given the increased cost, both economic and social, of HE to individuals and society, graduate employability is an increasingly high-stakes issue. We argue that the significant focus on labour market outcomes as a proxy measure of the value of higher education – by individuals, policy makers and institutions – makes a critical reconsideration of graduate employability timely. We examine existing conceptualisations of graduate employability and consider the value of applying alternative theoretical perspectives to provide a more nuanced approach to conceptualising graduate employability, allowing us to move beyond the dominant perspectives of graduate employability that overemphasise individual agency.

Drawing on Margaret Archer's concept of 'morphogenesis' and Pierre Bourdieu's 'theory of practice' we aim to encourage our readers to pause and reflectively consider graduate employment experiences and trajectories in the context of the directive nature of agency and the regulatory effects of structure to better understand this pressing *problematique*. This chapter will conclude with a discussion on the future application of such theories to graduate employment research.

Higher Education and Graduate Employability

In the UK in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to graduate employment. This is unsurprising as from New Labour onwards, there has been a clear political agenda to encourage and increase participation in higher education. Employment destinations of university graduates has become an important proxy measure of the value of a university education, and institutions in the UK use their 'destinations' data to highlight their success in this area, and therefore increase their attractiveness to prospective students. Whilst this is just one measure of performance, it has gained prominence given the increasing level of fees and higher levels of competition between institutions for attracting the highest performing students. Increasingly employability statistics are being prominently displayed on institutional websites and play a significant role in league table rankings. This has augmented the focus on the notion of employability and increased pressure on universities and their role in 'delivering employability'. Higher Education, now more than ever, is underpinned by assumptions of investment in human capital. This durable assumption is founded on a "conventional wisdom among politicians, parents and students alike that all education remains 'a form of investment'

and that it will in a sense 'deliver the economic goods'" (Brown and Scase 1994: 16). This stems from societal and individual-level expectations of the kind of employment that individuals should be entering after graduating (Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2011). Against this backdrop there is widespread agreement that the concept of employability needs further development and analysis (Holmes 2013).

Dominant Perspectives of Graduate Employability

As previously established, the HE environment is dominated by a discourse of employability. However the notion of employability, and more specifically graduate employability, is not uncontested (cf. Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2012). This is unsurprising given the numerous stakeholder groups – students, graduates, parents, employers, HEIs, careers and employability services, curriculum developers, training providers in the private sector and of course politicians. Despite this complexity, graduate employability is often represented in simplistic terms as an objective labour market outcome rather than a complex problem featuring a number of different actors and comprising various institutions with differing levels of rules, hierarchy and structures. Such representations reflect the human capital perspective that views HE as an investment which 'pays off' in subsequent employment opportunities and earnings. This 'returns to education' perspective emphasises employment destinations and earnings of graduates – and is reflected in the prominence of statistics such as the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). Such surveys act as measures of institutions' success in delivering employability to the individual which they can then 'put to use' in the labour market. These proxy measures of graduate employability are presented by HEIs and policymakers as 'evidence' of the value of individuals investing in HE and underpin major policy decisions linked to the significant expansion of the sector in the late 1990s and the recent increases in tuition fees (DfES 2003; BIS 2010, 2011).

Holmes (2013) argues that this context has led to a 'possession' approach to employability – the HEIs provide the opportunity for individuals to develop skills, attributes and competences such as self-management, team-working, communication and problem solving (CBI/NUS 2011) that will provide them with a level of 'graduateness' to their human capital that increases their employability and is reflected in their employment outcomes. As a consequence there has been an increased emphasis on embedding employability within the curriculum, for example the development of graduate skills and attributes frameworks (see for example the Leicester Transferable Skills

Framework http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/careers-new/build-your-skills/skills), and extra-curricular employability offerings. This aligns with what Tholen (2015: 767) describes as 'mainstream' perspectives on graduate employability which emphasise "the individual content that makes a person successful in the labour market". Through this lens, investment in HE to develop individual 'human capital' is presented as a rational investment as the financial returns will be higher than the investment made. Within this dominant perspective of graduate employability, whilst it is acknowledged that HEIs provide individuals with the opportunity to enhance their human capital, the emphasis is on individual responsibility for ensuring labour-market success – in this case obtaining employment commensurate with the investment made i.e. a graduate job. Such perspectives, perhaps unsurprisingly, present an image of meritocracy in relation to higher education and graduate employment, serving to emphasise unfettered individual choice and freedom in relation to decisions about human capital investment and the deployment of that human capital in the labour market.

