

# ‘Not everybody walks around and thinks “That’s an example of othering or stigmatisation”’: Identity, pedagogic rights and the acquisition of undergraduate sociology-based social science knowledge

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## Abstract

This article places itself in conversation with literature about how the experience and outcomes of university education are structured by intersections between social class, ethnicity, gender, age and type of university attended. It addresses undergraduate students’ acquisition of sociological knowledge in four diverse university settings. Basil Bernstein’s concepts of pedagogic identity, pedagogic rights, classification and framing are employed to analyse curriculum and interviews with 31 students over the period of their undergraduate degree. The nature of a sociology-based disciplinary identity is described and illustrated, and it is shown how the formation of this identity gives access to pedagogic rights and the acquisition of valuable capabilities. Addressing the question of whether pedagogic rights are distributed unequally in a stratified university system, it was found that they were not distributed, as might be expected, according to institutional hierarchy. It is argued that the acquisition of university sociological knowledge can disrupt social inequality.

## Keywords

Basil Bernstein, capabilities, disciplinary identity, pedagogic identity, pedagogic rights, sociological knowledge, university education

## Introduction

The ‘Pedagogic quality and inequality in undergraduate degrees’ project<sup>1</sup> was a 3-year study of equity and quality in undergraduate sociology-based education in four universities in England in different positions in published league tables. To signal these positions, the universities are called ‘Community’, ‘Diversity’ (regularly rated in the bottom third of league tables), ‘Prestige’ and ‘Selective’ (regularly rated in the top third). The larger project employed the concepts of the educational sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000)<sup>2</sup> to investigate curriculum and pedagogy in departments of different reputations; what pedagogic identities are engendered in students; and similarities and differences in the quality of education and the educational outcomes for students.

This article draws on documents and interviews with 31 students in each of the 3 years of their degree to argue that the acquisition of sociology-based social science knowledge shapes a disciplinary identity that is characterised by thinking in open-minded ways about human behaviour, by questioning the relationship between individuals and the conditions they find themselves in and by being oriented to improving society. The formation of this identity benefits students by broadening their horizons and by including them in a specialised group, and it benefits society by their acquiring the capability to participate in civil society. These benefits were not distributed according to the hierarchy of universities, suggesting that university education can effect some disruption of the social order, even if the conditions for doing so are more difficult in lower-status universities.

The argument is developed first by situating our study in the literature about the experiences of different groups of students in universities of different status and by explaining why Bernstein’s theory was an appropriate framing for the study. Following a methodological note, we develop the concept of a specialised disciplinary identity and discuss the formation of this identity in terms of access to ‘pedagogic rights’. Finally, we argue that a focus on students’ disciplinary knowledge acquisition in specific departments has shed light on

how relatively disadvantaged groups can and do benefit from university education more than is suggested by most research.

### **The inequities of UK university education**

It is evident that the UK Higher Education system is characterised by inequalities. The lower the socio-economic class a young person is a member of, the less likely she is to attend university (Reay et al., 2005). This article is concerned with those who are at university and locates itself within the literature that deals with the differentiated experiences of different social groups. While access to university might be more open than 20 years ago, there appear to be limits to the benefits of higher education for those who are relatively economically and socially disadvantaged. Within a stratified system, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (likely to be ‘first-generation’ university students) tend to enrol in the less prestigious universities (Boliver, 2011). Whatever university they attend, the personal costs are greater for poorer students: they are more likely to take on employment, which has an adverse effect on their studies; to have personal or financial problems; and to not complete their courses (Archer, 2007; Archer et al., 2003; Callender, 2008; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Voight, 2007). Compared to middle-class students, when they leave university working-class students are disadvantaged in the labour market and in postgraduate education and training (Brookes, 2006; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005).

In terms of other socio-cultural groupings, there is well-established evidence of an ‘ethnic attainment gap’ which is shorthand for the phenomenon that across UK higher education (HE), Black and minority-ethnic (BME) students achieve significantly fewer upper-second and first-class degrees than White students (HEFCE 2010; National Union of Students (NUS), 2011; Stevenson, 2012a, 2012b). While women’s participation in HE has in some areas overtaken men’s, they are underrepresented in high-status science, and participation is not matched in the labour market (David, 2014).

