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What can research into graduate employability tell us about agency and structure?

Gerbrand Tholen

Traditionally theorists who have written about agency and structure have eschewed empirical research. This article uses the findings of an empirical study into graduate employability to inform the sociological debate on how they relate to each other. The study examined how Dutch and British final-year students approach the labour market right before they graduate. The study revealed that the labour market and education structures are mirrored in how students understand and act within the labour market. It also showed that the interplay between agency and structure is mediated by an intersubjective framework shared by other students. The article argues that previous theoretical views on employability have failed to understand this and suggests how to improve our understanding of agency and structure.

Keywords: agency; structure; employability; intersubjectivity

Introduction

The agency–structure problem has traditionally been one of the most long-lasting and central problems within sociological theory. Here, structures are juxtaposed to agents; the former are thought of as objective social institutions influencing how people live and act, the latter embodies undetermined human action, deliberation and choice. There has been a consisting debate regarding the ontological status of agency and structure as well as establishing causal priority between the two. Some have tried to overcome the

agency–structure dichotomy, most notably through Bourdieu's 'habitus' (see Bourdieu 1977, 1990) and Giddens' structuration theory (see Giddens 1984).

Perhaps bizarrely, very few theoretical contributions within the agency–structure debate have sought assistance from empirical research. The observable has been taken out of the discussion, yet theory often asks for empirical grounding. Instead of posing another solution to the theoretical debate, this article aims to contribute by revealing what an empirical sociological investigation into graduate employability can tell us about the relationship between agency and structure. This research (Tholen 2010, 2012, 2013) aimed to uncover empirically how final-year students approach the labour market and the issue of employability in Britain and the Netherlands as well as how it relates to national structures of education and the labour market. The findings can inform us how agency and structure are conceptually related within this particular case. Because much of the empirical evidence of these findings has been published elsewhere, this article will not show any actual interview data to evince all the claims made. Instead, it will maintain a largely theoretical focus.

The article will first explain how agency and structure relate within the literature on graduate employment. It will then review some of the outcomes of an empirical sociological study on graduate employability. After this the paper will explain how the individuals within the study act within their structural context. Finally, the article will evaluate how these finding can aid existing theoretical insights on the agency structure debate.

Two views on employability

How is the relationship between structure and agency understood in shaping the way graduates understand and manage their employability in different national contexts? The literature on graduate employability can be divided into two camps; the mainstream and the alternative view. Both have distinct

theoretical underpinnings relating to how structure and agency are related.

The mainstream view

For the mainstream view, supported by the majority of policy-maker, media and research contributions, the term 'employability' is used to describe the individual content that makes a person successful in the labour market. The emphasis is on how well the individual can adapt to the demands of the labour market and subsequently invest time, effort and/or money in increasing or improving skills, knowledge or other characteristics. This line of reasoning has been highly influenced by the ideas developed by human capital theorists.

Following Mincer (1958), Becker (1964) argues that labour differs from physical capital. One can invest in human capital (through education, training and medical treatment). A more able and skilled worker is a more productive worker. Education and learning can be a major factor in improving productivity and enhancing economic growth.[1] According to Becker, there is a strong causal relationship between the post-war growth in productivity and the growth in higher education. The individual makes the investment in learning skills (money, time, energy) in relation to the perceived payoff. Becker shows that the evidence for a growing rate of return from schooling is clearly present. Educated people seem to have higher earnings for a reason (increased productivity).

Schultz (1971) emphasises that students are in principle perfectly capable of making an informed decision about whether to invest in additional schooling. Through self-interest, the student is:

> sufficient to bring about an efficient allocation of investment resources to education under the following conditions: 1) competition in producing educational services along with efficient prices of these services, 2) students acquiring optimal information, 3) an efficient capital market serving students, and no social benefits (losses) from higher education. (Schultz 1971, 181–182)

Because students are confronted with scarcity (in their total resources

and the amount of education available) they are presumed to use all available information and rationally maximise some utility function. Rational decision-makers take action if, and only if, the marginal benefit of the action exceeds the marginal costs. For instance, students choose to attend higher education institutions, select particular institutions and programmes and/or gather skills and work experience if, and only if, they perceive the benefits of that choice to outweigh the benefits of other alternatives.

