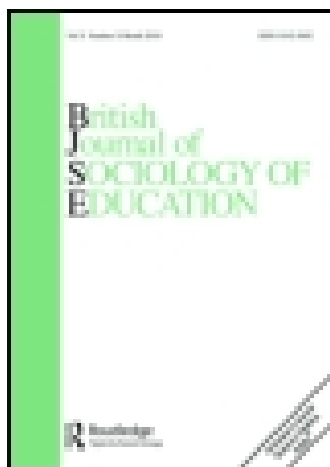


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Credentials, talent and cultural capital: a comparative study of educational elites in England and France

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This article examines student accounts of credentials, talent and academic success, against a backdrop of the enduring liberal ideal of an education-based meritocracy. The article also examines Bourdieu's account of academic qualifications as the dominant source of institutionalised cultural capital, and concludes that it does not adequately account for comparative differences in the social structure of competition and ideological shifts in class (re)production in different national contexts. This analysis is based on an empirical investigation of elite students at Oxford University and Sciences Po in Paris. We investigated how they understand the competition for a livelihood and whether they see themselves as more 'talented' than students from non-elite universities. This investigation revealed important similarities and differences between British and French students that have significant sociological implications for the (re)production and legitimation of educational and labour market inequalities.

Keywords: credential inflation; talent; cultural capital; elites; elite employability; positional competition; effortless achievement; class (re)production

Introduction

The discourse on 'talent' in the British context raises sociological questions about the competition for a livelihood and the legitimation of elite (re)production in education and the labour market (Brown and Hesketh 2004). This discourse also raises comparative questions concerning the conceptual relationship between merit, talent and credential competition, given the enduring liberal ideal of an education-based meritocracy (Halsey, Heath, and Ridge 1980; Goldthorpe 2007a) where credentials are viewed as a currency of opportunity. Within liberal theory, 'meritocratic' competition based on credential competition is seen to play a major role in minimising social bias and

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nepotism in the labour market as employers recruit on certified achievement rather than personal contacts or recommendations (Durkheim 1933; Kelsall 1954).

Contrary to the liberal view of meritocratic competition, conflict theorists including Bourdieu (1974) argue that the education system is a 'conservative force' given its primary role in the reproduction of existing class relations. Bourdieu observed (as Weber before him), how examinations and qualifications gained in popularity throughout the twentieth century, as they became widely used in recruitment into technical, professional and managerial occupations (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978). This led Bourdieu to view academic qualifications as the dominant form of 'institutionalised' cultural capital, contributing to class reproduction. It enabled students from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds to disguise their family privileges as a 'gift of nature', given the meritocratic myth that examination performance reflected differences in innate ability.¹ In France:

one has only to think of the *concours* (competitive recruitment examinations) which, out of the continuum of infinitesimal differences between performances, produces sharp, absolute, lasting differences, such as that which separates the last successful candidate from the first unsuccessful one, and institutes an essential difference between the officially recognized, guaranteed competence and simply cultural capital, which is constantly required to prove itself. (Bourdieu 2006, 110; original emphasis)

Through the accreditation of institutionalised cultural capital, Bourdieu observes how it becomes possible to compare the relative merits of qualification holders in the creation of a hierarchy of achievement that could be transferred from the field of education to the labour market. He argued that it was then possible to establish 'conversion rates' between cultural capital (in the form of credentials) and economic capital 'by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital' (2006, 110). However, this only holds true in specific circumstances because the economic value of educational qualifications depends on maintaining their scarcity within the labour market. Credential inflation therefore poses a serious threat to the economic positions of the middle classes because when more people gain educational qualifications their labour market value is likely to decline. As Bourdieu observed:

The overproduction of qualifications, and the consequent devaluation, tend to become a structural constant when theoretically equal chances of obtaining qualifications are offered to all the offspring of the bourgeoisie (regardless of birth rank or sex) while the access of other classes to these qualifications also increases (in absolute terms). The strategies which one group may employ to try to escape downclassing and to return to their class trajectory, and those which another group employs to rebuild the interrupted path of a hoped-for trajectory, are now one of the most important factors in the transformation of social structures. (1984, 147)

Bourdieu (1990) was therefore fully aware that the reproduction of class relations through education has become more problematic in a context of credential inflation (Goldthorpe 2007b). But given that the major thrust of his studies on education and social stratification was focused on the role of academic qualifications in the reproduction of existing class relations, he does not develop an analysis of the changing relationship between education and the middle classes (Power et al. 2003). Moreover, given his almost exclusive focus on French society, Bourdieu's analysis fails to acknowledge important comparative differences in class (re)production through education, employment and the labour market (Daloz 2010). There is a continuing emphasis on academic qualifications as the dominant source of institutionalised cultural capital, which does not adequately account for comparative differences in structural, cultural and ideological shifts in class (re)production in different national contexts.

