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## **Struggles for distinction: Classing as discursive process in UK museum work**

Samantha Evans, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London

\*Rebecca Whiting, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of  
London

Kate MacKenzie-Davey, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of  
London

\*corresponding author

### Abstract

This paper responds to calls from critical diversity scholars to explore class in context, arguing for a view of classing as a discursive process and adopting Bourdieu's concept of field as a site of discursive struggle. Analysing interview, web and focus-group data, we address this in the field of UK museum work. We contextualise the field's dynamic nature, highlighting its state of flux and explore three discourses: Distinguishing the field; Disavowing the market; and Gaining recognition through which it is constituted, and classing practiced. Discursive strategies of reinforcing, reframing and re-valorising were deployed by participants to legitimate their own and other positions in the field. We show how classing is a core process constituting an occupational field, how museum workers are entrapped by and complicit in this process and conclude with wider implications for understandings of class, classed inequality and diversity.

**Key words:** class, diversity, inequality, museums, Bourdieu, capital, discourse

## Introduction

Class, until recently, has been largely absent from the diversity literature within organizational studies (Holvino and Kamp, 2009) in part due to its invisibility to those studying managerial practices (Côté, 2011) and the avoidance of the language of class relations by some organizational scholars (Acker, 2006). A further problem is how mainstream approaches conceptualise diversity as a potential source of competitive advantage, downplaying the legitimacy of moral arguments for equality (Noon, 2007), and largely seeing difference as a property of the person, rather than the outcome of historic, structural or workplace processes (Kirton and Greene, 2007). In contrast, class analysts have long conceptualised class, and classed inequality, as mutually implicated with the employment relationship (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), and with organisational processes and hierarchisation (Acker, 2006). Critical diversity and class scholars have criticised the insistence on constructing class as a measurable category, arguing instead for a focus on the power dynamics and processes leading to classed inequality (Tyler, 2015). Critical approaches thus emphasise the importance of understanding class not as a neutral category, but a discursive resource, shaped by power dynamics (Tyler, 2015) and contingent on context (Irwin, 2015, 2018).

We build on critical approaches to explore how class is constructed within an occupational context, drawing on two areas of research. The first is work that investigates how people discursively construct class in everyday terms (Cannadine, 2000; Harrits and Pedersen, 2018; Irwin, 2015, 2018; van Eijk, 2013). The second is the theoretical work of Bourdieu, increasingly advocated by diversity scholars (Tatli, 2011; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012). Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) enable an

examination of the implicit hierarchies (Bottero, 2004) that can lead to classed inequality (Ashley and Empson, 2013; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Both strands of research highlight the discursive processes through which class is constructed, challenged, and ascribed value.

We provide three contributions to the critical diversity literature. First, we address calls for a better understanding of class as an aspect of diversity (Holck et al., 2018) by exploring classing as discursive process using Bourdieu's (1987, 1989) concept of field as a site of discursive struggle. Second, our research context, UK museum work, is significant for understanding how cultural capital is constructed yet empirically overlooked. Third, we highlight the importance for diversity scholars of understanding class and classed inequality as the outcome of a dynamic and discursive context. Below, we first consider the value of critical approaches to diversity, of understanding class as a discursive process and of Bourdieu's theory in examining classing processes. We then introduce the context of UK museum work and describe our methodology. Our findings identify three discourses: Distinguishing the field, Disavowing the market and Gaining recognition, through which the field of UK museum work is classed, and highlight the discursive strategies which hold this classing in place. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for critical understandings of class, classed inequality and diversity.

### Critical diversity and class

Diversity emerged as a management practice in the US in the 1980s (Liff, 1999; Tatli, 2011); its premise to position difference as a source of competitive advantage (Liff, 1999). It has been the source of substantial research, from exploring how to manage and leverage performative value from diverse workforces to more critical approaches which have

problematised diversity as practice and discourse (Holvino and Kamp, 2009; Tatli, 2011). Critical scholarship has questioned the epistemological basis of mainstream diversity approaches and its obscuration of power. Through the use of non-positivist research paradigms, they problematise the ‘polarizing; stereotyping; and essentialist’ (Bleijenbergh et al., 2018: 206) construction of difference as a property of the individual, highlighting how power shapes ideas and practices (for example, Holvino, 2010) particularly in an organisational context (Acker, 2006). Discursive studies have challenged the individualising assumptions which shape diversity as discourse and practice, highlighting the risks of following fashionable discursive shifts, from equality to diversity to inclusion (Oswick and Noon, 2014).

