To what degree?

The influence of low socioeconomic status on the lived experience of graduate development and career transition.

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Abstract

Over the past six decades, Western nations have been growing in their concern about global economic competitiveness and economic performance linked to the knowledge economy. Most recently, the massification of higher education has seen more graduates than graduate-level employment, with those with lower resources experiencing the most difficulty. This has placed universities under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates.

This thesis examines the influence of lower resources on graduate development and career transition. In particular, the thesis draws upon data generated by narrative interviews (NI) held with six recent graduates with lower resources on a BA Sport Development and Coaching who were interviewed twice over two years post-undergraduate graduation. Predominantly from the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, the lived experience of graduates from areas of high socio-economic deprivation was explored. Participants developed artefacts by plotting a social and professional target sociogram to demonstrate the development of social capital and a life trajectory to use as an aide memoire. Interview data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings reveal how individual habitus, resources and their alignment with possible self can enable or constrain the trajectories of lower-resourced students. The research findings are presented in three conceptual groupings (comfort seekers, to a degree, and risk takers); each group is categorised according to their achievement of attaining their desired graduate-level employment. The research reported here broadens Bourdieu's use of illusio to illuminate previous unexplored understanding of working-class students' career decision-making processes and career management. Emotional investment in a possible self within the classed trajectory aids the rupture of habitus, which can be enabled or constrained by resources and field-specific requirements. The findings contribute to using habitus as a method through narratives and life trajectory as

methodological instruments for capturing the habitus, uniting theory and method as Bourdieu intended.

This study demonstrates that a background of lower resources significantly influences dispositions, shaping perceptions and openness to adaptation or change. However, the dispositions of the habitus are not a solid state; they ebb and flow, enabling or constraining practice depending on the environment and Illusio for the game.

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List of abbreviations

DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
FE	Further Education (post-compulsory education)
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GOS	Graduate Outcomes Survey
HE	Higher Education (university)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSED	High Socio-Economic Deprivation
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification
NI	Narrative Interview
PPD	Personal and Professional Development
ROTG	Rules of the Game
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

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Introduction

To increase global competitiveness, developed countries moved towards service and knowledge-based economies, unable to compete with the natural resources and cheap labour available in developing nations (HM Treasury, 2004). The advance of post-industrialisation in the Western hemisphere, along with the knowledge economy, has fundamentally changed the relationship between education and the economy—from learning to earning (Standish, 2011), heightening political focus on Higher Education (HE) (Abbott, 2015; Whitty *et al.,* 2016). To improve its competitive position 'the UK must become a world leader in skills. Skills is the most important lever within our control to create wealth and to reduce social deprivation' (Leitch, 2006, p.2). The growth of HE has advanced the higher skill set of the nation. In 2020/21 'there were over two million HE students in the UK. Nearly 80% were undergraduates, and over 80% study in England' (Atherton, Lewis and Bolton, 2024, p.6). These figures suggest a success story; however, underlying them is the underachievement of graduate-level employment, particularly graduates of vocationally focused post-1992 institutions (Mosca and Wright, 2011). Moreover, the Learning and Work Institute argues that the UK remains behind EU comparators for investment in education and skills, including the amount and quality of vocational opportunities and the contributions to training by employers, on average 26% less per employee than in 2005 (Evans and Egglestone, 2024).

The growth of the knowledge economy, globalisation, and neoliberal discourses have perpetuated a prevailing doxa, placing the purpose of education as a vehicle to produce a thriving and competitive workforce for economic good (Patrick, 2013). Yet, as Wolf (2003) argues, the doxa that education contributes to economic growth is unfounded; on the contrary, economic growth leads to growth in education. Furthermore, she suggests that the middle classes have largely increased participation in HE, leaving the working class to remain a minority.

Alongside knowledge economy rhetoric, successive governments have used education to pursue societal agendas framed around a civic duty to mend 'a broken society' by

reinstating discipline, respect, and societal control (Ball, 2021). As Michael Gove MP portrayed in his speech at Brighton College on 10 May 2012, access to education and parity within the system are moral obligations.

> Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor, and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable country. For those of us who believe in social justice this stratification and segregation are morally indefensible. And for those of us who want to see greater economic efficiency it is a pointless squandering of our greatest asset - our children - to have so many from poorer backgrounds manifestly not achieving their potential. (Gove, 2012, line 58)

Social justice and the morality of a fair and just education system have long been part of neoliberal government policy (Forrester and Garratt, 2020). In contrast, Ball (2021) suggests a marked difference between what is said and done about the growing gap in education and employment inequality.

The significance of class

Significant global changes have occurred within the workforce, with a need for traditional class models to be rethought as they overlook shifts in the labour market and the intersectionality of gender and race. Traditional class classifications and language originate from founding sociologists Marx and Weber, who, over 100 years ago, established societal categories by occupation and industry based on industrial capitalism. Society and work have changed significantly during this time, with half the UK's population not in the labour market. This change does not mean that class is now inconsequential; on the contrary, interest in class has grown in contemporary Britain (Savage, 2015). There is an even greater need to understand society at a time of increasing inequality and reassertion of the elite over society (Alvaredo et al., 2017). However, as Alvaredo *et al.* demonstrate in their analysis of global income growth, the inequality is greatest at the top and bottom or elite and proletariat (working-class). This study adopts Savage's (2015, p.172) definition of the working-class as those in society 'who score lower than others in all three types of capital': social, cultural and

economic. There are many interchangeable terms for working-class used within the literature. This study employs two distinct terms: low socioeconomic status, when referring to the study design, and lower resources, when discussing individuals experiencing lower levels of capital, as I was conscious of not portraying individuals through a lens of lack.

Universities have become central to the political mission of pursuing social mobility and economic growth, utilising the human capital discourse of access equals success (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020). Progressive neoliberal HE policy reform has seen the individual placed wholly responsible for preparing appropriately for employment and market needs (Phillips and Ilcan, 2004). In return, individuals are attracted by the higher earning potential of HE despite persistent gaps in inequality of outcome in the labour market.

Current political and policy interest in graduate employment

Graduate employability denotes a graduate's approach to and knowledge of activities and learning essential to gaining graduate-level employment. Graduate employment and a student's proficiency in employability are important to a range of stakeholders, including the government, HEIs, employers, and students (Brott, 2012). However, the concept of employability is problematic and disputed, with no agreed definition, model, or measurement tool. A widely cited definition of the concept is provided by Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.1), who state that 'Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required'. The definition and much of its analysis in both theoretical and empirical studies have concentrated on the development of human capital via individuals gaining skills and knowledge (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Jackson, 2016; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Despite revisions to the concept, much criticism remains of the predominant meritocratic illusion (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013) placed on the individual by government and universities (Christie and Burke, 2020). This view disregards the effects of

broader external factors and individual backgrounds on graduate employment (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Michael Young first coined the phrase ‘Meritocracy’ in his 1958 satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy,* warning of the perils of a dystopian society where class advantage is masked as winners and losers, those who receive rewards are those that deserve it on merit (Young, 1958). Successive governments, operating under the guise of neoliberalism—defined by Harvey (2020, p.2) as ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’—have appropriated the term ‘meritocracy’ to justify the persistence of unequal societal structures, framing them as the outcome of merit and equal opportunity (Reay, 2020). However, the meritocratic ideology where merit = IQ + effort has not materialised (Allen, 2011) or provided equal opportunity for increased life chances (Reay, 2017), indicating that broader social, cultural, and economic disparities impact on social mobility.

Bourdieu claims that meritocracy is ‘sociodicy’, a powerful tool in creating the illusion of an equal system, hiding the reality of structural inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). For the past two decades meritocracy has been the bastion of being British, the idea that there are winners and losers. Central to this ideal is that everyone has an equal chance at success (Reay, 2017). Moreover, it has evolved into a powerful tool for reinforcing poverty and privilege in modern Britain (Dorling, 2015). Constructed around a narrative of hard work, it leads those less privileged to blame themselves if they ‘fail’ (Sayer, 2005). Conversely, the middle classes can exchange other resources (e.g. social capital) to succeed in the face of educational failure (Bourdieu, 1984, 2010).

In the 1960s, six per cent of those under 21 entered university in England (Clarke, 2003); in 2023, this became 37 per cent (Bolton, 2024). Despite the positive move to increase access to HE, graduates face exponentially challenging circumstances due to the rapid expansion of HE. Growth in graduates has exceeded graduate employment opportunities, leading to a significant increase in graduate underemployment (CIPD, 2022),

overwhelming the job market with graduates (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018). Notwithstanding great strides in widening access to participation in HE, inequality of graduate outcomes persists.

In 2010, the coalition government formed by the Conservatives and Liberals implemented undergraduate tuition fees of up to £9000 per annum, transferring tuition costs from the state to the student (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). The commercialisation of higher education has redefined students as consumers, altering the relationships between universities and students while increasing competition on local, national, and global levels. The worth of education is indicated by its effectiveness in securing employment for graduates (Bendixen and Jacobsen, 2017), which has led institutions to prioritise employability in their curricula to offer better value for money in response to growing consumer expectations (Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon, 2011). Yet, research suggests that the value of HE is being diminished, which could harm society and education (Bendixen and Jacobsen, 2017). In 2019, the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) replaced the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) data in response to concerns that previous timelines gave insufficient time for graduate transition. GOS provides a broader understanding of graduates' journeys 15 months after graduation (HESA, 2023). Its incorporation into the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) indicates the growing link between HE and employment (Christie and Burke, 2020) while evaluating institutional commitment to graduate employability. Conversely, as Cooper (2021) argues, the survey missed an opportunity to obtain a more thorough and contextualised analysis of graduates' contributions to civic needs, skill development, and graduates' perspectives on success—a gap this study aims to address.

As competition increases in the graduate labour market, graduates need a good degree from an elite university and the social and cultural capital to exchange within the field (Abrahams, 2017). For graduates from non-elite institutions such as post-1992s, the challenge to compete is far greater, often starting from a lower social, cultural and economic resource baseline (Burke, 2016). In contrast, middle-class students can differentiate themselves by leveraging greater amounts of resources, placing them at an

advantage over their less privileged peers (Savage, 2015). To compete, lower resourced students are encouraged to grow their social and cultural capital in addition to academic credentials. However, the need to ‘earn and learn’ restricts their time to fully benefit from the personal and professional development (PPD) opportunities of HE (Bunn, Burke and Threadgold, 2022). Financial instability acts as a 'double deficit' impacting academic performance and the ability to access career-enhancing activities (Hordosy, Clarke and Vickers, 2018). In addition to financial and time constraints, lower resourced students were observed to be resistant to engaging in career-enhancing activities. Lower levels of engagement became a source of frustration for me and colleagues providing value-added social and cultural capital opportunities within and outside the curriculum. Disengagement with opportunities was often linked to a lack of effort and motivation; however, I believed these behaviours were rooted in a student's background. This affected how they viewed activities that could enhance their careers. This led me to focus this study on understanding the influence of lower resources on graduate development and career transition.

The study context

As discussed earlier, post-1992 universities attract lower socioeconomic groups from a local catchment area. The sport development and coaching discipline is a vocational subject that attracts many lower-resourced students. Over the years, there was concern within the Sport and Exercise department in the university where this study took place that although the employment rates for the course were high at 92.3%, those in graduate-level employment were significantly lower at 61.5% (Guardian, 2019). This signified a juxtaposition between the perceived earning potential of a degree and the reality. Graduate employment is a complex area, and current means of understanding the gap through DHLE and GOS did not provide the nuanced understanding required to unpack the narrative of graduate transition for lower-resourced graduates. This thesis focused on what could be learnt from the lived experience of graduates from low socioeconomic backgrounds to inform practice to improve the transition into the labour

market. Constructed from an ethnomethodological lens of lived experience as socially, historically, and linguistically produced (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Boylorn (2008, p.490) highlights that 'Lived experience responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences'. Therefore, the focus on what individuals do and how they do it speaks to the study's aim to understand the influence of low socioeconomic status on the lived experience of graduate development and career transition. The central research questions of this thesis were;

1. To what extent does experience of lower resources influence graduate transition into desired career?
2. How do higher education and employers influence graduate development and employment?
3. What factors contribute to the personal and professional growth of sport development and coaching graduates in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation?

To answer these questions, the primary theoretical lens of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice was applied to demonstrate the interplay between structure and agency and its interface with economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals. To strengthen the theoretical foundations, the processual concept was adopted to deepen the understanding of the strategies graduates use for personal and career development and their ability to employ them in the field. The final concept is relationality, which reveals the influence of social and professional relationships and place on graduate labour market experience and outcomes.

This study makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge in three main ways. Firstly, Bourdieu intended habitus to be used as a theory and method (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018). With a few exceptions (e.g., Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Burke, 2016; Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018), habitus is rarely used as a theory and method. Therefore, this study adds to the body of research regarding inequalities in graduate outcomes by giving greater attention to the operationalisation of habitus as both theory and method. Secondly, building on the work of Costa, Burke and Murphy, this

study uses the concepts of illusio and relationality to illuminate the enabling and constraining dispositions of habitus and its influence on engagement in personal and professional development throughout the student-graduate lifecycle (accessing university, attending university, graduation and labour market transition). These concepts uncover the psychosocial dynamics of previously underexplored understanding of lower-resourced students' career decision-making processes and career management. As Threadgold (2019) argues, illusio is an essential mechanism for examining the development of aspirations. These contributions will be returned to in the conclusion of this thesis.

This thesis is structured around six chapters. In relation to the current research, Chapter One presents an overview of HE and skills policy since the mid-twentieth century, outlining the political ideology surrounding HE and the economy. This chapter also reflects upon classed inequalities in HE and graduate outcomes, illuminating the approaches HE and empirical research have taken in response to government policy. **Chapter Two** then discusses Bourdieu's theoretical thinking tools, the processual approach of graduate identity (Holmes, 2013) and the concept of relationality adopted by Finn (2016) as the theoretical framework for this study. Reflecting on existing studies on the influence of class, graduate development and employment transition, this chapter discusses how the work of Bourdieu and Finn can be applied to a sociological analysis of the impact of lower resources on graduate development and career transition. Following the theoretical framework, **Chapter Three** concerns the methodological approach and methods employed in this research. Drawing upon the theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of the social sphere, an explanation of the aligning methodology is provided. The use of longitudinal narrative interviews as a research method and target sociogram and life-trajectories as research tools are summarised. This is followed by an outline of the data generation procedures and the reflexive thematic analysis process. **Chapter Four** presents the data generated from the study through a series of pen portraits to add valuable context to study participants. This is followed by **Chapter Five,** which discusses how the data demonstrates the differential employment outcomes for lower-resourced graduates during the three conceptual groups' transition into the labour market. The conclusion and recommendations in **Chapter Six** draw together the golden threads running through the

study, demonstrating the value of illusio, theory of practice and relationality to understand the complex interplay between structure and graduate agency in achieving desired careers.

Chapter One: Critical Review of Literature

1.1 Introduction

To adequately understand the present-day graduate career development and transition into employment in England, it is first important to locate this within the historical policy context of HE and skills. Reviewing past policies and associated ideologies reveals intended and unintended consequences over time (Pickerden, Evans and Piggott, 2015). This understanding of consequences permits an interpretation of how historical developments informed the current policy landscape and approaches to graduate employability. The chapter aims to provide a chronological review of UK government policy on the development of HE and training, highlighting graduate employment inequalities as an area of interest. The review focuses on the differences in graduate experiences of labour market transition and outcomes based on social class. It concludes by identifying the specific areas in which the study aims to contribute—namely, the limited research on the lived experience of graduates with fewer resources as they navigate transitions before, during, and beyond university. This study also contributes to the limited work that foregrounds the influence of lower resources on illusio, resources, process and relationality on graduate development and career transition. It is this gap to which I aim to contribute.

1.2 HE and graduate employment inequalities a political and policy concern

Failure is frequently used as a strategy by successive UK governments to reform public education in England. Initially, they create crises to hold professionals, parents, and children accountable for a dysfunctional system, and subsequently, they offer rescue solutions that are meant to fail in order to uphold the necessity for change (Gunter and Courtney, 2023). The almost constant change within the political sphere of education and skills is ever present; as Gunter and Courtney (2023) reveal, failure as a strategy has been adopted so frequently that it has become the modus operandi of politicians. This failure strategy is outlined in the following chronological policy overview, beginning with the

Robbins report in 1963. The report states that individuals who attend university are there for the potential of increased earnings, not just for learning. Robbins continues, by suggesting HE can provide the higher skills required to maintain and improve the UK's global economic position (Robbins, 1963). The Robbins report paved the way for the interrelatedness between HE and future UK economic success. It emphasised the importance of providing equal opportunities for university admission to anyone with the capability, irrespective of their cultural or social background. The Robbins inquiry was groundbreaking for its era and aligns closely with this study; the report mentions, 'It is not merely by providing places for students from all classes that this ideal will be achieved, but also by providing, in the atmosphere of the institutions in which the students live and work, influences that in some measure compensate for any inequalities of home background' (Robbins, 1963, p.8). The Robbins report committee ignored Treasury advice to restrict the number of students to what they and the country could afford. Instead, the committee exceeded the recommended number of students by 58,000 (Callender and Scott, 2013), a trend that has continued.

Fearful of the dominance of universities over vocational training, Tony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science, established revolutionary principles and objectives for FE and HE in a speech in April 1965 at Woolwich Polytechnic. This two-tier HE system enabled separate funding to permit FE to respond to local needs and those of employers. He advocated that polytechnic colleges be created to focus on high-level skills, reducing the downgrading of FE and the technical education sector (Cable, 2014). The contention between the HE (academic) and FE (vocational) sectors still resonates today, resulting in workforce gaps in technical and vocational skills due to its reputation and status within UK culture.

In 1976, the Great Debate on education formed the link between education and employment, opening conversations between industry and educators to address a perceived deficit in the UK's global economic performance. Callaghan's influential Ruskin speech provided additional support for a more prescriptive approach to education and

training (Gillard, 2010), giving birth to 'new vocationalism' in the early 1980s. New vocationally oriented degrees grew as academic disciplines became less dominant. The Great Debate highlighted the necessity of education to address business and industry demands as part of wider neo-liberal educational changes that aimed to revolutionise the educational field. As was seen in 1985, the DES white paper, Better Schools announced, 'it is vital that schools should always remember that preparation for working life is one of their principal functions' (DES, 1985a: para. 46); and later, the white paper Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (DES, 1987) was conceptualised around improving the economy's relationship with education and expanding access to HE.

Margaret Thatcher was prime minister from 1979 – 1990. During her tenure, she strived for 'free market' Neo-Liberalism, the idea that every area of government ought to be liberated from the state and subjected to greater market competition as the basis of a strong economy (Abbott, Rathbone and Whitehead, 2013). The rise of neoliberal thinking led to Individualism, a central tenant of her New Right ideology, emphasising the need for individuals to prioritise themselves and their families over society (Forrester and Garratt, 2020). During her premiership, important milestones in education policy included marketisation, increased competition between schools, colleges and universities, the introduction of a National Curriculum, the disposal of school playing fields, and a nationwide testing system. (Whitty *et al.,* 2016).

To align education further with economic growth, the Conservative Party aimed to embed enterprise and entrepreneurship throughout education (Ball, 1990) to improve young people’s work readiness to service the economy, disguised as societal improvement through economic growth and wealth (Forrester and Garratt, 2020). They attempted to reform vocational training to change perceptions of its value alongside the more esteemed academic qualifications. However, this was not universally supported, as Sir Keith Joseph, who served as the Secretary of State for Education from 1981 to 1986, argued that technical and vocational education was meant for those who achieved less, a legacy that endures (Rowan, 1997). Vocational training dates back to the Middle Ages,

with the first national apprenticeship system introduced in 1563. Apprenticeships remained popular until the 1990s, when employers became frustrated with the lack of modernisation and disinterest from the government, leading to a rapid decline in availability and demand (Mirza-Davies, 2015).

A renewed focus on HE emerged in 1985 with the green paper - *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1985b), which received criticism for proposals inconsistent with its objective of improving the economy and potentially affecting lower-resourced students' educational opportunities (Williams, 2006). Subsequently, the white paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987) created tension by blaming and shaming learners and institutions for not developing the right skills or attitudes. However, as apportioning blame has become a feature of political and employer discourse and policy for the past 40 years (Gunter and Courtney, 2023) this criticism is unsurprising. Nevertheless, a year later, the white paper Training for Employment (DE, 1988) addressed youth unemployment by reversing the funding distribution to employers, placing the power with the consumer (young people), empowering them with the choice to want to learn new skills or 'opt-out' (Forrester and Garratt, 2020). The concept of individual motivation in the development of self was later coined 'careership' by Hodkinson and Sparkes (2008), signalling the emergence of employability curricular and human capital discourse. The gap in employment outcomes and policy failure was justified by viewing those lacking the requisite skills and attitudes as responsible for their situation (CBI, 1993). These attitudes have fueled neoliberal values of individualism and human capital within government and society, holding individuals personally accountable despite significant socioeconomic challenges that affect many in society. From the late 1980's, universities had reduced autonomy, forcing the adoption of 'managerial methods, enhancing their role as entrepreneurs and measuring their performance on quantitative indicators' (Tomlinson, 2001, p.59).

In 1991, there were two notable policy changes that were significant to education and employment. The white paper *Education and Training in the 21st Century* focused on

improving the market's supply side by increasing sixth form and FE college autonomy from Local Government control to create market flexibility (Clarke, 1991). The *Higher Education: A New Framework* white paper removed boundaries between polytechnics and universities, leading to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which granted degree awarding powers to former polytechnics, establishing post-1992 universities (DES, 1992). This move benefited former polytechnics; however, their teaching focus prevented them from competing for funding with the research-intensive Russell Group universities (Chitty, 2014).

During 1992, an economic recession reduced training opportunities despite new legislation and increased funding. In response to the recession, private employers cut training and recruitment activities to protect profits, highlighting the adverse effects of the private sector on the supply of vocational education. The reduction in apprenticeships highlighted the need for reform, which the 1994 white paper *Competitiveness: Helping Business to Win* addressed through initiatives to improve quality and opportunities for young people. The introduction of the modern apprenticeship for 18 to 19-year-olds provided greater choice by opening the market to competition (DfEE, 1994), including aligning HE funding to reward universities for industry partnerships (Heseltine, 1994).

Political priority and influence on HE in the UK and the Western world have intensified (Abbott, 2015; Whitty *et al*., 2016). Throughout the New Labour period (1997 – 2010), Blair and Brown adopted 'third-way' policies, integrating both free market principles and socialist ideals. To address social and educational inequalities, Tony Blair pledged that 50% of young people would enter HE (Chitty, 2016). This flagship policy aimed to enhance social justice based on class, and develop the knowledge economy, widen participation in HE, and encourage fair access to elite universities (Whitty *et al*., 2016).

To fund the expansion of the HE system, the Dearing Committee in 1997 recommended the implementation of student tuition fees and support grants, creating a new private income to fund the government plans. However, it was Tony Blair’s meeting with the

Russell Group universities in 2001 that was seen to be more significant than the Dearing recommendations. After that meeting, Blair prioritised raising the profile of the UK elite universities on the global stage to better compete with the US (Callendar and Scott, 2013). The main distinction between the UK and US universities was their fee system. In 2003 the white paper *The Future of Higher Education* was published (DfES, 2003), and the subsequent 2004 Higher Education Act established contentious £3000 variable tuition fees (Callendar and Scott, 2013). The objectives of the Act were to open access to HE, as 'top universities' were seen as socially and academically exclusive (Harrison, 2011). As Chitty (2016, p.209) notes, 'Those from the 'top' three social classes were almost three times as likely to enter higher education as those from the bottom three'.

Alongside widening access, New Labour reviewed the vocational skills deficit. The 2006 Leitch review highlighted that, despite stable economic growth, skill levels remained significantly weak (Sector Skills Development Agency, 2006). Recommendations centred on increasing adult skills, enhancing employer engagement, investment in skills, and increasing higher skills through employer and university collaboration (Leitch Review, 2006).

Following the 2008 economic crash and recession, the incoming Conservative-Liberal Coalition in 2010 introduced a period of austerity to 'balance the books' (Berry, 2016). Cuts were made to all departments, including HE. The Browne review on the future of HE funding saw the Coalition government go further than the previous Dearing tuition fee introduction by increasing student tuition fees to £9000, passing on the cost from the state to the student (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). This further widened the market of HE provision, cementing the student as a consumer model and intensifying the commodification of education (Ball, 2017), with severe consequences for the philosophy of education and student experience.

The 2011 Wolf Report reviewed vocational education, recommending improvements for 14 to 19-year-olds, emphasising both academic and vocational paths should lead to the

labour market or educational advancement. Additionally, the report urged for transparency on which courses, institutions, and qualifications improve life chances, while criticising vocational education for its complexity, calling for simplification and decentralisation (Wolf, 2011). Over the next four years, the government redesigned qualifications that focused on employer needs. For universities, this meant embedding employer engagement in course quality assurance to ensure curriculum relevance to employment. New performance measures were introduced, and 16-year-olds without A*-C in Math and English at GCSE were expected to continue studying (DfE, 2015).

In 2015, the Conservative-Liberal coalition was dissolved with the election of a Conservative majority under David Cameron. In 2019, Cameron's government prioritised the review of HE funding and further integration of FE and HE. The Augar Review proposed a reduction in tuition fees, extending the threshold and period of loan repayment and reintroducing maintenance loans for the disadvantaged (Lewis and Bolton, 2022). The government accepted some of the 53 recommendations, making changes to the student finance system, impacting those graduates earning the lowest income and freezing fees for others. Critically, the Conservative government focused on raising quality in HE provision whilst aiming to eradicate courses perceived as low-quality and poor value for money, particularly those perceived to lead to lower earnings and, therefore, reduced tax revenue.

In recent years, the massification of HE has increased the number of graduates, making graduate employment more flexible and challenging (Reay, 2017). The value of academic qualifications has declined as more individuals attain similar academic capital, leading to credentialism and perceived devaluation (Collins, 2019; Tomlinson, 2008). Recent Conservative governments under Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak have questioned the value of HE (Kernohan, 2023). The discourse on 'rip-off' degrees and poor value for money (DoE, 2023) arguably aligns HE more closely with economic output (Jarvis, 2023) while ignoring sectors where high-level skills do not equate to high-level earnings. The continued negative narrative towards HE and the growth in the costs of

attending university is shifting public perception towards vocational training apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships are seeing strong growth of 6% in 2023/24 (Gov.uk, 2024), offering paid work and on the job training with the potential of gaining a job at the end—appealing especially to those with less economic capital and concerns about securing graduate employment.

The growing interest in apprenticeships reflects a broadening policy focus on practical, work-based learning. This move has implications for sectors like sport, shaping professionalisation and career pathways. Consequently, the policy cycle of failure and reform illustrates ever changing power dynamics, that affects the stability of the HE system and complicating efforts to achieve meaningful and sustainable improvements (Pickerden, Evans, and Piggott, 2015).

1.3 Continuing professionalisation in sport: the case for vocational education

Community Sport in England traditionally relies on a volunteer workforce, who give their time to sports clubs and other organisations to support adults and young people in playing sport throughout the year (Nichols, 2013). Over time, sport and active recreation have evolved, becoming more professionalised through training and qualifications to improve the sector and participant experience. The sports sector in the UK contributes £39 million to the economy, much of this through the buying power of grassroots sport and job creation (Sport England, 2024).

In 2016, Sport England produced the first workforce strategy in partnership with the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA), designed to increase access and skills and establish clear career pathways in sport. To facilitate this, 'The Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) sectors play a big role in achieving this by ensuring their graduates are of high quality and have the right skill set for employers' (DCMS, 2015, p.66). CIMSPA has worked with education providers to improve the skilled workforce required to meet the government's objectives. As noted previously,

government HE reforms have long focused on workforce development, marketising degrees to develop 'the skills, competencies and knowledge to address a number of societal issues' (Aldous and Brown, 2021, p.635). The academic discipline of sport, along with many other disciplines, is an example of 'professional-vocational degrees' (Parry, 2015), which evolved from the need to grow the vocation and professionalisation of an industry by producing 'talented individuals with the right skills for the job, via approved standards, assessments and qualifications' (DCMS, 2015, p.37). Employers in the sector often favour flexibility, leading to a growth in low-quality, insecure employment (Ives, Gale, Potrac, and Nelson, 2021), where graduates may not fully utilise the skills, knowledge and capital gained reading for a degree. Consequently, many sports graduates seek employment within other sectors (Minton and Forsyth, 2014). For those who choose to enter sports occupations, motivations often include making a difference in society (Welty Peachey, Musser, and Shin, 2018) or their passion for sport (Cassidy, Jones, and Portrac, 2016).

1.4 HE responses to graduate employability and labour market transition

1.4.1 Defining employability

The origins of employability in the UK were initially framed around the opposite of unemployment; up to the 1940s, unemployment referred to a person's character failings, marking them as 'unemployable'. This negative stance softened post-World War II due to prolific unemployment, and in the 1980s, it was reframed through a neoliberal lens of individual responsibility for developing and maintaining one's employability (Crew, 2020). Since then, policymakers and HEIs globally have adopted the concept. Employability is a complex and contested term that explains 'the objectives of the economic strategies promoted by important supranational institutions and labour market policies' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p.197). As outlined in the introduction the most frequently cited definition of employability is that of Hillage and Pollard (1998), who emphasise the ability to gain, keep and seek alternative employment where necessary. Most theoretical and empirical research notably focus on human capital development,

emphasising individual skills and knowledge acquisition (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Jackson, 2016; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). However, focusing on human capital alone overlooks other important factors, such as social networks, cultural capital, and structural barriers, which are significant in shaping graduate employability. Over time, Pool and Sewell (2007) expanded the definition, focusing on skills, expertise, knowledge, and personal traits, to move away from the narrow focus of many earlier definitions (Williams *et al*., 2019). In contrast, Yorke and Knight (2006) extend earlier definitions by emphasising graduate employability across a working life, framing employability as a set of personal skills and attributes that make a graduate more employable, benefiting the individual, workforce, society and economy. Still, with an individual focus, Tholen (2015) critiques the concept, suggesting employability relates to those who are successful in the labour market, moving away from a simplistic idea of success through skill acquisition.

In contrast, Reid (2016) supports a broader view, identifying the need for all stakeholder requirements to be met for employability to be achieved. Definitions have become increasingly complex (Williams *et al*., 2019) and multifaceted through 'definitions, measures, antecedents and outcomes' (Dinh, Dinh Hai and Pham, 2022, p.2). This study aims to move beyond blunt measurement tools to gain a richer, nuanced understanding of graduate development and transition through a multi-dimensional lens. Despite revisions and broadening of the concept, much criticism remains of the predominantly individual human capital skills lens applied by the government and universities, without acknowledging the wider external factors and personal backgrounds of graduates. To address the broader social, psychological and external factors, researchers have developed theoretical and empirical models, further discussed in the conceptual models of graduate employability section 1.5.

1.4.2 Higher education approaches to developing employability in graduates

Through neoliberal ideals, Higher Education across the Western world has increasingly orientated towards developing an appropriately skilled workforce to service the

knowledge economy to meet labour market demands. The policy emphasis on HEIs' role in boosting their graduates' employability is well documented (Yorke and Knight, 2006; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018; Misni *et al*., 2020). To achieve these objectives, HEIs have created a range of approaches, initially gravitating towards institution-specific criteria of graduate skills and attributes —essentially, a list of generic requirements for a graduate to be considered 'work ready' and employable (Bridgstock, 2009; Coetzee, 2014). Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne (2017) outline the multi-dimensional strategies HEIs have developed in response to a moral and policy measurement duty. Interventions include structural changes (embedding employability into curricula, organisational mission and resources), curriculum development with vocational courses, work-based learning, employer engagement and enhanced career and employability services. These developments focus on growing professional networks and cultural capital through curricular and extra-curricular opportunities. However, as Dinh, Dinh Hai, and Pham (2023) conclude, improving the employability of graduates is a continuing challenge for HE organisations and academics alike. Variations in employment outcomes of predominantly widening participation (WP) students suggest that achieving a degree may not be the passport to social mobility that policy would suggest (Blythe, 2001). The inability of HEIs to prepare graduates for employment has created urgency within research to find appropriate solutions (Vande Wiele, 2017). HEIs have identified and categorised WP students and those first in family to attend university as experiencing increased drop-out and lower ‘good degree’ classification (O’Shea, 2019). However, on the ground, direct intervention beyond statistical analysis has been limited.

HEIs and government policy suggest that acquiring the necessary skills and becoming a graduate, ends at formal graduation (Holmes, 2015). However, as Steur, Jansen and Hofman (2012) contest, for some, developing a graduate identity can take much longer, suggesting that the approaches taken by HEIs are insufficient in preparing graduates for transition into the labour market. This study aims to address gaps in understanding by exploring the development and identity formation of under-resourced graduates throughout the student lifecycle of education and beyond graduation.

1.5 Conceptual models of graduate employability

This section of the literature review aims to provide an explanation and comparative critique of the conceptual models of graduate employability. The review begins with a critique of how the dominant skills approach to employability is framed through a human capital lens. This is followed by an examination of the three prominent graduate employability models of Graduate Identity (Holmes, 2013), Graduate Capital (Tomlinson, 2017) and the Integrated model of graduate employability (Clarke, 2018). A key consideration of the critique is the applicability of the models in explaining the relationship between graduate outcomes and socioeconomic inequalities.

1.5.1 Skills approach - human capital

Human Capital theory, championed by governments to maximise economic output (Tomlinson, 2012) and supported by employers seeking graduates who have the skills and competencies to make immediate contributions to the workforce (Clark, 2017), plays a central role in shaping labour market expectations.

Despite criticism of the empirical basis of human capital acquisition and graduate success, HEIs have generally adopted it within the employability agenda, making Human Capital theory central to government and institutional HE policy. Defined as 'the knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health of individuals' (Becker, 2006, p.3), the theory highlights the societal and individual benefits of investing in education (Sweetland, 1996). It is often implicit in employability literature, often referred to as part of their theoretical frameworks through concepts like the possessive approach and graduate attributes. With its foundation in economics, Human Capital theory (Peers, 2015) suggests that the accrued value may lead to exploitation, minimising the human aspect. Therefore, framing employability as a collection of achievements (Jackson, 2014; Knight and Yorke, 2003) can overlook inequities in employment outcomes between demographic groups (Holmes, 2013).

Possessive theoretical concepts are commonplace within policy and some research disciplines (Finn, 2016) which is evident in the many lists of skills and attributes commonly cited in the university's employability strategy expectations. Graduate attributes can be defined as 'a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that graduates must possess or acquire as part of their engagement with HE' (Finn, 2016, p.2). Universities across the Western world have developed strategies focused on generic graduate attributes encouraged by policymakers and employers (Bridgstock, 2009). As industry demands are diverse and perpetually evolving, a single representative list inclusive of employer and individual needs is impossible to achieve (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Despite this, the school system continues to encourage young people to invest in individual human capital through HE to enhance their economic and personal advantages within the labour market (Burke, 2016).

The concept of scholastic capital (a student's self-perceived value of a degree) (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2017) is problematic. It suggests that possessing a degree can insure against job market uncertainty (Christie and Burke, 2020). However, the value of academic qualifications depends on the number of individuals with similar academic capital, which can lead to devaluation (Tomlinson, 2008). The massification of HE has increased competitiveness within the graduate labour market, affecting graduate positioning (Tomlinson, 2023). As a result, academic credentials alone are no longer sufficient to guarantee graduate-level employment (Burke *et al*., 2017).

This argument is particularly significant for sports graduates, who often face disparity between employer expectations and perceived capabilities, leading to confusion and unsatisfactory employment or recruitment outcomes (Baker *et al*., 2017). This underlines a need for greater collaboration and employer involvement in curriculum development, as generic competencies and capabilities alone may not address the broader barriers to graduate employment. Bridgstock (2009) highlights how such a generic method is unfeasible given the short time students are at university and the applicability to the range of disciplines studied. Instead, Bridgstock proposes 'career management skills' to

move beyond generic schema, which gives graduates agency for managing their career planning to actively navigate their careers. However, shifting the responsibility to graduates to manage their career planning does not address the inconsistent employment outcomes for graduates who share similar qualifications (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016). It is argued that significant evidence exists that positioning and the ability to manage self and career (Jackson and Wilton, 2016) is open to class-based inequality (Bathmaker, 2021).

Extensive attempts in the literature have been made to broaden the concept of graduate employability away from the possessive approach, incorporating positional (social and cultural capitals) and processual (self and career management) perspectives (Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp and Graley, 2016; Finn, 2016; Holmes, 2013). Many quantitative studies were identified through the process of this review; they aim to be representative of all disciplines, but their generalisability limits an in-depth understanding of inequalities within the system. To address the weaknesses of quantitative design and the possessive approach, sociological research highlights positional theories, which emphasise social positioning as a key factor in employment outcomes (Finn, 2016).

Positional theory suggests that those with the highest amount of social and cultural capital have an advantage, leaving those from less privileged positions at a disadvantage, indicating a 'council of despair' where all hope of narrowing inequality between the advantaged and disadvantaged in society is lost (Holmes, 2013). In their 2004 study on the mismanagement of talent in the global knowledge economy, Brown and Hesketh identify two types of candidates: the 'purist' who adopts a meritocratic stance, reliant on credentials, fairness, and finding a job that suits them in the organisation to which they are suited, and the 'player' who does whatever is necessary to gain a competitive advantage (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Taking on board the player and purist concept demonstrates the possibility of agency in what individuals ‘do’ can impact their successful trajectory— signifying that despite barriers presented by background, ‘individuals are not 'mere pawns' (Holmes, 2013, p. 548). It is their decisions that affect their outcomes. Holmes proposes a theory and empirically driven processual approach focused

on developing a proactive emergent graduate identity. He is also aggrieved at the absence of guidance on curriculum interventions to help the situation, demanding a solutions-focused outlook to support practitioners. Through practitioner-based research, this study contributed to this guidance, aligning with Holmes's request for actionable solutions within and beyond the curriculum.

1.5.2 Graduate identity model

The graduate identity model challenges the graduate skills-based approach underpinning most government, employer and education discourse, arguing that there is little theoretical and empirical evidence to support the claim that successful skill acquisition results in graduate-level employment (Holmes, 2013). Recognising that issues with social positioning and reproduction make it less likely for those from working-class backgrounds to achieve graduate-level jobs, the graduate identity model attempts to bridge the social and cultural capital gap through self-management and career development (Bridgstock, 2009; Holmes, 2013; Jenson and Jetton, 2015; Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018).

The process of developing graduate employability and graduate identity is a valuable basis to begin to understand how individuals become graduates. The Graduate Identity model advocates for graduates to build a distinct graduate identity, making them recognisable as highly educated individuals who warrant graduate-level employment and a salary premium. According to this model, a graduate must self-identify as such through their emergent graduate identity. Graduates may claim a graduate identity which, during interactions, is affirmed or not by others; a mismatch can result in failure in the recruitment process. If the employer recognises the asserted identity claim, the likelihood of employment increases. Employers will not affirm graduate identity if the individual does not identify as a graduate or communicate the signs of graduateness effectively.

Although Holmes (2013) aspires for the concept of graduate identity to be a user-friendly practical resource, he offers limited guidance on how this is to be achieved in practice. Additionally, there is over-reliance on signalling with little consideration of class

advantage, and the resources required to grow graduate identity across the graduate lifecycle. Middle-class graduates with a priori capital are more likely to feel like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127) when applying for graduate employment, as their habitus aligns with the field (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2009a). This alignment makes their identity claims more readily accepted by employers (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004), unlike graduates from lower resourced backgrounds, who often experience lower expectations, aspirations, and feelings of entitlement (Burke, 2016).

1.5.3 Graduate capital model

Tomlinson (2017; Tomlinson and Nghia, 2020) extend the vocabulary of the processual nature of graduate employability through the identification of a 'Graduate Capital Model'; a set of graduate capitals with educational, social, cultural and psycho-social dimensions. These dimensions portray specific resources and their expression within the labour market (Smith and Smith, 2024). Building on a solid foundation of work on graduate employability, Tomlinson (2017, p.345) draws attention to the importance of identity and psychological capital in managing self and career. He defines identity capital as 'the level of personal investment a graduate makes towards the development of their future career and employability'. The model proposes that graduates need to construct identity capital in conjunction with other capitals to be perceived as employable. To enable graduates to invest in career and self-management, the model proposes the need for psychological capital to cope with career development and transition. This requires adaptability, self-efficacy, and resilience (Tomlinson, 2017). However, psychological and identity capital can be fragile, particularly when experiencing repeated rejection (Smith and Smith, 2024) in a highly competitive and 'fuzzy' labour market (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018).