The mainstream view likewise regards education, training or other skill acquisition primarily as an individual investment. Employability thus resembles an investment project, and an analogy with the entrepreneur therefore seems to be appropriate. Like the business entrepreneur, the individual (student) reallocates his or her resources in line with the economic incentive under particular risks and with uncertainties. People are competent to evaluate their 'attributes properly in determining whether it is worthwhile to act, and if it is worthwhile, people respond by reallocating their resources' (Schultz 1975, 834). In other words, if there is an incentive for acquiring education, individuals will respond accordingly. Although risks and uncertainty might distort the perception of incentive, individuals will still respond to economic demand for different classes of skills, the cost of education and the changes in earnings (Schultz 1975, 840).

That workers can turn themselves into entrepreneurs is increasingly important in late capitalism. The new economy is projected by the mainstream view as an economic era wherein the global nature of capitalism gives all individuals the opportunity to capitalise on the new economy (Reich 1991). The individual has become responsible for his or her own labour-market position and success, as skills and abilities are the main factors of value in the labour market. Employability becomes the measure of how well the individual had succeeded to match their human capital profile to labour-market demands (see Thijssen, Van der Heijden, and Rocco 2008).

For the mainstream literature, differences in educational choices can be

reduced to a trade-off between (monetary) costs and benefits. The clearest costs are tuition fees, study costs and foregone earnings (opportunity costs). The clearest benefits are expected or future earnings. The benefits of education do not have to be solely financial. Yet the mainstream literature still emphasises that education remains an investment in human capital. The obsession with graduate premia within both economic and policy literatures very much builds on the idea of a rational consumer of education. Many studies have dedicated much effort in indicating the financial returns to university participation in the labour market (for example, O'Leary and Sloane 2005; Boarini and Strauss 2007; Psacharopoulos 2009). This is meant to signal to prospective graduates that education is a sound financial investment as, on average at least, there are significant financial rewards over a lifetime, recovering far more than the costs of their investment. This is assumed to be a sufficient reason for individuals to invest in their own 'human capital'.

Structure and agency in the mainstream view

The theoretical stance of the mainstream view relies on the idea that the labour market is made up of individual actors who independently respond to labour-market opportunities and incentives. The labour market in itself is therefore reduced to an aggregate of individual actors. This is in line with methodological individualism: the idea that socio-economic explanation must be sought at the level of the individual agent. Social properties emerge from individual action.

In general, the mainstream perspective poses a strict separation between structure and agency, insisting that socio-economic explanation, at any point in time, must move from agency to structure. Structure in this sense is the coming together of agents' past acts. Only after independent actors act can we observe and describe regularities and structures. The individual is 'given' autonomy and agency in order to function within the new institutional

order of education and work. They are autonomous participants who gauge and strategise their actions based entirely on their assessment of the benefit-to-cost ratio of any given product or service they seek to acquire or trade. As Becker describes:

> all human behaviour can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from stable sets of preferences and accumulate an optimal amount of information and other inputs in a variety of markets. (1976, 14)

The actor in the labour market acts individualistically, strategically and competitively. The relationship structure has towards the individual remains one that begins from the agent and maps, unidirectionally, onto the social structure (Arnsperger and Varoufakis 2005, 3). Agency is in essence decontextualised. Structures might have influence on individual preferences. They also might pose barriers to access to economic or educational resources. Still, the role of institutional, social, economic and political structures is only of secondary importance.

Moreover, social factors such as family background characteristics, average ability, aspirations of peers and institutional characteristics (transition rates, admission standards, admission rates, academic reputation) are acknowledged but always interpreted as a utility factor – a means to an end. They serve as an impediment or an endowment to individual employability, being (dis)advantageous to individual labour-market progress. Those advocating the mainstream view do acknowledge that there are structures that influence an individual's management of their employability. These structures, however, have little ontological value in their own right but form conditions under which individuals act. Despite the fact that structural forces like the labour market, education, institutional and legal frameworks can act independently from individuals, they are not seen as real, in the sense that we cannot study them outside their relationship with individuals and their actions.