However, despite class being a significant marker of power (Ylostalo, 2016), particularly within organizations (Acker, 2006), there has been a relative lack of critical attention to class as a dimension of workplace diversity (Holck et al., 2018). In part this absence may be attributable to the atomisation of class analysis at the time that diversity emerged (Crompton, 2008). The difficulty of connecting objective measures of class as labour market relations (Chan, 2019) with subjective measures of class as identity led some to claim that class analysis was dead (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). However, critical class scholars argue that political discourses which reify the individual have obscured class identity and inequality (Tyler, 2015), leading to a lack of discursive space for class in favour of individualised identities such as gender and race (Crompton, 2008). In this way, discourses of diversity which celebrate individual difference are arguably complicit in obscuring attention to class equality (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001), a complicity further legitimated by the absence of class as a legally protected characteristic (Acker, 2006; Randle et al., 2015).

Within this contested climate, a growing body of research has side-stepped class as category to explore how classing is practised discursively in everyday contexts. This highlights that people are active classifiers, using local contexts, personal histories (Irwin, 2015, 2018), and constructing hierarchies of difference and value (van Eijk, 2013), to class themselves and others. Studies also show that people deploy class in particular ways to legitimate certain forms of classed inequality; for example, whilst class as economic inequality can be constructed as unfair and therefore not the fault of the individual (Harrits and Pedersen, 2018), class as educational attainment might be constructed as both fair and a matter of individual achievement (van Eijk, 2013). Furthermore, these studies highlight that classing is not a neutral process, as people adopt strategies to construct a positive identity in the face of being classed, for example, re-valorisation (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) or resistance (Savage, 2015) and in being a classifier, for example, downplaying snobbishness (Jarness and Friedman, 2017) or refusing to make moral judgments (van Eijk, 2013). Overall, this research demonstrates how classing in everyday terms is a contingent, fluid but high-stakes process.

There has been less research, however, on how class and classed inequality are reproduced discursively within work settings. Organizations are key locations where structural and symbolic hierarchies are reinforced through power dynamics and processes such as wage-setting and discourse (Acker, 2006). Zanoni (2011) examines how a master discourse of production is used by factory workers to class and (de)valorise other identities (gender, age and ableism). Others show how occupational hierarchies, long-used as academic measures of class (Crompton, 2010), can be used as everyday proxies by which individuals are evaluated and included, for example, in diversity programmes (Berrey, 2014; Crowley, 2014). We respond to calls to further examine class within a particular organizational setting (Zanoni et

al., 2010) and to do so using Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Tatli, 2011; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012) to which we now turn.

### Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital

To examine the processes of classing, we use Bourdieu's conceptual framework. Bourdieu's theory is increasingly popular with scholars exploring class in the workplace (Tyler, 2015) as well as diversity scholars interested in understanding inequality in context (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005; Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012). A strength is Bourdieu's attempt to move beyond binaries such as class or status (Flemmen et al., 2019), economic or cultural (Bottero, 2004) or objective or subjective epistemologies, by seeing people's actions as agentic but constrained by structures (Everett, 2002; Thompson, 1992). A further appeal is the practicability of his concepts; here we focus on field and capital (Bourdieu, 1987; Tyler, 2015; Webb et al., 2008).

The concept of field is particularly valuable for exploring class in the workplace. Fields are conceptualised as a dynamic space in which people and institutions share stakes in, and compete for, positions related to a particular practice (Flemmen, 2013). Fields are governed by a relational, discursive logic, such as commercial/non-commercial (Bourdieu, 1980) which Bourdieu likens to the rules of a game (Tatli, 2011; Thompson, 1992). This discursive logic distinguishes the field and shapes the way positions and capital are hierarchised by struggles between agents within the field. Struggles can be material (accumulating forms of capital) and discursive (naming the capital that is valued). Economic capital describes income or property, social capital describes valued networks whilst cultural capital is conceptualised in three forms: institutionalised (educational, knowledge), material (possessions, tastes) and embodied (dress, accent). Symbolic capital is described as the 'degree of accumulated

prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). Its intangibility is particularly subject to discursive struggle, as those with most capital can impose a dominant discourse of symbolic value, relying on others in the field to misrecognise this as fair and neutral (Bourdieu, 1989).

Bourdieu's concept of capital has been put to good use to reveal the, often invisible, processes through which inequality is perpetuated. Cultural capital - having the right accent, dress, educational background, and cultural knowledge - is mobilised by elite occupations such as law, accountancy or media to maintain a type of closure; ensuring only certain types of people get in and on (Ashley & Empson, 2013; Friedman & Laurison, 2019). In creative industries typified by project work, such as TV or advertising, social capital is relied on to allocate work, privileging those with existing connections often made in elite universities (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Economic capital plays an invisible but vital role in industries typified by precarity such as acting (Friedman and O'Brien, 2017) or which insist on unpaid work placements such as TV (Randle et al., 2015).