Tomlinson’s (2017) model builds on Holmes’ (2013) concept of graduate identity, highlighting the importance of the psycho-social approach to employability. A graduate's investment in career development signifies how they view and present themselves. Tomlinson adds that identity communication is aided by developing and using key

resources (education, social, cultural, psycho-social capitals) that assist in labour market transition. Tomlinson's Graduate Capitals could 'be seen as constituting a form of symbolic capital with magical powers, that hides the power relations involved in successful progression to graduate futures' (Bathmaker, 2021, p.78). This generic perspective fails to recognise the impact of *a priori* capital accumulated before university (Burke, 2016), nor does it address the influence of economic capital on a graduate's ability to develop and mobilise capital. Power dynamics in social, cultural and economic capital make it challenging for working-class graduates, who face unequal access to the resources required to effectively navigate self and career management.

While Tomlinson's model is mainly person-centred, it fails to recognise the external environment of the labour market and its significant influence on graduate employment. To counteract this, Clarke (2018, p.1931) developed an Integrated Model of Graduate Employability, which incorporates 'human capital, social capital, and individual behaviours and attributes that underpin individual's perceived employability, in a labour market context...'. This model integrates demand-side factors, recognising labour market influence on graduate outcomes (Smith and Smith, 2024). This recognition is particularly significant for graduates entering the sports industry known for its flexible and insecure labour market (Ives, Gale, Potrac, and Nelson, 2021), which impacts the success of sport development and coaching graduates.

1.5.4 Integrated model of graduate employability

The integrated model designed by Clarke (2018) recognises the influence of the labour market on graduate outcomes, a factor overlooked in earlier graduate employability models. With an oversupply of graduates, delays in obtaining appropriate employment are common, leading to underemployment in non-graduate level jobs or moving into different disciplines (Clarke, 2018). Therefore, the inclusion of the labour market within the graduate employability dynamic is essential. What is also required, which the model does not recognise, is the power dynamics of employers, as highlighted by Bathmaker (2021). Clarke's model integrates a selection of other dimensions from prior models,

including human capital (occupational-specific skills, plus generic soft skills and work experience), social capital (networks, social class and HEI ranking), individual behaviours (personality, adaptability, flexibility and resilience), psychological sources of self and career management. These dimensions feed into a graduate's perceived employability, the level of individual expectation of success in the graduate labour market (Clarke, 2018). Higher qualification levels generally increase confidence in employment outcomes. However, the model fails to include cultural or economic capital, which affects how confident graduates feel throughout their educational journey and their perceived employability in transitioning into the graduate labour market (Burke, 2016).

In summary, the dimensions of all three models (Holmes, Tomlinson and Clarke), while integral to contemporary views of graduate employability and transition, are too generalised and ignore the underlying economic and structural inequalities, particularly for lower-resourced graduates (Bathmaker, 2021). The UK’s graduate labour market exemplifies deep-seated structural inequalities across social class (Furlong and Cartmel, 2004), gender (Finn, 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2013), and ethnicity (Naseem, 2019). This results in the process of identity construction being disrupted (Bathmaker, 2021), restricting exposure to career management activities to develop further the signalling of graduate identity (Tomlinson, 2017). Structural inequalities restrict resources, particularly economic capital. All three models do not expressly identify money as an underlying principle nor recognise its ability to support additional types of capital accumulation throughout university and transition, as demonstrated in the literature reviewed in the Introduction chapter. Therefore, along with social, cultural, psycho-social, identity capital, it is vital to include the concept of economic capital within this research to understand its influence on the education process and transition into employment.

A final gap identified across models was the need to understand the influence of employer power within the recruitment processes; as research suggests, the power dynamic of employers is under-explored (Bathmaker, 2021). Employers often use cultural, behavioural, and identity signals to aid the screening process during recruitment

(Tomlinson and Anderson, 2020), often exhibiting conscious and unconscious biases that can eliminate those without a cultural fit. Therefore, an element of this study explored how employer practices affect transition into desired careers by those with lower levels of resources.

1.6 Graduate transition into the labour market

The concept of transition is complex and contested (Ecclestone *et al*., 2009; Gill, 2021). For this study, transition is defined as 'the capability to navigate change' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p.4). The concept suggests change can occur at any age; however, politically recognised educational transitions are important to this study, such as transitioning between school and HE, throughout HE and from HE to work. These phases follow the 'student lifecycle' (Bathmaker, 2021), denoting critical phases within student and graduate development.

Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2009, p.2) suggest effective transition management is linked to 'identity (people's sense of self), agency (the capacity for autonomous, empowered action) and structure (factors such as class, gender, race and economic and material conditions)'. Similarly, Schlossberg (1995) refers to similar aspects in their four S system: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies, highlighting the actions people take — or fail to take — due to the transition. Understanding the strategies influencing students' and graduates' capacities to navigate change during significant transitional stages is necessary for understanding inequality in graduate employment in lower resourced groups. As Tomlinson (2007) notes, there is a need to increase our understanding of how students and graduates perceive and experience the process of transition because little is known about this important phase. Distinct inequalities exist in graduate universities to work transitional experiences across gender, ethnicity, and class (Hooley, Hanson, and Clark, 2023). This study will focus on class as a criterion, given its intersection with both gender and ethnicity and its significant impact on graduate outcomes and transitional experiences.

1.6.1 Impact of less resources

Inequalities exist in graduate labour market outcomes, with graduates from lower resources often unable to utilise their HE knowledge and skills to 'cash in' on their educational investment. These outcomes demonstrate 'positional' differences between graduates based on social class, gender and ethnicity (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003; Burke, 2016; Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2020). To explain these issues, the work of Pierre Bourdieu's positional conflict theory dominates the literature reviewed; the most cited work was that of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990); Bourdieu (1986); and Bourdieu, Brown and Scase (1994). The theory suggests there is a conflict between comparable graduates with different levels of capital, inferring the graduate labour market values specific types of cultural capital, which are often owned by the middle classes (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003; 2004).

Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital is the most referenced social theory in research on disparities in graduate employment. Social capital pertains to group connections, affiliations, or networks (Legh-Jones and Moore, 2012). Research connects social and cultural capital theory to the preference shown for prospective employees who have existing relationships with the employer (Holmes, 2013; Finn, 2016; Hogan et al., 2013) or networks that reinforce their social status (Bridgstock, 2009).

Networks serve as a concrete way to illustrate social capital; examining participant social capital is useful for comprehending both the accessibility of social capital and its application during the transition within the labour market. As Redmond (2006, p.119) notes, universities often align with middle-class norms, leaving some groups feeling like 'outcasts on the inside' inhibiting instead of promoting the development of their social and cultural capital. Students from the working class are perceived to have limited social capital because the people they know lack expertise or influence in the job market for graduates (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005), creating a snowball effect at all stages of the student lifecycle (Abrahams, 2017) due to less accumulated family capital. Recognising the importance of social capital, Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne's (2017) findings show

that developing social capital is a way for working-class graduates to balance social injustice, enabling access to field insight and opportunities.

Financial resources underpin students’ and graduates' ability to take unpaid work opportunities, build social and cultural capital and gain valued experience in the field (Wright and Mulvey, 2021; Bathmaker, 2013; Lehmann, 2019; Vigurs *et al*., 2019; Burke, 2016). Graduates from lower-resourced backgrounds often feel pressured to find work quickly after graduating to gain financial stability and begin repayment of debt (Vigurs, Jones, Harris and Everitt, 2020), often leading them into low, unpaid, or insecure work (Hordosy, Clarke and Vickers, 2018). The urgency to earn is born of the personal responsibility for costs and risk during transition (Merrill, 2020), lengthening the time needed to transition into graduate employment.

1.6.2 Having a feel for the game

Studies on general and class-focused graduate populations observed disparities in graduates' understanding of labour market expectations and preparation strategies for transition (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Burke, 2016; Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018). These disparities centred around awareness of the devaluation of a degree, underestimation of the competitive graduate labour market, and the need for social and cultural capital alongside qualifications. Awareness of the need to add value to academic credentials through ‘soft credentials’ attained by career-enhancing activities (Tomlinson, 2008) is internalised as a necessity within the middle-class (Burke, 2016). Illustrating 'le sens practique' (the feel for the game) (Bourdieu, 1990, p.52) is essential for competing in a market where academic credentials are inflated and devalued (Abrahams, 2017; Lehman, 2019; Hordosy, Clark and Vickers, 2018). Extra-curricular activities (ECA) are essential for navigating the graduate labour market (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013) but lower resourced graduates with lower levels of capital in transition, fail to recognise their importance while studying (Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020), frequently coming to the conclusion too late to lever advantage in the job market (Bunn, Burke and Threadgold, 2022). The active cultivation and ability to mobilise a combination of valued

capitals (Bathmaker, 2013, 2016, 2021) by integrating and displaying cultural and social capital, the 'what and who' (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013) enhances 'personal capital' (Tomlinson, 2008). Middle-class youth develop valuable capital through familial guidance and finance of lifestyle experiences (sports, travel, music) and the continued accumulation throughout the university by seeking out career-enhancing activities, in particular, leadership responsibilities through clubs and societies (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). Parutis and Kandiko Howson (2020) emphasise the growing importance of international experience in demonstrating personal growth in the competitive global labour market, inaccessible to most. Ultimately, engagement in extra-curricular and career-enhancing activities reflects social structures and graduates' differing ability to manoeuvre within a flexible market (Purcell, 2012; Bathmaker, 2013).

Along with career-enhancing activities, insider 'hot knowledge'—informal advice from personal connections—is superior to official guidance (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2005), not on the basis of preference but the provision of short-cuts, insider knowledge and future opportunities. Middle-class graduates benefit from this knowledge, reinforcing class advantage (Abrahams, 2017), while working-class graduates rely upon human capital and merit to apply through formal recruitment pathways (Lehmann, 2019). This difference in the ability to access insider knowledge manifests in misunderstanding and inadequate preparation to navigate the labour market (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019). Class-based privilege and symbolic power play a central role in the development and transition of graduates into the labour market, alongside class advantages of economic, social, and cultural capital (Merrill, 2020). These advantages provide a grasp of the rules of the game (ROTG) and how to adapt to new labour market rules (Bathmaker, 2013). It could be argued that understanding the under-researched area of successful lower resourced graduate transitions (Schepper *et al*., 2022) requires exploring the developmental process lower resourced individuals undergo during university, particularly how they develop themselves and their careers, and if or how they engage in 'the game'. Through understanding lived experience, this study aimed to uncover the developmental process of lower resourced graduates.

Playing the game and, more importantly, having a feel for how to play it requires serious pursuit and commitment to learning 'the rules of the game'. This requires energy, time and emotional effort (Threadgold, 2021). Those from higher social groups are seen to engage effortlessly in player-type behaviour (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004), but in reality, it is slowly accumulated and honed over a lifetime (Bunn, Burke and Threadgold, 2022). In juxtaposition, where interest is low, an individual is inclined to evaluate and reject experiences that oppose primary dispositions (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020). In contrast, lower resourced graduates often exhibit lower aspirations and expectations for success alongside lower levels of mastery (Burke, 2016). Position, dispositions, and subsequent actions affect career decisions (Hodkinson and Killeen, 2008), which, in turn, impacts career development and knowledge of the rules of the game to transition smoothly into the labour market.

1.6.3 Psychological factors impacting transition

Positioning within the social fields of HE and the graduate labour market involves identifying 'possible selves,' defined by Markus and Nurius (1986, p.954) as 'representations of the self in the past, and they include representations of the self in the future'. These selves are socially generated and result from comparison with their own dispositions and those of significant others. A graduate's background, therefore, can significantly affect the construction of possible selves, affecting the career they aspire to. Commonly, middle-class graduates, supported by familial capital, often have clear career pathways (Papafilippou and Bathmaker, 2018). In contrast, working-class graduates are often working it out alone, making it up as they go along with no clear steps to achieve their often idealised careers (Bathmaker, 2021). Many wait until graduation to plan future employment, often with inflated expectations (Perrone and Vickers, 2003), unclear pathways leave lower resourced graduates with feelings of uncertainty, only realised during the transition (Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill and Revers, 2020).

Despite demonstrating valuable psychological capital of aspiration, resilience, and adaptability (Bathmaker, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017), many working-class graduates face

uncertainty and must independently manage financial burdens and risk, unlike their better-off peers (Merrill, 2020). Neoliberal and meritocratic ideals promoted to the aspiring widening participation masses discourage the use of networks under the auspices of making it on your own (Abrahams, 2017).

This 'blind braving it' can erode perceived employability (Smith and Smith, 2024), a consequence of continued rejection and delayed transition (Vigurs *et al*., 2020), culminating in the reassessment of chances (Lehmann, 2019), lowering of expectations (Vigurs *et al*., 2020; Burke, 2016) and career goals (Bathmaker, 2021). Merrill *et al*. (2020, p.173) describe this as 'biographicity', where 'reflexive agency which is constrained by structural limits and objective possibilities'. The challenging labour market can soon undo those who start with high levels of psychological capital.

Universities and employers could do more to support lower resourced graduates during the transition into early careers (Purcell, 2012; Holmes, 2013). Instead, elite opportunities are monopolised by top universities and coveted by employers (Crawford and Van der Erve, 2015), who use embodied cultural capital as a social filter for social fit (Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill and Revers, 2020). Thus, developing embodied cultural capital, which requires financial resources, time, and psycho-social awareness of its importance, provides class advantages while maintaining structural inequalities.

1.6.4 Decision making

The decision to attend post-compulsory education is framed within a neo-liberal discourse as a matter of choice, promising improved life chances and increased earning potential (Bruke, 2016), reflected in government policy and HEI promotional material. Individual choice is central to the agentic nature of social mobility; the choice to attend university, where to study, what to study, type of employer and where to live and work are framed as rational choices. Rational choice theory suggests that 'all action is fundamentally 'rational' in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do' (Scott, 2000, p.126). Portrayed as the 'homo economicus' or

economic man, without a past or habitus, 'everything he does is eternally new' (Swedberg, 2009, p.232) 'a kind of anthropological monster' (Bourdieu, 1997, p.61). This suggests that decision-making is an economic concern without external influence or practical implications. Sociologists reject this theory, arguing that individual actions and perceptions are socially and culturally constructed (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and Hodkinson and Killeen (2008) identify career decision-making as only partly rational; choices were pragmatic, context-related and born from socially derived experiences and dispositions (habitus), affected by emotions.

1.6.5 Relational impact

Graduate transitions are a relational process (Holmes, 2015), played out through relational and emotional dimensions, which enable and constrain decision-making throughout education and work. Remaining or relocating is a challenge many graduates face; the middle-class ideals often emphasise geographical and social mobility. However, many graduates from lower-resourced backgrounds *choose* (my emphasis) to attend local universities to remain at home and reduce the financial burden of gaining a degree (Naseem, 2019). This challenges the applicability of rational choice theory in graduate career decisions (Bathmaker, 2021). Research highlights parental influence on HE attendance and career, particularly by the middle classes (Burke, 2016; Threadgold, 2019). Interestingly, Naseem (2019) found that Pakistani and Algerian parents were instrumental in dictating their daughters’ HE attendance and subject discipline to secure economic independence. Though these women complied with expectations at the time, when their careers were established, they returned to HE to study subjects previously deemed unsuitable careers by the family.

Decisions are often relational; Finn's longitudinal study (2016) utilised narrative interviewing to investigate the impact of relationality on university to work transition for female graduates, suggesting that graduate employment transition is affected by emotional and relational dimensions, illustrating rational and irrational decisions. Finn’s study expands relational theory beyond dehumanised interactions, providing insight into

how emotional attachment influences decisions, identity, agency and social and cultural capital development. The concept expands the context to include a person's family life outside of university and increases awareness of networks and their capacity to either promote or restrict agentic conduct. Finn (2016) talks about how place affects local networks and compounds employment choice; her research, like mine, centres on a post-industrial economy that is in decline. Having relational ties to a place can significantly impact the opportunities available for graduate employment and outcomes (Christie, 2016). Relationality offers significant scope to explore further the influence of relationships and emotional ties on graduate transitions. There is a gap in knowledge around the impact of graduate decision-making on social mobility and career management. A better understanding of the enabling and constraining aspects influencing transitions may be made possible by the inclusion of relationality as an element of psycho-social capital. While Finn's study focused on ethnic minority females, this study on primarily white males from deprived areas may offer further insight into different demographics from deprived communities, addressing the knowledge gap regarding the impact of place and relationality across social strata.

1.7 Empirical research closely aligned with this study

The Paired Peers project, the most extensive study of classed experiences of English university attendance and transition, compared the experience of middle and working-class students from an elite and post-1992 HEI from the same city (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013). From 2010 to 2017, this longitudinal study conducted in-depth biographical interviews with 90 students, journals, mapping, focus groups, and time logs. Participants were drawn from eleven subject areas, matched by social class (Bradley, Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2017). In the final phase, 55 retained graduates were interviewed three times, twice in the first year of transition, focusing on experience from the past year and experiences of seeking work. Graduates were interviewed once the following year to capture the full experience by constructing a life history timeline. The study provides detailed insight into the differentiation of student experience in relation to class, *a priori* capital and the acquisition and mobilisation of capital throughout the student lifecycle.

Subsequent highlights from the study demonstrate in depth how middle-class graduates' privileged access to valued capital (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013) and working-class idealised career aspirations and limited resources constrain social mobility (Bathmaker, 2021).

The study's design demonstrated extensive depth and breadth over seven years, providing a nuanced understanding of participant experiences from contrasting social backgrounds. A wide range of qualitative research methods in phase one provided a holistic view of the phenomenon and trustworthiness of the data. Longitudinal biographical interviews are excellent in their ability to view developmental change over time (Flick, 2018), enabling the study to offer insights into the influence of class on HE and career outcomes. The study faced challenges; the attrition of participants was greater from the post-92 university, potentially introducing bias. The study's scale, duration and researchers involved could introduce inconsistency, reliability and overall quality of findings. Maintaining continuity of the interviewer across data collection points builds trust and rapport, aiding the depth of narration (Vogl and Zartler, 2021); disruption can lead to attrition (Bradley, Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2017), quality and comparability of research data (Hollstein, 2021). Nevertheless, despite the single city focus and inability to generalise, the study provides a unique and significant contribution to social mobility and the role of capital in student and early graduate experience. However, the theoretical dominance of capital overshadows potential structural barriers within the labour market and individual relational constraints.

In a seminal study published in 2016, Ciaran Burke explores the role of class in graduate employment trajectories in Northern Ireland (NI) (between 2009-2012), studying 27 graduates from pre- and post-1992 universities using biographical narrative interviews and a demographic questionnaire. Drawing on Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of habitus, capital and field, Burke identified five categories segmented by social class and employment outcomes. Those in graduate jobs (strategic working-class, converted working-class and strategic middle-class) and those in non-graduate jobs (entitled middle-

class and static working-class). The strategic middle-class group occupy a dominant position within the social field due to high levels of familial (economic, social and cultural) capital (Burke, 2016). Distinguishable by elevated aspirations, expectations and strategic management of their education and career, they exhibit a natural 'feel for the game' (Maton, 2008). Whereas the strategic working-class, although successful in attaining graduate-level jobs, remains dominated due to lower levels of familial capital. Throughout education, this group displays low levels of aspiration and expectation, which is well documented in previous government policy and research (Reay, 2012). Interestingly, this group changed their aspirations and expectations after out-of-environment experiences post-graduation, leading to an enlightened strategic focus. However, Burke emphasises that despite their improved strategy, the low levels of labour market knowledge or feel for the game continue.

The converted working class entered graduate employment with single-use capital, rendering them stranded and incapable of navigating the job market. The conceptual groupings of strategic and converted are very close in nature, and it could be argued that over time and with opportunity, the converted group may become more knowledgeable and strategic as they had already entered the graduate labour market and were in graduate roles. The data collection period for the study varied between two and ten years. This level of variation in timescale makes it difficult to analyse as a homogenous group. It is important to recognise that careers are not linear and continue to develop beyond the period of data collection (Hodkinson and Killeen, 2008).

The final conceptual grouping is graduates in non-graduate-level jobs; the entitled middle class has habitus, dispositions and strategies to capitalise on their position within the labour market. However, they accept and remain in non-graduate positions due to an innate sense of entitlement, criticality of norms and unwillingness to adapt to labour market expectations. Burke's static working class was the most similar to previous research on working-class trajectories by Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) and Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009). The static working class is juxtaposed with the entitled middle

class; the static group expects to fail and is willing to accept their position, deterred by the risk of job insecurity, leaving them static, unable to capitalise on their credentials due to fewer '*a priori* capitals, an out-of-environment experience or niche forms of capital' (Burke, 2016, p.112).

Burke's findings challenge the meritocratic view of HE, raising important questions about the role of habitus and the classed agentic practice of individuals seeking graduate employment. These insights provide a valuable contribution to understanding the persistent inequalities within the graduate labour market. The study's strengths lie in its methods; biographical interviews provide a rich understanding of graduate development and employment experiences. This approach enables insight into how social background, aspirations, and capital interact with graduate trajectories. Using Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit, Burke demonstrates new ways of applying the triad of complex mutually reciprocal concepts of habitus, capital and field in a graduate employment context, which offers an alternative lens to the usual mixed bag of ever-increasing capitals or the isolated use of the most popular concept at any given time (Reay, 2004).

The timeframe of labour market transition adopted was two to ten years after graduation, demonstrating a variety of perspectives across time, an aspect often missing from graduate employability research. However, the study's limitations include a diverse gap between the participant experience and the data collection point, impacting accurate recollection of experience. Those who have been in the labour market longer, up to eight years in some cases, may have developed more than those with only two years' employment experience, potentially skewing the results. The study's location in NI was also a limitation. While NI graduates may experience similarities with English graduates, there are still significant differences in economic, educational and labour market conditions. The study offers a detailed analysis of class; however, it has a limited focus on the intersectionality impacting graduate outcomes. The study analysis and subsequent findings categorisation would benefit from the use of the concept of relationality to demonstrate enabling and constraining personal and professional relationships. Ciaran

Burke's study significantly contributes to expanding understanding of class-based influences on graduate employment. However, its timeframe, NI context, relational influence on trajectories and the limited focus on intersectionality suggest opportunities for further development.

1.8 Summary

This chapter critically reviews the literature on UK higher education's role in workforce development. Policy-driven expansion of HE has exposed more individuals to degree-level qualifications and created an oversupply of graduates but without changing societal inequality or employment structures (Crawford and Van der Erve, 2015; Merrill *et al.*, 2020). Consequentially, devaluing scholastic capital disrupts traditional pathways and increases the need for individuals to compete for limited graduate employment. However, unequal awareness and access to valued resources (social, cultural, economic) and the ability to deploy them effectively leads to competitive advantage and inequality in the graduate labour market; the inequality gap between those that have the most valued resources (middle and upper classes) and the proletariat (working-class) is maintained. Accumulative generational class advantage and class inequalities are open to reinforcement and reproduction rather than reduction, as was hoped through continuing political efforts to widen participation in HE. More comprehensive and robust thinking around graduate employability and employment is required to interpret current challenges and assumptions within the labour market (Christie and Murphy, 2020).

Social class remains influential in graduate employment (Burke, 2016), and class trajectories are unarticulated in discussions about HE (Bunn, Burke and Threadgold, 2022). Further research into the experience of working-class transition after leaving university is needed: 'Even though employability is high on the agenda, HE research on this topic in relation to such students is sparse' (Merrill *et al.*, 2020, p.163). Schepper *et al.* (2022) emphasise the importance of understanding how lower resourced graduates successfully transition into graduate employment, including engagement in career-enhancing activities for personal and professional development during university. Lower resourced individuals

are reported to have lower aspirations and expectations, including a reduced mastery of the graduate employment landscape (Burke, 2016), impacting graduate outcomes. These factors associated with lower resources may influence interest levels and increase the likelihood of rejecting experiences that conflict with their primary habitus (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020). This study will focus on working-class graduates' development and transition experience over two years postgraduation, aligning with the Office for Students graduate outcomes measurement for HEIs and the ability to observe action or inaction over time, discussed further in chapter three.

The conceptual models of Holmes, Tomlinson and Clarke show the need to understand the multi-dimensional elements that constitute and influence graduate employability. Influential resources of identity, economic, social, cultural, psycho-social, and educational capital, as well as the labour market forces that restrict and enable graduates to acquire employment, can advance our understanding. A weakness identified with all three models is the absence of recognition for the significant resource barriers faced by graduates from lower resourced backgrounds. The omission demonstrates the need for the inclusion of economic capital alongside social, cultural, identity and scholastic capital as a key determinant of career enhancement activities (Hordosy, Clarke and Vicker, 2018). External influences like family background are driving the employability gap, and how lower resourced students and graduates mobilise capital requires further investigation (Pauritis, 2020). This study focused on graduate lived experience to provide rich and nuanced data on how lower resourced graduates experience university and labour market transition across the student-to-graduate lifecycle. A lifecycle approach enables the individual to construct a reflex narrative of past experience and future trajectories, highlighting how class disadvantage impacts self and career development and transition into employment. Reflexivity, essential for a developing graduate identity (Tomlinson, 2017), reveals how low levels impede practical mastery, leading to failed or non-existent career development strategies (Burke, 2016) and impacting graduate career trajectories. The inclusion of reflexivity, the act of looking forward and back across the graduate life cycle, will enable this study to examine the consideration lower resourced students and graduates give to

their personal and professional development, providing insight into how and why they make decisions.

Moreover, Clarke's integrated model of graduate employability (2018) highlights the role of institutions, labour market forces, and demand-side employment, often overlooked in employability research. This study will examine the influence of universities and employers on graduate development and employment to better understand institution-graduate power dynamics.

Empirical research notes that employability is relational (Holmes, 2015), potentially developing or subduing personal growth; the concept broadens the context of employability to encompass life outside of university and employment. The inclusion of relational theory offers the potential for new insight into the network of relationships surrounding graduate lives and how these relationships influence development, decision-making, and identities. By including relationality, this study will explore how personal and professional relationships and place shape identity and career decisions.

This thesis, therefore, operationalises graduate employability by moving beyond dominant definitions in the employability literature, which largely focus on human capital theory. It also challenges the three main models of graduate employability. By applying structural concepts of relationality and economic capital, the thesis introduces a more nuanced lens through which to interpret graduate transitions and employment outcomes, shining a light on the holistic nature of graduate lived experience. The proceeding chapter two outlines in greater depth the operationalisation of the theoretical constructs underpinning this research.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding this research, which aims to understand the impact of lower resources on graduate development and transition into desired careers. Over the past 50 years, HE policy has focused on widening participation in HE to reduce educational inequality. The Robbins report (1963) argued that HE could compensate for inequality in home background, instigating initiatives to expand access. However, HE research and practice have largely focused on widening participation with little understanding of the experience of lower resources students after graduation (Merrill, Finnegan, O'Neill and Revers, 2020). If HE serves as a catalyst for social mobility, then consideration of lower resourced graduates' experience of employment transition is of equal, if not greater importance, from a moral and economic perspective. This belief is something that drives the field and design of this research.

The theoretical underpinning of the thesis will be explained through a review of social scientific theories of human development and social change. The chapter emphasises how these theories help to explain factors influencing the personal and professional development of sport development and coaching graduates. Prior to this, there will be a discussion of the ontological and epistemological assumptions shaping this research, with section 2.3 drawing attention to the central and much-contested debate between the dominance of 'structure' or 'agency' in understanding individual and societal change.

2.2 Ontological and epistemological solutions - social constructivism

My ontological and epistemological position of social constructivism stems from my lived experiences, culture and political views. These views '…political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one's perspective' (Patton, 2015, p.70) influence my knowledge and ontological position. I believe reality is socially constructed and constantly evolving (Jones, 2015), where the presence of relationships within the research process is a recognised part of co-construction (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013). Positionality

influences the core beliefs that inform research questions and the selection of methods. I believe it would be disingenuous to conceal or seek to ignore these to conduct this research under the guise of objectivism. It would, therefore, be beneficial at this juncture to present a brief extract of my own life history as a means of illustrating how my habitus has influenced my ontological and epistemological assumptions.

My mother raised me in a town bordering Staffordshire; the town is not considered wealthy; it is semi-industrial and definitely working class. I received a state education and went on to complete further education before entering the world of work. I worked in the sport and leisure industry for 15 years within the West Midlands and Shropshire, working my way up from lowly lifeguard to senior leisure manager. I completed my undergraduate degree as a mature student and then left my local authority management role to undertake a master's to pivot into a new career as an academic. Throughout this time, I travelled extensively, experiencing different cultures and sporting pastimes.

My mother worked two jobs during my childhood: a school hygienist by day (nit nurse) and a part-time youth worker by night. She worked tirelessly to enable me to have a fulfilling and adventurous childhood. We part-owned a caravan in Wales, frequently visiting during the spring and most summer holidays, pony trekking, dancing, and our annual holiday abroad. I believe my mother's youth work shaped who I am the most as a person; I was immersed in youth centres from a very early age. The youth clubs and their residential trips had a great influence on me. Even though I was much younger, I met people from diverse backgrounds, trying to fit in with existing social groups. I became somewhat of a social chameleon, frequently mixing with new groups of adults and young people. I was an outsider to the young people, but an insider to the other leaders and my mother.

These skills have developed my ability to undertake social research, as I can build relationships quickly to fit in with a new setting. From my introduction to the world of youth work, I gained an insider perspective on the many social issues faced by young people and youth workers trying to support them, providing advice and support on challenges such as teenage drinking, drug and solvent abuse, sexual health, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, neglect, gangs, poverty and knife crime. This experience has shaped my understanding and empathy, fostering a passion to help people improve their social situation. Within my career in sport and leisure and later in academia, I have been fortunate to have forged close mentoring relationships with two individuals who taught me a lot and helped me to become the professional I am today. I believe that life is half chance, but you make much of that luck by being open to taking every opportunity for personal development.

Throughout my early career during the 1990s, local sport and leisure were strongly influenced by the Conservative marketisation of the public sector. Marketisation aimed to drive down costs and increase the efficiency of local authority provision. Through this time of heightened neoliberalism in the leisure sector, I observed an improvement in quality or at least awards that said so and a move towards income generation to attract wealthier commuters over the local community and under-represented groups. The emergence of New Labour in 1997 presented me with an opportunity to move into sport development, an emerging field that would enable me to focus on reducing inequalities in sport and physical activity participation. I am thankful for these 10 years of political and social justice stability; it provided me with the platform to follow my passion and build my career.

Figure 2.1 Life history monologue

This research has adopted a social constructivist ontological approach, which has impacted the potential theories that could be drawn upon. Social Constructivism is the philosophy of human development through the interaction between individuals and groups (McKinley, 2015). As Berger and Luckmann (1966, p.134) indicate;

> 'Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality. To understand the state of the socially constructed universe at any given time, or its change over time, one must understand the social organisation that permits the definers to do their defining'.

As articulated in the extract, my immersion into different social groups shaped my understanding of the social world and my ontological and epistemological position. I became acutely aware of how societal structures can create both barriers and opportunities for individuals. Chapter three, section 3.2, continues to provide a detailed discussion of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

When starting my doctoral journey, I experienced an instant evocative emotional response to the 'thinking tools' of Pierre Bourdieu, resonating with my lived experience as a first-in-family graduate and working-class HE lecturer. It was Bourdieu's view of the inter-relationship between structure and agency that interested me in his work, over others. What Bourdieu calls 'constructivist structuralism or structuralist constructivism' (Flecha, Gomez and Puigvert, 2001b, p.36). The context of Bourdieu's thinking was set between two dominant opposing theories of the time Structuralism and Phenomenology (Burke, Thatcher, Ingram and Abrahams, 2016). Bourdieu took an interpenetrative position between structure and agency, meaning that knowledge of social practice is conceived within and among the structure and agency of actors. I felt that this theoretical centre ground offered potential answers to the differential outcomes experienced by lower resourced graduates.

2.3 Structure and agency

'Sociological enquiry, at its fundamental level, is the relationship between structure and agency, individual and society or choice and regulation in everyday practice' (Burke, 2016, p.6). Structuralism asserts that 'people have been created by the structures into which they are born and socialised; we do not produce the structures, we are a product of the structures' (Flecha, Gomez and Puigvert, 2001a, p. 32). I found structuralism's theory to be a 'fait accompli', the belief that once you are born into a particular class or culture, your destiny is set. However, in contemporary Western neoliberal societies, this deterministic notion does not hold true when considering individual choice and social practice (Burke, 2018).

This research focuses on understanding the middle ground between structure and agency in the lived experience of graduates as they transition from HE into employment. Agency acts as the opposing side to structure in which agents or, in this case, graduates are knowledgeable agents (Giddens, 1984) exercising free choice based on their own interests. According to Christie and Burke (2020), the primary policy approach is developing individual employability, rather than the more complex challenges surrounding the structural socioeconomic context. I consider this as very individualistic and not at all reflective of real-life structural constraints of lower resourced graduates, who have family responsibilities, limited resources, networks or knowledge to enact their aspirations for the future.

Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit 'contains heuristics or devices; instruments to be used to think with' (Threadgold, 2019, p.37). To capture the transitory experience of graduate development and employment, I will utilise Bourdieu's (1984, p.110) '*field of the possibles*' (emphasis in the original), how habitus and capital shape embodied social constraints, a sense of what is possible or impossible for people like them 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.471). This premise was prevalent among many of my working-class students, a position some begin from, and some never leave. My research focuses on uncovering restrictive and enabling factors that shape a student's practice and agency

while exploring the significance of their habitus and capitals throughout the graduate lifecycle. In my experience, for many early graduates, this transitory time into the world of work can be unwelcome, stressful, and disheartening, where decisions are made within structural, cultural and economic constraints. Uncovering enabling and constraining factors is particularly poignant given the context of the long-standing policy rhetoric and graduate expectations of the transformative nature of HE as a pathway to enhanced earning potential and social mobility.

Bourdieu's middle ground between structure and agency acknowledges the interplay between structure and agency, between objective and subjective. In agreement with Bourdieu, I argue that a polemic view of society does not explicate societal function or individual choice. Instead, I conceive the nature of the graduate lived experience as a complex mellay between structure and agency. For Bourdieu, 'social practice is a product of processes that are neither wholly conscious nor wholly unconscious' (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994, p.185). This research will examine the middle ground by investigating individual experience before, during, and post-HE. Following Bourdieu's approach, this research applied his array of 'thinking tools' to critically and empirically examine graduate development and transition through a 'theory of the generation of practice' (Burke, 2016, p.6) as an explanatory framework.

2.4 Theory of practice

As Schepper, Clycq and Kyndt (2023, p.16) identify in their recent systematic review of graduate transition from HE to work, 'Bourdieu's Theory of Practice can be a valuable addition to existing career development theories'. Attuned to this, the primary theoretical lens adopted for this research is Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, which Threadgold (2019) notes as exploring social dynamics and language to describe the connections between disadvantage, individual experience and emotion.

Bourdieu is often elusive in the definition of his theoretical constructs; in a moment of clarity, he suggests '…to grasp the limits of objectivist knowledge...and to bring to light the

theory of theory and the theory of practice inscribed (in its practical state) in this mode of knowledge, that we can integrate the gains from it into an adequate science of practices' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.3). I interpret this as, to understand the social world, a theory of practice needs to be applied, as practice is how knowledge is gained of the actions, reactions or inactions of actors in the field, highlighting the inadequacy of objectivist views of society to interpret social phenomena. Bourdieusian theoretical principles and concepts have been widely used across multifarious contexts and research fields (Burke, 2018). Reay (2004) and Byrd (2019) argue that the tendency to use concepts indiscriminately—often citing them without fully applying their complexities—weakens the theoretical foundations of research and its findings. Therefore, instead of applying in isolation the most in-vogue concepts from Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit, this research aims to utilise the triad of Bourdieu's schema of practice '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101). The triad will be used as a mechanism for thinking, aiding the elicitation of knowledge and understanding of lived educational and employment experiences across the student life cycle and early employment transition. As Archer *et al*. (2007) concede, educational disparities are shaped by specific contexts and social spaces (fields) through the interpenetrative influence of habitus and various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic). Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' serve as valuable instruments for reflection (Hodkinson et al., 2000). Nevertheless, they do have certain limitations (Burke, 2016) (see sections 2.5 and 2.8). Therefore, I intend to include my own interpretation of his theory with additional concepts of illusio, identity capital and relationality, to make heuristic sense of the data and add further insight into its application.

2.5 Habitus

Bourdieu identifies himself as a structural constructivist (Flecha *et al.*, 2001); his methodology for understanding the interrelatedness of structure and agency is through the concept of habitus. Habitus is the result of the interplay between structure and agency, meaning that the two dimensions are always present, and habitus seeks to conceptualise the interaction between the two. Maton (2008, p.61) supports this

interpretation, suggesting that '…habitus provides a means of maintaining but relating such dualisms'.

Habitus can also be considered as theory and method, enabling understanding of how individual, family and social history can develop primary dispositions such as traits, tastes, beliefs and values through immersion in social structures. Reay offers a useful insight into how habitus can be used as a methodology (see section 3.4.2 for a detailed discussion). This approach goes beyond the 'structure-agency, objective-subjective and the macro-micro' (Reay, 2004, p.432), acknowledging a person's individual and collective history of their family are constitutive of habitus. The two areas of significant influence on habitus are education and family, thereafter, factors such as environment and social group also play a role (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus is the bodily hexis, an 'embodied history internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.56). The body is a mnemonic device for which the habitus is performed by improvising learned behaviour, an unconscious way of being (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu views dispositions as

> 'Durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed by the objective conditions' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.54).

The durability of habitus and its dispositions have attracted criticism around its reduction of agency (Jenkins, 2002) and deferring the recognition of internal conversations through reflexivity (Archer, 2007). Despite such accusations of reductionism, Bourdieu argues that structures are influential, but individuals are uncomfortable with being constrained and not in control of their choices or fate (Burke, 2016). Therefore, dispositions need to be understood, not to diminish, but to raise awareness of their collective existence and influence on choice and perceptions (Burke *et al*., 2017). They can have an expansive influence on various inequalities (Devine *et al*., 2005).

Primary habitus is socially reproduced and is formed during the formative years within the family (domestic habitus), school (institutional habitus), friends and environments (Bourdieu, 1992). Familial habitus, Wacquant describes, as the primary habitus 'being endowed with *built-in inertia'* (Wacquant, 2005, p.314, emphasis in original). However, as Atkinson (2010); and Burke *et al*. (2017) contest, certain conditions suggest a rupture of habitus is possible. This can occur with continued time outside of familiar environments or fields, especially when the habitus is open to change due to its permeable nature (Reay, 2004). This out-of-environment experience provides agents with a choice to adopt different dispositions 'modus operandi'. However, Bourdieu moderates this by suggesting that habitus often prevents a person from entering the environment (Bourdieu, 1992). Thus, it is unlikely to rupture the habitus. The widening participation of HE has increased the number of working-class students entering and, therefore, accessing a field which the habitus may have otherwise rejected, creating space for potential secondary habitus formation by the acquisition of capital, in particular cultural capital. The acquisition or not of secondary dispositions and traits can have significant economic consequences on graduate employment trajectories (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019). This research study aims to reveal the internal archive of embodied primary and secondary habitus and capitals employed to enable a greater understanding of the practices and dispositions congruent with graduate capital.

Dispositions can be unconsciously constraining; this is especially common among working-class students, who are less conscious of the importance of expanding their social and cultural capital through career-enhancing activities, restricting access to the full benefits of a HE. HE can provide opportunities for out-of-environment experience, challenging primary habitus; however, as Ingram and Abrahams (2018, p.148) argue, sometimes 'the new field is rejected and so its structures are not internalised', re-affirming the habitus as opposed to reconciling it. This is often more acute in commuting students who spend less time within the university environment. Repeated immersion in the structuring influences of a field can increase the durability of habitus, as primary habitus denies entry into environments conducive to dispositional change (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Burke

and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020)—a phenomenon Bourdieu (1977, p.78) describes as 'regulated improvisations'. Consequently, students with limited immersion may reject new structures and fields, influencing dispositional change and habitus rupture.