Critique of Dominant Perspectives of Graduate Employability

The dominant perspective of graduate employability continues to emphasise objective employment outcomes and the development of human capital to achieve 'appropriate' labour market outcomes for a graduate. Aside from the challenge of defining what an 'appropriate' labour market outcome is for a graduate, such perspectives are increasingly subject to scrutiny as they imply that individual agency is unconstrained and decontextualised and that failure to achieve the labour market outcomes commensurate with the human capital investment i.e. non-graduate employment, is related to the (in)ability of the individual to develop, articulate and mobilise their employability in the 'appropriate' manner. In response to this, more critical alternative perspectives of graduate employability have emerged, which question these assumptions by highlighting "the relational, contextual and conflictual nature of employability" (Tholen 2015: 770).

This more critical work highlights the limitations of human capital perspectives, arguing that the development or deployment of other forms of capital (social, cultural and personal) and how this interacts with the wider structures of the labour market needs to be acknowledged and explored (Holmes 2013; Brown et al. 2003). A key argument within this perspective is the need to explore the potential for discriminatory practices, intended or otherwise, of graduate employers as a means to explain variations in

employment outcomes between different graduates who arguably 'possess' the same skills. This 'positional' perspective (Holmes 2013) emphasises how, as the supply of graduates has increased, new forms of credentialism have emerged which serve to stratify human capital through the development of 'hierarchies of universities' (Holmes 2013). This is concerning as not only is participation still dominated by the most advantaged groups, it is argued that social class plays a significant role in the institution attended and the degree classification achieved (Reay et al. 2009; Tomlinson 2012). As a consequence, rather than HE providing a means to reduce social inequalities and increase social mobility, individuals from more advantaged social backgrounds obtain more prestigious credentials; and in doing so are able to position themselves better within the labour market (Brown et al. 2003). Whilst there have been reports of some employers attempting to reduce social bias in the process by introducing 'blind' recruitment and selection processes which remove the institution at which the individual studied and in some cases whether the individual attended state or independent schools (Garner 2014) such moves might merely serve to emphasise less tangible forms of capital – for example social or personal.

In recent work by McCracken et al. (2015) graduate employers emphasised that a degree was no longer enough to demonstrate ability and potential and they looked for evidence of work experience and the development of additional skills. However, there is a lack of consensus on what such skills, competences or attributes are and how they can be evidenced or assessed (cf. Holmes 2013). Furthermore, McCracken et al. (2015) found that when making selection decisions subjective aspects such as having something 'extra', an 'edge' and 'standing out from the crowd' played a key role. This reflects earlier work by Brown and Hesketh (2004: 35) which highlighted the rise of 'personal capital' within the graduate labour market. Personal capital emphasises "the importance of who you are as much as what you know" and is seen to be a combination of hard currencies (e.g. credentials, work experience and extra-curricular achievements) and soft currencies (e.g. interpersonal skills, charisma, appearance and accent). This is concerning as differences such as social background, gender and ethnicity become more prominent leading to greater inequality in the graduate labour market (Tholen 2015).