There has been less focus on understanding how these processes of inequality are maintained discursively. This, Bourdieu (1980) argued, is a struggle in which agents adopt particular strategies to impose their vision of the world as legitimate and universal. Those with most linguistic capital i.e. the authority and dominant language from which to speak, are at an advantage. The struggle is also shaped by the complicity of those willing to play the game and misrecognise the unfair nature of dominant discourses, which favour those with most capital. For example, the nebulous language of 'talent' legitimises promotion of what may well be classed tastes and behaviours (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). The processes through which people uphold or challenge the discourses of the field are recognised as an important



first step in researching inequality in workplaces (Tatli, 2011) but have not been substantially researched. We address this here for UK museum work.

### UK museum work

UK museums are defined as ‘institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society’ (Museums Association, 2018). They arguably play a powerful role as constructors and classifiers of culture (Macdonald, 2011) and are implicated in the construction of cultural capital (Savage et al., 2005; Warde, 2013). As part of the creative and cultural industries, museums are called on to demonstrate social relevance (Ng et al., 2017). Whilst diversity and equality have been substantially researched in the cultural industries (Conor et al., 2015), a sector where precarity mediates against those with low volumes of capital (O’Brien et al., 2017), there are few studies on work within UK museums (McCall and Gray, 2014; Rose, 2007).

Today, there are an estimated 44,000 museum employees in the UK (Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport, 2018). The data on composition is patchy, suggesting a workforce more female, white and with higher than average educational capital (Arts Council of England, 2019; O’Brien et al., 2016). A recent survey suggests over half of respondents have a postgraduate degree and 20% attended private school, suggesting a higher-class origin than the UK working population overall (BOP Consulting, 2016). Scholars also highlight an increasing trend towards professionalisation (Wilkinson, 2014) with employers increasingly demanding higher qualifications and unpaid work experience (Hutchison and Cartmell, 2016), whilst paying less than other graduate roles (BOP Consulting, 2016).

The field is characterised by diversification of institutions, job roles and practice. National museums are often those earliest established, followed by local authority museums and the independent museums of the 1980s. National museums are distinguished by receiving direct government funding, mandated to lead the sector (Mendoza, 2017), and as sites offering valued symbolic capital to elite trustees, donors and government (Griffiths et al., 2008). Museum work has also diversified (Wilkinson, 2014). Whilst the earliest museums employed a scholar-curator, UK museums now also employ designers, interpreters and educators (Wilkinson, 2014). A recent museum skills survey profiled its respondents as curatorial (16.4%), education (16.3%), conservation (11.2%), front of house (11.1%) with HR, marketing or finance at less than 2% each (BOP Consulting, 2016). This change in roles reflects a shift from object to audience-centred practice in part facilitated by a ‘new museology’ (McCall and Gray, 2014), and a political climate encouraging museums to justify their value (Wilkinson, 2014). These changes in practice create tensions between museums as sites of cultural distinction or entertainment (Prior, 2011) and between curatorial and management status (Holmes, 2008). They reflect a struggle for the autonomy of the field to name the capital valued (Bourdieu, 1980, 1993). With increased funding cuts exposing them to market forces (Mendoza, 2017), this struggle to maintain distinction is intensified, leading to an embattled professional status (McCall and Gray, 2014).

In sum, the field of UK museum work is characterised by discursive tensions over practice and the status of work roles with potentially a disproportionately higher-class workforce than in the UK population. This makes it a fertile site in which to explore classing. Specifically, we examine: *How is classing practised within the field of UK museum work and what are the implications for understandings of class, classed inequality and diversity?*

## Research approach

Our approach is that classing is a process of social construction; our epistemological stance that discourse is both a mechanism of, and an insight to, these processes (Ainsworth, 2002). Whilst Bourdieu himself is critical of discourse analysis, his concern its abstraction from the dynamics of field (Sayer, 2017), he nonetheless recognises the importance of discursive processes in constructing the field and as a form of capital through which the game is played (Bourdieu, 1980, 1989, 1993; Sayer, 2017; Tatli, 2011). Our approach is to understand discursive processes as an important part of social practice and vice versa (Sayer, 2017) where people shape and are constrained by discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Whilst mindful of the co-constructive effects of the research process, it is possible to identify discursive processes from which wider constitutive effects can be interpreted (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

