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ABSTRACT

As undergraduate degrees have become increasingly common and their relative value has declined, employers increasingly look for evidence other than human capital that can distinguish one candidate from another. Both social and personal capital are important in this respect, but also create disadvantages for university graduates from less privileged backgrounds. Using data from a qualitative longitudinal study, I will discuss the employment outcomes of working-class, first-generation university students in Canada. The findings to be presented highlight that working-class graduates struggle with the development and mobilisation of social and personal capital in the search for employment. Instead, they largely rely on formal job postings and trust in the value of their human capital. Some participants discussed mandatory internships and placements that took place during their education, and how they assisted them in the development of networks and social capital for career advancement. Shifting occupational goals can also be interpreted as the result of participants' reassessment of their chances to break into high-status professional careers.

Introduction

Human capital theory, with its central claim that labour market outcomes improve as individuals increase their formal education, continues to inform most employment policies aimed at young people. Yet, anybody who has ever visited a career counsellor or read a career self-help book is aware of the central importance of networking in finding employment. Career experts often evoke the metaphor of an iceberg; just as most of the iceberg is immersed and invisible under water, so do the majority of employment opportunities remain hidden. Connections and networks are presented as the most effective mechanism to access these hidden opportunities. Moreover, those entering the labour market are encouraged to distinguish themselves through volunteering, studying abroad and similar activities. Yet, access to networks and opportunities to distinguish oneself are unevenly distributed and classed.

In this paper, I will first review literature that has addressed and tried to explain the persistent class inequality in the employment outcomes of university graduates. I then draw on data from a longitudinal Canadian study of working-class university students to investigate how their class position not only affected their employment trajectories four years after graduating from university, but also how it is implicated in job search strategies. Of importance in this analysis is the students' ability to mobilise different forms of capital when looking for work. Lastly, the data presented suggest

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that working-class students downshift original occupational goals, although it is unclear whether this is in response to class-based challenges they encounter in their transition from university to employment.

Class inequality in the transition from university to employment

The development and activation of forms of capital other than human capital is a useful way to address this issue. In the context of the transition from university to employment, social capital plays an important role. Granovetter's (1974) seminal work on how individuals find employment identifies personal contacts as a key mechanism, but also distinguishes between strong and weak ties to such contacts. It is weak ties, those made outside one's close circle of family and friends, that provide the best leads for employment opportunities. Weak ties are made up of loose networks that may be established at university, in jobs, or even by chance and thus open up a wider network of opportunities than those available through strong ties.

Putnam's (2000) concepts of bonding and bridging capital similarly explain the differential value of close familial connections (bonding capital) versus connections to a broader social community (bridging ties). As the terms imply, bonding capital connects you more strongly to a close network. The problem with bonding capital, as with strong ties, is that they can be limiting when trying to achieve, for example, social mobility, whereas bridging capital (or weak ties) can open doors.

The problem with strong/weak ties and bonding/bridging social capital is that they say little about the conditions of the field in which these are to be applied and the power relations within these fields. For instance, a student from a middle-class family can likely rely on her strong ties or bonding capital to gain access to middle-class career opportunities, whereas a student from a working-class background cannot.

Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation of social capital, with its linkage to the notion of field, offers a nuanced way of explaining employment outcome differences. Bourdieu (1986, 51) defines social capital as the sum of the actual or potential resources that are embedded in a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance. These resources can be mobilised to gain benefits in specific fields (Bourdieu 1990). It is important to note that the same social capital (i.e., the same networks) can be of value in one field, but not relevant in others. Put simply, having lawyers and doctors in one's social network will be very useful for those trying to gain access to these professional fields, but not especially useful if one wants to become a plumber, an automotive technician, or a beautician.

In addition to social capital, economic capital, human capital and what Brown (2013) has called personal capital have also been shown to be very important in the transition from education to employment and are intricately interlinked.