Talent: a new source of distinction?

Since the publication of *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), the overproduction of qualifications has posed increasing problems for middle-class families as they seek to reproduce, if not improve on, their social status. This led to the growth of postgraduate studies as those aspiring to join occupational elites add professional, master's and doctoral qualifications alongside their undergraduate credentials. Adding additional hurdles in the competition for a livelihood is a predictable outcome given that it benefits those with the financial resources able to sustain a prolonged campaign (Hirsch 1977; Collins 1979), especially at a time when a 'user pays' model of higher education funding greatly increased the individual and household costs of securing marketable credentials. Pressures on middle-class families have also resulted from the expansion of higher education because it creates a more fine-grained ranking of universities along with new forms of academic stratification as employers develop global rankings of universities with significant implications for labour market inequalities with respect to jobs, incomes and status (King, Marginson, and Naidoo 2011).

However, the struggle for distinction in education and the labour market is no longer limited to a competition for credentials. Today, at least in the British context, employers argue that the kinds of people they are looking for has changed and that the credential tells them less about what they need to know about a candidate when making their recruitment decisions (Brown and Hesketh 2004). This has led employers to identify a range of behavioural competencies including 'soft' currencies of employability – communication skills, persuasiveness, drive, resilience, adaptability, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills – alongside 'hard' currencies including credentials, internships, sporting achievements and music prizes. Equally, the value employers attach to both 'hard' and 'soft' currencies of employability

depend on how they are packaged in a *narrative* of productive potential (2004, 35). This involves being able to present one's experiences, character and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles scrutinised by employers.

Elite employability is no longer a by-product of elite class membership. The self has to be packaged in ways that make it difficult to hide one's 'self' and cultural inheritance (embodied capital) behind the veiled screen of technical expertise (Rose 1999; Skeggs 2004). The 'whole' person is exposed in the assessment of managerial competence, reflecting the widespread use of student profiles, assessment centres and staff appraisal schemes.

This explicit use of 'social' qualifications in employer recruitment decisions is also premised on the assertion that organisational success increasingly depends on the performance of 'talented' employees, which bear less relationship to established status hierarchies based on educational credentials. There has been a subtle, but important, shift in the way the 'knowledge' economy has been understood in relation to education, jobs and rewards. Some business consultants, most notably McKinsey (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001), have argued that while the knowledge economy increases the value of ideas, insights and expertise, it also increases the demand for outstanding talent (believed to remain in short supply) rather than well-qualified university graduates: 'it's more important to get great talent, since the differential value created by the most talented knowledge workers is enormous' (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001, 3). Such ideas have led a growing number of companies to differentiate employees in terms of performance alongside technical knowledge, and to reward 'top talent' a lot more than the rest (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). Florida (2005) presents a similar argument in suggesting that attracting the best creative talent has become central to the competitive advantage of nations. Companies and governments are therefore encouraged to pay more attention to the way they attract, select and retain talent, which is assumed to be much more important than investing in vast ranks of university graduates.

This greater emphasis on elite talent not only brings into question the historical role of the credential in certifying expertise in occupational selection, but equally the conceptions of merit. Firstly, the hierarchy of meritocratic achievement that assumed a rough correspondence to an occupational hierarchy with incremental differences in status and rewards is undermined by rhetorical claims to talented performance that differentiate the 'best from the rest', even though the rest will include many with graduate qualifications. This presents both challenges and opportunities to educational elites as there is more at stake in the competition for the best jobs in both the private and public sector (van Zanten 2009).

Secondly, when education is organised on a market competition for the 'best' schools, colleges, universities and jobs, performance trumps merit.

Blau and Duncan (1967, 429) argued that ‘superior status cannot any more be directly inherited but must be legitimated by actual achievements that are socially acknowledged’. But this does not necessarily involve a commitment to a ‘level playing field’ in pursuit of equality of opportunity, where the state assumes the role of restricting the use of educational markets by wealthy families. When education is organised on a market model of parental choice, individual achievement is limited to measuring and benchmarking outcomes – examination results – irrespective of how they are achieved. Merit is reduced to performance with scant regard to inequalities in educational opportunities. In a market model of individual achievement, ‘talented’ performance represents a ‘disorganising’ concept, disrupting the way people think about social justice in the competition for a livelihood (Brown 2013).

Therefore, it is not only changes within the ‘scholastic mode of reproduction’ (Bourdieu 1984, 147) that need to be studied but how they relate to the restructuring and re-stratification of middle-class occupations. Bourdieu suggests that ‘diploma inflation’ (1984, 143) would lead to the creation of large numbers of semi-bourgeois positions, produced by redefining old positions or inventing new ones, and designed to save unqualified ‘inheritors’ from downclassing and to provide parvenus with an approximate pay-off for their devalued qualifications’ (1984, 150). But this fails to take into account the dynamics of global capitalism in its drive for capital accumulation, knowledge capture and low-cost competition within which national elites in developed economies are finding it more difficult to define the rules of the game and to maintain their class positions based on the ‘economy of practices’ that were the major focus of Bourdieu’s (2005) analyses (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011).

