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**Symbolic closure: Towards a renewed sociological perspective on the relationship  
between higher education, credentials and the graduate labour market**

**Abstract**

This article explores how our understanding of the graduate labour market can be improved by re-assessing some of the insights of the conflictual tradition within sociology. In particular, its theorising of ‘social closure’ and the use of educational credentials within the labour market remain highly relevant. Yet these ideas need to be modified to better deal with the current social, economic and educational contexts. This article extends the social closure literature to deal with some of the changes within the graduate labour market by turning to Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on symbolic violence. I will argue that ‘symbolic closure’, the reliance on exclusion through categorisation and classification, becomes of greater importance in a graduate labour market that no longer offers any clarity about what graduate skills, jobs and rewards constitute and signify.

**Keywords: Bourdieu; conflict sociology; credentialism; graduate labour market; higher education; social closure; symbolic closure**

**Gerbrand Tholen**

City University London

**Corresponding author:**

Gerbrand Tholen, Department of Sociology, City University London, Northampton Square,  
London EC1V 0HB, UK. Email: gerbrand.tholen@city.ac.uk

**Introduction**

In many Western nations the graduate labour market has received considerable attention within policy, academic and media circles in recent years (see: Tholen 2014a). Since the start

of the Great Recession, concerns have grown about whether the labour market can absorb the influx of new graduates. Historically, workers with university degrees were relatively sheltered from competition with those with lower qualifications and worked in well-defined traditional graduate occupations. Yet in the past few decades, the continuing growth in higher education has led to widening labour destinations for graduates. The relationship between higher education, graduate skills and graduate jobs forms the backbone of all the discussions on the fate of graduates and high skilled work in modern capitalism. The conventional understanding of graduate labour, largely informed by economics, holds that an increase in the demand for advanced skills (through predominantly increased trade and/or technological change) creates a growing supply of people investing in the acquisition of advanced skills (Becker 1964; Goldin and Katz 2010; Leadbeater 2000). The sustained earnings premia on tertiary education show that the demand for graduates for in the labour market on average remains high, leading to growing participation in higher education. This dominant functionalist discourse regards the graduate labour market as consensual, individualistic and increasingly meritocratic (Parsons and Shils 1951; Blau and Duncan 1967; Jonsson 1992; Baker 2011). For many sociologists, the lack of attention to differences in power between individuals or groups within labour markets is not satisfactory. Sociological models or theoretical frameworks to understand the role of graduate credentials, skills and rewards within a post-industrial economy are either scarce or have not been fully developed. An important exception is the work of various theorists who oppose the conventional understanding of skills, education and work regard the labour market as deeply relational, contextual and, most importantly, conflictual (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976; Brown 2000; Collins 1975, 1979; Murphy, 1988 Weber 1978 [1922]). Groups and/or individuals strategise ways to create advantage over others using any resources necessary, including educational

ones. This deeply compromises the idea that the labour market is based on meritocratic principles.

In this article I argue that this conflictual tradition offers a useful sociological counterbalance, particularly through its use and theorising of ‘social closure’ and the use of credentials in the labour market. Yet these ideas need to be modified to better deal with current social, economic and educational contexts. I will extend some of the work of those who have used social closure to describe labour market stratification and inequality, and introduce Bourdieu’s ideas on symbolic violence in order to adapt the concept of social closure.

### **Social closure and credentialism**

An important tradition within sociology has taken the monopolisation of opportunities, or social closure, as a central concept to study domination in society and specifically how social stratification occurs. This tradition elaborates on the work of Max Weber (but also borrows from Marxian ideas on class conflict and ideology). Weber (1978 [1922]) used social closure to describe domination in society and how it affects social stratification. Weber gave conflict a central role in social relations. He saw conflict as permanent and structural, resulting in a stratified society full of competing and conflicting individuals and groups. The process of social closure produces and preserves stratification among groups. Social closure occurs as groups seek to increase the advantages of their situation by monopolising resources to their group and restricting access to outsiders. Monopolising opportunities can be closed off to outsiders not just by economic classes but also by other groups such as status groups. Wherever groups can successfully label characteristics such as race, language, social origin, religion or lack of credentials as inferior, closure can be achieved. Virtually any group attribute can be used to make those outside the group outsiders and close off social and

