

**PLEASE NOTE: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
British Journal of Sociology of Education on 27 Apr 2013, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/01425692.2013.782811>.**

Journal: British Journal of Sociology of Education

**'When you see a normal person...': Social class and friendship networks
among teenage students**

Abstract: This paper draws on social capital theory to discuss the way social class plays out in the friendships of teenage students. Based on data from individual interviews and focus groups with 75 students in four London secondary schools, it is suggested that students tend to form friendships with people who belong to the same social-class background as them. Social-class 'sameness' is considered to be an element that importantly exemplifies the quality of their friendships, hence, close, inter-class friendships were significantly less common than close, intra-class ones. In addition, class differentials were evident and often reproduced by students, even in the context of the rarer inter-class friendships. This paper concludes that social class is of continuous importance in teenagers' lives and despite some agentic negotiation of class boundaries, as in the case of omnivorousness, students' friendship networks are dynamically informed by class inequalities.

Keywords: social networks; friendships; social class; Bourdieu; social capital; omnivorousness

Introduction

On social class and friendship:

‘A ... political implication of friendship is that it is fundamentally egalitarian, and one of the strongest barriers to pure friendship is structurally conditioned inequality ... Typically, strong pressures exist in class-structured societies to avoid the formation of friendships between social unequals’ (Pahl 2000, 162).

Friendships comprise a significant part of most children’s lives, both within and outside school spaces. Yet, friendship formation is not an uncomplicated and straight forward process but an elaborated and complex one. Research, for instance, underpins how childhood friendship development is facilitated and/or constrained by various identities, such as gender (Morrow 2006; Renold 2005) and ethnicity (Hewitt 1986; Windzio 2012). More recently, children’s networks and attitudes have been the foci of considerable interest by both research and policy making in the UK in relation to debates on social cohesion (Home Office 2001). Particular attention is drawn on students’ inter-ethnic attitudes and levels of tolerance (Janmaat 2012) as well as on the friendships they form in relation to their ethnic background (Bruegel 2006; Reynolds 2007).

While the area of ethnicity and student networks¹ received substantial consideration, *inter alia* with regard to social cohesion, issues of social class have been discussed to a lesser extent with regard to similar debates in England. In particular, research has not considerably looked at the way students form friendships in relation to their social class background (with the exemption of Reay (2008) and Hey (1997)), despite some evidence from the United States that young children and adolescents are likely to form friendships with social class equals (Hallinan 1995; Kupersmidt *et al.* 1995). The focus of this article, then, is to explore and discuss teenage students’ friendship patterns in relation to social class, based on data from a research study carried out in the London context². In doing so, I intend to contribute to the debate about the continuous importance of social class on young people’s lives and to highlight the prominence of social class not only as a form of perceived identity (Papapolydorou forthcoming) but also as a factor that shapes the social dynamics of certain contexts, such as school communities, and in turn the social networks of its members. Of course, it is acknowledged that nowadays, student friendships are formed and developed in

various settings, including the neighbourhood/local community and the web. Yet, this paper focuses on the social networks that are situated within school contexts.

Drawing on Bourdieuan elaborations of social class (Bourdieu 1984; 1986; 1987) and on social capital frameworks (Granovetter 1983; Putnam 2000) this article attempts to tease out the complex ways in which class plays out in students' close friendship networks and the way students make sense of these networks from their own classed standpoint. First, the article discusses social capital theory, and particularly emphasises the existence of different types of networks and their relevance to this study. Subsequently, the methodological approach employed for the collection and analysis of data is described. The article then discusses the findings of this study. It is suggested, first, that students were more likely to form class homogeneous friendships, as they perceived class differentials as a barrier to friendship formation. As one student argued 'they (students from a different class background as him) behave differently, talk differently, got different interests completely'. Second, it is argued that even among the rarer friendships, which crossed class boundaries, class inequalities were highly visible by students and perceptions of class dichotomies were often appropriated by them reproducing therefore existing class hierarchies.

Social Capital theory and Children's friendships

Social capital has been widely used by both academics and policy makers during the last two decades. According to Bourdieu:

'Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word' (1986, 248).

In line with this definition, friendships could be viewed as a form of social capital since they comprise *networks* between individuals who possess *membership* in a certain friendship *group*. Furthermore, friendships comprise a form of resource, which is another characteristic of social capital according to both Bourdieu (1986) and Putnam (2000). Indeed, an important

body of research highlights the virtues of friendship for children's social and emotional well-being (Bukowski *et al.* 2011; Morrow 1999) and a number of researchers have studied child friendships through the prism of social capital (Helve and Bynner 2007; Reynolds 2011). In the same vein, social capital frameworks are deemed pertinent to the context of this article as they provide useful conceptual tools for the exploration of the diverse and dynamic friendships formed by this study's participants.

Children often possess a range of social networks of diverse nature and/or quality. For instance, Dunn's research (2004) underpins this diversity by suggesting that childhood friendships are characterised by different levels of intimacy. Social capital frameworks enable the acknowledgement of diverse networks which then facilitates the unravelling of the ways social class informs friendships, without, nevertheless, sacrificing their complexity. For the purposes of this article I focus on two different taxonomies of social capital in order to better make sense of the way class plays out in students' friendships. In particular, I look at the distinction between strong and weak ties and the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital.

