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Understanding Social Exclusion in Elite Professional Service Firms: Field Level Dynamics and the 'Professional Project'

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Abstract

This article explores social exclusion in elite professional service firms (PSFs) through a qualitative study of six legal, accounting, investment banking and consulting firms. Employing a Bourdieusian perspective we find that all six firms privilege candidates with the same narrow forms of cultural capital, while acknowledging that this contradicts their professed commitment to social inclusion and recruiting the best 'talent.' We find that this behaviour is enshrined within the habitus of elite firms. We argue that it represents an organisational strategy generated by a compulsion to achieve legitimacy in a specific field of London-based elite PSFs. We identify a 'professional project' of sorts, but argue that this can no longer be mapped on to the interests of a discrete occupational group. As such, we contribute to studies of elite reproduction and social stratification by focusing specifically on the role of elite professional organisations in the reproduction of inequality.

Keywords: Bourdieu; Elite Reproduction; Professional Service Firms; Social Exclusion, Social Stratification

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Introduction

A wide body of empirical evidence demonstrates that new entrants to elite professional service firms (PSFs) are not representative of society at large, but are instead likely to be relatively privileged with respect to their socio-economic background (Cabinet Office, 2009; SMCPC, 2013; 2015). This evidence demonstrates that social exclusion has become increasingly acute in recent years within certain professions (Cabinet Office, 2009); that social exclusion is evident in both new and established professions (The Sutton Trust, 2012); and that social exclusion is especially marked in the most lucrative and prestigious PSFs which comprise the global elite (Cook, Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012).

Understanding social exclusion from the professions is important since this phenomenon contributes towards wider social inequalities (Adams, 2014; Parkin, 1974). Doing so in the current context is also timely, since elite PSFs increasingly acknowledge their exclusionary behaviour and profess a strong 'business case' for change (Ashley, 2010; Ashley and Empson, 2013; Cook et al, 2012). Yet, despite over ten years' of initiatives aimed at social inclusion within the professions, there has been little sign of significant change in outcomes to date. For example, while almost 90% of the population are educated at non-selective state schools in England and Wales, they continue to represent under 30% of new entrants to professional roles at elite accountancy firms. The proportion of new entrants to leading law firms educated at fee-paying schools is similar to the current population of partners in these firms, at typically just under 40% (SMCPC, 2015). This compares to c.7% of the total population in the UK in total.

In this article we ask: *why do elite professional service firms continue to exclude on the basis of social background, in view of their professed commitment to social inclusion and to recruiting the very best talent*? A substantial literature within the sociology of the professions has theorised the process of 'social closure' as a coherent 'professional project' (Larson, 1977), deployed by an occupational group in order to achieve collective social mobility on behalf of all its members (Macdonald, 1995). However, this literature has two main limitations in the current context. First, many of the most influential and important studies were conducted over twenty years ago and theorise social closure predominantly in relation to occupational privilege and power (Larson, 1977; Witz, 1992). This approach is though difficult to sustain in the light of the rapid growth of powerful and influential PSFs, which has led to a fundamental shift in related power dynamics (Carter and Spence, 2014; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Second, though these early studies theorised social closure across a range of professions, more recent studies undertaken against a backdrop of fragmentation, have often focused on a single profession, usually the law (e.g. Ashley, 2010; Ashley and Empson, 2013; Cook et al., 2012; Sommerlad, 2011, 2012). As such, they do not investigate how social exclusion may be affected by relationships between occupations and organisations in a range of sectors.

We address these limitations here. Our study is distinctive because we adopt a cross-sectoral approach, focusing on six organisations in four occupations. In addition, we combine Bourdieu's theoretical perspective and methodological approach to field analysis, in order to unite the macro (structural) analysis commonly associated with Weberian-inspired scholars working within the sociology of the professions (eg: Larson, 1977), with a focus on the micro-dynamics of organisational life more commonly associated with scholars of PSFs (e.g. Ashley and Empson, 2013).

We find that, when hiring new professionals at entry level, recruitment teams at the six case study firms particularly value those with the same forms of social and cultural capital, which are closely associated with higher socio-economic status. In order to attract and appoint high numbers of these candidates all six firms have adopted similar routines and rules. This situation continues despite current professionals acknowledging that these processes exclude many talented individuals and have a detrimental impact on social inclusion. We argue that exclusion can be explained as an organisational strategy aimed at competitive advantage, which is generated by a compulsion to achieve legitimacy and status within a specific field of London-based elite PSFs. We show that the dynamics of this particular sub-field exert significant pressures on elite firms with respect to recruitment and selection in favour of the status quo, and lead to clear homologies in the social and educational background of new entrants across elite firms in different professions.

Our key theoretical contribution is to demonstrate that *organisations* rather than *occupations* are nowadays the key actors in the process of social exclusion from the professions, leading to social stratification and the reproduction of existing elites. While barriers to entry based on formal credentials have historically offered benefits to entire professions, those based on informal or cultural criteria are nowadays specifically available to and employed by elite PSFs in order to help safeguard their particular interests, including high status and rewards.