Indeed, within the British context we find an internecine positional struggle as occupational elites attempt to increase their class privileges by engaging in a twenty-first-century equivalent of a ‘land grab’, as more of the power, initiative and rewards have been captured by those close to the apex of corporate hierarchies. The rhetoric of the ‘war for talent’ is therefore symptomatic of positional conflict within the upper-echelons of British society. Those in positions of market power are seeking to legitimate larger salaries at the expense of other employees by asserting that credentials and the claims to income and status that they have traditionally granted are now subject to re-negotiation in an economy that depends on the outstanding performance of a ‘talented’ elite.

This analysis points to a new research agenda focused on the changing relationship between family, education, employment and rewards, in the (re) production of unequal life-chances and life-experiences. This article will contribute to this research agenda by examining how the relationship between credentials, merit and talent is perceived by students at Oxford University in the United Kingdom in comparison with those studying at an elite university in Paris, France in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

How do they understand the competition for a livelihood and their positions within it? Do they feel that the competition has changed and how do they perceive issues of academic and labour market distinction? What is the source of their distinction and do they perceive themselves to be more talented than students from non-elite universities? Do they view any positional advantage that they have derived from attending an elite university as meritocratic? More generally, what do any similarities or differences in student perceptions in Britain and France reveal about elite (re)production and the sociological significance of credentials, merit and talent in the legitimation of educational and labour market inequalities?

Methodology

The research evidence presented in this article is based on an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project on the way talent, merit and employability are viewed by elite graduates in England and France. It therefore examines their aspirations and expectations rather than actual occupational destinations. Our comparative framework offers a methodological approach for understanding both similarities and differences in student perceptions, and how these relate to national differences in the social structure of competition. This focus highlights the relationship between structure and agency, informed by the work of Weber and Bourdieu along with others.

Despite their close proximity, England and France offer an interesting comparison because they represent different historical traditions of education, state and society (Green 1990). In France, education is considered as state bureaucratic, while in England is characterised by market competition and institutional autonomy (King 2009). There are also comparative differences in the relationship between education and the labour market, given the role of the *concours* in France (Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre 1982) while England has a more 'flexible' labour market within which employers place a greater emphasis on talent and behaviour competence (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

Our comparative framework involves two cohorts of students that have been 'matched' as closely as possible on the basis of the status of the institution and the career orientation of degree courses. In England, we have interviewed a cohort of 20 final-year students (13 male, seven female) studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics or History at the University of Oxford. In France we have interviewed a cohort of 20 students (12 male, eight female) taking the Master's in Public Administration at Sciences Po, Paris. Both Sciences Po and Oxford would count themselves as elite institutions – near the top of national hierarchies of prestige but also in international league tables. Both institutions would claim to be 'global universities' and are highly selective. Despite attempts in both countries to widen participation, these institutions recruit disproportionate numbers of privately educated students.

Not only are both institutions of roughly equivalent status and selectivity, there are parallels between the courses our respondents are taking. The Master's in Public Administration at Sciences Po prepares students for careers in public administration. Its curriculum includes public law, economics and public finances, with extended internships in key national and international organisations (Suleiman 1978). Most importantly, it provides the main pathway to gaining entry into France's Ecole Nationale d'Administration – the significance of which has led to its graduates being referred to as the 'enar-chy'. Sciences Po provides entry to what Bourdieu (1996) has famously termed the 'state nobility'. Although the courses our respondents are taking at Oxford are less specialised than their counterparts at Sciences Po, Philosophy, Politics and Economics in particular has a reputation for feeding graduates into elite public-sector employment and Westminster politics.

Despite the attempt to match students, institutions, and degree programmes, there are differences that need to be taken into account. These largely derive from the different ways in which higher education is organised and the relative importance of bachelor's and master's degrees. Thus, in England it is the university of the first degree that is often most significant in opening up particular elite career opportunities although postgraduate study is important in some fields, such as the MBA for managerial and executive occupations. For most graduates, the significant interface between higher education and the labour market occurs in their early twenties. Most of our respondents were between 20 and 22 years old. In France it is the master's-level qualification that carries most weight, and the most important interface between higher education and elite recruitment is on the completion of the master's degree. Our Sciences Po respondents are therefore somewhat older than the Oxford respondents as they are mostly in their mid-twenties. Hence, the failure to achieve a perfect match does not necessarily represent a weakness in research design, but reflects sociologically significant differences in how elite (re)production is institutionally configured.