The data collection, part of a larger study examining classed inequality in UK museum work, was organized in two phases, beginning with scoping the field. This comprised interviews with a purposive sample of individuals (Saunders, 2012) from ten field-level organizations representing UK museums and museum workers (for example, trade unions and professional associations). We asked participants about challenges facing museums, museum workers and how might class be a barrier. As part of the scoping exercise, we searched websites of organizations mentioned by interview participants, in line with use of grey literature in shaping research (Adams et al., 2017). From this web material, we selected for analysis a 60-minute publicly available video recording of a chaired panel debate *Working Class Heroes: social mobility in museum*, from the Museum Association (MA) 2016 conference. As a rare example of class being explicitly discussed in the field this provided rich data for examining how classing takes place and the discourses shaping these processes. The debate, introduced

as a discussion on declining social mobility, offered four speaker perspectives on how class was problematized in the field of UK museum work: an academic view, a practitioner view with two self-defined working-class people providing personal narratives on working in the field. Audience questions raised issues including the ‘museum professional’ and low pay. We cannot know the audience (the marketing literature claims the conference was for senior museum professionals) or secure consent from attendees. Whilst the recording is in the public domain, we are cognisant of the ethical considerations of internet research (Whiting & Pritchard (2017); quotes here are used anonymously, removing individual-level identifying material.

In phase two, guided by the initial analysis of phase one data (see below), we used focus groups, a tool for exploring processes of social construction to reveal how discursive processes between people (specialist vocabulary, legitimating claims, telling a story) show how participants construct each other as an audience with, for example, shared understandings. Assumptions, silences and absences can indicate potentially hegemonic discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

Five focus groups were held in London, Manchester, Bristol, Wales and Leeds, locations requested by participants. The groups were open to anyone who worked, had worked, or volunteered in UK museums. The 39 participants were recruited through social media and museum networks. Many responded specifically to the opportunity to talk about class saying they had not been given the opportunity to do so before. Each group included a mix of grades and occupational roles, for example, curators, museum directors, educators, fundraisers, contractors, administrators, ex-employees, and volunteers. Focus groups lasted between 90 to 120 minutes. Participants were asked about their understanding of class and what it takes to

get in and on in UK museum work. Given the prevalence of implicit hierarchies in lay understandings of class, we explored this by asking how they might position museums and museum roles according to status, and if/how they saw class as a barrier within the field. The design is summarized in Table A below.

[Table A about here]

Data analysis was conducted iteratively in several steps. All data were transcribed (interviews, video-recording and focus groups). Extracts relating to class, capital and field were coded using template analysis (King, 2012). This enabled an inductive top-down and data driven bottom-up analysis from which hierarchy was identified as a useful analytical tool to detect implicit and explicit discursive processes of classing. This included noting when hierarchies were constructed, e.g. presuppositions such as *from/to; then/now*; vocabulary such as *higher/lower, senior and leadership* and metaphors (comparing museum directors to government), and examining the meaning of hierarchies e.g. *'I ended up doing history as history of art was out of reach'* highlighting a knowledge hierarchy. We looked at the processes underpinning language use to show the strategies used to legitimate ideas and voice; the assumptions made at the level of field, for example, the value of claiming *'museum professional'* status or how participants assumed shared understanding (*'I used to be considered posh, until I worked for the [particular art gallery]'*). We applied Bourdieu's framework to this analysis, exploring the discourses that bound shared understandings of the field, its relationship to other fields (e.g. the market) and the hierarchies through which capital and positions were valued. We examined the discursive strategies used by participants to enhance the position of objects, others and themselves within these hierarchies, which highlighted tensions and struggles over naming the valued capital. Our findings were refined

in discussion between authors and through further iteration with the data, which we related back to the overarching research question. This led us to our discursive themes presented below.

### Classing museum work: the context

Participants constructed the UK field of museum work as in flux. Attributions ranged from historic sector changes (shift from object-orientated to audience-centred practice), austerity cuts and a policy discourse encouraging entrepreneurialism (Mendoza, 2017). These changes contributed to discursive tensions, at the heart of which was a struggle over what makes a museum distinctive (collections or public service) and whether they were businesses or specialist custodians. These discursive tensions indicated that museum workers (at least our participants) struggle to retain a sense of distinction for their chosen field of work. This has implications for how the field is discursively constructed and how classing is practiced.

Within this struggle, hierarchies were constructed and deployed to make valorised distinctions that positioned objects and subjects (museum, job, person) as superior or inferior to others. Participants invoked either a graduated spectrum of value ('higher/mid/lower') or a binary construction (London vs. the regions). Hierarchies were indicative of the way museum work was valued and symbolic capital constructed:

*You are dealing with superlative objects... there's a cachet, you're on the international stage, you're working for a national... (in) a way that person is that collection.* (Interview participant, Funding Body, emphasis as in the original)

The value of the worker's job (*there's a cachet*) is aligned with the hierarchical positions of the collection (*superlative objects*), the museum (*a national*) and the work (*you're on the*

*international stage*). Gaining proximity to objects (*that person is that collection*) is thus constructed as valued symbolic capital with implications for how museum work is classed.