The alternative view

A wide variety of research, theories and approaches move away from the mainstream assumptions and produce a different account of how employability and the competition for (graduate) jobs can or should be understood. Where proponents of the mainstream view accentuate the individual, consensual and empowering quality of employability, those writing alternative accounts criticise or deny these elements. Instead, they regard employability as relational, contextual and, most importantly, conflictual. According to these alternative accounts, employability is structured by opportunity and inequalities, not purely by the individual's human capital. Late capitalism has not eradicated the limits of the labour market or the effects of national differences in skill formation. Most commentators feel that the economy has changed in the last few decades but it has not led to an age of employee empowerment or unbridled opportunities for university graduates (Hesketh 2003; Hinchliffe 2006). Employability is therefore a relative as well as absolute notion (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2004). Opportunities for graduates competing in the graduate labour market depend not only on their own skills, experience and abilities, but also on how other graduates act. Whereas the mainstream view regards employability as a matter of individual attributes, alternative accounts consider the labour market to be an arena where individuals and groups are struggling to obtain advantage over others, using means that do not necessarily relate to skill, ability or work-related capacity.

Following Weberian sociology, conflict and domination are inescapable in the labour market. Different social groups aim to dominate each other for wealth, status or power. The question of how jobs are linked to ability or skills is closely related to theories on how qualifications relate to job positions. Whereas individual theories like human capital theory (or screening theory, queuing theory or signalling theory) solely create labour-market attributes, others question whether the meritocratic assumption is justified.

So-called credential theories (Collins 1971; Parkin 1979; Murphy 1988) argue that formal schooling is positively linked to socio-economic success. This is a result not of the superior skills or knowledge of the well educated but of their ability to control access to elite positions (Bills 2003, 452). In other words, the association between education and socio-economic attainment does not result from a relationship with economic productivity. Employers make decisions based on non-meritocratic assumptions of what constitutes the 'right' candidate. These assumptions are relatively arbitrary. In fact, employers have 'quite imprecise conceptions of the skill requirements of most jobs' (Collins 1971, 1018).

By demanding formal qualifications for access to jobs, employers can control access to privileged positions. Brown, Hesketh, and Williams write: 'The primary concern of employers is not the release of the creative energies of the workforce but how to maintain managerial control in flatter, leaner and more flexible organisations' (2003, 115). In addition, the financial rewards of jobs are scrutinised under the credential system. Jobs that pay higher wages to more educated workers do so not because those workers are actually more productive but because their higher education has established them as being a member of a higher status group that commands greater rewards (Berg 1970; Collins 1971, 1979; Bourdieu 1977).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the sociological understanding of graduate employability and the skills of graduates (for example, Brown 2000; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2012; Elias and Purcell 2004; Purcell et al. 2012). For example, Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2004) stress that in graduate recruitment 'personal capital', a wide range of various personal qualities, increasingly matters. Both hard currencies, such as qualifications and work experience, and soft currencies, such as personal skills and appearance and accent, are salient. The authors argue that because of the large pools of qualified candidates, personal 'qualities' of individuals such as social, cultural and economic backgrounds have been increasingly exposed. It is very difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to

demonstrate the 'personal' capital required to gain elite employment. Inequality is to some degree reproduced under the guise of meritocracy. This fits with Grugulis and Vincent's (2009) observation that employers use proxies to evaluate personal attributes, attitudes to work and individual qualities.

There have been numerous other studies signifying that relative markers of value are not necessarily meritocratic yet play a role within the recruitment process as well as students' employability strategies (for example, Tomlinson 2007; Morrison 2012; Rivera 2012). Others point at the role of social context (for example, Edvardsson Stiwne and Alves 2010; Tholen 2013). In particular, employer's views on credentials, knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes, as well as self-identity and social positioning of the graduates themselves are significant.

Yet graduate employability tends to be seen as a matter of an individual's skills, particularly in higher education policy (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). But for the alternative view it is impossible to define the content of 'employability' as it is fundamentally socially constructed often according to power relations and embedded within social contexts (Boden and Nedeva 2010).