2.6 Capitals

Universities face growing pressure to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and value to students and taxpayers, driven in part by employers' demands for better-prepared graduates. As a result, employability has become a top priority, with a focus on developing human capital through sector-specific skills and transferable competencies (Clarke, 2018). Friedman and Laurison's (2019) study of social mobility in the UK highlighted the persistence of class privilege throughout education and employment within the dynamic knowledge economy. They suggest that '…those from working-class origins are less likely to have degrees, less likely to have gone to prestigious universities, and tend to earn less even when they have gone to the top universities and got the highest grades' (Friedman and Laurison, 2019, p.64).

The political focus, however, remains largely around the skills and knowledge deficit of students and the prevailing narrative of the meritocratic society. This has led to most universities in the UK increasing their focus towards opportunities for students to grow their employability through work-based learning and pedagogy. It is apparent that not all students access and benefit equally from these opportunities to develop graduate capital and the 'significant role that capitals play' (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021, p.897). Capital can be considered in four forms: what you own or can turn into cash, reputation, whom you know, and learned tastes, traits and experiences. Bourdieu identifies four types of capital: economic (financial resources), symbolic (status), social (connections), and cultural (inherited) (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013).

2.6.1 Economic and symbolic capital

Economic capital is one of the more visible forms of capital and refers to the possession of 'money or wealth' (Grenfell, 2008, p.222). From a student's perspective, this often means access to family rather than personal wealth (Burke, 2018). As a means of distancing himself from Marxism, Bourdieu did not specifically include economic capital as part of his theoretical toolkit. He perceived Marxist theory as too narrowly focused on the financial aspects to explain power and social inequality (Crossley, 2008). Bourdieu believed that the 'volume and composition' of capital (Bourdieu, 1984) could explain an individual's position in the social space. Mapping of the social space can be further understood through symbolic capital, a form of economic capital made up of 'cultural, linguistic and literary capital' (Moore, 2008, p.103). Symbolic capital is an unspoken indicator of wealth and taste, which cannot be reduced to physical assets (Burke, 2016). Nevertheless, it can serve to convey a person's standing within social hierarchies.

Economic capital is endemic in modern-day life, like grease on a wheel; without it, one is stuck. It is the root of all other capital (Burke, 2016). It creates a superfood to fuel the growth of an individual, enabling freedom and opportunity. Students from lower socio-economic groups are likelier to have lower social, cultural, and economic capital (Burke, 2016). Without sufficient economic capital, financial insecurity is ever present, constraining horizons of opportunity (Hodkinson, 2008) or the 'field of the possibles' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.110) at every stage of the student-graduate lifecycle. These constraints impact the need to stay local; attending the nearest university to home reduces costs and debt (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). It affects self-confidence during education, perceived employability during transition (Burke, 2016), and the ability to engage in career-enhancing activities (Hordosy, Clarke and Vicker, 2018). This makes it more challenging for working-class graduates to navigate self and career management, competing to position themselves with unequal access to resources.

2.6.2 Social capital

The theory of social capital pertains to involvement in groups and the connections and relationships within social and professional networks (Legh-Jones and Moore, 2012). Networks provide physical ways to illustrate social capital and explore its development and interactions. Lower-resourced students often have less bonding and bridging capital to employ to gain an advantage within the labour market. This can lead to difficulty securing graduate-level employment and accepting any available job to provide income security, often in lower-paid, non-graduate roles.

Social capital, specifically graduate capital, is seen as a means of levelling middle-class advantage within the labour market. The concept of capital could assist in interpreting how lower-resourced graduates employ capital during labour market transition. Redmond (2006, p.119) argues that higher education for individuals from widening participation groups has resulted in them becoming 'outcasts on the inside' instead of promoting the growth of social and cultural capital.

2.6.3 Cultural capital

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital identifies three categories: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodiment can be considered how bodily hexis—emotions, perceptions, and physical traits shaped by habitus—interact with the social world. Embodiment forms a fundamental part of education and shifts in habitus, enabling or disabling the development of students and the transitions of early graduates into employment. Embodied cultural capital is 'strongly related to one's origins' (Garratt, 2016), revealing itself in our accent, manners, dress and tastes.

Objectified cultural capital includes material objects that are symbols of cultural capital and wealth, such as works of art, and can be converted into economic capital. Institutionalised cultural capital is demonstrated by educational qualifications and institutions (Tomlinson, 2017), also called scholastic capital (Ashleigh, 2017). This form of cultural capital is endemic in HE, with the highest levels ascribed to those attending elite

universities and studying culturally valued subjects (Morrison, 2018; Hordosy, 2021). Institutionalised capital extends beyond education into the companies and organisations a person is associated with personally or professionally. These associations and inculcated capital can aid acceptance of ‘people like us’, which can impact the recruitment practices of graduate recruiters through conscious and subconscious bias (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). For this research, the dimensions of cultural capital expressed through embodied and institutionalised are considered most useful in understanding L graduates' experiences of PPD and transition into aspired careers.

2.7 Field

The field is not a physical manifestation but the social space within which communications, exchanges and experiences transpire. ‘Central to field theory is an understanding that social environments are dynamic, complex and made up of interacting and unequal forces’ (Hodkinson, 2008, p.6). The boundaries of a field are regarded as hazy and serve as locations for accumulating field-specific resources, indicative of an actor's position within the field. Bourdieu's examination of field and power relations inside various social contexts exemplifies this.

> A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu, 1998, pp.40–41)

The employment field is often perceived as simply the labour market or the external environment, which oversimplifies the field's complexity. As Hodkinson (2008, p.6) illuminates, ‘the employment field in any geographical location entails complex interactions between employers, education providers, local, regional, national and international labour markets’. Field-specific forces of the graduate labour market are often omitted from the graduate employability discussions. The inclusion of field within

the theoretical framework speaks to Clarke's (2018) integrated model of graduate employability, which acknowledges the power and influence of labour market forces—such as recessions and a shortage of graduate jobs— impact graduate outcomes. This external perspective is necessary to understand the influence of HEIs and employers on graduate development and transition. This provides a holistic view of the factors influencing gaining and maintaining graduate-level employment beyond the individual level.

The complex forces within fields interact with causal effects. The individual is not devoid of the field(s); the field influences them as much as their decisions can relationally affect the field (Thomson, 2008). The recounting of lived trajectories enables the exploration of the dynamic fields of education, family and community. Bourdieu suggests that social reproduction influences habitus and capitals and can significantly impact inculcated attitudes towards what is possible or impossible within available resources. When this reproduction is from a lower resourced group, this can negatively affect an individual's worldview and how they approach opportunities for personal and professional development. To understand graduate transition, it is important to understand the effect of power, position and practices within the UK labour market field from a graduate perspective. To build on this understanding of how the social field can influence personal and professional development, it is essential to explore how and why graduates engage with the field, particularly in relation to Bourdieu's concept of illusio. Bourdieu (1998, pp.76-77) defines illusio as:

> [t]he fact of being in the game, of being invested in the game, of taking the game seriously. Illusio is the fact of being caught up in and by the game... That is what I meant in speaking of interest: games which matter to you are important and interesting because you have been imposed and introduced in your mind, in your body, in a form called the feel for the game.

An exchange of capital for career-enhancing activities or employment is not accessible to all; as Bathmaker, Waller & Ingram (2013, p.726) argue, 'certain students can more readily mobilise several forms of capital simultaneously', for example, combining cultural capital

in the form of ‘what they know’ with social capital in the form of ‘who they know’. Those with limited access to the game's rules can go to extraordinary lengths to find critical information (Spence and Carter, 2014). Thus, taking them longer to understand the rules of the game potentially leads to delayed illusio and development of graduate identity, as Steur, Jansen, and Hofman (2012) concur.

A degree can provide both institutional capital through a socially recognised qualification (Spence and Carter, 2014) and awareness of the field, the unwritten rules of the game, and how to play it (Bathmaker, 2015; Bathmaker, 2021)—providing the opportunity to be ‘taken in by the game, engulfed by it, as in a transcendent universe’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p.151). As Grenfell (2008, p.156) asserts, they are performing an act of adjusting to a feeling of the ‘forthcoming of the game’, making them open and eager to engage with the course and the opportunities it presented. However, those who do not have a feel for the game consider its activities and goals pointless (Bourdieu, 1982). This could present serious challenges to universities tasked with improving the work readiness of graduates, particularly those from working-class backgrounds known to reject opportunities that are not aligned with the primary habitus (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020).

2.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has two dimensions: methodology and the influence on the researcher’s pre-reflexive presumptions (as identified in Figure 2.1). ‘Bourdieu’s understanding of reflexivity can be defined as a critical epistemological process that consists of objectifying the very conceptualisation and process of scientific objectification’ (Grenfell, 2008, p.200). In essence, it is not just the influence of the research on the participants that should be reflected on; consideration also needs to be given to the research process itself, as reflexivity is omnipresent in design, delivery, and analysis. Criticism is levelled at Bourdieu’s theoretical project for its dominance towards structure at the expense of agency (Archer, 1996, 2007); in particular, his underemphasis on reflexivity, especially the types of reflexivity that occur outside times of crisis—such as in everyday interactions with actors through figurations—leaves a conspicuous gap (Mouzelis, 2007). In response to

such claims, Bourdieu's position on reflexivity has evolved and been reformulated to adapt to the context of the changing modern world (Deer, 2008).

Reflexivity provides agency, informed by our past, present, and future, which is defined as 'the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.970). This study's longitudinal narrative design amplifies this process, creating space for retrospective and forward-looking internal observation by participants and researchers, making explicit the dispositions formed by habitus. Such narrative discussion facilitates looking forward by imagining our future selves. In the context of students and graduates, this can be understood as having or creating opportunities to bring the unknown into the known through reflexivity, enabling potential reconstruction of dispositions (understanding of the field in which they wish to be employed) and the potential to rupture the primary habitus, enabling secondary habitus formation. For graduates and institutions that do little to engage and grow graduate identity capital, this shift of habitus may never come to pass, restricting the opportunity to maximise institutional capital and PPD to aid employment transition.

2.9 Graduate identity

An increased number of graduates in the labour market has broadened the HE market, resulting in the stratification of HEIs, creating elite universities (Russell Group) and the underclass of universities (post-1992) (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Students from lower resourced backgrounds are more likely than their more privileged peers to attend post-1992 universities (Campbell, MacMillan and Wyness, 2019). Elite professions primarily recruit from Russell Group institutions (The Sutton Trust, 2019). This suggests that social positioning and the university attended define employment outcomes (Holmes, 2013). For example, if a lower resourced student has not developed the right cultural capital, positioning theory suggests there is little hope of progressing into graduate employment or elite professions. This may be true if viewed as a fixed state, as Bourdieu's habitus has been criticised previously. I would argue that the processual concept is worth investigating as positioning or habitus can change through out-of-environment experiences, as

demonstrated by the work of Burke (2016). These experiences provide access to field-specific cultural capital, expand insight, provide a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1982; 1998) and broaden horizons that influence practice.

The concept of 'process' is regarded as the implementation of positional capital, the actions taken to develop and communicate the identity of a highly educated person, their ‘graduateness’ (Clarke, 2018). Additional perspectives are required to obtain a detailed appreciation of the process of graduate development and to minimise the limitations of an entirely Bourdieusian lens, particularly in its application to the current flexible graduate labour market. I was drawn to the graduate identity model proposed by Holmes (2013). The model emphasises the need to understand the 'Processual approach,' or the process graduates follow to develop employability and identity, shedding light on how they navigate university-to-work transitions. Positioning theory suggests how individuals use language and diverse discourse to establish their positions and those of others (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010). Individuals position themselves through proactive career self-management (CSM) behaviours, which provides a frame for identifying graduate practice during university and how this is communicated to employers. Graduate identity demonstrates the level of accrued capital and the ability to employ them within the field, signalled through dispositions. The concept of graduate identity appealed as it facilitated a means of observing how graduates self-identify and the potential impact this may have on graduate outcomes. Holmes (2013) indicates that candidates who are successful in their applications are frequently selected based on their ability to express their fit with both personal and organisational culture rather than solely on their skills. This could significantly impact gaining graduate-level employment if a graduate cannot substantiate the claim, resulting in a failed identity. Moreover, the insight could improve HE employability policy and practice within and outside the curriculum (Holmes, 2015), impacting graduate retention and outcomes.

2.10 Relationality

To further extend Holmes' processual concept, relationality provides a way to push the boundaries of conceptualising graduates as individual agents, free to choose and be socially mobile. The attraction of this concept lies in the ability to reveal the significance of personal and social relationships and their influence on graduate development, employment, social mobility or immobility. Lynch, Lyons, and Cantillon (2007) identify a gap in research that often ignores or under-theorises caring and other interdependent relationships within the graduate employment and policy literature. Finn's (2016) long-term research on how relational factors impact job opportunities for working-class female graduates provided valuable insights into the emotional and relational aspects associated with location that influence graduate transitions, illustrating both rational and irrational decision-making. The question of geographic area is frequently neglected in debates concerning graduate employment and the graduate job market (Alexander, 2020). Relationality as a social and familial capital aspect could provide an improved understanding of enabling and constraining factors affecting graduate self and career management.

2.11 Summary

In conclusion, this research sits within a Social Constructivist paradigm, interpreting reality as graduates construct it. The study aims to understand the lived experience of graduates as they develop and transition into employment. The primary theoretical lens adopted for this research is Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, which is applied to demonstrate the interplay between structure and agency and its interface with economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals. The research aims to apply Bourdieu's triad of thinking tools in all its complexity, using reflexivity alongside field to reveal the nature of habitus. To strengthen the theoretical foundations, the concepts of graduate identity capital will be applied to deepen the understanding of graduates' processual approach to their self and career development, the level of accrued capital, and the ability to employ them in the field. The final concept is relationality, which reveals how social influences impact graduate development and labour market experiences.

Chapter Three: Methodological Approach

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the primary theoretical constructs adopted from Pierre Bourdieu's toolkit for interpreting social reproduction, which serves as the theoretical framework for this thesis. The objectives of this chapter are to (i) explain the epistemological and ontological assumptions were adopted, along with the related qualitative approach; (ii) explain how these assumptions and concepts informed the selection of a narrative research methodology, which involved three research methods – narrative interviews (NIs), life trajectory (LT) and target sociogram—to generate data in the study; (iii) to outline how the study was conducted; and (iv) to explain the process of data analysis explicitly adopted reflexive thematic analysis.

3.2 The epistemological and ontological assumptions

In order for research to be strong, it needs to be anchored in its philosophical foundations, as these orientate the selection of theory, research methodology, and appropriate methods to answer the research questions (Cresswell and Poth, 2017). This research comes from a social constructivist ontology, as introduced in section 2.2. As someone who engages in both practice and research, I think that the essence of an experience is shaped by those involved (Beck, cited in Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011; Waring, 2017), rooted in the perceptions of graduates, influenced by social norms which are in turn constructed. Therefore, to acquire subjective knowledge, the researcher must engage in the research process (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011) rather than observe objectively (Gray, 2014).

Interpretivist epistemology, within the constructivist ontology, aligns closely with the ontological position of the researcher and the research questions (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013). This method falls under the qualitative paradigm, aligned to qualitative methodologies (e.g., NI), inducing knowledge and personal understanding of the actions and emotions of social actors (Williams, 2016). The study strived to understand how

socioeconomic status can affect graduate development and transition into employment; this can be more clearly understood by looking at the viewpoints of individuals who have gone through the phenomena. Their insights and comprehension of their experience with PPD contributed to the study by collecting valuable subjective data on their experience. Researchers who adopt an interpretivist approach collaboratively construct knowledge by considering participants' perspectives and reflecting on their own lived experiences within the context of a post-1992 university situated in a region of HSED. Interpretivists assert that subjectivity is inherent (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and that achieving complete neutrality is unattainable; instead, it is accepted, and biases and values are made clear from the outset, as I have outlined in Figure 2.1.

3.3 Methodological decisions

3.3.1 Narrative inquiry

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, biographical accounts bring the relationship between structure and agency and the lived experience of social inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender to the fore (Bathmaker, 2021). As Moen (2006) outlined, throughout our lives, we are in constant dialogic interaction with others and ourselves, and these interwoven experiences require organisation to make sense of their complexity. One way of meaning-making is through stories; a narrative can be understood as a system of stories where the narrator chooses how to construct and recount them. Storytelling has been the primary means of retelling historical events and characters throughout history, particularly in Western cultures (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013). Moen (2006, p.56) and other sociologists believe that;

> For most people, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience. Not only are we continually producing narratives to order and structure our life experiences, but we are also constantly being bombarded with narratives from the social world we live in.

Following Moen, the present study has adopted narrative inquiry to provide research participants with reflexive space to narrate their lived experiences as an individual, through which meaning can be uncovered (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Narrative inquiry has been well established in the fields of psychology, education, and health; since the seminal work of Smith and Sparkes in 2009, this method has also gained traction in the realm of sport and exercise (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013).

The narratives individuals share reveal personal and societal constructs, allowing for a deeper comprehension of the participant and the narrative identity they build (Ricoeur, 1984). Narratives provide the storyteller with a means to reflect on and convey insights about their identity and experiences. Engaging in narrative research ensures that the narrator's voice stands out against broad generalisations (Chase, 1995); in this study, the emic perspectives of the participants' voices take centre stage. In her subsequent works, Chase points out a valid connection between narrative research and personal as well as social transformation, which she describes as the 'urgency of speaking or being heard' (Chase, 2011). While this study may not encompass the same level of urgency or profound injustice as certain topics (such as those experiencing persecution); nevertheless, social inequality in education and employment are worthy phenomena for investigative research.

3.4 Overview of research methods

3.4.1 Narrative interviews

Narrative interviews were chosen to obtain the complete story of individual lived experience, in their own words, without interruption (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013). This approach places the power with the participant, allowing them the freedom to tell their story in their own way whilst also enabling me as an interpretive practitioner-researcher to engage in the research process (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011). Chase (1995) proposes that data can be gathered diachronically, meaning that events are recounted in the order that the participant chooses (narrative method). In contrast, synchronic data is collected in response to questions based on themes defined by the

researcher (semi or structured interview methods). To enable the uninterrupted flow of the story and improve the power dynamic within the interview, I have chosen to adopt NI, following the advice of Jones, Brown and Holloway (2013, p.134), who argue, 'Semi-structured interviews interrupt participants, and we advise students not to use these in narrative research'. Narrative interviewing is, therefore, seen to be more appropriate method for understanding the influence of socioeconomic status on graduate development and transition from university into employment. Autobiographical stories enable the storyteller or participant to 'link the past to the present and the future' (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013, p.132), thereby reflexively enabling disparate events to be seen as a whole (Polkinghorne, 1998).

After researching the variations in narrative interviewing, I decided against the Biographical Narrative Interpretive method developed by Wengraf (2001) as its procedures appeared too prescriptive. The elicitation technique of Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), adapted from Schutze's 1997, spoke to me, as it offered suggestions rather than prescriptive rules. In narrative interviews, it is important for the researcher to avoid interrupting the storyteller or posing questions, as this might disrupt the narration or unduly highlight certain aspects that are not meant to be emphasised (Smith and Sparkes, 2009), which could compromise the reliability of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000, p.5) suggest NIs are 'conducted over four phases: it starts with the initiation, moves through the narration and the questioning phase, and ends with the concluding talk phase. For each of the phases, several rules are suggested. The function of these rules is not to encourage blind adherence, but to offer guidance and orientation for the interviewer to elicit rich narration on a topic of interest, and to avoid the pitfalls of the question-answer schema of interviewing'.

3.4.2 Habitus as method

This study utilises the lens of habitus from Bourdieu's triad of thinking tools as a methodological instrument to understand the complex intersectionality of agentic action and inaction within the social field. Bourdieu argued for a methodology that would bring

together an 'inter-dependent and co-constructed trio—field, capital, and habitus—with none of them primary, dominant or causal' (Thomson, 2010, p.69). Thomson suggests that this deconstruction of the social world needs to be researched case by case.

Individuals are 'endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences. These systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge' (Bourdieu, 2000, p.138). The popularity of habitus as a conceptual tool in the theoretical debate has diminished Bourdieu's concern about reconciling theory through method (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018). Consequently, Elias (2012) argues that theory and methods are inextricably linked. Therefore, this study chooses not to isolate theory from the method but instead acknowledges their interdependence between the concepts of Bourdieu, Holmes and Finn and the preferred methods of narrative interview, target sociogram and life-trajectory. Capturing habitus is not a straightforward endeavour. However, the combination of these methods over potential alternatives brings to light the habitus through narration of past events (LT), dispositions, capitals (NI), relational ties (TS) and structural constraints (NI), providing a tacit understanding of how the habitus shapes participant practice. This enabled students to explain their experiences and life events within the capitals available to them and the level of perceived and actual agency within economic and social structures; thus highlighting the interplay between structure and agency and the 'variable margin for choice' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.50). Longitudinal narrative interviews were conducted over two years exploring the development of secondary dispositions over time through secondary habitus or 'habitus rupture' (Costa et al., 2017). These dispositions, shaped by out-of-environment experiences (Burke, 2016), are represented in participants' practices. The longitudinal narrative interview method created the opportunity to analyse career intricacies by creating space for reflexivity.

Costa *et al*. (2017, p.16) outline that 'Reflexivity as a research tool is able to evoke participants' capacity of analysing their practice and denoting a researchers' place in the research setting.' The 'time lapse' between experience and the exercise of reflexivity is arguably the greatest challenge to the methodological limitations of this study. To begin

with, the narrative fallacy is doubtful when a thorough account is provided (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In addition, the meaning-making associated with a person's narrative is representative of trustworthiness in the data (Costa *et al*., 2017). As Hodkinson and Killeen (2008, p.13) argue, '...people re-story the past in the light of the present, which may lead some people to tell more coherent, rational narratives of their career than they experienced as that career was actually progressing.' This study collected data across the transition, which captured the moment and re-storied versions of the narrative when reflecting over time.

Harrison et al. (2017) emphasise the use of triangulation using multiple methods to improve the validity of qualitative research. This is why the current study adopted longitudinal NI to revisit the topics later and also (target sociogram and life trajectory tools) to assist with comparison across the longitudinal narrative.

3.5 Participant sample

The choices made regarding research sampling in the study design significantly influence the robustness of the findings; hence, it is essential to select a sample that accurately reflects the phenomena being studied (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003). The sampling approach used was non-probability purposive sampling, which involves selecting a sample from the entire population based on particular characteristics (Dahlberg and McCaig, 2010). Guided by my theoretical framework, I selected participants from a known population of recent sport development and coaching graduates, aiding access and selection (Mertens, 2010). Participants were selected using inclusion criteria as indicated in Figure 3.2.

Criteria	Justification
They graduated with a BA in Sport Development and Coaching from City University.	The researcher has an existing relationship with these students, which increased accessibility and rapport with the sample.
Resided in an area of HSED in England for more than ten years	Participants need to have significant lived experience and embodied habitus from an area of HSED.
Graduated with an undergraduate degree in 2018	The research is interested in understanding graduate transition up to 2 years post-undergraduate graduation.
Have one or more of the following characteristics: male, female, disability, mature student, has dependants, foundation year entrant.	Specific variables within the sample could bring different perspectives and structural influences on the study.

Figure 3.2 Participant inclusion criteria

An analysis of the existing literature indicates that individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds tend to possess reduced levels of social, cultural, and economic capital (Burke, 2018). To understand the influence of social reproduction and habitus on graduate lived experience, participants must have been immersed within areas of high socio-economic deprivation. As Skeggs (2004, p.84) has noted, ‘the habitus is an ‘immanent law’ laid down by each agent in their earliest upbringing the internalisation of objective structures. This is how individuals embody, in the form of dispositions, the marks of social position and social distance’. The inclusion of participants, specifically from lower socio-economic groups, was defined by utilising participant home postcode and the indices of multiple deprivations (IMD) (Gov.uk, 2018); only those from areas of HSED were invited to take part. This quantitative measure goes against the qualitative constructivist nature of this study; however, as Archer (2003) suggests, such unsophisticated

quantitative modelling can provide a good starting point for a participant sample. This was then supported with a demographic questionnaire (Appendix One) and immanent questions following the narrative interviews (See Appendices Two, Three and Four) to inform the participants pen portraits (Chapter Four). Figure 3.3 aids understanding of the demographic profile across the participant sample.

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Dependents	Disability
Harry	Male	25	White British	No	No
Jess	Female	25	White British	Yes	Yes
Joe	Male	24	White British	No	Yes
John	Male	22	White British	No	No
Robert	Male	25	White British	No	No
Steven	Male	39	White British	Yes	Yes

Figure 3.3 Participant demographic profile

3.6 Data generation stages

3.6.1 Narrative interview: participants

The recruitment of participants proved to be a more protracted process than initially planned. As a university lecturer, I have built professional relationships by tutoring many cohorts of students over the years, which provided me access to potential study participants. When considering which cohorts to involve in my study, I discovered that the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) was revising the DLHE survey, which collected data on graduate employment six months after graduation. The purpose of the revision was to enable sufficient time for graduates to enter the labour market post-graduation. Therefore, a new GOS was launched in 2018, which collected data on graduate outcomes 15 months after graduation. The latest data point enables graduates to progress to post-graduate opportunities (Hewitt, 2017) and allows universities to measure how well they develop employable graduates. Initially, I saw this as an opportunity to illustrate the lived experience behind the quantitative data and to learn from graduates, in their own words, their transition experience. However, since undertaking the research, the focus of the

learning has gone far beyond adding value to graduate outcomes data; the study aims to add a nuanced holistic understanding of the influence of social background on student development and graduate transition into the labour market. This research has been a journey of learning and evolution, constantly expanding its scope and depth. Consequently, to obtain the richest data (Patton, 2002), the sample for the study was my most recent graduates experiencing transition over the Graduate Outcomes period, enabling me to follow their transition over what became two years due to the availability of participants and my workload.

To access the sample, after ethical approval (Appendix Six), I informally invited a range of suitable participants as defined by the participant inclusion criteria in Figure 3.2 before graduation in July 2018. I perceived that recruitment would be challenging once they had left the university. Several of them verbally agreed, but post-graduation, when the formal invites were sent, five of the six responded; the sample size of six was considered adequate as Crouch and Mckenzie (2006, p.483) note it fosters 'the researcher's close association with the respondents, and enhance the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings'. I successfully recruited one other graduate, ensuring a fair balance in the sample. However, there was still an imbalance between those transitioning straight into the labour market at Level 6 (undergraduate) and those progressing to Level 7 (masters) before entering the labour market. However, during the fieldwork, one of the master's students withdrew from the course, resulting in one participant having experience from both perspectives. The approach to data collection and the underlying philosophical perspective also impacted the sample size; individual narrative interviews were utilised, necessitating fewer participants because of the profound depth and richness of the information gathered (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2003). The sample size is adequate for narrative inquiry to provide sufficient depth and richness of data to answer the research question (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013). Furthermore, Mason (2002, p.126) states that sample size in qualitative research should be sufficient to provide 'a flavour – sometimes a very vivid or illuminating one' of the lived experience of the target population.

3.6.2 Narrative interviews: procedures

Before data collection, participants were requested to complete a demographic questionnaire to contextualise them as individuals. This information assisted in the development of an anonymised pen portrait of each participant. The research decision to include pen portraits is discussed in detail in the pen portraits (Chapter Four).

Narrative interviews captured graduates' transition two years after graduation, providing an in-depth narrative of the graduate transitional process and their experience. The phases make up a ‘whole lifecycle approach’ to exploring how students experience getting in, getting on, and going further beyond university (Hordosy and Clarke, 2018). Figure 3.4 provides an overview of the data generation process.

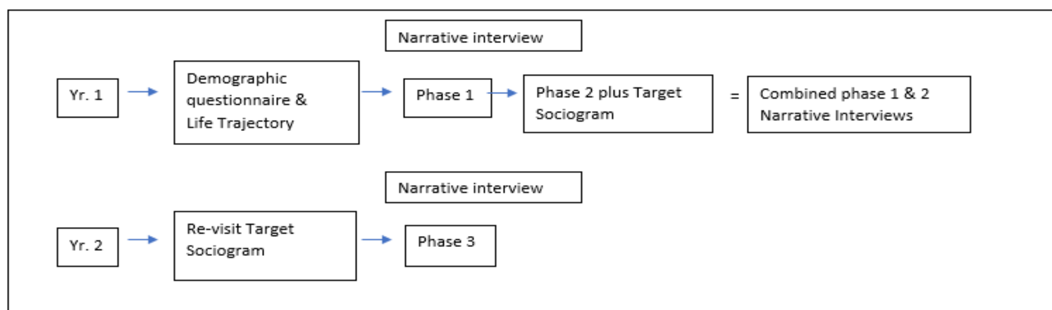

Figure 3.4 Data collection flow diagram

Phase one NIs were planned to take place six months after graduation. However, they were delayed until March 2019 due to the workload of the ethical approval committee during this time. The location of the interviews was commonly a quiet room at the university, as this was a familiar and convenient setting. The phase one NIs enabled me to capture significant life events from birth up to entering university. A participant-created LT artefact aided this to help them narrate their lived experience; see Figure 3.5 for an example and Appendix Five. These artefacts facilitated insight into the participants' habitus and capitals through pictures, dates, and names to communicate experiences and aid recall (Delamont and Jones, 2012). Life trajectories frequently play a role in gathering life history data and are ‘visual depictions of an individual's life events in chronological order which may include interpretations of the events depicted’ (Gramling and Carr, 2004, p.208).

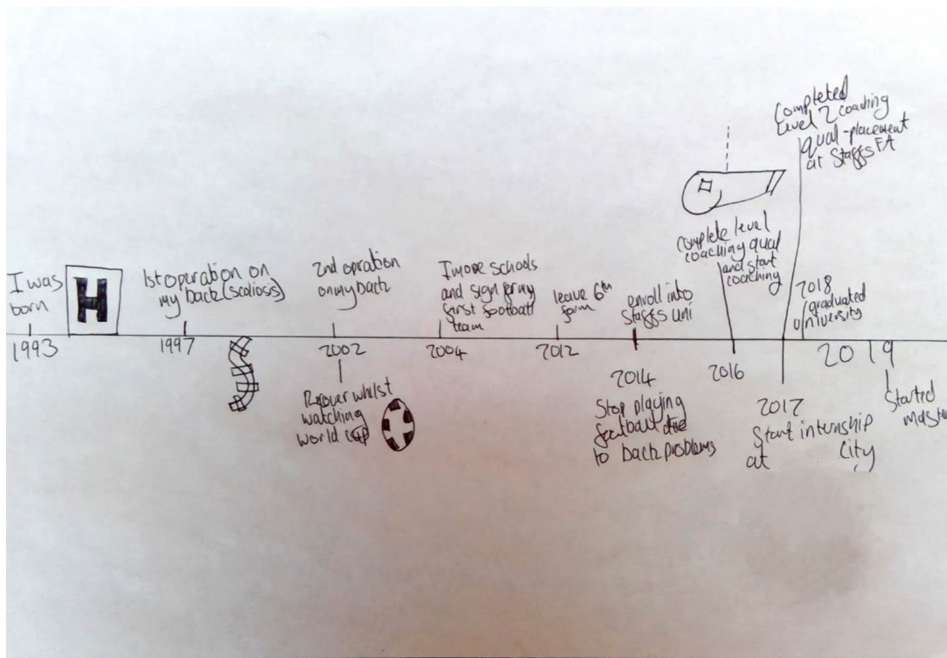

Figure 3.5 Robert's life trajectory

When I started phase one fieldwork with two participants, I felt I was cutting the participants narrative unnaturally short, preventing them from continuing to discuss their lived experiences beyond entering university. Having two separate phases to cover before and during university made little sense as it prevented participants from effectively narrating their whole university experience. As Reissman (1993) warns, unnatural breaks in the narrative can 'fracture the text' of the story. Therefore, I combined phases one and two into a single interview, enabling them to continue their narrative flow, save the participants time and improve the study's rigour. All other participants undertook a combined NI of phases one and two, narrating first the significant events in their life history before university. Then, the second initiation question was proposed, inviting them to narrate their experience of seeking post-graduate education and employment up to and beyond graduation. All phase one and two NIs were completed by June 2019, 8-11 months after graduation. During the second phase, NIs were enhanced using target sociograms (Appendix Seven) and Pen Portraits. As Kara (2015) recommends, interviews enhanced with creative methods generate more nuanced and insightful data that better reflect the multitude of meanings in social settings. Target sociograms are a series of

concentric circles of social and professional networks surrounding the individual, aiding the exploration of network stories (Ryan, 2020). I first came across sociograms in Dobbie, Reith and McConville's (2017) research on gamblers' social relationships; I was attracted by the opportunity to gain insight into participant social capital resources and the relational influence on an individual's PPD over time. When plotted by the participant and paired with interviews, this form of representation can provide vital details regarding the size of networks, arrangement, and closeness between individuals (Tubaro *et al*., 2016). Providing a printed template and coloured pens, I asked participants to write their names in the centre, then plot those who were influential to their PPD, placing those who were most influential closest to them on the target. Participants were then asked to reflect on those relationships and circle whether they had been a positive or negative influence on their PPD. Positive influence was represented by a green pen, and negative influence by a red pen. Some participants found this quite difficult, concerned with displaying disloyalty to those close to them, resonating with Benchekroun's (2020) reflection that participants may find a heavily structured process of sociogram completion intimidating and uncomfortable. On observing this, I offered them the option to add both colours to individuals to ease their discomfort. Moreover, the creation process enabled space for deep reflection, allowing me, as the researcher, to be responsive to their representations of their social and professional networks. Who is influential in their PPD? Why were they depicted at that distance? And why do they perceive them to be a negative and/or positive influence? The discourse provided essential insights into their support networks, enabling 'network stories' (Ryan, 2020) of opportunities or barriers to PPD, deepening my understanding of participant and familial social capital and the influential nature of relationality over time. Target sociograms provided an alternate lens to explicate the impact of relationality on graduate development and career transition. This enabled a detailed insight that informed the pen portraits and categorisation of graduates into specific conceptual groups.

The third and final NIs were conducted on average two years after graduating with their undergraduate degree; after beginning the phase 3 NIs, England was put under strict social restrictions because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, I was required to

submit an ethics amendment to enable me to continue with data collection remotely (Appendix Eight), switching from in-person to online video conferencing using Microsoft Teams. The phase 3 narrative initiation question focused on them reflecting on their experience of seeking employment. Then, I asked them to consider their aspirations for the future. The participants were also shown the sociogram they had produced during their last interview two years earlier; I asked them to reflect on the individuals and their location on the map and describe any changes in their social and professional support network.

I believe that the change in method to online NI benefited some participants, particularly those who were previously less talkative (Jones, Brown and Holloway, 2013), enabling them to speak to me from the comfort of their homes. However, the change in environment did present some challenges. It was difficult for them to see the sociogram that they had hand-drawn, but this was overcome by talking them through it and asking them to confirm or amend the individuals and their positions as needed.

3.7 Reflexive thoughts during data collection

Reflexivity was a golden thread throughout the research process because, as Howell (2013) argued, to truly be reflexive means acknowledging one's perspective during the research process and being consciously aware of it at every stage of that process, not simply in one element. I achieved this by expressing my reflexive thinking when forming preliminary ideas about the field, including where knowledge comes from, setting the research questions, gathering data, analysing information, and understanding the results. However, I felt it was important to have a specific section on my reflexive thoughts during data collection, analysis, and write-up, as this was when I had to be most vigilant in my reflexivity. The co-creation of narrative by the participant as narrator and protagonist in their own 'interpersonal reality' (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012, p.301) and the researcher as interpreter of the participant story is vulnerable to power dominance, misinterpretation, and othering (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). There were times within the research when I questioned my pre-conceptions of participants; as their ex-tutor, their

narratives disclosed highly personal information and painful reflections of past experiences, which I had not previously been aware of as their tutor and often personal tutor. This made me question whether I should have known them better or whether this would have been possible within the tutor-student relationship, me in a position of power and them fearful for how they would be viewed. According to Menter *et al*. (2011), the power dynamics that previously defined our relationship had transformed, resulting in an honest and more open discourse. It also made me question my knowledge of current students and how I could create opportunities to understand how their habitus was shaped (see Chapter Six for recommendations). Foremost, I acutely felt the pain of their experiences; as an individual who had grown up in an area of HSED, I could relate to some of their experiences through knowledge of issues within my community (as detailed in Figure 2.1). I found myself revisiting these revelations many times during the research process. I believe this aided me in staying true to participant narratives and made me conscious of protecting them within the write-up.

When interviewing participants who found the transition into the labour market difficult, I realised that my insider position (Greene, 2014) placed me in a difficult position; my instinct was to offer advice and assistance, yet this intervention could change the natural course of their trajectory. This challenged me to address what Rallis and Rossman's (2010) term caring reflexivity and to question what is ethical with these participants in this context. I had not foreseen such implications for my insider researcher position; as Ross (2017) points out, little is written about the emotional impact of insider research. For reliability in the data, Greene (2014, p.9) emphasises the need to create and maintain a suitable degree of emotional and social distance. This was paramount to the integrity of my research, forcing me to watch them confounded and unable to help throughout the longitudinal duration of the study. I reconciled my discomfort by adopting a sense of responsibility to communicate their stories and advance concepts of graduate development and transition that had previously been misunderstood.

3.8 Data interpretation and analysis

All interviews were subjected to a systematised analysis of themes from the verbatim interview transcripts to identify the participant's lived experience of graduate development and transition into their desired careers. To increase credibility, I transcribed the narrative interviews verbatim and contacted the participants to offer the opportunity to 'member check' the transcript for accuracy; no participant requests were received. When considering appropriate methods of data analysis, consideration was given to structural and performative analysis, which aim to elicit the 'how' of the story plot, characters and order in which the narrative is told (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). I felt that the inclusion of this type of analysis would distract from the 'what', the content, themes and ideas being revealed in the narrative. Therefore, I followed the Braun and Clarke (2020) method of reflexive thematic analysis to 'make sophisticated conceptual interrogations of the underlying meaning in the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Some consider the method too descriptive (Clarke and Braun, 2018); however, a thorough thematic analysis can yield reliable and detailed insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The method also permits inductive and deductive coding, enabling my analysis to adopt a primary inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while acknowledging how my theoretical framework sensitised me to patterns in the data. I started by familiarising myself with the data, going through the printed interview transcripts multiple times, as I find reading and annotation easier in written form. As I read, I became drawn to pertinent points raised by the participants. Following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2012), I took notes on my analytical insights and treated the data as data, engaging in critical reading to analyse it effectively; these notes served as a reference for my analysis moving forward.

As Braun and Clarke (2012, p.6) recommend, the subsequent analysis stage generated initial codes, 'codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question'. This coding required looking beyond the words to formulate latent codes—moving past the semantic expression to generate meaning and interpret the underlying assumptions in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2023). This approach aligns with the study's conceptual and theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The selection of which participant characteristics within the data to focus on was grounded in the data; these were the signifying conditions towards realising possible future selves and striving for illusio. I decided to approach each narrative interview as an individual piece of data, coding each participant and their longitudinal interviews separately; this allowed me to be thorough in my analysis without the risk of potentially missing relevant data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Initially, codes were a mixture of latent and semantic; at times, I found it challenging to develop a single word and instead adopted a phrase approach. Braun and Clarke (2012) suggest that novice coders may initially find coding challenging.

After annotating hard copies of the data set, I constructed an electronic record of the study, similar to a structured codebook. Moreover, I chose not to adopt a positivist deductive structured codebook, as this presents barriers to qualitative researchers interested in discovering rich insights (Braun *et al.,* 2019), going against my interpretivist approach. Qualitative codebooks are a set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze interview data' (Decuir-Gunby, Marshall and Mcculloch, 2011, p.138). I developed my data-driven qualitative codebook (Appendix Nine), allowing me to visually organise the multitude of codes, themes and descriptions across the dataset in a single Excel file; this tool may be perceived as adding a layer of complexity to an already tortuous theory-method nexus. However, the decision was a practical necessity; I needed my analysis to be in a manageable, accessible, and electronic format, enabling me to efficiently observe patterns across the data set (Braun, Clarke, and Weate, 2016). This single source helped me to swiftly continue data analysis while balancing part-time doctoral studies, full-time work, and family responsibilities (Gardener and Gopaul, 2012). As the codebook developed, I identified data that was of interest to formulate the context and background of the participant, but did not form part of the analysis. Therefore, I decided to extract this data to form pen portraits (See Figure 3.6). For a detailed description of the method of presenting this aspect of the data analysis, see the introduction below and chapter four for the participant pen portraits.