By paying attention to hierarchies we thus traced the discursive processes used to construct and class the field. We now consider three discourses through which classing takes place within the field. These were used by participants to valorise positions (job roles and institutions) and capital, and thus construct the ‘rules of the game’ (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007). Alongside the explicit deployment of these discourses, we also describe how participants deployed discursive strategies to legitimate a position and hence ‘play the game’ by either reinforcing, reframing or re-valorising capital, thus reaffirming its rules.

### **Distinguishing the field**

This discourse refers to how participants classed roles according to their relationship to the field. Roles specialist to, or distinctive of, the field were afforded higher status, highlighting their construction as invested with symbolic capital. There was a degree of consistency regarding which job roles were considered highest status and hence invested with symbolic capital: museum directors, curatorial and conservation roles (*‘Your guest curators...the superstar, kind of thing’* Focus group participant, Leeds). The logic of this positioning was the ability of these roles to confer distinction to the field:

*There’s always been a divide between ... lower grades, often less educated, and obviously on poor salaries and the curator grade which also on not great salaries! But they are university educated, they’ve got the knowledge and are often seen as the one who are the museums.* (Interview participant, Trade Union)

The construction of being definitive of the field (*the one who are the museums*) with their defining knowledge contrasts with the lack of distinguishing power afforded to roles seen as

low status; the participant invoked a shared understanding of this differentiation (*obviously*) characterised by low pay (*poor salaries*). Other low status roles included front of house, security and cleaning:

*Cleaner? I don't want to say the lowest of the low but it, kind of, the perception is...And often not employed by the organisation which I think does change status.*

(Focus group Manchester)

Cleaners may physically operate in a museum but are excluded (*often not employed*) from belonging, and hence denied a privileged identification. Their alignment with the museum is reversed, they do not define the museum; the museum defines them through exclusion from an employment relationship. Since cleaning, security and front of house roles were often outsourced, excluded status was often used by participants to construct a low (or no) position in relation to museum work. However, the relationship between status and outsourcing was not always applied consistently as here:

*Yes, I think digital is higher than marketing, currently. It's a bit more specialist to the sector in a way, whereas marketing is more generic.*

- *Or you outsource it. I mean, we get an agency.*

(Focus group participants, London)

In this dialogue, whilst digital skills are also outsourced, their '*specialist to the sector*' construction afforded them higher status than the generic nature of marketing, though '*currently*' indicated its contingent nature. Whilst being able to 'distinguish the field' was easily applied to higher and lower status roles, those in the middle (outside specialists) were subject to debate and justification.

Work was not only hierarchised and valorised according to role but by virtue of the status of the employer institution. National museums were consistently classed as high status, the top



of the hierarchy, through constructions such as ‘*the vanguard of museology*’ and ‘*top of the top*’ (Participants, Focus groups, London and Manchester). As possessors of the ‘best’ collections, they were invested with legal and political legitimacy and symbolic capital:

*Researcher: Explain to me ...why would national museum be at the top?*

*Participant: Because it’s the best collections, the best funding, the best people. (Focus group participant, London)*

The participant applies ‘best’ as a qualifier to national museum collections, extending this to funding and people, which are arguably economic capital. Being the best is thus conflated with having the most. Whilst there may be a legitimate hierarchy of collections from which a ‘best’ can be identified and acquired, this construction may be a potential misrecognition in Bourdieusian terms. Symbolic capital (being a national museum) is not only a disguised form of other capital (economic in terms of funding) but also symbolic or hegemonic power: the ability to name the capital that is valued (having the best collections) (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989).

### Reinforcing

Whilst the discourse *Distinguishing the Field* was used explicitly to valorise positions and construct symbolic capital, participants achieved this through a more implicit legitimisation strategy *Reinforcing*. This involved deploying symbolic capital, often that of high-status institutions, to legitimate the status of an object (museum or role) or action (career decision). In doing so they also reinforced the status and symbolic capital of the institution they used as a legitimating device, as here:

*...The Museum of Homelessness. We don’t have a building and we don’t have a collection as yet. We’ve focused on the people and together we’ll be launching our public programme at Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool. (Participant, MA Conference)*

The symbolic capital of the London base and regional branch of a major national museum lends legitimacy to a new museum with no building or collection (in contrast to national museums whose collections construct them as 'best'). Participants also deployed institutional status to enhance their own, as here:

*I (got) a grant to study art history ... one of the best bits of advice [a teacher] gave me... you may as well go to the Courtauld because it won't do you any harm. (Focus group participant, London)*

Here, seemingly neutral career advice (*won't do you any harm*) is constructed as highly positive guidance (*best bits of advice*), based on an implicit understanding of the status and high symbolic capital of the Courtauld by those within the field. It implies a hierarchy and indicates the high symbolic capital and hence legitimating role afforded by teacher, participant and those in the focus group to this institution's name. The deployment of the reinforcing strategy enhances the status of both the objects being legitimated (new institution and course of study) as well as the symbolic capital of the objects and the institution doing the legitimation (here, two national art institutions). The strategy of *Reinforcing* is a more implicit deployment of the discourse *Distinguishing the field*.