Of most relevance to this article is a substantial body of research that undertakes Bourdieuan explorations of university students’ experiences. This work reveals how universities comprise a ‘field’ of discursive practices which mesh with the ‘habitus’ of middle-class students and exclude working-class and ethnic-minority students from mainstream university experience. Of particular note is the work of Gill Crozier et al. (2008b) who draw on findings from a study of undergraduate students at four different types of university to observe:

An interrelated spectrum of differentiated experiences exists across and within institutions rather than simply stark polarisation. This is structured by the differential wealth and organisation of the universities, and their expectations of students, the subject sub-cultures, and students’ own socio-cultural locations, namely class, gender, age and ethnicity. (p. 167)

They conclude that working-class students facing a middle-class world without the right kind of cultural and social capital find it harder than their middle-class peers to engage in the wider university, to fit in and to develop strong, confident learner identities (Crozier et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2010).

Moreover, they found different inequities operating at universities of different status. In higher-status universities, working-class students were less likely to feel part of the university than those in lower-status universities (where they regard other students as ‘like us’). But students at lower-status universities were not encouraged to work as hard as students at higher-status universities and were anxious not to be thought of as ‘nerdy’ (Crozier and Reay 2011; Reay et al., 2009, 2010). Sometimes this research portrays working-class students as agents responding in multiple ways to their university education and shows them successfully dealing with challenges (mainly in the higher-status universities). But overall, from the perspective of this body of work, for working-class students either the ‘identity work’ required to ‘fit in’ causes discomfort or ‘for the most part [they] end up in universities seen to be “second class” both by themselves and others’ (Reay et al., 2010: 121). Bowl (2003) also found that ‘non-traditional’ students knew about the status divide and were drawn to the lower-status universities.

This type of analysis confirms the implication of league table rankings that higher-status universities offer a better quality education. For example, Crozier and Reay (2011) employed a Bernsteinian analysis to demonstrate how high expectations at an elite university served working-class students better than the ‘dominant tendency to “tip toe” around the students for fear of putting them under too much pressure which it was thought, could be counterproductive’ (p. 150). Similarly, a decade ago, Ainley (1994) predicted that the students in lower-status universities would receive a vocational education which would not provide them with ‘the conceptual tools and general thinking skills to question received ideas’ (p. 191). Yet, other accounts emphasise how university education has transformed lives; for example, Stuart’s (2012) life histories of first-generation entrants to HE reveal how the experience has opened ‘gateways to other worlds’ (p. 124). And Brennan et al.’s

(2010) 5-year study found that whatever university students attended, for the majority ‘the experience of university is associated with the achievement of greater confidence, independence, communication skills, understanding of other people, and maturity’ (pp. 155–156).

Undoubtedly, there are inequities in university experience. Yet, the evidence of the ‘interrelated spectrum’ of who gains what from a university education points to complexities that are laborious to unravel. Given the uncertainties, a key underlying assumption for the project reported here was that league tables compound disadvantage by combining indicators of pedagogic quality with other indicators that depend on institutional status and wealth (e.g. entry qualifications and staff–student ratio), thereby conforming to general suppositions about the hierarchy of universities (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Such tables ignore student progress and the differences involved in teaching students who begin university with lower qualifications and little familiarity with the idea of HE (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003).

Although the studies discussed above select students from specific disciplines, and see department and discipline as important variables, the accounts do not go into depth about the specificity of transmitting and acquiring disciplinary knowledge and the effects of doing so. Concomitantly, policy documents about the quality of HE (e.g. ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ (BIS, 2011)) make no reference to knowledge (Ashwin et al., 2015). The research reported here focused strongly on the effects of acquiring disciplinary knowledge, which it was assumed would differ according to discipline. Sociology (and allied areas) was chosen for three reasons: university sociology is taken up by all socio-economic classes (Houston and Lebeau, 2006); it is a discipline that pursues social and moral ambition by applying theory to social problems (Halsey, 2004) which provides a basis for exploring educational outcomes beyond economic goals; and the researchers teach and research sociology or sociology of education, giving us an insiders’ understanding of the knowledge being acquired by students.

Next, we show how an interest in ‘bringing knowledge back in’ (Young, 2008) is served using a framework drawn from the work of the sociologist of education, Basil Bernstein.

### **Bernsteinian concepts for investigating the distribution of undergraduate sociology knowledge**

The lifework of Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) combined empirical investigation and theoretical elaboration about how the distribution of knowledge is related to hierarchies in society. His early work investigated language use and socialisation in families, and he extended this to address how school organisation, curriculum and pedagogy reproduce society’s inequalities (Bernstein, 1971, 1973, 1977, 1990, 2000). Most of his work was on schooling, where he explored the relations between educational experience and the (re)production of socio-economic class. During formal schooling, the link between social class and educational attainment is persistent, and his work unearths the ways inequalities are transmitted through curriculum and pedagogy.