First, the distinction between strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1983) is significant for the understanding of the quality of friendships and their association with students' class background. Weak ties can be seen, here, in relation to loose and remote student friendships, whereas strong ties can be taken to refer to intimate and close friendships. This study's participants occasionally used the word 'friend' or 'friends' very loosely to indicate distant friendships while the same word was also used to refer to their close friends. As one participant, talking about a group of his fellow students, distinguished: 'they are my friends, my classmates. But not my close friends'. Students' strong-tie friendships were considerably denser and were often characterised by frequent contact – face-to-face meetings and/or other forms of communication such as texts or calls. In addition, they often entailed elements of trust and mutual reliance which were absent from the weak-tie friendships.

Second, the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000) is valuable for the examination of the composition of students' friendships in terms of social class. Bonding social capital is taken to refer to networks between people with similar characteristics. This definition, as applied here, denotes friendships between people who belong to the same social class, namely intra-class friendships. Bridging social capital refers

to the links between people with different characteristics or from different associations and communities, and is used here in relation to friendships between people from different social class backgrounds, namely inter-class friendships. These two types of social capital are characterised by ‘different empirical qualities’ which in turn legitimise and necessitate the existence of this very categorisation (Halpern 2005, 22).

Methodology

The research discussed here draws on the qualitative data of a mixed-method approach study³ that examined the role of social capital in students’ educational outcomes and experiences (Papapolydorou 2011). 75 students from four London state-secondary schools participated in the qualitative part of the study. Two schools were situated in North East London, one school in East London and one in North London. The schools were non-denominational, co-educational and comprised an ethnically diverse population. All participants were studying at the sixth form section of their secondary school (year 12) and were between 16 and 17 years old. Most students were studying toward either an academic or a vocational qualification of Key Stage 5 (i.e. BTEC, AS) while a few students were studying to retake their Key Stage 4 exams (i.e. GCSEs). The sample comprised participants from both a White British and a minority ethnic background.

Students’ class background was defined through their response to a question about their parents’ occupation. Their responses were categorised against the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) (Office for National Statistics 2000). Yet, students’ own perceptions and operationalisations of class were also deemed of interest and are discussed in more detail in a forthcoming article (Papapolydorou forthcoming).

The research methods included socio-graphs and in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews and focus groups. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and a half, whereas focus groups lasted between an hour and two hours. The socio-graph approach was used to support the interview process by encouraging the development of discussion and by engaging the participants in the overall process. Participants were given a piece of paper and a pen, at an early stage of the interview, and were asked to draw a socio-graph to include

their close friends. They were also shown an example of a socio-graph that I had drawn myself. Each student, then, developed their own socio-graph, which included their name in a circle and around it the names of their close friends. These socio-graphs were used as prompts for discussion about their networks with their friends and with other students. As such they yielded information about the gender, class and ethnicity of students and their friends as well as about the way these factors played out in their relationships. As the interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature, the conversations often took different trajectories focusing on emerging themes and students' inclination toward particular topics. Therefore, students had some control over the research process and were involved in the study as 'active participants' (Alderson 2005, 30).

All interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded and were then transcribed verbatim. The data was in turn analysed with the Atlas.ti software, using a thematic content analysis approach (Flick 1998). Thematic codes were used to make sense of the data and identify possible patterns. The coding was based on both the original research questions and emerging themes. Students' names are not identified here, for confidentiality and anonymity purposes; instead, pseudonyms, chosen by the participants themselves, are used. The students were overall keen to participate in this research and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to share their experiences and views.

Findings

Participants' friendships were by no means straightforward and identical. Conversely, friendship networks were dynamic and unique in their content. It would, therefore, be a mistake to argue that their complexity and vibrance can be limited to a discussion of their association with social class issues, and this is not my intention here. Nevertheless, while showcasing the uniqueness of participants' networks, the data analysis also pointed to the direction of some important patterns with regard to the salient presence of social class in students' friendships. It is these patterns that I discuss in this part, by juxtaposing some illustrative and representative interview extracts that highlight the complex yet powerful ways in which class played out in students' networks.

Network Reflexivity and Weak and Strong Ties

When discussing classed and gendered subjectivities in the framework of late modernity Hey argued the importance of network reflexivity, suggesting that 'by its nature, network reflexivity is about self-conscious knowingness' (2005, 863). Indeed, the participants of this study demonstrated high levels of reflexivity and 'self-conscious knowingness' in relation to their own social class location, and in turn in relation to their social networks. Students appeared to have a good understanding of their position in social locales and were able to distinguish the differences between them and social class 'Others'. This negotiation of 'Otherness' was often mirrored in the nature and density of their networks.