That is not to say that individuals are merely passive recipients of structural constraints, individuals' careers and employability are part of a dynamic process. Giddens (1991: 75) argues "we are not what we are but what we make of ourselves" and Watson sees identity creation as being an

emergent and dynamic process for "as we move through different situations and circumstances and interact with different 'others' so we adjust ourselves to achieve a sense of self-hood – our self and social identities … shape and reinforce each other." (2003: 195). This aligns with the processual perspective of employability (Holmes 2015) which conceptualises employability as the actions and decisions that individuals take as part of an ongoing and emergent identity project. This perspective explores the interaction between individuals and 'gatekeepers' (recruiters) to employment opportunities. The graduates claim an identity that is affirmed, or not, by the gatekeepers within the recruitment and selection process. Career self-management is the process by which employability is developed (Brigstock 2009; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios 2015) and is the effort individuals put into the realisation of their career goals, encompassing both reflective (development of career aspirations) and behavioural (enacted career management behaviours) components (De Vos and Soens 2008). It is clear from the competing positions that a more accurate understanding of graduate employment can be fostered through the combination of perspectives appreciating both structure and agency

Alternative Theoretical Perspectives

In an effort to achieve this above goal, we consider the heuristic values of applying critical social theory to help us critically think about and examine graduate employment experiences and trajectories. By making the familiar unfamiliar, facilitated through a theoretically driven epistemological break, the application of theory will allow us to consider the friction between structure and agency and question the dominant assumption of meritocracy that underpins higher education policy. It can be argued that the re-examination of the dominant meritocratic narrative is increasingly pertinent, as 'traditional' UK university undergraduates will have exclusively been raised, educated and inculcated in a late modern/meritocratic policy bubble – whether through New Labour, the UK coalition government or the current Conservative government who took power in 2015. It is not our intention to reify our chosen theorists – nor astound our audience with abstract arguments complicated for the purpose of complication – but, rather, to put these theories to work and consider their practical use in providing a better understanding of graduate employment as Stephen Ball argues "theory is the language of rigour" (1995: 266). In the section below, we examine Pierre Bourdieu's structural constructivist position and

Margaret Archer's specific form of critical realism. From the comparison of their theoretical positions and a consideration of their application to graduate employment research, we will move on to discuss future applications and their potential role in the formation of a critical agenda.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND BOURDIEU

Bourdieu's fecund career is the opening section for many commentaries of the man's work; he covered a broad range of topics, including anthropology, politics, economics and cultural consumption. The breadth is even further demonstrated by the range of topics to which his work has been applied by researchers too numerous to mention. However, it is his work on (higher) education and, in particular, the three volumes – *The Inheritors, Reproduction* and *The State Nobility* – that are particularly significant and popular, cementing many to understand Bourdieu as, first and foremost, a philosopher/sociologist of education. His central thesis sees the educational system as a key site for social reproduction, via symbolic violence, as, through a narrative of meritocracy, the higher education system provides a subtle version of inheritance, allowing the dominant group within social space to retain their position for generations to come.

The majority of Bourdieu's career and the subsequent application of his work have been driven by a structural, constructivist ontology – seeing social reality as characterised by both choice and constraint. At the heart of this project to combine two sides of the coin (structure and agency), Bourdieu applied a number of, as he referred to them, thinking tools. These heuristic devices were used to observe, explain, understand and track this complex and seemingly contradictory ontology. While there are various tools[1], the three fundamental tools are: habitus, capital and field.

Habitus can be most succinctly – but not simply – defined as an individual's norms, values and dispositions. How we see the world and what we take for granted will, in part, affect our subjective expectations and our ability to strategically manoeuvre within social space – collectively termed practice. The source of the habitus comes from formative sites and institutions to which we are exposed throughout our life history – namely, family, education, social environment, peer group, etc. To practice the structural constructivist ontology that Bourdieu claimed the habitus was both a source of structure and regulation and an opportunity for agency and choice. Rather than acting as a reinforced iron cage, as proposed by Jenkins (2002) and Archer (1996), the habitus operates in a fluid and

inter-penetrative manner, offering space and structure for 'regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu 1977: 78). In other words, rather than practices being exclusively directed by an external force, beyond influence, there is choice within the habitus; however, options available will be based on access to resources and environment.