Economic capital is a foundational form of capital (Bourdieu 1986), as it enables access to human capital, for example, in the form of undergraduate and postgraduate credentials. As undergraduate degrees are becoming more common, the inflation of credentials increases the value of exclusive forms of human capital (e.g., in the form of selective postgraduate programs), as well as personal capital. Highly valuable forms of personal capital include career-relevant work, volunteer or internship experience. Employers (and admission committees to postgraduate programs) increasingly look for such forms of personal capital when making hiring (or admission) decision. Access to opportunities that build one's personal capital, however, are classed. As Brown (2013) and others (Allen et al. 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Brooks and Waters 2009; Lehmann 2012; Leonard, Halford, and Bruce 2016; Stuber 2009) have shown, the acquisition of personal capital is intimately tied to other forms of capital associated with privilege (but not recognised as such): these include the 'right' kinds of social networks to locate internship and volunteer opportunities in a professional field, or the financial stability to work without pay, or to travel and study abroad to signal to an employer one's readiness for a global workforce. Rivera (2015) has shown that in recruitment and hiring practices for high-status positions, greater value is indeed placed on experiences that favour those from privileged backgrounds. These findings are

echoed by Kim and Bastedo (2017), who have shown that participation in extracurricular activities has more benefits for graduates of selective institutions. In contrast, experiences gained in casual, income-supporting jobs, which are more likely to be held by working-class and low-income students, are seen as less valuable (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). University graduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds are thus significantly more likely to secure high-status professional employment (e.g., in law and medicine) upon graduation than their peers from less privileged families (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015). For instance, The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009) in the UK has documented that coming from a privileged family is more important for access to employment in the professions today than it was decades ago, and researchers in the United States have found that the likelihood of intergenerational social mobility has declined over time (Chetty et al. 2017).

Having outlined the importance of privileged forms of capital in the transition to employment, and working-class students' potential disadvantages in accessing and mobilising this capital, the paper asks the following research questions:

(1) How do working-class students find employment after graduating from university?
(2) What are the roles of different forms of capital (financial, human, social and personal) in working-class students' transition from university to employment?
(3) Do class-based challenges encountered in the transition from university to employment affect working-class university students' long-term career dispositions?

Methods

The data reported here are from follow-up interviews to a study that originally lasted for four years, from 2005 until 2009. During the original study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), 37 newly enrolled working-class students at a large research-intensive university in Canada were interviewed three times – in the first, second and final year – of their undergraduate studies. All participants were the first in their extended families to attend university and most had parents who had not attained education beyond high school and were employed in blue-collar or lower-level service occupations. During the final interview of the original study (in 2009), participants were asked if they were interested in participating in further research. Those who agreed provided their contact information and that of family members or friends through whom they could be reached, as most were likely to move after graduating. Using this contact information, 20 of the original participants were re-interviewed in the fall of 2014, five years after they had finished their undergraduate studies. The majority of interviews were conducted by telephone or video-calls, although a number of participants had either stayed locally or used visits back to schedule an interview.

Interviews lasted between 70 and 120 minutes and were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using qualitative analysis software. During data analysis, coding categories were established that reflect the research questions both descriptively and theoretically.

In the interview quotes presented below, I have followed the actual transcripts as closely as possible, with a few minor editorial changes to make them more readable. I also use pseudonyms throughout to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants.

Participant profiles

As Table 1 shows, most participants entered university with plans to pursue high-status professional career paths, largely as doctors or lawyers. By the end of their undergraduate education, many had already abandoned these plans. While 10 participants indicated that they wanted to become doctors in their first interview, four years later, only four still considered this career. Table 1 also shows that 15 of the 20 participants had participated in some form of post-graduate studies,