economic opportunities (1978 [1922]: 342). Frank Parkin, Randall Collins and Raymond Murphy developed Weber's ideas on society's internal structuring and subdivision by processes of social closure and, from a sociological position, have arguably developed them most successfully<sup>1</sup>. Collins stressed that through gaining alliances, particular knowledge and influencing others, which he calls 'political labour' (as opposed to productive labour), individuals can create sinecures: exclusive monopolistic positions that are often well rewarded, regardless of the skills used. Collins (1979: 58) gave prominence to *cultural* markets in controlling material production. Conscious communities of actors sharing common cultures can use their cultural resources to exclude others through formation of group identities and symbolic control of value and significance. Collins went so far as to say that "cultural exchanges are the empirical means by which all organized forms of stratification are enacted and by which class struggle over work and materials are carried out" (1979: 59).

Parkin's (1974, 1979) main contribution to the understanding of social closure was his suggestion that it should be regarded as a dual process, distinguishing two separate modes of mobilising power to increase or defend group interests. Dominant group members close off opportunities 'downwards' of groups below them to preserve or to secure privilege, named 'exclusion'. Subordinate groups can resist and win a greater share 'upwards' of the dominant group's resources through 'usurpation'. Parkin stayed true to Weber by emphasising the dynamics in social stratification, with constant struggle for resources. Each form of exclusion has the potential to provoke usurpation. Groups can both exclude certain groups 'below' them as well usurp the power of groups 'above' them.

The efforts of these theorists have been very useful in mapping some of the mechanisms behind reproduction of privilege and inequality. The area that has received considerable attention is their observations on the role of education and in particular

educational credentials as a means of closure within the labour market and society as a whole.

### *Credentials*

Within the conflictual tradition, the rise of the demand for credentials may thus not be the result of any increased demand for skills within jobs, but either a means employers' use for their selection process according to their cultural or professional preferences, or a tool for labour market entrants to gain advantage over others. Weber (1978 [1922]: 1000) understood how educational credentials serve the purpose of monopolising positions within bureaucratic structures. Within modern democracies specialised examinations or tests of expertise are increasingly indispensable for modern bureaucracies, leading to closing off opportunities to outsiders (1978 [1922]: 998–1001). In particular, the establishment of professions 'patenting' education limits the supply of contestants, and thus creates economic advantage. Weber wrote: "Today, the certificate of education becomes what the test for ancestors has been in the past, at least where the nobility has remained powerful" (Weber et al. 2009: 241). Weber mostly focused on credentialism within professional trajectories.

Collins specifically discussed the relationship between (higher) education and stratification (focusing mainly on the US). Without using the term 'social closure', Collins emphasised the role universities play in closing off opportunities within the US labour market. From the 1960s onwards, the credential system in the US spiralled out of control and trust in credentials and what they signify was downgraded, leading to credential inflation. Denouncing the technological function of education, Collins stated that schooling does little to increase the skills actually used in managerial and professional roles. These are mainly learned on the job and are irrelevant to productivity. Academic knowledge and educational credentials form the foundations of certain groups' cultural domination (re)producing sinecures. The educated can set up their job requirements and exclude anyone without the

right vocabulary, knowledge, ideals and perhaps most importantly, educational credentials. Universities therefore have remained important gatekeepers to the upper segment of the labour market.

Closure theory as defined by these Neo-Weberians remains relevant today. At the minimum, it offers a sociological rebuttal to the (neo)functional discourse described earlier, as well as its individualist ally of human capital theory. The functionalists' assumption that the demand for degrees has increased alongside the technical requirements of jobs is unfounded and often disguised in the rhetoric of a new era of capitalism.

Yet the nature of social closure and credentialism is by no means protected from historical change. Weber himself highlighted how subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions cannot be understood without their specific social-historical contexts. Currently, there is a need for theoretical renewal to capture how social closure occurs through the use of educational credentials. This is because in the last two decades there have been distinct changes within the occupational structure and nature of graduate-level work that have altered both the value and significance of credentials and its possibility for social closure. I will now briefly describe a few of these fundamental and prominent labour market changes.

### **The changing nature of graduate work, skills, rewards, careers and credentials**

The most obvious recent development that affects Western as well as non-Western graduate labour markets is the continuous expansion of higher education, and the subsequent growth in the share of graduates in the labour force. In 2014, no less than 33% of 25–64 year olds and 41% of 25–34 year olds in OECD countries were tertiary-level educated (OECD 2015: 41). The increase in workers with university credentials is likely to continue. But alongside this growth are other developments that have loosened the relationship between credentials and



labour market success. Within the limits of this paper there is only scope to outline five of the important changes briefly. (For a fuller discussion of some of the key trends see Tholen 2014a.)