We begin by reviewing the literature examining the relationship between social closure, credentials and cultural capital. We then describe Bourdieu's methodological prescription for field level analysis, which generates three secondary research questions around which this article is framed. After describing our research methods, we present the empirical material

which seeks to explain social exclusion by constructing the field of elite PSFs; examining their organisational habitus with regard to risks, rituals, and routines; and mapping objective relations within the field.

Closure, credentials and cultural capital

The City of London, where many elite PSFs are headquartered, has experienced dramatic change since financial deregulation in 1986. The so-called 'big bang' is associated with the breaking down of established barriers between broking, trading, and corporate finance activities, the entry of large US firms into the City, and the growing dominance of large, multinational firms in a range of sectors (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). These developments are said to have brought about the end of 'gentlemanly capitalism' within the City (Augar, 2000), including the use of informal recruitment practices where social networks offered access to many prestigious and lucrative positions, and aspirant professionals with the appropriate background could be hired without a university degree. This new regime of intensified competition was accompanied by a discourse of meritocracy and a heavy focus on entrepreneurialism and, partly in response, during the 1980s investment banks in particular opened their doors to new entrants from a wider range of backgrounds who were thus able to pursue personal upward mobility projects.

Yet since this time similar opportunities have been closed off. For example, a study conducted in 2011 examined the educational background of over 7,000 of the UK's 'leading people,' and found that 57% of those in financial services had attended fee-paying schools (The Sutton Trust, 2012). An apparent bias in favour of people from relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds is not limited to the financial services sector. For example, while accountants born in 1958 grew up in families with an income close to the national average, those born in 1970

grew up in families with an income 40% *above* the national average (Cabinet Office 2009). Social exclusion is particularly acute within the legal professions where c.40% of new entrants to elite firms have been educated at private or fee-paying schools compared to 7% of the population (SMCPC, 2015).

Theoretical explanations for social exclusion have historically been found within the sociology of the professions and of education (Larson, 1977; Murphy, 1988; Parkin, 1974). Influential neo-Weberian analyses have demonstrated how occupational groups operate a process of social closure, by which social collectives seek to maximise status and rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles (Parkin, 1974: 3). This concept is closely tied to the notion of the 'professional project,' which presents the process of professionalisation as an attempt by occupational groups to translate "one order of scarce resources – special knowledge and skills – into another – social and economic rewards" (Larson, 1977: xvii). Scholars suggest that occupational groups seek to monopolise the market and control entry to their occupation, with dominant elites restricting access to the knowledge and education on which their profession is based.

Closure is a spatially and temporally contingent process (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990). Therefore scholars working within the sociology of the professions suggest that occupational members must work continually to develop, maintain and enhance their professional status (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). Those working within the neo-Weberian tradition identify a particular challenge to the professions: the expansion and apparent democratisation of higher education in the UK over the past 30 years (Sommerlad and Ashley, 2015). While enabling the rapid growth of large professional organisations, these scholars argue this has threatened to undermine notions of exclusivity and high status in the professions by reducing their control

over the supply-side, contributing to diversification away from the professional white, male, middle-class 'norm.'

Professions have responded to this threat by establishing new strategies of social closure, using informal (cultural) barriers to entry, rather than formal credentials alone (Bolton and Muzio, 2007). Bourdieu's core concepts of the forms of capital, habitus and field (e.g. 1984, 1990, 1996) have been deployed to help explain this process in more detail.

Bourdieu (1984) characterised social space in terms of overlapping fields, defined as a structured social space or network with its own rules and forms of common sense. These rules are produced and naturalised through the field's cultural practices and through its actors' interrelationships, which may in turn become part of an individual's *habitus*. This describes patterns of thought and behaviour that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Fields are characterised by struggles between individual agents and institutions over the various forms of capital which are in circulation and which, in addition to economic capital, comprise the following forms. *Social capital* relates to contacts and connections which allow people to draw on their social networks. Cultural capital comes in three forms: *embodied capital* refers to both consciously and passively inherited properties of the self which are typically acquired through socialisation and tradition; *institutional capital* refers to institutional recognition of the cultural capital held by an individual, most commonly academic credentials and qualifications; and *objectified capital* refers to physical objects that are owned. Finally, *symbolic capital* is defined by Bourdieu (1989: 17) as the "form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate" within the field.

Studies using this framework have shown that as organisations attract, screen and select applicants, they make collective assumptions about the relationship between particular types of cultural capital and an individual's likely performance in the professional field (Cook et al. 2012: see also Rivera, 2015; Sommerlad, 2011, 2012). These attributes include a degree from an elite university, particularly Oxford or Cambridge, defined as institutional capital, and characteristics such as deportment, body language and "professionalism" under pressure, defined as embodied capital (Cook et al., 2012). These attributes are considered by recruiters and their colleagues within elite PSFs to engender trust and predictability in the professional context (Hanlon, 2004), signal high quality to clients, and support the brand image of elite firms (Ashley and Empson, 2013. See also: Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson, 1998).

Analyses within the sociology of the professions are closely aligned with those within the sociology of education which demonstrate that the expansion of higher education has encouraged employers to develop ever more fine-grained rankings of universities over the past twenty years (King, Marginson and Naidoo, 2011). One result is that elite PSFs tend to recruit the majority of their graduates from elite universities, in the UK typically defined as the Russell Group[i] (Cabinet Office, 2009; Harris 2010; High Fliers, 2013). This matters, because elite universities are disproportionately populated by students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Harris 2010). For example, just over 10% entering Oxford and Cambridge are from lower socio-economic groups, compared to over 30% for the university sector as a whole (HESA, 2015). This is not necessarily the result of the superior ability and aptitude of more privileged students, but because of their enhanced access to teaching and resources (Metcalf, 1997).