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Pseudonym	Career plan in first year university (2005)	Career plan in fourth year university (2009)	Post-graduate education	Job at time of follow-up interview (2014)	How job was found
Alissa	Doctor; Physiotherapist	Doctor; physiotherapist	Bio-engineering (second undergraduate degree)	Engineering firm; private sector	Formal job postings; career fairs
Alicia	Undecided	Geologist	No post-graduate education	Ministry of Labour; mining inspector; public sector	Formal applications; government job listings
Ashley	Undecided	Government work in HR	No post-graduate education	HR administration in provincial government	Initial summer job through connections; further jobs via internal postings
Alison	Doctor	Doctor	MA in public health	Public health; public sector	Formal postings
Anabel	Doctor	Teacher	B.Ed	Supply teacher in public school board	Formal applications (e.g., supply teacher lists)
Becky	Doctor	Doctor	Nursing (second undergraduate degree)	Nursing education not yet finished in 2014	Not yet working; but hopes to be hired from mandatory hospital work placement
Brian	Undecided, possibly lawyer	Government, policy	MA in public policy	Public servant in provincial government	Internships from MA program; job movement through internal postings
Brenda	Teacher	Teacher	Social work degree	Social worker with local Children's Aid Society; publicly funded	Local contacts
Colleen	Management	Management	No post-graduate education	Business consulting firm	Formal applications; university program career portal
Dan	Doctor	Doctor	Med school	Not yet working	Not yet working
Hilary	Lawyer	Lawyer, or academic	MA and PhD in criminology	Not yet working	Not yet working*
Jim	Doctor	Academic, researcher	MA and PhD in Chemistry	Not yet working	Not yet working*
Jill	Doctor, or other health-care related	Health administration	Various post-grad programs in health-care related fields	Public health organisation	Formal postings and applications
Kristen	Teacher	Work in university admin/recruitment	Master in university administration and leadership	Employed by her university, first recruitment, then academic advising	Worked as campus tour guide during UG; stayed on and moved up the ranks
Melissa	Management	Management	No post-graduate education	Management trainee in large firm	Formal applications; university program career portal
Monica	Teacher	Teacher	B.Ed	Teacher in public school board	Formal applications
Shirley	Doctor	Undecided, generic admin	MA rehab sciences	2 part-time jobs in rehab (physiotherapy)	Formal applications, but also networks through mandatory work placements
Sally	Lawyer	No plans	No post-graduate education	Casual work in a group home for children	Newspaper or online postings
Tanja	Doctor	Academic, researcher	PhD biochemistry	Not yet working	Not yet working*
Vanessa	Doctor or dietician	Public health nurse	Nursing degree	Public health organisation	Formal applications, but also networks through mandatory work placements

*Although these participants were not yet working, they expressed a strong desire to find employment at public universities, for which formal applications to job postings are required.

all of which took place at university, although the programs for which participants returned to university varied considerably. Five participants completed a second undergraduate degree (three of them in nursing), four entered masters programs (e.g., in public policy, public health or rehabilitation sciences), two completed teacher education, three were still engaged in doctoral studies and only one was in a professional program, studying medicine to become a family physician.

With the exception of one participant who relied on local contacts to get a job with a Children's Aid Society and those not yet working, all participants found their initial (and often current) jobs through formal means rather than social capital or networking. Lastly, only four participants were employed in the private sector. The rest were either already working in the public sector (or publicly funded organisations), or were still in education with the goal of entering the public sector (for example, as university professors).

Findings

Finding work

Those looking for work are usually advised that the most effective ways of finding employment are to tap into the hidden labour market through networking and to mobilise personal capital to set oneself apart from other job candidates. Yet, both these strategies are affected by a job seeker's class position. When previously interviewed during their last year at university, participants voiced concerns that their lack of social and economic capital restricted them from participating in 'value-added' extra-curricular experiences such as an internship abroad or unpaid work placements in doctor's offices or law firms. For instance, Becky, from whom we will hear again shortly, mentioned how her casual work experience, required to cover the cost of university, was seen as irrelevant when applying for a research assistant position on campus. Similarly, Alison, who had hopes of participating in a university-led internship abroad, talked about not being able to afford this experience, which she felt would give those who did a leg up in the competition for admission to medical school. Lastly, Ian, who had hopes to become a dentist, spoke about peers with parents or family friends who are dentists and can broker work placements, whereas his lack of such networks meant that doors remained closed for him (Lehmann 2012, 209–211).

These concerns, voiced in participants' final year at university, indeed characterised their search for employment after graduation. Nearly all participants in the study relied on formal means, such as publicly available job postings, university career centres and career fairs to find employment opportunities or introduce themselves to prospective employers. Here, Becky explains how she found her first job after graduating with a bachelor degree in health science.

> Yeah, it was usually look on the Canada Job Bank, so that's where I found that job. [...] I saw an advertisement for a – it was to work in a dermatologist's office. So I applied and I got the job. They were asking for BScN, which I had, which turned out not necessary for the job. (Becky, nurse)

Colleen also relied on formal means to locate employment, despite graduating from a well-known business school that prides itself on its vast alumni network.