First, global economic integration has made graduate work more susceptible to foreign competition. Through declining costs and increasing opportunities in transportation and communication, increased efforts to adopt labour-saving technologies and continuous transfer of technologies, the production of more goods and services is less bound to location (Brown et al 2012). Wages, employment opportunities and labour conditions are fundamentally influenced by the demand and supply of labour markets abroad.

Second, we have witnessed an emergence of new graduate occupations (e.g. sales managers and physiotherapists) and ‘graduatisation’, i.e. an increase in the share of labour entrants with university degrees into previously non-graduate occupations. The graduate labour market has expanded with the rapid growth of higher education. More jobs have been created in traditional graduate occupations, new graduate occupations have been created and graduates have moved into non-graduate occupations (Brynin 2013; Purcell et al. 2012; Tholen 2014a).

Third, many organisations that recruit graduates no longer desire predominantly hard skills and knowledge; instead soft skills such as interpersonal skills are of increasing importance (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). These skills are not exclusively formed through higher education. In other words, the skills that graduates possess are not always exclusive to graduate workers. It is therefore better to talk about the skills of graduates than of graduate skills (Tholen et al. forthcoming).

Fourth, there has been a strong emancipation of the upper echelon of the graduate labour market (especially in law, finance and management consultancy). As a result of increasing internationalisation, management and organisational changes within companies

and distinguished recruitment strategies focused on individual talent and the competition for the best graduate jobs is progressively more demarcated from the rest of the graduate labour market (Tarique and Schuler 2010). Equally important, few graduates are deemed suitable to compete for these jobs. Those who are identified as talented enough to do so, are thought to be special and unique. (Rivera 2011).

Fifth, the earnings of graduates are also diverging (Brynin, 2013; Tholen, 2014a). Why wage inequality among graduates is increasing remains unclear. It could arise from occupational change or shifting demand and supply for certain skills or characteristics.

These trends have helped loosen the relationship between graduate jobs, skills, careers and rewards in Western economies. Following differentiation within and massification of the graduate workforce a university diploma is no longer necessarily a scarce or valuable credential. Phillip Brown has made a vital contribution to our sociological understanding of the nature of 'recent' credentialism (1995, 2000, 2003). He demonstrated that labour market conditions have fundamentally changed the role of credentials in labour market competition. Because of the rapid increase of higher education, individuals with university credentials understand that the exclusionary effect of their diploma does not guarantee them high-skilled or high-paid employment. Brown writes that over-qualification of graduates has 'weakened the differentiating power of knowledge (credentials) in the legitimation of labour market and workplace inequalities' indicating 'educational stagflation' (2003: 160).

Agreeing with the credentialist tradition, Brown did not assume that educational credentials necessarily have productive or meritocratic characteristics. He argued that within mass higher education there is an acceptance that educational credentials are no longer contested or seen as a meritocratic mechanism (through which the brightest individuals can show their labour market superiority). Following Parkin, he agreed that there has been a shift from collective to individual rules of closure but these individual rules need closer scrutiny

(1995, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Brown introduced a positional component using Hirsch's (1977) ideas on positional goods. If the number of good jobs are limited, absolute criteria (educational credentials) have less importance, how well you do compared to others, much more (hierarchy). As more and more labour entrants will have university degrees, those who can mobilise material, cultural and social capital alongside educational credentials, in order to obtain advantage, will ultimately win desirable positions. This is increasingly being done by changing the rules of the game (competition rigging) rather than through discriminatory exclusion, and is increasingly based on market rules (as opposed to membership or meritocratic rules).<sup>3</sup> The state no longer seeks to provide a level playing field for those who compete for scarce resources such as top jobs and the best education. Instead, the emphasis is on choice. This domination of market rules increases the power of those with superior social, cultural and economic capital as they are in the best position to rig the competition, whether in education (private education) or the labour market (networks and elite cultural capital).