For Bourdieu, early influences on the habitus – in particular, family and school – are especially potent and durable; however, the habitus *is* open to change if it is met by a different environment for a sustained period of time (Bourdieu 1992). The likelihood of this happening, Bourdieu is quick to point out, is limited, as individuals, in part due to their habitus, will continue to occupy complementary environments. It is the concept of complementary or shared environments that supports the extension of habitus towards a group dimension. While the habitus is individual, Bourdieu (1977) contends the environment individuals share and the experiences within those environments are likely to be similar, leading to a collective of habitus with enough overlapping norms, values and dispositions to count as a group – at least, as Nash (1999) argues, for empirical ease and generalisability.

If we consider the habitus in relation to the graduate labour market, individuals' ability to access certain occupations or roles will not only be determined by the possession of a degree but how they are able to deploy this hard-earned resource. This issue is most clearly illustrated through Furlong and Cartmel's (2005) research on the classed experience of, and attitude toward, the graduate labour market. Whilst the members of Furlong and Cartmel's working class sample all possessed a degree, there were structural barriers regulating the moves or directions they could make in the graduate labour market. Indicative of a working class habitus, characterised by limited/capped levels of confidence and expectation, the working class graduates in their study expressed quite low expectations of their earning potential and often took the first job they could find (generally non-graduate), as they were concerned about their ability to secure *any* job after graduation.

Habitus represents a significant portion of Bourdieusian sociology; whether it is future application or critique, habitus is seen as the primary concept when examining Bourdieu's theory of practice (Reay 2004). Alongside habitus we also have capital – the three main forms of which are economic, social and cultural (Bourdieu 2004). Economic capital is comprised of access to resources (money and property), while social capital is based on access to various social networks and ways in which these can be

used; cultural capital includes knowledge, practices and tastes. In addition, Bourdieu discusses symbolic capital, which can be read as a legitimate form of types of capital. Capital has three purposes or roles within Bourdieu's theory of practice. First, the composition of different levels of capital allows us to locate an individual's position within social space on economic, social and cultural grounds (Crossley 2008). Second, the subsequent position within social space will influence the level of confidence/aspiration an individual has –what Bourdieu terms '*field of the possibles*' (1984: 110, emphasis in original). Third, the use of the term capital allows us to think about how these resources are exchanged (Burke 2015a). Serving as a critical extension of both Marx and Engels' (1846/1970) economic model and human capital theory (Schultz 1971), the appreciation of social networks and cultural tastes having buying power and being exchanged for goods and services provides a contemporary account of the position within and the experience of social space beyond an out-dated purely economic model. In the specific context of graduate employment, the role and buying power of social capital can be clearly appreciated through the increasing importance placed on internships in order to not only establish connections but also to offset the devalued degree. Bradley et al.'s (2013) comparative study on the classed experience of UK HE illustrates the ease in which their middle class sample were able to convert the 'right type' of social capital into access to the best internships in comparison to their working class counterparts.

The final tool within Bourdieu's theory of practice is field; the social arena in which habitus and capital interact. Thompson (2008) reminds us that we should not view the field as merely the staging area of habitus and capital, but rather, a significant and active element within practice. Field is particularly significant when considering the norms, values and dispositions that make up the habitus. If there is a fit between the expectations and requirements of the field and the habitus, a mutually beneficial relationship can be engendered; Bourdieu likens a congruent habitus and field to a 'fish in water' (1992: 127), as the level/form of practical mastery directed by the habitus will be welcomed and be generally successful. Equally, an incongruent habitus and field can lead to a negative relationship and quite damaging consequences.

In the context of graduate employment research, it could be argued that all that is required is the logical extension of Bourdieu's work with Passeron, on access to higher education. The lack of access to higher education for working class students that the two authors discuss in *The Inheritors* (1979)

suggests that the vast majority of working class students do not make it as far as higher education, and those students who did have cobbled together enough resources and experience to successfully move from one stage to the next – including graduate employment trajectories. However, while Bourdieu's work on higher education can be extended to graduate employment through the argument that barriers to higher education create barriers to graduate employment, and indeed has been through the positional perspective, we would contend that this is quite a narrow interpretation and application. In the context of increased absolute mobility in the UK (Devine and Li 2013), increasing levels of working class students in higher education (Ross 2003), the general upward trend of higher education participation (BIS 2012) and the apparent non-linear social composition of the UK (Savage et al. 2013), we argue that graduate employment research needs to re-examine social barriers to centres of knowledge and the knowledge economy. As such, Bourdieu's thinking tools should be applied to the particulars of the graduate labour market, as too, can his seldom-referenced work on graduate employment (Burke 2015b).