> I actually look online. [laughing] I think it's my generation, not my line of business. So you know, just monster. ca, going into websites for companies that I'm interested in, checking out their website. [I found my first job] through a posting at the career office at [university] and [current] job through the [business school] job posting site – career portal, that's what they call it. (Colleen, management trainee)

Lastly, Alicia used a government job site to access employment opportunities as a geologist.

> I think I just applied for it through the government online application. It was just a normal process, it didn't really have any names or references or anything like that in particular. (Alicia, mining inspector)

Ashley, who graduated with a business degree, was the only participant who gained entry into her career field through the kind of social capital we might define as a loose tie. Even then, this

connection was used to secure a student summer job with a government agency, rather than a post-graduate position, although this early connection did eventually lead to continued employment.

> Well, I did actually have a connection to get into the government. I was dating a guy throughout university, or throughout the first part of university, whose mother worked for the government and she got me my first job, coming into the government. So that was my connection to get in. [..] I worked part time as a HR secretary with the Ministry and I made a lot of connections there. (Ashley, human resources with government employer)

When asked about loose ties and social capital in the job search, participants generally responded that those were either not available to them, or that they never considered non-formal options. Both Vanessa and Jill work in the public health field and found their first jobs through formal postings and unsolicited applications:

> Some people, for example if they have, like if they have a nurse – like, an aunt, or mom, or someone they knew was a nurse working in a hospital, it was like an easier way to drop their resume in there and hope for a call. Whereas like, for me, a lot of times I had to just apply through external postings, there was no internal help per se. (Vanessa, public health nurse)

> They were all publicly posted and available. I probably I applied, … I believe it was 182 jobs. […] People always say in these books and all these articles and everything that the um, that the way to find the job is through connections and networks, through you know reaching out and stuff like that. But there's something with me where, I don't know … opportunities come up and you know how to use that opportunity. (Jill, public health nurse)

In the absence of social capital, loose ties and other distinguishing forms of personal capital, the respondents placed their trust almost exclusively on the value of the human capital they had gained by attending and graduating from university.

Recognising the value of social and personal capital

Many participants did agree that their better-connected and more privileged peers may enjoy advantages in the social and personal capital they are able to mobilise in their job search, as the following experience of Melissa illustrates.

> There's a girl that also went into kind of the training program that we had, and we could never figure out why she always had the most unique jobs. She was like the assistant to our CEO, and then she was assistant to our CFO the next year, it was just one of those roles that – it's like we never knew that type of role. She was family friends with the CEO and all of her roles were uniquely created just for her. Um, so you do see that, and I think you continue seeing that. (Melissa, management trainee)

Brenda (who held a degree in psychology and was qualifying to become a social worker) and Colleen (a graduate from an elite business school from whom we had heard earlier) further felt that mobilising this capital is easier for more privileged peers, for whom accessing such networks is habitual in the same way that it is foreign to them.

> Some friends were able to get in at companies that their family works at and have very high level jobs that nobody else would have. It's very frustrating. [laughing] […]. I think that people who come from those kinds of families are better at asking for things. They're better at saying, "Hey, you know my dad." or whatever [laughing]. They're better at using their connections and um, not exploiting them, but…benefiting from them. (Brenda, child support social worker)

> Most people go to [elite business school she attended] for the network. I totally failed in that aspect. [laughing] Like, I think I failed to see the importance of it back in university, the importance of that network, so I never put the amount of effort that I should have to go out and network with people and to meet. Like I was always told that networks are important, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. This is one of the things you're coming to [business school] for. But I didn't realise how true that was until now. […] For people from, well a more privileged background they see the importance of networking when they're a lot younger, because that's something that their parents may have ingrained in them, because they can see it from their day-to-day life.

[…] It might be second-nature to them to build that relationship, whereas for me, like I never saw my parents going out trying to make an extra effort just to network with someone, you know? (Colleen, management trainee)

Although participants recognised the benefits of privileged forms of social capital, they also insisted that lacking such a network does not automatically create a disadvantage for them. Melissa, another business school graduate from whom we heard earlier, explained that the human capital and skills she had acquired more than compensated for her lack in social capital.