Research findings

With respect to the role of education in social reproduction, students in both countries thought that the competition for a livelihood had become more intense, especially in comparison with their parent's generation. They were fully aware that the competition for credentials had also been extended, as we were told:

The social situation has evolved in such a way that we have to study longer to get to the very same social position ... Compared to my parents I have studied much longer but it doesn't guarantee me a better income in the end.

It is a bit ‘unfair’ because it’s a lot of work. But it will eventually pay off. Hopefully! (Jean-Yves, Paris)

You now have thousands and thousands and thousands of graduates all competing for what are essentially ... the same amount of jobs ... It’s not just people who have just graduated but ... people who have MBAs, Masters and PhDs who are going for jobs lower down the scale than they might have done ... it is getting harder because you know there is this great sea of graduates. (Colin, Oxford)

Students in Britain thought that the financial crisis in 2008 had added to social congestion in the job market, whereas French students at the time of interview felt it had little tangible impact, in part reflecting the greater importance attached to the financial sector in Britain and the drastic action taken to bail out British banks along with subsequent cuts in public spending. But it also reflected important differences in career aspirations as most of the French sample expected to enter the elite ranks of the civil services while the British sample saw their futures in the private or voluntary sectors as they demonstrated little sense of the civil service as a vocation (Power et al. 2013).² It is for this reason that more of the British sample thought that they were increasingly in competition with graduates from other countries. As an Oxford student aspiring to a career in corporate law told us:

You are not just competing against the top however many per cent of your own country, it’s the top globally. That’s just by definition going to make it harder because you have more competition. (Emily, Oxford)

The general view that education and the labour market had become more competitive and pressurised also reflects another change in comparison with their parents’ generation, with implications for our understanding of cultural capital. Bourdieu highlighted the role of credentials in the reproduction of existing class relations, but academic elites in both countries (and despite important differences that we will outline below) were not simply ‘chasing status’ or high monetary rewards, but were ‘chasing the dream’ of a career that would remain challenging, interesting and fulfilling. As this French student recently accepted onto a Master’s in Public Administration at the London School of Economics observed:

I think today it’s more difficult than for my parent’s generation. They did not have the same compulsion of being in an interesting job. My father is 53 years old but he still says that he is going to the factory although he is an executive in a major French utility company and not an electrician. But for him work is not something where one fulfils his or her potential. It’s only to earn a living. And I think we have lost this in my generation. Everyone wants to be in an interesting job. It’s everyone’s concern. So it becomes more difficult to find a job! (Francoise, Paris)

This emphasis on wanting an interesting career as well as the social status that it derives offers an insight into how they are oriented to education and legitimate 'the edge' and 'blue chip' prospects that they perceived themselves to have over other college and university students (Bourdieu 1996). Despite a more competitive world, they were aware that studying at an elite university gave them a competitive advantage in the labour market because the 'best' employers are looking to recruit the 'best' graduates.³

companies I think expect the best ... that is why they are looking to hire us.
(Colin, Oxford)

Compared to other people who don't go to Sciences Po ... it is like night and day.
(Jean-Yves, Paris)

There is an enormous signalling effect of the degree even though in my opinion it is a little misleading ... Sciences Po gives you a competitive edge.
(Rene, Paris)

Rough justice: inheritance, luck and strength of character

While those we interviewed did not question the legitimacy of their own achievements, they expressed ambivalence about the 'fairness' of academic competition. Most students did not believe there was a level playing field for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was keenly felt by a French student from a 'downclassed' family in Dijon who initially attended a secondary school that was prone to gang violence before moving to a different school. He did not see the current system of education selection as fair because it privileged those from Paris over those from 'la province' along with students from privileged backgrounds, but he thought that the 'crucial unfairness' was family background:

I think it's complicated to have a fair education system because what is most important is where you come from, your family background. What you talk about during family dinners, as a child. If you had books at home. This is something unfair but I don't see how you can solve the question. It's not the State, nor the education system's role to interfere in family life. That's the crucial unfairness. You don't start with the same basic knowledge. (Jean-Yves, Paris)

An Oxford student also questioned the current injustices in the education system because some people end up in 'really crap inner city schools' for no fault of their own apart from being born into a disadvantaged family. This led him to reflect on his own experience:

You know I have been very lucky. I had a really good childhood, and have had a really good education and here I am! There are very few people here who have come from poor state schools and succeed. (Colin, Oxford)

Lucy also observed that:

Compared to the average I'm lucky, and I've always been surrounded by people that value learning ... and have had the opportunity to be taught very, very well, and had access to excellent resources all the way through. (Lucy, Oxford)

This reference to 'luck' is not by chance. There were many references to 'being lucky' in coming from a social background that valued education or getting into a 'good' school even if they were not from a wealthy family:

Compared to my classmates I wasn't privileged but compared to other secondary schools clearly I was. But it wasn't probably the privilege of money. It was the privilege of philosophy, of choice. (Rene, Paris)

This 'individualisation' of the systematic inequalities in education and life-chance was also evident in the view that being disadvantaged was not destiny. A French student who described their background as 'normal' rather than elite suggested that we 'should not put everything on the account of social determinism'. He suggested that 'at home we did not have many books except mine. I took the initiative on my own to borrow or buy them with my pocket money.' (Daniel, Paris).