Brown argued that modern work organisations are characterised by the need for charismatic personalities that fit certain cultural environments. This compatibility drives selection towards “‘personality packages’ based on a combination of credentials, skills and charismatic qualities which need to be repackaged and sold in the market for managerial and professional work” (1995: 42). Those from privileged backgrounds are in an exceptionally good position to provide their children with the right cultural capital. More importantly, within the market-driven competition, the struggle of parents to provide their progeny with the right credentials and cultural capital is in full swing. While foreign competition has increased the market power of multinational corporations, the power of professional interest groups to rig domestic markets has been challenged. The economic structure, in particular within a globalised labour market, does not make the graduate labour market more meritocratic but it forces actors, especially those within the expanding middle classes, to

sustain their positions within the hierarchy. All over the world, mass higher education and marketisation have made parents and their offspring increasingly creative and fearful to gain advantage (Weis et al. 2014; Van Zanten, 2015). What Brown began to explore is not so much how graduates as a group can gain advantage against non-graduates, but how within the expanding graduate populations, distinction and closure of opportunities are achieved.

What has not been explored sufficiently is how workers create advantage through symbolic and discursive means for exclusion. Authors such as Ridgeway (1997), Tilly (1998), and Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey (2014) have extensively used distinction and labelling to explain persistent inequality within the labour market but their foci have not been on credentialism. Credentialist theory does recognise that degrees have a symbolic dimension. Yet the idea that the symbolic order can be the *foundation* of closure has not been developed much. Here Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence' can take a directive role.

### **Symbolic violence**

Throughout his writing Bourdieu was concerned with 'symbolic violence'.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (e.g. 1977 with Passeron, 1984, 2000) described how unconscious cultural and social domination occurs over subjects through forcing categories of thought and perception on the dominated, as opposed to (but in reality alongside) domination and power, which arise from overt physical force and violence on the body as well as material possession.<sup>5</sup> The dominated are not passive bodies but are actively complicit as – crucially – they have to accept the legitimacy of the existing social order, which therefore reproduces the social structure that benefits the already dominant.

Bourdieu argued that symbolic violence is very much present within the educational system and especially in the way the curriculum is constructed. Meanings are selected and

imposed, socialising children in recognising the social structure as objective and at the same time measuring and evaluating them by the dominant culture's standards benefitting particular groups or classes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The durability of symbolic violence against dominated groups should not be seen as false consciousness of class position in a Marxist manner. Yet these systems of classifications that are engrained in human actors' practical knowledge of the social world are internalised, 'embodied' social structures (Bourdieu 1984: 470).

Bourdieu (1984) described how inscriptions of social order in people's minds are constructed through schemes of perception and appreciation. Individuals' cognition of the world is shaped by the terms, concepts and categories created through a conflictual interest struggle. Powerful actors try to legitimatise these classifications and categorisations in order to maintain their position within the hierarchy. Classifications codify and thus transform boundaries on how to think and what can be held possible. The orchestration of categories of perception of the social world is adjusted to the divisions of the established order (and thereby to the interests of those who dominate it) and common to all minds structured in accordance with those structures, and present every appearance of objective necessity. Once the worldview expressed in particular categorisations is accepted, domination is achieved and relatively easily maintained.

Given Weber's influence on Bourdieu (Bourdieu et al. 2011), it is not hard to see that his ideas on how the classification struggle has parallels with the Weberian notion of social closure (without explicitly mentioning it) (see also Ball, 2003). Dominating groups also need to perform some categorical work in order to exclude non-group members on the basis of arbitrary grounds or characteristics in order to maintain or seize advantage. Weber wrote that any "cultural trait, no matter how superficial, can serve as a starting point for the familiar tendency to monopolistic closure" (Weber 1978 [1922]: 388). It does not necessarily matter

which characteristic is chosen. Domination thus means convincing these traits are indeed legitimate but also legitimatise the definition of the group itself and thereby making and unmaking groups (Bourdieu 1991: 221).

Similarly, Bourdieu's classificatory systems are the stake of struggles between the groups they characterise and oppose, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their advantage. Yet there is also a consensual moment within Bourdieu's symbolic violence to be found as the dominator needs the consent of the dominated through the incorporation of meaning and understanding via habituation. Classificatory systems are actively (though not necessarily consciously) maintained, and at least to some extent, purposively delivered by its members. Bourdieu suggested that discourse contributes to the shaping and re-shaping of social space itself, in which those with superior economic and cultural capital can maintain advantageous positions. Dominant actors within the field actively solidify these classificatory schemes into an objectified, institutionalised system that is accepted and must be protected against contradictory systems of meaning. Unfortunately, Bourdieu did not make clear how exactly this is achieved.