Universities are ‘official pedagogic sites’ (Bernstein, 2000) for the distribution of knowledge. The system is structured hierarchically both materially and symbolically by way of resource inequities, the different social positions of students in different status universities and reputation reflected in league tables. Nevertheless, given that university students have on arrival attained a good level of education, and given our interest in exploring the justice of university rankings, we did not make assumptions about how disciplinary knowledge was being distributed. Although Bernstein’s brief speculations about university education predicted inequalities, his theory allows for both reproduction and disruption of social inequalities.

In Bernstein’s theory, code<sup>3</sup> is embedded in individuals and groups by formal and informal educational practices which differentially distribute knowledge in society. The concept is central and overarching because it shapes what individuals and groups think and feel about what it is (im)possible to be and do. The process is the experience of boundaries which ‘[. . .] are relayed by various pedagogic processes so as to distribute, shape, position and opposition forms of consciousness’ (Bernstein, 2000: xiii). Consciousness here refers to the experience of being constrained or enabled in the relationship between the outer world of material conditions and an individual inner world. Code restricts or opens up possibilities for living because the boundaries of code operate between inner and outer. Code is conveyed by classification and framing.

Generally, classification reflects power relations in society by establishing boundaries between categories (agents, agencies, discourses, practices) in terms of how strongly insulated they are from each other. Within education, the principle of classification regulates *what* knowledge, skills and discourses are taught by whom to whom. Framing is evident *within* classified categories and relays principles of control.

In formal education, the principle of framing regulates *how* knowledge, skills and dispositions are taught and learned.

### **Methodological note: Finding a ‘discursive gap’ between theory and data**

Three years’ intensive fieldwork in the universities Community, Diversity, Prestige and Selective produced rich data sets. For the purposes of this article, we draw on an analysis of curriculum documents and the interviews of the 31 case-study students who were interviewed each year for 3 years. Course and module handbooks were analysed for the content of the curriculum, assessment regimes, sequencing, modes of teaching and contact hours, and messages about student learning.

The case-study student profiles appear in Table 1. Social-class allocations (middle or working) were decided by parents’ and siblings’ occupations and educational qualifications.

**Table 1.** Case-study students.

University	Number	Female	Male	Middle class	Working class	BME	W
Community	6	2	4	0	6	0	6
Diversity	9	3	6	2	7	8 <sup>4</sup>	1
Prestige	9	7	2	6	3	3 <sup>5</sup>	6
Selective	7	4	3	5	2	3 <sup>6</sup>	4
Total	31	16	15	13	18	14	17

BME: Black and minority-ethnic; W: White.

The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo software, and researchers independently generated themes and used inter-coder reliability checks. We then developed holistic departmental accounts year-by-year of how the students experienced teaching and what they thought they had learned, and we wrote a synopsis of each student’s background, experiences of pedagogy and curriculum, what they had gained and future aspirations.

Our approach to analysis and interpretation was guided by Bernstein (2000). He distinguishes between ‘internal languages of description’, which are the languages of theory or concepts, and ‘external languages of description’, which are rooted in the empirical world. For Bernstein, theory should engage directly with reality, opening a ‘discursive gap’ between the internal language of macro theories about the reproduction of inequality and the external language of everyday discursive practices (Moore and Muller, 2002).

The analysis below draws on curriculum document analysis and the case studies to argue that formation of a specific disciplinary identity and access to pedagogic rights derive from acquisition of sociology-based knowledge.

### **Understanding who social science students become: A specialised sociology-based pedagogic identity**

The term ‘pedagogic identity’ appeared late in Bernstein’s (2000) work and was not substantiated in empirical work. He proposed that pedagogic identities are projected through the classifications of disciplinary content and the framings of pedagogy and curriculum which shape students’ ways of being, becoming, feeling, thinking, relating and desiring. Ideas from Bernstein’s (2000) typology of pedagogic identities are adapted and related to empirical data to construct for sociology-based social science students a specialised identity with three aspects: disciplinary, personal/social and performative.

#### *The disciplinary aspect of a specialised sociology-based disciplinary identity*

The disciplinary aspect is based on Bernstein’s (2000) ‘retrospective pedagogic identity’ (p. 67) of scholars or professionals who preserve the ways of thinking and being which are characteristic of strongly classified ‘single’ disciplines or fields of practice (e.g. physics or law). While Bernstein categorises sociology as a weakly classified ‘region’, we found a strong core which conveyed singularity. Tutors acted as gatekeepers of ‘sacred’ disciplinary knowledge (Abbas and McLean, 2010). Similarly across universities, tutors expected students to engage with a range of theoretical, empirical and methodological knowledge which from Bernstein’s perspective are powerful because they offer high ground on the problems of life.