Likewise, Lucy believed that although there were inequalities in educational opportunities. She thought that:

really exceptional people will do well whatever background they come from but ... it is more difficult if you come from an environment that doesn't value education ... if you go to a school where teachers don't have the time to notice or encourage your particular skills, I think it is much more difficult and I think it does play a role, quite a strong one for a lot of people. (Lucy, Oxford)

Therefore, while they use the language of 'being lucky' in benefitting from opportunities that those from less advantaged backgrounds do not have, the idea that social background is not destiny is connected to the view that their route into elite education is about 'taking one's opportunities'. This not only distinguishes them from students from working-class background but also those from privileged backgrounds. Those with the same opportunities who do not put in the effort to develop themselves are committing a 'personal sin'. As a male student at Oxford heading for a career in management consultancy explained:

I think that you always have to work at something particularly if you want to maximise your talent ... I mean it is my little bug bear that there are people at Oxford and from private school who have reasonable opportunities, who have so much talent as it were, and yet don't put in the hours and it is kind of disgraceful. When you are at a university that is so competitive, people

would cut off their right arms to be at. To have such potential ... but getting drunk, or ... you can't be bothered to spend time in the library, you sort of slack off and not do the work and not make the most of the opportunities that you have been given. (Tim, Oxford)

No time for 'effortless achievement'

In comparison, they had taken their opportunities by performing at a very high standard in competition with the best in the country. Students from both universities believed that their hard work, as much as raw ability, had contributed to their success. This emphasis on individual character and moral fibre was an important part of their self-legitimation (Sennett 2003). They believed that they deserved what they had achieved and the opportunities that going to an elite university offered. This is because raw ability and talent counted for nothing without hard work. As Emily (Oxford) explained, talent is 'natural ability that requires practice' and so 'you can't just rock up to a piano and start playing'.

There was little reference to 'effortless achievement' highlighted by Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) in either country because a willingness to work hard and put in hours of graft was central to their understanding of personal success and legitimate achievement. Indeed, being pushed to work hard in pursuit of their goals was viewed as the essence of an elite education. Their positional advantage in the competition for elite employment was not only seen to derive from the reputation of the institutions but a superior educational experience.

Most saw their studies as offering a different kind of education that was more challenging and involved harder work than that experienced by students at other universities. They were expected to produce assignments on a weekly basis to be presented to academic staff within a small group context. The unique nature of the tutorial system in Oxford was frequently mentioned, as was the pedagogical approach at Sciences Po where students learnt to construct and present arguments in ways that those from other universities had little opportunity to develop (Halsey 1992). This was perceived to give them superior skill sets distinguishing them from other university students. Both Oxford and Paris students recognised a 'pedagogy of inequality' that privileged an intense level of engagement with staff far removed from the realities of mass higher education:

They make you work at Sciences Po. Seminars are in small groups. You always have 4–5 papers to hand in each semester ... we were so busy that we could hardly have a proper sleep! My brother went to university and I realised he hadn't been submitted to the same workload. Sciences Po forced me to work, really. (Jean-Yves, Paris)

While Jean-Yves did not think that his experience at Sciences Po had contributed a lot to his general knowledge, it taught him how to structure his

ideas and contributed to building the ‘social confidence’ required for a successful career in the higher echelons of the French civil service:

The main thing I’ve learned is the way you could structure your ideas, to make public speeches, to be confident when you talk to an audience ... and to be self-confident ... Sciences Po has given me enough confidence to make me believe that what I am saying is not completely stupid.

This difference in academic ‘quality’ is not limited to the formal curriculum. It also includes extracurricular activities that require ‘energy’, ‘passion’ and ‘engagement’:

That is the fantastic thing about Oxford it’s a high pressure, high stress lifestyle, but that ... carries with it the opportunities to develop interests and develop talent in practically any field you care to want to look at whilst you are here. So the old cliché that you can work, play, sleep and at Oxford you can’t do all those three things and one of them has to go and that is sleep! So you are constantly on the go but because of that and because of the other motivated people that study here, it creates a huge variety of different things to do, whether it’s an involvement in politics, whether it is involvement in banking or law, what have you during vacations, in other ways, whether it is sports, whether it is writing and journalism, there is a huge scope to become involved here. (Stuart, Oxford)

The legitimization of ‘guilty’ networks: a meeting of minds

The intense educational, cultural and social experiences that studying at elite institutions facilitated was not only used to explain why an Oxbridge or Sciences Po degree is distinctly better than those awarded at other universities, but also to explain why it was legitimate for leading employers to target them above other graduates. In both countries, the importance of internship and using the elite university brand to gain access to tough-entry jobs was widely acknowledged, despite the continuing importance attached to the *concours* in France (see below). But what is of interest here is how these students thought that access to social capital through alumni and other networks was ‘deserved’ (Tholen et al. 2013).⁴ Such connections were not viewed as ‘guilty networks’ but as the result of like-minded people gravitating to one another due to shared experiences, personal chemistry and mutual recognition. Indeed, there is a perceived homology between the atmosphere, experience and engagement at Oxford and that found in leading companies (Bourdieu 1996).