### **Symbolic closure in the graduate labour market**

Within the context described earlier, the meaning of graduate work has fundamentally changed. Traditionally, graduates were automatically classified as being more able, knowledgeable and deserving than non-graduates, within society. The symbolic power of the university-educated was upheld because of their superior economic, social and cultural capital, leading to them having a dominant position within various fields such as politics, the arts and the media. Although this dominance has persisted for some graduates, the massification of higher education has produced graduates who have an increasing variety of

cultural, social and economic capital and subsequent labour market outcomes. As a status group, graduates have *collectively* been less effective in holding privileged positions. The appeal to social esteem and social honour has been less effective. As higher education grows rapidly and labour market outcomes for graduates are widening, middle-class graduates' collective esteem has diminished.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the classification of graduates as a salient and meaningful group has not weakened. It still has an important role within media and policy discourses (see Tholen 2014a). For example, within the discourse of social mobility, higher education has been given a central place. The university diploma is a key means of rising to the professional and managerial classes regardless of social background. Under the adage 'learning is earning', university credentials have been framed as the prerequisite for economic and social well-being within the knowledge-based economy, which is in dire need of skilled workers (Leadbeater 2000; Wagner 2010).

As explained before, education is a great source of social and economic distinction. Originating from the traditional and elite societal position of universities (hence the use of titles such as bachelor, master or doctor), the continuation of this social fiction of linking worthy and valuable characteristics to university-educated workers, jobs and skills remains powerful for clear reasons. Bourdieu wrote about the institutionalised value of the qualification that solidifies the relationship between professional work and its perceived labour market value: "The qualification is in itself an *institution* (like language) that is more durable than the intrinsic characteristics of the work, and so the rewards associated with the qualification can be maintained despite changes in the work and its relative value" (1991: 241).

Because graduates are no longer a status group in the traditional sense, symbolic classification of what degrees signify becomes prominent. At all levels of the graduate labour market, credentials are used to create new or solidify old patterns of social exclusion and stratification, through active categorical work within the graduate labour market. To be able to define concepts such as ‘overqualification’ ‘graduate occupation’ or ‘elite schooling’ is to dominate the symbolic struggle over labour market value. Credentials are now increasingly used symbolically to create monopolies and exclusion through not merely selection and recruitment practices that reproduce cultural domination of a status group, but by (re)defining the meaning of educational qualifications, skills or occupations. Simply put, graduates do not solely have to sell themselves but have to also (collectively) convince others that their educational status and credentials confers a particular meaning. Symbolic dominance justifies particular groups or individuals’ rewards, occupational protection or labour conditions. Strengthened by a dominant discourse that links credentials, skills, productivity and wages, symbolic dominance aims to justify and expand sinecure of the university-educated. I will now discuss three examples of this symbolic closure: the recruitment of finance workers, the professionalisation of UK registered nurses, and the occupation of commercial residential estate agents.

When recruiting finance workers, university degrees are a means to keep out non-graduates. Browne (2010) shows that financial firms hire graduates from both elite and non-elite universities yet their interns, who are positioned for fast-track progression to managerial positions, are all given to independently educated, male, white applicants from the most highly classified universities.

The role degrees have for finance workers within the recruitment process is not primarily linked to functional skills but to their association with cultural and educational background, which is shown in two key studies. Rivera’s study on the recruitment practices



of American elite professional service firms including investment banks, showed that evaluators valued the prestige of a candidate's educational affiliations rather than the content or length of education. The possession of an elite credential was a sufficient signal of a candidate's ability to perform the analytical capacities of the job (2011: 79).

In Karen Ho's ethnography of a Wall Street investment bank, she observed that the bank's obsession with recruiting the best and brightest is not concerned with "actual technical skills, a background in finance or even a specific aptitude for banking" (2009: 64). Instead, recruiters carefully select graduates from those elite schools that match their perceived needed cultural capital and prestige. Decisions about how to distinguish graduates for the more prestigious roles in the front office of a large financial institution are partly based on whether the candidate holds a degree from the right elite institution. This again signifies whether a candidate matches the cultural homogeneity of the particular company.