Bernstein (2000) argued that the most crucial factor shaping the relations between knowledge, curriculum and assessment in a university is its position in the field of HE. He predicted that higher-status universities, such as Prestige and Selective, will use their international reputation to focus on research and single disciplines, such as sociology, whereas lower-status universities, such as Community and Diversity, will focus on recruiting

students and disciplines as ‘regions’ – combinations of disciplines or interdisciplinary studies – in order to create new packages of knowledge attractive to prospective students and employers. According to this prediction, students at Prestige and Selective would study ‘pure’ sociology which offers a way of thinking beyond the current ways in which the world is constructed, whereas students at Community and Diversity would study a version of sociology which would not give them access to thinking beyond employment.

We found a more complex reality. Certainly, the departments in Prestige and Selective had a higher research profile than Community and Diversity: they had larger and more varied research groups, more published research, some well-known academics and more academics hold doctorates (almost all compared to around 60%). However, in terms of the curriculum, Prestige and Diversity offer sociology as a singular, with Selective offering a social policy degree and Community offering sociology as a region only (criminology). The curriculum, therefore, was not configured along clear higher/lower status lines. Prestige stood out by introducing the canon of ‘classical sociology’ and its theories and methods in the first year, and then in subsequent years all modules were options with heavy emphasis on ‘identity sociology’ (e.g. feminist/queer theory) based on lecturers’ research interests (this department had the most optional modules for students to choose). At Community, Diversity and Selective, students were instead introduced to what can be called ‘political’ and ‘critical’ ‘sociology’ which ran through the whole course. Political sociology is based on UK sociology’s strong focus on the link between social critique and social reform, and several modules in all three departments focused on inequalities and social justice. In ‘critical sociology’, the emphasis is on diverse, discursive and social practices: each department has a one (Community) or two (Diversity and Selective) term module on social identities and cultures. The question for equity, which we address in relation to specialised pedagogic identity and pedagogic rights, is whether one type of knowledge is more transformatory or powerful than another. We found the strongest engagement with knowledge among Diversity (whose students learned pure sociology) and Selective (most of whose students learned social policy). Perhaps Prestige’s dense introduction to the founding fathers of sociology followed by a great deal of choice driven by their tutors’ research interests does not comprise a firm disciplinary basis.

### *The personal/social aspect of a specialised sociology-based disciplinary identity*

In our terms, a robust sociological identity requires more than established, handed-on knowledge (such as that offered to Prestige students in the first year). Sociological knowledge is about understanding the relationship between biography and socio-economic structure. We have called the application of knowledge the ‘personal/social aspect’ of the sociology-based disciplinary identity, and it is related to Bernstein’s (2000) idea of a ‘prospective pedagogic identity’ (p. 67) which is oriented to acting in the future. Like all disciplines, social science must be ‘retrospective’ in the sense of building on previous knowledge, yet, by its nature, it allows envisaging alternative ways of life by creating new bases ‘for social relations, for solidarities and for oppositions’ (Bernstein, 2000: 76). These new bases arise in the discursive gap between the disciplinary (theoretical and conceptual) and personal/social (empirical) aspects of a specialised disciplinary identity. Connecting sacred and everyday ‘mundane’ knowledge is not an easy pedagogical task, and we found tutors in all universities using seminars (which we observed) to encourage students to connect theoretical knowledge with everyday issues and problems. For example, in a Year 2 discussion about ‘objectivity’ and ‘cultural relativism’, the example of foot-binding, which students saw as wrong, was used to explore how it had been linked to ideas of femininity and physical beauty in China, in order to lead to questions about current British practices that might appear to other cultures similarly irrational and damaging. The most explicit expression of connecting everyday life and disciplinary knowledge was found in Diversity’s first year module called ‘Self and Society’, and it was here that students most often talked about how they saw their own lives in a different light. This first year module was in sharp contrast to Prestige’s core module of ‘classical sociology’ which appeared far removed from the everyday lives of students.

### *The skills and dispositions of the performative aspect of a specialised sociology-based disciplinary identity*

Bernstein (2000) proposes an ‘instrumental pedagogic identity’ which arises from ‘generic’ modes of learning in which curricula are produced by a ‘functional analysis of [. . .] the underlying features necessary to the performance of [. . .] an area of work [. . .] giving rise to a jejune concept of trainability’ (p. 53). Yet, we found that making explicit the ‘underlying features’ of doing sociology clarified what it is to form a fully rounded specialised sociology-based disciplinary identity.