You come to accept that people are just from different status, and that a network is a good thing, and good for them for having that network, and it helps propel them faster or further. It might just be more work for me to build up that network and build up that trust. I do believe it might take more time, but if you have that skill, you could still succeed. (Melissa, management trainee)

Despite this emphasis on formal channels to find employment, participants did draw on a range of strategies and had access to resources aimed at increasing their chances for success. Mostly, these were tied to increasing the value of the human capital they had gained through their undergraduate degrees. Personal and social capital did play some role, but in perhaps unexpected ways.

Seeking access to social and personal capital through human capital

Without access to exclusive forms of social or personal capital, participants' strategies to increase their employability almost exclusively relied on their trust in the value of human capital, which was evident not only in their use of formal job postings, but also in the fact that 15 of the 20 participants engaged in further post-secondary education to advance their employability. Post-graduate programs that led to specific career pathways, but also required work placements were especially important in this respect. Consider, for example, Becky and Vanessa, whose first degrees were in the sciences, but who returned to university to train to be nurses and who talked about the value of the hospital placements that are part of their nursing programs.

I think part of the final placement is – you kind of – it's almost like an extended job interview. So if they like you … I could stay in the critical care unit. (Becky, nursing)

The final placement, like, the consolidation placement meant something, because you were there for four months, you're there like three-four times a week and you develop, like um, mentorship relationships with the nurses on the floor. (Vanessa, public health nurse)

These career-relevant post-graduate programs gave participants direct access to employment opportunities (as mentioned by Becky), while also allowing them to build a professional network and getting access to mentors in their career field. Shirley, who held a degree in health sciences and then completed a post-graduate program in rehabilitation sciences, explained that the support in finding placements and connecting students to potential employers that these post-graduate programs offer helps working-class students overcome their relative disadvantage in social capital.

[Networks are] very necessary in my career. I've never actually looked to my parents for network and connections, it's just never been an expectation of mine, so when it doesn't happen, it doesn't even strike me as – I don't think about it, cause I don't expect them in the first place. (Shirley, rehabilitation sciences)

Being placed in a hospital as part of her post-graduate program in rehabilitation sciences, Shirley was able to make connections, but also to impress upon potential employers her skills and work ethic.

Okay, so the hospital I had a placement and I was very good with my placement, had a very good work ethic, very professional, understood what our role was. As an employee, I think I stood out. […] I think whoever I've met in my field, I've managed to leave a good impression, and because of that I haven't really had trouble networking or finding a job, really. (Shirley, rehabilitation sciences)

Similarly, Brian spoke about choosing his post-graduate program in public policy not only for its academic content and his interest in government, but also because of the added benefit of a paid internship with government agencies that can lead to future employment.

> What really attracted me to the [University X policy program] was that in the summer between first and second year, there is a mandatory paid internship component, and they do a lot of work to – like you don't have to find it yourself. [...] So, I ended up working in the Ministry of Finance, Treasury Board Office, which is a very, very centre part of government, which is kind of neat. (Brian, public service)

In the absence of career-relevant social capital, and with fewer opportunities to afford the development of elite personal capital, participants saw these formalised mechanisms to build employment-relevant experiences as essential to make inroads into their chosen career field. For many, this was part of a larger strategy of shifting occupational goals.

Shifting occupational goals

Participants' shifts in occupational goals were one of the most pronounced findings. Of the 20 participants, 10 mentioned becoming a doctor or surgeon as a first or second choice when asked about their career goals in the first interview (when they started university in 2005) and five wanted to be lawyers. That these were the most common career goals is not surprising, as most young people enter university with only the vaguest knowledge of labour markets and career options, which renders these publicly highly visible professions obvious. That they are also dominant amongst working-class students, whose habitus could be considered at odds with such ambitions, is also understandable. For most young people and their families, becoming a lawyer or doctor represents the pinnacle of mobility and middle-class achievement.

These career goals were already beginning to change during their four years as undergraduate students. During their last interview as students (in their fourth year of studies), nobody was interested in becoming a lawyer any longer and only four participants still hoped to be doctors.