The halo effect of elite universities such as Princeton or Harvard reflects a specific notion of what talent and competence represents. Degrees from these universities encompass a symbolic closure of those wanting to access prestigious labour market positions. This classification battle of what talent represents is constituted not only by the investment banks and the competing graduates themselves but also by a wider socio-economic sphere of customers and competing companies. Ho observed that investment banks "construct a mutually reinforcing connection between the market and the Ivy League: because we have the best and brightest working for us, then what we say about the market must be believed and the deals we envisioned must be executed" (2009: 69). Likewise Rivera noticed that employees from elite universities engender a sense of confidence in clients (2011: 80). Her study also showed that educational credentials are interpreted by employers and evaluators according to meanings of value and classifications of suitability and talent under negotiation by all those involved.

In financial organisations, the role of degrees within the closure mechanism is not merely a passive sincecure for those with elite credentials nor is it just a signal of future productivity, but an active process in which a social actor negotiates an association between educational status and labour market value. In this specific case the classification struggle is ‘fought’ on multi levels from the institutional (e.g. investment banks recruitment) to the personal (e.g. between recruiter and candidate). The battle to be classified as suitable and able according to educational signifiers demonstrates the antagonistic nature of symbolic closure in the graduate labour market meaning. Legalization of privilege within the corporate finance sector is continuously maintained and constructed through symbolic violence against various social and educational groups. Those from less privileged backgrounds are not only less likely to enter elite higher education, they may also have less cultural resources to legitimise their own educational and social trajectory. The example of finance recruitment also shows that symbolic closure at the top end of the graduate labour market deals in particular with elite educational qualification and associated qualities.<sup>7</sup>

The second example of how credentials are used to create new or solidify old patterns of social exclusion deals with British registered nurses, an occupational group that aims to professionalise, partly through the use of qualifications. Although various occupations have become more professional throughout modern history, recently a major force within the professionalisation of nurses has been propelled by a need to recognise nursing as a proper graduate occupation. Nursing has now become an all-graduate entry profession in the UK, and there has been a growth in the provision of master’s level education for qualified nurses. The main reason for upgrading nursing from being an associate professional and technical occupation to a professional occupation in the renewed Standard Occupational Classification of 2010 (SOC2010) was the great increase of graduates entering the occupation (Elias and Birch 2010: 11).

Although the reasons for the upgrade in qualifications may be diverse it has certainly coincided with a professionalisation project. A study by Gerish et al. found the master's level nurse education symbolically strengthens the occupation's professionalisation strategy. Using interviews with nurse lecturers, the authors found that it wasn't necessarily the *qualification* that conferred credibility but "rather it may be an acknowledgement of the special competence of the person who holds the qualification" (Gerish et al.: 107). This credibility was needed by nurses to be able to deal with organisational constraints and occupational hierarchies thrown up in the work process during interactions with medical staff and healthcare managers.

An important reason why nursing credentials have not led to significant professional status is the (perceived) lack of knowledge base associated with graduate professions. There is evidence that the disciplinary maturity of the field leaves much to be desired, which is why nursing is not considered to be an autonomous academic and professional discipline (McNamara, 2010). The lack of academic currency has become a serious problem for the nursing profession, which it can only address by professionalising nursing further. The profession has not been able to confer the association with a formal body of knowledge, and full-flexed academic status has been difficult to maintain, perhaps because of the (assumed) practical nature of their roles. The profession has tried to defend itself from media and political discourses that consider an academic degree qualification as not strictly necessary (e.g. Santry, 2010) or promote the idea that better educated nurses are less able to care (e.g. Ford, 2012). Although having a degree might have given registered nurses greater professional status, nurses in general have not been able to maintain their professional status as their higher degree alone does not confer the desired elevated status through which further professionalisation could potentially have emerged.<sup>8</sup> If and only if the nursing occupation can develop and exercise enough symbolic power to classify itself as a serious academic

discipline, its attempts to professionalise may falter. By accepting the professional classification which is dominant throughout the medical field, the occupation reinforces the existing power relations.

The symbolic power occupational groups have over the defining the meaning of educational credentials provides a base for symbolic struggle. Symbolic closure will become more important for a growing number of associate professional groups. They will need to convince others that their occupations classify as a professions, graduate occupations, or as skilled. They will need to negotiate the value and meaning of (particular) university credentials and bodies of knowledge, in order to close off opportunities to other groups.