In sociology, the underlying features of performance are as follows: (1) competence at performing the discipline by way of text work (reading and writing), discussion and research work (e.g. analysing texts/images, interviewing, designing surveys) and (2) possession of a set of dispositions: being questioning, critical, analytical, open-minded and challenging. The pedagogic processes or framings of knowledge offered to students by their teachers provide opportunities to develop a competent performance and critical dispositions.

The pedagogical framings we found were along hierarchical lines. Community and Diversity offered fewer optional courses, more contact hours and considerably more varied forms of assessment than the two higher-status universities. Despite larger groups, students in the lower-status universities also reported closer relationships with their lecturers than students in the higher-status universities and better teaching on a range of indicators.<sup>7</sup> For example,

It's just the way it's set out to explain every single detail and he's kind of narrated it like a story. So every single lecture when you leave the lecture hall you actually understand what he's talking about and [ . . . ] for the seminar you have pre-prepared reading and he makes sure that we actually read and we discuss about it a lot more [ . . . ] and he pushes us [ . . . ] so encourages us to read more, encourage us to actually understand the work. (Lisha, Diversity, Year 2)

In contrast to Crozier and Reay (2011) who found explicit messages about learning in the elite university in their study, in our study Community and Diversity were markedly more engaged than Prestige and Selective in making visible the underlying features of performing sociology. Bernstein (1990) contrasted 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies arguing that the latter, in which expectations are implicit, disadvantages students who come from backgrounds where they have not learned the rules of studying.

In sum, we found the formation of strong specialised disciplinary identities being projected in all departments, with Community projecting more strongly than the other three a 'prospective market' identity by supporting the 'employability' of students. We found that the three aspects of a specialised disciplinary identity gave access to what Bernstein (2000) called 'pedagogic rights' which, theoretically, if distributed fairly disrupt the society's hierarchies. In the next section, we explore the case-study students' perspectives to discuss their access to pedagogic rights.

### **Understanding the value of a specialised sociology-related disciplinary identity: Access to pedagogic rights**

Bernstein (2000) proposed three 'pedagogic rights': enhancement in the personal realm, inclusion in the social realm and participation in the political realm. Formal education systems, he claimed, should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they institutionalise access to the three rights. He discussed pedagogic rights only briefly, yet his definition, which we unpick below, shows that they concern the extent to which education frees people to imagine and act or, on the contrary, the extent to which it bounds imagination and what it seems possible to be and do. Moreover, the extent to which people have access to pedagogic rights determines the extent to which they feel they have a stake in society. His scant treatment of the concept has given us leeway to develop it by way of empirical investigation.

In order to indicate where our investigations led, we have adapted a diagram from Bernstein and connected it to the human development paradigm of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (1998). From the human development perspective, the expansion of human capabilities as a social goal is conceptualised as the expansion of the essential means for individuals and groups to be free to make reasonable choices about who they want to be and what they want to do. Therefore, we can say that access to pedagogic rights in university social science education allows an individual to develop freedoms – in the form of 'capabilities' – to be and do what he or she has reason to value (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Basil Bernstein's (2000) three pedagogic rights, adapted from p. xxi.

Right	Level	Capability
<i>Enhancement</i>	Personal	Confidence
<i>Inclusion</i>	Society	Communitas
<i>Participation</i>	Polity	Civic discussion and action

The three capabilities that result from access to pedagogic rights frame a discussion about how the social science knowledge acquired by the students in our study resulted in the formation of a specialised pedagogic identity which they value and which benefits society.

### *Individual enhancement: Personal confidence*

For Bernstein (2000), the first pedagogic right, individual enhancement, is ‘the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities’ and access to it expands personal horizons, resulting in ‘confidence’ (p. xx). The achievement of individual enhancement requires boundaries to be ‘experienced [as] tension points’ (Bernstein, 2000). Starting university can be conceptualised as a tense boundary crossing, and, as discussed above, it is likely to be more difficult for BME and working-class students. As might be expected, the students in our study, especially in the campus universities (Community, Prestige and Selective), reported growing confidence in themselves by leaving home, becoming independent of parents and looking after themselves. The experience of the tensions involved in crossing the boundary between being at home and away from it, and also between school or college study and university study, is an opportunity for personal growth. Almost all the students at Diversity remained living at home, yet they too reported meeting and making friends with and learning from a more diverse group of people than before coming to university:

It’s all new, it’s like a new world of smart people [. . .] there is a guy I spoke to this morning, Victor, he’s a sociology guy he’s telling me about his Ph.D. [. . .] and he is such a great guy to talk to. He can sit there and describe me, and he’s got an accurate perception of me just by how I look and what I am wearing, I was just amazed, he’s cool. (Lamar, Diversity, Year 1)

Such horizon expanding is made up of many human encounters that involve students’ active negotiation. There is an expansive literature on students’ ‘transition’ to university; however, it tends to be of a generic nature (see Harvey et al., 2006). Rather, our main interest lies in how studying a university discipline is an analogous experience of boundary crossing and individual enhancement.