Before developing the themes, codes were reviewed to ascertain if they 'thoroughly captured the analytically relevant aspects' of the dataset (Braun, Clarke and Weate, 2016); at this point, it is possible to stop, as coding is a perpetual process. Identifying themes involved examining codes and collapsing and clustering around a broad overarching topic (Braun and Clarke, 2012). First, I grouped themes around similarities. However, this led to a disparate understanding of the findings; as Braun and Clarke (2012, p.7) argue, the creation of analysis is like a piece of art. It can be worked and shaped into 'many different variations'. My revised approach focused on mapping the data around themes that 'work together in telling an overall story about the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.8) to answer the research questions. This revised approach required me to step back from the micro view of the data and take a strategic macro view of what the sub-themes and themes were telling me (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The final stage of the reflexive analysis process was then initiated, consisting of defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013, 2021). The themes drawn from individual lived experiences became a story of graduate development or underdevelopment grouped around their strength of illusio for career and resources to enact it. This resulted in the formation of three conceptual groups of graduates—comfort seekers, to a degree, and risk takers—which offer deep insight into the constraining and enabling factors they faced during university and labour market transition. The 'comfort seeker' group had weak illusio for career, perpetuating inaction due to uncertain possible self, leading to low career planning levels and adequate resources, see Figure 3.6 for a worked example of coding to themes of comfort seeker Robert and Appendix Nine for a broader example of Robert's codebook. The 'to a degree' group experienced a developing strength of illusio and willingness to pursue it despite structural barriers. The 'risk taker' group developed a strong illusio for possible self and had adequate resources and knowledge of the rules of the game. These conceptual groups are reported in detail in combined findings and discussion, presented in chapter five.

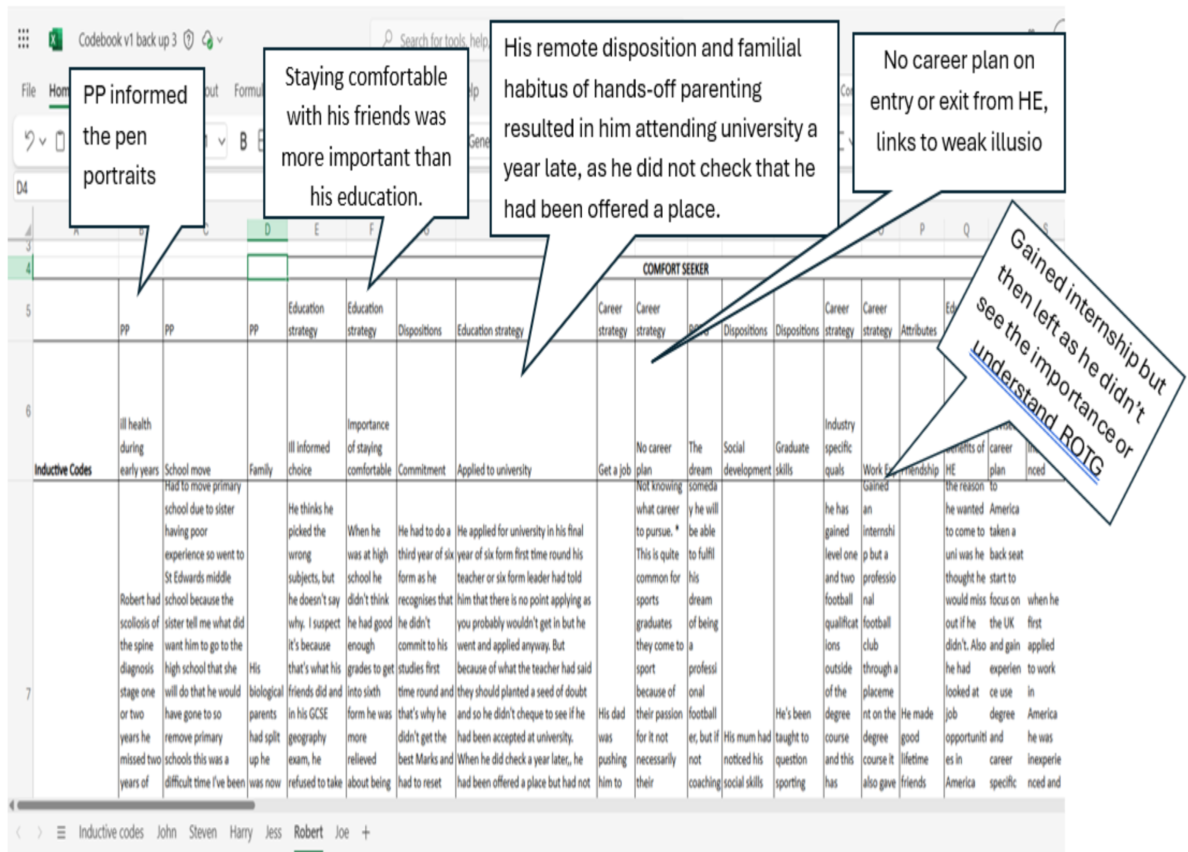

Figure 3.6 Worked example of coding to themes

3.8.1 Pen portraits

A tacit analytic process was undertaken throughout data collection, producing a wealth of complex qualitative data; as Sheard and Marsh (2019) outline, the challenge is presenting the data without losing its richness and the changing narrative over time. To achieve this, I needed to situate the findings within the context of the research, as Jones, Brown and Holloway (2013, p.139) stress 'stories and events or experiences are affected by culture and location in time and space, they do not operate in a vacuum…'. Pen portraits of each participant enable the reader to contextually position the individual within the wider analysis in relation to their character, upbringing, networks and significant events that have shaped their habitus. Bringing to the fore Bourdieu's thinking tools (habitus, capital and field) on graduate development (RQ 3) and transition into the labour market (RQ 1). To structure the pen portraits, guidance taken from Sheard and Marsh (2019) was followed, whereby I drew upon data from the NIs and field notes across the longitudinal

study to Illustrate the participants' unique background, including an explanation of their home lives, relationships, education, and work, to bring their story to life, whilst staying true to the participant voice throughout. Pen portraits can be found in chapter four.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical dimensions of the research extend to every aspect of the research process, affecting both participant and researcher and requiring constant reconsideration. The research was conducted in line with BERA (2018) Ethical guidelines for educational research; the research was also compliant with the university policy and principles where the research and EdD were conducted. The approval for this research study is appended in appendices six and eight. Informed consent was gathered from a participant consent form (Appendix Ten) and a participant information sheet (Appendix Eleven) explaining the research topic and how information will be gathered, utilised, and stored (Wood and Smith, 2016). Consent must be provided willingly and without coercion or deception (BERA, 2018). This is especially important in an academic environment where the researcher holds authority in the student/teacher dynamic. To reduce any sense of pressure, participants were made aware that joining the study was optional and that they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences. The undergraduate sample consisted of recent graduates who were no longer involved with the researcher and several post-graduate students who were still under the researcher's influence during NI phases one and two, but not the final phase of NI, which improves the trustworthiness of the data. Participants in the sample were all over 18 and did not fall into the category of vulnerable adults.

All data was audio recorded, manually transcribed, anonymised, and stored electronically on the university server under password protection. All hard-copy consent, demographic questionnaire, target sociogram, and life trajectory documentation were stored in a locked cabinet, accessible only by me. All data will be stored for ten years and destroyed in accordance with the University Ethics policy (Staffordshire University, 2019). Within the thesis, all participants and institutions were given pseudonyms to minimise non-

maleficence and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Kara (2018) cautions that maintaining anonymity when writing reports and disseminating findings can be challenging in qualitative research. Data was rich in detail, and the cohorts of students were relatively small, making it easier to piece together information. I had to be thorough and cautious not to compromise anonymity.

The existing relationships between the researcher and participants expedited rapport and trust within the research relationship, helping to create trustworthiness, closeness, and confidentiality within the research (Mason, 2000). As a result of the close relationship, sometimes very personal and sensitive information was disclosed as the participants narrated their lived experiences. This privileged position was not without complications; as Tietze (2012 cited in Syman and Cassell, 2012) outlines, the closer the relationship, the higher the potential of (inadvertent) exploitation. Throughout the research process, I was highly aware of the need to remain vigilant of this danger, particularly when writing the pen portraits. This required continued reflection and refinement to uphold anonymity and replace the more sensitive details with a generalised overview where possible. The NI may also evoke unforeseen and possibly distressing memories. Considering harm to the participant is vital to being a reflexive researcher (Wood and Smith, 2016). To mitigate potential distress, participants received the researcher's contact information as well as the details for the Samaritans, in case of any unforeseen issues.

3.10 Summary

The main objective of this chapter was to detail the research design, methodology, and procedures of the study and to generate rich data that addresses the research questions. Consequently, it was argued that narrative interviews, supported by life trajectory and sociogram research tools, helped investigate the influence of lower resources on an individual's practice and the factors contributing to the transition into graduate careers. The chapter also outlines the procedures the researcher undertook to generate empirical data and how this was analysed. The data is presented in two chapters. Chapter four provides pen portraits of each participant to understand the individual's character and the

relevancy of events in the wider context of the research. Chapter five provides an overview of the characteristics that underpin the three conceptual groupings (comfort seekers, to a degree and risk takers) investigating the graduate experience during the shift from university to the workforce.

Chapter Four: Pen Portraits

4.1 Introduction

This chapter's purpose is to enrich the understanding of the data through pen portraits to illuminate the background narrative, which is vital in observing the influential nature of participant habitus, resources and strength of illusio for a career.

Pen portraits illustrate participants' personal and family lives, support systems, education, and career narratives over time. They situate individuals within the wider research context demonstrating the influential nature of these contributory factors to personal and professional growth and transition into employment.

4.2 Harry

4.2.1 Personal life

Harry is a 25-year-old single white male with no dependents. While studying at university, he rented a house and has continued living independently in the same city. He initially studied for a two-year Sport Foundation degree at college before transferring to City University, where he completed a top-up degree, graduating with a 2.1. He then completed a master's degree, graduating in October 2019.

4.2.2 Family life

Harry’s parents separated when he was young, leading to a turbulent home life. He moved home and schools frequently, which made it hard to establish lasting friendships. At 14, he moved in with his dad, who he describes as calm, relaxed, and consistent. This stable environment enabled Harry to form stronger friendships during his teenage years. His dad provided the sense of stability Harry had been lacking in his earlier years.

4.2.3 Support system

Harry’s dad remains a steady source of emotional support, and Harry knows he can rely on him when needed. After moving out, Harry noticed that his mother tried to repair their relationship, though he found her attempts suffocating. Valuing his independence, Harry found it difficult to navigate her attempts to reconnect. Harry learned to be independent from an early age, impacting his views on asking for support. He has maintained a close friendship with a friend from school and prefers seeking advice from this friend rather than from his family. During college, he was in a long-distance relationship with a girlfriend from his hometown who encouraged him, especially when he faced self-doubt. Financially, Harry supports himself entirely; there is no ‘bank of mum and dad’.

4.2.4 Education and career

Harry’s secondary school experience was challenging, as his friends from earlier schools went elsewhere, leaving him to start again. The school he attended had a large ethnic minority population, and Harry initially felt like an outsider within this close-knit community. Despite these challenges, he formed strong friendships at school, considering his new friends like brothers. Reflecting on his time at school, Harry admits he spent more energy being the class clown than on his studies, although he still managed to get good grades. His school encouraged him to stay on for A-levels and attend university, but Harry was not interested at the time.

After leaving school at 15 with no clear direction, Harry turned to his grandad and uncle for advice. They suggested he take up a trade, so he trained as a painter and decorator, choosing this path because he thought it was less risky compared to more dangerous trades like roofing or electrical work. For the next few years, Harry worked as a decorator, taking temporary office jobs between contracts. At the age of 20, he hated his work and felt stuck in his career. He enjoyed playing football in his free time, and after talking with a teammate who worked for the Football Association (FA), he was encouraged to pursue football coaching. This person arranged for Harry to complete his first coaching

qualification and offered him part-time work, which sparked Harry’s desire to pursue coaching as a full-time career.

Determined to make a change, Harry went back to college to study sports coaching, fully funding the course himself with help from his father, as he was too old to get it for free and not on benefits at the time. After completing his college course, he moved a significant distance away to pursue a Foundation Degree in sports coaching, seeing it as a fresh start in his new career. He enjoyed his time on the course, building strong friendships and solidifying his career aspirations. After completing the award, he moved closer to home to complete his final year at City University. Following his graduation, Harry worked for a company teaching excluded pupils. During this time, he was offered a brief internship at City University, which he accepted, hoping it would lead to a longer-term opportunity. The work was rewarding, and he saw it might be an opportunity to get into lecturing. Since there was a chance the role could be extended, he signed up for a master's degree and rented a house. Unfortunately, the internship was not extended, and he was left with a rental agreement and no means to pay for it. Juggling work and postgraduate study was tough, but he managed to complete his master’s degree while also gaining additional coaching qualifications. After finishing university, Harry secured a part-time role as an academy football coach at a junior regional training academy, continuing to build his career in football coaching.

4.3 Jess

4.3.1 Personal life

Jess is a 25-year-old single white female with a child. While attending university, she lived at home with her parents and commuted to campus. She completed a three-year BA in Sport Development and Coaching, graduating with a first-class undergraduate degree. Jess then stayed at City University to complete a master's, which she completed with in October 2019. She began a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) that same year.

4.3.2 Family life

Jess's mother worked as a carer, and her father was employed at a local factory. Jess experienced a glue ear as a baby, which delayed her speech. At age six, her family moved her to a different primary school to allow her sister to pursue her talent in math. Jess feels the move did not benefit her, and her parents now regret moving her. Her sister later moved away to go to university, where she remains, and now works as a researcher in HE. At 18, Jess became pregnant and continues living with her child at her family home.

4.3.3 Support system

Jess had difficulties in school, particularly with math. Her dad attempted to help but struggled. Jess eventually chose to do her homework independently after an incident where her mother tore pages from her English book due to poor handwriting. Her aunt, who was very supportive and proud of Jess's decision to attend university, passed away during Jess's first year, which was a difficult time and a loss of vital support.

Before Jess earned her first-class degree, her parents did not view her as academically capable, negatively affecting her confidence and self-concept. She felt her mother saw her sister as the smart one, and this perception of being in her sister's shadow became a motivating factor for Jess's academic journey. During her master's, she received emotional support from her partner, who, while not knowledgeable in her field, was always encouraging.

4.3.4 Education and career

In high school, Jess noticed she was struggling with exams more than her peers and sought help. However, after an assessment, her head of year said she was 'slow but not quite slow enough to get help,' which Jess interpreted as being 'thick but not quite thick enough to receive support'. This, combined with bullying between the ages of 14 and 16, made her high school years particularly difficult.

It was not until college that she was diagnosed with dyslexia. She was provided with support in the form of concessions and a tutor. She established a strong relationship with her Dyslexia tutor, who built her confidence and encouraged her to apply to university. Her first experience in the sports industry came when she was 15, volunteering for a charity that organised recreational sports activities. After finishing school, she went straight to college to study Sport and Exercise Science, but her grades were initially not high enough for university admission. The college recommended she transfer to a Sport Development and Coaching course to improve her grades, which she did successfully.

After college, Jess applied to university and, at the same time, began volunteering with a football coaching company that eventually progressed into paid work. However, she became unexpectedly pregnant, leading her to defer her university place for a year to have her child. Though she wanted to live independently and raise her child, it was not financially viable, so she remained at the family home while studying.

When Jess started university, she studied hard, although her parental responsibilities limited her ability to engage in extracurricular activities. After completing her undergraduate degree, she completed her master's and a postgraduate teaching qualification (PGCE), allowing her to teach in further education (FE) colleges. Jess completed a placement at a local FE college as part of her PGCE, which led to a short-term lecturing contract. When the contract ended, she was unemployed and searching for a permanent lecturing position in FE.

4.4 Joe

4.4.1 Personal life

Joe is a 24-year-old single white male with no dependents. He lived on campus during university but moved back in with his family after graduating. He studied for a BA in Sport Development and Coaching at City University, completing a four-year program that began with a Foundation Year and graduated with a first-class degree.

4.4.2 Family life

Joe and his twin brother were born two months prematurely, and his brother was seriously ill as a child. Joe often felt in his brother's shadow and chose to play the villain, distancing himself from the influence of his mother and grandfather. He preferred to rebel and do things his way rather than follow their guidance. However, Joe now recognises that their influence helped his brother’s personal and professional development, while he chose to reject it and forge his own path.

Neither of Joe’s parents attended university. Joe’s mother runs a successful hair salon and is driven by self-improvement, while his father has worked in various roles since leaving school and has been in a supervisory position for the past 20 years. When Joe was in college, his parents separated, which caused him considerable stress. He reflects on how difficult that time was but notes that both his parents are now happier, as are he and his brother. Joe’s passion for sport stems from his family—his father was an avid squash player, his grandfather played golf, and his uncles were involved in football and cricket.

4.4.3 Support system

Both of Joe’s parents eventually found new partners, and he enjoys good relationships with everyone. His stepmother has been especially supportive, offering him voluntary and paid work experience at her nursery business. Joe had a stable school experience, developing close friendships that helped him during his parents’ separation. He expanded his social circle at university, building strong connections within and outside his course.

His long-term girlfriend was a key source of support, encouraging him to stay focused on his studies, especially when he felt like giving up.

4.4.4 Education and career

Joe achieved satisfactory grades in high school and entered university through a foundation year, ultimately studying for four years. His decision to study sport development and coaching was driven by his love for sport and the impact of his inspirational cricket coaches. He decided to choose a university far enough away to require him to live on campus but close enough to return home when needed. Joe enjoyed his university experience, participating in university sports teams and social life. While he did not have a paid job during his studies, he completed a placement module that gave him some experience.

After graduating, Joe initially aspired to work for Camp America, but that opportunity fell through. He struggled to find employment, sending applications and receiving no replies. During his job search, he was approached on LinkedIn by someone claiming to represent Wattlesborough County Football Club. Joe went to meet the individual but, upon observing that the person was not wearing the official club uniform, suspected the offer was fraudulent and left without confirming his suspicions.

That summer, one of his university tutors suggested he consider pursuing a master's degree, which Joe saw as a potential option due to the lack of job opportunities. On the day of the application deadline, Joe's father texted him that he had arranged an interview with a local sports coaching company. Joe attended the interview instead of completing the master's application and was offered a part-time role, and the position soon expanded to full-time. After a few months, he left the coaching role to become a lifeguard at a local leisure facility with the goal of training as a leisure manager. Once qualified, Joe hopes to relocate to a city closer to his girlfriend.

4.5 John

4.5.1 Personal life

John is a 22-year-old single white male with no dependents. While studying for a BA in Sport Development and Coaching at university, he commuted from home and completed the three-year program with a 2.1 undergraduate degree.

4.5.2 Family life

John's parents separated when he was three, and he was primarily raised by his mother, a small business owner. He remained close to his father, a painter and decorator. When John was nine, his mother entered a new relationship and moved to another part of the city, requiring him to change schools. Later, when his mother's relationship ended, John chose to stay at the same school rather than change again, remaining throughout the sixth form. His mother drove him to school until he passed his driving test, illustrating the level of economic support available to him despite living in an area of high socioeconomic deprivation.

John's mother attended university, first training as a nurse, then becoming a primary school teacher before eventually starting her own business. He recalls that she became less stressed and more supportive after she started the business. His father, while supportive, had less influence on his education as he had not attended university, and John lived primarily with his mother.

4.5.3 Support system

John received significant academic support from his mother, especially in his final two years of university, benefiting from her university experience. Although his father remained supportive, John's mother impacted his education most. During his university years, his girlfriend provided a calming influence, helping him stay focused on his studies and spend more time at home rather than socialising.

4.5.4 Education and career

John acknowledges that moving primary schools after his mother's relocation was not ideal, but he managed to make new friends. He describes high school as 'normal' but admits to having no interest in subjects other than Physical Education (PE) and playing football. His AS-level results were poor, resulting in him dropping a subject and changing to Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Sport, which he preferred due to its practical nature. Despite his laid-back attitude, John achieved grades high enough for university admission.

Unsure of his career path, John chose to stay in education and attend university, considering it the easier option. His passion for sport and encouragement from his school to pursue a career in this field led him to study for a BA in Sport Development and Coaching. He initially applied to several universities but chose City University to stay close to friends and reduce living expenses.

John began working at 16, taking on various part-time jobs, primarily in hospitality and sport coaching, while continuing his studies. His friends were already at work and earning money, but as a student, John had to study and work part-time to afford socialising without getting into debt. Before graduating, John began applying for apprenticeships. Though initially unsuccessful, he secured an apprenticeship with a large civil engineering company after graduation. He successfully completed the apprenticeship, was retained by the company, and later secured a scholarship on their civil engineering degree program.

4.6 Robert

4.6.1 Personal life

Robert is a 25-year-old single white male with no dependents. He commuted from home while studying for a BA in Sport Development and Coaching at City University. He completed a four-year degree, beginning with a Foundation Year, and graduated with a 2.1 classification. Robert pursued a master's degree, which he completed in October 2019. After finishing his studies, he continued living with his family.

4.6.2 Family life

Robert faced significant ill health as a child, causing him to miss two years of primary school. During that time, he remembers watching the football World Cup, which inspired his passion for a future football career. His parents separated when he was young, and he lives with his mother and stepfather. He also has an older sister who lives nearby. His parents both attended college before entering the workforce—his father is an electrician. Robert did not share many details about his family, but it is clear that they have played a significant role in shaping his decisions. For instance, he turned down an opportunity to work in America over the summer because it coincided with his sister's wedding, which he deemed too important to miss.

4.6.3 Support system

While Robert's father was against him attending university and pushed him towards a vocational trade, his mother and stepfather fully supported him going to university. They encouraged him to find work he enjoyed and supported his decision to pursue a master's degree.

4.6.4 Education and career

Robert's parents moved him while in primary school so that he could attend a better high school than his sister, which required him to adjust to a new environment and make new friends—something he found challenging due to recovering from a back operation. His

time at high school was relatively normal, though he admits to choosing the wrong GCSE subjects and only doing the minimum necessary to pass, resulting in him only just getting into sixth form. In sixth form, he did not focus enough on his studies and had to complete an additional year to improve his grades and gain university admission.

Robert entered university through the Foundation Year pathway, where he made a concerted effort to improve his academic skills. He built a strong, supportive network with his peers on the course. To gain work experience, Robert volunteered to coach a friend’s football team at university and completed his Level 1 Football Coaching qualification. He also worked as a volunteer intern for 3 months at a large local football club but eventually stopped due to the extra 30-minute commute after moving house.

After completing his undergraduate degree, Robert pursued a master's degree, believing it would benefit him in the future. However, after graduating, he found himself unsure of his career direction and began applying for jobs in various fields. He realised he might need to start from the bottom of an organisation rather than immediately securing a graduate-level job based on his academic credentials. Currently, Robert is unemployed and actively seeking work.

4.7 Steven

4.7.1 Personal life

Steven is a 39-year-old married white male with multiple dependents. He owns his own home and studied for a BA in Sport Development and Coaching over four years at City University, starting with a Foundation Year. He graduated with a first-class undergraduate degree. Though he began a master's degree, he withdrew from the program due to external commitments.

4.7.2 Family life

Steven describes his upbringing as difficult. His household was marked by his brothers' additional needs, limiting opportunities for individual attention. He feels that his parents could have been more supportive of his personal development, particularly in guiding him when he made poor decisions. Reflecting on his childhood and school years brings him sadness as he struggles to recall many happy memories. These experiences have shaped how he parents his children, making him strive to be a strong role model.

Steven idolised his older brother, whom he saw as a 'Rockstar' figure. They started a business together, but when the venture failed, it damaged their relationship. This failure marked a turning point in Steven's life, as he decided to forge his own path rather than follow in his brother's footsteps. Since then, their relationship has improved.

4.7.3 Support system

Steven acknowledges his wife as being instrumental in his personal development. Although she did not attend university, she helped him overcome many personal and professional challenges. His biggest motivators, however, are his children, who inspire him to keep going. Steven's friends outside of university were less supportive of his career pivot. They questioned his motives for attending university, implying that he only wanted to claim benefits, avoid paying taxes, and have an easy life. After university, the jealousy and tension surrounding the life changes he had made changed their relationship forever.

4.7.4 Education and career

School was difficult for Steven, as he was bullied throughout primary school, which led him to attend a high school across the city, leaving him socially isolated. He admits that his poor final exam results were due to insufficient effort. After leaving school, Steven went to college, where he earned a General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and began a BTEC program. However, his poor attendance led to him being removed from the course. After attempting A-levels, he abandoned them, not even collecting his exam results, knowing he had not done well.

Instead, Steven shifted his focus to work. His brother gave him his first job as a part-time chef. Within 18 months, Steven was running the kitchen and managing a team of 10. Aspiring to do more, he became a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) trainer. Despite his success as a chef, Steven found his hours unsociable and wanted to spend more time with his growing family. He became a full-time NVQ assessor to improve his lifestyle, which paid well but required frequent travel. When his brother proposed starting a catering business together, Steven agreed. Although initially successful, the business expanded too quickly and ultimately failed.

After returning to the NVQ assessment, Steven had a particularly difficult day at work. Feeling uncertain about his career, he impulsively decided he could no longer continue in this role and began exploring the possibility of attending university. He was accepted into a four-year degree program with the Foundation Year. During his studies, a friend helped him secure a part-time job at a youth offenders' institute. While convenient, it was a challenging role. He also gained a sports coaching internship through the university, leading to part-time and full-time employment after graduation.

Steven briefly began a master's degree but withdrew due to the challenge of balancing family, work, and studies. He continued to expand his role within the sports coaching company and is developing a partnership with the directors to create another branch of the business.

Chapter Five: Graduate Conceptual Groups

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides an overview of the characteristics that underpin the three conceptual groupings introduced in section 3.8, exploring how graduates experienced the transition from university into the graduate labour market. The ‘comfort seekers’ experienced weak levels of illusio for a career due to uncertain possible self, perpetuating inaction, leading to low levels of career management and adequate resources. The ‘to a degree’ group experienced a developing strength of illusio and willingness to pursue it despite structural barriers. The ‘risk taker’ group developed a strong illusio for possible self and had adequate resources and knowledge of the rules of the game.

The chapter explores how habitus and financial security restricted reformulating the 'comfort seeker' dispositions. This restricted their illusio for their desired career, limiting the opportunity for habitus rupture during the early transition from university. What follows is an account of how the rupture of habitus was only partially achieved by individuals in the 'to a degree' conceptual group. There were multifarious reasons for this; predominantly, they had restricted access to relational and economic capital, resulting in a tempering effect on dispositions and the realisation of illusio. The chapter culminates in an exploration of the 'risk taker' conceptual group, detailing individuals with a clear vision of their possible self and a strong illusio for the game, who actively pursued opportunities to improve their positionality within the field.

5.2 The influence of habitus

Habitus denotes the norms and practices of particular social groups, which provoke dispositional approaches to thinking, behaving and being in the world, developed within a field of social relations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The habitus articulated by Bourdieu assigns the experience of early upbringing as ‘primary or generic habitus’ (Costa and Murphy, 2015, p.7). Early experiences can be extremely influential on personal development. As previously identified in chapter two, one of the main criticisms of

Bourdieu's work on habitus is the suggestion that the habitus 'tend to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change' (Costa and Murphy, 2015, p.7). Therefore, habitus can constrain some individuals and enable others to successfully navigate social spaces such as universities, as they seem to effortlessly glide in through and beyond (Maton, 2008). Bourdieu illustrates this by suggesting that 'people who succeed in the universe because they are made for that universe and have been completely fashioned by it: it is the inheritor who, having lived and breathed the same atmosphere since the day he was born, succeeds in his actions without needing to calculate them…' (Bourdieu, 1982, p.66). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that universities are constructed around middle-class practices, where the 'unwritten rules of the game' align with the habitus of those from similar habitus (Maton, 2008, p.58). For those not conditioned in the same way, these often-invisible embodied social rules affect feelings of belonging due to misalignment of habitus and field, thus resonating with those of similar habitus and repelling those that are not. This is significant for this study as universities have a moral obligation and statutory duty to be inclusive spaces of learning and scholarship. Without inclusivity, working-class students can feel like 'outsiders on the inside' (Reay, 2015), affecting their development as students and transition as graduates into the labour market. These aspects link closely to RQ 1 and 2 to understand how lower resources affect the lived experience of students and graduates during and beyond university, in addition to highlighting the practices of universities to develop individuals for transition into graduate-level employment.

Critics of Bourdieu, in particular (Archer, 2007), argue that there is an absence of individual reflexivity within the context of habitus, suggesting a permanent state impermeable to external or internal influence. In response to this, contemporary advocates of Bourdieu draw upon the concept of 'secondary habitus—a dispositional scheme...acquired at a later stage and in more specialised contexts, such as school or workplace—is more likely to encourage changes in individuals' practice' (Costa and Murphy, 2015, p.7). My study contributes to the evidential base for secondary habitus by illustrating the conditions under which the rupture of primary habitus occurs, leading to

the formation of secondary habitus. To illustrate this, I have developed three conceptual groups (Risk taker, To a degree and Comfort seeker) as introduced in section 3.8. Each conceptual group exhibits stronger or weaker propensities enabled or constrained by internal agency or external structures. Processual is the middle ground between structure and agency, whereby the practice of individuals intersects to achieve their illusio through the emotional connection to their possible self as defined previously in chapter two.

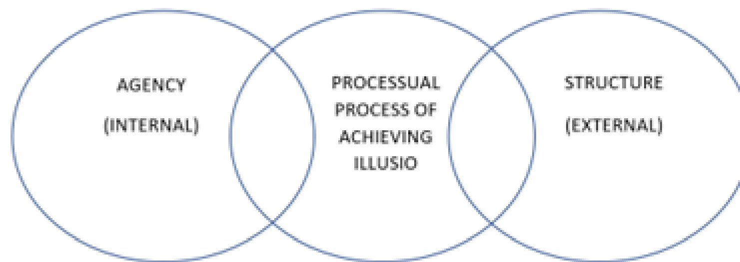

Figure 1.7 Process of Illusio

Central to this research was understanding the strategies lower resourced graduates used in their educational and career development. Key resources for each conceptual group are explored to explain how they were enabled or constrained in the graduate transition process.

5.2.1 The directive nature of illusio on strategies for education and career

The degree to which graduates realise their illusio for a career depends upon their emotional connection to their possible selves. The greater the clarity of who they would like to become, characterised as ‘comparisons in which the individual’s own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviours have been contrasted to those of salient others’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p.954) the more likely they are to emotionally commit to the game, illustrated by the transformation or inertia of an individuals’ dispositions. The strength of illusio is a core characteristic which can enable or inhibit habitus rupture depending on where an individual falls on the Illusio continuum. Illusio is a key concept in Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (Costey, 2005; Golsorkhi and Huault, 2006), without

this, it is challenging to comprehend the intense involvement of specific participants in the game and their struggle to envision a different approach to playing or a life beyond the game (Lupo and Empson, 2015). Graduate inequality of outcome in the labour market is recognised as one of the most significant challenges facing the sector; previous interpretation has been focused on human capital, through acquisition (or not) of skills and attributes. As previously outlined in chapter one, a considerable shift has taken place in the literature, focused on the impact of social factors on graduate employability. By utilising the conceptual lens of illusio, possible selves and resources, the difference in graduate outcomes can be exposed within and beyond class boundaries.

The effect of illusio has the most prominence within the 'risk taker' and 'to a degree' conceptual groups, which are presented in detail in this chapter. The application and broadening of the theoretical concept of illusio to include possible selves enable enlightenment of the importance of the strength of commitment to the game and the level of context-specific resources required to achieve desired careers successfully. The strength of illusio also corresponds with engagement in broader career management practices. The conceptual groups speak specifically to the levels of career management engagement, which start with the means of gaining insight to support career development and progression in the field of sport. The 'comfort seekers' prefer to consume information at a distance, 'to a degree' is limited by structural factors, and the 'risk takers' will take any opportunity to gain insight and proactively create opportunities without waiting for an opportunity to arise to realise their possible future self.

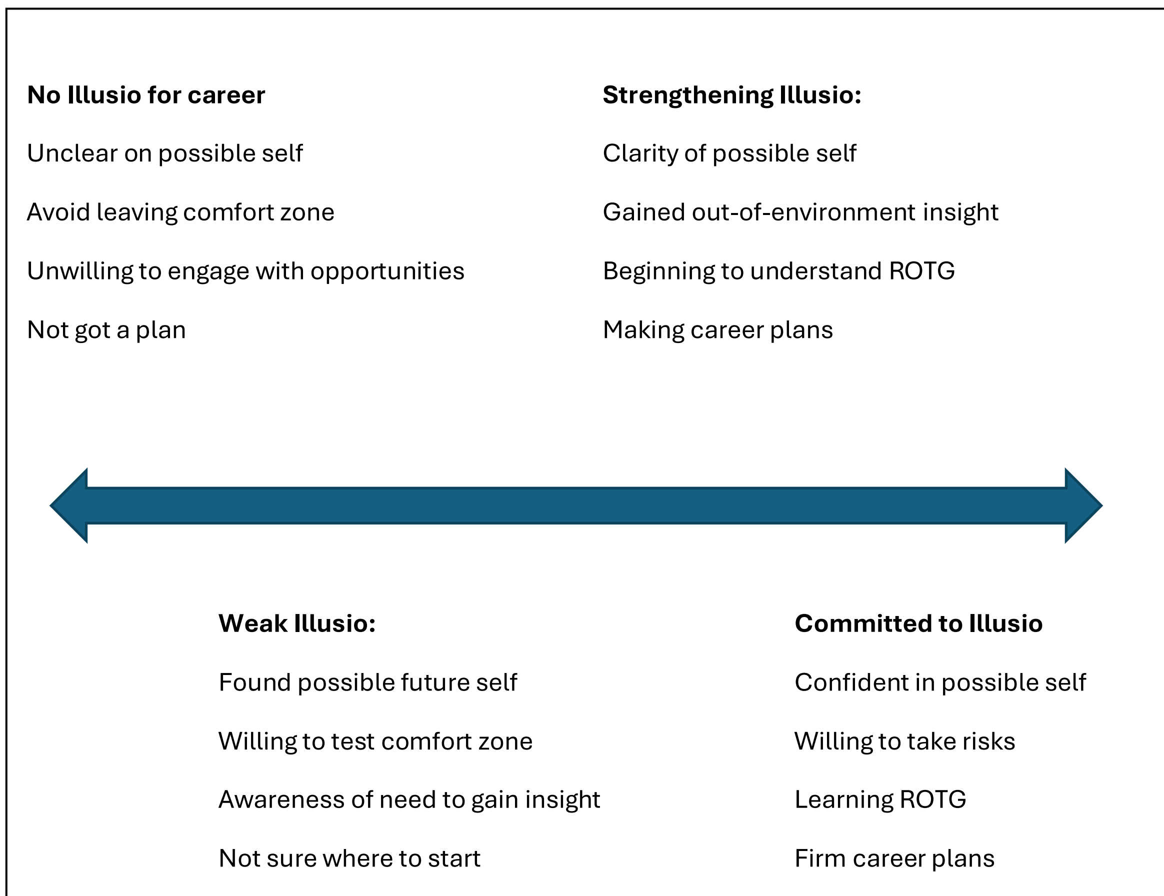

Figure 5.8 Illusio Continuum

Figure 5.8 shows the degree of illusio towards a career, from 'No Illusio' (interest) in what to do for a career to a 'Weak Illusio' whereby an individual has found a person in the field that aligns with them and their wants and needs. They are beginning to imagine their future self as a realistic possibility and are, therefore, willing to start to come out of their comfort zone to explore opportunities. The next stage is 'Strengthening Illusio', whereby they spend time outside of their normal environment, pushing their comfort zone and beginning to gain insight from the field on the rules of the game. This helps shape their career planning and strengthen their illusio for possible future self. Posited at the end of the continuum are those 'committed to illusio' who have a clear idea and emotional connection to their graduate identity; they are committed to the game and exhibit a strong illusio, where working in another career or industry is unimaginable. They have used their social and cultural resources to craft insight into the rules of the game, which

has begun to feel natural, giving them confidence in how to play the game and take significant risks to achieve their career goals. Outside of individual illusio for career, a heterogeneous mix of four resources were identified. These resources enabled or constrained practice, locating them within one of the three conceptual groups.

5.3 Resources

5.3.1 Relational capital

Relational capital can be defined as the personal and social relationships and influence of place on graduate development, employment, and mobility. Each conceptual group has varying degrees of personal and professional support through relationships with people or places. These relationships are not simplistic; they are complex and can be both enabling and empowering yet also constraining. This is evident in Jess, part of the 'to a degree' group, as her responsibilities for a dependent child limited her access to opportunities, impacting her personal development. Others have different relational constraints related to their relationship with place, as can be seen in Steven's account of his home city and its impact on his economic capital and social mobility.

5.3.2 Social and cultural capital

The social capital characteristic demonstrates how individuals grow, maintain, and utilise personal and professional networks to maximise information and opportunities to benefit their personal development. There is a clear distinction between levels of engagement with this characteristic across all three conceptual groups, with those who prefer to stay within their comfort zone being the least likely to develop and benefit from the opportunities social capital can provide. Those on the other end of the continuum actively engage in and seek out opportunities to expand, maintain, and use their networks for career advancement.

A broad spectrum of affiliation attributed traditionally to esteemed higher qualifications and membership of educational institutions is a feature of institutional capital. Also,

within this theme is the institutional capital provided by association with organisations that hold credibility within the sports industry. For example, having worked for a high-level sports organisation provides symbolic capital within the labour market as it can be a mark of group affiliation, cultural capital, experience, and available networks.

5.3.3 Economic capital

The final characteristic relates to the financial resources available to graduates while undertaking their degree and transitioning into the labour market. Individuals from lower resourced communities traditionally experience lower levels of economic capital, resulting in insufficient funds to support them through HE and beyond; this results in prioritisation of all things that save money, such as staying near or at home whilst studying and undertaking paid work around their studies. The amount and type of work correspond to the level of need the individual faces; for example, those living independently from family have to be self-sufficient, earning enough to pay all household bills and living expenses. For others, they are living at home or in rented accommodation with financial support from family. These dichotomies have implications for graduate development and transition into employment illustrated by the differences between conceptual groups.

In March 2020, the UK went into a national lockdown for the first time due to the global COVID-19 pandemic (Institute for Government, 2021); during this time, participants from this study were in the middle of their early transition into employment. The UK lockdown rules were that ‘all 'non-essential' high street businesses were closed, people were ordered to stay at home, and permitted to leave for essential purposes only, such as buying food or for medical reasons’ (Kirk-Wade and Brown, 2021, p.5). Resulting in unprecedented times for the sports labour market, community recreational and school sport ceased, effectively shrinking the labour market. However, the impact varied by participant, with some individuals suffering greater loss than others who continued to work with little disruption due to immunisation and key worker status. The conceptual groups show that the pandemic affected everyone to some extent, given that the restrictions assisted career development in some cases but hindered it in others; the

experiences were nonlinear. The following section outlines further analysis of the three conceptual groups.

5.4 On the side-lines: 'Comfort Seeker' conceptual group

This section examines how the conceptual group of the 'comfort seekers' is conceptualised in relation to the strategies they employ in navigating education and graduate employment, as well as the enabling and constraining forms of resources—social and cultural, relational and economic—that influence their outcomes. Each conceptual group exhibits varying degrees of these strategies and forms of capital, leading to different outcomes depending on the interplay between structure and agency. The participants that align with this category are Robert and Joe. This findings and discussion section illustrates how the primary dispositions of their habitus contributed to their weak sense of illusio (see Figure 5.8). As a result, they were unable to embrace their possible self, hindering personal and professional development and creating a stasis that continued throughout university and beyond. Furthermore, economic and relational capital re-affirmed rather than transformed their primary habitus.

5.4.1 Educational strategies

Many students enter HE with the sole focus of achieving a degree to improve their employment prospects and earning potential. However, due to massification and flexibility in the graduate labour market (Reay, 2017; Abrahams, 2017; Lehman, 2019; Hordosy, Clark and Vickers, 2018), a degree is devalued and no longer sufficient to secure graduate-level employment (Burke, 2016). As discussed in the critical review of the literature (Chapter One), this shift increased competition requiring graduates to leverage available resources, leaving those with the lowest level of resources struggling to gain desired graduate jobs. As seen in previous studies (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Burke, 2016; Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018) these disparities also extended to less awareness of degree devaluation and the expectations of scholastic capital to enable smooth transition. Discussing his expectations for navigating the graduate labour market,

Robert presents a clear gap in his expectations for his academic credentials and the competitive nature of the labour market.