### **Disavowing the market**

This discourse describes how museum work was classed according to its relationship with roles which were either non-specialist, and/or associated with the activities of the economic market. It had an inverse relationship to *Distinguishing the Field*, mutually reinforcing symbolic distinction within the field by disassociating it with a market or economic logic. This relationship echoed Bourdieu's (1980, 1993) argument that a cultural field's symbolic capital relies on the disavowal of a pursuit of purely economic interests. This is reflected in

how participants constructed positions within the field as a choice between symbolic or economic capital as below:

*They [specialist staff] have the backing of their parents, whereas people from certain social class do not have that luxury. So, they might do jobs like marketing or digital manager where they come in from different fields. They've always wanted to work in museums but ... I put myself in this category, I'm not important.* (Focus group participant, London).

This participant emphasises the hierarchy between 'specialist staff' and those 'from different fields' linking this to economic capital (*backing of their parents*) and museum work status (*not important*). This contrasts with roles with higher status but lower economic capital as below:

*A friend of mine has just taken a massive cut in salary, just because she wanted to work for the Tate.* (Focus group participant, Bristol)

*Curators wield a lot of power within an organisation, but it's not reflected in their bank balance.* (Focus group participant, Bristol)

Here the high status associated with institution and/or job role was seen to be exchanged for lower economic capital. Lower economic return was coupled with the increasing cost of securing such a position, by working for free and paying for institutional capital:

*A lot of the specialist jobs ... conservator, curator ...you have to be able to work for free for many months, years. So, perhaps you end up with a more privileged class of people who can afford to work for free.* (Focus group participant, London)

*Everyone told me, you won't progress unless you get a postgraduate qualification. I did, but it cost me 20 grand. How many people can afford to do that, to become a curator? This is why I think there is a class divide between operations and collections.* (Focus group participant, Bristol)

In these extracts, the economic capital required to do such roles is thus complicit in constructing a classed hierarchy defined both by person (*privileged class of people*) and position (*class divide between operations and collections*). This highlights how everyday discussion may take class for granted as a property of both person and occupational position.

However, this relationship between symbolic and economic capital was not always inverse. For some institutions, for example national museums, having high symbolic capital was constructed as a legitimate source of economic accumulation through attracting staff to '*museums where everybody wants to go and work*' (Interviewee, professional body) and funding (*'a significant amount of money that goes into nationals and rightly so'*) (Interviewee, professional association). This points to a power imbalance between museum workers and high-status institutions, whereby accumulation of symbolic capital is constructed as economically costly for the former and advantageous for the latter. This highlighted the contingent nature of such a relationship and alluded to the power of the institution over and above the individual. In contrast, the economic capital of lower status roles was rarely discussed.

### Reframing

*Reframing* describes a legitimation strategy whereby participants used an alternative discourse to re-construct a perceived lack of capital. In relation to *Disavowing the market*, whilst some participants constructed lack of economic capital as a barrier to achieving high status positions within museum work, others reframed this using an entrepreneurial discourse. Lack of economic capital was reframed as a potential source of value within a field where money did not matter. This was applied to career stories and museums:

*I found myself drawn to the organisation that couldn't pay very much. You could use your thriftiness, but you also were in a position to make a difference though sheer grit and hard work. (Participant, MA Video)*

*Independent museums ... that don't receive any core local authority funding ... have to think much more creatively about fundraising and income generation (Interviewee, Professional Body)*

In the first extract the participant, a self-defined working-class museum director, reframes her own lack of economic capital as a source of value through associating lack with positive personal attributes ('*thriftiness*', '*sheer grit*' and '*hard work*'). The second extract also reframes lack of money as a source of creativity. Both indicate the influence of an entrepreneurial narrative with the paradoxical effect of using the logic of the market whilst still disavowing the importance of having or lacking money. It highlights the difficulty of constructing classed inequality as a straightforward lack of economic capital.

### **Gaining recognition**

This discourse describes how positions in the field were classed according to their level of recognition, within and without the field. *Gaining recognition* was constructed as an important strategy to getting in and on in UK museum work. As with the other discourses, participants used *Gaining Recognition* to valorise positions, as below:

*What sort of skills do directors need? ...establishing a name for yourself internationally. It seems to be more important now than ever. (Focus group participants, London)*

*And you get your guest curators. The superstar, kind of thing. And then you've got your people in the engine room who are just trying to keep your collection going (Focus group participant, Leeds)*

Here participants construct recognition as both a prerequisite for, and privilege of, higher status roles. To achieve these roles, one needs to be known, presumably outside the museum (*'internationally'* or as a *'superstar'*) whilst having such roles distinguishes the person from *'the people in the engine room'*. These constructions were contrasted with the lack of recognition of roles seen as having a lower status:

*Once you're in front of house, you're invisible.* (Focus group participant, London)

*I mean our cleaners and visitor assistants always complain... that the Director would go past, never like look at them and say hello* (Interviewee, Trade Union)

Here a discursive process of recognition/non-recognition is constructed and deployed as a classing principle. Those in higher status positions have individual visibility, recognised by people within and beyond the institution. Those in lower positions are invisible even to their own colleagues.