Emily decided on a career in law after trying banking but did not take to it. She secured an internship with a leading London law firm and ‘loved it’:

I really connected with the people there and I got on really well with my supervisor, and yeah, it was definitely my first choice of firms to work for.

They have just got a very distinct culture and fairly heavily Oxbridge actually, but it was a really nice place to work. (Emily, Oxford)

Following this internship she was successfully interviewed for a full-time position after finishing her university degree. Emily believed that her success was partly due to finding it easy ‘to connect with the people that are interviewing you’, which was made easier by the fact that ‘almost all of my interviewers for all of the jobs [I applied for] have been Oxbridge students in the past ... so you instantly have a kind of bond’.

Emily’s experience was similar to Lucy’s, who wanted a career in management consultancy. She applied for an internship with a leading firm of management consultants knowing that:

It was quite a formal process with the idea that once you got onto the internship you’d have periodic assessments and be offered a job or not at the end of it. And I was fortunate enough to be offered a job. And I really enjoyed working with them. I found it similar to my experience here at Oxford, in that they throw you in at the deep end, it’s challenging and you have to deal with lots of new things quickly. I very much enjoyed the companies ethos, the people that I met, and so I’m going to work for them as of January next year. (Lucy, Oxford)

Again, while Emily and Lucy thought they were ‘lucky’, they did not believe that the ‘personal chemistry’ between themselves and occupational elites in major ‘employers of choice’ was unfair or a form of academic nepotistic. It was more a ‘meeting of minds’ nurtured through their academic training. Lucy believed that ‘there is a type’ of person that leading companies are looking for, but it is very diverse. During her internship she was the only native English speaker, so they have people from all over the world but ‘there is a similar sense of driven-ness, sociability and ability to work hard, also to have fun’. And it is precisely this ‘type’ that gravitates towards Oxford University because:

it’s hard to thrive here unless you enjoy a challenge, you enjoy getting a lot of work and going ‘right, I’m going to do this’, and you enjoy taking advantage of what could be quite an intimidating environment. I think it’s that decision where you go, ‘Ok, this is all very new and possibly quite scary, but this is exciting’. And I think they want people would react in that way to something, rather than wanting to sort of run away from what could be quite a daunting environment.’

These elites therefore do not view their cultural and social capital as inherited or ascribed (Goldthorpe 2003) but as achieved through personal abilities, effort and character (Bourdieu 2006). However, there are important differences in how English and French students understand the rules of legitimation in education and the competition for elite employment.

Elite legitimization: talent, merit and credential competition

French students were hesitant in their response to questions about ‘talent’ as it was not commonly found in the discourse on education and life-chances. It was generally believed that talented people were exceptionally found in politics or other creative industries rather than in managerial occupations. This was exemplified by Claudine, who felt that ‘talent is a big word’ and while there may be ‘small talents with sharpened qualities’, talent is ‘knowing to do something well that very few people know’. Therefore, she rejected the idea that there was a ‘war for talent’ within the occupational labour market:

They say talent but I would have said intelligence. They are looking for intelligent people and talent is not necessarily intelligence. Moreover, we can be strong in one field and useless in another. I think that when we have quality education ... for example, at Sciences Po, everyone is able to work in a consulting firm if one explains what is to be done. There isn't anyone who stands out from the bunch and who is exceptionally brilliant or exceptionally passionate. From the moment we like what we are doing we would always look for excellence in our work. (Claudine, Paris)

Therefore, educational elites in Paris recognised ‘meritocratic’ selection as ‘individualised’ whereas an emphasis on talent is to ‘personalise’ the recruitment process in ways that expose it to arbitrary and discriminatory practices given that it is difficult to ‘benchmark’ talent to make the process of selection fair and transparent. Those we interviewed in Paris thought that organising elite recruitment on ‘talent’ rather than a system of entrance examinations runs the risk of returning to ‘social’ selection, especially through ‘recommendations’ (social capital) and the use of cultural capital, where those from the ‘right’ background such as the children of the *enarques* ‘would know what to do to get a place in the Administration’ (Rene, Paris), rather than based on merit through rigorous examination.