On a handful of occasions, Bourdieu makes specific reference to the graduate labour market, characterised by graduate inflation and increased deregulation, and discusses how his thinking tools can help unpack issues concerning the market that underpin experiences and inequalities within it. Bourdieu and Boltanksi (1981) discuss the increasingly deregulated and uncertain graduate labour market within a neo-liberal post-industrial context. The authors contend that growing ambiguity towards the composition, structure and function of the graduate labour market requires individuals to base their employment strategy on a new set of rules. Bourdieu (1984) considers that the ability to negotiate and manoeuvre within a market based on tacit rules and regulated often by the unsaid is aided by a habitus 'equipped' to 'play the game'. Such a habitus is often located within the dominant sphere of social space, supported by a complementary fit with the field – dominant (middle class) graduates will be able to navigate and steer this 'runaway' graduate market. The congruence between middle class graduates' habitus and the requirements of the labour market can be seen in a succession of literature spanning the last 20 years (Brown and Scase 1994; Brown et al. 2003; Bradley et al. 2013; Burke 2015a). A recurrent theme in existing research is the frustration expressed by working class students at the intangibility of the labour market. Many of these students'/graduates' declarations of wanting to take their first step toward a graduate position but not knowing how, were

in sharp contrast to their middle class colleagues' comfort and confidence in their future trajectories. Alongside the market's ambiguous structure/ set of rules lies a predisposition to move or shift without the need for agentic pushing and shoving. In other words, the graduate labour market can independently change, altering both the requirements for entry and the rules for success. Bourdieu (1977) provides a theoretical framework to account for this alteration in the market or field – and the friction and anxiety left in its wake – through the concept of *hysteresis of habitus*. While the concept was most famously attributed to understanding changing relationship patterns in the Bearn[2] (Bourdieu 2008), it is applicable and relevant when considering graduates' ability to successfully negotiate the graduate labour market (Burke 2015b). Once again, beginning with the position that habitus provides a 'feel for the game', hysteresis of habitus is the time/gap between a shift in the composition of social space or the rules of the game and an individual/group understanding the changes and reformulating their strategy to meet the new requirements. The length of this gap is influenced by the habitus, where the dominant group is in a better position to realign with the field due to their increased practical mastery and resources/capitals. In the context of graduate employment, hysteresis takes the form of a change in the market's requirements, leading to a devaluation of certain degree subjects. Members of the dominant group appreciate this shift and invest in subjects with the necessary buying power while their dominated classmates and counterparts expect the same market value for now-disbanded subjects and, as such, indiscriminately invest in degree programmes (Bourdieu 1984). As Burke (2015b) illustrates through the comparatively high levels of anger and confusion his working class graduate sample expressed at their inability to immediately and easily 'cash-in' their degree for a graduate position, hysteresis of habitus can extend beyond devalued subjects to devalued degrees in general and the need to incorporate additional resources.

A key resource in a graduate market, characterised by increased participation in higher education, is capitals beyond the scholastic capital provided by a university degree. Bourdieu and Boltanksi (1978) discuss the leading role *a priori* capitals play on graduate pathways when scholastic capital has reached a critical mass and can no longer be used to distinguish oneself from a significant proportion of the population. For the authors, *a priori* capital reproduces position and division within social space, as it is those capitals which are inherited and disproportionately enjoyed by the dominant group that offset the devaluation of 'earned' capital open to all.