A third and final example of symbolic closure in the graduate labour market occurs within the occupation of commercial residential estate agents. Although previously exclusively a non-graduate profession, this profession is rapidly becoming graduate-only. A recent study on the work of British residential sales estate agents (Tholen et al. forthcoming) showed that employers do not seek graduates for their university-related skills but mainly for their soft skills. It was understood that neither workers nor employers needed a university degree to do their work. Within this uncertain context, what a degree represents needs to be established and re-imagined between employers and employees, between graduates and non-graduates through interaction and interpretation. There was no clear perception about what graduates bring to the labour market, perhaps because most of those working in estate agency have not got degrees themselves or because they lack experience of hiring and working with graduates. The study found that there was a wide variety of conceptions of what graduates would add from their educational experience, with little agreement or consensus. While employers did not demand graduates per se, many spoke about 'graduateness', believing that having a degree signalled the possession of particular characteristics, skills and abilities. In general, graduateness is a collective reference that includes soft skills and generic skills such

as time management, commitment, organisation, independence, roundedness and life experience. Here the meaning of graduate skills and university degrees are open and contested. There is little conception of the value or nature of graduate workers within the sector. To some employers, having a degree may symbolise a better, 'more rounded' employee. Yet graduates themselves need to establish the value and meaning of their degree within the work process.

The example of UK estate agents shows that within a graduatising labour market, individual workers (in addition to organised occupational groups such as nurses) and employers purposefully aim to alter classificatory systems in order to create advantage. The meanings of 'graduate work' and 'graduate skills' are under construction. Whether graduates in non-graduate occupations can successfully legitimate any advantage through their educational backgrounds or qualifications and whether non-graduate can challenge the imposed system of meaning, remains to be seen.

Using symbolic rather than exclusionary power, graduates aim to uphold many of the perks and advantages that traditionally were associated with graduate professions; yet not all of them in reality will achieve this. Symbolic closure is directed both inwards and outwards. It is targeted outwards towards non-graduates, including skilled craft workers, the vocational professions and those with only high school qualifications. Yet equally important, it is targeted inwards redressing the growing inequality within the graduate labour market. Within the graduate labour pool, members accept the social fiction that disguises the failure of many graduates to lead fulfilling careers, high wages and skilled jobs. Graduates and groups of graduates need to continuously convince others of their value and (re)negotiate the meaning and value of (particular) qualifications, skills, occupations and careers. Bourdieu aptly noted that the credential system justifies the existing social order through enabling "those who benefit most from the system to convince themselves of their own intrinsic worthiness, while

preventing those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their own deprivation” (1991: 25).

The process of misrecognition among dominated groups, crucial to Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, takes place in various places and situ and through various sets of actors, predominantly through linguistic and cognitive means. An important aid for symbolic closure in the graduate labour market is the existing meritocratic ideal, assumed to drive the labour market, which is still widely accepted and internalised masking symbolic domination. The naturalisation of current labour market inequalities shapes the misrecognition of credentialisation, for instance, only when elite financial firms’ insistence on the educated elite is validated by trusted educational institutional hierarchies, which all participants unwittingly help sustain but which they also deeply rely on in order to distinguish themselves in mass high education. The assumption that ultimately employers’ recruitment strategies are based on fairness and performance that purports to represent genuine meritocratic differences likewise enforces associates’ elite credentials with ‘natural’ abilities and proven achievement. Likewise, the example of the registered nurses shows that symbolic closure requires sometime active work to change prevailing social perceptions on the nature of work and the status of credentials. Groups and individuals face a struggle to contest established and taken for granted ways to conceptualise, classify and order the status of their occupation.

Table 1 summarises the relationship between symbolic and traditional social closure and their application to the graduate labour market. It is important to notice that symbolic closure does not exclude the possibility of other types of closure.

*[Table 1: Social and symbolic closure in relation to the graduate labour market]*

## Conclusion

This article's main goal is to assess how the conflictual or credentialist tradition can help understand social closure within the current graduate labour market. The graduate labour market in many Western nations is becoming an anachronism and the university qualification can no longer serve as the exclusionary device it once was. As the share of traditional graduate occupations remains rather constant, a growing number of graduates are involved in occupations where the worth of the qualification and the graduate category needs to be (re)negotiated. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) felt there had been credential inflation in the graduate labour market; this rather than increased mobility made it possible for the number of working-class students accessing higher education to increase. Yet Bourdieu perhaps did not foresee the immense growth in higher education and all its consequences on the labour market.