Existing literature within the sociological tradition offers valuable insights into how and why social exclusion comes about. However, scholars of the professions such as Muzio et al. (2013)

underline the disruptive effects associated with the growth of large, powerful PSFs and the fragmentation of the professions (Suddaby et al., 2007; Ramirez, Stringellow & Maclean, 2015). They and others have called for more research which focuses on the micro-dynamics of organisational life, alongside the structural processes within the professions commonly associated with the sociological approach (Muzio, Cooper and Greenwood, 2013; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011). The current study responds to this call, facilitated by Bourdieu's theoretical perspective and methodological approach to field analysis, as described below.

Field level analysis

Though previous studies of social closure have adopted Bourdieu's theoretical perspective, our study is distinctive because we also employ his methodological prescription for field analysis. This involves three discrete but interconnected levels or "moments" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's is a relational approach and the exclusion of any one of these 'moments' is considered to lead to only a partial explanation of the phenomenon in question. As such, we use Bourdieu's three 'moments' to generate the secondary research questions (RQ) around which our analysis is based.

The first moment requires that we analyse the *field* in relation to other fields, especially the field of power. This is characterised by Bourdieu (1996: 264) as a "gaming space in which those agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital (economic or cultural capital in particular) [are] able to occupy the dominant positions within their respective fields [and] confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming those relations of power." We therefore ask:

RQ1: In which *field*(s) are elite PSFs located and how do they relate to the field of power?

A second 'moment' requires that we analyse the *habitus* of actors within the field, in this case organisations. The concept of habitus links the concepts of field and capital and is defined as the way society becomes deposited in individuals, groups or institutions, in the form of 'lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005: 316, cited in Navarro 2006: 16). We therefore ask:

RQ2: What forms of capital are specifically valued within the organisational *habitus* of elite PSFs and why?

A third 'moment' requires that we analyse the *distinctions* which are created within the field in question, as a result of their particular *portfolios of capital* – economic, social, cultural and symbolic. We therefore ask:

RQ3: What distinctions are the result of elite PSF's *different capital portfolios*?

Although these questions overlap, they nevertheless tell us different things. For example, RQ1 focuses on the macro level of analysis. We locate our case study firms within a specific sub-field of elite PSFs, and underline the specific role played by structural pressures within this field with respect to social exclusion. RQ2 focuses on the organisational habitus of our case study firms. This tells us about the "rules of the game" established within the fields in which our firms operate, including which forms of capital are ascribed highest value and why, and how these rules have been embedded within organisational DNA. RQ3 focuses on distinctions which originate as a result of firms' different capital portfolios. In other words, having

demonstrated how clear homologies *between* dominant agents in multiple professions are set up via the operations of the sub-field of elite PSFs (RQ2), we consider in RQ3 how distinctions *within* this field are the result of organisation's different capital portfolios.

Employed in this way, a Bourdieusian framework offers a number of specific advantages in relation to our intended theoretical contribution, most important of which is a focus on multiple levels of analysis, and therefore a focus on both occupations *and* organisations. Before addressing our three research questions, we consider our research methods next.

Research methods

The empirical data reported here draws from two studies including 95 interviews. The first examined diversity and inclusion strategies within the London offices of five PSFs. This study was conducted in 2010, and included in-depth case studies of two Big Four accounting firms (with diverse portfolios including audit and advisory work); one leading management consultancy (with a diverse portfolio including advisory work and design and delivery of large IT systems); and two international law firms (both focusing on corporate and commercial work). The second study, conducted in 2012, extended our analysis to the London headquarters of a major investment bank. The overall purpose of the research was to explore the nature and scope of diversity and inclusion policies including an investigation into attitudes towards social background and social inclusion.

TABLE ONE here

Interviewees were purposively selected with the help of a key gatekeeper, to include senior staff with recent and/or current responsibility for graduate recruitment and selection, and/or for promoting social inclusion, and/or holding senior leadership positions more generally. Thus

job titles of interviewees included, but were not limited to: graduate recruitment partner, people partner, graduate recruitment manager and practice leader. More junior members of staff were also included in the study as they had recent personal experience of the recruitment and selection process.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, face-to-face on the organisations' premises, and took approximately one hour. Interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire, and in both studies covered interviewees' knowledge and experience of graduate recruitment and selection procedures, including how firms encourage graduates to apply; on what basis they are screened and subsequently selected for interviews and by whom; on what basis they are considered suitable for internships and eventual appointment; and critically, how these selection criteria are explained and justified by interviewees. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken.

Data analysis took an inductive and iterative approach, allowing themes to emerge in part from theory, and in part during the process of data collection and data analysis (using specialist qualitative software NVivo). Transcriptions were searched first for references to graduate recruitment and selection. This category was further sub-divided, searching for all references where interviewees explained how selection decisions are made according to the various forms of capital. During this stage the analysis explicitly sought to look for points of difference and similarity among the six firms. It quickly became apparent that there was a high degree of uniformity across all firms on many major themes, including the forms of capital that are most highly valued.