Even though the focus of this article lies on the strong ties – close friendships – of students, it is worth pointing out that there was a compositional and qualitative difference between weak and strong ties with respect to social class. As discussed earlier, these two types of networks have different characteristics and often different outcomes (Granovetter 1983). In relation to this study, one of the starkest differences between weak- and strong-tie friendships was in relation to their class composition. On the one hand, participants possessed weak ties – distant friendships – that were class heterogeneous. In other words, students formed weak-tie friendships both with students who belonged to the same class background as them and with students who belonged to different class backgrounds. This indicates the existence of some level of inter-class mixing within the school context and, therefore, students' possession of bridging social capital pertaining to weak ties. This finding is justified considering the diverse socio-economic composition of the schools that made possible the exposure of the participants to students from different class backgrounds. On the other hand, students' strong ties – close and more intimate friendship networks, included in their socio-graph – were predominantly class homogeneous. Indeed, the majority of students (approximately three quarters of the overall sample) had friends who belonged to the same class background as them. So, despite evidence of bridging social capital at the weak-tie level, most students' strong-tie friendships were social class homogeneous and would be therefore characterised as bonding social capital.

This finding raises interesting questions about the way students make sense of class differences through their close friendship networks – whether bridging or bonding. Are students' understanding(s) and experience of class differences reflected in their bonding

social capital? How do students negotiate these differences within bonding social capital and bridging social capital friendships? Finally, are social class hierarchies and relevant issues of power less prominent among bridging than bonding social capital? The two sections below focus on a discussion of the bonding and bridging networks of students with particular reference to their close friendships and attempt to tease out the way social class issues were evident within the framework of these friendships in order to shed light on these questions.

Bonding Social Capital – “Like me” attracts’: Social Class ‘normality’ and ‘Otherness’

As we know from previous research on childhood networks, children form friendships on the basis of the ‘principle of “like me” attracts’ (Dunn 2004, 50). This is consistent with this study’s findings in relation to social class, as participants were considerably more likely to form bonding than bridging social capital. Students who possessed bonding social capital appeared to value the shared understandings and experiences that were present in their close friendships with same-class people. They emphasised their commonalities by drawing on wide ranging class signifiers – both material and symbolic. For instance, Tashell emphasises the importance of having common financial experiences with her friends.

RESEARCHER: How about your (close) friends’ socio-economic background?

TASHELL: We are all the same. We are all around the same. (We are) working class.

RESEARCHER: How can you tell this?

TASHELL: Cause when we talk, we talk like about ‘oh, if we get this how are we going to save up money to go and buy stuff’. *None of us have money, are rich so that we can just go and take money. (my emphasis)*

(Tashell, Black African, working-class girl)

Budgeting in order to purchase goods is a shared necessity for Tashell and her friends, which signifies, according to her, their common class background, namely their working-classness. This is contrasted to a different kind of classed experience; that of rich (middle-class) students who are thought to have easier access to money. Indeed, a middle-class student put forward the same example in order to explain his common class background with his friends.

RYAN: (talking about his socio-graph friends) Mike and Tony are really well off ... The girls are just normal, Jane is normal, Nora is normal. Yeah! No one is really from a poor background. They are all from middle class I'd say. No middle class, there is no class, just the medium. *They've just got enough money to go and buy anything spare. None of them are broke*, if you get what I mean. *(my emphasis)*

(Ryan, White British, middle-class student)

Ryan uses the term 'middle class' but subsequently rejects it (as some of Reay's (1998) and Savage and his colleagues' (2001) participants) and substitutes it with the 'medium' term. Despite this rather ambiguous use of class terminology, it is evident that there is a significant contrast between the experiences of Tashell and her friends, on the one hand, and Ryan and his friends, on the other hand. The former students do not have the financial latitude to buy whatever they want; instead, they have to think, plan ahead and save in order to materialise certain purchases. Conversely, the latter students can afford to buy ('spare') things without following such processes. Just like Tashell, Ryan contrasts poor (working-class) background to rich ('well off'), middle-class background. This suggests that students are well aware of the social-class dichotomies and are able to understand how these are reflected in their choice of friendship networks.

What is also remarkable from Ryan's extract is the triple use of the adjective 'normal' to describe his friends' middle-class background. So 'normality' is seen here in conjunction to middle-classness. Similar to Ryan, other students too emphasised notions of normality and appropriateness in relation to their class background. These notions were seen as positive characteristics and were importantly assumed for the self and the 'Likes', whereas 'Otherness' was seen in a less than 'normal' and often demeaning and undesirable way. Normality and 'Otherness' were often discussed in relation to symbolic signifiers of social class. The focus group extract below demonstrates how three close, working-class friends relied on their common experiences to discuss the classed 'Others' in relation to language and define 'normality' in working-class terms.

JAMES: I can change my voice. If I go to a posh place I can be allocated in that and I can talk how I want to talk. But I know how to talk good as well.

ANDY: Yeah, just like posh people sometimes when they come across us they know... they'd try and talk like that.

JAMES: Yeah, they'd try it out but you can't talk like that. (smile)

GEORGE: *When you see a normal person and they start trying to act all goody... You know then you'd feel embarrassed for them. They can't do that!*

JAMES: Yeah. Yeah.