Agency and structure and the alternative approaches

Alternative approaches attempt to emphasise the structural character between macro-economic variables with micro phenomena. Employability is structured by opportunities and inequalities within a structural context. It is not purely an individual phenomenon. The labour-market rules decide who can rise in the labour-market hierarchy. This means that the macro-structural elements receive relatively more attention in their analysis within the alternative approaches.

However, alternative accounts by no means limit their foci to the macro or meso level. Some contributions point out the role of identities when people are deciding whether to go to university and in their perceptions about

the competition for jobs. They also emphasise that an individual's perception of the labour market is not solely based on future earnings, but their life history, class, gender, ethnicity and background mediate their choices (for example, Reay et al. 2001; Smetherham 2006; Brooks and Everett 2008). Contrary to the general nature of the theoretical position of the mainstream literature, many other authors have stressed the difference and contingency in how people act within the labour market. Individuals do not act uniformly. Their identities, roles, class, ethnicity and gender make up their subjectivity. Labour-market behaviour is heterogeneous, contingent upon (institutional, social, economic or political) structures, values, and/or discursive forces.

Many feel that those taking the mainstream approach do not fully understand why people do what they do in the realm of work and education. The assumptions made by those holding the mainstream view are too rigid to deal with the complexity of the social. The uniformity of behaviour in the mainstream view is irreconcilable with the rich varieties of social, economic, institutional and cultural contexts. As Whitford explains:

> there is no good reason to assume that actors choose ends-in-view by maximizing relative to stable preferences, as this leaves no room for novelty and suggests that similar situations always call for similar actions. It fails to recognize that problem-situations are occasioned precisely by the inability of established practices to meet established expectations. By assuming that the actor must either follow norms or blindly adhere to his fixed interests, the task of searching for new solutions is obscured. (2002, 355)

However, exactly how structures like institutions relate to individual behaviour becomes a fundamental problem for those holding the alternative view. Few alternative accounts attempt to integrate or connect the micro and the macro in a thorough or comprehensive manner. A study on graduate employability has provided insights on how potentially this can be achieved. The next section will elaborate on this study and its outcomes.

The study and its findings

Tholen (2010, 2012, 2013) undertook a comparative study on graduate employability in Great Britain and the Netherlands. The study adopted a dual approach consisting of a micro analysis and a contextual analysis. The contextual analysis aims to uncover the institutional framework that students experience during their education and beyond. It examined a wide array of secondary data on education and the labour market to contextualise the positional competition for graduate jobs in each country.

The micro analysis investigated how students subjectively experience and perceive employability and the competition for jobs. Sixty final-year students were interviewed from one university in each country. Ten students from three different degree courses – history, business studies and applied sciences (engineering, applied physics, technical engineering, industrial engineering and management) – at each university were selected. Students from multiple courses were chosen to insert heterogeneity into the sample. There was an almost equal distribution in gender between the Dutch and British students (14 Dutch women and 16 British women). The majority of the students were a few months away from entering the labour market or entering a new course (master's or PhD).

Both universities are internationally established institutions and can be considered relatively equal in status. The selected British university is a large redbrick university established in the nineteenth century. The selected Dutch university is slightly smaller than the British university. Both universities are established institutions involved in education and research in a wide variety of academic areas.

The study revealed that British students in this study define employability in a different way to Dutch students.[2] The national context of a relatively unregulated labour market and a competitive higher education system is aligned with a specific social construction of the labour market. Within the context in which British students are embedded, their identities as

labour-market entrants are always in relation to a generalised other, a fellow competitor. They believe that their journeys into the labour market are decided by external forces, and are well aware of the outside rules and constraints of the competition. There is a need for a continuous redefining and searching for external signals that can define what constitutes 'an employable student'. Competition is not only a feature of the macro context but it also forms the leading principle of how students interpret the labour market. The labour market and educational context that promote exclusivity, distinction and competition fits with the experiences and perceptions of British students.