Bernstein (2000) states that in educational terms ‘enhancement entails a discipline’ (p. 76). Arguably, in the case of sociology-based social science, it is because the formation of the disciplinary identity is the experience of ‘tension points’ in the boundaries between abstract disciplinary sacred knowledge and previously held mundane knowledge about people and everyday life. In our study, the discursive gap which allowed students to see life differently excited them.

Lauren at Diversity is interested in applying Judith Butler’s theory of gender reproduction to understand a polycystic fibrosis, a disease in which she has a personal interest:

Butler’s theory [shows how] we still live in this normative sort of thing, all men look like that, women like that, what happens when because of this disorder you ended up not looking as you’re supposed to and . . . How do you feel about it? How do doctors treat you? How do people treat you? What sort of implications in terms of being feminine? (Lauren, Diversity, Year 3)

And, Ethan at Selective discusses a criminological theory and how it has changed his views:

The way he [his tutor] links consumer culture to compulsive impulses that compel people to commit acquisitive crimes, I thought that was very interesting [. . .] usually it’s seen to be an individual pathological root cause [. . .] Whereas, looking at it from a cultural perspective I thought was an interesting slant. (Ethan, Selective, Year 3)

Generally, students repeatedly reported that having their minds ‘opened’ about themselves, others and society has changed them forever in ways that they valued and were committed to:

University has opened my eyes too much. I’ve been too exposed to reading certain things that are happening around me [. . .], I can’t just shut my eyes and go back to normality. I don’t think I can do that now, I’d feel like I am betraying myself and what I think and what I believe in. (Martin, Community, Year 3)

Because of what I’ve learned in terms of [. . .] knowledge about the way society is, it’s made me question more everything, and I like that because not everything has a definite answer, and I like the diversity of seeing everything differently and seeing new things and it impacts on me as a person, how I behave towards others [. . .] it’s helped me become a better person purely because of the experience and seeing new things. (Leena, Diversity, Year 3)

We see the personal transformation that students reported as a result of the processes of forming a specialised disciplinary identity that sees the relevance of sociology-based knowledge to everyday life.

While a Bernsteinian lens reveals the processes by which the capability of confidence is achieved through knowledge acquisition, human development approaches put flesh on the capability itself as an educational

outcome. The acquisition of critical understanding leading to confidence in one's personal life is closely related to Nussbaum's capability of 'practical reason' whereby an individual can plan her or his own 'good' life. As such, it is reasonable to regard it as a foundational right, much as practical reason 'stand[s] out [among capabilities] as of special importance', because it 'organise[s] and suffuse[s] all the others, making their pursuit truly human' (Nussbaum, 1998: 82). The acquisition of sociological knowledge assists students to, in John Dewey's (1916) words, 'develop their minds' (p. 16) for thought about their own lives and others.

In terms of differential access to enhanced confidence, there were more expressions of having gained confidence and having horizons broadened from students in the lower-status universities, perhaps because the boundary they had crossed to get to university was greater than for most of the students in the higher-status universities.

### *Social inclusion: Belonging*

The second pedagogic right is 'to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally [including] the right [to be] autonomous' (Bernstein, 2000: xx). 'Communitas' is the capability gained from access to the second pedagogic right. Bernstein leaves the work of defining and elaborating the concept to others. Communitas is an anthropological term (Turner, 1995 [1969]) and characterises people who experience liminality or periods of transition together, and, in some interpretations, it denotes an unstructured community outside society, yet from which society benefits, which, arguably, is university students' position (depending on one's view of the social role of universities). More straightforwardly, communitas can be defined as a feeling of solidarity and togetherness among equal members of a community.

The difficulties of feeling part of university that Crozier et al. (2008b) found, we also found: for example, Faith who was Black and working-class at Prestige felt lonely and cried during her first year, though afterwards she joined university clubs (she never felt part of the department), and Lemar who was Black, disabled and working-class had good relations with staff at Diversity but felt 'alienated' from other students. More generally, students at Prestige felt that they belonged in university, while at Diversity the students went home after class.