However, during this process, an additional issue emerged relating to the question of cultural 'fit' within the field in which these firms operate. A second round of coding sought to address this theme, using two main categories. The first category identified where interviews described how *similarities* between firms in multiple professions are set up via the operations of the sub-field of elite PSFs. The second category identified where interviewees indicated how different capital portfolios are leveraged by firms seeking advantage relative to other firms in the same occupational field. During this second round of coding some differences between the case study firms did become apparent, as interviewees at the two slightly less prestigious firms according to industry rankings were more likely to focus on the second category, and describe their firm's on-going struggle for 'distinction.' We explain these findings in further depth next, starting with an analysis of the overlapping fields in which these firms are located.

Constructing the field

In this section, we address RQ1, namely: *in which field(s) are elite PSFs located and how do they relate to the field of power?* We illustrate how these firms are located in overlapping fields in Figure One.

FIGURE ONE here

Elite status and professionalism are both products of constantly shifting social relations. However, in order to 'fix' this concept, we draw from academic literature and sources within the trade press to suggest that the term 'elite' applies to the very largest professional organisations, with global reach and which command premium fee rates (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). These firms also have the highest turnover and/or profits within their

occupational group and their clients tend to comprise similarly large and prestigious organisations, including FTSE250 companies, government institutions, and indeed, each other.

On this basis, UK law firms with elite status include those within the *Legal Business* Top 25. This includes the five firms collectively known as the 'magic circle', as well as 'second tier' UK based firms (Legal Business, 2013). Within the accountancy profession, elite status is commonly associated with the largest and most prestigious firms in the UK, collectively known as the Big Four. Within investment banking, elite status is typically associated with so-called 'bulge bracket' firms. This term tends to be used in relation to the nine most profitable and largest banks in the world. Within management consulting, the pinnacle of elite status is represented by the largest and most prestigious strategy consulting firms, though this definition is also regularly extended to firms within the top 25 in terms of turnover (The Economist, 2013).

Given the certified technical knowledge of their members, law, accountancy and to a lesser extent investment banking, can be seen as archetypal fields, with relatively clear boundaries (denoted by solid lines in Figure One). Management consultancy has not fully professionalised and represents huge diversity for example with respect to the size of firms, and the credentials of its workers. While it might be recognised as a field, it undoubtedly has more porous boundaries (denoted by dotted lines in Figure One). All fields are though characterised by specialisation and subdivision, and during recent decades there has been an increasing divide in the scale, revenue and profitability of firms which comprise the elite, compared to the rest of their respective occupations (Suddaby et al, 2007).

We suggest that elite PSFs can be located in a number of overlapping fields, each of which exhibits shared rules and logics of action. These fields include, first, their own occupation but second, a discrete (though porous) field of elite PSFs that spans several occupations and is thus horizontal rather than vertical (see Figure One). Since most elite PSFs are headquartered in or around the City of London, this field is to some extent geographically prescribed. Given this physical location, their elevated position within their own occupational hierarchy, and their client base (which includes each other as well as leading corporates within the FTSE100 and governments), we suggest that these firms are also located in close proximity to the field of power, i.e. the social space where elites from various occupations rub shoulders as equals (Carter and Spence, 2014). This also indicates the variation within occupations in relation to the relative prestige of firms and practitioners, with those at the top possessing high stocks of economic and cultural capital, and those at the bottom less.

All six firms we report on here have elite status according to this definition (see Table Two). As such, we suggest that they occupy each of the overlapping fields we have described. The location of these firms close to a generalised field of power confers access to prestigious clients and lucrative work. This location also contributes towards their strong position within the graduate labour market since elite firms are generally particularly attractive to candidates educated at the most prestigious universities. However, as suggested in Table Two, some of the PSFs we study are more prestigious than others. These distinctions can be mapped on to the relative prestige and popularity of these firms as graduate employers. All six firms are among the top 300, yet four are ranked among the top 100, and three among the top 50, as captured by *The Guardian's* '300' survey of top graduate employers (2013)[ii]. In the remainder of this article we discuss the impact that operations within the sub-field of elite PSFs have on social exclusion and describe the implications for the 'professional project.'

TABLE TWO here

Organisational habitus and individual capital in the field of elite PSFs

In this section we address RQ2: *What forms of capital are specifically valued within the organisational habitus of the case study firms and why?* We seek to understand how social processes impacting upon these firms over many years have produced rules that are naturalised within the field and have led to patterns of thought and behavior which perpetuate social exclusion.

In order to do so, interviewees were asked first to describe the recruitment and selection process, revealing that all six firms have adopted similar rituals and routines here, as outlined in Figure Two. Thus, all six firms follow a similar process defined as 'best practice', starting by focusing their attraction strategies on a limited number of Russell Group universities, and followed by implementing a very similar approach to selection.

INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE

Interviewees were also asked to describe the characteristics, aptitudes, skills and abilities of potential recruits that were most valued by their firm within this process. They focused on three main areas which again, were consistent across all six firms. First is strong academic credentials, typically defined as 340 UCAS points or above[iii] and a 2:1 or first class degree from a university that is designated by firms as elite. This can be theorised as *institutional capital*. Second, recruiters place particularly high value on individuals who demonstrate evidence of ambition and resilience, but above all, who are "polished." Polish was generally

characterised by interviewees as a high level of confidence; strong communication skills; and a 'professional' presentation with respect to dress and appearance. These characteristics can be theorised as *embodied capital*. Third, interviewees explained that their firms value individuals who can demonstrate their interest in, aptitude for and knowledge of the occupation in which they wish to work, especially via relevant work experience, which can be characterised in Bourdieusian terms as *social capital*.

Interviewees described how at each stage of the selection process, the social and cultural capital of applicants is measured and assessed by current professionals on this basis. Thus, social capital may secure initial work experience and/or ensure that applicants have acquired the desired extra-curricular experience:

> *. . . really bright kids from working class backgrounds apply but . . . they come for their interview and they can't talk about their year's scuba diving, or working in, say, the rainforest, and that makes them less interesting candidates on the basis that they won't present as well to clients. (LU2, Director)*

> *. . . if your Dad's a client or your uncle works here, there's no doubt that will get you an internship . . . (IB10, Vice President)*

Institutional capital is associated predominantly with attendance at a Russell Group university:

> *The recruitment strategy has certainly changed quite dramatically. It's primarily from Russell Group universities now. (LU3, Senior Manager)*

Embodied capital is assessed at interview and during vacation placements, with a strong emphasis on "polish".

> *Image is very important here. You have to be polished. You can be the cleverest person . . . but if you haven't got the right background, you are not going to fit into our culture . . . . (IB2, Senior Manager)*

Over half our interviewees acknowledged that the current approach to hiring graduates excludes many bright students, potentially from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Interviewees suggested the current approach to recruitment sometimes results in their firm appointing '*second-rate*' (AA2) students from elite universities, rather than the very best and most appropriate students educated outside this small group. They underlined that selecting students on this basis results in a homogenous group of employees who are confident and for the most part intelligent, but who often lack commercial aptitude, drive and ambition.

> *. . . we're recruiting to a set of [academic] standards . . . but in terms of our ability to accommodate . . . the sort of people who might actually benefit our business, we've lost that. (AB10, Partner)*

Despite these concerns, few interviewees anticipated that their firm would make any significant change to mainstream recruitment practices in the immediate future. We suggest that stasis can be explained because despite some disconfirming evidence, established routines relating to recruitment and selection of graduates developed over many years have become enshrined within the firms' organisational habitus. This denotes an understanding of the rules of the game in the field in which these firms operate, where current processes are the basis on which

members of these firms believe "excellence" is achieved (Bourdieu, 2012: 1). Thus, an emphasis on narrow forms of institutional capital is, in part, a response to growing numbers of applicants to elite firms, whereby recruiters continue to use attendance at an elite university as an efficient shorthand for 'merit.'

However, recruitment operates according to a set of important additional rules. First, recruiters consider that candidates who possess the specific forms of cultural capital (especially institutional and embodied) are most likely to send appropriate signals to clients about the quality of the service they will receive. As such, these forms of capital have acquired significant *symbolic* value within the field.

> *. . . if you've got a CEO of a business, he wants to be speaking to somebody who he thinks has been brought up and educated in the right way . . . That's not to say that that person is any better or worse than someone from a sort of lower social strata, who might be fifteen times more intelligent, but the CEO probably won't think that's the right person. (IB6, Vice President)*

Second, these rules insist that appointing individuals with specific stocks of social and cultural capital enhances the *overall* stock of capital possessed by elite firms, which acts as a vital route to distinction compared with other, lower status organisations within their own occupation. Selecting significant numbers of graduates from a wider range of social and educational backgrounds is expected on the other hand to have the opposite effect:

Getting people from different backgrounds, maybe different universities, it's really for other firms, criminal aid, smaller high street firms. For large corporate firms like us . . . it's our reputation . . . we just can't afford to do it. (LU5, Partner)

Third, our data suggests that a key component of this strategy is to ensure that firms within the sub-field of elite PSFs in London appoint new professionals with similar portfolios of cultural capital to those appointed by their peers:

We basically go after the same people as other firms in the Big Four . . . We can't always get them because it's competitive but going to other universities would make us look different . . . clients may wonder why. (AA7, Partner)

The concept of 'fit' relates then in part to matching the characteristics of existing members of the firm. Yet, as important, appointing graduates with specific and narrowly defined forms of cultural capital enables recruiters to mitigate perceptions of risk in the selection decision while safeguarding impressions of prestige and elite status, by ensuring that new professionals conform to the specific norms of the sub-field of elite PSFs in which they operate.

It will be really difficult for us to change. We have to get that fit . . . with the firm but also the City . . . I don't think it's fair for the bank to go out and try and attract talent that isn't going to fit with that because it's going to be a disappointment for us both. (IB12, Vice President)

It is about quality. But to be honest there's plenty of people who are the right quality. So … then it becomes more about that fit, who are our peers, what work are we doing, who are we working with? (AB16, Partner)

As a result, elite firms across a range of sectors compete intensively to attract the same students from a relatively small pool and in doing so, perpetuate the current status quo.