Alternatively, the Dutch students define the transition between education and work as a trajectory. Students construct their own personal path from education to the labour market. Whereas within the educational trajectory potential is cultivated, the labour market is the place where it will be utilised. Education is seen as the unfolding of potential to be realised in the labour market. In the occupational segmented labour market, Dutch students' own pathway is often clear to them. Employability is socially constructed as a process of finding the match between one's 'labour-market' persona (skills, abilities, interests, experiences and choices) and the right opportunity in the labour market.

The interaction with the highly planned Dutch labour market provides students with a distinct interpretative framework. The close link between education, labour market and employers resonates in students' perceptions of employability. They assume that their education is directly aligned with a certain area of the graduate labour market. Students align their interests and abilities with a targeted area of the labour market because they perceive skills to be directly linked to work. The teleological sense of students' employability makes the competition for jobs more insular. This makes students' identification with their chosen course more likely than in the British case. Students' labour-market persona is actively transformed and constructed by their preferences and choices.

The main point is that the national institutional context in these countries

gives rise to two distinct ways of thinking and reasoning about the competition for graduate jobs and employability. We can perceive a close integration between students' interpretive framework and educational and labour-market parameters. The latter provide the rules for competition rather than why or what students compete for.

Agency and structure

Traditionally, sociologists (e.g. structuralist or individualistic traditions) distinguished structure and agency (or subject and object) as detached ontological entities. In the same vein, critical and social realists (e.g. Bhaskar, Archer, Sayer) analytically (not philosophically) separate the agent from social structures. Archer (1995), for example, separates material and cultural conditions in which action takes place from the action itself. Social structures, like organisations and social institutions, are causally effective in their own right because their causal influence only arises when their parts (predominantly human individuals) are organised into this sort of structure. The individuals concerned would not have these causal powers if they were not organised into such structures; hence they are powers of the structure and not of the individuals who are its part. Both human individuals and social structures have causal powers that are distinct from each other. Although social realists avoid structural determinism as well as solipsism or voluntarism, they still keep the micro and macro distinction intact. Yet ontological dualism brings along an endless stream of other dualisms that are impossible to close with a realist positioning (see Fuchs 2001) and reifies or neglects social relations (King 2004).

The research on graduate employability demonstrates the explicit social construction of how students understand and perceive what it means to be employable. Students in Great Britain and the Netherlands act on distinct rules of competition but the relationship the students have with the national structures of education and work is complex. Students are shaped by many biographical, social and cultural forces. However, it seems that the intersubjective

logic is very much in line with the labour market as well as higher education. The conditions shaped by institutional structures are mirrored in the intersubjective framework of students, which provides organisation of meaning for the individual student.

Again, the mainstream view might interpret this in a different way. It is the individual assessment and reaction towards similar circumstances. Students behave rationally in similar ways. So a student who faces a labour market that 'needs' distinction will act on it and try to distinguish himself or herself from other competitors. Yet this would mean that the reaction towards these circumstances and their understanding of them is homogeneous. This does not seem to be the case. Students in both countries act in different ways and have different and contradictory ideas on the nature of the labour market and employability. There was little consensus on the importance and value of specific credentials, work experience, grades, personal character, degrees or other factors in relation to employability. It is the framework of meaning that was shared, not the information received or the alleged rational decision-making process. The underlying assumption of the relationship between education, skills, jobs and opportunities showed clear coherence. As students try to make sense of themselves in the labour market, the experiences they have with social structures and other individuals produce shared hermeneutic frameworks.

The relation between agent and structure in the case of employability is not one where structures have direct power over individuals' action, nor is it one where the agent acts independently from its structural context. Interpretive frameworks or 'schemes', as identified in the work of Anthony Giddens (1979, 8), mediate how individuals relate to the labour market. For Giddens, these are a modality of a structural system by which structures are translated into action. Giddens is right to state that humans use interpretive schemes to constitute and communicate meaning and then take action with intended and unintended consequences. The Dutch students talked about the competition as a challenge and trajectory, employing a narrative of choice.