These modified plans were much closer to their actual employment destinations five years after graduating. In the end, none of the participants entered law school and only one had continued to medical school to train to become a general practitioner/family doctor. Four participants ended up in the medical field, but not as doctors, as they had initially hoped. Two participants had returned to university for nursing degrees, three others were employed in the public health sector and one worked as a physiotherapist. Despite the fact that teaching was an often-mentioned first or back-up career choice, only two participants ended up becoming teachers.

It might be tempting to see these shifts as a working-class response to structural constraints, such as the aforementioned lack of social and personal capital, or the often exorbitant costs associated with post-graduate programs in law and medicine. Yet, only very few students claimed that they gave up on medical or law school for such structural reasons. Instead, these shifts were mostly explained as active choices and as better reflecting changing interests and becoming more mature, independent and self-confident, as in the case of Hilary who decided to pursue an academic career rather than following her initial goal of becoming a lawyer.

> Well, since graduating from [my undergraduate program], I enrolled into a master's program in criminology. Though the goal was to go to law school, I started to have some doubts about whether I wanted to go to law school and I thought, well I could do a one-year masters and that gives me some more time to figure out if I am committed to this occupation in the legal field. Then it turned out that I was pretty damn good at the academic stuff, so I decided to apply to the PhD program. (Hilary, doctoral student)

Alissa, who studied kinesiology but had the long-term goal of becoming a doctor, changed her career plans after exposing herself to a different range of options in the medical field in the year following graduation (it should be noted here that Alissa found these opportunities through formal online postings). Although her initial purpose for taking a year off was to better prepare herself for

medical school, she ended up using these experiences to reassess her plans. Alissa's exposure led to a rather radical shift in goals.

> After I graduated, I still thought I wanted to be a doctor and I took one year off to get my application ready and get some experience. So I spent that first year after I graduated working at a physiotherapy clinic. It was very eye opening because it was the first time I actually tried a job with patient care. I got to see what all those professionals did. And about three months in I realised that I don't want a single one of those jobs. So back to the drawing board. I ended up going back to school the following year in biomedical engineering. So I actually did a second undergrad degree from the beginning. (Alissa, biomedical engineer)

Somewhat similarly, Becky, who graduated from a health science program with the intention of entering medical school and becoming a doctor, casually worked as a receptionist and medical assistant in a doctor's office after graduating in 2009. She became quickly disenchanted with what she felt was the callous way doctors treated their patients. This confirmed her growing discomfort with becoming a doctor, but unlike Alissa, she realised that she still wanted to enter a caring profession. This led her to return to university to study nursing instead. Her initial observations (and her new career goal) were reinforced once she worked in clinics and hospitals as part of required placements in her nursing program.

> Throughout my placements that I've had, we interact with doctors and, I really like getting to know the people, like all my patients. Getting to talk to them, getting to know them, whereas doctors, they just have like five seconds with the person and they don't care really about them. They just are all about the diagnosis and the medication and – whereas I get to know them, I get to meet their family, I get to talk to them, I get to really help them. (Becky, nursing)

Moreover, being aware of their potential disadvantage with regards to social and elite personal capitals, most chose occupations or employment areas they felt were characterised by meritocratic selection processes; in other words, hiring based on transparency, a fair assessment of skills and credentials, and formal job postings. Four participants hoped to find such meritocratic selection in academia, arguing that academic hiring depends on the quality of one's research and publications, and not on social capital, whether through family or lose ties. We heard from Hilary, who abandoned her goal of becoming a lawyer for a career in academia, earlier. Here she talked about other non-privileged peers who followed through with their plans to attend law school and how she may have avoided the unique struggles her friends encounter because of their lack of privilege.

> It kind of became clear to me as some of my friends did go to law school. Even though they were very smart people, very successful in school, they were getting kind of lower rung articling positions and it was all about their inability to network because there was no real jumping-off point for them. They didn't already have networks in place. [It] was something I definitely realised and was kind of like phew, probably that would have been me. (Hilary, doctoral student)

For participants like Tanja, who entered university wanting to become a doctor but was pursuing her doctoral degree in biochemistry at the time of the interview, academia was also seen as a place in which mentorship is based on ability, furthering the perception of a meritocratic process.