RESEARCHER: Really? In what cases?

JAMES: Like... I've been to many... cause I've got many posh friends I've been to many posh parties and like... and you see some people walking in and just... oh! 'Waw waw' (mimicking posh accent mockingly) My God! (all three laugh) (*my emphasis*)

(James, White British, working-class boy; Andy, Black African, working-class boy; George, mixed heritage: Black African and White British, working-class boy)

The three boys take for granted their shared working-class background and the 'shared habitus' (Ingram 2009, 423) it infers to talk about class 'Otherness' and assume normality for themselves. There are clear dichotomies implied here. The posh spaces and the posh people with the 'good' talking are contrasted to the non-posh spaces, themselves ('normal people') and their way of speaking. Students talk about posh places as spaces not inherently compatible to their subjectivities. As James implies, allocation in such spaces does not come naturally but one can achieve it ('I can be allocated in that'). James, here, appears to be flexible and able to navigate various spaces ('I can change my voice', 'I can talk how I want to talk'). Likewise, 'posh' people can try and talk like them. Yet, James and George quickly mention that such an attempt would not be fruitful and the vice-versa. The characterisation of posh people as 'goodies', which also comes up in other parts of this focus group, bears a derogatory connotation, hence any attempt by 'normal people' to act like them would be embarrassing. They go on to mock posh way of speaking and laugh.

Language is seen here as a form of bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1984), an embodied habitus (Reay 2004) that is infused with symbolic value (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Students' attention to classed characteristics, such as language register, is particularly evident within educational contexts (Mac Ruairc 2011) and has important implications not only for their learning but also for their social interactions. The psychological element (Reay 2005) attached to the recognition of class signifiers is also manifested here in the way James discusses his language register in relation to social class 'Others'. On the one hand, he admits being able to adopt this way of speaking and seems to perceive this kind of flexibility as a privilege, whereas on the other hand he mocks posh accent. This apparent tension reveals an

acknowledgement, on behalf of James, of the power differentials implicated in the distinction of language and the advantages that might accrue as a result of the adoption of such a middle-class habitus (Bourdieu 1990). Yet, at the same time it reveals an attempt to reject this reality by agentially resisting to perceive it as normative (hence the accent mocking). This agentic and conscious adoption of a more general form of habitus – outside one’s own perceived class frameworks (Bourdieu 1990) – is further discussed in the next section in relation to the concept of omnivorousness.

In the focus group extract above, the distinctions between social classes were clearly manifested even though amid a certain level of boundary fusion and attempts from students’ of different classes to adopt different (classed) habitus (Bourdieu 1990). Yet, students’ bonding social capital networks were often crudely defined across class boundaries, allowing little space for bridging social capital and boundary fusion. As Anton and Jon illustrate below, working-class students can find it difficult to make friends with middle-class people.

(The two students were previously arguing that it can be difficult to make close friends with people from different ethnic backgrounds)

JON: The same with... you get the White middle-class people as well. They (White middle-class students) can be difficult to mix with.

RESEARCHER: Why do you think this is the case?

JON: They’ve got different interests, completely.

RESEARCHER: How would you be able to say that they are middle class?

ANTON: By how they act. How they dress, especially in sixth form because everybody has their own dress.

JON: They behave differently, talk differently, got different interests completely. Like, they like to play games such as Warlords (a computer game).

ANTON: They spend a lot of time gaming in.

RESEARCHER: So what do working-class students do?

JON: Just going out! Socialising!

(Anton, White South African, working-class boy; Jon, White British, working-class boy)

Anton and Jon’s view that it is difficult to mix with middle-class students is supported by Reay’s research whose findings suggest that ‘despite varying degrees of social mixing with the classed and racialised other across the sample, nearly all the white middle-class young people remain firmly and primarily anchored in white middle-class networks’ (2008, 91).

Class differentials are readily recognisable by Anton and Jon. They are visible through students' use of language register, dress code and general interests such as leisure activities. Indeed, previous research has shown that individuals' use of language (Bernstein 1960; Bourdieu and Thompson 1991; Mac Ruairc 2011) and consumption of clothes (Hamilton 2012; Preston 2007) can serve to symbolically distinguish people in class terms (Bourdieu 1984). As Bourdieu argues 'social distances are inscribed in the body' (1987, 5) and these bodily inscriptions seemed not only to be perceptible by students but also to inform their friendship networks. Occasionally, these and other kinds of classed distinctions alienated students of different class backgrounds. James' experience is indicative of some of the ways working-class students realised the social distances between them and their middle-class peers and in the way the expression of these distances influenced their psyche.

JAMES: Yeah, I actually find it funny because say we go to a party with a lot of posh people and you go and sit on the sofa next to them... All these posh people would get up and move away. And I'm like why are you moving for? And they are like 'Oh because you are gonna rob us'.

RESEARCHER: Are you serious?

JAMES: Yeah, they do. They do.

RESEARCHER: But how can they tell...?

JAMES: They can because... I sit there and my body posture... I'm open.

RESEARCHER: So by your body posture?