The British students in their own way spoke about the labour market as a direct competition between graduates. They spoke of skills, experience and education as currencies. As Giddens also explains, structures do not exists outside individuals but operate through them, and are reproduced and modified by them. They are virtual in nature because 'they only exist as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents and as the instantiation of rules in the situated activities of agents' (Giddens 1987, 21).

Agents are also rightly seen by Giddens as 'knowledgeable agents' with the capacity to transform situations. The students in this research are in no manner determined by the national structures, nor do their understanding of the labour market fully condition their behaviour. Despite similarities in their thinking, their subjectivities must be seen as idiosyncratic, changing and fluid rather than stable, set or reified by the conditions of the structural system. Through what Giddens (1984) calls 'practical consciousness', actors produce and reproduce shared meanings. These meanings make interactions more predictable and acceptable as there is a shared understanding of what the other actor knows and how he/she will respond.

One of the problems of Giddens' theory is that it places too much emphasis on individual agency. The relational aspect between structure and agency loses out. Individuals are still primary ontological units. As Kilminster states:

> individuals are seen […] only in the first person, as positions. There is no conceptual grasp of the perspective from which they themselves are regarded by others in the total social web, or of their combined relatedness. Structuration theory is a one-dimensional view of society that does not permit the sociologist to show this combined interplay of relations and perspectives in all its richness and complex balances of power. (1991, 99)

This research demonstrates that Dutch and British students face the labour market in a dynamic way. Agency as well as structure were expressed in the shared intersubjective framework that defined their reasoning towards their labour-market entrance. Therefore, the relations themselves, rather than individuals, have to be provided with the desired ontological affirmation. A

more relational mode of reasoning can help to describe and understand the relationship between student and structural environment.

Here the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) can inform us how the relational structure and agency is defined in this case. Bourdieu (like Giddens) aims to reconcile an objectivist philosophy and a subjectivist philosophy. He argues for a high degree of complexity of people's activities as simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the social world. Individuals exercise agency but within existing social conventions, values and sanctions. Bourdieu wants to examine the social construction of objective structures with an emphasis on how people perceive and construct their own social world, but without neglecting how perception and construction are constrained by structures. An important dynamic in this relationship is the ability of individual actors to invent and improvise within the structure of their routines. Agency involves individuals strategically engaging in and manipulating the rules of the social situations.

Habitus, for Bourdieu, serves as internalised schemes through which the world is perceived, understood, appreciated and evaluated as a result of long-term occupation of a certain position in the social world. Depending on the position occupied, people will have a different habitus. The habitus operates as a structure, but people do not simply respond to it mechanically. The habitus does not determine particular actions, but orients actors to particular goals and strategies. Through the workings of habitus, practice (agency) is inherently linked with capital and field (structure). Bourdieu's relational mode of thought can function as a means to understand how employability is played out in two different contexts without placing the structure outside the individual.

Each habitus is grounded within one or more fields. A field for Bourdieu (1984) is a network of social relations. The field is a type of competitive marketplace in which economic, cultural, social and symbolic powers are used. The field is analogous to a game, with explicit and tacit rules of play. Capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic) is used to compete and

determine positions and control the fate of others Agents act strategically depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital.

The variety of habitus of British and Dutch students provides an interpretive space where they make sense of the competition for jobs. The individual's thoughts about reality are in line with the individuals' social structures via the intersubjective mode of habitus. As Barnes describes it:

> there is a correspondence between social structures and mental structures. A 'habitus' of 'durable transposable dispositions', of 'principles which generate and organise practices', is deposited alike in individuals as a mental structure and disposes them to act alike. At the same time the field itself is continually reconstituted as the practices of particular human beings are oriented by habitus. In these reflections on the relationship of macrocosm and microcosm, order at the macro-level ultimately derives from an isomorphous order immanent in the mind/or body of each individual. (2000, 55)

The graduate labour market as well as higher education represent two separate although to a certain extent homologous fields. Fields for Bourdieu are also relatively autonomous structured domains or spaces, which have been socially structured and are recognised and largely accepted by those who struggle within them. This mutual understanding legitimises which type of capital holds what value.

Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game to describe how actors try to dominate others within a particular field. Actors strategise to negotiate their positions within the fields. Graduates in both countries act within different field with different rules of the games. Their understanding of how to compete within the Dutch or British graduate labour market are shared and not questioned, called 'Doxa' (for example, Bourdieu 1977, 165–167). Not every student has the same feel for the game, they bring with them their own habitus (acquired in particular through socialisation).

For example, British students know that the symbolic capital related to educational ranking is key and they themselves rank them and their labourmarket opportunities according to the symbolic value of their university. In

the Netherlands, there is doxic agreement on the need for occupation or industry-specific skills in order to create advantage.

How students construct their employability depends on their own habitus that structures their understanding of the competition for jobs, themselves and the possibilities they have, but also the field, in which certain doxic assumption regarding how employers value certain credentials, experiences, characteristics (such as modes of capital) and which labour-market strategies are deemed accepted and/or successful. Within Bourdieu's field there is a correspondence between social and mental structures. In other words: '[T]he cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, "embodied" social structures' (Bourdieu 1984, 470).

Bourdieu's habitus still leaves space for the role of social groups (such as class) to co-produce and structure individuals' courses of action. Yet the relational structure of agents within a chosen field, even as large as the graduate labour market, and its doxic underpinnings, are useful to make sense of the employability strategies of students as well as make the nature of structure and agent explicit. The students in the study are circumscribed by an internalised framework that makes some educational and labour-market possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable (Reay 2004, 435).

However, Bourdieu strongly emphasises that agents act strategically, depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital. Bourdieu's fields are sites of domination and resistance. This seems to be true in some cases but the research shows that the students are also enabled and constrained by different categories and discourses about what constitutes success and how they see themselves in the labour market. These are not necessarily based on strategy and they vary between societies. It is here that Bourdieu's concern with defining society as a site of struggle between different kinds of social groups overemphasises structural influence. In the graduate labour market, unequal distribution of different types of capital is

indeed of significance and competition is a driving force of any labour market, yet Bourdieusian analysis potentially neglects how the subjectivity of the student actually comes about and independently develops from the conflictual struggle over resources.

It is here that phenomenological and interpretive approaches can illuminate the intersubjective mode encompassing both agent and structure. Although Endress (2005) points out that Bourdieu's sociology is grounded in phenomenology, others (for example, King 2000) have pointed out that the interactional aspect of agency has lost out in the work of Bourdieu as he regards the relations between habitus, individuals, networks and membership as systematic rather than contingent. The relations between individuals are performed via interactions. As Bottero puts it: 'Bourdieu ignores the variable interactional properties of that space, and so neglects the intersubjective character of practice' (2009, 417).

Bourdieu's ideas can be informed or complemented with ideas from the phenomenological tradition (as identified by Crossley 2001; Atkinson 2010). Phenomenological sociology (for example, Schutz 1972; Schutz and Luckmann 1973) emphasises that humans interact with each other on the basis of shared meanings. The students in this study likewise express themselves in similar ways because they have similar interpretive schemata that map their experiences. These schemata may or may not be fully demarcated by a particular field and are not necessarily driven by conflictual rationales. It is therefore important not solely to view the students as independent knowing subjects or defined only by their structural context, but also to focus on the 'dialectic of the active perceiving subject and his experience of the objectiveness of social reality through intersubjective communication and understanding' (Smart 1976, 86). The works of phenomenological authors like Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger focus on the meaning individuals put on situations encountered in everyday life and the intersubjectively constituted objects that they produce via interactions.

The knowledge of the world we possess serves as a 'scheme of interpretation

of past and present experiences, and also determines this anticipation of things to come' (Schutz 1970, 74). We make our own reality but we experience the world as an objective reality and fully internalise the constructed nature of institutional structures around us (Berger and Luckmann 1966). So we externalise as well as internalise and objectify reality in an ongoing dialectic movement (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 149).