> I think that working with [professor] really opened doors for me, and exposed me to the academic world, and I've completely fallen in love with that, and it is sort of what I want to do. I was really lucky when I met her because she was a great balance between, um, you know she was very very smart and had good ideas scientifically, but she was also very nurturing, and I think she – probably not until I left her lab did I realise just how much she mentored me into the position that I'm in now I'm really grateful for that. (Tanja, doctoral student)

Alison also entered university with the hope of becoming a doctor, but decided to become a public health nurse instead. Like others whose plans shifted to become nurses or public health professionals, she spoke about a form of skill and experience-based hiring in hospitals and regional health authorities that is open, transparent and fair; a process in which she and others felt they had an equal chance of being selected.

> Our organisation has very stringent hiring policies and so I wonder if that's what makes our organisation different. There are no internally posted jobs, all jobs are posted internal and external. (Alison, public health nurse)

Employment in the public sector, whether the outcome of shifting occupational goals or not, was generally seen to be more meritocratic than in the private sector. Ashley, who has a business degree and found employment in a human resources department of one of the Canadian provincial governments, made the following comments about hiring processes in government.

> So, there are competitive processes and collective agreement requirements that we [government] need to abide by before we make a hire. There are certainly pieces within the collective agreements that create a fair and transparent hiring process; definitely more hiring based on merit than connections, compared to the private sector. (Ashley, human resources in government)

Receiving his first position on the strength of his performance in the internship required in his graduate program in public policy, Brian felt that he had been able to drive his career on his terms. He argued that his strong work ethic and performance resulted in the types of employability that does not require elite personal capital, but that he had also been able to build networks through his post-graduate education and employment.

> I wouldn't say [my network is] super broad, but I think it exists. [Policy graduate program] was extremely helpful for that, both because you get exposure to a lot of the instructors there who used to work in the public service [...] and then you also are friends with [your peers in the program], you know some of the most promising public servants that are just entering the public service. Like we enter as a cohort and keep in touch so, there's sort of a natural network there, and then through that you also meet other people. [...] Maybe this is a silly distinction that I just use to make myself feel better or something; I guess it feels different because it wasn't a family-based or class-based network, but a professional network. (Brian, public servant)

Shifting occupational goals and seeking employment in the public sector appears to have paid off for the respondents. With only one or two exceptions, all participants had successfully entered their new career pathways, or were in a strong position to do so (for those still completing their post-graduate education). None were resentful or wistful about having abandoned their initial plans of becoming, for example, doctors and lawyers. All felt that the choices they had made better reflected who they were and were they saw themselves in the future.

Discussion and conclusion

Answering the first research question about job search strategies, almost all participants found their initial employment through formal means, such as public job postings, career fairs and by researching web pages of potential employers. For some, mandatory internships and placements during post-graduate programs also led to employment opportunities. These findings also suggest answers to the second research questions, which asked what roles different forms of capital played in participants' transition from university to employment. Overwhelmingly, they trusted in the value of the human capital they had obtained in their first degree and subsequent post-graduate programs they completed. Although they were aware of the potential benefits of other forms of capital (especially social capital and exclusive forms of personal capital), they felt that they either did not possess such capital, that they never felt compelled or comfortable mobilising it (if they had it), or that it was not important for success in their chosen career fields. Which leads to an answer to the final research question about the long-term impact of class on career dispositions. Despite entering university with very high occupational aspirations (to become lawyers and doctors, for instance) and, by and large, being academically successful, only one of the participants followed through with their initial plan and had entered medical school by the time of the follow-up interviews. Most others who had originally wanted to become doctors instead pursued careers in semi-professions in the medical field, such as nursing, public health, or rehabilitation. Similarly, none of the participants ended up entering law programs, but instead continued their education as

criminologists or entered public policy programs to become public servants. In fact, most of the participants were looking for and had found work in the public sector, in the belief that it was characterised by meritocratic hiring processes that valued human over other forms of capital, and thus gave them an equal chance of success. It is, of course, impossible to say if hiring in the public sector is indeed more meritocratic. Participants' employment in the public sector is as much explained by their educational choices (e.g., to study nursing, public health, or public policy), as it is by hiring practices. It is safe to argue, however, that many of the participants were drawn to these careers (and the public sector) because they felt that the lower cost of the education required, and the mandatory internships, would offset disadvantages in economic, social and personal capital.