Again Claudine, who would one day like to become the director of one of the most famous French public theatres in Paris, also thought that moving away from entrance examinations would be ‘dangerous because then recruitment would rest on interviews and here meritocracy may disappear. There would be more chances of being recommended.’ Rene, hoping for a legal career within the public sector, also thought that the entrance examinations are meritocratic but unpredictable, although it is something he retains ‘faith’ in and could see no alternative to the *concours*:

it is more an act of faith than other things. It's anonymous. Each candidate is reduced to an answer paper ... I don't see any other solution to the use of entrance examinations as basing it on interviews leads to discrimination which could be based on family, age and also the sex of the candidate. These things which are normally hidden in a competitive exam, become apparent. (Rene, Paris)

The *concours* (entrance examinations) therefore stand at the heart of the idea of ‘meritocracy’ in the French system as a powerful source of legitimisation, even though many of these students had entered Sciences Po after attending fee-paying preparatory courses that less affluent students find it difficult, if not impossible, to afford.⁵ But there was recognition that the private sector could be less meritocratic than entry into public-sector employment:

What attracts me to public service is the fact that the competition truly corresponds to the idea that we have of meritocracy. It is completely based on individual merit ... For people working in the private sector it is always the question of networks, of people we know, of internships ... In the selective exams I have the chance of succeeding if I prepare well and work hard. (Daniel, Paris)

Oxford students also lacked a consistent definition of talent, but bought into the idea that in a more competitive economy employers need to hire more talented, rather than just well-qualified, employees who could demonstrate passion, energy and resilience because ‘they don’t expect you to sit in an office as a brain’ (Colin, Oxford). Therefore, the extension of the recruitment process to include the ‘personal qualities’ of candidates beyond their ability to pass formal examinations was taken for granted, especially given the problem of credential inflation. As Tim observed, the early stages of the recruitment process is ‘a bit of a minefield’ as employers screen out ‘people who didn’t go to a certain type of university’, but ‘the further you get down the whole interview sort of process I think the more fine-grained the judgements can become because they are more interactive with the person’ (Tim, Oxford).

A bachelor’s degree from Oxford was thought to keep them in the competition because it was of higher status than credentials awards at most other British universities. As Stuart observed, those who pass through Oxford and Cambridge ‘get the skills, the experience, the connections, the label to go on and succeed in whatever field of society you want to go into’, but the credential only ‘gets you above the threshold, above the cut off point’, which means that elite recruiters will take your application seriously because an Oxbridge degree offers a ‘guaranteed standard’ (Stuart, Oxford).

But it is not enough to perform to a high standard in academic examinations given that talented performance in the workplace depends on a broader range of personal qualities that they view as a legitimate consideration in the recruitment process. This difference between educational elites in French and English is partly explained by a much tighter or ‘organised’ connection between education and the labour market in France, especially for recruitment into the civil service. The Grande Ecole were created to fill the exact number of positions required by the state: it was a recruitment system before

becoming a training system (van Zanten 2009). Whereas in England hiring decisions are frequently based on an extended process of recruitment that often includes an initial screening of online applications, followed by an interview with a recently recruited graduate and then by a more senior colleague, before being invited to an assessment centre that usually involves a day of further interviews, group tasks, in-tray exercises and psychometric tests, which are all evaluated in terms of the behavioural competences identified by public and private sector organisations as signifying elite employability:

I think the assessment centre and interview process is generally fair. I suppose ... no recruitment process is going to be, it's just like exams, they are not going to exactly reflect the abilities of every candidate. To an extent you do need to practice, to be prepared for how to answer, and be questioned as well ... I think generally the people who will be best suited to certain jobs end up with those jobs but there are always anomalies. (Emily, Oxford)

I think in a way interviews and kind of gauging as to how good someone is at communicating and expressing themselves is actually much more justified because those are the skills that you need for a job ... I kind of feel like interviews probably do give a good indication of how someone would do in the job. (Faith, Oxford)

A small proportion of the Oxford sample, however, recognised that the use of assessment centres enable students with the confidence and know how to 'play the game', although there was little reference to using family contacts as a way of directly securing employment. Through carefully examining company brochures and learning the appropriate buzz-words these can be 're-phrased', so:

you can make it sound impressive ... like it's something that you have created yourself ... so it's really important to be entrepreneurial. You just re-phrase what they are looking for. I think that's what it means by playing the system and it seems to work. (Jack, Oxford)

Despite these concerns, there was little questioning of the process of elite (re)production in either country, in part because they viewed themselves as the major beneficiaries in their respective systems.

Conclusion

This study shows that the dominant rules of exclusion evident in each country are reflected in the way elite students perceive the competition for a livelihood and legitimate their positions within it. The emphasis on talented performance that extends beyond academic achievement in England is less prevalent in France, where claims to meritocratic achievement through formal entrance examinations (*concours*) continue to dominate at least in entry to the 'state nobility'. Hence, differences in how educational elites in

England and France view the relationship between merit and talent reflect differences in the structuring of elite (re)production.