While the broader experience of university is important for personal growth (for some Brennan et al., 2010 found it is the most important), our interest is in the effects of acquiring specialised knowledge in an academic department. We conceptualise communitas as being achieved by finding a place and role in society by being one of others with a sociological 'gaze', even if it is loose. Acquiring specialised knowledge and understanding is a positional good. Students are included where previously they were not, and it is especially valued by those whose parents are not of the professional classes:

I think it makes you be able to take part of the society more. The way you talk to your doctor. The way you talk to your banker [ . . . ] You have better relationships with other professionals [ . . . ] You feel like your status is more on level with other professionals. Like, I can have a better conversation with my doctor because -not that I am understanding everything he is saying, but because I feel more in a place to debate with him. (Mark, Community, Year 3)

We cannot know whether Mark would have felt the same had he studied engineering. Social science knowledge does specific work. It illuminates the interaction between individuals and social systems or structure.

When Leanne (Diversity, Year 3) says that 'Not everybody walks around and thinks "That's an example of othering or stigmatisation"', she gestures towards being differentiated in society by belonging to a group of people with a specialised sociology-based 'gaze'. A further example is Fay distancing herself from the 'average sort of mother' in terms of being sensitive to gender stereotyping:

The average sort of mother reading to her child probably doesn't notice the gender stereotyping in the books [ . . . ] but [ . . . ] if you are presented with a study saying, 'Actually there are only half as many girl characters in books as there are boys', I find it interesting there are so many things that you just don't notice unless you study them. (Fay, Prestige, Year 3)

This knowledge allowed students to gain insight into and ask questions about why people, including themselves, are as they are and to develop a sense of solidarity with others. For example, Elliot illustrates how social science knowledge has contributed both to a sense of solidarity with others (which he did not have before) and to challenging the *status quo*:

And I find that really interesting, people's attitudes towards girls that choose to have a baby from a young age, but how we sort of demonise people based on their class. The way that I find middle-class people really interesting, being, you know, middle-class myself as well and the way that they all look down on working-class people and not really realising that they're doing it. They'll just think, 'How can they behave like that?' (Elliot, Selective, Year 3)



The students expected to use their knowledge to enlighten others: for example, to argue with their parents about capital punishment (Leanne at Diversity) or with their friends about the need to be sceptical about the news (Mary at Community). The specialised place that students achieved relates closely to Nussbaum's (1998) human capability 'affiliation' defined as being able to live well with others, treating them with respect.

In terms of social inclusion, our data suggest that sociology-based social science knowledge places students in two specific and related relationships to other people and to society in general: as those whose sociology knowledge gives them a sense of solidarity with others in society, especially those who are designated 'different', and as those who belong in and contribute to society by questioning and challenging what goes on in the world around them. It can be said then that the 'rite of passage' of the sociology-based degree invests students with specialised knowledge and understanding which has the potential to benefit society by way of their capability for affiliation/solidarity which, at the same time, gives graduates access to the right to be included in society at large.

When disciplinary knowledge was focused on, we did not find any differences across institutions in students' access to *communitas*, despite differential access to the experiences of the wider university. Perhaps this finding reflects Brennan et al.'s (2010) finding that 'sociology students seemed more likely than others [biosciences and business studies] to locate the source of [personal] change in their academic studies' (p. 155).

### *Political participation: Making use of social science knowledge*

The third pedagogic right is to participate in debate and practices that have outcomes in society: 'to participate in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social order' (Brennan et al., 2010: xxi). In Bernstein's view, an effective democracy needs people who 'have a stake in society' by which he means they both receive (rights) and give (obligations). Evidence in the case-study interview data for the capability of civic discussion and action is considerably less than for the other two capabilities: none of the case-study students engaged in political activity.