Robert: If an employer is looking at it he says, oh you know he's done something for four years, he's been disciplined for four years to start something and then finish it. I think that would probably, if I was an employer that's something that I'd probably look at and see, you know. I've done four years of a degree, you know, with a foundation degree, and then done a master's degree. So, you know, it shows that you're constantly trying to learn, you're constantly trying to improve yourself and improve your chances of being employed.

Robert believed that possessing a degree communicated what Tomlinson (2013) refers to as 'graduateness'—the qualities of a highly educated person who possesses skills and attributes of hard work and self-improvement. He believed this alone should be sufficient to secure graduate employment. Here, Robert illustrates Parutis and Kandiko Howson's (2020) argument that lower resourced graduates have lower levels of capital in transition, as they failed to recognise their importance while studying. However, Robert and Joe both demonstrated an awareness of the need to focus on career-enhancing activities while studying for their degree, as Robert's account of employability advice demonstrates.

*Robert: Well, from the beginning of the degree lecturers, they, kind of, prompted you to do, you know, as much get as much experience you can. You know, really also when you do graduate you've got, you know, this jam-packed CV so I tried to, I did it, I did do an internship with ****. Which could have led to something but because I moved house, I couldn't carry on doing that.*

Their awareness contrasts with Burke's (2016) findings of the educational system failing to provide practical advice and mastery for working-class students. In this research, respondents received advice on the competitive nature of the graduate labour market but failed to implement it effectively or at all. Robert gained an internship with a professional football club through a partnership with the university. He recognised that he would not have secured the internship unless it was through the university. As Bathmaker (2021) suggests, people have more opportunities to exert greater agency and achieve their professional goals thanks to official and informal interventions by people in positions of power. Prior interns had gained valuable experience and been offered paid work opportunities after the internship. Three months into the internship Roberts family moved

house, resulting in a 30-minute commute for Robert to university. The move deterred Robert from completing his internship, forgoing valuable experiential, social, and cultural capital. He perceived the journey as too far to travel despite being only ten minutes away from the university. This could be interpreted from a position of lack, a lack of motivation, idleness or economic capital, but that is not how I interpret this action. Robert was an economically stable comfort seeker; he had a car, lived with his parents, and did not need to work. His unclear connection to possible self, perpetuated his weak sense of Illusio for the game. Without this emotional connection to his possible self, his primary dispositions discouraged him from remaining in the out-of-environment experience due to a clash between habitus and field. His weak illusio means he is not committed to playing the game and did not have a feel for the rules. This decision links closely to habitus 'shaping our unconscious sense of the possible, probable and, crucially, desirable for us' (Maton, 2010, p.59), moreover, passing up the opportunity to build vital social, cultural and experiential capital. Robert's reluctance to continue with the internship resembles Bourdieu's (1990) reflections on the interest and investment in the game, as without interest, or illusio, habitus structures the *'field of the possibles'* (emphasis in the original) (Bourdieu, 1984, p.110). Robert perceived the game of undertaking unpaid work as no longer holding value, suggesting that Robert was not invested in the game sufficiently to develop a strong interest to continue playing, which presents a weak sense of illusio. During our final interview, he reflects that he has been reaching out to professionals in the field and has been informed that he needs more experience if he is to progress into his desired career. Robert: *…So I have just been messaging people on LinkedIn to see if they know any … erm to see if they have got any advice really, …if they can give me any direction of where to look, or if they know of anything.* Through his ability to connect with salient others for guidance on the rules of the game, Robert is starting to show signs of dispositional change. Their guidance has prompted him to look again at internships to gain the field specific experience needed to compete in the labour market. Here he states, …*that's what has probably prompted me into getting an internship or a volunteer role really, not having that much experience as probably the majority of the people applying.*

This demonstrates an increase in the strength of illusio for the game, and a moderate change in his primary dispositions from passive engagement in gaining insight to actively reaching out to those with insider 'hot knowledge', to better understand the rules of the game and how to play. However, he is still unaware of how to move forward from his remote position. Robert: …*other than writing letters and sending emails and, you know like I said, messaging people on LinkedIn, erm yes I haven't really… I can't really think of many other avenues to look down.* This reflects his grasp of the rules of the game and how to play it. Without professional networks and active engagement in the field, he is unable

to learn the rules, and his dispositions to stay comfortable keep him stuck. Robert continues to seek out internship opportunities close to home. Robert: …*maybe I would look probably half an hour past City, wherever that would be.* The need to remain close did not stem from economic reasoning. Here, Robert suggests, *I like having ... I don't know if it's like a protective blanket around me, with my friends and family, or not, it probably is, but yes I would probably prefer to drive two hours than move two hours away, I think.* Relationality and the fear of going it alone continue to reflect his weak illusio for the game and dispositions not to take risks that feel uncomfortable.

When asked what more could be done to help graduates with the transition into employment, Joe suggests*: I think everything was basically covered [on the course]. It was just down to the students' interaction and down to erm their willingness to get involved and to actually learn what to use and how to make that transition.* This suggests an awareness and realisation of what he should have undertaken during his degree but chose not to. Instead, the focus was on his social life and developing scholastic capital during university. The use of the term 'willingness' throws light on an active choice being made to develop and implement career enhancement activities. A simplistic view of agentic choice could conceal an underlying reluctance by students to undertake an activity that makes them feel uncomfortable. As Burke *et al*. (2017) propose, a rupture of the primary habitus is possible if individuals are open to changing their dispositions. These findings support Bourdieu and Waquant's (1992) contention that the constraints of primary habitus deny entry into environments conducive to dispositional change. In essence, someone who does not have a feel for the game considers its activities and goals as pointless (Bourdieu, 1982).

Both Robert and Joe focused on the scholastic capital being the basis for their being able to get a job after graduating from university. Robert focused on his academic achievement, and Joe focused on enjoying the student experience as opposed to considering what he would do after university. Joe placed a great deal of value on the choice of how you use your time at university. *Joe: You've got to make it what you want. If you want to just go out and party that's your choice, but if you want to press your career,*

it's the right place to do it. You can earn qualifications that will ultimately stand you in great stead.

Joe recognised that university provided opportunities to gain additional qualifications and experience, but instead chose to maximise the social side. Joe: *As well as the party side, when you and you friends decide to go to Magaluf for the first time. … We had a fantastic time, the antics we got up to.*

Joe's choice to not focus on his career during university also reflects the work of Greenbank and Hepworth (2008, p.503) found that working-class students 'often did not engage in career-enhancing activities because they were unaware of their importance to employability'. Conversely, it could be argued that an awareness of the importance was apparent to Joe but with deeper analysis through Bourdieu's (1979; 1984) lens of field, he did not comprehend the importance of 'pressing his career' because of the absence of a 'feel for the game'. His inexperience in the field led to lower levels of embodied cultural capital, delaying his ability to acquire graduate employment. This too is relatable to Bourdieu and Wacquant's assertion of illusio, that an individual must be 'taken in by the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.116), essentially weighing up its worth before committing. Joe's agentic choice was, therefore, not fully informed, resulting in the underdevelopment of social and cultural capital.

In comparison to the other participants, neither of them seemed to understand the rules of the game and the requirements of the field due to low social and cultural capital. Students from the working class are perceived to have limited social capital because the people they know lack expertise or influence in the job market for graduates (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). This is why 'as Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) infer,' the graduate labour market will only value specific types of cultural capital often owned by the middle classes. Middle-class students attend university with *a priori* capitals (Burke, 2017). These accumulate further whilst studying, widening inequalities. Without these predispositions, working-class students must utilise the employability support offered by the institution

and the wider industry. If the value of this development opportunity is not recognised or underdeveloped, then graduates like Joe and Robert are left well qualified but without the necessary cultural capital to understand ‘the rules of the game’ (Bathmaker, 2021) to compete in the graduate labour market.

Within the working classes, the lack of knowledge of labour market conditions, impacts their ability to adapt (Reay, 2017). As a result, Robert was left frustrated*…I think the fact that I am not ... the fact that having a degree hasn’t visually got me a job so far, is a little bit maybe frustrating…* Robert’s frustration originates from the ‘self-perceived value’ (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2017) placed on a degree qualification. Robert believes his scholastic capital would enable entry into the labour market despite being told otherwise through his university course. This is what Bourdieu (2010, p.138) refers to as the hysteresis effect, … the holders of devalued diplomas become, in a sense, accomplices in their own mystification since, by a typical effect of *allodoxia* (‘misapprehension’), they bestow a value on their devalued diplomas which is not objectively acknowledged.

Hysteresis is disproportionally higher in those with a weak knowledge of the educational qualification marketplace. As Robert and Joe were both from a working-class background and were the first in the family to gain a degree, they had less knowledge of the marketplace. Those with this advantageous knowledge inherit this cultural capital from previous experience and use it to position themselves to make the greatest return on investment (Bourdieu, 2010). This is significant as both Robert and Joe relied heavily on their scholastic capital to position themselves in the marketplace and secure graduate employment. As was the case in Burke’s (2016) research of graduate trajectories, working-class graduates placed high levels of trust in HE to deliver on its social mobility promise, resulting in frustration when the degree was not enough.

5.4.2 Career strategies

Sport as a subject, along with other degree disciplines, can lead to many career pathways inside and outside of sport. Therefore, it is not uncommon for students to change career

goals during the degree. Formulating a career goal is an important part of realising illusio; Robert and Joe started university with a sense of illusio exhibited by a general interest in a career in sport but then struggled to move beyond this point.

Robert and Joe graduated without a clear plan; throughout their early transition into the labour market, they frequently changed their minds on potential career paths due to limited illusio for any role or career pathway. The pattern of the findings for Joe and Robert is consistent with those of Perrone and Vickers (2003), who believe that undergraduate students typically have a vague sense of what life might be like after university and do not start actively thinking about their future employment until graduation. However, I would argue that Joe and Robert's experience was more nuanced; they were aware of the importance of career-enhancing activities in preparing for life after university. What hindered their successful transition was a weak sense of illusio regarding their career, stemming from a lack of reflexivity about possible future selves during HE—a time meant for exploration outside familiar environments. Without an idea of who they wanted to emulate, other than their interest in sport, there was little emotional investment in career planning or acquisition of social or cultural capital while at university. Conversely, other conceptual groups diverged from this practice, committing to their possible self, strengthening their illusio and developing robust career strategies to achieve their desired graduate identity.

Upon graduation, Joe felt the need to start earning money straight away, mirroring previous research on working-class financial insecurity and debt (Vigurs, Jones, Harris and Everitt, 2020). However, in contrast, Joe is not in a financially difficult position and has not been told to get a job. The doxa, the 'taken for granted assumption' (Maton, 2008) that he needs a job straight away, is driving the desire.

Joe explored many post-graduate and employment options, and he enjoyed the university lifestyle, the university, and studying. He was more active in exploring potential careers due to his perceived need to earn money and level of social capital. He considered

professions in teaching, youth offending, disability sport, and becoming a physiotherapist. His ex-girlfriend had contacts with her old work placement, and he was able to observe a few physiotherapy consultations across two different settings. The clinic was keen for him to continue volunteering to gain insight and experience. *Joe: They said keep coming in, there's bound to be something but being a bit overeager, wanting a new job, probably should have stuck it out a bit more.*

A sense of illusio for possible self-prevented a definitive career strategy from being established. Joe did not have any specific plans to become a physiotherapist; however, his social connections and a weak sense of illusio for the role allowed him to gain some experience while he waited for an opportunity to present itself. Consequentially, a weak illusio meant he was not captured by the game of any of the fields he began to explore, leading to little understanding of the rules of the game (Spence and Carter, 2014). Due to habitus, he felt the need to get on the career ladder as soon as possible, resulting in the rejection of many of the opportunities, as they were not perceived as possible (Bourdieu, 1996). As Golsorkhi and Huault (2010) suggest, the habitus and the amount of capital an agent holds are the key factors that enable practice. The dispositions of habitus influence the perceived level of interest and subsequent emotional attachment; without a strong illusio, he became impatient to get a job, giving up on the possibility of becoming a physiotherapist. Joe's impatience demonstrates his lack of commitment to the field of physiotherapy, exhibiting the opposite of what Bourdieu (1996, p.228) asserts as 'belief in the game and the value of its stakes which makes the game worth the trouble of playing'. Joe is positioned lower down on the Illusio continuum, he has developed a 'sense of illusio', he has an idea of the industry he wants to work in and is beginning to explore different employment options. This is a striking juxtaposition to when an individual has a strong illusio, as portrayed on the illusio continuum in Figure 5.8. The stronger the interest (illusio) in the game, the greater the commitment to involvement, and the inability to envision an alternate gameplay style or a life outside of it (Bourdieu, 1990). Those who sat on the upper end of the continuum had clarity about their possible self, which enabled

them to gain insight into their career objectives and the strategies they needed to employ to achieve them.

Interestingly, in Joe's last interview, 18 months post-graduation, despite being one of the least prepared for the labour market, he had begun to focus on the next stages of his life, with aspirations of moving in with his partner and buying his own home. This suggests that the need for economic security and independence can stimulate career planning and illusio. Here, he reflects on his decision-making process regarding his future career options. *Joe: I do need a certain salary for what I want, so I have to make the decision based…on that as well, as long as I enjoy the job.*

He is beginning to realise the need to achieve a certain income level to have his independence. This speaks to the work of Hodkinson and Killeen (1997) on pragmatic rationality being both practical and emotional influences on career decisions and turning points. His relationship and need for independence have focused his mind on the level of income he needs to aspire to, but this is not at any cost; enjoyment is still an important part of his disposition, meaning he wants to earn more money, but in a career he enjoys. Moreover, he reflects that some of his dispositions have changed since university. *Joe: I would say that definitely reflecting back to university life, I'm a lot more organised, I'm a lot more driven than I have probably ever have been. After Uni I have been willing to take on any sort of skill, erm I mean I never thought I would be able to do like I am to be honest.*

He has found a job he enjoys, strengthening his belief in his possible self. Through his new position, he is beginning to gain insight into the rules of the game through experience within the field. This illustrates how 'individuals are moved by stimuli in certain fields and not others' (Wacquant, 1992, p.62). In Joe's case, he finally found his salient other and the possible self he could become as a leisure manager, strengthening his illusio, and changing his dispositions. Field-based stimuli or role models are, therefore, vital components to the

formation of illusio. However, habitus can restrict entry into new fields, hindering personal development and progression into graduate employment.

Joe: I haven't really got a....definitive career plan because like ... I was actually talking to my girlfriend about this last night, ... she said... are you enjoying where you work, I went yes I really enjoy it but I don't see myself doing that for the rest of my life. And she went well as long as you enjoy it for now and you are saving the money and as long as you are making decisions about what you want to do, you know just stick at it and then if the right opportunity comes your way, you take it.

This indicates that his girlfriend had a significant influence on supporting his decision-making and career planning, demonstrating the influential nature of relationality on PPD. There is still a sense of waiting and wondering if things will happen rather than proactively trying to create opportunities to develop and progress. It is also possible that the concept of career goals and planning needs to be reconsidered to allow for a more flexible planning approach. This approach to labour market entry aligns with the 'wait-and-see students' profile identified by Cohen-Scali (2001), who observed that these students have no firm plan or strategy for employment. Robert waits for another year while still seeking a job to find out if he has been given a place, and if he does not get on that course, he must wait another year for the course to finish and then to see if he can get on it next time.

Robert: I am still waiting to get onto my next coaching badge so that's ... so that kind of has slowed everything down because you have to apply like a year in advance and then once they announce that you have got on the course, you have to wait another year for the course to finish and then to see if you have got on it again. So, I am still waiting erm you know, waiting for a long time to try and get onto that because that kind of limits what coaching jobs I could get, and I can get.

He is patiently waiting for an unlikely opportunity, considering the competition for the role and his inexperience. He knew he needed to gain experience at a league-level club, but he perceived barriers around travel or taking a sideways step to gain experience from within a club. This suggests that his habitus and dispositional perspective placed internal

barriers, reproducing agentic inaction centred around doing the minimum and remaining comfortable.

5.4.3 Resources

Rather than step out of their comfort zones, Robert and Joe preferred to access career insight through online resources rather than interact with people in person or virtually. Here, Robert outlines who or what he considered consulting to aid their career decision-making process.

Robert: I think it's, you know, what I want to do is, you know, a career or as a job is influence what I do. So, it's not really someone, it's…I've looked at what, you know, the job entails, and it says oh you need a degree or a master's degree. So that's, kind of, influenced what, you know, I do next.

He does not believe that someone has influenced or helped to shape his career, reinforcing earlier findings of an absence of familial career advice, leaving him to operate from a remote position, his preferred disposition. This point is significant to Burke (2016), who understood that the family often supports their working-class children but cannot provide them with advice that could shape their practical mastery of university and the labour market. Instead, Robert follows the human capital careers discourse commonly used; he studies job descriptions, determining the skills and qualifications needed for each position, and then bases his decision on those needs. Many employability models and researchers champion the human capital approach, and Tomlinson's (2013 p.197) graduate capital model supports this activity, stating that graduates need to 'decode employers' recruitment criteria' to form their presentation of graduateness. Robert gained essential criteria for recruitment, but reliance on this alone resulted in him missing out on the nuanced, softer cultural capital gained from first-hand experience. Drawing on what Tomlinson (2008) calls 'soft credentials', career-enhancing activities would add much-needed value to his academic credentials, assisting him in communicating his graduate identity.

Although Robert and Joe did not actively develop their professional networks while at university, they did develop a personal network through alumni, a friend gave Robert opportunities to gain some volunteering experience and introduced him to a paid work opportunity, which he later declined.

*Robert: I did do a bit of work with ABC, who ******* works with, going into schools and putting on sessions. I only did that for a week but, you know, it's one of them where I knew as soon as I went into there it wasn't something that I wanted to do. It's not something that I could, you know, it just didn't suit me so I stopped doing that.*

Robert failed to recognise the value of gaining experience in work that was not directly associated with his career aspirations, again forgoing the opportunity to gain transferable experiential capital.

Joe asked his peers from school and university for information on job vacancies when he graduated. This is in contrast to research undertaken by Christie and Burke (2020), which suggests that higher socioeconomic groups utilise friends and family to aid their transition into employment. Not only did friends support the 'comfort seekers' in their quest for a career, but Joe's father was instrumental in using his social capital to help Joe gain his first job. His father had reached out to his network and managed to get his son an interview for a position that had not been advertised; Joe's father was instrumental in using his social capital to help Joe gain his first job.

*Joe: I got a text message off my dad saying you've got an interview. I went, okay, what's this for. Found out, found out it was for this coaching club......... Thought, well, why not. Give it a go, couldn't hurt. And came for the interview here [unclear] and it went incredibly well, and she said everything's perfect, we just need to do a practical interview to assess how you do. So, I went to ***** and met Dave, did the practical interview…the next day he said would you want the job?*

This is not unusual in some sectors where employment opportunities are not advertised, and social capital is utilised. Joe could access a job vacancy through his father's parental social capital to shortcut the normal recruitment process. This finding confirms those of

other studies from 2022. For example, a YouGov survey suggested that 'three-quarters of Britons (74%) would use their contacts if they had a child who needed a helping hand' (Abraham, 2022). According to Tomlinson, McCafferty, Fuge, and Wood (2017), access to job openings can be made easier by strong family ties, enabling graduates to access opportunities before open recruitment. However, if the family has relatively low-level social capital, this constrains the possible employment opportunities (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). In contrast, higher-status connections could facilitate a faster career trajectory (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). The constraint discussed by Friedman and Laurison was evident with Robert. In his case, his family did not have or did not use social capital to gain employment opportunities for him. *Robert: The people that I speak to regularly are the people that I'm close to. Wouldn't really speak to people that I'm not really that close with…if you know what I mean.*

With a small personal and professional network and no desire to reach out for support or direction outside of this group, Robert's opportunities to grow and access gatekeepers that could give him an advantage are limited due to his networks. In Robert's final interview, he recognised the employment pathway in coaching is often unclear and not always based on merit, as opportunities are frequently gained through professional networks. *Robert: Coaching it is a little bit more uncertain, I think it is more of who you know and, you know, what can they, you know, people ... as you get introduced to people then they will then consider you for certain things…*

As in other sectors, employment instability in sports coaching arises from the need to constantly seek further opportunities due to 'increased labour market flexibility and casualisation' (Reay, 2017, p.18). Sports coaches often trade on reputation, using their social capital to find further employment opportunities within their network. However, students like Robert struggled with the confidence to network and gain professional contacts. Here, he discusses networking: *'That's the thing, struggle to, kind of, to do that, yeah'*. Robert's personality when beginning university could be considered as introverted in nature. *Robert: I think if we were doing this interview in my foundation year or before*

that I'd probably, I don't know… I'd probably just be saying one or two weird answers. But now I can feel like I'm more confident.

Although he recognises that he has become less shy and introverted since attending university, he has remained within his 'comfort zone' and failed to develop his social and cultural capital, negatively influencing his transition into the labour market. Wilt and Revelle (2009) establish that numerous facets of how a person thinks, feels, and engages with the environment are influenced by their level of introversion. This idea is also supported by Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997), highlighting how Robert's bodily hexis prevented his interaction and ability to network. This finding is consistent with the previous work of Bourdieu (1992), emphasising that habitus often prevents a person from entering the environment. As with Robert, the habitus did not rupture as his dispositions were not open to change, preventing him from entering the environment or field for the habitus to be reformulated. This pattern of results is consistent with the previous literature on the significant disadvantage habitus can have on inequality (Devine *et al*., 2005). These findings are consistent with the claim that dispositions need to be understood, not to diminish, but to raise awareness of their collective existence and influence on choice and perceptions (Burke *et al*., 2017). The implications are that dispositions can restrict learning, acquiescence in career-enhancing opportunities, and ultimately prevent the realisation of career aspirations, contributing to reduced graduate outcomes within the labour market and continued class-based inequality.

In his earlier interview, Robert discussed his awareness of the need for high levels of additional qualifications and experience and that he had tried to achieve this. In actuality, he had obtained a few sport-specific qualifications, started an internship but never finished it, and volunteered to coach a friend's junior team, but he had no previous experience working in the field. Robert aspired to become an elite football coach. After gaining a multi-sport volunteering opportunity during university, he tried it for a short period before deciding not to continue, as it was not purely football, which was where his

interest lay. He also struggled with the behaviour management required within a school context. *Robert: I appreciate that, you know, you're not going to start something and then just be good at it or enjoy it straightaway…But I knew, kind of, straight from the beginning that it wasn't something that I was going to either improve on or was going to change my opinion of.*

Robert's brief out-of-environment experience as a multi-sport coach in a primary school mismatched with his aspirations to be an elite football coach, making him feel that it was not for him, rejecting any such role in the future. From these comments, it is apparent that comfort, 'as White (2009) points out', is where an individual feels anxiety-free, utilising limited tools to reduce the risk of failure. This also speaks to Bourdieu's (2000) suggestion of reading the future based on expectations and past experiences conditioned by the habitus. As with Joe, Robert did not have a clear focus or illusio (Bourdieu, 1990) that he was working towards, which arguably affected his willingness to step outside his habitus, restricting his knowledge of the field and feel for the game. This resulted in a lack of career planning and goal setting. Instead, a re-confirmation of the primary habitus occurred as opposed to a reformulated secondary habitus. Both Robert and Joe finished their degrees, neglecting to prioritise the process of deciding on a career, demonstrating a lack of consideration for the long term (Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). Career planning is essential for successful job searches, acquiring career happiness, and securing a job (Shury, Vivian, Turner and Downing, 2017).

Robert: I think I have maybe put a little bit too much weight on having an Undergraduate Degree and a master's degree, even though I think they are very valuable to have, I think maybe I have put too much weight on that over maybe having experience. Where I think experience would probably, you know, be more beneficial because that is the feedback from the jobs that I have applied for is, 'maybe you haven't got the experience that we are looking for'.

An explanation for his previous predisposition towards the importance of academic qualifications is offered by the work of Ingram and Abrahams (2018, p.148) who argue that if 'the new field is rejected, and so its structures are not internalised'. In Robert's

case, he was informed of the requirements of the field, but due to his dispositions, he felt uncomfortable with the requirements and therefore rejected them, focusing instead on the element he felt comfortable doing, which was gaining academic qualifications. Dispositions can be deeply rooted but, over time, can change (Hodkinson, 2008). In his final interview, a year after he graduated with his master's, he was still unemployed and had begun to seek out individuals in the field through LinkedIn. They reaffirmed the need for experience in the industry, which helped him internalise the requirement. This finding aligns with what Archer (2007) denotes as conversations conducted internally with the self to evaluate past decisions. Robert demonstrates the reflexivity that Bunn, Burke and Threadgold (2022) discuss as working-class graduates often realise the requirement to gain cultural and social capital when it is too late to mobilise them to their advantage in the labour market. He realised that to gain his desired role he needed to redress his lack of experience, resulting in him trying to regain an internship or voluntary experience. *Robert: I am not saying I would prefer to have the experience over the degree, but I think maybe if I had the experience alongside the degrees as well, that I would be in a much better position to be more successful in getting jobs, I think. Definitely.*

For Joe, the realisation of insufficient cultural capital in the form of experience came a little sooner post-graduation. After graduation, Joe used various methods to gain insight into employers and careers; however, due to his lack of knowledge of the rules of the game, he went to peculiar lengths to ascertain insight into employers. *I went to an open day at Leeds University, and I asked if they did any, like if there was any companies they work with regarding teaching.* Eventually, aided by his social capital, he gained part-time employment as a sports coach. He was still unsure what his career goals were, despite having gained some insight into other career options such as physiotherapist and preschool worker through paid or voluntary experience. His indecision, knowledge of the rules of the game, and level of illusio impacted his transition.

During our final interview nearly two years after graduation, he discussed gaining a job as a lifeguard at a local leisure facility. He had been recommended for the job by a friend.

The post was not a graduate-level job, but there was an opportunity to receive management training. Here, Joe is demonstrating his use of low-level social capital, as Granovetter (1985) conceptualises that family and close friends can generate awareness of job openings. In doing this, Joe exhibits a shift in his employment strategy (Burke, 2016), enabling him the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge of other employment opportunities in the sport and leisure industry. Thus, expanding his insight and 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998).

Adding to their financial comfort was the minimal influence of relational ties to geographical place, with Joe openly wanting to move away and Robert aspiring to work in America. They were both single males, without responsibilities or dependants relying on them for financial support, thus free from the relationality that restricted the actions of other participants. The combination of financial assistance from their families, a propensity to emphasise enjoyment, and scholastic capital contributed to their minimal illusio and weak approach to career management, resulting in a lack of understanding of the rules of the game.

Robert and Joe did not work whilst undertaking their studies, which goes against previous research that argues that most students from working-class backgrounds need a student job to survive (Bonnard, 2023). Their financial stability continued postgraduation, suggesting family income may be substantially greater than the average for the HSED area, allowing their children to live more comfortably without needing to work. Robert and Joe lived with their family after graduation, and although Joe felt the need to get a job straight away, as was also found by Vigurs *et al*.'s (2019) research on working-class graduate gap years. They both were not put under any pressure by their parents to gain a job straight away, which speaks to middle-class values (Brooks and Everitt, 2009). These findings complement Burke's (2016) concept of the "static working-class," characterised by individuals who, lacking capital beyond their degree credentials, demonstrated low levels of practical and symbolic mastery, minimal reflexivity in educational and career planning, and limited out-of-environment experience. However, they were not similar in

their need to work to live for economic security. Therefore, they are caught between having the financial capital to afford the luxury of searching for the right job—a privilege often associated with the middle-class—and the habitus of the static working-class, which is out of touch with the competitive graduate labour market and lacks an inherited feel for the game.

The field can also present structural barriers. This was felt acutely by those in early career transition during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak disrupted most industries, impacting individuals in their development as Joe demonstrates. *Joe: professionally ... because I had done so well in the months that I had taken my new job, they actually put me forward for management training, so I feel as though had Covid had not come in I would possibly be completing my training or at least starting it.*

As a consequence of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, Joe had limited development opportunities. His life remained on pause as most recruitment and training was suspended by organisations. This finding matches the research of Green, Henseke, and Schoon (2021), who found that during the pandemic, young people in employment who requested in-house training in industries that were essentially inoperable during lockdown were affected most. This was not the case for all conceptual groups, in particular, the risk-takers were least affected by the pandemic restrictions. After finding a new and strengthened illusio, Joe has still not got a clear plan on how to develop his new career. This could be due to the pandemic pausing development and a lack of knowledge of the rules of the game.

5.4.4 Comfort seeker summary

Individual students engage differently with information and insight about their industry and career opportunities within it. This summary aims to provide a brief synopsis of how limiting factors of the 'comfort seeker' conceptual group impacted how they gained insight and developed social and cultural capital. During their time at university, the 'comfort seekers' preference was to consume at a distance, remain comfortable, and seek

insight through online resources, resulting in surface-level knowledge. After graduation, they maintained their detached strategy by scanning job sites and mailing out letters and CVs. After little success, Joe's family and friends began reaching out to their networks utilising their social capital to gain employment insight on Joe's behalf. This created opportunities for Joe to gain experience and begin building his professional network. Meanwhile, Robert's professional network remained inert until he began to reach out to industry professionals; he did not possess the familial capital to gain career insight. Thus, taking them longer to understand the rules of the game, leading to delayed illusio and development of graduate identity, as Steur, Jansen, and Hofman (2012) concur.

The ever-evolving labour market in the UK places increasing demands on graduates and those wanting to enter their desired careers. The global Coronavirus pandemic has compounded these pressures. Employers expect high levels of experience and industry-specific qualifications, as they do in most labour market sectors. The sports industry presents some unique challenges, such as informal hiring practices, ambiguous career routes, the need for active and current professional networks, the desire for a finished product, and selectivity due to higher demand than supply for these vocations. For those respondents who do not have an idea of their possible selves, they do not have an interest in investing in the worth of the game, unable to commit to an illusio. Therefore, Robert and Joe chose not to invest time and effort in career planning or gaining role-relevant experience. Instead, their 'comfort-seeking' deeply ingrained dispositions and financial security prompted them to sit back and wait, hoping, wishing, and wondering if opportunities would present themselves. Their habitus was reconfirmed, and although they showed signs of reformulation of dispositions, the primary habitus remained. This resulted in professional network stagnation, frustration at hysteresis, and an enduring lack of comprehension of the rules of the game.

5.5 In the game: 'To A Degree' conceptual group

This section of the findings and discussion sets out the conceptualisation of the 'to a degree' conceptual group. The participants that fall into this category are Jess and Harry,

who both developed a strengthened illusio during their time at university (see Figure 5.8). Harry found his possible self and illusio for a career during his first year of study, whereas Jess began to develop hers in the final year. Like any conceptual grouping, there are minor areas of similarity and/or difference. However, these two participants were distinctive, owing to inhibiting factors relating to their lower resources and the employer practices that hindered access to their desired careers.

5.5.1 Educational strategies

Harry joined City University for his final top-up year to gain his full degree, after studying his first two years at college. Harry was determined to complete his degree and gain the necessary qualifications to move forward. Here, he reflects on his feelings about the year at City University. *Harry: I didn't overly enjoy the year to be honest, it was a case of let's get through it. I've got to get, I want to get my full degree, let's get it done and we'll see where it takes us.*

The final year of the degree was viewed as a means to an end, a requirement to obtain the qualifications to work as an elite football coach. This demonstrates a purely pragmatic decision due to the need for the qualification rather than one based on passion or aspiration. Exposing what Randall Collins discussed in his 1979 seminal work on 'The Credential Society' as Credentialism, the inflationary effects on educational credentials such as degrees, cause a lowering of perceived value (Collins, 1979). Harry did not perceive his final year to be beneficial to his development; it was regarded as necessary, finding the assignments challenging and overly academic. Top-up students frequently struggle to integrate into university from a college environment (HEA and NUS, 2013). However, Harry was a strategic learner, meaning he learned the prerequisites to accomplish just enough to receive an adequate result. In the final year of the degree, there were fewer curriculum opportunities for practical experience, as these were offered in years one and two, allowing students to focus on larger academic assignments. This resulted in Harry not being offered career-enhancing activities as he had studied his first

two years elsewhere. Harry's awareness of the need to build a professional network and experience forced him to proactively seek career-enhancing opportunities for himself.

Harry: …I wanted a placement at City FC, and I wanted it to be an attainable job that I could get when I leave City. So, the main reason I came here [City University] was because it was close to Keepersfield and I could get a placement at City Football Club working with the community trust.

Harry was utterly focused on gaining as much as possible during his time at university. Here, he explains his educational strategy and reason for attending this university; as a mobile student, he aimed to work with a high-profile employer in his field whilst studying to increase his chances of employment post-university. Harry goes on to reveal that his efforts towards Keepersfield in another major city were to increase his professional network and insight into the career opportunities near his family.

Harry: I was probably more concentrated on my work placement at the time and trying to build some sort of network here and then back in Keepersfield as well. So, I'd always travel back every weekend while I was here to Keepersfield to work for a place called Goals. … just to get us access to loads of different coaches...

This demonstrates Harry's educational and employment strategy, as he was aware of the necessary need for educational credentials but not at the expense of building professional networks and experience, demonstrating a practical mastery of the game. Harry's network-building falls in opposition to much of the work on working-class students and graduates, who found that due to the working-class habitus, there was little understanding of the rules of the game (Spence and Carter, 2014; Steur, Janson and Hoffman, 2012).

Paradoxically, Jess had been more focused towards gaining scholastic capital throughout her undergraduate degree, primarily due to dispositions and caring responsibilities. At the end of her undergraduate degree, Jess realised the need for experience and utilised the opportunities offered by the university during her master's and PGCE to begin to build her experiential assets, including social and cultural capital. They were both the same age, but

Harry had previously worked in several professions. This is an important distinction as the prior experience of the labour market and career dissatisfaction impacted Harry's possible self, driving his strength of illusio, strategies and feel for the game during his undergraduate degree.

Students with caring commitments, like Jess, struggled to find the time outside of university to take on additional voluntary or paid work. Jess focused on gaining the best possible grades as a way of securing her future. Avoiding socialising or building social capital, her strategy was academic credentials. Jess: *I focused on wanting the big grades. Erm, and I didn't really seek the party life that other people did, like on my courses.*

Studying and striving for scholastic capital were things she could control. She believed they would provide a return on the time and effort she was investing. Here, she demonstrates her frustration as her reliance on academic achievement was not highly valued within the labour market.

Jess: I know I've got like my degree and I'm going to have a Master's. But my idea is that I can have a qualification next to me… that… people will actually look at me for. Because I've got a first-class degree, but people aren't really still looking at me, like I can't be a teacher because I haven't got a PGCE, or I can't go into coaching because I can't drive.

Jess's frustration at her inability to immediately secure a graduate-level job after achieving a first-class undergraduate degree is congruent with the hysteresis felt by Joe and Robert and many other working-class graduates, as previous research has shown (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Burke, 2016; Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018). As the rules of the game within the field shift, it leaves a time gap filled with anxiety for those left without the inside track (Bourdieu, 1977). This is applicable to the graduate labour market whereby certain habitus have a delayed understanding and response to changes of devaluation (Burke *et al*., 2017). At this point, Jess realised that she needed to overcome her deficit of social, cultural capital and experiential assets and decide on a possible self with a clear career path. Due to limited access to field specific opportunities, Jess utilised

the curriculum opportunities provided on a postgraduate teaching course to gain experience and build up her professional network.

Jess: I did work placement at City College, erm and then ... graduated. ... I carried on with my placement…because they wanted me to do some marking, because the lecturer I was working with, she went off sick and they really liked this work I was doing, so they asked me if I could carry on… it was just as we started going into the first bit of lockdown and everything was kind of like shutting. Then I had a good six months off and then the past five weeks I got a job again at City College doing sport and actually getting paid for it this time.

The work placement led to paid part-time fixed-term work with the same organisation. This could be seen as luck that there was an opening whilst Jess was on placement. Alternatively, had Jess not accessed this opportunity or been remembered, the employment opportunity would probably not have come her way, or she would have had to compete. Trusting relationships is a vital component of social capital, leveraging position in an informal flexible labour market, echoing Burke's (2016) observation that social capital is only beneficial if it is of a level of power to be useful and you have capital to exchange. Jess's college lecturing placement was a turning point in her strength of illusio, demonstrating as Atkinson (2010) indicates that out-of-environment experience can have a substantial influence on the habitus. If the dispositions are receptive to new experiences, the permeable nature of habitus enables dispositional change and the potential of habitus rupture (Reay, 2004). Jess's employment situation has similarities to that of Burke's (2016) converted working-class. They both have a poor understanding of the graduate labour market, experienced failed strategies and have exchanged one-off capital to achieve employment, somewhat temporary in Jess's case.

5.5.2 Career strategies

Bourdieu (1996) and Bathmaker (2015) emphasise that the players within the field compete and negotiate with those in positions of power. To gain positionality within the field, Jess and Harry attempted to gain insight into the rules of the game; Jess's dispositions gave her the tendency to want to access information remotely where

possible. Jess read through job advertisements and job descriptions to see what qualifications were required. Tomlinson (2013) supports this, stating that graduates need to 'decode employers' recruitment criteria to form their own presentation of graduateness (Tomlinson, 2013, p.197). The findings of this study suggest that graduateness requires students to have a much broader understanding of the rules of the game to develop graduate identity capital. Knowledge of the unwritten rules comes from networks and cultural capital gained through interaction with those in positions of power within a given field. This level of awareness took time for Jess to develop. In contrast, Harry was developing a good feel for the game, understanding that experiential assets were a crucial element in gaining insight and cultural capital to assist in his development and opportunities for employment.

At university Harry spoke with and observed the teaching team, discovering information on the types of employment open to him, stimulating the 'sense of illusio'.

Harry: When I started university those first two years, is when I built up a realisation of what I want to do and who I was…and then that's when I sort of saw roles that were applicable. I looked at what the people that were educating me were doing and I thought I can do that. How do I do that?

It follows that, as Bourdieu (1998, p.40) exemplifies, 'all the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.' Through interactions with those in possession of powerful industry knowledge, Harry was inspired to discover more. This emotional connection influenced his decision-making and encouraged his transformation. As Bourdieu (1982) notes, illusio—the deep commitment to the game—enhances investment in it. The teaching team at college inspired him, giving him the drive to find out how to gain further field-specific knowledge (rules of the game) to improve his power and position within the field.

Harry: They were working in the daytime in the university coaching football, coaching footballers, players that'd been released from academies or wherever and had gone onto

college/university programmes, and then doing an academy job at night. All of them drive decent cars, all of them have decent lifestyles. I thought I could that, that's a bit of me. I asked one of them is that a joke right? Well, no, not really. So, it's like well that's something I can do.

To make sense of Harry's belief, I drew upon the early work of Markus and Nurius (1986, p.955) who wrote about an 'individuals' self-knowledge of what is possible for them to achieve is motivation as it is particularized and individualized; it serves to frame behaviour and to guide its course'. They go on to discuss how an individual's past self, informs 'possible selves' in the future. Harry's reflexiveness towards what he achieved in the past and his self-knowledge of what he believed he could achieve in the future aided the strength of feeling towards his 'possible self'. The possible self is set within the context of what is possible, impacted by habitus. Only by observing and speaking to the football coaches at college, did he interpret this as personally achievable. Thus, Bourdieu reaffirms that 'Belief is…an inherent part of belonging to a field…' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.67).

Towards the end of her undergraduate degree, Jess also began to use her social capital to gain insight into the rules of the game. She developed a close relationship with her lecturer and personal tutor to inform her decision on which master's degree to pursue.
Jess: I don't really know how I came to wanting to do like a Master's. It was something that, um, I sat down and spoke to Claire about. Um, and, um, I asked… Like, I wanted to do a Master's, but I wasn't sure on what kind of master's degree to go for, what kind of course to look for.

This suggests two factors. Firstly, the perceived lack of knowledge of how she came about wanting to undertake a master's suggests poor career management, which could be linked to habitus. Secondly, her strategy to gain insight from those in positions of power suggests, as Bourdieu (1998) argues, an underlying awareness of ways to gain a position within the field. After completing her master's degree, Jess investigated the possibility of undertaking a PhD. Using her professional academic network, she contacted the Dean to ask for any opportunities to do a social science PhD at her current institution.