JAMES: Yeah, I'd just sit there open. I'd just sit casually. Like that (he demonstrates). I'd just sit like that.

ANDY: Just like that, yeah.

JAMES: Yeah and they'd move away. All right then. And when, when they say that I'm like...

GEORGE: That's the silliest thing. The silliest thing.

JAMES: I just think to myself because they think that I'm gonna rob them... then I just think to myself I'm gonna rob them for the sake of it. And I've done it.

(James, White British, working-class boy; Andy, Black African, working-class boy; George, mixed heritage: Black African and White British, working-class boy)

As showcased here, the awareness of class differentials is often accompanied by evaluative frameworks, pertinent to certain social-class groups. On this occasion, James' working-classness implied negative connotations such as criminality. Hence, James was seen as an undesirable and potentially threatening subject for those ('posh') people who did not share the same class background. This outspoken, negative stereotyping could account as a form of

symbolic violence targeted at James who then reacted in a spontaneous, emotionally loaded way deciding to rob them ('for the sake of it'). Importantly, James mentioned at a later part of the interview that he did not really intend to rob them but only to scare them. So he immediately gave them back their money and said to them that he wanted to prove that he had no intention in robbing them even though we could, in principle. James went on to say that he asked them not to talk to him in that way again and that the incident ended there. James' reaction reveals that other people's attitudes and views about him influenced him significantly. He felt the need to demonstrate that he was not the criminal that he was thought to be and that he did not deserve their depreciation and aversion.

It should be noted, nevertheless, that working-class students were not passive receptors of negative working-class stereotyping. On the contrary, they also employed a number of negative descriptions in relation to their middle-class peers. For example they often portrayed them as 'snobby' and 'pretentious', and engaged in different levels of teasing and mocking on this and similar grounds. Yet, James' intensely psychological engagement in this incident underpins the pervasive way in which class inequalities influence people's emotions and psyches (Reay 2005). It also suggests that class differentials and perceived hierarchies inform the social lives of people by pushing them away from class-heterogeneous and toward class-homogeneous friendship networks, reinforcing, thus, bonding social capital. The next part explores the less frequent bridging social capital friendships with respect to class manifestations.

Bridging Social Capital – Omnivorousness and Distinction

Unlike bonding social capital, bridging social capital friendships were characterised by heterogeneity of class backgrounds and were therefore, at least seemingly, more likely to embrace class differences. This heterogeneity appeared to be celebrated by students who had a recognition of and familiarity with different 'tastes' (Bourdieu 1984) relevant to different social classes. Indeed, possession of bridging social capital appeared to necessitate some level of understanding and/or tolerance of class 'Otherness'. The concept of 'cultural omnivore' suggested by Peterson and Kern (1996) is very relevant here. Peterson and Kern used this concept to explain a new trend according to which people from high status groups in the US behave in relation to their cultural taste, such as music, art, theatre etc. They argue that there

is now a different tendency, compared to earlier times, toward a wider acceptance and knowledge of different tastes that are common among lower status groups. This, Peterson and Kern argue, is a less snobbish consumption of culture and lifestyles on behalf of high-status people. Drawing parallels with this, it could be argued that students who possessed bridging social capital could be characterised not only as ‘cultural’ but also as ‘social omnivores’. So as ‘social omnivores’ some students had strong-tie friendships with people from a different social-class background and were exposed to their norms and attitudes.

Notwithstanding this exposure, both middle-class and working-class students, who possessed bridging social capital, were well aware of the class differentials within their friendships, whether financial or otherwise. Louise’s extract below resembles the experience of Tashell and her friends in the previous section:

LOUISE: Most of them (close friends) are richer than... No, they are all richer than me actually.

RESEARCHER: How can you tell this?

LOUISE: For example if there is a school trip or something I have to ask for my parents to give me the money or pay for it myself whereas my friends don’t have a problem with that.

(Louise, White British, working-class girl)

Louise being the only working-class girl in her friendship circle recognised her difference in relation to the financial elements of class. Likewise, the boundaries between different types of classed lifestyles and their implications were discernible within inter-class friendships. Students were not only able to distinguish their friends in relation to their family’s economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) but also in relation to their tastes (Bourdieu 1984) and types of habitus (Bourdieu 1990). Some students, following recognition of class differentials, adopted characteristics that would situate them within a different class location, whereas in some other occasions consciously distanced themselves from such characteristics.

ROTLINE: I don’t really believe in the class system. I come from... my parents consider themselves working class, they come from a working-class background but I socialise in quite middle-class circles. I have working-class friends from my childhood, in Soundsburry School where I grew up with, but I have the ability to speak well and so people perceive me as middle class. And... And now I live with two flatmates and they are both middle class. So now things are different. But when I was younger I considered myself as working class [...] Because there is such a conflict between the classes and more so between upper classes being almost intimidated by

working classes. I used to go to school to Hackney where there was a bigger divide. And I wanted to socialise with different people and I changed the way I approached people and it had a big difference. And also I had the ability to be articulate so the way you speak to different people makes a big difference to the way people perceive you.