Individuals and groups can indeed still act strategically within a changing credentialised society through aligning cultural and personal capital along with their educational credentials. Yet closure is also achieved by changing the understanding of what reality is, and more specifically by changing the understanding of the nature of the labour market, and the value of credentials and signifiers of worth. Credentialism has turned on itself and affects the educated as much as the non-educated. Parkin did not recognise the possibility of a group using exclusionary tactics and trying to usurp power from other individuals *within their own group*.

The consequences of symbolic closure within the graduate labour market are inherently connected to class struggles. Especially within a widening middle class, the stakes to secure a middle-class livelihood have never been higher. As Roscigno observed, "social

closure as a sociological construct directs us toward an in-depth understanding of the processes through which stratification hierarchies are both defined and maintained” (2007: 9).

Instead of following the dominant functional discourse, sociology needs to examine further what credentials actually signal to employers and what is the role of skills and knowledge that can be linked to higher education within the labour process in an expanding graduate labour market. A renewed take on social closure should continue to examine traditional forms of exclusion such as occupational and professional (see e.g. Weeden, 2002) as well as how groups and individuals can manipulate the rules of competition. But it is also crucial to examine how particular discursive practices uphold and create categorical divisions. This article has outlined some of the ongoing classification battles within the graduate labour that draw on these divisions. Domination resides in the power to allocate symbolic meaning to categories and labour and educational positions, identities and statuses. Closure theory has traditionally emphasised the role of capital and property as constitutive of closure mechanism and largely neglected the symbolic order. The concept of symbolic closure can help advance the concept of social closure that has already been made within sociology and clarify the nature of inequality and the competition for jobs and livelihoods within advanced economies. There is a need to operationalise symbolic closure further to aid work in the labour market and other areas such as social stratification and professionalisation. Also, more work needs to be done on how symbolic closure operates outside the Anglo-Saxon contexts. We know that the educational system and labour market characteristics shape the value and meaning of educational credentials and how workers understand the competition for jobs (Muller and Shavit 1998; Tholen 2013, 2014b; van der Werfhorst 2011) and thus may change how the classification and categorisation occurs.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Murphy (e.g. 1984) is not covered here, yet his contribution to the concept of social closure has been of importance, for instance, by adding a distinction between principal, derivative and contingent forms of exclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Collective rules of closure have gradually disappeared or lost power as legal equality has made exclusion based on for instance class, ethnicity or gender more challenging or impossible.

<sup>3</sup> An example of competition rigging is the continuous efforts of middle and upper classes to provide beneficial opportunities to their children such as exclusive internships. Membership rules are based on ascribed attributes (such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender or social class). Meritocratic rules are based on the ideology of individual achievement, providing everyone with equal opportunities to seek out those with the best abilities and efforts.

<sup>4</sup> According to Luc Waquant, Bourdieu's entire oeuvre was about the quest to explicate the specificity and potency of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1996: 1).

<sup>5</sup> For Bourdieu gender relations form a key example of the operation of symbolic violence. Women can serve their own domination by sharing the very same doxic understanding of gender as their male oppressors.

<sup>6</sup> At the same time the common lifestyle associated with Weber's status group does not hold up for the graduate group.

<sup>7</sup> The example of the recruitment of finance workers is based on the Anglo-Saxon context. Despite the globalised nature of the financial sector, there may be distinct differences in other parts of the world.

<sup>8</sup> The UK government also announced that healthcare assistants already working in hospitals will be able to avoid the degree route and train on the job to become a nurse (UK Government 2014).

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Gerbrand Tholen is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Department of Sociology at City University London. His research interests are centred around education, skills, jobs, occupations and the labour market. He is currently writing a new book on the British labour market for graduate workers.

**Table 1**

	<b>‘traditional’ social closure</b>	<b>symbolic closure</b>
<b>Foundation of closure</b>	ability to use and benefit from exclusionary resources and strategies	ability to monopolise and legitimatise positions through persuasion and redefinition
<b>Means of exclusion</b>	monopolisation of opportunities	classification and categorisation
<b>Role of education</b>	provider of credentials and cultural and social capital	provider of as well as barrier for opportunities towards legitimisation
<b>Relevance for graduates</b>	closure depends on the skills, experiences, networks and credentials higher education provides	closure depends on the classificatory potential that their (educational) resources provide