*Jess: I emailed, um, ****** asking him if there was any social sciences PhDs going… And he said, no, there isn't any going. He did look into it, but they haven't got anything running. So, then I emailed a couple of other universities. ****, I think was one of them. And they actually replied to me, and they wanted a proposal from me and everything. And I realised I didn't actually have any full-fledged proposal ready. So, that panicked me and I was like, right, okay, and I kept that email. [Chuckling]. I haven't replied or responded, but I kept it.*

This exemplifies what Spence and Carter (2014) refer to as habitus a factor that can concurrently be an enabling or constraining power. Such a power can either support or restrict an actor's view of what is possible and how to perform to potentially establish improved positionality within the field. Her habitus and lived experiences meant that she was constrained to pursue those career aspirations through a lack of knowledge of the rules of the game within the desired field. On the surface, Jess has developed social capital with professional contacts within academia at her institution. However, as Burke (2016) argues, high levels of social capital are demonstrated when individuals can use them to increase or reproduce their success in a certain field. It could be argued that she had contacts that were able to increase her opportunities but could not or would not, due to low social capital. The inability to use her social capital led her to reach outside her network with little knowledge of the rules of the game and its expectations. As a result, she received a request that unnerved her, as she was uncertain about the expectations of the PhD application process. Consequently, her decision to pursue a PhD was constrained. As White (2009) suggests, a person operates in the comfort zone when operating in a situation where they feel anxiety-free, utilising limited tools to reduce the risk of failure. Writing a proposal and pursuing a path previously untrodden would require her to come out of her comfort zone, so instead, she filed the email and did not reply. This example demonstrates how habitus can constrain individual agency, but this risks a simplistic theorisation. In addition to habitus, Jess was also constrained by illusio, economic capital, and relationality.

Although Jess and Harry became aware of the need to reach out to those in positions of power for information, this was made more difficult by their lack of familial habitus, which

would have provided a priori knowledge and access to professional opportunities. They demonstrated self-reliance in their professional development. Jess outlines here whom she did and did not consider consulting for support during and beyond university. *Jess: I tend to do all of my own research first, find it all out first on my own. I don't know, my mum and dad don't really… I don't know, I want to say they don't really understand it but I think half of it's just that they're letting me get on with it.*

Her parents' lack of knowledge to be able to help her and the perceived need for her to be independent result in her not consulting them on career decisions, which can be empowering but also a disadvantage. Familial social and cultural capital could provide access to industry-relevant knowledge and employment opportunities, speeding up the labour market transition process and subsequent employment opportunities, progression and earnings (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). As noted in the research by Liu (2015) middle-class students tend to have greater access to job-related information compared to their less privileged peers, which also leads them to secure better positions in the labour market. Those without the opportunities created by familial habitus or capital are repressed, limiting access to opportunities for progression and creating inequality of opportunity.

Harry, like Jess, also rejected consulting his parents about career planning. Here, he notes that his dad did not really have a career and floated from job to job with little purpose. *…He went on and just worked dead-end jobs…He worked in Walkers, he worked as a taxi driver…Like I needed some sort of career.*

The need for a fulfilling career was stimulated by his desire to achieve more than his parents had achieved. The findings concur with those of Bowers-Brown (2016) whose research highlighted how the non-achievements of family, in particular parents, motivated them to go to university. After initially taking his grandfather's advice on developing a trade, he decided a career in decorating was not providing him with the fulfilment he desired. Therefore, when making the decision to change, he investigated and gathered

information on career pathways outside of the norm for his family, resulting in him going it alone as they were unable to advise. As Thomas and Jones (2007) and Crew (2020) point out, students from lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to have 'inferior' amounts of social capital since the individuals they know have limited access to or influence in graduate-level employment. However, my data suggests that although lower resourced graduates may begin with lower levels of social capital, motivation to realise illusio can improve social and cultural capital levels through participation in HE and industry, developing institutional, academic and cultural capital.

In the world of sports coaching, and in particular football, the industry often operates informal recruitment practices. Harry illustrates the informal nature and often tokenistic application process he experienced in his approximately four years in coaching.

Harry: I've never applied for a job in sport, ever. Erm, it's always been either a conversation, or me asking a question... I've never filled out an application form, I've never had to fill out an application form in my life for a job. Just always well, spoke, and it happens, I get them. …It's always been a case of who you know, not what you know.

Up to this point, he had never applied for a job in football; instead, he had always been given jobs or positions through word of mouth, relying on his social capital and professional networks. In a sense, this contradicts and supports Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) proposal that cultural capital is exchanged, valued, and used to exclude others from jobs and other opportunities.

Harry refers to his employment success as role-filling, whereby people are placed into positions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This usually involves recruiting those that are tried and tested first, those known to the employer; then they reach out to their network to find other coaches that they can offer employment to. Sports coaching employers want the best they can get and the route of least pain to fill insecure, nonstandard employment zero hours contracts (Ives, Gale, Potrac and Nelson, 2021). Harry reflects on being head-hunted for a sports coaching role due to his reputation.

Harry: …you know he gives you a job because he'd heard of me, that was all it was with him. He'd never met me. Truth be told he probably wasn't overly keen on my personality, probably just liked me a little bit more than others. …if I'd messed up I would've been gone. Like work's not doing me a favour, you know, it's a mutual thing.

In other words, he recognised that undertaking work in football coaching was precarious work (Kalleberg, 2018). By this, I assert that working in this field is unstable and insecure, resulting in the balance of risk, lying with the individual rather than the employer, with little employment protection for workers (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018).

Harry was interested in progressing in the football coaching industry; however, to enable a grassroots coach to progress to academy-level coaching, the coach must gain a UEFA B licence. Harry is frustrated at the perceived capping of progression by the English Football Association. He needs a secure 2-year contract at a league-level Football Club to gain the next coaching qualification. Then he needs money to fund the course. Limited places are available on a course, and before the pandemic, they ran one course per year. At the time of the interview, during the pandemic, there were no courses currently available in England. Harry believes his demographic status does not help when the FA are looking to close the inequality gap in the football workforce.

Harry: …one thing that I know they have done in Keepersfield in terms of Level 2s and stuff, is a lot of BAME stuff, which is great for people in this area, so one of the clubs I work for, they are always massive in sort of getting BAME people involved in coaching but obviously as much as I support all that, again it doesn't really affect me, being a 26-year-old white English male. Erm, and the same with the girl's side of it as well, which I think… they need to push… but again it means that somebody like me maybe doesn't fall into those categories, so I am just sort of hoping that they sort of buck their ideas up and they make it available for everyone.…

Unfortunately, young white males are not a priority group for workforce development, focusing instead on positive action to increase representation to achieve a more diverse workforce (The Football Association, 2020). However, he perceives that the FA do not want ordinary coaches from the grassroots to progress to the elite academy level. He suggests accessibility needs to change, embedding professional qualifications within

university courses could improve access and the standard of coaching in England. Grassroots football in England is run by a third-sector national governing body for the sport, the FA; domestic Elite Football players are developed through privately owned football academies operated independently under what Bourdieu (1996a) terms 'restricted cultural reproduction'. Restricted access to licensed professions constrains supply, which in turn increases average salaries (Wolf, 2019). As Spence and Carter (2014) convincingly argue, autonomous fields have their own rules as they are not answerable to external influences. Harry has bought into the illusio of elite football coaching and is disheartened and frustrated at the restriction of capital in the field. Such symbolic domination, whereby inequality is produced and maintained (Grenfell, 2008) within the coaching hierarchy, could be seen as symbolic violence.

Jess also noted difficulties in progressing into lecturing in HE. She stated that you need to be employed as an HE lecturer before being able to access the teaching qualification to enable you to teach in universities. *Jess: I'd like to be a [university] lecturer, but you can't do that course unless you're already working… at a university.* To become a lecturer, typically, you must have or be nearing completion of a PhD or professional doctorate. Alongside this, academic or industry experience is required, and it is desirable to have a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Education (PgCHPE) (University of London, 2024).

Harry and Jess tried to minimise the impact of the labour market. These graduates adapted their employment seeking strategies by targeting large-scale organisations they hoped would offer greater employment security and opportunity for training and development. Due to the perceived risks of financial instability, combined with a lack of experience, Jess lowered her expectations of her ideal job. Jess decided to seek employment as a lecturer in further education as opposed to gaining a PhD in the hope of securing a job as a university lecturer. My reading of this links to Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, quoted in Hodkinson, 2008, p.10) work on pragmatic rationality, that 'career decisions are indeed embodied, though because of the tacit dimension, it is not often

possible to separate out practical, physical, emotional and affective aspects'. Jess perceived there was a greater chance of attaining a job in further education, providing her with stability, whilst enabling her to build experience towards a university lecturing position or a PhD.

This decision was tacit and based on her understanding of the field and her position within it. The tacit nature of the decision makes it difficult to extrapolate; however, recognition must be given that the decision was pragmatically rational. Reinforcing this analysis is Bourdieu's (1984, p.110) concept of the 'field of the possibles' (emphasis in the original), where habitus and capital impose embodied social constraints. These constraints shape decisions about what is possible or impossible based on an analysis of the objective chances of achieving the desired outcome. Individuals also tend to 'avoid fields that involve a field-habitus clash' (Maton, 2008, p.59). Essentially, Jess's decision to become a university lecturer was tempered by her perception that the field was too difficult to enter and by her material constraints, which required her to start earning a sufficient amount to support herself and her child.

5.5.3 Resources

Harry observed many students like Jess that focused on the academic achievement over building professional networks.

Harry: I saw people at Uni that, you know…would actually blitz me for grades. Unbelievably clever, but then I have a strong feeling that if you asked how many of those people could find a job in sport afterwards, they probably couldn't and it is because they didn't get to know people, they didn't network people, they didn't put the effort into the volunteering work they were doing, erm they didn't come out of places and have people remember them. Erm and I think, rightly or wrongly, … I think sometimes people judge a personality over what they can actually do. … I think I have sort of focused, especially in my last year at Uni and then my master's year, focused on that balance of 'yes I need to do this' but then by the same token make sure that you come across the right way'.

Perhaps one of the most compelling findings was Harry's feel for the game and his ability to learn the rules of the game. This speaks clearly with Bourdieu's (1998) work on

‘practical mastery’ and ‘practical knowledge’, demonstrated when playing the game. Harry played the game to the best of his ability, valuing accruing social capital over scholastic capital. He rebukes other students who were too focused on getting the best marks and not building social and cultural capital. This speaks to Bourdieu’s lens of illusio, individuals with a strong illusio ‘can tell who is playing badly or using an unorthodox style, but they rarely ask if the game is worth playing at all’ (Bourdieu, 1982, p.84).

Instead, Harry was strategic in the development of his academic skills: how to research, put it across and gain good enough marks to gain the scholastic capital. The 'feel for the game' is an intuition for the consistencies of practice, born out of habitus (Grenfell, 2008). A possible explanation for this finding is a ‘rupture of habitus’ developed through out-of-environment experience (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2018) in educational and employment fields. This finding concurs with Sin, Tavares and Amaral's (2016) reference to students internalising responsibility for their own employability and proactive use of extra-curricular activities to develop strategic positioning over others in the field.

Harry: I see university as, you need to do the work, to pass and to keep your place at university, but you need to try and build a network. You need to try and build relationships; you need to make sure that when you graduate six months down the line that they’ll remember you. 12 months down the line they’ll remember you. Erm, otherwise it’s just another number, who can easily end up working at Asda. That can easily happen, because there’s no opportunities out there really, there’s not many. And people give opportunities to people they remember.

These points are significant as they demonstrate an awareness of and a focus on, the wider opportunities that HE provides for building social and cultural capital—not just subject knowledge. Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne's (2017) work echoed these thoughts, suggesting the development of social capital by graduates is a way of balancing out social injustice, enabling access to field insight and opportunities. Harry’s strong emphasis on being remembered, categorically links to building strong relationships with professional contacts. This reflects Burke’s (2016) assertion that strategic social capital is only beneficial if it can be exchanged, and connections used for an individual's benefit,

recognising the importance of strong ties and relationships in building professional networks. Social and cultural capital in the field of sport and particularly elite football is deemed of greater importance than scholastic and economic capital. Despite this, Harry argues that support from professional networks is not value-free. *Harry: People don't do it out of personal, they don't mind helping you out, but there's always I think there's a mutual thing there.* Harry's insight demonstrates how social capital exchange for career opportunities and advancement in football centres on a mutually beneficial arrangement, where support is offered on a win-win basis, expanding the often-philanthropic discourse within social network literature. Additionally, this exchange also offers a holistic view of social network interactions, to enrich understanding beyond graduate 'exploitative and general networking behaviour' (Batistic and Tymon, 2017, p.382). Harry's observations of strategic exploitive networking demonstrate his growing knowledge of the wider rules and how to play the game within the field of Football coaching.

Jess also recognised from her time in sports coaching that it was hard to maintain contacts, particularly when you have a break away from the field when having a child.

Jess: I think that year gap I had, I kind of like lost a couple of, like, contacts. And then, as I've tried to come back into it, it's... I mean, you know, some employers look at your CVs and stuff and notice that you've had like a year out or something. …Like, realistically, I've not had a job for nearly three years now.

The sports industry is fast-moving and short-term focused. After taking a year out, she believes this held her back, causing a loss of her professional network and insight into employment opportunities. Sports Coaching, like other fields, has informal recruitment practices. Making it difficult to rebuild once you are out of the loop or your contacts have moved on.

To understand the field's impact on female career planning, I drew on Finn's (2016) work. Finn identified that female graduates make decisions about their employment choices through their 'personal and emotional lives' (2016, p.11); their transitions are affected by

both rational and irrational factors based on emotional and relational dimensions. Like Finn, I observed a strong relational dimension to Jess's social mobility; here, she explains her reasoning.

*Jess: …because of my relationship, her jobs in City, and she doesn't drive. And secondly, I'd have to think about if **** could even get in a school outside of where I was working. So, that's two things I'd have to think about before I'm even considering moving … I'd have to look at… seeing if I could do the commute instead, before moving.*

Similarly, Lynch, Lyons, and Cantillon (2007) identify the importance of caring and other interdependent relationships within graduate employment. These emotional and relational dimensions related to people and place affect graduate labour market transitions, representing rational and irrational choices. This finding is consistent with Spence and Carter (2014), who remind us that habitus limits actors' aspirations and horizons of possibility. Therefore, it is proposed that Jess's habitus remained ruptured only 'to a degree' due to the restriction of economic capital and the influence of relationality on the strength of illusio required to rupture habitus.

To build on the findings of Finn (2016), who identified the influence of relationality on lower resourced female graduate decision-making processes, Harry, an lower resourced male graduate, also demonstrates that relationality was critical in his decision-making, indicating that the concept of relationality is influential across genders. Despite Harry's strong belief in the 'illusio' of the game, he had gained institutional capital and low-level social capital. Constraints in Harry's habitus were also influenced by relationality; when he was younger relationships had restricted his willingness to take opportunities to build experience and cultural capital. During the transition into the labour market, Harry portrayed an excellent example of a change to his dispositions and rupture of habitus. He accepted the opportunity to cover a coaching session, which led to an offer to coach the under-nines—a role he acknowledged he did not want. However, he went against the norms of his primary habitus and took the opportunity. This decision led to further work abroad, allowing him to gain cultural capital and a deeper understanding of the rules of

the game. As I looked more closely at this data, I was struck by the parallels of what Costa *et al*. (2017, p.20) referred to as 'In times of change or rupture, the habitus – albeit a reconfigured habitus – provides a point of reference to observe and examine dispositions. Harry's rupture of dispositions through the embodiment of another field's rules, made observing the reconfigured habitus possible.

This willingness to take an opportunity to help the business when needed was rewarded by being given the option to have two different job roles with increased hours of employment. In this example, cultural capital has value and results in an exchange for economic capital. This exchange aligns with what Savage and Devine (2005) refer to as the ability to mobilise capital within fields, being dependent on personal characteristics and flexibility. Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) concur that people who self-manage their careers require themselves to remain flexible and proactive. Whilst these were still not full-time positions and were on short-term contracts, had he not taken the opportunity and gained cultural and social capital, he probably would not have been considered for these positions.

In our final interview Harry contemplates how his dispositions have changed to be less relationally focused, liberating him to make decisions based on what's best for him and his career.

Harry: If someone said you know are you going to move away to Denmark for three years, you know you're not going to see the UK, I'd go, it wouldn't bother me. There'd be nothing… You know maybe my grandad, but that's about it. Whereas before I'd always sort of made decisions about I got such and such there, this is happening there, so let's rely on people as well as profession. And that's probably the one thing that's probably tweaked since I was young and since I went through university to now.

Relational capital can take many forms and relate to personal friendships, familial ties, or place. No individual is an island, but our habitus and dispositions align us to more normative ways of living, i.e., staying local to the community we grew up in and close to family. As previously introduced, Harry had experienced constraints to his career

progression due to his relationships with people and place. Here, I will show in more detail how he came to this revelatory realisation.

Harry: I always used to rely on people. People make you happy, and going out and having a good time with friends will make you happy. But it doesn't. I think now a stable lifestyle, decent job, getting up every morning and wanting to go to work. I think that's probably what makes me happy.

Harry's reflection shows he had previously relied on often unstable relationships to maintain his happiness and emotional wellbeing, but over time, he realised and rejected these constraints. His views have now changed to represent contentment in his work and achieving his career aspirations. What Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002, p.22-23) describe as individualism; 'The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time'. His discontent emanates from the realisation that his past personal relationships (relationality) have controlled and disempowered his agency to act on his illusio. Instead of relying on personal relationships for emotional wellbeing, he aspires for stability and satisfaction in playing the game. However, to view this narrative as simply an agentic decision towards neo-liberal individualism misses the relational context in which this narrative is cited. As Mason (2004, p.178) warns, 'central to the very essence of identity and agency is people's connectivity with others.' In essence, it is imperative to keep the web of relationships in sight, more so than the individual, as agentic practices rarely happen in isolation.

Any individual's potential to advance is greatly affected by the resources (economic, cultural, and social) to which they have access (Hodkinson, 2008). Like many elite professions, football coaching as a field is inaccessible without sufficient cultural capital. To obtain such capital, an individual requires independent means of economic and social capital to gain the opportunity and time to be available to gain it. Academy football is the entry level into elite football coaching; the roles are often part-time; this was a key opportunity for Harry to gain access to the social space. *'Say in football coaching at a high level you need to be useful, dependable and available to help when and where needed,*

flexibility and adaptability is key'. He recognises the importance of dependence and adaptability to gain and retain employment at a high level; without them, opportunities are withdrawn. These results are consistent with the findings of Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004); Bridgstock (2009); and Clarke (2018) who describe adaptability as the active adaptation tailored to the workplace that helps employees to recognise and seize career chances. However, many sociological writers have questioned the legitimacy of focusing solely on individual human capital, what Christie and Burke (2020) describe as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism fails to recognise the influence of entrenched structural inequality and power inequalities within the labour market (Bathmaker, 2021). Harry demonstrates an awareness of this structural power, suggesting that *… as soon as you become less useful to somebody I have found; they can easily forget. So, it's the idea is to stay useful, stay in coaching, in sport, in football…*

He believed he was only in the frame for opportunities when actively working within the organisation or industry. He worried if he left the industry, perhaps to earn more in a different job, he would no longer be remembered when people were considering who to offer positions to. The field is a social space that involves negotiation between participants in the process of positioning both the self and others, reliant on the power of others to position them for opportunities to advance. As Bourdieu conceives, the field is a site of struggle and constant change (Grenfell, 2008), where instability and informal recruitment practices within the football industry result in constant change and require individuals to be available and adaptable to compete for positions within their professional field.

Harry: If I let one foot come out of the door then its 50% of always having them both out of the door, if you know what I mean. Erm a bit like a dog with a bone, I am not ready to let go. I would rather earn half the money and keep myself in sport because I think, it's like anything, as soon as you step out, I think it's so hard to get back into something because your face fades away and you have become slightly more irrelevant.

Here, Harry is emphasising the need to keep his position within the field; he has worked hard to build a reputation for being dependable. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p.6) theorised that 'horizons for action are influenced by a person's position, by the nature of

the field or fields within which they are positioned, and the embodied dispositions of the person him/herself'. Harry's position in the field depends on dispositional change within the habitus: being available, adaptable, and dependable. He relies on relationships within his professional network for employment opportunities and knows he will lose his position in the field if he is not available for work. As Reay (2015, p.12) insightfully points out, Bourdieu 'writes of habitus as consisting, in part, of bodily beliefs that are passions and drives' and suggests that the interaction between the habitus and the field is consistently influenced by affectivity, through affective transactions between habitus and the field. This affectivity from the field requires his habitus to change, to rupture new dispositions to maintain his position. The reflection of Hodkinson (2008, p.10) that 'career is always part of unequal and complex relational interactions' aligns with Harry's dependence on relationships within the field to maintain his position and progression. Harry's strengthening illusio speaks to aspects of affect and bodily belief. He is emotionally invested, which motivates his continued struggle, echoing Threadgold's (2021) analysis of illusio: 'One must invest effort, time and emotions to pursue them…'. Consequentially, achievement or failure in these investments has emotional repercussions.

The ability to drive and have access to a car was an important enabling factor in many participant stories. For those who did drive, it enabled them to access volunteering and employment opportunities and a range of other enhancements to everyday living. Learning to drive and then affording and maintaining a vehicle comes at a high cost and can be prohibitive for those without the economic capital. It is more problematic for job seekers who do not have access to their own vehicles to access employment owing to their dependency on public transportation (Bastiaanssen, Johnson and Lucas, 2022). Both Harry and Jess were the only graduates who left university unable to drive. While at university, Harry did not see the necessity of driving; he rented accommodation close to campus and could access most places by public transport. He was also fortunate to have built up a strong relationship with his employer and had an understanding that they would help transport him to the venue. His primary habitus shaped Harry's reluctance to drive. Burke and Hannaford-Simpson (2020, p.20) offer a useful portrayal asserting 'how an

individual would assess and opt-out of experiences contrary to its initial dispositions'. The constraining nature of habitus is what Bourdieu (1977, p.78) describes as 'regulated improvisations'. Over time, Harry develops a 'feel for the game' indicating a change to primary habitus; here, he signifies his delayed realisation of the importance of driving.

Harry: I was very late to the party in terms of passing my driving test. Erm so anybody that wants to coach I would say straight away probably in their first year at Uni, pass your driving test…, because if you don't you will be struggling, and I don't think a lot of people realise.

Harry realised that being mobile—specifically, having a car—makes you more employable in sports coaching. If you are more employable, you are more likely to gain early experience in the field, which helps build cultural capital and professional networks. If you apply for a sports coaching role and you are unable to drive, you are less likely to be offered the job.

*Harry: …I passed, got a cheap and cheerful motor and … it's definitely helped. It has meant I could take on the RTC role… I am driving all the way to ***********… here there and everywhere for fixtures. And you know you can't get the train down with a bag of footballs and cones in your hand, you know what I mean, it's not practical. (laughs).*

When Harry passed his driving test, he was able to access high-level coaching employment, which required regional travel. The ability to drive and access his own transport was necessary for the role, enabling him to gain economic, cultural and experiential assets. Jess had also not prioritised learning to drive during her undergraduate degree. Jess's inability to drive cost her employment opportunities, she interviewed for a position and was rejected due to her inability to drive. *Jess; They loved me. They thought I was awesome, and they rang me and said that the only reason I couldn't have the job was because I couldn't drive.*

The need to have a driving licence and access to their own transportation to gain employment is very restrictive to those without the economic capital to afford it. As Jess suggests, it's not just a case of paying for driving lessons and passing your test. *Once I've*

passed my driving lessons. I mean, even then I wouldn't have a car anyway. But still, once I've passed my driving lessons, that opens up a load of more doors….

These findings align with those of Le Vine and Polak (2014, p.2), who found that '3 in 10 young adults can be interpreted as not viewing driving as a priority, though half of those without a license are either learning to drive or are deterred principally by the cost of learning.' More recent research suggests a positive relationship remains between driving license acquisition and labour market participation (Wu, Le Vine & Sivakumar, 2020). This indicates that the ability to drive is not just a skill but an 'absolute' component of employability, with those without a driving license facing restricted job opportunities (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams, 2003). These findings are commensurate with those of Crew (2020) who found that her participant perceived employment was withheld due to her inability to drive. Crew suggests this geographical immobility because of not driving 'increases the probability of graduates being underemployed' (Crew, 2020, p.49). Without a license or vehicle, habitus and low levels of economic capital incline working-class graduates to what Morrison (2020, p.35) labels 'cultural and material positional disadvantage' in the labour market, leading to social injustice due to structural constraints limiting 'objective possibilities' (Merrill *et al*., 2020, p.173).

Financial stability is a human need and a fundamental aspect of everyday life; a wealth of research demonstrates this across the academic disciplines of sociology and psychology. Most participants grew up during what's classed as the Great Recession 2008-9 and its aftermath stimulated this generation to focus on careers and financial stability (Selingo, 2018). Contrary to the neoliberal Homo economicus premise of individual calculation to advance their own self-interests, those with care obligations are not regarded as perfect citizens (Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon, 2007). This theoretical perspective overlooks the inequalities encountered by specific social groups, particularly those based on socioeconomic status, gender, and life stage, such as young mothers like Jess. As a young single mother, Jess lived with her parents, which allowed her to study without having to work. Upon graduation, she wants to become self-sufficient, requiring full-time secure

employment and enough income to care for her child and herself independently. Here, she reveals the difficulties she is having finding a job within sport in an area of HSED. *Jess: I would say in my, in the areas that I am looking for, I am quite employable but there isn't really anything around for me to go for….*

Geographical location can significantly impact the labour market conditions of an area, particularly those who are socially immobile.

Jess: I did have to do the drastic thing of signing on for Universal Credits, … I was really struggling with money… because I couldn't get a job, and everything was ... I couldn't do it. So, I am getting money off them now, … I just keeping looking for jobs, I would like to do a PhD, but I don't know if I have got it in me.

Like Hodkinson's (2008) interpretation of the influences of career decision-making. The extent to which an individual can manage their career is significantly affected by their standing within the field and the capital available to them. Burke (2016) identifies that low levels of economic capital can impact an individual's ability to further themselves. Therefore, Jess's low level of socioeconomic capital to financially support herself and her child restricted her ability to continue to study. The need for self-sufficiency and independence is not limited to those with parental responsibility; nonetheless, the realisation of the desire for economic stability is more compelling in individuals with less economic capital with more to lose, resulting in a heightened awareness of risk.

Harry reflects on the cyclical nature of the football coaching industry; *'I feel like everything in sport works like on a 12-month cycle.'* 12-month fixed short-term contracts, and then employees must start all over again. By this, I mean applying, attaining, and retaining during the contract. He suggests that it is impossible to depend on coaching employment; you need to do what is required to keep the job, as employees on short-term contracts are easy to dismiss. Ives, Gale, Potrac and Nelson (2021) recognise that due to the expansion of low-quality and unstable jobs in the sports sector, sports coaches strive for secure positions with no guarantee of achieving them.

In March 2020, the UK went into a national lockdown for the first time due to the global Covid-19 pandemic (Institute for Government, 2021) (see section 5.3.3). Harry reflects on how the pandemic impacted his employment and career opportunities in grassroots football during this time. *Harry: I mean, the FA have just cut another 42 jobs, so 80 odd people lost their jobs, and I think they have only bought back 40 of them because they lost £30 million or something over the year….*

Harry was in the process of applying for a job in Keepersfield City FC; in June 2020, Keepersfield and surrounding areas were locked down under local restrictions by the UK government. The restrictions on freedom of movement and the closing of schools and sports facilities resulted in the Football club freezing all recruitment. The government restrictions due to the pandemic 'has brought about significant financial worries for those clubs lower down England's elite/professional football league system, with clubs in the EFL far less reliant on television income, and far more dependent on match day revenues' (Griz, Brannagan, Grimes and Neville, 2021, p.11). Harry experienced multi-dimensional impacts due to the pandemic. He was furloughed on his fixed-term contract, which meant he was earning money, but it was less than usual. He was conscious that his contract would expire, and he was anxious about finding further employment due to the economic impact of the pandemic on sport. *Harry: I knew my contract was coming to an end, …so from a professional point of view, which is where I put all my focus, erm it threw all of that up into the air.*

Consequently, Harry's mental health was significantly impacted, particularly as the risk of failing to realise his career aspiration (illusio) was higher for him due to unstable income, restricted employment prospects, and living independently, all of which impacted his financial security. The potential repercussions of chasing his illusio were severe, and he had little control over them due to the structural constraints. The pandemic made businesses re-evaluate staffing. Some furloughed their staff; others reassessed what was needed due to the restrictions. Those on temporary contracts were more at risk of labour

market instability. Job and earnings losses were most profound in young people during the first lockdown (Major *et al*., 2020). Since the pandemic restrictions have prevented sport, Harry is back with job insecurity and competing in the field again, resulting in the continuation of hourly paid work and job casualisation. Kalleberg & Vallas (2018, p.1) offer a useful definition for employment insecurity; they suggest that this type of work 'is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections from the point of view of the worker'. This definition resonates with Harry's situation, highlighting the precarious nature of sports coaching, which has been further heightened by the pandemic.

5.5.4 To a degree summary

The 'To a degree' conceptual group details the variation in the lived experience of Jess and Harry, two sports graduates who developed capitals and illusio for the game from different starting points. Throughout their studies and in transition, they challenged their primary habitus reflecting on predispositions that had not aided their development. Through moments of crisis, they developed new dispositions, rupturing habitus and reformulating a secondary habitus to an extent. The findings illustrate their exposure to restricted economic capital and exclusionary industry practices limited their ability to fully realise their illusio, impeding access to their preferred career.

5.6 Committed Players: the 'Risk Taker' conceptual group

The 'Risk taker' conceptual group includes individuals who have been the most successful in acquiring their aspired careers. In juxtaposition to the comfort seekers on the Illusio continuum. They are distinguished by their strength of illusio initially set in the *'field of the possibles'* (emphasis in the original) (Bourdieu, 1984, p.110) – discovered in social space and articulated by family and industry role models. The strong illusio provided a driving force influencing career planning, the building and use of social capital, and the exchange of embodied cultural capital. This confluence of factors facilitated them to nurture what

Bourdieu calls a 'feel' for the game (Maton, 2008). They were willing to take risks to learn the rules of the game to achieve their desired identity. Thus, reformulating dispositions and rupturing habitus is sustained by a strong illusio for the career they aspire to pursue. In this section, I will demonstrate the internal and external factors influencing their development and trajectory into the graduate labour market. Steven and John are committed players, 'in it to win it'; they do not question the game's merits, nor do they consider failure an option in achieving their desired careers.

5.6.1 Educational strategies

Risk-taker graduates were successful in making dispositional changes due to their receptiveness to out-of-environment influences. In agreement with Burke *et al*. (2017) Wacquant's (2005) assessment of 'habitus inertia' seems incorrect with respect to my data. There are conditions that can break the inertia of the primary habitus if the individual is in a suitable environment and open to change. As Bourdieu (1977) says, education and family are the strongest influences on habitus. Both Steven and John identified personal attributes or dispositions that had changed during their time at university. John outlines specific aspects he developed and how they have impacted his employment trajectory.

*John: People skills, like taking myself out of my comfort zone, definitely. Like I don't think I would have got … like if I had of gone straight in for an interview with ***, if I had come straight out of school, I don't think I would have got it, because I was just immature like. So, yeah it matured me a lot going to Uni.*

John believed that attending university was essential for securing his job, as it provided him with transferable skills, independence, and maturity. The degree also pushed him out of his 'comfort zone,' enabling him to take risks. This speaks to Costa and Murphy's (2015) supposition that secondary habitus developed through specialist settings is more likely to develop a change in dispositions and practice. *John: …have got a work-base experience now…, so like my mentality changes I suppose…. Collaborating with others, and like feel more enthusiastic about what I do kind of thing and I know what I am working towards*

now… John believed his first degree was not a waste of time despite him now needing to do a second as it gave him the confidence and scholastic capital to aid him in his next degree. By undertaking work within the industry John gained insight and motivation to strive for his career aspirations. Steven recognises that if he had not gone out of his way to avoid choosing the easy option for his placement, he would not have secured his current job or built the professional networks he has today. This finding is consistent with John's reflection, demonstrating that they both proactively challenged themselves to push their boundaries. This finding accords with how Sin, Tavares and Amaral's (2016) view of the internalisation process, whereby students take responsibility for their own employability. Steven was very vocal about actively challenging himself, wanting to learn and gaining the freedom to take risks and not worry about making mistakes as long as you learned from them. *Steven: I use that with my own children now, so it's made me a better father as well, it's made me a better person for them.*

This signifies a changing habitus and recognises the impact his reformulated habitus is having on the primary habitus of his children by influencing the development of their dispositions.

5.6.2 Career strategies

The power of illusio for Steven and John was strong, as indicated by the Illusio continuum (Figure 5.8); they were committed and willing to take risks to realise their career. Bourdieu is used as the explanatory framework to demonstrate the intrinsic value of the game.

> '…the people who play the game invest in it and illusio, which is their very commitment to the principle of the game. It follows from the same property, ….it is very rare for people who play the game with a healthy illusio to question the existence or nonexistence of the game' (Bourdieu, 1982, p.84).

The investment in the illusio for the game comes from their instinctive desire to use whatever strategies necessary to achieve their desired career. The playing of the game is an unconscious act, due to the strength of emotion attached to the game and its

illusio. Steven's motivation for the game was his desire to make a difference in society through sport. Most participants were motivated into careers in sport due to their passion for sport in general or a specific sport (Cassidy, Jones and Potrac, 2016) and want to do a job that they enjoy. *Steven: …naively I want to make a difference to people, you know, I love affecting other people and helping them achieve what they want to achieve….*

This finding reflects the work of Welty Peachey, Musser and Shin (2018), who identified that every individual in their sample, regardless of context or background, was motivated to continue working within the sector to make a difference in society and to help others. Steven believed he had a valuable contribution to make to society through exerting a positive influence through sport. His need to realise his illusio operates within what Giddens (1991) terms practical consciousness—an embodied, intuitive sense of the game. His motivation for illusio was deeply felt and instinctive; he possessed what Bourdieu (1982, p.83) refers to as 'libido vivendi'—the inherent drive and emotional investment to play the game without question.

John, on the other hand, made career decisions based on materialistic desires. His primary needs were clear progression pathways and an attractive salary. These priorities came over and above his passion for sport. He believes that he can still play sport around a more lucrative career. *John: …it was money orientation for me …, I want a decent wage. As I was looking for jobs in sport …. It would be harder to work my way up to the same ways that could get to in engineering.*

The need to be financially secure can come from having a background that is not financially stable. He feels the need to improve himself and do better than his parents and peers. This was quite a different career driver to the other participants who were motivated by their passion for the vocation. This material desire and ability to climb the ladder quickly excluded sport as a career as he perceived it to be quite difficult to navigate the career path, and the wages were low initially. As Sport England (2018) recognises in the 'Working in an Active Nation: The Professional Workforce Development Strategy for

England', there is a need to develop a clear set of professional standards, career development pathways and new qualification and training approaches. Therefore, he used his familial relationships to access industry insight to gain knowledge on the salary and potential career pathways and progression. When he compared the salaries and ease of progression in Engineering with sport, he decided to switch career paths away from his possible self in sports and apply for an apprenticeship as a civil engineer. John's desire to maximise his earning potential and alignment with a possible career in engineering changed his view on working in sport. Instead, he gained an engineering apprenticeship with a large engineering company that offered clear career pathways and progression. Minten and Forsyth (2014) argue that sports graduates largely found jobs outside of the sports industry in a range of sectors. This was the case for John and Jess. However, other participants in this study were either employed or seeking employment within sport. After initially questioning its necessity, John decided to enrol on an engineering degree course upon completing his apprenticeship.

John: …a lot of people who I'm working with at the minute who are high up and on a nice little wage, they say just getting out on site and getting your experience in is more valuable than going to uni and getting a degree... So the experience they seem to…value more.

This is an extract from John's phase 2 interview, in which he rejects the need to undertake the civil engineering degree based on advice from his professional network in the field. However, as his apprenticeship progressed, his social capital broadened, giving him access to hot knowledge and clarity of his possible self through his mentor. His view changed, and he became open and receptive to the advice his mentor was giving him. *John: Because that's kind of what everyone looks for, you have to be degree qualified to become like a site engineer role. That's what a lot of companies look for, especially if they are paying for it – it's a no brainer really.*

Field is dynamic in nature, continuously evolving with agents manoeuvring for positions of power (Bourdieu, 1984). After gaining more experience and reflecting on advice from his mentor and Human Resources, John revised his decision not to pursue further scholastic

capital. It could be argued that his level of social capital had broadened upon graduating from his apprenticeship. This enabled him to circulate with individuals with more strategic knowledge of the field, which in turn enabled him to get a better feel for the rules of the game. This finding aligns with what Artess et al. (2017) ascribe to increasing social capital, which not only provides greater understanding and additional pathways to explore but also moves individuals from motivation to inspiration, shaping their sense of who they could become. A further deciding factor in John's career decision-making was the structural assistance offered by his employer, who had clear progression pathways and financial support for employee development. Upon calculating his options, he decided to progress down the path of Site Engineer; having already gained experiential assets, he would progress faster than the normal graduate. *John: I should really be going into a site engineer role, instead of going into a graduate engineer. So, a site engineer and then hopefully just work us way up the ladder….*

In possession of this knowledge, he reformulated his disposition; he was, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest, taken in by and invested in the game. Already possessing scholastic capital from his previous HE, he felt confident in his ability to study at this level due to prior knowledge and practices. This demonstrates how HE fosters a positive attitude to further learning (Brooks and Everett, 2008) through embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Due to cultural competency (Burke and Hannaford-Simpson, 2020), HE fosters a positive attitude to further learning. He has a clear career plan seeking 'positional advantage' (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004), using his social capital and knowledge of the field to position himself to realise his illusio. John's willingness and ability to utilise his capital and exchange them for advancement in position within the field are in stark contrast to the findings of Abrahams (2017) and Burke and Hannaford-Simpson (2020), who contend that middle-class graduates are far more at ease utilising a variety of capitals, including social capital, to assist in their trajectory than working-class graduates. From this, it is surmised that perhaps the class disparities are not as clearly associated with a particular social background. I propose that working-class individuals who have ruptured habitus are also willing and able to utilise resources in pursuit of

career advancement and positionality if the conditions of the field are supportive. This finding clearly relates to RQ2. It illustrates how employer practices—such as financial support, clearly defined career paths, and mentoring—influence graduate development and employment. These practices also help mitigate potential hurdles that working-class individuals may face due to well-documented shortages in economic and social capital. Despite the challenges of the labour market, Steven remained committed to his possible self, focused on challenging himself to achieve the position and salary he feels he is capable of achieving.

Steven: You know, I'm not, after completing my degree I'm not where I want to be. However, I know that I'm moving in the right direction and firmly believe that doing what I'm doing with my degree behind me is going to allow me the opportunity to get where I want to be in the future.

He believes that in time and through experience, opportunities will present themselves, which, as Hodkinson's (2008) theory of careership points out, it is important to remember that research data collection captures a snapshot of practice at a specific point in time. Even in longitudinal research such as the methodology followed by this study, it is important not to forget that career construction continues after the timeframe of this study. Further discussion on this point is made in chapter six.

5.6.3 Resources

The risk taker conceptual group was the most active in managing their career. They worked hard at seeking insider knowledge to give them greater insight into the rules of the game. They intentionally sought to connect with individuals who could be useful to them in their professional development. Using Bourdieu's lens of social capital, it becomes clear that social capital is not distributed uniformly among group members; rather, it is obtained by individuals who strive to secure positions of power and influence while developing positive relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). The most influential connections originated from family. However, in John and Steven's experience, the sources were established with the assistance of familial and institutional relationships. These networks

aided the individuals to gain work experience within their chosen field, supporting their advancement of knowledge, experiential assets and embodied cultural capital. Firstly, I shall present a detailed narrative from both Steven and John on social capital development to aid positionality within the field.

The ability to build, maintain and grow professional networks was seen by half of the participants to be key in their personal development, providing insight into their chosen career path, and the provision of opportunities for development and employment. This was recognised as something that their university course had emphasised, and to a varying degree, participants had taken the opportunities offered to empower them to build their own networks. What segregates the 'risk takers' (John and Steven) is their ability to develop and use these networks to enhance their career opportunities. Steven recognised the need to develop professional networks whilst at university.