Entry into the 'state nobility' remains highly prized by the French students interviewed in this project, which explains why so much emphasis remains on success in formal examinations, while elites in the English context view success in the competition for credentials as contributing to a broader range of 'hard' and 'soft' currencies of employability that conform to the competency profiles of graduate 'talent' in leading private and public-sector organisations. Paradoxically, given the discourse on meritocratic achievement in the French system, the role of the *concours* in occupational recruitment rules out of contention any candidate who has not passed the requisite entrance examinations; whereas in the British context, although elite employers target top-ranked universities, there remains the formal opportunity (even if rarely a substantive reality) of being hired by an 'employer of choice' because elimination is not institutionally ratified by a formal entrance examination but more on an assessment of behaviour competence (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

A further conclusion is that most of those interviewed acknowledged that students from disadvantaged backgrounds received 'rough justice' because they did not have the same supportive family environment or quality of schooling. But at the same time, social disadvantage was not viewed as destiny given that some people succeed regardless of family origins. While they recognised an element of luck in being part of an educational elite, it was a willingness to work hard and take one's opportunities in an increasingly competitive environment that legitimated their elite status, not only in respect to those from working-class families but also others from middle-class backgrounds. There was little reference to cultural or intellectual superiority leading to 'effortless achievement' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964). A 'passion to succeed' and 'strength of character', alongside academic abilities, were believed to give them access to an elite educational experience and a positional advantage in the labour market.

What, then, of the relationship between credentials and cultural capital? This study has only interviewed middle-class students who have become part of an educational elite, but when credentials are subject to inflationary pressures their role as the dominant form of 'institutionalised' cultural capital is called into question. Indeed, it could be argued that middle-class reproduction is in crisis because middle-class families find it more difficult to translate their cultural capital into credentials that retain market value in the competition for jobs. In such circumstances, many of those from middle-class backgrounds are constantly required to prove themselves (Bourdieu 2006).

This poses new research questions concerning changes in the relationship between 'culture' and 'capital' and the future role of education in the capitalisation of culture. Bourdieu's related concept of habitus is also called

into question due to changes in the class structure and expansion of higher education (Reay 2004). The significant expansion of the middle classes since the time Bourdieu developed his conceptual framework in the 1970s makes it more important to develop a theory of ‘within’-class or ‘intra’-class inequalities in conjunction with the traditional focus on inter-class inequalities.

We need a better understanding of how middle-class families, sharing similar aspirations, cultural resources and educational biographies, experience the competition for a livelihood and arrive at different destinations (Power et al. 2003). Moreover, the process by which ‘habitus’ is developed and transformed into ‘personal capital’ (Brown and Hesketh 2004) becomes more important especially in labour markets prone to credential inflation. This is clearly the case in England, but even in the French context elite employability increasingly involves a narrative of character-building, self-development and personal efficacy that involve ethical decisions around the ‘life-world’ and how the competition for a livelihood should be played. In short, class background remains central to the study of social (re)production and we should not abandon the concept of ‘habitus’ as some have suggested (Goldthorpe 2007b), but it may have less explanatory value than is often assumed by many of those who contribute to this Journal.⁶

Finally, the comparative differences found in this study may be a product of the sample given the large number of French students aspiring to enter the civil service compared with the English sample, where most wanted to enter the voluntary or private sector. How students studying other academic subjects understand education and its relationship to the labour market in both England and France is in need of further study. Moreover, the direction of change in French society may also have an impact, and this is likely to depend on whether the country is able to ride the worst of the European debt crisis. As one of French students observed in terms of the distribution of income: ‘I am afraid that we are evolving towards a system like in the United States or Britain where the differences are like an abyss. It is a dangerous evolution.’ Recent evidence suggests that France is not immune from the European debt crisis as unemployment has increased and there is growing political pressure for further cuts in public-sector employment (European Commission 2013). This may make a career in the civil service less attractive. How French elites will respond to these changing labour market conditions require further empirical analyses, as do the responses from non-elites. This analysis suggests that new conceptual work is required to capture the educational, cultural and societal changes that are re-shaping the (re)production of educational and occupational elites.

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Notes

1. Bourdieu also argues that 'the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled' (Bourdieu 2006, 108).
2. Difference in attitudes towards a career in 'public service' was one of the most striking findings to emerge from this research and has been analysed in a separate article. See Power et al. (2013).
3. This was more likely to be UK students as the majority of French students saw their futures in public-sector organisation, especially the civil service.
4. For a discussion of the role of networks and connections (social capital) in the labour market strategies of these students, see Tholen et al. (2013).
5. For more details on the issue of working-class students in elite higher education in France, see van Zanten (forthcoming).
6. Richard Jenkins (1992, 97) wrote of Bourdieu's concept of habitus that 'behaviour has its causes, but actors are not allowed their reasons'.

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