The importance of *a priori* capitals in the contemporary graduate market is clearly articulated by Smetherham's (2006) comparison of graduate employment pathways by HEI attended (a form of institutionalised cultural capital – denoting your ability to complement expected norms and cultural practices of an institution). In contrast to the meritocratic narrative prevalent in much social policy, Smetherham reports a clear disparity between graduate employment outcomes and institutions where their degree was read. Graduates who possessed 1st class degrees from elite HEIs were four times more likely to take a position in a graduate fast track trainee programme than graduates who possessed 1st class degrees from lower status HEIs. This trend was not only evident at the top end of academic achievement; Smetherham found that graduates from elite institutions were twice as likely to be in a position which formally required a degree compared to graduates from lower status HEIs. A classed anxiety toward the increasing requirement of *a priori* capitals has been captured by Morrison (2014). Working class students in his study expressed an understanding of the need for soft skills/cultural capital articulated as 'speaking properly'; however, many students were concerned about their inability to apply such capitals, reducing the employment pathways they were considering.

Limiting the application of arguments/concepts from Bourdieu's long career to those which he specifically linked to graduate employment is arbitrary and unnecessary; there are a number of other concepts that would lead to further illumination on this subject, such as doxa and symbolic violence; however, something which sticks out is the field of the possibles (Bourdieu 1984). As discussed, the concept posits that position within social space will provide particular norms and levels of expectations/aspirations. These possibles provide caps above *and* below (depending on position within social space) on legitimate trajectory/lifestyle. In the context of graduate employment, the powerful force of self-exclusion before *a priori* capitals are cashed or hysteresis of habitus is recognised provides a potential starting point for the dominated/classed nature of graduate underemployment – as working class graduates limit their scope and ambitions (Burke 2015b).

CRITICAL REALISM AND ARCHER

The second theoretical tradition at which we wish to look in order to unpack graduate employment is Margaret Archer's *Morphogenic* project. While Bourdieu's own particular logic of practice, combining structure

and agency, can be filed under structural constructivism, so Archer's concepts have a natural home within Critical Realism. As Case (2013) has pointed out, critical realism, like many contemporary belief sets, is a broad church incorporating a large array of interpretations of what it means to be a realist and what it means to be critical. Most notably attributed to the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1989), critical realism's fundamental characteristic is the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of a realist ontology – an external reality, one that directs practice but is removed from influence. This contradictory position is not the result of a reactionary ontology, and certainly not of a fickle relationship with reality, but is caused through a desire to retain an appreciation for an external reality while also respecting and recognising the role of the subjective – in other words, structure and agency. Critical realism is based on understanding reality as not being comprised of either open systems or closed systems but, rather, a combination of both. Through the application of metaphor and philosophical excavation via transcendental arguments, critical realists are able to consider the subjective experience of reality and provide a causal account of observable phenomenon. In doing so, critical realists maintain the realist tradition's natural arm of empiricism – positivism's preoccupation with description – while also providing opportunity for Weber's concept of Verstehen (1949). Importantly, the recognition of structure's presence within reality does not degenerate into a linear relationship between structure and agency (Sayer 2000). Structure requires the active or passive acceptance from agency to engender practice; it can equally face an agentic challenge to the structural status quo (Case 2013).

In a bid to occupy a centrist position within the structure/agency spectrum, Archer's own grand project and, ultimately, her own theory of practice is based on the concept of *morphogenesis* (1996). In a similar vein to habitus, morphogenesis is concerned with the interaction and interrelation between structure and agency. For Archer, practice – whether that be reproduced practices or pioneering actions – is the product of the relationship between the individual/groups (agency) and the socio-cultural system (structure). In a traditional critical realist position, the relationship is not characterised by a linear process or by the socio-cultural system's overwhelming influence on individuals/groups. This interrelated relationship between structure and agency can be expressed as 'Cultural Conditioning → Cultural Interaction → Cultural Elaboration' (Archer 1996: 106). The rules and norms of the socio-cultural system influence or condition the members within that system; however, members (on an

individual or group level) also interact and actively engage in discussion and thought. These interactions can lead to an elaboration or, essentially, an alteration of structure. Rules and regularities come from repetitive actions/thoughts (Bourdieu 1986), but where Archer and Bourdieu part ways is the opportunity for members of that social space to critically discuss the relations and conditions in which they live.