Steven: I've networked myself a lot, you know, obviously started in year one with… internship. I remember I did three sessions for them as an intern and by the fourth session we were sitting down talking about me taking a job. In year two, um, I made links with, um, the CSP and we went…and did, uh, a community sports leaders award from Active Partnership….

Steven capitalised on opportunities facilitated by the university course throughout his studies. Some of these opportunities aided him in gaining additional field specific qualifications and employment, and in the process, developed his professional network. As Bourdieu (2010, p.143) noted, there can be a distinction between middle and working-class educational experiences; those who are not rightful members 'lack the social capital to extract the full yield from their academic qualifications'. In contrast to Bourdieu, Steven and other working-class students did develop social capital whilst undertaking their university degrees. This may be due to the increased focus of government, society, and, therefore, HE on employability and graduate outcomes (Hewitt, 2020).

John had a more relaxed, unobtrusive, almost taken-for-granted attitude towards his use of family social capital (FSC). He did not make overt references to networking, only

narrating what they had enabled him to do and the benefits he had acquired. In his final year, John decided he was inspired by a career in engineering. He began to apply for apprenticeships while working on a building site to gain insight into civil engineering. Through a relative, he was able to secure paid work and learn about construction. John: *I started working with erm one of me relatives. Just construction and housing…. Doing bits for him getting paid for it as well. Not bad pay.*

As John's previous degree was in sport, he had little knowledge or experience in the construction industry. He reached out to a relative who was a construction manager to see if he could help him gain some insight. His relative secured him paid work on-site, where he shadowed a variety of tradespeople. By leveraging his familial capital, he created an opportunity to access informal training and gain insight, providing him with valuable experience and cultural capital in the industry. This aided his apprenticeship application while also allowing him to earn money at the same time. Past researchers have acknowledged that social networks offer exchanges that may mobilise their cultural and economic capital (Ball, 2003). This type of exchange is not accessible to everyone. As Bathmaker, Waller, and Ingram (2013, p.726) suggest, such exchanges are categorised by the ability of certain students to mobilise multiple types of capital at the same time. For example, some students can combine cultural capital— 'what they know'—with social capital— 'who they know'—to their advantage.

John: It's like starting from scratch in it, because…, I didn't really know about construction and engineering. I think the six months beforehand when I worked on the site. It actually …did me good because I kinda got to terms with some of the stuff that goes around within construction. …So yeah that did me well.

When applying for apprenticeship roles, he benefited greatly from the experiential knowledge and language he had gained in this new field of construction. Shortly after his paid work experience, he secured an apprenticeship with a large civil engineering company. Through his ability to use familial capital, he gained what Bourdieu (1986, p.247) would describe as cultural capital in 'the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-

lasting dispositions of the mind and body'. The advantage gained through strong familial ties, strengthened his position in the field. Graduates need to be able to narrate their emergent identity alignment with those of their potential employers to increase their chances of securing employment (Tomlinson, 2017).

In order to extract the most from their degree the study found that the 'risk takers' developed experiential assets and embodied cultural capital from academia and industry. They identified a variety of opportunities to gain work-related experience as part of the degree course through placements, internships, and informal promotion of voluntary and paid work. Steven gained a part time sports coaching job whilst he was studying through an internship. *Steven: I remember in the first year there was an internship with my now employer, uh, ABC Sports, who offered out opportunities for university…students,…to come and get some experience….*

This finding is supported by the research of Mason, Williams, and Cranmer (2009), who found that having work experience aided graduates in finding employment and helped them acquire graduate-level positions. He then chose to do his course placement at the local football community trust, one of the largest employers of sports coaches in the area. *Steven: I did six, six to nine months with them where, you know, I built up relationships with all the top people there….* Being recognised as someone who has worked alongside high-profile organisations provided him with institutional and embodied cultural capital to aid his position within the local field. The development of cultural capital aligns with the work of Tomlinson *et al*. (2017, p.31), who describe graduates as embodying 'the behaviours, dispositions, and interpersonal qualities that signal their desirability and potential for social fit'. Social fit can aid communication of identity by fostering horizontal relationships where members look out for one another, perceive one another as partners and peers, raise awareness of one another, and view one another as resources (Leitch, McMullan and Harrison, 2012).

To increase graduate employability, universities have increasingly focused on internships and placements within their curriculum (Burke *et al*., 2017) or outside of the curriculum through voluntary or paid work opportunities with local employers (Milburn, 2012). Holmes (2013) suggests universities are ideal sites for professional identity affirmation, however, identity affirmation is strongest when acquired from industry work experience (Smith and Smith, 2024). Despite these efforts, the power within the field is influenced by a variety of stakeholders, including employers (Hodkinson, 2008). Employer practices and employment requirements such as industry-specific experience can be challenging for universities to replicate and students to gain access to. Here Steven discusses not gaining employment even with the experience he had accrued.

Steven: …some of the jobs that I've gone through where I'm doing a sport development manager or community sport development…, they're coming back and saying…you need more experience, you need this, you need that. So, this is where I've taken the decision that, okay, I'm going to go and get that experience and I'm going to get it on my own and I'm going to start my own business up and show that I can apply for these funds and get these grants and manage these grants and then go onto it. So, although I'm only employed as a school sports coach,…but I've also got an opportunity with the business that I'm in now that we're actually launching our own sport development company….

Although he is not in his desired job role due to lack of experience, he has identified an opportunity to create a role for himself within his existing organisation without the risk of loss of income. This reveals his habitus and illusio to succeed, his resilience, and, despite being rejected due to inexperience, his 'feel for the game' as identified by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). Such a 'feel for the game' results in proactive gameplay in an unconventional manner, demonstrating what Bathmaker, Waller and Ingram (2013) recognise as the ability to 'play the game'. Bridgstock (2009) refers to this ability as utilising career building skills to exploit career opportunities. In essence, as Burke (2016) reflects, the ability to create an opportunity to obtain the desired skills valued by employers reveals a high level of practical mastery. *Steven: I know that obviously my employer's supporting me in that, so it's good that I've got a wage whilst I'm trying to obviously launch something because going back to when I did, you know, my last sort of self-employed business venture, I didn't have a wage.*

This insight was gained by understanding the business needs from within. With this knowledge, he sought to create an opportunity for personal development while also growing the business. Being within an SME sports organisation and having a good professional relationship with the senior leadership team has enabled him to evaluate areas for growth and have influence through his social capital. As Holmes (2013) argues, employment success is often grounded in alignment with personal and organisational culture. This finding suggests that the use of scholastic and social capital by a working-class graduate challenges Bourdieu's (2010) view on the positionality of the working-class. It presents another example of 'risk takers' assuming what would ordinarily be considered middle-class attributes, the ability to access and extract benefits from social capital.

As seen in John's pen portrait (section 4.5), his mum was fundamental in positively shaping his attitude towards education, particularly during his time at university. His mum shared her experience and knowledge of the game of HE. John: *…the second year that's when it starts to really count, so that's what my mom was telling me. Knuckled down did all right….* As Calhoun (2003) notes, knowing the rules of the game is important, such as needing to submit assessments on time but grasping the feel for the game enables you to play it well. As discussed in chapter one, Bourdieu refers to this as a 'le sens practique' (the feel for the game) (Bourdieu, 1990, p.52) or the practical sense of what to do and when to do it. This is where not being first in the family was beneficial to John's academic success, demonstrating an explicit example of lower resourced parental habitus shaping the development of the scholastic capital of their children. This highlights a disruption to the traditional taken-for-granted assumptions in HE institutions that the majority of working-class students are first in family and therefore viewed from a position of deficit.

Also revealed in Steven's pen portrait was the support he received from his wife during his studies. *Steven: My wife has been an amazing support. And also my children. …One of the proudest days of my life was standing up on the stage and getting my degree and having*

my three kids in…the crowd. Relationships were seen to be significant in the decision-making processes throughout the graduate life cycle. As Hodkinson (2008, p.10) reflects on his body of work 'career is usually entwined with varying and complex relational interactions'. Thus, for Steven and John relational influence was positive, enabling them to grow and providing support for self and career management.

Relationality can also relate to geographical place as discussed in chapter one (Having a feel for the game), where an individual and their family and community reside. The relationship between people and place has the potential to enable and constrain the social mobility of graduates. The geographical location for this study was 'City' an area of high socioeconomic deprivation in the Midlands of England. Place can have an impact on potential earnings and employment opportunities.

*Steven: …so you know geography is definitely tough. …I think if I lived in London, or Manchester, or Birmingham, I think there are a lot more opportunities around in the bigger areas, in the bigger cities. I think it is a much …shallower pool …in say ****, if I was prepared to travel, you know then I would…*

His reflection on more employment opportunities in the larger cities is combined with his perception of lower wages in 'City' compared to other areas. In contrast, for John, the centrality of the Midlands area to many of the country's road networks has enabled him to access employment opportunities in civil engineering. Despite the challenges some face in living in this geographical area, this does not discourage most from staying. In this example, Steven highlights the geographical divergence between opportunities in the North and South of England.

Steven: I suppose the frustration is there's lots of jobs in the South. You know, you search for these jobs, there's lots of London-based jobs, there's lots of jobs where you've got to commute to London. And again, that wouldn't bother me but it would be very difficult to do.

Here, he reflects on the difficulties and the inequality that geography can present. These findings align with those of the Social Mobility Commission (2017), who states that where

the labour market within the geographical space or industry is weak, social mobility stagnates. This stagnation would account for Steven's perception of employment inequality. However, this is not in every industry, in the civil engineering industry. For example, the UK Government invested £1.5 billion in Smart motorways in 2015 (Gov.uk, 2015), which strengthened opportunities for John's employment trajectory.

Steven's social mobility is also affected by his relationship with place; he is reticent to travel for better opportunities and pay. His relational bonds to his children, wife, voluntary football coaching, and 'City' influence his decision-making. *Steven: I'm the one that is very much entrenched in our local area. …Um, a football club that I'm part of that I run. … It does sometimes feel like you're choked a little bit with your expectations of the area and where you're at.*

Steven's emotional ties to family and place are akin to the work on careership by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), who reveal that social and contextual influences affect the emotional response to pragmatic career decision-making—signifying that an individual rarely makes an entirely rational decision without relational influence. Much of graduate employment is indeed located not just in London, as is the common misconception, but in other major cities across the country (Ball, 2020). This has implications for government policy around social mobility and levelling up, as people like Steven with spatial immobility are impacted on their ability to move to more lucrative employment to counteract local labour market conditions. This is particularly impactful in areas of HSED or detrimental to filling labour shortages elsewhere in the country (Ball, 2020). Steven also has a strong relationship with his employer; he is aware he could be earning more working for another company, but he was not considering moving as he trusted them and felt secure. They had been flexible around family commitments; he was well-treated, and they had been supportive during the pandemic. This displays his emotional attachment to the company and his work, rooting him further in the community. Steven's success, despite remaining immobile, problematises the legitimation of 'graduate social mobility' as a symbol of success. These findings speak to the work from the Paired Peers project, where Ingram *et*

al. (2023) argue that home and community are an important but underappreciated possible source of substantial social and cultural capital for working-class graduates. As can be seen by Steven's account, he has succeeded in building social and cultural capital with the support of his family and local networks and is employed in a managerial level graduate job whilst remaining close to home. This suggests that the conventional narrative of success centred around the geographic social mobility of graduates is largely based on middle-class values of mobility; perhaps new classless assumptions should be derived that consider the benefits of remaining in stasis.

All participants clearly focused on seeking stable employment and secure income, influenced by personal circumstances, background and economic capital. Steven owned his own home and was the only source of income for his family. He received government financial support to make it financially viable for him to attend university. This support was important to him as he and his family had experienced financial instability when a business venture had not worked out. The work of Hodkinson (2008, p.12) helps to explain how this can impact decisions, '…at any one time, our career is influenced by our past lives, in ways that enable and constrain future career actions. Rather, it is an inherent part of thinking about a career and an ongoing process of new construction and learning. By gaining financial stability through government financial support and his part-time work while at university, he could focus on his development.

Averse to building up long-term debt, John lived at home with his mother and worked numerous jobs inside and outside of sport to fund his way through university. These findings imply that the risk taker conceptual group was typically financially stable, not excessively so, but enough to give individuals the freedom to manage their careers. As observed by Burke (2016), low levels of economic capital can impact an individual's ability to advance themselves, as was seen with the 'To a degree' conceptual group. Crucially, the commitment to the game is expedited when a graduate has both illusio and economic security, which enabled some graduates, those within the 'Risk taker' conceptual group, to

rupture habitus and transition into their desired career faster than those classified as 'To a degree'.

This was a particularly challenging time for graduates transitioning into the labour market, disproportionately for those aged 16-25 and from a lower-resourced background (Major *et al.* 2020). Some participants were designated key workers, due to John's role in construction, he worked throughout the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic. This resulted in minimal impact on his day-to-day professional life. However, the pandemic did put a stoppage to his professional development plans. His enrolment on the degree course was paused for a year owing to Covid-19. This delayed his progression, but he remained in employment, gaining further experience with the organisation. Because Steven was an older employee; he was able to get vaccinated sooner than other staff members, allowing him to work in areas that others were unable to, such as care homes and schools, because this was a stringent legal requirement. The opportunity allowed him to demonstrate his potential and capacity to accomplish more for the company, which was recognised by his employer, allowing him to advance his career.

*Steven …as the sort of 'Covid Bombshell' hit a year ago, it was also good to be part of the trusted few within…the company **** to steer them through that. So, you know I took quite big role in that. From that I have actually ended up going into sort of like a four-way sort of partnership with the two directors...*

The Covid-19 restrictions for Steven resulted in a positive impact on his professional development, increasing his position within the company and the field. This was in stark contrast to the rest of the sport sector as Ecorys (2021) reported, 'UK sport-related job losses may total 250,000 (23% of all sport job losses in Europe)'. It is important to point out that both people who fell into the 'Risk taker' category were the least impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak. This could be because their career trajectory moved faster than others, but it also reflected the structural influence of government policy and regulation on the practices of agents. In the instance of Steven and John, the government's

'key worker' status allowed them to continue working and progressing, albeit at a slower pace.

5.6.4 Risk taker summary

John and Steven's strong illusio created an enchantment with the field and served as a source of jouissance and recognition. This also explains the efficacy of their dedication. This commitment to illusio was strengthened by their willingness to seek advice from the field to understand the game's rules. John possessed familial social capital in his chosen field, which aided him in acquiring experiential assets and embodied cultural capital. Whereas Steven did not have familial capital and instead actively sought out support and advice from his professional network. From these relationships, he gained insight, experiential capital and a 'feel for the game'. The insight they both gained via different routes provided an out-of-environment experience that led to dispositional change, rupturing the habitus and strengthening the illusio for their desired career. This is juxtaposed to the 'comfort seekers' who did not present a rupture to their habitus; in fact, throughout the majority of the study, they continued to reconfirm the primary habitus. Therefore, the 'risk taker' conceptual group presents an interesting combination of enabling factors that contribute to the personal and professional development of graduates from areas of high socioeconomic deprivation. Career management, including social and cultural capital will aid the development of a strong illusio and dispositional change. However, the influence of personal economic instability, relationality and self-sufficiency on career decision-making should not be underestimated, as was narrated in the 'to a degree' conceptual group.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This study sought to understand the influence of low socioeconomic status on the lived experience of graduate development and career transition. The career development approach adopted by many HEIs is based on human capital theory (Becker, 1994). The theory centres on the acquisition of a myriad of skills and attributes formulated and attractively presented to secure desired employment. The suggested reasoning behind unsuccessful graduate employment outcomes is the inadequacy of skills or presentation as an 'employable graduate' (Bridgstock, 2009). However, despite efforts to reduce the inequality in graduate outcomes, significant discrepancies remain between different socio-economic backgrounds. On entry and during progression through HE, an individual's background or habitus can reduce their *a priori* capital, affecting approaches to PPD opportunities (the acquisition of social and cultural capital) inside and outside of the university; ultimately, impacting their positionality to compete in the graduate labour market (Adnett and Slack, 2007). Throughout the thesis, I have demonstrated how an individual's background has a significant influence on how undergraduates and graduates develop and transition. The preceding chapters explored the wide range of issues relating to graduate transition into employment and this concluding chapter draws these together in the context of the initial research questions. Evidentially, the practices of institutions and individuals, alongside structural factors, impact the effectiveness of graduate career transition into the labour market. Each conceptual group narrates the findings of grouped sets of dispositions on the path to illusio and habitus rupture. Understanding the process from an individual perspective is only part of the solution. This chapter outlines ways in which these issues might be addressed by informing key stakeholders in national policy, HE, students, and employers. Focusing on solutions-based practice, rather than identifying problems, was a central concern throughout the study.

I also aim to explain my empirical contributions to knowledge, which I outline as theoretical and methodological. Conducting this study has been a learning journey, both personally in the capacity of an EdD student, and professionally in terms of my practice. I

will share these reflections and my recommendations for further research at the end of this chapter.

6.2 Research questions

As the preceding chapters have shown, the nature of graduate transition into employment is complex and interwoven. Three research questions were designed and addressed across chapters four and five. This concluding chapter draws together the golden threads running through the study to focus on answering each research question.

RQ 1. To what extent does experience of lower resources influence graduate transition into desired career?

Illusio lies at the heart of engagement in personal development and career decision-making and is shaped by lived experience. The primary habitus is formed in early childhood through immersion in family, community, and educational norms and influences an individual's taste and perceptions, setting the horizons of possibility (Spence and Carter, 2014). An individual's sense of what is possible or impossible can be widened or narrowed depending on their socioeconomic status. This study demonstrates that background has a significant influence on dispositions, shaping perceptions and openness to adaptation or change. However, the dispositions of the habitus are not a solid state; they ebb and flow, enabling or constraining practice depending on the environment and illusio for the game. In my response to RQ3, I will detail additional external factors outside of personal agentic practice that influence the trajectory of an individual's PPD.

For this question, I will focus on the social practices of the individual as the point of interest. Social practice derived from structural experience directs a particular way of interpreting the world (Grenfell, 2008). Throughout the data, there were signs of the habitus coming into view (Reay, 2010) across their life history. The use of both biographical life-trajectory artefact and narrative inquiry methods facilitated engagement in narrating significant past life events and dispositions. The exploration and explanation

of lived experience from childhood to maturity revealed how the primary habitus enabled or constrained practices. From the perspective of constraint on education, Steven and Harry both explained how it was seen as unimportant within their family, shaping their negative attitude towards school and HE, and leading them to reject the doxa of education. This resulted in Steven leaving school with few qualifications and Harry doing well but refusing to continue with education as it went against his cultural norms and perceived 'future self'. The rejection of academic routes into employment negatively impacted their career planning as it could be argued that schools at the time had very little knowledge of alternative options to HE progression (Bowers-Brown, 2018; The Sutton Trust, 2020). With little to no guidance from the education system, Harry turned to his family for career guidance, and Steven accepted to work for his brother, resulting in them both following family patterns to pursue vocational trades. Familial habitus encourages young people to adopt employment opportunities that are familiar and acceptable to the family (Reay, 1998), which can deny entry into environments at odds with the habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) or can prohibit an individual from staying long enough in a new environment to be affected by the dispositions of the field. For example, when Robert moved house, he perceived his internship opportunity to be too far and not worth the effort despite its location being close to the university. Instead, he remained comfortable and concentrated on gaining a 'good degree', forgoing the opportunity to build cultural and social capital and possible employment opportunities. This demonstrates that despite awareness-raising efforts, those without *a priori* capital and a tendency for introvertive dispositions either resisted taking or committing to opportunities for career enhancement. They instead focused their efforts on acquiring scholastic capital as a means of labour market positioning, inadvertently mismatching the requirements of the field, resulting in hysteresis, becoming accomplices in their own mystification. Predispositions when faced with new fields can inhibit action due to feelings of discomfort and anxiety, resulting in missed opportunities due to a mismatch of habitus to field.

The data from this study suggests that inheriting a ‘feel for the game’ of HE (Costa *et al*., 2017) is no longer the realm of the middle classes. Those working-class individuals with previous HE experience also impart knowledge, enabling their children to inherit a tacit understanding of education and a feel for the game, signifying a shift in previous discourse on the middle-class in HE. An example of inherited knowledge was evident in John’s navigation of HE, where he utilised social capital to gain experiential assets and embodied capital, aiding his transition into his desired career. Thus, a multivarious layering of the traditional working-class becomes evident. Although *a priori* knowledge was not the only factor, those without an inherited ‘feel for the game’ were at an automatic disadvantage before, during, and post HE. To attend university, they had to assume independent dispositions, often going against the norms of peers and family. This independent philosophy aided them in entering the HE system but then hindered those who were not open to dispositional change due to weak illusio. Threadgold (2019) defines this as how much time, effort, and emotion a person is willing to expend to attain his or her goals in a specific field, and to what extent they are willing to 'buy-in'.

For many, getting into university alone was seen as a significant achievement, given the classed discourse of HE being dominated by the middle classes. However, it seemed to result in them being inclined to ‘take it easy’ and not make full use of the facilitatory opportunities in HE and industry during university. Consequently, dispositions of self-distancing, not seeking support or guidance from peers, university services, or industry left some indecisive and unsure of how to improve their position in the field. Although there are aspects of possession and social positioning within the data, fundamentally the findings of this study do not result in what (Holmes, 2013, p.538) rebukes as a ‘counsel of despair’. Instead, these findings go beyond Skeggs's (2004) argument of pathologised immoral individuals portrayed by a narrative of lack of reflexive self, unable or unwilling to exchange, value and affect their position. These findings suggest that although Bourdieu’s theory of habitus was focused on the middle classes, under the right conditions, reflexivity can act as a catalyst for change. This is not because of moral fault but as a result of using HE to acquire social, institutional and cultural capital, enabling the reflexive self,

strengthening illusio, transforming dispositions, and rupturing habitus to reformulate a secondary habitus.

This study's methodology had reflexivity at its core; NI’s created space to observe three important phenomena (past, present and future): the recounting of the processes of past actions and the formation of new conceptualisations of those events as time progressed. Under the right conditions, reflexivity can act as a catalyst for change; once open to dispositional change, an individual needs insight into their desired career through direct and indirect immersion in the field and connexion to its members. Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua – 'I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past' (Rameka, 2017, p.387) is a Māori (Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) proverb that highlights the understanding of the interwoven nature of space and time. I felt this conceptualisation of the omnipresent nature of our past being with us in our present helpful in thinking about how reflexivity enables individuals to consciously consider past events, actions, and thoughts of the future. This was evident with the ‘comfort seeker’ conceptual group, they both acknowledged that their past avoidance of building experiential and social capital had hindered their employment trajectory. The final aspect was the assimilation of new meanings of past events and the consideration of a change to their ‘nomos’ of practice in the future. This internal introspection through reflexivity was most prominently evident in those with stronger levels of illusio. Steven and Harry’s discourse around self-improvement and positionality demonstrated conceptualisations of their past experiences and the changes to possible future selves and their practices to achieve it. This illusio provided an appetite to open their dispositions to change, seeking out-of-environment experiences and being influenced by the requirements of the field.

Central to Bourdieu’s theory is the notion that ‘there is no action without interest’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.290), shaping engagement within the field. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.116), an illusio is when individuals become personally invested in a field, creating a trajectory in which they are ‘taken in and by the game.’ All participants in this study had a shared interest in pursuing a career in sports, as ‘interest is habitus

incarnate' (Grenfell, 2008, p.154). However, despite coming from similar class backgrounds and studying the same degree, distinct differences emerged among them. The strength of their interest is depicted upon the Illusio continuum (Figure 5.8), the greater the personal investment in the illusio, in this case, a possible self, a trajectory is formed. Those with weak illusio do not prioritise acquiring capital, whereas those with a strong illusio were inclined 'to 'furiously' accumulate capital' (Hage, 2011, p.86). This emerged in the narratives within the 'to a degree' and 'risk taker' conceptual groups. Those taken in by the game devised career plans and strategies for learning more about the field, this was achieved by direct work within the industry and building social and embodied cultural capital. The more intense an individual's belief in the game (illusio), the more freedom they feel to take risks and open themselves to changing their dispositions, triggering habitus rupture and secondary habitus formation. However, the findings of this study imply that an individual's circumstances either facilitate or limit their ability to act on their illusio, thus slowing down the ability to rupture habitus. For example, those in the 'to a degree' conceptual group experienced significant economic and relational barriers to improving their position within the field, this will be covered in detail under RQ3.

RQ 2. How do higher education institutions and employers influence graduate development and employment?

This thesis discovered multifarious ways in which the university and employers encouraged the development of PPD for graduates. Conversely, specific challenges indicate there is still potential for improvement to optimise graduate development and successful transition into employment.

The university course offered many embedded and extra-curricular opportunities to enhance student employability. Respondents welcomed and appreciated the informal and formal opportunities provided. Informally, academic staff would invite guest speakers who were industry employers or role-specific experts, enabling students to gain insight into

potential careers and often provided invitations to gain voluntary or paid work experience, which allowed them to develop experiential assets and professional social and cultural capital, known to aid transition (Bathmaker, Waller and Ingram, 2013). Those with the stronger illusio capitalised on these opportunities as they proactively sought further insight, followed up on invitations, and made connections. Participants discussed formal opportunities embedded within the curriculum, including internships, placement modules, and personal tutoring. However, the conceptual groups provide insight into how habitus and external factors influenced levels of engagement in voluntary and assessed career-enhancement activities, suggesting that the supply of formal and informal career-enhancing opportunities alone will not impact the inequalities in graduate outcomes. A much deeper multifaceted intervention is required considering primary habitus and access to economic, social, and relational capital. This will be discussed in more detail in the recommendations for practice.

Graduates had a wide range of employment experience before, during, and post-university. The greatest benefits from employer engagement were experience, professional networks, investment in personal development, and employee-friendly practices. In John's instance, he was financially assisted to continue from a paid apprenticeship to a sponsored degree course; Steven valued the company's family-friendly culture and flexibility. Harry took advantage of an opportunity to gain cultural and experiential capital by working abroad. However, while these examples highlight the benefits of employer engagement, several challenges remain, particularly in ensuring consistent career support and opportunities for all students.

The findings suggest that City University faces challenges in maintaining consistency in the career enhancement offer across the levels of study. Direct entrant students transferring to the university in their final year are at a disadvantage due to missed employability curriculum content and career-enhancing activities activities only in levels 4 and 5. Harry discussed an absence of careers service support during his final year, as this is a vital year

regarding the culmination and attainment of scholastic capital and preparation for transition into graduate employment.

From an industry and employer perspective, issues must be addressed, particularly around ambiguity in career paths, recruitment practices, and restrictions to career-specific qualifications. The UK sports industry is diverse, and graduates go onto many different roles within the industry spanning charitable, private, and public sectors. This diversity makes providing accurate and insightful information available on prospective careers challenging. In 2012, the governing body for sport, Sport England appointed CIMSPA to clarify the roles and routes into professions within the sport and physical activity sector (CIMSPA, 2023). Unfortunately, many organisations within the sector are not aligned with these standards due to awareness of the Chartered Institute and its limited power to regulate the sector.

As a result of a flexible labour market fixed-term contracts or casualised hours have increased, leading to economic uncertainty for individuals and dependence on social capital due to informal recruitment practices. This was most evident in Harry's accounts of the sport and football coaching industry, where an active network was essential, and availability was necessary for securing and maintaining employment and progression. Employment practices such as these take a short-term perspective, perpetuating insecurity and risk not attracting or losing the most educated individuals.

Finally, the findings demonstrated examples of restrictive access to role-specific qualifications; this was evident in Jess and Harry's narrative experience, where both were denied access to entry-level qualifications required for their desired career; in Harry's case, restrictions to the number of courses and acceptance due to targeted demographics. Jess was unable to gain access to a HE and professional educators' course without already being employed in the role by the university. These employer and sector practices could be seen as symbolic violence, synonymous with restricted cultural reproduction, as argued by Bourdieu (1998).

RQ3. What factors contribute to the personal and professional growth of sport development and coaching graduates in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation?

It is vital to view the world with an appreciation of the social conditions that shape it; individuals are not independent actors but are instead deeply embedded in social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental relationships. As Grenfell notes, 'Behind the concepts of habitus and field there is the notion of structural relations; but structure in both subjective and objective sense, and as both stable and dynamic - *structured* and *structuring'* (Grenfell, 2008, p.155 emphasis in the original). This thesis identified several structural factors that assist or hinder the PPD of sport development and coaching graduates from low-income communities. These factors include relationality, familial, social and cultural capital, and economic stability.

The observation of external influences on individuals' career decision-making is challenging to understand. The data revealed how emotional and relational dimensions, were the most significant contributory factors for action or (in)action across participants. Relationality as a concept helped me to understand the intersectionality of the phenomena, and as Hodkinson (2008) argues, it has a consequential influence on individual choice and decision-making processes. Emotional connections are the result of our relationships with people and place, and within the findings of this study, family had the greatest emotional effect on development and transition. Relationships, in some instances, motivated, supported, and developed individuals; in others, they were restrictive, consequently limiting the horizons of possibility due to obligations to children and partners. Some parents performed an important role in supporting emotionally, and financially, and by use of social and cultural capital. John's mother was fundamental in influencing his attitude towards and knowledge of the HE system, providing him with practical mastery, what Bourdieu refers to as 'le sens practique' (the feel for the game) (Bourdieu, 1990, p.52). Joe's father was instrumental in assisting him to obtain his first job, by utilising his social capital. If an individual has deep links with family and is open to using familial social and cultural capital where available, they can be useful to an

individual's PPD. However, previous research suggests where family social capital (FSC) has high-status links a faster career trajectory may be possible (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Although FSC did aid employment opportunities, any connexions were low level due to working-class habitus; moreover, many experienced little to no assistance from family in terms of HE, career planning, or career opportunities.

Relationality also relates to geographical place, where family and community reside. The relationship between people and place has the potential to enable and constrain the career decisions and mobility of graduates. Places where the labour market is weak [areas of high socioeconomic deprivation], can have a detrimental impact on communities due to income and employment inequality (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). On the surface several participants would be classed as socially immobile due to their disinterest or inability to move for improved social outcomes, going against the primary social policy rhetoric of 'social mobility'. However, Steven, among others, had relational ties to place and decided to remain within his HSED community. He progressed into a graduate-level job and continues to develop, suggesting that Steven's success whilst remaining immobile problematises the legitimation of 'graduate geographical social mobility' as a symbol of success. As Ingram *et al*. (2023) argue, home and community are important but underappreciated possible sources of social and cultural capital for working-class graduates. Thus, while the traditional focus on geographic mobility reflects middle-class constructs, the broader context of economic stability and relational support reveals complex influences on career trajectories and personal professional development for individuals across different financial circumstances.

Economic stability, in its simplest form, expedites illusio for a career, permitting freedom to act; without it, horizons of possibility are impeded. However, the concept is complex and can act as a barrier for PPD to those with and without financial security. The most obvious being low levels of economic capital, which can impact an individual's ability to further themselves (Burke, 2018), as with Jess, her low level of socioeconomic capital restricted her ability to continue to study or live independently with her child, impacting

on career planning and horizons of opportunity. The desire for self-sufficiency and independence is not limited to those with parental responsibility; nevertheless, the findings (see ‘To a degree’ and ‘Risk taker’ conceptual groups) show that where the desire for economic stability is greatest, usually among those with the least economic resources and the most to lose, the career illusio is stronger. However, full rupture of habitus is restricted due to low levels of economic capital. For individuals who were financially supported, without any dependents, and closed to dispositional change (Comfort Seekers), their relative financial comfort worked as a deterrent against investing in the worth of the game, unwilling to risk committing to the illusio throughout university and transition into employment, culminating in professional network stagnation, frustration, and an ongoing lack of understanding of how to proceed further.

6.3 Personal reflections on the research

This section presents my reflections on conducting this study, from both a personal and professional practitioner perspective. I will structure these reflections around the theoretical and methodological contributions to knowledge that my study provides, followed by an examination of how these contributions can be applied in practice, including recommendations for various stakeholders. I will then offer suggestions for future research to expand on the study's findings and conclude with reflections on the methodological limitations of the study.

6.3.1 Contribution to knowledge

Theoretical

In this study, I drew predominantly upon the thinking tools of Pierre Bourdieu and Kirsty Finn’s interpretation of relationality as a lens to view and analyse the lived experience of working-class graduates' transition into desired careers. Bourdieu’s triad [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice was especially useful as it provided me with ways to think through graduate practices and external influences reflexively. To this end, Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of class and inequality is generative for grasping how structure

(principally HE and industry) and agency can be instrumental in understanding the practice against a backdrop of neoliberal policy discourse. It is here also that Bourdieu and Finn's attention to class and relationality is of value for informing how structural, relational, and agentic practices interact, constraining and enabling graduate lived experience of early labour market transition. Nevertheless, it is practice itself that overcomes the dichotomy of structure and agency, which Bourdieu neglects as a primary construct for explaining social phenomena (Welch and Yates, 2022). Through narratives of practice, this study engages in both the application of practice theory and attempts to understand the action or inaction of graduates as they transition throughout the graduate lifecycle.

The theoretical contribution of this study offers an insightful extension of Bourdieu's influential 1984 triad of a theory of practice in the context of graduate employment. I have argued that using the lens of illusio can illuminate previous unexplored understanding of working-class student's career decision-making processes and career management. I propose a tetrad of **[(illusio) (habitus) (capital)] + field = practice**, as it is the emotional investment in a possible self within the classed trajectory that aids the rupture of habitus, which can be enabled or constrained by resources. Plus, the field of the graduate labour market dictates entry and access to opportunities and progression. These field-specific requirements acquired through institutional cultural capital dictate the practice of graduates in the context of development and early career transition. As Threadgold (2019) stresses, illusio is an essential mechanism for examining the development of aspirations, and as this study has identified it is the illusio for possible self that brings about the change in dispositions and behaviours, driving the strategies to acquire field-specific knowledge, culminating in how practices are carried out. By applying illusio—one of Bourdieu's key conceptual tools—this study reveals how inspiration, emotional connection, and investment in a possible future self shape differences in student and graduate classed trajectories.

However, it is acknowledged that Bourdieu's theories often focus on the sociological and are devoid of relational or experiential capital (West, Fleming, and Finnegan, 2013).

Therefore, through the complementary lens of relationality (Finn, 2016), the study findings were enriched to address these discrepancies whilst answering Reay's (2004) assertions of habitus, as possessing an unclear grasp of feelings and emotional states. These complex characteristics and practices led to the development of conceptual groups consisting of ‘comfort seekers’, ‘to a degree’, and ‘risk takers’ (see Chapter Five). These groups challenge previously conceptualised groups of working-class students commonly used in HE, such as ‘first in family’ or WP, as these generalised groups fail to explain the differentiation of engagement in PPD and outcomes within the academic and employment fields. These groupings also challenge previous conceptualisations suggested in research reviewed in chapter one. Each conceptual group within this study exhibits stronger or weaker propensities of the characteristics of habitus rupture namely reflexivity, illusio, relationality, and three aspects of capital (cultural, social, economic) due to internal agency or external structural influence, constraining or enabling dispositional reformulation. The illusio continuum Figure 5.8 demonstrates the fluidity and exposure of enabling and constraining agentic and structural factors inhibiting or advancing graduate career transition. Thus, providing valuable insight into understanding the practice of individuals as they navigate their awareness of meaningful work.

‘Considering illusio through intensities and awareness brings forth affective and temporal elements of aspirations, where one may perceive and understand the illusio of the field but lack realistic strategies and time to be able to pursue the rewards’ (Threadgold, 2019, p.43). This is true to a degree for my data, the intensity of illusio is there for Harry and Jess, however, the effects of low levels of economic capital limit the realisation of illusio. My data does not suggest this has an immediate effect on the illusio in the field, instead, the longitudinal data indicates a temporal nature of pursuing aspirations can influence an individual’s perspective over time. This point also has resonance with Joe and Robert; they had low-level intensity, what Threadgold (2019, p.43) refers to as 'go with the flow', or a weak illusio throughout their studies and early transition. They also had lower levels of awareness of how to 'strategize and network towards their goals' Threadgold (2019, p.42). Illusio considered in this way is non-binary, demonstrating how

intensity and awareness aid the explanation of the affective, temporal, and economic aspects of aspiration. Consequentially, it impacts the power to realise career aspirations, and if not supported, could be classed as an act of symbolic violence (Threadgold, 2019). Recommendations pertaining to these findings are discussed in Figure 6.1.

My research study challenged conventional ideas about working-class students and graduates' habitus, dispositions, and employability practices. In doing so, this thesis adds depth to the way graduate employability has been previously theorised by demonstrating the inherent connections between class-based habitus, illusio, and structural factors of relationality and economic resources on graduate PPD and employment. This knowledge could be used by policymakers and practitioners to improve understanding of social reproduction and educational inequality among graduates from areas of HSED.

Methodological

Throughout this study I was acutely aware of my positionality as an insider researcher, this position explicated my experiences as a lecturer and researcher within the field, this privileged position coming from familiarity with the field (Chavez, 2008) and its participants, enabling advantages and complications (see section 3.9 for a more in-depth discussion). The findings and study design make a modest contribution to methodological knowledge in an under researched field of practitioner research. As a research tool myself (Mosselson, 2010), I was able to reflect on my unique social and academic experiences of tutoring the participants during their time at university; for some, this extended from Level 3 (Foundation Year) to Level 7 (Masters). The trust engendered during this time stimulated natural interaction and enhanced disclosure, which, when combined with my inimitable knowledge of the participant journey and prior expertise in the sports sector, enabled me to reconcile and deliver a comprehensive appraisal driven by the data.

The final methodological contribution came in an attempt to bridge the theory-method gap. This study utilised Bourdieu's concepts as devised, to trace the social practices through the convergence of theory to method to unearth deeper meaning, bringing

theory to life. The concept of habitus was put to work by examining the lived experience and historical life trajectory as a methodological instrument for capturing the habitus. Through careful analysis, patterns in both attitudes and practices can be empirically observed in reflexive narratives (Bourdieu, 1987). This illuminated an insight into the dispositions of graduates as they have evolved before and during HE and subsequently in transition into employment. Habitus as a theory and method has been neglected, obscured by its popularity as a theoretical construct (Costa *et al*., 2017). I hope this study plays a small part in encouraging other researchers to view habitus as more than a theory; by reuniting theory and method, the virtues of practice and social reproduction can bring new interpretations of phenomena.

6.3.2 How can we use this knowledge to improve relevant policy and practice?

The conceptualisation of this study came from the premise of a solutions focused approach, by seeking to understand the lived experience of lower-resourced graduates to inform policy and practice across stakeholders, ultimately improving career outcomes through HE. Despite the size and limited generalisability of the study, I believe there are elements of transferability to similar groups and HEIs. Figure 6.1 outlines recommendations for policy and practice for the sport development and coaching industry, HE and government.

Recommendations for policy and practice	
Industry	**Clarity of career pathways**
	Clear and accessible entry routes into sports coaching and football coaching from the grassroots through to the elite level.
	Employment stability
	The sports coaching industry relies on short-term contracts for staff due to the short-term funding they receive. Larger providers can employ staff on a longer fixed-term basis, while others offer casual or zero-hour contracts, resulting in unstable employment. Employers should aim to employ staff permanently where possible, offering stability, training,

	and development. Greater collaboration across providers would enable employment stability and the development of professionals.
	Closed role-specific qualifications
	Universities and the FA operate restricted recruitment by limiting access to role-specific qualifications. For example, the post-graduate certificate in higher and professional education and the FA UEFA-B license. These qualifications need to be more frequent and accessible to all who meet the entry criteria.
Higher Education	**Space for reflexivity**
	Increasing reflexivity through regular narrative interviewing of students across the student journey can help students to reconcile past events and dispositions and to consider their possible selves. It also enables support services to provide an individualised approach by identifying students with specific barriers to development, requiring more targeted assistance, facilitating a move away from the one size fits all approach and traditional categorisation of 'first in family and WP'. Such support and guidance on a personal and professional level could reconfigure the student relationship with careers and guidance services and integrate employability.
	Habitus rupture workshop
	To increase awareness of the influence of an individual's background on their PPD and career management. It is aimed at those from a lower-resourced background and those supporting them in services and academia.
	Building social capital workshop
	Students would benefit from learning about the importance and how to maximise opportunities to grow their professional network. This could be ad hoc or in preparation for structured opportunities around

	placement, internship, work experience, and post-experience to reflect and support the maintenance of new relationships.
	Financial support for PPD
	Students should not be prevented from undertaking career-enhancing activities due to their financial circumstances, access to financial support to fund activities such as learning to drive, qualifications and continuous professional development (CPD) would help to bridge the gap in equality of opportunity.
Government Policy	**Equality legislation**
	The inclusion of class origin as a protected characteristic as part of the Equality Act 2010 alongside areas such as gender, disability, and race. Prevention of discriminatory practices across all areas of society, in particular education and employment.
	Labour market transition intervention
	HEIs need to work with the government and CIMSPA to provide scaffold interventions during the transition from university into the labour market, supporting graduates yet to realise their illusio for a career. This could be through the provision of career planning, professional mentoring, opportunities to gain work experience (paid or unpaid), and financial support where needed.
	Personalised careers advisory service
	There is a need for a careers advisory service across the working life course that offers informed independent advice, on an individual basis.
	Graduate success
	There needs to be a reconsideration of conventional understandings of graduate success and social mobility discourse. The conventional narrative of success is centred around the geographic social mobility of graduates and is largely based on middle-class values of mobility, this study amongst others (Ingram *et al*., 2023) suggests a new classless

	assumption should be derived that considers a broader appreciation of success not simply economic and the wider benefits to individuals and society of remaining in stasis.