(Rotline, White Irish, working-class girl)

Rotline, like other students earlier, understood the use of language as an important signifier of class. So, her ability to ‘speak well’ enabled her to be perceived as a middle-class individual and distance herself from the working-class circles of her previous school. Her decision appears to be conscious and to be related to her view that working-class individuals might be seen as ‘intimidating’ by middle-class individuals. This stance resonates with James’ experience earlier whereby his working-classness was associated with potential criminality. Rotline, as a cultural and social ‘omnivore’, engaged in a ‘performance’ of social class, an enactment of classed habitus that was not commonly associated with her class background. A similar ‘performance’ of class is discussed in the extract below:

EVA: Some people put up a facade cause they want to come across a certain way. I have a friend... In secondary school I knew a girl whose dad owns an art gallery and stuff. So she is really upper-middle class. But she talks... Like you would never think that... the way she dresses and everything you would never guess... You would probably think that she is a normal working-class girl.

RESEARCHER: So why do you think this was the case?

JANE: She might not want us to think that she is upper class.

ZEYINEB: Yeah, Probably to fit in.

EVA: Yeah, yeah to fit in.

(Ewa, Jane and Zeyineb, Black African, working-class girls)

As with Rotline, above, the girl mentioned in this extract was perceived to belong in a certain social-class location because of the way she talked and dressed. Both cases highlight the flexibility of the students, as social and cultural ‘omnivores’, to transcend class boundaries and operate within classed friendship circles that deviate from their own background. Omnivorousness could be seen here as a way of experimenting with and building of a certain (classed) persona that might be or thought to be yielding a ‘practical or symbolic advantage’ (Warde *et al.* 2007, 161).

On the contrary, the extract below exemplifies the way in which students would sometimes consciously distance themselves from particular characteristics of their friends' lifestyles when these were seen as deviating from what they considered appropriate.

KYLA: My dad is a lawyer and I live in... it's not a private road but I live in... you know, I live in a quite affluent area. But... (*she pauses for a while*) apart from Anna and Beatrice and maybe a little bit Chris, the rest of them (close friends) are... aren't that well to do... aren't that well off. *And I'm anything but a snob.* You know some people would think... a lot of the people where I live... even in her own respect my mum can be a bit snobby in a way, but I've never been like that, I am very accepting and there are certain things, especially with Helen, there are certain things with her that she does and I don't agree with her. Like for example she smoked weed during her pregnancy with the twins. And I'm assuming she did it with her other two. Her mum and their grandma also smoke weed and they sell it... So they haven't got much to aspire to whereas I've got... My dad is a successful businessman, he owns a partnership, he is virtually self-employed and my mum has worked very, very hard, considering she was never that bright. Like I said I was lucky. (...) But my mum is very hard working, my mum helps people out. My sister is at university at the moment. So I have good role models. I don't know. I don't know... *They are my friends and I spend time with them but I look at them sometimes and I think 'You are a bit of a waste of space'.* (*my emphasis*)

(Kyla, White British, middle-class girl)

Kyla here contrasts her own privileged family, which comprises 'good role models' to her friend's background whose mother and grandmother sell drugs, and points out a difference regarding the level of aspirations. The distinction is clear and this inevitably puts forward a tension in Kyla's friendship. On the one hand, she celebrates her inter-class friendship and her accepting attitude ('I'm anything but a snob'). She almost perceives her bridging social capital 'as a project of cultural capital acquisition', (Reay 2008 91) a skill that enables her to interact with class 'Others'. And on the other hand, Kyla distances herself from her friends' habits and condescendingly admits that she considers them 'a waste of space', internalising, therefore, and reproducing class stereotypes.

It is also interesting to note here that a *filtering mechanism* of social capital is available to Kyla and to the other middle-class students. This filtering mechanism enabled them to view their friendships through a critical lens and to interrogate the potential effects of peer influence especially in relation to their education and future career prospects. For example,

one of the middle-class interviewed students said that he did not want ‘to end up working at McDonalds’ like a lot of his working-class friends who had left school. Some other middle-class students spoke about their friends who worked at KFC restaurants or supermarkets and reflected the same attitude. In this sense, middle-class students scrutinised their friends’ state of affairs and strategically decided to distance themselves from certain norms of lifestyles that they considered ‘damaging’. In particular, when talking about education and future plans middle-class students who possessed bridging social capital often reverted to their family members for guidance and positive influence. They were effectively drawing on their family’s support to explore the educational opportunities and privileges available to them and were determined to succeed. As Kyla said:

I’ve got a lot of older friends and if anything I learnt from their mistakes as opposed from learning from their achievements. I’m just determined not to waste what I’ve got, I’m determined to do it now...

(Kyla, White British, middle-class girl)

So, the strategies and flexibility of social and cultural ‘omnivorousness’ enabled some students to agentially navigate their inter-class friendships in an effective way. Nevertheless, ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984) was still present and evident among these class-heterogeneous friendship networks. This distinction came as a result of the recognition of the differences between students in relation to various class signifiers, such as parental occupation, language register or even educational aspirations and norms. Occasionally, distinction among inter-class friendships succeeded in sustaining and reinforcing the power differentials and hierarchies between classed individuals, just as distinctions elaborated in intra-class friendships did.