For the most part, our perceptions, experiences and understandings are in accordance with intersubjective structures. They provide a horizon for action; tell us what we can rely on. This is exactly what we see with the Dutch and British students; their structural context provides a framework of meaning. The relation between jobs, education, rewards and skills is understood in different ways. Interaction and interpretation of the particular characteristics of the labour market and educational structure lead to distinct intersubjective ways of dealing with employability and participating in the competition for graduate jobs.

The mainstream literature most clearly separates the individual (the agent) from its context (structure). The positional competition for jobs is an outcome of multiple individual actions coming together in a market institution. Individuals independently enhance their chances by investing in their human capital and independently are able to decide how to achieve what they want. According to competitors' mix of experience, attitudes and hard and soft currencies, they will be able to advance in the labour market. Neglecting the spatial and social dimension of context results in a conceptualisation of employability that is ultimately flawed because it does not account for the intersubjective production of meaning. It does not in any way integrate context with individual action: 'Agency is always a dialogic process by which actors immersed in the durée of lived experience engage with others in collectively organized action contexts, temporal as well as spatial' (Emirbayer 1997, 294).

Proponents of the alternative view place employability within wider societal conditions and thus acknowledge the need to use a robust contextual

analysis. They understand that employability must be placed in a much broader social and cultural configuration with historical and structural dimension. However, many have not yet avoided placing the individual against a societal system where inequalities in power, class, gender or ethnicity are played out. The hermeneutic dimension of how people approach work and education is downplayed, with the result that the interactional influence of the socio-cultural is left out of the picture. The students in this study are inseparable from the transactional and interpretive context within which they are embedded. Many 'alternative' contributors have often 'overstructured' their models of labour-market competition.

Discussion

This article delivers insight from an empirical investigation into graduate employability to aid the structure agency debate. I argue for a more relational approach in order to understand how students act in and understand the labour market. What the research was has been able to show is that both the mainstream as well as alternative models of labour-market behaviour and employability within the literature are not able to (fully) integrate individual action and the effects of structures. Students act within intersubjective modes of understanding in which they make sense of the value of work, education, credentials and the labour market. These modes are in line with institutional organisation. Both models isolate agency and structure to understand labour-market behaviour, yet understanding graduate employability requires a contextual analysis that integrates both.

The students in this study find themselves in circumstances beyond their own choice. The ontological constitution of the interpretive interplay between contextual structures and subjective forms of agency not only can close the gap between the two but also highlights the importance of socially constructed forms of meaning. The latter limits, enables and co-creates in the first place the relationship the agent has with its structure. The emphasis on mutual constitution of meaning does not imply that the competition for

jobs is consensual or that struggle within society for scarce resources ceases to exist. There is still room to embrace the fundamental insight of (neo-) Marxist, Weberian and credentialist theories on how certain groups and individuals control and dominate other groups and individuals by using their position within society or the labour market or utilising scarce resources or forms of capital. In the same way, individuals have the ability to resist and react against contextual structures. Participants are in no way caught in an intersubjective web of meaning.

Both sets of students find themselves in different intersubjective spaces where the construction of what success in the labour market means needs to be negotiated and interpreted. Subjects should be understood to be constituted and formed by social relations that cannot be reduced or equated with the singular abstract logic of an institutional or economic model. To reduce social context to a set of conditions or an aggregate of individuals is not satisfactory. On the other hand, to talk about social systems of employability in the absence of a strong notion of individual subjects makes little sense. The relations individuals have with each other are intertwined with how people understand themselves. Context should be the arena of social relations in which the individual is embedded.

Unfortunately, the methodological set-up of the study did not allow any observation of interaction. Relying on interview data, the analysis cannot show how students interact with the institutional context in an everyday sense. This remains a major weakness in utilising this study to inform the theoretical debate. Future research efforts need to provide more inclusive empirical models to enhance our understanding of how exactly people engage with structures.

Notes

1. The idea that knowledge and skills can raise productivity and therefore education can be seen as an (economic) investment is much older. Economists such as Adam Smith and Strumilin have written about this (see Woodhall 1987) in the past.

2. This article only reflects on the differences in the approach towards the labour market between Dutch and British students. There were, however, interesting differences between students from different disciplines that are not covered here. Differences in gender and ethnicity were less marked.

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