Human capital emerges as the key source of capital for the participants' career trajectories and aspirations. In most of the formal job search strategies they used, the participants could only distinguish themselves through evidence of academic achievement. It was also through human capital, largely in the form of mandatory work placements and internships in post-graduate programs and other further education, that they were able to begin building social capital that had career value. Those are the types of professional networks, rather than class or family networks, to which Brian refers in the quotation that concluded the Findings section. This points to the central importance of post-secondary institutions in connecting working-class students (and other students who cannot easily rely on social capital, such as those from racialised and immigrant families) with employers and individuals in their career fields. Studying a number of US liberal arts colleges and their graduates' transitions to employment, Hurst (2016) reports that the college in her sample with the least classed outcomes was also the one with the most highly rated career services, including subsidised internships for low-income students.

It is important, however, not to over-estimate the role of universities and colleges or to see internships, work placements and other forms of experiential learning as magic bullets. Just as access to graduate jobs is classed, so is access to student jobs and internships. Unless there is a careful matching process that takes into consideration social class, and unless universities or employers can offer pay or bursaries, the expansion of such programs can actually further disadvantage working-class students who lack their own access to opportunities and whose financial situations often make it impossible to work for free. Moreover, nothing universities or colleges hope to achieve with such programs can be realised if it is not matched by an equal level of support and involvement of employers. At least in Canada, however, employers in the private sector have a dismal track record of being actively involved in the training and education of current or future employees (Saunders 2009). It is also worth remembering that the participant in the present study began using internships and workplaces after they had altered their initially high career goals and decided to become nurses rather than doctors, for instance.

There was no sense of regret evident in the data. Participants in the study considered themselves successful. They excelled academically (Lehmann 2014) and found themselves in careers and occupations that reflect social mobility. Mostly, participants expressed happiness with their choices. Their new careers were discussed as better reflecting their interests. Earlier goals were occasionally dismissed as uninformed or immature. At the time of the interviews, their embrace of their new careers and their lack of regret seemed entirely genuine.

Although structural constraints were not discussed as the key reason for shifting occupational goals, it is still possible to argue that some of these shifts can be interpreted as a classed response to employment preferences and realities. Classed preferences may be evident in some participants' desire to help and work more closely with the public, which they argue is not work that doctors or lawyers do, but those placed lower on the occupational hierarchy. These decisions and their explanation may well be seen as an assertion of a working-class habitus, but one that nonetheless allows participants social mobility and the utilisation of their human capital. It also makes it easier to develop career-relevant social capital with individuals who are more likely to share or at least are closer to their working-class backgrounds. Related to this interpretation of changes in occupational

goals is the observation that in many cases, participants felt that the new occupations in which they worked or were still pursuing were ones in which the possession of elite personal capital and social capital was less important.

These choices, however, can also be interpreted as the consequences of social congestion (Brown 2013), in which working-class students are confronted with realities of finite social mobility and very little evidence of downward social mobility (Smith 2009), which would be required to make room for those wanting to move up. The decision to revise original occupational aspirations can thus also be seen as a form of agency that is very much bound (Evans 2007) by classed relationships of capital and field. Such decisions also lead to a situation in which, as Furlong (2009, 346) put it, 'advantaged occupational positions clearly remain the preserve of the upper middle classes.' Without a doubt, these young people would have also succeeded in the careers to which they initially aspired. They would have made good doctors and lawyers, and as such, would have contributed to a greater diversity in these professions better to reflect the populations they serve.

Widening participation for groups traditionally excluded from the university has been a policy concern for some time. As important as it is to increase access, we also need to be concerned about the outcomes of widening participation, especially given the relatively high and risky investment made by working-class students and their families. Hopefully, the experiences presented here can offer productive insights and interpretations and thus contribute to a growing body of scholarship that investigates the reach of class into students' post-graduate dispositions, decisions, experiences and outcomes.

Disclosure statement

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