As well as having an acknowledged position from which to speak, participants constructed linguistic capital as an important resource for gaining recognition and acceptance within the field:

*Our CEO, his skillset is, if you put him in front of a microphone and ask him to speak on message, he can at a drop of a hat* (Focus group participant, London).

In this extract, the ability to speak the required language of business expediency (*on message*) in a way that is seemingly natural and without preparation (*at the drop of a hat*) is constructed as a legitimate skillset for being a CEO. This contrasts with the extract below:

*I stuck out like a sore thumb. My accent, my knowledge, like, I just I mispronounced things all the time. ...I felt like a real fish out of water. Sometimes people are not thinking you're as capable as you are, because you don't fit their mould.* (Focus group participant, Manchester)

Here the participant felt unable to speak correctly, hence attracting the wrong sort of recognition (*stuck out like a sore thumb*), being made to feel out of place (*a fish out of water*) and to doubt the legitimacy of belonging in a role shaped by others (*don't fit their mould*). Saying things correctly and well is constructed as a proxy through which work ability is evaluated, with the potential to withhold recognition.

### Re-valorising

The struggle over gaining recognition also involved use of an implicit legitimisation strategy of *re-valorising*. Here, participants aimed to change the linguistic status of a potentially lower-status position within a field, and hence re-valorise it. This is illustrated by the emergence of claims to 'museum professional' status which could be available to those without the symbolic power of a curatorial job title. Those speaking at the MA debate could, and did, make their own claims to this status or were introduced as such by the Chair as follows:

*(She) is a member of Museum Detox a networking group for black, Asian and minority ethnic museum professionals. [Chair, MA Video] This is even though she says 'I'm still struggling to apply for jobs now and it's more than a year later'*

[Participant, MA video]

This extract highlights the discursive rather than material nature of professional status as the speaker does not have an actual position in museums, her professional status being legitimated by the Chair and membership of Museum Detox. By claiming to be a museum professional she achieves a platform from which to speak (here at the MA Conference) and gain recognition.

In other instances, claims to professionalism were legitimated through a mixture of social (e.g. '*actively engaging on Twitter and participating in conferences*') and cultural capital

such as job title and length of service (e.g. '*worked in the cultural sector in the UK for 26 years*') as offered by other speakers at the MA Conference. However, the ability to re-valorise one's status did not appear to be accessible to all positions, as highlighted in the following extract:

*There's a lot of working-class people that work in museums, but they work in support services, they work in kitchens, they work as security guards. Critical parts of our employment are as much professional as anybody else. There's very few of them in this room and there's very few of them who can be sent to conferences.* (Audience member, MA video)

Here the speaker problematises the occupation-based articulation of museum professional status, challenging how for *working-class people* working in a tangible museum space is insufficient to confer museum professional status. However, whilst claiming professional status and hence re-valorising their position on their behalf, the speaker also effectively classed these roles. Those doing such roles were absent, unable to claim their own class or professional status. As with the other discourses, the strategy of re-valorising, whilst contributing to the dynamics of the field, does not substantively alter the discourses through which it is constructed. On the contrary, this and the other two strategies, reaffirm the discourses, as rules by which the game is played and its status as a game worth playing (Tatli, 2011).

To summarise, our analysis has outlined the discursive processes by which participants constructed their field, valorising job roles, institutions and capital; in short how they classed their field. We now consider the implications of these findings for our understanding of class, classed inequality and diversity.



## Discussion

Our research addresses the call for a greater understanding of class as an aspect of diversity (Holck et al., 2018). We approached this by exploring classing as a discursive process using Bourdieu's (1987, 1989) concept of field as a site of discursive struggle. We have done so within the context of UK museum work, a significant site for understanding how cultural capital is constructed (Savage et al., 2005; Warde, 2013). In doing so, we show how field and classing are mutually contingent, (re)produced through discursive struggle within and without the field yet constrained by potentially hegemonic discourses. This highlights the importance for diversity scholars of understanding class and inequality as outcomes of a dynamic and discursive context.