Mapping objective relations within the field

In this section we ask: what *distinctions* are the result of elite PSF's *different capital portfolios*? (RQ3). As Bourdieu (2008: 46) points out, within every field, every actor:

"engages other actors in competition by wielding his relative strength, a strength which defines his position within the field and, consequently, also his strategies."

RQ3 thus represents the third moment in Bourdieu's field analysis which suggests that we should map distinctions in relation to social relationships which pertain within the field. This is important since successful agents (in our case organisational) can be distinguished from those who are less successful by reference to the different capital portfolios of each (Spence and Carter, 2014).

To illustrate the process of struggle implied here, we focus on two of the (marginally) less prestigious firms within our sample group, LawV and ConsultCo. These firms have historically struggled to attract applicants with the most valuable forms of cultural capital. However, we show that over the previous ten years they had consciously adopted recruitment strategies which aim to ensure 'fit' within the London-based field of elite PSFs, in order to

ensure that they might enjoy similar advantages. They do so by adopting the same routines and rituals with respect to graduate recruitment as their slightly more prestigious peers, even when this is inconsistent with historical hiring patterns. As such, we demonstrate once again the specific power of the field to shape firms' recruitment practices, away from (relative) inclusion and towards elitism and exclusion.

LawV is among the largest and most prestigious law firms in the world and is headquartered in New York. Our study focused on the firm's London office. Interviewees explained that following its foundation in the mid-1990s, the firm's London office had a client list which though impressive, focused on the European operations of US corporate clients and investment banks. Ambitious leaders in London wished for the firm to compete more aggressively with 'magic circle' peers and attract more prestigious and lucrative UK-headquartered clients, particularly within the FTSE250. Though the firm's London office had been established by these same leaders with the explicit intention that it would be diverse and socially inclusive, in time they changed the recruitment strategy to attract and appoint higher numbers of graduates whose cultural capital was a clear 'fit' with other firms within the field of elite PSFs. For example:

> *. . . people feel that…they're more likely to get a quality person if they come from Oxbridge . . . I disagree. [But] as a law firm doing the sort of work we do, charging the way we charge and our economics and our client base, we have to be seen to be recruiting academically at least at the level of our peers. (LV42, Partner)*

A similar struggle for homogeneity (with other firms within the field of elite PSFs) and distinction (from less prestigious firms within its own occupational group) was illustrated by

ConsultCo. This firm had expanded in the ten years prior to the current research, largely through acquisition and mergers. Many of the firm's legacy employees did not have a degree but had worked their way up from the 'shop floor,' often having trained as apprentices in engineering and with relatively modest socio-economic backgrounds:

> *People I used to work with . . . are people who left school at fifteen and came through the shop floor, into IT and then found their way into ConsultCo and people from that background have survived perfectly well within this organisation. (CC5, Managing Director)*

.

ConsultCo had achieved significant success on this basis. However, interviewees claimed that the firm increasingly sought to compete for clients with Big Four accounting firms and the most prestigious strategy consulting firms. Firm leaders apparently considered that appointing higher numbers of graduates with the requisite cultural capital was one means to achieve this goal. Having previously cast the net relatively wide, the firm's graduate recruitment manager said that currently the firm actively markets vacancies to graduates from just seven universities, which are the same or similar status institutions to those targeted by elite competitors. This focus on institutional capital was accompanied by an emphasis on embodied capital, with some interviewees suggesting that the two could be closely mapped. Interviewees acknowledged that this recruitment strategy is expensive, putting ConsultCo in direct competition with higher status peers for the same candidates, and the aptitude and even the intellect of students appointed using this strategy was sometimes questioned. However, the logic of pursuing this course of action was not challenged, even by senior consultants with no higher level qualifications themselves:

Historically there has been a lot of diversity here. But it is relationship based and sort of smart tie, nice suit, first impressions matter . . . it's not necessarily a welcoming environment for anyone who is working class. (CC9, Director)

We're trying to be more successful . . . you know, we've been successful in this way, but [names Big Four accountancy] has been far more successful, so let's use their formulas! (CC8, Director)

Our evidence suggests a deliberate attempt to change the firm's habitus, from an environment in which socialised norms suggest that expertise, job performance and experience may determine merit, to an environment in which signs of culture and taste which are equivalent to their more prestigious peers have become equally important. One manager summarised this project by claiming that in future:

We won't have anyone who speaks "cor blimey." Because that's not the professional image we would want. (CC6, Senior Manager).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, the over-arching question we have sought to address is: *why do elite professional service firms exclude on the basis of social background, in view of their professed commitment to social inclusion and to recruiting the very best talent*?

We have demonstrated that elite PSFs in multiple occupations with previously diverse hiring practices, have experienced similar social pressures and in response, come to adopt similar rituals, routines and rules in relation to hiring practices, such that narrow forms of relatively

scarce cultural capital are highly valued. Individuals within these firms are often aware of the negative implications for social exclusion and for 'talent.' However, associated rules have become enshrined within the organisational habitus of firms such that they offer an engrained "cultural grammar for action" (Swartz, 1997: 102). While elite PSFs underline their commitment to merit-based recruitment in their corporate literature, in private, those involved in recruiting underline the necessity to ensure that new employees' stocks of cultural capital fit with current norms within the London-based sub-field of elite PSFs. One result is that social inequality is constantly reproduced.