This suggests an interesting tension with regard to bridging social capital. On the one hand, bridging social capital presupposes the possession of habitus that cuts across social classes. This possession of ‘multi-classed’ habitus, which is at the base of social and cultural ‘omnivorousness’, denotes an egalitarian framework – to a certain extent – as it enables the development of networks that rise above class differences, unlike in the case of bonding social capital, where class differences are perceived as a barrier. On the other hand, this very ‘omnivorousness’ is often accompanied with awareness of ‘distinctions’ (Bourdieu 1984) corresponding to class differentials among network parties. These distinctions are not without

a realisation of relevant issues of hierarchy, which, in turn, often challenge the egalitarian notions, originally assumed by omnivorousness, as they bring to the surface issues of power and inequality (in status, education, income, etc.). Bourdieuan frameworks are strongly implicated in this tension as they support the theoretical understanding of both the formation of bridging social capital – in terms of acquisition of various kinds of classed ‘habitus’ – and the way inequalities become evident through the realisation of distinction within this kinds of networks. As such, Bourdieuan frameworks serve well in facilitating the understanding and exposure of the complex ways in which a) class interacts with bridging capital, in the framework of concepts such as habitus and distinction, and b) bridging social capital can play out in both frameworks of ‘trans-class’ equality and frameworks of class division.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that social class differentials appear to be particularly prominent among the close friendships of students. Despite their exposure to a relatively diverse socio-economic context, the majority of students’ close friendship networks could be characterised as bonding social capital whereas bridging social capital was less common. Both students who possessed bonding social capital and those who possessed bridging social capital exhibited a high level of awareness about the distinction between various classed subjectivities, whether these were situated outside or within the friendship circle. Students tended to view their friendship networks in relation to class dichotomies with regard to the use of language, possession of money, fashion consumption, leisure activities etc. While in some rare occasions these dichotomies were transcended and students were able to adopt various classed habituses, acting as social and cultural ‘omnivores’, for the majority of students these differences seemed to be an impediment for inter-class friendship formation. On the contrary, class ‘sameness’ was often seen as a virtue of a friendship network, as it implied common understandings and experiences among its members, reinforcing therefore bonding social capital. As Bourdieu argued: ‘The homogenising effect of homogenous conditionings is at the basis of those dispositions which favour the development of relationships, formal or informal (like homogamy), which tend to increase this very homogeneity’ (1987, 6).

These findings contribute to the understanding of the way social class plays out in students' social networks and underpin the critical way in which social-class inequalities are mirrored in friendship patterns. While students were reflective about the presence of social class in their networks and agentially rejected and/or adopted various types of classed habitus, as in the case of the social and cultural 'omnivores', in most cases the existence of class inequalities and of relevant issues of power vigorously interfered with and informed their friendship formation, generating patterns of social closure. These patterns of closure could be seen as a manifestation of social-class polarisation, which is, in turn, detrimental to the formation of a socially cohesive school community. It could be therefore argued that policies aiming at the improvement of cohesion levels within educational spaces should seriously take into consideration the friendship patterns and attitudes among students of different class backgrounds.

From a research perspective, this article proposes that focusing on the exploration of network patterns and students' network negotiations could give important insights into the way class is perpetually lived within educational contexts. Social-class inequalities have been argued to be very influential within school communities in relation to students' learning (Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Mac Ruairc 2011). I suggest, here, that these very inequalities are also influential in relation to students' social lives. As shown throughout this article, students' friendships are important spaces in which various classed experiences take place, such as the building of class synergies, the reliance on common class understandings, the generation of emotions and the experimentation in relation to (class) identity and adopted habitus. Therefore, students' networks warrant a serious examination, in both research and policy frameworks, as they echo the social-class inequalities that are present in educational milieus and might even contribute to their reproduction and perpetuation.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the +3 ESRC award, the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation Scholarship and the Nicholas Hans Comparative Education Scholarship. I would like to thank Professor John Preston for his very helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

Notes

¹ Analysis of this study's research data demonstrated that perceptions of the self and others in racialised terms informed students' social networks. These points will be explored in a forthcoming paper.

² It is worth highlighting this study's focus on London, as a geographical locale. London arguably comprises a particular kind of environment for young people, for instance, with reference to the opportunities and experiences that result from its distinctive urban and multicultural characteristics (Brighouse and Fullic 2007). As such, students' friendships experiences discussed here could be seen in conjunction to the overall London framework.

³ The research design of this study included a quantitative methodology part in addition to the qualitative one discussed here. In particular, questionnaires were administered to 250 students of the four schools and the data was then analysed with the aid of SPSS software. Yet, the themes discussed here were only addressed by the qualitative part of the study, so the quantitative method is not further discussed.