Conceptually, as with other studies (Ashley and Empson, 2013), this analysis shows that class and classed inequality can be understood to derive from how capital is valued according to the logic of a field. We advance this by highlighting classing as a dynamic, discursive and high-stakes process by which hierarchies and the field itself are constructed explicitly and implicitly. In this case, within an embattled field in flux, museum workers struggled to retain a sense of distinction for their field and roles. We also show that classing itself is indicative of classed inequality, shaped by power dynamics (such as who can determine the capital that matters) and also the complicity of those within the field. Classed inequality is not just a lack of economic capital. Symbolic capital is constructed as contingent, highly prized, but not equally accessible to all. And within this process, those denied a privileged identification (e.g. those in low status work) were excluded, lacking the opportunity to re-valorise their status, discursively excluded from museum work or only included to show diversity. This highlights the value of using Bourdieu's concept of field within critical diversity research, as

a situated, contingent and relational concept and of doing so discursively to highlight the potentially hegemonic discourses shaping such dynamics.

Empirically, our analysis highlights the discursive dynamics by which museum workers constructed their field. These bear out Bourdieu's (1980, 1993) arguments that the field of cultural production (here, museums) pursues symbolic profits by disavowing economic ones. Whilst Bourdieu (1980) acknowledged the potentially classed and unequal nature of this, we have examined what this means for those working in the field. Our findings align with the work exploring inequality within the UK cultural sector, in acting (Friedman and O'Brien, 2017) and TV (Randle et al., 2015), which show how economic capital plays an important, often invisible role, in who can get in and on. Our study extends this in two ways. First, it shows how lack of economic capital is constructed as part of the discursive logic of the field itself, a logic acknowledged and legitimated by museums workers, for example, by reframing this as a source of value or creativity. The autonomy and distinction of the museum field was maintained through distancing from the commercial market. However, this disavowal of the importance of economic concerns benefits those most able to defer immediate (economic) rewards. In this way the reification of the symbolic ultimately disadvantages those with least capital. Second, our study highlights how this applied at an institutional and individual level. Hence the high status of institutions was constructed as a legitimate basis for accruing economic capital, including paying lower wages, whilst for individuals, high status was at the cost of economic capital. This highlights the non-essentialised nature of this relationship and reveals the hegemonic power dynamic at play.

By attending to field as a site of discursive struggle, we also show how participants are complicit in constructing an unequal field, 'playing the game' (Tatli, 2011) by deploying

legitimation strategies (here, reinforcing, reframing and re-valourising) to enhance their own position, and potentially those of others. However, these strategies, whilst contributing to the dynamics of the field, did not substantially challenge the three discourses we identified. Rather, the strategies reaffirmed these discourses, highlighting how participants accepted these as the ‘rules of the game’. These rules arguably benefit the participants by maintaining the distinctiveness of their field. Participants are simultaneously constrained by, complicit in and beneficiaries of the discursive construction of a field which potentially benefits those with most economic capital. This reiterates Bourdieu’s own understanding of classed inequality, by showing it is best understood through field-level dynamics, in which people willingly compete, albeit with differing levels of capital, and position-taking. Whilst Bourdieu understood this to be a process governed by habitus, we argue, as with other studies of everyday classing (for example, Harrits and Pedersen, 2018; Irwin, 2015, 2018), that our participants were conscious of the processes and discourses which held them in place.

The use of discursive methods enabled us to identify taken-for-granted assumptions around notions of class, particularly in the conflation of person and occupational position. Whilst participants constructed recognition of the individual - beyond their work position - as an important source of equality, they also made assumptions about the classed nature of people doing particular roles, with person, role, class and capital sometimes used interchangeably. This suggests the powerful and taken-for-granted nature of occupational hierarchies in constructing class within everyday contexts, even where people are reflective of equality (Berrey, 2014).

Our study has begun to explore a more complex consideration of classing by using Bourdieu’s (1987, 1989) concept of field as a site of discursive struggle to attend to the

discursive processes through which both class and classed inequality are constructed. We make no claims about people’s ambitions or motivations, rather our focus has been to show the value of field as a heuristic device (Thompson, 1992) and the importance of creating a discursive space within which class can be examined (van Eijk, 2013). This highlights the value of using discursive approaches to understand classing as a contingent process, here maintained through mutually intertwined discourses of distinguishing the field, disavowing the market and gaining recognition. We suggest that diversity scholars interested in inequalities (such as economic and educational disadvantage) can benefit from examining their mutual constitution with context and the value of examining processes that produce both class and classed inequality (Oswick and Noon, 2014).

Table A: Focus group topic guide

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>One</b>	<b>Two</b>	<b>Three</b>	<b>Four</b>	<b>Five</b>
Why did you come to a discussion about class?	What are the ways you would know your/others class?	What does it take to get in and on in museums?	Shared exercise: How would you position museum types and museum roles according to status. Who can achieve	Have you seen or experienced classism?	What solutions are there to classed inequality?

these

positions?

### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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