A central component or process required to allow for a fruitful cultural interaction leading to elaboration is reflexivity or internal deliberation articulated through internal conversations (Archer 2007). For Archer, we are all able to have internal conversations or to be reflexive; however, the tone and content of these conversations will differ on the type of reflexive we are. Archer provides a typology of reflexivity characterising individuals as either – communicative, autonomous or meta-reflexive (2003, 2007, 2012). Communicative reflexives are individuals who rely on external validation and reassurance to plug the gaps left by their internal dialogues. This type of reflexive will typically accept the conditioning/rules of the socio-cultural system and reproduce that system. Autonomous reflexives, on the other hand, are able to question the structural conditions and elaborate/alter the structural relations. Meta-reflexives also conduct their internal conversations without any need of assistance; the difference is that they are value-orientated, whilst autonomous reflexives operate on a means/ends continuum. Not all of Archer's reflexives are congruent with her morphogenic model – communicative reflexives support a system of morphostasis. Importantly, Archer (2012) argues that our particular period of history, aided by various resources including access to (higher) education, is witnessing the increase in self-contained autonomous reflexives to the demise of communicative reflexives, providing increased opportunity and scope for morphogenesis. Within Archer's overall project, we can see the directive role of structure and the mediating influence of agency.

The question is 'where to?' for Archerian social theory and graduate employment. The agentic qualities within a morphogenic system, stemming from interaction and leading to elaboration, point to a system of individual influence and power. Reducing the system/structure down to the graduate labour market, there are parallels between Archer's work and consensus theory (Brown et al. 2003). In the context of a knowledge economy, consensus theory advocates that knowledge, skills and innovation are the driving factors of our society. Individuals own both the means and tools of production; they are in control to the extent that the market must placate them to ensure that they continue to apply their

much needed expertise. Employability is both a problem and solution. Individuals see the increase in inequality within a global market, and, to counter this inequality, they increase the knowledge capital they are able to exchange this for employment. In a similar vein to human capital theory (Schultz 1971), future leaders are the technical elite, moulding the market/structure rather than passively existing within one. In the right historical period, such as post-industrialisation (Bell 1973), Archer's project demonstrates the process required for these individuals/groups to alter the structure. Beyond the blueprints for alterations in the market, Archer also provides the source: reflexivity. The rise of autonomous reflexives, according to Archer, since the 1980s demonstrates the character and dispositions of individuals – in particular, those individuals who have been educated (in our case, graduates). The presence and need for graduates to conduct internal conversations when attempting to navigate the graduate market can be seen in Tomlinson's (2007, 2008, 2013) work. Here, Tomlinson argues that graduates are required to 'decode employers' recruitment criteria' (2013: 197) and piece together a bespoke graduate identity or graduateness. While the current composition of structure and agency within the graduate labour market is debatable, it is clear that an ever-growing cohort of individuals approach the market from an individual and critical manner, questioning not only its structure and direction but also their position within the market now and in the future.

Developing a Critical Agenda: Implications and Challenges

The dominant perspective on graduate employment, what Holmes (2013) terms the possessive perspective, has shaped HEIs' employability policies and is the underlining basis and rationale for HE policy in the UK. Beyond the official narrative of graduate employability, stakeholders, including prospective students, graduates, employability units, families and employers, need an accurate illustration and explanation of the paths to employment and the barriers graduates will face. We argue here that the epistemic reflexivity which the application of social theory requires provides us with the opportunity to consider structure and agency or regulation and reflexivity – essentially, what Mills meant in his seminal work *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