Our key theoretical contribution is to studies of social stratification and elite formation within the professions. While we maintain an emphasis on structural forces consistent with sociological accounts of the professions (eg: Larson, 1977; Murphy, 1988; Parkin, 1974), in our analysis we place the organisation centre stage. In other words, we suggest that exclusion is nowadays primarily an *organisational strategy*, which helps to legitimise the position of firms within the sub-field of elite PSFs, and which is possible largely as a result of their existing power and prestige. In this way, we extend Weberian framing of 'social closure' since, while we identify a 'professional project' of sorts, we argue that this can no longer be mapped on to the activities and interests of a discrete occupational group. As a relational process, exclusion implies a process of 'Othering,' which arguably benefits elite firms at the expense of their less prestigious peers. This process is likely to prove both cause and effect of further fragmentation of previously coherent occupational groups, a trend that has been noted in a variety of professional contexts (Ramirez, Stringfellow & Maclean, 2015).

The issue of social mobility and access to the elite professions has become increasingly topical in recent years (Cabinet Office, 2009; SMCPC, 2013, 2015). Partly in response, many elite

PSFs are now enacting initiatives aimed at improving social inclusion. The profile of new entrants to elite firms has not though become substantially more representative over the past ten years (SMCPC, 2015), underlining Bourdieu's (1984: 101) contention that the dispositions originating in the habitus are extremely robust. Yet this theoretical position is not entirely deterministic, since habitus can be changed "under unexpected situations or over a long historical period' (Navarro 2006: 16). The current study notes that social exclusion is exacerbated as elite firms imitate and adopt their peer group's approach to 'best practice' in recruitment and selection at entry level. It is of course possible that as some firms develop more innovative and impactful solutions to social inclusion, these tendencies towards similarity could be leveraged in a more progressive direction. Yet we have demonstrated that social exclusion is arguably considered central to competitive advantage by many professionals in elite firms and as such, the structural dynamics of the field may continue to construct clear barriers to the widespread enactment of more progressive aims.

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Figure One: Fields Occupied by Elite PSFs