The capabilities approach, in which individual choice is paramount, provides an alternative perspective on the students not participating politically while at university. From this perspective, students might have a capability yet choose not to exercise it in the form of a 'functioning' (in this case, being an 'active citizen' at university). The students we talked to often said that they could see 'beneath the surface of things' or 'think outside the box'; they thought about ways in which society might be differently arranged, for example:

One of my mates just won't watch the news because it is so depressing. But then I kind of look at it and think 'why' and 'what has happened' and 'what can I do to change it'. Yes it is thought provoking. (Mary, female white student, Community, Year 3)

Furthermore, when asked about future employment, most students envisaged public service work where their knowledge, understanding and dispositions will contribute to society. Examples are as follows:

I would like to become qualified as a teacher and I'd probably like to do teaching in poor inner city areas, but I really would like to get people thinking about current issues, and introducing ideas about equality and diversity, and feminism [. . .] That's really exciting and something that I would have really loved as a young person to come across. (Ed, Selective, Year 2)

I've looked at international affairs, international politics. That's my real interest, that's my passion. I've been looking at internships in Britain to do with like, working for NGO's- like human rights, like Amnesty International, but also I've been looking at public affairs consultancy. Which is basically, I go to the government and I lobby on behalf of a company or on behalf on an NGO. (Martin, Community, Year 3)

Other students, not as clear as Ed and Martin, wanted to make a 'positive contribution' and variously explained how the knowledge they were acquiring helped them analyse how wrongs might be tackled at the levels of policy, organisations or personal intervention.

In summary, sociology-based social science knowledge enlightened the students in our study about themselves and others (individual enhancement); it located them in a loose group of people who have specialised understanding about how individuals and society interact (social inclusion), and it will be of use – in or out of employment – to improve the social world (political participation). While the students in the lower-

status universities reported more personal transformation (arguably the students in the higher-status universities already had access, so did not comment), we did not find differences between them in access to the other two pedagogic rights, as we have defined them.

### **Conclusion: The distribution of undergraduate social science knowledge**

The case-study student interview data suggest a complicated relationship between individual attributes, university attended, curriculum and pedagogy and access to pedagogic rights. There were some clear inequities, which we will discuss briefly. On the one hand, the students at Community and Diversity perceived their (very differently framed) teaching to be of a higher quality (and could explain why) than at Prestige and Selective, and this is important because perceptions of good teaching mediate engagement with knowledge (cf Note 7), and they described their tutors as more friendly and approachable. On the other hand, Community emphasised employability and did not offer a dissertation in the final year, and, in our view, this curtails access to 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge. Diversity students complained both that other students did not work hard and that their tutors do not 'push' them enough (the same as Crozier and Reay's, 2011 findings). Nevertheless, despite these systematic differences, the curriculum contained similar ideas and methodologies and projected similar identities. All the case-study students valued the acquisition of sociological knowledge because they had become more competent in a range of skills, both academic and more general; had become more socially flexible and confident; and had experienced a sense of personal change.

This article contributes to debates about social justice and university education. While inequities in university experience should be revealed, in doing so there is a danger of denigrating the lower-status universities, thereby doing a disservice to those students who get to university against the odds and to their tutors who work intensely for their students in worse conditions than in higher-status universities (Abbas and McLean, 2010). The thrust of Bernstein's (2000) work was to reveal how education systems reproduce inequality. Indeed, in his final volume, he made brief predictions about the unequal effects on identity-formation of a stratified HE system: for staff and students in 'elite' universities, a traditional, powerful 'single' disciplinary identity bolstered by the ability to attract 'research stars', and for lower-status universities, where dedication to discipline will be seen as an obstacle, a weaker vocational/applied identity. What we found is a challenge to this prediction, perhaps because the academics in all the departments we studied were dedicated both to reproducing their disciplines in teaching and to producing it in research. We found students from different educational, social and economic backgrounds in universities of hugely different wealth and resources forming the same disciplinary identity. It is important to note that we do not claim that the same would be found in every discipline in other configurations of higher- and lower-status universities, and we acknowledge the precarious circumstances of academics in lower-status universities. That said, in our study, if viewed through the lens of access to pedagogic rights the students studying sociology-based social science were not subject to inequalities entirely structured by the hierarchy of universities. As Bernstein proposed, disciplinary knowledge acquisition had the effect of disrupting the hierarchy.

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1. Funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC): RES-062-23-1438.
2. When he died in 2000, Bernstein was Karl Mannheim Chair Emeritus in the Sociology of Education, at the Institute of Education, University of London.
3. The concept is similar to Bourdieu's 'habitus'; the difference, as Bernstein (1990) pointed out, was that code carries an explanation of the mechanisms by which it is embedded.
4. Includes one dual heritage student and one South American student.
5. Includes a Japanese student.
6. Includes two mixed race students.
7. Indicators of good quality university teaching derive from a body of literature (see, Gibbs, 2010; Ramsden, 2003) and include courses that are coherent and well-designed; clear expectations; the facilitation of participative and demanding discussions; content made interesting and its relevance demonstrated; and feedback on work which indicates how to improve. This research shows that students' perception of good teaching influences their level of engagement.

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