References

Alderson, P. 2005. Designing ethical research with children. In *Ethical research with children*, ed. A. Farrell, 27-36. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bernstein, B. 1960. Language and social class. *The British journal of sociology* 11, no. 3: 271-76.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In *Handbook for theory and research for the sociology of education*, ed. J.G. Richardson, 241-58. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1987. What makes a social class? On the theoretical and practical existence of groups. *The Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32: 1-18.

Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. and J.B. Thompson. 1991. *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brighouse, T. and L. Fullic eds. 2007. *Education in a global city: Essays from london*. London: Bedford Way Press.

Bruegel, I. 2006. Social capital, diversity and education policy. London: Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, London South Bank University.

Bukowski, W.M., D. Buhrmester and M.K. Underwood. 2011. Peer relations as a developmental context. In *Social development: Relationships in infancy, childhood, and adolescence*, eds M.K. Underwood and L.H. Rosen, 153-79. New York: The Guilford Press.

Dunn, J. 2004. *Children's friendships: The beginnings of intimacy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Flick, U. 1998. *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Granovetter, M.S. 1983. The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory* 1: 201-23.

- Hallinan, M.T. 1995. Patterns of cliquing among youth. In *Friendship and social relations in children*, eds H.C. Foot, A.J. Chapman and J.R. Smith, 319-40. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Halpern, D. 2005. *Social capital*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hamilton, K. 2012. Low-income families and coping through brands: Inclusion or stigma? *Sociology* 46, no. 1: 74-90.
- Helve, H. and J.M. Bynner eds. 2007. *Youth and social capital*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Hempel-Jorgensen, A. 2009. The construction of the 'ideal pupil' and pupils' perceptions of 'misbehaviour' and discipline: Contrasting experiences from a low-socio-economic and a high-socio-economic primary school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30, no. 4: 435-48.
- Hewitt, R. 1986. *White talk black talk: Inter-racial friendship and communication amongst adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hey, V. 1997. *The company she keeps: An ethnography of girls' friendships*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hey, V. 2005. The contrasting social logics of sociality and survival: Cultures of classed being/longing in late modernity. *Sociology* 39, no. 5: 855-72.
- Home Office. 2001. *Community cohesion: A report of the independent review team (chaired by ted cante)*, ed. Hmso. London: HMSO.
- Ingram, N. 2009. Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30, no. 4: 421-34.
- Janmaat, J.G. 2012. The effect of classroom diversity on tolerance and participation in England, Sweden and Germany. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 1: 21-39.
- Kupersmidt, J.B., M.E. Derosier and C.P. Patterson. 1995. Similarity as the basis for children's friendships: The roles of sociometric status, aggressive and withdrawn behavior, academic achievement and demographic characteristics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12, no. 3: 439-52.

- Mac Ruairc, G. 2011. Where words collide: Social class, schools and linguistic discontinuity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32, no. 4: 541-61.
- Morrow, V. 1999. Conceptualising social capital in relation to the well-being of children and young people: A critical review. *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 4: 744-65.
- Morrow, V. 2006. Understanding gender differences in context: Implications for young children's everyday lives. *Children & Society* 20, no. 2: 92-104.
- Office for National Statistics. 2000. Standard occupational classification 2000. Volume 2 - the coding index. London: The Stationery Office.
- Pahl, R. 2000. *On friendship*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Papapolydorou, M. 2011. The role of social capital in students' educational outcomes and school experiences: Toward a contextualised understanding. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Institute of Education - University of London.
- Papapolydorou, M. forthcoming. Direct, indirect and relational: Social class manifestations in teenage students' accounts. *Youth and Policy*.
- Peterson, R.A. and R.M. Kern. 1996. Changing highbrow taste: From snob to omnivore. *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5: 900-07.
- Preston, J. 2007. *Whiteness and class in education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Putnam, R.D. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of american community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Reay, D. 1998. Rethinking social class: Qualitative perspectives on class and gender. *Sociology* 32, no. 2: 259-75.
- Reay, D. 2004. 'It's all becoming a habitus': Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, no. 4: 431-44.
- Reay, D. 2005. Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology* 39, no. 5: 911-28.

Reay, D. 2008. Class out of place. The white middle classes and intersectionalities of class and 'race' in urban state schooling in England. In *The way class works: Readings on school, family, and the economy*, ed. L. Weis, 87-99. London: Routledge.

Renold, E. 2005. *Girls, boys, and junior sexualities: Exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Reynolds, T. 2007. Friendship networks, social capital and ethnic identity: Researching the perspectives of Caribbean young people in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies* 10, no. 4: 383-98.

Reynolds, T. ed. 2011. *Young people, social capital and ethnic identity*. London: Routledge.

Savage, M., G. Bagnall and B. Longhurst. 2001. Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: Class identities in the northwest of England. *Sociology* 35, no. 4: 875-92.

Warde, A., D. Wright and M. Gayo-Cal. 2007. Understanding cultural omnivorousness: Or, the myth of the cultural omnivore. *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 2: 143-64.

Windzio, M. 2012. Integration of immigrant children into inter-ethnic friendship networks: The role of 'intergenerational openness'. *Sociology* 46, no. 2: 258-71.