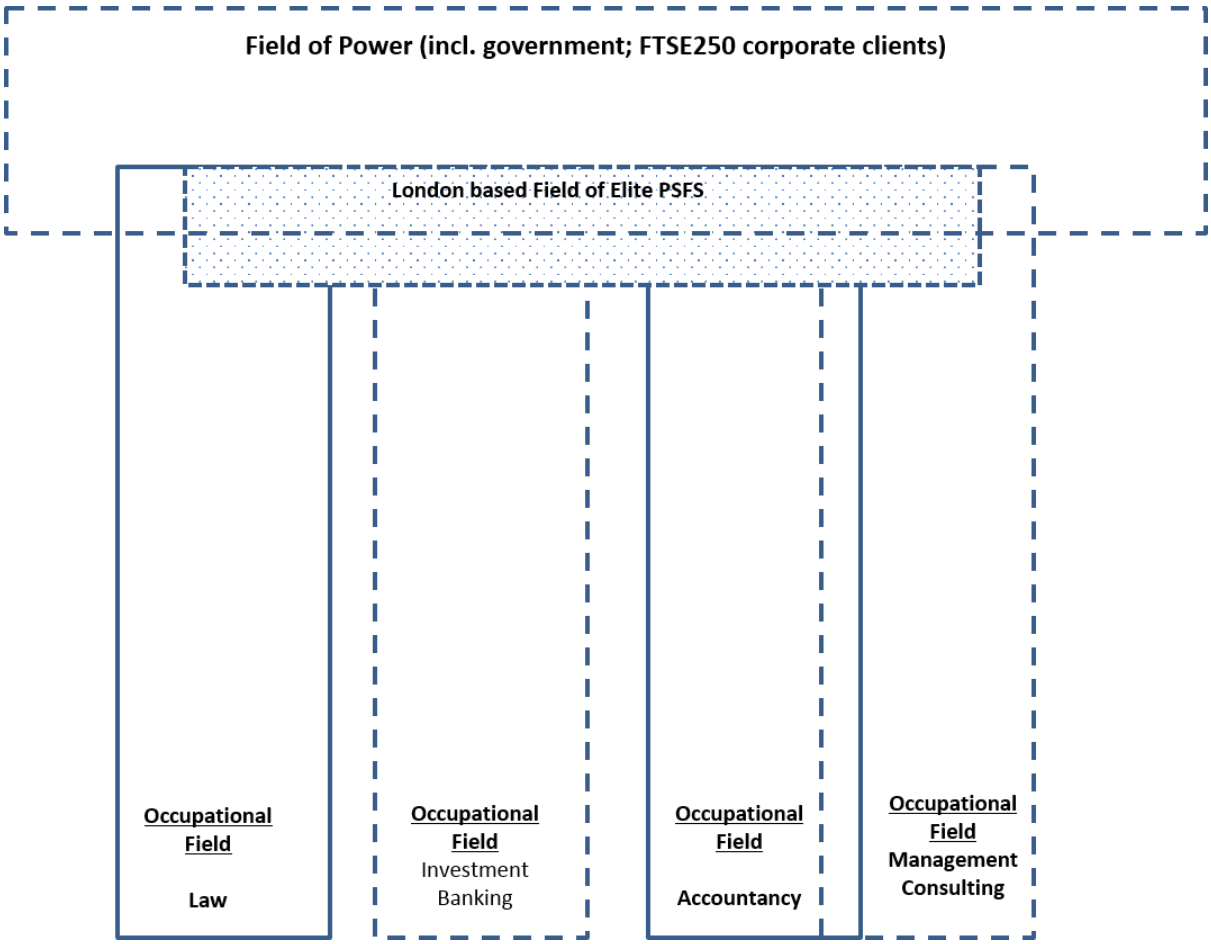
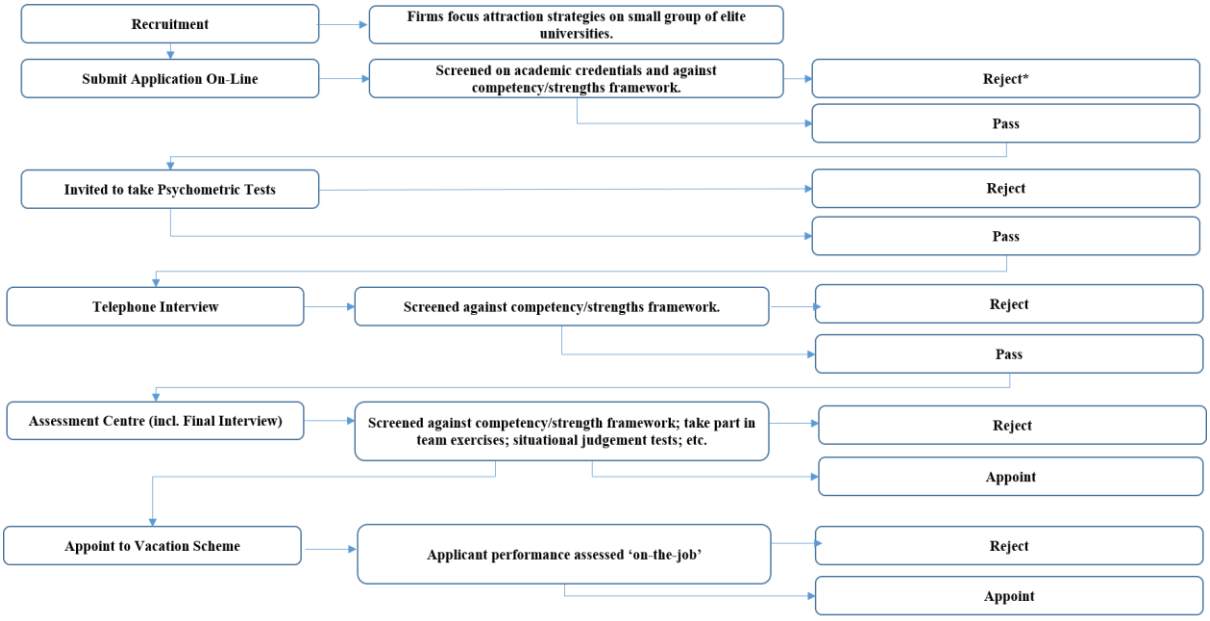


Figure Two: Recruitment and Selection Process at Case Study Firms



- Up to sixty per cent of applications may be screened out here.
** Typically between 3 and 10 per cent of all applicants receive a job offer.

Table One: Firms and Interviewees

	Managing Director/Partner		Vice President/ Director/Senior Associate		Senior Manager/ Junior Associate		
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	
InvestBank (IB)	4	-	5	2	2	4	**17**
AccountA (AA)	-	4	2	1	1	3	**11**
AccountB (AB)	3	1	1	2	4	5	**16**
ConsultCo (CC)	5	1	2	1	1	1	**11**
LawU (LU)	6	3	5	5	-	1	**20**
LawV (LV)	2	3	2	7	2	4	**20**
TOTAL							**95**

Table Two: Governance Structure and Rank of Firms by Popularity as Graduate Employers

Firm	By size	Approx Global Employees (1,000s)	Governance Structure	By popularity with recruits (The Guardian '300')
InvestBank	Bulge Bracket	250K	PLC	1 – 50
AccountA	Big Four	150K	LLP	1 – 50
AccountB	Big Four	150K	LLP	1 – 50
ConsultCo	Top 25 Globally (by turnover)	150K	PLC	150 – 200
LawU	Top 10 in UK (by turnover)	3K	LLP	50 – 100
LawV	Top 15 (by revenue worldwide)	3K	LLP	250 – 300

[i] The Russell Group is a self-selecting consortium of twenty-four universities including Oxford and Cambridge ("Oxbridge"), which is often used as shorthand for the UK's most prestigious universities.

[ii] The Guardian 300 Most Popular Graduate Employers is based on a survey of over 25,000 students across 100 universities conducted mainly via university careers services. The survey ranks the 300 most popular UK employers and the most popular employers within the major

graduate career sectors. The survey is available at: http://targetjobs.co.uk/uk300 (accessed online 17th April 2014).

[iii] UCAS is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in the UK. It operates a tariff which is the system for allocating points to the different qualifications students can use to get into undergraduate higher education.