Table 6.1 Recommendations for practice

6.3.3 What do we still need to know?

Tetrad of thinking tools

Research into the factors that stimulate the illusio for a role or career would be beneficial. It appears that potential earnings, imagined future self and economic stability are contributory factors surrounding the process of realising illusio. However, further research opportunities specifically focusing on the strategies and environment conducive to its development would enable the creation of interventions to promote early adoption of illusio, stimulating openness to dispositional change, leading to growth in social capital, embodied cultural capital and the acquisition and management of their desired career.

Models of Dispositional Change

Further research into the potential applicability of the Illusio continuum (Figure 5.8) to other subject disciplines would be useful to surmise their transferability as tools to understand class-based inequality in inter-disciplinary student and graduate outcomes. The Illusio continuum offers a deeper insight into aspirations. The range of positions or level of strength is linked to the alignment of major enabling structural and agentic elements and represents the difference between habitus rupture and reconciliation. Additionally, the characteristics identified to illustrate the conditions in which rupture occurs, namely reflexivity, illusio, relationality, and (cultural, social, economic) aspects of capital could provide a broader understanding of how graduates from similar backgrounds transition differently into the labour market. This would enable universities and services to support students more effectively with their PPD as learners and graduates.

Extended longitudinal qualitative research

There are calls for further insight into, longitudinal research of student transitions, with fewer time constraints I would have liked to conduct a further small-scale study with the same sample, to revisit their trajectories as they progress to interpret whether those that had not ruptured habitus and realised their illusio went on to do so, developing a committed illusio and a protracted rupture of habitus. My findings of the current study suggest a temporal nature to progression may exist with those that have a less intense focus on their career during their studies and transition, progressing but at a different pace to other conceptual groups. This problematises the current measurement of the GOS 15 months after graduation, as some graduates' illusio matures at a different pace and others can have significant structural and relational barriers to progression, resulting in inaccurate reporting of graduate outcomes and perceived success.

Conceptual groups of graduate transition

The conceptual groups offer new ways of understanding the graduate labour market transition beyond the discipline of sport development and coaching. The elements of the conceptual groups demonstrate how dispositions, institutions, and relationality influence decision-making and aspirations. I believe they can be applied and developed through further research within sport and across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, aiding the investigation into the broader application to alternate disciplines. If established this knowledge could improve early intervention strategies by careers and academic teams to move students and graduates along the illusio continuum to habitus rupture. More broadly it could be used to inform employability curricula, university employability policy, economic support, and employer practices.

6.3.4 Methodological limitations

Practitioner research

Undertaking this research has afforded me the opportunity to discover what happened to my students after graduation and to better understand the transition process into the labour market. I realised how I and key others had played a part in the PPD of these

individuals and how challenging it can be to relinquish this role whilst undertaking empirical research with those individuals. My intention to research the lived experience of graduate transition into employment was rooted in my practice as a lecturer supporting students to learn and develop, witnessing differentiation in student engagement and inequality of outcomes. These experiences led me to want to understand why students perceived learning and career-enhancing activities in the manner they did, and whether their background was a factor. Participants were selected from my most recent cohort of graduates at the time of data collection, as I believed it was important to research those with recent experience of the degree and to follow them as they transitioned into the labour market. As a result of this sampling method, I already had a relationship with the participants, being a personal tutor to most of them. This brought with it potential issues of researcher bias, of viewing the shared experience through a rose-tinted lens (Chavez, 2008). I minimised such bias by shifting the power balance to the participant through narrative inquiry. Narrative interviewing allowed for a nuanced view of their lived experience to be understood from the participant's perspective, without direction from me the researcher. This enabled them to narrate their own experiences in their own way, without interruption, providing detail and depth that comes from reflecting in the presence of a trusted individual. I believe our prior relationship and the narrative method helped to overcome bias in the data, as opposed to encouraging it, enabling deeper reflection, and revealing more than they may have had we not shared a similar experience.

Consequentially, this depth of disclosure created a greater need for me to be sensitive to the trust placed in me, limiting how I portrayed the more intimate details of their circumstances and experiences to protect their identity and personal information. Attempts to reduce researcher bias were designed into the study from the outset, a longitudinal design facilitated multiple interviews over 2 years, allowing for a true sense of participant self to be produced across interview narratives, improving quality assurance within the data. As I had prior knowledge of the participants before the study it was important for me to not allow this to bias my interpretation of the data, to minimise

the risk I immersed myself in the data, reading and re-reading before beginning emergent coding. Once coded I created a codebook to organise and record raw data alongside the code to check and challenge my coding throughout the analysis and write-up, making sure I stayed true to the data, rather than my own knowledge.

Participant sample

The participant sample was heavily influenced by a particular gender and ethnicity, which could impact the research findings. However, the sample did include one female, and the sample was representative of BA Sport Development and Coaching cohorts from a gender and ethnicity perspective. The demographic variety added value to the sample, but it was not the primary objective for recruitment. The main factor in the selection of the sample was their background, as I wanted to understand their lived experience of early transition into graduate employment from the perspective of individuals originating from areas of high socioeconomic deprivation. Postcodes mapped onto Office for National Statistics (ONS) data for multiple deprivation is a common method of categorisation (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013). However, as Byrom (2010) highlights, these aggregate measures fail to reveal the unique family histories influential in developing primary habitus and individual behaviour. This could account for differences in support received by participants from their family, a challenge faced by any homogenous grouping.

Influence of Covid-19 pandemic

During the final phase of data collection for this study, the UK was placed under restricted movement, and social interaction was limited due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in my data collection method having to change from face-to-face to online video interviews using Microsoft Teams. The inconsistency in the method of data collection was a limitation of the study, nevertheless, the change was necessary due to the need to collect time-sensitive data to capture their early career transitional experiences. Consequently, the method enabled the participant to be in familiar surroundings of their home, easing the nerves of being interviewed in person, potentially improving the quality of the data collected.

This research brings to the fore ‘uncomfortable truths’ about the influence of inequality in education and employment transition. It explains how an individual's background affects their perceptions, levels of interaction, and investment in career-enhancing opportunities, impacting individual learning, support networks, employment outcomes, and, ultimately, social change.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Demographic Questionnaire

DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Contact Information

Name	
Address	
Post Code	
Date of Birth	
Phone Number	
Emergency Contact Name	
Emergency Contact Number	
Email	

Ethnicity

☐ White: English/Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British (1)	☐ White: Irish (2)	☐ White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller (3)

☐ White: Other White (4)	☐ Mixed/multiple ethnic group: White and Black Caribbean (5)	☐ Mixed/multiple ethnic group: White and Black African (6)
☐ Mixed/multiple ethnic group: White and Asian (7)	☐ Mixed/multiple ethnic group: Other Mixed (8)	☐ Asian/Asian British: Indian (9)
☐ Asian/Asian British: Pakistani (10)	☐ Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi (11)	☐ Asian/Asian British: Chinese (12)
☐ Asian/Asian British: Other Asian (13)	☐ Black/African/ Caribbean/ Black British: African (14)	☐ Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British: Caribbean (15)
☐ Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British: Other Black (16)	☐ Other ethnic group: Arab (17)	☐ Other ethnic group: Any other ethnic group (18)

Marital status

Single (1)	☐	Separated (2)	☐
Married (3)	☐	Divorced (4)	☐
Living with partner (5)	☐	Widowed (6)	☐

Dependent children

Yes (1) ☐	No (2) ☐

If yes, how many……………………….

Undergraduate Degree classification awarded

First class (1) ☐	2.1 (2) ☐
2.2 (3) ☐	3rd (4) ☐

How many years of higher education? ……………………………….

Current employment status

Unemployed (1) ☐	Retired (2) ☐
Employed/self-employed full-time (3) ☐	Unable to work (4) ☐
Employed/self-employed part-time (5) ☐	Homemaker (6) ☐
Student (7) ☐	

Accommodation details

Own my own home (1) ☐	Rented property (2) ☐
Registered Social Landlord (3) ☐ Please state Housing Association.....	Living with parents/family (4) ☐

……………………………………….	
Other (5) ☐	

Disability / long-standing illness

Yes (1) ☐	No (2) ☐
If yes, please state………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………………………………..	

Appendix Two: Narrative Interview Schedule 1

Narrative Interview Schedule 1

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field
	Formulating exmanent topics
1 Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration
	Using visual aids
2 Main narration	No interruptions
	Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling
	Wait for the coda
3 Questioning phase	Only 'What happened then?'
	No opinion and attitude questions
	No arguing on contradictions
	No why-questions
	Exmanent into immanent questions
4. Conclude talk	Stop recording
	Why-questions allowed
	Memory protocol immediately after interview

(Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000, p.5)

Phase 1: Life trajectory narration

Hi, I asked you to prepare a life trajectory diagram to illustrate the events in your life so far.

Phase 2: Narrative interview initiation

We've got as much time as you need for the interview. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, and I may take a couple of notes that I'll ask you questions about later. As I said, take as much time as you need.

Phase 2a: Main narration—Can you start by telling me all about yourself, using your life trajectory if that helps?

No interruptions, only non-verbal encouragement to continue storytelling, wait for the coda.
Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Phase 3: Questioning phase

What happened before/after/then?

Exmanent prompts (these will be translated during the interview into immanent questions using the participant's own language):

- Support network
- Educational opportunities and attainment
- Employment aspirations

Phase 4: Concluding talk:

Stop recording
Ask why questions from the narrative.
Make a memory protocol immediately after the interview.

Appendix Three: Narrative Interview Schedule 2

Narrative Interview Schedule 2

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field
	Formulating exmanent topics
1 Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration
	Using visual aids
2 Main narration	No interruptions
	Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling
	Wait for the coda
3 Questioning phase	Only 'What happened then?'
	No opinion and attitude questions
	No arguing on contradictions
	No why-questions
	Exmanent into immanent questions
4. Conclude talk	Stop recording
	Why-questions allowed
	Memory protocol immediately after interview

(Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000, p.5)

Phase 1: Life trajectory narration

Hi, the last time we talked, you told me your life history, which was very interesting. This interview is focused on your experiences and events in seeking employment up to and beyond graduation.

Phase 2: Narrative interview initiation

As before, take your time. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, and I may take a couple of notes that I'll ask you questions about later. As I said, take as much time as you need.

Phase 2a: Main narration - Can you start by telling me about your experiences seeking graduate employment?

No interruptions, only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling and wait for the coda. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Phase 3: Questioning phase

What happened before/after/then?
Exmanent prompts (these will be translated during the interview into immanent questions using the participant's own language):

- Perception of development of own Graduate Identity
- Development of self during this time
- Social, economic and cultural factors influencing graduate employment
- Support network (Family, friends, professional)
- Expectations of gaining graduate level employment

Phase 4: Concluding talk:

Stop recording
Ask why questions from the narrative.
Make memory protocol immediately after interview.

Appendix Four: Narrative Interview Schedule 3

Narrative Interview Schedule 3

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field
	Formulating exmanent topics
1 Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration
	Using visual aids
2 Main narration	No interruptions
	Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling
	Wait for the coda
3 Questioning phase	Only 'What happened then?'
	No opinion and attitude questions
	No arguing on contradictions
	No why-questions
	Exmanent into immanent questions
4. Conclude talk	Stop recording
	Why-questions allowed
	Memory protocol immediately after interview

(Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000, p.5)

Phase 1: Life trajectory narration

Hi, over the past two interviews you have told me about your life history and seeking graduate employment. This interview I would like you to reflect back on this time and your experiences. In addition I would like you to discuss your aspirations for the future.

Phase 2: Narrative interview initiation

As before take your time. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt and I may take a couple of notes that I'll ask you questions about later. As I said take as much time as you need.

Phase 2a: Main narration - Can you start off by reflecting back on your life trajectory, networks and graduate employment?

No interruptions, only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling, wait for the coda.
Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Phase 3: Questioning phase

What happened before/after/then?

Exmanent prompts (these will be translated during the interview into immanent questions using the participant's own language):

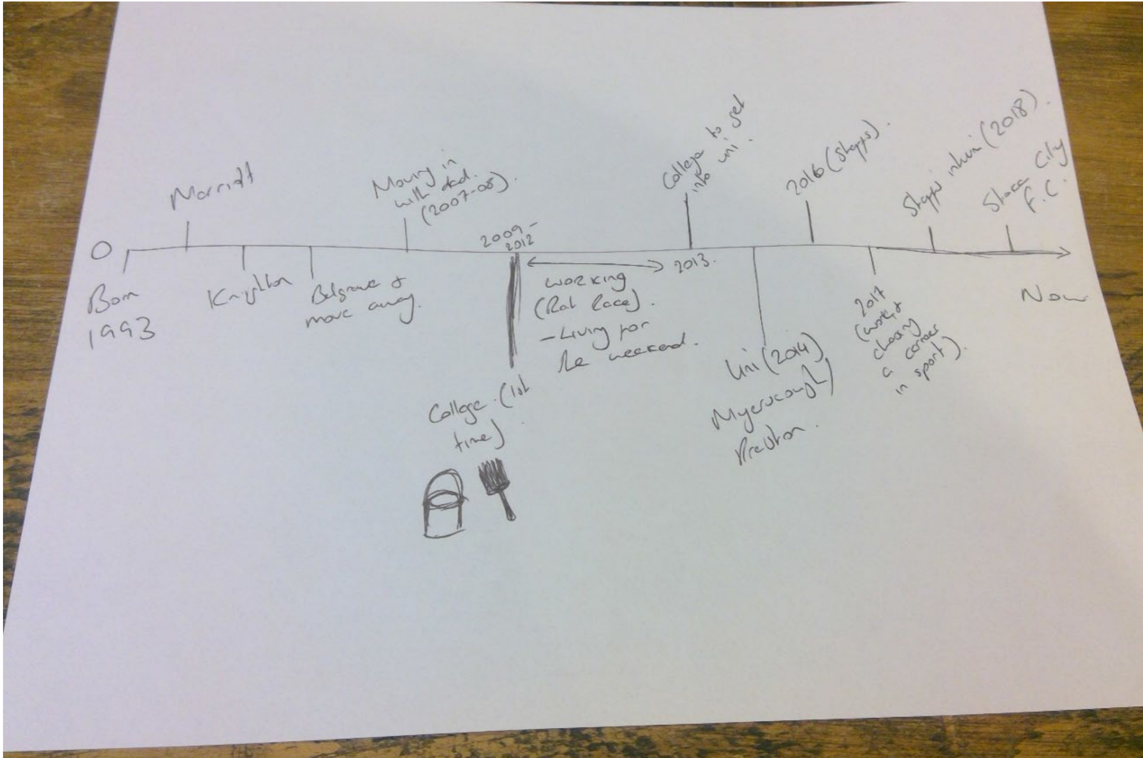
- Perception of own graduate identity
- Values and behaviours developed
- Expectations of future career and self-development
- Level of self-perceived employability

Phase 4: Concluding talk:

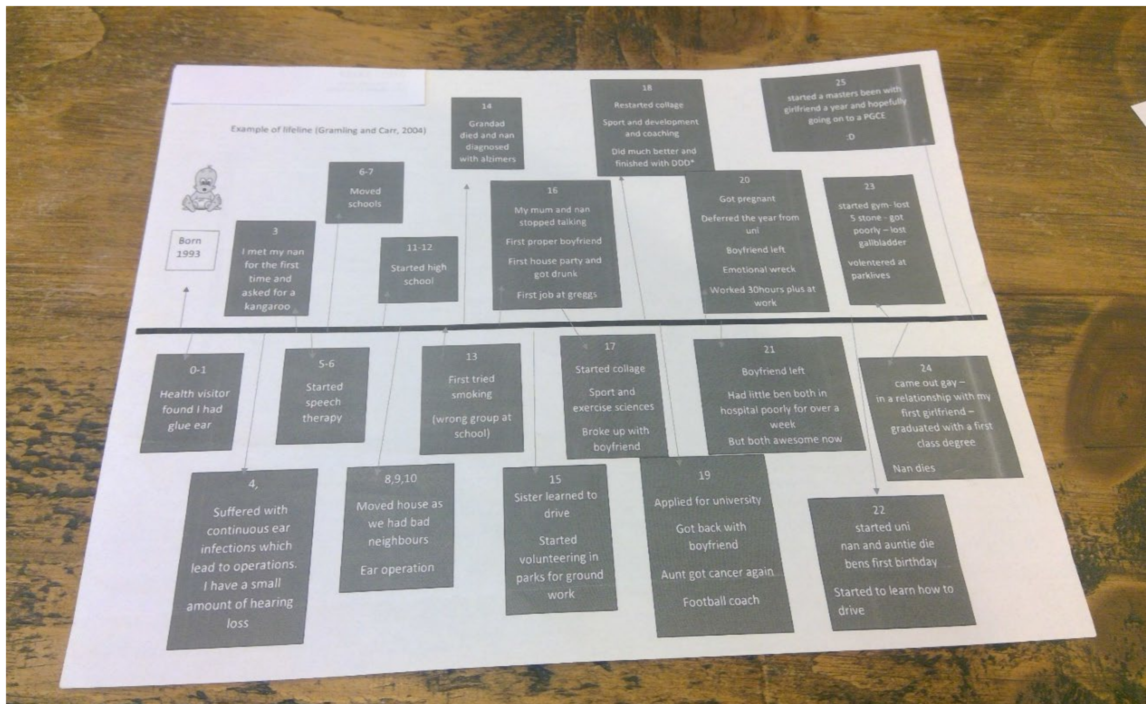
Stop recording
Ask why questions from the narrative.
Make memory protocol immediately after interview.

Appendix Five: Participant Life Trajectories

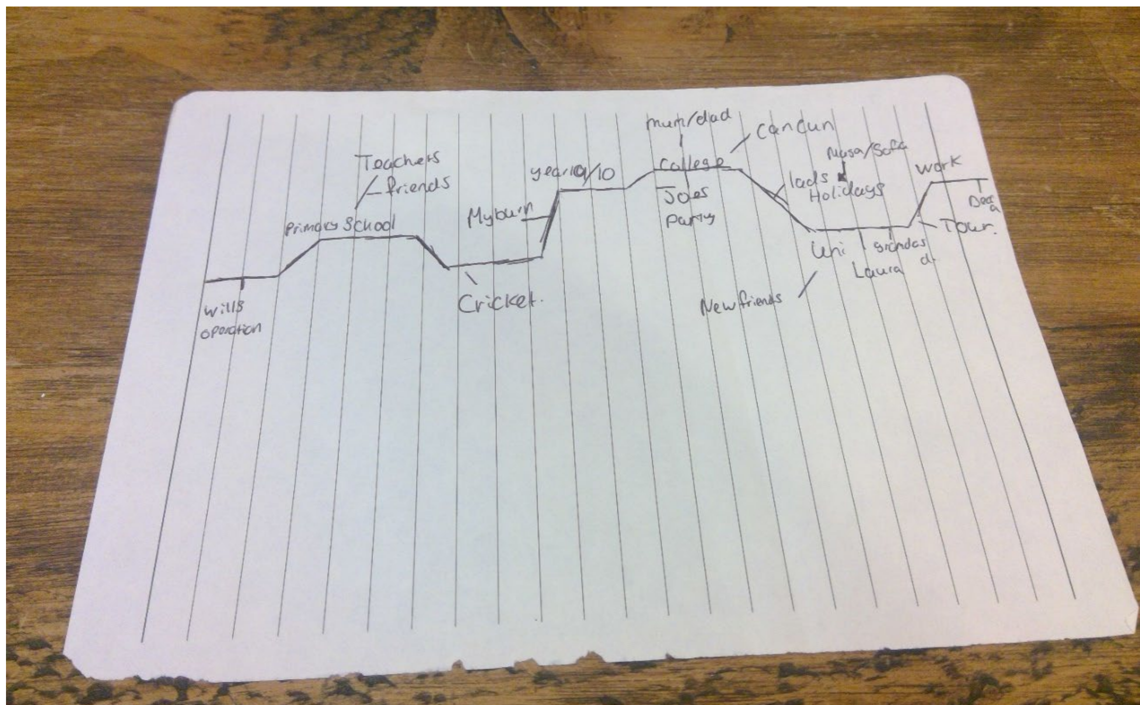
Life Trajectory: Harry



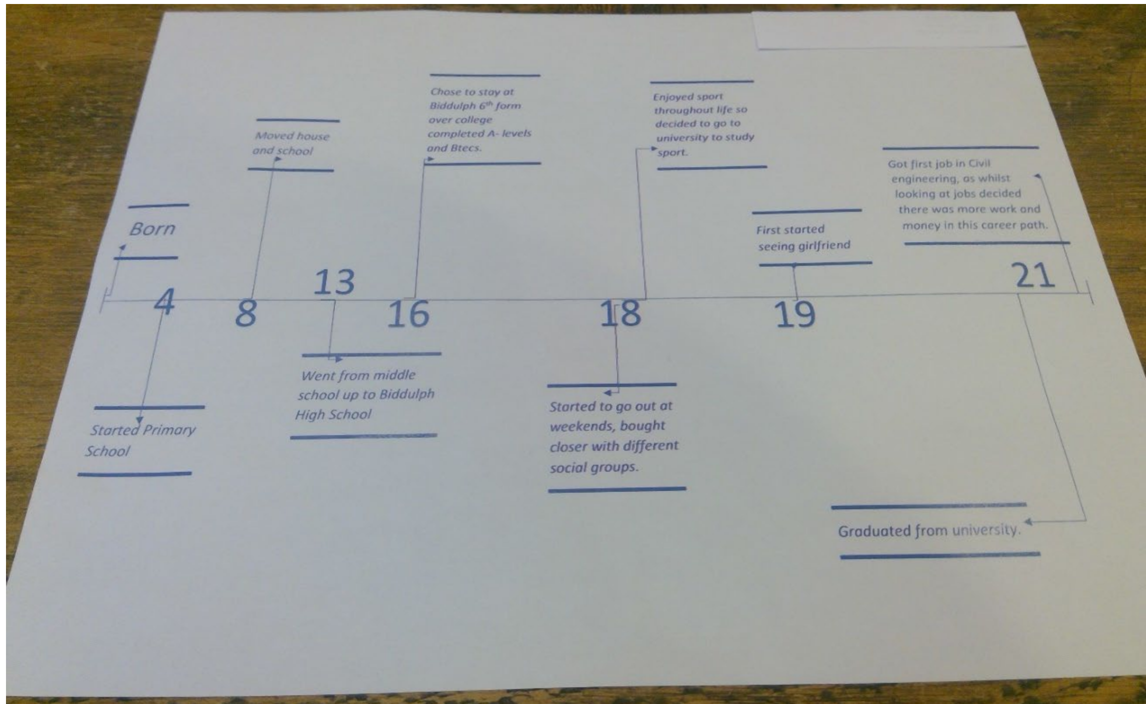
Life Trajectory: Jess



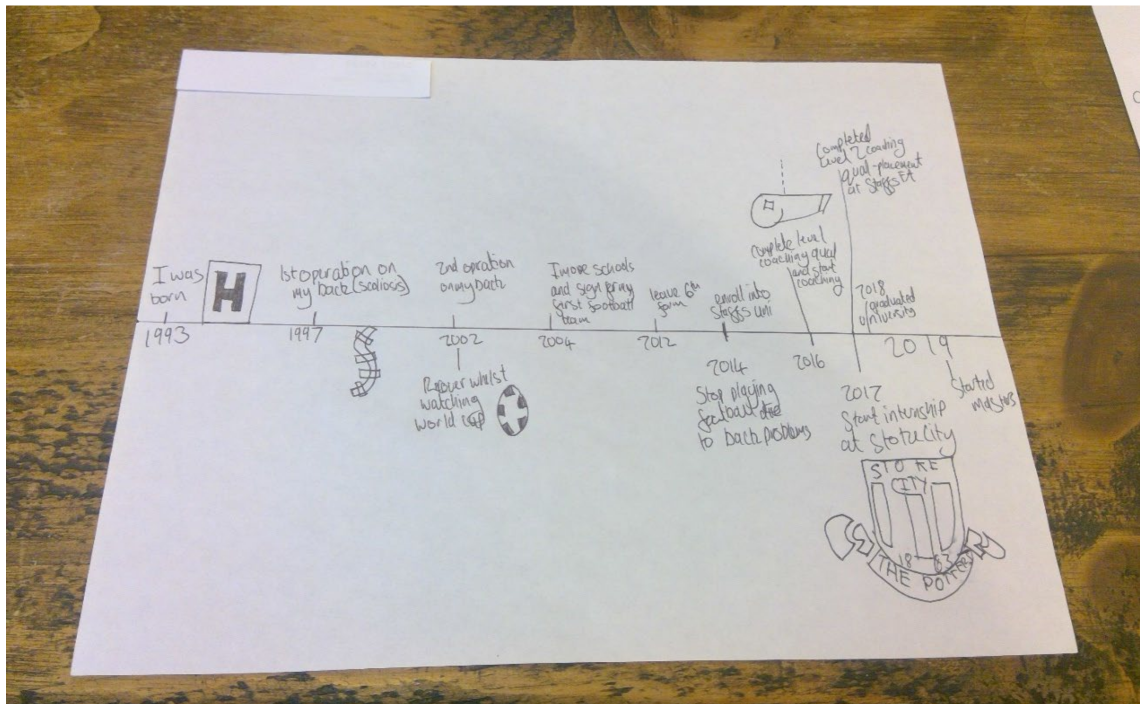
Life Trajectory: Joe



Life Trajectory: John



Life Trajectory: Robert



Life Trajectory: Steven

Appendix Six: Ethical Approval (1)

Health Sciences

PROPORTIONATE REVIEW APPROVAL FEEDBACK

Researcher Name:	Jo Ellard
Title of Study:	Exploring Graduate Views Of Graduate Identity And Capitals Used In Transition Into The Labour Market. A Narrative Study Within An Area Of High Socio-Economic Deprivation
Status of approval:	Approved

Thank you for forwarding the amendments requested by the Ethics Panel.

Action now needed:

Your project proposal has been approved by the Ethics Panel and you may commence the implementation phase of your study. You should note that any divergence from the approved procedures and research method will invalidate any insurance and liability cover from the University. You should, therefore, notify the Panel of any significant divergence from this approved proposal.

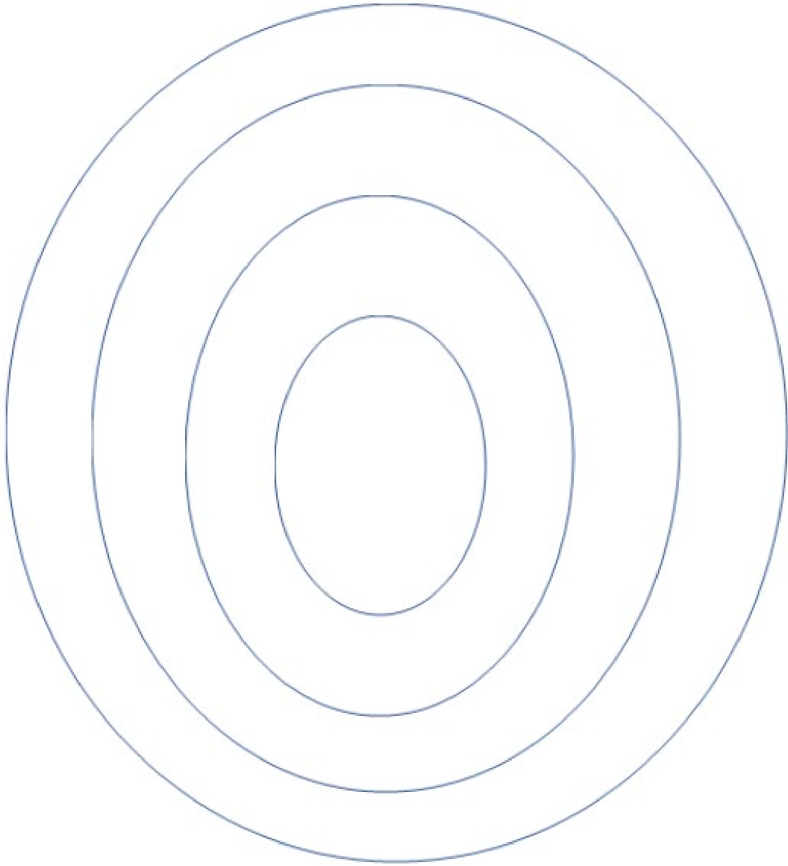
When your study is complete, please send the ethics committee an end of study report. A template can be found on the ethics BlackBoard site.

Signed: Dr Roozbeh Naemi **Date: 14.09.2018**

Chair of the Health Sciences Ethics Panel

Appendix Seven: Target Sociogram

<u>Target Sociogram template</u>



Appendix Eight: Ethical Approval (2 – Covid)

Life Sciences and Education

ETHICAL APPROVAL FEEDBACK

Researcher name:	Jo Ellard
Title of Study:	Exploring Graduate Views Of Graduate Identity And Capitals Used In Transition Into The Labour Market. A Narrative Study Within An Area Of High Socio-Economic Deprivation
Award Pathway:	**Doctorate**
Status of approval:	**Amendment approved**

Thank you for your correspondence requesting approval of a minor amendment to your previously approved application that were highlighted in your emails to me on 10th and 12th June 2020

Your amended application is approved. We wish you well with your research.

Action now needed:

Your amendment has now been approved by the Ethics Committee.

You should note that any divergence from the approved procedures and research method will invalidate any insurance and liability cover from the University. You should, therefore, notify the Panel in writing of any significant divergence from this approved proposal.

You should arrange to meet with your supervisor for support during the process of completing your study and writing your dissertation.

When your study is complete, please send the ethics committee an end of study report. A template can be found on the ethics BlackBoard site

Signed: Prof. Roozbeh Naemi **Date:**

Ethics Coordinator
School of Life Sciences and Education

Appendix Nine: Qualitative codebook extract

1										COMFORT SEEKER									
2		PP	PP	PP	Education strategy	Education strategy	Dispositions	Education strategy	Career strategy	Career strategy	ROTG	Dispositions	Dispositions	Career strategy	Career strategy	Attributes	Education strategy	Career strategy	Career strategy
3	**Inductive Codes**	ill health during early years	School move	Family	Ill informed choice	Importance of staying comfortable	Commitment	Applied to university	Get a job	No career plan	The dream	Social development	Graduate skills	Industry specific quals	Work Exp	Friendship	Benefits of HE	Revised career plan	Inexperienced
		Robert had scoliosis of the spine diagnosis stage one or two years he missed two years of primary	Had to move primary school due to sister having poor experience so went to St Edwards middle school because the sister tell me what did want him to go to the high school that she will do that he would have gone to so remove primary schools this was a difficult time I've been just still recovering	His biological parents had split up he was now living	He thinks he picked the wrong subjects, but he doesn't say why. I suspect it's because that's what his friends did and in his GCSE geography exam, he refused to take part in the exam	When he was at high school he didn't think he had good enough grades to get into sixth form he was more relieved about being with	He had to do a third year of six form as he recognises that he didn't commit to his studies first time round and that's why he didn't get the best Marks and had to reset the	He applied for university in his final year of six form first time round his teacher or six form leader had told him that there is no point applying as you probably wouldn't get in but he went and applied anyway. But because of what the teacher had said they should planted a seed of doubt and so he didn't cheque to see if he had been accepted at university. When he did check a year later,, he had been offered a place but had not accepted it because he didn't know. * This could link to parental	His dad was pushing him to get	Not knowing what career to pursue. * This is quite common for sports graduates they come to sport because of their passion for it not necessarily their	Still hopeful that someday he will be able to fulfil his dream of being a professional footballer, but if not coaching	His mum had noticed his social skills	He's been taught to question sporting	he has gained level one and two football qualifications outside of the degree course and this has increased	Gained an internship but a professional football club through a placement on the degree course it also gave links with	He made good lifetime friends during	the reason he wanted to come to uni was he thought he would miss out if he didn't. Also he had looked at job opportunities in America and noted	Moving to America taken a back seat start to focus on the UK and gain experience use degree and career specific qualificati	when he first applied to work in America he was inexperienced and had only

Robert | Joe | +

	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM
1																				
2	Attribute	Dispositions	Resources	Dispositions	Career planning	Career pathway	Resources	Career strategy	Dispositions	Resources	Dispositions	Career strategy	Resources	Resources	Career strategy	Career strategy	Career strategy	Career strategy	Resources	Disposition s
3	Self doubt	Attitude towards education	Relational ity	Doing the minimum	Fulfilment	Support	Pressure to earn	Careers advice	Better than peers	Network	Will not reach out	Reason for post grad	Career influence	Decision making	Need to gain experienc e	Gained experience	Accessing career path	Career planning	Friend helped gain employm ent	Misalignme nt
4	at that time of a first applying he didn't get through the first round but they said you could try again and a few weeks in Manchester to prove that he had what it takes to gain the coaching job in America. But he didn't go as he had to travel and believed what he was told that it was not good enough so therefore he didn't try.	I did enough just to get by the bare minimum, he didn't really want to be there (school) always finding the reason to mess around didn't pay attention. Feels it is ironic he has continued	his mother encourag ed him to not just do the minimum particular	He applied for coaching in America I didn't hear anything back so he didn't chase it, when details finally emerged and he had been	his mother was of the understanding that she wanted him to gain a job that he enjoyed before he got into the trap of having to earn money to support himself. She wanted him to do something he really	His mum and his step dad were willing to support him financially so he could afford to find fulfilling employment . * This could be linked that to them not having fulfilling employment	his father was of the opposite persuasio n he was encourage d in his son to get a job and to start earning money, go down the route of gaining a	His dad Started pressurising him after graduation to get a job. He was pushing him into areas and careers that he had no interest or illusio with and they	He aspired to be better than his friends that hadn't gone to university, to not just settle for the status quo and to want more. He didn't want to be like them * this could be linked to	has a small group of close family and friends who he relies on for advice and support. Wouldn't speak to	he's never sought support not use the careers service to advise or help him to develop	Motivated currently to continue with education if he left it would be harder to re engage with the masters and that would result in possible missed opportunities to aid future career ambitions. If he didn't do it now he would never do it. He didn't want to do the coaching masters because it was two years part time and distance learning and because he wasn't convinced he	Doesn't believe that someone has shaped his career or helped had influence on his career decisions he believes it's more around the jobs he wants to do so he reads through the job descriptions see what experience and qualifications are required by the job and then	spoke to university friend close friend and lecturers about the masters course, so did you social capital to inform decision. His mum also supported the idea of him	He remembe rs its lecturers promptin g you to gain as much experienc e as you can so when you graduate	he undertook an internship at stoke in order to improve his CV and he believes this could have developed into a further opportunity had he not moved house and	he perceives that he tried to consciously build his CV to put in a good position for transitioning to employment. But he thinks even now with the small amount he's done that he'll still have to start probably at the bottom again maybe to do	He's been gaining experience voluntarily within sport development and there's a possibility that this could develop into a paid position but this is not guaranteed. He still pursuing coaching positions within league level football and would	His close university friend has put his name forward with his company he works for and they have offered him work, he has	Gained work exp doing multi-sport coaching but that was not what he wanted to do, which was just football. So, he did not continue. *Same as

Robert | Joe

Appendix Ten: Participant consent form

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: EXPLORING GRADUATE VIEWS OF CAPITALS USED IN THE PURSUIT OF EMPLOYMENT. A NARRATIVE STUDY WITHIN AN AREA OF HIGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Please read each statement, and tick the box next to it to indicate that you are in agreement with the statements

Statement	
I have read the participant information sheet and the nature and purpose of this research has been explained to me.	☐
I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that if I change my mind, I can withdraw up until the data has been aggregated for analysis purposes. I can do this without prejudice and without giving a reason.	☐
I understand that I do not have to answer every question if I do not wish to and I don't have to give any explanation.	☐
I understand that confidentiality will be maintained throughout this project, and that none of the information I provide will be linked to me in the final thesis, or any other academic writing, conference presentations or teaching.	☐
I confirm that quotations may be used in the report, provided that the quotations are anonymised and do not reveal my identity if I choose to remain anonymous.	☐
I confirm I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation in it.	☐
I understand that my data will be securely stored in accordance with Staffordshire University protocols and current data protection guidelines.	☐
I confirm that I agree to take part in this research project.	☐
I would like my data to remain anonymous as far as practicable	☐
I agree that any interview that I take part in may be audio recorded	☐

Should I wish to receive a copy of a summary of the study findings I will provide my contact email in the address box below	
Participant Name (please print)	
Signature	
Date	
Researcher Name	Mrs Jo Ellard
Participant Email Address * optional	

Page 1 of 1

Appendix Eleven: Participant information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Research Project: *From widening participation to widening graduate level employment, narratives of recent graduate experiences.*

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you are happy to take part, it is important that you understand what the project is about, why I am inviting you to take part, and exactly what is involved. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

What is the project about?

The project seeks to understand sport graduate's experiences of transition from university into the labour market and graduate employment. I want to explore student stories of the last 12 months after leaving university, to understand how prepared they were, barriers they faced and what the degree programme could do to prepare future graduates further.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because have graduated with a sport related degree from Staffordshire University in 2018 and have resided in Stoke on Trent for many years.

What does it involve?

Taking part would involve you being invited to take part in face-to-face narrative interviews with the researcher who is working on the project (Jo Ellard). The research is a longitudinal study with 3 interviews at particular points (recent graduate 3 months after graduation, Spring 2019 and again Autumn 2019). The first interview aims to help you tell your life history up to graduation, I will ask you to roughly draw a life trajectory as it can help to remember and express events. The second narrative interview will be focused on your transition into the labour market, I will ask you to draw a network map of key people in your personal and professional life. The final interview you will be asked to reflect back over their current and previous experiences, your network map will be revisited to update if appropriate. The interviews will take approximately 45 minutes to complete and would take place at a time and location that is convenient for you.

Are there any risks or benefits?

There are no personal risks or disadvantage involved in taking part in the research. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form to make sure that you fully understand what you are agreeing to. The research has been approved by the University Ethics Committee at Staffordshire University. There are no personal benefits for the people who take part, but any knowledge that is gained as a result of the research will be made available to the school teaching teams involved on your programme of study, to consider how we might do things differently in future to improve the experience of students in future academic years. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you change your mind at any point, you can withdraw at any time up to the point at which the data becomes aggregated for analysis purposes and you don't have to give a reason for doing so. If there are any questions in the interview or any subsequent interviews that you would prefer not to answer, you do not have to answer them.

Will I be identified in the report?

No. None of the information that you provide will use your name or be attributed directly to you in the study report. All reasonable steps will be taken to safeguard the anonymity of everyone who takes part and present in the final document.

Any personal information that you provide will be confidential and accessed only by the researcher. Transcripts of the interviews will be stored securely whilst the research is being undertaken and will be destroyed in accordance with university and school procedures that are in force when the project is completed.

General Data Protection Regulation 2016.

Your data will be processed in accordance with the GDPR. The data controller for this project will be Staffordshire University. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined in this information sheet. The legal basis for processing your personal data for research purposes under GDPR is a 'task in the public interest'. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the GDPR. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the Staffordshire University Data Protection Officer. If you wish to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a dissertation for a professional Doctorate in Education at Staffordshire University. If you have any queries or questions related to this research, please contact me on 01782 294153, or by email at j.d.ellard@staffs.ac.uk. If you have any concerns about this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr. Caroline Bath. Her email address is Caroline.Bath@staffs.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.