In our discussion of both Pierre Bourdieu (et al.) and Margaret Archer, we are aware that very little attention was given toward the limitations of their work and the extensive critique the authors have received, sometimes

even from each other. While this piece is not the appropriate platform for an extended discussion of their critics' charges, both have been criticised in terms of the balance they offer between structure and agency. Bourdieu has been widely labelled a structural determinist (Jenkins 2002; Archer 1996), as his thinking tools – in particular, habitus – are understood to limit the effect that individuals' actions can have on the socially reproductive system he advocates. At the other end of the spectrum, the cultural interaction and cultural elaboration stages of Archer's morphogenic system are seen to gloss over the structural barriers that could affect these processes (Zeuner 1999; Burke 2015b). While both theorists would fiercely counter their detractors, there is an issue of balance for both their theories. Rather than labouring over semantics or the niche reading of one theorist by another, we look to the possibility of occupying the middle ground and to the future. By middle ground, we do not advocate combining these two theoretical traditions but, rather, finding a compromise within one position to develop a critical agenda. Although Archer's work has enjoyed increasing application (Case 2013; Porpora 2013), there have been clearer developments within the Bourdieusian canon to position itself in a more palatable 'structure off centre' space. From the work of those Burke (2015b) has dubbed 'Bourdieusian modernisers', there is a shift toward providing greater room for agency, whether that is through a permeable habitus (Reay 2004), increased reflexivity (Atkinson 2010, Sayer 2005), resistance stemming from the habitus (Ingram and Abrahams 2015) or the subjective and transitory character of capitals (Burke 2015a). It is these developments within Bourdieusian social theory that we find more convincing and useful when considering graduate employment.

Returning to Holmes' (2013) contrasting employability perspectives, the contemporary reading, adaption and application of what is now an established theory allows us to bridge the two competing perspectives: positional and processual. As Holmes has previously highlighted, Bourdieusian social theory falls within his umbrella term of the positional perspective on employability. Bourdieu's thinking tools – in particular, the structural facets within his theory of practice – and his empirical work on the role of *a priori* capital articulates the reproductive argument at the heart of the positional perspective. While we agree with Holmes' characterisation of Bourdieuisan social theory as pessimistic, that does not mean it is not an accurate depiction of social space and the graduate employment market more specifically. A key limitation stemming from Bourdieusian social theory, and experienced more generally

by the positional perspective is the lack of consideration for those who do develop and manage a graduate employment trajectory. The processual perspective, or the concept of an ever-emerging graduate identity (Holmes 2013, 2015), is premised on the contention that, upon graduation, students do not simply become graduates immediately qualified and suitable for a graduate position. Rather, a graduate identity is constructed over time through interactions and experiences with employers, family, peers, institutions, etc. There are parallels between this perspective and Goffman's *interaction order* (1983); graduates, over a period of time, are attempting to craft a successful interaction order to meet the expectations of their employers. However, as Goffman (1983: 5) acknowledges, the source of what is deemed legitimate – no matter how transitory – within these interactions or the process of acquisition is not clear. Within the processual perspective, the Bourdieusian commitment to structure can help us trace the genesis of the accepted forms of identity and signpost barriers in the development of graduates' ability to play the game. In the context of the positional perspective, the contemporary application of Bourdieu, with a greater focus on the agentic side of this theory of practice, lessens the fatalistic tone from social reproductive theories. It provides space for individuals to develop and tend their graduate careers whilst not forgetting the role of structure. The close application of social theory, in particular Bourdeuisan social theory, in the combination of the positional and processual perspectives requires 1) a theoretically driven critical examination of trajectories and 2) a close inspection of those trajectories. Recent examples of large scale research that provides such an opportunity can be found in both the Future Track study (Purcell et al. 2013) and the on-going Paired Peers study (Bradley et al. 2013). Paired Peers, which initially followed a cohort of students from Bristol and Bristol UWE through their time in university is now examining their graduate employment trajectories. Through this (albeit short) longitudinal approach and close qualitative inspection, the research, and hopefully future research, will be able to observe the emerging graduate identities while also appreciating the barriers students may face.

Notes

1. Many of which are discussed at length in Grenfell's (2008) *Bourdieu: Key Concepts.*
2. A province in south west France.

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